



SCHOOL OF
ECONOMICS AND
MANAGEMENT

BUSN49

Degree Project, Spring 2020

MSc Managing People, Knowledge and Change

Change Agent or Change Target?

- A qualitative study of the middle manager's role during a cultural change process

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Word Count: 24820

Acknowledgments

Firstly, we would like to give thanks to our thesis supervisor, Roland Paulsen, for keeping us calm, cool and collected, by listening and guiding us through distressing and inconvenient times brought on by a pandemic.

To our friends and family, thank you for your never-ending support, patience, and encouragement.

Last, but definitely not least, we would like to express our profound gratitude to Alpha, and especially the CEO, for letting us take part in your company during these trying times. We were in high spirits after every interview due to everyone's kindness, openness, and sincere interest in both Alpha and our study. We look forward to following you as you evolve!

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Lund, 22nd of May 2020

Abstract

Title	Change Agent or Change Target? - Qualitative study of the middle middle manager's role during a cultural change process.
Seminar date	June 1st 2020
Course	BUSN49 Degree Project in Managing People, Knowledge, and Change.
Authors	Louise Lindberg & Lina Svensson
Supervisor	Roland Paulsen
Keywords	Organizational Change, Change Management, Sensemaking, Sensegiving, Organizational Culture, Middle Management
Purpose	The purpose of this thesis is to develop a deeper understanding regarding middle managers perspective of their role in organizational culture change
Methodology	This qualitative study uses an abductive approach. The research methods used to generate data were primarily semi-structured interviews, and some document analysis of the organization in this study.
Theoretical perspective	This thesis outlines previous research on middle managers, Weick's concept of sensemaking, six images of managing change, and Floyd and Woolridge's four middle management roles.
Empirical support	The primary empirical data generated for this study were obtained from 14 semi-structured interviews from middle managers from the same organization, as well as the CEO. Document analysis was also conducted as supporting empirical material.
Conclusion	In our study, different roles of middle managers during cultural change were identified based on how they understood their role and their approach to managing change. From this finding we conclude that the middle managers individual sensemaking, approach to managing change and cultural awareness will guide how they experience their roles and responsibilities and thereby influence the cultural change process.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The introductory chapter of this thesis will begin with a brief overview of the chosen research area, then head into explaining the problematization of how change should be approached and managed and the role middle managers have within organizational change, which leads into the purpose of this study and why our chosen research questions are justified. The chapter ends with a disposition outlining the chapters and the contents of this thesis.

1.1 Background

Today there seems to be an accepted truth that organizations need to change in order to survive. Internal and external forces trigger businesses to change in order to stay competitive. However, to succeed with radical changes is not an easy task and around 70% of change programs fail (Beer & Nohria, 2000). One reason for this is the neglect of organizational culture (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Several researchers argue that organizational culture is a key aspect of managing organizational change, culture is either seen as an issue that needs to be changed or as a key factor that needs to be taken into account in order to enable successfully manage change (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015; Nieswandt, 2015).

During strategic change projects, middle managers often play a crucial role (Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008). Middle managers act as the link between the top management and the lower levels of the organization (Balogun & Johnson 2004; Huy, 2002). In that sense, middle managers often become change agents and are vital for the spread of the change. Still, studies of how cultural change projects impact middle managers and their perceptions are few (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003; Nieswandt, 2015). Managers are often viewed as agents of change instead of targets (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003), but middle managers are in fact both agents and targets. They are expected to both accept and change themselves while at the same time persuade others to accept change (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003). Due to their central position, taking a middle management

perspective on cultural change could provide important insights into change management. Even though there is a lot of literature discussing organizational change, this is still a problematic issue for organizations that are forced to change even though the odds of succeeding are low. Therefore, there is still a need for more research regarding organizational change, especially with a focus on culture and middle managers as its neglect is considered a common reason for failure.

1.2 Problem Statement

“Change can be like an old slot machine, where a penny placed in the top can take many different paths so that you cannot know in advance what you will get out at the bottom” (Balogun, 2006, p.30). This quote represents a critique of the ideas of diagnostic OD that have been central in change management literature for decades (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). The diagnostic approach has a view of change as controllable in a linear and episodic manner which has led to an increasing number of n-step models for how to successfully execute planned change (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). These models have received critique for oversimplifying the complex nature of change and neglecting the influence of the local context (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015; Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). To successfully manage change is hard, and a particularly challenging task is changing organizational culture. Researchers have diverse opinions regarding the manageability of culture due to its deeply embedded nature as inseparable from individuals (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003).

Furthermore, in the mentioned quote, Julia Balogun (2006) is emphasizing the pivotal role that middle managers can play in change projects that are implemented in a top-down manner. The middle manager will during change conduct interpretative activities both upwards with their senior managers, laterally to their peers and downwards to their team. Middle managers become, in this sense, intermediaries of the senior management's plans, and their interpretations will affect how they implement and support the change downwards in the organization (Balogun, 2006; Balogun, 2003).

The references to the slot machine are suggesting that change is not simply placed on people, but that they affect and create the change process. This can lead to unexpected outcomes that are not controllable by senior management, therefore “assumptions of senior manager control over change need to be replaced with recognition of the role of change recipients in creating change” (Balogun, 2006 p.30). Alvesson & Sveningsson (2015, p.38) have a similar argument in relation to planned change attempts “a highly significant, but commonly ignored, circumstance is that people tend to interpret and make sense of change efforts in quite diverse ways”.

Previous literature on middle managers during change has described middle managers and their sensemaking activities as pivotal during change processes (Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008). The role of middle managers seems rather conflicted and problematic because middle managers have been described as both change targets and change agents, and as blockers and enablers of change (Nieswandt, 2015; Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008). They have further been described as influencing the outcome into different, sometimes unexpected, directions (Balogun & Johnsson, 2005). This literature has mainly had their focus on strategic change or middle management in general, however, both in our literature review and other studies, there is limited research, particularly empirical research, linking middle management's role and organizational cultural change (Nieswandt, 2015). Previous research focused on the roles of middle managers has centered around what middle managers are expected to do and factors that can enable their strategic action (Mantere, 2008). Further research on middle managers often view middle management as a homogenous group (Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008). The various descriptions of middle managers raise the question of how middle managers understand and make sense of their role and responsibilities during a cultural change project. Both culture and middle managers have been pointed out as important factors of change but there are few studies combining the two. Therefore, in this study we aim to move beyond what a manager is supposed to do and focus on what middle managers actually do in practice and the reasons behind their actions. From a practical perspective it is relevant to further understand the middle manager perspective on cultural change projects to gain understanding regarding how they perceive their role and how this perception influences organizational change outcome. From a more theoretical perspective we believe that this research is relevant since it combines culture and middle management, which are two factors that have been

proven important but there are not many empirical studies that study both simultaneously. Furthermore, middle managers are often studied as a homogenous group, in our research we will emphasize individual interpretations. We aim to contribute to existing knowledge regarding the role of middle managers during cultural change by bridging theories on change management, culture, middle management, and sensemaking.

1.2 Purpose & Research Question

Middle management has a pivotal role within change processes and has the ability to influence the outcome of change processes, sometimes in an unexpected way. Furthermore, they can be both hinders and enablers of change. In order to best utilize their potential for successful implementation, it is essential to understand the individual manager's perception during a change project, specifically cultural change. Thus, we aim to explore how middle managers make sense of their role as both target and agent of change during a cultural change process and how their actions influence the change process. We will investigate middle manager's perceptions of a change initiative and how this perception impacts their actions as change agents towards their subordinates. This study will take a process perspective on change and is not primarily focused on the outcomes of change but rather how the continuous process unfolds. Therefore, our research question is:

How do middle managers make sense of their role during cultural change and thereby contribute to the cultural change process?

More specifically, we are interested in:

- *How do middle managers make sense of their role and responsibilities during a cultural change process?*
- *How do middle manager's image of managing culture change influence the change process?*

1.3 Disposition

This thesis contains six chapters: *Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Empirical Results, Discussion, and Conclusion*. The first chapter is an introduction presenting the background and purpose of our research as well as our research question. Chapter two consists of a literature review on organizational change management, organizational culture, sensemaking, images of managing change, and the role of middle managers during organizational (cultural) change. These will be provided in order to create a foundation for this study. In chapter three, our research methods for gathering and analyzing data, our ontological standpoint, as well as quality, ethics, and limitations will be presented to the reader. The empirical result of the study is presented and analyzed in chapter four and is thereafter discussed in chapter five. The conclusion of the thesis, with recommendations for future research, will follow in chapter six.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

In this chapter the reader will be presented with a review of the literature regarding the chosen subject. This is to provide an overview and understanding of the existing literature as well as a theoretical framework for the upcoming analysis. The review begins with an overview of organizational change and culture and will thereafter be narrowed down to focus on the role of middle managers during cultural change processes. To acknowledge that middle managers can be perceived as both targets and agents of change, literature on sensemaking and change management will be used to construct our theoretical framework. Sensemaking since the middle manager as targets of change needs to make sense of the change process, while the middle manager as a change agent is expected to lead the change process.

2.1 Organizational Change

Change is a challenging feat for most organizations, with many different ways to understand it. A common distinction that refers to the scale of change is between evolutionary and revolutionary change (Burke, 2008). Evolutionary change refers to continuous gradual changes. This often concerns smaller changes that only affect parts of the organization (Burke, 2008). Revolutionary change refers to strategic transformational changes that occur during a certain period of time and affects the whole organization (Burke, 2008). Another distinction, in terms of change, is planned or emergent change (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). Planned change is induced top-down where managers, often with the help of consultants, plan and execute change projects (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). Emergent change, on the other hand, refers to change that can start anywhere in the organization and can be the result of spontaneous developments from within (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015).

Moreover, planned change projects are vastly debated, mostly regarding the possibility to conduct a planned change project. An example of a planned change project is Kotter's (1996) eight-step model, which highlights eight steps to follow to successfully implement the desired change. There are many similar models that also consist of a number of steps that need to be executed. These are usually referred to as n-step models or change by checklist (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). These approaches view change as manageable and predictable and the proponents state that as long as one follows the steps as described, they will be successful. Although popular, these models for planned change have received criticism due to an oversimplification of managing change, the ignorance of contextual factors (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). Due to the high failure rate of planned change attempts, a process approach to change has gained popularity where change is accepted as unpredictable and hard to control (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). The process approach shows interest in how people in the organization perceive, make sense of, and relate to the change process and how this influences their behavior (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). The processual perspective acknowledges that reality is complex, and that change is hard to control, plans might need to be revised and resistance might occur (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015; Balogun 2006). Instead of seeing change as something placed upon individuals, individuals' interpretations, feelings, and sensemaking shape the outcome (Balogun, 2006). However, it is important to note that changes are interpreted and understood differently by different individuals based on, for example, personal interests, position, background. (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). What might be perceived as a small evolutionary change, might be a radical change for someone else (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). The perception of change can also vary depending on the level of analysis, whether a change is viewed from a macro, societal perspective, or on a microlevel. As an example, if observing an organization from a distance it might be perceived as a stable entity, but by observing the daily activities it might be perceived as continuously changing (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015).

2.2 Organizational Culture

One important factor during organizational change is the culture that resides within the organization. Some argue that organizational change cannot occur without the culture being affected (Nieswandt, 2015). Hence, it is important to understand what culture is. There is a plethora of literature on organizational culture with various definitions (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). This thesis will use a definition, where organizational culture is about the “shared values, beliefs and norms that influence the way employees think, feel and act towards others, both inside and outside the organization” (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017, p.150) Culture is expressed in numerous ways, such as through language, rituals and physical expressions (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). Moreover, organizational culture is in constant motion since every member within an organization can be seen as a carrier of the culture, thus the culture is influencing and is being influenced continually (Nieswandt, 2015).

To acknowledge the invisible nature of culture, it is common to use the metaphor of an iceberg where the visible components such as behavior and practices represent the top of the iceberg. “Culture is expressed in language, stories, and myths as well as in rituals and ceremonies and in physical expressions such as architecture and actions (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015 p.43). Shared assumptions, underlying beliefs, norms, and values are the invisible part that guides behavior (Daft, Murphy & Willmott, 2017; Hall, 1976).

2.3 Changing Organizational Culture

Due to its intangible nature, culture is very hard to change, some researchers even argue that it is impossible to manage (O’Donnell & Boyle, 2008). A big reason for this is due to the inseparable connection culture has with people and their beliefs and values, which increases the risk of resistance to the change because of the personal connection (Nieswandt, 2015). This then raises the question: why change organizational culture?

Influences from the environment will continue to occur and therefore change will continue to take place in organizations (Nieswandt, 2015). When change occurs in an organization it inadvertently influences, and is influenced by, the organizational culture, which is a part that is often neglected and is a reason that many organizations fail their change initiatives (Nieswandt, 2015). Thus, organizational culture is an important aspect to include in all change initiatives, even if it is risky.

The research regarding the manageability of culture can be divided into three streams (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). One where culture is seen as manageable, one where culture is believed to be manageable under certain circumstances and one stream which believes it is not possible to manage culture (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003). By the definition of culture, a change refers to addressing meaning, values, and beliefs. Thereby, emotions of uncertainty and anxiety are common and can often trigger people going through a change process to reflect on their identity and self-view (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). Since culture and identity are closely related, this becomes especially relevant during cultural change. Culture is part of constructing an identity for employees as well as the whole organization (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). Further, there are different views on how to change the culture, either by targeting meaning, values, and beliefs, where changes in behavior will follow (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). Another view is that if the behaviors of people are changed, changes in meanings and values will follow (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015).

According to Alvesson (2013) there are in broad terms two different approaches for cultural change projects; the grand technocratic project and the everyday reframing. The grand technocratic project refers to cultural transformations that are carefully planned and designed often with support of n-step models (Alvesson, 2013). If the plan is followed there will be a planned cultural change. These change projects are driven top-down often with the involvement of consultants. The other approach is reframing of everyday life, which on the contrary, is an approach focused on local interpretation and reframing of meaning in everyday activities and conversation (Alvesson, 2013). This often refers to emergent change in a local and informal manner (Alvesson, 2013).

2.4 Middle Managers Role in Change

As mentioned previously, a reason for failure is the lack of consideration for the culture of an organization (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). However, other authors also call attention to another reason for failure and that is the lack of involvement of managers from the entire organization, specifically middle managers, in the change process (Nieswandt, 2015; Mantere, 2008). Since the 1970s, research has addressed and highlighted the importance of managers as change agents in businesses, especially within innovation (Hirte & Sieger, 2018) and strategy implementation (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Huy, 2002). In general, most senior managers are not directly active in the day-to-day operations but that is where middle managers play a central role. This is because they are and need to be the link between senior managers and the rest of the employees, by implementing plans and communicating the organization's mission and goals (Hirte & Sieger, 2018; Nieswandt, 2015).

It is difficult to define middle managers, and the lack of clear definition also creates difficulties in the transferring of findings and thus, comparisons of research studies (Meyer, 2006; Nieswandt, 2015; Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008). What adds to the difficulty of defining middle management is the wide debate regarding the definition and difference between leader and manager, which trickles down to the debate regarding middle managers definition (Nieswandt, 2015). However, one of the main reasons for the difficulty of defining middle management is due to the fact that each organization can be different in ways such as the organizations' size, structure, and process chains (Nieswandt, 2015). Therefore, middle management definitions are very dependent on the number of management levels within an organization and the definition always has to be "within the concrete context of the respective organization in which the research is conducted" (Nieswandt, 2015, p.47). Accordingly, we decided to define middle management as a position in organizational hierarchies "between the operating core and the apex" (Mintzberg, 1989, p.98). Those who we classified as middle managers in our study are those who report to the CEO, have people who report to them, and are each in charge of at least one department.

Middle management's role and influence has mostly been researched within corporate entrepreneurship, innovation and organizational learning, strategy implementation, and strategy-making processes (Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008). Much of this research shares the same outcome, that middle managers are critical in explaining key organizational outcomes (Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008). However, there is a lack of studies, especially empirical, examining middle managers during cultural change (Nieswandt, 2015; Ogbonna & Wilkinson 2003). Middle management's attitude and initiative play a decisively important role for any organizational change initiatives success or failure, especially within larger organizations (Hirte & Sieger, 2018; Nieswandt, 2015). Studying cultural change through a middle management perspective is important due to their intermediate position where they act as a link that connects otherwise disconnected actors in the organization such as top management and the operational level (Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008). Especially in organizations that are complex and geographically disperse, middle managers interaction and leadership are required to be spread throughout the organization (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). In such organizations having a single leader or small groups would not work as well and middle management is vital for the interaction between the different units and levels (Balogun & Johnson, 2004).

Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) identified four different strategic roles of middle management that highlight their pivotal role in a change process; implementer, facilitator, synthesizer, and champion. During change, top management expect middle management to perform these roles (Mantere, 2008). Mantere (2008) further recognizes that in order to enable middle managers strategic agency so that they can fulfill the expectations, certain conditions are required. These four roles were created in relation to strategic change that organizations go through, however, research conducted by Nieswandt (2015) found that these roles are also relevant within cultural change because strategic change rarely, if never, occurs without impacting the culture in one way or another.

As *implementer*, the middle managers are supposed to disseminate the strategy downwards to their subordinates and get them to conform to the new strategic objectives (Floyd and Lane, 2000). Mantere (2008) mentions four factors that could hinder or enable middle managers in this role; 1

information about the new strategy and the thought process behind it, 2) that the strategy is linked to the work context with clearly defined objective to support decision-making 3) that they have the authority and tools they need to make changes and 4) that top management sees the strategic value of implementation in everyday work in change processes. In other words, middle management needs sufficient information regarding the strategy and the reasoning behind it, resources, and authority to realize changes. Mantere (2008) emphasizes that middle managers need to understand the reasoning behind the new strategy in order to make sense of the news and its connection to the past. Further, it is of importance that the middle managers understand their relevance for the strategy implementation (Mantere, 2008)

In the role of *facilitator*, which is also top-down, the middle manager is expected to facilitate adaptability through encouraging experimenting and development of work within their area (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). The factor that enables this role is trust from top management and openness towards failure (Mantere, 2008). To fulfill this role, it is important that the middle managers feel a sense of responsibility for driving the change and that they are not punished for potential failures in the experimentation process (Mantere, 2008)

Synthesizing information is a bottom-up procedure where the middle manager is expected to gather and interpret information from the subordinates and share with top management in order to report whether the change is going forward or facing obstacles (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992). This can be described as giving feedback to the top management. The prerequisite for managers to be able to fulfill this task is responsiveness by senior management towards the given feedback (Mantere, 2008).

The last role middle managers are expected to take on is *championing* alternatives, which is also a bottom-up procedure. Middle managers are supposed to pick up on ideas created at the lower levels of the organizations and bring them up in order to be able to enhance or change the strategy for the better (Floyd and Lane, 2000). This will be enabled by letting middle managers take part in planning activities where they can present ideas, as well as that senior management, can evaluate the presented ideas (Mantere, 2008).

Literature about middle management seems to be in two camps. Some believe that middle management hinders change of becoming successful because of their personal interests and feelings, such as fear of losing their position (Nieswandt, 2015; Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008). Due to their feelings and their attitude towards the change, managers, like any other employee, will act to protect their personal interests (Nieswandt, 2015; Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008). The difference is that middle managers are able to modify the change by influencing its direction favorably, which employees at lower levels are not always able to do (Nieswandt, 2015). On the other hand, middle manager's role are also perceived as positive since they hold in possession specific knowledge of people and their units inside the organization, their processes and work-flows, as well as their strategic coherence (Nieswandt, 2015). This gives middle managers an advantage in being able to convince employees to engage and execute the change. As briefly mentioned earlier, this capability is something top management often are not privy to, to the same degree as middle managers since middle managers are closer to the operational units.

2.5 Sensemaking and Sensegiving

As mentioned, organizational change is greatly challenging, not just for the implementers but also for the employees. This is because of all the emotions and thoughts an individual may go through during change and *how* they interpret and understand the situation; their sensemaking. There are many different definitions of sensemaking with different schools of thought (Weick, 1995). Nonetheless, sensemaking can be described as an intersubjective world where people create and maintain it through various channels, such as spoken and written (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). The process of sensemaking and its use can be described as providing “a recipe for understanding organizational processes through the utilization of a series of interdependent social psychological ‘properties’, offer a way of understanding how individuals make sense of their complex environments” (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009, pp. 461). Sensemaking usually ensues after a critical event takes place and occurs at an individual level (Weick, 1995; Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009). Weick (1995), explains that interpretation, among other words, is often used synonymously

with sensemaking, which he believes is wrong. So, to set sensemaking apart, seven characteristics were gathered to explain sensemaking further, as mentioned in the definition above as properties (Weick, 1995). The seven characteristics, or properties, are the following:

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

Weick (1995) explains that these seven characteristics were formed after being mentioned often in sensemaking literature. He also informs that they could be used as rough guidelines when examining sensemaking since they can help reveal “what sensemaking is, how it works, and where it can fail” (1995, p.18). Moreover, it is also important to note that even though all the characteristics of sensemaking can influence the process simultaneously, all of them do not play an equal role in an individual’s sensemaking process all the time. Sometimes one or more of these properties have a stronger influence in the sensemaking process than some of the others (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009). This, and how they can interlink, will be shown as we go through each characteristic.

The first characteristic, *grounded in identity construction*, is seen as key in sensemaking’s process (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009). This is because identity construction has the power to influence how the other characteristics within the process of sensemaking are understood (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009; Helms Mills, 2003). In other words, when experiencing change, identities influence how individuals understand and make sense of events and how meanings are enacted (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009).

The second characteristic in the sensemaking process is *retrospective*. This is the process in which one interprets events during change and then makes sense of it and its meanings, which is done by looking through “a lens of past experiences and understandings” (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009, p. 462). This then shapes the individual's sensemaking for current and future events (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009). Thurlow and Helm Mills (2009) further explains how retrospective links with identity by explaining that an individual's identity that had meaning in the past will influence the identities shaped in the future.

Thurlow and Helms Mills (2009) states that *Enactment*, the third characteristic, is when an individual may put a certain meaning into action, and this is done, for example, by putting it into language and speaking with fellow members in the organization. During this process of enactment, individuals make sense of their beliefs at the same time (Thurlow and Helms Mill, 2009). So, one can see as the process of enactment, and therefore sensemaking, occurs in a loop. This shows that an experience might have different meanings attached to them and therefore cannot say one is “right” and the other is not, since individuals make sense of the same event differently (Thurlow and Helms Mill, 2009).

Weick (1995) explains that an important part of sensemaking is the *social* aspect. Sensemaking is a social process that is easily forgotten. How an individual's sensemaking process is conducted is dependent on the conduct of other individuals; it is never solitary even when the social activity is internal (Weick, 1995).

Ongoing, the fifth characteristic, refers to that sensemaking is an ongoing process, which does not stop and start fresh (Weick, 1995). It means that an individual can use two separate forms of evidence together, for example, to solve a “current cognitive puzzle” by using a feeling-based memory (the past) (Weick, 1995). Weick (1995) goes on to explain that if an individual gets emotional, for example angry, both that person and the individuals around them will be reminded about an event where anger was a dominant feeling (retrospect). He means that past events become a type of explanation in the present because of the emotional connection made (Weick, 1995).

Plausibility is when “one particular meaning or explanation is more meaningful than others” where, within the given possible explanations available in a given situation, it feels right, which might not necessarily be accurate (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009, p. 462). Weick (1995) says that there is no definition of what makes an explanation plausible, but gives a few suggestions, such as when there are no better alternatives or when others are enthusiastic about a specific alternative (Thurlow & Helms, 2009). In order for plausible meaning to emerge, individuals turn to and use extracted cues (Thurlow & Helms, 2009).

Individuals base their sensemaking upon cues that are specifically selected, these are called *extracted cues*, which are connected to ideas and actions that help to cognitively tie elements together (Thurlow & Helm Mills, 2009; Weick, 1995). Thurlow and Helm Mills (2009) give an example of this: if an organization's decision-making process is consistent with cues that are extracted from the environment, then the individual's sensemaking could be supportive and therefore beneficial for the change process. However, it also may work against the change process if the cues are inconsistent or if important cues are missed (Thurlow and Helm Mills, 2009).

Simply put, sensemaking is the process in which people may have disparate understandings of the same event, such as organizational change (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009). The different characteristics that are part of the sensemaking process in one way or another, for example previous experiences impact an individual's identity, who they are, which in turn affects the way in which specific cues are selected and extracted. This helps an individual make sense of an issue, or issues, at hand and makes them become plausible (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009). Another aspect in which one can affect an individual's sensemaking process is through the concept of sense-giving.

The process of sensemaking cannot be prevented from happening by managers, but they are able to extensively influence the organizational members' interpretations. This can be done via various actions in a process called sensegiving, also known as management of meaning (Dunford & Jones, 2000). With organizational culture being an ambiguous concept with many different meanings, it is important for the change managers to give sense to the rest of the organization in order to create shared meaning and understanding (Balogun & Johnson, 2005). By engaging in sensegiving,

managers can counteract negative emotions and interpretations of the change, and thereby reframing their sensemaking process of the organizational members (Will & Pies, 2018). According to a study by Will and Pies (2018), this should constitute creating narratives that describe and clarify the change process in relation to other relevant alternatives, and appropriate discussions to help guide how the organizational members form their expectations. However, it is important to emphasize that the change managers do not have complete power when it comes to influence individuals' sensemaking (Will & Pies, 2018). This is because there are many other factors that influence this, which change managers do not have power over, such as emotions linked to past events (Dunford & Jones, 2000; Weick, 1995). As shown in the concept of sensemaking and the model of communication, it is common for individuals to interpret and understand events differently, especially when extensive change is taking place (Will & Pies, 2018). Therefore, it is critical for sensegiving to take place when managing change projects (Balogun & Johnson, 2005).

Many researchers emphasize the significance of language and narratives in supporting meaning creation (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2017; Dunford & Jones, 2005; Weick, 1995). Stories and narratives express peoples sensemaking and help people to understand, relate, and position themselves to the change (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan (2017) state, based on a model of the communication process by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, that the way the receiver decodes the message during a communication could be different from the transmitter's intention. Therefore, it is vital that there is feedback to confirm understanding and tackle miscommunication in order to prevent failure (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). Failure in communication between the transmitter and receiver often occurs because they do not have the same background, and do not share experiences and understanding. This leads to them having different frames of reference, similar to sensemaking (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). This means that when communicating organizational changes, especially major changes, the transmitter cannot assume that the receivers will interpret the message exactly as intended by the transmitter. It is more likely that the receivers will have a different understanding of the information from each other, as well as from the transmitter (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017).

Therefore, change managers have a vital, albeit onerous, task in conveying the change clearly and to frame a meaning for those involved via communication and actions (Johnson & Balogun, 2005; Weick, 1995). However, as understood from sensemaking, that is of course easier said than done.

2.6 The task of Changing Organizational Culture

When introduced to a cultural change project, middle managers are expected to act as agents of change and implement and facilitate change downwards (Mantere, 2008). Their interpretation of the proposed change will thereby influence the actions they take in their roles as implementer, facilitator, synthesizer, and champion (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). However, as mentioned earlier there are several different images of change present and thereby it should be acknowledged that there are several different approaches to managing change (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). Palmer, Dunford, and Buchanan (2017) identified six different positions of change manager by combining images of managing change with images of the possibility to control change outcomes. They distinguish images of managing into controlling or shaping management style. The controlling management style refers to a directive approach where the change is implemented top-down. This view is based on the views of Fayol (1916) that described what managers do as planning, organizing, supervising, directing, coordinating, reporting and budgeting. The focus is on hard values rather than soft values such as culture, motivation, and leadership. Shaping management on the other hand is referred to as a participative form of management concerned with involving, encouraging, and engaging employees (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). Further referring to the outcomes of change, they separate images of change outcomes into intended, partially intended, and unintended. This refers to whether the managers had an image of change outcomes as possible to control. There is no image of change better than the other, but it is important to be aware that underlying images of change will direct the manager's focus (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). Hence, it is favorable for managers to be able to switch perspectives and be aware of their underlying image of change and how it might make them see certain aspects and miss others (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017) Managing culture is in many ways similar to managing other types of change, however, culture is defined in terms of values, beliefs, and

norms which are attributed to individuals and norms, making the task more complex (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). As mentioned earlier, there are also divided meaning regarding if culture is possible to manage which links to images of change outcomes as possible to control (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017)

Images of Change Outcomes	Images of Managing	
	Controlling (Roles and Activities)	Shaping (Enhancing Capabilities)
Intended	director	coach
Partially intended	coach	interpreter
Unintended	caretaker	nurturer

Fig 1 - Six images of managing change (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017)

2.7 Summary of Theoretical Framework

In this literature review we have discussed and presented a middle management perspective on organizational culture change. We have presented four different roles that middle managers are expected to fulfill during a change project; implementer, facilitator, synthesizer, and champion. It was further explained that in order to enable middle management strategic agency and give them prerequisites to fulfill these roles, certain conditions were needed that focused on; information, resources, links to work context, authority to act, a trust from top-management as well as being invited to strategic meetings. However, we problematize these roles further by acknowledging that since middle managers are both targets and agents of change, they need to make sense of the strategy simultaneously as they act as change agents and implement the change. As targets of change we have acknowledged that the receiver of a message might not interpret it in the same way as the sender. Therefore, the sensemaking and interpretation of middle managers will affect how they act during a change process. This is further connected to the image of change that the individual middle manager holds and how they believe a cultural change is executed can vary. Therefore, we want to address not only what roles middle managers are expected to perform and

what factors enable them but also how the underlying sensemaking and images of change influences how directions of actions taken by middle managers and how this influences the change process.

Chapter 3. Methodology

In this chapter the philosophical grounding and research design will be presented to the reader in order to understand the way the research was conducted and the underlying considerations. It also includes how the data was analyzed, general limitations, and quality of the research, and ethical considerations.

3.1 Philosophical Grounding

We aim to address the situation from a social constructionist approach with a focus on the subjective view of the world of the employees (Prasad, 2018). This approach was chosen because it allows us to explore and understand a cultural change process, what it means to those involved, and how they make sense of and evaluate the situation. Our research will be grounded in the interpretive tradition with the aim to understand how the change initiative impacts the socially constructed reality of those involved (Prasad, 2018). We are aware that each of our interviewees' social reality is unique and true to each individual and are thereby aware of generalizability and objective truth, as well as our socially constructed reality, which may also influence the research process (Prasad, 2018).

We intend to do a qualitative and abductive study, which implies a back and forth movement between deduction and induction (Bryman & Bell, 2007). This means that we shifted between being guided by theory and viewing theory as an outcome of our research (Bryman & Bell, 2007). This allowed us to be reflexive for, as an example, when adapting interview questions where we noticed recurring statements. The qualitative data generation techniques used were mainly interviews, a method which aided us in understanding the meaning of their individual social realities with the use of language and, to some extent, situational context (Prasad, 2018). These choices were appropriate for our study since they allow us to get insight into, and understand, the interviewees subjective view of the situation that we studied.

3.2 Data Collection Method

The following subsection starts with a brief introduction to the chosen company and discusses four different methods in collecting the data. The company was chosen due to that it is currently going through an organizational change, specifically, culture change. In addition, them being an international company with a long, rich history, we were given a wide range of interviewees from different backgrounds and positions.

Our main data collection method was conducting interviews complemented with a document analysis obtained from the organization. To gain further insights, we intended to include two other methods, observations, and questionnaires, however, this was not possible due to COVID-19 and the restrictions that followed. Observation was going to be used, in order to gain an understanding of the company and to get to know them, its employees, its working environments, as well as the strategy change. This way we possibly could have understood the individuals studied better by observing, for example, their interactions in different situations in their natural settings, such as when discussing the strategy and its updates (Rennstam, 2007). Comparing the interview results and document analysis with our observations, would allow us to gain a greater understanding of the employee's emotions and to analyze whether their verbal accounts from the interviews match their actions. Therefore, this thesis does not include observations and could thus be argued that this is a limitation to our research since we could not corroborate the observation with the interviews to increase the credibility of the study and its results. However, observations itself have limitations as well, such as the Hawthorne Effect, where people modify their behaviors because they are aware they are being observed (Payne & Payne, 2004).

Further, we intended to send out a questionnaire to employees at the lower levels in the company, whom we did not manage to interview. This was to get a general understanding of their point of view in the organizational change process as employees without a managerial position. Questionnaires can be limited by factors such as sampling concerns and access issues (Wright, 2017). However, the purpose of the questionnaires was to gain more knowledge of the company and the general views of the staff at lower levels in the organization to help us understand the

views and relationships within the company. Although questionnaires could have provided useful background information relating to the employees in the organization as an added bonus, they were not the priority in our study, as our focus lies on the middle managers. With this being said, we were not able to receive any answers due to that the company was going through furlough discussions brought on by COVID-19.

However, even though we were not able to collect as much data as we intended, this did not hinder our research. We were interested in subjective interpretations which were shared with us during the interviews. Altogether, the interviews complemented with insights from our document analysis provided us with sufficient material to analyze the case and we did not see the lack of observations as a hindrance.

3.2.1 Case Study - Alpha

This thesis is based on a case study at a company, Alpha. They are a notable company within a specific section of the construction industry, with more than 60 years of experience. They are present in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and the United Kingdom. Alpha is currently going through a planned, radical change process. One part of the change process involves changing the organizational culture which makes this a suitable case to study for our purposes. In 2018, the company decided to change its corporate strategy after losing market shares to new competitors. They changed the management team and their strategy. One part of the new strategy was to transform Alpha from a manufacturing company into a sales company and they acknowledge that in order to succeed a cultural change is required. In our study we focus on their work concerning changing their organizational culture from manufacturing to consumer driven.

3.2.2 Semi-structured Interviews

The majority of our primary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were used as they would allow us to understand and interpret the diverse lifeworld's of the employees (Kvale, 1996). Semi-structured interviews involve having an

interview guide with questions prepared, but leaving space to be open-minded and to follow other key topics that arise during the interviews (Kvale, 1996). This way we were open to different aspects of the situation and had space for follow-up questions and elaboration where needed (Kvale, 1996). This allowed for both us and the interviewees to be flexible and have a more natural conversation flow. The interviews were held with employees at Alpha in order to understand their subjective image on the situation and were held individually and anonymously in order to enable the interviewee to speak more freely. All interviews were held by us; where one asked questions and the other observed non-verbal behavior and asked follow up questions where needed. This gave the opportunity to focus on, not only what was being said, but also how it was being said, providing a richer material to analyze (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). On the other hand, this was not followed strictly since we did not want a rigid atmosphere, rather a natural dialogue between us all. Initially the interviews were planned to be conducted in a face-to-face setting, but due to COVID-19 and the restrictions imposed, this was not possible. The interviewees also had to adapt their way of work to the current situation and held meetings via Microsoft Teams video calls. This is also the platform we also decided to use as they were already comfortable using the platform.

This could be seen as a limitation due to the fact that face-to-face interviews conducted in a room enable for better observation of non-verbal behavior and create a personal atmosphere since during video call, you mainly see the interviewees face and not the whole body's responses, which would support the examination of our results during the data analysis stage (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Mathers, Fox & Hunn, 2000). However, even with the restrictions, we felt that we received the main benefits from face-to-face interviews during our video calls. These benefits are that those types of interviews give a greater degree of flexibility, since it can allow the interviewer to probe responses, clarify misunderstandings and questions to obtain relevant information, as well as being able to follow up on new ideas that are raised during the interviews, compared to other methods where this is not possible (Mathers, Fox & Hunn, 2000). Further, several interviewees were at home, in an atmosphere in which they are comfortable in and have privacy from other colleagues, during the interviews. We believe that the fact that they were outside of the workplace made them feel more relaxed and open to talk to us and created an atmosphere of informality. A limitation of not being able to conduct face-to-face interviews and instead using video calls is that technology

is not always reliable. We experienced some technical difficulties, which could be seen as a hindrance, however, we felt that it was a nice and convenient icebreaker to lighten the mood once we got the call going.

The interviews typically lasted for approximately 40 to 50 minutes. This amount of time was satisfactory enough in gaining insightful data, which could be analyzed within a limited timeframe, without obtaining excessive amounts and redundant data. We conducted a total of 14 interviews, where 13 of these interviews were held with middle managers with different types of backgrounds, positions, and varying seniority. One of the interviews was held with the CEO of the company. These interviews were conducted in a span of a week and in no specific order other than the participants' availability, with the exception of the CEO. Having anticipated questions and thoughts arising for us in the interviews, we chose to interview the CEO last, as to have an opportunity to hear his point of view on these points to clarify them.

The interviews started with general small talk to ease the tension and was then started with a quick recap with what we are investigating and what the interview is about. Then the first question was asked, which was having them introduce themselves and their job. The interviews ended with two questions; what they wanted to learn from our thesis, and then if they wanted to add anything that they felt was important to elaborate on or bring up that we might have missed. The questions asked in the interviews were open-ended questions, such as "how was this organizational change communicated to you?" because, according to Bryman and Bell (2011), it lets the interviewee to open up and speak freely, which is important since it increases the likelihood of gaining information that specific questions might not obtain, such as emotions, attitudes, and personal stories (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2011). in relation to general topics on how the participant makes sense of their job, the company, as well as the strategy. The interviewees did not receive our interview guide beforehand since we did not want the interviewees to have prepared answers by themselves or by convening with colleagues in order to receive as spontaneous and authentic answers as possible (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2002).

In one of the interviews, anonymity was brought up, which raised the concern of social desirability bias, which is that we were worried that people would answer, consciously or unconsciously, what they think they should answer, rather than what they think, because they are afraid to be negative towards the strategy or company itself (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Especially during sensitive times with COVID-19. Although it is difficult to know when this occurs, we did not think that this occurred a lot due to several factors, which were that people were very friendly, expressed they wanted to help us and the company, and did not shy away from stating their personal opinion, but also due to the measures we took to make the participants feel comfortable and open. This was done by reminding them about the study's ethical regulations, that they were anonymous and it was confidential, as well as asking questions that were two-sided, i.e. the positives and negatives of certain matters, and by keeping the tone friendly and open-minded. We thought of the possibility of the participants' concern regarding the small size of the company and how it could be relatively easy to figure out who said what, and other than the ethical regulations we are also going through each quote we believe is beneficial for our study and making sure to not include names or anything that could suggest or lead to figuring out which quote came from which person. This part was very important to us since we did not want to hinder the change process in any way by creating conflict between people and countries, especially a small company that is going through a sensitive change.

3.2.3 Document Analysis

To gain additional insight and deeper understanding of the organizational change and its process, a document analysis was conducted. The documents that were analyzed were ones that gave us an overview of the overall background of the company, the status of the company currently, as well as the organizational change project. The CEO gave us access to PowerPoint presentations of the company's strategy, its reasoning, goals, etc. The purpose of the document analysis was to gather further data, which would then be used to check, and hopefully increase, the credibility of the study by comparing and corroborating the data gained from the interviews.

As most data collection methods, document analysis also has its flaws. Biased selectivity could have occurred, by both the CEO and the researchers themselves. To limit this, bias the researchers

looked at each of the documents separately and then came together to share notes on them. Even though biased selectivity could still occur, this way could lower the chances of influencing each other during the analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis Method

With our different data collection methods, we gained a plentitude of empirical material, therefore this subsection will explain the various techniques used in order to sort, extract, and analyze the most relevant material for this study.

Since this is a qualitative thesis based on interviews there is a substantial amount of data that will need to be sorted and reduced in order to make sense of it (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). We transcribed our interviews shortly after they had been held and wrote down our observations during the interviews. We then codified our data into different themes that were detected. When categorizing into different themes we focused on both what was being said and how it was being said, as recommended by Gubrium and Holstein (1997) called the analytical bracketing technique. The goal was to be able to organize and categorize the data, and to reduce the material by choosing the most relevant and interesting themes. We are aware that all interesting themes cannot be addressed in this thesis, thus, the material was reduced by choosing the most relevant concepts in order to be able to go in-depth and contribute to the existing knowledge (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). To try and reduce biased judgments we did the initial analysis separately and then came together to discuss what felt vital in analyzing further and discussing in this study. The documents we received were both used before the interviews to have a clearer understanding of what they are going through, but other documents were also used after the interviews in order to verify some essential themes that emerge during the investigation.

3.4 Research Quality, Reflexivity and Ethics

With any study there are factors that can influence the result, and thereby have an effect on the quality of the data and study conducted. This subsection will, therefore, include factors that could

have altered the quality of this study, and ways in which we tried to reduce this. It will also disclose ways in which we kept within the lines of ethical guidelines.

We are aware and recognize that our empirical data may be biased since our research was focused on middle management and mainly get their point of view, which may be perceived differently compared to other employees at different levels (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2002). However, the aim of this study was to understand middle management, their sensemaking, and their role during cultural change.

A big part of this study is the concept of sensemaking, and it would be a mistake if we did not mention it here as well. Even though Weick's (1995) sensemaking is aimed at organizations, it is still applicable to us in some sense. The way we make sense of concepts and situations are different and thereby can affect the results of our study by the way we formulate our questions, interpret the answers, language, and emotions, among many other things. This can also be seen as a strength in the sense of gaining different opinions on the same matter. However, it can also affect the results of our study by misinterpreting what our interviewees said or meant. To reduce this we conducted semi-structured interviews with how and why questions, which allowed our interviewees to explain and elaborate on different matters to avoid misunderstandings, miscommunications and assumptions as much as possible (Prasad, 2018).

To practice reflexivity, we were aware of not being steered in a certain theoretical direction because of our background in change management studies and theories we have studied. We aimed to be open to viewing our findings from different perspectives without preconceived assumptions. Also, we did not use management terms when conducting our interviews but tried to formulate our questions as simple as possible. This was because we are aware of the different backgrounds, we may have from them and, therefore, we may have different meanings connected to the words. This could have otherwise changed the outcome of the results.

To ensure privacy and ethics, this study included an ethical consent form created by Lund University, with minor modifications, such as name and title of the study. This consent form was

sent out to all participants to be signed before the interview took place, where it stated specifically that the study was anonymous, confidential and participants could withdraw at any moment without explanation. The participants were always allowed to stop and ask us questions when needed, especially about privacy and confidentiality, which most participants did. Moreover, all the names in this study have been replaced with random pseudonyms with no regard to gender.

Those who were sent the questionnaire were told that it was anonymous, confidential and that they could withdraw whenever they wanted without explanation. To add to this, the questionnaire was created in a way where no information, like email, was collected and therefore we did not receive any information from those who participated other than their answers. With these initiatives and assurances, we believe and are satisfied that this study is in line with ethical guidelines.

3.5 General Limitations

The company is Swedish and has its headquarters in Sweden, but they are also in the UK, Norway, and Denmark. Thus, several different nationalities and languages, this brought up the issues of interpretation and translation, which could impact the results negatively. This was because some interviews had to be done in Norwegian, Swedish and in English due to the varying levels of the English language. We tried as much as we could to conduct the interviews in English, however, some were not comfortable speaking a different language. Thus, interpretations of both questions and answers could differ due to cultural background, which can impact how people interpret certain questions or certain words, as well as the language barrier that could limit a person to fully explain an event or feelings as intended (Bryman and Bell, 2015). For the sake of the interviewees to be able to express themselves freely and feel comfortable, some of the interviews were held in Swedish and some in Norwegian. Most were conducted in English. To reduce the bias and miscommunication as much as possible, we attempted to keep the questions short and clear, and since one of the researchers were more comfortable with English, she was in charge of the English interviews, while the other, who was more comfortable with Swedish, was in charge of the Swedish and Norwegian interviews. However, this also brings up the issues of some aspects of the

interviews being lost in translation since words can mean differently in different languages and cultures. We, therefore, tried to have the interviewees elaborate on certain points for clarification so the translation would not be too affected.

It can be argued that another limitation is the small sample size within this study (n=14), which could lead to generalized and biased results (Bryman and Bell, 2015). To minimize this limitation as much as we could, we tried to interview a diverse group of people who had different backgrounds, positions, experiences, as well as were in different countries, to balance the results.

Chapter 4. Empirical Results

In this chapter our empirical material will be presented to the reader structured in different themes. This chapter will follow the following structure; Firstly, the background and context of the organization will be presented in order to get familiar with the organization and its cultural background. Then, the new strategy will be presented based on data gathered through a document analysis on documentation regarding the formulation of the new strategy. Next the implementation and communication process top-down will be described to present how the strategy was handed over from top to middle management. Afterward the middle manager's interpretations of the new strategy and their role in the strategy implementation will be presented and compared to show that there are various interpretations present. Lastly, the perceived outcomes of the change process will be presented to highlight discrepancies between the intended change and the actual outcome.

4.1 Understanding Alpha - Background & Context

Alpha is a company with a history that the employees are proud of. Alpha is a company that has been in the business for 60 years and has basically been built on the same concept the whole time without major changes. The company is an old manufacturer with a strong focus on quality and security. When asked upon what they liked about Alpha almost all of the interviewees said that they enjoyed working for a company with such a high quality and safe product; a product they are proud of.

Being a 60-year-old company in the business, you have a lot of knowledge and experience. We are a high-quality company and I am working with some very good people around me who have a lot of knowledge and experience of what they are doing. - Charles

When people were asked why they are working at Alpha the majority answered it was because of the product and its quality and potential; “for me, it is the products, the quality” - Charles. James similarly answered; “The potential in our products, our material, is infinite. You can build or do almost anything you can, only imagination is the limit.” Another example is; “There is a lot of pride, definitely. It is one of the main reasons why I still work at Alpha, I am extremely proud of the company and its products.” - Mike. From these statements it is clear that the proudness of the company and its product are central within the organization and its culture from a middle management perspective. This company has a history of being a proud manufacturer of a high-quality product. The products are evidently central to the existing culture at Alpha and a big reason why people are working there.

However, a common theme during the interviews was how the history of being a production-focused company for 60 years has created a production-focused culture that is hard to change which is perceived as problematic when wanting to implement new ideas or renew the old ways of working.

But the culture in it is a little bit difficult to work with from time to time because it's a very old culture and from time to time a very old way of thinking because we are a company that is over 60 years old so there can be a little bit of arrogance about us as being a company for 60 years. We say that the culture is hanging in the walls and if you want to change the culture it is a little bit more difficult - Charles

Scott and Otto further adds that Alpha was centered around the production and that they were in charge of what was being produced, not the customers.

Before the new strategy it was all about production. We want to produce this because we like to produce this and not what the market wanted, or customers wanted but what Alpha wanted, and you could take it or leave it. Pretty arrogant actually - Scott

The factory has been the most important thing for 60 years. The factory (...) was the most important place in Alpha because that is where we manufactured a very very high-quality product - Otto

A term that was used repeatedly during interviews was that the culture is “*ingrained in the walls*”. In an email to employees that informed them about this study, the culture was also referred to as “stuck in the walls”. This metaphor implies that the old culture is hard to get rid of. The culture

within the company is, based on these statements, problematic and one reason why Alpha has not renewed itself. Another issue that has been causing frustration within Alpha is the lack of common language and the lack of understanding between departments, for example production and sales staff.

In my job, they [customers] come to me and tell me what they need. But when I go to production and say "hey, listen, this is what the customers tell me they need" the production they say "yes we have heard what you have said but we do not have the time to listen to you". The difference between what they do and what the customers tell us that they need is the biggest difficulty. I understand it because I am so close to the customers, I understand what they mean but the production, it feels like they are miles away from us. So, I think that for me this is the biggest problem - Scott

The problem of being divided was also brought up by Kevin, even though he emphasized that this is something that has improved.

It was four different corporations; it was like four different silos with very little cooperation between them. I also felt that there were silos even between departments in each country. This is something that has been improved lately, we are starting to work more as a team, even though we are not there yet - Kevin

The production focused culture has caused troubles in terms of sales due to a neglect of external perspective of what the market and the customers want. This has caused friction between different departments. It is also clear from this statement that this is an organization that has a history of being divided without much collaboration. This has created a problematic situation where sales were dropping as new competitors entered the market.

4.2 The New Strategy

This part is based on Alphas strategy documents. How Alpha is conducting their business lies in its DNA as an engineering and manufacturing company, where the focus has been more internal rather than on customers. However, as the market and competitors have increased, they can no longer only rely on manufacturing and have to focus more actively on customers and sales. The market has changed, and customers are requesting flexibility and customized solutions, this has caused problems since Alpha is perceived as an inflexible company that no longer can meet the demand of the market. This is why the senior management team decided they needed to transform

from a manufacturer to a sales company. To form this new strategy the company used a consultancy firm, as well as gathered several middle managers in various workshops to get their input.

During 2018, Alpha started working with creating a new strategy to develop the company further and the implementation of this strategy is still an ongoing project. The goal was to create long-term growth with increasing profitability. To be able to do this they have created building blocks on which the strategy rests on:

- Focus on markets close to home
- Increase focus on complex segments within sectors
- Transform from manufacturer to sales company
- Strengthen value proposition
- Tailor to customer types
- Optimize production and logistics

These six building blocks are also visualized in the figure below. This visualization was presented both in the annuals report 2018/19 and when presenting the strategy to the organization.

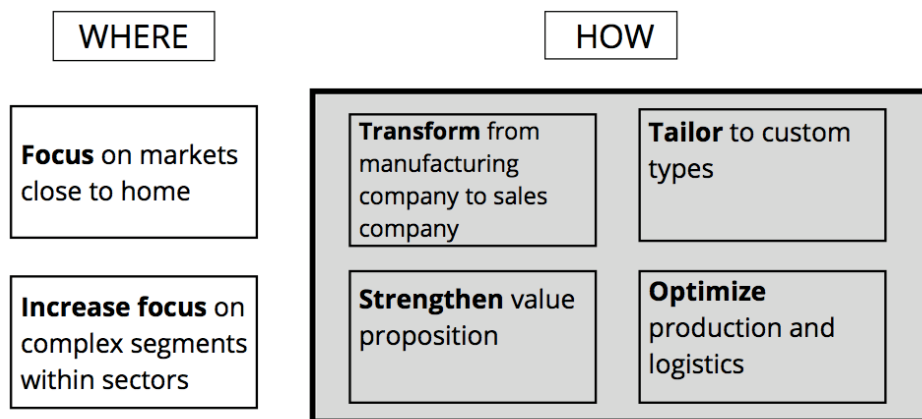


Figure 2 - Alphas new Strategy, as seen in their annual report 2018/2019

In figure two the strategy is illustrated as it was presented in the strategy document. The figure might come across as unclear and hard to grasp which is the main point in this case due to the fact that it is written in general business words. In this thesis, we will focus on the cultural part of this new strategy which is transforming the manufacturer into a sales company. The top management has no specific implementation plan for how this plan should be realized, instead, the view of change is that “change should be a part of life” as stated in an interview with the CEO. The change is supposed to be a natural part of organizational life and therefore the senior management team did not believe in creating a common implementation plan. The view of the top management is that this change process needs to be interpreted and implemented on a local level. Further, the management team describes the change process as successful so far but that there is still work to be done since the implementation is in its early stages. It is described that, so far, there has been no resistance to the implemented change and people seem to understand and agree that this is the best way forward. Overall the process is described by the senior management as rather uncomplicated and straight forward. Their perception is also that the cultural change has not reached the lower levels of the organization yet, which implies that there is more work to be done.

4.2.1 Becoming “One Alpha”

Another process that is going on in the company, which is not mentioned in the above-presented strategy, is that Alpha is moving towards becoming a functional organization. The company has organizations in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and the UK which have previously worked as separate entities. A gradual process is in place with the goal of making these separate entities work more as a team, becoming “One Alpha”. Even though it is not specifically mentioned in the strategy, many of those interviewed talked about it.

The biggest part [change] is that Alpha is “one Alpha” today and not four different Alpha. The silos [walls] between us have absolutely been torn down. - Kevin

Other managers agreed that it is not as separate anymore but that it still has a long way to go.

Alpha has, I do not want to say been divided but every country has worked on their own (...) the work to form “one Alpha” is constantly being worked on. However, we are not quite there yet. The organization is still divided - Mike

The majority of the interviewees talked about how Alpha has been very disconnected between each country and that it has improved greatly but it still has a long way to go before it is adequate. This divide will be a central point in our thesis, as it was one of the most talked-about subjects.

4.3 Implementation and Interaction of the New Strategy

This part will focus on what happened after that the strategy formulation was done and ready to leave the drawing board and set into motion. A process of handing over the responsibility for implementation to the middle managers will be described.

4.3.1 Communication of the New Strategy

The new strategy was communicated to middle management through meetings and workshops where they had the opportunity to express their opinions.

We spent many many months working on this. We had a few workshops where we met and discussed. We had small workshops where we talked about what we feel, what we can do, and a lot of ideas that we lifted up in the small and big workshops. We were so close and everyone had the same focus (...) In these workshops everyone talked and listened, lifted up ideas, and spoke together and a lot of ideas came from everyone. So yes, absolutely, the workshop was good. - Scott

As mentioned, the new strategy was communicated to the middle management level through meetings and workshops. Except for that, there seems to be a general perception in the company that if you have questions it is then your responsibility to seek the answer.

I do not know if everybody in the organization does [understands the strategy], I must say that I do [understand] because I seek the information and get it but you have to be actively doing it. Because you do not just lean back because then I probably would not have got all the information. So, the flow is not automatic. So, you have to seek it from time to time. That is also what I tell my people, my employees, if you do not know then ask somebody instead of saying "no I did not know" - Charles

Regarding the communication of the new strategy the middle managers get informed on meetings and workshops, and except for that they had the opportunity to ask if they had any questions. Several of the interviewed middle managers describe the CEO as very present and that his door is always open for questions, as exemplified below by Mike;

If you do not understand then it will be explained very clearly and emphasize that there is no shame in asking questions and saying if you are not following what is being said. Our CEO is very clear about this and that his door is open if you are wondering about anything. That is worth a lot. - Mike

Based on these quotes there is a view of the climate as open where questions are encouraged and not punished. A potential risk with this type of communication, where the flow is not automatic, to use the phrasing from the quote, is that people that are not motivated to change will not seek information.

4.3.2 A Decentralized Change Implementation

As mentioned, middle management was informed of this new strategy by taking place in meetings, workshops, and information sessions with senior management. Afterward, the middle managers are supposed to spread this change in the organization, but there were no directions regarding how this should be done.

So, it was definitely not a strong direction from the headquarter that you have to do it this way, not like 'here is a blueprint of how to do it, this is how it should be done'. We have done our own stuff, no one told us to do it this way, we just decided to do it this way. I think if you ask the other countries, they have done something else. So, no strong directions from headquarters on how this should be done. There are of course positives and negatives with this. The positives are that you have the freedom to do what you think works best in your own setting, negative is that you do not get a common approach across the group; you develop your own customer-oriented culture - Mark

Mark sees both positive and negative aspects of this approach. The positive side is the freedom to adapt the strategy to fit the local context while a negative could be the lack of a common approach. Kevin, another manager, backs up this claim with what he thinks is missing to be able to take the next step.

The part that we might like more help with is to take it to the next step. We have a strategy, we have started to work with it, but how do we continue? How do we go deeper into the building blocks? What kind of objectives are there within the blocks that we can follow? They [the building blocks] are quite general today. How do we get them more concrete for each department? Those are the resources That is what I feel is missing to be able to follow through these parts. You have your regular job as well, the daily tasks, and if there is limited time and resources then there is not enough time to go in and work with the strategy in detail. - Kevin

Based on this statement the middle managers were informed of the new strategy and then it was up to every individual to decide how to proceed. The change was thereby implemented and communicated in a decentralized manner. It was up to every manager to take the strategy, interpret it, and implement it in their own department. The manager in this quote has also made a relevant reflection regarding that each country possibly develops its own customer-oriented culture which will be further discussed later in this essay. In other words, a too strong local focus is contradicting and could possibly undermine the process of becoming “one Alpha”. Further, Kevin acknowledges that the middle managers still have to perform their regular tasks which leaves them with limited time to focus on the new strategy.

4.4 Reception and Interpretations of the New Strategy

In general, the interviewees were happy with the new strategic direction of the company and the general perception was that this change is going in the right direction. This section will present more thoroughly how the strategy has been received and interpreted in the company.

4.4.1 Language Barriers

One aspect of the new strategy was the language used which was general business terms. Several managers mentioned that they had struggled relating to the words, thereby the strategy needed interpretation as exemplified by Charles and Mark:

Management consultancy language is like gibberish to most people and often does not make sense for people when they read it. - Charles.

Mark also thought the language needed to be changed and told us how he went about it.

It is very symbolic to have it in your own language I think, so, we took the time to translate it to [our language] and put it in words that we felt that people could understand and not use Management consultancy language, which is like gibberish to most people and very often without any sense really for most people when they read it. So we put it into very understandable words and had two times two hours discussing and presenting what this means to us - Mark

Scott gives an example of the language and words used, which did not resonate well with them.

They [the consultants] say sales-oriented but I think that is a very bad word to use for customers, they do not want to hear that we are coming to sell them stuff, I prefer to use the word market-oriented - Scott

From these statements it is clear that the language and the choice of words used in the strategy are not familiar in the company, which calls for translation into understandable terms in order to adapt it to the context. The very general choice of words that also are not familiar to the employees opens up for a possibility of different interpretations of the strategy. This will be looked upon more closely in the following discussion section.

4.4.2 Confusion about Objectives

There is a general perception among the middle managers that the new strategy was easy to understand on an overall level but there is some confusion regarding what this actually implies in practice.

Looking back, when we started up it was easy, 'no problem we will fix it'. But it is more complicated than that, we came up with what we should move from and what the goal was, but I think that in the process we needed more tools on how to do it. 'What to do' was easy, but how to do it was tougher - Charles

It was also mentioned how the culture change was not the most prioritized part of the new strategy.

I think it has not been a very strong corporate focus to change the culture, it has been spoken about, talked about in management meetings, but it has been left mostly to the business units to sort them out themselves - Mark

The fact that the new strategy was on an overall level without objectives caused confusion regarding how the new strategic goals would be accomplished. Below Tim shows this confusion with a hint of frustration.

The strategy itself makes sense, but it is not granular enough. It is very top level, so the building blocks have not been broken down into group-level objectives, it is very vague. So we want to enter more complex segments but there is no objective against that. Initially we had these slides by the consultants that were presented to us on a top-level basis and that was it. It stopped there and we were told, each and every one, to go and decide how to work with this, but people interpreted it differently. It is difficult because there are no group-level objectives against the strategy, how should you then break them down into individual departments objectives, and set objectives by person? I do not know how other managers go about it. - Tim

The confusion regarding the lack of objectives is further described by Larry who describes how other colleagues similarly describe the situation.

From the conversations that I have had with colleagues, it has always been like 'alright we have seen these slides but we do not really know what we are doing with them' and it is almost like everyone is so busy, and there are individuals that are so stretched, in terms of workload and capacity (...) they do not have the time to assess whether they should be doing their work differently, or what else they could be doing to support that strategy - Larry

These statements show that some of the middle managers are struggling with what the objectives of the new strategy are. They all seem to have a common idea of what the goal is but no clear way to get there. The absence of clear objectives opens up the possibility of different interpretations regarding how to approach this task. It also puts a lot of responsibility on the middle managers to translate the strategy into their local context and figure out how to approach it.

4.4.3 A Challenge that Creates Commitment, Motivation and Creativity

The decentralized approach without clear objectives has raised questions among the managers but the responsibility and freedom to act have also increased the motivation, commitment, and creativity among some of the managers. Charles, Mark, and Kevin talk about this change as a positive force in the company that they are happy to be a part of and they sound very committed to the company and the new strategy.

I prefer the decentralized approach to be able to decide how to approach it, how to present it, which levels to push and pull to push the culture in the country which I am responsible for, so I have to take care of my organization. I think it is easier to decide for yourself, you know your organization and you know your people so you can trim it and adapt it to something that you know well and will resonate with the people, something that they will understand. - Mark

With a decentralized approach, Charles is motivated to change and has many ideas he is planning on implementing in order to foster a more collaborative and creative work environment.

The thing is that I wanted to create a more creative work environment. Also, we are an old fashion company and in our office, we work in what I call cages. It is like an office for one person. It is not getting creative that way, you have to put them in the same room, maybe with a little wall between so when you rise to stand up you can see everybody. - Charles

Another manager said he likes the challenges and thinks it is an important and fun part of his work.

I see it as a challenge to find ways to get this to work, finding ways to persuade people around me that this is the right way. - Kevin

They perceive the absence of objectives as a challenge and the freedom to do what they think is the best solution in their local context which fosters creativity. These managers further state that they are motivated by responsibility and challenges in their work. The decentralized approach has indeed raised questions, but some managers seem motivated to find the solutions.

4.4.4 Different Interpretations of the Role as Middle Manager

One distinction that was noted among the managers was their perception of how this new strategy and change process affected them in their work. Some described how this change had affected their role as managers in terms of new ways of working, new challenges to tackle while others perceived themselves as rather unaffected by this change process.

I guess that is what is interesting with this company, that it has existed for so long and they have built and sustained the company on this system and the concept which has worked all these years, so my challenge is to find new ways, new ideas, new challenges, new ways of thinking and get that change to spread throughout the company - Kevin

Here Kevin explains he is active in trying to get his colleagues to become more engaged in the change process. As previously mentioned, Kevin expressed that he enjoys challenges like these and that it motivates him in his job. The second manager, Charles, is eager to change the work environment to help his team become more comfortable with the new strategy. One of the ways

he is planning on doing this is changing the physical environment as well, as he mentioned in a previous subsection.

I try to create a more open and, you know, not open but a different work environment than we had because it has always been in kind of boxes, you know, so it is about opening up these boxes and moving people's comfort zones; making them more comfortable with the new strategy. But it takes time, but we are working, and we will get there. Definitely. But it takes time, it does... - Charles

As shown throughout this chapter, Mark is another manager who has been affected by the strategy and is active in implementing it. Below shows manager James' positive reaction to the change and how it affected his job, however, due to anonymity and ethics we cannot go into details about how.

So when I was first introduced to the idea I was very quick to get on board with the idea (...) and I think it is a good way to do it. After all, there is a way of working that you have worked on before and you are constantly trying to find improvements and steps to get closer to the strategic goal. And it is difficult to change old routines and it will take time, but you have to take it step by step. But I definitely think we are on our way but then it is about changing routines and ways of working on a practical level, It is a big challenge - James

Managers Kevin, Charles, Mark, and James showed responsibility for taking initiatives and implementing this change. In their translation of the strategy they have positioned themselves as responsible for implementing this change and this is something that affects their everyday work in a significant way.

Managers Noah, Larry, Edward, and Otto on the other hand perceive themselves as not significantly affected by the change, it does not affect their way of working that much. Some of the managers said that this strategic change had not been affecting them that much in their daily work. They agreed that the strategy is good and the right way forward for Alpha but when asked upon how they are affected by and working with the new strategy the answer was that they were not that affected and that their daily work task did not change very much.

My tasks or my role has not really changed that much but one has to change mindset a little and think at a bigger, helicopter level, so that one has the new strategy in mind when doing an analysis for example - Noah

The following two quotes by Larry and Edward continue in the same line as Noah. The interviews with Larry and Edward often consisted of short, straight to the point answers, compared to other managers, for example, those who feel the strategy has affected them.

Not that much affected actually, it is not that much change according to me - Larry

No, I have not really noticed a change in my work in relation to the new strategy - Edward

Otto said that the change has not had a significant impact on him either and therefore, he continues on as he usually does.

No, I continue to work the way I have always done. I do not think it is that much of a big change. We might be more attentive to the customer, more customer-oriented than we were before, that we have gotten better at. - Otto

Notable in these statements is that these managers talk in terms of that they have not noticed or observed that much of a change in relation to the previously mentioned managers who talk about how they are planning on taking initiatives to make change happen.

4.4.5 Different Approaches to Managing Culture

Another distinction that was noted among the managers when asked to describe the new strategy in their own words and what this meant for them was the people or task orientation. Managers Charles, Kevin and Mark put a strong emphasis on the need to make the people understand the change. Their approach was people-focused with individual dialogues making sure that each person understands the new strategy.

It is always a different thing to work with people because there is no clear answer about right and wrong and people are different, so it is a big challenge. Sometimes it is very frustrating when you get setbacks you though you have got the message through and you evidently had not so you had to repeat and it is a continuous process and its challenging and rewarding because you see that over time things are slowly moving in the right direction but there are no shortcuts it is like discipline and repeating. Change is about doing very simple things with a very high degree of discipline again and again. Repeating the same message this is where we are going so we have to do it this way now, explain why you do things not how but why. Always explaining why, I think this is important. And that is what we have done nothing more complex than that, it is very simple and very complicated at the same time - Mark

Much like Mark, above, Kevin also sees the change as a welcomed challenge because of the people-focused aspect in implementing the change.

I myself feel that it is a challenge that one must tackle. And the challenge lies in finding ways to convince them. The first step is to convince them to the stage that they are willing to try. Then it is very important to have a dialogue with these people and continue to convince them until they get to the stage that they feel this is good and they themselves come with improvements and suggestions. Then you feel that you have achieved it and that there is change - Kevin

Mike believes that in order to convince people he needs to bring them out of their comfort zone and by doing that he needs to be people-focused and not rush.

Changing culture is about getting people to become comfortable with change and leave their comfort zones because when people do not leave their comfort zones they stay in their old culture because we feel comfortable there. At the end of the day it is discussing every day when stuff happens that is relevant, and you have to discuss with them if you see that they and slowly they will learn and get comfortable. It is not like a magic wand; you have to take it case by case. - Mike

Charles realized how differently his team understood the strategy because of what they, consciously or subconsciously, wanted to hear.

When you do the presentations telling the strategy of the future and the culture change we want to go from production to a sales company and all this stuff, they listen to it but if you have 10-15 people in the room, everybody will listen to it in their own way and the thing is that they pick up on different things. Whatever affects them is what they hear and remember, the rest they will not hear. So afterwards I had to talk to each of them because everybody saw what it was, but everybody had their own version of it, so how will it affect "me?". So, you have to go through person by person, so everybody understands it, and then you have to keep them in the loop and information and stuff like that. - Charles

Also, Scott and Tim emphasized the importance of getting everyone on board with change as the most important aspect.

I believe the biggest issue and hindrance for change is the culture, therefore it is important that everyone is open to change and on board with the new strategy. I believe that is a big challenge and I do not know how that is going. - Tim

It is very important that everyone is on board with the change process and understands that this is the right way and the new direction. That is the most important and probably the most challenging part of change according to me - Scott

These managers view managing cultural change as a matter of leading people, making sure they understand why to change and making people comfortable in their new working environment. They all emphasized to dialog with people as the most important thing during cultural change.

They emphasized that people will interpret the same information differently based on what affects them and the importance of information and support.

The rest of the managers had a different approach to change. Their focus was on a more practical level in relation to changes in formal structures, technical details, administration, optimization or efficiency. There was no focus on the understanding of people as was emphasized by the previous managers, instead there was a focus on routines and tasks.

That is what I mean when I say that change is a work in progress, you look at the tasks that need to be filled and you see who can fill them and work from that. You need to find elements in tasks and routines that can be changed and done more efficient - James

Both James and Mike talk about the different ways in which their practical focus is part of the change.

I try to improve efficiency as much as I can. I talk and know a lot of products and articles, we get new articles that replace old ones and we have to phase out the old, so to say, to have as clean an article base as possible if you understand. - Mike

Further Adam, and Noah referred to managing changes in administration and technical aspects;

The most important part for me to change is how to adopt the technical aspects of our products to fit with the new strategy and create competitive advantage in the future - Adam

This change requires a lot of change in our files and registers. I try my best to sort everything out and update files and product lists and specifications to fit with the new mindset - Noah

These managers could be categorized as being task-oriented rather than people-oriented due to their focus on practical matters rather than how people interpret and feel regarding the new strategy. All managers were asked the same questions but showed different approaches to managing change.

4.5 Outcomes and Results of the New Strategy (So Far)

This section will focus on the perceived outcomes of the strategy implementation so far in the process.

4.5.1 Moving in the Right Direction - But Slower Than Expected

When asked how the cultural change process has been working so far everyone agreed that it is moving in the right direction but slower than expected. Also, the structural change seems to move further than the cultural change.

The internal cultural change you can see the change, but it has not gotten the same effect as the external. They have not followed each other, the external has gone very fast while the internal does not change as fast. - Kevin

Charles has the same view as Kevin, where the varying speed is noticeable.

Well it is going forward. Definitely. You see a certain change, but I think it is going slower than expected because the thing is... (...) I think there is a common problem where you have to get it to spread to the whole organization so everybody understands where we are going. And it is moving but I think it is moving slower than expected. - Charles

It has been mentioned several times that the cultural change is not on top of the agenda and the managers who value culture find this neglect of culture frustrating. The cultural change is perceived as moving in the right direction but slower than expected because of the problem of spreading the change throughout the whole organization. This could be a consequence of culture not being prioritized.

4.5.2 Unclear Outcomes

Several managers answered that from this thesis they want to learn what other countries have done, how they interpreted the strategy, what has been working well and perhaps not so well and how far the new culture has spread which implies that the managers are unaware regarding how the change process is unfolding outside of their department. Hence, the outcomes of the change

process so far is unclear - there seems to be a need for follow up, feedback and exchange of experiences among the managers.

I would have like to see more that we at least discussed and exchanged experiences, what did we do, how did we do in our market, it is okay that people do different things but at least share the experience and if somebody not doing anything or something counterproductive towards what we are trying to achieve it can be steered in the right direction. And to learn from each other, what has worked and what has not worked. It has not been so much of that as I would have liked. - Mark

The need for information exchanges is also expressed by Kevin.

What I feel is missing is the feedback, you have had information in different groups and workshops but what is missing is the feedback. What have you learned, what do you bring with you, what are the things we need to change or look at in a different way, we may need to run a second round. - Kevin

There seems to be a need for communication, exchange of experiences and learning, the managers seem to have a feeling of being alone in this process. As mentioned by Mark it would be a good idea to change experiences in order to catch if someone is doing something counterproductive in order to make sure that everyone is working towards the same goal in this process.

4.5.3 One Alpha and Local Implementation

When asked how the processes of changing the culture is unfolding, there are in general two different stories among the middle managers. One about how the manufacturing company is moving towards customer orientation and one about how a company with silos between departments and countries are trying to tear down these walls and become a function-based organization. These stories are told separately without connections to each other. There seems to be a general perception that there are two separate projects running at the same time with a lack of connection to each other; the implementation of the new strategy and the process of becoming a functional organization. Some describe it as “we are moving towards a functional organization with a cultural project running alongside, so it is two different projects” - James. While others put more emphasis on the cultural aspects and do not put significant attention to the goal of becoming a functional organization. A potential problem with two different processes without connections is that the way they are being implemented could, therefore, contradict each other. “It kind of seems like each country has gone away and done what they want with the strategy, but then it in

some cases contradicts working as more as a functional organization since each country will interpret it to themselves” - Tim. The fact that every country and every department has its own way of interpreting and working with this cultural change could possibly strengthen the existing divided culture and be counterproductive when wanting to create one Alpha. This could be a reason for the slow progress of the strategy internally in the company.

4.6 Summary of Empirical Material

Alpha has a history as a proud manufacturer, but the production focused culture has now been appointed a hindrance for renewal. By the help of consultants, a new strategy was formulated that included a culture change from production focused to sales focused. The new strategy was formulated on a strategic level without connections to the operational level. After being presented to the new strategy the middle managers were expected to implement the change in their respective department. This left the middle managers with a big task of figuring out - what does the strategy mean for my department and how do I change the culture? The outcome of this change is therefore dependent on the sensemaking and actions taken by middle managers. As has been described, different attitudes towards the change implementation were detected where some seem to actively create change while others were more of a passive recipient of change that adjusted instead of created change. There were also different perceptions of what to change, some emphasized changing people and culture while others emphasized tasks that needed to change. The outcomes of this change process are so far unclear. The process is described to be moving forward, but slowly. The lack of communication and feedback has created a situation where the middle managers are not aware of how the cultural process is unfolding outside of their own department.

Chapter 5. Discussion

This chapter will discuss the empirical material in relation to the theoretical framework. The chapter will begin with a discussion regarding the formulation of the new strategy, mainly based on the analysis of strategy documents. Thereafter, the manager's various approaches to managing cultural change will be discussed. This will be followed by a section that discusses how the middle managers perceived their role during change, and how they chose to act based on their sensemaking and image of change. The variables of sensemaking and image of managing change will thereafter be combined and presented in a matrix to show four different approaches to change found in this case. This chapter will end with a discussion regarding the middle managers perception of their role in the change process, and how this has influenced the outcome of the change project. Please note, that in this chapter the use of the word manager(s) means middle management, while senior and/or top management/managers is not used synonymously with managers, unless stated differently.

5.1 The New Strategy

Analyzing documents regarding the new strategy and the background work, it is evident that a significant period of time was spent constructing the new strategy. In order to devise a new strategy, consultants were brought in to hold customer interviews, meetings with middle managers, and gather data. The scale of change, involvement of consultants, and considerable time spent planning made this project resemble a grand technocratic project (Alvesson, 2013). Analyzing documents concerning strategy formulation it was noted that an implementation plan regarding the execution of this change was missing. The CEO explained that he wanted the change: “to be a part of the daily life“ on a local level, furthermore he did not believe in constructing a common implementation plan. Using the terminology of Alvesson (2013) the studied case might therefore best be described as a mixture of a grand technocratic project and everyday reframing. The

planning phase started with a diagnostic approach. Problems were identified by senior management alongside consultants, and a new future state was idealized. In the implementation phase, responsibility of implementing the new strategy in everyday work in a local context was handed over to middle management. The implementation phase was executed on a local level by middle management without involvement of senior managers, as Mark describes it, “*we have done our own stuff (...) no strong directions from headquarters on how this should be done.*” The implementation stage is therefore more characteristic of local everyday reframing (Alvesson, 2013).

Analysis of strategy documents, complemented by the thoughts of the CEO, raises questions regarding the separation of the grand and the local. There are no explanations regarding what the strategy should entail in everyday practice. The new strategy is formulated using general business terminology that is vague and disconnected from the operational level (see fig.1). The CEO further described that middle management is expected and responsible for facilitating and implementing change downwards. Senior management receives feedback from middle management during meetings regarding the status of the change, upon which groundwork for improvements can be made. Senior management expects middle management to act as what can be described as: implementer, facilitator, synthesizer, and champion of alternatives (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). The grand plans regarding the overall business plan of senior management were handed over to middle managers in a local context and were supposed to be implemented on a day-to-day basis. A gap is evident between the plans, and the context in which they are supposed to be implemented. The individual middle manager has to make sense of what the strategy entails on a local level and continue leading the change downwards in the organization. This process will be further explained and elaborated on in this discussion.

5.2 Various Approaches to Managing Cultural Change

Managing cultural change has been proven to be so challenging, that some would even argue that it is not possible (Harris & Ogbonna, 1998). Furthermore, several different views on managing

change exist. Since middle managers are responsible for implementing and sustaining culture change in our case, this section will focus on their view of the task.

Following an introduction to the strategy through several meetings and workshops, the middle managers were supposed to spread their interpretation of the strategy downwards in the organization. A clear distinction between managers who approached this with a view of management as *controlling* or *shaping* was noted (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). It should however be noted that things are never black and white, and that this is a broad categorization. As mentioned by Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan (2017) managers can switch between these images, and a more accurate description would probably contain elements of both. For the purpose of this thesis, we categorize them based on the characteristics that were most outstanding regarding their view of cultural change management. Their view of managing change will direct the attention of managers to certain factors in line with their image and can make them oblivious to other aspects (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017).

5.2.1 Management as Controlling

Interviewees James and Mike talked about the change in terms of administration, optimization, routines, and coordination. Their focus was on which tasks that needed to be done in order to reach new goals. These managers emphasized the structural component of the change and talked very little about culture in general. An example of this is from James: “I definitely think we are on our way but then it is about changing routines and ways of working on a practical level.” When asked to explain the new strategy, neither mentioned the cultural aspect. When asked to comment specifically on the cultural part they both stated, “that is another project that we have alongside”, without much further elaboration. Noah, Adam, and Edward had a similar approach. They described technological details, changes in the product line, and registers when asked to elaborate on how they are working with the new strategy. All described practical details that needed to be changed in order to provide efficiency. These managers can be described as having a *controlling* image of managing change (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). They seem to emphasize typical managerial tasks and hard values. In other words, they all described managing change in terms of

the tasks associated with it. Furthermore, even though it was not explicitly discussed, these managers seem to have a view of change as possible or at least somewhat possible to control (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). This interpretation is based on that they did not mention any specific hindrances, signs of resistance, or obstacles in relation to change. Several of them emphasized that they will reach their goal given enough time and resources to do the task needed.

Based on their image of managing change, structural factors and routines were in focus. Secondary was managing the cultural aspect of the change. These managers preferentially directed their actions towards tasks, rather than people. The new strategy contained several different changes. As mentioned by Mark and Kevin, who have a shaping view of managing, changing the corporate culture has not been a priority in meetings with senior management. It is possible that their controlling image of managing, in combination with a low overall focus on culture in the company, directed their focus to aspects other than culture.

5.2.2 Management as Shaping

Remaining managers showed a stronger focus on managing as *shaping* (Palmer, Dunford, Buchanan, 2017). Upon describing their view of managing cultural change, they emphasized the need to get everyone within the organization “on board” with the change. Examples mentioned include the involvement of people: encouraging them to try new things and take responsibility, providing clear information, and ensuring understanding. Kevin, Mark, and Charles stood out especially in this category. For example, when Mark translated the strategy into a language his team understood, and had workshops focusing on the change. Further, Kevin and Charles both said that they hold individual and group meetings with all of their subordinates, to continuously monitor the development and reception of the cultural process. Mark stated in the interviews that “a new strategy will never work if the culture does not support it”. These managers put a strong emphasis on the need to change the culture within the company and displayed some frustration that the rest of the company did not prioritize the cultural aspect of the change. Further, these managers reflected upon that they faced some resistance. They saw the hard and unpredictable ways their subordinates could interpret the new strategy and saw this change process as challenging but also

acknowledged that people are hard to control. In comparison to the above-described managers, these managers seem to have a view of change that it is not possible to fully control, however, they still seem confident that change outcomes are at least partially possible to control through active communication with people.

It is evident that there are differences in approaches to managing change amongst the managers. In this thesis we do not want to argue that one approach is superior. Instead the most beneficial scenario for a change process might be one where managers are able to see multiple facets of the change (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). Intriguingly, most of the middle managers seem to take either a cultural or a structural perspective. There are different streams of research regarding if culture change should be conducted by targeting mindsets or targeting behaviors, and there is no definitive answer (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003). Managers with people orientation seem to target culture directly, while the task focused managers target behavior. Some researchers argue that when people change their behavior, culture change will follow (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). Therefore, the managers with task orientation might still be active in changing the culture albeit indirectly. Even though a controlling style of management might not be intrinsically negative, the managers in this study displayed a lack of cultural awareness. The absence of cultural focus, even when specifically asked, is possibly a red flag in this change process. As mentioned in the introduction, neglect of organizational culture is a common symptom amongst failed organizational changes (Alvesson, 2017; Johnson & Balogun, 2004; Nieswandt, 2015).

5.3 Interpretation of Strategy

In this section we acknowledge that middle managers are targets of change, and that they must make sense of the new strategy. A new strategy was presented and entrusted to middle management. Each individual was required to make sense of the new strategy, and independently establish their identity in relation to it. In previous research the importance of acknowledging individual sensemaking in cultural change efforts has been emphasized (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Balogun, 2005; Nieswandt, 2015; Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009; Weick, 1995). Every

individual interprets and makes sense of information in their own way. The process of sensemaking usually starts after a critical event. In our case, the critical moment was the introduction of an extensive organizational change (Weick, 1995; Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009). Weick (1995) suggests that this is done via a process of seven sensemaking characteristics grounded in: identity construction, retrospective, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on, by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. The following paragraphs will discuss the process of sensemaking in regard to information gathered from the interviews.

It is important to acknowledge the history of the organization, since people retrospectively make sense of new information based on their mental frames of past experiences, identity, and knowledge. (Weick, 1995). In this case, the company culture had been production-focused for a long time, and the culture was described as proud and “stuck in the walls”. It can be assumed that a culture that is ingrained in the walls of the company also, to various extents, is part of the employees’ identity. Weick (1995) states that an individual's identity construction is closely linked to the retrospective. Indicating their sensemaking and identity construction in relation to the new strategy will be shaped by the old company culture. Further, it was described that the organization had a history of working in “silos” in which every country and department was working individually with minimal interdepartmental teamwork. Resulting in a lack of common language between departments. Scott exemplified this by describing the differences between the production and sales departments. The distinctly divided company structure indicates that mental frames of reference can be significantly different throughout. As such, the view of the organizational culture is also expected to differ across departments (Weick, 1995).

When the new strategy was introduced, it was formulated in what was described as “consultancy language”. Weick (1995) states that senior management often makes sense through a strategic perspective, while others make sense from a local perspective. The new strategy was formulated by consultants with another background than the middle managers. Therefore, the frames of reference of the consultants and senior managers designing the strategy are different from those of the middle managers tasked with implementing it. Using consultancy words on a strategic level ensured the language was not suitable for people lower in the company hierarchy. The strategy

was explained on an overall strategic level. Underlying reasoning was explained through meetings and workshops. Senior management and consultants were exercising sensegiving by helping the middle managers extract the accurate cues and understand the strategic directions throughout this process (Dunford & Jones, 2000; Will & Pies, 2018). All the middle managers claim to have understood and been given sufficient information regarding the strategy on a strategic level. When asked to explain the strategy however, their explanations show that they emphasize different aspects of the introduced strategy. This was showcased during the interviews when managers were asked to explain the new strategy and how to reach the outlined targets. James, Noah, and Mike for example described the process of becoming a functional organization, which was not part of the new strategy, but a process that has been going on for a couple of years. Adam, Edward, and Mike talked about what sales-focused means in technical terms, while Charles and Kevin emphasized the cultural transformation. Some understood the culture as the main point of interest while others emphasized tasks and routines. One reason for this is that their preconceived image of change, as discussed in the previous section, guides their sensemaking to focus on the aspects that align with the areas they consider important. The managers seem to have extracted different cues, or made sense of the cues differently, and thereby created their own interpretation of the new strategy. The fact that the organization has a history of working separately “in silos” can be another factor that has resulted in the middle managers placing value on a selection of different aspects.

Regarding the strategy on an operational level, no sensegiving was provided to guide the middle managers. No objectives or explanations were given regarding the new strategy on an operational level. Each individual manager needed to adapt the consultancy words to their local context. When no sensegiving occurred, the middle managers had no guide in which cues were accurate and instead searched for plausible cues that made sense within their existing frames (Weick, 1995). If sense is not given, and information is missing, then individuals will fill in the missing “gaps” by extracting cues to create plausible explanations (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009; Weick, 1995). The strategy that made sense on a grand level did not provide a clear path on a local level. The need for strategy interpretation on an individual manager basis resulted in different interpretations arising.

As described in the literature review, language plays a critical role in organizational change, as well as the success of the leadership of change (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2017; Dunford and Jones, 2000). Referring to the model of communication process, even though we might share a common language, we all have different frames of reference due to our differing backgrounds. Our differing backgrounds can result in each individual decoding messages diversely (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017; Weick, 1995). The transmitter of the organizational change cannot assume that all receivers of the communication will interpret and understand the message as the transmitter intended, or even the same as the other receivers (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). As an example, Charles arranged team-wide meetings about the strategy, followed by individual meetings. During the individual meetings he realized people had only picked up on a few aspects of the strategy presented, primarily the parts which they felt related to them. Aspects of the strategy not relevant for themselves were forgotten. To avoid miscommunication, the room for feedback is crucial. In our interviews we found that there seems to be a lack of follow up and feedback about the ongoing change. There has been no formal follow up on how the cultural process is unfolding, and what kind of actions the middle managers have taken. Therefore, it is hard for both the middle managers and the senior managers to establish if they are on the right track. Although, according to our interviewees, Alpha is an organization that allows room for feedback; at least ever since the new CEO was appointed. Nevertheless, feedback is still clearly lacking since the interviews showed us that the strategy has been interpreted in a multitude of ways.

Some managers seem to have concluded that the new strategy was not their responsibility. The language referred to the strategic level, and they, the managers, function at the operational level. This view can be exemplified by Noah, Edward, and Otto who talked of the new strategy in terms of that “I have not noticed any change” or “the change has not affected me”. Their responses can be interpreted as that they do not take responsibility for implementing change, instead, they are observing whether change has occurred. As a contrasting example, Charles, Kevin, and Mark talked about, not whether they were affected by the change but how they are trying to implement the change and affect others. This shows that some managers felt a responsibility for implementing and spreading change while others could better be described as targets of change. This is an

example where the targets of change adopted a plausible solution that was not necessarily the accurate one (Weick, 1995).

Managers who feel responsible for the change process have attempted to make sense of the strategy and translate that meaning into action. Kevin enacted meaning by putting it into language and had meetings and workshops with his team about the strategy. (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009). Mark had workshops with their team, and by doing this it enacts the construction of sensemaking about the strategy. This is because the enactment of meaning influences the individual identity construction and the plausibility of other actions, which then influences the sensemaking process (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009). As mentioned in the literature review, it can be described as going in a loop. This loop could be detected after Mark's workshop, which led to him having the strategy translated to their mother tongue and into words that he and his team could understand better. We learned that this had a positive effect and that this unit had come quite far comparatively in the strategy implementation and, therefore, the culture change. The managers who settled with concluding that the strategy did not concern them, seemed to settle with a plausible cue, enact meaning by making small adjustments, if any; which did not seem to trigger any more of the sensemaking properties. This can be shown in the manager's reflection regarding their explanations of the change process. For example, Mark and Charles explained the strategy in their own words and gave illustrative examples of how they have interpreted it. While for example Edward and Otto explained the strategy using the same words as in the strategy document. Mark and Charles further discussed positive and negative aspects of their work so far and they could also tell stories of how they faced resistant subordinates. In contrast Edward and Otto thought that everything was going well and had nothing critical to add which could be a sign that they have not come as far in their sensemaking process.

Furthermore, there was a general attitude regarding the flow of information, that if someone has questions, they need to seek the information. Several of the managers said that the door to the CEO is always open. However, in times of change, where the importance of sensegiving has been emphasized (Balogun & Johnson, 2005), this attitude could be seen as a hindrance to cultural change. This is because if people are not motivated to change, for example, due to lack of guidance,

they will probably not seek out information and therefore have to make sense of the situation themselves. As example, the managers who concluded that they were not in charge of implementing the change process will probably not seek more information regarding how to execute this task. Additionally, we want to point out that having an open-door policy is also very helpful in the sensemaking process and understanding the strategy. Many managers, like Manager Mark and Mike, pointed out how helpful this is in order to make sense of the strategy and the change it entails. This is because the managers and the CEO enact meaning, as well as sensegiving, by speaking to each other, which then influences the other sensemaking properties as well, as explained above (Weick, 1995).

The fact that the new strategy was introduced without sensegiving on an operational level resulted in people interpreting their role differently and that they emphasized the goals that they felt concerned them but not the rest. Thus, only some of the managers seem to have acknowledged the culture change while others are focused on the structural parts of the new strategy. This could be exemplified using Weick's (1995) analogy of strategy as a map that guides people. In this case there seems to be a map with several destinations without a clear path. This has resulted in managers working towards different destinations in different ways. Weick (1995) also states that the actions taken is more important than the map itself, an insufficient map could be enough. The importance is to keep enacting the new strategy in order to extract cues and continuously evaluate what is going on, where we have been and how we can move forward. He further states that it is common that leaders find themselves in a situation where they know that the map is insufficient, but that it is important to keep motivating people by leading them towards a general goal and extract cues along the way. The introduction of the new strategy seems to have failed to trigger an ongoing process of sensemaking in some of the managers, they quickly settled with plausible cues and moved on. In this case, the lack of sensegiving in combination with the local implementation and the history of working in silos, seems to have enhanced these so-called silos due to that every country and department seem to develop in their own way based on the middle manager's interpretation of the new strategy.

To summarize this part, the lack of sensegiving resulted in the middle managers constructing their own explanations where there were differences in which part of the strategy, they found most important. However, the most striking difference was between those who felt responsible for the implementation of the change, and the ones who did not. We will from now on refer to them as change agents and change targets, respectively.

5.2.1 Targets and Agents of Change

As discussed, a distinction between managers who understood their role as change agents and change targets has been identified. Managers Mark, Mike, Kevin, Scott, Charles, and James showed a commitment to change and were taking initiatives to change the culture of the company. They saw this as a challenge that they wanted to succeed with and felt responsible for making this change happen. Managers Edward, Otto, Larry, and Noah were, in comparison to the above, more passive recipients of the change implementation.

These findings can be contrasted with what a middle manager is expected to do in strategic change, as described by Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd (2008), in the roles of; implementer, synthesizer, facilitator, and champion. These roles describe the middle manager as the link between top management and the operational level in both directions. They are expected to implement the strategy downwards and synthesize information from the operational department to report back upon how the strategy is unfolding. They are also expected to facilitate change through experimentation, bring ideas generated on the floor up to top management to change and enhance the strategy (Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008). This description is very similar to what the CEO said he expected from the middle managers. However, it seems like the ones classified as change agents are trying to fulfill these expectations while the ones classified as change targets are not. Again, we want to emphasize that our broad categorization is for the purpose of presenting our findings in this case, and in reality, things are never black and white. A more realistic picture would probably acknowledge that people are doing different tasks in different situations to a various extent. What we can conclude is that some of the middle managers did not feel responsible

for implementing the change and thereby did not fulfill the expectancy of them to be implementers of change. What also seems to be troublesome in this case is the lack of feedback back to top management but also between middle managers. There is a general unawareness regarding what is going on outside of their local context.

5.4 Roles of Middle Managers During Cultural Change

So far, we have categorized our managers into shaping and controlling ways of managing and Change Agents and Change Targets. This categorization is, as previously discussed, based on their view of change management and their interpretation of their role during the studied change process. By combining these parameters four different approaches to change are identified among the middle managers. These four approaches are presented in the matrix below and followed by a description of each category.

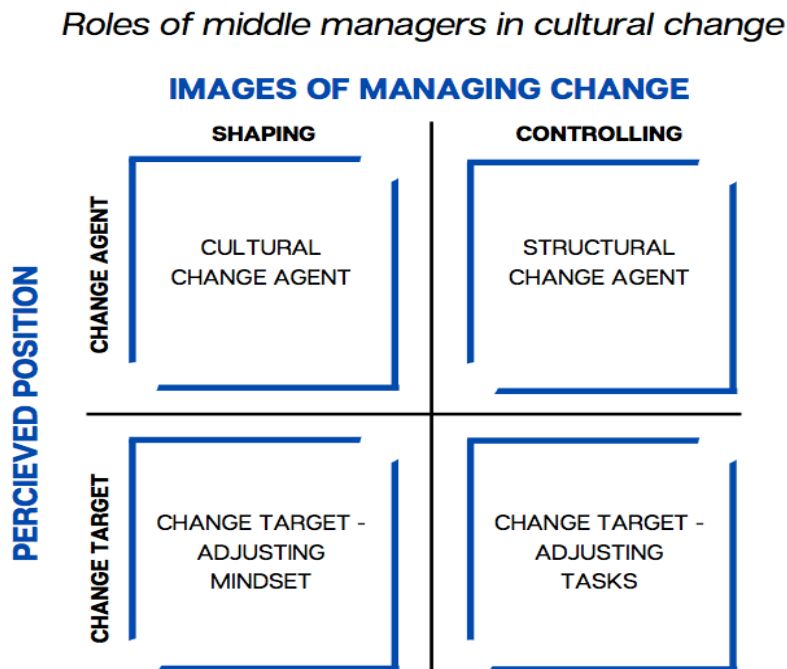


Fig 3. Perceived positions refer to whether the middle manager feels responsible for implementing the change (Change Agent) or not (Change Target). Images of managing change refers to a shaping or controlling view of management

based on Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan (2017) identified images of change management. Each quadrant is further described in the text below.

The Cultural Change Agent - The managers in this category are actively trying to create cultural change through a focus on people, meaning, and motivation. In this group we find Charles, Kevin, and Mark. These managers are grounded in a shaping image of managing change and their attention is thereby directed towards involvement and encouragement of people (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). Implementing and sustaining cultural change is perceived as important when implementing a new strategy. Changing culture is perceived as complicated since it requires reframing meaning for the people involved, it requires continuous work focused on people to make sure that each and everyone understands the change, what this means for them and to make sure that they do not fall back into old habits. These managers told stories of how they had interpreted the strategy and what it meant for them in practice. They were keen on using other words than the ones used in the strategy formulation and giving examples to explain its meaning. They showed reflexivity and discussed the pros and cons of their work, what is going well and what is not going well, and challenges for the future. They mentioned that they have faced some resistance but that most issues can be resolved by communication. They emphasized giving employees responsibility and support to develop. The managers in this category were also curious to know how other managers had taken on this challenge and to share experiences of their methods of implementing and sustaining cultural change. This group showed some frustration regarding that cultural change is not a priority in the organization with the motivation that structure needs to be supported by culture to function.

The Structural Change Agent - These agents are actively trying to create structural change through a focus on tasks that need to be done to reach the goal. In this group we find Adam, James, and Mike. However, in relation to the previously described group of managers these are grounded in an image of managing change as controlling. There they are focusing on other aspects of the strategy which are perceived more important than the culture change. These managers talked mainly about the process of becoming a function-based organization, optimization of processes, administration, or the change of customer segments. These managers have potentially impacted the culture indirectly however even though they were asked specifically regarding the cultural

change from manufacturer to sales company they did not have much to say which is a sign of cultural unawareness.

The Change Target: Adjusting Mindset -This category of managers can be described as passive change recipients that are adjusting his or her mindset to fit with the new strategy but are not taking initiatives and responsibility to implement change. In this group we find Scott, Tim, and Larry. The general attitude could be described as “I am positive towards the new strategy, but it has not affected me in my work”. These managers described the new strategy in terms of culture and acknowledge the need to make sure that everyone in the organization understands and adapts to the new culture. However, they showed no incentives for doing anything about it. It should be noted that two managers in this category, Tim and Scott showed frustration regarding wanting the culture to change but not knowing how to contribute.

The Change Target: Adjusting Tasks - This category of managers can also be described as passive change recipients that, in contrast to the previous group, are adjusting his or her behavior to fit with the new strategy but are not taking initiatives and responsibility to implement change. In this group we find Edward, Brad, Otto, and Noah. The managers in this category described the new strategy very shortly using vocabulary from the strategy document. They agreed that the strategy was good but showed no signs of reflection around it. They could give examples of adjustments they made regarding routines or practical details in their own work but not how they worked with spreading the change.

5.4 Outcomes of the Change Process So Far

In the studied change, the process was moving slower than expected and one factor is that a majority of the middle managers were passive in the change implementation process and positioned themselves as change targets rather than change agents. The process could benefit from all managers identifying themselves as change agents (Mantere, 2008; Nieswandt, 2015). Further it was also mentioned by Smith that the external changes were moving faster than the internal (culture) change.

The different roles of the middle managers influence the change process in different ways. The structural and cultural change agent has enabled their strategic agency and are acting in accordance with what a manager is expected to do during change, namely; implementer, facilitator, synthesizer, and champion (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). However, their approaches to managing change are directing their attention and have led to a difference in focus. The cultural change agents are trying to enable change through involving people and are thereby directly aiming at changing the culture. The structural change agents are focused on conducting structural with a focus on managerial tasks and are thereby influencing the change in a different way. We do not want to argue that one is better than the other, instead, we would call for reflexivity and to acknowledge that it is important for managers to be able to switch perspectives. We would also like to point out the lack of cultural awareness among the managers classified as structural change agents. The lack of awareness of culture is also a factor that could have slowed down the change process.

The change targets on the other hand are not actively resisting but are blocking and slowing down the change process due to not showing strategic agency. This is one potential factor that has led to the slow progress of the cultural change process. However, there is a lot of potential in this group of managers. They seemed open to change but confused about whether they were responsible and how they could contribute. We believe that by supporting these two groups of managers to enable their strategic agency would have been beneficial for this change process.

Another potential reason for the experienced slow progress is that the middle managers seem to work towards different goals. The new strategy is implemented in a local manner while at the same time there is an ongoing process aiming at uniting the company to "One Alpha". The strong local implementation of the new strategy contradicts the aim of becoming one unit. There is a risk that the local focus in combination with a lack of feedback and communication can enhance the feeling of separation and silos instead of creating one unit.

A change process will, according to previous research, benefit from middle managers embracing their role as change agents and showing responsibility for implementing and creating change

(Mantere, 2008). In our study, we have acknowledged certain factors that may have led to some of the middle managers identified as change targets rather than change agents and thereby slowed down the change process. Similarly, Mantere (2008) argued that for middle managers to fulfill the roles of implementer, synthesizer, facilitator, and champion, several enabling conditions are needed. The two first conditions were sufficient information regarding the strategy and the reasoning behind it as well as links to the work context (Mantere, 2008). In this case, there was a lack of information regarding what the strategy meant on a local level and the used language was vague. Thereby, these two conditions were identified as hindrances in our study also. The next four conditions refer to that middle managers being given trust, authority, resources, as well as top management recognizing the strategic value of local implementation in everyday work (Mantere, 2008). In our case, managers have been given the responsibility to implement the change which is a sign that they have trust, authority, and that everyday implementation is valued. However, the middle managers were not given any tools or resources to work with which might have been a hindrance in this process.

Thus, we can conclude that lack of information and understanding of the strategy, lack of links to the local context, and no resources can be potential factors for middle managers not acting as change agents. However, the middle managers in our case had roughly the same prerequisites and still fulfilled these roles in very different ways, therefore, the factors mentioned by Mantere (2008) do not seem to sufficiently answer the question of how to enable middle managers. Our study indicates that in order to understand the actions taken by middle managers during change a more individual approach is needed in accordance with Balogun & Johnson (2004). The middle managers are not a homogenous group, as shown in this case, thereby individual sensemaking will affect their actions.

In a cultural change process, we would also like to air the condition; cultural awareness. Managing cultural change is hard and what was seen in this case was that some of the managers did not seem to be aware of the importance of managing culture. Therefore, it is important to make sure that middle managers understand the importance of culture during change processes. In the studied case the old culture was pointed out as one of the main problems within the organizations and was

referred to as a problem “*stuck in the walls*”. Even though the culture was appointed the main reason for that the company has not renewed itself earlier, relatively few of the interview managers seemed to be aware of the importance of culture in a change process. It should also be noted that the managers were occupied with their daily tasks as well as making practical changes due to the new strategy that they might not have the time to reflect around cultural matters.

5.5 Remarks on Change Management

At the beginning of this discussion we stated that based on our document analysis we spotted a gap between the strategic strategy and the operational context it was supposed to be implemented in. Conducting change as a *grand technocratic project* based on n-step models has received a lot of criticism (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). The option is local *everyday reframing* which is perceived as a more realistic way of performing change, however by the analysis of this case this approach is not unproblematic (Alvesson, 2013). Therefore, this confirms existing literature that organizational change is complex and difficult to manage as those who advocate processual change state. Change as everyday reframing rests on the middle manager's ability to be managers of meaning otherwise there will not be a change in culture, or it can also lead to unexpected outcomes (Alvesson, 2013; Johnson & Balogun, 2005). The focus on local adaptation and implementation leaves middle management with a great responsibility. As noted in this case some take on this responsibility and are motivated by it while others show no feeling of responsibility for implementing this change. Further the focus on the local can possibly harm the organization as a whole due to lack of common understanding. Further, the local focus could possibly enhance cultural differences instead of creating one common culture. Having too much freedom to interpret and implement a change can have the opposite effect and be damaging. This is the way that Alpha could be headed, since the separate interpretations and implementations can increase the gaps between each country which they are trying hard to combine. The local focus also raised confusion due to not knowing what others were doing or how far they have come. Implementing change in a decentralized and local manner seems, based on this case, to require discipline and coordination in the form of feedback, learning, and follow up.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

Change management is a troubling matter for organizations. In the literature review we found that both culture and the involvement of middle managers are crucial elements of succeeding with cultural change. However, the empirical studies combining the two are few. We also found that there is a tendency to view middle managers as one homogenous group without acknowledging their individuality. This research was, therefore, aiming towards understanding how middle managers make sense of their role during cultural change and thereby influence the cultural change process.

- *How do middle managers make sense of their roles and responsibilities during a cultural change process?*

In this study we acknowledge a difference between what a middle manager is expected to do compared to what middle managers are actually doing during a change process (Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008). Mantere (2008) has previously tried to explain factors that will enable middle managers to act on and fulfill these roles, however, this was not enough to explain our findings. Given the same prerequisite, the middle managers had a different interpretation of what their role was. In this study four different roles of middle managers were identified. This indicates that the individual sensemaking will influence how they interpret the strategy and their role and responsibility. Our findings are thereby in line with (Balogun, 2006; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015) and strengthens the view of the importance of acknowledging individual sensemaking since this can influence the change process and possibly lead to unexpected outcomes. This further supports the importance of sensegiving in cultural change processes (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). This study further confirms Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd (2008), Manter (2008), and Nieswandt (2015), regarding that middle managers, have an important strategic

role in change as the link between top management and the operational level, thereby, their sensemaking and actions influences how the change process unfolds. However, by adding the element of culture and drawing on that neglect of culture is a common reason for failure, we want to acknowledge the need to raise the issue of cultural awareness among middle managers.

- *How do middle managers perceive the task of managing culture change?*

Managing culture is not an easy task and researchers have different views regarding whether it is possible to manage culture. However, in a cultural change project, middle managers are often responsible for managing culture. In the studied case the organizational culture was appointed one of the main problems that hindered development. However, few of the managers seemed aware of the importance of culture in the change process. This study has shown that middle managers can have different approaches to managing culture change as well as different understandings regarding the importance of culture. A difference was noted between managers. Some of the managers emphasized managing culture change through a focus on tangible factors such as routines, structures, coordination, and technical aspects. These managers, in general, saw the change process as rather straightforward and under control. In contrast, other managers emphasized the involvement and encouragement of people and emphasized that change is a complex process that is hard to control.

To conclude, the change process is influenced by how the middle managers have interpreted the strategy but also on their view of managing change and whether they show cultural awareness. In this study, we identified different interpretations of the strategy, as well as different approaches to managing cultural change. By bridging theories of organizational change, sensemaking, and the roles of middle managers, we would like to acknowledge the importance of not viewing middle managers as a group who are expected to embrace certain roles due to their position as a link between top management and the operational level. In our case, the middle managers were expected to act as change agents but due to unclear responsibilities, information, and lack of feedback, only some of the managers identified themselves as change agents responsible for implementing change. Secondly, it is important to acknowledge not only if the manager has

understood what is expected of them, but also how they approach their task. The managers in the studied case showed different approaches to managing change and, therefore, their actions will influence the change process differently. The different interpretations found in this case where sensegiving did not occur from top management indicates that sensegiving might have been useful in this situation to set a common direction.

It should be noted that in our research we did not encounter resistance among the middle manager towards the change process. In a setting where resistance occurs, our findings might not be applicable. We want to acknowledge that we believe sensemaking and images of change could be important elements in all change processes, however, the matrix and the specific roles found in this case might have limited generalizability. These findings were made in a geographically dispersed organization where, as mentioned, no active resistance among the middle managers occurred. Without further studies it is hard to evaluate the applicableness to other organizations.

6.1 Practical Contributions

These results can be useful to consider for organizations going through a similar change process. Middle managers have an important role during change, and culture is an important factor to consider. Therefore, we would like to acknowledge that middle managers with an awareness of culture could have the potential to influence change processes in a positive manner. It is important to not view middle managers as a homogenous group, rather, our findings suggest acknowledging the individual sensemaking of the middle managers. It is essential to not only make sure that the middle managers understand the strategy but also that they are aware of their underlying image of managing change and that this will direct their attention towards certain factors and make them miss others. For example, in our case, it showed that managers with a controlling view of managing seemed to focus solely on functional aspects and thereby lost the culture focus. The findings in our study further highlight the importance of culture and, therefore, we believe that it is important with awareness among the middle manager of the importance of culture. Moreover, we want to stress the necessity of allowing there to be a process feedback in all directions. This will aid organizations

in finding out what is working well during the change and find the aspects that are working less well to prevent them from escalating into damaging results.

The matrix that was created during this study can help organizations, especially those organizations which are highly decentralized as Alpha, in figuring out which middle managers are in need of more support than others and to recognize that middle managers can position themselves as change targets instead of change agents if they are not given enough support. However, we saw great potential in the group called change targets. The problem was that they were uncertain of their responsibilities and how they could contribute. Moreover, in highly decentralized organizations, the importance of clear goals, objectives, and feedback processes cannot be stressed enough. This can help avoid confusion, differing interpretations, and thus decreases the risk of change failure.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study adds to the limited empirical material about middle managers and their role during culture change, in hopes of encouraging more research on this topic and similar ones. This study also presented a matrix that explains the middle manager's role that came up in our research, which we hope may be a beneficial catalyst, in one way or another, for others in the field. Our results are in agreement with Balogun and Johnson's (2004) arguments and Alvesson and Sveningsson's (2015), that the individual sensemaking of middle managers are important to acknowledge since it has the power to influence organizational change outcomes. Our research thereby also confirms that middle managers have a central role in change (Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008; Nieswandt, 2015; Mantere, 2008). Combining the two with culture we found differences regarding the interpretations and ways of managing among the middle managers but also in their awareness of the importance of culture. Our findings suggest that in order to understand the middle manager's perspective and how they influence change outcomes it is important to acknowledge cultural heterogeneity, not only in an organization but within the group of middle managers. Moreover, our study acknowledges the importance of viewing middle managers as both change agents and

targets. This is in terms of their sensemaking as recipients of change and way of managing change together will influence the change process.

6.3 Implications for Future Research

During our research process we saw different elements to consider for future research, that are either interesting or necessary or both. Firstly, due to the fact that we were not able to perform observations in this study, it would be both interesting and beneficial to see if the middle managers practice what they preach, in order to support or refute our findings. Further, this research did not involve the perspective of the employees which has the potential to show further how the middle managers are influencing change outcomes dependent on the employees and their sensemaking and action.

Further it is important to note that we did not encounter resistance among the middle managers in our study and everything agreed that the new strategy was a good decision for the company. Other results could, therefore, occur in a context where middle managers disagree with the change they are supposed to implement. It would, therefore, be relevant to investigate further how resistance impacts the role of middle managers.

As this study only gets a glimpse of the change process at Alpha, it would also be beneficial and interesting to see middle managers at the start of a change, during and once the change is implemented. However, we are aware of the arguments regarding that cultural change is not static, rather a continuous process that may be difficult to fully analyze.

Chapter 7. References

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