



SCHOOL OF
ECONOMICS AND
MANAGEMENT

Becoming One Across Different Realities

*A Qualitative Case Study of Global Transformation in a Multinational
Digital Engineering Consultancy*

by

Ellen Bergving & Evanthia Vraka

27th of May, 2026

Master's in Managing People, Knowledge and Change

Supervisor: Stefan Sveningsson

Examiner: Sverre Spoelstra

Abstract

Title	Becoming One Across Different Realities A Qualitative Case Study of Global Transformation in a Multinational Digital Engineering Consultancy
Authors	Ellen Bergving and Evanthia Vraka
Supervisor	Stefan Sveningsson
Submission	27/05/2026
Aim	Organizational change is widely researched, yet less attention has been given to how planned global change unfolds across the levels and locations of a digitally coordinated multinational organization. This study investigates how a global transformation programme is interpreted, negotiated, and shaped as it moves through such a setting.
Methodology	The study follows an interpretive qualitative research approach. The empirical data was gathered through semi-structure interviews with leaders across different organizational levels and national contexts within a single multinational digital engineering case organization.
Theoretical Framework	The theoretical framework combines traditional change management theories, using a process-oriented understanding of organizational change. Latour's distinction translation model serves as the central analytical lens, supported by literature on organizational culture, leadership, and digitally mediated coordination.
Contributions	This thesis challenges linear views of change implementation by showing how transformation initiatives are translated, interpreted across organizational contexts. The findings highlight leadership, culture, communication infrastructure, and capacity as interrelated conditions that both enable and constrain the embedment of the programme's vision, with these conditions unevenly distributed across markets. The study contributes to the literature on planned change and offers practical implications for managers leading distributed transformation programmes.
Key words	Global Transformation, Planned Change, Organizational Culture, Leadership, Communication, Digital leadership, Multinational consultancy

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we would like to express our gratitude to Stefan Svenigsson, who has been our thesis supervisor at the Lund University of Economics. During regular meetings, Stefan has guided us in the writing process, and with his enthusiasm, knowledge, and belief in us, he has assisted us greatly in developing the study. Therefore, we would like to thank you for your involvement, support and guidance!

Furthermore, we would like to thank Orion Engineering Consultant Company for providing us with the opportunity to conduct research on their global change project. Their trust, collaboration and insights were instrumental for developing our research. We would also like to express our sincere gratitude to our contact person at Orion, who supported us with interview connections and further guidance throughout the case study, as well as to the many others who recommended relevant interview participants. Thank you for taking the time for us; we genuinely felt appreciated.

Finally, we would like to thank each other for a rewarding collaboration, as well as our friends and family for their invaluable support and encouragement throughout this project.

Thank you, we hope you enjoy reading the thesis!

Ellen Bergving and Evanthia Vraka

Table of Contents

1 Introduction.....	6
1.1 Background.....	6
1.2 Research Objectives.....	7
1.2.1 Problematization.....	7
1.2.2 Purpose and Research Questions.....	8
1.3 Outline of the Thesis.....	9
2. Literature Review.....	9
2.1 Organizational Transformation and Change Management.....	10
2.1.1 Type of Change.....	10
2.1.2 Change perspectives.....	12
2.2 Areas of Influence.....	15
2.2.1 Role of Culture.....	15
2.2.2 Role of Leadership.....	20
3. Methodology.....	24
3.1 Philosophical Grounding.....	24
3.2 Research Approach.....	25
3.3 Data Collection.....	26
3.3.1 Sampling.....	27
3.3.2 Semi-structured Interviews.....	28
3.3.2 Document Analysis.....	29
3.4 Data Analysis.....	29
3.5 Reflection on Credibility and Limitations.....	31
4. Empirical Material and Findings.....	32
4.1 Case Background.....	32
4.1.1 Orion.....	32
4.1.2 Background of the Transformation.....	33
4.1.3 Orion Accelerate – The Next Step	36
4.2 Setting the Scene.....	39
4.3 Entering The Workforce.....	43
4.4 Translating from Top to Bottom.....	47

4.5 Moving from Understanding to Living.....	54
5. Discussion.....	59
5.1 Translation versus the Diffusion Logic of Global Design.....	59
5.1.2 The Translation Journey of Change.....	61
5.1.3 From Global Design to Local Practice.....	62
5.2 Enablers and Constraints of Embedment.....	63
5.2.1 Leadership: Making the Change Meaningful.....	64
5.2.2 Culture: What Lives Behind the Backs.....	66
5.2.3 Communication Infrastructure: Reaching but Compressing.....	68
5.2.4 Capacity: No Time to Absorb.....	70
5.3 A Layered View of Translation in Multinational Change.....	71
6. Conclusion.....	75
6.1 Main Findings.....	75
6.2 Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications.....	77
6.3 Limitations and Future Research.....	80
List of References	82
Appendix.....	88

List of Figures

Figure 1: Organizational structure.....	33
Figure 2: Timeline.....	36
Figure 3: Orion Accelerate governance.....	38
Figure 4: The Narrative.....	41
Figure 5: From Global Design to Local Practice: The Transformation Journey.....	63
Figure 6: The Leadership Translation Deficit.....	65
Figure 7: A Layered View of Translation in Multinational Change.....	73
Figure 8: Explanatory Framework.....	74

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Organizations today are under constant pressure to change. From the outside, shifting markets, the rise of artificial intelligence, geopolitical instability, and broader cultural shifts push them to adapt. From the inside, demands for efficiency, cost reduction, and innovation further accelerate the need for change (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023). In response, organizations increasingly launch large-scale, planned transformation programmes, often spanning multiple countries, business units, and functions, with the ambition of producing coherent, lasting change. However, the growing expectation for organizations to continuously transform can itself become destabilizing, contributing to burnout, demotivation, and change fatigue, ultimately weakening the organization's capacity for further change (Palmer et al., 2017, p.258).

Planned change of this kind is typically understood in the literature as episodic and often revolutionary in scale, affecting culture, structure, and strategy at the same time, with each dimension shaping the others (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025; Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023). Smaller, more incremental change, often described as evolutionary and emergent, is generally seen as more successful, partly because it places less strain on the identities of those involved (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023). Planned change, by contrast, continues to fail at a rate widely cited as around 70%, despite decades of management research aimed at improving how such programmes are designed and carried out (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025).

Scholars offer a range of explanations for this persistently high failure rate. These include an overreliance on rational planning, mechanistic models of organizational behaviour, and an underestimation of the cultural, historical, and human dimensions through which change actually unfolds (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025). A further tendency is to treat the organization as a single, unified entity whose members respond in the same way to change, which can lead to a neglect of the different meanings people attach to it (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025). Addressing this, a process perspective on change emphasizes that it is not necessarily the change itself, but how it is interpreted, that becomes the central question. The

same change can be read in very different ways depending on who is doing the reading and what it means for their work, identity, and position. Organizational change, therefore, requires an understanding not only of plans and structures but of the meanings, identities, emotions, and politics through which it is lived (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023).

A further tendency in the literature is to place leadership at the centre of whether change succeeds or fails. Alvesson et al. (2017) note that this emphasis can produce an overoptimistic view of what leadership alone can deliver. Managers themselves, in turn, often frame change initiatives more positively than the realities of implementation tend to support, presenting them as smoother and more controllable than they tend to be in practice (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023). The result is a literature in which change is often discussed in terms of intent and design, while the slower, messier work of carrying change through an organization's everyday life receives less attention.

Against this background, this study examines a planned, global transformation programme and how it is interpreted and carried out by leaders positioned at different points within it. The programme follows a previous consolidation and is now being strategically implemented across structural and cultural dimensions. It operates across roughly 30 countries and is coordinated almost entirely through digital channels. In such a setting, much of the relational work the change literature describes as central must take place at considerable distance, and across national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. Yet how programmes of this kind move through multinational organizations, and how their multidimensional and digitally mediated nature shapes the way they are interpreted and lived, remains comparatively underexplored.

1.2 Research Objectives

1.2.1 Problematization

When we looked into how organizational change is typically discussed in the literature, we noticed something that seemed worth investigating further. Running through much of the planned change literature is the assumption that transformation can be cleanly designed, communicated, and led to its intended outcome (Palmer et al., 2017; Sveningsson & Sörgärde,

2023; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025). However, scholarly discussions on organizational change reveal a persistent tension between how planned change is described, framed, and analyzed, and how it actually unfolds in practice (Burke, 2018; Palmer et al., 2017).

Given the high failure rate of planned initiatives, this calls for closer attention to what actually happens to large-scale change once it leaves the design stage and meets the everyday work of those expected to carry it. Within this conversation, one strand of research has shifted the focus toward translation, sensemaking, and local interpretation as the central mechanisms through which change moves (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Szabla et al., 2017; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025). However, comparatively little is said about how this unfolds within the specific complexities of a multinational organization. While culture and leadership are widely recognized as central to how planned change is received (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025), much less is known about how they function in distributed settings where coordination happens through digital channels rather than in shared physical space. This is so despite growing scholarly attention to digital and technical distance as a feature of contemporary transformation (Gilli et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2025).

Subsequently, this study aims to contribute to the literature by investigating how a planned global transformation programme is interpreted and navigated by leaders positioned at different vantage points, from those designing it at the global level to those carrying it locally in national markets. By conducting an in-depth qualitative case study across organizational levels and country contexts within a company, we examine a setting in which the transformation must reach a workforce shaped by varied national histories, prior change experiences, and a dispersed mode of work. By doing so, we aim to contribute to the field of organizational change, and more specifically to research on how planned transformations are interpreted and experienced once they meet the realities of local practice.

1.2.2 Purpose and Research Questions

Building on this problematization, the purpose of this study is to develop a more grounded understanding of how a planned global change programme takes shape as it moves through a geographically dispersed organization. We therefore aim to see how a global programme is

experienced across different local realities. We aim to fulfil this purpose by answering the following two research questions:

- How does a globally planned change programme take shape as it moves across the levels and locations of a multinational organization?
- What enables or constrains the embedding of the programme's vision in daily organizational practice?

1.3 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is structured in six chapters. Chapter 1 has introduced and problematized the research topic and objectives, resulting in our research questions. Chapter 2 presents a review of the existing literature and outlines key concepts within the field, forming the theoretical framework that guides the discussion. Chapter 3 is the methodology section, where we detail our research approach, context and processes of data collection and analysis, followed by reflections on limitations. This is followed by Chapter 4, where our empirical findings are presented in a narrative form. In Chapter 5, these findings are discussed in relation to the literature review and theoretical framework presented earlier. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by presenting key findings, practical and theoretical implications, and suggestions for future research. Our list of references and appendices can be found at the end of the thesis.

2. Literature Review

In this chapter, we situate the study within the broader literature on organizational change. We first examine how change has been theorized, distinguishing between planned and emergent approaches and introducing three perspectives that shape how change is studied. We then turn to the areas the literature identifies as central to how change unfolds in practice. We give particular attention to how these are reshaped when change must travel across organizational levels and local contexts.

2.1 Organizational Transformation and Change Management

Although organizational change has long played a central role in management and organization literature, how scholars understand it has shifted considerably over time (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025). Within the field of change management, two broader approaches can be identified, each carrying different assumptions about what change is and how it unfolds. The first treats change as planned and episodic; the second treats it as emergent and incremental (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023, p.42). While the labels vary across the literature: planned versus emergent, episodic versus continuous, transformational versus transactional, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2025) note that these distinctions often track roughly the same underlying divide between change as something designed and executed, and change as something that unfolds through everyday interaction. We turn to this distinction in more detail below.

2.1.1 Type of Change

In the literature, planned organizational change is commonly described as episodic (Weick & Quinn, 1999). This approach views organizations as largely stable entities that undergo infrequent and intentional shifts (Weick & Quinn, 1999; Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023). On this account, change is initiated when an organization drifts away from equilibrium. This drift usually emerges when a growing gap develops between the organization's deeply rooted ways of working and what the environment seems to demand (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Change in this tradition is typically understood as revolutionary in scale, affecting culture, structure, and strategy (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025). These aspects are often interdependent and influence one another. Structural changes redistribute work and power; strategic changes such as mergers or acquisitions can prompt people to reassess who they are, generating cultural and identity tensions in the process (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023). Management in this tradition is often portrayed through what Palmer et al. (2017, p. 37) describe as the "Director image," where change outcomes are treated as intended and broadly achievable through rational planning and strategic choice. Furthermore, change sequences are often described through well-known n-step models, such as Lewin's famous three-step model: unfreezing the organization, moving it to the desired state, and refreezing to embed the new ways and prevent a return to old ones (Palmer et al., 2017; Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023). Lewin's model forms the basis of many contemporary

frameworks, such as Kotter's eight-stage model, which extends this logic by breaking change down into eight steps, including establishing urgency, creating and communicating a vision, and empowering action (Palmer et al., 2017, p.328; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025; Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023; Szabla et al., 2017). What unites these models is a rationalistic assumption that change can be controlled and managed through a predetermined sequence of activities (Palmer & Dunford, 2008). This assumption has drawn recurring criticism for implying that an enlightened elite can implement change in a top-down manner with predictable results (Burke, 2018; Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023).

The limitations of this rationalistic framing become visible in the persistently high failure rate of planned change programmes. Scholars connect this to an over-reliance on mechanistic metaphors and a tendency to overlook the human side of change, in which individuals' identities and feelings of fatigue or cynicism act as powerful counter-forces (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025). One specific dynamic Palmer et al. (2017, p.257) describe is what they call the "acceleration trap." Organizations caught in this trap continue launching new change efforts even as the previous ones are still being absorbed, producing a cumulative strain on the workforce that the next initiative is then layered on top of. Within this trap, the authors distinguish between three forms overload can take: staff being asked to do more than their time and resources allow (overloading), being stretched across too many different kinds of activity at once (multiloading), and the organization running so close to capacity that there is no room left to recover between efforts (perpetual loading) (Palmer et al, 2017, p.257). Beyond lowering morale, fatigue of this kind can reinforce bureaucratic caution and cynicism, making subsequent change even harder to achieve (Palmer et al., 2017; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025). These implementation difficulties have prompted scholars to rethink change itself, not as a bounded episode to be executed, but as a continuous process to be navigated (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025). This rethinking is captured in the emergent approach, which views change as unfolding through everyday interactions rather than through bounded programmes (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025). Within this stream, scholars emphasize culture, leadership, and shared meaning in shaping how change actually develops, and view organizations as meaning-making systems in which meaningful change occurs only when mindsets and core narratives shift (Bushe & Marshak, 2015; Palmer et al., 2017).

In practice, however, the two distinct approaches are in practice not as clearly separable as their theoretical opposition suggests (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023). Even the most planned and rigidly designed top-down mandate must ultimately be interpreted through interpretation and the daily interactions of those it passes through (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025). As Burke (2018, Chapter 2) argues, planned change is inherently paradoxical: because implementation is frequently chaotic and messy, managers must “plan change yet understand that things never turn out quite as we planned.” Palmer et al. (2017, p.27) reinforce this, suggesting that change leaders are always “building the plane as it flies.” Building on this, although this study is concerned with a planned initiative rather than an emergent one, the process perspective through which emergent change is typically studied remains analytically relevant for understanding how planned programmes are interpreted and remade once they meet the everyday work of those expected to carry them. The three perspectives that frame how change is studied are introduced in the next section.

2.1.2 Change perspectives

Organizational change is often characterized by a tension between the desire for managerial control and the unpredictability of human reality (Burke, 2018). To address this complexity, scholars have moved beyond the 'how to' of change toward a more philosophical examination of how it is conceptualized, executed, and experienced (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023). This section examines three change perspectives through which organizational change can be studied (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023).

A useful starting point is the notion of ‘knowledge-interest’ (Habermas, 1971, pp.187-191), which shapes how individuals and organizations create and apply knowledge in the context of change. It determines whether change is viewed as a technical problem to be controlled and resolved as an act of survival, as a social process aimed at better understanding and human interaction, or as an emancipatory concern (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023, pp.20-21). These interests, in turn, shape whether an organization sees transformation through a tool-based lens focused on control, a processual lens focused on collective sensemaking, or a critical lens focused on political structures and power (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023, pp.21-24). The latter

one, the critical perspective, is rooted in an emancipatory knowledge-interest, uncovering power structures and corporate ideologies that often marginalize certain voices. From this point, change is never neutral or inevitable but a political process driven by the interests of those in power (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023, p.24).

The tool-based perspective is driven by a technical knowledge-interest of organizational change, focused on control, problem-solving, and efficiency. Organizations are conceptualized as complex ‘living organisms’ or open systems comprising subsystems such as strategy, structure, IT, culture, and Human Resources that need to be aligned to ensure survival (Sveningsson et al. 2023, pp.21-22). Change, on this view, is a rational and controllable process initiated by top leadership to ensure long-term equilibrium (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023, p.22). This orientation aligns with Burke’s (2018, p.79) Open Systems Theory, which views organizations as systems of inputs, throughputs, and outputs that must continually adjust to environmental pressures. Because the organization does not exist in a vacuum, a change in one subsystem, such as technology or structure, triggers reactions in others, including culture, leadership, and individuals (Burke, 2018, p.79). Bandura’s (1988, pp.275-276) Social Cognitive Theory addresses how those reactions take hold, treating transformation as a matter of producing durable behavioural change, achieved when leadership consistently shapes the structures, culture, and processes through which employees learn what is expected of them.

Contemporary scholars challenge the assumption that change is always predictable and manageable through a linear sequence. The process perspective instead emphasizes how change unfolds in practice, through cultural conditions, organizational contexts, and employee experience. Standardized models, on this view, overlook the diversity and complexity of everyday organizational realities (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023). Change is not an event with a planned start and finish but a dynamic, ambiguous flow of sensemaking, dialogue, and identity work. From this standpoint, an organization does not *have* a culture but *is* a culture, developed through daily interactions (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023, pp.23-24). Similarly, Karl Weick (1995) shifts away from the top-down management ambitions, focusing directly on the process perspective rooted in a social constructionism framework: organizational change is a chaotic reality continuously created and sustained through human interaction. Furthermore, he expands

on the significance of sensemaking. When a disruptive event occurs, individuals do not act as passive recipients but interpret the situation and decide how to guide their behaviour. The study of change perspectives reveals that successful transformation is more associated with the ongoing negotiation of meaning, power, and identity rather than a “sovereign rule” of management (Alvensson & Sveningsson, 2025, p.34).

Within this broader recognition and shift toward a more processual view on change, scholars have drawn attention to translation as a central mechanism (Latour, 1986; Latour, 2005, pp.34–35; Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025). Latour distinguishes diffusion from translation. In the diffusion model, a change message is assumed to be transmitted downward from the top of the hierarchy. If the message fails to be spread as planned, it may appear as friction, poor communication, or employee resistance, treating employees as passive receivers. From this tool-based perspective, resistance is typically framed as an obstacle to be avoided, identified, or overcome through better planning or communication, often attributed to psychological, political, or cultural causes (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023, pp.239–243). In the translation model, by contrast, change only moves when individuals are engaged with it, make sense of it, and adapt it in their roles, goals, and identity before it becomes meaningful in practice (Latour, 1986, pp.34–42). Building on this, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2025) argue that change programmes are continuously reinterpreted at each level it passes through, with different groups attaching meaning to it based on their position, interests, and prior experience. Change thus becomes a socially constructed process in which actors function as “mediators” who transform and modify the programme as it travels (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025, p.34). This helps to explain why planned changes often have unintended consequences, or arrive at different organizational levels as effectively different programmes. A translation lens, therefore, shifts the analytical focus to local interpretation, sensemaking, and the identity work of those carrying the change forward (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025).

Expanding on this, the process perspective views resistance not as mere refusal but as a natural part of how change is translated and negotiated. What appears as resistance is often the point at which a change idea meets the interests, identities, and prior commitments of those it passes through (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023, pp.250–252). Employees actively adapt to change by

interpreting it in local meanings, and may selectively comply, reinterpret, or distance themselves from change initiatives to protect their professional identity. Resistance can therefore be open or hidden and may function to preserve competence, autonomy, and legitimacy rather than rejecting change outright (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023, pp.251, 264). On this account, resistance signals that change is being worked on in practice, shaping how programmes should be read and responded to. This raises an important question for managers: ‘‘What would make people engage in the change process and invest their time and energy in it?’’ Sveningsson & Sörgärde (2023, pp.251-252) argue for interactive processes of listening and constructive dialogue, where opposing ideas and standpoints can generate greater insight and more effective collective action. From the process standpoint, the question of whether a programme succeeds becomes more a question of how it is read, carried, and remade as it travels than of how well it was designed. This view speaks directly to studies of large, distributed organizations, where the change must additionally cross national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). The perspective therefore shifts attention to what becomes of it as it travels, which prompts a closer look at what is emphasized as significant during implementation.

2.2 Areas of Influence

Sveningsson & Sörgärde (2023, p.14) identify three areas of importance that shape the change process: organizational culture, identity, and leadership. We now discuss how each of these enables or constrains the transformation. Although identity does not appear as a separate heading, we treat it as part of the broader discussion of change, woven into the cultural and leadership dimensions rather than examined in isolation.

2.2.1 Role of Culture

Organizational culture has no single agreed definition but is broadly described as a construct of shared values, norms, and beliefs (Palmer et al., 2017, p.151). It is also generally understood as collective rather than individual, emerging gradually through tradition and experience, and as relatively inert: people tend to hold on to their established ideas and ways of acting, which is part of why culture is difficult to change (Hofstede et al., 1990; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025). Cultures vary in strength, with strong cultures characterized by widely shared and intensely held

values that shape behaviour with consistency, and weak cultures by little agreement on core values or expected ways of acting (Palmer et al., 2017). Partly because of these features, culture is frequently identified as the most influential factor behind the failure of change initiatives (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023).

One well-known model is Schein's (2004), which organizes culture into three interrelated levels. At the core sit the assumptions, which are the taken-for-granted beliefs about reality, the organization, and people's relations to one another, which guide everyday thinking and action. Above these are the values and norms that prescribe how the organization is supposed to work: its stated principles, objectives, and codes. At the most visible level are artifacts: the physical, behavioural, and verbal expressions through which the deeper layers become tangible, from symbols and routines to the stories an organization tells about itself. The levels are mutually influential, but the deeper layers tend to be the least accessible to deliberate intervention. This relationship between espoused values, visible artifacts, and underlying assumptions becomes central to debates about whether and how culture can be intentionally changed (Schein, 1985; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025).

Building on this view, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2025) argue that change initiatives often remain superficial because the deeper cultural assumptions that shape everyday organizational life are rarely addressed or questioned. Because these assumptions are taken for granted, they tend to escape the planned change agenda altogether. In this way, they are too embedded to be noticed, let alone questioned. As a result, visible elements such as communication systems, routines, and formal structures can be altered while the underlying ways people think and make sense of situations remain intact (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025, pp.28-30). For change to be lasting, the authors argue, these assumptions must be brought to the surface and recognized in the concrete artifacts through which they are expressed: symbols, structures, incentives, routines, and the stories an organization tells about itself.

Two Ways of Approaching Culture

Smircich (1983) groups the field into two broad camps: research that treats culture as a *variable*, and research that treats culture as something it *is*. The ‘variable view’ treats culture as something an organization *has*: a controllable element in the managerial toolbox, alongside other organizational subsystems (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023, p.137). The perspective of culture is in a tool-based approach where organization is conceived as an ‘organism’ in which culture plays a functionalist role and must be aligned with other subsystems to ensure efficiency. The risk is that such alignment remains superficial unless it reaches the deeper levels of the organization (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023, p.137). Hofstede et al. (1990) underscore this concern by describing culture as ‘inert’ and ‘historically related’: it is shaped by long-established experience and predictability, which makes organizational members naturally resistant to efforts to manipulate or rapidly change cultural patterns. The implication is that what an organization treats as a variable to be adjusted is also, in practice, the product of how it was built and run over time.

The being view, by contrast, reflects a more process-oriented and anthropological approach in which culture functions as a lens through which organizational reality is perceived and experienced. Elements such as leadership become expressions of culture that may be interpreted differently depending on the people doing the interpreting. Culture is thus continuously shaped and maintained through everyday interactions, which implies that multiple understandings of it can coexist, and that employees’ and managers’ views of change are not necessarily aligned (Alvesson, 2013; Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023, pp.136-138). Building on this view, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2025, pp.56-57) draw attention to a more processual and localized understanding of cultural change as “everyday reframing”: culture emerges gradually through conversations, informal influence, and small adjustments in how people interpret their work and the realities they encounter. On this view, cultural change does not depend primarily on formal strategies or senior management initiatives but on the meaning-making that takes place across an organization’s everyday interactions.

Building on the translation model introduced earlier (Latour, 1986, 2005), Alvesson and Sveningsson (2025, p.160) point to what they call the “unintentional reinforcement of existing

culture”: a backfire effect in which a programme, depending on how it lands, paradoxically reinforces the very patterns it was designed to dissolve. For instance, a programme intended to build trust can, by how it is rolled out, leave participants experiencing it as evidence that they are not heard. This points to a feature of change work itself: it can carry elements of a “non-recognized” existing culture that actively counteract the new espoused objectives, operating, as the authors put it, “behind the backs” of the change agents (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025, p.182). A related dynamic Alvesson and Sveningsson (2025, pp.107, 193) describe is what they call “managerial hypocrisy”: a pattern in which values are espoused at the top without the organizational practices to support them. They identify this as one of several meanings employees ascribe to change programmes that lack credibility, alongside readings of the programme as a ‘paper product’ or as an ideal too far from daily reality (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025, p.107). The hypocrisy reading is the most damaging because it positions managers as performing values they themselves do not live (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2025). This connects to Schein’s (2004) earlier point that espoused values and underlying behavioural assumptions can be very different from one another. The same dynamic can extend downward through the organization, since the local actors through whom programmes are reinterpreted are central but their visible support cannot be read at face value. Middle managers frequently back organizational change because they feel “heightened surveillance” or pressure to comply rather than because they genuinely embrace its values (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003, pp.1152, 1171; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025, pp.50, 52). From this standpoint, local managers, informal authorities, and small groups become important actors in cultural change because they shape how organizational values and change initiatives are interpreted at the level where work actually happens (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025, pp.56-57).

Stories, Identity, and the Psychological Work of Change

Part of what makes cultural change so difficult is that it touches the stories and identities through which people understand their work (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025). Watson (1994, p.150) emphasizes that organizational culture is shaped by competing ways of talking about work and management, including official narratives of empowerment, teamwork, and growth alongside more cynical accounts tied to managerial control, insecurity, and cost. People interpret the organization through these informal stories, gossip, and jokes that help them make sense of

uncertainty and power, and these narratives are culturally consequential because they shape what employees take to be realistic and legitimate.

Identity is closely related to culture, though the two are usually distinguished. Culture tends to be treated as the more implicit and emergent context of organizational life, while identity is more explicit, language-oriented, and directly articulated (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025). Ybema (2010, p.493-494) develops this connection by arguing that organizations construct collective self-understanding by comparing past, present, and future. Culture, on this view, is temporal: built not only through shared assumptions but through stories about who ‘we’ were, who ‘we’ are now, and who ‘we’ are becoming. In the context of organizational transformation, this matters because change is often experienced as a shift in identity and belonging before it is registered as a change in structures or systems. Therefore, employees ask not only what is changing but what the change says about them, whether it fits who they are, and what the organization stands for.

When change is perceived to threaten these identifications, it may trigger resistance rooted in identity concerns. From a tool-based perspective, change initiatives framed by management as efficiency or improvement can instead be experienced by professional groups as threats to their autonomy, expertise, or established values. If perceived as an attack on “sacred values” tied to identity, resistance emerges as the protection of something groups experience as constitutive of who they are (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023, pp.243-244). This emotional and identity dimension also aligns with Schein’s (2004, p.31-32) understanding of organizational change as a psychological process rather than a purely structural one. People often experience tension between the need to adapt and the fear of losing familiarity, competence, or identity, and must feel psychologically safe in order to learn and take on new assumptions. Without that safety, uncertainty and anxiety can produce defensiveness and attachment to existing cultural patterns rather than the openness that change requires (Schein, 2004, p.16-17). If change requires people to feel safe enough to let go of familiar assumptions, the question becomes who is responsible for creating those conditions, which brings the role of leaders into focus.

2.2.2 Role of Leadership

Culture and leadership are, on Schein's (2004, p.88) account, "two sides of the same coin": leaders shape culture through what they pay attention to, reward, or ignore, and culture, in turn, defines what counts as leadership. This intertwining is why a discussion of culture in change naturally leads into one of leadership. Leadership has been studied across many theoretical traditions and resists a single, fixed definition (Alvesson et al., 2017). In addition, leadership is itself part of the cultural context in which it operates and may be interpreted differently depending on how people perceive it (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023). Despite this interpretive openness, a central distinction is made between the functions of leadership and management. Management is typically associated with structural planning, controlling, organizing procedures, and allocating resources, while leadership is understood as a relational process of constructing meaning and commitment between leaders and followers, targeting their ideas, beliefs, and values. On this view, the primary goal of leadership is not behavioural compliance but the management of meaning, where the leader's task is to shape a shared organizational reality (Alvesson et al., 2017). Although the two functions are conceptually distinct, scholars have argued that the distinction is often blurred in practice and that effective organizing requires "seeing managers as leaders, and leadership as management practiced well" (Palmer et al., 2017, p.33). Managers at all levels are accordingly expected to engage their teams, provide direction, and help others make sense of strategic change (Alvesson et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2017). In practice, however, there is often a mismatch between what is expected of managers and what most are realistically able to deliver, as many lack the skills or time to take on this work alongside the administrative demands (Alvesson et al., 2017).

In the context of organizational change, leadership has long been emphasized as crucial under unpredictable and chaotic conditions (Alvesson et al., 2017; Balogun et al., 2015; Musaigwa, 2023). What is needed in such conditions is described as a leadership "targeting the hearts and minds of people" through appeals to meaning, culture, and inspiration (Spector, 2013, as cited in Alvesson et al., 2017, p.40). This emphasis is captured in the well-known distinction between transactional leadership, which works through clarifying tasks and exchanging rewards for performance, and transformational leadership, which aims to motivate people beyond their

formal work tasks through vision, identity, and shared meaning (Alvesson et al., 2017). In times of change, much of the literature foregrounds the latter, pointing to the significance of leaders not only making sense of change themselves but acting as sensegivers who construct plausible meanings and seek to shape how others interpret a new organizational reality (Sparr, 2018; Kraft et al., 2018; Logemann et al., 2019; Kihlberg & Lindberg, 2021). Drawing on Lewin's three-step model, scholars argue that this sensegiving work is particularly critical to "unfreeze" the status quo, where leaders are expected to create readiness by managing employee perceptions and shifting existing mindsets toward the need to change (Armenakis et al., 1994; Bakari et al., 2017). To exhibit strong leadership, it is also highlighted that leaders should act as role models by embodying the new behaviours and providing the emotional support that helps others navigate the anxiety (Palmer et al., 2017). Schein (2004, p.278, 398-399) adds to this the call for cultural humility: an awareness among leaders that old assumptions may no longer fit the context, and a willingness to support the unlearning that change requires.

Despite this perceived importance, critical scholars, such as Alvesson et al. (2017), caution that the role of leadership is frequently overemphasized in both academic and practitioner literature, often portrayed with a "heroic" glow. As a consequence, both success and failure are frequently attributed to the traits, behaviour, or style of individual leaders. Much of the leadership discourse, they argue, is "vague, naive and idealistic" (Alvesson et al., 2017, p.2). They warn against treating leadership as a "panacea" for organizational problems (Alvesson et al., 2017, p.2), noting that outcomes in organizations typically reflect a combination of contingencies. A leader's impact is often shaped, and sometimes constrained, by economic pressures, regulatory conditions, and existing organizational bureaucracy, which may have a stronger influence on change outcomes (Alvesson et al., 2017). This position suggests that leadership in change is best understood not as a heroic intervention but as a relational and interpretive practice that must work with the existing meanings, anxieties, and local perceptions through which any planned change is received.

Leadership Communication

Leadership communication is not merely a tool for disseminating information about change, but the very process through which change is "talked into being" (Palmer et al., 2017; Weick et al.,

2005, p.413). Weick et al. (2005) highlight how communication is not separate from sensemaking and organizing but constitutive of them. Through ongoing talk, people interpret the circumstances they collectively find themselves in, and in doing so, organizations and the situations they face are continuously formed and reformed (Weick et al., 2005). From this standpoint, effective change communication should shift from “getting the word out” through information dissemination to “getting buy-in” through two-way dialogue, where messages are not only transmitted but interpreted, questioned, and made meaningful by those who receive them (Palmer et al., 2017, p.224). However, change managers tend to act more as reporters disseminating information than as sense-makers facilitating shared understanding. Communication widely in itself is not sufficient, as employees may respond with anxiety and cynicism when change is informed to them without opportunities for dialogue and involvement (Palmer et al., 2017).

Beyond what is communicated, the language through which change is talked about shapes the reality of the change itself (Marshak, 2002; Palmer et al., 2017). Collins (2018, p.xxi) argues that for managers, “walking the walk” necessarily implies “talking the talk.” In a similar way, Palmer et al. (2017) argue that the management of change is, in important respects, the management of conversations. Even informal exchanges shape how meaning is constructed and how change is perceived, and coherence across these conversations helps prevent the mixed signals that arise when language and intent diverge. Marshak (2002, p.284) takes this further, arguing that the conventional vocabulary of change carries hidden assumptions about what change is. Terms such as inertia and momentum, borrowed from mechanical and physical movement, position organizations as stable systems pushed and pulled by external forces, with change understood as something to be planned, executed, and brought to a conclusion. This framing obscures what is psychological and social about change: the ongoing interpretive and relational work through which transformation actually unfolds. Treating change instead as a continuous adjustment of meanings, relationships, and practices invites a different vocabulary, one that foregrounds how people experience and make sense of what is happening (Marshak, 2002). This also helps explain why change initiatives so often remain unfinished or contested: those involved interpret and reshape what arrives in light of their local realities rather than receive it as a finished message.

Leading Change Digitally

Contemporary transformation initiatives are increasingly coordinated through digital channels, a condition scholars describe through the concept of “digital” or “technical distance”: the reduction of non-verbal cues, the loss of spontaneous and informal interaction, and the increased risk of fragmented meaning across teams (Gilli et al., 2023, p.12; Kim et al., 2025). Where these conditions hold, leaders are described as having to work harder to develop shared understandings, because the everyday interactions through which such understandings tend to form are weakened (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025; Gilli et al., 2023). In these virtual settings, “trusting environments no longer arise automatically”; they must be actively and intentionally cultivated (Gilli et al., 2023, p.12). Kim et al. (2025) extend this point, arguing that what leaders convey, and the quality of how they convey it, come to matter more than how often they do so. Technology can also produce information overload and a state of “permanent availability” that exhausts employees without a clear sense of purpose (Klus & Müller, 2021, p. 1207). The challenge is what might be described as a paradox: leaders are required to convey a coherent sense of direction and to build trust through “cold” channels that compress the very cues on which credibility and presence have typically depended (Avolio et al., 2014; Gilli et al., 2023, p.12). To address this, Kim et al. (2025) argue that transformational leadership becomes particularly relevant. Its emphasis on articulating a clear vision, providing motivational support, and demonstrating “psychological presence” is described as central to keeping employees aligned despite the distances of remote work (Kim et al., 2025, p.11).

A further strand points to a gap between what leadership at a distance is said to require and what it tends to look like in practice. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2025) describe a recurring pattern in which senior managers preach involvement and visible leadership while showing limited ongoing commitment to the projects they have initiated. The visibility and presence such settings demand are often precisely what the everyday rhythms of senior leadership work displace, with consequences for credibility at the levels of the organization that depend most on those qualities. Leading change from a distance is thus inherently complex, where traditional leadership paradigms and forms of oversight have proven inadequate (Hassan et al., 2024). This suggests that leading change digitally is not a matter of bringing existing leadership

practices online, but of working within a setting that reshapes what leadership can and must do differently. Less attention has been given, however, to how these dynamics operate in global transformation programmes that travel across many national contexts simultaneously. In such settings, the relational work of leadership is carried out at considerable linguistic, cultural, and temporal distance.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, we present the methodological design used to conduct the study to create transparency in how our findings are derived and what they are based on. We begin by outlining the philosophical grounding, research approach, and context on which the study is grounded. This is followed by the data collection, data analysis, and lastly, a reflection on the study's credibility and limitations.

3.1 Philosophical Grounding

Before engaging with the material, it is important to clarify the study's ontological and epistemological assumptions, as these shape what is considered valid knowledge (Styhre, 2013; Prasad, 2018). Ontology concerns what is assumed to be real, and epistemology concerns how knowledge about reality is interpreted (Styhre, 2013; Prasad, 2018). This study assumes, ontologically, that interpretations of transformation are not a fixed reality but are socially constructed through people's experiences and interpretations. Epistemologically, the knowledge about change is not a detached fact but is produced through individuals perspectives and meanings. Since we are interested in understanding how leaders subjectively interpret a global change programme, it is grounded in an interpretive research tradition. In this tradition, knowledge is understood as socially constructed through human interpretation rather than as an objective reflection (Prasad, 2018).

Within this interpretive tradition, the study is further informed by Symbolic Interactionism (SI), which focuses on how meaning is constructed through lived experiences and everyday interactions, such as in work contexts, “from the standpoint of multiple roles, self-images, and identities” (Prasad, 2018, p. 26). It builds upon the idea of ‘negotiated orders’ (Prasad, 2018, p.

22), where what is perceived as a shared reality emerges through ongoing social negotiation. From this perspective, individuals interpret situations in relation to how they see themselves and others, and these understandings are shaped by their roles within a given context. These identities are not stable or fixed, but shift across situations and over time, meaning that different interpretations may coexist. As a result, social reality is understood as multiple and evolving, rather than stable (Prasad, 2018).

This is relevant for exploring how change is understood and negotiated during a transformation process in everyday organizational life, where interpretations may differ across actors, roles, and geographical contexts within the company. From this perspective, this study does not claim to provide a universal truth, but rather to offer insights into how change is socially constructed and interpreted by individuals in a specific context. Accordingly, the role of the researcher is to interpret these processes in a systematic and reflexive manner, acknowledging the constructed and context-dependent nature of knowledge (Prasad, 2018; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

3.2 Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative approach, which allows for a deep exploration of how meaning is constructed through subjective experiences (Flick, 2014; Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). Such an approach is appropriate given the study's focus on relational and context-dependent processes that are difficult to capture through standardized measures (Alvehus, 2020). This further supports the choice of interviews and a single case study to gain an in-depth understanding of individuals' interpretations within their specific context.

As we did not aim to test specific hypotheses derived from theory, an abductive approach was considered suitable, allowing existing literature to be challenged in light of the empirical findings (Alvehus, 2020). We avoided imposing strong theoretical assumptions at an early stage to allow insights to emerge from the data. This aligns with a SI perspective, which emphasizes developing understanding from participants' experiences rather than testing fixed conceptual relationships (Prasad, 2018). Although we approached the study from the empirical material, in line with inductive reasoning (Reichert, 2014), we drew on a prior understanding and familiarity with the research topic when developing the interview guide. This positions the study within an abductive

logic, integrating both deductive and inductive approaches through an iterative movement between empirical material and theoretical perspectives (Reichert, 2014).

Our openness to emerging insights was further shaped by a problematization approach from a standpoint of challenging assumptions underlying existing literature (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). Alvesson & Sandberg (2013) argue that an overly rigid approach can limit the researcher's ability to reveal a 'strong point' (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 38). Based on this, we searched for so-called 'breakdowns', where the empirical material may contradict underlying theoretical assumptions (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 141). Such contradictions allow for the development of a mystery, forcing us to see the situation from a fresh light rather than getting stuck in old, existing patterns. Therefore, an open mind and room for freedom and creativity were considered essential when engaging with the material in order to question those dominant perceptions (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

3.3 Data Collection

This study's sample consists of leaders at one case company, referred to throughout this thesis as Orion. The company was chosen for its relevance to the research topic and for the opportunity to access leaders involved in an ongoing global transformation programme across different organizational contexts. This setting provides a relevant empirical basis for examining how a planned change programme is interpreted across local realities. While a single case study may at first appear limited in scope, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2025) argue that an in-depth, contextually sensitive study of one organizational setting offers more analytical value for change research than examining many organizational settings only on a superficial level. They further note that change cannot be understood by treating an organization as a single unit, since different groups within it often experience and read the same programme in very different ways. This study follows that orientation, examining the same transformation through the perspectives of leaders positioned at different levels and in different national contexts within one organization.

To ensure the organization's anonymity, pseudonyms have been used for all participants as well as for the organization itself, its parent group, and the prior companies involved in the

consolidation that preceded the current programme. Neutral names were chosen randomly for the interviewees and do not carry any specific meaning.

3.3.1 Sampling

To select interviewees, we used purposive sampling, a non-random method commonly used in qualitative research that involves intentionally selecting participants based on characteristics relevant to the research topic (Flick, 2014; Rapley, 2014), Flick (2023) outlines that suitable participants should be able to reflect critically, be willing to engage in the research, and possess relevant subject knowledge. Based on these criteria, we identified one key contact within Orion, who in turn recommended further relevant interviewees, following a snowball sampling approach (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020).

Initially, the study was designed to focus on participants in a single country, with the aim of exploring how a global transformation programme is interpreted within one local reality. However, the scope was later broadened due to practical access constraints, including varying willingness to participate and limited responsiveness. As a result, the sample was extended to closely related functions across multiple countries within the organization. This adjustment also reshaped the analytical focus of the study: rather than examining variation within a single local context, the research came to explore how the same transformation programme is interpreted across different national contexts. Flick (2014) emphasizes the need to balance depth for rich insights with breadth for diverse perspectives, and the wider geographic scope enabled us to capture this variation in interpretation.

The snowball approach allowed us to access rich data on relationships between clusters of connected practitioners, capturing both individual and shared interpretations within the company. While a sample size of 13 participants may be considered limited, the number required to reach data saturation is not fixed and depends on the scope and context of the study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). To ensure richness, we gradually assessed the data saturation level by staying aware of repetition of patterns in data (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2020).

3.3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews are commonly used in the SI tradition, typically centred around understanding the meaning and depth of situations (Prasad, 2018). Our empirical material consists of semi-structured interviews with leaders involved in or impacted by the transformation programme, primarily from marketing, brand, and communications functions, as well as from change management and practice function. Some leaders hold key positions in shaping and driving parts of the transformation: some as global workstream sponsors or leads, and others as local leaders who translate global directives into national contexts (see Appendix B). The participants work primarily remotely, although some spend more time in the office than others. In Appendix A, their work location (remote or on-site), as well as the countries they are based in – the UK, Germany, Australia, France, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Bulgaria – are outlined.

To support the data collection, an interview guide with open-ended questions was developed based on the study's aim (see Appendix D). The guide was adapted in response to emerging insights and served as a guiding framework rather than a strict script, allowing the interviewee to remain in control of the narrative. Given this, as well as the varying extent to which participants elaborated on different topics, not all questions were asked in every interview, and the order of questions also varied. In SI, it is common to include questions about how the individuals view the 'self' and others in the given context (Prasad, 2018), which we considered when formulating the interview guide. Following this tradition, the questions were designed to capture participants' constructions and negotiations of meaning through interaction. Interviewing participants from different countries across closely linked functions further allowed for a nuanced exploration of how multiple realities and interpretations emerge and are shaped across contexts within the same organization.

Pilot interviews were conducted with two participants (Kim and Sam), which allowed for testing and refinement of the initial interview guide and research direction. Some adjustments were made to the wording and questions following these interviews, while the overall research focus remained largely consistent (see Appendix C and D). Certain parts of the pilot interviews were therefore considered suitable for cautious inclusion in the final empirical material and for providing background on the research context. The first pilot interview with Kim was conducted

in person, while the other ones were conducted via Microsoft Teams, including one follow-up interview. All 13 participants were used to meeting online, as Orion operates across approximately 30 countries in a highly dispersed team setting. Although the lack of face-to-face interaction could be seen as a limitation, we cannot recall that it negatively impacted the results. All interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour and were conducted in English. In addition, one follow-up interview was conducted (Kim) and complementary data was collected through two written responses to follow-up questions sent via email (Alex and Billie, see Appendix E). While email responses lack the interactivity and spontaneous probing of live interviews, they provided considered reflections and were therefore treated as complementary qualitative data.

3.3.2 Document Analysis

In order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the research context, we used document analysis as a second data collection method. We reviewed 13 provided company documents, from which those most relevant to the study were selected. Although the documents themselves are not included in this thesis due to confidentiality, an overview of the selected ones is provided in Appendix A. In this study, document analysis served as a complementary research method, offering background information on the organization (Bowen, 2009), including its structure, strategic direction, and the objectives of the ongoing transformation programme. This helped contextualize the empirical findings and further inform the interview guide. It further provided us with a better understanding of the development of the transformation programme over time, as document analysis can enable researchers to identify changes by examining materials from different stages (Bowen, 2009). One limitation of document analysis concerns ‘biased selectivity’ where the available material may reflect particular organizational agendas (Bowen, 2009). To address this, we reviewed a range of documents rather than relying solely on those aligning with emerging findings.

3.4 Data Analysis

The empirical material was analyzed using a thematic coding process that followed an abductive, iterative logic (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014), drawing on Rennstam & Wästerfors’s (2018)

sorting-reducing-arguing framework, combined with theme-identification techniques from Ryan and Bernard (2003). First, we audio-recorded each primary interview after obtaining consent from the participant, and then followed with a full transcription, using the tool KLaingAI as support before analysis began. We then began with *sorting* the data (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.69), starting with initial open coding in which recurring patterns of interpretations were identified and labelled close to the empirical material. This was done independently by each of us and then cross-checked and discussed together, in order to reduce individual bias and align our interpretations. During this first pass through the transcripts, we drew on Ryan and Bernard's (2003) *scrutiny techniques*, "things to look for" in the text (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p.88), such as repetitions, indigenous typologies (local terms participants used in distinctive ways), metaphors and analogies, similarities and differences across participants' accounts, and transitions like pauses or voice tone shifts (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, pp.89-91). This reading was also guided by a Symbolic Interactionism lens (Prasad, 2018), through which we focused on how participants described their understandings of the phenomenon, the meanings they attributed to it, and the practices through which they shaped shared understanding. Because contemporary SI research emphasizes the close relationship between language and interpretation (Prasad, 2018), these linguistic features mattered to us as the places where participants described and made sense of their realities. This work continued iteratively as we grouped initial codes in an Excel matrix into more focused categories, which accumulated in broader main themes with subthemes reflecting distinct yet related dimensions. This structured overview allowed systematic comparison across cases and ensured transparency in how empirical evidence was linked to analytical categories.

Because sorting tends to open up more analytical paths than any single study can pursue, the next stage of the analysis involved *reducing* the material (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.107). Following Rennstam and Wästerfors's argument that the analyst must select both between categories and within them, we collectively reviewed the thematic structure, identified the patterns, and chose the quotations that most clearly conveyed each theme. We then drafted the empirical analysis in several iterations, working towards a narrative that stays close to the participants' accounts while making the analytical thread explicit. We were mindful of the big influence of the researcher in interpreting and presenting the material. The quotes used in the

Empirical Findings chapter were therefore selected on the basis of how clearly they illustrated the key ideas within each theme

3.5 Reflection on Credibility and Limitations

First and foremost, informed consent is critical when conducting ethical research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015), which was obtained in writing before participating as well as on audio. Taking part in the study was voluntary, and they were all provided with the research context and overall information about the thesis beforehand. Additionally, confidentiality is a key principle in qualitative research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). To ensure anonymity, no personal names or company identifiers were included. It is also crucial to be aware of the researcher's role to uphold an ethical and reflective approach (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). We continuously discussed and had in mind how our prior assumptions and presence during the interviews may have affected the empirical material and findings. To further improve trustworthiness, we both attended all interviews and asked follow-up questions to ensure shared understanding and accurate interpretation, particularly as some participants were not native English speakers.

In order to increase the likelihood of validity, the researcher is recommended to explicitly outline what techniques they used to find the themes. This identification can be found in our data analysis section. Moreover, reliability is crucial to ensure that the same thing is being measured by both. Researchers should aim to reach a strong 'intercoder agreement,' meaning that there is an agreement and similar understanding in how to apply themes to the data (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 104). By discussing and reviewing each other's coding both separately and together, we sought to reach that common ground.

As mentioned in the data analysis section, KlangAI was used as support for the transcription process. This tool is designed to protect user data, with no use of data for training purposes and is compliant with GDPR (klang.ai, 2026). Moreover, ChatGPT and Grammarly were used as a language-support tool for paraphrasing, improving readability and detecting misspellings. It did not contribute to idea generation, argument development, or analytical reasoning.

4. Empirical Material and Findings

4.1 Case Background

To establish the case study's relevance, we present background information on the selected organization, drawing on semi-structured interviews and provided documents. The pseudonym used to describe the organization is Orion, which was formed when Oris, an Alpha Group company focused on IT outsourcing, acquired Aeon, a digital engineering firm, with the combined entity subsequently rebranded as Orion. Alpha Group is the broader parent group.

4.1.1 Orion

Orion can be described as a global digital engineering consultancy operating across approximately 30 countries (Document 3). The company delivers consulting services, software engineering, and technological expertise to clients across multiple industries (Document 2), including automotive, aerospace, technology, life sciences, energy, banking, and public sector (Document 3). Structurally, Orion operates as a global business unit with its own companies in each market, centrally coordinated by a global leadership team while retaining local country organisations. The resulting structure is matrix-like in form, with intersecting global-functional and local-country reporting lines (Kim, 05.04.2026), and enabling functions at the corporate level (Document 4). Within markets, practices own consultant development and capability-building, while sales and industries own client relationships and accounts, so that consultants and others increasingly work across two reporting axes rather than within a single hierarchy (Billie, 28.04.2026).

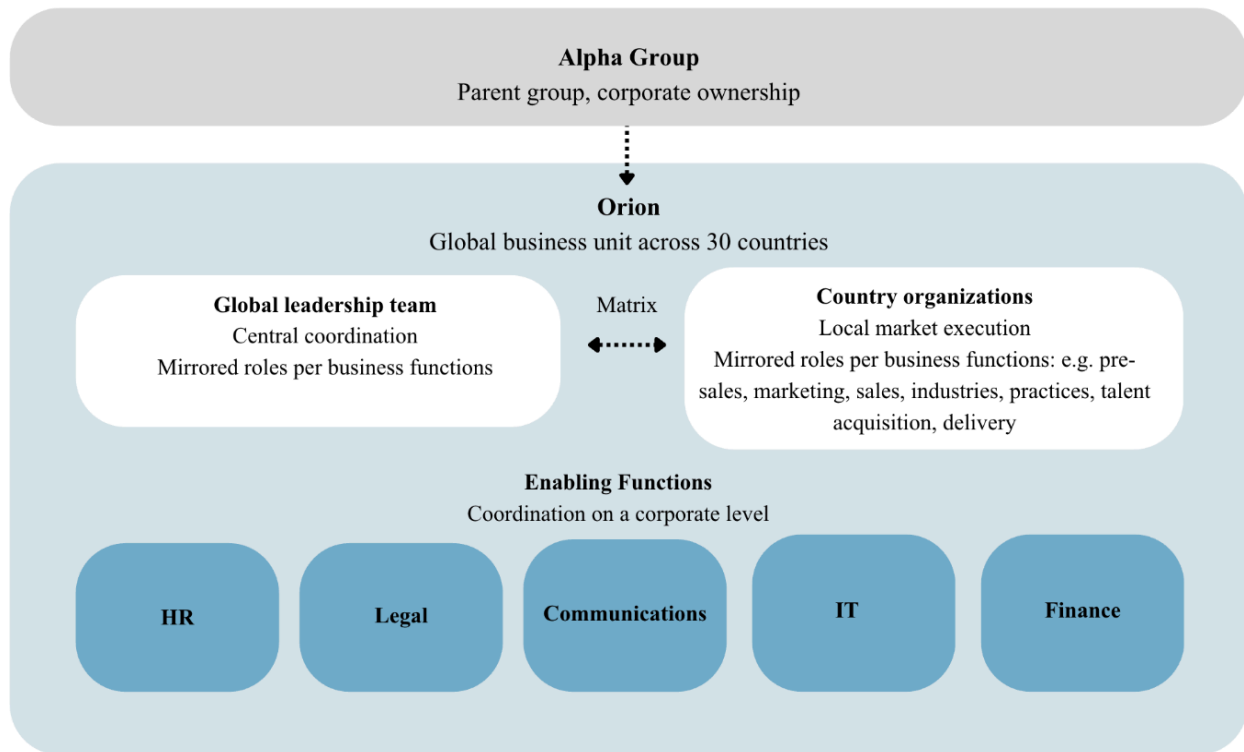


Figure 1: Organizational structure

4.1.2 Background of the Transformation

Before Orion

In the period before Orion took its current form, the broader organization was structured along largely siloed national lines, with each country operating semi-independently and oriented primarily toward its local market. Quinn characterizes this period as the absence of a genuinely global culture:

We were a big organization, but each country was running on its own. They were focused on the local market, on the local culture, and we weren't communicating with the other countries a lot. Maybe just for reporting – Quinn, 24.04.2026

Kim further describes how Alpha Group entities operated at country level with multiple brands, such as Oris, sitting underneath, and how Oris itself existed in fragmented, locally driven forms

across markets, without joint processes, shared HR, or an overarching brand strategy. In 2018, the then-CEO identified Oris as a growth pillar and initiated a strategy to consolidate the fragmented Oris operations together with other group assets, such as Alpha IT, into a single, centrally managed global business unit. In January 2021, Oris officially established as a global business unit, centrally managed by a global leadership team while retaining its own companies in each market (Kim, 05.04.2026). Quinn describes what this felt like:

We basically invented the brand by our own. We had the name and the logo, but that's it. We didn't have culture. We didn't have guidelines. We didn't have anything. – Quinn, 24.04.2026.

The “Big Bang”

The merger, it was a key step, like the Big Bang in a way. So we had historically two different cultures with some common areas. So what we needed to do for building one Orion, culture, vision, and everything. – Quinn, 24.04.2026

In spring 2022, Oris acquired Aeon and the combined entity was rebranded as Orion (Kim, 05.04.2026; Quinn, 24.04.2026). Most interviewees describe this transaction as a “merger.” This wording likely reflects both the fact that Aeon was, as Kim puts it, “another big company almost as big as we [Oris] were” (Kim, 23.02.2026), with the rebrand signalling the creation of something new rather than the absorption of Aeon into Oris. Quinn describes this as the “second transformation” and more complex than the first, because it involved combining two companies with fundamentally different cultures, business models, and professional identities. Oris was rooted in IT outsourcing and technical support, while Aeon came from digital engineering with deep expertise in automotive and industrial sectors (Quinn, 24.04.2026).

The combining of Aeon and Oris played out very differently, depending on the geographics and the relative size of each entity in each country. For instance, in Belgium, Aeon was dominant, and its culture and tools prevailed; in the Netherlands, Oris was the larger entity. This asymmetry created distinct starting points for the two countries even before Orion Accelerate began (Billie, 28.04.2026).

A particular challenge in the period that followed was the us-versus-them dynamic at the employee level long after leadership had aligned on the new vision. Quinn notes that for approximately two years, colleagues continued to refer to the old brands out of habit. At the management level, alignment was easier because leaders had access to the overarching narrative and strategic direction. However, translating that vision downward across more than 30 countries, each with different internal processes, cultures, and levels of organizational maturity, proved to be challenging. An additional complexity came from legal restrictions during the early transition period, which prevented the two brands from communicating freely with one another, limiting transparency at the very moment when employees most needed clarity. Quinn describes the challenge this created:

We want to know the big picture, and it was really hard to onboard the team by saying, ‘Hey, we’re doing something with some purpose, but we cannot tell you what this is. But trust it’s the right thing.’ It’s not a very strong message. – Quinn, 24.04.2026

After two to three years, the integration reached a point where people largely stopped identifying with the old brands and began to think of themselves as one company – what Quinn describes as the shift from “us and them” to “us.” This, she argues, was the necessary foundation for everything that followed (Quinn, 24.04.2026).

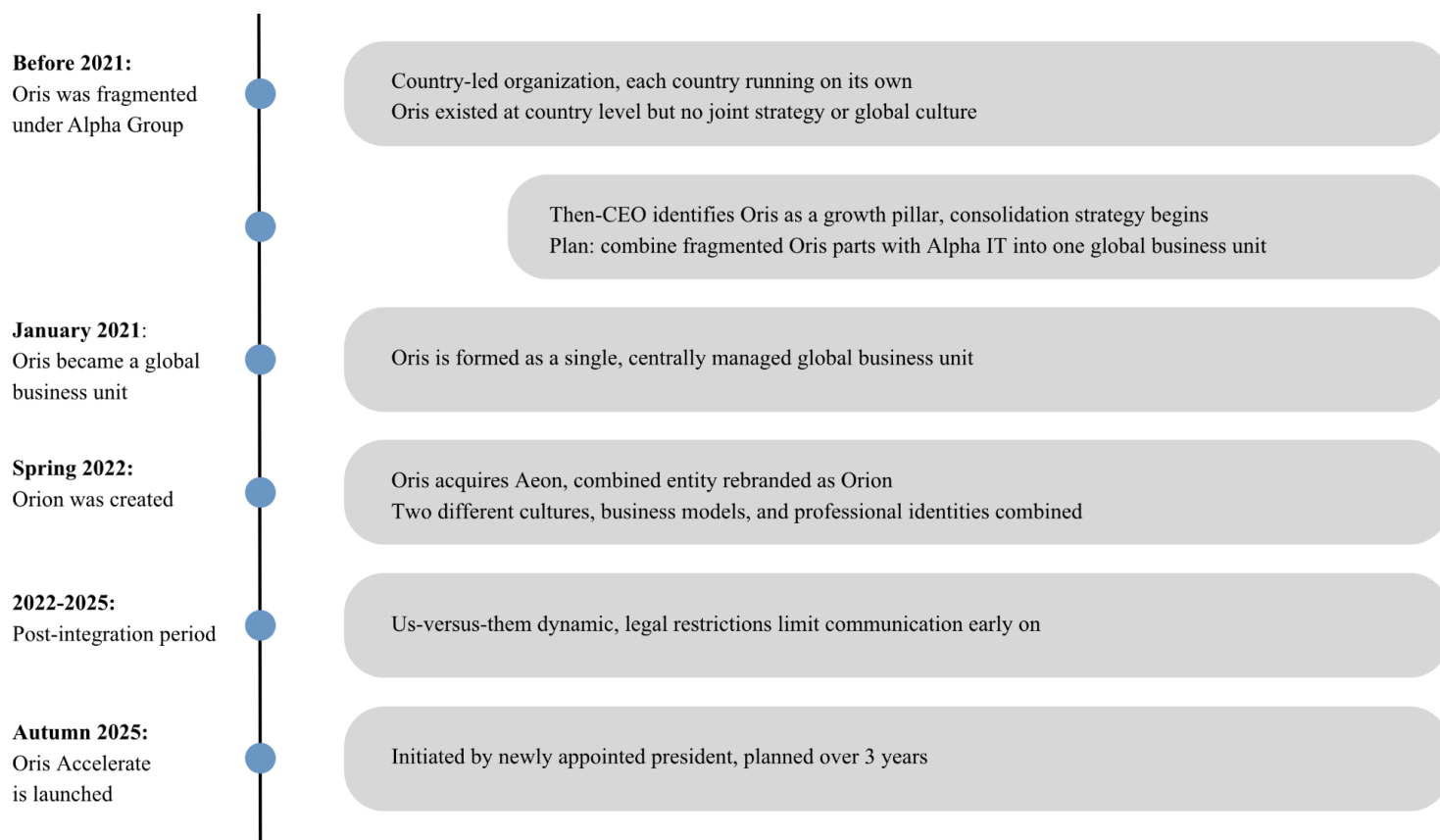


Figure 2: Timeline

4.1.3 Orion Accelerate – The Next Step

With the internal mindset more aligned than before, though this remains a work in progress, and a shared organizational identity gradually taking shape, the focus could begin to shift toward aligning processes, sales approaches, and market positioning across countries. In Quinn’s own framing, “this is actually the next step” (Quinn, 24.04.2026). The third chapter could begin: Orion Accelerate. Planned to extend over approximately three years (Document 4), the programme was initiated in autumn 2025 by a newly appointed president, who had joined the organization earlier that year. Rather than representing an entirely new strategic direction, Kim, describes it as an acceleration and scaling of existing ambitions that emerged following the consolidation (Kim, 01.04.2026). The central goal of the programme is to operate as “One Orion” by combining global scale, local expertise, and coordinated delivery to better serve

clients with international reach. Within this process, the global level is responsible for strengthening coordination across markets, while local country teams remain central to leading client relationships and delivery. This helps keep the global strategy grounded in local presence and expertise (Document 5).

Elements of Alignment

The programme is aimed at strengthening alignment and operations across markets and functions (Kim, 23.02.2026). The transformation programme spans three pillars concerning sales operations, operational infrastructure, and delivery (Document 1), each with sponsors, streamleaders and contributors (Document 4). The sales pillar focuses on harmonizing sales activities across different national contexts and strengthening a more proactive market orientation. This includes redefining ways of working, clarifying organizational structures, and developing shared approaches to training, goal-setting, and performance follow-up. In parallel, the organization is implementing changes within its *operational infrastructure*. This part of the transformation addresses internal processes and supporting systems, including IT, to ensure that organizational structures and tools enable and support new ways of working. A third dimension of the change initiative relates to *delivery*. As the organization's core offering is based on expertise and specialized skills, a key challenge lies in ensuring that the right competencies are matched with the right client needs across different markets. This involves improving coordination and capability matching so that expertise is effectively deployed across markets while also maintaining local relevance (Kim, 23.02.2026).

Underpinning all three pillars is the target operating model, something the organization did not previously have, with every country having operated under its own framework until now (Avery, 04.05.2026). The role of this model is to create greater clarity and consistency in how work is organized, how roles connect across teams and geographies, and how success is understood (Document 6). Furthermore, a transformation workstream called "Change Management & Communications" encompasses the three pillars with the goal of achieving One Orion, aiming to align change impact and planning with the other streams. This stream is responsible for the rollout of global change management frameworks as well as internal communication campaigns,

and by 2027 the outlook is to institutionalize change management practices and support adoption across countries and streams up until then (Document 7).

The transformation could be understood as operating on two parallel dimensions: a structural shift in processes, tools, and ways of working, and a more cultural one toward building a felt sense of belonging to one coherent organization (Alex, 24.04.2026). Kim further describes the design as a deliberate balancing act between these two pulls: the programme is process-focused, she says, because the organization genuinely needs that at this stage, but it is also committed to local ownership and empowerment. Countries are positioned as the powerhouse of execution, while global provides direction and scalability (Kim, 05.04.2026).

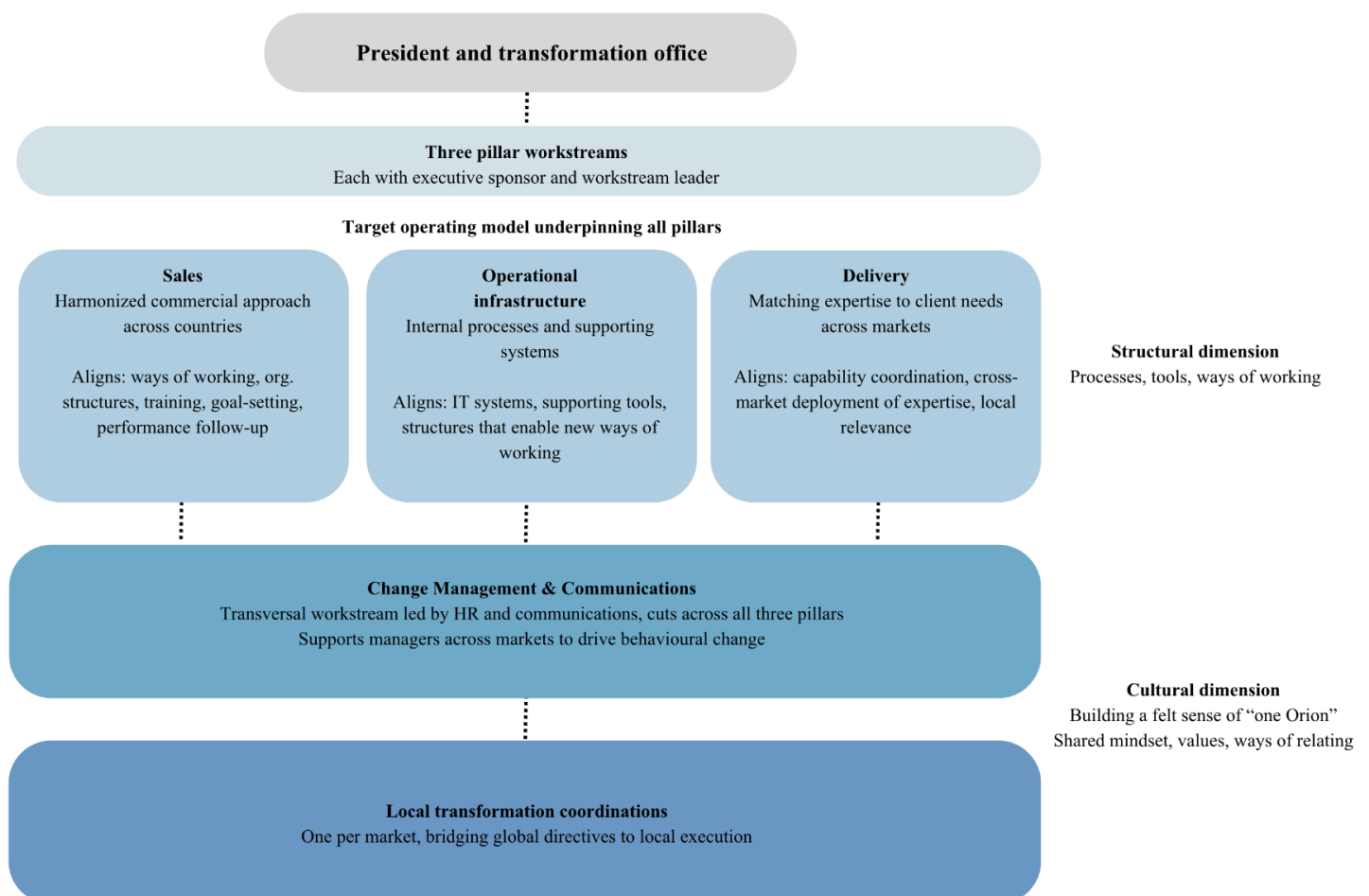


Figure 3: Orion Accelerate governance

Coordination

Digital tools play an important role in everyday coordination across the dispersed organization. Day-to-day communication runs primarily through Microsoft Teams, alongside email, WhatsApp, and increasingly AI-enabled documentation systems. At the same time, Orion operates across partly fragmented digital infrastructures, as the IT systems inherited from the Aeon-Oris integration remain in the process of integration (Kim, 23.02.2026; Robin, 24.04.2026). Orion Accelerate is coordinated almost entirely through these digital channels. At the global level, Microsoft Project manages the operational flow of tasks and reporting cycles with country leads reporting back in two-week cycles. Rather than giving country leads direct access to the project tool, the global transformation office consolidates progress into visual presentation packs. Alongside this, a monthly Transformation Council brings country representatives together to share how they activated change locally. This functions as a peer-learning forum across markets instead of purely upward accountability to global (Avery, 04.05.2026). Communication efforts also include the launching of video series in which employees across roles and geographies share what is changing, what is improving, and what opportunities they see ahead, aiming to create recognition and engagement around the transformation across the organization (Document 8).

4.2 Setting the Scene

Before examining how the transformation unfolds, it is worth looking into why it was initiated in the first place, and how those living through it understand its necessity. Across interviews, a consistent picture emerges: Orion has been operating not as one global organization but as a collection of largely autonomous national units, each with its own processes, messaging, and way of working. The transformation is, at its core, a response to the organizational fragmentation that had built up as Oris and Aeon came together and then operated for years as largely independent national units. As a result, countries do things that make sense for the local context, but from a global perspective, those local choices produce disconnect (Sidney, 28.04.2026).

Despite sharing many of the same service offerings, countries had developed their own ways of presenting and selling them, such that a client engaging with Orion in two different countries

could receive different propositions for the same solution. As Quinn puts it, “we have a lot of common solutions in the countries, but we are selling them in different ways. We are having different EVPs, different messages, even different presentations for the clients. It’s not a good message” (Quinn, 24.04.2026). Avery, responsible for the global transformation programme, points to the same fragmentation at the operational level, noting that a vast number of consultants, engineers, and tech consultants globally were all operating in different ways, with no single standard process across countries. The organization had never been able to track its own performance globally, map its pipeline, or even establish how many consultants it had across markets and what their capabilities were (Avery, 04.05.2026). The root cause, as Avery identifies it, is structural: “we have been segmented for such a long time due to mergers, due to countries operating in their own ways because they’ve had the freedom to do so. But that’s not what industry wants anymore, and we can’t continue to accelerate as a company if we don’t come together” (Avery, 04.05.2026). The freedom that had allowed local markets to operate independently had become an obstacle to the organization’s ability to compete and scale. Orion has existed as a combined entity for only around four years, and is behind competitors that have operated as unified global companies for considerably longer (Kim, 01.04.2026). Competing in a market where clients increasingly expect consistent engagement regardless of geography demands that Orion present itself as a single, coherent entity rather than thirty loosely connected national operations under a shared brand. Avery describes the urgency directly: without change, “this organization is not going to be here,” what is described as the unspoken truth that underpins the entire programme (Avery, 04.05.2026). She thus frames it as not a strategic ambition alone, but as a necessity for the organizational survival.

These accounts reveal that Orion had grown through a series of structural changes and geographic expansion, but cohesion had not kept pace with scale. The change driver is therefore best understood as a collective recognition that the existing model had reached its limits, not only in terms of external coherence and scalability, but also in terms of internal execution. When reflecting on her initial reaction to the programme, Kim says: “We have said that we should do a lot of things that never fully materialized. We make a decision in the executive team, and then little might happen” (Kim, 01.04.2026). She further notes that the company had operated in an agile, loosely structured way for too long, and what was now needed was process, governance, and follow-through. The new president, according to her, is significantly precise because he

closes the gap between decision and action: “There was always a clarity, and there was always a strategic direction. But what he realized is that now we need to really focus on executing. And that’s what this transformation program is about” (Kim, 01.04.2026). The transformation is thus driven by two recognitions: fragmentation that made the organization incoherent to its clients and unscalable in a competitive market, and an internal pattern of deciding without necessarily doing. These recognitions provide context for the following narrative.

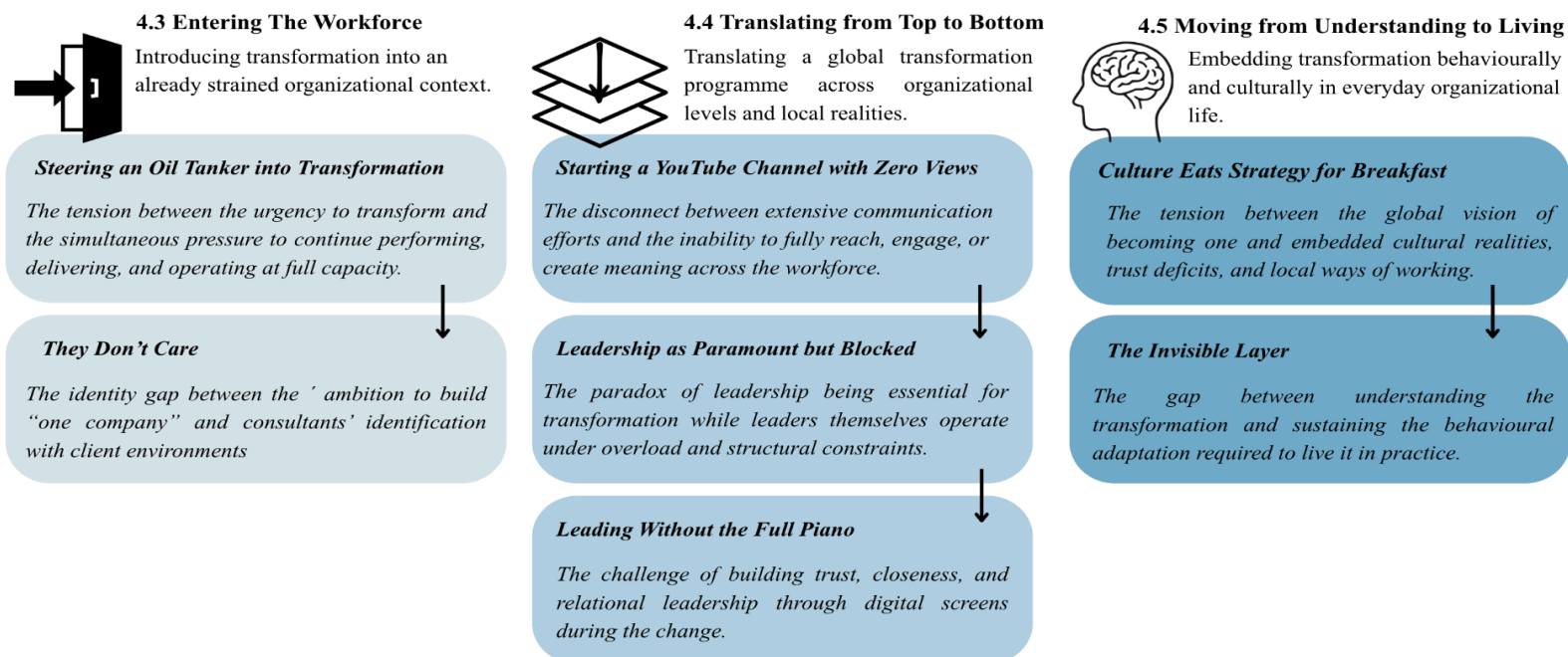


Figure 4: The Narrative

In the narrative that follows, the extent of each respondent’s involvement in the transformation varies (see Appendix B for respondents’ function in the programme), which is why some participants appear more frequently in the narrative. While the respondents are based in eight different countries, several of these countries are more closely involved in the programme than others:

Australia has been an early mover in the transformation, being one of the first countries to adopt Astra and lean into the Copilot pilot (Alex, 24.04.2026). Avery describes the country as having

historically assumed it could operate independently, “in a bubble,” but now being pushed to align globally (Avery, 24.04.2026).

Benelux is a region that remains organizationally split between Belgium and the Netherlands, with separate country structures and ERP systems, despite a longer-term vision of consolidation (Billie, 28.04.2026). While experiencing the transformation, Belgium also got a new local CEO around the same time the programme launched (Charlie, 04.05.2026).

Bulgaria is described as an engaged but non-central market in the transformation, not among the priority markets of France, Germany, and the US, but participating and supportive of the programme at a local level (Quinn, 24.04.2026).

France has been running its own local, strategic programme and gone through multiple phases, currently in its third phase of their programme (Taylor, 24.04.2026). This phase focuses on teams and operational relevance (Riley, 22.04.2026). The local and global programmes are now perceived as fully integrated, with the new global CEO’s direction seen as a natural continuation of what France had already been building toward (Taylor, 24.04.2026).

Germany is a large local market, with over 60 offices spread across the country and around 4,000 employees across eight industries, making coordination a significant challenge in itself (Jamie, 04.05.2026). Jamie frames the core tension as one between global alignment and local relevance, and between speed and coordination. While stakeholders improve alignment, they can slow execution, and Germany’s scale means this tension is felt acutely (Jamie, 04.05.2026).

4.3 Entering The Workforce



Before examining how the transformation is coordinated and implemented in practice, this theme turns to the workforce and organizational realities it enters. What the interviews reveal is that the transformation does not arrive in a neutral or fully receptive environment. Rather, it enters a workforce already shaped by exhaustion, ongoing pressure, and structural distance, where large parts of the organization remain difficult to reach before the transformation has even begun.

Steering an Oil Tanker into Transformation

One of the consistent findings across the interviews is not active resistance towards the transformation, but that there is a sense that it arrives on top of an already full workload. The challenge does not seem to primarily be about persuading people about the necessity of the transformation, but of finding space for it. Robin captures this when describing the early atmosphere in Belgium and the Netherlands:

Both in Belgium and in the Netherlands, we have more people leaving the company since the transformation. People say, “This is not for me,” and they leave the company, which is fine. It's not for everyone... The overall vibe, especially in the beginning, was not good. People were like, “Why are we doing this? It’s already hard enough as it is.” And they were seeing these processes because, let's be honest, Alpha Group and also Orion are very big companies, so it’s not very easy to go in one way or another. It's like an oil tanker: if you want to steer it, it takes a lot of time. And you see that people in the beginning were like, “Oh, no, we have enough work as it is. We need to reach our targets. Just leave us alone.” – Robin, 24.04.2026

The language points to a sense of exhaustion. Robin frames this with the oil tanker metaphor: redirecting something so large and loaded while it continues to operate takes time that neither the organization nor its people feel they have. Taylor captures the same tension in a phrase she returns to several times: “transform while perform” (Taylor, 24.04.2026). Where the oil tanker speaks to the scale and weight of the organization as a whole, “transform while perform” names what that weight means in practice. The transformation requires time, attention, and reorganization, while the business must simultaneously keep delivering, selling, and hitting its targets (Taylor, 24.04.2026). Both images point to the same structural problem: the organization is expected to restructure and deliver at the same time, and neither can fully wait for the other. Taylor notes that this balancing act is made considerably harder by a difficult economic and geopolitical climate that puts additional pressure on everyone. Sidney reinforces this when describing how the fast-paced external environment creates a broader sense of “nervousness,” as organizations are required to move quickly “to keep up with the pace of change” (Sidney, 28.04.2026). Avery, approaching it from the global change management perspective, adds another dimension to it when describing the atmosphere:

The current vibe? Stressed. Stressed. Over capacity, which results in stress and uncertainty. We also have an AI transformation happening as well which impacts people’s identity about who they are and how they work, and are they important anymore. But it is very much people are stressed, uncertain, scared – Avery, 04.05.2026

Avery frames the AI transformation not only as something parallel but as an identity threat. As people are being asked to change how they work, the broader technological environment is simultaneously questioning whether people’s roles and expertise will remain relevant.

This sense of reluctance runs through several interviews. Robin describes “people don’t like change” as a somewhat universal truth (Robin, 24.04.2026), and the accounts from different geographies suggest he is not wrong. Particularly, Riley notes that “In France, we don’t like changes.” Notably, France has already been through multiple transformation cycles under its own programme before Orion Accelerate. Kim, observing this from the global level, names the consequence:

There might be a little bit of a fatigue, like a change fatigue. For example, in France because they started to transform locally even before this transformation, and they built a some transformation program, and then they had, like, one, two versions of that coming after. And then on top, there is this global transformation. We see a little bit the same pattern probably in Germany and North America. These three would be our three biggest markets. In all of those, there has been a number of transformation programs with different fancy names over the years, and they might be a bit tired of just changing all the time. – Kim, 01.04.2026

At the same time, both Taylor and Kim flag that for smaller markets that have not yet started this journey, it arrives as something unfamiliar and challenging. The same programme, in other words, generates opposite readiness problems depending on the market it enters: exhaustion in those that have seen it before, disorientation in those that haven't. Billie offers a third variation, describing the atmosphere in the Netherlands by reaching for a local idiom to capture the dominant mood: “de kat uit de boom kijken,” which translates roughly as waiting to see if the cat comes safely out of the tree before committing. This points to a deliberate withholding of engagement until it becomes clear the investment is worth making. Ongoing operational demands compete with attention toward the change, and in that competition, he says: “there are enough other things you can do instead of focusing on the change.”

What connects all variations is that none of them represent opposition to the destination itself. Charlie adds a further nuance, describing the atmosphere in Belgium as tense, yet the intent behind the transformation as positively perceived. Alex reinforces this, noting that people can tolerate uncertainty as long as they are given a clear narrative of “the previous state, the future state, the why, and what really are the impacts to the individual” (Alex, 24.04.2026). This implies that it is not the destination people resist, rather the discomfort of getting there without that clarity. Altogether, people seem to understand the value of the destination, yet struggle to find the time, energy, and space to get there while the business continues to run. Rather than a lack of acceptance, the challenge appears to be one of capacity. What appears to make this harder still is that the transformation does not arrive in isolation. With the technological, economic and geopolitical pressures happening at the same time, the oiltanker, already loaded, has to navigate increasingly turbulent waters.

They Don't Care

Beneath the organizational atmosphere lies a structural issue across all geographies that several interviewees identify as a readiness challenge the transformation faces. Namely, that: the majority of Orion's workforce, the consultants placed at client sites, do not primarily identify as Orion employees. Avery names this directly as someone who has been on both sides:

For everyone else, which is the majority of our workforce, consultants, they don't care. Why should they be listening? They feel more akin to the clients than they do their own organization. That is a systemic issue. I felt the same when I was a consultant. I had to force myself to become a part of the organization. – Avery, 04.05.2026

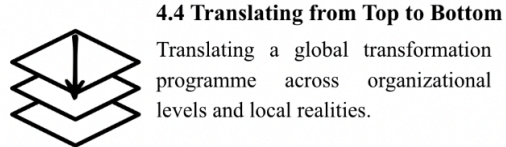
The indifference and disengagement Avery describes is, in her framing, a consequence of how the work itself is organized. As consultants spend their days in client environments, using client IT systems, they are oriented toward client priorities. The organization that pays them is, in daily practice, largely absent from their experience. Robin elaborates on this:

When an employee of Orion starts working, after one day, they are already placed at the client site. The issue there is that they don't feel Orion at all, right? They are, "Okay, Orion, that's my payslip. They placed me here." But they view it as an interim company like Alpha, which just places you somewhere, and that's their identity. – Robin, 24.04.2026

The Orion laptop, Robin notes, is blocked at client sites. Employees operate on the client infrastructure during working hours. The infrastructure itself affects who they belong to, and it is not Orion. Consequently, a programme designed to build one Orion culture, align one set of values, and establish one organizational identity meets a workforce whose identity and loyalty was formed elsewhere. Taylor identifies this as a gap between the head of the company and the consultants on projects, who may see no direct interest in the transformation for themselves. Something that is not just observed from above, but felt from within. Riley confirms this from the ground level: when she speaks to consultants informally, she finds it is simply harder for them and that it is a different experience entirely. How the organization attempts to bridge this in practice leads into the next theme, which examines how the programme moves from the top of

the organization to the people who are supposed to enact it: through messaging, leaders, and digital channels.

4.4 Translating from Top to Bottom



Despite an explicit ambition of alignment: common processes, shared language, one coherent organization, the same programme lands with different weight, meaning, and momentum depending on how it is carried and by whom it is translated. This theme examines the frictions and mechanisms through which the change travels through organizational levels and locations.

Starting a YouTube Channel with Zero Views

Across the interviews, communication is consistently positioned as foundational to the success of the transformation, yet the way it actually functions in practice reveals a gap between intent and reach. Quinn argues that communication is the determining factor in whether an organization holds together at all: “you could have the brightest minds. But if they’re not aligned and not communicating and working together, you cannot achieve anything” (Quinn, 24.04.2026). The challenge, she adds, lies not just in sending the message but in adapting it to the person receiving it.

It seems that the programme is structurally well-governed at the top, but the further a message travels from its origin, the more it depends on conditions the programme cannot fully control: manager engagement, channel access, and identification. Robin names the central paradox directly. A full communication strategy exists, yet it fails to reach:

We have a full strategy, full planning on when to communicate, what to communicate, how do communicate, how to cascade. But the real bottleneck is reaching those employees who are at the client site... Now today, it's really, really difficult. We have one

set of employees that we reach with every communication that we do, and we have one set of employees that we sometimes don't reach at all, which is very weird if you think about it, but that's really the way it is. That's really a challenge today. – Robin, 24.04.2026

He registers a strangeness: “which is very weird if you think about it.” A communication strategy that reliably fails to reach the majority of the workforce is not necessarily a communication logistics problem but a deeper identity issue. The consultant identity gap described in the previous section means that the infrastructure through which the transformation communicates simply does not have access to the people it most needs to reach. Robin's response to this is not to redesign the strategy but to persist through it:

It's like starting a YouTube channel. At first, you post a video, and you have zero views. And then you post another video, and you have maybe five or ten views. But if you continue to push, in the end more and more people will see your message... I need to be there because some people will only look at Viva Engage. Other people will only look at their mail. So if I skip one of those channels, I will miss those people every time. – Robin, 24.04.2026

Here, Robin describes a patient and pragmatic logic, but it also focuses on reach, not necessarily meaning as the primary goal. Taylor offers a complementary lens, observing that standard channels, like email, intranet, cascaded updates, are necessary but not sufficient:

I think we need to be more creative to make them understand how we would like to go there, why we would like to go there and things like that. And that's, for me, the most difficult part because otherwise the transformation appears as something in a box for only part of the people of the company, and they don't necessarily see an interest with and what would be the results at the end. When you want to make someone or a team move, it's very important, I think to explain and to embark people and for me that's not only the strategy or what you want to achieve, which takes time, but it's having the people on the same stream as you and make them move forward in the right direction. That's the thing that takes a lot of time. – Taylor, 24.04.2026

Taylor is describing something different from Robin's multichannel persistence: not the problem of reach but the problem of meaning. Even where messages arrive, they can remain abstract to what consultants and ground-level employees actually do or why it should matter to them. The global-local friction layer compounds this further. Sam, based in France, names language as the hardest challenge in global communication. English is the common language, but common does not mean equal, and the gap between sending a message and having it genuinely understood across accents, fluencies, and cultural registers remains. When global communications arrive in English, Riley, also based in France, states plainly that the assumption is immediate: the email will not be read. This seems to be a routine to local, showing how the same communication can be considered successful at the point of sending from the global perspective and structurally ineffective at the point of receipt. This gap between sending and receiving is not unique to France, as Billie says:

The central communications is effective to a limited part of the audience. And myself and some other people are the type of people that read the documentation and go through it. There are also many colleagues in the company who are like, "Well, too long, didn't read," or, "Well, it's too complex, I don't read it." And for those the only way to reach them or this category is to have a manager and have, well, almost one-by-one conversations in the office to make it land and to make it stick. – Billie, 28.04.2026

Building on this, Avery points out that the central coordination infrastructure is in place, but embedding requires leaders who believe in it and exhibit the behaviours themselves. Where that local leadership is absent or overwhelmed, people are left without orientation. The transformation's communication success thus seems unevenly distributed by the quality and capacity of middle managers. This points to a gap between information that lands in an inbox and the meaning that someone's manager helps them make of it, which leads us into the next section of this theme.

Leadership as Paramount but Blocked

If the previous section established that communication alone cannot close the gap between reach and meaning, this section explores the role of leaders in bridging it. Across interviews, a consistent pattern emerges. While formal programme structures and communications create

awareness, it is leaders who translate awareness into meaning. In terms of how they do this, the data reveals variation in approach. Some interviewees emphasize organizational values, prioritizing people as part of a humanistic approach, and treat conversations as an initiative for a shared understanding of the values and the impact of the transformation. Avery describes it as a “brain-friendly” act so that people feel heard. It is important because people are more likely to contribute to and support the change when they feel that they belong and understand the impact and reason for implementing it, rather than just following processes (Avery, 04.05.2026). The practical consequence of whether leaders apply this logic or not is visible in Billie’s account, where he observes that teams whose managers communicate actively and make the transformation personally relevant to their people have considerably more clarity than those whose managers do not:

In the end, if you really want to reach the people, it’s about the manager making the time and making this topic important and really discussing the how, what’s in it for them, and how the change is affecting them. And with, like, all the people changes going on, and people were absent, there are some teams that had a manager like this, so they’re, I think, well, positive, or at least aware. And there are also some teams where the majority of the people are unaware, so it’s a bit unclear, I think, for them. – Billie, 28.04.2026

The formal structure of communication channels reaches only part of any audience, and even then, it reaches their awareness rather than their behaviour. This suggests that the variation in transformation experience across the organization is not primarily a function of the programme’s design, but a function of who is leading it locally and how.

Sam captures the role of the leader in a recurring mantra: “show the way, lead the way, get out of the way” (Sam, 10.04.2026). He frames the leader’s role as directional and empowering, but he also identifies where that model breaks down in practice: at the middle-management layer. On this layer, the alignment that exists at the executive level does not cascade down into genuine buy-in. Avery confirms this:

Leadership is paramount. Absolutely paramount. But in an organization as complex and as big as this, the leadership at the top are all on board, they are fantastic at what they do. It’s the people underneath them that are where things get blocked. Stereotypical middle

managers. Which is where we need to invest in building their awareness, their skills, and their capability in being change leaders. A lot of our middle managers are there because they're very good at what they do, not because they're good at people skills. Which is normal. It happens. But when the organization is moving into the future, particularly with the inclusion of AI into our workforce, we need more people leaders rather than technical leaders. – Avery, 04.05.2026

The pipeline that produced the current middle management layer was designed for technical excellence, not for the relational and translational work that transformation requires. This implies that the programme is relying on a layer that was never built for what it is now being asked to do. Avery's diagnosis is also paradoxical. She argues simultaneously that leadership is “paramount,” but that the leadership layer most critical to implementation, middle management, is systematically under-equipped for the role. She continues:

Across my dashboard, it's pretty much red on capacity. The capacity for both our key stakeholder group but also our leadership to make the time and take their teams on this journey, make the time to listen, adapt, and take feedback on, is not there. So that is the biggest impact I'm seeing in this transformation. Things are being implemented at force, not for desire, because they don't have the time to build that desire. – Avery, 04.05.2026

This suggests that the role of leadership is crucial in theory but structurally blocked in practice. The transformation has not caused the capacity problem, but since the programme is now being rolled out on top of people who were already at or beyond capacity, it has dramatically exposed and intensified a pre-existing issue. The “desire” Avery refers to cannot be built when there is no time or capacity to build it. At the local level, Billie points to a situation a few weeks prior where six of thirteen senior managers were absent without making any redesign of processes and responsibilities, further confirming the capacity constraints Avery describes.

The variation between teams within the same organization, navigating the same programme, points to the importance of managers in making global intent locally meaningful. These accounts suggest that without them, the transformation remains a directive that travels through the organization without actually landing. Yet the programme's simultaneous demands on time and behavioural change have made the absence of that capacity acutely visible. Two vulnerabilities

are exposed: middle managers who were selected for technical competence rather than people leadership, and a leadership layer at every level that is operating beyond capacity. Both also point to the medium through which leadership must now operate, leading us into the next heading.

Leading Without the Full Piano

The Orion Accelerate programme operates almost entirely through digital channels. Most participants have never been in the same room as the colleagues with whom they are implementing change, and some have never met their own teams in person. What the previous section identifies as essential to making the change meaningful locally: relational leadership, must now travel through infrastructure that shapes and filters what arrives. Building that trust virtually is not described as easy, but as a challenge (Billie, 01.05.2026).

Participants affirm digital as operationally necessary and dominant, as Billie puts it:

Digital channels have become essential for coordinating the change, and to me, and I think most of the colleagues, digital is the way of work and dominant. Although it makes information sharing faster and enables quick updates, it also means leaders need to be more visible and proactive as a written message or digital file is easily neglected, misinterpreted or what most of the time happens: not the prime focus of the audience. – Billie, 01.05.2026

What he describes is that leadership messages compete for scarce attention and are often not read, misread or deprioritized, and the constraint pushes toward more intentional and active leadership effort. Jamie names a related dimension, pointing to an overload: “too many meetings, too much communication, and too little focus,” making attention and prioritization themselves a key leadership task (Jamie, 04.05.2026). Other limitations are visible across accounts. Both Kim and Avery describe a loss of informal intelligence: the “information base and relations” produced by bumping into colleagues from other functions (Kim, 05.04.2026), and the “water cooler conversations, the things that people say when they’re not in the meeting room” (Avery, 04.05.2026). Kim adds that conversations on a screen tend to become “more mechanical,” with less of the depth and creative emergence physical co-presence produces (Kim, 05.04.2026). Sam

identifies a further cost: because digital environments are efficient, they tend to skip moments of recognition and celebration that make change feel meaningful. The next project replaces acknowledgement of the last, and what gets optimized away is part of how people come to feel their effort matters. For Kim, interacting with people is the foundation of how trust is built, and the digital setting restricts her ability to fully embed and exercise leadership:

My strength as a leader probably weakens a little bit when I cannot play the full piano, so to say. I cannot put the hand on the shoulder and really follow up straight after with a couple of colleagues. To really be close to your people is challenging in a digital world. – Kim, 23.02.2026

For leaders whose style depends on those registers, the reduction is notable when the full range of keys is no longer available. Charlie names a parallel risk on the systems side. Aligning the digital tools that support the change creates friction in how information is shared and labelled across teams, and the time absorbed by this alignment becomes an additional workload at a moment when the organization cannot afford to lose business because of the transformation itself (Charlie, 04.05.2026). There are, however, meaningful inversions framing it not merely as reduction. Avery observes that people behind a screen often speak with more courage, offer multiple insights, and feel more protected than they would in person. For a change lead whose job depends on hearing honest responses, this suggests that the digital setting addresses, at least partially, the previously identified deficit in psychological safety. The picture that emerges, therefore, is not simply one of loss but of a compressed relational register through which trust must now be built. Alex captures what this demands of leaders in a digital setting: “leadership shifts from presence to precision and perception: what you do, what you say, how often, and how clearly it matters” (Alex, 01.05.2026).

4.5 Moving from Understanding to Living



This theme turns to what is now surfacing and recognized as the programme moves from being communicated and understood into being lived. As communication moves from informing people about the transformation to sustaining it in everyday practice, the challenge increasingly becomes cultural and behavioural. Culture, built and rewarded over years, becomes visible as the underlying layer the change has to land in, and the move from awareness to behaviour reveals what embedment actually demands of people.

Culture Eats Strategy For Breakfast

What surfaces first is the depth of the cultural patterns, structures, and ways of working the programme must contend with. Across the interviews, culture emerges as a result of how the organization was built, structured, and rewarded over time, which, in turn, affects how the transformation's vision lands locally. A recurring pattern is the gap between what the programme asks people to do and what their working environments have historically made possible or necessary. As Alex frames it:

Culture is either the accelerator or the constraint. There's very little middle ground. Change is the true test of culture. It brings theory into practice and will quickly show the true character of an organization and its leadership. – Alex, 01.05.2026

Yet despite its importance, both Alex and Billie identify culture as something that became more visible later in the programme and does not receive the attention it requires. Alex reflects that the early stages of transformation tend to underestimate the role of culture and capability gaps in favour of planning and process (Alex, 01.05.2026). Billie observes a similar imbalance in the

current programme: vision and values receive a lot of focus, while the harder work of translating strategy into daily action remains underplayed, and operational details absorb attention that should be going toward the bigger cultural shifts (Billie, 01.05.2026). As Sam puts it:

Culture eats strategy for breakfast. You can have a nice vision, say, “I want to be number one in X, Y, Z.” But if your team feel that we cannot do it or doesn’t understand the path to do it, then they know they are putting themselves at risk. – Sam, 10.04.2026

In this framing, people who cannot see the path from here to the vision will not commit to the journey, regardless of how clearly the vision is stated. A telling pattern across several interviews is this distinction between understanding the transformation and actually changing behaviour because of it. Avery names it explicitly when she distinguishes between the values the organization officially holds: “passion, collaboration, inclusion, courage, and customer at heart,” and the unlisted ones that they are ‘not good at’: “psychological safety and co-creation” (Avery, 04.05.2026). The gap is between what the organization formally values and what it actually makes possible for people to do. The unlisted values require something the organization is currently short of: the space and capacity to act on them. Alex makes a related distinction: stating that you have an open culture and actually giving people the opportunity to speak are two entirely different things. The culture can perform openness while the practice of openness requires deliberate and sustained work. Yet even where inclusion is attempted, Avery points to a deeper trust deficit:

We try to empower people, we try to help people have that inclusion, that courage, and collaborate, but it’s not always reciprocated because the trust is not there. We’re the big scary people upstairs. And, I’ll be honest, you feel that when you go into the office, and you’re the only global person in the office, you are isolated. No one wants to talk to you... The challenge is a very much us-versus-them mentality. Countries don’t want to lose control. And none of our messaging has ever been about losing control. It hasn’t. And naturally, when you’re told to change, you feel like you’re losing control. So countries feel like they’ve lost ownership, even though that’s not what Global has ever said or done. – Avery, 04.05.2026

Avery's account illustrates a gap between global's stated intentions about empowerment and inclusion, and the experienced reality on the country side: fear of losing control. Global's efforts are described as not landing because the underlying trust is not yet there. The trust deficit Avery describes connects to her own experience of having occupied both positions: the "sheer frustration" she now receives from countries is what she once felt toward global from the country side: "I used to say, 'Oh, what on earth is global doing? They have no idea what they're doing.' Now I'm sitting on the other side, I'm like, 'Oh dear, what are the countries doing?'" (Avery, 04.05.2026).

The origins of the trust deficit may partly reflect the fact that global and local have not historically operated as one, with countries working in their own ways because they had the freedom to do so (Avery, 04.05.2026). Kim reinforces this, describing how markets still look and operate fundamentally differently from one another, having spent years developing autonomous identities under different legacy brands. Alex frames these "legacy mindsets and unclear ownership" as factors that slow down the change (Alex, 01.05.2026). Looking at this from a local standpoint, Billie points to a concrete example in the Netherlands: the previous industry-based setup meant that everyone connected to a client sat together in one business unit, a design that, as Billie puts it, "stimulates a more silo-driven approach. Everybody was working in silos" (Billie, 28.04.2026). This silo-driven structure is also reflected in what the organization is currently strong at. With teams historically organized around delivering specific client outcomes, Billie describes a performance-oriented culture, noting that its strengths lie in execution: "the ongoing delivery, especially of the less complex services, so being, in the end, a time and material or statement of works" (Billie, 28.04.2026).

Furthermore, markets don't just differ in culture, history, and ways of working: they also differ in what they can afford to invest in the change itself. Avery describes a cultural training programme piloted in one of the "higher-performing" countries that the change team would like to scale globally; the financial barrier, however, is significant. Only the higher-performing country where the pilot ran could afford it, while most other markets could not fund the same investment that might help them embed the change.

Together, these accounts suggest that cultural alignment cannot be installed, but has to be built over time. The gap between stated and enacted values, combined with the weight of previous structures and ways of working, points to a distance that is not only cultural but structural. This distance between where different parts of the organization currently stand and where the transformation aims to take them points to the difficulty of truly embedding change when the starting points are still quite far apart.

The Invisible Layer

If the previous section named the distance between where the organization stands and where the programme aims to take it, the human layer adds what surfaces as people are asked to close that distance through their own behaviour. As Orion Accelerate moves further into implementation, the gap between theoretical understanding and daily enactment is where the real difficulties surface, appearing when people are expected to actually change their behaviour rather than just know what the change is asking for. Billie names this directly:

Sometimes resistance or unexpected obstacles pop up, usually because of old processes or ingrained habits. In my experience, these issues tend to surface when people shift from understanding the theory of change to actually living it day-to-day. It's a reminder that transformation is rarely straightforward, and being flexible is key. – Billie, 01.05.2026.

What Billie describes is consistent with Alex's broader observation: the biggest insights tend not to be new problems generated by the transformation but "previously invisible problems" that surface only when people move from understanding to enacting it day-to-day (Alex, 01.05.2026). She frames the "human layer" as the defining factor of success as transformation progresses (Alex, 01.05.2026). Avery makes a related point:

It's not the communication awareness now. It is the embedding of the behavior, which is highly dependent on our leaders and our people leaders. So if our people leaders don't believe in this, even if they do believe in it, but they're not exhibiting the behaviors, following new processes, reinforcing them, it's not gonna change. So unless we really hold the accountability of our leaders to embed this and our leaders, like, demonstrate the behaviors they need to exhibit, we're not gonna get any further. – Avery, 04.05.2026

The programme has reached the layer where awareness must become behaviour. This is where the urgency around what comes next begins to show itself. Kim argues that people need to start seeing performance results soon, or confidence in the change will erode:

It's always a combination of follow through and the human factor because the change management, there is always, you somehow need some people to do things differently than in the past. So it's usually a behavioural change. See different things, do different things. So it's always this soft and hard factor in combination. And of course, we need to start to see performance based on what we do now, so people get confidence in the change and we actually see the impact of it. If we don't within even several months from now, I think people would start to doubt that we are putting the right buttons. – Kim, 01.04.2026

Sidney frames the same question from the opposite direction, naming speed as the biggest risk: moving too fast means missing the human journey, producing poor uptake, and losing good people (Sidney, 30.04.2026). What this reveals is a tension between patience for behavioural change and urgency for visible results. Kim, in her second interview, complicates her own earlier framing by acknowledging this same tension from the inside: behavioural change takes time because “people are not machines,” and de-learning habits, such as a salesperson of twenty years being asked to operate differently, does not happen overnight (Kim, 01.04.2026). Alex names the same gap from a planning standpoint, observing that “the timelines were a little accelerated” and that ambitious agendas were probably “too condensed” because they did not factor in how slowly people actually absorb change (Alex, 01.05.2026). The programme therefore needs to be slow enough to embed but fast enough to prove itself, and those two demands are pulling in different directions.

What surfaces in these accounts is a recognition of what embedment now demands: behaviour beyond awareness, and a pace that holds both patience and visible results in tension. Together with this, what is also becoming visible: the human layer, the time required to unlearn ingrained

habits, the dependence on leaders modelling rather than communicating, has now become the central question of whether the programme will land.

5. Discussion

This study set out to examine how a global transformation programme takes shape as it moves through a multinational organization, and what conditions, variations, and tensions emerge as it does. The empirical chapter traced this through three themes: the workforce the programme enters, the mechanisms through which it is translated, and what surfaces as it moves from awareness into embedment. The discussion now reads these findings through the literature on planned change, and through the lenses of culture and leadership. The first section addresses the first research question by examining how the programme moves through the organization, surfacing tension across three registers of friction. The next section addresses the second research question by examining the conditions that enable or constrain embedment. Lastly, we present our findings through a model illustrating the layered view of translation in multinational change.

5.1 Translation versus the Diffusion Logic of Global Design

Orion Accelerate is structurally modeled as a planned, episodic change initiative, treating transformation as a linear progression from corporate awareness to localized behavior, and from formal communication to embedded practice. Within this framing, the multinational corporation aligns with a rational “open system” of explicit subsystems that can be systematically aligned through top-down intervention (Burke, 2018, p.79), reflecting a tool-based perspective on change. The findings show this logic clearly in how leadership frames what the programme is meant to solve. Quinn points to countries “having different EVPs, different messages,” and Avery describes consultants and engineers as “all operating in different ways, with no single standard process across countries.” The transformation is framed as a problem of alignment, where different parts of the organization are to be brought into coordination through shared processes, shared language, and a coherent global identity.

This tool-based perspective is visible across the initial design, articulated by senior leadership and reflecting an underlying assumption that strategic direction can be cleanly decoupled from local implementation. In our interviews, this became apparent when participants discussed the transition from global planning to a collection of distinct market views, moving from what global executives intend to the practical reality of how individual countries are required to execute it. We interpret this framing as a planned episodic-change mindset that explicitly separates strategic direction from execution, treating the global strategy as a stable process that can travel intact. Our findings expose a disconnect when the organization's leadership assumes that explaining "clarity" through strategy will lead to successful implementation in practice, as the programme stalls and is interpreted differently as it moves across the hierarchy.

To interpret the disconnection, we draw upon Latour's (1986, 2005) distinction between the diffusion and translation models of change. In the diffusion model, a change message is assumed to be transmitted downward, and where it fails to spread as planned, the failure appears as friction, poor communication, or employee resistance. Robin's framing of the situation, "we have a full strategy... but the real bottleneck is reaching those employees who are at the client site," names what the diffusion model cannot deliver. A complete cascade strategy fails to reach the majority of the workforce, and persists in failing despite repeated effort. The assumption is that a multi-channelled, planned communication strategy should lead to successful implementation, transferring information straightforwardly from top management to employees. What this perspective overlooks is that a strategy focused on transmission cannot secure behavioural internalization. Latour's translation model offers a different starting point. A change initiative does not possess any momentum of its own; it only moves forward when individuals actively engage with it, negotiate with it, and alter it to fit their localized roles and identities. As a result, a global programme is interpreted differently at each organizational level, often reaching frontline employees in a form that differs significantly from the original intention. Consequently, we interpret the translation process as a form of collaborative reshaping, where the global programme as it moves through the organization is gradually adapted to local conditions and realities. We use this distinction throughout the discussion as the analytical lens through which the friction between Orion's design logic and its implementation reality becomes visible. Our findings show that this friction surfaces across three registers as the programme moves through

the organization: the communication layer, the leadership layer, and the digital layer that mediates both.

5.1.2 The Translation Journey of Change

The Communication Layer: Reach versus Meaning

Formal corporate messages reach local inboxes, but they require manager-led translation to produce localized meaning. Riley notes that English-language updates sent to French consultants meet a routine assumption: “the email will not be read.” A communication effort can therefore be successful at the point of transmission but ineffective at the point of receipt. Weick’s (1995) theory of sensemaking holds that when an organizational disruption occurs, individuals do not act as passive recipients of information. Rather, they interpret the situation and determine how it affects their daily roles and professional identities. Because Orion Accelerate relies on standardized presentation packs and corporate channels, it does not necessarily trigger the localized sensemaking that would shift embedded cultural assumptions. Consultants interpret the top-down messages as an abstract corporate backdrop disconnected from their daily client obligations. Consequently, their behaviours remain unchanged because their local realities are ignored by the centralized messaging. Taylor puts this directly, calling for creativity to engage individuals with the vision. Otherwise the transformation remains “something in a box” for only part of the company. This exposes a core limit of the diffusion model and points to the need for local communication to shift toward a translation approach focused on collective alignment and local sensemaking.

The Leadership Layer: Fragile Translation

The transformation appears uneven across the organization because the interpretive work must be carried out at the leadership level by middle managers. This fragile operation validates Alvesson and Sveningsson’s (2025) argument that change initiatives depend on localized interaction. As Billie notes, if an organization truly wants to reach the people, it depends on the local manager “making the time and making this topic important” and “discussing the how, what's in it for them.” Where a manager creates the space for these conversations, the global mandate becomes meaningful in local terms. Where a manager is structurally overloaded or

disengaged, the sensegiving work breaks down. The consequence is visible in Billie's observation that while some teams have managers who actively translate the change, others have "the majority of the people unaware" of the transformation happening around them. The conditions that enable or constrain this translation work are discussed in detail in section 5.2.1, where we develop the concept of the *leadership translation deficit*.

The Digital Layer: A Mediating Register

The communication and leadership layers do not operate in isolation. Both pass through the digital register through which Orion Accelerate is coordinated, and this register shapes what can travel and how. Most participants have never been in the same room as the colleagues with whom they are implementing change, and the digital infrastructure has become the dominant medium through which leadership messages and corporate communications now move. The fragmented IT systems inherited from the legacy Aeon-Oris integration, combined with a corporate over-reliance on standardized presentation decks reproduce a diffusion design through which the programme operates. What participants describe is a compression of the relational registers through which trust and shared understanding usually travel, with informal interactions and the kinds of close, in-person follow-up that build connections becoming harder to sustain. Headquarters perceive digital platforms as efficient tools for implementing change, but deep behavioural change requires an interpersonal closeness that screens struggle to replicate. This friction exposes a clash between centralised digital efficiency and the human need for connection. The digital register thus sits between the diffusion design and the local translation work, mediating what reaches across and what gets compressed in the process. As we will develop in section 5.2.3, this digital register operates with a dual character: it makes the programme globally scalable while compressing the relational registers through which trust develops, and at the same time it offers protective distance that can enable certain kinds of openness.

5.1.3 From Global Design to Local Practice

Across the three registers, the diffusion design produces outputs that diffusion logic treats as outcomes. The actual outcomes the programme requires: meaning, behaviour, trust, depend on

translation work that diffusion design does not provide. This positions the success of the programme, as Alvesson and Sveningsson (2025) argue, as a question of how it is read, carried, and remade as it travels rather than how well it was designed. These three registers of friction together show how the programme moves from global design to local practice through a series of stages where transmission alone is not enough. Figure 6 traces this journey through four stages: 1) the global design; 2) the digital register through which the design produces reach without necessarily producing meaning; 3) the middle management layer where translation work is performed unevenly; and 4) the local practice level where relational embedment either takes place or stalls. What this points to is that meaningful momentum in a global transformation programme emerges only when local actors actively reshape the change to fit their daily realities. This requires local managers to intentionally create and make space for one-on-one time with their teams. We interpret this to mean that organizational transformation cannot be fully achieved through standardised communication alone. Employees and local actors must gradually work through the change in their daily interactions, relationships, and routines. It is through this relational one-on-one sensemaking work that trust, shared understanding, and new ways of working slowly develop over time, making the global programme meaningful in practice.



Figure 5: From Global Design to Local Practice: The Transformation Journey

5.2 Enablers and Constraints of Embedment

Following the layers and breakdowns of translation empirically identified in section 5.1, we now turn to what enables and constrains the embedment that the diffusion design does not centrally address. We start by discussing leadership as the practice through which translation becomes meaningful, moving on to culture as the underlying environment the programme must land in. We then turn to the structural layer affecting both: communication infrastructure as the medium

through which translation must operate, and organizational capacity as the structural condition that shapes the performance of the translation.

5.2.1 Leadership: Making the Change Meaningful

Leadership emerges across the interviews as central to whether the programme moves from awareness into meaning as introduced in section 5.1.2. Here we develop its role in terms of enabling or constraining embedment. The change literature highlights leaders as sensegivers who construct plausible meanings and shape how others interpret a new organizational reality (Sparr, 2018; Kraft et al., 2018; Logemann et al., 2019). What our findings identify as essential, namely managers making time, framing the change in terms of what it means for people, modelling new behaviours, reflects this. Therefore, it can be seen as a key practice shaping whether the programme's vision becomes embedded in daily practice. Teams whose managers engage in this work were described as having considerably more clarity.

The critical strand on leadership's role cautions that it is frequently overemphasized and treated as "panacea," while change outcomes typically reflect a combination of contingencies (Alvesson et al., 2017, p.2). Our findings suggest that leadership is critical but cannot itself compensate for missing structural conditions. The diagnosis of the leadership layer as "pretty much red on capacity" shows that even capable and motivated leaders cannot do the required translation work when the structural conditions for that work are not in place. At the same time, the findings push back against the critical literature. What our findings reveal is that leadership has been under-recognized in Orion's programme design, with leadership treated more instrumentally than relationally.

This points to what we conceptualize as a leadership translation deficit operating at three levels, seen in the gap between the relational leadership the change programme actually requires and the structural conditions provided for it. First, leadership is described as "paramount," but this recognition is not seen in the programme design itself, which treats leadership primarily as a channel for cascading information rather than as meaning-making. Second, at the level of capability, middle managers were selected and developed for technical excellence rather than relational competence, which leaves them under-equipped for the demands of the programme.

Third, the leadership layer is operating beyond capacity, with Billie reporting six of thirteen senior managers absent from a unit. It seems that, even where recognition and capability exist, the time and space to exercise them do not.

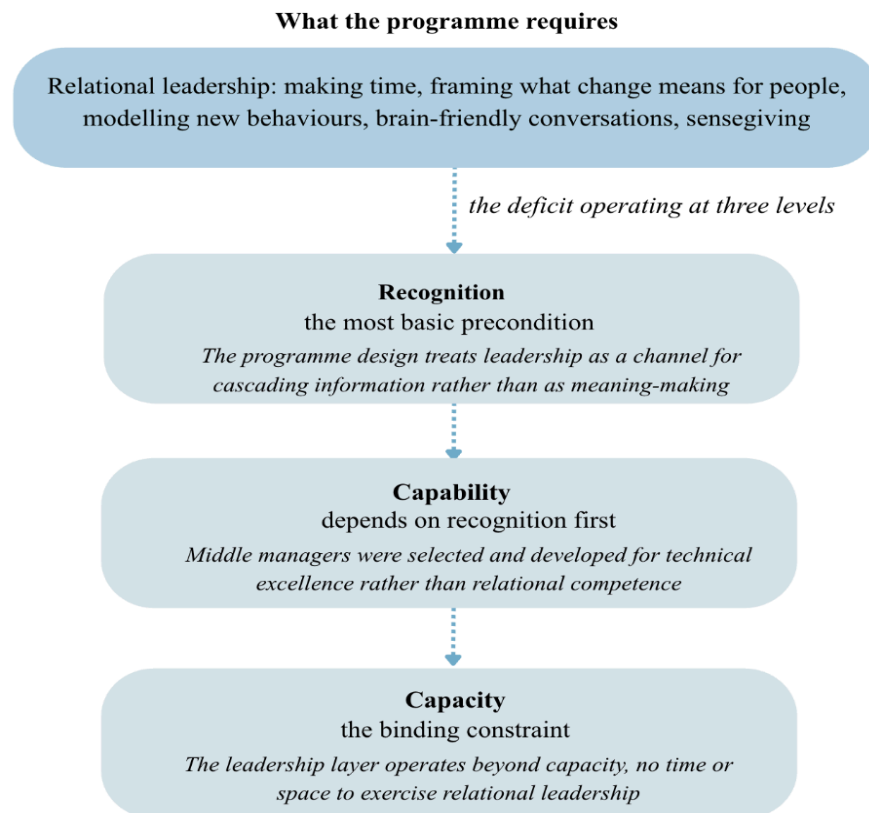


Figure 6: The Leadership Translation Deficit

What we want to argue here is that our findings, similarly to critical scholars, confirm that leadership cannot and should not be seen as a “panacea” for change outcomes (Alvesson et al., 2017, p.2). But in the Orion case, the relational conditions through which change actually moves have not been sufficiently recognized in the structural design. The diffusion logic of the programme operates with an assumption that leadership will appear at each level, but the translation reality it meets shows that leadership at the middle management layer is structurally blocked. The implication is not that leadership has been overemphasized but that, as the findings affirm, in this case it has been underemphasized and assumed. In this way, leadership enables embedment by creating clarity when managers make the time to translate the change for their

teams. However, it also constrains embedment where the structural conditions for that work are absent, and the vision therefore does not move into daily practice.

5.2.2 Culture: What Lives Behind the Backs

The cultural dimension of the programme reveals a tension between two different understandings of culture: culture as a variable an organization *has*, and culture as something an organization *is* (Smircich, 1983; Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023, p.137). The design of Orion Accelerate could be read through the variable view, treating culture as something that can be shaped and managed through cultural training pilots, defined behavioural values, and strategic alignment across local countries. Culture is here viewed from a tool-based perspective as something to be aligned alongside the rest of the change (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023, p.137). The respondents also describe a performance-oriented culture focused on delivery, which implies that the right cultural training, the right values, and the right alignment work would shift the culture toward the desired state.

This picture is further complicated when we look at how the programme is actually translated in practice. The findings reveal a culture operating in the way the being-view describes, treating it as the lens through which organizational reality is interpreted, and as something that is not controllable through strategy alone (Alvesson, 2013; Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023, pp.136-138). In Orion Accelerate, we see this in several accounts pointing toward culture as an underlying environment the programme has to land in, built up over time. According to Schein's (2004) three-level model, the underlying assumptions that guide everyday thinking and action shift only through accumulated practice over time. Several accounts in our data reflect the time it takes for the underlying patterns to surface, describing how markets still look and operate very differently from one another.

Despite the central role of culture, several accounts show that attention is drawn to planning instead of culture with the programme handling culture as if it were a more of a managed and controlled issue. Similarly, literature points out that change initiatives often underestimate the cultural and human dimensions through which change actually unfolds and overrelies on rational planning (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025). The risk of neglecting these aspects is that change initiatives remain superficial when the deeper

assumptions are not brought to the surface (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025, pp.28-30). One consequence of this in Orion is that the programme's stated values do not land as intended. The programme articulates empowerment, inclusion, and shared ownership, but yet country actors experience it as evidence of lost autonomy. The empowerment Global offers is partly undercut by where it comes from, described as voices from “the big scary people upstairs.” This points to what Alvesson and Sveningsson (2025, p.107) describe as “managerial hypocrisy,” the gap between officially stated values and what is actually made possible. Furthermore, what the programme intends as empowerment is read as control, because the trust that would make the empowerment legible has not yet been built. The very design intended to dissolve the us-versus-them dynamic rather reinforces it, in line with what Alvesson and Sveningsson (2025, p. 160) describe as the “unintentional reinforcement of existing culture.” This is further amplified by the digital register, in which messages reach some groups and not others (the consultant identity gap; the English-only communications), making unreached groups even more peripheral than before.

What this reveals is that the cultural patterns the programme is asking to shift are not only ways of working but ways of identifying. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2025), Hatch and Schultz (2002), and Ybema (2010) argue that culture and identity are closely linked. In Orion, the identity dimension is visible at several levels. At the country level, markets that developed autonomous identities under different legacy brands continue to operate from those identifications, with the global programme experienced as a threat to who they have come to be. At the workforce level, the consultant identity gap produces what could be described as an “identity split,” in which the majority of the workforce does not primarily identify as Orion at all, but with the clients. Ybema’s (2010) temporal framing helps make sense of why this matters. Identity is built through stories about who ‘we’ were, who ‘we’ are now, and who ‘we’ are becoming. Therefore, when the programme asks the organization to become something new, it is not only asking for new ways of working but for new stories about belonging. However, for such stories to become meaningful in practice, they rely on the kind of leadership translation work that section 5.2.1 identified as structurally blocked. What the case shows is that identity threads through both culture and leadership, articulated through the stories people tell.

The findings also expose a dimension the variable-being distinction does not centrally address. Namely, that culture is itself unequally resourced. The capacity to invest in cultural change is unevenly distributed across markets. What we found was that the cultural training programme piloted well in a high-performing market, but most countries couldn't afford to fund it, meaning the conditions that might shift the culture are themselves unequally distributed. This points to the critical perspective, capturing the political-economic dimension of cultural change (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2023, p.24). Through this lens, we can see that the same programme generates opposite readiness problems depending on where it lands: exhaustion in markets that have been through multiple prior transformation cycles, disorientation in markets that have not.

What surfaces in the findings, then, is not merely a culture that partly resists the programme through historical ways of working, but a culture that the programme reveals. Pre-existing patterns such as inequality, identity gaps, and ingrained habits could be seen as what Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2025 (p.182) describe as working “behind the backs,” patterns that the programme has now made visible by asking the organization to act differently. In this way, culture both shapes and limits what the programme can do. Our findings suggest that there is a misalignment between the existing culture and what the programme asks. Consequently, the programme's vision surfaces the existing patterns rather than shifting them and reaching underlying assumptions. The cultural patterns the programme is asking to shift, including legacy mindsets and the us-versus-them dynamic, remain deeply embedded.

5.2.3 Communication Infrastructure: Reaching but Compressing

Building on the digital register introduced in section 5.1.2, we now examine how communication infrastructure functions as a structural condition shaping embedment. Our findings show that the communication infrastructure through which Orion Accelerate operates is what makes the programme globally scalable. The infrastructure carries the diffusion design through standardized presentation packs, centralized reporting, and two-week cycle dashboards. This could be seen as reproducing the tool-based logic by making cascade easier, faster, and more measurable. What the infrastructure produces is reach, in the sense of how far a message can travel. However, reach is not the same as meaning.

The findings also show how the infrastructure as a digital medium compresses the relational registers through which trust and shared understanding develop, giving leaders fewer piano keys available to play on. Scholars name this loss in terms like digital or technical distance, framing it as increasing risk of fragmented meaning across teams (Gilli et al., 2023, p.12; Kim et al., 2025). However, our empirical analysis complicates the literature framing of digital coordination as primarily a reduction. Avery observes that people behind a screen often speak with more courage and feel more protected than they would in person, in contrast to the assumption in Gilli et al. (2023, p.12) that “trusting environments no longer arise automatically” in digital settings. This suggests that certain kinds of trust may be enabled by digital mediation, even as other kinds, the embodied trust Kim describes, are weakened. The digital communication infrastructure therefore emerges as both an enabler of one kind of translation work and a constraint on another.

This also changes what leadership comes to depend on in practice. Kim et al. (2025) argue that what leaders convey, and the quality of how they convey it, become more important than how often communication takes place. Alex’s framing of leadership shifting “from presence to precision and perception” captures the demands the digital register places on leaders. At the same time, Klus and Müller (2021, p.1207) note that the same digital tools that promise efficiency can produce information overload and a state of “permanent availability” that exhausts employees. Jamie reflects this dynamic, describing “too many meetings, too much communication, and too little focus.” In this sense, the digital register intensifies the demand on attention and prioritization, even as it appears to enable productivity.

What surfaces in our findings, then, is that communication infrastructure functions as a structural condition cutting across the relational layers of the transformation. It compresses the registers through which leaders build trust (Kim’s piano metaphor), while also shaping who is reached by the programme and who remains peripheral. This becomes visible in the consultant identity gap identified in the empirical analysis. When Orion laptops are blocked at client sites, the very infrastructure through which the programme communicates cannot reach some of the people it most needs to engage. The English-only communication operates in a similar way: language itself becomes a channel condition, meaning those who do not read English are systematically reached less, widening the identification gap. Communication infrastructure therefore affects

leadership, identity, and culture simultaneously, making it the medium through which these relational conditions must operate.

5.2.4 Capacity: No Time to Absorb

Running through these is the structural capacity condition. Across the interviews, the organization is described as already at or beyond capacity even before the transformation begins. Palmer et al. (2017, p. 258) describe the trap organizations risk getting stuck in when they keep launching new change efforts before the previous ones have been absorbed. The findings show the three forms of overload operate simultaneously. Robin's "oil tanker" and Taylor's "transform while perform" describe overloading by asking fatigued staff to do more than time and resources allow. They further capture the multiloading aspect by stretching them across local delivery and global transformation tasks at once. The perceptual overloading is reflected in Avery's "red on capacity" where the organization is running so close to capacity that there is no room left to recover in-between.

The country-level findings extend this. The notion of change fatigue in France, Germany, and North America stems from multiple prior transformation cycles under local programmes, while smaller markets that have not yet been through this experience disorientation rather than fatigue. The same programme generates opposite readiness problems depending on where it lands, as seen in the Netherlands where withholding of engagement is described using a local idiom. Avery's framing: "implemented at force, not for desire, because they don't have the time to build that desire" names the consequence. Where capacity to absorb change is absent, change is implemented through force rather than desire, and force does not generate embedment.

This connects back to leadership. The leadership translation deficit identified in 5.2.1 is not primarily a problem of leader capability but of leader capacity. Even where managers understand what is required, the brain-friendly approach, the one-to-one conversations, the meaningful framing, the structural conditions to perform that work are not present. Even when recognizing the trap, structural demands push toward acceleration despite this recognition (Palmer et al., 2017). As in the Orion case, Kim's awareness that "people are not machines" and Alex's diagnosis that "the timelines were a little accelerated" coexist with continued pressure to show visible results. What capacity also surfaces is the structural inequality at the core of the

global-local dynamic, as previously noted in section 5.2.2. The capacity to absorb change is itself unevenly distributed. Where the conditions for translation are weakest, the structural support to build those conditions is also weakest. The result is what Avery describes as “going round in circles.”

5.3 A Layered View of Translation in Multinational Change

The previous sections discussed in dialogue with the literature review, point toward a layered view of how planned global change moves through a multinational organization. Bringing these threads together, we can identify four interrelated claims, resulting in a model.

First, the programme is structured as a planned, episodic change initiative with a tool-based logic, but to be converted to meaning, it moves through translation. Central in the findings is local managers’ role in making sense of the change for their teams through time, framing, behavioural modelling, and trust-building within compressed relational registers. While the diffusion design can produce a certain amount of awareness; translation produces meaning leading to behaviour. This is consistent with what the change literature has argued (Latour, 1986; Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025), and our case extends that argument to a distributed multinational programme coordinated through digital channels across multiple national contexts.

Second, friction surfaces where diffusion meets translation, seen in the communication and leadership translation, and the digital register that mediates both. The registers are shaped by the diffusion logic of the design, but require translation work that the design does not provide. In Orion’s case, at the communication layer, reach is not meaning, and messages arrive without being received. At the leadership layer, awareness can be translated into meaning, but this translation is unevenly performed depending on level of recognition, capacity, and capability. At the digital layer, the infrastructure that enables global coordination also compresses the relational registers through which leaders can build trust and shared understanding typically travel.

Third, the enablers and constraints of embedment, determining the performance of translation: culture, leadership, communication infrastructure, and capacity, are unequally distributed across the organization, and the programme has not been designed with this distribution in mind.

Culture surfaces as the underlying foundation, and leadership is recognized as paramount but is operating beyond capacity. The communication infrastructure functions as the mediating condition that both makes scalability possible, but also compresses the relational registers. Lastly, where capacity is constrained, even capable and motivated leaders struggle to perform the translation work the change depends on.

Fourth, while critical leadership literature caution against overemphasizing leadership, our findings suggest this caution may go too far in distributed multinational settings. The Orion case shows leadership as under-recognized rather than overemphasized in programme design. The argument is not that leadership should be treated as a panacea (it is not). Rather, our findings point to the need to explicitly recognize that planned global change, particularly in distributed multinational settings, depends on a layer of relational translation work that programme design cannot bypass. Our findings also point to the limitations of leadership as being a capacity-dependent work.

These four claims together suggest a layered model of how planned global change takes shape across a multinational organization. The model is presented in Figure 7 with an explanatory framework below.

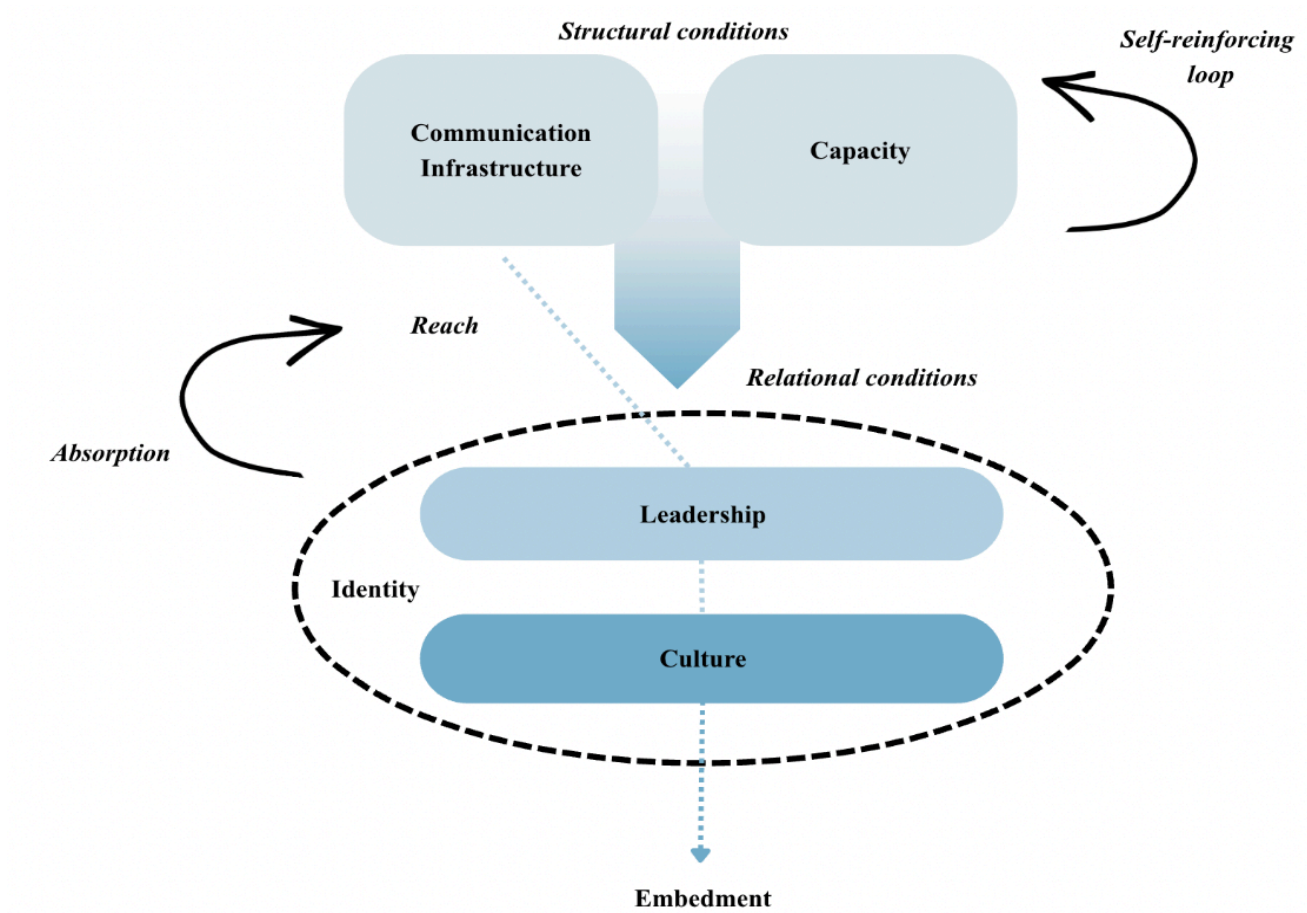


Figure 7: A Layered View of Translation in Multinational Change

Explanatory Framework

Structural conditions enabling or constraining the relational work, and produce reach (downward)

Capacity: Time, attention, and resources available for the relational work

Communication infrastructure: Language, channels, digital tools, formats through which the programme operates. Medium of reach and compression.

Self-reinforcing loop:

- where capacity is weakest, conditions for translation remain unbuilt; where conditions are unbuilt, design intent does not reach embedment
- where infrastructure fails to reach, identification weakens; where identification weakens, the next message reaches even less

Reach: Communication flow, how far the message travels in the translation process

Absorption: Relational receptivity affects what reach lands and what gets filtered down.

- Identification: shapes whether reach even registers
- Leadership engagement: Where managers don't engage, reach stalls
- Cultural receptivity: pre-existing patterns and cultural dynamics shape how reach lands and what gets filtered.

Relational conditions for meaning-making, determines absorption (upward): what the structural layer's reach can become.

Leadership: The relational practice through which translation occurs – where reach is converted into meaning

Translation work at the leadership level moves down into the culture where pre-existing patterns surface or shift

Culture: The shared ways of working and thinking – filtering how reach lands; what gets revealed by the translation work

Identity: Threads through both leadership and culture – who 'we' are, articulated through stories and narratives about past, present, and becoming

Embedment: Assumption-level shifts, behaviour beyond awareness – where design intent reaches the level of underlying assumptions through successful translation

Figure 8: Explanatory Framework

6. Conclusion

This thesis has examined how a global change program, Orion Accelerate, travels and is interpreted across the levels and locations of a multinational engineering consultancy operating across digital environments. In this process we have identified and explored conditions that enable or constrain the embedding of the programme's vision in daily organizational practice. Moving away from linear assumptions and top-down models of implementation, this study points to the relevance and importance of adopting a process-oriented lens to examine how global mandates are continuously translated and adapted through local practices, interactions and sensemaking processes. The following sections present the main findings from our analysis, providing the foundation for the following theoretical and practical contributions.

6.1 Main Findings

In tracing how the change programme takes shape as it moves through the organization, our study demonstrates that a global transformation program does not travel intact; it is continuously reshaped through the structural and human conditions of the local environments it encounters. Our findings suggest that the success of a global transformation depends more on how initiatives are interpreted, adapted, and reshaped as they move through different levels of the organization than on the quality of the original strategy itself. In the Orion case, translation becomes a complex and fragile process in which meaningful momentum emerges only when local actors actively reshape the change to fit their daily realities. This requires local managers to intentionally create and make space for relational work. When local management capacity is limited, global strategy is enacted through institutional pressure rather than voluntary alignment.

Our findings also reveal that attempts to manage fragmentation through standardized timelines and centralised reporting can unintentionally reinforce the very patterns the transformation is meant to dissolve. When individuals are required to adapt to compressed corporate timelines, this can produce surface-level compliance, suggesting that a meaningful embedding cannot be imposed. Instead, embedment requires organizational patience that allows people to unlearn established routines and gradually develop shared understandings over time.

Consequently, our findings suggest that transformation cannot be fully achieved through standardized communication alone, since local interaction and sensemaking remain central to how change is understood and enacted in practice. Drawing on this, we identify four interrelated claims that together suggest a layered view of how planned global change unfolds in practice, where translation of change into embedment depends on conditions that are themselves often unequally distributed.

Key insights

Our key findings can be summarized in the following points concerning how global, planned change unfolds in practice in a multinational organization:

- Global transformation programmes rely on translation for meaning, where local actors interpret and remake the change to make it meaningful in their own context. Consequently, for reach to convert into embedment, the programme depends on manager engagement, cultural receptivity, and identification, mediated through structural conditions.
- Leadership is under-recognized rather than overemphasized in programme design. While leaders are paramount for embedment, the structural conditions in which they operate often prevent them from performing that role. It is thus important that programme architecture recognises leadership as relational and meaning-making work.
- Communication infrastructure has a dual nature. The digital medium through which multinational change operates makes the programme globally scalable, but it also compresses the relational register through which trust and shared understanding develop. The infrastructure functions as a structural condition cutting across the relational layers of leadership, identity, and culture, making it the medium through which these conditions must operate.
- Culture surfaces less as something the programme installs and more as something it reveals. Built up over years of how the organisation was structured and rewarded, culture cannot be aligned alongside the rest of the change. Consequently, stated values do not

always land as intended, and the very design intended to dissolve cultural tensions can instead reinforce them.

- Identity threads through both culture and leadership in distributed change. In project-based workforces, an *identity split* often emerges where employees feel more commitment to external clients rather than their own organization. Where this gap holds, local leaders are left without the channels or capacity to reach them, and the distance widens between the programme's intent and what is taken up on the ground.
- The capacity to absorb change is seldom evenly distributed across markets, which can produce a self-reinforcing pattern. Where capacity is already weakest, the conditions needed for translation remain underdeveloped. The continued pressure for visible results tends to push toward further acceleration rather than allowing time for recovery and absorption.
- Embedment requires a different pace than the programme can easily provide. Genuine change requires the unlearning of ingrained habits, leaders modelling new behaviours, and time for assumptions to shift through accumulated practice. This work runs into a pacing tension between patience and visible results, and these two demands often pull against each other.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

Theoretical Contributions

Our study contributes to the organizational change literature by questioning the assumption that standardised structural processes and digital communication on their own lead to organizational alignment. Theoretically, we show that change messages sent globally do not guarantee that those messages will be received, understood, and accepted in the way leadership intends. Drawing on Latour's translation theory, we argue that a global change programme is never implemented in the same way across the organization, even when delivered through identical digital platforms. Instead, it is reinterpreted and reshaped by local employees as they adapt it to their daily realities.

Building on this, our study identifies a dual character of digital coordination in virtual change environments. The digital medium can act as a barrier to the relational work through which trust and shared understanding develop, while the same digital distance can also create a psychological buffer that gives individuals a safer space to express honest opinions and voice concerns. This complicates the dominant framing of digital coordination as primarily a reduction.

Our findings also extend identity-focused change theory by examining how it plays out in professional consulting firms. Because consultants are embedded in external client projects, their professional identity tends to be tied to clients rather than to their employer. We describe this as an *identity split*, which helps explain why top-down change programmes, at least from a leadership perspective, stall when employees feel detached from the corporate strategies the programme depends on. This shows how identity threads through both culture and leadership, and why programme design that does not account for it may produce reach without embedment.

A further contribution comes from showing how rigid, standardised global change execution can unintentionally reinforce the very patterns it is trying to dissolve. When headquarters enforces change through rigid templates, strict reporting deadlines, and top-down presentations, the intervention can be read as evidence of control and an administrative distance the programme was meant to overcome. This risks producing cynicism and surface-level compliance rather than real behavioural change.

We also contribute a process-oriented view of planned change management by highlighting the tension between rigid corporate timelines and the non-linear nature of human adaptation. While executive expectations call for rapid, measurable results, behavioural change requires a different pace that allows people to unlearn ingrained routines over time. When organizations push human adaptation to match corporate speed, they create forms of overloading, where the organization runs so close to capacity that there is no room left to recover between efforts.

Finally, our study contributes a *layered model of translation in multinational change*. The model brings together four interrelated claims: 1) that planned global programmes designed through a diffusion logic move through translation; 2) the translation friction surfacing at communication, leadership, and the digital register, 3) that the identified conditions for enabling or constraining embedment are unevenly distributed and not addressed in programme design; 4) and that, in

distributed multinational settings specifically, leadership is under-recognized rather than overemphasised in programme design. While critical scholars have rightly cautioned against treating leadership as a panacea, our findings suggest that this caution may go too far when planned change must travel across digital channels and many national contexts. The model offers a way of seeing planned global change as a process requiring relational translation work that programme design cannot bypass.

Practical suggestions for managers

Global leaders should recognize that the reach of digital communication does not equal shared meaning, and move beyond treating change communication as a logistical exercise of mass emails and standardized decks. Rather than relying on top-down communication, management should allow local actors to shape and interpret the change narrative. Middle and local managers should act as cultural translators, translating corporate goals into local routines and making change meaningful and actionable for employees.

Rather than relying on impersonal digital communication that can strip away the relational cues needed for change, global leaders should intentionally build more interactive virtual forums focused on open dialogue and active listening rather than just operational tasks. At the same time, organizations may use the relative distance created by digital platforms to foster psychological safety and support more open communications and establish low-risk feedback outlets where employees can express resistance or anxiety safely.

Instead of assuming that all parts of the multinational organization are equally prepared for change, leadership should recognize that readiness differs across local contexts. We suggest that leadership acknowledge differences in local readiness for change rather than assuming that all units can absorb transformation in the same way. Before implementing any initiatives such as Orion Accelerate, organizations should assess local context such pressures, language barriers and change fatigue from previous transformation cycles. Adjusting the pace and supporting the local conditions can prevent overloading teams whose capacities are already constrained.

When implementing change within project-based or consulting workforces, organizations need to move beyond framing the change purely as corporate alignment or administrative compliance,

since this carries limited relevance to employees' daily roles at client sites. Instead, the transformation should align with employees' professional identities by showing how the change supports their autonomy, improves the value they can deliver to clients, and reduces daily operational friction.

Lastly, rather than treating the completion of communication initiatives, such as the closure of reporting timelines, as evidence of successful change execution, organizations should distinguish between measures of employee awareness and measures of behavioural embedment. Since lasting change requires time for people to unlearn established habits and adopt new ways of working, transformation programmes should include phases that support gradual cultural adjustment and realistic organizational expectations of pace.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

Our study provides in-depth qualitative insights into how a global transformation programme takes shape as it moves through a multinational organization. It does not aim for broader empirical generalisability, but instead focuses on one organization in depth. While this allowed us to examine how the same programme is interpreted across different national contexts and organizational levels, several limitations remain that future research could address.

First, our study was conducted during one phase of an ongoing change programme. We captured how the programme was being interpreted at a particular point in time, but not how those interpretations shift as the programme moves through its different phases. A longitudinal study, with interviews conducted at multiple points across the transformation timeline, could provide insights into how meaning-making, translation work, and embedment evolve over time. It would also be interesting to see how the conditions we identify as enabling or constraining embedment shift in response to the change itself.

Second, our sample consists of leaders in change-related roles, primarily from marketing, brand, communications, and change management functions. While this provided rich material on how the programme is translated and shaped by those carrying it, it did not capture the perspectives of frontline employees. The consultant workforce we identified as central to the identity-related findings is a particular gap. Future research could examine the consultant identity gap from

within, exploring how project-based employees experience global transformation programmes when their daily working environment is shaped mainly by external clients, and testing how the identity split concept holds in other distributed and project-based workforces.

Third, our study focused on one case organization within the digital consulting industry. Comparative research across multiple organizations, industries, and national contexts would help test how transferable the layered model is. It could also surface other conditions that shape how planned change unfolds, such as more industry-specific dynamics.

Fourth, our findings briefly touch on the material and political-economic dimensions of change in distributed organizations. The financial inequality across markets, where the capacity to absorb change is itself unequally resourced, points to a structural feature of multinational transformation that deserves focused attention. Future research drawing on the critical change perspective could extend this dimension by examining how such dimensions in different markets shape the translation work.

List of References

- Alvehus, J. (2020). Chapter 1, in *Formulating Research Problems*, Lund: Studentlitteratur, pp.11-22
- Alvesson, M., & Sandberg, J. (2011). Generating Research Questions Through Problematization, *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp.247-271, <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMR.2011.59330882>
- Alvesson, M., & Sveningsson, S. (2025). *Changing Organizational Culture: Cultural change work in progress*, 3rd edn, New York: Routledge
- Alvesson, M., Blom, M., & Sveningsson, S. (2017). *Reflexive Leadership: Organizing in an imperfect world*, London: SAGE
- Armenakis, A. A., Harris, S. G., & Mossholder, K. W. (1993). Creating Readiness for Organizational Change, *Human Relations*, vol. 46, no. 6, pp.681-703, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872679304600601>
- Avolio, B. J., Sosik, J. J., Kahai, S. S., & Baker, B. (2014). E-leadership: Re-examining transformations in leadership source and transmission, *The Leadership Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp.105-131, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.11.003>
- Bakari, H., Hunjra, A. I., & Niazi, G. S. K. (2017). How Does Authentic Leadership Influence Planned Organizational Change? The role of employees' perceptions: integration of theory of planned behavior and Lewin's three-step model, *Journal of Change Management*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp.155-187, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2017.1299370>
- Balogun, J., Bartunek, J. M., & Do, B. (2015). Senior Managers' Sensemaking and Responses to Strategic Change, *Organization Science*, vol. 26, no. 4, pp.960-979. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2015.0985>
- Bandura, A. (1988). Organizational Applications of Social Cognitive Theory, *Australian Journal of Management*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp.275-276, <https://doi.org/10.1177/031289628801300210>

Boyle, M. P., & Schmierbach, M. (2020). *Applied Communication Research Methods: Getting started as a researcher*, 2nd edn, New York: Routledge, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429296444>

Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method, *Qualitative Research Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp.27-40, <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>

Burke, W. W. (2018). *Organization Change: Theory and practice*, 5th edn, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE

Bushe, G. R., & Marshak, R. J. (2015). The Dialogic Organization Development Approach to Transformation and Change, in W. J. Rothwell, J. Stavros, & R. L. Sullivan (eds), *Practicing Organization Development: Leading transformation and change*, 4th edn, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, pp.477-500, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119176626.ch31>

Collins, D. (2018). *Stories for Management Success: The Power of Talk in Organizations*, London: Routledge

Czarniawska, B., & Joerges, B. (1996). Travels of Ideas, in B. Czarniawska & G. Sevón (eds), *Translating Organizational Change*, Berlin: de Gruyter, pp.13-48, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110879735.13>

Flick, U. (2014). Mapping the Field, in U. Flick (ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, London: SAGE, pp.3-18, Doi: 10.4135/9781446282243

Flick, U. (2023). *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 7th edn, Los Angeles: SAGE

Gilli, K., Lettner, N., & Güttel, W. H. (2023). The Future of Leadership: New digital skills or old analog virtues?, *Journal of Business Strategy*, vol. 45, no. 1, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JBS-06-2022-0093>

Habermas, J. (1971). *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Boston: Beacon Press, pp.187-191

Hassan, Y., Pandey, J., Majumdar, S., Pereira, V., Behl, A., & Bazal-Shoham, O. (2024). Examining the Impact of E-Leadership on Strategic Innovation at Work: A moderated-mediation

model, *The Journal of Technology Transfer*, vol. 50, pp.469-487, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10961-024-10108-3>

Hatch, M. J., & Schultz, M. (2002). The Dynamics of Organizational Identity, *Human Relations*, vol. 55, no. 8, pp.989-1018, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726702055008181>

Hofstede, G., Neuijen, B., Ohayv, D. D., & Sanders, G. (1990). Measuring Organizational Cultures: A qualitative and quantitative study across twenty cases, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 2, pp.286-316, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2393392>

Kihlberg, R., & Lindberg, O. (2021). Reflexive Sensegiving: An open-ended process of influencing the sensemaking of others during organizational change, *European Management Journal*, vol. 39, no. 4, pp.476-486, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2020.10.007>

Kim, H. S., Waight, J., Xu, X., & Yoon, S. W. (2025). Navigating Leadership in Hybrid or Remote Workplaces: A systematic review of employee engagement strategies, *Human Resource Development Review*, vol. 25, no. 2, <https://doi.org/10.1177/15344843251381>

Klang. (2026). European AI for Conversations That Matter. <https://klang.ai/> [Accessed 22 April 2026]

Klus, M. F. & Müller, J. (2021). The digital leader: What one needs to master today's digital transformation, *Journal of Business Economics*, vol. 91, pp.1189–1223. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11573-021-01040-1>

Kraft, A., Sparr, J. L., & Peus, C. (2018). Giving and Making Sense About Change: The back and forth between leaders and employees, *Journal of Business and Psychology*, vol. 33, pp.71-87, Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-016-9474-5>

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2014). *Den Kvalitative Forskningsintervjun*, 3rd edn, Lund: Studentlitteratur

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2015). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*, 3rd edn, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE

Latour, B. (1986). The Powers of Association, in J. Law (ed.), *Power, Action and Belief: A new sociology of knowledge?*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the Social*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Logemann, M., Piekkari, R. and Cornelissen, J. (2019). The Sense of It All: Framing and narratives in sensegiving about a strategic change, *Long Range Planning*, vol. 52, no. 5, Article 101852, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lrp.2018.10.002>

Marshak, R. J. (2002). Changing the Language of Change: How new contexts and concepts are challenging the ways we think and talk about organizational change, *Strategic Change*, vol. 11, no. 5, pp.279-286, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jsc.604>

Musaigwa, M. (2023). The Role of Leadership in Managing Change, *International Review of Management and Marketing*, vol. 13, no. 6, pp.1-9, <https://doi.org/10.32479/irmm.13526>

Ogbonna, E., & Wilkinson, B. (2003). The False Promise of Organizational Culture Change, *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 40, no. 5, pp.1151-1178, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.00375>

Palmer, I., & Dunford, R. (2008). Organizational Change and the Importance of Embedded Assumptions, *British Journal of Management*, vol. 19, pp.20-32, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2008.00568.x>

Palmer, I., Dunford, R., & Akin, G. (2017). *Managing Organizational Change: A multiple perspectives approach*, 3rd edn, New York: McGraw-Hill

Prasad, P. (2018). *Crafting Qualitative Research: Working in the postpositivist traditions*, 2nd edn, New York: Routledge

Rapley, T. (2014). Sampling Strategies in Qualitative Research, in U. Flick (ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, London: SAGE, pp.49-63

- Reichertz, J. (2014). Induction, Deduction, Abduction, in U. Flick (ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, London: SAGE, pp.123-135
- Rennstam, J., & Wästerfors, D. (2018). *Analyze! Crafting Your Data in Qualitative Research*, Lund: Studentlitteratur
- Ryan, G. W., & Bernard, H. R. (2003). Techniques to Identify Themes, *Field Methods*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp.85-109
- Schein, E. H. (1985). *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Schein, E. H. (2004). *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 3rd edn, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Smircich, L. (1983). Concepts of Culture and Organizational Analysis, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 3, pp.339-358
- Sparr, J. L. (2018). Paradoxes in Organizational Change: The crucial role of leaders' sensegiving, *Journal of Change Management*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp.162-180, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2018.1446696>
- Spector, B. (2013). Flawed from the 'Get-Go': Lee Iacocca and the origins of transformational leadership, *Leadership*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp.361-379, <https://doi.org/10.1177/174271501351488>
- Sveningsson, S., & Sörgärde, N. (2023). *Managing Change in Organizations*, 2nd edn, London: SAGE
- Szabla, D. B., Pasmore, W., Barnes, M. A., & Gipson, A. N. (2017). *The Palgrave Handbook of Organizational Change Thinkers*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52878-6>
- Watson, T. J. (1994). Culture, Chaos and Control in Managerial Work, in S. R. Clegg, C. Hardy, & W. R. Nord (eds), *Handbook of Organization Studies*, London: SAGE, p.150
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE

Weick, K. E., & Quinn, R. E. (1999). Organizational Change and Development, *Annual Review of Psychology*, vol. 50, pp.361-386

Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking, *Organization Science*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp.409-421, <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1050.0133>

Ybema, S. (2010). Talk of Change: Temporal contrasts and collective identities, *Organization Studies*, vol. 31, no. 4, pp.481-503, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840610372205>

Appendix

Appendix A - Empirical Material

Selected Analyzed Documents

Document	Name	Type
1	Value Creation Plan	PowerPoint
2	Magazine	PDF
3	Client Presentation	PDF
4	Change Management & Communications	PowerPoint
5	Transformation Update About Global Accounts	Email
6	Target Operating Model	Email
7	Kick-off Transformation Workstream	Email
8	The Inside Story	Email

Pilot Interviews Conducted

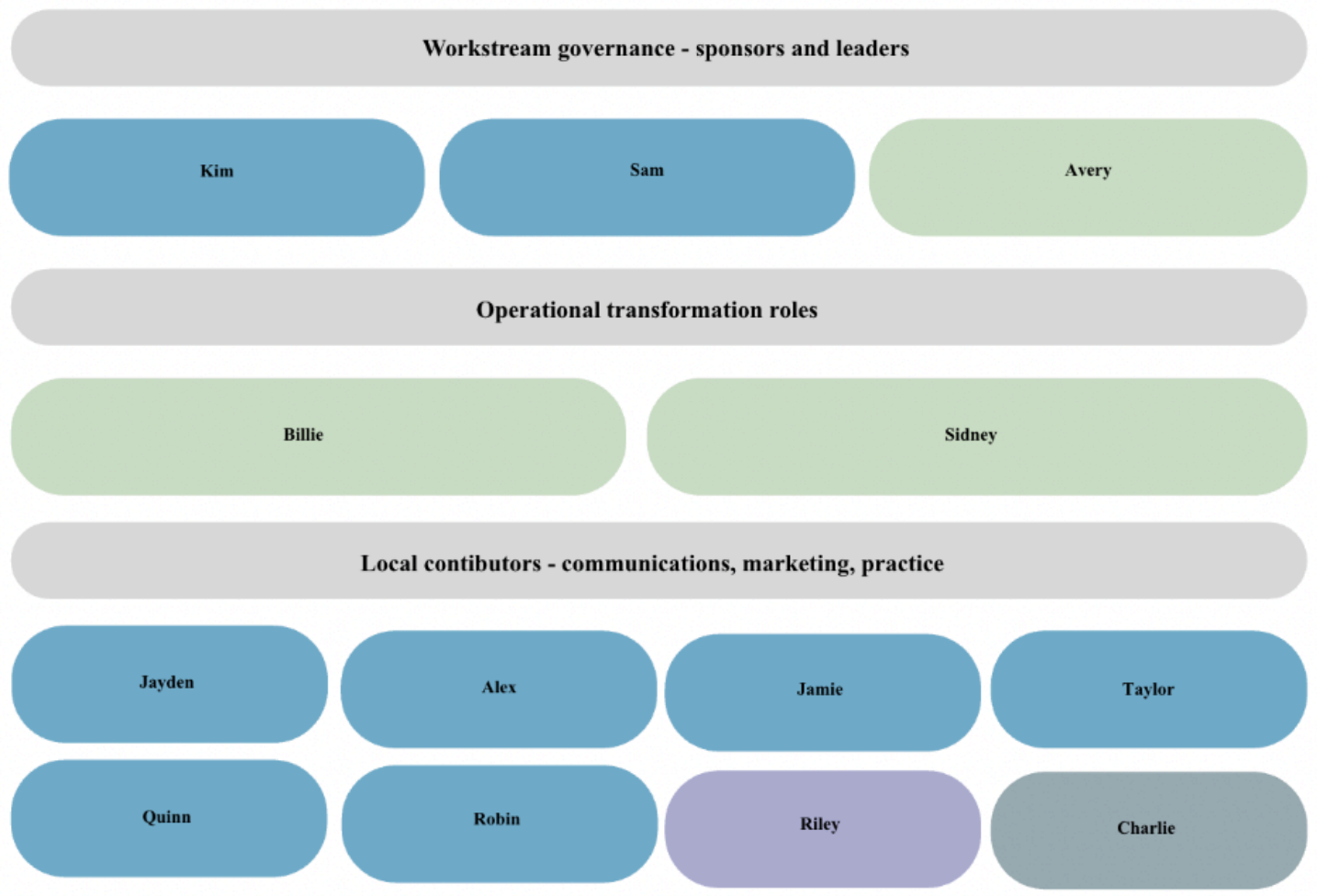
Nr	Name	Date	Work Location	Legacy Organization and Year of Joining	Length
1	Kim	23.02.2026	Predominantly remote, occasional presence in office (Sweden-based)	Oris, 2020	44
2	Sam	25.02.2026	95% digital (France-based)	Oris, 2021	37

Respondent Overview

Nr	Name	Date	Work Location	Legacy Organization and Year of Joining	Length
1	Kim	01.04.2026	See above	See above	53
Follow-up		05.04.2026			25
2	Sam	10.04.2026	See above	See above	45
3	Riley	22.04.2026	Office. Remote one day a week. (France-based)	Aeon, 2004	44
4	Jayden	23.04.2026	Fully remote (UK-based)	Alpha Group since 2020, Oris 2022	54
5	Robin	24.04.2026	Flexible, policy-driven, with increasing office expectations (Belgium-based)	Aeon, 2021	54
6	Alex	24.04.2026	Primarily remote. Office one day a week. (Australia-based)	Oris, 2021	39
Email follow-up		01.05.2026			
7	Quinn	24.04.2026	Primarily remote. Office two days a week. (Bulgaria-based)	Oris, 2016	1 hour
8	Taylor	24.04.2026	Primarily office. (France-based)	Orion, 2025	43
9	Sidney	28.04.2026	Primarily remote. Office two days a week. (Australia-based)	Oris, 2021	45

10	Billie	28.04.2026	Flexible, policy-driven, with increasing office expectations (Netherlands-based)	Alpha Group since 2014, Oris 2021	42
Email follow-up		01.05.2026			
11	Avery	04.05.2026	100% online (Australia-based)	Orion, 2022	1 hour
12	Charlie	04.05.2026	Primarily office. Remote two days a week. (Belgium-based)	Aeon, 2016	30
13	Jamie	04.05.2026	Flexible, primarily digitally dispersed work. (Germany-based)	Orion, 2023	45

Appendix B - Overview of Respondents' Function in Transformation



Grouped by role in transformation, coloured by function

Green: Transformation; Blue: Marketing & Brand; Purple: Communication; Grey: Practice

Appendix C - Pilot Study Interview Guideline

Ice-breaker:

- How are you? Thank you for taking the time for this interview. It will last for approximately 45 minutes.
-

Introduction:

- Our names are Ellen and Evi, we are studying Managing People, Knowledge & Change at the University of Lund, and we are writing our thesis investigating leadership in times of the transformation programme at Orion Consulting.
 - All the empirical material, including names, will be anonymised; no personal names or company identifiers will be included, nor for the University or for Orion.
 - If we have your consent, we would like to record this interview for transcription purposes. The files will be deleted after analysis. If approved from your side, we may include some information about your overall role and responsibilities in the thesis. Would that be okay for you?
-

Introductory questions

- Can you describe the company in a few sentences and your current role within your function?
 - How long have you been in this role?

Transformation

- How would you describe the current transformation programme in your own words?
- What does ‘alignment’ mean for this transformation programme?
- How would you characterize the scope of your responsibilities in relation to the ongoing change programme?

Leadership

- How would you describe your everyday leadership context (physical presence vs. digital interaction)?
- How would you describe leadership at the organization in general and during the period of change?
- From your perspective, what feels most central or important to achieve in your leadership role during this transformation?
- Have expectations of leadership changed during the transformation? If so, how?

Communication

- To what extent and in what ways do you think hybrid and geographically dispersed forms of communication influence how you see and practice your leadership role?
- How does digital communication differ from face-to-face communication in your experience?
- How do you ensure that your intended message is interpreted as you expect across dispersed teams?

Digital tools

- Which digital tools are most central in your work during this transformation?
- What role do digital tools play in how you practice leadership?
- Have they created any tensions/difficulties in how you collaborate or lead this transformation?

Identity & trust

- Has communicating and leading in hybrid and digitally mediated environments influenced how you understand yourself as a leader? If so, in what ways?
- How do you build and sustain trust across dispersed teams?
- What do you feel is most affected in your leadership style and characteristics when leading this through digital platforms?

Tensions & ambiguities

- Have you noticed any mismatches between what digital tools enable and what your team seems to need from you as a leader?
- What aspects of the transformation feel most uncertain or difficult to communicate?
- How do you handle that in your communication with your team?

Future & reflection

- How do you see leadership evolving as this transformation progresses?
- What do you think will be most important for sustaining trust and alignment over time?
- Looking ahead, what kinds of leadership capabilities or approaches will become increasingly important in this organization?
- Is there anything else you think is important to understand about this that we haven't discussed?

Thank you for taking part in this interview. We are very grateful for your contributions and insights.

Appendix D - Interview Guideline

Ice-breaker:

- How are you? Thank you for taking the time for this interview. It will last for approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour.
-

Introduction:

- Our names are Ellen and Evi, we are studying Managing People, Knowledge & Change at the University of Lund, and we are writing our thesis investigating leadership in times of the transformation programme at Orion Consulting.
 - All the empirical material, including names, will be anonymised; no personal names or company identifiers will be included, nor for the University or for Orion.
 - If we have your consent, we would like to record this interview for transcription purposes. The files will be deleted after analysis. If approved from your side, we may include some information about your overall role and responsibilities in the thesis. Would that be okay for you?
-

Introductory questions: Role & context

- Would you like to briefly introduce yourself?
- Can you describe the company and your role in a few words/sentences?
 - How long have you been in this role and the company?
- Where do you usually work from? From the office or more digitally online?
- How does your work connect to other teams, countries, or functions?

The Transformation programme

- Can you explain the ongoing transformation as you understand it and what stands out to you about it?
- What was your first reaction when you first heard about transformation?
- Does it show up in your everyday work, the transformation? If so, where?
- What are you or your team expected to do differently, if anything, because of the transformation?
 - Has anything become easier or harder?
- Have you felt any friction, tensions, or things that don't quite work as expected? Where do these occur, and why?

Understanding Change & Culture

- How would you describe the “vibe” or atmosphere in the organization today?
 - What are the values that guide the people [generally or in the ongoing transformation program]?
 - Has this changed during the transformation?
- What parts of the company culture seem stronger right now, and what parts feel more challenged?
 - Do you feel like the culture has made things harder or easier? How has it affected the transformation overall?
- How would you describe the overall change attitude?
 - How do you and the people around you talk about the transformation informally? (Are there typical stories, phrases, frustrations, or jokes etc.?)
- Do you feel that people are aligned in how they understand what is happening? (Differences across teams, countries, functions etc.)

Leadership and communication

- Can you walk us through how you usually communicate and interact with others in your work?
 - What tends to work well? What doesn't?
- How do you typically try to guide and motivate others in your work?
- How do you feel about “leadership,” what does that mean to you?
- Do you feel that leadership is more or less visible or important now during the change?
- Do you think that leadership plays an important role? If so, why?

Digital tools in practice

- What digital tools are you using in your daily work?
- How do you feel about this kind of communication, and how do you use these tools?
- Are they important, and if so, why?
- Are there situations where the tools help or make things harder?
- What do you think is the most important behaviour or skill a leader needs to master to keep the team aligned through digital channels and changes?

Closing: Reflection and Future

- Looking ahead, what do you think is most important for this change to succeed?
 - Is there anything you think is currently missing?
- What would you say is the biggest challenge?
 - How do you manage that?
- Is there anything you would like to add before we end?

Appendix E - Email Interview Guideline

As we continue with more interviews and new insights emerge, as a final step, a few follow-up questions have come up. We touched on these briefly earlier, and we would really appreciate it if you could elaborate on the questions below.

1. **Working in dispersed teams**

- How do you experience this (especially now during the transformation)? What challenges and/or opportunities come with it – how do you manage these?
- When working in dispersed teams, how does coordinating change through digital channels affect leadership? (could be in terms of impact and overall possibilities or challenges of exercising change-related leadership in a digital setting)

2. **Alignment and change**

- What needs to align for this transformation programme?
- Are there any aspects of what the program aims to align that you feel are underemphasized or downplayed, or perhaps overemphasized?
- How is the global strategy executed locally in practice, including any challenges in aligning the two?
- Have any insights or issues appeared later in the transformation process that weren't recognized at the start? If so, why do you think that is?

3. **Culture and change**

- When it comes to the current culture, what aspects support the change, and are there parts that slow it down?
- What defines a strong culture in your view (any specific norms, values, habits)? How do you work to promote/encourage that?

Greatly appreciated!
