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Making sense of strategic change during times of emotional turbulence

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Liisa Yli-Ojanperä
Aalto University School of Business
Corporate Communication
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Author Liisa Yli-Ojanperä		
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Objective of the study
Much of the existing sensemaking research focuses on the sensemaking of people in manager positions, while little attention has been drawn into the sensemaking of frontline employees. In addition, the role of emotion in the sensemaking process has remained relatively unexplored. This study aims to fill these gaps by concentrating on the sensemaking processes and experienced emotions of frontline employees. The purpose of this study is to increase understanding about the ways in which frontline employees make sense of strategic change in times of emotional turbulence. This is done through three empirical research questions: 1) How do the frontline employees retrospectively make sense of strategic change? 2) What is the role of emotion in the frontline employees' sensemaking process, and which aspects influence those emotions? 3) How does the organization's culture support, accept and consider emotionality during implementation of strategic change?

Methodology and analytical framework
The empirical data is collected through ten semi-structured interviews with frontline employees working with business customers of a service company. The ways in which the interviewees describe 1) specific events, factors and elements of the strategic change process, 2) their feelings, experiences and understandings of the change, and 3) organizational culture and strategic change implementation in general, are analyzed. The organization has recently conducted a major restructuring program in one of its business units in Finland, causing changes in most of the employees' job design. Before the current initiative, the organization has gone through various changes, including cooperation negotiations in multiple business units, and office closures in several locations. Therefore, the situation is characterized by emotional turbulence.

Findings and conclusions
The findings indicate that frontline employees make sense from multiple environmental cues, and emotion seems to play a key role in the sensemaking process. The way how an individual employee feels about the previous change programs, his/her participation opportunities, changes in his/her professional identity and the future direction of the organization, seems to have a great impact on sensemaking. The findings also suggest that sensemaking is an individual process, in which each individual actor connects, not only the environmental cues shared with the other organizational actors, but their own interpretation, personal experience and emotions of those cues. Additionally, lack of emotional focus in an organization may lead to a feeling among employees that expressing emotions is forbidden or that emotions should be distanced from working context. Therefore, it seems that by appreciating emotionality, sensemaking could be enhanced in organizations. Finally, a set of four best practices is formulated, providing practitioners with tools on how to successfully implement strategic change.

Keywords sensemaking, emotion, strategic change

Aalto-yliopisto, PL 11000, 00076 AALTO
www.aalto.fi
Maisterintutkinnon tutkielman tiivistelmä

**Aalto-yliopisto
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Tekijä	Liisa Yli-Ojanperä
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Tutkielman tavoite

Suuri osa olemassa olevasta merkityksellistämisen tutkimuksesta keskittyy esimiesten tapoihin merkityksellistää todellisuutta, ja etulinjan työntekijöiden merkityksellistäminen on jäänyt vähälle huomiolle. Lisäksi tunteiden roolia prosessissa on tutkittu verrattain vähän. Tämä tutkielma pyrkii täyttämään nämä aukot keskittymällä etulinjan työntekijöiden merkityksellistämisprosesseihin ja heidän kokemiinsa tunteisiin. Tutkielman tavoite on lisätä ymmärrystä tavoista joilla etulinjan työntekijät merkityksellistävät strategista muutosta tunnekuohujen keskellä. Tämän tavoitteen saavuttamiseksi tutkielma esittää kolme empiiristä tutkimuskysymystä: 1) Miten etulinjan työntekijät merkityksellistävät strategista muutosta retrospektiivisesti? 2) Mikä on tunteiden rooli etulinjan työntekijöiden merkityksellistämisprosessissa, ja mitkä tekijät vaikuttavat näihin tunteisiin? 3) Miten organisaation kulttuuri tukee, hyväksyy ja ottaa huomioon tunteita strategisen muutoksen jalkauttamisen aikana?

Tutkimusmenetelmät ja analyyttinen viitekehys

Empiirinen tutkimusaineisto on kerätty kymmenen puolistrukturoidun haastattelun avulla etulinjan työntekijöiltä, jotka työskentelevät palveluyrityksen yritysasiakkaiden parissa. Tutkielma analysoi tapoja, joilla haastateltavat kuvailevat 1) strategisen muutosprosessin yksittäisiä tapahtumia, tekijöitä ja elementtejä, 2) heidän tunteitaan, kokemustaan ja ymmärrystään muutoksesta, ja 3) organisaatiokulttuuria ja strategisen muutoksen jalkauttamista yleisesti. Organisaatio on vastikään toteuttanut yhdessä Suomen liiketoimintayksikössään merkittävän toimintamallin uudistuksen, joka on aiheuttanut muutoksia useimpien työntekijöiden työnkuvaan. Ennen tätä muutosohjelmaa organisaatio on käynyt läpi useita muutoksia, kuten yhteistoimintaneuvotteluita eri liiketoimintayksiköissä ja useiden toimipisteiden sulkemisia. Siten tilanteeseen liittyy merkittäviä tunnekuohuja.

Tulokset ja johtopäätökset

Tulokset osoittavat, että etulinjan työntekijät merkityksellistävät todellisuutta useiden ympäröivien tekijöiden avulla, ja tunteilla on tärkeä rooli merkityksellistämisprosessissa. Sillä, miten yksilö kokee aikaisemmat muutosohjelmat, omat osallistumisen mahdollisuutensa, muutokset ammatti-identiteetissään ja organisaation tulevaisuuden, näyttäisi olevan suuri vaikutus merkityksellistämiseen. Tulokset osoittavat myös, että merkityksellistäminen on yksilöllinen prosessi, jossa kukin yksilö yhdistää paitsi muun organisaation kanssa jaettuja ympäröiviä tekijöitä, mutta myös heidän omia tulkintojaan, henkilökohtaisia kokemuksiaan ja tunteitaan näistä tekijöistä. Lisäksi se, että organisaatio ei hyväksy tai ota huomioon tunteita, voi johtaa työntekijöiden kokemukseen että tunteiden näyttäminen on kiellettyä tai että tunteet tulisi eristää työkontekstista. Siten organisaatiot voisivat edistää merkityksellistämistä kunnioittamalla ja ottamalla tunteet paremmin huomioon. Lopuksi tutkielma esittää neljä parasta käytäntöä, joiden avulla ammattilaiset voivat jalkauttaa strategisia muutoksia entistä onnistuneemmin.

Avainsanat merkityksellistäminen, tunteet, strateginen muutos

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1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to increase understanding about the ways in which frontline employees make sense of strategic change in times of emotional turbulence. Change recipients, often frontline employees, are left with the responsibility to implement and live with organizational changes that they did not initiate themselves, and hence they may experience the change initiatives very differently than the top or middle managers who have been involved in planning the change from early stages (Bartunek et al., 2006). As frontline employees play a crucial role in actually implementing the change initiative into practice, it is essential to understand how they make sense of the change in the first place. If frontline employees' understanding and account of the change substantially differs from top management's understanding and plans, they may consequently enact a change that is different from what the top management believed to be initiating (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). The frontline employees may, for example, experience the initiative very emotionally or feel that the initiative has ethical or social contradictions with their own or the organizations values (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

Frontline employees are, due to their constant interaction with external audiences, also extremely important players in influencing how customers and other stakeholders see the strategic orientation of an organization. Therefore, the change that the frontline employees enact is the change that external audiences will experience. Thus, sensemaking of frontline employees should be of great interest in every organization. Overall, frontline employees play a crucial role in how the change initiative is enacted and implemented in an organization, and how the organization's strategic orientation is seen from outside.

Much of the previous research on sensemaking in change situations focuses on managers – either on top management team or middle managers and on their experiences about the change, but apart from few exceptions (e.g. Bartunek et al., 2006), little attention has been drawn into frontline employees. Middle managers naturally play an important role in how the change initiative ultimately is passed on to the employees in the frontline, due to their access to the information provided by the top management, and their responsibility to pass that information on to frontline employees (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). However, frontline employees engage in sensemaking activities also on their own, based on

environmental cues that they have access to. Frontline employees, often in a change recipient position during a change, are not at all passive actors in change situations, but active participants that contribute to the change by making sense of it, having feelings about it and judging it (Bartunek et al., 2006).

Maitlis et al. (2013, p. 222) have argued that emotion is a "critical but relatively unexplored dimension of sensemaking in organizations". They argue that emotion plays multiple roles in the process of sensemaking; emotion signals the need for sensemaking, but emotions also emerge out of sensemaking (ibid.). Emotion provides the energy that fuels sensemaking and has a role in concluding sensemaking (ibid.). Therefore, emotion's role in sensemaking process should be investigated more in detail.

1.1   Research problem and objectives

The current study fills the above mentioned gaps in the research by concentrating on the sensemaking processes and experienced emotions of frontline employees in particular. The purpose of this study is to increase understanding about the ways in which frontline employees make sense of strategic change in times of emotional turbulence. To do this, the paper investigates frontline employees' sensemaking about strategic change and emotion's role in the process through the following three empirical research questions:

1. How do the frontline employees retrospectively make sense of strategic change?
2. What is the role of emotion in the frontline employees' sensemaking process, and which aspects influence those emotions?
3. How does the organization's culture support, accept and consider emotionality during implementation of strategic change?

The empirical data is collected through ten semi-structured interviews with frontline employees working with business customers of a company operating in the service sector. The organization has recently conducted a major restructuring program in one of its business units in Finland, causing changes in most of the employees' job design. In addition to the current change initiative, the organization has gone through other emotionally charged situations in recent years, such as cooperation negotiations in multiple business units, and office closures in several locations.

From the practical point of view, the study enlightens managers on the ways employees in the frontline positions may react to and understand strategic change initiatives. The study also helps managers to understand the complex role that emotion plays in strategic change and sensemaking processes, in situations that involve changes in job design. Finally, the paper formulates a set of four best practices, providing practitioners with tools on how to successfully implement strategic change.

1.2   Report structure

The paper begins by reviewing the existing academic literature around organizational change, sensemaking, and emotion. Next, the research design, data and methods are introduced, beginning with the empirical context, namely the strategic change conducted in the business unit focusing on business customers of a service sector company in Finland, and continuing with explaining the data collection and analysis in detail. Finally, the research findings are presented and discussed, and the conclusions are drawn, after which both academic and practical implications are presented. The results of this study must be understood in the specific context studied.

2   Sensemaking and emotion

In this chapter, theories and concepts from literature in the fields of sensemaking and emotion are presented and analysed. The literature review begins with taking a look at how emotionality and emotions are generally treated in organizational cultures, and with brief introduction to definitions of emotionality and sensemaking. The chapter then continues with an overview of the literature around emotion's role in different points of sensemaking process: in triggering sensemaking, during sensemaking process, and in concluding sensemaking. Finally, the theoretical framework used in this particular study is presented.

2.1   Emotions' role in organizations

The range of socially acceptable emotional expressions tend to be limited in organizations (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995). Two emotional expressions that tend to be particularly unacceptable in organizations are expressions of emotions that are either negatively loaded or rather intense – these emotions tend to be acceptable only under certain conditions (ibid.). For example, in general, only the organizational members that hold high status are socially allowed to express their frustration or impatience, and expressions of intense emotions tend to be acceptable only in situations that are of great impact for the organization as a whole, such as a record year (ibid.). This, according to Ashforth and Humphrey (1995), is due to a common belief in organizational culture that expressions of intense emotions weaken routine task performance.

Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) list four mechanisms that organizations use to control the organizational members from experiencing and/or expressing emotions: neutralizing, buffering, prescribing and normalizing. "Neutralizing" means simply preventing the emergence of socially unacceptable emotions, and "buffering" stands for segregating potentially harmful emotions from the main activities (ibid.). "Prescribing" stands for describing the means of experiencing and expressing emotions that are socially acceptable in the organizational context, and "normalizing" means diffusing or reframing unacceptable emotions to preserve the status quo (ibid.).

This eagerness to regulate emotions in organizations seem to result from the common assumption that emotionality contradicts with rationality. Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) however, argue that the two dimensions (emotionality and rationality) are interpenetrated,

emotions being integral and often functional part of organizational life. Both technical and social dimensions can coexist and supplement each other in organizations, as can objectivity and subjectivity, predictability and spontaneity, stability and creativity, understanding and experiencing, as well as hierarchies and networks (ibid.). Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) argue that organizations could at times improve their effectiveness by appreciating emotions and taking them into account in decision-making, rather than by trying to ignore the existence of emotionality in the organization.

Rouleau (2005) contributes to this discussion by drawing attention to the importance of tacit knowledge. She argues that for sensemaking to take place in an organization during times of strategic change, tacit knowledge about the organization, its people and their reactions to the change is just as important as explicit, conscious knowledge about the technical details around the change initiative (Rouleau, 2005).

For managers, socio-cultural tacit knowledge is an important resource that they can use in legitimating decisions and convincing people to adopt the change (Rouleau, 2005). Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) add that leaders can obtain valuable information by paying attention to felt and expressed emotions throughout the organization. This information on how the change resonates in the organization helps the leaders further understand the process through which change initiatives are implemented (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010).

Sandelands (1988) pointed out that many organizations do not have a vocabulary or appropriate culture to discuss emotions or organizational members' own experiences. Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) raise their concern about these traits and argue that individuals need emotional connection to their work in order to gain strong motivation and psychological involvement.

The traditional focus on effort (behavior) and expectations (cognition) addresses the hands and the head of the individual, but not the heart.

Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995, p. 110

Research conducted by Ashforth and Humphrey (1995), Sandelands (1998), Rouleau (2005) and Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) suggests that emotionality is an important part of human interaction and organizational life, and hence emotions should be considered in

sensemaking research more thoroughly. Emotionality does not exclude rationality – emotions play their part in every human decision and social process, including strategic change and sensemaking.

2.2 Range of emotions

Russel (2003) divides one's emotional experience into two dimensions: *degree of pleasantness* and *degree of activation*. Pleasantness refers to the individual's experience on how pleasant/positive or unpleasant/negative the situation is. Activation, on the other hand, refers to the experience on how the situation energizes or mobilizes one to action, which refers to the intensity of the emotion. (Russel, 2003).

When looking at these properties in a change context, both properties, pleasantness and activation, influence how the change initiative is judged by the change recipients, that is, how much gains do they experience from the change (Bartunek et al., 2006). If a person connects positive emotions to the change, he/she is likely to experience gains and see the change as a good direction to take, and conversely, unpleasant emotions signal that the direction is somewhat problematic or detrimental to their well-being (Bartunek et al., 2006; Maitlis et al., 2013). Activation, on the other hand, provides the energy that motivates one to take action on the change initiative.

Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) see the range of emotions somewhat differently; they suggest that feelings vary in terms of their intensity, duration, consistency, and valence. The way people experience their work is full of feeling – varying from frustration, dissatisfaction and fear to joy and commitment (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995). In their definition of emotion, Ashforth and Humphrey (1995), include basic emotions such as joy, love and anger but also social emotions such as shame, guilt and jealousy.

2.3 Sensemaking as a process

Before diving deeper into emotions' role in sensemaking, it is reasonable to look at the concept of sensemaking itself – the kinds of definitions that scholars have developed and used to describe it.

The term sensemaking is rather ambiguous to this day, and a single agreed definition does not exist (Brown et al., 2015). The definition of sensemaking in Brown et al. (2015, p. 266)

reflects this ambiguity quite distinctively: "Sensemaking is a perspective, or concept, approach, lens or theory…about how people appropriate and enact their realities". Although wide range of words are used to describe what sensemaking is, the majority of scholars view sensemaking above all as a process or as a set of processes (Brown et al., 2015; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Maitlis et al., 2013; Rouleau, 2005). Through the process of sensemaking, sensemakers reduce equivocality (Maitlis et al., 2013) by connecting and interpreting cues (Rouleau, 2005) into a new rational reality (Maitlis et al., 2013) – making sense of the changed environment around them (Brown et al., 2015). Sensemaking helps people to carry out change, make decisions, and come up with fresh solutions to problems. (Maitlis et al., 2013).

The concept of enactment adds another important factor to the definition of sensemaking. According to Brown et al. (2015), sensemaking is but making sense of occurrences by extracting and interpreting environmental cues, also enacting that very environment. Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010, p. 553) put this idea nicely in words: "people generate their environment through their actions and through their attempts to make sense of these actions". When bringing this aspect to the context of organizational change, we come up with the idea that organizational change takes its shape based on how the organization interprets it. By interpreting and connecting different cues and aspects of the change, organizational members themselves participate in creating how the reality of the change unfolds.

Sensemaking begins when novel, unexpected or confusing event or other trigger (Maitlis et al., 2013) causes a breakdown of a harmonious representation, so that new cues do not fit into it (Maguire, Maguire, & Keane, 2011). The experience of equivocality, ambiguity and confusion around issue or event leads to sensemaking process: perceiving cues, interpreting them and acting according to the interpretation (Brown et al., 2015), and, finally, constructing a new account (Maitlis et al., 2013). In other words, sensemaking occurs when contradicting cues cause an interruption to individuals' ongoing activity (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Emotions' role in triggering sensemaking is covered more in detail in section 2.4.

The cues from which sense is made, can be physical changes, technical information, words, texts or actions – various types of familiar elements (Maitlis et al., 2013). Rouleau (2005) points out the practical and social dimensions of sensemaking. Leaders cannot expect sense to be made only from carefully planned events or official strategy statements distributed in the organization's official communication channels (Rouleau, 2005). Micro-practices – everyday interactions, conversations and other daily experiences also act as important cues that employees use in their efforts to understand what is happening (Rouleau, 2005).

In this study, sensemaking is considered above all as a process through which individuals reduce equivocality by connecting and interpreting cues into a new rational reality – and, consequently, enact that reality. However, as Bartunek et al. (2006) hold, change recipients do not make sense of the change in a neutral way – they have feelings about the change, and those feelings are necessary for leaders and researchers to understand. Next section moves on to the emotions' role in sensemaking process – starting with emotions' effect on the sensemaking trigger.

2.4 Emotions' role in triggering sensemaking

Sensemaking process triggers when any unexpected interruption in an ongoing activity or normal situation occurs (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Maitlis et al. (2013) point out, however, that not all the events, issues, actions or situations that provide interruption to normal state of being trigger sensemaking. Because sensemaking is an important process for organizations and individuals in overcoming changes and challenges, it is important to identify the factors that are especially likely to trigger sensemaking.

Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) suggest that crisis and change are particularly likely to trigger sensemaking, due to significance of the disruption that they produce to ongoing activity. When individuals or groups face changes in their circumstances, their ordinary routines are interrupted and, therefore, they are forced to re-think and re-enact their environments to create new meanings (Bartunek et al., 2006; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010).

An interruption to ongoing activity, such as crisis or change, leads to the arousal of the autonomic nervous system, resulting in one experiencing different kinds of emotions (Weick, 1995 cited in Maitlis et al., 2013). The interruption provides an individual with a

feeling that his/her well-being may be at risk and that he/she ought to act in some way – to make sense of what is happening (Maitlis et al., 2013).

Maitlis et al. (2013) raise an interesting perspective into the discussion on when sensemaking is likely to be triggered. They see sensemaking as a potentially negative experience that individuals may try to avoid (Maitlis et al., 2013). Sensemaking includes cognitive, identity and social costs, and therefore sensemaking requires effort from individuals to engage in it, and to overcome those costs (Maitlis et al., 2013). In order to develop new accounts and to make sense of what is happening, individuals are required to think and analyse the situation and consider how the new situation affects their self-conception (*cognitive cost*) (Maitlis et al., 2013). In addition, the individual may have to admit their confusion and uncertainty in public (*identity costs*), which raises questions about his/her competence and position (*social costs*) (Maitlis et al., 2013).

Sensemaking is an effortful, sometimes difficult, and potentially unpleasant process, and so individuals must be energized to engage in it.

Maitlis et al., 2013, p. 226

Maitlis et al. (2013) propose that emotion is a critical factor explaining why certain events trigger sensemaking and other events do not – they argue that emotional reaction to the interruption provides the energy that the individual needs for engaging in sensemaking – to develop a new understanding of the situation (Maitlis et al., 2013).

2.4.1 Moderately intense, negative emotions trigger sensemaking

Maitlis et al. (2013) also argue that some emotions are more likely to energize individuals to engage in sensemaking than others. According to Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010), intensity of the emotion plays a critical role in determining how powerful the emotion is in triggering sensemaking. Since the emotional reaction has to be strong enough to fuel the effort, low intensity emotions cannot provide the emotional energy needed (Maitlis et al., 2013). On the other hand, highly intense negative emotions, such as panic or rage, tend to interrupt clear thinking, consume capacity and shift attention to the emotion itself rather than the trigger (Maitlis et al., 2013). Similarly, moderately intense positive emotions can provide the energy for sensemaking, but very intense positive emotions may be blinding and depleting (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

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Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) suggest that self-conscious emotions, when intense, may impede sensemaking particularly strongly. Self-conscious emotions include others' evaluations of self, such as quilt, shame or pride and may be experienced in change context for instance when an individual feels unfairly affected by the change (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010).

Individuals usually pay more attention to negative events than positive ones (Maitlis et al., 2013). Positive feelings are also generally interpreted as a sign of a safe situation where no systematic processing of information is needed (Maitlis et al., 2013). In contrast, negative feelings are often interpreted as a sign of problems in the environment, where search for meaning is required (Maitlis et al., 2013). Thus, negative emotions are more likely to trigger intensive sensemaking than positive emotions (Maitlis et al., 2013).

In sum, individuals tend to perceive a stronger need for sensemaking, when the trigger is connected to moderately intense negative emotions, such as anxiety and sadness (Maitlis et al., 2013). Conversely, after events that lead to positively valenced feelings, such as joy, delight or contentment, or highly intense emotions, such as panic or rage, sensemaking process is less likely to begin.

2.4.2 Individual reactions to triggers vary

There are contradicting views among researchers on whether the same impulse always creates same emotional response in different individuals, or whether the response depends on how the individual interprets the impulse (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995). Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) think that emotional response may be ambiguous at times, and that interpretation may be socially constructed within the group. It seems that not all individuals develop similar emotional reactions to certain triggering events – individual characteristics influence the emotional reaction that a trigger causes in each of us.

Bartunek et al. (2006) pointed out that while the people who are initiating the change may focus on the organizational outcomes, regular employees usually pay more attention to their personal gains or losses resulting from the initiative. Moderately intense negative emotions, the ones most likely to energize individuals to engage in sensemaking, are most often generated by triggers that have either a moderately negative impact on an individual's important personal goal, or a significantly negative impact on moderately important goal

(Maitlis et al., 2013). Therefore, investigating personal goals of organizational members may give us information on whether or why sensemaking has taken place.

Sensemaker's regulatory focus is another aspect that may enlighten us on how sensemaking process is triggered (Maitlis et al., 2013). Regulatory focus divides people into two categories: prevention-focused individuals and promotion-focused individuals (Maitlis et al., 2013). Individuals in a prevention-focused state tend to concentrate on avoiding pain and mistakes, while the people in a promotion-focused state tend to focus on pleasure and success (Maitlis et al., 2013). Regulatory focus differentiates people in how they react to similar events, and therefore affects the emotions that each event raises in different individuals (Maitlis et al., 2013).

A person in a promotion-focused state tends to experience more intense emotions from events that create pleasure and less intense emotions from events creating pain, and the other way around in case of a person in a prevention-focused state (Maitlis et al., 2013). Therefore, for prevention-focused people, a moderately negative event, and for promotion-focused people, a severely negative event will most likely trigger sensemaking process (Maitlis et al., 2013). The state of an individual's regulatory focus may vary over time, depending on the environment – his/her regulatory focus at the time of the potential trigger event determines the kind of emotion that is generated by the event. (Maitlis et al., 2013).

Once sensemaking process has been energized by emotional reaction, sensemaker starts to connect "cues" to "frames" (Weick, 1995 cited by Maitlis et al., 2013). In the following section, the role of emotion during this sensemaking process is covered in detail.

2.5 Emotions' role during sensemaking process

In the previous section, emotions' role in signalling the need for and triggering sensemaking was covered, but emotions also fuel sensemaking and emerge out of sensemaking during the process (Maitlis et al., 2013). Different felt emotions have different impacts on the sensemaking process (Maitlis et al., 2013). Felt emotions can but impede sensemaking, also facilitate sensemaking by providing valuable information (Maitlis et al., 2010).

Once triggered, the process of sensemaking may involve multiple cycles, during which individuals produce provisional, intermediate accounts until they construct an account that is plausible and consistent with the sensemaker's emotions as well as with his/her action orientation (Maitlis et al., 2013). Felt emotion plays a key role in this process. A sensemaker may discard some provisional accounts because of their inconsistencies with his/her emotions, or emotions may fuel the construction of new accounts (Maitlis et al., 2013).

According to Maitlis & Sonenshein (2010), emotion plays a significant role in sensemaking process during organizational change. Negative emotions are common in the context of organizational change – it generates feelings of ambiguity and confusion among organizational members, and the emotions are often intense (ibid.). Employees typically feel disoriented and confused (ibid.), potentially even threatened – feelings of fear and anxiety are common in change situations (Weick, 1993).

2.5.1 Shifts in felt emotion are needed for sensemaking to proceed

Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) argue that positive emotions, such as hope, relief, and joy, can shape individuals' sensemaking towards constructive change and, therefore, prevent crises. However, positive emotions connected to a change may also result in individuals to judge the situation excessively optimistically, and hence ignore the signs of danger. (Mayer et al., 1992). Therefore, both negative and positive feelings are important as the sensemaking process proceeds.

While negative emotions, especially moderately intense negative emotions, are more powerful in triggering sensemaking than positive emotions, positive emotions lead to more *generative sensemaking* once the sensemaking is triggered (Maitlis et al., 2013). In contrast, negative emotions are more likely to foster *integrative sensemaking* (Maitlis et al., 2013). In generative sensemaking, appearing cues are integrated into the overall view of the situation flexibly and creatively (Maitlis et al., 2013), whereas in integrative sensemaking, new information is processed more systematically and with greater attention (Maitlis et al., 2013). In order for an individual to create whole, rational, plausible accounts in the end, generative sensemaking is essential.

Shipton and Sillince (2013) also highlighted the need for shifts in felt emotion – in their research about organizational learning, they found that positive and negative emotions

complement and follow each other, comfort leading to frustration and frustration back to comfort. Threat may raise the understanding that change is needed and tension is held back by excitement (Shipton and Sillince, 2013).

"Dual tuning" perspective about mood by George (2011) supports this argumentation by suggesting that negative emotions make an individual to identify the problem, but positive emotions are needed to come up with creative ideas to address and solve it. Hence, it seems that shifts in felt emotion are important for the sensemaking process to take a generative form (Maitlis et al., 2013).

2.5.2 Expressed emotions stimulate emotional contagion

So far, we have been mainly concentrating on felt emotions. However, Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) point out that expressed emotions may also have a substantial role in sensemaking.

Maitlis et al. (2013) argue that sensemaking always occurs in a social context, but the degree to which the process itself involves others may vary. Sometimes, sensemaking can be a fairly solitary process where the individual interprets and takes action mostly on his/her own, and sometimes those interpretations are negotiated with others to create shared understanding and then act based on shared sense of the situation (Maitlis et al., 2013).

Emotional contagion, a tendency to 'catch' the emotions of other people, can occur in diverse organizational situations (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995). Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) argue that emotional contagion strengthens in occasions of high interaction or high ambiguity, such as crisis or change; or when the expression of emotion comes from a high status leader or from a much-liked member, or when the emotion aligns with the routines and rules already present in the situation. Emotional contagion can happen consciously or unconsciously, through conscious feelings or unconscious expressions of sympathy (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995).

Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) argue that emotional contagion may work for either constructing or destructing the organization. Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) support this view, as they argue that excited and enthusiastic emotions expressed by leaders can on one

hand, create shared positive emotions throughout the organization, and on the other hand, create substantial blinkers and cause the organization to overlook cues that indicate danger.

As a construction force, emotional contagion increases empathy, solidarity and feeling of involvement among the organizational members and, therefore, create a motivated, cohesive group (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995). As a destruction force, emotional contagion causes emotions to overwhelm the individuals and therefore impair their performance, or, spread negativity throughout the organization (ibid.). Negative emotions spreading quickly through the organization may inhibit problem-solving, spread change resistance or make different groups of people attack each other (ibid.).

Rouleau (2005) reminds us that virtually every organizational member can influence each other's interpretations and strategic orientation by changing their daily routines – the way they speak, write, behave and look. Understanding the concept of emotional contagion may be useful and beneficial for managers. During organizational change, observing employees' expressed emotions may help the leaders to understand how they have succeeded in communicating the change, and thus take the actions needed to enact and implement the change more thoroughly and to engage in transformational leadership behaviour (Rubin et al., 2005).

Expressed emotions also relate to the concept of sensegiving. In organizations, managers do not only participate in sensemaking from external cues, but also in sensegiving to their internal audiences (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Maitlis (2005) found that the form of organizational sensemaking is influenced by the degree to which leaders attempt to affect others' understandings of the topic – engage in sensegiving. Sensegiving is but giving information about and reasons behind a decision or situation, also excluding the events that do not contribute to create a plausible and credible story and explanation (Rouleau, 2005). Sensegiving and the degree of shared meaning also affect the nature of the accounts that people generate through their sensemaking, and actions that people take based on those accounts (Maitlis, 2005).

Management team can, consciously or unconsciously, also spread negative emotions among organizational members, and consequently create an understanding that change is necessary (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Managers should, however, be cautious with this – although

expressions of danger may mobilize people to action, it may also inhibit sensemaking by making it harder for organizational members to interpret the situation (Maitlis et al., 2013). Therefore, in complex change situations, emotions may need to be managed in a way that enables sensemaking, rather than constrains it (Maitlis et al., 2013). Leaders should thus remember that different individuals may be experiencing the change with different emotional reactions.

2.5.3 Shared meanings during sensemaking process

Maitlis & Sonenshein (2010) found support in literature to the view that shared meaning is of great importance in change. However, Bartunek et al. (2006) hold somewhat different view on shared meaning. They suggest that understanding the change is primarily an individual process, but organizational members can even though share affective experience (Bartunek et al., 2006). This means that although each organizational member might understand the change in their own way, they agree on the outcomes of the change – on how the change affects them as a group (Bartunek et al., 2006).

According to Maitlis et al. (2013), self-conscious emotions may have an impact on whether the sensemaking process is more social or solitary. By self-conscious emotions, they mean the emotions that connect closely to a sensemaker's sense of self, such as shame, guilt, pride or hubris (ibid.). Maitlis et al. (2013) argue that specific self-conscious emotions (pride, guilt) result in more social sensemaking, and global self-conscious emotions (hubris, shame) in more solitary sensemaking.

Bartunek et al. (2006) point out that the understandings among the different organizational members about the same issue can vary greatly. Change recipients and change agents experience the change quite differently, as do top managers and lower level organizational members and even middle and higher-level managers (Bartunek et al., 2006). Into a single change process, individuals may connect meanings that they share with the management, meanings that contradict with the management's ideas, and their own experiences on how the change initiative affects them, thereby creating their own rational, coherent account (Bartunek et al., 2006).

Brown et al. (2015) continue this line of thinking by arguing that work teams and organizations do not necessarily share understandings. Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) also

point out that shared meaning throughout an organization during crisis or change may not be possible or even necessary to enable collective action. The behavioural consequences may be more important and relevant to the success of the change implementation than shared meaning (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

In their study on a strategic change in a hospital, Bartunek et al (2006) give multiple reasons for why change efforts may not be experienced throughout the organization the way the change initiators visualize. The new vision may not have been conveyed to the change recipients well enough, or the recipients may have presuppositions about the change that the change has not succeeded to meet (Bartunek et al., 2006). The recipients may also mix the current change with a previous or another one taking place simultaneously in the organization, which creates confusion and difficulties among change recipients to differentiate the multiple changes and their messaging (Bartunek et al., 2006). For example, the nurses studied by Bartunek et al. (2006) blamed the new change program for things that, in fact, resulted from other changes taking or taken place in the hospital. Due to this intermingling of change programs, the nurses had difficulties to respond to any of them (Bartunek et al., 2006).

Shared meanings can refer to shared commitment, shared identity or shared expectations. According to Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010), all of these three aspects can either enable or constrain sensemaking. Commitment to a plan or vision, for instance, can but fuel action and show direction, also create dangerous blind spots (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). These blind spots may rise, for example, when commitment to secrecy prevents individuals to raise an alarm when it is needed (Weick, 1988 cited by Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010), or, when an organization is committed to an old vision that no longer aligns with the changed environment (Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996). Therefore, commitment to an old vision or idea may need to be reduced before a new one can be fully implemented (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991).

Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) remind that an organization can also be committed to expressed emotions of leaders, and that can turn out fatal as well. Leaders' strong, positive statements may result in substantial blind spots throughout the organization – creating feeling that the situation is ordinary, everything is going to be fine and no substantial

sensemaking is needed (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). If everything is not fine, consequences can be dangerous – this kind of fake sense of security reduces organizational actors' tendency to actively interpret cues.

However, commitment to a plan or idea can also help individuals to construct new meanings during times of ambiguity, and thus to keep moving forward and not to get stuck with one meaning (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Commitment to a vision or strategic decision can fuel the whole organization's sensemaking, mobilize action and help people communicate the vision to others (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991).

Identity is another aspect that can either enable or constrain sensemaking (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). During organizational change, an individual's identity may go through a major transformation, and when people succeed in developing a positive belief in their own and the group's capacity, this new, shared identity may facilitate sensemaking and reduce change resistance (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Similarly, when an individual or group, while going through identity crisis, stick to a strong, outdated identity that their changed environment does not support any more, sensemaking becomes difficult (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Managers can also enact certain identities through their own action – labelling employees as change resistors, the individuals who actually did not resist the change in the first place may start acting the way the environment expects them to act (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010).

As commitment and identity, also expectations can work as enabling and constraining force for sensemaking. While shared expectations can help individuals unite the cues into a comprehensible meaning, overly optimistic or overly negative shared expectations can be dangerous (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Overly optimistic expectations may result in individuals or groups to ignore important cues that signal danger, and when the expectations shared within an organization are overly negative, the urge to work hard towards common goals may decrease (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). This way, managers and subordinates can develop a shared set of expectations about performance, and consequently enact that performance in their everyday work (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

Shipton and Sillince (2013) connect shared meaning and expectations to the concept of organizational learning. Organizational learning is the process of creating shared meaning

that is aligned with the organization's strategic goals, and results in the individuals to become more confident about their strategic orientation (Shipton and Sillince, 2013). Whenever an individual feels that the level of organizational learning includes familiar experiences and corresponds with his/her expectations, feelings of comfort or excitement occurs, and conversely, when he/she faces unfamiliar experiences and organizational learning does not match the expectations, feelings of anxiety and frustration evoke (Shipton and Sillince, 2013).

As illustrated by Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010), shared meanings can be helpful in implementation of a change initiative, at least in certain circumstances. Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) argue that the groups that engage in updating and doubting are more likely to avoid blind spots and destruction that shared meanings can cause. Updating provides the individuals with the urge to revise their interpretations through constantly gaining new information and transferring the knowledge forward around the group (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Doubting, on the other hand, reminds the individuals about the non-existence of absolute truth, and provides them with enough confidence and cautiousness, which together maintain curiosity (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

2.5.4   Participation can create a sense of clarity

A chance to participate in a way or another to the change effort may provide employees with a feeling of clarity around the change and hence improve sensemaking. Education and training, for example, may help the employees to adapt to the news circumstances (Bartunek et al., 2006). At its best, in addition to giving the skills and knowledge required in the new environment, education provides understanding of the rationales behind the change and, of how this change relates to and distinguishes from other changes taking place in the organization (Bartunek et al., 2006).

However, the timing and recurrence of training sessions also matter. Bartunek et al. (2006) call for trainings to be repeated at the key points when the change is carried forward. For example, they found that when training sessions were held before the actual change implementation, the employees viewed the content as mainly hypothetical (Bartunek et al., 2006). This made it hard for the employees to connect the provided education to their own work, and they would've needed additional trainings after the implementation

(Bartunek et al., 2006). In addition, it is essential to make sure the trainings are available to the employees that are hired during or after the change has taken place (Bartunek et al., 2006).

Although the strategic change may be mainly affecting internal audiences, external audiences must be considered in change implementation and in training session around the change (Rouleau, 2005). External consideration may also help internal sensemaking – once the organizational members are confident on how to explain the change initiative to customers or other stakeholders, their own sensemaking has to have reached a plausible account. Providing reasons for external actors requires an individual to engage in justifying (Rouleau, 2005), which is important during sensemaking process.

Education and training are ways to increase the sense of participation and involvement, which have been found to affect sensemaking about the change initiative (Bartunek et al., 2006). Bartunek et al. (2006) found that participation helped the individuals see the personal gains that the change brings to them, and therefore they rated it higher. Active engagement provides the employees with new knowledge and understanding about the change on a regular basis, the change agents have more opportunities to influence the employees, and therefore the employees may develop a more positive and coherent account of the initiative (Bartunek et al., 2006).

2.6   Emotions' role in concluding sensemaking

Emotion has also a role in concluding sensemaking (Maitlis et al., 2013). Although sensemaking is to some extent a continuous process in which people engage constantly at some level, sensemaking does reach moments where its intensity drops – those moments are when 'sensemaking concludes' (Maitlis et al., 2013). The cycles of sensemaking conclude when a sensemaker constructs a plausible account – a satisfying interpretation of the situation that is coherent with the sensemaker's felt emotion and action orientation (Maitlis et al., 2013).

A plausible account is one that eliminates ambiguity and provides a rational, resonating solution (Weick, 1995 cited by Maitlis et al., 2013). Emotion is important factor in determining the plausibility of the account – it indicates when sensemaking has concluded (Maitlis et al., 2013). Maitlis et al. (2013) argue that the sensemaker's felt emotions and

his/her account have to be consistent before a sensemaker stops making sense of the situation. Therefore, paying attention to sensemaker's felt emotion is important in order to understand how the sensemaking process concludes.
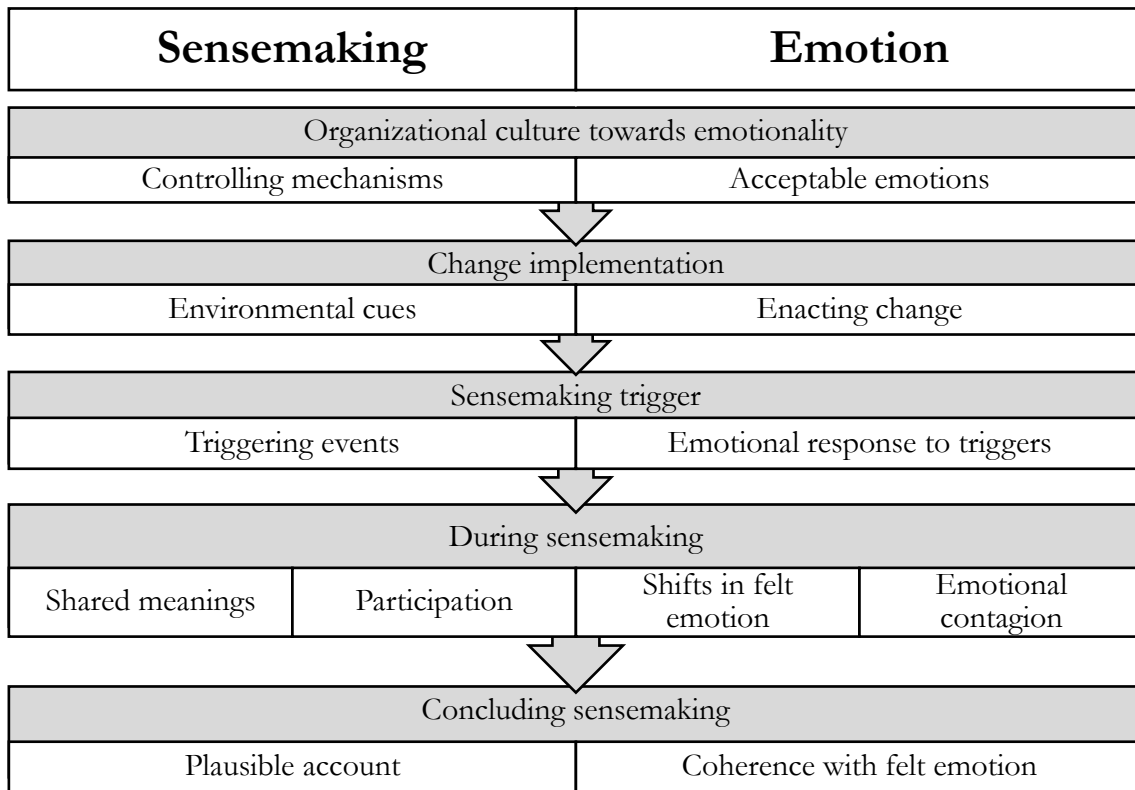
As stated in the section 2.5.2, public positive statements can generate substantial sensemaking blind spots during crisis and change (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). However, according to Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010), optimistic sensemaking and positive, public evaluations after a crisis can actually benefit the organization, enable post-crisis sensemaking and help the organization recover from the situation.

2.7 Theoretical framework on sensemaking and emotion

A summary of core themes related to sensemaking and emotion is presented in the Figure 1, which will also work as a theoretical framework for the empirical study. The framework takes a shape of a process that combines the knowledge gained from both sensemaking literature and research on emotion's role in each step of the sensemaking process. This paper views sensemaking as a process, through which sensemakers reduce equivocality (Maitlis et al., 2013) by connecting and interpreting cues (Rouleau, 2005) into a new rational reality (Maitlis et al., 2013). According to Maitlis et al. (2013), sensemaking helps people to carry out change, make decisions, and come up with fresh solutions to problems. In this section, key elements of the framework are summarized.

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework on Sensemaking and Emotion.

Sensemaking		**Emotion**	
Organizational culture towards emotionality			
Controlling mechanisms		Acceptable emotions	
Change implementation			
Environmental cues		Enacting change	
Sensemaking trigger			
Triggering events		Emotional response to triggers	
During sensemaking			
Shared meanings	Participation	Shifts in felt emotion	Emotional contagion
Concluding sensemaking			
Plausible account		Coherence with felt emotion	

Organizational Culture towards emotionality: In many organizations, the extent and range of socially acceptable emotional expressions tend to be limited (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995). The reason for these limitations, according to Ashforth and Humphrey (1995), is a common belief in organizational cultures that emotionality somehow weaken task performance and that emotionality contradicts with rationality. However, various scholars (e.g. Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; Sandelands, 1998; Rouleau, 2005; and Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010) suggest that emotionality is an important part of human interaction and organizational life, and hence emotions should be considered in sensemaking research more thoroughly.

Organizations use multiple mechanisms to control the organizational members from experiencing and/or expressing emotions, and expressions of negative or intense emotions tend to be particularly unacceptable (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995). Thus, investigating the control mechanisms used and the emotions accepted may enlighten us on organizational culture more deeply.

Change implementation: When looking at sensemaking processes during strategic change in particular, it is essential to focus on the factors that affect the way change is implemented – environmental cues and enacting change. The environmental cues can be physical changes, technical information, words, texts or actions – various types of familiar elements that individuals use to make sense of the environment (Maitlis et al., 2013), including micro-practices – everyday experiences constantly around us (Rouleau, 2005). Besides interpreting cues, sensemaking is enacting the environment around us through our actions and attempts to make sense of the actions (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Paying attention to how individuals interpret environmental cues and enact their environment provides us with deeper understanding of the sensemaking process.

Sensemaking trigger: Sensemaking is triggered by unexpected interruption in an ongoing activity, such as crisis or change (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). The interruption alerts individual that his/her well-being may be at risk and that he/she ought to act – to make sense of the situation (Maitlis et al., 2013). Emotional reaction to the interruption, especially moderately intense negative emotion, energizes individuals to engage in sensemaking (Maitlis et al., 2013). Individual characteristics, such as regulatory focus at the time of the triggering event or personal goals may influence the emotional reaction that a trigger causes in us (Maitlis et al., 2013). By investigating the individuals' emotional reactions to triggering events we may increase our understanding on the circumstances and ways in which sensemaking is likely to be triggered.

During sensemaking: Once triggered, the process of sensemaking may involve multiple cycles, during which individuals produce provisional, intermediate accounts until they construct a plausible account that is consistent with their felt emotion (Maitlis et al., 2013). Shared meanings can enhance change implementation, and the groups that engage in updating and doubting are more likely to avoid blind spots that shared meanings can cause (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Participation is another element that may help individuals see the personal gains of the change and therefore fuel sensemaking (Bartunek et al., 2006).

While negative emotions tend to be more powerful in triggering sensemaking, positive emotions lead to more generative sensemaking once the sensemaking is triggered (Maitlis et al., 2013). George (2011) also suggests that negative emotions are needed to identify the

problem, but positive emotions help with creating ideas to solve it. Hence, shifts in felt emotion seem important for the sensemaking process to take a generative form (Maitlis et al., 2013). Finally, people tend to "catch" emotions from others (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995). According to Rouleau (2005), every organizational member can influence other's interpretations and strategic orientation by the way they speak, write, behave and look. In sum, aspects of shared meanings, participation, shifts in felt emotion and emotional contagion are important to understand, when aiming for deeper understanding of sensemaking in organizations.

Concluding sensemaking: Finally, sensemaking cycles conclude when a sensemaker constructs a satisfying interpretation of the situation that is coherent with the sensemaker's felt emotion and action orientation – in other words, when a plausible account (Maitlis et al., 2013) is formed. A plausible account eliminates ambiguity and provides a rational, resonating solution (Weick, 1995) that is in alignment with the sensemaker's felt emotion (Maitlis et al., 2013).

The next chapter moves on to the empirical research. The research design is based on the theoretical framework presented above.

3 Research design, data and methods

This study is based on the theoretical framework illustrated in Figure 1. The framework takes a process approach on sensemaking, and identifies the key elements of sensemaking process, on the grounds of scholarly research on sensemaking and emotion. Inspired by the framework, the following research questions have been outlined for this study:

1. How do the frontline employees retrospectively make sense of strategic change?
2. What is the role of emotion in the frontline employees' sensemaking process, and which aspects influence those emotions?
3. How does the organization's culture support, accept and consider emotionality during implementation of strategic change?

With these research questions, the key elements presented in the theoretical framework (Figure 1) are involved in the empirical study. The research design ensures that the sensemaking process is thoroughly covered, and that the role of emotions in the process is carefully investigated.

3.1 Empirical context

The empirical study focuses on sensemaking process and emotions of frontline employees who work with business customers of a service company, in a context of a strategic change that has affected the frontline employees' job design. The particular strategic change being studied involves three main elements:

1. **New support function** has been formed by combining multiple teams that support the sales personnel in various operational tasks. These previously separate teams have been united as one function, operating under one director.
2. A completely new team, **Extended Sales Support**, has been formed in the Customer Care function. The new team takes care of various tasks of which the regional sales personnel used to take care themselves, purpose being to reduce the sales personnel's workload.
3. **Lots of customers** on the smaller side of the regional sales personnel's customer portfolio have been **removed to the remote channels**, such as telephone service and digital channels. As a result, these customers no longer have their own single contact person in the company.

The main purpose of these changes is to enable the regional sales people to focus more on sales activities and reaching out to large customers, by removing operational, routine tasks and smaller customers to other teams. The goal is to improve collaboration in and between functions and teams, improve efficiency and release sales personnel's time so that they can focus on sales. Before launching the new operation model to the entire business unit, it was tested in a pilot project, in which a fraction of the organization was selected to participate.

Before this change, the organization has gone through various changes, both strategic and operational, including multiple cooperation negotiations and extensive lay-offs. One of the changes conducted in this specific business unit has been the decision to centralize the local assistants to the Finnish headquarters in Helsinki. Due to the continuous flow of changes that affect the employees not only on task-level but also on emotional level, the situation is characterized by emotional turbulence.

3.2   Data collection and analysis

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted between 21 November and 4 December 2017, with interview duration varying between 30 and 76 minutes and averaging 50 minutes. There were six female and four male interviewees and they represent different teams from five geographical locations in Finland. The transcribed interview material comprises 48 pages of text.

Six out of the ten interviewees represent sales teams, two of which focus on sales to smaller customers via remote channels, working from the Finnish headquarters. The other four sales representatives focus on their own region's larger clients, working from branches of different sizes around Finland and meeting clients face-to-face. The remaining four interviewees work in different teams in the newly established support function in the Finnish headquarters. In order to protect interview quality, a discussion guide (Appendix 1) was used as a basis for all the interviews.

Data analysis focuses on interviewees' understandings of the strategic change and the display and expression of emotions during their sensemaking process. The ways in which the interviewees describe 1) specific events, factors and elements of the strategic change process, 2) their feelings, experiences and understandings of the change, and 3)

organizational culture and strategic change implementation in general, are analyzed. This careful analysis ensures that an empirical answer to each research question is sought.

The knowledge gained from interviews is limited to ten interviews. Although the study may enlighten us about sensemaking processes and emotions' role in them in a more general way, the results of the study must be understood in the specific context studied.

4 Findings and discussion

In this chapter, the research findings are presented and discussed. First, the impact of previous change programs to the reception of the current change is discussed. It seems that the frontline employees mix the experiences and feelings from previous changes with the current one, creating emotional turbulence. Second, the emotional turbulence seems to vary between individual employees. The experience of participation, the experienced changes in professional identity, and emotional contagion and shifts in felt emotion all seem to have an important role in determining the frontline employees' emotional reaction and its intensity. Third, it seems that the frontline employees struggle in making sense of the big picture – the future direction of the company in the digitalized world. This hinders sensemaking and results in employees enacting a change that is ultimately different from what the top management team has visualized. Finally, it seems that the change has not fully met the frontline employees' expectations towards collaboration, which has led to some employees feeling frustrated and disappointed.

4.1 Previous changes affect the reception of current change

As Bartunek et al. (2006) found out, the change recipients may mix the current change with a previous or another one taking place, which may make it harder for them to respond to any of the changes. The frontline employees interviewed for this study also seem to have difficulties in differentiating the previous changes and their messaging from the current one. It seems that the constant flow of change programs has created a sense of continuous change, where employees struggle in recognizing points where one change initiative ends or another begins. This observation is in line with the work of Bartunek et al. (2006) who argue that intermingling of change initiatives create feelings of confusion among the employees.

Although the interviewees were provided with a description of the specific change initiative that they are expected to discuss during the interview, many brought up other change initiatives that the organization had gone through in recent years. The experiences and feelings from previous change programs were mixed with those from the current one, indicating that previous experiences impact on how the employees react and feel about the current change.

Especially the changes that have been experienced negatively seem to have shaken the trust towards the future change initiatives. Multiple cooperation negotiations and restructuring programs, not only in the business unit in question but throughout the company, seem to have left their trace in people. An example of an especially painful change initiative that was mentioned by multiple interviewees has been the decision to remove local assistants and centralize the assistant services to the headquarters a couple of years ago. This frustration was illustrated by a regional salesperson in the following interview quote:

Losing colleagues really gets to folks. Most of the change resistance relates to that. This kind of anger is very understandable.

Regional salesperson

Centralization of the assistants to the Finnish headquarters seems to have been a severe blow to some employee groups, and it seems that the organization still has not fully recovered from it. Although one might think that this has mostly affected the people working in branches outside headquarters, this topic was brought up also by the employees sitting in the headquarters, such as by a support function employee in the following extract:

Removing the assistants was for sure not a positive change.

Support function employee

It seems that the decision was taken most heavily in the bigger branches, in which, for many years, the employees are used to have helping hands sitting next to them, and which have lost the local assistants most recently. In small branches, where the regional salespeople have been used to work without additional helping hands for a long time, these new changes are taken more positively. This difference between big and small branches is illustrated by the following interview extracts of two regional salespeople. Furthermore, in branches that still had an assistant one year ago, these new changes, such as the extended sales support team, are mostly experienced as poor attempts to make the situation from terrible to a little less terrible, even though everyone seemed to be quite happy with the actual work of the extended sales support team. The interviewees also seem to feel that the centralization of the assistants has increased the operational risk, as assistants used to be a great source of knowledge and information for newly started salespeople due to the fact that the assistants were familiar with the individual situation of each customer.

Use of time was much more efficient before [the centralizing of assistants]. *This direction we are taking is just pure maximization of stupidity.*

Regional salesperson, big branch

That [centralizing the assistants] was a change that felt very negative for a long time. But time takes care of it, we have went on without [an assistant] *for a couple of years already. In the beginning, the fact that assistants in Helsinki do not know the customers, felt terrifying, but that fear has mostly proven unfounded.*

Regional salesperson, small branch

As was brought up by a support function employee in the following interview quote, some employees, especially the ones representing the older generation, seem to experience the constant flow of change programs heavily – that changes seem to follow each other non-stop. They seem to long for a break from any changes and some peaceful time for refining the existing practices.

The older folks probably hope that there wouldn't be any changes at all in a while.

Support function employee

According to Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), commitment to a vision or strategic decision can fuel the whole organization's sensemaking, mobilize action and help people communicate the vision to others. It seems that the negative experience from the previous change programs has reduced this commitment. The organization has been forced to run through cooperation negotiations on a regular basis in recent years, which has shaken the trust in the company's future and the job stability. This lack of trust was illustrated by a regional salesperson in the following interview extract:

This is not an employer of the future anymore; it's also not attractive for students. I don't recommend this for my kids either, because work disappears from here.

Regional salesperson

Alarmingly many interviewees, especially among the regional salespeople, stated that they have been considering seeking employment elsewhere and that they are regularly keeping an eye on the job market. The following interview extract from a regional salesperson

provides an illustrative example of this experienced uncertainty. Many of the other interviewees told that the job stability worries them constantly as well; there is a shared belief that the lay-offs will continue, and this uncertainty creates anxiety. Some employees have voluntarily applied for internal relocations towards positions that they think are needed in the future too, compromising their individual passions and interests. Some employees seem to even think it is a matter of time when they get fired themselves. This kind of stagnation and lack of trust indicates that employees have for some part lost their commitment to the strategic decisions made in the company. This significant lack of trust was illustrated by the following interview quote of a support function employee.

The poor future prospects make me think if I should still consider other fields before retirement, or if I can trust that I have a job here. I've been keeping my eyes open elsewhere as well. I have to think about job security, I mean, I'm not young anymore.
Regional salesperson

But I'm not able to worry anymore; it can be a blessing to receive the brown envelope [lay-off letter] *after all. Those of us who have gone through multiple cooperation negotiations are too tired to worry anymore; we just take one day at a time.*
Support function employee

The employees' experiences from previous change programs seem to work, on one hand, as environmental cues from which sense is made in order to understand the current situation and reality. On the other hand, some previous change programs, such as lay-offs or centralization of the assistant services, seem to have worked as a sensemaking trigger to many employees, creating an intense emotional reaction that provides the energy that fuels people restructure and organize their reality, in other words, make sense of it (Maitlis et al., 2013). The emotional reaction to these previous changes has often been negative, which results in individuals perceiving a stronger need for sensemaking (Maitlis et al., 2013).

Bartunek et al. (2006) pointed out that while the change agents may focus on the organizational outcomes, regular employees usually pay more attention to their personal gains or losses resulting from the initiative. It seems that some employees have experienced the changes preceding the current one to have negatively impacted their personal goals, due to the losses in helping hands and anxiety related to job stability. However, it seems that

the intensity of the emotion varies, as for example the salespeople from bigger branches have experienced certain previous changes more negatively than salespeople from smaller branches. Previous changes may thus have resulted in either moderately intense negative emotions, which are likely to trigger sensemaking, or highly intense negative emotions, which are likely to hinder sensemaking. Therefore, the previous changes may have either triggered sensemaking or hindered it, depending on how intense each individual's negative emotions are.

4.2   Emotional turbulence

The emotional turbulence caused by the previous changes presented in the section 4.1 seems to make it harder for employees to accept new changes, and is potentially hampering sensemaking. Therefore, it is important that leaders pay attention to the valuable information that felt and expressed emotions (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010) and socio-cultural tacit knowledge about the organization, its people and their reactions to the change (Rouleau, 2005) can provide.

The interviews indicate that understanding the emotional reactions to change initiatives is important also because the more dissatisfaction a person experiences, the more difficult it is for one to see room for improvement in their own actions. For example, it seems that for the regional salespersons who were overall satisfied with the recent changes, it was easy to admit that they have had room for fine-tuning the organizing of their own work. These individuals also seemed to take the collaboration difficulties and operational stumbling in the beginning as a natural part of any change process. Conversely, the individuals who seemed to be the most dissatisfied with the direction the organization is taking were mostly focused on judging the decisions made by others. They seem to feel pleased with the occasions when the top management has apologized or admitted their mistakes. This difference between generally satisfied and unsatisfied salespersons is illustrated through the following two interview quotes:

Surely there has been room for improvement in how I organize my own work; learning away from the old has taken some time.

Regional salesperson, generally satisfied

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The problem is that the process for using the support function should be much clearer …. Feedback has been given, but it is another thing whether that leads to anything. There have been times when top management even admitted that things did not go so well.

Regional salesperson, generally unsatisfied

Three aspects seem to have particularly important role in determining the frontline employees' emotional reaction and its intensity; the experience of participation, the experienced changes in professional identity, and emotional contagion and shifts in felt emotion.

4.2.1 Experience of participation

According to Bartunek et al. (2006), participation and active engagement help individuals to see the personal gains of the change initiative and provide the employees with up-to-date knowledge and understanding about the change on a regular basis. They found that when employees are provided with a chance to actively participate in the change process, the change agents can more efficiently influence the employees, resulting in the employees developing more positive and coherent account of the initiative (Bartunek et al., 2006).

In the current empirical study, although we can notice some clear benefits of active participation in speeding up the sensemaking process, we also notice that the demands and hopes for participation seem to vary between different employee groups. It seems that the salespeople, both the regional salespeople and those doing sales through remote channels, tend to be more willing to participate in the decision making and to have a say in changes than the employees in the support function.

This tendency was illustrated in three ways. First, those regional sales managers who were provided with a chance to participate in the pilot project, through which the new operations model was tested, seem to be clearly happier with how the change turned out than others. The following two interview quotes from pilot project participants provide illustrative examples of this satisfaction. It seems that they have gone further than others in making sense of the change, already seeing concrete positive aspects in their own work – in other words, experiencing personal gains. However, even their sensemaking is still ongoing,

as it seems that the old and new ways of working are still clashing in some areas. Nevertheless, they seem to have more faith in the future than others.

We have had it easier than others because we participated in the pilot project. During the pilot, we could give constant feedback and regular update sessions were held. Surely all the feedback was not put into practice, but for most part, the end result is what we wished for …. This is a positive and customer-oriented change …. As soon as we have learned away from old processes, I believe things get even better; even more time will be saved …. It's hard to criticize a change you were part of yourself!

Regional salesperson, participated in pilot project

When the pilot started, it immediately felt like I get an own assistant, except there are many. It was like a turn-key solution.

Regional salesperson, participated in pilot project

Second, the regional salespeople who were not provided with this opportunity, felt disappointment and frustration due to them not being able to get their opinions heard. They also felt that the pilot was conducted in the wrong branches. These feelings of dissatisfaction are demonstrated through the following two interview quotes from salespeople who did not participate in the pilot project:

We have not been able to influence the changes in any way. Opinions have been asked, but things have been implemented according to original plans.

Regional salesperson, did not participate in pilot project

They conducted the pilot project in small branches, where the whole [sales] *volume may be equivalent to one salesperson's volume here in bigger branches.*

Regional salesperson, did not participate in pilot project

Third, the sales personnel focusing on remote channels seemed to be very happy with the recent development in their work, as they felt they had been recently provided with a chance to participate much more than before in strategic planning activities, such as campaign design and target group optimization. This was illustrated by the following interview excerpt:

I am terribly happy with this change and our team. I feel that my job design is much wider now …. Work is much more meaningful; now I feel I'm not only a salesperson but I can participate and influence in various development projects …. I can utilize my previous experience and expertise more versatilely than before.

Salesperson, remote channels

For the employees in the support function, which has more of an operative role, it seems to be enough to be able to participate in the practical organization of their own team's work. They seem to be fine with that the strategic decisions are done higher in the organizational hierarchy. In fact, some of them even feel that the leaders should take a bigger role in decision making – that some leaders ask employees' opinions a little too often when they should be clearly taking the lead. These feelings are illustrated by the following through interview excerpts by two of the support function employees:

The big lines are drawn higher [in the organization]*, but one gets to influence the organizing of everyday work and suggestions for fine-tuning processes are listened to. I don't need nor want more power.*

Support function employee

We [in the team] *are all a bit critical at the moment, the manager is not really able to make decisions or give orders. We are always asked how we should proceed, while we would long for clear leadership.*

Support function employee

In line with the work of Bartunek et al. (2006), our findings suggest that the understandings among the different organizational members about the same issue can vary greatly. It seems that in the specific empirical context studied, the eagerness for participation in decision making is greater among the sales personnel, whereas employees in the support function are more comfortable with leaders clearly taking responsibility of strategic decisions.

As proposed by Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010), public positive statements after a change program can enable post-crisis sensemaking and help the organization recover from the situation. Therefore, having the people who seem to be happiest with how the change has unfolded share their positive experiences more widely in the organization could help others

see the personal gains and help the whole organization in its sensemaking towards a plausible account. This possibility was illustrated by one of the pilot project participants:

I have talked with some colleagues about my experiences in the pilot project since the beginning, and [after hearing about the positive experiences] *they were clearly looking forward to the launch of the new model for them too.*

Regional salesperson, participated in the pilot project

The interviews indicate that the employees are in different phases of their sensemaking journey. As described by Maitlis et al. (2013), sensemaking concludes when a sensemaker constructs a plausible account – a satisfying interpretation of the situation that is coherent with the sensemaker's felt emotion and action orientation. It seems that especially those employees that are happy with their participation opportunities, such as the pilot project participants and the salespersons taking care of remote channels, are reached a point closer to a satisfying, plausible account. Therefore, it seems that the employees in this organization do not completely share the meanings connected to participation. However, according to Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010), shared meaning throughout an organization during change program may not be possible or even necessary.

Emotion is important factor in determining the plausibility of the account – the sensemaker's felt emotion has to be consistent with his/her account in order to reach plausibility (Maitlis et al., 2013). In the context of frontline employees we can clearly notice the importance of felt emotion – it is not only the extent of participation that automatically speeds up the sensemaking process, but it is how the individual *feels* about his/her participation opportunities. As we noticed from the experiences of support function employees, all the employees do not seem to be interested in extensive participation in decision making. When these individuals were provided extensive participation opportunities, they experience emotions of frustration and confusion, caused by their longing for clear leadership. Therefore, it seems that individual employee's felt emotions towards his/her participation opportunities play a more important role in concluding sensemaking than the participation opportunities themselves.

4.2.2 Experienced changes in professional identity

During organizational change, an individual's identity may go through a major transformation, and commitment to identity can either enable or constrain sensemaking (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). As we learned from Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010), if people succeed in developing a positive belief in their own and their team's capacity, this new, shared identity may facilitate sensemaking and reduce change resistance. However, if people stick to a strong, outdated identity that the changed environment does not support, sensemaking becomes difficult (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Both of these situations seem to be present in our empirical context.

The experienced changes in professional identity seem to vary between different employee groups – both in terms of how positive/negative and how significant the changes are. Regional salespeople seem to have experienced the most significant changes in their professional identity – some of them experiencing very positive and some very negative changes in their professional identity. Some regional salespeople, especially the ones located in smaller branches, illustrated by the next two quotes, felt that the strategic change had significantly improved their role as experts. They felt that as they have been able to remove smaller customers to others, they can now focus on more complex projects. Additionally, as they were provided with the option of removing routine tasks to the new extended sales support team, they felt like they had received their own assistant.

My professional identity has changed as a result of this change. As I am focusing on bigger companies now, their needs are more complex and they take us aboard at an earlier stage of their planning processes. I get to work with executive groups more often and they listen to me as an expert …. Previously, I could have managed with a vocational degree, but now – now my Master's is very much needed.

Regional salesperson, small branch

The extended sales support team has helped in that they find the best expert for each question for me; I don't have to do that myself anymore. They really are a gang of iron. The anxiety caused by searching [information and experts] *has disappeared.*

Regional salesperson, small branch

In contrast to small branch salespeople feeling they have received an assistant, the salespeople in bigger branches seem to feel they have been turned into assistants themselves, and that they have lost their expert role. There are two main reasons for some regional salespeople to feel this way. First, the previous change of centralizing the assistants to the headquarters is still experienced as a significant loss in some, especially the bigger branches. The salespeople feel they are wasting a lot of time in tasks which were previously handled by the local assistants, the following interview extract providing an illustrative example of this. They think that the fact that they are nowadays the only person their customers can meet results in great challenges for time management. Therefore, they feel their professional identity has moved towards that of an assistant. Second, regional sales managers are desperately waiting for electronic signatures to become possible also for the business customers' contracts. Some of them feel that they have been promised the electronic signature to become possible a long time ago, and the fact that it is still not in place creates additional frustration. They feel that they are wasting most of their time printing papers and driving around collecting signatures, again illustrated in the following quote. In fact, all the regional salespeople expect electronic signature to save a lot of time from them, time that they could focus on sales and reaching out to customers instead. However, as the salespeople in smaller branches are used to take care of the signatures and printing themselves, without a helping hand of an assistant, they have not felt significant negative changes in their professional identity due to the delay of electronic signature. Conversely, the salespeople who used to have an assistant taking care of these tasks have experienced significant negative changes in their professional identity – feeling they have become assistants.

> *It* [the change] *has influenced negatively my commitment and motivation. I would expect me* [as a salesperson] *to be able to use my time advising customers and suggesting suitable solutions for them. Now I'm just printing papers and taking signatures all days.*
>
> Regional salesperson, big branch

It seems that unlike the regional salespeople, the employees located in the headquarters have not experienced great changes in their professional identity due to the strategic change, or their experience has been mainly positive. The work is found meaningful by

most of the employees in the headquarters, such as the support function employee quoted below. Many also felt that they have been provided with an opportunity to move towards positions they are most interested in. Some interviewees also mentioned that they believe that switching between positions and tasks has become easier now.

My professional identity has not changed; I feel the work is as before. And I don't wish it to change – I still like this a lot. It is nicely varied with different tasks. Some others' work has probably changed more, but everyone applied here themselves after all.

Support function employee

It seems that the sales organization and the support function vary somewhat in terms of reputation, which seems to have an impact on professional identity. The sales organization was described with words such as dynamic, efficient and fast, whereas the support function was described as slow and factory-like. This variation in reputations was illustrated by the interviewees who pointed out their confusion towards the decision to move two teams from the sales organization to support function. They were concerned that due to this shift, their career prospects would weaken and the risk for getting laid off would increase. There seems to be a common belief in the organization that people are always needed in sales, and that the organization always tries to keep the amount of personnel in support functions at minimal. Interestingly, nobody had noticed any significant differences in the concrete work when moving from sales organization to support function, but it was about how it *feels* to work in the support function. In other words, the move to support function created confusion and concern among the employees, but once they understood there is no real difference in the work itself, these concerns slowly faded away. On the other hand, as there was no notable difference to previous, the purpose of the whole operation remained blurry for employees. The reputational differences of the sales organization and the support function were illustrated by the following two interviewees:

I was so relieved when I moved back to the sales organization, because I don't feel I belong to the support function.

Salesperson

After the beginning, move to support function hasn't been that big of a deal, as we are still allowed to sell. In the beginning we were very worried for our jobs, as we thought

there is always need for people in sales but not necessarily so much in support functions …. But it is a good question what was the purpose of this [change program]*, as I haven't experienced any difference in work or any improvements in efficiency.*

Support function employee

As in the case of experienced participation, the great variation in the employees' experiences of changes in their professional identity indicates that the employees are on different stages on their sensemaking journey. Some employees, especially the regional salespeople in big branches, experience the changes in their professional identity very negatively, which may interrupt clear thinking, consume capacity and therefore hinder their sensemaking (Maitlis et al., 2013). On the other hand, some employees, such as the regional salespeople in small branches, seem to experience the changes in their professional identity very positively, which may help them reaching a plausible account, a satisfactory understanding of the situation, while others are still far from that stage.

The notion of professional identity is closely connected to the employees' personal goals, gains and losses to which, according to Bartunek et al. (2006) regular employees usually pay more attention than to organizational outcomes. Additionally, although individual differences do exist, it seems that the sales personnel in general perceive the goals related to their professional identity more important than the employees in support functions. Therefore, emotions connected to the current change are generally more intense among salespeople. Some salespeople seem to experience the change in their professional identity very negatively, and some very positively, resulting in some salespeople experiencing intense negative emotions, and some experiencing intense positive emotions. Now again, depending on individual differences in the extent of intensity of the emotion, the change may have either triggered sensemaking or hindered it.

On the other hand, the employees in the support functions seem not to pay much attention to professional identity, which suggests that professional identity is not very important goal for them. As they also did not experience much change in terms of professional identity, this aspect seems to not have resulted in support function employees' moderately intense negative emotions, known to boost sensemaking (Maitlis et al., 2013).

4.2.3 Emotional contagion and shifts in felt emotion

Emotional contagion, a tendency to 'catch' the emotions of other people, can occur in diverse organizational situations, but especially in occasions of high ambiguity, such as crisis or change; or when the expression of emotion comes from a high status leader, or when the emotion aligns with the routines and rules already present in the situation (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995). Since the empirical context under study is a strategic change, it is characterized by high ambiguity. We can also notice how the employees have been catching emotions from their managers during their sensemaking process. Finally, the findings from the interviews suggest that there are certain rules and routines present in the organizational culture that emphasize the spread of certain emotions and, on the other hand, hinder the spread of other kinds of emotions.

Emotional contagion can impact the organization either positively or negatively. It can increase empathy, solidarity and feeling of involvement and, therefore, create a motivated, cohesive group from the organizational members (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995). However, emotional contagion can also cause emotions to overwhelm the individuals and therefore impair their performance, or spread negativity which may inhibit problem-solving and spread change resistance (ibid.).

It seems that some managers have been actively delivering a positive picture of the strategic change to their subordinates, constantly pointing out the good side of the change, the following quote providing an illustrative example. This seems to have the effect of subordinates to "catch" positive feelings from their managers.

Our manager has been very useful, eager for reforms, willing to develop, curious and therefore been helping us immensely.

Salesperson

On the contrary, it seems that other managers have been focusing mostly on the operative, technical changes, and the pain spots on the emotional level have been mostly ignored in some teams. This kind of operational focus is illustrated by the following two interview extracts:

For what I know, I have been under the impression that the managers think the changes make sense. They don't really talk about their feelings with us.

Support function employee

Well at least the managers have not spread negative atmosphere. It's hard to say whether they understood or explained why the changes [are being made] …. *The managers mostly focused on concrete things like this is the situation, how do we proceed and what are the practical things that this affects to if it affects to anything.*

Support function employee

This study seems to support the argument of Ashforth and Humphrey (1995), stating that the range of socially acceptable emotional expressions tend to be limited in organizations. It seems that, at least in some teams, the organizational culture does not support emotionality, which may result in employees catching only the emotions in alignment with this cultural rule (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995). This lack of emotional focus may lead to a feeling among employees that expressing emotions is forbidden or that emotions should be distanced from working context, which may result in organization losing the benefits of emotional contagion (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995).

As multiple scholars (e.g. Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; Sandelands, 1998; Rouleau, 2005; and Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010) have pointed out, emotion plays a crucial role in working life and human interaction. Additionally, Maitlis (2005) found that organizational sensemaking is influenced by the degree to which leaders attempt to affect others' understandings of the topic – engage in sensegiving. Therefore, managers should pay close attention to experienced and expressed emotions of employees. The findings support the argumentation of Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) that organizations could at times improve their effectiveness by appreciating emotions and taking them into account in decision-making, rather than by trying to ignore the existence of emotionality in the organization.

Organizational culture that does not support emotionality may also decrease its ability to experience shifts in felt emotion. Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) argue that both positive and negative feelings are important in order to move on with the sensemaking process. George (2011) supports this argumentation with her "dual tuning" perspective which

suggests that negative emotions help individuals identify the problem, but positive emotion is essential for coming up with creative ideas to address and solve it.

Based on the interviews, the employees seem not to have experienced great shifts in felt emotion. It seems that most employees feel either negatively or positively about the change and the negative and positive feelings seem not to take shifts in an individual employee. It is, however, hard to draw reliable conclusions based on single interviews, without having examined other points in the sensemaking process. It would, nevertheless, be ideal for the sensemaking process that shifts in felt emotion exist – negative emotion triggering sensemaking and positive emotion helping to find plausible solutions (George, 2011).

4.3   Challenges in making sense of the future direction

Organizational members' commitment to a vision or strategic decision can fuel the whole organization's sensemaking, mobilize action and help people communicate the vision to others (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). Based on the interviews, the employees struggle in their sensemaking especially about the future direction of the organization. Although when asked whether the changes have been sensible, many interviewees, especially in the support function, answered something like "I guess" or "I think so", employees seem confused about the ultimate direction where the organization is going to, and how do these changes position in the big picture – suggesting that the strategic nature of the changes has not been fully understood by the employees. The lack of understanding about the strategic direction may lead employees not committing to the strategy. Many employees seem to struggle in understanding the big picture and purpose behind all the changes. These challenges are illustrated by the following two interview quotes:

They have not communicated enough about what is the purpose. The big picture has been left blurry, what is all this for. Has been focused on putting this and this together and remove them there. No one has explained what the aspiration is.

Support function employee

The big picture has been left in the background and vague, there is confusion on what they are going to do with the company in the future, and how do these changes position in the big picture and digital development in the society. I've tried to dig some

general digitalization reports online, but would want to know what we think about it.

Apart from the participants of the pilot project, it seems that the purpose of the changes has not been fully understood – cost savings are seen as the ultimate purpose for all the recent changes. Some employees, such as the salesperson in the following interview extract, seem to even be under the impression that together with cost savings, the main purpose has been to make employee surveillance easier – that the leaders could better monitor and register poor performance of individual employees. Many employees seem to also think that, with these changes, even cost savings will not be achieved in the long-term, because they feel that the recent decisions have decreased customer satisfaction and customer experience.

The purpose of the change has been to improve efficiency and to make it easier for top management to see what I do. To make it easier to lead and steer. To achieve cost savings and make sure that nothing gets unnoticed by the management …. I don't know, but at least for now all this has been mostly harmful for customer experience.

Salesperson, remote channels

Especially the organization's take on digitalization has created confusion. The personnel see a lot of benefits and opportunities in digitalization – exploiting digitalization and opening more digital channels are seen as a good direction for the future and they are looked forward to. However, frontline employees seem to feel that the organization does not currently take the optimal advantage of digitalization.

Multiple interviewees presented their concern that the organization has proceeded too quickly towards digitalization and digital channels, ignoring the hopes and needs of customers and the readiness of the company's own systems. They feel that the shift has been made in the wrong order – that local personnel was reduced before the sufficient support systems, such as electronic signature are in place, and that customers are forced to only use services through digital channels before they are ready for it. The lack of electronic signature seems to the biggest single problem, implementation of which would solve many reasons for frustration. Many employees also felt that customers should be given an opportunity to choose personal service until they, from their own initiative, want to start

using digital channels. These areas of frustration are illustrated by the three interview quotes below:

They shouldn't have removed the assistants before the electronic signature is in place. They should have left even one person until then.

Regional salesperson

"I feel they [the management] *are waiting the digital jump to happen much faster than it seems to be happening. Most of the interaction is already handled electronically, but the customers still cannot order much independently online. If this would have been made easy for customers, they would like all this. But when these* [digital services] *were not fixed first, now everything just falls in the hands of fewer people. When things are difficult for customers, they prefer calling to their contact person or changing to competitor.*

Regional salesperson

The only thing is that there is a contradiction when we want [to offer our customers] *a good customer experience. We have gone so fast to a model for which our customers are not ready. A softer transition would have been better for customer retention for sure.*

Salesperson, remote channels

Although most regional salespeople are happy that they have been able to remove smaller customers to the digital channels and therefore reduce their own workload, many of them, such as the three interviewees quoted below, seem to worry how the customers experience that decision. On the other hand, the salespeople taking care of remote channels can see also some benefits from customers' perspective, such that now also the smaller size customers, which have not necessarily been the top priority of their local salesperson, are now systematically taken care of. Nevertheless, many interviewees seem to think that the decision of not letting the customers decide whether they want to meet face-to-face or through digital channels has weakened the service quality, that the customers do not always get the best service. They think that some customers want to be in contact with a person

they know, and are concerned that customers are not welcome to the local branches anymore.

Even if we would polish our processes up to brilliant, if the customers do not get the service they need the way they want it, they will choose their service from someone else and then we are pretty much alone with our processes here.

Salesperson, remote channels

Do we really have to always go first with everything? Could we for once wait that the competitors take the biggest criticism from customers? Even the competitors are wondering our cuttings, asking what on earth we are doing.

Regional salesperson

I'm not totally convinced that customers get the best service now. I don't think they always do.

Support function employee

Due to these challenges, some interviewees wondered why so many operations have been centralized in the headquarters. They felt that placing remote workers and units around Finland would be a better solution – it would allow meeting customers flexibly when needed, while the existing information technology systems enable just as efficient employee collaboration as having all the employees sitting in the same location. Some interviewees also argued that the stability of workers outside Helsinki is higher due to fewer job opportunities, and salary and premise costs lower. For these reasons, some employees, such as the salesperson in the following interview extract, seem to feel that the company utilizes digitalization only to accelerate its internal processes, and not to improve customer experience.

Why are we not utilizing digitalization also to improve customer experience, not only to make our own processes more effective as we do now? …. I hope that in the future, we would utilize digital services the other way round, so that we would be where the customers are.

Salesperson, remote channels

The employees have made sense from multiple environmental cues; previous change programs, webinars, internal articles, monthly meetings and discussions with colleagues and with supervisors. Despite the various information sources that have been used to communicate about the change, it seems that the strategic nature and purpose of these changes have not fully been understood. Many feel that they have been given empty promises, especially in regards to different teams' service promises and the electronic signature service. As the organization has not been able to live up to these promises, it has damaged the trust in the messages. The following quote from regional salesperson provides an illustrative example of this weakened trust:

There has been lot of communication, but electronic signature has been talked about since the beginning. They have promised it to come in place next spring, but I don't think anyone here in the regions believes in that anymore. They should not promise what they cannot keep …. Also the teams gave service promises but I think no team has been able to keep them.

Regional salesperson

Organizational change takes its shape based on how the organization interprets it – the way how people make sense of their reality affects the way how that reality unfolds (Brown et al., 2015; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). From this perspective, it seems that the strategic change has not fully reached it targets. Employees seem to face challenges in making sense of the ultimate purpose of the change, and this mismatch between frontline employees' sensemaking and that of top management team's results in employees enacting a change that is different from what the management team has planned. For example, instead of moving towards the management teams' vision of being a digital pioneer, it seems that the employees partly understand and enact an organization that does not utilize digitalization in the most optimal way and which' future direction is blurry. Consequently, the employees that struggle in making sense of the strategic direction, are most likely not able to clearly communicate the vision and future direction to external audiences, such as customers, either. As Rouleau (2005) explained, providing reasons for external actors requires an individual to engage in justifying.

4.4   Challenges in collaboration

As Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) argue, managers and subordinates can develop a shared set of expectations about performance, and consequently enact that performance in their everyday work. However, overly optimistic expectations may result in individuals ignoring important cues (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). In addition, whenever an individual faces experiences that do not match the expectations, feelings of anxiety and frustration evoke (Shipton and Sillince, 2013). This is what seems to have happened among the frontline employees.

It seems that many employees expected that the strategic change under investigation would enhance collaboration in and between the teams. These expectations may be partly created by the fact that collaboration is one of the core values of the company. One can reasonably assume, after all, that any strategic change would move the organization towards a condition where it operates according to its core values. However, it seems that the expectations of enhanced collaboration has not been fully met, which creates confusion and frustration among the employees. There are concerns that resources are not optimally shared in and across teams, assignment formulas are too complex, and that task division is complicated.

Some regional salespeople, such as the regional salesperson quoted below, feel that the support function teams located in the headquarters do not share resources across teams. They feel that there are always some teams facing massive workload and dealing with extensive delays, while at the same time there are teams with a very fast response time and low workload. However, the support function teams themselves feel that sharing resources has become somewhat easier due to the changes, an observation that is illustrated by the quote of the support function employee below. They feel they have received help especially from the new, extended sales support team. In addition, the extended sales support team seems quite happy with their collaboration abilities, as we can notice from the below quote of an extended sales support team employee.

It seems that the teams [in support function] *do not really lend resources to their fellows.*

Regional salesperson

There has been busy times and less busy times. I feel the workload has remained pretty much the same. Surely sick leaves of parents of young kids create temporal lack of resources, but we have actually received help from extended sales support team from time to time, which has been great.

Support function employee

Because we have such a variety of expertise in our team, we are to help others when they're busy. We have versatile experts in the team and we've been well able to share tasks and information, usually an answer to everything is found from our team.

Support function employee, extended sales support

As the support functions are no longer sitting next to the regional salespeople, the support personnel are not familiar with all the customers and their individual situation. Therefore, assignments from salespeople to support functions need to be more detailed and formal than before. Some regional managers feel that this formality hinders the benefits of the strategic change. Some of them even feel that it takes more time for them to fill out the complex formulas that are required for getting and assignment forward, than doing the actual task themselves. On the other hand, the support function teams seem to feel that there are great differences in the quality of assignments between regional sales managers. In other words, it seems that the expectations for the best ways to assign tasks are not shared between support function employees and the regional salespeople. These challenges regarding task assignments are illustrated by the following two interview extracts:

We should avoid excessive bureaucracy, filing tasks is way too formulated, full of formulas and lists for what the email should include. It easily leads to a situation where I prefer doing it all by myself, because filing a task takes more time.

Regional salesperson

The assignment quality has decreased, which makes them slower to process. At times I need to read three to four pages of email threads to figure out what it is about. Especially the salespeople from big branches who are used to having helping hands next to them, have clearly not used to brief others …. I mean c'mon, at least the name and Business ID of the company should be included – even that seems to be a challenge

Support function employee

The previous work experience of support function employees also impacts in their thoughts about the assignment quality. It seems that especially for the people with branch experience, such as the interviewee quoted below, who have learned to receive tasks on a post-it note, it is easier to understand short messages and their senders' motives to do that. They seem to be fine with making direct calls to customers and ask further questions more than others.

The assignments have been easy to understand for me, since I'm used to getting task

on a post-it note. And hey, we cannot demand the salespeople to know everything.

Support function employee

It seems that for many employees, such as the regional salesperson quoted below, the customer interest is a top priority, and because they feel customer interest is not fully appreciated in all levels and aspects, it creates frustration.

These changes may cause internal hassle, but they should not be visible to customers.

Regional salesperson

The work division between different support function teams seems to feel blurry for both regional salespeople, remote salespeople as well as the support function teams themselves. The organization seems to rely largely on the fact that employees know people from other teams and functions. In addition, the regional salespeople feel they are being bounced from counter to another when they are seeking for help. It seems that the employees would need a clear process description or a list about the tasks and response times of each team, as this seems to be unclear at the moment. These collaboration and task division challenges are illustrated by the following two interview extracts:

I also don't know which tasks each team takes care of, and they don't even know

themselves and their tasks change at every turn. It also depends on the person whether

they do it or not. The task division seems to be super unclear and the guidelines change

on a weekly basis and depending on the person.

Regional salesperson

It is a bit unclear which support function team does what and how quickly. I would need more detailed, trustworthy information on the replacements and reorganized tasks. I have to be able to promise customers schedules to which we can keep.

Salesperson, remote channels

The task division has been changed on the way, and it seems that employees have not been able to keep track on who does and what. Therefore, some employees, such as the two interviewees quoted below, feel that the change program and task division should have been designed and planned more in detail before implementing any changes.

I try to think that these are positive changes, but they could have been built better before assembling. The corrections have made things better, but those could have been thought of beforehand.

Support function employee

I feel that they implemented the changes relatively unplanned, without testing and thinking through. Removing different employee groups from branches to headquarters, and then reducing them, units were clearly under-resourced and they did not know the customers which resulted in huge delays.

Regional salesperson

These collaboration problems are not necessarily thought to be caused by the current change initiative. However, this change initiative has not been able to solve the problems either, which means the change has not from this part met the expectations set for it. This is illustrated by the following interview extract of a support function employee:

"It [the collaboration problems] *has not been caused by this change, but the change has not brought any relief to that either. We hoped that now when we are all in one function, collaboration would get easier, but I haven't noticed that so far.*

Support function employee

5 Conclusion

This qualitative study was conducted through 10 interviews of frontline employees working with business customers of a service company, which has recently gone through a strategic change program. The purpose of the study was to answer the following three research questions:

1. How do the frontline employees retrospectively make sense of strategic change?
2. What is the role of emotion in the frontline employees' sensemaking process, and what aspects influence those emotions?
3. How does the organization's culture support, accept and consider emotionality during implementation of strategic change?

Sensemaking

The findings indicate that frontline employees make sense from multiple environmental cues; previous change programs, internal communication, monthly meetings and discussions with colleagues and with supervisors. In addition, emotion seems to play a key role in the sensemaking process. The way how an individual employee feels about the previous change programs, his/her participation opportunities, changes in his/her professional identity and the future direction of the organization, seems to have a great impact on the sensemaking process. Therefore, the results support Rouleau's (2005) arguments that leaders cannot expect sense to be made only from carefully planned events or official strategy statements distributed in the organization's official communication channels. Micro-practices – everyday interactions, conversations and other daily experiences also act as important cues that employees use in their efforts to understand what is happening (Rouleau, 2005). Additionally, the findings suggest that especially the emotions connected to those micro-practices play an important role in how the employees make sense of a strategic change program.

The findings also indicate that the employees are in different phases of their sensemaking journey, suggesting that sensemaking is an individual process, in which each individual actor connects, not only the environmental cues shared with the other organizational actors, but their own interpretation, personal experience and emotions of those cues. Although some similarities can be found in groups that share similar characteristics, after all

each employee has their own experience on the previous change programs, preferred level of participation, personal goals, professional identity and future expectations. Therefore, identical environmental cues can be experienced and interpreted in different ways, resulting in some employees reaching a plausible account, a satisfying interpretation of the situation (Maitlis et al., 2013), earlier than others. For example, the employees that are satisfied with their participation opportunities, taking into account that the desired level of participation may vary greatly, are more likely to have reached a plausible account. Or, if the change has not met an individual employee's expectations related to their personal goals, changes in their professional identity or the future direction of the company, commitment to the strategic decisions may weaken and thus sensemaking become more difficult. From this perspective, the results support the arguments of Bartunek et al. (2006), who pointed out that instead of organizational outcomes, regular employees usually pay more attention to their personal gains or losses resulting from the change initiative.

Emotion

The findings of this study indicate that emotionality plays an important role in how frontline employees make sense of strategic change. Therefore, the findings support the argumentation of multiple scholars (e.g. Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; Sandelands, 1998; Rouleau, 2005; and Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010), stating that emotion plays a crucial role in working life and human interaction. Emotional turbulence may be caused by not only factors related to the current change, but also by employees' previous experiences and the organization's ability to meet their personal goals and expectations. Emotional turbulence seems to make it harder for employees to accept new changes, and is potentially hampering sensemaking. On the other hand, positive emotions such as excitement and enthusiasm seem to help employees in their sensemaking journey towards a satisfying, plausible account.

Based on the research findings, an individual employee's emotions may be influenced especially by previous change programs, their preferred level of participation, personal goals, professional identity and future expectations. The findings suggest that negative experiences and interpretations of the environment may result in the strategic direction being left blurry, which may therefore hinder sensemaking. General dissatisfaction also seems to make it harder for the employees to see room for improvement in their own

actions, and may result in employees enacting a change that is different from what the management team has planned. The findings therefore support the work of Brown et al. (2015) and Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) – that the way how people make sense of their reality affects the way how that reality unfolds.

The importance of felt emotion is well illustrated by the findings related to participation – it is not only the extent of participation that automatically speeds up the sensemaking process, but it is how the individual *feels* about his/her participation opportunities. Although we noticed that participation can speed up the sensemaking process, the expectations towards participation may differ between employees, and the core question is whether those expectations are met. Similarly, we noticed the importance of felt emotion in how the employees described the differences of sales and support functions. Although there were no significant changes in the concrete work when the two sales teams were moved from sales organization to support function, the confusion was about how it *feels* to work in the support function.

Organizational culture
The findings indicate that employees are likely to catch emotions from their managers during their sensemaking process, especially from managers that actively deliver their understanding of the change initiative. However, not all the managers seem to focus on emotionality, which seems to lead to those teams focusing mostly on the operative, technical changes, and the pain spots on the emotional level being ignored. Findings from the interviews also suggest that there are certain rules and routines present in the organizational culture that emphasize the spread of certain emotions and, on the other hand, hinder the spread of other emotions.

This study therefore supports the argument of Ashforth and Humphrey (1995), stating that the range of socially acceptable emotional expressions tend to be limited in organizations – that organization may have a culture that does not support emotionality. This lack of emotional focus may lead to a feeling among employees that expressing emotions is forbidden or that emotions should be distanced from working context. It seems that by appreciating emotions and taking emotionality into account in decision-making and leadership, sensemaking could be enhanced in organizations.

5.1 Managerial implications

Useful implications for practice can be drawn from the current study. Based on the research findings, the following four best practices are formulated for leaders who are about to enter the process of implementing strategic change.

1. Change communication is not important

Organizational actors make sense of their reality and interpret their environment from multiple environmental cues, of which official statements and carefully planned change communication represent just a fraction. Instead, employees' experiences on previous change programs, everyday discussions, their experienced participation opportunities, changes in their professional identity, and their individual expectations for the change are important cues from which the employees construct meanings and understandings of the reality and the change program. Sense is made from everything around us. Therefore, leaders are advised not to trust too much solely on the official change communication to do the complex job of implementing change.

2. Don't treat employees as bulk – consider individual experiences

Sensemaking is an individual process, in which each individual's personal experiences play a key role. Therefore, leaders are advised not to assume that employees experience the change in a similar way, or that similar treatment is experienced positively by all employees. Although some similarities can be found in groups that share similar characteristics, such conclusions should not be drawn without careful investigation. Each individual has their own experience on the previous change programs, preferred level of participation, personal goals, professional identity and future expectations, and therefore it is advisable to lead different individuals differently on their sensemaking journey.

3. Know what your people expect and how they feel

Without knowing what the employees expect about the change program or the future direction of the company, it is very difficult to fulfill these expectations. Therefore, leaders are advised to carefully investigate what kinds of expectations the organization has for the change initiative, in order to be able to either correct the misunderstandings related to the purpose of the change, or to steer the change towards a direction where the expectations

can better be met. Similarly, understanding of how the organization feels, not only about the change but the work environment in general, gives leaders valuable information and tacit knowledge about the possible emotional pain spots that they should potentially be addressing.

4. Build a culture that supports emotionality

Lack of emotional focus may lead to employees feeling that expressing emotions is forbidden or that emotions should be distanced from working context. Therefore, it is important that, especially in change context where active sensemaking is needed, emotionality is appreciated. Leaders are advised to make sure that managers and team leaders are equipped with adequate abilities to understand, handle and discuss about emotions with their subordinates. In addition, encouraging attitude towards emotionality should be emphasized also in the statements and other communication of top management.

5.2   Suggestions for future research

The empirical data of this study is limited to single, one-time interviews, which hinders the ability of this paper to investigate the issue of shifts in felt emotions. However, as Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) and George (2011) have argued that shifts between positive and negative emotions during the sensemaking process is important; a more of a longitudinal study on frontline employees' emotions during sensemaking process would provide valuable information as a future research topic.

This paper does not pay much attention to the division of individuals into prevention-focused and promotion-focused people (Maitlis et al., 2013). Future research would add interesting perspective on the frontline employees' sensemaking by investigating the possible differences between the sensemaking of these two types of individuals.

Finally, this paper views sensemaking above all as a process, focusing on the frontline employees' sensemaking journey towards a plausible account during strategic change. In the future research, sensemaking of frontline employees could be studied from a different perspective, for example as a continuous cycle that does not have a beginning or end.

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Appendix 1: Interview guide

- You work as a [title]. Could you tell me a little about your work here in this company?
- Could you tell me a little about the change that has taken place in this business unit?
- What are the main things that have been changed?
- How has the change been communicated? What has been done to tell about the change and explain it?
- How has your manager taken the change, how does he/she talk about it?
- How did the people take the news when they first heard about the plans?
- How did you feel personally?
- How have the feelings or attitudes changed after the first reactions, or have they? Why?
- Do you think that the change has made sense?
- Do you think that other people agree with you?
- Are there positive aspects in this change? What?
- Are there some aspects in this change that are especially negative? What?
- Is there something that has helped you during the change process?
- Is there something that has especially confused you regarding this change?
- What have been the most significant changes in your own work?
- How do you feel about it?
- Has your or others' professional identity changed? How?
- How has other peoples' work changed?
- How did they feel about it?
- Do you think that employees have been able to participate in the change implementation? Have the employees been heard? Why? What could have been done better?
- Have you received training? How has that been?
- Have you been able to tell someone how you feel about the change? Why?
- How has your team been dealing with the change? Have you talked about it? How?
- What kinds of personal goals do you have for your career? Has this change affected those goals?
- How do you expect the company to be in the future? How about your own work? Has this change altered your expectations?
- How has this change affected your commitment and work motivation?