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Research Online

2021

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Front-Line Management during Radical Organisational Change: Social Exchange and Paradox Interpretations

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Abstract: External shocks have severely affected the aviation sector with detrimental impacts on airport service employees. Service-sector organizations tend to implement radical organizational change to survive and front-line managers face often-opposing demands. This study aims to shed light on how front-line managers cope by utilizing social exchange-based strategies during radical organizational change. This study uses an exploratory qualitative design and thematically analyses data obtained from 40 semi-structured interviews with senior managers, front-line managers and employees working for an airline services provider operating in a major international airport in Australia. The study finds that front-line managers employ several social exchange approaches to overcome the paradoxical challenge of facilitating change while maintaining current operations. We find evidence of four approaches that the front-line managers utilize that are based on social exchange: (1) building relationships with clients' representatives; (2) utilizing relationships with experienced employees to facilitate radical organizational change practices; (3) rewarding employees in exchange for helping to manage personnel shortages; and (4) motivating employees by various morale-enhancing techniques. The study contributes to organizational sustainability and change research by developing a deeper understanding of the importance of social exchange in facilitating the work of front-line managers in the airport services sector.

Keywords: social exchange theory; paradox theory; external shocks; airport services; front-line managers; organizational sustainability and change

1. Introduction

Organizational change refers to a "relatively enduring alternation of the present state of an organization or its components or interrelationships amongst the components, and their differential and integrated functions totally or partially, in order to attain greater viability in the context of the present and anticipated future environment" [1] (p. 81). Organizational change comprises dualities of different forces—elements that oppose but still complement each other [2]. In line with these opposing features of change, for sectors that are highly exposed to external factors, the consequences of external shocks exacerbate the change process and increase its complexity. The aviation industry is such a sector that, although highly regulated, is subject to many external elements that can affect operations and hence bottom lines in very considerable ways, for example, sudden changes to oil prices, terrorist attacks, volcanic eruptions, and grounding of fleets due to safety issues. Combined with the highly competitive nature of the Australian airport services industry, this has forced many organizations to either exit or conduct radical organizational change to remain viable. For example, several airport services companies operating in Australia have closed or filed for bankruptcy in the last few years [3].

Many of the organizations within various industries are currently undergoing significant change to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and their negative economic implications. The negative impact of COVID-19 has forced organizations to search for ways to survive and achieve organizational sustainability. Organizational sustainability is concerned with overcoming a unique challenge through selecting the appropriate change strategies, talents and leadership that lead to sustainable organizational performance. Although the speed and duration of change in this pandemic is unprecedented, the pandemic does provide an opportunity to reflect on key and generalized lessons that can be learnt from organizational responses to major change events. The present study sought to uncover such lessons by investigating how an airline services provider responded to several past external shocks. These lessons may help similar organisations to ride the turbulent waves of change as a result of COVID-19 and the organisations that must contend with future external shocks.

Indeed, sustainable organizational performance entails a combination of growth and profitability. Nonetheless, organizational sustainability is mainly motivated by internal improvement [4,5]. Organizational sustainability is a multidimensional phenomenon that aims to maintain positive outcomes, generate the required knowledge, and continuously build capacity through gaining adequate experience to enable the entity to produce products and services based on an efficient and effective process [6]. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development [7], the principle of sustainability in an organizational context is fundamental to developing the entity based on economic, societal and environmental foundations.

For this paper, we follow Rodrigo's [8] understanding of organizational sustainability as follows (p. 16):

The contributions of the organization to sustainability equilibria, including the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of today, as well as their interrelations within and throughout the time dimension (i.e., the short-, long-, and longer-term). This entails the continuous incorporation and integration of sustainability issues in the organization's system elements (operations and production, strategy and management, governance, organizational systems, service provision, and assessment and reporting), as well as change processes and their rate of change. The system elements and change processes transform the inputs (in regard to material and resources that have economic, environmental, and social value) into outputs (products, services, and waste, with their economic, environmental, and social value). These fulfil the organization's goal or objective, based on resource efficiency and effectiveness. The organization is affected by the organization's nonhuman and human resources (i.e., individuals, groups, culture, values, attitudes, and norms), its infrastructure, its supply chain (upstream and downstream), and the interactions with its stakeholders (internal, interconnecting, and external).

One way to accomplish organizational sustainability is by implementing radical organizational change, which has been described as the recovery of an organization's financial performance after an existence-threatening decline [9]. Within the process of radical organizational change, front-line managers are a critical group: They are the intermediaries between those initiating the change and those implementing it at the operational or ground level. A "front-line manager" is typically any employee immediately below the senior manager or department head, such as a leading hand, foreman, supervisor, section head or duty manager [10].

Stafford [11] described social exchange as a non-rigid relationship between two individuals in which they are not compelled to make decisions, but rather do so voluntarily. Emerson [12] defined social exchange theory as a social scheme—one that does not necessarily cover specific materialistic objects, but that includes economic considerations in a social relationship. As this study focuses on the context of work and organizational change, we adopt an integrated definition for social exchange as follows: "voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the return they are expected to bring and typically do in fact bring from others" [13] (p. 91).

Front-line managers are often challenged with seemingly major paradoxical demands [10]. The context of paradoxical demands results in tremendous job demands for front-line managers during radical organizational change. The front-line managers use social exchange to overcome these paradoxical demands.

Change management literature has generally highlighted the critical role of individuals holding leadership positions in any change initiatives [14,15]. However, researchers' efforts have mostly been directed at senior managers/CEOs and change practitioners because they are at the top of the organizational structure and initiate the change. Although, front-line managers play an important role in leading and facilitating operational activities and filling the gaps caused by the implementation of radical organizational change, relatively little attention has been given to the role of the front-line manager in radical organizational change events, which has been highlighted in several studies [16–19]. However, front-line managers are a crucial group because they are often required to implement the radical organizational change strategies that senior managers design, and they have the most direct influence on the attitudes of operational staff. Furthermore, front-line managers understand the concerns of senior manager and employees [10]. Nevertheless, radical organizational change research has focused on the effects on employees, leaving a gap in understanding how these strategies affect front-line managers and their role in the process. The front-line manager's role is critical to any change process because front-line managers can influence employees in many ways, which has been also emphasized by numerous studies [20–23].

Although the radical organizational change may be driven by external events or shocks, our research focuses on front-line managers dealing with internal organizational perspectives (e.g., human resources (HR)), as these are issues that dominate their day-to-day jobs. However, because radical organizational changes cannot be entirely insulated and internalized within the organization (due largely to the outsourced nature of airport services) [24], our research also covers some aspects related to service provider–customer relationships, (e.g., the engagements with the client airlines and their other outsourced partners).

When managers are faced with the consequences of external shocks, they often rush to implement radical organizational change plans with the intention of limiting financial loss and employee resistance [20,25]. Although many studies on radical organizational change acknowledge the importance of paying attention to human elements, few have departed from a relatively hard-systems approach, which focuses on the organization's financial and quantitative objectives, rather than on the people management aspects of radical organizational change [26–28]. Consequently, some researchers have expressed concerns that there is a need to better understand the influence and contribution of the people management element, which encompasses social exchange processes, to the success of radical organizational change [28].

This study aims to address some of these research gaps by understanding the role of social exchange in helping front-line managers to overcome the apparently paradoxical demands while undergoing radical organizational change in the context of major external shocks that have faced the aviation services industry in the past decade. In so doing, the study hopes to reveal the importance of the front-line managers' role in enabling struggling organizations to deal with the consequences of external shocks.

In this study, we integrate paradox theory with Blau's perspective of social exchange as a theoretical basis to understand the role of front-line managers who are individuals working in the context of extreme organizational change and who undertake both social and economic exchange as part of their work. Researchers have recognized the tensions between facilitating change and maintaining operational continuity, and the depiction of these tensions often takes the form of dilemmas or paradoxes, which have been developed to form the basis of "paradox theory" [29]. Social exchange theory (SET) can help to inform front-line managers regarding how they can perform their role in a manner that meets the paradox of facilitating both change and regular work activities during an external

shock [30]. The use of social exchange theory as a theoretical lens is appropriate because front-line managers primarily handle the people management aspect of daily operations and because they tend to build social exchanges with employees.

By revealing how front-line managers overcome the paradoxical demands using social exchange at the workplace, this study aims to help managers and researchers better incorporate the human element in radical organizational change where front-line managers play a critical role in this process. Accordingly, the present study is guided by the following two research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What is the role of social exchanges in helping front-line managers cope and manage during major radical organizational change events?

RQ2: How do front-line managers manage the paradoxical demands of facilitating both change and regular work activities during major radical organizational change events?

To address this, 40 semi-structured interviews were conducted among employees, front-line managers and senior managers working at an airport services provider in Australia and who experienced radical organizational change several times in the last decade. In this research, an airport service provider is referred to as organizations that provide airport ground handling functions such as cargo, passenger services, aircraft cleaning, supply and catering, and ramp services [31]. Much of the existing research consider the front-line services staff of these different services as one group i.e., frontliners [32,33], but we believe this is not an accurate reflection of the way these airport services are provided as there are internal management structures in these sub-groups (see Figure 1).

As such, we examine the role of front-line managers' social exchange in the context of radical organizational change from multiple perspectives among those who are closest to the phenomenon: senior managers, front-line managers and employees.

Importantly, the study contributes to the development of theory as follows. First, in terms of front-line managers' roles, it helps to understand the role of social exchange in enabling the front-line managers to overcome some of the challenges caused by paradox demands. Second, in terms of integrating social exchange and paradox theory, it improves the understanding of front-line managers' roles in the context of external shocks.

This study's practical contributions include highlighting certain practices that front-line managers need to be concerned about during periods of change to prepare them to handle the consequences of external shocks. The study also reinforces research that finds that front-line managers will need to develop competencies in paradox resolution or reconciliation to enable them to overcome the conflicting demands as a result of these shocks.

Additionally, the study ascertains four appropriate strategies that front-line managers adopt based on social exchanges to overcome the ostensibly paradoxical demands. These strategies include building relationships with the clients' representatives, utilizing relationships with experienced employees to facilitate radical organizational change practices, rewarding the employees in exchange for helping to address the personnel resource shortages, and motivating employees to boost morale.

Airport ground handling

01/ Aicraft
ground handling
services

Ramp

Includes all the jobs performed
on the airport apron as well
as the processes needed
to conduct the loading and
unloading of mail, luggage,
merchandise, etc.

Supply and catering

Includes the services aimed at
offering comfort to passengers in
the aircraft cabin (newspapers,
merchandising, and others) as
well as the supply of food and
beverages for passengers and crew
to be consumed during the trip.

Cleaning

It includes the internal cleaning
of the aircraft as well as
the preparation of the aircraft
so that everything is ready
for passengers to board.

Airstart units for
engine start

De-icing and external protection
of aircraft against the cold

ACU
Air Conditioning Units

Pushing/towing of aircraft
with pushback tractor

FOLLOW ME
Guidance to parking position

Supply of unsafe water
for sinks and basins

Air cargo handling

Loading/Unloading of luggage
and transfer to terminal

Transport of passengers to
terminal. Boarding buses

Electrical power supply
with engines off

Marshalling and
positioning of chocks

Fuel load

Removal of
wastewater

Safety
first

Coupling of
air bridge or stairs

Internal cleaning
of aircraft

Loading of
catering supplies

Boarding of crew
and passengers

Boarding / disembarking of persons
with reduced mobility, PRM

02/ **Passenger service**

It includes check-in, passenger
service as well as the services
rendered to streamline waiting/
access of passengers, boarding
and loading of luggage and
merchandise.

Figure 1. Airport ground-handling fuctions. Note: Adapted from Frutos [34].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Radical Organizational Change After an External Shock

When organizations are being challenged by the consequences of external shocks that impact their financial positions and existence, financially troubled businesses aim to survive by searching for ways to increase their resilience and sustainability [35,36]. Nystrom and Starbuck [37] describe radical organizational change as a defensive strategy that is based on unsystematic reactions to corporate financial problems, which is sometimes caused by a change in the economy because of an external shock. Radical organizational change may involve strategies that are related to any aspect of the organization, whether they are financial, administrative, market related, human resource related or operational. It is important not to view change as something that only directly influences systems, practices and infrastructure—it also influences the human dimension, which is related to people management (including social exchanges).

Radical organizational change is a broad term that includes many strategies. Boyne [38] finds that most radical organizational change strategies fall under three main categories: reorganization, repositioning and retrenchment. Although the aim of these strategies is to yield better outcomes, they can negatively affect staff performance and organizational culture or climate indirectly, as well as the success of the intended radical organizational change. For example, when managers are faced with the consequences of external shocks, they tend to implement radical organizational strategies without considering the human element, leading to negative implications for human interaction [39]. Poor change practices may directly or indirectly affect the employees' pre-existing social exchange, or they may establish new social exchanges [39]. As a result, the role of front-line managers may be affected by increasingly conflicting demands and expectations that could lead to negative outcomes.

According to Paquette and Frankl [25], change management practitioners usually aim for quick changes to save the organization's financial position, though some scholars suggest that change practitioners may have an underlying personal motive for implementing fast or dramatic change [26]. Agreeing, Caldwell [40] notes that swift radical organizational change often results in the resistance from operational staff. For example, employees' skills can be compromised if radical organizational change cost cutting leaves insufficient funds for education, training or learning [41]. Failure to budget for skills development at all levels can also lead to frustration and erode engagement.

Radical organizational change success typically depends on managers understanding the importance of correct timing [42]. Organizations that lag in making prompt actions during a crisis may fail. In other cases, managers may fail to consider timing in relation to workload requirements [15,43]. For example, among airport services providers, school and Christmas holidays are normally busy periods in which they try to avoid implementing radical organizational strategies.

Buhler [44] asserts that organizations usually place too much emphasis on cost cutting and retrenchment. However, too much emphasis on retrenchment may cause the loss of employees with valued skills, distinctive experiences and organizational-specific knowledge [45]. In some organizations, experienced employees are sometimes retrenched because they have the longest tenure, and the longer they stay on, the cost of layoff and retention increases [44]. When the organization loses critical skill sets due to senior management decisions, front-line managers are required to cover the gap caused by the loss because they are at the coal face and must ensure that the workflow is uninterrupted [42].

Radical organizational change practitioners and managers who fail to consider the interests of front-line managers, operational employees, support teams, and other internal stakeholders may result in these stakeholders resisting change because their interests are threatened [44]. Jacobs et al. [46] suggested that managers should thus regard all staff as stakeholders, not just those who are in senior management. When employees feel that the management team is not protecting their interests, they may exit the organization.

Poor communication weakens leadership credibility during radical organizational change and may cause workers to perceive a lack of trust, justice or fairness, or even to feel betrayed [47–49]. The lack of communication thus affects morale and creates confusion and ambiguity among the employees [26,38]. Consequently, front-line managers' skills of conveying reassurance become vital to the effectiveness and success of radical organizational change.

2.2. Front-Line Management and Managers

According to Hales [10], many scholars have described front-line managers as those who are charged with direct supervisory obligations, usually for non-managerial employees. Hutchinson and Purcell [50] argue that front-line managers are positioned at the lower level of the leadership hierarchy, typically at the first or second level of the management structure. Some front-line managers play a vital role in an organization because they possess strong communication skills and an ability to facilitate the workflow [10]. Brewer [51] finds that front-line managers can transmit optimism to subordinates, which may thus improve their performance. Applebaum et al. [52] note that front-line managers may also promote or stimulate positive discretionary behaviors in supervisees, which is often called working "beyond contract" [52]. This, in turn, will affect personal and organizational efficiency.

Front-line managers, for the most part, are employees who have been promoted from the front office or workshop level [22]. Subsequently, this promotion may cause more pressure, as many managers can attest to being caught in the middle between senior managers and floor employees' conflicting demands. This upgrade in both role and responsibilities complicates the front-line manager's facilitation of work activities while undertaking a radical organizational change. McConville and Holden [53] describe front-line managers as being caught in a dilemma or in a paradoxical situation between the directives of the senior managers and the expectations of the service delivery on one side, and the demands and problems of their subordinates on the other.

Several research articles have addressed the front-line manager's experience in general, without clearly unfolding how the front-line manager manages work activities during the implementation of change process [21,22,54,55]. While the upper echelon and middle managers have been the major focus of some change management studies [56], front-line managers have been neglected [57].

2.3. Paradox Theory

The underlying principles of all changes may lie in the perception of reality from a dialectical or paradoxical perspective [58]. Nonetheless, stability and change are opposing features; they coexist in an organization, and their relationship may be considered a paradox [59]. Smith and Lewis [29] concentrate on the tension between conflict and consensus, which is the profound nature of organizational change, and suggest a thorough review of the concept of organizational change as practice.

Although paradox theory has helped advance our understanding of complex decision-making [60,61], the choices that front-line managers often must deal with are not normally simple tensions between two logics but often involve multiple paradoxes or dilemmas at the same time. Moreover, these logics are not necessarily universal in nature and are made more complex in radical organization change that involves individuals with different values and beliefs [62]. Accordingly, paradoxical features such as conflict and consensus during radical organizational change create a major challenge for the front-line managers: a dual role for the front-line managers, in which they are expected to simultaneously manage regular operational activities and facilitate radical organizational change strategies to achieve the required outcomes [63,64].

Additionally, the scope of front-line manager tasks generally includes a combination of traditional management responsibilities, such as providing specialized skills, tracking effectiveness, organizing, assigning tasks, and providing leadership and people management. However, front-line managers are also pressured to simultaneously control

the administration or managerial aspects of the role and achieve service or operational goals. Hutchinson and Purcell [65] argued that these conflicting demands of the front-line manager's role will often impede the front-line managers' abilities to perform people management duties effectively.

Little is known about how the front-line managers manage these apparent paradoxes while facilitating both change and regular work activities during major radical organizational change events, even though the front-line managers' role within the change process is important because they lead and guide operational staff, and accordingly, they influence the effectiveness of change [17–19,66]. The current study will investigate the role and the way front-line managers handle the ostensibly paradoxical nature of managing during significant change events, in which front-line managers require leadership, communication and change management skills to act as intermediary agents between employees and senior managers.

The seemingly conflicting demands that front-line managers face are considerable, particularly in the context of the shift work environment that characterizes the aviation industry. This is particularly the case in the airport services sector, where front-line managers must find a balance between senior management, employee and client needs. Senior management expect cost cutting and reduction in labor hours, while client airlines expect a high-end service. Conversely, employees expect to not work excessively, so they can avoid being injured or fatigued, particularly in a 24/7 shift work environment.

2.4. Social Exchange Theory

According to Homans [67], social exchange involves a minimum of two individuals exchanging tangible or intangible activities. Crawford et al. [68] suggested that, based on social exchange theory, the strength of social relations emanates from a progression of social interactions. This can result in a commitment to the other party or organization, and social exchange entails collaborative interactions between parties. Through these interactions, the parties form an equivalent commitment to one another and attempt to attach equal value to these exchanges [68]. Attaching value to these commitments thus leads to further lasting future interactions and exchanges [69]. Figure 2 below is an example of the values front-line managers exchange with employees within an airport services provider.
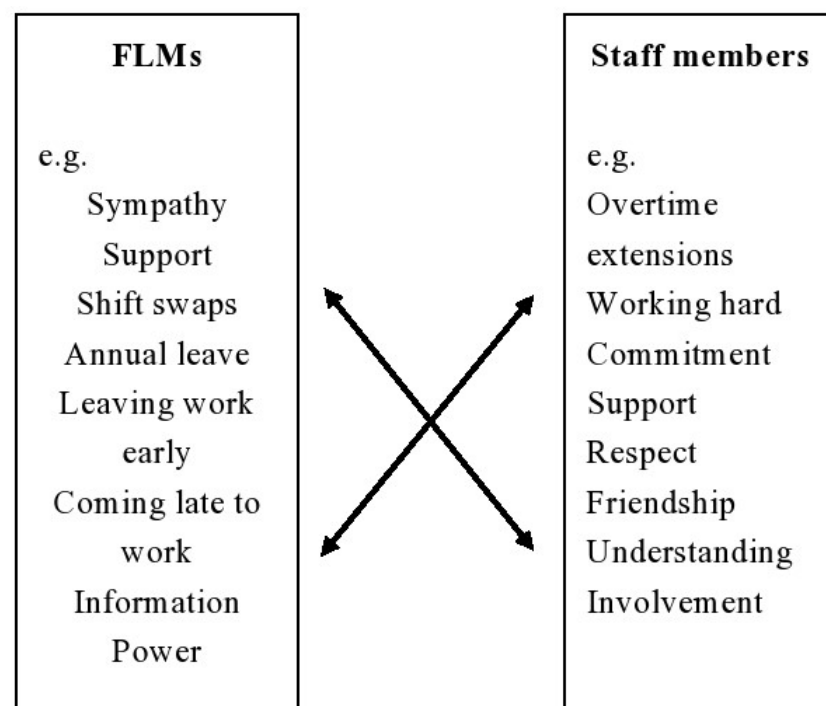

Figure 2. Exchange values between front-line managers and staff members.

Social exchange is based on the roles that rewards and costs play in influencing the decisions that are made in relationships. The members of the relationship shoulder some obligation towards each party. In this light, Stafford [11] concluded that the pillars of any social relationship are costs and rewards.

Costs: These are a collection of events that do not have a positive effect on a member of the relationship. Some examples include financial commitments, time and energy.

Rewards: These refer to events that have a positive effect on the members of the relationship. Examples include warm friendship, compatibility and assistance.

Kim et al. [69] focused on the behaviors of both parties towards the relationship and how they optimize costs and rewards. These behaviors towards the relationship include how satisfied the parties involved with the "exchange" are [70]. According to Benson et al. [70], the source of this idea is applied in workplace settings, with the proposition that a suitable and satisfying employee–reward system is vital to achieving better employee performance. Accordingly, the front-line managers use social exchange to their advantage when handling paradoxical demands during the change process.

Social exchange scholars have argued that an organization itself cannot participate in the social exchange relationship with an employee. However, it is possible for its representing agents to participate in social exchange relationships [71]. Liu et al. [71] suggested that representatives may evaluate their business relationships based on the nature of the social exchange with their employees, whose responsibility is to execute work tasks in a manner that is in line with the administration's process [36]. The representative would further cooperate with the senior management team, whose task is to provide vital choices on HR frameworks (e.g., pay circumstances, vocational improvement and representative cooperation approach) [72]. Nonetheless, some front-line managers tend to have close relationships with the floor employees, to ensure that the service delivery meets the organization's required outcomes. In contrast, other front-line managers have closer relationships with senior management, sometimes in the hope of advancing their career [26]. Others tend to adopt a contingent approach regarding how they participate in social exchange relationships on behalf of the organization [73].

This study draws on both paradox theory and social exchange theory to analyze how front-line managers respond to the oftentimes paradoxical nature of demands that exists in a fast-paced environment and constantly changing dynamic, in the context of radical organizational change.

3. Methodology

This qualitative phenomenological study explored and interpreted the experiences of the participants regarding how they perceived the front-line manager's role while handling the paradoxical demands following an external shock. To help address the research question and build an in-depth understanding, the study investigated social exchanges among three parties —senior managers, front-line managers and employees. It examines five pairs of relationships: (1) among employees (2) among front-line managers; (3) between front-line managers and employees; (4) between senior managers and front-line managers; and (5) between senior managers and employees. This approach was selected because of the complicated nature of the front-line manager's intermediary role within the airport services providers.

To facilitate understanding of the concept and tasks of airport services providers, the airport ground handling agent (GHA) diagram in Figure 1 above illustrates the bulk of the provision of services.

3.1. Research Context

The study's interviews focused on a single organization operating in the aviation industry in Australia. The organization underwent transformational change by using multiple change strategies at airports across Australia. According to the interview with the airport services provider terminal manager (12 June 2018), this transformational change

process involved changing the company's ownership, name and branding, as well as its organizational culture, structure and leadership roles. Significant budget cuts required downsizing through forced redundancies. Table 1 illustrates the impact of the external shock on four radical organizational change events that the organization experienced.

Table 1. External Shocks Impact on Radical Organizational Change Activities.

External Shock	Events	Activities
SARS pandemic 2003	ROC 1	Change in management structure Change in ownership Change in management personnel and redundancies Change in business name Change in vision, mission and values Combined management duties and roles Focused on quality improvement Improved efficiency Introduced new workflow processes
Eruptions of Eyjafjallajökull, Iceland and Puyehue-Cordon Caulle, Chile Volcanoes in 2010/2011	ROC 2	Increased part-time roles and decrease full-time roles
		Introduced a new safety culture and practices
		Downsized and redundancies
		Combined front-line managers' and employees' duties and roles
		Fewer full-time staff
		Subcontracted staffing
Paris terrorism attacks and Brussels bombings in 2015/2016	ROC 3	Continued to reduce full-time employment
		Downsized and redundancies
		Fewer admin staff
		Management restructure
Bali Mount Agung, Indonesia volcano eruptions, 2017–2019	ROC4	Redundancies and fewer full-time staff
		Established a new sister company with a low-cost theme
		Subcontracted all the staffing
		Focused on efficiency and competitive pricing
		Change in management structure

3.2. Data Collection

This study adopted an exploratory approach using qualitative semi-structured interviews. The sample size was dependent on several factors—including the purpose of the study, methodological perspectives, the theoretical underpinnings of the study, and the variability in the population. We followed Adler and Adler's [74] suggestion that the number of interviews range between 12 and 60, depending on the purpose. As such, the sample in the present study consisted of forty participants. We were constrained from increasing the sample size due to the voluntary nature of the research based on requirements set by the university ethics committee. This is because the nature of radical organizational change made many potential participants wary of participating because they had job security concerns. The researchers secured 40 participants out of the total 200 employees working for the target organization, which equates to 20% response rate. Based on existing research practices, this is an acceptable size for a qualitative study [75].

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from the chosen organization's main operational department, which is customer service. In focusing on staff, front-line managers' and senior managers' experiences, the study fits in the interpretive paradigm of social research [76]. In the interview process, the participants were asked about the challenges facing the front-line managers and how the front-line managers dealt

with them. For example, the participants were asked, "Can you please tell me how the front-line managers managed all these challenges that came with the transformation?" (For more information related to the research questions, see the Appendix A).

It is important to note that the voice of senior managers was not apparent through the interviews because they were underrepresented at the research site as most of them were based in the headquarters location (only five senior managers were employed in the research site). Although all five senior managers in the research site participated in the study, they were extremely cautious in answering the interview questions due to their concerns for privacy and confidentiality, despite reassurances, therefore resulting in them giving only very short and diffuse answers.

In this study, a "purposive sampling" method was employed, which meant that not every person had the opportunity to be chosen for the study sample and only particular participants were selected based on shared characteristics and the value they add to the purpose of the study [77]. The researcher listed the participants that met the inclusion criteria, and contacted and scheduled suitable times and dates with those who agreed to be interviewed. Table 2 describes the roles of the key business personnel who are referred to as "participants".

Table 2. Key Participants and Roles.

Study Participants	Role Description
Employees	Floor employees who work under the front-line managers and who are mainly responsible for operations such as check-in, boarding, meeting, and greeting the arriving aircrafts, mishandled luggage recovery service and handling grounded flights.
First-line managers	Individuals who report to senior managers. Their focus is on managing day-to-day operations.
Senior Managers	Based in the local state office. Responsible for the organization's strategic management and overseeing the front-line managers.

3.3. Sample

The participant profiles show that the interviewees' ages ranged from 15 to 63 years of age. The gender split was 52.5% female and 47.5% male. Senior managers represented only 5% in comparison to employees representing 42.5% of the sample, which reflects the limited access to the senior managers at the research site (as most of the senior managers were based in the regional headquarters location located in another major city in another part of the country). The workplace had five senior managers, and they all participated in this study. Similarly, the researchers had limited access to some participants, such as ex-employees and ex-front-line managers. Moreover, Table 2 shows that 40% of the participants had been working in the company for over 6 years, which is an adequate representation; it indicates that the participants have suitable experience in the subject matter and that they likely contributed positively to the results of this study. Table 3 summarizes the study participants' demographic profiles.

3.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data to identify patterns or themes that displayed commonalities, relationships, overarching patterns or theoretical constructs [78]. Six major steps were followed in accordance with Braun and Clarke's [79] thematic analysis method. First, the interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber. The researchers in this study re-read the transcripts several times and took down notes. Second, the researchers mapped out the notes and categorized the information that stood out. The researchers uploaded the transcripts into NVivo for coding and categorized and segregated the information under each code. Third, the researchers collated the data according to potential themes. Fourth, the potential themes were reviewed by mapping out the

information. Fifth, the researchers identified and highlighted common patterns and themes. Accordingly, the researchers merged the sub-themes and revised the themes and finalized the selected themes. Sixth, the researchers produced the final analysis report with examples and quotes under each theme.

Table 3. Summary of participants' 'demographic profile'.

Gender	Total Number of Participants	Percentage of the Total Sample	Working Contract	Total Number of Participants	Percentage of the Total Sample
Male	19	47.5%	Full-time	17	42.5%
Female	21	52.5%	Part-time	23	57.5%
Positions/working status	**Total number of participants**	**Percentage of the total sample**	**Years of experience with the company**	**Total number of participants**	**Percentage of the total sample**
Employees	17	42.5%	0–1 year	1	2.5%
First-line managers	13	32.5%	1–3 years	15	37.5%
Senior managers	5	12.5%	4–6 years	8	20%
Ex-employees	2	5%	More than 6 years	16	40%
Ex-first-line managers	3	7.5%			

In qualitative methods, coding is the first step of a systematic approach to prepare and order the data for analysis and reporting. According to Saldaña [80], a code is a term or short phrase that assigns an attribute to a segment of language-based data. This study employed two coding methods—structural and pattern coding—which were used across three cycles to identify and classify common themes. Before sorting and classifying the data under each code, the researchers highlighted the relevant and important data based on the notes taken during the reading of the transcripts. Accordingly, the researchers attempted to identify categories and classifications.

NVivo was used to manually code each participant's transcribed interview. The first and second cycle of the coding process were based on a structural coding technique that categorizes data based on interview questions' headings and subheadings. Conversely, the third cycle of coding was based on a pattern coding technique that identifies similar data, followed by grouping them together to generate themes for answering the study's questions [80]. Overall, the researchers identified a pool of 34 cycle codes.

To ensure an accurate representation and understanding of the topic, the coded data were reviewed after the NVivo coding process. The researchers reviewed the textual data to ensure that the identified themes were explicitly stated by the interviewees. The elimination of information was based on importance, while the importance of the information was based on the quality of the content and the number of times that participants mentioned them. The identified themes were assessed to ensure that each critical moment/event or lived experience was essential for understanding the study's questions.

Ritchie and Lewis [81] believe that the frequency of theme occurrences does not necessarily signify that the theme is important for answering the study's questions. As such, the following steps were taken. The invariant constituents of the experiences were clustered to form thematic labels. Based on the invariant pattern constituents, specific themes emerged from the thematic labels. The preliminary grouping code report was used to generate the main thematic labels that were important to the primary and secondary research questions. After sorting the data into the first, second, and third cycle codes, the researchers used the pattern coding technique to identify thematic and conceptual similarities.

4. Findings

In the sections below, this study presents the findings by using the "power" and "proof" quotes technique [82]. The power quotes in Table 4 demonstrate the proof quotes that provide additional supporting evidence to the power quotes. According to Pratt [83] (p. 501):

"Power quotes are those in which the informant is so concise, or insightful, that the author could not do a better job of making the same point. These appear in the main text of the study. Proof quotes are often used to show the prevalence of a point. These quotes may be a source of triangulation in which the researchers show how each data source supports a particular argument. Proof quotes may also be presented as a bundle of short quotes that are used to illustrate the prevalence of findings."

Table 4. Proof quotes.

Category	Proof Quote
Building relationships with clients' representatives: 13 comments	Staff member stated: 'With the airline reps, if you have a good rapport with them and they trust you, and they know you're going to do your best for them whether it's a front-line managers or employee, they tend to back off a little bit and just leave you to do what you need to do. But if you're someone who doesn't have a good rapport with them, hasn't built up the trust component of the situation, that's when you have people stomping their feet, demanding to do this and demanding to be seen. That's when it happens.'
Utilize relationships with experienced employees to facilitate the radical organizational change practices: 10 comments	Staff member stated: 'During the transformation, no-one knew what was going on, whether front-line managers will be affected, whether the employees will be or both. So, both the employees and front-line managers were worried that they might lose their position, so during the transformation, the FLMs' relationships changed totally to the better and they started treating people nicely, being patient and being friends with everyone. They wanted us to be independent, to do our own thing and look after the flights without direct supervision.'
Rewarding the employees in exchange for helping to address the personnel resource issue: 16 comments	Staff member stated: 'If there's a sickie, I find that some of the junior managers or first-line managers email out immediately or give their employees a text to see if they're available . . . it's all about the first-line manager relationships with the staff, if they like you they will pick up and if they don't they will let you down.'
Motivate employees to boost morale: 7 comments	Front-line manager stated: 'I think we've all handled them (employees) well under the circumstances. And, then we've tried to remain positive because the employees were under a lot of stress. We wanted to make sure things happen on time and move on time. I think it was all handled pretty well from our perspective (FLMs). We tried to boost staff morale. If we didn't do that, trust me, no flight would've departed knowing how bad the staff felt. Looking back, it's a stressful situation and time for everyone. And I think everyone's handled that as best as they possibly can.'

The power quotes are the most compelling data that effectively illustrate the researcher's ideas, while the additional data in the proof quotes aim to illustrate a particular idea or argument. This also means that the researchers may have several proof quotes in one table to reflect each idea [83].

Four main themes were found that answer the research questions, and these themes constitute strategies that are derived from the front-line managers' use of social exchanges to cope with and manage the paradoxical demands of facilitating change and regular work activities.

4.1. First Approach—Building Relationships with the Clients' Representatives

According to the participants (five front-line managers, four employees, three senior managers and one ex-front-line manager), establishing social exchange with the clients' airline representatives was a highly used strategy to alleviate the lack of service that was provided to those clients. The participants highlighted that the relationships between front-line managers and airline representatives went beyond positive working relationships, in

which the front-line managers and client representatives were exchanging benefits in a work and outside-work context. This social exchange was initiated because of the front-line managers' regular interactions with the airline representatives related to work issues and challenges. The front-line manager acts as a management representative: It is the front-line manager's responsibility to explain the reasoning for shortfalls in services during the shift. However, the participants believed that to avoid the escalation of complaints relating to the shortfalls of services that were provided, which ultimately negatively impacts the front-line manager's performance evaluation, the front-line managers participated in social exchange with the airline representatives. Despite this, the social exchanges with airline representatives did not alleviate the problems that were related to the safety of passengers and aircraft. For example, one employee stated:

In this period, the front-line managers who would have the least complaints are the ones who have a very good or close relationship with the clients. The front-line managers who have a basic relationship with the clients would have the most complaints on their shifts regarding service, safety, slow checking, and staff shortages. Front-line managers who have a weak relationship with the clients have received more complaints than others but, in many cases, issues related to safety are difficult to cover, even if you have a relationship with the reps.

Building relationships with the airlines' representatives was an effective strategy for overcoming some the challenges caused by the radical organizational change.

4.2. Second Approach—Utilizing Relationships with Experienced Employees to Facilitate Radical Organizational Change Practices

The participants (six front-line managers and four employees) believed that after establishing the new subsidiary company, the front-line managers had to manage staff within both organizations, despite each organization having different working conditions. The parent company retained all the experienced employees, whereas the new subsidiary company recruited staff who were mostly inexperienced. The front-line managers were challenged to manage the different levels of skill sets. The front-line managers aimed to be positively perceived by senior management because they wished to be regarded as cooperative and capable individuals who could work under pressure.

Based on the interviewees' responses, the front-line managers participated in social exchange extensively to use experienced employees to facilitate the day-to-day operations of the mother company. This strategy aimed to guide experienced employees to become independent and self-managed. The front-line managers allocated the difficult tasks to experienced employees, and this strategy freed the front-line managers to allocate their attention and support to the new subsidiary and its inexperienced employees. For example, one staff member stated:

"During the transformation, since there are two sides of the business to take care of, I think duty managers were more engrossed in the new business than the old business. In saying that, the previous business that I'm part of is working like a well-oiled machine. I can say that it's thanks to the relationship that we used to have previously with the duty managers. I wouldn't be able to answer from the new side of the business because I'm not involved with them."

The front-line managers used their social exchange with employees to facilitate the radical organizational change practices and achieve the required outcomes. However, the front-line managers were challenged by a scarcity of resources and had to use their social exchange and negotiation skills to overcome this challenge.

4.3. Third Approach—Rewarding the Employees in Exchange for Helping to Address the Personnel Resource Shortages

The shortage of personnel resources was a problem that became apparent after the downsizing occurred. The participants (seven employees, five front-line managers, two ex-employees and one ex-front-line manager) believed that the shortage of personnel resources

was managed primarily by the front-line managers. The front-line managers aimed to ensure that all shifts were covered to fulfil the operational needs. The participants believed that the front-line managers were using social exchange as a strategy for persuading employees to cover the shifts. The front-line managers also concurrently considered the lack of personnel resources a temporary issue and hoped that the resource situation would improve soon. Social exchanges were thus occurring more frequently than ever, as described by a front-line manager:

> "With resources, it's hard to manage sick leaves, shortages and everything. I think it's just a minor communication trying to get out, like, 'Guys, for this period, you have to help us out and then, later on, we can help you out'. I didn't deal with others. In the interactions with other front-line managers, I saw them doing favors and everything, so you must give favors. I saw emails going out, making deals and everything: 'Cover this shift and we're going to take you off another shift'."

The front-line managers used social exchange with the employees to counteract the lack of personnel resources that was caused by the radical organizational change. The findings also highlighted a lack of communication concerning the radical organizational change, and the front-line managers used this issue to their advantage by sharing the information that they had on hand with the employees who had social exchange with these front-line managers.

4.4. Fourth Approach—Motivating Existing Employees by Various Morale Enhancing Techniques

Participants (three front-line managers, three employees and one senior manager) asserted that radical organizational change events affected the morale of both the remaining employees and those about to be made redundant. According to the participants, employees were not consulted or involved in the decision-making process, so the employees consequently disengaged with the change process. The employees were demoralized, resistant to change and questioning senior management decisions. The participants highlighted that mishandling radical organizational change created mistrust between senior management and employees, particularly when important information was being withheld. Faced with redundancies, employees became concerned about their future with the organization.

The radical organizational change negatively influenced the employees' performance because it added to the remaining employees' workloads. Radical organizational change caused difficulties for the front-line managers managing the day-to-day operational activities because the employees were reluctant to take on the additional workload. The front-line managers attempted to motivate the employees to overcome the negative effects of the radical organizational change, facilitate the workflow and boost morale to alleviate further issues. The front-line managers tended to purposefully motivate the employees to boost their morale. For example, one front-line manager stated:

> "I tried to manage the employees and keep them going, tried to motivate them and not be negative about it (change). It might be 2 weeks or 4 weeks, you don't know. In that case, you have to be positive for as long as you have to, and you have to ensure that everyone is positive if you want the work to be done. Otherwise, we would be in big trouble."

Table 4 outlines the findings discussed above and provides proof quotes to support the power quotes that were provided earlier in this Section.

Motivating employees, boosting their morale and sharing important information placed the front-line managers in an advantageous position to ask for an exchange in return. The social exchange between front-line managers and employees mobilized the informal network within the organization and enabled the front-line managers to overcome some of the challenges caused by the radical organizational change.

5. Discussion

In the following sub-sections, key themes that emerged from the interviews are discussed and embedded in the literature. Each theme is expressed as an approach employed by the front-line managers to manage the seemingly contradictory demands of their jobs.

5.1. First Approach—Building Relationships with the Clients' Representatives

Building relationships with the clients' representatives means that front-line managers are conducting exchanges across organizational boundaries. The front-line managers consequently used their intra- and inter-organizational relationships to overcome these apparently contradictory demands during radical organizational change.

Previous literature did not cover the benefits of front-line managers' involvement with external stakeholders, such as airlines' representatives. However, the research finding being discussed here is closely related with Jiun-Sheng & Chia-Chuan's [84], and the study concluded that the social skills of the employees who are working for the service providers' organizations are positively related to the service friendship element provided perceived by the customer and in turn affects future interaction with clients or customers. Additionally, the finding is in line with Delcourt et al. [85], who highlighted the importance of customer perceived employee emotional competence on customer loyalty and satisfaction, and in this study context, the front-line managers tried to stay calm and hide their emotions in front of clients. In contrast to this conclusion, Schepers and Nijssen [86] warned about the negative effect on customer satisfaction caused by allowing the front-line employees to advocate for the organization especially in the service industry.

This research result highlights the benefits of front-line managers collaborating with external stakeholders. The findings suggest that front-line managers built relationships with the airlines' representatives as a strategy for alleviating the lack of service that was provided to those clients after an external shock. It is important to highlight that the airlines' representatives work in the same environment as the front-line managers and other employees. Unlike front-line managers/employees, airlines' representatives are contracted by the airline companies themselves, rather than the airport service provider. Although airlines' representatives work closely with the ground-handling staff to achieve a common goal, their scope is slightly different; they are employed to solely protect the airline's interest. While the social exchange has been considered a dyadic perspective, this study aligns with that of Cooper-Thomas and Morrison [87], who believed that multiple actors exist at various levels in an exchange system. Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu [76] suggested that generalized exchange can inhibit interaction with individuals from outside the system. In this case, the relationship between airlines' representatives and front-line managers/employees falls under the "across organizational boundary exchange". Figure 3 illustrates the across-organizational boundary exchange.
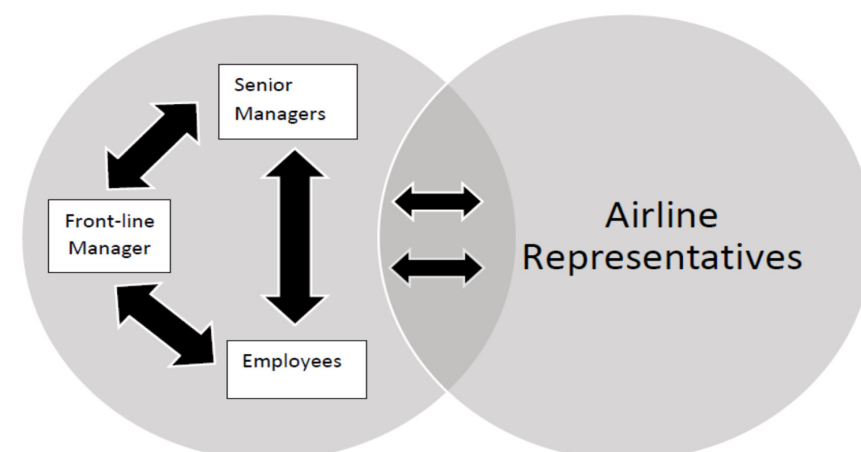
Figure 3. Exchanges across organizational boundaries.

5.2. Second Approach—Utilizing Relationships with Experienced Employees to Facilitate Radical Organizational Change Practices

Ching-Fu and Yu [88] indicated that both job demands and job resources have a significant impact on burnout and organization commitment. While front-line managers are overloaded with paradoxical demands of the role and their organizational commitment was questioned, using internal social exchange to compensate for the lost skill set was critical to facilitate radical organizational change practices.

After establishing the new subsidiary company, the original subsidiary received all the experienced employees, while the new subsidiary company was left to recruit inexperienced individuals. The front-line managers were challenged to manage the opposing degrees of skill sets. Ottley and Davis [41] believed that the employees' skills could be compromised if radical organizational change cost cutting left insufficient funds for employees' education, training or learning through employment experience. Although this research finding agreed with Ottley and Davis' [41] belief regarding the negative effects of radical organizational change, which include lost skill sets and experience, it enhances it as Ottley and Davis's study did not uncover how these lost skill sets are being recovered and how the use of front-line managers' social exchange aids the building of skill sets. This research yielded in-depth information that related to the recovery of these skill sets; the results revealed that the front-line managers used their relationships with experienced employees to facilitate the day-to-day operation of the original subsidiary, which helped the front-line managers to build up spare time to allow them to focus on the new subsidiary. Additionally, the front-line managers mobilized their social exchange with the experienced employees to compensate for the lost skill sets caused by the radical organizational change.

To compensate for the lack of skills and training, new employees tended to build relationships with the front-line managers, who had knowledge and expertise gained throughout the years. This finding revealed the importance of social exchange in relation to the front-line manager's role during radical organizational change. It revealed the benefits that front-line managers could offer to attract employees and participate in social exchange with them.

5.3. Third Approach—Rewarding the Employees in Exchange for Helping to Address the Personnel Resource Shortages

According to Hussain et al. [89], non-monetary rewards and recognition motivate employees more than financial rewards. In their research, they have listed a few examples of non-monetary rewards for employees, including recognizing the employee's effort in producing the company newsletter, providing written letters of recommendation, providing the employee with extra time-off or over-time, and verbal appreciation and recognition. This is in line with our findings where the front-line managers were rewarding employees in return for helping to address the personnel resource shortages post downsizing. The front-line managers were offering employees additional days off and allowing them to leave work early. This finding supports Prouska et al. [90] who found that work-life balance motivates employees to work harder because it is perceived as a reward. In contrast, Peluso et al. [91] conducted a quantitative research and concluded that while many employees like to be rewarded, whether in monetary or non-monetary form, it differs from one individual to another, wherein some individuals may not be motivated by the reward provided by the employers.

Front-line managers could have gained valuable input regarding higher-level planning and decision-making from employees, including feedback on employee attitudes. While employees' involvement in planning was non-existent, the results indicated that the front-line managers adequately mobilized their relationships with the employees and rewarded them to improve the workflow and provide practical solutions. The front-line managers engaged employees and used them as part of the solution for the issues that were caused by poor planning and radical organizational change mismanagement. In line with this finding, González and Garazo [92] encouraged managers to place more emphasis on stimulating employee job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behavior.

5.4. Fourth Approach—Motivating Existing Employees by Various Morale Enhancing Techniques

The results of this study indicate that the failure to consider human factors in radical organizational change planning, communication and management leads employees to perceive an ambiguous organizational future and to resent and resist the change. Senior managers lacked the means to accommodate for this shortfall—such as not possessing a contingency plan or rectification process—and were focused more on the financial and legal aspects of the change rather than on being concerned about the employees' wellbeing. Similarly, front-line managers were excluded from the planning process and had no notion of the process required for managing or evaluating the change. However, the findings suggested that the front-line managers used their relationships with the employees to gain some acceptance of the change and to concurrently facilitate the change process. The front-line managers focused on the human factors of the employees during the change. This finding corroborates the research by Martins [93], who believed that if knowledge and teamwork are considered important organizational resources, then managers must consider employees as a primary stakeholder group during change management. In line with this, Buhler [44] emphasized on the importance of considering staff a key element in strategic planning, which is a viewpoint not shared in the organization that was studied.
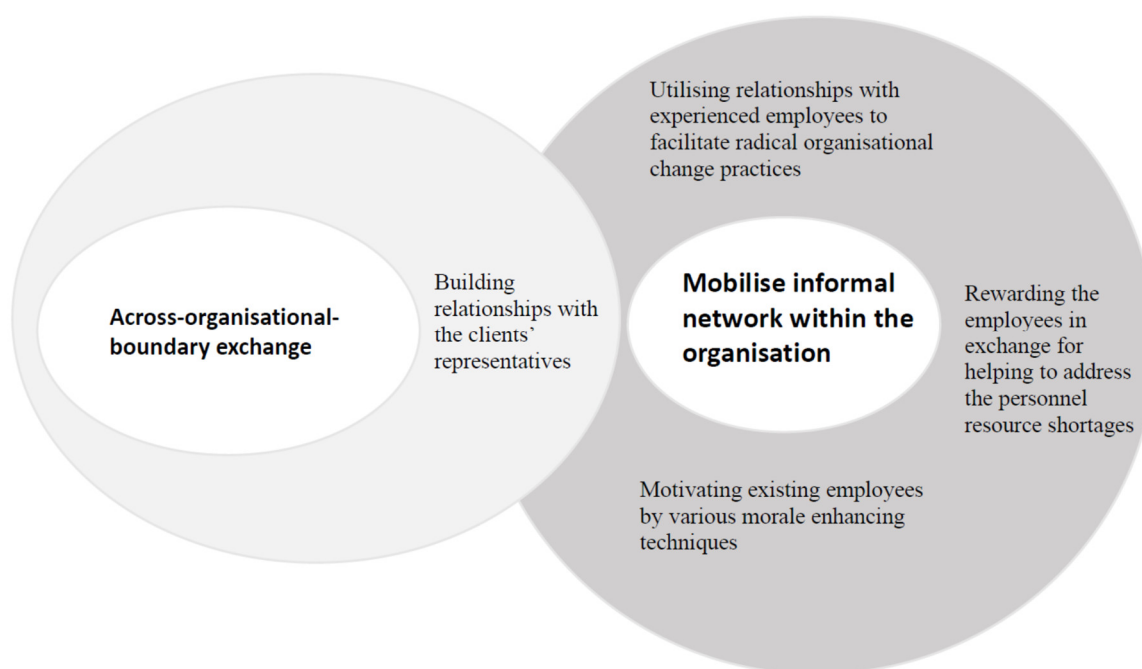
The front-line managers used internal social exchange to alleviate the adverse effects of radical organizational change on the employees. The radical organizational change negatively affected the employees' performance and made it difficult for the front-line managers to manage their day-to-day operational activities. The findings revealed that those individuals who remained may also be demoralized. Brockner [94] reached a similar conclusion, believing that those who remained would experience psychological stress—particularly those with inflexible or conservative coping responses, skepticism and low motivation and morale. The resulting "survivor syndrome" involves a set of negative emotions such as fear, distress, guilt, distrust, betrayal, depression, anger, frustration, and insecurity that may continue for a long time [95].

Consequently, this negative survivors' experience may change the formulation of relationships in the workplace and may make the achievement of organizational goals more challenging [86]. The redundant and remaining employees tend to ally with the front-line managers, so that their need for sympathy is fulfilled. The results revealed that the front-line managers attempted to motivate employees to overcome the adverse effects of radical organizational change, to facilitate the workflow and to control morale to alleviate further issues. Previous studies, such as Applebaum et al.'s [52], found that front-line managers' leadership might also promote or stimulate positive discretionary behaviors in supervisees, which is often called working "beyond contract" [52]. This, in turn, will influence personal and organizational efficiency.

5.5. First Theoretical Contribution: Understanding the Role of Social Exchange in Enabling the Front-Line Managers Overcomes Some of the Challenges Caused by Paradoxical Demands

This study contributes to an understanding of the role demands, expectations and challenges that front-line managers face during radical organizational change. In recent decades, the scope of the front-line manager's role has expanded, and organizational failings have augmented the weight of increased workloads and more extensive responsibilities [96,97]. Inadequacies in the definition of the position and in the expectations that come with it can result in role conflict [93,98]. Inadequate support from management, which involves the direct manager of the front-line managers, the surrounding managerial culture and systems and structures, may further augment role conflict [93]. This study unpacks the complexity of the front-line manager's role through a triadic investigation, which is a contribution to the field of knowledge in change management research. It provides evidence regarding how front-line managers can fulfil the seemingly paradoxical demands of their role using social exchange processes. This study suggests that the front-line managers mobilized social exchange to overcome challenges during radical organizational change. The mobilization of social exchange involves four approaches that were outlined above.

Social exchange studies within the business context situate themselves mainly within organizational boundaries; however, the complexity of the business environment in general, and particularly within the airport services provider context, prompted the researchers to look beyond these boundaries. In the environment of the airport services provider, there are social exchanges beyond the organizational boundaries that are detrimental to the front-line managers' role and that are, in many ways, helpful to overcoming radical organizational change's negatives effects. The results of this study demonstrate that cross-boundary exchanges notably influence the way that front-line managers act daily, particularly during radical organizational change. Figure 4 illustrates how the front-line managers mobilized their social exchange.

Figure 4. Front-line managers' mobilization of social exchange.

5.6. Second Theoretical Contribution: Integrating Paradox Theory and Social Exchange Theory to Better Understand Front-Line Managers' Role in the Context of External Shock

Kerr et al. [99] summarized the front-line manager's role in the following ways: scheduling, planning and work allocation; work conduct and output monitoring; equipment, cleanliness and safety inspection; directing new equipment establishment; handling unpredicted issues with recruitment, production and equipment; enforcing discipline; managing conflicts; counselling; training; keeping records; and helping in work operations. According to Thurley and Wirdenius [100], the essential roles of supervision include ensuring the continuity of production and achieving operational reality with written plans [101].

While these duties are typical of a front-line manager's role, from the lens of social exchange theory, the relational aspect of the front-line managers' duties is emphasized—something that has not been discussed in detail in previous studies. If we expand the view of employment to include a sense of community, which refers to " . . . the perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them [and] the feeling that one is a part of a larger dependable and stable structure" [102] (p. 87), the socially interdependent nature of workers and front-line managers in the aviation services firm is reflected in participants' responses to questions regarding the support they sought or received in their employment. In spite of the many radical changes that were happening in the workplace, and when many individuals faced significant job insecurity, paradoxically, the overwhelming answer was that support came

from "colleagues" and "friends" and with almost equal emphasis on the support from "front-line managers".

Following on from this, the study finds evidence that it is useful to anchor aspects of change management from the front-line managers' perspective on a logic of paradox, and that this approach is valuable in furthering our understanding of managing change during periods of extreme change due to the consequences of external shock [103]. Through paradox theory, it is possible to map paradoxes and the interactions during the change process and classify them under three approaches that front-line managers adopt in both facilitating change and sustaining ongoing operations in the aviation services sector.

Social interaction and social exchange are part of all workplaces, but the emphasis of both front-line managers and workers' responses to this question foregrounds the importance of viewing the role of the front-line manager from its relational aspect [104].

5.7. Practical Implications

The study is important in that it allows similar organizations to learn from those that underwent past external shocks to ride the turbulent waves of change as a result of COVID-19 and enhance their organizational sustainability and longer-term competitive advantage from two perspectives.

First, the study highlights certain practices that front-line managers would need to be concerned about during periods of change due to the consequences of external shocks. These include the following:

1. building relationships with work colleagues to achieve the KPIs,
2. rewarding and recognizing employees' efforts to maintain a positive work environment,
3. building a relationship with clients to achieve the service level agreements
4. raising awareness among employees and senior managers through informal communication,
5. encouraging direct communication between employees and senior managers, and
6. guiding employees on the most effective approach to protect employees' best interest

Second, the study reinforces research that finds that front-line managers will need to develop competencies in paradox resolution or reconciliation to enable them to overcome the conflicting demands as a result of these shocks [105]. While it seems that front-line managers appeared to get through the changes based on their experience and by capitalizing on social exchanges, they will need to learn and develop skills relating to recognizing and resolving or reconciling paradoxes [62]. Learning processes are intrinsically social and collective, building on common codes of communication and coordinated search procedures to jointly understand complex problems. However, learning goes a step further in that it generates new patterns of activity, new routines and new logics of organization [105], and it can help reconcile the paradoxes associated with order and chaos through reordering, and serendipity and recognition through preparation.

5.8. Limitations and Future Research

The present study has three main limitations. First, because each of the external shocks are unique in nature (e.g., volcanic eruptions are different to terrorism events), some of the findings are not generalizable across events and industries. Indeed, the external shocks listed earlier (see Table 1) that had an influence on the organization between 2003 to 2019 and resulted in major radical organizational change events were usually short-term events. Therefore, this raises the question as to what extent the study findings can be used with the situation caused by COVID-19, which is significantly more extensive and long-lasting. Future studies should be conducted in other industries and in other organizations within the aviation sector and during COVID-19 restrictions if possible. It is also recommended that a comparative analysis across countries be conducted, specifically, comparing the development, opportunities and barriers to social exchange in selected sectors in different countries in the Southeast Asian region and/or other regions. These

studies with larger samples could also use the qualitative interview, or case study method. The researchers suggest including a subsequent development of quantitative hypothesis testing cross-sectional or longitudinal studies to confirm major findings.

Second, using interviews as the primary method for collecting the data helps deliver the study's objectives, although this is subject to personal bias and recall bias. Also, some participants were cautious about answering some interview questions because they may have had privacy and confidentiality concerns. Future research should consider grounded and action research methods to collect primary data. Third, other theoretical perspectives could be used instead of social exchange theory, including leader–member exchange, network theory and identity theory. Also, the study points to opportunities for future research investigations of various phenomena, such as across organizational boundaries within the different stakeholders of the airport. They may investigate the exchanges between airlines' representatives and airport services providers' employees and/or leaders. While this research is focused on the ground-handling service providers, future researchers may investigate other types of service providers such as government agencies including security, quarantine and the border force. This study highlighted the importance of social exchange in a hectic, fast-paced environment. Front-line managers were found to have a critical role in incorporating human factors in radical organizational change. The findings should encourage future researchers to look more deeply into what can be done to ease the burden of the consequences of external shocks on front-line managers while managing the paradoxical demands of change and regular work activities.

6. Conclusions

Understanding the nature of social exchange is important for the role of front-line managers because the findings suggest social exchanges enable front-lines managers to facilitate radical organizational change and overcome paradoxical demands. This study finds evidence of the importance of social exchange in understanding how these front-line managers overcome the paradoxical challenge of facilitating change while ensuring continuing current operations.

From this, it elaborates on four main approaches that front-line managers use, based on social exchange, to overcome the often-paradoxical demands of the role. In so doing, the research will help senior managers to understand the importance of social exchanges in the workplace in the context of external shock. This may result in positive outcomes for employees and improve the efficiency and effectivity of the change process.

Thus far, the literature has not given sufficient attention to the human element during radical organizational change strategies like retrenchment, reorganization and repositioning as responses to an external shock. Nevertheless, some scholars consider the human element a defensive reaction to a crisis. According to this study, although the role of senior managers during change is acknowledged to some extent, front-line managers are the group with the most connection to issues of staff motivation, engagement, morale, and performance.

This paper recommends that future researchers investigate how to structure communication during radical organizational change events, to investigate the importance of communication between different levels of management and to investigate the crucial "lynchpin" role of front-line managers.

The study's practical and managerial implications include better incorporation of the human element in radical organizational change practices during external shocks, which reduces the problems caused by layoffs and negative psychological reactions among employees. It is also important that organizations prepare its front-line managers by helping them learn and develop skills to organizationally build relationships and to recognize and reconcile paradoxes. While COVID-19 may be more extensive and a much longer lasting external shock that affects many more sectors of the global economy, organizations can learn from previous experiences of those that underwent similar radical changes due to external shocks. In so doing, it allows those organizations that are often at the mercy of ex-

ternal shocks to avoid a common problem noted by Winston Churchill: "We often stumble over the truth, but we pick ourselves up and hurry along as if nothing had happened."

Appendix A. Extract of Interview Protocol Questions

The researchers: I'd like to understand how the front-line managers managed their shifts during the transformational change events considering there was a lot of pressure put on the front-line managers. They had to deal with new staff, redundancies, managing the change process, and implementing new procedures, and at the same time they had to work effectively and efficiently, and deliver better outcomes. The front-line managers were challenged with a dual role, facilitating change and regular work activities at the same time.

Appendix A.1. Understanding the Dual Challenge of Front-Line Managers Role and its Challenges

Can you please tell me how the front-line managers managed all these challenges that came with the transformation?

Comment: Prompt the respondent about their social exchange with clients/staff. Example: What change does the dual role make to service standard? How does it impact the company environment? How may it limit the problem-solving skills of front-line managers? Did the front-line managers hold employees accountable to overcome the operational problems? Did they ensure employees are not complacent to limit the problems? How did they manage it?

The researchers: During the transformation, the social exchange between the different individuals was subject to change; I would like to know how the front-line managers reacted to this change and how it affected their daily tasks.

Appendix A.2. Learning about the Front-Line Managers Enactment During ROC

From your observation, can you please comment on how the front-line managers handled and managed the following:

○ Handling of disruption (Grounded flights, flight delays, equipment breakdown)
○ Manage resource allocation (Sick leave, staff shortage, no shows, injuries, fatigue)
○ Leadership style (leading by example, stay calm and professional, work ethically, follow the company procedures)
○ Monitor employees (maintain the employees' performance, disciplinary actions, ensure compliance, smooth workflow)
○ Manage clients' relations (service level, errors, aircraft damage, safety standard, visa violations, slow processing)
○ Manage sharing important information with their fellow workers/senior managers (Ensure circulation of information, formal meetings, face-to face conversation)."

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