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Enablers of a Circular Economy: A Strength-Based Stakeholder Engagement Approach

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Introduction

This chapter increases our understanding of strength-based stakeholder engagement as an enabler of the sustainability transition to a circular economy. A circular economy entails reducing the use of natural resources, reusing materials to sustain value, recycling more efficiently and seeking to build closed cycles of material, energy and nutrient flows (Corvellec et al., 2022; Korhonen et al., 2018). A circular economy is seen as a promising response to the current sustainability crisis (Kirchherr et al., 2017; Marjamaa et al., 2021). The transition from a linear to

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a circular economy is a systemic change that requires broad-based stakeholder interaction, collaboration and engagement of public and private organisations (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017; Gonzalez-Porras et al., 2021; Lehtimäki et al., 2020; Lieder & Rashid, 2016; Morseletto, 2020). The circular economy makes the sustainability transition actionable at individual, organisational and societal levels.

Recent research has indicated that stakeholder engagement is significant in the circular economy, as the mutual support of stakeholders is needed to effectively implement the idea of a circular economy (Lieder & Rashid, 2016). Stakeholder engagement is increasingly used to study sustainability-related issues such as sustainable innovations (Scuotto et al., 2020; Todeschini et al., 2020), environmental management (Onkila, 2011; Papagiannakis et al., 2019), sustainability accounting and reporting (Herremans et al., 2016), biodiversity conservation (Jolibert & Wesselink, 2012) and climate change mitigation (Luís et al., 2018). In a sustainability transition, stakeholder engagement entails identifying the drivers and barriers of the advancement of environmental and sustainability issues and sustainability management (Harclerode et al., 2016). Moreover, stakeholder engagement has an impact on the ways in which sustainability (Hine & Preuss, 2009), goodwill, consent, control, cooperation, accountability, trust and fairness (Davila et al., 2018) are considered in stakeholder relationships.

Stakeholder engagement, in this chapter, refers to the involvement of stakeholders who can affect, or are affected by, a circular economy and their relationships in activities and decision-making processes related to a circular economy (cf., Freeman, 1984; Greenwood, 2007; Roloff, 2008). Previous research has concluded that stakeholder engagement consists of a variety of practices and is a purposeful action with aims and outcomes (Sachs & Kujala, 2021). Stakeholder engagement practices involve processes through which various stakeholders can be included and acknowledged in decision-making and policy-making processes (Kujala et al., 2022). Examples of stakeholder engagement practices are informing, consulting, dialoguing and learning from and with stakeholders (Greenwood, 2007; Kujala & Korhonen, 2017; Lehtimäki & Kujala, 2017). As the outcomes of stakeholder engagement, previous

literature has highlighted the importance of positive and constructive stakeholder relationships (Freeman et al., 2010; Harrison & Wicks, 2013). While stakeholder engagement is often considered as something positive (Correia Loureiro et al., 2020; Davila et al., 2018; Greenwood, 2007), a deeper understanding of what creates the positive in stakeholder relationships is needed.

In this chapter, we explore what constitutes positive and constructive stakeholder relationships at the individual, organisational and societal levels of stakeholder engagement. Theoretically, we build on an established notion in management research arguing that by engaging stakeholders collaboratively and democratically, leaders can create collective futures that are built on the strengths of the participants and an appreciation of the best of what is (Cooperrider & Srivastava, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). The goal is to increase our understanding of how identifying and enhancing the strengths in stakeholder relationships reveal opportunities that exist for sustainability transition and support, realising sustainable value for all stakeholders. In the strength-based approach, the best of 'what is' and 'what could be' are taken as a starting point in the analysis of the situation at hand and in imagining the future (Bushe & Marshak, 2014).

Empirically, we present an exploratory study of stakeholder engagement in a circular economy in Finland, a country globally recognised for its thought leadership in advancing the circular economy. The data comprise in-depth interviews with 36 specialists representing different stakeholders involved in advancing the circular economy in Finland. The respondents were asked to describe situations where they had received positive feedback on their personal or collective action in advancing the circular economy. In the analysis, we focused on the language the respondents used in describing the situations and the positive experiences they have had. The results of the analysis elaborate on the situations of receiving positive feedback from others and moments of success as experienced by the interviewees at the individual, organisational and societal levels.

Our study contributes to the stakeholder literature by elucidating the positive foundation of stakeholder engagement. By focusing on the moments of appreciation and positive experiences of individuals engaged

in stakeholder interaction, we explicate the ways in which stakeholders engage 'in a positive manner' (Greenwood, 2007, p. 318) and build a 'positive connection' (Correia Loureiro et al., 2020, p. 388) with each other. The result of empirical analysis demonstrates the constructive capacity of stakeholders for creating positive social change by nurturing life-giving forces in interaction (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Our study illustrates that identifying and enhancing the strengths in stakeholder engagement reveal opportunities that exist for a circular economy activity in fostering sustainability transition.

The rest of this chapter is structured as follows. In the next two sections, we discuss the theoretical premises of our study, the strength-based approach and stakeholder engagement. Next, we describe the methodology and findings of our study. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical contributions, managerial implications and guidance for future research.

The Strength-Based Approach

The strength-based approach is an alternative to problem-solving and root cause analysis as organising principles. The focus in the strength-based approach is on identifying the strengths of the current state and working on the desired future, starting with the smallest available action points (Cooperrider & Srivastava, 1987; Thatchenkery, 2013). Cooperrider and Srivastava (1987) evoked the construct of 'anticipatory reality' to demonstrate that by engaging stakeholders collaboratively and democratically, leaders can create a collective future that is built on the strengths of the societal participants. Contrary to viewing organisations as problems to be solved, the strength-based approach is interested in what it is that people consider as valuable and in what situations they feel appreciated (Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2006). Thus, organisations are considered as sites of human relatedness and alive with infinite constructive capacity for creating positive social change, where the purpose of organising is to nurture life-giving forces in interaction. The central argument is that an organisation and organising that focuses on problem-solving is tied to what is wrong, while organising that focuses

on strengths can more easily identify solutions and use the strengths in transforming the organisation (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

The difference between a problem-solving and strength-based approach can be illustrated with an example from organisational development research. Bushe and Marshak (2009, 2014) identified two complementary approaches, diagnostic and dialogic, in organisational development and change. In the diagnostic approach, the objective is to produce a detailed analysis of the system, identify problems in the system and create action plans to invoke behaviour to solve the problems. The objective of the dialogic approach, on the other hand, is to increase awareness of a variety of experiences in the system and help to change the mindset of organisational actors. Both approaches emphasise process orientation and focus on interaction that enables the solution-seeking action of others. While the diagnostic approach emphasises objective data, detailed analysis and problem-solving methods, the dialogic approach emphasises raising consciousness about alternative perspectives and self-organising for invoking generative ideas that lead to change (Bushe & Marshak, 2009, 2014).

The strength-based approach comprises two well-established streams of research, appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Selian, 2021; Cooperrider & Srivastava, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Laszlo & Cooperrider, 2010; Thatchenkery et al., 2010) and appreciative intelligence (Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2006). Next, we describe these two research streams more closely.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative inquiry is a constructive inquiry process that looks at what is of value to organisations, communities and larger human systems when they are functioning at their best (Thatchenkery et al., 2010). It is both a form of study and a mode of practice. As a form of study, appreciative inquiry adopts a systematic search for capacities, processes, language and practices that give life to a living system. It seeks to increase our understanding of the types of practices that support human growth, increased awareness and capacity-building (Bushe & Marshak, 2009,

2014). As a mode of practice, appreciative inquiry is a process through which people are invited to discover what is working well, to dream and envision what might be, to design what should be and to define the plan to achieve what is designed (Cooperrider & Srivastava, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Whitney, 2010).

In empirical research, appreciative inquiry refers to action research that combines studying and changing social systems using social constructionist principles to draw attention to the power of positive language in creating desired futures (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004). In empirical inquiries, researchers collaborate with people engaged in the study to identify the future potential and create action plans in the focal organisation. Laszlo and Cooperrider (2010) demonstrated that appreciative inquiry strengthened a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate and heighten positive potential. Drawing on their experiences at an appreciative inquiry summit that was designed to facilitate collaborative discovery with a strengths-based approach, they argued that involving stakeholders in imagining what is possible fosters co-learning, co-development and responding to complex situations creatively and holistically (ibid.). Studies conducted in Finnish organisations comprised appreciative inquiry in public, private and non-governmental organisations (Holma et al., 2015; Lehtimäki et al., 2013; Parkkali et al., 2015; Parkkinen et al., 2015). The studies indicated how appreciative inquiry supports developing a customer-oriented culture through bottom-up processes, engaging the members of an organisation and middle management in organisational change processes and enhancing communication and focusing on positive potential in post-merger situations.

Appreciative Intelligence

Appreciative intelligence refers to the ability to perceive the positive potential in a situation and to act purposively to transform that potential into outcomes (Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2006). Appreciative intelligence has three components: reframing, appreciating the positive and seeing how the future unfolds from the present. We will describe each of these in the following.

Reframing refers to seeing problems in a new light and creating alternatives that have not occurred within the old framework. It involves shifting a frame so that new relationships and dependencies become apparent. As an example, Thatchenkery and Metzker (2006) demonstrated that Silicon Valley entrepreneurs thought differently (with respect to the content of their thoughts and the processes they employ) by intentionally reframing market signs and opportunities. Reframing is necessary in leadership, as continuous problem-solving and crisis management are what leaders face often. Over a period, the firefighting mindset may inhibit the appreciative intelligence of leaders and trap them in a path of a single-trajectory problem-solving style. Opportunities for innovation and creativity might be lost and time is spent attending to what is urgent as opposed to what is important. As an example, in the transition from a linear to a circular economy, the default mode is the deficit conversation such as warnings about the looming ecological disaster originating from the irreversible climate change. Even though the science about climate change is solid, the doomsday crisis mentality generally pushes people to resort to a reactive way of thinking and responding. Reframing means, seeing the circular economy as a novel purpose for joint action across organisations to create opportunities for sustainable innovation. It encourages new relationships and dependencies among stakeholders from the public and private sectors and government agencies.

Appreciating the positive, the second component of appreciative intelligence is based on social constructionist philosophy. Appreciating the positive is about intentionally seeking the generative vocabulary that looks at what works in a system as opposed to what does not. Appreciating the positives must become a habit if it is to have a lasting impact. Most well-meaning participants in a circular economy are unconsciously participating in all-pervasive deficit discourse with a vocabulary consisting of hundreds of negative words about the ecological crisis awaiting us. Circular economy activists will have to observe with an open mind and truly believe that positive possibilities can be brought to the surface with intentional reframing. Appreciating the positives allows for shifting the viewpoint from visibly insurmountable macro-level issues to small changes that are possible to attend to at the individual and local levels. Such reframing encourages action towards a

sustainable future instead of helplessness and procrastination in the face of incomprehensible change.

Seeing how the future unfolds from the present is the third component of appreciative intelligence. It is not enough to reframe or recognise positive possibilities. We must know what to do at the present moment, akin to a state of being mindful (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). The future possibility must be realised in the current reality through purposive action, very similar to the process of the enactment of possibilities (Weick, 1988). It becomes easier to join the action rather than remain an outsider and criticise, dismiss, or neglect the sustainability transition. For example, climate activist Greta Thunberg has demonstrated the power of individual initiatives to create and transcend global movements. With appreciative intelligence, we start noticing and valuing the actions that are taken by investors in for-profit corporations for the public good and by the citizens and legislators at the societal, national and global levels.

In addition to the three components mentioned above, appreciative intelligence leads to four qualities in individuals (Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2006), namely persistence, conviction that one's actions matter, tolerance of uncertainty and irrepressible resilience. Persistence is the ability to stick with a project or problem to its fruitful completion. There are two types of persistence. The first one, behavioural persistence, is the external manifestation of visible actions that are sustained over a period to accomplish a goal. The second one is cognitive persistence, where an individual continues to think about a goal that may continue long after behaviour to accomplish it has stopped.

Conviction that one's actions matter creates confidence in our abilities to mobilise the mental resources and plan of action needed to accomplish a task. Overall, people with high self-esteem have a greater tendency to persist in the face of failure and challenges. They are also more likely to reframe and see the presence of alternatives to achieve a goal. The creative ideas and actions that individuals pursue create uncertainty or ambiguity. Moreover, people with high appreciative intelligence exhibit a high tolerance of uncertainty, ambiguity and cognitive dissonance (Thatchenkery, 2015). Beyond tolerating their own uncertainty, they help other people to address uncertainty, often by reframing situations to help them see

what was positive. Finally, individuals possessing high appreciative intelligence exhibit irrepressible resilience and can bounce back from a difficult situation or a challenge with renewed energy (Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2006).

Appreciative intelligence also relates to cognition and opportunity recognition, two important facets of a circular economy. Gaglio and Katz (2001) suggested that successful entrepreneurs possess a cognitive schema called 'entrepreneurial alertness', which helps them to stay in a mental state of being alert to opportunities. They hypothesised that entrepreneurs possessing such a schema are predisposed to searching for and noticing market disequilibria and possibly reframing to see new positive possibilities, for example, for a circular economy. Entrepreneurially alert individuals will thus be more able to 'think outside the box' than people with a lower level of alertness. This line of thinking is consistent with the characteristics of people with high appreciative intelligence who have narrated stories regarding how they reframed problem situations, recognised opportunities and overcame challenges, all by recognising the generative potential in them and engaging in immediate actions to help unfold the future of the circular economy. The potential for enhancing a circular economy vitality by creating a robust appreciative intelligence development programme for stakeholders is clear.

Stakeholder Engagement

Most of the current stakeholder engagement literature builds on stakeholder theory, focusing on the relationships between firms and other societal actors (Freeman, 1984; Freeman et al., 2010). Accordingly, stakeholder engagement can be described as involving stakeholders and stakeholder relationships in organisational activities and decision-making (Sachs & Kujala, 2022), and examined by paying attention to stakeholder relations, stakeholder communication, as well as learning with and from stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2017; Kujala & Sachs, 2019). Moreover, stakeholder engagement is often understood as something positive (Correia Loureiro et al., 2020; Davila et al., 2018; Greenwood, 2007) and constructive stakeholder relationships are seen as the

outcomes of stakeholder engagement (Freeman et al., 2010; Harrison & Wicks, 2013). To better understand stakeholder engagement and relationships, especially in the sustainability context, we need to pay attention to what happens at various levels of stakeholder engagement.

The levels of stakeholder engagement comprise the individual level, the organisational level (firm and industry levels) and the societal level (Gonzalez-Porras et al., 2021). In sustainability transitions, the individual level of stakeholder engagement focuses on stakeholders as change agents (Pelenc et al., 2015). This level examines actors and their actions rather than stakeholder relationships and interactions (Fischer & Newig, 2016; Koistinen et al., 2020) and considers individuals' role in sustainability transitions. Understanding stakeholders' attitudes and motivations is important, as individual-level practices may lead to positive societal transformations when supported by the institutional environment (Köhler et al., 2019; Mutoko et al., 2014; Pesch, 2015).

The most established organisational-level stakeholder engagement analyses organisation–stakeholder relations (Sachs & Kujala, 2022). At the organisational level, stakeholder engagement refers to relationships and interactions between an organisation and its stakeholders such as employees, suppliers or customers (Bulgacov et al., 2015; Loorbach et al., 2010; Sulkowski et al., 2018). Stakeholder engagement at the organisational level also depends on the context in which the organisation operates (Gonzalez-Porras et al., 2021). The presence of a supportive environment is highly significant (Rhodes et al., 2014; Waddell, 2016), and stakeholders, such as the government and researchers, have a key role in establishing regulations, promoting infrastructures and disseminating sustainability practices (Foxon et al., 2004; Hörisch et al., 2014).

In addition, the organisational level of stakeholder engagement involves industry-level networking to address common concerns (Millar et al., 2012; Mutoko et al., 2014). Collaborative processes include gaining knowledge and expertise, accessing resources and improving each participant's legitimacy through an interorganisational learning process based on diverse dyadic relationships and interactions between the actors (Millar et al., 2012). As a process, industry-level networking

requires a dialogical approach and a high level of trust (Millar et al., 2012). To advance sustainability-related issues in stakeholder engagement, collaborative relationships, resource sharing, mobilisation in stakeholder networks and partnerships and the alignment of objectives and activities towards a shared goal are needed (Köhler et al., 2019; Millar et al., 2012; Mutoko et al., 2014).

Finally, at the societal level, organisations and their stakeholders from different sectors interact with civil society to support systemic change and promote sustainability transitions (Glasbergen, 2010; Köhler et al., 2019; Pattberg & Widerberg, 2016; Waddell, 2016). The societal level includes 'diverse stakeholders from multiple sectors and industries who, together with civil society actors—NGOs, local communities, governments, cities and the media—seek to solve sustainability challenges and enable sustainability transitions' (Gonzalez-Porras et al., 2021, p. 220). At the societal level, stakeholder engagement consists of various dialogical collaborative practices that lead to knowledge sharing and learning, as well as promoting societal change through partnerships, human interactions, communication, conversations, negotiations and agreements (Pruitt et al., 2005). Stakeholder engagement may be improved by processes of learning and argumentation, where stakeholders interact to promote environmental change and learn how to turn conflicting views and interests into shared views, agreement, consensus and joint solutions (Van de Kerkhof, 2006). The outcomes of stakeholder engagement at the societal level consist of change innovations and value creation that meet societal needs and support sustainability (Gonzalez-Porras et al., 2021; Mont et al., 2014; Watson et al., 2020).

To conclude, stakeholder engagement at the individual, organisational and societal levels consists of various activities that often have a positive or constructive connotation or undertone such as gaining knowledge and learning, generating innovations, turning conflicts into consensus and supporting sustainability change. To deepen our understanding of what constitutes the positive and constructive in stakeholder relationships, especially in the sustainability context, we move now to our empirical examination of stakeholder engagement in a circular economy context in Finland.

Context and Methods

A circular economy in Finland is an interesting context for studying stakeholder engagement, because Finland has been a global thought leader in the circular economy, introducing the first circular economy road map in the world in 2016 (Sitra, 2016). In 2019, the government set the goal of reaching carbon neutrality by 2035 (Programme of Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Government, 2019) and, in 2021, the government prepared a strategic programme to promote the circular economy.

We conducted 35 interviews and interviewed 36 circular economy specialists (two specialists were present at the same time in one interview) in Finland in the spring of 2020. The interviewees represented different stakeholders involved in advancing a circular economy at local, regional and national levels in both public and private organisations (Table 11.1). The interviews were conducted in Finnish, and recorded and transcribed verbatim.

During the data collection, we followed the appreciative inquiry guideline of not asking the interviewees to share their problems and challenges but rather to focus on positive experiences. In designing the interviews, we applied the appreciative framework by Thatchenkery and Metzker (2006) and asked the interviewees to describe two types of experiences. First, the interviewees were asked to describe an experience of positive feedback they had received on individual achievement in advancing a circular economy. Second, the interviewees were asked to describe an experience of appreciation for a joint achievement. We then asked the interviewees to reflect on positive thoughts, constructive feedback, feelings of appreciation and points of learning from both experiences.

For the analysis of the interviews, inductive content analysis (Berg & Lune, 2017; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) was performed to identify keywords and themes of strength-based experiences. Many interviewees initially reported that it was difficult to describe their feelings during the occasions they described as moments of appreciation. This exemplifies that dwelling on the negatives is the default mode. However, when we persistently reframed and asked what was working and when they had felt joy,

Table 11.1 The interview data

Stakeholder groups	Interview date	Length (minutes)	Interview code
Ministries	14.5.2020	45	20MI13
	20.5.2020	46	20MI19
	27.5.2020	81	20MI27
	29.5.2020	110	20MI33
	28.5.2020	101	20MI30
Federations	13.5.2020	48	20FE12
	15.5.2020	59	20FE10
	20.5.2020	70	20FE34
	20.5.2020	90	20FE18
	22.5.2020	83	20FE20
	27.5.2020	69	20FE28
Development and support organisations	11.5.2020	79	20DE01
	12.5.2020	80	20DE03
	13.5.2020	57	20DE06
	14.5.2020	73	20DE07
	25.5.2020	64	20DE22
	29.5.2020	84	20DE31
	11.5.2020	110	20RE02
	15.5.2020	84	20RE09
	18.5.2020	85	20RE14
	25.5.2020	69	20RE23
	26.5.2020	87	20RE26
	26.5.2020	68	20RE25
Cities and municipalities	12.5.2020	52	20CI04
	14.5.2020	88	20CI08
	15.5.2020	56	20CI11
	25.5.2020	83	20CI21
Companies	13.5.2020	55	20CO05
	18.5.2020	62	20CO15
	18.5.2020	79	20CO17
	29.5.2020	80	20CO16
	26.5.2020	96	20CO24
	27.5.2020	93	20CO29
	29.5.2020	68	20CO32
Other	22.5.2020	79	20MI35

excitement and success in working with others, the interviewees were able to share several such instances. The responses to positively oriented questions indicate that when encouraged, people become empowered to focus on what is vital and nurturing in their work. Consequently, we were able

to collect data that allowed us to examine what worked in stakeholder relations and the opportunities that emerged when stakeholders communicated with each other. Intentionality and mindfulness are needed to focus on positive language, to reassure constructive feedback from others and to foster empathy and positive emotions.

Findings

To answer our research question regarding what constitutes situations where people feel appreciated and make the organisation/stakeholder engagement alive with a constructive capacity for creating social change, we identified life-giving forces at the individual, organisational and societal levels of stakeholder engagement (Table 11.2). We will elaborate on each of these in the following.

Individual Level

The responses reflected an understanding that, as an individual, one can have an impact but that appreciation for a slow change is necessary. The respondents described that individual motivation gives a sense of value as a change agent and that the work on a circular economy

Table 11.2 Moments of appreciation in stakeholder engagement in a circular economy

Level	Moments of appreciation
Individual	Having individual motivation
	Feeling of appreciation
	Having positive feelings about oneself
	Being able to set an example
Organisational	Appreciating routines
	Crossing organisational boundaries
	Building a shared understanding
	Doing things together
	Receiving positive feedback from others
Societal	Recognising that change is possible
	Understanding collaboration as a powerful practice
	Becoming empowered through interaction

is rewarding. These actions help in reframing and focusing on what is possible. At the individual level, emotions and feelings of appreciation were important. The interviewees described a variety of emotions they experienced, namely pride, satisfaction, empowerment, inspiration, humility, enthusiasm, belief, capability and appreciation. The circular economy specialists also described a variety of positive feelings of themselves while working on issues related to a sustainable future. These feelings included satisfaction, tranquillity, empowerment and a sense of doing the right thing. Appreciation of stakeholder engagement supported self-efficacy.

Also, the sense of being able to set an example in the sustainability transition in society at large was considered important. The interviewees appreciated the notion of being among the forerunners in the sustainable circular economy. They described the importance of being able to demonstrate how solutions can be identified and applied. They were also proud of being among those who are applying the sustainable circular economy principles and being in a position of awakening others about the importance of sustainable development in public and private organisations and in society at large.

> The latest example is from this week, when I got a government official to change his mind and approve an alternative construction material manufactured by our member organisation as part of their project. The material is not purely circular economy but involves the use of recycled materials. I also got appreciation from the company for getting deeply involved in this and for giving clear guidelines. (Interview 20FE20)

Organisational Level

The responses indicate that learning to appreciate routines and practices in stakeholder engagement for sustaining continuous communication and learning with stakeholders so that the desired future can start to unfold from the current reality was important. Moments of success that the interviewees described included success in creating collaboration across organisational boundaries and winning competitions. The

respondents considered crossing organisational boundaries as empowering in collaborative learning and continued interest in engaging with each other. What was considered important in collaboration was building a shared understanding among different actors. This included the sense of being open in dialogue, the capability of bringing people together to discuss and find solutions, and the ability to enable discussion among those who were identified as important actors in advancing the sustainability transition through a circular economy, but who might not identify each other as actors working on similar topics. The excerpt below expresses the sense of accomplishment that an active specialist had achieved through active participation in a national dialogue on advancing the circular economy:

> I am proud that [our industry] has become one of the central actors and discussants in the circular economy so that we are now participating in almost everything that takes place in Finland. It has been a joy to talk about all that companies are doing, and then you notice that your voice is heard, and you receive invitations to all kinds of programmes and groups. (Interview 20FE12)

Joint efforts in organisational boundary-crossing co-operation built a sense of accomplishment. Encouraging trust building in relations that transcend organisational boundaries was considered important. The excerpt below illustrates that trust building is considered an outcome of openness and self-commitment:

> … trust needs to be built. It comes with open discussions and maybe also with setting a personal example, I mean, that when I show that I share a secret with the other person, they notice that they can tell their secrets to me. Being an open and trustworthy partner takes you far. Also, I would like to add that it is important to recognise your own weaknesses, be appreciative of them and be open to say that, listen, I don't know or understand much about this either, but I know someone, let's call them. (Interview 20CO17)

The sense of doing things together in collaboration with others emerged as an important consideration. This included the experience of

growing and building competence together, being part of a successful team and building lasting relationships with others, and working on making the sustainability transition happen in organisations.

Instances of receiving positive feedback from others were plentiful and were described in rich detail. Peers in the interviewees' own organisations and in stakeholder organisations, superiors and young people were mentioned as those giving positive feedback. Such feedback included indicating interest in what the specialist had to say, curiosity to learn more about the viewpoints of the specialists and expressions of gratitude for taking action to advance a sustainable circular economy.

> It feels good to get appreciative feedback. But when you look a bit deeper, well, I think, I don't know, I think it starts with placing yourself in the positions of others so that one can communicate the different kind of viewpoint. It is about humility. (Interview 20CO32)

Societal Level

The responses indicate that there is a sense of empowerment in recognising that one can influence change in society through one's work and that people and the society can change. This notion builds on the experience that collaboration is a powerful practice. The excerpt below describes a situation where people from different organisations came together to launch an event for a circular economy product:

> Well, we learned to appreciate that we have incredibly motivated people and that it was very rewarding that we pulled together teams that crossed organisational boundaries and found a completely novel kind of power in them. (Interview 20CO05)

Change in the societal level entails interaction across organisations. The excerpt highlights the value of interaction between stakeholders from different organisations. The interaction took place across sectors and involved private, public and third-sector organisations. Our analysis shows that at the societal level, stakeholder engagement does not only

consist of various dialogical collaborative practices that lead to knowledge sharing and learning, but also a sense of togetherness, empowerment, motivation and reward that stems from working together for a common goal. The excerpt above shows that the outcomes of stakeholder engagement at the societal level include a potential for innovative practices in future collaborative activities across organisational boundaries.

Discussion

Our analysis shows that individual motivation, feelings of appreciation, positive feelings of oneself and pride in being among those who are making a change constitute the life-giving forces of a strength-based stakeholder engagement at the individual level. At the organisational level, appreciating routines, collaboration within and across organisational boundaries, building a shared understanding, doing things together and receiving positive feedback from others are the life-giving forces of a strength-based stakeholder engagement. At the societal level, the life-giving forces of a strength-based stakeholder engagement consist of recognising that change is possible, understanding that collaboration is a powerful practice and becoming empowered through interaction with people from different organisations. The findings contribute to multi-level analysis of sustainability transition (Geels, 2020).

In particular, this study contributes to previous research by elucidating the positive in stakeholder engagement (Correia Loureiro et al., 2020; Davila et al., 2018; Greenwood, 2007) and by explicating that strength-based stakeholder engagement builds on the positive potential for change at all levels of stakeholder engagement (Gonzalez-Porras et al., 2021). Focusing on strengths highlights the power of collaborative efforts in organising for sustainability and fosters appreciative dialogue in framing the desired future (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004). Furthermore, the results of our analysis indicate that strength-based stakeholder engagement is powered by being non-judgmental about the variety of experiences in advancing a circular economy, constructive feedback to novel ideas and collaboratively attending to constructing anticipatory realities. Identifying strengths in stakeholder engagement and focusing

on the best in people reveal opportunities that exist for sustainability transition.

The analysis also indicates that a broad-based understanding of the change and courage of both an individual and a larger collective is needed. The circular economy specialists considered that keeping up the momentum and being resilient in the face of a slow-moving societal change are important. Such notions seem to strengthen learned optimism (Seligman, 1991) and belief that the circular economy makes the sustainability transition possible.

Our study points to significant managerial implications. Enhancing the circular economy has had a technological 'bias' to some extent. There is an underlying belief that scientific and technological advancements will solve the sustainability crisis. Corvellec and colleagues (2022) have recently pointed out that the circular economy has an implicit ideological agenda dominated by technical and economic narratives, which may slow down long-term viability and acceptance among leaders and decision-makers at the organisational and political levels. Our study indicates that there is space for a dialogical organisational development approach founded on transformative positive conversations among stakeholders, focusing on what is possible instead of what is not.

We would like to caution the well-meaning and highly motivated stakeholders and leaders that ignoring the resistance-to-change aspect of organisational transformation may come at a high price. Circularity is a socio-technical systems (STS) challenge. The technical domain has shown immense progress, which should be acknowledged and celebrated. At the same time, we should be mindful to equally focus on the social domain and recognise how the default deficit dialogue can unconsciously undermine future progress and innovation for circularity. Our study points to the promise of positive conversations and the development of appreciative intelligence among stakeholders for creating a robust social foundation for supporting the technical advances yet to come.

The limitation of our research is that we have only examined stakeholders who are involved in the challenge of advancing the sustainability transition with a circular economy. Our interviewees were among the pioneers of the circular economy development in Finland and thus

enthusiastic about and committed to advancing the issue. Future research on stakeholder engagement should focus on finding ways to address strength-based stakeholder engagement among the non-interested or critical stakeholders. Lessons learned from this study will be directly relevant for framing a workable research design for such research.

Conclusion

The circular economy represents action that supports the sustainability transition and requires stakeholder engagement. Building on a strength-based research approach, we interviewed circular economy specialists representing various circular economy stakeholder groups and explicated the life-giving forces for positive and constructive stakeholder engagement at the individual, organisational and societal levels. By focusing on moments of appreciation and positive experiences, we elaborated on the ways in which strength-based stakeholder engagement reveals opportunities that exist for circular economy activity in fostering the sustainability transition. Our study contributes to the stakeholder literature by elucidating the positive foundation of stakeholder engagement.

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