

# LEADERSHIP AND STRATEGY THE VITAL BUT EVASIVE ROLE OF COOPERATION AND CLARITY OF EXPECTATIONS DURING STRATEGIC CHANGE\*

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## ABSTRACT

Strategic change evokes a shift in the distribution of power and, therefore, often impairs cooperation and obscures the standards that employees must achieve. Yet, unless employees perceive the work environment as cooperative and their responsibilities as unambiguous, they tend to feel too unsafe to embrace the uncertainty that change entails. To examine the significance of this cooperation and clarity of standards, in Study 1, 223 executives assessed workplace cooperation, clarity of standards, meaning at work, impediments to strategic change, and firm performance. Workplace cooperation and clarity of standards were inversely related to impediments to change – a relationship that was mediated by meaning at work. To clarify how organizations cultivate this workplace cooperation and clarity of standards in the midst of change, 35 executives were interviewed. Thematic analyses revealed that leaders should first inculcate a vivid, shared vision but then gradually encourage individuals to assume distinct responsibilities that match their preferences.

**KEYWORDS:** leadership, change management, cooperation, meaningful work, obstacles to change, strategic change

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## 1. Introduction

Despite the prevalence and significance of strategic change in organizations, many initiatives or transformations culminate in a range of complications and problems (Franken, Edwards and Lambert, 2009). For example, during the implementation of strategic change, the norms and dynamics of the workplace are disrupted and may seem unfamiliar to employees. As familiarity declines, two complications can unfold. First, in unfamiliar environments, people are more inclined to perceive their social environment as hostile instead of cooperative (cf., Rios, Ybarra and Sanchez-Burks, 2013). Second, in these environments, people are not as certain which duties, obligations, and standards they should fulfill (Higgins, 1987).

Because of these two complications, after strategic changes are instituted, individuals are not as sure their relationships with co-workers are strong and support-

ive. They feel that other individuals may either be hostile or reject them. When the strength of their relationships subsides, people are not as likely to perceive their work as meaningful (for evidence, see Zadro, Williams and Richardson, 2004). As this sense of meaning declines, individuals are not as engaged in their work (Kahn, 1990, 1992; May, Gilson and Harter, 2004), often diminishing their resilience (Britt, Castro and Adler, 2005), and increasing their resistance to change.

Therefore, to implement changes effectively and to curb any resistance to these changes, managers and change agents must, somehow, prevent these threats to relationships. Leaders need to foster support and trust. This study explores the practices that executives utilize or champion to achieve this goal. Furthermore, this study examines whether these practices do indeed diminish the obstacles that have been shown to impede the success of workplace changes.

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## 2. Obstacles to change

The majority of strategic change initiatives do not achieve their desired objectives because of unexpected barriers. Franken et al. (2009) estimated that about 75% of change initiatives are unsuccessful. These shortcomings have been ascribed to a variety of obstacles (e.g., Getz, Jones and Loewe, 2009; Hrebiniak, 2006, 2008; Rowe, 2001).

Arguably, these obstacles can be reduced to four clusters. First, managers and change agents often overestimate the capability of themselves, or their organization, to implement the change. Consequently, expectations are unrealistic (Miller, Wilson and Hickson, 2004), deadlines are implausible (Alexander, 1985), complications are trivialized (Speculand, 2009), too many changes are attempted (Freedman, 2003), and not enough responsibilities are delegated (Lippit, 2007). Furthermore, inadequate training is offered to facilitate this adaptation to change (Alexander, 1985).

Second, managers and change agents often reach decisions prematurely (Kruglanski and Webster, 1996), in which they fail to seek enough advice and support from other experts in the organization (Lippit, 2007; Raps, 2004). Likewise, they do not garner the opinions and perspectives of a sufficient number of employees (Raps, 2004). In addition, they do not reflect upon the complications adequately but instead settle on plans that are devoid of detail and clarity (Alexander, 1985; Cocks, 2010). Employees thus feel either disenfranchised or uncertain, diminishing their willingness to embrace the change.

Third, managers and change agents are not always willing enough to update and refine their plans. Consequently, they do not monitor the changes adequately (Freedman, 2003; Lippit, 2007), because they are not especially receptive to feedback. Individuals, therefore, do not feel accountable (Cocks, 2010), and apathy towards the change may unfold.

Finally, managers and change agents may dismiss the uncertainty and anxiety that change can provoke rather than help employees withstand these emotions. They may not engage employees adequately or inspire these individuals to accept unpleasant emotions as integral to this broader vision (Lippit, 2007). They do not offer incentives, such as rewards and recognition in response to success (Freedman, 2003) – incentives that could motivate employees to accept these changes.

## 3. Meaning and obstacles to strategic change

To reiterate, many of the obstacles that impede strategic change can be reduced to four clusters: inflated capabilities, premature decisions, reluctance to update plans, and neglect of unpleasant emotions. Practices that redress these four clusters, therefore, should override the impediments to change. Fortunately, according to the meaning maintenance model (Heine, Proulx and Vohs, 2006), when individuals experience a sense of meaning at work, these four clusters of impediments tend to dissipate. This model, although usually applied outside the workplace, could provide some vital insights to managers and change agents.

### 3.1. Meaning in life and inflated capabilities

According to the meaning maintenance model, when people are exposed to events that shatter their sense of meaning or coherence – such as incongruent words (Randles, Proulx and Heine, 2010), subliminal reminders of futility (Van Tongreen and Green, 2010), or absurd narratives (Proulx and Heine, 2009) – they become more susceptible to a range of cognitive biases (Proulx and Heine, 2006, 2008). Each of these cognitive biases is activated to restore a sense of meaning and coherence.

First, after their sense of meaning is threatened, people tend to overestimate the capabilities of themselves or their associates. To illustrate, in response to words that prime futility instead of meaning, people tend to inflate their self-esteem (Van Tongreen and Green, 2010). Consequently, they feel they can achieve their purpose, instilling a sense of meaning in their lives. Therefore, if people experience a sense of meaning in their work or personal lives, their tendency to inflate their capabilities – the first impediment to strategic change – should abate.

### 3.2. Meaning in life, premature decisions, and reluctance to update plans

In addition, after meaning is threatened, need for closure escalates. People become especially motivated to seek certainty and clarity, endorsing activities or environments that are predictable, ordered, and unambiguous (Van Tongreen and Green, 2010). Without this certainty, the facets of their life do not seem coherent and meaningful (Heine et al., 2006).

Conceptually, this need for closure comprises two facets: seizing and freezing (Kruglanski and Webster, 1996; but see Roets, Van Hiel and Cornelis, 2006). Seizing refers to the tendency of some individuals to reach decisions prematurely, without careful consideration, ultimately to

override feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty (De Dreu, Koole and Oldersma, 1999). Freezing refers to the inclination of some people to neglect feedback or information that could challenge their assumptions (Kruglanski and Freund, 1983). Threats to meaning, therefore, are likely to provoke both premature decisions and disregard of feedback (Van Tongreen and Green, 2010). Accordingly, if individuals experience meaning in their work or personal lives, premature decisions and reluctance to update plans – the second and third impediments to strategic change – should dissipate.

### 3.3. Meaning in life and the neglect of unpleasant emotions

Finally, when individuals feel their life at work or home is meaningful, they are more willing to embrace the unpleasant emotions that strategic changes can initially elicit. To demonstrate, when individuals perceive their work as meaningful and important, they feel their tasks align to their values (Kahn, 1990, 1992). They do not feel the need to suppress their natural inclinations and, therefore, can devote themselves wholly to their work, manifesting as engagement. Consistent with this argument, when individuals perceive their work as meaningful, they are more likely to feel engaged at work (May et al., 2004).

Employees who are engaged at work tend to be more resilient to change and other stressful events. In demanding circumstances, they regulate their emotions effectively, as gauged by increased activation of the parasympathetic nervous system (Seppala, Mauno, Kinnunen, Feldt, Juuti, Tolvanen and Rusko, 2012). They also experience fewer symptoms of illness in response to escalating demands and responsibilities (Britt et al., 2005), provided these events do not divert the attention of these individuals from their work. Indeed, many studies indicate that a sense of meaning, a key determinant of engagement, coincides with resilience to unpleasant emotions (e.g., Affleck and Tennen, 1996; Savolaine and Granello, 2002).

In short, if employees experience a sense of meaning, especially in the work environment, strategic changes are more likely to be implemented effectively. That is, the likelihood or consequences of inflated capabilities, premature decisions, reluctance to update plans, and unpleasant emotions diminishes.

## 4. Strategic change and meaning

As these arguments imply, to override the hurdles that impede the implementation of change, managers and change agents must instill in employees a sense of mean-

ing in their work or personal lives. A variety of practices can be instituted to fulfill this goal (see Baumeister, 1991). Yet, as Stillman, Baumeister, Lambert, Crescioni, DeWall and Fincham (2009) demonstrate, individuals do not experience a sense of meaning, unless they feel supported and included. In particular, if people feel rejected, their activities do not seem as meaningful (Stillman et al., 2009). Instead, when excluded, individuals orient their attention to more immediate pursuits, such as their need to restore relationships, rather than to meaningful aspirations for the future (Mikulincer, Shaver and Rom, 2011; Popper and Amit, 2009).

Unfortunately, during strategic changes, individuals are not as likely to feel supported or included. Two features of these changes can explain this decline in support.

First, after strategic changes are implemented, the distribution of power and responsibilities that characterize the workplace tend to shift. Individuals, therefore, often become more motivated to seek power (cf., Judt, 2010). According to the motivational lateralization hypothesis, this pursuit of power tends to diminish the motivation of people to cooperate (see Kuhl and Kazen, 2008).

Consistent with these arguments, as Maner and Mead (2010) demonstrated, when the distribution of power is liable to shift – a plausible consequence of strategic changes – managers are not as likely to behave cooperatively. They become more inclined to prioritize their own interests over the needs of their workgroup or organization. In these settings, individuals are more inclined to perceive their managers or colleagues as unsupportive, sometimes called a negative model of others (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991).

Second, in the aftermath of strategic changes, people are not always certain of their duties and responsibilities. They are not sure of the standards they are expected to fulfill, especially because many of these expectations are implicit and evolve gradually over time (cf., Cannon-Bowers, Salas and Converse, 1993). Consequently, individuals feel they may violate these duties and standards. In these circumstances, people assume, often implicitly, they will be punished, rejected, and perceived as unworthy of their community (Higgins, 1987, 1999), sometimes called a negative model of the self (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991).

Accordingly, in the midst of strategic change, individuals are more likely to perceive other people as unsupportive or themselves as unworthy of their community. When people adopt this mindset, they feel they may be rejected or excluded rather than supported or included (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2005; Mikulincer, Shaver, Bar-on and Ein-

Dor, 2010; Shaver, Schachner and Mikulincer, 2005). Their sense of meaning thus declines (Stillman et al., 2009), exacerbating the obstacles to strategic change.

## 5. Study 1

### 5.1. Preliminary remarks

Taken together, as these considerations imply, while strategic changes are implemented, individuals may not perceive their surroundings as cooperative or feel certain about their duties and responsibilities. Consequently, they do not feel sure they will be supported, diminishing their sense of meaning, at least in the work setting (Stillman et al., 2009). Consequently, these individuals inflate their capabilities, reach premature decisions, fail to update their plans, and experience strong negative emotions in response to change (e.g., Van Tongreen and Green, 2010).

As this account implies, to implement changes effectively, managers and change agents must circumvent these problems. They must foster a sense of cooperation, despite the changing distribution of power and resources. They must also clarify the duties and obligations of individuals within the midst of shifts in strategy. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: A sense of cooperation and clarity of standards should be negatively associated with impediments to strategic change.

Hypothesis 2: These relationships should be mediated by meaning at work.

The first study was conducted to assess these hypotheses. In this study, executives from a variety of organizations, mostly associates of the Palladium Group or the researchers, completed an online survey. The survey assessed the degree to which these managers believed that employees perceive the work environment as cooperative and the standards as unambiguous and achievable. In addition, the survey measured the degree to which employees seemed to experience meaning at work. Finally, the executives evaluated both the degree to which various hurdles impeded attempts to implement change as well as the performance of their firm. The second study sought the opinions of executives on how to foster this cooperation and clarity of standards.

## 5.2. Method

### 5.2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were executives working in 223 organizations in Asia or Oceania. These individuals were invited

to participate in an online survey, comprising five main sections. First, participants answered demographic questions in which they were asked to describe the revenue, size, sector, industry, and location of the organization as well as their own age, gender, position, and experience in management. Second, participants completed questions that related to a model, developed by the Palladium Group and the other authors of this paper, around the leadership practices that facilitate the execution of strategy. These questions included items that gauge the level of cooperation and clarity of standards in their organization. Third, questions that assess the degree to which the employees manifest a sense of meaning were posed. Fourth, participants indicated the degree to which they felt that various obstacles had impeded their attempts to implement strategic change. Finally, a measure of firm performance was included, partly to substantiate the consequences of obstacles to change. All these questions were embedded within a broader survey that also assessed other features of the organization.

Among 223 companies, 22% of these organizations reported revenue greater than \$1 billion, and 15% reported revenues between \$10 million and \$49 million. Furthermore, 49% of these organizations employed more than 1,000 employees, and 20% employed between 100 and 499 employees. These organizations mostly operated in Oceania (53%) and Asia (32%). The sample comprised more male than female executives (73 vs 27%, respectively). Finally, 33% of participants were aged between 40 and 49, whereas 29% were aged between 50 and 59.

### 5.2.2. Measures

#### 5.2.2.1. Cooperation

A measure comprising three items, developed by the authors, was administered to gauge the perceived level of cooperation in the organization. The measure was derived from Baumeister's (1991) theory of meaning, the meaning maintenance model (Heine et al., 2006), and the Model of Sustained Strivings (Moss, 2012) and reflects the extent to which the individuals in the organization, including peers and leaders, seem helpful and supportive. Each item comprised two statements, representing high or low cooperation respectively. A sample item is "At my organization, people tend to be very cooperative, supportive, and caring of one another" and "At my organization, people are often competitive, rather than cooperative, towards one another". Participants specified the degree to which one statement was more accurate than was the other statement on a 7 point scale. This format is designed to prevent ambiguities and, therefore, to minimize random error. The alpha reliability of this scale was .76.



### 5.2.2.2. Clarity

A set of five items was constructed and administered to measure clarity of standards and duties. These items were derived from established theories of meaning (Baumeister, 1991; Heine et al., 2006; Moss, 2012) and reflect the degree to which individuals feel a sense of control over their work, either because their duties are unambiguous and feasible or because they are granted autonomy. Established scales were not applicable, because they do not integrate each of these features. Again, each item comprised two statements such as “Employees have clear objectives and accountabilities” and “Employees do not have clear objectives and accountabilities”. Participants indicated the extent to which one statement was more applicable than was the other statement on a 7 point scale. The alpha reliability of this scale was .75.

### 5.2.2.3. Sense of meaning

Three items were also developed to measure the degree to which a sense of meaning pervades the workplace. Each item comprised two statements such as “At my organization, managers and employees seem determined and passionate at work” and “At my organization, managers and employees sometimes seem uninspired at work”. Again, participants specified the extent to which one statement was more accurate than was the other statement on a 7 point scale. The alpha reliability of this scale was .88.

### 5.2.2.4. Hurdle to successful execution of strategy

Thirteen items, adapted from the measure that was developed and validated by Hrebiniak (2006), were administered to identify the degree to which participants felt the execution of their strategies were impeded by a set of obstacles and hurdles. Sample items are “Lack of upper management support of strategy execution”, “Poor or inadequate information sharing between individuals or business units responsible for strategy execution” and “Inability to

manage change effectively or to overcome internal resistance to change”. Each item was measured on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) *not at all a problem* to (7) *a major problem*. The alpha reliability of this scale was .95.

### 5.2.2.5. Firm performance

To assess performance, a scale that was evaluated and constructed by Shea, Cooper, De Cieri and Sheehan (2012) was administered, with some minor adjustments. The scale comprises two subscales: organizational performance and market performance. Organizational performance reflects the extent to which managers believe the products, services, and operations of their organization are favorable. In contrast, market performance reflects the extent to which managers feel their organization engages in practices that increase financial success in the market. For this study, only market performance was examined. This 4-point subscale comprised 4 areas including growth in sales, profitability, and market share. Items were preceded by the stem “How would you compare your organization’s performance over the past year to that of other organizations in your industry sector in terms of ...? (1 = *worse*, 4 = *much better*). The alpha reliability of this scale was .83.

### 5.2.2.6. Control variables

Controls included firm revenue, number of employees, and industry sector. Four categories of industry sector were differentiated: private sector, public sector, government department, and non-profit organization.

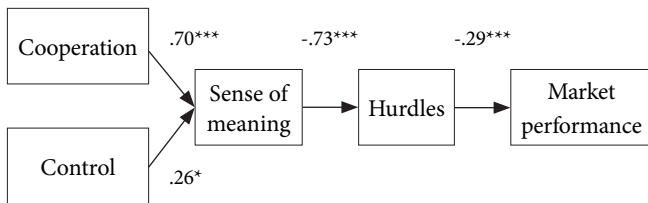
## 5.3. Results

Table 1 presents the mean, standard deviation, and possible range of each key variable, coupled with the correlations between each pair of variables. These data were subjected to structural equation modeling.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Firm revenue	4.74	2.19	--							
2. Number of employee	4.60	1.71	.72**	--						
3. Sector	1.43	0.64	.00	.10	--					
4. Clarity	4.45	1.12	.28**	.38**	.13*	(.75)				
5. Cooperation	4.87	1.22	.14*	.21**	.09	.66**	(.76)			
6. Sense of meaning	4.79	1.35	.28	.27**	.01	.68**	.73**	(.88)		
7. Hurdles	4.15	1.51	.10	.19**	.11	-.59**	-.64**	-.59**	(.95)	
8. Market performance	2.43	0.73	.06	.08	.22**	.21**	.20**	.13**	-.29**	(.83)

**Table 1.** Descriptions statistics and correlations between the key study variables

**Legend:** SD – standard deviation; N = 223 organizations (alpha reliability coefficients are specified in parentheses along the diagonal); \* p < .050; \*\* p < .010



**Figure 1.** Structural equation model that depicts the relationships between cooperation, clarity of standards, meaning at work, hurdles to the execution of strategy, and performance

**Legend:** \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Note:** Model 1 is depicted in Figure 1. Models 2, 3, and 4 are identical to Model 1, except direct paths from cooperation and clarity to hurdles, hurdles to performance, and cooperation and clarity to performance were included in each model respectively.

Four models were assessed. Model 1, depicted in Figure 1, assumes that cooperation and clarity of standards affect meaning at work, and this meaning at work influences hurdles to the implementation of change and ultimately performance. This Figure also includes the B coefficients associated with each path. Model 2 was identical to Model 1, except direct paths from cooperation and clarity of standards to the hurdles or obstacles to change were included as well. Model 3 was the same as Model 1, except a direct path from meaning at work to market performance was also included. Finally, Model 4 was identical to Model 1, except direct paths from cooperation and clarity of standards to market performance was added. Models 2 to 4 were designed to assess whether mediation is full or partial.

Table 2 presents the fit indices that each model produced. The fit indices indicate that Model 1 fits the data adequately. Models 2, 3, and 4 did not significantly improve the fit indices. Therefore, Model 1 was deemed to be the most parsimonious representation of the data. As this model showed, the hypothesized indirect effects of cooperation and clarity of standards on hurdles to change via meaning at work were significant. Furthermore, cooperation and clarity of standards were indirectly associated with market performance.

Models	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	RMSEA	CFI
Model 1	821.82	420	1.95	.06	.90
Model 2	804.30	418	1.92	.06	.90
Model 3	820.75	419	1.95	.06	.90
Model 4	820.56	418	1.96	.06	.90

**Table 2.** Fit indices associated with the alternative models

**Legend:**  $\chi^2$  – ratio of chi square; df – degrees of freedom; RMSEA – root mean square error of approximation; CFI – comparative fit index

## 5.4. Discussion

In the aftermath of changes, the distribution of power and the duties of individuals tend to shift. Therefore, people are more inclined to contest this power, provoking a competitive rather than cooperative environment (e.g., Maner and Mead, 2010). Furthermore, as people become uncertain of their duties, they feel concerned they may violate these obligations and thus be rejected or punished by colleagues (Higgins, 1987). When individuals feel the environment is uncooperative and feel concerned they may be rejected, they do not believe they will be supported if problems unfold (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991), which compromises their sense of meaning in life (Stillman et al., 2009). As their sense of meaning declines, individuals exhibit a need for closure (Van Tongreen and Green, 2010), in which they reject both unpredictable settings as well as information that challenges their pre-existing preferences or practices – ultimately impeding the execution of strategic change.

To assess these propositions, in this study, executives from 223 organizations completed a survey that gauged the extent to which the environment is cooperative and the duties of individuals are unambiguous and attainable. Furthermore, the survey assessed the degree to which individuals perceive their work as meaningful and the level of their firm's market performance. As predicted, when the organization was cooperative and individuals felt their duties were achievable, people were more likely to perceive their work as meaningful. This sense of meaning was negatively associated with the extent to which hurdles impeded the execution of change. As these hurdles dissipated, market performance of the organizations tended to improve.

Several limitations need to be acknowledged. First, because the design was cross sectional, the direction of causality cannot be established definitively. For example, when hurdles impede the execution of strategies, individuals are not as hopeful their goals and aspirations can be reached. Their sense of efficacy diminishes – a state that has been shown to impede a sense of meaning (Baumeister, 1991).

Likewise, a sense of meaning might increase the extent to which people feel the environment is cooperative, or their duties are achievable, rather than vice versa. This possibility, however, is unlikely. Consistent with research on the meaning maintenance model, when meaning is reinforced, biases tend to dissipate (Heine et al., 2006). Individuals are not as inclined to inflate the fairness of the environment or the magnitude of their efficacy (e.g. Van Tongreen and Green, 2010). Therefore, a sense of meaning should diminish the degree to which individuals er-

roniously feel the environment is cooperative or their duties are achievable. In short, the results do provide strong evidence that a cooperative environment, coupled with achievable duties, foster a sense of meaning in employees.

Second, the survey assessed the experience of employees, such as the clarity of duties, from the perspective of executives. When individuals occupy positions of power, they become more likely to misconstrue the mannerisms and cues of other people (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi and Gruenfeld, 2006), especially if they are not very cooperative (Mast, Jonas and Hall, 2009). Their preconceptions are particularly likely to contaminate their evaluations of other people (Keltner and Robinson, 1997). Executives, therefore, might not be able to decipher the perceptions of employees precisely. These managers may not have accurately characterized the level of cooperation, clarity of standards, and the meaning at work their employees experience.

Nevertheless, two considerations imply this limitation may not have compromised the legitimacy of these results. First, the perceptions of executives often shape the behavior of employees. To illustrate, consistent with research on the Pygmalion effect (Tierney and Farmer, 2004), executives who assume that employees tend to be uncooperative will often cultivate a hostile environment. Consequently, even if executives overlook mannerisms and cues, the perceptions of these individuals may still align to the perceptions of their employees.

Second, if executives misconstrue mannerisms and cues, and therefore characterize employees inaccurately, a source of random error is introduced. This random error should diminish statistical power. Therefore, if future studies assess the perceptions of employees as well, the observed relationships may be even more pronounced.

## 6. Study 2

### 6.1. Preliminary remarks

Despite some limitations, Study 1, coupled with previous research, especially in the field of attachment theory (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991), implies that strategic change is more likely to be effective when two conditions are fulfilled. First, individuals need to feel their social environment at work is cooperative and supportive. Second, individuals need to feel the standards and duties they need to fulfill are unambiguous and attainable.

Unfortunately, during the turbulence of strategic change, these conditions are not always fulfilled. In the midst of strategic change, the distribution of power may shift, and competitive, rather than cooperative, behavior

may prevail (Maner and Mead, 2010). Likewise, during these changes, the roles of individuals may also shift, and their duties or standards may become uncertain.

Study 2, therefore, was conducted to ascertain how executives foster a cooperative environment and unambiguous duties in a dynamic and changing environment. That is, these individuals were first asked how they cultivate trust and cooperation among employees during the execution of strategic changes. Second, these individuals were asked how they clarify the duties, obligations, and standards of employees during these turbulent periods. These questions could uncover some key insights on how managers can foster the conditions that facilitate the implementation of strategies.

## 6.2. Method

### 6.2.1. Participants and procedure

The participants were 15 senior executives of companies in Asia, Australasia, Middle East, North America, Europe, and Africa. These executives were invited to participate by the Palladium Group. One-on-one interviews with each participant were conducted by one of the researchers. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes.

### 6.2.2. Interview schedule

The interviews were designed to characterize the practices and strategies that executives implement both to foster cooperation and to clarify the duties and standards of employees in the midst of change. The first few questions were intended to prime memories of relevant strategic changes. Participants were asked to describe between one and three strategic changes they implemented at their organization – that is, changes that affect an entire department, business, or organization. Next, they were encouraged to describe how they executed this change as well as the hurdles or complications that impeded this endeavor.

Then, to fulfill the aims of this study, participants were asked to describe the practices the organization implemented to foster trust and cooperation among employees. In addition, they were asked to indicate how the organization clarified the duties, obligations, and standards that employees need to achieve. Finally, participants were granted opportunities to discuss other practices or strategies that were applied to facilitate the implementation of these changes.

### 6.2.3. Data analysis

The responses of participants were subjected to the six phases of thematic analysis, as delineated by Braun and

Clarke (2006). First, two researchers skimmed – and then carefully read – the transcripts while they transcribed their initial thoughts, assumptions, and conclusions. Second, the researchers assigned codes to chunks of data that seemed to relate practices that were intended either to foster cooperation or to clarify duties and standards.

These chunks of data ranged from about 5 to 25 words and usually comprised 1 to 3 sentences. For example, the response, “Giving our people the feedback in performance management in a constructive way is where the trust begins and it comes back to the individual playing their part” was coded as “Constructive feedback about contributions”.

Third, to unearth potential themes, the researchers uncovered constellations of codes that appeared to be conceptually associated with one other. Disparities between researchers were then discussed and reconciled. Fourth, the researchers ascertained whether or not these themes were comprehensive enough to represent all the codes and responses of participants. A few themes were amended to fulfill this goal. Fifth, the researchers defined the key features of each theme. Finally, to construct a unified account of these data, the themes were compared and contrasted.

### 6.3. Results and discussion

Fifteen executives were asked to describe the practices they apply to foster trust and cooperation during times of change. Thematic analysis distilled three key themes: bidirectional communication, an emphasis on commonalities, and behaviors that exemplify trust.

#### 6.3.1. Bidirectional communication

The first theme, broached by 12 interviewees, revolved around bidirectional communication of information. According to many of the executives, to foster trust and cooperation, a range of practices that enable managers both to convey information and to receive feedback should be implemented.

These executives characterized the information that managers should disseminate. First, strategic changes should be described in detail, partly to enable employees to acclimatize themselves to these developments (e.g., “[...] give people an opportunity to reflect and absorb what is going on and to be able to ask questions”). Second, these changes should be justified clearly (“Explaining the reasons for things”; “being transparent”). Third, this communication should not underscore problems and complications but convey some benefits and progress (e.g., “We moved from talking (about) lost time injuries to more positive aspects such as the number of Safety Action notices raised in a month”).

The executives also clarified how managers could garner more feedback. That is, they referred to several tools and procedures that enable employees to share feedback with management, such as blogs (e.g., “We have been using and sharing internally with feedback and blogs”) and regular surveys (e.g., “I put out a survey every year. Where do you think we are and what needs to be changed and how should we progress”). Specifically, according to the interviewees, these tools should be designed to increase the number of channels in which information is communicated (e.g., “communicating a lot by multiple ways”) as well as the frequency of communication (e.g., “we call and email most days”).

This theme partly overlaps with the concept of autonomy support (Gagne, 2003). In particular, this theme implies that managers should justify their choices extensively as well as appreciate the distinct concerns of each person. These features, according to proponents of self-determination theory, promote an environment in which individuals feel autonomous (Moreau and Mageau, 2011; Ryan, 2005). That is, when decisions are justified and the unique needs of each person are acknowledged, individuals feel they are granted the autonomy to choose courses of action that align with their values.

Conditions that foster this sense of autonomy do indeed promote cooperation. In these environments, people recognize the unique needs and concerns of each person. They are not, therefore, as likely to objectify people – that is, to perceive individuals as objects to manipulate (Moller and Deci, 2009). They are more empathic and cooperative rather than aggressive and exploitative. Indeed, many studies indicate that autonomy support can promote supportive, cooperative behavior (Gagne, 2003).

#### 6.3.2. An emphasis on commonalities

The second theme, mentioned by 5 interviewees, related to an emphasis on commonalities across individuals. That is, the executives felt they should underscore the shared goals and experience, rather than emphasize the distinct roles and rights, of all managers and employees.

In particular, the executives tried to highlight the qualities that all managers and employees share, such as a common goal or objective (e.g., “Trust is built as you work towards a common goal”), a common set of values or priorities (e.g., “common sense of priority”), a consistent set of practices or behaviors (e.g., “Consistency in the way we work together”), and even a shared rival (e.g., “We make sure they understand how we can win against [our rival]”).



Rather than merely communicate these commonalities, executives also implemented other practices to foster these similarities. First, whenever individuals violated the values of their organization, some redress, such as castigation or warnings, were executed promptly (e.g., “We have taken actions on individuals that have stepped outside of these values”). Second, the goal to execute these strategies was shared across the organization rather than confined to a specific unit (e.g., “We don’t assign strategic areas to specific members”). Third, divisions between management and other employees were also moderated (e.g., “[...] a flat structure in our business”).

The consequence of these commonalities is that individuals conceptualized themselves as a collective (e.g., “It is all about us as a team not as individuals”) in which all members felt ownership over the change (e.g., “We have developed a sense of mutual ownership”). This identification with a collective and feeling of ownership is assumed to promote trust and cooperation.

Indeed, these themes closely align to the tenets of social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Specifically, people are more likely to cooperate with members of their social identity than with other individuals (Buchan, Brewer, Grimalda, Wilson, Fatas and Foddy, 2011). Consequently, individuals are more inclined to trust people who they conceptualize as members of their social identity or collective (Krueger, 2007).

### 6.3.3. Behaviors that exemplify trust

The third theme, broached by only two interviewees, revolved around management behaviors that exemplify trust. That is, as these executives emphasized, even trivial manifestations of support and credibility can promote trust.

These behaviors seemed to be classified into two constellations. First, some of the behaviors manifested goodwill and support in which managers offered unexpected rewards. Examples included “a happy hour although no alcohol” or “We also provide lunch three or four times a year”. Second, some of the behaviors manifested expertise, to promote trust in the proficiency of management (e.g., “Credibility to the middle management ranks”). Indeed, one of the executives highlighted the need to train and to recruit the best managers (i.e., “We have purged the middle management and we have hired good people to replace. Better and more expensive”. Better trained middle management).

These insights from the interviewees align with past research. Consistent with attribution theory (Kelley, 1973),

when managers engage in helpful behaviors that are distinct rather than ubiquitous, they are perceived as supportive. This perception that managers specifically, and the organization in general, is supportive tends to foster positive emotions (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Indeed, many studies indicate that unexpected favorable events elicit these positive feelings (Heilman, Nakamoto and Rao, 2002), and such emotions have been shown to promote close, trusting relationships (Waugh and Fredrickson, 2006).

In addition to supportive behaviors, proficiency can also promote trust. That is, people tend to identify more closely with some person or community they perceive as effective (van Zomeren, Leach and Spears, 2010). This research implies that employees are more likely to identify with managers they regard as proficient, and this sense of identification translates to trust (Tajfel and Turner, 1986).

### 6.3.4. Evolution of comprehensive key performance indicators (KPIs)

In addition, executives were asked to delineate the practices they utilize to clarify the duties, obligations, and standards of individuals in the midst of strategic change. This question also uncovered three distinct themes: evolution of comprehensive key performance indicators (KPIs), alignment of strategy to duties, and engaged communication.

The first theme, evolution of comprehensive KPIs, was broached by 6 interviewees. According to these executives, the roles, responsibilities, targets, and expectations of employees should evolve gradually from discussions rather than be imposed on employees.

In particular, the procedures to construct KPIs should align to five principles. First, KPIs should be mutual rather than inflicted onto employees (e.g., “agreed KPIs”). Second, these KPIs should accommodate the distinct needs and characteristics of each person (e.g., “Set key performance targets [...] that suit the individual as well as the organization”). Third, these KPIs should be refined over time (e.g., “It is updated”). Fourth, informal and formal feedback should be offered to foster a shared understanding of these KPIs (e.g., “Giving feedback ... should be done both informally and formally”). Finally, KPIs should transcend overt tasks and entail behavioral expectations as well (e.g., “How people are expected to perform within their role also needs to be clear”).

The recommendations of these executives are compatible with the determinants of ownership, delineated by Pierce, Kostova and Dirks (2001) and validated extensive-

ly (e.g., Pierce, O'Driscoll and Coghlan, 2004). According to this theory, when people feel they understand some change intimately, have been granted some choice about this change, and have even contributed to this development, they experience a sense of ownership. That is, they perceive this change as central to their identity, increasing their commitment to this development (O'Driscoll, Pierce and Coghlan, 2006).

This evolution of comprehensive KPIs is likely to foster this sense of ownership. During this mutual development of KPIs, employees should develop a greater insight into the historical evolution of these strategic changes. Because these KPIs are mutually agreed, employees should also be granted a sense of choice and opportunity to contribute to these changes.

### 6.3.5. Alignment of strategies and duties

The second theme, alignment of strategy to duties, was discussed by 6 interviewees. According to these executives, employees should be granted opportunities to understand how the overarching strategic change translates to their specific responsibilities and duties.

The interviewees described four phases or objectives that are needed to convert strategies into duties. First, employees must understand the strategies and values that underpin the organization. The executives recognized that many employees do not appreciate this overarching strategy either because their attention is confined to their own roles (e.g., "People from different fields tend to only see their patch") or because they need to reconcile competing priorities. To clarify the overarching strategy, managers believed the mission, vision, and values must be succinct (e.g., "(a) more succinct mission (is) central to our organization"), conveyed with words that resonate with employees (e.g., "We contemporized the language with focus groups"), and be communicated throughout the organization (e.g., "cascades throughout the regions").

Second, managers conducted discussions with employees to identify the more immediate objectives that need to be achieved, as well as the concerns that need to be addressed, to implement this strategy. One manager, for instance, referred to an "Excel chart that displays this week, next week and emerging issues". This phase is intended to "break our initiatives down".

Third, managers apportion these objectives to individuals. The aim of this procedure is to ensure that "Everyone knows what they are responsible and accountable for". Finally, to clarify the standards that individuals are expected to observe, managers develop and document standardized

procedures (e.g., "Clear policies and processes which are supported by process flow charts").

The benefits of these practices can be understood from the perspective of construal level theory (Trope, Liberman and Wakslak, 2007). According to this theory, individuals can either conceptualize activities, such as their work tasks, abstractly or concretely. That is, they can direct their attention to intangible patterns and regularities, called an abstract construal, or to specific, tangible features, called a concrete construal.

An emphasis on the overarching mission, vision, or values of the organization should elicit an abstract construal, in which individuals orient their attention to underlying patterns rather than specific details (Forster and Denzler, 2012). Indeed, past research confirms that references to values evoke this construal (Eyal, Sagristano, Trope, Liberman and Chaiken, 2009). Once an abstract construal is primed, individuals tend to think more flexibly. That is, they can more readily uncover a range of opportunities, tasks, and activities that could achieve some overarching purpose (for evidence, see Forster and Denzler, 2012). Consequently, an abstract construal, primed by allusions to the mission, vision, and values, might enable people to identify the responsibilities and duties they should achieve to fulfill this strategy.

### 6.3.6. Engaged communication

The final theme, engaged communication, was mentioned by four interviewees. These interviewees highlighted that communication about roles, responsibilities, duties, and standards should engage individuals. Rather than merely convey these standards in passive documents, managers referred to the importance of engaging people with more vivid media by "using stories and analogies". Furthermore, individuals should be granted opportunities to negotiate their role and responsibilities (e.g., "People get together and present and make their case then get endorsed or otherwise").

This reference to vivid stories and analogies is particularly apt, aligning closely to research in intuition and unconscious thinking. In particular, vivid depictions of some event have been shown to prime intuition and diminish the reliance of individuals on systematic cognitive deliberation (Lee, Amir and Ariely, 2009). That is, after they are exposed to vivid portrayals or pictures, to reach decisions, people trust their hunches, rather than, for example, count the benefits and drawbacks of each alternative (Lee et al., 2009).

Interestingly, when people depend on these intuitions, sometimes called unconscious thinking (Dijksterhuis,

2004), their decisions tend to be more astute – provided their experience in this matter is extensive (Dijksterhuis, Bos, van der Leij and van Baaren, 2009) and the alternatives vary on many ambiguous attributes (Dijksterhuis and Nordgren 2006; for conflicting results see Newell, Wong, Cheung and Rakow, 2008). Consequently, these individuals become more likely to reach decisions that generate the desired consequences. They can, for example, more readily decide which tasks to complete and how to complete these tasks. Therefore, they become more certain of their tasks, responsibilities, and duties.

## 7. Conclusion

Many scholars and practitioners bemoan the problems that unfold as organizations attempt to introduce strategic changes. This paper illustrates a paradox that may partly underlie these challenges. On the one hand, strategic changes can undermine the level of cooperation and obscure the duties and standards that employees must achieve. Specifically, strategic change can shift the distribution of power, provoking a competitive, instead of a cooperative, orientation in many employees (Maner and Mead, 2010). Furthermore, in the aftermath of strategic change, individuals are not certain whether duties, responsibilities, and standards they previously observed still apply.

On the other hand, during the execution of these strategic changes, cooperation and clarity of standards are especially important. Consistent with attachment theory, as this cooperation and clarity declines, individuals become concerned they may be rejected, rather than supported, by other people (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991). They feel too vigilant to explore future possibilities, diminishing their sense of meaning (Mikulincer et al., 2011). As their sense of meaning subsides, they seek certainty and closure (Van Tongreen and Green, 2010), decreasing their receptivity to change.

Study 1 uncovered results that vindicate these arguments. In this study, executives answered questions that assessed workplace cooperation, clarity of standards, meaning at work, impediments to strategic change, and firm performance. As predicted, workplace cooperation and clarity of standards were negatively associated with impediments to change, and this relationship was mediated by meaning at work. Furthermore, impediments to change were negatively related to firm performance.

Study 2 was conducted to uncover the practices and approaches that executives apply to foster both cooperation as well as clarity of duties and standards in the midst of change. To promote cooperation, executives suggested that managers should communicate often, justifying their changes as well as emphasizing the goals, values, practices, and challenges that everyone shares. Furthermore, they should furnish employees with many opportunities to provide feedback.

To clarify duties, responsibilities, and standards, managers need to communicate the mission, vision, and values as vividly as possible, with reference to stories and analogies. They should then collaborate with employees to formulate responsibilities and KPIs – responsibilities and KPIs that gradually evolve to accommodate the needs of individuals and the feedback they receive.

Taken together, these insights imply that managers should initially promulgate a vivid and shared vision of the future and then, over time, inspire employees to assume distinct responsibilities that align with their qualities and aspirations. Yet, further research is warranted to ascertain whether or not these recommended practices do indeed foster cooperation and clarity in the midst of strategic change.

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