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Reframing organizational change from a processual perspective

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## *Reframing organizational change from a processual perspective*

### **Abstract**

**Purpose.** This article aims at reframing organizational change from a processual perspective in order to transcend the polarized tensions between planned and emergent approaches to change and to better align with the lived reality of practitioners. **It informs the field of Learning & Development with fresh insights on how to broaden sensemaking repertoires of managers and employees in realizing organizational change.**

**Design.** In order to understand how change agents conceptualize organizational change at a conceptual level, this article relies on Heidegger's three modes of being-in-the-world to identify three dominant conceptualizations of organizational change and subsequently theorizes on corresponding phenomenological qualities of sensemaking.

**Findings.** This article develops a theoretical scaffolding that posits the emergence of organizational change as dialectic process of three different conceptualizations of change, i.e. wayfinding logic, managerialistic logic, and reflexive logic, that translate into three different phenomenological qualities of sensemaking, i.e. absorbed sensemaking, detached sensemaking, and mindful sensemaking respectively.

**Practical implications.** **A processual reframing of organizational change informs Learning & Development scholars and practitioners in at least three ways: raising awareness of and probing underlying managerial assumptions of what change is and how change should be managed, training managers and employees to deal with sensemaking processes to effectively realize organizational change, and actively assist in developing a broader sensemaking repertoire in order to deal with the equivocality associated with organizational change.**

**Originality.** This processual reframing contributes to the sensemaking literature on organizational change by reframing change as a dialectic process of different underlying assumptions of change agents, and different qualities of sensemaking of change. **It pinpoints to concrete actions that Learning & Development professionals can initiate in order to contribute to more effective change management practices.**

## **Keywords**

Organizational change, sensemaking, dialectics, processual thinking.

## **Introduction**

There is a growing sense among organizational scholars that theorizing on organizational change - “the reweaving of actors' webs of beliefs and habits of action to accommodate new experiences obtained through interactions” (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, p. 567) - does not provide a profound understanding of change. This includes its micro-processes and non-linearity thereof, the accomplishment of change and its dynamic, emergent and unfolding quality, as well as the successful ‘production’ of change (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Nor do change theories provide a solid guide for practitioners in the field: failure rates of change programs – to the extent that these can be estimated - vary highly, the 70% failure rate put forward by Beer and Nohria (2000) is much cited. Bottom line is that “we do not know enough about how change is actually accomplished” (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, p. 568) and how change ‘becomes’ in practice.

Organizational change theorizing is fraught with implicit and explicit assumptions that there is one best way to manage change, resulting in either planned or emergent approaches to change (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008; Burnes, 2011; Smith & Graetz, 2011). Whereas the planned vs. emergent or variance vs. process debates still dominate much of change debates, theorizing started to broaden and emphasizing various perspectives (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005) in an effort to shed light on underlying change dynamics: process, practice, middle management, sensemaking, etc... For example, Tsoukas and Chia (2002) emphasize relational interdependent complexities that unfold during organizational change under a relational process ontology. Practice perspectives take the micro-processes and lived experience of change practitioners seriously, researching practices, practitioners and praxis (Chia & Holt, 2009; Chia & MacKay, 2007; Nicolini, 2013). Middle management perspectives pinpoint the process of strategy translation, sensegiving, and facilitation during change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Sensemaking perspectives - whereby sensemaking is defined as “the process through which individuals work to understand novel, unexpected, or confusing events” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 58) - focus on the individual and collective interpreting, constructing and enacting dynamics of change among different change stakeholders (Bartunek, Balogun, & Do, 2011; Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph, & DePalma, 2006; Maitlis, 2005; Stensaker & Falkenberg, 2007).

Although a particular stream of research focusing on middle management sensemaking during change implementation (Balogun, 2003; Balogun, 2006; Balogun, Gleadle, Hailey, & Willmott, 2005; Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005; Bartunek et al., 2006; Luscher & Lewis, 2008; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011) recognizes differences in sensemaking modes in terms of ‘preprogrammed’ or ‘almost taken-for-granted’ sensemaking during times of ‘stability, and ‘more conscious’ sensemaking during times of change (Balogun, 2006), this approach remains embedded in a heavy juxtaposition between stability and change. It thereby associates one type of sensemaking during stability and another type during change, and exemplifies the prevailing dualistic thinking that is embedded in in being-realist ontology.

Theorizing on organizational change fails to truly incorporate how change is continually enacted and re-enacted in processes of organizing, resulting in a disconnection from the very phenomenon of ‘changing’ itself and practitioner lived experience thereof. From a phenomenon-based point of view, it stays unclear how change is constituted through sensemaking processes of organizational actors. In other words, the link between the ontological status and praxeological enactment of change remains uncharted territory. What is needed, according to Hernes, Hendrup, and Schäffner (2015, p. 118), is “not to move from stability to change, but to work with the forces of change already at play and understand the dynamics by which they interact to sustain an evolving focus for the change process. Such a view calls for thinking in terms of movement and flows.”

In order to overcome this frequent polarization in organizational change literatures, we provide in this article the scaffolding for a processual approach on the ‘becoming’ of organizational change. These processes have thus far not adequately been delineated in several recent efforts to explain organizational change (Bartunek et al., 2011; Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013; MacKay & Chia, 2013; Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2011; Van de Ven & Sun, 2011). “What is badly needed is a theory of change that acknowledges the inherently changeable nature of organizational reality” (Nayak & Chia, 2011, p.286). In sum, we tackle the following research question: How can sensemaking of organizational change be reframed from a processual perspective?

This article aims at unpacking what we mean by ‘changing’ through advancing a processual approach on organizational change. To study change, one has to look at how change is enacted and re-enacted through processes sensemaking. We argue that organizational change ‘becomes’ through a dynamic equilibrium of different conceptualizations of change and related qualities of sensemaking. Adopting a processual perspective, brings the constituting questions (Hawes, 1977)

of ‘what is the very phenomenon of change’ and ‘how is the phenomenon of change accomplished’ to the foreground.

We contribute to the process literature on organizational change by advancing a scaffolding for a processual approach on organizational change grounded in a more refined phenomenological orientation of sensemaking. We offer two specific contributions to the literature on organizational change. First, we add further refinement to the literature on organizational change by explicating different conceptualizations of organizational change from a phenomenological perspective and how these different conceptualizations shape the sensemaking processes of change recipients. Second, we reframe organizational change as a dialectic process whereby organizational change is being realized through a dynamic equilibrium (i.e. a dialectic) of the three identified conceptualizations of change and phenomenological qualities of sensemaking. As such, this processual perspective transcends the predominant variance-process duality in theorizing on organizational change, and focuses on practical relevance by bringing in a phenomenological perspective that focuses on different qualities of sensemaking.

A better understanding of underlying process dimensions of organizational change will furthermore enable Learning & Development scholarship and professionals to contribute to the realization of organizational change. Learning & Development scholarship will be provided with a scaffolding of different conceptualizations of organizational change in order to develop an enhanced understanding of the often competing approaches to manage organizational change. On a more practical level, training organizational members in the processual dynamics of change will not only raise awareness of the various dimensions of organizational change, it will also proactively help them in building a broader sensemaking repertoire in order to deal with and eventually realize organizational change successfully.

This article first introduces the onto-epistemological groundings of change and sensemaking based on Heideggerian phenomenology. Then, we elaborate on the interdependent ideal-types of onto-epistemological positions and praxeological framings: change as wayfinding logic and absorbed sensemaking; change as managerialistic logic and detached sensemaking; and change as reflexive logic and mindful sensemaking. Subsequently we discuss the processual nature of our proposed framing, and explain how this perspective adds to processual theorizing on organizational change.



## **A processual scaffolding for reframing organizational change**

In order to understand how change agents conceptualize organizational change at a conceptual level, we rely on Heidegger's three modes of being-in-the-world (Blattner, 2006; Chia & Holt, 2006; Dreyfus, 1991; Heidegger, 1926/2010) to identify three dominant conceptualizations of organizational change. Subsequently, we theorize on corresponding phenomenological qualities of sensemaking. Jointly, these three levels will constitute a theoretical scaffolding for reframing organizational change from a processual perspective. The development of the dominant conceptualizations of change and the phenomenological qualities of change occurred through leveraging literature streams of organization as practice (e.g. Nicolini, 2013), process organization studies (e.g. Hernes et al, 2015), critical management studies (e.g. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011), and organizational mindfulness (e.g. Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006).

Level 1 consists of Heidegger's three modes of engaging with the world: immersion, involved thematic deliberation and theoretical detachment which are based on 3 ways in which the world may show itself to a being who is active in it: availableness, occurentness, and involved thematic deliberation. **Availableness** represents a mode of awareness of total immersion and unintentional absorption in the world prior to any deliberate action and mental presentation, a mode of 'dwelling' among readily available interiorized objects (Chia & Holt, 2006). **Occurentness**, on the contrary, involves detachment between individual and phenomenon: "things and events force an actor immersed in his/her performance to become a reflective observer who self-consciously stands back and intentionally assigns identities, meanings, functions and causes both to him/herself and to phenomena around." (Chia & Holt, 2006, pp. 641-642). Between availableness and occurentness, or between immersion and detachment, resides **involved thematic deliberation**: "a mode of engagement that involves both immersion in practice and deliberation on how it is carried out" (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011, p. 344). This mode of involved focusing is characterized by involvement in practical activity, whereby deliberate attention is given to our actions. In other words, the quality of awareness of deliberate attention remains dependent on being engaged in activity, what could be referred to as 'reflection-in-practice' (Schön, 1983).

Level 2 of the theoretical scaffolding consists of 'constructing' three corresponding conceptualizations of organizational change building on Heidegger's three modes of being-in-the-world: i.e. how do change agents define change? How do we know what change is? These include: change as wayfinding logic (grounded in 'availableness'), change as managerialistic logic

(grounded in ‘occurentness’), and change as reflexive logic (grounded in ‘involved thematic deliberation’). These conceptualizations of change represents how organizational actors think about change.

Eventually, level 3 of the scaffolding further develops how practitioners make sense of change on a practical level, and represent a set of assumptions about change needs to be ‘managed’. Indeed, “(managerial) approaches to change are based on assumptions about how change works” (Smith & Graetz, 2011, p. 1). We thus identify there different qualities of sensemaking that are grounded in different conceptualizations of change elaborated upon in level 2: absorbed sensemaking (grounded in a ‘wayfinding logic’), detached sensemaking (grounded in a ‘managerialistic logic’), and mindful sensemaking (grounded in a ‘reflexive logic’) as sensemaking qualities that address how practitioners interpret, deal and engage with change (Guette & Vandenbempt, 2016).

As a result, Heidegger’s three modes of engagement with the world - availableness, occurentness and involved thematic deliberation - are rendered into three conceptualizations of organizational change – change as wayfinding logic, change as managerialistic logic, and change as reflexive logic, respectively – and three phenomenological qualities of sensemaking – absorbed sensemaking, detached sensemaking, and mindful sensemaking, respectively. See Table 1:

**Table 1: Conceptualizations and sensemaking qualities of organizational**

<b>Level 1: Mode of Being-in-the-world</b>	<b>Level 2: Conceptualization of change</b>	<b>Level 3: Sensemaking quality</b>
Availableness	Wayfinding logic	Absorbed sensemaking
Occurentness	Managerialistic logic	Detached sensemaking
Involved thematic deliberation	Reflexive logic	Mindful sensemaking

According to this scaffolding, organizational change ‘becomes’ through a dynamic equilibrium of different sensemaking qualities, which are respectively grounded in different conceptualizations or organizational change. Change is continually enacted and re-enacted by actors engaging in alternating & oscillating sensemaking work, grounded in different logics that - interdependently - allow the process of change to become. In what follows we elaborate on the three conceptualizations and sensemaking qualities of change advanced.



## **Availableness: Wayfinding logic and absorbed sensemaking**

### **Change as wayfinding logic**

A first way of conceptualizing organizational change, based on a mode of being-in-the-world of total immersion and absorption, entails an emerging character. Change is presupposed as always present and managing change is guided by the emergence of lived reality. As such, Chia and Holt (2009, p. xi) have referred to ‘strategic wayfinding’ to depict change as an “emergent process of heterogeneous engineering” (Chia, 1996, p. 53). Depicting change as wayfinding, implies that there is no pre-existing map of the road to walk, and acknowledges what Merton (1936) argued: deliberate interventions result in unanticipated consequences, and urges for undeliberately and unintentionally capturing “the richness and quality of lived experiences” (Chia & Holt, 2009, p. 178). Conceptualizing change as wayfinding thus questions ‘organization’ by revealing the tensions inherent in ‘organizing’. This implies change to be an emergent process, to be indivisible and first nature of organizing: “(i)f you imagine a change as being really composed of states . . . (y)ou have closed your eyes to true reality. (Bergson, 1946/1992, pp. 146–147)” (Chia, 2013, p. 11)

### **Absorbed sensemaking of change**

Based on a direct engagement with the world, absorbed sensemaking is ‘driven’ by what Bourdieu (1990) called ‘habitus’: “unconsciously acquired, culturally shaped habits of acting; a modus operandi that, though latent and visible, nevertheless plays an active role in shaping individual choices and strategic action.” (Chia & Holt, 2009, p. 23). Making sense of organizational change according to a wayfinding logic aims at replacing a conceptual order by a perceptual order. This requires nevertheless direct perceptual access to the unfolding micro-processes of organizing. One needs to deny the existence of pre-existing maps instructing which road to walk, thereby “reaching out into the unknown and developing and incomplete but practically sufficient comprehension of the situation in order to cope effectively with it.” (Chia & Holt, 2009, p. 159). Absorbed sensemaking occurs, for example, while being immersed in teaching a class of motivated students, conducting a spontaneous and lively conversation with friends, preparing your favorite recipe for a sumptuous meal, or going for your daily run in the park, as long as one remains ‘absorbed’ or in ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992).

This phenomenological quality of absorbed sensemaking reflects enables organizational actors to be immersed in their activities, and to remain aware of their perceptions prior to being conceptualized. Absorbed sensemaking of change is thus characterized by a non-deliberate reflection-in-action being fully immersed in the local context of the unfolding change. Sensemaking therefore, is not a byproduct of deliberate and intentional actions, but the result of locally embedded initiatives that emerge spontaneously during the unfolding of organizational change. Sensemaking automatically unfolds in a context of dynamism and equivocality, whereby sense is continually re-made based upon absorption in unfolding reality. Absorbed sensemaking entails a feeling of comfort in situations of uncertainty, mystery, incompleteness and doubt; without clinging to controlling mechanisms and representational tools (Chia, 2013). Weick (1999, p. 135) puts it as follows: “When people act in this engaged mode [of ‘absorbed coping’], they are aware of the world holistically as a network of interrelated projects rather than as an arrangement of discrete physical objects such as tools.”

## **Occurrentness: Planned managerialism and detached sensemaking**

### **Change as planned managerialism**

A second way of conceptualizing organizational change, based on an occurrent mode of being-in-the-world, is coined ‘planned managerialism’ and is characterized by deliberate intentions and rationalized representations to manage and control change following a designed plan. This approach towards change is highly prevalent both among scholars and practitioners: “(a) common assumption among writers on change is that stability is the norm and that change occurs in successive states, as a result of managerially initiated and planned change programmes.” (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008, p. 18). Their major conviction resides in the controllability of change based on ex-ante rational maps crafted to intentionally direct organizational action in order to achieve a desired outcome. Managerialism emphasizes the underlying belief that managers have to manage change, and that this is executed in a planned and rational way adopting formulaic prescriptions that reflect a specific version of an n-step model or so-called ‘stage models’ that fail to deliver their promises (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011; Stubbart & Smalley, 1999).

This conceptualization of organizational change tends to view change as merely an epiphenomenon of organization whereby organizations are considered as discrete stable entities ‘out there’, change being the exception that needs to be controlled and managed, often by deliberate intervention.

(Chia, 1996; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). As a consequence of prioritizing organization over change, planned approaches reduce change to a series of immobilities, and is consequently unable to explain how organizational change is actually accomplished. N-step models of organizational change are thus unable to realize change single-handedly (Beer & Nohria, 2000), nor to capture the essence of the phenomenon of change. In explaining organizational change, even process studies emphasize either deterministic natural selection or strategic choice explanations of change (MacKay & Chia, 2013), thereby omitting the dynamic interdependent complexities inherent to micro-processes of change and failing to capture how change unfolds. Indeed, change occurs in the *process of changing*, not to be confused with the mere *labeling of change* (March, 1981).

### **Detached sensemaking of change**

Making sense of organizational change in a ‘detached’ phenomenological quality, aims at representing perceived reality by a series of concepts in an effort to represent and simplify reality (Allard-Poesi, 2005; Weick, 1979). Equivocality is consequently seen as a necessary evil that requires to be controlled and eliminated by granting representational knowledge claims the status of absolute reality. Detached sensemaking operates under a conceptual order that filters experience through precast concepts and mental models whereby we “selectively reduce and make more comprehensively manageable our lived experiences” (Chia, 1996, p. 39). This fosters the selective filtering and reduction of perceptual phenomena or concrete experiences into pre-existing conceptual categories to make sense of lived experience (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

Detached sensemaking of organizational change implies that practitioners consider change as an exceptional event that requires intentional intervention by controlling - ‘managing’ - the process and reducing ambiguity along the journey. The change process gets chopped in a series of steps to achieve, measured by performance indicators that are supposed to represent the alignment of the organization with the intended plan. Meeting the pre-identified targets implies a successful change project. One usually notices retrospectively that during the change project, the environment ‘out there’ has changed again, and that a new change initiative is urgently needed for the organizing to survive in the ever increasing frenziness of today’s industry. Detached sensemaking is characterized by brainstorm sessions in which different change avenues are carefully evaluated based on swot-analysis, market forecasts, carefully described ‘as is’ and ‘to be’ situations, with the sole objective of mapping out a X-year change trajectory consisting of N-steps which are represented by key performance indicators, inflection points, and monthly progress reports. Quick

wins are celebrated through grandiose newsletter announcements, and competitions to be awarded employee of the month for those lucky ones that meet – and preferably exceed – their metrics on the KPI dashboard, closely monitored through automated ‘templates’ and ‘systems’. The objective is to control the outcomes of change, reduce the complexity of organizational life, create a simplistic discourse, and eliminate equivocality throughout the change process (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011; Chia & Tsoukas, 2003).

## **Involved thematic deliberation: Reflexive practice and mindful sensemaking**

### **Change as reflexive practice**

A third way of conceptualizing organizational change, based on involved thematic deliberation, entails change as reflexive practice. Conceptualizing change as ‘reflexive practice’ presupposes that practitioners are reflexive *in* their action (Schön, 1983; Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009). In this context of reflection-in-action, Schön (1983) characterizes ‘reflective practitioners’ by “their tacit knowing-in-action and their ability to question their knowing-in-action and the underlying ‘framing’ of the situation, when confronted with complex, novel tasks and unprecedented events.” (Jordan, 2010, p. 393). Schön’s starting point is that practitioners exhibit predominantly tacit knowing-in-action on which they reflect while continuing to perform their action in order to cope with the often messy situation at hand, or, simply stated: “we can think about doing something while doing it” (Schön, 1983, p. 54). A relevant dimension to theorizing on reflection-in-action added by Schön refers to the action-present: “the zone of time in which action can still make a difference to the situation” (Schön, 1983, p. 62). In most examples cited (Orr, 1996; Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009; Dreyfus, 1991; Polanyi, 1966; Petroski, 2002) this action-present represents a rather short timeframe, whereby actors do not have much impact on the immediate outcome of their actions. However, practitioners who are engaged in organizational change, conduct their actions typically in a longer action-present and possess broader opportunities to reflect-in-action while generating impact on the situation. It is notably this critical approach of reflexivity that is meaningful in our discussion of the ‘becoming’ of organizational change. Critical reflexivity probes the taken for granted, the often too quickly accepted organizational discourse of change, the grand narratives produced to elevate the organization towards the ultimate level of competitiveness. By questioning on what ground action is taken, and critically sensing whether this makes sense in-the-moment of the present context, organizational actions can avoid discursive closure that is inherent in managing change unreflectively.

Conceptualizing change as a reflexive practice avoids the process of merely conceptualizing change by names and categories (too fast) in the implementation process, whereby emerging phenomena tend to get lost in categories and stereotypes that are used to label change. This is problematic as change becomes determined by pre-interpreted concepts used, rather than by emerging processes of change. This reframing allows for de-conceptualizing organizational change implementation from the labels and categories that reduce change to rationalized processes. By intentionally adopting a reflexive attitude towards automatic interpretations, organizations start to unpack their dominant assumptions, worldviews, frames of reference, and labels. Thereby organizations open up to richer perspectives and interpretations of organizational change.

### **Mindful sensemaking of change**

Making sense of organizational change in a reflexive way calls for a sensemaking quality that is grounded in in-the-moment reflexivity, that is non-judgmentally aware of what is going in, that is - in other worlds - mindful. Mindful sensemaking includes a set of adaptive organizational capabilities focusing on: enhanced distinction making through awareness and attention, preventing shifts from perception to conception which threaten rich awareness of discriminatory detail, such as paying attention and anticipating weak cues, countering dominant ways of thinking, rising awareness of system interdependencies, learning from and bouncing back after failure, and proactively stimulating decision making process flexibility (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). Mindful sensemaking builds on the assumption that any familiar event is known imperfectly and contains novel elements, unveiling the complexity and reality of impermanence in organizing (Weick & Putnam, 2006; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 1999). Mindful sensemaking is aligned with what Chia (1996) would call second-order or meta-reflexivity associated with a radical questioning of predominant change narratives and mainstream conceptualizations.

Mindful sensemaking furthermore overcomes simplifications, ‘pre-interpretation’ of the universe, tendencies to normalize unexpected events, as well as blind spots created by expectations. Bottom line is that mindful sensemaking prevents shifting from perceptual processing to conceptual processing and in applying irrelevant mental frameworks to novel situations. Mindful sensemaking suspends automatic labeling processes by forcing awareness to stay in the present situation. What is more, mindful sensemaking surfaces taken-for-granted assumptions inherent in organizational schemata and calls for assessing whether these assumptions fit the situation and context faced, opening the door for unlearning irrelevant assumptions adopted in the past.

## Discussion

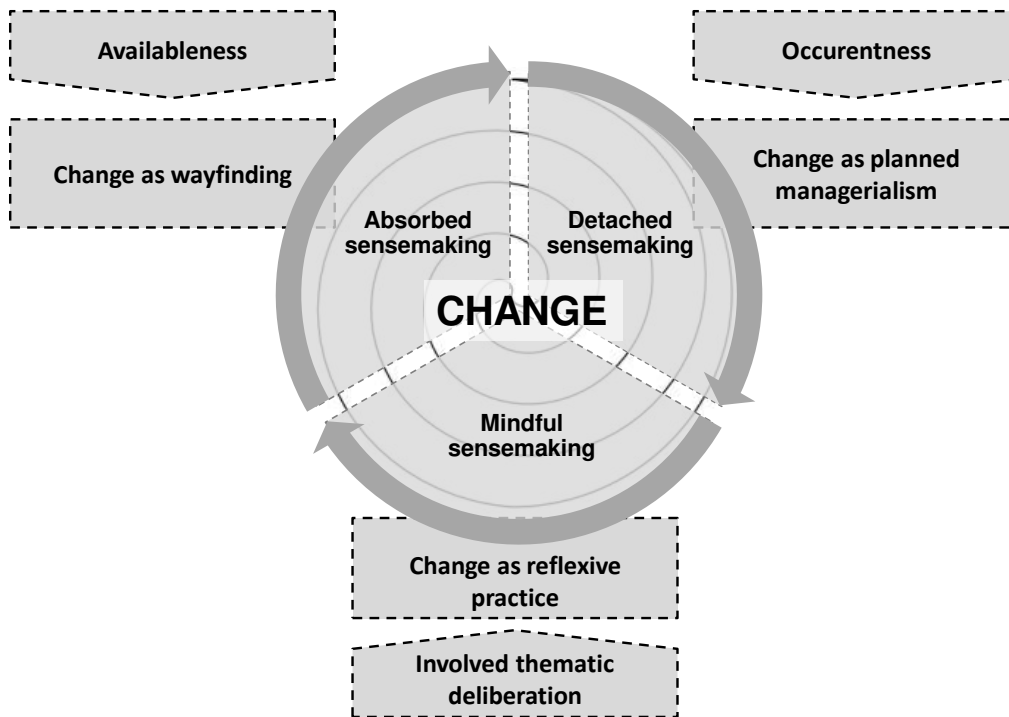


Figure 1: A processual reframing of organizational change

This article provided a theoretical scaffolding for a processual approach on organizational change grounded in a more refined phenomenological orientation of sensemaking. We offer two specific contributions to the literature on organizational change. First, we add further refinement to the literature on organizational change by explicating different conceptualizations of organizational change from a phenomenological perspective and how these different conceptualizations shape the sensemaking processes of change recipients. Second, we reframe organizational change as a dialectic process whereby organizational change is being realized through a dynamic equilibrium (i.e. a dialectic) of the three identified conceptualizations of change and phenomenological qualities of sensemaking. In other words, organizational change happens when change agents adopt a broader conceptual repertoire of how change has to be managed, which translates into different sensemaking styles by change recipients. As such, this processual perspective transcends the predominant variance-process duality in theorizing on organizational change, and focuses on practical relevance by bringing in a phenomenological perspective that focuses on different qualities of sensemaking. **This is where Learning & Development professionals play an important dual role both in training managers and employees in developing organizational mindsets that**

capture the different conceptualizations of organizational change in order to create a broader perspective on how change is realized within organizations, as well as in developing broader sensemaking repertoires of organizational actors in their efforts to deal with and eventually realize organizational change.

This article offers a contribution to the sensemaking of organizational change literature by widening the aperture of the sensemaking perspective through advancing a more holistic and integrative approach, grounded in different phenomenological qualities, that takes process and temporality seriously. More precisely the contribution aims at taking in the true processual nature of sensemaking and refining its continuity-episodic and thought-action paradoxes by demonstrating that sense is continually re-enacted at the intersection of different phenomenological qualities. It follows that sensemaking is ‘interpreted’ through the lens of a processual perspective that is grounded in the way people relate to the world. Sensemaking is thus reframed from being embedded in predominantly dualistic thinking (thought-action, episodic-continuous, agency-structure, macro-micro) to dialectic thinking stressing the continuous re-enactment of phenomenological tensions.

The processual reframing of organizational change furthermore hints at an elevated role of middle management in broadening the phenomenal sensemaking repertoire of change agents and recipients. Under a highly developed change managerialistic logic, top management teams define strategic direction, performance targets, and future-proof roadmaps. And this makes sense, as this represents best practice in conducting strategy as these are taught in business schools and advised by management consultants. However, from the processual perspective advanced in this article, the realization of change requires a broadening of this planned managerialism logic to encompass and allow broader epistemological and praxeological phenomenological repertoires to emerge. Broadening the way change is conceptualized and made sense of fosters the reweaving of beliefs and actions needed to realize change. We observe that contexts whereby ‘middle management’ (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Luscher & Lewis, 2008; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011) broadens the organization’s epistemological and praxeological phenomenological repertoires, reweaving and accommodation processes of change emerge more naturally. In this respect, managers, or leaders, may have to develop a ‘phronetic’ capability<sup>1</sup>, i.e. “a refined capacity to intuitively grasp salient

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<sup>1</sup> Derived from the Greek “phronesis” and typically translated as practical wisdom.

features of ambiguous situations and to constitute a ‘landscape’ of possible paths of response” (Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014, p.224). It is this form of deep understanding that enables the integration of different forms of knowledge: knowing why, knowing what, and knowing how (Nonaka, Toyama, & Hirata, 2008)

Reframing organizational change as a dialectic process between different phenomenological qualities of sensemaking, offers some very clear implications for Learning and Development practice in order to better manage the implementation of organizational change.

First of all, for organizational change to realize, organizations need to develop capabilities in the conceptualizations and sensemaking qualities proposed. Learning & Development professionals can develop a training program for employees and managers to develop awareness of one’s underlying assumptions towards change and managing change, understanding how these underlying assumptions impact organizing processes, and eventually experimenting and allowing different practices to enter the organizations portfolio of thought-action repertoire. A first step in establishing this elevated awareness is to emphasize being mindful of one’s discourse as this represents a gateway to grasping underlying and often taken for granted assumptions.

Organizations that push through a change program, need to be highly aware of the impact it can generate on the sensemaking of employees. Therefore, it is crucial to have a Learning & Development strategy in place that develops both managers’ and employees’ sensemaking repertoires. As this impact is likely fraught with unintended consequences, the training program should openly adopt and emphasize a ‘not knowing’ attitude as to the precise impact of the change, and learning managers and employees to stay closely attuned with their lived reality and subsequent sensemaking. Irrespective of the precise factors that impact sensemaking and prevent team mental models to reweave, emerging affective responses are likely to increase the strength of these factors and increase the likelihood of sensemaking derailment, impeding change realization. Training, acknowledging and learning how to deal with these affective processes and allowing open discussion of affective responses to change will likely tame their intensity and prevent the further ‘escalation’ of sensemaking.

Second-order change is supposedly to impact an organization’s identity and subsequently employees’ identification processes. When implementing change, a clear understanding of employees’ identification processes is needed: what organizational characteristics are central,



peripheral, distinctive and/or enduring? How does the proposed change process impact identification over time? Learning & Development processes should be in place to capture these underlying current and future identification schemes of employees in order to prevent alienation and enhance sensemaking malleability. Therefore: understanding, communicating, discussing and enacting identification should become a focus of training programs in educating managers and employees on organization change.

During change implementation, plurivocal organizational discourses will likely emerge, due but not limited to different thought worlds and overall underestimated heterogeneity of cultures. Organizational training programs should encompass the development of multiple discourses and facilitate managers' and employees' sensemaking to becoming able to overcome their dominant discourse, aiming at the emergence of diverse and even contradictory discourses in order to foster employees' meaning creation processes, resulting in sensemaking that is closely aligned with their lived experience, and which can function as feedback mechanisms to change agents as to the extent that the intended discourse is captured appropriately.

It will furthermore prove particularly important for Learning & Development practitioners to develop a perspective of change as reflexive practice and facilitating mindful sensemaking of change. Throughout this research we have emphasized the principal quality of reflexivity in broadening the sensemaking repertoire in order to foster the becoming of change. Generating broader reflexive capabilities entail, for example, adopting a 'not knowing' attitude, attempting at discarding one's automatic labelling processes, questioning the obvious, adopting a critical attitude by playing devil's advocate, questioning one's own and others knowledge, challenging the taken for granted, asking 'stupid' questions, etc.

Eventually, Learning & Development professionals can facilitate developing the ability to navigate through different conceptualizations of change and different qualities of sensemaking. This requires cultivating agility in terms of shifting perspective while being attuned to the goings-on of organizing processes. In particular, it requires a shift in effort from controlling change to letting happen change, and to cultivate reflexivity to shift between these two perspectives swiftly. In order to construct a dynamic equilibrium in the becoming of change, it is imperative to develop a degree of comfort in and ability to deal with tensions and contradictory cues. Dealing with change in a dialectic way requires juggling with opposing and contradictory thoughts while remaining closely connected to the unfolding reality on the ground. Loosening the urge to stick merely to pre-

fabricated change plans, no matter how imperative compliance may be, will likely enhance the ability to genuinely live with the contradictory tensions inherent in changing.

## **Conclusion**

This article set forth a processual reframing of change contributing to the sensemaking literature on organizational change by reframing change as a dialectic process of different underlying assumptions of change agents, and different qualities of sensemaking of change. Organizational change is thereby approached from a different frame of reference that allow not only to take into account the dynamic and paradoxical nature of organizational change processes, but also the contextual limitations of change practitioners that have to realize change in organizations. Our hope is that this processual reframing of organizational change offers practitioners a few handholds to manage and implement organizational change in a more effective way, i.e. implementing change along the lines of the organization's strategic directions, while taking account with the organization's routines, habits and ways of working, and allowing for sufficient reflection that allows to assess the overall effectiveness of change over time. Reframing organizational change from a processual perspective incites both academics and practitioners to question their thinking and underlying conceptualizations of change by adopting a more inquisitive mindset: How do we think about change? How do we define change? How is change supposed to be managed? What do we as organizational scholars recommend managers and practitioners on the field? What are relevant questions to address?

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