

## Making sense of leadership communication in organizational change: A literature review

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### *Abstract*

*Leaders need to manage changes in their organization through communication. However, there is a lack of understanding of how leaders communicate and establish changes through communication. Using the perspective of sensemaking, this article provides a literature review assessing how leaders make sense of organizational change through communication. The reviewed studies showed that leaders across the hierarchy redefine the change and their role during the organizational change. Specifically, sensemaking at the top level can affect the meaning of change at the lower level, which has implications for overall organizational change. In general, the leaders redefine their role as a facilitator in implementing the change. However, higher-level leaders tend to focus on initiating change, while middle-level leaders act as mediators, and lower leaders focus on evaluating organizational change. Consequently, leaders' sensemaking about the change also contributes to their organization's structural and cultural change. This study suggests that research should center on how leaders, with various levels of management, make sense of the change in their organization and how they deliver their understanding to others.*

*Keywords: change, communication, leadership, organization, sensemaking*

### **Introduction**

The leadership role is critical, particularly in communicating the risks of preserving the status quo and potential advantages of accepting a change in the organization (Denning, 2005). Leader communication is a significant concern, and many experts believe that communication is vital for managing organizational change (Elving, 2005). Through

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communication, leaders can navigate the organization on whether to reject, support, or modify the organization to change effectively and actively involve others in the overall change process.

Research on leadership communication and organizational change shows several emphases. First, the research emphasizes aspects of communication such as messages, channels, and actors. Various studies have found that change statements are reflected in vision, as the source for communicating change and the basis of change (Lewis, 2006; Ramcharan & Parumasur, 2014; Seyranian, 2014; Shvindina, 2017). The findings exemplify that the leaders' roles are also highly substantial in their communication through the production and reception of messages about change through inclusive meaning and language.

According to previous studies, communication channels should be interactive, face-to-face, open, informal, and casual to discuss practical issues that drive people more comfortable when making changes (Gordon & Martin, 2018; Ophilia & Hidayat, 2021). Meanwhile, other leadership communication research focuses on actors in change that can enhance or limit change efforts. The literature shows that most studies on leadership communication in private organizations (Abdelgawad et al., 2013; Nohe & Michaelis, 2016; Reeleder, 2006; Shulga, 2020) and government organizations (Kovačević et al., 2018; Robinson, 2013) still focus on leadership at the top management level. However, several studies emphasize the role of communication in middle management (James, 2005; Oborn et al., 2013). It shows that the emphasis on the centrality of leadership communication remains strong. Although several studies examine the middle level, efforts to understand leadership communication holistically are important to fill the gaps in the research of leadership communication in the organizational change framework.

On the other hand, studies of leadership communication in organizational change use the concept of leadership style or behavior, such as transactional leadership (Battilana et al., 2010; Holten & Brenner, 2015; Ramcharan & Parumasur, 2014), relational leadership (Battilana et al., 2010; Ramcharan & Parumasur, 2014), traditional leadership (Groves, 2016; Holten & Brenner, 2015; İkinci, 2014; Pratt et al., 2019; Rahman & Hadi, 2019; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016; van der Voet, 2016; Yang, 2011, 2014; Yue et al., 2019; Zogjani & Raçi, 2015), charismatic leadership (Men et al., 2020; Nohe & Michaelis, 2016), authentic leadership (Alavi & Gill, 2017; Gordon & Martin, 2018; Shulga, 2020), and several studies examining destructive leadership (Grant-Smith & Colley, 2018; Neves & Schyns, 2018). The results of these studies have not been able to illustrate the consistency of effectiveness between leadership communication styles and

organizational change, and even have shown contradictions between research related to leadership communication styles and organizational change.

From a communication perspective, the previous leadership theory is seen as a linear form, and although interactional models have been formed (as in contemporary models), this concept still lacks in explaining of the various factors and complexities of leadership. For this reason, Ruben and Gigliotti (2016) argue that leadership communication as a system is seen to be able to fill the gap from the limitations that exist in leadership studies. This approach focuses directly on how individuals form, transmit, choose, interpret, and shape received information and shape reality, in the sense that communication is a process, not a mere exchange of information and meaning between actors (Ruben & Stewart, 2016). According to Fairhurst (2008), one of the theories which has the systemic understanding of leadership communication is sensemaking. In this theory, leaders and subordinates communicate to build a sense of the existing reality. Therefore, leaders communicate and construct reasonable meanings for the environment and share their interpretations with others. This role in sharing information with the leader (sensegiver) requires the ability to simultaneously interpret, set the agenda, and perform the frame, seeing the complexity of sensemaking (which also includes the concept of agenda setting and framing) in its ability to study leadership communication in an organizational context.

The theory of sensemaking derives from organizational studies and was developed by Karl Weick (Weick, 1979). Miller (2005) explained that this theory is interpreted as a process of organizing, which focuses on the communication aspect in organizing and views the organization as a communication forum, in which organizing and communicating are linked continuously and mutually and influence each other. Sensemaking or 'making sense' places meaning, while making is a construction activity or building something. Such process is beneficial in understanding how leaders organize changes within their institution. Therefore, the literature review presented in this article provides the novelty in understanding the current understanding of leadership communication in organizational change context with a sensemaking perspective for the past ten years. The findings allow for the suggestion of future research directions.

## **Methodology**

This research applies a qualitative approach to data and information extraction. Literature was selected from a Scopus-indexed database

with a span of the last 10 years (2010-2021) to obtain high-quality articles and recent studies. To find articles that match the research topic, keywords such as “sensemaking”, “organizational change”, and “leadership communication” to filter the data. The collected articles are then reselected, especially in looking for the context of change in the organization and discarding articles related to changes from social contexts such as community, society, or changes in particular issues that are not in the context of an organization.

Emerging themes are derived from the various selected articles to develop a coherence review (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Additionally, existing categories were then organized to become a narrative review (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), including the concepts related to leadership communication from a sensemaking perspective in the context of organizational change.

## **Results**

A total of 30 articles were analyzed for further processing. Furthermore, the theory of sensemaking in the study of leadership in change with the organizational context and can be found in general organizations (Berthod & Müller-Seitz, 2018; Bilgili et al., 2017; Filstad, 2014; Gröschl et al., 2019; Hammond et al., 2014; Kan, 2019; Kearney, 2013; Kraft et al., 2018; Lord et al., 2016; Minei, 2015; Morais-Storz et al., 2020; Peng et al., 2016; Sparr, 2018; Steinbauer et al., 2015; Waddock, 2019; Whittle et al., 2015), health organizations (Barach & Phelps, 2013; Gilson et al., 2014; Rodríguez & Bélanger, 2014; Warwick-Giles & Checkland, 2018), as well as in education (Brewer, 2016; Browning & McNamee, 2012; Farrell & Marsh, 2016; Matsumura & Wang, 2014; Park et al., 2013; Sahlin, 2019; Twyford & Le Fevre, 2019). Studies also show that the theory of sensemaking and its application on the topic are still minimal in government institutions (Gilson et al., 2014; Matarazzo et al., 2020; Robert & Ola, 2021). On the other hand, existing studies are still dominated by organizations based in the United States (Farrell & Marsh, 2016; Gröschl et al., 2019; Kearney, 2013; Matsumura & Wang, 2014; Minei, 2015; Park et al., 2013) and countries in Europe (Kraft et al., 2018; Morais-Storz et al., 2020; Sahlin, 2019; Warwick-Giles & Checkland, 2018; Whittle et al., 2015).

From the selected scientific articles, several themes emerged. These themes include the sensemaking process as a process of constructing meaning, the process of redefining the role of leadership, and the process of forming structure and culture, which will be discoursed in the subsequent parts.

## Redefining the Meaning of Change

In general, leaders (regardless of their position in the hierarchy) were visioning or establishing understanding and shared ownership of change (Brewer, 2016; Sahlin, 2019). The development of this understanding of change, according to Hammond et al. (2014), is carried out through: 1) the triggering events that cause the connection and/or disconnection across the domain (or not to notice or pay attention), 2) cognitive processing of these connections and disconnections (interpretation), 3) modifying the identity and narrative of individuals in accordance with the current interpretation (authoring or writing), and 4) enacting a new identity, modified in the leadership situation (enacting or enacting). Leaders are involved in processing, highlighting additional differences (dichotomous) or integration points (dialectical), and continuing to build identity through narratives that take into account multiple fields. Similarly, Steinbauer et al. (2015) contend that sensemaking begins with the presence of environmental stimuli (both new and familiar), which are then processed with schemas to produce a reasonable narrative generated from common sense (conscious sensemaking) leading to schemas from time to time, where leaders can unconsciously understand their environment (unconscious sensemaking). However, Sparr (2018) argues that paradoxes in organizational social change are the driving force in giving meaning to these changes. He argues that tensions in change encourage employees to assess fairness of change (interpersonal fairness), honesty and openness (informational fairness), and transparency (procedural fairness). This assessment is mediated by the process of meaning and the giving of meaning by leaders and the process of meaning of followers. Furthermore, the paradoxical understanding of the followers is evaluated and facilitates positive reactions to the demands of change. Thus, the construction of meaning for change is based on the stimuli for change that encourage individuals to interpret and give that meaning to others.

Change triggers, which can be internal, external, or both, encourage leaders to rearrange their framework of understanding on a change issue by involving their beliefs and orientation. In a case study of policy implementation in schools, Park et al. (2013) explained that the emerging framework could be in the form of diagnostic (leaders use it to diagnose the problem of inequality, confront the issue, and redefine the problem), motivating (leaders provide rationalization to encourage action by building a sense of shared responsibility), and prognostic (leaders build sustainable efforts to achieve change, which is seen as a reflection of what is being done) as efforts to build a new culture. From this we can see that the meanings made by leaders at the top level can have implications on how the meanings are at the lower levels (Filstad, 2014). This is consistent with the results of

reported by Peng et al. (2016), that the leader's actions of intellectual stimulation can give a positive effect on the viewpoint of the meaningfulness of the work of employees, especially during times of crisis. This signifies a collective meaning process from top management that is able to directly shape perceptions of the importance of all employee work, especially in dealing with crises or organizational change. In addition, Kearney (2013) found that there is a certain period or hot zone, which is a time span in which negative emotions dominate organizational conditions during times of change, where emotions become the background for insiders before sensemaking, because there is insufficient information that can be identified to start the process of complete understanding. Furthermore, understanding in the construction of decisions and actions, as well as an assessment of what was done and interpreted before being processed again (positive assessment to strengthen the scheme and negative assessment to weaken the initial scheme and build a new scheme) are required (Steinbauer et al., 2015). According to Waddock (2019), these efforts are carried out by forming narratives, frameworks, and stories, which can construct visions, culture, ideology, belief system, values, norms, and, ultimately, attitudes and behaviors in a particular system.

At the top management level, the leader was considered more as an initiator in building the narrative of change (Matsumura & Wang, 2014; Warwick-Giles & Checkland, 2018; Whittle et al., 2015). A study showed that the top managers do not involve others in the decision-making process and instead rely on their expertise, thus limiting them from understanding the complexities of a novel knowledge vision in sensemaking (Filstad, 2014, p. 17). However, the study by Matsumura and Wang (2014) described that the change in the leader's understanding of a change was influenced by their beliefs about dialogic instruction to improve outcomes, context, and sanctions for not meeting targets (Matsumura & Wang, 2014). Whittle et al. (2015) stated that top management negotiated to break the framing of issues and change (reframe) the issue of change to existing activities and attributes. Furthermore, Bilgili et al. (2017) argue that disclosure of information has the potential for disruption to intraorganizational resource flows (i.e., human resources and strategic social capital) during times of organizational change (i.e., retirement and replacement search), and elicits negative reactions from stakeholders. Narrative in leadership is the delivery of change by encompassing lexical cues (such as positive emotional tones, togetherness, and originality) that can convey information that reduces uncertainty, that is, showing management's commitment to actions to maintain the status quo or reflecting commitment to organizational change (Bilgili et al., 2017). Furthermore, Warwick-Giles and Checkland (2018)

disclosed that senior leaders build strong success narratives and collective identities to build meaning to create formal enthusiasm in an integrated program, which then generates momentum for integration.

Although positive messages are generally formed in an effort to support change, Warwick-Giles and Checkland (2018) identify that positive messages in meaning can possibly hinder a realistic appreciation of lower levels of involvement (Warwick-Giles & Checkland, 2018). The research by Minei (2015) describes a failure to redefine and frame leaders' messages that has implications for negative effects on organization, misinterpretation of messages, and the existence of various frames leading to misinformation and competition. This finding provides an overview of the negative side of leadership in building sensemaking, which can then exacerbate organizational conditions such as the existence of opposing groups as a consequence of sensemaking among their leaders.

Meanwhile, at the middle level, the study by Gilson et al. (2014) illustrates the crucial role of local office managers as mediators in bridging the building of understanding or sensemaking between the center and front-line service staff. They were maintaining values and mindsets that are in harmony with change, developing shared meanings about change, instilling a shared culture, and acting as a role model using language to signal meaning (Gilson et al., 2014). Moreover, the understanding of the middle manager can influence the understanding of followers, not only providing an understanding of a certain thing but also driving the followers to adopt it. Furthermore, the impact of leadership sensemaking on the followers may last for a long time or even be considered a legacy, as it is constantly incorporated into the perspectives of their successors (Kan, 2019).

On the other hand, the meaning process at the lower or staff level is also important in organizational change. Gilson et al. (2014) argued that sensemaking at lower levels is collective and could be seen as a barrier to change initiated by the central leadership. Farrell and Marsh (2016) also found that individuals carry out sensemaking on what is considered important to be the basis for carrying out an action for change, especially those that are relevant and up-to-date, while omission or little response to existing information tends to be driven by their skepticism about the validity of the data Farrell dan Marsh (2016). Therefore, how staff perceive the context and urgency of the change allows employees to critically consider how they can change their work practices.

Kraft et al. (2018) divide the meaning-making process at the lower level into four phases. In the initial phase, which is the exploration, the sensemaking of subordinates is dominated by ambiguous conditions

and uncertainties from existing rumors, and leaders need to raise issues and discuss matters of concern to employees. In the second phase, which is the preparation, workers face different or contradictory information about the change, and the leadership must be involved in the discussion and interpret the change for them. Furthermore, the next phase, which is the implementation, shows that workers are more focused on the negative side of change, and leaders must convey a balanced understanding by explaining positive compensation and negative things about change. In the last phase, namely the evaluation, workers tend to personally evaluate to changes, and leaders need to provide feedback and prepare for changes to be made. The division of phases by Kraft et al. (2018) is considered to be able to assist researchers in exploring the process of sensemaking and change in a structured way. However, this phase does not provide sufficient explanation for an ongoing change process where the change process is not generally regarded as complete or ready for evaluation. Furthermore, the emphasis on the phase of change fails to demonstrate the existence of the change and how the leadership communicates the change in greater detail or in practical terms. A similar finding was also reported by Twyford and Le Fevre (2019) that the process of interpreting risk and ambiguous conditions starts from assessing current and future consequences that affect perceptions and feelings of vulnerability, and then encouraging responses in the form of emotional or risky actions. This shows that leadership not only influences the meaning of change, but also acts in response to it.

#### Redefining the Role of Leadership in Organizational Change

In addition to the theme of redefinition and reconstruction of change, sensemaking on the topic of leadership and organizational change shows a process of redefining one's role in making changes. Lord et al. (2016) in their leadership study found that the trend of studies was moving from understanding the leader to understanding the leadership process. Furthermore, they state that sensemaking is a process that bridges the response of leaders to subordinates, which can help provide a lens in interpreting leadership experiences. For this reason, the leader is viewed not only as a driver, but also as a facilitator of change between the organization and its members.

Facilitation, according to Morais-Storz et al. (2020), needs to be retrospective (which lifts old assumptions that focus on questioning what has happened and is assisted by leadership actions with the relationship and task function), as well as prospective (which emphasizes revised assumptions, with a focus on what will be done now, and the existence of change-oriented leadership interventions). This confirms the role of leaders who facilitate meaning with

interventions that can build representations of the future to find innovative solutions to make changes.

The meaning of the leadership role can also be perceived from the sensemaking on leaders interpreting their role, which describes the actions of leadership driven “by a combination of individual characteristics and choices” (such as experience) and organizational interactions both before and during their leadership period (Browning & McNamee, 2012, p. 747). These perceptions and actions encourage leaders to interpret themselves and take actions that range from trailblazers who are active toward change (breakers/pioneers, who act to make considerable changes) or caretakers who tend to be passive (maintaining what is there or just carrying out its role without making significant changes) (Browning & McNamee, 2012).

Furthermore, Waddock (2019) argues that leaders in organizational change act like a shaman who acts in three roles, namely as a healer (making comprehensive changes that have integrity and ethics), connector (connecting internal systems with stakeholders and social), and meaning maker (sensemaker, making others understand change more clearly). Leaders must “transform” among healers, connectors, and meaning makers by adapting to organizational needs (Waddock, 2019). This shows that the role of the leader must be changed based on the changes in function rather than changes in control.

Twyford and Le Fevre (2019) have illustrated that the role of leadership in uncertain and risky conditions is to ensure a safe and supportive environment, by seeing others as learners, providing empathy and respect, providing support, and building trust. This describes how leader can support subordinates to change by facilitating the change-learning process.

Another aspect is related to the official status of the leader. Browning and McNamee (2012) revealed that interim leaders who act as temporary leaders playing a role as pioneers believe in their traditional roles (seeing themselves to have the same authority as permanent leadership positions), self-consciousness (feeling obligated to accept temporary roles and feeling compelled to reserve if they fail to secure permanent positions), and aspiration (voluntarily seeking temporary positions and feeling empowered to make decisions). Meanwhile, leaders with a nurturing view focus more on short-term issues that immediately affect the organization and its members, and tend to understand their roles in a subservient or controlled way, so they do not perceive themselves as engaging in high-level leadership for the organization in the future (Browning & McNamee, 2012, 744).

The shift in the role of leadership in change can also be seen from various structural levels, from the top, middle, and bottom. In top

management, Filstad (2014) illustrates that leaders at this level do not include their subordinates in the change-sensing process. Consequently, there is a contradiction between its interpretation and the verbal intention to facilitate change (Filstad, 2014). This signifies that their role as initiators of change is very strong.

In contrast, Brewer (2016), in his study of the sensemaking of change in an educational context, points out that top leaders use the interprofessional capacity framework as a vision and sensemaking instrument for use by other leaders in the development of a university curriculum. This indicates that they play a role in facilitating sensemaking by encouraging the discussion of the topic, experience, or concept to be developed (Brewer, 2016). The same example in the context of commercial organization from the research of Gröschl et al. (2019) describes the role of top management in encouraging discussion and adoption of sustainability aspects from the previous focus on corporate profits. Similarly, a study of leadership in police organizational change in Sweden shows the involvement of employees in producing their narratives. The involvement has an open character, has low control over signals from leadership (such as setting aside the hierarchy for critical discussion), uses multiple signals (such as imagery, movies, and music in expressing opinions), and encourages complexity and ambiguity (such as creating dynamics) in providing employee autonomy as well as quick and clear instructions (Robert & Ola, 2021). For this reason, giving meaning to change can be built together by maintaining dynamics and balance in the leader's role in the structure and the role as companion. Furthermore, the research by Matarazzo et al. (2020) on police organization process in Brazil in response to the Covid-19 pandemic has disclosed that the involvement of superiors and subordinates makes the police interpret the situation and build their role initially as law enforcers, then shift to a more relevant role, namely as part of preventing spread of the virus. Therefore, leadership plays a role in making adjustments to internal work processes, such as reconfiguring work models for officers who have experienced transmission and, while also preventing the virus from spreading. This demonstrates the importance of collaborative construction when redefining and reconfiguring the environment.

Differences in the redefinition of roles also appear in managerial management at the middle level. It is identified that the sensemaking of a new role in change can be strongly influenced by the politics of top managers, so they are not empowered to act as the agents of change and focus solely on applying change and keeping the business running (Filstad, 2014, p. 17). This demonstrates that they can play a passive role in change. However, a study by Gilson et al. (2014) described the existence of a function as a mediator of change between top management and frontliners. Their key role is to build meaning by

creating spaces for discussion, reflection, and dialogue about change with senior managers, laterally with colleagues, and downstream with the team to assist them in understanding change intentions and to negotiate how change should be implemented. Furthermore, Whittle et al. (2015) also showed that managers at this level play a role in reconfiguring work structures and processes in accordance with lower-level work systems (e.g., customer-oriented) that are different from top management (e.g., quality and product sales).

On the other hand, at the lower management and staff levels, their role is that of an evaluator (Farrell & Marsh, 2016; Kraft et al., 2018; Sparr, 2018). Farrell and Marsh (2016) found that lower managers reflected on useful assessments and used change information as a basis for organizational improvements. Similarly, Kraft et al. (2018) illustrated that workers tend to focus on the negative side of change and personally evaluate change. Furthermore, the evaluation by subordinates can also be used by leaders to reconstruct the change (Sparr, 2018).

In addition to being evaluators, there is a tendency for lower levels and staff to be seen as barriers to change (Filstad, 2014; Warwick-Giles & Checkland, 2018). Filstad (2014) found that the existence of coercive activities from the top level can limit the staff understanding, so staff does not implement changes. Furthermore, unbalanced messages, which tend to focus on the positive aspects without acknowledging the negative aspects of change, can hinder a realistic appreciation of lower levels of engagement (Warwick-Giles & Checkland, 2018).

The construction of Structure and Culture as A Result of the Sensemaking of Change

The process of meaning and reinterpreting the various stimuli, cognitions, and experiences that leaders have with change that underpin their role in acting and implementing change is emphasized in change leadership sensemaking. Sensemaking of changes has implications for changes in organizational processes, which are reflected in the organization's structure and culture.

Structural Change

Sensemaking from the leaders can encourage the organization to change its structure, which in turn changes its the system. Reconstruction of the existing structure can also be seen in the study by Rodriguez and Bélanger (2014) on organizational change in health care in Canada, in which leaders play a role in using organizational identities that previously had strong bureaucracies to then facilitate change through the construction and reconstruction process of a stronger organizational identity. In more detail, the results of this study explain that the process is carried out through the formation of

a metaphorical narrative about a journey in organizational change that is capable of revealing things that are invisible to others, upholding the value of change, and collectively inviting members to participate in navigating the barriers of change practices. The study of Matsumura and Wang (2014) also found the sensemaking principles and sanctions for failing to meet the targets of accountability (Matsumura & Wang, 2014).

In addition, existing meanings can cause structural changes that are not the same but still contain the same essence. This is illustrated by the study of Whittle et al. (2015) on changes in commercial organizations, indicating the role of top leadership in challenging (breaking the framing of issues) and changing (reframing issues) existing forms of activity and attributes. In practice, top management interprets change by altering the product-oriented structure, while lower-level leadership reconstructs that meaning by altering the customer-oriented work structure (Whittle et al., 2015). In practice, top management interprets change by altering the product-oriented structure, but lower-level management reconstructs that meaning by altering the customer-oriented work structure (Whittle et al., 2015). Furthermore, in a recent study, Robert and Ola (2021) discussed that the presence of reflective meaning given by leaders could encourage an open work structure, lower control over signals from leaders (such as leaving the hierarchy for critical discussion), use multiple signals (such as imagery, films, and music in expressing opinions), and encourage complexity and ambiguity (such as creating dynamics in providing employee autonomy, as well as prompt and clear instructions).

#### Cultural Change

In addition to the formation of structure, the meaning of change can also build the culture of the organization. Case studies in hospitals in Australia reported that if leaders do not seriously take organizational irregularities, organizational members tend to conclude that there are some regulatory consequences or normative irregularities in violating established standards of behavior (Barach & Phelps, 2013, p. 389). This indicates that the sensemaking of leaders not only comprehends the substance of change, but also actively understands the environment and pours it into routine behavior to build normative behavior change or build culture. A similar result is also illustrated in a case study of policy implementation in schools by Park et al. (2013), which explained that the meaning of leadership can be diagnostic (from inequality problems, confronting issues, and redefining problems), motivating (encouraging action by building a sense of shared responsibility), and prognostic (building sustainable efforts to achieve change) as an effort to build a culture of change. This confirms that sensemaking aims to

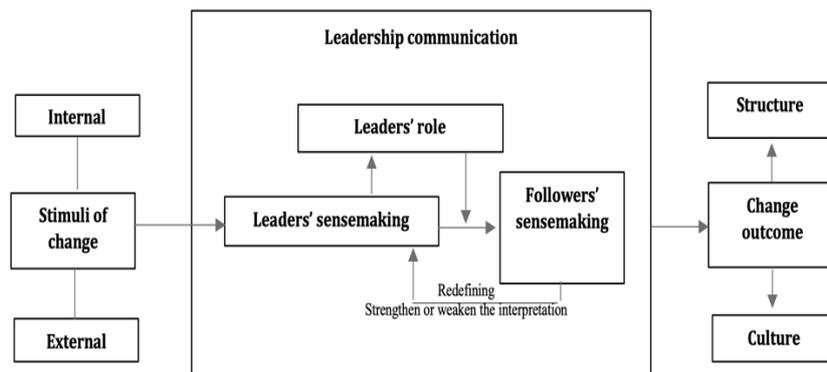
influence the old culture or form a new culture, which manifests itself in work routines.

The degree to which leaders can help staff at lower levels understand the intentions of a policy and use it in their daily routines and practices can be used to measure the success of cultural change from meaning (Gilson et al., 2014). Furthermore, collaboration fosters sensemaking that can shape a culture of change. For example, in a study of collaboration between schools and private companies for change in secondary schools in Sweden, school leaders build meaning on the opportunities and values that exist in collaborating with various parties, both internal and external (Sahlin, 2019). Leaders build a culture to involve outsiders and view each other as an asset, as an effort to support collaboration for this change. In addition to participation, leaders who shape the culture in organizations by constructing the meaning of change, are considered to have the capabilities in supporting change, carried out through narratives, frameworks, and stories, which can then construct vision, culture, ideology, belief systems, values, norms, and, in turn, finally, attitudes and behaviors within a given system (Waddock, 2019, p. 937).

## Discussion

Based on the study on the previous research, leadership communication is a process of interpreting and reinterpreting changes from various stimuli, cognitions, and experiences of leaders as well as redefining their roles as a result of interaction with their members (joint construction) as an effort to change the organizational structure and culture (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 Making sense of leadership communication in organizational change**



(Source: formulated by the authors based on the literature review)

Leaders redefine the essence of organizational change by building a narrative that can encourage meaning at the lower level, which then has implications for change as a whole. This effort also includes reorganizing the leadership role, which emphasizes not only the function of control and position in enforcing change, but also shifting their role and redefining the meaning of change (Table 1). At the top level, leaders act as initiators and formulators in the meaning of change, as an initiator in creating the narrative of change through their narratives (Matsumura & Wang, 2014; Warwick-Giles & Checkland, 2018; Whittle et al., 2015) and as a facilitator between the organization and its members in making changes (Lord et al., 2016; Whittle et al., 2015). Therefore, the communication focuses on building collective identities (Warwick-Giles & Checkland, 2018), creating information that reduce uncertainty and reflecting commitment to change (Bilgili et al., 2017), and building formal enthusiasm in change through successful narratives (Warwick-Giles & Checkland, 2018).

**Table 1 Leader’s role and redefining process in organizational change context**

| Position             | Role                                   | Redefining meaning of change   |
|----------------------|--|--|
| Higher-level leaders | Initiator<br>Facilitator               | Conveying information that reduces uncertainty<br>Building formal enthusiasm in change<br>Reflecting commitment to change              |
| Middle-level leaders | Interpreter<br>Mediator<br>Facilitator | Transferring meaning to lower-level leaders<br>Creating harmony between values and change<br>Role modeling through languages and signs |
| Lower-level leaders  | Evaluator                              | Collectively assessing the change<br>Questioning the validity of information<br>Looking for the negative side of change                |

(Source: formulated by the authors based on the literature review)

Meanwhile, the middle management act as an interpreter in defining the meaning of change (Warwick-Giles & Checkland, 2018), a mediator between top management and frontliners (Gilson et al., 2014; Minei,

2015), and a facilitator by reconfiguring work structures and processes (Whittle et al., 2015). Consequently, they are transferring the constructed meaning from the leaders (Kraft et al., 2018) and composing information that could harmonize values and mindsets with change (Gilson et al., 2014).

At the lower level, leaders serve the evaluators of changes (Farrell & Marsh, 2016; Kraft et al., 2018; Sparr, 2018). Their communication stems from collective assessment of the change (Gilson et al., 2014), focusing on risk and ambiguous conditions of the current and future consequences of change (Twyford & Le Fevre, 2019), questioning the validity of information (Farrell & Marsh, 2016). However, the assessments of their change are seen as the bases for organizational improvements (Kraft et al., 2018). As recipients and implementers of change, lower management and staff can act as evaluators and participate in reconstructing meaning, but they can also be passive or even resist change as a consequence of their lack of involvement in change.

The findings indicate that the leaders' role must be changed based on their functions, rather than by changing their control over their employees. Leaders not only influence the meaning of change, but also act in response to the meaning of change. Therefore, leaders and followers influence each other in constructing the meaning of change. As a result, leaders who emphasis on positive aspects of change tend to hinder the acceptance of change by the lower management (Warwick-Giles & Checkland, 2018). Thus, providing more balanced information may assist them in understanding and participating in the change process.

Consequently, the collective meaning of change from the leaders can form a structure that accommodates change (Matsumura & Wang, 2014; Rodríguez & Bélanger, 2014) and work culture (Barach & Phelps, 2013; Gilson et al., 2014; Sahlin, 2019; Waddock, 2019). The changed structure is built not only based on the meaning from the higher-level leaders, but also from the lower-level leaders who provide a form of structure at that level with a different orientation (i.e. customer-oriented work structure (Whittle et al., 2015)), which is still in harmony with the core of the change to be achieved. On the other hand, culture could be shaped by constructing the meaning of change which contain values and belief (Waddock, 2019). Consequently, structure and culture may manifest itself in various forms as a consequence of the different meanings, while remaining in harmony with the essence of the change to be achieved.

## **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Based on the analysis on the previous studies, it is evident that the role of leadership in organizational change is interpreted not only as a traditional leader, that is, as a function of control and position in enforcing change, but rather as a facilitator who can bridge the meaning of change and provide the needs of its members in achieving the desired change. Therefore, making sense of organizational change through leadership is a process of meaning and reinterpreting the various stimuli, cognitions, and experiences of the leader. A lack of clear understanding and events that cannot be fully understood can trigger a lack of understanding of the organization in carrying out its activities related to organizational change. Moreover, the process of interpreting and conveying change is sensitive. Redefining efforts, such as the formation of success narratives, do not necessarily drive change (Minei, 2015; Warwick-Giles & Checkland, 2018). Instead, the presence of a skeptical dialogue, the facilitation of feedback, and the redefinition and re-evaluation of messages are important for leaders in creating sustainable change. From this point of view, leadership communication in change starts with triggers for leaders to pay attention to certain events or things, which then encourage interpretation, modify personal identities and narratives, and enforce new identities. Awareness and interpretation from various sides encourage the development of a more in-depth and competent leadership identity on the issue of organizational change. As a consequence, this study offers a foundation for exploring leadership communication in organizational change, especially on how leaders make sense of organizational change, which could suggest a formidable basis for understanding leadership communication and a trajectory for conducting future studies on this topic.

The literature review, however, has limitations that could be addressed in a future study. First, despite their high quality, the articles' scopes are limited to the Scopus-indexed database. Thus, scholars can consider using a larger database to obtain more comprehensive results. Furthermore, the findings have proven that sensemaking can influence meaning at a lower level, which has implications for the overall change process, even when participants are not involved in the construction process. To enrich the study of leadership communication in the context of change, research into how members of the organization perceive, discuss, and manage change in their work, a gender perspective of leaders sensemaking, or a comprehensive study at various levels of management is considered necessary. Furthermore, since the results have revealed less variation in the actors or leaders, which were still dominated by top management, who viewed them as both formulators and initiators of change, middle and lower-level managers should also be evaluated

simultaneously to gain a comprehensive understanding of the organization. Finally, because most studies are conducted in western countries, North America and European countries, research from organizations in other regions, such as Asia and the Middle East, would provide a more comprehensive understanding on how leaders communicate the change.

#### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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