

Transformational change by a post-conventional leader

Transformational
change

Eva Norrman Brandt, Sofia Kjellström and Ann-Christine Andersson
*Jönköping Academy for Improvement of Health and Welfare,
Jönköping University, Jönköping, Sweden*

457

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine people's experience of a change process and if and how post-conventional leadership principles are expressed in the change process.

Design/methodology/approach – The study used a retrospective exploratory qualitative design. In total, 19 semi-structured interviews and 4 workshops were conducted and analyzed in accordance with a thematic qualitative analysis.

Findings – The post-conventional leadership appears to have facilitated an organizational transformation where explorative work methods aimed at innovation and improvement as well as holistic understanding was used. Dispersed power and mandate to employees, within set frames and with clear goals, created new ways of organizing and working. The leader showed personal consideration, acknowledged the importance of the emotionally demanding aspects of change and admitted the leader's own vulnerability. Balance between challenge and support created courage to take on new roles and responsibilities. Most employees thrived and grew with the possibilities given, but some felt lack of support and clear directions.

Practical implications – Inspiration from this case on work methods and involvement of employees can be used on other change efforts.

Social implications – This study provides knowledge on leadership capabilities needed for facilitation of transformational change.

Originality/value – Few transformational change processes by post-conventional leaders are thoroughly described, and this study provides in-depth descriptions of post-conventional leadership in transformational change.

Keywords Transformational change, Adult development, Action logics, Leadership agility, Post-conventional leadership, Retrospective study

Paper type Research paper

Received 24 July 2018
Revised 20 December 2018
1 April 2019
17 April 2019
Accepted 6 May 2019

Introduction

Transformational change is particularly challenging to achieve in organizations, and the failure rate for change initiatives is high (Burnes, 2009; Greenwood and Hinings, 1993; Lee *et al.*, 2012). Nevertheless, research in the field of adult development indicates that post-conventional leaders with more complex ways of meaning making are more successful in driving change, in particular transformational change (Fisher and Torbert, 1991; Joiner and Josephs, 2007; Kjellström and Ståhle, 2017; McCauley *et al.*, 2006; Rooke and Torbert, 1998; Torbert *et al.*, 2004; Vincent *et al.*, 2015). There is a need for more studies describing these types of cases. This study provides an empirical example of a cultural transformational change process. The data were collected retrospectively to see if and how post-conventional principles were used in a 10-year-long change process.

Transformational change

Operating in a fast-changing complex world, innovation skills and the ability to master change are often mentioned as vital for organizations. Global competition, disruptive innovations and complexity are all factors affecting organizations, creating a need for organizations to adapt and respond in order to survive (Cegarra-Navarro *et al.*, 2016; Ebrahimpour *et al.*, 2012; Joiner, 2009; Lee *et al.*, 2012; Tallon and Pinsonneault, 2011), yet few change efforts achieve their targets (Burnes, 2009, 2011; Iveroth and Hallencreutz, 2015; Kotter, 2012). Possible causes, such as poor ability to engage organizational members and underestimation of sociocultural and behavioral mechanisms, are identified



and well described in the change literature, but the knowledge is not always used by managers and change leaders (Bartunek *et al.*, 2011; Bunker and Wakefield, 2006; Burnes, 2011; Hallencreutz, 2012). Since the 1990s, interest in and the need for transformational change has increased as a result of disruptive forces in society, such as information technology, intense market competition and legal and regulatory changes (Lee *et al.*, 2012). The need to rethink and reframe organizations calls for transformational change, which is defined as intentional, multidimensional change that departs radically from an organization's past precedents, aims at large-scale readjustments and is complex and systemic (Balogun and Hailey, 2008; Greenwood and Hinings, 1993; Kezar and Eckel, 2002; Lee *et al.*, 2012).

Altering organizational culture, i.e., shared patterns of beliefs, assumptions and expectations among organizational members, is considered even more difficult than other change efforts (Pettigrew, 1987; Schein and Schein, 2016). This puts demands on leaders to create a robust design for change that leans toward a long-term view, a collaborative approach that includes and invites people to holistic understanding and sense making, and internal ambassadors who can carry the new schemes forward (Kezar and Eckel, 2002; Kotter, 2012). The leaders of an organization play an important role if change is to succeed (Iveroth and Hallencreutz, 2015; Kezar and Eckel, 2002; Kotter, 2012; Rooke and Torbert, 1998; Torbert *et al.*, 2004). The CEO or top leader has a significant impact on transformational change (Laloux, 2014; Rooke and Torbert, 1998) and if the top manager does not approve of transformational change work, it may be impossible to accomplish (Joiner, 2009; Rooke and Torbert, 2005).

Post-conventional leadership

Adult development theories have their origins in developmental psychology but are applied in different scientific fields for analysis of societal challenges (Brown, 2012; Commons and Ross, 2008; Jordan, 2011; Kjellström and Stålné, 2017). The core of the theories is that an individual's meaning-making system (action logic) evolves and can become more complex through life. A variety of empirically supported concepts have evolved to describe the qualitatively different stages of making meaning (Kjellström and Stålné, 2017). In this paper, the theory of action logics developed by Torbert *et al.* (2004) is used as a base, with reference to the description from Joiner and Josephs' (2007) leadership agility framework. The labels are somewhat different, but the content and description of the levels are similar (Table I). An action logic represents how we organize and interpret reality. During adulthood, some individuals transform toward a more advanced capacity to question their actions and become more aware of their own and others' assumptions, strategies and values. The transformation of action logics affects how we interact, collaborate and understand ourselves and others (Torbert *et al.*, 2004).

Torbert	Joiner and Josephs
Conventional	Heroic
Diplomat	Conformer
Expert	Expert
Achiever	Achiever
Post-conventional	Post-heroic
Individualist	Catalyst
Strategist	Co-creator
Alchemist	Synergist

Table I.
Comparison of
developmental stages

Source: Adapted from Joiner and Josephs (2007, p. 248)

More advanced action logics allow a leader to engage in both long-term visionary work as well as emergencies that might arise from day to day.

Transformational change

There is a central distinction in adult development between conventional and post-conventional action logics, originating from the study of Kohlberg (1973) (Table II).

Levels of leadership agility correspond to different action logics. Joiner and Josephs (2007) adopted the terminology heroic and post-heroic (inspired by Bradford and Cohen, 1998). Table III presents one post-heroic level of leadership agility (catalyst) on three leadership arenas as well as views on leadership. This level is displayed because the managing director in our study scored catalyst in a Leadership Agility 360 survey (Cambriaconsulting.com), and this level of post-heroic leadership is the most common among the post-heroic styles (Joiner and Josephs, 2007). The connection between the developmental stages and the ability to drive change is presented and discussed in the next section.

Conventional action logics	Post-conventional action logics
Take social categories, norms and power structures for granted	Challenge current power structures and rely more on principles than on rules
Value stability and similarity	Value differences and participation in ongoing, creative transformation
Do not question assumptions	Design situations where others can be the origin of causation and where tasks are controlled jointly
Do not seek feedback	Seek out feedback on a regular basis
Do not challenge and introduce negotiation about current frames with superiors	Make efforts to understand subordinates' frames and use them as a basis for synthesizing shared understanding
Are less interested in the perspectives of others	Undertake negotiation with superiors to create a new shared frame
Advocate own views rather than inquire about others or adapt to others views without questioning	Reflect and expand awareness on own action logics
Do not reflect on own action logics	

Table II.
Features of conventional and post-conventional action logics in leadership inspired by Torbert *et al.* (2004)

	Catalyst
Assumptions about leadership	Visionary, facilitative orientation. Assumes that leadership involves the articulation of an innovative, inspiring vision and bringing the right people together to transform vision into reality. Feels that leadership is about empowering others and actively facilitating their development
Pivotal conversations	Skilled in balancing assertive and accommodating styles as needed in specific situations. Likely to identify and question underlying assumptions, including their own. Genuinely interested in learning from diverse viewpoints. Proactively seeks and utilizes feedback
Leading teams	Intent upon creating a highly participative team. Acts as both team leader and facilitator. Models and seeks an open exchange of viewpoints on challenging issues. Empowers direct reports. Uses team development initiatives as vehicles for individual leadership development
Leading organizational change	Organizational change initiatives often include development of a culture that promotes teamwork, participation and empowerment. Proactive engagement with diverse stakeholders reflects a belief that this input will increase the quality of decisions, not just gain buy-in

Table III.
Catalyst leadership on three arenas

Source: From Joiner and Josephs (2007, pp. 8-9)

Post-conventional leadership and change

The connection between leaders' action logics and approach to different managerial tasks, including leading change, have been investigated in several studies (Fisher and Torbert, 1991; Rooke and Torbert, 1998; Torbert *et al.*, 2004). There are indications that leaders with more advanced action logics are more successful in driving transformational change (Fisher and Torbert, 1991; Joiner and Josephs, 2007). Post-conventional leaders are more open to rethinking and reframing their purposes (Fisher and Torbert, 1991; Rooke and Torbert, 1998; Torbert *et al.*, 2004), i.e., engage in double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978). When handling a problem, they look for the underlying causes rather than simply accepting a given definition (Fisher *et al.*, 1987; Merron *et al.*, 1987). They also believe in dialog with members of the organization to explore differences in opinion and views to generate transformation. Empowerment and exchange of views are seen as the only way to drive transformational change as well as negotiation with superiors to create a common frame of understanding (Fisher and Torbert, 1991). The influence on followers is of interest because transformational change has to embrace all members of an organization to be successful (Fisher and Torbert, 1991). The match between leaders' action logics and followers has been investigated (Berger and Fitzgerald, 2002; Kegan, 1994), and some challenges regarding followers' demands and needs compared with leaders' way of leading are presented below.

Level of adult development and influence on followers

Leaders' action logics seem to predict their capacity to drive transformational change, but as transformation of an organization includes cultural changes, it seems to rely on engagement of organizational members (Crocitto and Youssef, 2003; Fisher and Torbert, 1991). Therefore, the interaction between leaders and followers is of interest. Leaders with late action logics have the capacity to engage others in creating a collective vision (Kegan, 1994), but they also give fewer directives, which might cause frustration in followers with earlier action logics because followers expect their leader to have a vision and a plan (Berger and Fitzgerald, 2002; Kegan, 1994). Because few individuals operate from advanced action logics (McCauley *et al.*, 2006), these leaders' way of leading might not make sense to others in the organization. A developmental shift may be required by the organization to appreciate and welcome leaders with advanced action logics (Drath, 1990).

Aim

The aim of this paper is to examine people's experiences of a change process and if and how post-conventional leadership principles were expressed in this change process. The study covers a time span of 10 years when the leader in focus held the role of head of quality (2005–2010) and managing director (2010–2014). There are relatively few studies on how post-conventional principles are used in change work (McCauley *et al.*, 2006), which made it interesting to understand how they were enacted.

The case

The organization in this study is an international biotech plant, located in a small town in Sweden. The plant has a long history as a manufacturer within the biotech industry. Over the years, they have been awarded various prizes, such as Energy and Climate Change Certificate (2010), Operational Excellence Award (2011) and Change Management Awards and Leader Profile of the Year (2013). The plant has conducted quality improvement work for many years and has focused on innovation and flow-based production, i.e., focusing on cross-functional teams instead of functional organization with separate departments. The strong focus on improvement and involvement of employees has been successful regarding employee satisfaction and productivity (Sandell *et al.*, 2013). The plant has been affected by demanding

market conditions for many years. In 2011, the managing director stated that productivity had to increase by 50 percent within five years due to market conditions. The plant had 219 employees (2015), 23 managers and 7 members of the Site Leader Team (in total 30 leaders). An innovation project called the Future Trip was launched, allowing 22 employees to work part time in innovation groups. The intention was to come up with novel solutions to organizational challenges. The change journey, further described in the study of Norrman-Brandt et al. (submitted), comprised three periods of different change situations starting with small adjustments and improvements within current structures (2005–2009), proceeding to an adaptation to larger production volumes in a new plant requiring new solutions and ways of working (2009–2011). The third period (2011–2014) was transformational, deeply affecting the culture and assumptions about ways of leading, organizing and prioritizing.

Method

The study used an exploratory qualitative design and qualitative methods through interviews with leaders and employees and observations from meetings with leaders from the organization. The study adopted an interactive research design involving the organization in the research process (Svensson *et al.*, 2002).

The research team consisted of the authors of this paper: Eva Norrman Brandt (ENB), Management Consultant, Licensed Psychotherapist and PhD Student; Professor of Quality Improvement and Leadership, Sofia Kjellström, PhD, Jönköping Academy; Associate Professor and Ann-Christine Andersson, PhD and Senior Lecturer, Jönköping Academy. ENB had previously (2005–2010) done consultant work on a smaller scale in the organization. At the time of the study, no consultancy work was done but some of the participants had met ENB earlier in the consultant role. The managing director was interested to invite researchers to analyze the change process retrospectively. There was a common interest in the leadership role in the change from the organization and the researchers. Two of the researchers had previous knowledge of adult development theory and two of the researchers had long experience within change management.

Sample

Two groups of participants were included. The first group of 19 interviewees was selected to create a purposive sample of information-rich cases related to different perspectives of the change process. The second group of participants was leaders attending four workshops (with 10–16 participants) where they interacted with the researchers on different topics aligned with the current study, such as themes from interviews and possible questions on preparing interviews. An appointed contact person from the organization assisted in the recruitment process of interviewees.

Interviewees represented managerial level ($n=9$) and subordinates ($n=10$), union representatives and a variety of educational backgrounds from upper secondary to PhDs, aged 39–60 years. All interviewees except two had at least eight years of experience; some had much longer. Two interviewees had five years of experience but were recruited to provide the organization with extensive experience from transformational change work in other settings. The participants represented different views and opinions about the change process. The selection of interviewees was made to include people known to be critical of the change process and leadership, people who had a view balancing positive and negative aspects and people who really appreciated the change journey. They also represented different parts of the organization, and all had the ambition to provide as many perspectives on the change and leadership as possible. The managing director during the period (2010–2014) was one of the 19 interviewed. She had left the organization before the data collection. All participants who were asked to be interviewed accepted. Members of the leader forum participated in the meetings with the researchers on a voluntary basis (Tables IV and V).

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the plant from February to June 2015. No pilot interview was conducted but a thorough reflection of the interview questions and design of data collection took place. One of the authors (ENB) conducted all the interviews. The interview guide consisted of three main questions, which were followed by probing questions aimed at further exploring the chosen areas. The interviews lasted 45–75 min and were tape recorded and transcribed. In addition to the interviews, preparation and feedback meetings with leaders at the site, leader forums, a group of leaders and managers gathering regularly to discuss relevant topics, were conducted. The purpose of the meetings was to include and involve the managers in the research process in accordance with an interactive research model (Ellström, 2007). Discussions around the set-up and design, as well as feedback and reflections on the results, were conducted. Two to three members of the research team participated in these meetings, and minutes were taken during three of the meetings. The outcome of the feedback and reflections are included in the results as a way of validating the accuracy of the analysis.

Analysis and adoption of Braun and Clarke

Data were analyzed in accordance with the six phases of a thematic qualitative analysis inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis process described below had an inductive approach strongly linked to the data.

Familiarizing yourself with the data. The transcripts were read through several times by the three authors to get a sense of the whole. Minutes taken at the meetings of the leader forum were also read and taken into account. Initial ideas were written down.

Generating initial codes. Key elements were identified from the transcripts, and sentences and citations from the interviews were collated to the key elements. Key elements were

Table IV.
Characteristics of
the participants
in the interviews

Participants	Educational level	Role in organization 2015
12 women aged 39–60 years (average 47 years)	4 upper secondary level 6 graduate level, 2 PhDs	6 managers (one had left) 4 specialists 2 organizational developers
7 men aged 39–58 years (average 48 years)	4 upper secondary level 2 graduate level 1 PhD	2 managers 1 team leader 2 organizational developers 2 specialists

Table V.
Meetings with the
leader forum

Date	Focus of meeting	Participants
November 3, 2014	Dialog on goal, purpose and collaboration in the research study	16 leaders, 2 researchers
January 26, 2015	Ideas on topics for the interviews to come, ideas on people to interview, reflections on changes made and challenges forward	15 leaders, 3 researchers
August 24, 2015	Feedback of preliminary results from interviews that took place in February–June. Reflections on how the results could be used for future learning in the organization	10 leaders, 3 researchers
September 12, 2016	Feedback from the thematic analysis. Face validity was tested; was there anything missing or anything that did not seem correct	12 leaders, 3 researchers

circumstances or occurrences approached by several or all interviewees and participants in the leader forum. For example, the key element “demands on organization” was created by citations such as “We are evaluated constantly. We always must prove we deliver, otherwise we are made redundant,” “We have been subject to threats of closing the plant several times,” “We are constantly aware of demands, we have sense of urgency.”

Searching for themes. Key elements or codes were grouped in potential themes, collating all relevant coded data extracts within the relevant themes. At an early stage, there were ten preliminary themes, all relevant to the interview questions and covering the entire data corpus, but these were reviewed in an iterative process.

Reviewing themes. The idea of overlapping themes resulted in collapse of the themes; two or three themes were merged into one with a similar meaning. The sense of the two chosen themes was that they captured and reflected the meaning of the entire data set. The subthemes underpinned the meaning of the two main themes (Figure 1).

Defining and naming themes. Going back to the aim of the study, the themes should relate to the overall aim of the study. One of the main themes had a focus on working methods, the other on leadership. The themes and subthemes were named and renamed several times until the label that incorporated the essence of the theme was found.

Producing a report. The last step in the analysis model was writing the results into a report in the form of this paper. The findings from the analysis are presented as well as the themes and subthemes that emerged from the analysis. The main themes, explorative work methods and leadership footprints, were underpinned by the six subthemes that give more detailed information of the views from participants. Each theme is illustrated by quotations, translated by the authors. In addition, the results are interpreted through the lens of post-conventional leadership principles presented in Tables II and III.

Results

Participants expressed ideas about two main themes (Figure 1). Explorative work methods theme refers to the new way of working that was not previously seen in the organization, and the leadership footprints theme refers to the style and actions of the leader within the organization.

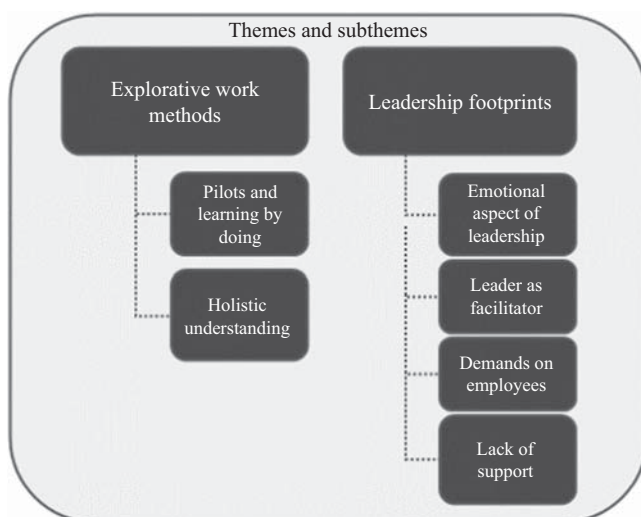


Figure 1.
Themes and subthemes

Explorative work methods

The explorative work methods theme discloses new ways of working suitable for dealing with uncertainty and unexplored areas. External demands on productivity and efficiency both forced and encouraged the organization to engage in new ways of handling challenges. Novel work methods emerged during the entire change process (2005–2015), but the participants experienced a peak in the period 2011–2014 during the Future Trip project. The call for 50 percent increase in productivity enforced new work methods. The managing director, with support from an external consultant, decided to create an entirely new way of engaging employees in innovation work within four areas within the organization: leading and steering, communication and branding, new products, competence development and staffing.

New types of meetings, on a cross-functional basis, where new perspectives and different approaches to problem solving supported learning and development, fostered a habit of looking at a dilemma or problem from different perspectives:

We got used to looking at problems and deviations on a more holistic level when meeting in cross-functional groups. The sense of WE instead of US and THEM emerged with this way of working. (Interview 5)

The habit of reflection and multiple views of a dilemma became a cornerstone in the organizational culture. This theme demonstrates several features of post-conventional principles. The design of situations where others can be the origin of causation, and making efforts to understand subordinates' frame of reference and use that as a basis for synthesizing shared understanding (Torbert *et al.*, 2004) was demonstrated in the Future Trip design, where employees were given a mandate and freedom within a given area. A conventional leader would most probably have wanted more control and influence on a change process. Proactive engagement with diverse stakeholders as a means to increase the quality of decisions, adopting a visionary, facilitative orientation and bringing the right people together to transform the vision into reality (Joiner and Josephs, 2007) is also a post-conventional principle that seems to have been used in this case and expressed in the Future Trip.

The subtheme of pilots and learning by doing highlights how the leader encouraged trials and difficulties to become a developmental method where anybody was allowed to make and try out a suggestion. This required tolerance for uncertainty and temporary disequilibrium and a leadership that was aware that it was difficult to steer and predict the outcome, and allowed the organization to try different methods without overly high expectations of functionality. The mindset of a learning culture, where the fear of failure was small, encouraged people to be creative:

In our organization, it is absolutely accepted to fail. As long as you admit and are transparent about it so that we all can learn from it, it's all right. I once caused a failure in production that cost a lot of money, but nobody blamed me because this happened in the new factory and we didn't yet know how things would work out. We used it as a learning opportunity. (Interview 10)

We developed a way of working that allowed anyone to try developmental ideas on a smaller scale. When we had tried and found the solution good enough, we adopted it on a more permanent basis. (Interview 11)

When the use of pilots became established, a process and habit of testing and working in new ways or adjusting roles to see if it was functional was the new normal. Empowering of direct reporting and seeing the need to bring the right people together are characteristics of post-conventional action logics (Joiner and Josephs, 2007), as well as design situations where others can be the origin of causation (Torbert *et al.*, 2004), are examples of post-conventional principles.

The next subtheme, holistic understanding, is about how the leader encouraged all employees to see a bigger picture with a broader view of the plant as a system. In the search

for increased efficiency both here and now as well as several years ahead, an overview of the whole system was needed to see where delays arose and how the product could proceed smoothly through the plant. Constant and conscious attention to the product changed the way people worked and acted. Interviewees also mentioned the focus on long-term goals and visionary views that encouraged people to take on bigger challenges. The systemic understanding developed a sense of interdependency and acceptance of sacrifices that had to be made in search of an overall goal:

The Future Trip is much about a changed mindset, from “here and now” to future goals including the whole organization. All the talk about the products, the overall goals for the plant helped us to look away from personal short-term wins. (Interview 8)

We used to suffer from long lead times when every department had its own planning. At that time, we used to do things that maybe weren’t the best for the whole organization. We considered what was best for our own department. Now, we always consider what is most profitable for the products’ passage through our system. After all, it is about releasing a product on time. Without the product, we don’t have a job. (Interview 1)

These quotations illustrate that efforts were made to facilitate a long-term, visionary and systemic view to enable employees so get a holistic perspective on the plant in order to contribute outside narrow personal preferences. Transformations require engagement and understanding from all members of the organization (Crocitto and Youssef, 2003; Fisher and Torbert, 1991). Post-conventional principles, such as transparency, involvement and mandate to contribute (Joiner and Josephs, 2007; Kegan and Lahey, 2009; Torbert *et al.*, 2004), were present in the various efforts to establish a holistic view of the organization.

Leadership footprints

This theme identifies the effect of the somewhat unusual and unconventional interventions that the leader (managing director) made. Demonstrating the shared responsibility, the mandate given to employees, the long-term and visionary goals and the transparency with urgent challenges are all examples of how the leader expressed the view on leadership. The leader’s assumption was that involvement and shared responsibility was the only way to develop and change the organization:

If we don’t ask our employees when facing a problem in our production, how can it be solved? We had to turn the hierarchical pyramids upside down to handle our future existence. (Interview 2)

The subtheme, emotional aspects of leadership, covers the emotional influence that the leader had on employees and other leaders. One aspect, which seems important, is the leader’s acceptance of his/her own and others’ vulnerability throughout the change process.

The leader’s ability to acknowledge people’s fears and doubts as well as willingness to show her own vulnerability was mentioned by several participants in the interviews and in workshops:

It was clear that our leader paid attention to how we felt. She wanted us to feel good during the changes we went through and encouraged everybody to share and talk about feelings and reflect in groups about the process we were in. (Interview 3)

We were all on an emotional journey because so much was changed around us and so much was uncertain. We talked about anxiety and how we dealt with it. I guess that became accepted because our managing director admitted that she was anxious too. (Interview 4)

It could be frightening for people to be on a change journey where nothing is predictable. Managers used to being in control seemed to feel especially uncomfortable not knowing the outcome. (Interview 2)

Our manager’s personality affected us all positively. She would sit by anybody at lunch, knows our names, cares about us, shows positive energy and enthusiasm. A typically visionary leader who showed trust in colleagues. (Interview 12)

This illustrates an awareness of own and others feelings in a difficult change process. "People's stage of development influences what they notice and can become aware of, and therefore, what they can describe, articulate, cultivate, influence, and change" (Cook-Greuter, 2013, p. 3). Later stages allow more differentiation (more aspects of the world are noticed) and more integration (the different aspects are brought together into a coherent whole that functions as one). Development at later stages of understanding entails more autonomy, more tolerance for difference and ambiguity and more self-awareness (Kjellström and Stålné, 2017). People at higher stages of development and post-conventional action logics have access to positive and negative emotions and parts of oneself. The quotations above could be interpreted as if the managing director had this ability.

The next subtheme, leader as facilitator, deals with the way the leader leads and guides the organization. The theme indicates a way of leading that gives direction and trusts that people in the organization can create the way forward to a set goal. Challenging hierarchies by giving mandate to employees was demonstrated in many ways. Employees noticed that the managing director and the site leader team gradually let go of control by trusting teams to solve problems. One of the more tangible events was when the leader handed over a steering wheel to a representative of the employees with the message: everybody takes the steering wheel:

The management team had no clue about how to solve an issue of water shortage in the new plant we built, but they (employees) did it in a week! (Interview 2)

We have tried to disseminate power from the management team to the groups that work with a problem. The pyramids have been turned upside down and decisions are made by those who own them. (Interview 11)

The somewhat unusual way of disseminating power, giving a mandate to employees, caused various reactions, mostly positive. The post-conventional assumption that leadership is about empowering others is demonstrated in this theme.

The subtheme, demands on employees, is about the stress that a change situation causes. Some felt a demand to take on new responsibilities and new roles according to the organizational changes that took place. The norm in this case seems to have been willingness to step out of one's own comfort zone to partake in change work of different kinds:

Some people grew immensely and took on challenges they would never have dreamed of. Others felt they lost something when the organization left the functional structure. You are expected to take on a broader range of assignments in the new organization. (Interview 5)

Not all participants were comfortable meeting these expectations, and some expected the management team to provide answers and clear directions:

When you start a change process, you cannot say what the result will be. It could be worse for some people, at least to begin with. (Interview 7)

We got a message that costs must be reduced by 50% but no solutions on how this was going to be done. It is certainly disturbing when a leader does not show you the way to the goal. (Interview 9)

One of the challenges was to judge for oneself:

Am I interested in and suitable for innovation work? What challenges and changes am I ready and willing to take on? (Interview 6)

From a cultural perspective, the audacity to propose yourself for an assignment or a role is considered quite bold. The risk of being assessed differently than your self-image was scary, and in some cases evoked shame when somebody was denied participation in an innovation team. A result of the shift from functional to flow-based organization meant a challenge to

professional platforms and identities. A consequence of flow-based organization was that professional groups were dismantled and expert roles became less indispensable: Transformational change

Earlier, we had specialists and experts only in their own area of knowledge. Now, we focus on teams and make sure we are not so vulnerable if somebody quits – the knowledge is in the team – by encouraging more people to learn what only the experts knew earlier. The heroes are not what they used to be – irreplaceable. (Interview 11)

Some people left because of the new roles, realizing that the demands on them were different and uncomfortable or that the view on leadership changed from expertise leadership to a more inclusive, coaching leadership style. This theme demonstrates the darker side of post-conventional leadership. The idea of empowering employees, giving mandate and freedom, can also be difficult for people who need more structure and directives.

Both advantages and disadvantages of the leadership style became clear, and the subtheme, lack of support, indicated that having the freedom and opportunity to try new ways of working, thinking and acting was very beneficial for some people but meant an unpleasant sense of chaos and insecurity for others.

In some of the interviews, tension between the Future Trip participants and the rest of the plant was mentioned, and there was a perception that the managing director approved more of those who were innovative and creative, and less of those who wanted more structure and predictability:

I cannot say that the Future Trip was a failure but it created two camps – the ones who were invited to be creative and innovative and the ones who had to keep production going. The managing director's style was very positive but there seemed to be a demand on everybody else to be the same way. (Interview 9)

At the beginning of the Future Trip project, there were some reactions to the participants when they left their ordinary work to engage in innovation. Some felt they must do their job and felt resentful. (Interview 3)

The managing director admitted in an interview that there might have been too little focus on those who were not engaged in innovation and change work:

Although everybody was needed in order to make this huge change effort possible, I may have been too focused on the Future Trip project and the people involved in innovation work. (Interview 2)

It is obvious that the anxiety around our new way of working has decreased in the past year. We carry out a survey four times a year asking employees how they experience the work environment, and the results have been much better in the last year. I think the new way of working has settled and people are getting used to our new culture. (Interview 11)

The change has clearly caused various reactions and a good deal of anxiety, but these reactions seem to have decreased with time.

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to examine if and how post-conventional leadership principles were expressed in a change process and how people experienced that leadership. The findings show changes in work methods, altered assumptions about power and mandates, and somewhat challenging hierarchies by giving a mandate to employees to come up with solutions on strategically important issues for the plant's future. The leader demonstrated post-conventional action logics in several ways: adopting a visionary and facilitative leadership style, bringing the right people together (Joiner and Josephs, 2007); looking five years ahead to create readiness for change; facilitating co-creation; challenging current power structures; and relying on principles rather than rules (Torbert *et al.*, 2004). In the innovation project and workshops with all employees, there was a balance between the

leader's own ideas and the views and perspectives of others when discussing strategic issues. A culture promoting teamwork was established including the design of arenas where others outside the management team could be the origin of causation (Torbert *et al.*, 2004). The leader had the capacity to engage, empower and trust employees. This enabled the organization to rethink and reframe the organizational design. The managing director's willingness to openly admit her own anxiety and vulnerability by talking about emotional aspects of change encouraged others to be open about stress and anxiety. Employees and leaders seemed confident when stepping out of their own comfort zone, trying out new things. This means that the participants experienced and described a leadership adopting post-conventional action logics.

The results indicate that a transformational change process took place with a leader adopting post-conventional principles, thus supporting previous research that states that post-conventional leaders are better equipped to lead transformational changes (Rooke and Torbert, 1998; Joiner and Josephs, 2007).

But not everyone was happy with the change process and the leadership. A number of people felt neglected and that they lacked support. Research in the area of adult development states that challenges need to be balanced with adequate support (Kegan, 1994), and differences in leaders' and employees' level of development might cause frustration (Berger and Fitzgerald, 2002; McCauley *et al.*, 2006). The reason is that people construct meaning in different ways, and employees with earlier action logics might suffer from a visionary and delegating way of leading. The employees who felt lack of support and discomfort in this situation might have been on a different developmental level than the managing director. Employees at an expert level expect the leader to provide a plan (Berger and Fitzgerald, 2002), and are not comfortable with a leader inviting them to co-create a vision and a plan. In this study, we have not investigated action logics among those who felt frustration and lack of support, but differences in their action logics and the leader's might be one reason for their reaction. The leader in charge scored at early post-conventional level (catalyst), which might have contributed to the difficulties in predicting people's reactions.

Would the leader have been even more capable of handling the stress, frustration and need for support among those who were not comfortable in this challenging organizational transformation if scoring at a later action logic level? There are indications that the leader in some sense was aware of the action logics, but more as a result of looking back at the change situation than in the middle of it. There was a hesitation to negotiate with superiors to create new common frames. Results were delivered from the plant to the corporate level and, as a result, freedom to lead according to principles that did not always resonate with the corporate standards. A leader with later action logics might have involved superiors to a greater extent and maybe inspired several other plants in the corporation to adopt some of the principles used in this case. One finding from this study is that post-conventional leaders possibly play an important role in change and enable a process that embraces a cultural shift. Some scholars even suggest that the senior leaders' level of development acts as a ceiling for sense making (Laloux, 2014; McCauley *et al.*, 2006). Other reflections claim that an organizational culture may be a holder of more complex sense making than the individual level (Huffaker, 2017; Kegan, 1982). When the authors of this study arranged a workshop at the plant in 2016, two years after the post-conventional managing director left, the principles, methods and other cultural footprints established still prevailed. The cultural transformation was not dependent on a single person but seemed to be carried by the majority of employees in the plant. Principles of collaboration and sense making were deeply rooted and made sense according to business needs, a shared vision and a clear purpose.

The need for more research in the area of post-conventional leadership has been mentioned by several scholars (Brown, 2012; Kjellström and Stålné, 2017; McCauley *et al.*, 2006). This case provides an empirical contribution to an area of importance but less

researched and with small samples. This study may inspire change leaders to adopt more post-conventional principles when facing a transformational change challenge.

The need for transformational change seems to increase as the years go by as well as the need for cultures built on collaboration and shared leadership among all employees (Laloux, 2014; Huffaker, 2017). It would be important to further study how to balance challenge and support in organizations to create good and healthy work environments in the twenty-first century.

References

- Argyris, C. and Schön, D. (1978), *Organizational Learning*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA.
- Balogun, J. and Hailey, V. (2008), *Exploring Strategic Change*, Prentice Hall, Harlow.
- Bartunek, J.M., Balogun, J. and Do, B. (2011), "Considering planned change anew: stretching large group interventions strategically, emotionally, and meaningfully", *Academy of Management Annals*, Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 1-52.
- Berger, J.G. and Fitzgerald, C. (2002), "Leadership and complexity of mind: the role of executive coaching", in Fitzgerald, C.F. and Berger, J.G. (Eds), *Executive Coaching: Practices and Perspectives*, Davies-Black, Palo Alto, CA, pp. 27-58.
- Bradford, D.L. and Cohen, A.R. (1998), *Power Up: Transforming Organizations Through Shared Leadership*, Wiley, Hoboken, NJ.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006), "Using thematic analysis in psychology", *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol. 3 No. 2, pp. 77-101.
- Brown, B.C. (2012), "Leading complex change with post-conventional consciousness", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, Vol. 25 No. 4, pp. 560-577.
- Bunker, K.A. and Wakefield, M. (2006), "Leading in times of change", *Harvard Management Update*, Vol. 11 No. 5, pp. 1-25.
- Burnes, B. (2009), *Managing Change: A Strategic Approach to Organisational Dynamics*, Prentice Hall/Financial Times, New York, NY.
- Burnes, B. (2011), "Introduction: why does change fail and what can we do about it?", *Journal of Change Management*, Vol. 11 No. 4, pp. 445-450.
- Cegarra-Navarro, J.G., Soto-Acosta, P. and Wensley, A.K.P. (2016), "Structured knowledge processes and firm performance: the role of organizational agility", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 69, pp. 1544-1549.
- Commons, M.L. and Ross, S.N. (2008), "Special issue: postformal thought and hierarchical complexity", *World Future*, No. 64 Nos 5-7, pp. 275-281.
- Cook-Greuter, S.R. (2013), "Nine levels of increasing embrace in ego development: a full-spectrum theory of vertical growth and meaning making", available at: www.cook-greuter.com/CookGreuter%209%20levels%20paper%20new%2011=14%2097p%5B1%5D.pdf
- Crocitto, M. and Youssef, M. (2003), "The human side of organizational agility", *Industrial Management and Data Systems*, Vol. 103 No. 6, pp. 388-397.
- Drath, W. (1990), "Managerial strengths and weaknesses as function of the development of personal meaning", *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, Vol. 27 No. 26, pp. 483-499.
- Ebrahimpour, H., Salafari, M. and Asiaei, A. (2012), "The relationship between agility capabilities and organizational performance, a case study among home appliance factories in Iran", *European Journal of Business and Management*, Vol. 4 No. 17, pp. 186-195.
- Ellström, P.E. (2007), "Knowledge creation through interactive research: a learning perspective", paper presented at HSS-07 Conference, May 8-11.
- Fisher, D. and Torbert, W.R. (1991), "Transforming managerial practice: beyond the achiever stage", *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, Vol. 5, pp. 143-173.

- Fisher, D., Merron, K. and Torbert, W.R. (1987), "Human development and managerial effectiveness", *Group and Organization Studies*, Vol. 12 No. 3, pp. 257-273.
- Greenwood, R. and Hinings, G.R. (1993), "Understanding strategic change: the contribution of archetypes", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 36 No. 5, pp. 725-755.
- Hallencreutz, J. (2012), "Under the skin of change: meanings, models and management", doctoral dissertation, Luleå University of Technology, Luleå.
- Huffaker, J. (2017), "From me to we: how collaborate culture developed in an organization", doctoral dissertation, Fielding Graduate University, Santa Barbara, CA.
- Iveroth, E. and Hallencreutz, J. (2015), *Effective Organizational Change. Leading Through Sensemaking*, Routledge, London and New York, NY.
- Joiner, W.B. (2009), "Creating a culture of agile leaders", *People and Strategy*, Vol. 32 No. 4, pp. 28-35.
- Joiner, W.B. and Josephs, S.A. (2007), *Leadership Agility: Five Levels of Mastery for Anticipating and Initiating Change*, Jossey Bass/Wiley, San Francisco, CA.
- Jordan, T. (2011), "Skillful engagement with wicked issues: a framework for analyzing the meaning-making structures for societal change agents", *Integral Review*, Vol. 7 No. 2, pp. 47-91.
- Kegan, R. (1982), *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Kegan, R. (1994), *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Kegan, R. and Lahey, L. (2009), *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome it and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization*, Harvard Business Press, Boston, MA.
- Kezar, A. and Eckel, P. (2002), "Examining the institutional transformation process: the importance of sensemaking, interrelated strategies, and balance", *Research in Higher Education*, Vol. 43 No. 3, pp. 295-328.
- Kjellström, S. and Stålné, K. (2017), "Adult development as a lens: applications of adult development theories in research", *Behavioral Development Bulletin*, Vol. 22 No. 22, pp. 266-278.
- Kohlberg, L. (1973), "The claim to moral adequacy of the highest stage of moral judgement", *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 70, pp. 630-646.
- Kotter, J.P. (2012), "Accelerate!", *Harvard Business Review*, November.
- Laloux, F. (2014), *Reinventing Organizations*, Nelson Parker, Brussels.
- Lee, S.-Y.D., Weiner, B.J., Harrison, M.I. and Belden, C.M. (2012), "Organizational transformation: a systematic review of empirical research in health care and other industries", *Medical Care Research and Review*, Vol. 70 No. 2, pp. 115-142.
- McCauley, C.D., Drath, W.H., Palus, C.J., O'Connor, P.M.G. and Baker, B.A. (2006), "The use of constructive-developmental theory to advance the understanding of leadership", *Leadership Quarterly*, No. 17, pp. 634-653.
- Merron, K., Fisher, D. and Torbert, W.R. (1987), "Meaning making and management action", *Group and Organization Studies*, Vol. 12 No. 3, pp. 274-286.
- Norrmann-Brandt, E., Andersson, A.-C. and Kjellström, S. (submitted), "The future trip: a story of transformational change".
- Pettigrew, A. (1987), "Context and action in the transformation of the firm", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 24 No. 6, pp. 649-669.
- Rooke, D. and Torbert, W.R. (1998), "Organizational transformation as a function of CEOs developmental stage", *Organizational Development Journal*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 11-28.
- Rooke, D. and Torbert, W.R. (2005), "Seven transformations of leadership", *Harvard Business Review*, April, pp. 66-76.
- Sandell, K., Eriksson, J., Eriksson, K., Stigell-Warnstrom, M. and Gjellan, K. (2013), "Continuous improvement: a path towards excellence", in Friedli, T., Basu, P., Bellm, D. and Werani, J. (Eds), *Leading Pharmaceutical Operational Excellence*, Springer, Berlin and Heidelberg, pp. 433-442.

-
- Schein, E. and Schein, P. (2016), *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Wiley, Hoboken, NJ.
- Svensson, L., Brulin, G., Ellström, P.-E. and Widegren, Ö. (Eds) (2002), *Interaktiv forskning – för utveckling av teori och praktik*, ISBN: 91-7045-637-2, Arbetsliv i omvandling, Stockholm, p. 7 (in Swedish).
- Tallon, P. and Pinsonneault, A. (2011), “The link between strategic IT alignment and organizational agility”, *MIS Quarterly*, Vol. 35 No. 2, pp. 464-485.
- Torbert, W.R., Fisher, D. and Rooke, D. (2004), *Action Inquiry: The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership*, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco, CA.
- Vincent, N., Ward, L. and Denson, L. (2015), “Promoting post-conventional consciousness in leaders: Australian community leadership programs”, *Leadership Quarterly*, No. 26, pp. 238-253.

Corresponding author

Eva Norrman Brandt can be contacted at: eva.brandt@ipf.se