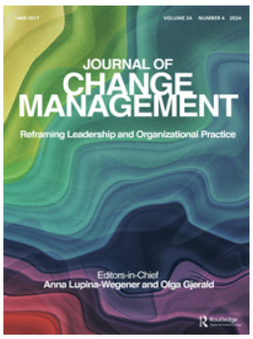

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How Managers Experience Downsizing: Navigating among Professional, Loyal, Empathic, and Critical Positions

Niina Koivunen, Riitta Viitala and Katja Ekman

School of Management, University of Vaasa, Vaasa, Finland

ABSTRACT

Downsizing, a significant organizational change, is often entrusted to middle managers. These agents play a crucial role in navigating the complexities of downsizing, yet we know little about their downsizing experiences. In this study, our research question was: how do managers who have to lay off people experience downsizing. We used discourse analysis to describe what we refer to as 'discursive positions' adopted by downsizing agents in our interviews. Our research material comprises 21 interviews in a large Finnish manufacturing company that underwent a downsizing process. We show how 12 downsizing agents navigated among different discursive positions while serving many conflicting interests. The rationalistic positions of Professional and Loyal target the shareholders, other business professionals, and the employer. The position of Empathic addresses subordinates, and the position of Critical is directed at top management and human resource professionals. We show how discursive positions are divided into rational and emotional spheres and examine the strong tensions between them. It appears that middle managers apply several often-contradictory discursive positions, struggle with satisfying conflicting expectations from top management and from their subordinates, and use several coping methods.

MAD statement

A common challenge for change managers is that they are brought in only after a downsizing decision has already been made. Sustainable change management requires ongoing preparation for change, regardless of whether downsizing or restructuring is imminent. This proactive approach helps all stakeholders to respond responsibly when an urgent situation arises. It also reduces the need for abrupt action and prevents reactive, high-speed learning that often accompanies such crises. We recommend that companies establish a cross-functional change team to develop long-term personnel reduction strategies. While constant change is often celebrated in management, we argue that many organizations would benefit from maintaining a reasonable degree of stability.

KEYWORDS

Discourse analysis; discursive position; downsizing; layoffs; manager

CONTACT Niina Koivunen niina.koivunen@uwasa.fi

1. Introduction

Downsizing has become a regular part of organizational life since the 1980s (Appelbaum & Donia, 2000; Gandolfi & Hansson, 2011). Most global companies downsize or restructure regularly in order to cut costs or to move resources between locations. Downsizing has, in fact, become institutionalized as a common tool in companies that are trying to meet the profit expectations of their shareholders (McKinley et al., 2000; Schulz & Wiersema, 2018). Downsizing has been defined as an organizational change involving personnel reductions and the redesign of work processes undertaken to improve organizational efficiency, productivity, and competitiveness (Cameron, 1994). Despite the dramatic nature of downsizing, corporations often construct this business practice as an unavoidable, positive, routine, management strategy (Vuontisjärvi, 2013).

The causes and consequences of downsizing have been a topic of many research articles since the 1990s. Most research on downsizing has focused largely on either top management, on company-level strategic decision-making, or on employee-level experiences of downsizing events. The research on top management's strategic activities primarily adopts a rationalistic perspective in which downsizing decisions are justified with objective criteria related to profitability and the market situation (Gandolfi & Hansson, 2011). Studies on the downsizing experiences of those who have been laid off emphasize their emotional upheaval and describe how both dismissed and retained employees struggle with stress, sadness, and other negative emotions (Dlouhy & Casper, 2021). Little is known about the part of the organization in between – the middle managers who must conduct the downsizing activities. This lack may be due to the sensitivity of downsizing situations; few companies are keen to let researchers investigate this troublesome process. Yet downsizing brings great stress and contradictory demands upon middle managers, a situation that definitely warrants more research about their role in downsizing processes. Our goal with this paper was to address this gap in an attempt to understand how middle managers charged with laying off employees struggle between two sets of demands: the demands of top management that they perform their assigned tasks as requested and the demands of their subordinates who are stressed, confused, and wanting explanations.

From previous research, we know that the process of downsizing is an extremely demanding task for middle managers. Downsizing agents have been called 'toxic handlers' (Frost & Robinson, 1999), 'executioners' (Kets de Vries & Balazs, 1997) or even 'grim reapers' (Clair & Dufresne, 2004). Their list of responsibilities is a long one: They are charged with delivering the message, reorganizing work practices in a new setting, and trying to keep the remaining employees – the survivors – somewhat content. In some cases, they may even be required to choose the employees to be dismissed. They make decisions on a tight schedule with limited information, engaging in the paradoxical task of implementing a downsizing while keeping the remaining workforce motivated to perform. They must take orders from top management while facing the emotional atmosphere in the workplace – two stressful and often-contradictory situations. Downsizing agents are required to cope with a double burden of their own emotional reactions and those of the survivors: sadness, bitterness, and anxiety. Middle managers, then, are both the agents and the recipients of change (Wiesenfeld et al., 2000).

Based on our reading of the earlier literatures, we define these managers who are charged with conducting a downsizing process as *downsizing agents*. Although various terms have been used to label the actors in the downsizing process, we are using three terms in this paper: *victims*, *survivors*, and *downsizing agents*. Victims refer to laid-off employees and survivors entail those employees who stay in the organization.

From the perspective of management studies, it is valuable to study how managers experience and understand various aspects of downsizing. Yet it is striking how little we know about the way downsizing agents – managers carrying out this drastic organizational change – experience and account for these events. We could find only seven relevant papers on downsizing agents employing empirical material, all of which were published 20 years ago and reported studies conducted in the aftermath of the large layoffs that took place during the 1990s. From these earlier studies, we know something about managers' coping mechanisms from at least two perspectives: a psychological perspective and an ethical perspective.

From a psychological perspective, Kets de Vries and Balazs (1997) identified coping strategies used by what they called the 'executioners' – the downsizing agents – and the 'victims.' We also know how managers distance themselves from these events (Clair & Dufresne, 2004) and navigate conflicting demands from various actors (Fairhurst et al., 2002). Wright and Barling (1998), for example, studied the long-term effects of downsizing decisions on downsizing agents. They found that downsizing others is professionally demanding and 'leads to role overload, a search for meaning, social and organizational isolation, a decline in personal well-being, and conflict between family and work' (p. 349).

We also know about downsizing managers' experiences from an ethical perspective. Lämsä (1998) studied four managers who were required to implement a massive downsizing and found that they justified their actions as necessary conducting their managerial obligations and achieving cost savings for their organization. Lämsä and Takala (2000) identified three roles for managers making downsizing decisions: the rational and independent manager, the marionette, and the emotional individual. Bean and Hamilton (2006) showed how managers attempted to provide attractive frames in order to sell the idea of a downsizing to employees. In addition to these key pioneering studies, we need a better understanding of the way managers comprehend and explain their downsizing activities. Organizational restructuring and change initiatives may feature many similar events to downsizing, but because they do not necessarily involve the reduction of personnel, we have omitted them from this literature review.

Using qualitative methods, we studied one downsizing process in depth – a process that was anything but smooth, despite the best efforts of local top managers. Our research question was: how do managers who themselves have to lay off people experience downsizing. Our empirical material consisted of 21 interviews in a large Finnish manufacturing company (The Company) that had recently undergone a downsizing process. The particular focus of our study, however, was on the 12 middle managers who became downsizing agents; they were required to conduct the concrete layoff process but were not charged with choosing the specific subordinates who were to be laid off. We were interested in how these middle managers made sense of the activities involved in this process. We used social construction and discourse analysis to describe what we called the discursive positions adopted by the downsizing agents in our interviews and demonstrate that they employed four discursive positions to make sense of the downsizing. They

used the rationalistic positions of Professional and Loyal to target their employers, the shareholders, and other professionals in their line of business. The more emotional and personal positions of Empathic targeted subordinates and the position of Critical is directed to top management and human resource (HR) professionals. The managers navigated among various discursive positions as they tried to serve many conflicting interests.

We demonstrated three major factors and drew three major conclusions from this study. (1) The downsizing agents in our study did not adopt one permanent discursive position but switched among several positions. Their sensemaking tended to be unsystematic, even contradictory. (2) Operating in the middle as they did, between top management and their subordinates, these middle managers were forced to satisfy conflicting expectations. (3) These downsizing agents were required to cope with extremely emotional situations and with a newly downsized organizational unit, which they were now expected to run with fewer employees.

2. Theoretical Background

To provide background information about the downsizing phenomenon, we provide a short literature review, focusing on the causes and consequences of downsizing. We then address the research that has dealt with middle managers as downsizing agents.

2.1. Causes and Consequences of Downsizing

Downsizing has received interest in many research fields, the focus of which has been on environmental and industry factors (Budros, 2002; Coucke et al., 2007; McKinley et al., 2000; Schulz & Wiersema, 2018) and organizational factors that influence downsizing decisions (Budros, 2002; Gandolfi & Hansson, 2011; Iverson & Zatzick, 2007; Perry & Shivdasani, 2005). In addition, the actual downsizing process in organizations has been investigated: What are the criteria for terminating or not terminating people (Segalla et al., 2001), for example, and how are terminations undertaken in practice (Karl & Hancock, 1999; Wood & Karau, 2009)? Organizational outcomes (Flanagan & O'Shaughnessy, 2005; Gandolfi & Hansson, 2011; Guthrie & Datta, 2007; Mishra & Mishra, 1994) and individual and group-level outcomes (Brockner et al., 1992; Fairhurst et al., 2002; Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998) have also been investigated. For a closer examination of the research, an extensive literature review by Datta et al. (2010) paints a picture of downsizing as a hard weapon in the struggle for better performance with contradictory and haphazard outcomes. It also reveals that most studies are quantitative in nature.

As for the consequences of downsizing, we know that it usually has substantial effects on organizational structures, work roles and responsibilities, and workplace culture (Edwards & Clinton, 2023; Schweiger & Denisi, 1991). We also know that survivors – the employees who remain in the organization after downsizing – experience a great deal of emotional strain (Dlouhy & Casper, 2021; Kernan & Hanges, 2002; Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998; Paterson & Cary, 2002; Wiesenfeld et al., 2000). Several studies have described 'a survivor syndrome' (Baruch & Hind, 2000), which includes reduced levels of work effort, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment in the aftermath of downsizing among those who remain in the organization. Survivors tend to experience an increased workload (Greenglass & Burke, 2000), increased job insecurity (Hellgren & Sverke, 2003), and a

loss of trust in their organization (Latack et al., 1995; Niehoff et al., 2001). These employees tend to watch the downsizing process closely and are reassured if they find that everyone involved is dealt with in a dignified manner. Unfortunately, downsizing is often implemented through a clumsy and humiliating procedure. Such negative behaviour on the part of the downsizers easily increases opportunism and damages employees' faith in their employer (Appelbaum & Donia, 2000; Day et al., 2012). Yet some studies indicate that these negative feelings diminish over time and that their attitudes return to pre-downsizing levels or even improve (Armstrong-Stassen, 2002; Baruch & Hind, 2000; Bergström & Arman, 2017).

2.2. Managers as Downsizing Agents

There are few studies about the managers who are charged with conducting the downsizing process. Strictly speaking, we found only seven such empirical studies. Two of them addressed the psychological reactions of downsizing agents and their coping mechanisms in downsizing operations. The Kets de Vries and Balazs (1997) study, for example, showed that top managers who acted as downsizing agents experienced the process in five different ways, which they labelled compulsive/ritualistic, abrasive, dissociative, alexithymic/anhedonic, and depressive. Their coping mechanisms varied from a mechanical application of rules and laws, while showing no emotion (compulsive/ritualistic), to a negative attitude towards the whole process, including feelings of guilt and sorrow (depressive). Their extensive study comprised interviews with the people they described as 60 victims, 60 survivors, and 80 executioners. The interviewees came from multinational companies, especially from banking and insurance and from high-technology sectors. Clair and Dufresne (2004) studied managers in a US financial company who were required to conduct a downsizing process. They focused on how downsizing agents experienced and reacted to their downsizing responsibilities. Managers' experiences were emotionally taxing because they had to deceive others; make tough, uncertain decisions; deal with others' emotional pain; and become stigmatized. These managers built such coping mechanisms as emotional distancing from the victims, cognitive distancing through neutralization techniques, and physical distancing behaviours. The authors drew attention to the tension that existed between compassion and dispassion. Too much compassion can result in 'compassion fatigue' or 'emotional numbing,' and high levels of dispassion can make the downsizing agent feel inhumane.

The more general long-term effects on managers of making a downsizing decision were the topic of Wright and Barling's (1998) study. They interviewed 10 male and female senior managers in private and public Canadian organizations and found several long-term effects that influenced these managers in a similar fashion. The downsizing exercise was professionally demanding, and the impact was far-reaching. The managers told how the experience had changed their work and personal values and beliefs, their relationships with their staff, and even their relationships with their families. Wright and Barling (1998) provide five themes that made downsizing professionally demanding. (1) The biggest burden was *role overload* – a substantial increase in workload. (2) They also struggled with *personal meaning* as they searched for some meaning for the downsizing – a search that included several reference points, such as maintaining self-respect and having to confront the victims' and survivors' emotions. (3) Managers experienced

extreme levels of *isolation* after the downsizing, both inside and outside the organization. (4) Furthermore, they struggled with *personal wellbeing* and even (5) functioning within their *families*. Wright and Barling (1998) have argued that the stereotype of downsizers as 'axemen,' 'corporate killers,' or 'executioners' (p. 351) does not do justice to the experience of the majority of downsizers, who are negatively affected by their activities.

Along with the psychological effects of downsizing on managers, there are ethical effects, and ethical perspectives have been the topic of two such studies. Lämsä's (1998) case study addressed the ethical experiences of four downsizing managers who came from different companies. She found that these managers viewed downsizing from two perspectives: as a means of achieving economic goals or as one of their managerial obligations. The economic goals viewpoint addressed utilitarian ethics and rational management and suggested that managers have a highly mechanical view of ideal management. The managerial obligation viewpoint refers to company loyalty and a duty to treat people fairly, thereby supporting the ethical perspectives of deontology and rule-utilitarianism. Lämsä and Takala's (2000) study addresses the decision-making roles of managers in a downsizing situation and draws particularly on ethical perspectives. They make a noteworthy point: The managerial literature, by definition, concentrates on the building of growth, not in dealing with shrinking company size. Consequently, downsizing managers seem to be on thin ice when having to execute the task they have been charged with accomplishing. Lämsä and Takala' study of bank managers has demonstrated that they can adopt three roles when making decisions about dismissing employees: the rational manager, the marionette, and the ethical manager. The ideal manager can be seen, as traditionally presented in the managerial literature, as a *rational and independent manager*. In the midst of a chaotic downsizing process, the manager may sometimes rely on the role of *marionette*, who is forced to carry out orders from top management. There is also the possibility of an ethical stand, whereby managers throw themselves into the empathic sphere by taking the role of *an emotional individual*.

Lämsä and Takala's (2000) managers adopted different ethical perspectives in order to process the downsizing experience, whereas managers in Bean and Hamilton's (2006) study attempted to sell downsizing as a move towards what the authors refer to as a 'brave new workplace'. Bean and Hamilton also studied subordinates' responses to their managers' framing of downsizing as an attractive alternative. The study took place in a Nordic telecommunications company, which allowed them to undertake a balanced analysis of downsizing from the perspective of both managers and subordinates. The greater emphasis in the Bean and Hamilton paper, however, was on subordinate responses. We do obtain insight about leaders' attempts to sell the downsizing as an inevitable move towards the brave new workplace that combines flexible work practices in open-landscape office space. The concepts to promote this frame included 'flexibility, freedom, self-reliance, innovation, teams and nomadic work' (p. 334). The subordinates ended up either maintaining this frame or combatting it.

The last study in our review is the Fairhurst et al. (2002) study of a US organization that underwent three successive downsizings and experienced contradictory and unintended consequences. Through this extensive study, the authors collected interview data from various parties: the leadership team, HR personnel, the work-reduction manager, and the employees who represented both survivors and victims. The theoretical focus was on contradictions and how they were discursively constructed by members of the

organization. It is possible, however, to ferret out a middle-manager role, because the study reveals how the work -reduction manager, who occupied a position described as 'upper-middle-management' had to plan and implement the downsizing decisions and was involved in many discussions with the leadership team and their subordinates. The work-reduction manager was caught between a rock and a hard place, in having to navigate among conflicting interests and make sense of apparent contradictions as they emerged. The severe contradictions involved in the principles of the first two downsizings strongly affected this manager and required a new perspective: the necessity to consider a subordinate viewpoint and reconsider the entire process. Thus, the third downsizing was set into motion in a way that introduced a real change in the organization's downsizing practices and led to a voluntary separation program called 'the velvet boot.'

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Context

The interviews were conducted in the Finnish business unit of one large multinational company (The Company) – a market leader in technology that underwent a massive global downsizing process in the early 2010s. The Company was founded over a hundred years ago and has made steady profits for decades, without facing any serious financial crisis. When the market situation started to change dramatically, however, management decided to start downsizing in order to ensure The Company's future competitiveness and profitability. The entire workforce numbered approximately 1,700, 60% of whom had white-collar jobs, and 40% of whom had blue-collar jobs. In a quarterly report, The Company announced the elimination of several hundred jobs in Finland. The announcement ended a long historical period during which layoffs were purposefully avoided, and the employees had learned to perceive their employer as offering long career opportunities.

A member of The Company's management team contacted one of us two months after the layoffs to discuss the possibility of our analysing the downsizing process and its shortcomings. The management team members believed that the process had not entirely succeeded, and they wanted to learn from their mistakes. As promised, we delivered a practical report to The Company about the major shortcomings of this downsizing and developmental topics for eventual future downsizings, and they allowed us to use the anonymized interview material for our own research purposes.

The Act on Co-operation Within Undertakings regulates downsizing in Finland. It aims to enhance employees' opportunities to have a voice in the decision-making process and to improve their position in organizational change – especially in situations involving workforce reduction. The law requires that companies notify their employees of a downsizing six weeks before layoffs can begin. In reality, The Company started the preparation process some six months before the official announcement, when the CEO of the business unit in Finland shared the news with the Vice President. Later, the CEO and the Vice President involved a few trusted key people in planning the upcoming downsizing, and the CEO made the public announcement in a quarterly report nine weeks before layoffs. After the official announcement, the middle managers who were to become downsizing agents were officially involved in the concrete planning of the operation. Some of these middle

managers learned of the decision for the first time at that point; others had already been informed about it behind the scenes. This uneven dissemination of information caused resentment among the middle managers.

After the official announcement, top managers, especially the CEO, provided the downsizing agents with details about the locations, schedule, and unit-specific financial targets of the downsizing. HR professionals calculated the necessary decrease of personnel in each work unit, negotiated with the downsizing agents on ways of allocating the decreased target within each subunit, and trained the downsizing agents for layoff discussions. Performing the layoffs took one day, but it took several months to reorganize the work processes in downsizing agents' work units.

It remained unclear to us who actually decided on the individuals to be laid off. The managers we interviewed avoided talking about this issue, and the victims were given the official story that top management had made the decisions.

3.2. Data Collection

Our qualitative study is located within the philosophical position of social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Burr, 2006), which entails knowledge about reality being constructed in social processes, through language and in shared meanings. Conceptual language is not merely a means of representation; it has a performative role as well, bringing actions, things, and events into being (Hosking, 1999). The constructionist tradition is also based on the assumption that the researcher is part of the research topic rather than a distant observer. Researchers and interviewees are co-constructors in interview situations. It is vital to be reflexive about this role. (See, e.g. Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016.) We are also aware of some perils of social constructionism. In general, this paradigm tells us that a person's world-view is socially constructed. In mainstream social sciences research, such as management studies for example, interview data is often interpreted as 'telling the truth' about a certain event or process. It follows that in order to be really sure about having identified the 'correct interpretation' of research material, the number of interviews needs to be high while in genuine social constructionist research, only ten interviews may create a sufficient research material. Furthermore, it is also challenging to be truly reflexive, or even reflective, in a short article format.

We adopted multiple methods in this study: interviews, documentary analysis, and company-specific data. However, the study of company documents was very limited, due to the delicate nature of our research topic, and mostly took place on company premises. Similarly, we were and are not able to include any company-specific data in this paper. Therefore, a traditional data triangulation has not taken place as it should have in a critical realist paradigm. We designed a qualitative semi-structured interview to examine the middle managers' experiences of the downsizing process. We began the interviews by asking them to describe the downsizing process from its beginnings to the current situation at The Company and to deliberate on the downsizing and how it had influenced their respective units. We also asked them to define their roles and activities in the process. We asked follow-up questions and further clarifications when necessary and concluded with a question about their feelings and experiences of the overall process.

We interviewed 21 people in The Company. In the analysis reported here, we concentrate on interviews with 12 downsizing agents – 2 women and 10 men between the ages of 35 and 60 – all of whom were engineers. The downsizing agents held middle-management positions of general manager, director, and project manager. In order to create a more comprehensive view of the downsizing process in The Company, however, we also interviewed the CEO, the HR Manager, five survivors, one victim, and one shop steward. The interviews were conducted between three and six months after the layoffs. The HR manager chose the interviewees and scheduled the interview timetable, but top management did not know who was being interviewed. Two interviewers conducted 19 interviews, and one person alone conducted the other two. They were all conducted face-to-face in a negotiation room of The Company and lasted between 50 and 90 min. They were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim, producing a total of 492 pages of material. While this set of data may seem rather modest from a point of view of critical realism, for a study based on social constructionism and discourse analysis, this amount of research material is plentiful and rich in nature (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016).

We signed an agreement with every interviewee and made them aware that the material was used for research purposes, but that their anonymity was guaranteed. Given the sensitivity of the research topic, we made an extra effort to create a relaxed and trusting atmosphere. Despite the sensitive topic, however, respondents were surprisingly open in the interviews. We got the impression that most of them appreciated a chance to reflect upon their experience.

3.3. Discourse Analysis and Discursive Positions

A linguistic turn took place in social sciences in the 1990s, and discourse analysis emerged as a popular method in organization studies (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Grant et al., 1998; Höglund & Svärdsten, 2018; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) explain how discourse analysis emphasizes the communicative character of human interaction and captures key aspects of the dominant organizational activity. Discourse analysis is also useful for field research, because it allows for a critical and performative view of organizations, as it requires sensitivity to power relations. Furthermore, discourse analysis suits to studying organizational change (Doolin et al., 2013; Grant & Wolfram Cox, 2017).

Researchers can focus either on detailed micro-level language use in organizations (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) or address wider discourses on a societal level (Fairclough, 1992). Alvesson and Kärreman (2000, pp. 1126–1127) labelled these approaches as 'small d discourse' and 'capital D Discourse,' and in their later 2011 article redefined these terms as 'text-focused studies' and 'paradigm-focused studies.' According to Alvesson and Kärreman's (2000) classification, our approach to discourse analysis could be characterized as close-range/autonomous; our research material is collected in one local context, and the discourses are relatively transient. We believe that discourse and meaning are intertwined but not completely coupled. Downsizing agents may adopt the discursive position of a business professional in their interview, for example – which is noteworthy in and of itself – but that does not imply that it is their final opinion on the matter. As Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) explained it, ' … language use

follows its own dynamics. Talking in certain ways or reproducing a specific vocabulary does not imply any specific cognition, feelings or practices' (p. 1132).

We make use of the notion of positioning as introduced by Davis and Harré (1990) and used by Bisel and Barge (2011) in their article on planned change and by Gronvad et al. (2024) in connection to change reactions. Davis and Harré (1990) have described how subject positions are created within a discourse. Stories like those told in interviews 'are located within a number of different discourses, and thus vary dramatically in terms of the language used, the concepts, issues and moral judgements made relevant and the subject positions made available within them' (Davis & Harré, 1990, p. 46). We particularly wanted to see how the downsizing agents positioned themselves in relation to other people, activities, or things, as they tried to make sense of the downsizing process. It should be added that according to Davis and Harré (1990):

> Persons as speakers acquire beliefs about themselves which do not necessarily form a unified coherent whole. They shift from one to another way of thinking about themselves as the discourse shifts and as their positions within varying story lines are taken up. (p. 58).

Thus, the same person can take several different positions – positions that can sometimes contradict one another, either internally or relative to other possible positions (Davis & Harré, 1990). Human beings are not completely logical actors who always think and talk consistently in every situation.

3.4. The Analysis of Research Material

The analysis could be described as inductive, given that we started the analysis from empirical material (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). We read all 21 printed interview transcripts several times to gain an overall comprehension of the material. We started by creating a general picture of the downsizing process in The Company. We then focused in greater detail on the interviews of the 12 downsizing agents. We marked the parts of the text in which the interviewees talked about their sensemaking process, including their activities, thoughts, and feelings. This stage could also be called thematization: marking the various themes about downsizing. Our goal was to understand the types of discursive positions these interviewees adopted, what were the major claims in these positions, and who they were referring to in their interviews. As a result of this first round of analysis, we distinguished four discursive positions that the interviewees applied when talking about the downsizing process and labelled them Business professional, Representative of the employer, Fellow human being, and Critical yet obedient implementor. We discussed this data interpretation and concluded that it was a good representation of the interview material. Again, it is useful to be reminded about how 21 interviews for the entire study and just 12 interviews for the main data analysis are not too many in the paradigm of critical realism, but plentiful in the paradigm of social construction. Social constructionists can count numbers as well, but their main interest is in how language is used and how through language shared meanings and understandings are created and maintained.

Because we now had a convincing conceptualization of the interview material, we proceeded to organize the material according to the discursive positions. We conducted our coding with the help of NVivo, a computer software designed to process qualitative data, such as interview data by moving each piece of material into its appropriate position. The

Table 1. Discursive positions.

Discursive position	In relation to	Claims
Business professional (Professional)	Shareholders Global business community Competitors	Rationalizing • Downsizing is business as usual. • Business strategy must be followed. • Layoffs based on employee performance Moral responsibility to ensure profitability Distancing oneself from the event
The employer's loyal representative (Loyal)	Employer	Technical orientation The legal procedure must be followed strictly. Focusing on details of the process rather than people Dehumanizing oneself
Empathic fellow human being (Empathic)	Subordinates	Empathy toward the victims Downsizing is unfortunate and creates human suffering. Both managers and employees can display emotions.
Critical implementer of layoffs (Critical)	Top management and HR professionals	Highly critical comments about the process Downsizing was a questionable decision, and the process was handled badly. • Top management did not consult us. • The timing was lousy. Disappointment with top management and HR • They did not support us. • They left us alone to do the dirty work.

final results of the data analysis – discursive positions, target groups, and major claims – can be seen in Table 1 under Findings. The language editor then suggested some changes in the discursive positions to communicate their content in better English. We conclude by labelling the positions: Business professional, Employer's loyal representative, Empathic fellow human being, and Critical implementor of layoffs. It is crucial to understand that these discursive positions do not represent the middle managers' private experiences; rather they represent the discursive culture of the organization and the wider societal context in which these managers live (Höglund & Svärdsten, 2018; Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

In the next section, we demonstrate how the downsizing agents used their discursive positions when talking about the downsizing process.

4. Findings

We identified four discursive positions in the accounts of the downsizing agents: 'business professional' (Professional), 'the employer's loyal representative,' (Loyal), 'empathic fellow human being' (Empathic) and 'critical implementer of layoffs' (Critical).

In the position of *Professional*, the interviewees talked about the downsizing event as if it were business as usual. They employed a strong normalizing tone in distancing themselves from the event. They explained that downsizing is difficult and unpleasant but that it is something that must be done in contemporary businesses. In the position of *Loyal*, they presented the layoffs as a legal process that had to be conducted according to The Company's procedures. When taking the *Empathic* position, interviewees talked about their confusion and anxiety and expressed concern for the employees who were laid off. They worried

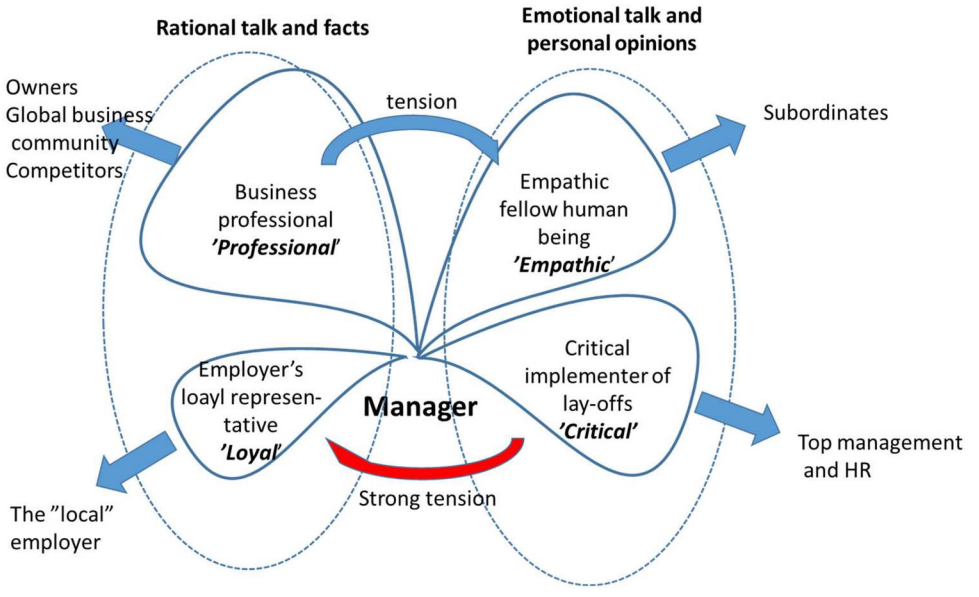

Figure 1. Discursive positions, spheres, and tensions.

about how those people would find new work, could support their families, and would cope with the situation in general. In the *Critical* position, the downsizing agents explained how they carried out their tasks but criticized the procedure planned by top managers and the HR professionals. They explained that the orders came from above without consultation or described discrepancies between the talk and the actions of the top managers.

These discursive positions always referred to something or somebody. When taking the Professional position, downsizing agents were related to shareholders, global business mechanisms, and competitors. When Loyal, they related to their employer; under Empathic they focused on their subordinates; and when taking the Critical position, they related to top management and the HR professionals. Table 1 presents the discursive positions, their relationships and central claims.

In the next subsections, we present the four discursive positions in greater detail, introducing the downsizing agents' main points about the process and their role in it. In concluding, we describe how discursive positions can be divided into two main spheres, both of which introduce strong tensions (Figure 1). We further explain how managers can take several discursive positions, despite the contradictory nature of some of these positions.

4.1. The Business Professional (Professional)

This discursive position builds on strong efforts to rationalize and even normalize the downsizing process. Downsizing agents who adopted the discursive position of Professional, claimed that redundancies are part of contemporary business life and that companies must follow their strategy of competitiveness and efficiency. Business principles also legitimize the decision criteria for choosing the persons to be laid off.

The interviewees also constructed an image of a downsizing agent for us. A Professional knows the rules of the game and is willing and able to follow them. Furthermore,

a Professional has a moral responsibility to The Company to ensure its profitability and future success. Extreme decisions, such as downsizing, must occasionally be executed for the sake of a better future. Downsizing is a regrettable situation, but Professionals should not hesitate to execute it, thereby fulfilling their professional duty. A good Professional manager should also follow the market situation, be aware of signals that indicate a potential decrease in customer demand, and be prepared to act accordingly. Should the downsizing decision come as a surprise to the middle managers, it shows that they were not really in tune with the market situation and are therefore not competent business professionals.

> We are a modern company, which means that they [top management] are going to watch the cash flow brutally. I can understand it well, and it's better to lay people off than to jeopardize the whole company. (Manager #17)

Rationalizing the downsizing becomes easier if one is capable of setting personal feelings aside and focusing on hard and measurable facts. This discursive position clearly allows the manager to become distanced from the unpleasant activity. One way of distancing was by explaining how one was just doing one's job or carrying out top management's decisions. This positioning makes the downsizing agents into passive 'company people,' duly carrying out orders: 'To be honest, I don't want to comment on it. It's not my decision.' (Manager #15).

Another way of achieving distance from this difficult situation was by stating that the downsizing decision was in line with The Company's strategy. The logic here is that strategy requires action and that the Professional must act accordingly, even if downsizing is questionable.

> In my understanding, a company must operate according to its strategy. If our decisions are in line with the latest strategy, then it [the layoffs] is the right thing to do. (Manager #8)

The discursive position of Professional included explanations about rational criteria used in making decisions about who was to be laid off and who could stay. There was no need to become personally or emotionally attached to these decisions, as they could be calculated in a reliable way. The interviewees who talked about decision-making criteria mentioned two factors: performance and attitude.

- We were asked who the low performers are. (Manager #9)
- Attitude and performance, pure and simple. (Manager #13)
- I have tried to explain from my part that I made the decision by choosing those people who have not respected the employer. Not respected the employer and the targets. But also not respected colleagues. (Manager #13)

Despite efforts to present the downsizing as business as usual and to distance themselves from it on a personal level, the interviewees admitted that the downsizing process is one of the most difficult tasks a manager can be faced with. Yet they failed to see any alternative.

> It isn't a nice situation to be called out to the meeting room with your belongings. In the open office everybody can see it. It isn't nice, but it is life. I don't know a better way to do it. It is a reality in this world. (Manager #15)

4.2. The Employer's Loyal Representative (Loyal)

In this discursive position, the downsizing agents adopted the stance of the employer's representatives and dutiful implementers of the employer's decisions. They emphasized that the process was conducted in a legally correct way and according to The Company's plan, strictly by the book, paying extremely close attention to the smallest details and practicalities. Obviously, this position provides a way of protecting a person in a harsh situation, lessening the moral burden and downplaying the aspect of human interaction. Explanations about how the task was carried out were delivered in polished and correct language.

> The legal downsizing process is, in fact, fairly simple. We check the legal criteria for layoffs and their effects. It is business. It took a rather long time to go through these factors in every business unit. (Manager #6)

The Company had organized a training session to prepare the downsizing agents for the layoffs; it consisted primarily of information concerning the legal procedures. It seemed that top management was more interested in protecting its downsizing agents from the harmful effects of the process than it was in protecting the employees who were being laid off. The downsizing agents were to conduct a specific procedure on the day of the layoffs. They were to call the victims individually, asking them to come to the meeting room and to bring anything that belonged to The Company, such as their key cards and computers. The formal information about the layoff was to be given in the meeting room, and each victim was given the opportunity to meet with the shop steward.

> We were given advice in the training session: We should not focus on small details. Yet many supervisors worried about details. What do I do in this situation? Which papers do I need? What exactly do I say? (Manager #5)

The future downsizing agents were told during their training to keep their discussions with employees to the minimum to avoid distressing questions and emotional outbursts. The agents were also told to say they had not made the layoff decisions – that the decisions were made by their boss or by top management. By adopting the Loyal discursive position, the downsizing agents could tell the victims that they were only executing orders from above and were not to blame for the harsh decisions.

- I pretty much followed my script; I used very correct language when explaining why the layoff took place. (Manager #5)
- The instruction from the Company was that everyone leaves on the same day. They collect their belongings and leave as fast as possible. That's what we wanted. (Manager #19)

4.3. Empathic Fellow Human Being (Empathic)

The discursive position of the Empathic is that of a humane person, who is capable of compassion. When the interviewees adopted this position in our interview, they revealed anxiety and concern about the situation and compassion for the employees who had been laid off. This positioning revealed that laying people off is an extremely emotional situation for both the victims and the downsizing agents.

In the Empathic discursive position, the interviewees stated openly how difficult and unpleasant was the task of having to lay off employees. The smoothness of the Professional position about layoffs as a normal part of today's business world was nowhere to be heard when these middle managers assumed the Empathic position. It seemed that the unpleasant task of performing downsizing activities even led them to question their decision to be a manager. As one downsizing agent told us, 'This is a real shit job to do. Do I want to be the person who makes these nasty decisions?' (Manager #13).

It seems that the emotional rollercoaster was still continuing at the time of our interviews between three and six months later. The downsizing agents said that the atmosphere was heavy after the official announcement; and six weeks after the announcement, the mood dropped even lower. One of the interviewees said that during the two weeks before the layoffs, not one of his subordinates had the courage to approach him. Another downsizing agent said that the weekend before was awful, because she spent it thinking how she could handle the situation. Other interviewees expressed their pressure and frustration in these ways:

- It was really distressing for everyone just to sit and wait. (Manager #5)
- Strategy feels meaningless when you meet a smiling and cheerful person in the parking lot who is to be laid off, but doesn't know about it yet. (Manager #19)

Many of the interviewees talked especially about the day when they conducted the layoffs – a dramatic and emotional time. They told us a great deal about the difficulty of encountering their subordinates' emotions. When we asked them how it felt to lay off people, many interviewees burst into tears or struggled against tears, even three months after the event. As three of our interviewees described the situation:

- Let's put it this way: There was a huge storm in my head. But I had to hide my own emotions. I know that these people have families, three kids, a mortgage. You just have to stick to your role and follow the procedure. Try to talk sensibly, but not too relaxed. People being laid off don't understand anything at the moment. They're completely petrified, with an empty look. The emotional turmoil is huge. I can see that the person is in shock. There are no tough guys in this organization who wouldn't have that look on their faces. Those who say so are just lying. (Manager #5)
- It's also important that the managers who have to lay off people recognize their own feelings and reactions in the situation and afterwards. (Manager #11)
- Even though I had prepared, one cannot really prepare for this task. I almost cried myself. (Manager #20)

This discursive position allowed downsizing agents to express their emotions. Indeed, a variety of emotions emerged in the interviews: anxiety, sadness, guilt, helplessness, fear, and depression. One downsizing agent reported nightmares four months after the event.

4.4. Critical Implementer of Layoffs (Critical)

In this discursive position, the downsizing agents positioned themselves critically in relation to the main architects of the downsizing process – the top managers and HR professionals

who had made them solve the problem with inadequate means to do so. The interviews featured a great deal of normative talk about what top-level managers should have done and how they should have dealt with the downsizing process. Despite the criticism, however, the downsizing agents followed orders and conducted the process as they were told.

One of the recurring themes in the Critical position was the claim that top management did not involve these middle managers in planning the downsizing, as they should have, and thus overlooked several key issues. The interviewees explained that it would be advisable in organizational restructuring to have asked the middle management team how certain changes should be implemented. The interviewees who took this position spoke of disappointment, frustration, and anger towards top management and the HR function. As Manager #9 said:

> First they announce the organization change, then they start thinking about how to organize work in that structure. Do we even have the right people in right places? I think we should first think how we work and what kinds of knowledge we need and only then think about the organization structure. Now we do things in the opposite order and are then stuck with the fixed organization. (Manager #9)

The interviewees talked, for example, about top management's ignorance concerning the production workload. They explained that the downsizing decision was not in line with the increasing production load in some business units, thus creating a great deal of pressure and difficulty in managing it: 'Everything would have been much easier had there been some advance thinking.' (Manager #10).

Interviewees who took the Critical discursive position disapproved of the way the downsizing process was planned and implemented, especially by top-level managers. They suggested that top management considered people to be merely numbers and not real human beings. They said that they received little information about the process as a whole, and criticized the HR professionals for their insufficient and narrow training session. From the Critical position, the entire training session was presented as if the downsizing were just a technical procedure. The interviewees who took this position had hoped for more advice about how to behave in their organizations before the actual layoffs. They also thought they needed more help in choosing the people to be laid off.

- These decisions have been made at a high level. They [the top management team] should have consulted the people one level down. (Manager #9)
- HR could have coached us managers much better to prepare for the process. They are the professionals here. Most of us managers were laying off people for the first time. HR promised to organize some training for us, but it was very thin and light in my opinion and took place too late. (Manager #19)

These interviewees expressed anger and frustration about the poorly planned process, which put them in a difficult spot as implementers of the downsizing. They especially emphasized the lack of planning for the day of the announcements. They were upset by the cold and unsympathetic way the victims were brought from their desks to the downsizing agent's room, given the news, and then led directly off the premises. The employees did not have a chance to say goodbye to their colleagues; there was no farewell get-together and no thanks for their service. Even the necessity of the whole downsizing

process was questioned by many interviewees: Given the increased workload, many of the victims were called back to work a few months after they had been asked to leave.

> I was wondering if this could have been handled in a different way. It is not a cheap process. We lose a lot in efficiency, before and after. … Six of the eight employees that were laid off are now back with us. Sometimes I wonder whether it was even necessary, this whole process. (Manager #19)

The interviewees who have taken the Critical discursive position often sounded extremely frustrated. They suspected that top management had little understanding of their work and questioned the need for constant change and the need to restructure the organization repeatedly. They saw the consequences for business as harmful:

> We had the last organization change only one-and-a-half years ago. We had just managed to get the wheels turning. And then you need to change everything again. (Manager #7)

4.5. Discursive Positions, Spheres, and Tensions

The four discursive positions can be divided into two main spheres (see Figure 1) The positions of Professional and Loyal were constructed by a relatively neutral and rational discourse with a focus on facts and involving cognitive distancing from the downsizing event. The positions of Empathic and Critical featured emotional talk and personal opinions and included a wide array of extremely negative emotions: sadness, compassion, anxiety, disappointment, frustration, and anger.

Different positions are formulated in relation to different referents: the individual, the organization, and the broader society. The Professional connects to the societal meta-discourse that addresses the role of managers in executing corporate strategies (including downsizing operations) in the global business environment. This meta-discourse emphasizes harsh principles of professional management in global business, typically employed by business magazines and in other media. Some management textbooks and management consultants also view managers as strong individuals who routinely buy and sell, terminate, cut costs, and re-engineer. This discourse portrays successful managers as tough individuals who can play the game and make harsh decisions. When taking this position, the managers rarely questioned these business principles; they considered them facts of life, to be accepted and lived by as a professional manager.

The position of Empathic is related to the individual level, to the middle managers' subordinates. In this position, the managers reflected on their relationships with the victims and the survivors – with the subordinates they were forced to lay off and with those who remained but had to suffer insecurity and an increased workload. They obviously tried to imagine the situation of the laid-off employees and looked at the process from their point of view. This discursive position also included talk about the ethical and sustainable aspects of downsizing from the perspective of corporate social responsibility. The main concern was the human aspects of downsizing.

The two remaining discursive positions were constructed in relation to The Company as the employing organization. The interviewees addressed the expectations and instructions placed upon them (Loyal) and the kind of organizational support they received in this grim task (Critical). These positions focused on the operational management in The Company: what had happened in the downsizing process and the interviewees' role in

it. The main concern revolved around concrete questions of handling a downsizing process and the downsizing agents' role in it.

It was also noteworthy that the interviewees shifted among these positions in our interviews. Some of them took certain positions more than others. Here, we need once more to emphasize that these positions are by no means a typology of persons or their behaviour; nor do they represent managerial roles or personal opinions. On the contrary, practically all interviewees took several discursive positions in their answers, most of them adopting all four of them. At the most, one can say that the Professional position was slightly prevalent, whereas the Loyal position was the least used. The Empathic and Critical positions were equally popular.

We noticed no particular pattern of how the interviewees shifted between these discursive positions. They moved from one position to another by all possible routes. Some of the routes illustrate the contradictions among these positions as the following extract from the research material shows: This interviewee applied the position of Professional and then smoothly switched to the Empathic position.

> On one hand I am satisfied that we have finally done what we have been talking about for a long time, and what should have been done a long time ago [Professional]. And right after this thought, one goes okay, even though we had problem cases and bad performance, they are still human beings who have been working here and who have given their best shot [Empathic]. (Manager #13)

This quote shows that downsizing agents are aware of the contradictory expectations placed upon them and actively try to make sense of the situation and perhaps even bring some order into the complexity. This effort is never completely successful, however, and the agents remain puzzled and confused about the process in which they were forced to participate. Downsizing agents' beliefs about themselves and their environment are full of unresolved contradictions, which they had to content themselves to accept.

Finally, we highlight certain tensions between these discursive positions, as illustrated in Figure 1. The tension between the positions of Professional and Empathic is relatively self-evident, as it consists of the fundamental differences between the interests of the global business world and the needs of individual human beings. It is the tension between the positions of Loyal and Critical that is truly fascinating, though. The Loyal position links to another meta-discourse that values long-term employment and an ethos of 'the Company Man' (always a man) who spends his life loyally serving his organization and takes pride in giving his life to the employer. The Company Man is proud to represent his company, to be one in a group of people who work there, building the company and developing its expertise. In return, the expectation is that the company takes care of its people by offering long-term employment, additional benefits, and care. When taking the Critical position, the downsizing agents revealed their feeling of being betrayed and even abandoned by The Company.

The positions of Loyal and Critical also clash, although they both concern operational management. The Company is obviously undergoing a massive change of its organizational culture, as it is the first time in its long history that it has laid off employees. Layoffs had never come into question before, and when they now did, the process was handled in a manner the employees and downsizing agents found difficult to understand. The collective psychological contract was brutally broken, and The Company's reputation as a secure employer was severely damaged.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

We did not find downsizing managers to be cold-blooded executioners (Wright & Barling, 1998). Rather, they tended to be confused and insecure individuals who were all of a sudden charged with conducting an extremely difficult process for which they were largely unprepared. The middle managers' agency was also limited, as they were required to follow orders and had limited decision-making power about who was to be laid off. The power base of many managers either oozed away (because they have little effect on the downsizing) or became a burden (because they were required to lay off the victims). These downsizing agents experienced emotions similar to those of the survivors: insecurity, cynicism, confusion, and stress (Gandolfi & Neck, 2005; Margues et al., 2014). Thus, managers and their subordinates were almost equally vulnerable to the principles of global business – at least in this organization.

Our major contribution to the downsizing literature is our analysis of downsizing managers' experiences of the process. There is little prior research on the experiences of middle managers as downsizing agents, and most of what does exist dates back 20 years. By applying discursive analysis and positions, we demonstrated that the downsizing agents in this Finnish manufacturing company did not adopt one permanent position; rather they switched among four positions when explaining their downsizing activities and their reactions to the process. Our analysis shows how managers' sensemaking can be unsystematic, even contradictory, in various speech acts (Davis & Harré, 1990). Downsizing agents in this study did not adopt a permanent viewpoint or role that they followed consistently throughout the process of laying off subordinates. Rather, they applied several discursive positions that sometimes directly contradicted one another. Our findings support and extend those of Lämsä's (1998) study, in which the managers viewed downsizing as part of their managerial obligation. The Professional and Loyal positions include similar claims: downsizing is a part of the contemporary manager's job, and it must be carried out efficiently and in a professional manner. Our findings about the positions of Empathic and Critical, on the other hand, supported Lämsä and Takala's (2000) finding about downsizing managers taking the role of an emotional individual. The Critical position includes intense frustration with and criticism of top managers and HR professionals; such fierce dissatisfaction, even anger, has not often been reported in earlier studies. The interviewees taking the Critical position criticized top management's ignorance of increasing workload in production that resulted from the downsizing and the poor planning of the entire downsizing process. The adoption of the Empathic position shows the compassion these middle managers felt towards employees that they were forced to lay off.

As a second contribution to the literature, we have demonstrated how downsizing agents struggle with satisfying conflicting expectations from top managers and from their subordinates. This challenge illustrates a typical situation in the daily work lives of middle managers: They are constantly finding themselves in the middle and trying to solve an unsolvable paradox. Top management decided to downsize, and the middle managers were tasked with implementing it. Some employees were laid off, and others were allowed to stay, and these middle managers had to attend to both sets of needs, using whatever skills and knowledge they possessed. This experience of satisfying conflicting expectations is similar to that found in the Fairhurst et al. (2002) study, in which the

work-reduction manager had to navigate between conflicting interests of various organization members. The managers in our study revealed a sense of powerlessness and confusion, even though some of the interviewees may have had some managerial power to choose the subordinates they laid off. The interviewees tried to decide whether it was better to be involved in decision-making in a downsizing process or just to be a good soldier fulfilling the orders of top management. Both alternatives have their benefits and costs. This powerlessness closely resembles the role of marionette found in Lämsä and Takala's (2000) study.

As a third contribution to the literature, we have illustrated how downsizing agents cope with this extremely stressful situation. We believe that downsizing agents build their coping strategies based on their sensemaking processes and especially on the way they position themselves. We can recognize some connections to typologies constructed by Kets de Vries and Balazs (1997). When taking the discursive positions of Professional and Loyal, the interviewees talked about the downsizing task as their duty, leaning towards rationalistic reasoning and expressing relatively neutral feelings, which resemble Kets de Vries and Balazs' compulsive/ritualistic and abrasive types of coping strategies. When adopting the discursive position of Empathic, the interviewees often expressed guilt and sorrow, which resonated with the depressive coping strategy type. The alexithymic/anhedonic category was not evident, but some traces could be noticed in the position of Critical. In this position, the downsizing agents showed sensitiveness and stress, but also frustration, disappointment, and even anger, emotions that were not mentioned in the typology created by Kets de Vries and Balazs (1997).

Our study also supports Clair and Dufresne's (2004) findings on how managers build coping mechanisms, such as emotional distancing from the victims, cognitive distancing through neutralization techniques and physical distancing behaviours. By adopting the positions of Professional and Loyal, the managers were able to create emotional and cognitive distance from the employees they were forced to dismiss.

We did not study the long-term effects of making a downsizing decision, as Wright and Barling (1998) did, but their findings of significant effects on work and personal values and beliefs, as well as relationships between the middle managers and their subordinates, appear perfectly plausible.

5.1. Future Research

Future researchers could address downsizing as something many managers are tasked with conducting at least once during their careers. A better understanding of the manager's role in downsizing processes would greatly benefit the study of managerial work (Korica et al., 2017; Mintzberg, 1973; Tengblad, 2002, 2012). Corporate downsizings not only affect managerial work; they also lead to growing job insecurity and career uncertainty for managers themselves (Foster et al., 2019) – not to mention the survivors.

Another future area of research could address the clear connections that we have demonstrated between our study of downsizing managers and research on middle managers in general and their typical activities. Although we have touched upon that theme, it is one that warrants more research. It is usually middle managers who are tasked with conducting various change processes, organizational restructuring, or merger and

acquisitions processes, often with a clear lack of preparation and knowledge. In both of these situations, the challenge is embedded in double-hatting: simultaneously delivering the change and living through the experience oneself (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Teerikangas & Birollo, 2018).

5.2. Practical Implications

This study also clearly indicates a need for developing better HR practices in the downsizing process. Many of the interviewees were openly annoyed that they did not have a formally created opportunity to share their frustrating experiences with anyone else in the workplace. Many of them also expressed the need for practical help in designing new job descriptions and planning the orientation of the survivors to their new tasks. We suggest that the challenges of a downsizing process should be discussed in management training programs to help managers prepare for the possibility of having to conduct a downsizing. Such training can include managerial coaching, peer meetings among managers, or discussions with HR professionals. All in all, it is necessary to emphasize how managerial work in downsizings entails conflicting situations and difficult human interests that subject managers to strong emotional strain. We believe that the more aware managers are of various tensions inherent in the layoff situation, the better they will be able to handle the pressure and the emotional rollercoaster. Moreover, organizations should offer managers every possible psychological support to deal with their own feelings before, during, and after the actual downsizing event.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethics Statement

The research material was collected before 25 May 2018 when the General Data Protection Regulation (GPDR) within the European Union came into force. We took care of the data and research participants protection following good scientific practice valid in that period of time. We signed an agreement with every interviewee and made them aware that the material was used for research purposes, but that their anonymity was guaranteed.

Data Availability

The data used in this study are confidential.

ORCID

Niina Koivunen http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0431-3261

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