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Understanding resistance to change within informal intra-organizational social networks

Case study

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ABSTRACT:
The purpose of this thesis is to examine how informal intra-organizational social networks influence individuals' perceived resistance to change during organizational transformation. The majority of organizational change initiatives have been found to fail, with resistance to change determined as one of the primary causes of these failures. Simultaneously, informal interaction among employees may shape the perception how individuals interpret change. It is therefore interesting to explore how these two phenomena can interact in the context of organizational change. The topic of the thesis is also relevant as a comprehensive understanding of resistance to change can offer organizations competitive advantage within increasingly fast-paced and competitive environment.

The theoretical framework of this thesis explores resistance to change as a complex phenomenon affecting the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of an individual during organizational change. Intra-organizational social networks are studied particularly from the perspective of informal social networks. Moreover, social networks are also examined based on concepts of social capital, the strength of weak ties, and opinion leadership. The research is conducted as a single case study within the context of a multinational pharmaceutical company in which seven employees are participated in qualitative semi-structured interviews.

The empirical findings of the study suggest that informal intra-organizational social networks can both reduce and increase resistance to change. Broader, cross-functional social networks promote diverse communication within the organization, increase the sense of involvement and influence, and further develop commitment to change by reducing uncertainty. Contrastingly, narrower social networks consisting of closely connected like-minded individuals may foster one-sided interpretations of change, thus reinforcing resistance to change. Additionally, the study findings emphasize the role of informal opinion leaders within intra-organizational social networks as shapers of collective attitudes.

Based on the conducted research, organizations should seek to create an organizational culture and environment that supports and enables cross-functional networking, transparency, and participative decision-making. Furthermore, it could be beneficial for organizations to recognize the role of informal opinion leaders as bridging cross-functional social networks, and as key actors in managing resistance to change.

KEYWORDS: Resistance to change, informal intra-organizational networks, opinion leadership

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TIIVISTELMÄ:
Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää, miten yrityksen sisäiset epäviralliset verkostot vaikuttavat yksilön kokemaan muutosvastarintaan organisaatiomuutoksen aikana. Suurimman osan organisaatiomuutoksista on todettu epäonnistuvan, ja muutosvastarinnan on havaittu olevan yksi pääsyistä näihin epäonnistumisiin. Samaikaisesti organisaatioiden arjessa tapahtuu jatkuvasti epävirallista vuorovaikutusta työntekijöiden välillä muovaten yksilön tulkintaa muutoksesta. On siis mielenkiintoista selvittää, miten nämä kaksi ilmiötä risteävät organisaatiomuutoksen kontekstissa. Aihe on myös ajankohtainen, sillä yhä nopeammin muuttuvassa maailmassa ja kilpailuympäristössä muutosvastarinnan kokonaisvaltainen ymmärtäminen voi tarjota organisaatioille kilpailuetua.

Tutkielman teoreettisessa viitekehyksessä tarkastellaan muutosvastarintaa moninaisena ilmiönä osana yksilön ajattelua, tunteita ja käyttäytymistä organisaatiomuutoksen aikana. Teoreettisen viitekehyksen toista kokonaisuutta, yritysten sisäisiä sosiaalisia verkostoja, käsitellään erityisesti epävirallisten verkostojen näkökulmasta. Lisäksi sosiaalia verkostoja tutkitaan sosiaalisen pääoman, verkostosuhteiden siteiden vahvuuden sekä mielipidejohtajuuden kautta. Tutkimus on toteutettu yksittäisenä tapaustutkimuksena kansainvälisen lääketeollisuusyhtiön kontekstissa, jossa seitsemän henkilöä on osallistunut laadullisiin puolistrukturoituihin haastatteluihin.

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että yrityksen sisäiset epäviralliset verkostot voivat sekä lieventää että vahvistaa muutokseen kohdistuvaa vastarintaa. Laajat ja poikkiorganisatoriset sosiaaliset verkostot tukevat monimuotoista kommunikaatiota lisäten yksilön osallisuuden ja vaikutusmahdollisuuden tunnetta, mikä helpottaa muutokseen sitoutumista ja täten vähentää yksilön kokemaa epävarmuutta muutoksesta. Toisaalta tiiviisti samankaltaisesti ajattelevista jäsenistä koostuva verkosto voi johtaa yksipuolisiin tulkintoihin muutoksesta vahvistaen muutosvastarintaa. Samalla tutkimustulokset korostavat epävirallisten mielipidejohtajien roolia yritysten sisäisissä sosiaalisissa verkostoissa kollektiivisten asenteiden muokkaajina.

Tutkielman pohjalta organisaatioiden tulisi panostaa yrityskulttuuriin ja ympäristöön, joka tukee poikkiorganisatorista verkostoitumista, avoimuutta ja osallistavaa päätöksentekoa. Organisaatioiden tulisi myös tunnistaa mielipidejohtajien merkitys sillanrakentajina yrityksen sisäisten sosiaalisten verkostojen välillä osana muutosvastarinnan hallintaa.

AVAINSANAT: Muutosvastarinta, yrityksen sisäiset epäviralliset sosiaaliset verkostot, mielipidejohtajuus

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1 Introduction

In this chapter, the background and the identified research gap of the study is first presented. Followed by that, the research questions and objectives are determined. Thirdly, the key concepts of the thesis are defined. Lastly, the structure of the thesis is presented.

1.1 The background and research gap of the study

You sit in a meeting when your manager announces a new upcoming organizational model that is supposed improve ways of working, collaboration, and decision-making. The room is silent for a moment before people start whispering to each other. In the break room later, colleagues gather in small groups, some debating how this new organizational model might improve teamwork and flexibility, while others are skeptical about responsibilities and potential future ambiguity. By the end of the day, informal discussions across teams have taken on a life of their own. As a result, opinions, concerns, and ideas are spreading through lunchroom chats, group messages, and casual hallway encounters.

This scenario reflects the reality of modern work life, where change is the only constant. Dievernich (2015, p. 9) describes this era as one of "permanent flux", where organizations must continuously evolve to remain competitive. As a result, organizations are under continual pressure to adapt, whether adopting new technologies, restructuring processes, or responding to global disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic. While adapting to change is essential, it is rarely straightforward. Introducing change often generates a range of emotions and reactions, from enthusiasm to skepticism. These varied responses underline a critical challenge for organizations – resistance to change (Castillo et al., 2018, p. 470). The success of change initiatives depends not only on formal strategies but also on how individuals experience and interpret change within their social contexts (Oreg, 2006, p. 74).

Resistance to change is not just an individual phenomenon, it is deeply rooted in social interactions. Change recipients often turn to their colleagues to make sense of change, assess its implications, and form collective opinions and narratives. These unstructured, everyday connections between colleagues are referred to as informal social networks. According to Horak et al. (2020, p. 511), these networks are often overlooked when implementing change initiatives. This may be due to the difficulty of mapping these networks, as they often cannot be identified from hierarchical organizational charts (Huning et al., 2015, p. 21). However, they may play a vital role in shaping how information, emotions, opinion leadership, and social influence flow among employees during times of change as these networks serve as channels through which individuals form opinions, share concerns, and build collective responses to organizational change (Horak et al., 2020). By examining these informal network dynamics, organizations can better understand the variability in how different teams and individuals respond to change. Failing to account for informal social networks during change initiatives can have unintended consequences, such as allowing resistance to spread unchecked, ultimately undermining the success of the transformation (Hubbart, 2023, p. 1).

Despite being an extensively studied and research issue of high importance in recent decades, organizations still face multiple challenges understanding resistance to change (Ashworth et al., 2009, p. 165). This is illustrated in the research of Errida and Lotfi (2021), where they estimate that as many as 70% of change initiative fail or do not meet the expected outcomes. Furthermore, a survey of 400 organizations by Deloitte and Touche found that resistance to change is seen as the main cause of organizational change projects failing (Prochaska et al., 2001, p. 253).

Each change includes unique contextual factors, objectives, and individuals involved. As a result of the varying circumstances, reactions to change cannot be generalized to all organizations. Therefore, more in-depth case studies examining the interaction between informal intra-organizational social networks and resistance to change can offer practical insights for leaders and change agents, but also for change recipients themselves.

Additionally, as organizations are constantly changing, for instance, due to technological advancements, globalization, and changing workplace dynamics, such as increasing remote working, the nature of change also keeps evolving. Furthermore, opinion leadership has been regarded in marketing research as a means of influencing consumer's purchase decisions. The concept, however, is also relevant in organizational research as opinion leaders who are part of an organization's networks may have an essential role in making change initiatives successful (Oueslati et al., 2024, p. 642). In this study, it is examined through resistance to change within informal intra-organizational social networks. Further research is needed from the perspective of diachronic reliability as well. Finally, in their research, Oreg et al. (2011) stress the importance for empirical research that concentrates on emotions and opinions individuals encounter during change processes as recent studies show that people's emotions and how they respond to organizational change are significantly correlated. (Heim & Sardar-Drenda, 2021; de Souza et al., 2024).

1.2 Research questions and objectives

Based on the research background and identified research gap motivated in chapter 1.1, the objective of this study is to examine the interplay of resistance to change and informal intra-organizational social networks. The main research question guiding the conduct of this study is following:

> *How do informal intra-organizational social networks influence resistance to organizational change?*

In order to support the research problem, following research objectives are defined:

- *How does resistance to change manifest during the organizational change in the case company?*
- *How informal social networks impact resistance to change?*

- *How do opinion leaders impact informal social networks during resistance to organizational change?*

To explore these questions, this study focuses on a single case study within a global multicultural pharmaceutical company undergoing significant restructuring. The restructuring aims to reduce bureaucracy and hierarchy by streamlining organizational layers and integrating siloed teams into larger, cross-functional entities. At the time of this study, the outcomes of the change remain uncertain, but new work procedures and potential downsizing through restructuring are expected.

1.3 Definitions of key concepts

This chapter presents definitions of the key concepts that form the basis of this study. In this thesis, key concepts are resistance to change, informal intra-organizational networks, strong and weak ties, and opinion leadership. By defining these key concepts, this chapter aims to help the reader to understand the main concepts based on which this research is written.

Resistance to change

According to Zantvoort (2015, p. 342-345), resistance to change describes reluctant attitudes, behaviors, or actions that individuals or teams within an organization express when facing new procedures, ideas, or structures. Resistance may stem from factors such as perceived loss of control, fear of the unknown, lack of trust in the leadership, or possible drawbacks of the change. Resistance to change can be both individual resistance and organizational resistance.

Informal intra-organizational social networks

Informal intra-organizational networks refer to the informal relationships and communication channels that are formed between individuals in the workplace. These networks are formed on the basis of shared interests, social interactions and collaborative work. Moreover, these networks often involve the sharing of information, support, and resources. Such networks and relationships are crucial in fostering cooperation, innovation, and problem-solving and are often more flexible and faster than hierarchical networks. (Huning et al., 2015).

Strong and weak ties

The strength of a tie is a theory by Granovetter (1973), which characterizes the nature and intensity of social connections between individuals in the spread of information and the structure of networks. Strong ties are often established with close friends, family members, and work colleagues with whom one engages regularly. While strong ties are characterized with support and trust, these relationships tend to be homogenous, therefore, not providing access to diverse information. Contrastingly, weak ties are formed between less familiar acquaintances. Weak ties are argued to be important in bridging separate social networks, enabling access to new information, ideas, and opportunities that would not be accessible within closely-knit groups. (Granovetter, 1973).

Opinion leadership

The concept describes the influence that some individuals have over the beliefs, actions, or choices of other members of a social network. These individuals are referred to as opinion leaders due to their colleagues valuing and respecting their perspectives and regarding them as reliable sources of information. The majority of the research of opinion leadership has concentrated on the consumer and marketing perspective (Cho et al., 2012). Particularly during change initiatives, opinion leadership may be significant in social networks, as it influences the way how new concepts, procedures, and ideas are spread. (Dearing, 2009, p. 507).

1.4 Structure of the study

The structure of this master's thesis comprises six chapters. The first chapter of the study presents the motivation for this thesis by offering a short background for the research including the identified research gap as well as presenting the research questions of the study. These chapters discuss organizational change, with a particular focus on resistance to change, followed by informal intra-organizational social networks, including the concept of opinion leadership as part of social networks. The research methodology, data collection process, and analysis of the research data are outlined in the fourth chapter. Subsequently, the research findings are presented in the fifth chapter. Finally, the sixth and last chapter presents the discussion of the key findings of this study and discusses theoretical contributions and managerial implications of this thesis. The sixth chapter also considers the limitations of the study as well as suggestions for future research.

2 Resistance to change

In this chapter, resistance to change is introduced as the first main theoretical theme of this study. Firstly, organizational change is presented in order to understanding the phenomenon of resisting change in sub-chapter 2.2. Thirdly, sources and various stages of resistance to change are examined, followed by the different individual responses to change. The final sub-chapter presents the positive aspects of resistance to change.

2.1 What is (organizational) change?

Change, as defined in the dictionary, refers to the shift of the essence, structure or feature of any phenomenon from one state to another (Vartola, 2004, pp. 52-53). The definition of organizational change is not unambiguous, although research has offered a wide range of theories to explain organizational change, there is no single unifying definition. However, it has been suggested that change in an organization represents any change in the state of affairs in the organization (Alolabi et al., 2021, p. 1). For instance, Alolabi et al. (2021, p. 1) have described organizational change as a new context-dependent, unpredictable, non-linear idea or process introduced in an organization, which can be internal or external. In its simplest form, organizational change is seen as a new way of working and organizing work (Stenvall & Virtanen, 2007, p. 43). Studies based on individuals' rational choices and actions suggest that change arises from deliberate actions in response to an objective, external reality, while a more contextual approach suggests that change results from institutional pressures, isomorphism and routines. However, both define organizational change as the transition of an entity from one distinct and unique state to another, whether it be an organization as a whole or a particular procedure (Quattrone & Hopper, 2001, p. 403).

Organizational changes have also been described and categorized according to a variety of characteristics. The catalysts for change can take many different forms and have a wide range of effects (Atuahene et al., 2023, p. 1; Stenvall & Virtanen, 2007, p. 19). Generally, these catalysts are divided into external and internal factors. External factors that may present challenges to an organization and its change include, among other things, globalization, shifting competitive settings, and increasing expectations for sustainability and social responsibility. Similar internal factors may include the evolution of management culture and the pressure to change a rigid and bureaucratic organizational structure into a more flexible network organization (Atuahene et al., 2023, p. 3; Stenvall & Virtanen, 2007, p. 19).

According to Tienari and Meriläinen (2009, p. 15), change can occur, for instance, through top-down planning or gradually, almost as if by self-adaptation. Edwards, Prætorius and Nielsen (2020, p. 342) argue that not only management-planned but also emergent changes take place in organizations. While planned change is consciously driven, unplanned and emergent changes can be seen more as an adaptation to some external changes in the organization (Liebhart & Lorenzo, 2010). Wee and Taylor (2017, p. 11) even argue that, change usually originates at a lower level of the organization, contrary to what is usually thought. The nature of change is also intrinsic to its scope; change can be large or small, it may be structural, an operational change that affects the whole organization, or it can only affect a single way of working procedure. However, organizational change typically affects a number of employees, their responsibilities and functions, and sometimes the entire workforce of the organization. It should be noted that several different types of changes can be implemented at the same time.

Organizational structures may be impacted by organizational change, which oftentimes lead to adjustments in staffing or production output levels. For instance, reducing production costs by streamlining cost structures, introducing new production methods, lowering the organizational structure, and restructuring staff are measures that drastically change the way the work community operates and also the conditions under which the workplace exists. It is generally agreed that organizational change is above all characterized by complexity and high uncertainty (Oreg, 2006, p. 82).

2.2 What is resistance to change?

Kurt Lewin originally introduced the concept *resistance to change* in his field theory model in 1947. Lewin's model seeks to explain group behavior by examining the opposing forces that work to maintain the status quo and those that drive for change. His three-step process is still one of the most widely utilized theory to explain the process that change recipient must go through to change. Although Lewin initially described how individuals change in everyday life, the theory has since been applied in change management theory. The environment is regulated by forces that act in diverse directions and with varying strengths and the state of equilibrium is achieved by balancing the forces that promote and hinder change (Hussain et al., 2018, p. 123; Patalano, 2011, p. 250). Lewin distinguished three stages in the process of change: unfreezing, moving, and freezing. Unfreezing is the process of unlearning existing behaviors, which can be accomplished by either reducing the restraining factors or increasing the driving forces. The actual change occurs during the transition state “moving”, which shifts the forces' equilibrium in the desired direction. To prevent reverting to the previous equilibrium, in freezing stage it is ensured that the post-change state is firmly established in practice.

Despite being introduced more than half a century ago, there is no universally recognized definition of the concept resistance to change. Since its inception, resistance to change has been commonly used by many researchers in academic literature as an explanation to describe why the extensive endeavors in organizational change, implementation of new ways of working and operating models or performance assessment systems fail to meet the desired outcomes or even fail entirely (Oreg, 2006, p. 73). Resistance to change has been also broadly defined as any unwanted reaction or force that prevents or limits the change. From this perspective, change resistance is seen as a constraint that must be overcome in one way or another. However, some researchers have criticized this idea for not taking into account the positive aspects of resistance to change (Erwin & Garman, 2010, p. 40). Another criticism is that people do not necessarily resist the change itself, but all the uncertainty and potential negative consequences that comes with it such as loss of status, loss of pay, increased job demands, and modifications to required skills (Dent & Goldberg, 1999, p. 26).

As revealed by Errida & Lotfi (2005, p. 121-122), it has been estimated that as many as 70% of change initiatives fail with resistance to change being a significant but frequently disregarded factor contributing to this outcome. Krantz (1999, p. 42) states that especially when resistance to change has been identified as a source of failed change initiative, is has become typical from those who are ranked higher in the organization hierarchy to use the concept as a way of blaming the below employee levels who are part of change implementation for unsuccessful outcomes. However, he argues that the phenomenon applies to employees too as they tend to be prone of placing the responsibility for unsuccessful change projects on their superiors instead of themselves. Indeed, the origins of resistance to change may oftentimes be traced to the divergence between the vision for change set by leaders and the actual change that the employees are supposed to carry out and with the effects they are subsequently supposed to live with (Erwin & Garman, 2010, p. 46).

2.3 Sources and stages of resistance to change

In literature, there is a prevailing belief in the inherent tendency, innate inertia, of human beings to be conservative towards change. Zantvoort (2015, p. 342-345) describes inertia as "an unreasonable or counterproductive resistance to a change" that is seen necessary, desirable, or inevitable. The sources of resistance to change can be manifold. For instance, new procedures are often perceived worse than the old ones because of fears of increased workload, changed routines, reduced compensation, and lack of resources. Old routines seem safe, familiar, and comfortable, hence it is possible for individuals to feel being “in control' of one's environment”. Although change is exciting, it may also be unknown, unpredictable, and challenging.

According to various uncertainty management models such as proposed by Hogg (2004) and McGregor (2004), people possess an inherent need to experience certainty in their surrounding environment but importantly, certainty over their role within it. Moreover, these models suggest that uncertainty can be perceived as a threat, leading individuals to seek ways to either eliminate uncertainty or find strategies to cope with it. Consequently, people tend to defend themselves from being in or imagining being in such situations where they lack confidence or are uncertain about themselves (van den Bos et al., 2008).

Erwin and Garmin (2010, p. 45) argue that people's attitudes to changes are influenced by "their perceptions of the personal and organizational implications and outcomes". That is, individuals' views about the change, either positive, neutral, or negative, are influenced by the possible drawbacks or advantages of the change, specifically about if how likely they can expect to benefit or lose from the change. According to Oreg (2006, p. 79), particularly strong negative feelings and resistance to change is caused by uncertainty about the continuity of one's employment. This experienced uncertainty can be linked to the hierarchy of needs theory invented by Abraham Maslow in the 1940s.

The hierarchy of needs provides a basic psychological framework to understanding the psychology of change and the human element of transformation (Maslow et al., 1987). The theory consists of five levels and suggests that human nature is driven by behavior that can be traced to our basic needs. Moreover, in order to progress to the next level in the hierarchy of needs, the needs must be fulfilled in the lower levels first (Rouse, 2004, p. 27). For instance, if for some reason an individual fails to satisfy one's fundamental basic needs including physiological, and safety and security needs, one's ability to succeed reaching the higher levels such as self-esteem and self-actualization will be limited. Thus, people naturally want to avoid harmful circumstances and to experience control and predictability in their lives (Ford & Ford, 1992, p. 88-89). In the highest level of the hierarchy, in self-actualization, individuals strive to be the best version of themselves and maximizing their potential by seeking personal growth. However, as Uysal, Aydemir and Genc (2017, p. 225) argue that it is essential to acknowledge that this framework is dynamic rather than static, that is, rather subject to change meaning that a change in an individuals' environment can revert them back to the lower levels of the hierarchy if the experienced safety or predictability is disrupted.

The consequences of change are often not interpreted or internalized correctly or understood at all. Thus, learning to cope with the new challenges associated with change is seen daunting. In addition to the fear of losing one's job or uncertainty of financial security, fear of losing status and prestige is also a common cause of resistance (Warrick, 2023, p. 435). Therefore, Kotter and Schlesinger (2008) argue that change resistance is often more about the fear of giving up the old, rather than a fear of new. Furthermore, often people do not resist change as such, rather the way in which it is implemented. Addressing the reasons behind employee dissatisfaction and respecting the opinions of those questioning the change will help to ensure that future organizational changes are implemented in a smoother way. This also decreases negative experiences of individuals in the organization, thus increasing the commitment to the change. If this is not done properly, the implications and consequences of resistance to change are going to be more visible and severe to the organization as a whole (Hubbart, 2023, p. 1). If the organization is unable to address negative emotions related to change together, individuals may start seeking explanations for these negative emotions by blaming other stakeholders. In such situations, individuals' common sense fails as negative emotions take over and seemingly unrelated things are associated with each other oftentimes distorting the magnitude of problems.

2.4 How different people react to change?

As has been noted, people are do not necessarily resist the change itself, but rather the consequences of change. Although the most common sources and causes of resistance to change have been discussed in chapter 2.3, everyone reacts to different changes in a different way and with varying intensity. That is, individuals tend to have a different disposition for dealing with change. For instance, some might prefer routine, and become nervous around change, thus have more inflexible attitude towards accepting change in general (Hubbart, 2023, p. 3). On the other hand, others consider routine tasks tiresome and thrive in an environment where new procedures emerge frequently. In addition to an individual disposition towards change, context of the change matters too. For instance, attitudes toward change can be positively impacted by having a suitable amount of information and confidence in management. (Oreg, 2006, p. 77-78). The context can also have an opposite effect as other aspects of an individual's life also affect their readiness to change. For example, the amount of stress an individual is already under in one's personal life can undermine his or her readiness to accept organizational changes (Küçükatalay et al., 2023, p. 123).

The emotions aroused by change are determined by an individual's past experiences and their current circumstances. If the change reminds individuals of their past experiences, the feelings of those changes may be reflected and carried either positively or negatively into the change that is about to take place. Moreover, the object and content of the change is central to the individual's past experience, the emotions triggered by the change are thus stronger. Consequently, employees who have previously experienced positive changes, tend to be more inclined and receptive towards changes than those who have had negative experiences of change as poorly managed changes are particularly burdensome and remain in people's memories for a long time. In addition to past experiences of change, also the timing when one hears about the change may have a significant impact on one's attitude towards the change. (Patalano, 2011, p. 255).

Piderit (2000, p. 784) and Palmer et al. (2006, p. 261-262) argue that an individual's position in an organization may play a role in how they experience change. Most often accusations of resistance to change are directed towards employees and experts, however, resistance to change can occur at all levels of an organization, as middle managers and supervisors tend to resist change for the same reason as all other employees (Self & Schraeder, 2009, p. 171). After all, leaders are members of an organization and are influenced by their work experiences as much as their subordinates. Since middle managers are often in charge of implementing the change, their position can have a significant impact on how change projects turn out. Indeed, research shows that a change leader’s cynicism about organizational change negatively impacts the entire workforce (Rubin et al., 2009, p. 680). Therefore, organizations should pay close attention to managers' and top executives' change cynicism and work to prevent this category of employees from becoming change cynics. Sinkovics et al. (2011, p. 39) discovered that the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors of employees are affected by the leadership behavior of managers. Management's reserved behavior and communication caused disappointment, lack of motivation, and rumors. Conversely, transparent and communicative behavior created an environment where the majority of employees worked together to achieve a common objective.

According to Oreg (2006, p. 74) and Piderit (2000, p. 785), resistance to change is a complex phenomenon consisting of cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Behavioral dimension posits how people behave and act in the face of change, the cognitive dimension to what people think about the change, for instance, is the change beneficial, and the affective dimension to what feelings the change causes to change recipients. Piderit (2000) furthermore proposes that people function within all of these three dimensions at the same time and that they can have mixed feelings about changes in any of these aspects.

2.4.1 Cognitive dimensions

Cognitive dimension focuses on how individuals perceive, think, and believe when confronted with change. When individuals recognize that change is occurring, they begin to analyze and interpret the situation in order to make sense of it. (Piderit, 2000, p. 786). According to van den Bos (2008), people look for meaning, particularly when faced with unfamiliar and surprising situations. Bartunek et al. (2006, p. 182) argue that sensemaking gives new information significance and simplifies the complexity of previously acquired knowledge. The concept of sensemaking, or what a person thinks a certain change implies. In addition to creating cognitive reactions reflected by personal opinions and experiences, this sensemaking process assists in processing the change.

According to Oreg's (2006) research on change attitudes, people who have positive perceptions about change are more likely to think that they will gain from it. This result is consistent with the research conducted by Bartunek et al. (1999), which examines whether people can react favorably to change if they perceive that the change will be beneficial. Moreover, according to the study, change commitment was shown to be positively correlated with change effectiveness, which in turn influences individuals' positive reactions to change. Oreg et al. (2011) demonstrated that the more positive individuals' reactions to change were, the more open and ready the individuals were to accept the change, as well as more willing to participate in the change process. Contrastingly, it has been shown that those with negative responses view changes adversely and think that they will not be helpful. According to Oreg (2006, 89), individuals who have negative feelings about the change think they will not be able to gain anything from it.

2.4.2 Affective dimensions

Piderit (2000, p. 786) describes affective attitudes as "an individual's feelings, moods, emotions, and sympathetic nervous-system activity that people have experienced in relation to an attitude object and subsequently associate with it". In 1969, Swiss-born psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross published a work on the confrontation with death, in which she presented a change curve describing the emotions caused by change in the grieving process. In Kübler-Ross's model, the life cycle of change is described by five different stages: shock & denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Corr, 2020). The model, as shown in figure 1, has subsequently been adapted to describe the various emotions that individuals experience during changes in the business sector. Through a sequence of phases, the model explains how people react to change and how they eventually accept it. The transition from one stage to another is mostly unconscious and the progression through the change process is individual – some people transition rapidly between the stages while others require more time to adjust (Leybourne, 2011, p. 16). A person's characteristics, life experiences, and perceived level of control all affect the progression. Not everyone must experience every step of the change curve in a specific order and depending on one's situation, a person may even go back to an earlier stage. Leybourne (2011, p. 18) points out that everyone reacts differently to change.

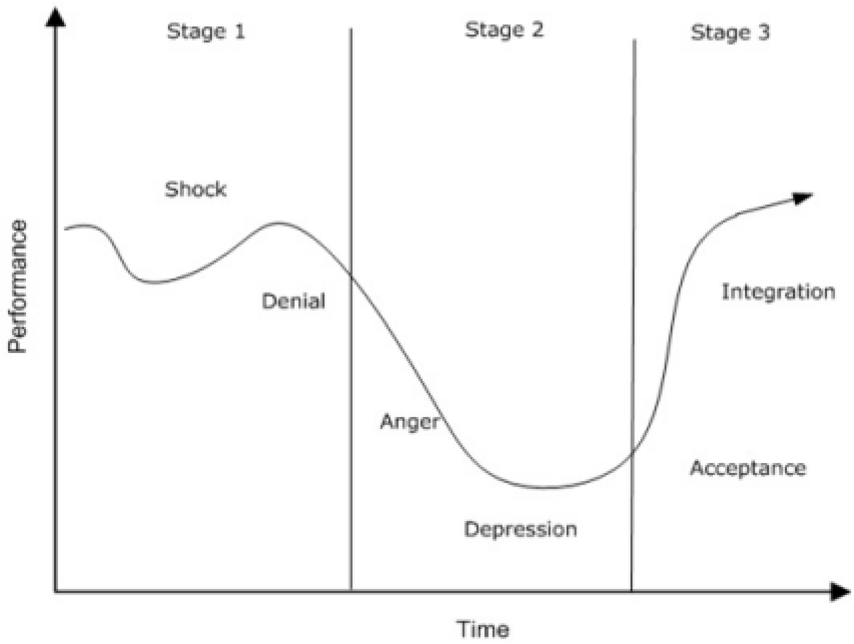

Figure 1. The Kübler-Ross Change Curve (Kübler-Ross, 1969).

Shock and denial: During the initial stage of the change curve, individuals may be shocked by the change and be skeptical of its implementation. The reasons behind the change should be communicated in order for employees to understand its possible advantages. New information should be provided slowly and gradually.

Anger: After internalizing that change is approaching, employees may become angry as a result of their fear of uncertainty. When forced to change their ways of working and behavior, individuals may become irritated. At this point in the change curve, individuals may blatantly express their dissatisfaction. Support and clear communication are required and expected from the management.

Bargaining: In the third stage of the change curve, employees might begin searching for the most effective way to adopt to change. They may try to negotiate with management about their views and how to best achieve the desired outcomes. It is the responsibility of management to guarantee that all employees receive the necessary training. Full productivity cannot be expected at this stage, as individuals need time to learn and adapt.

Depression: During this stage, productivity reaches its lowest point and there are signs of sadness, apathy, and demotivation. By this stage, employees have realized that change cannot be avoided. For managers and team members, it is critical to reassure colleagues that these feelings are normal and other members in the organization are experienced similar emotions. Particular attention should be dedicated to inspiring training.

Acceptance: Employees begin to develop new objectives and ambitions when they embrace the change. In the fifth stage of the change curve, tangible results can eventually be noticed. Individuals are eager to show their development and thus productivity increases. Ideally, from the perspective of continuous improvement, the entire change process should be critically reviewed.

2.4.3 Behavioral dimensions

Change experiences are greatly influenced by emotions. They influence employees' behavior and provide structure to change (Warrick, 2023, p. 435). Generally, behavioral responses to organizational change are categorized in four broad categories which are active resistance, passive resistance, compliance, and enthusiastic support. Figure 2 presents the most common symptoms of both active and passive resistance. The kind of resistance to change which includes acts that obstruct or oppose the change is known as behavioral resistance. This happens when individuals encounter obstacles or limitations that keep them from embracing the change, or when they lack drive, dedication, or trust in the change. Passive-aggression, sabotage, procrastination, and non-compliance are examples of behavioral resistance. (Warrick, 2023, p. 435).

Symptoms of Active Resistance	Symptoms of Passive Resistance
Being critical, finding fault, ridiculing, arguing	Agreeing in person but not following through
Appealing to fear, starting rumors	Failing to implement change
Using facts selectively, distorting facts	Procrastinating, dragging one's feet
Blaming, accusing, intimidating, threatening	Feigning ignorance
Manipulating, sabotaging	Withholding information, suggestions, support
Blocking, undermining	Standing by and allowing change to fail

Figure 2. Active and Passive Resistance (Palmer et al., 2009)

The most negative response to a change is active resistance. Active resisters may directly and provocatively criticize the change initiative by starting rumors or even sabotaging the change. Passive resistance, on the other hand, is more subtle and involves individuals quietly resisting the change by not engaging, avoiding responsibilities, or slowing down productivity. Passive resisters often experience stress, dissatisfaction, and may start to seek for another job. Thirdly, compliance entails that some individuals may comply with the change without fully embracing it. Moreover, despite their lack of enthusiasm for the change, these individuals tend to adhere to the new protocols and procedures. Finally, in case of enthusiastic supporters of the change, employees actively support and contribute to the success of the initiative and by helping others during the transition period as well. (Palmer et al., 2006, p. 261).

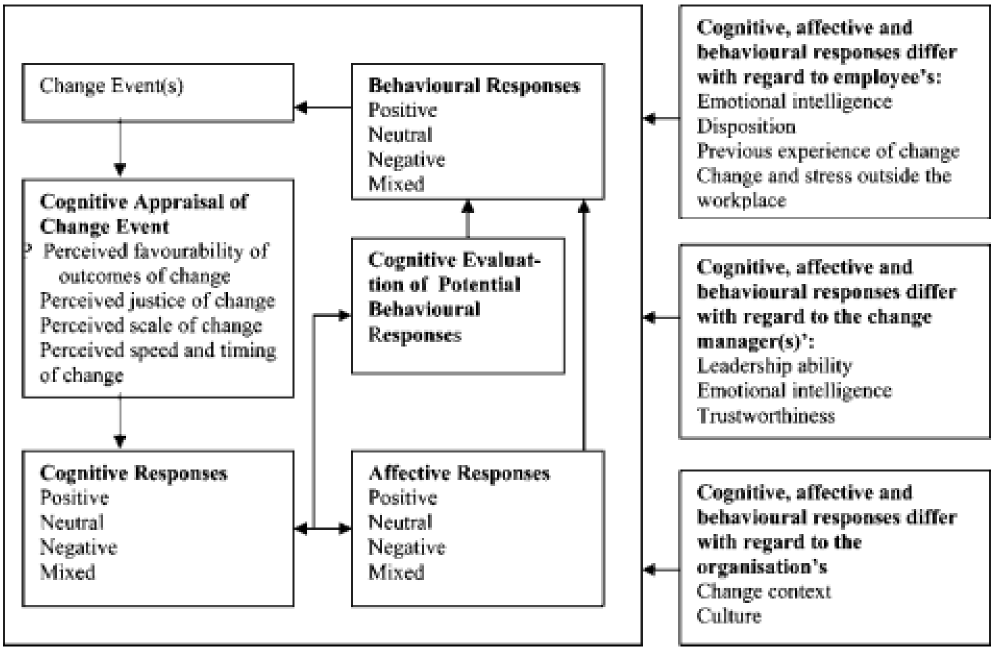

Figure 3. Model of responses to organizational change (Smollan, 2006, p. 146).

Figure 3 summarizes chapter 2.4. and its sub-chapters by visualizing how organizational change can be experienced and subsequently responded by the individual and depending on the individual interpretation of the change.

2.5 Praising change resistance

The two most common approaches to conceptualizing resistance to change are either to demonize it or to celebrate it. Typically, in the management literature, resistance to change is considered to be as a more negative phenomenon, based on definition, characteristics, and ultimately its effects on the desired objectives. However, the demonizing approach has often led to failures in the change initiatives. (Thomas & Hardy, 2011, p. 322-324). Hughes (2010) suggests that resistance to change is often understood in too one-dimensional manner and is therefore a misleading and inappropriate concept to describe its complexity. Therefore, he argues that the concept is outdated and replaced with 'the employee response to change' which better considers the possible outcomes of organizational change - positive, neutral, and negative. Thus, those of responsible for change, i.e. top management or change agents, should focus on building readiness for change rather than overcoming resistance to change (Self, 2007, p. 12). Nevertheless, change should always be approached critically, as change should not be done just for the sake of change.

When considering the complexity of resistance to change, it should also be examined from the perspective of unintentional or not deliberate resistance (Piderit, 2000). Most of the employees do not seek to resist change by intentionally attempting to challenge, sabotage, or act against the organization's best interests (Warrick, 2023, p. 440). Arguably, neither an individual nor an organization can constantly respond to all changes in its environment. Thus, an adequate level of individual or institutional inertia may be vital for maintaining the necessary stability to ensure organizations ability to function on a day-to-day basis as otherwise it is difficult to find repeatable, scalable business models, and daily routines (Zantvoort, 2015, p. 358).

Resistance to change is much more complex phenomenon than its predominantly negative definition and characteristics suggest (Smollan, 2011, p. 828). In recent times, resistance to change has been praised as a part of successful change initiatives. The hypothesis is that resistance can actually provide completely new ideas for changes and thus contribute to its success. According to Thomas and Hardy (2011, p. 324), if resistance is seen as a positive element for successful change, management and change agents should use this behavior in the design and implementation of change. It may be an indication that something has been neglected about the change. Thus, resistance to change may also be defined as direct feedback about mismanaged change. As a result, resistance should no longer be interpreted as a counterproductive factor, but as an interaction between the change agent and the change recipient. In fact, if change resistance is properly addressed and timed by change recipients, it can prevent management and change agents from pursuing change initiatives that could negatively or possibly harmfully affect the operations of an organization. (Piderit, 2000, p. 790).

Psychologist Kurt Lewin viewed organizational development as a useful as a practical application of social psychological theory. Lewin opposed the narrow job roles that were favored by other theorists in his time and saw work primarily as a source of value and meaning in human life and a source of individual growth. He examined issues such as job satisfaction and creativity. Lewin conducted experiments that demonstrated that the behavior of a group of people is most likely to change when these individuals can participate in the consideration and problem-solving process. (Juuti & Virtanen, 2009, pp. 36-37). More specifically, it was discovered that incorporating staff knowledge and abilities into decision-making could lead to improved operational performance. Employees not only performed better, but also benefited from participating in the challenge and taking responsibility (Pasmore et al., 2019, p. 68).

Lewin (2017), as well as Warrick (2023, p. 436), noted the importance of giving feedback during organizational changes. Warrick (2023, p. 439) indicated that organizational improvement depends on collective discussion and feedback; if a manager discussed proposed changes with one's subordinates, especially through group discussions, changes were generally more likely to be perceived as positive in the organization. In contrast, if the manager did not design changes with employees, change did not occur, and instead employees may even become frustrated with the lack of clarity. Lewin's findings began to be more widely used in organizational change. At the same time, there was a demand for a theory of the mechanisms behind these best practices (Juuti & Virtanen, 2009, p. 38). The challenges of the mechanistic conception of organization led many theorists towards the possibilities offered by human sciences for organizational thinking. This development was influenced, among other things, by Lewin's insights that employees are human beings with complex set of needs that must be fulfilled to support a full and healthy life and effective work.

A leadership style that praises resistance to change enables valuable interaction between change agents and change recipients. However, this requires management and change agents to be able to tolerate criticism. (Walk, 2023). Furthermore, the responsibility for turning resistance into positive developments does not only lie with management as employees need to be able to present their criticism in a patient and constructive way. Well-justified and communicated resistance provides an opportunity for continuous learning and improvement within the organization as employees are experts in their operative work and often propose the most practical suggestions for process improvements. (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). Moreover, numerous studies (Alas & Vadi, 2006; Awardi, 2019; Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005) have shown a correlation between employee involvement and reduced resistance, and increased probability of change outcomes and overall commitment.

3 Informal intra-organizational social networks

This chapter presents the second main theoretical theme of the study, informal intra-organizational social networks, with the focus of interconnecting the two main themes, informal intra-organizational social networks and resistance to change together. The chapter first provides an overview of social networks and progresses to discussing the characteristics of both formal hierarchical networks and informal social networks. Next, the importance of social capital during periods of change is discussed. Thereafter, Granovetter's theory of the strength of ties is introduced. Also, the role of opinion leadership in networks is explored. Lastly, this chapter concludes with a summary of the theoretical framework, which provides a basis for the study's research methodologies and the means for addressing the research problem.

3.1 Social networks

Organizations are complex entities. Complexity often refers to the intricate nature of a system or organizational structure, which is characterized by ambiguity. A complex system, such as an organization, comprises multiple stakeholders that interact with each other in both systematic and chaotic ways, driven by various forces. (Piderit, 2000, p. 785). According to Bernoux (2002), organizational change can be seen as a social phenomenon that is constantly constructed through the interrelationships and myriad interactions between members of the organization. Consequently, individuals create emergence in social context that changes the organization through both formal and informal interactions. Moreover, organization's ability to adapt to changes fundamentally relies on informal networks in which individuals engage randomly with each other. If these interactions are sufficiently frequent and active, new insights and unforeseen ideas may can result by addressing differing opinions and challenging the status quo.

The cultural perspective of networking was incorporated into organizational research in the 1950s once it was acknowledged that individuals create a sense of meaning and purpose in the setting which they live in. It was initially regarded as both a psychodynamic and sociological phenomenon. As a theoretical concept, it gained popularity during the mid-1970s and 1980s, when it became evident that financial resources and technological advancements, or the scale and influence of an organization did not necessarily ensure successful transformation and achievement of objectives. (Haveman, 2022).

The cultural perspective of network research reveals that organizations possess an internal reality that influences the thoughts, decisions, and behaviors of employees. This observation has been found to be predominantly unconscious, and to a certain extent, independent of the organization's formal structures (Schein, 2004). Additionally, the culture of an organization is represented as a mental reality that is typically established over an extended period of time. Moreover, this reality is often utilized to evaluate not only structures but also practices and changes. Whereas the process of change has traditionally been perceived as task involving transformations in technology, structures, and the capabilities and motivation of employees, the cultural perspective suggests that successful change also requires changes in the attitudes and values that guide actions (Schein, 2004). According to Boonstra (2013), the two main takeaways from the cultural perspective for organizational change are that successful organizational change always involves cultural change above all else and that change must take into account the atmosphere and its evolution. In the context of organizational transformation, culture within networks may function as both an asset and a liability; it can serve as a crucial facilitator of change, or as a hindrance (Mattila, 2007, p. 35). Tsai (2011, p. 1) argues that deliberate cultural transformation is possible not just within organizational management but also in work communities, provided that the organization's members understand the characteristics of the existing cultural system through multi-faceted social learning processes. Burke (2014, p. 243) claims that cultural transformation is considered the most challenging aspect of organizational change.

A network is a value creation model and cooperative relationship between multiple actors, such as individuals, interest groups, and organizations, that is based on mutual knowledge and resource sharing. The objective of a network is to combine the competences and resources of the involved stakeholders in order to accomplish synergies. Without additional value or synergy creation, the network has no meaningful role. Each member contributes their unique skills, information, relationships, insights, and experiences to the process. To achieve ideal synergy and value creation, collaboration should be as multifaceted, systematic, and interactive as possible. In general, networks are founded on a voluntary, equal, reciprocal, and self-organizing cooperative relationship, which has been determined to be the most optimal method of collaborating. (De Janasz & Forret, 2008, pp. 630-631).

Successful networking relies on participant's willingness or need to participate and collaborate (Siciliano & Thompson, 2018). Therefore, in theory, joining a network should be optional, and each member makes the decision to participate based on their own interests. Mandatory membership rarely produces the desired commitment, especially if network activities occur alongside one's individual responsibilities. However, voluntary membership should not be misunderstood; once a commitment to networking is established, other members of the network have the right to anticipate that the cooperation agreement will oblige all participants to fulfill their responsibilities. (Siciliano & Thompson, 2018).

Another principle of networking is reciprocity, in which benefits should be equally distributed among all participants (Lewis, 2015, p 1). Despite this, it should be acknowledged that reciprocity within networks is seldom fully symmetric, and benefits may not always originate from the same source or at the same time as the investment itself (Molm, 2010, p. 124). This further complicates the monitoring of reciprocity and its balance. However, the core idea of network membership suggests that reciprocity will occur and that the time invested will lead to benefits to every participant in one way or another. Thus, the sensation of reciprocity and its fairness in such a voluntary collaborative activity is crucial for the commitment and motivation of its members (Molm, 2010, p. 123).

Networks consist of equal participants, all of whom should have equal power, equal voting rights and evenly distributed responsibilities. To achieve equality, collective and participatory decision-making is a prerequisite. (Bell & Reed, 2022, p. 596). Although the decision-making process may not be as effective as, for instance, in hierarchical organizational systems, commitment to decision-making is significantly improved when every participant is involved in the process. As with all human relationships, the concept of power and its various forms exist in networking even if it is based on equal cooperation. Power can be exercised, for example, by individuals who have more knowledge or relationships than others. Additionally, member's role in the organization may be associated with perceived notions of power. If a network member establishes a position of power over other participants, it may diminish the commitment and involvement of other participants (Avin et al., 2018, p. 3).

3.1.1 Formal hierarchical networks

Diefenbach and Sillince (2011, p. 1515) define hierarchy as "vertical formal integration of official positions within one explicit organizational structure whereby each position or office is under the control and supervision of a higher one". To put exasperatedly, formal hierarchical network is a framework of defined interconnected roles and positions through top-down command and control lines (Laumann et al., 1971). Moreover, formal networks are often established on both hierarchical relationships between managers and subordinates as well as on horizontal interdependence between colleagues. An organizational chart is frequently used for displaying formal networks and relationships. Organizational charts indicate routes for reporting, communication, authorization, and sharing of information.

Nearly all societies, including organizations, have been found to be organized as social hierarchies at some point in their history (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011, p. 1515; Laumann et al., 1971). However, it has been predicted that the era of organizations would be in transition, followed by the era of networks. Hierarchical organizations perform well in stable and predictable environments by effectively delivering solutions to clearly defined problems, while networks thrive in volatile and uncertain circumstances, where innovation, agility, flexibility, and dynamic features are required (Rigby et al., 2016). According to Diefenbach and Sillince (2011) formal and traditional hierarchical organizations can be hampered by rigidity and an inability to solve complex problems. Krackhardt and Hanson (1993, p. 104) argue that "if the formal organization is the skeleton of a company, the informal is the central nervous system driving the collective thought processes, actions, and reactions of its business units".

3.1.2 Informal social networks

Informal relationships are bonds within an organization between individuals that are not interlinked in organizational charts with each other, contrastingly to formal relationships (Huning et al., 2015, p. 21). Furthermore, these networks refer to the pathways that facilitate the exchange of information. Depending on the degree of mutual expectations and responsibilities and the amount and duration of an interaction, personal relationships can be positive or negative, weak or strong. A dyadic and multiplex relationship combines more than one dimension, such as friendship and the transfer of advice. Informal networks are frequently classified as either instrumental (guidance and communication) or affective (trust among individuals). (Lamertz & Aquino, 2004). Informal networks also have their potential drawbacks. Some studies on organizational networks also focus on *sour social capital*, or unfavorable relationships and attitudes including gossip, betrayal, and mistrust or other obstructive behavior by colleagues (Moerbeek & Need, 2003, p. 71).

Informal networks are established through several means. Individuals connect through shared activities, aligned schedules, geographical proximity, and mutuals interests (Huning et al., 2015, p. 24). Also, social informal networks have an intriguing characteristic in that individuals tend to be inclined to connect with peers who are fairly similar to them. Such interactions can bring individuals closer together, even creating a relationship of dependency. Through informal networks, weak signals can be detected, which can help to anticipate future challenges in a controlled way especially during times of organizational change. Due to their lack of formality, informal networks provide access to otherwise elusive knowledge and ideas that can lead to new innovations. Thus, it can be beneficial for individuals to join informal networks for personal gain. A fundamental perspective in informal network creation is the consensus that "the whole is greater than the sum of the individual members' contributions" as informal networks are the basis and platform for organizational learning and social capital. (Huning et al., 2015, p. 24).

3.2 Social capital

Although the concept of social capital is defined and operationalized differently according to various schools of thought, there is a consensus among theorists that social capital is derived from networks between people. Research on social networks has become more popular since the 1970s. Its purpose is to study the structures of interpersonal relationships and their implications from the perspective of both individuals and organizations. Social capital refers to the interpersonal relationships and norms within an organization that influence the quantity and quality of social interaction in particular environment (Bekkers et al., 2008). It is a broad concept encompassing social norms, values, and relationships that regulate interpersonal actions between people, facilitate cooperation to achieve mutual objectives, and promote social developments for employees and consequently enable economic growth for organizations. Individuals use social networks as a platform for information sharing, while trust is fostering collaboration (Putnam, 2001).

Social capital and the ability of organizations to cooperate are mainly based on the development of three interrelated and interdependent factors: trust, cohesion, and interaction. Continuous interaction builds trust, trust fosters cohesion, and cohesion develops interaction. Lin (2001, p. 29) proposes that social capital is defined as social relationships through which an individual obtains certain benefits. Moreover, social relationships serve as conduits through which social resources, such as knowledge and information, can be transferred from one individual to another (Lin, 2001, p. 29). Thus, the social networks formed by social ties between individuals within and across organizations, which was discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, can have a major influence on the development of social capital (Son, 2020).

In Bourdieu's theory, social capital is an individual's way of acquiring a better position in society and in the social networks to which they are attached (Bourdieu, 2002). Furthermore, belonging to a specific network distinguishes an individual from actors outside the group, which further enhances the individual's position and trust within the network. At the same time, the amount of social capital acquired by an individual is also influenced by the size of the social networks linked to the individual and the economic and cultural capital that the individual has accumulated. The social involvement of an individual does not emerge by itself; it requires constant energy and economic investment, which not all individuals have equally (Son, 2020). In order to manage social capital, individuals must perceive the differences and similarities that arise through socialization. Bourdieu (2002) stresses that the individual must be able to acquire a certain degree of reputation and respect in their social networks.

Portes (1998) argues that social capital consists of the expectations of action within a social network. These expectations represent, for instance, the economic objectives of the network and the way in which these objectives are to be achieved. Portes' theory (2010, p. 412) categorizes expectations of action into four components: internalized values inside the network, reciprocity exchanges, bounded solidarity, and enforceable trust. Putnam (2001) categorizes social capital into bridging and bonding forms that allow individuals to develop social support and trust in relation to other actors in the network (Putnam, 2001). Bonding relationships are most often built between the people who hold significant importance to the individual, such as family members. As the name suggests, these relationships are strong and thus enable norms to emerge. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, can be developed through wider and more informal connections established between individuals, for instance, through hobbies and work (Cross & Parker, 2004). Both bonding and bridging social capital are valuable for the individual, however they function differently in social networks. An individual with solely bonding ties has a restricted network, hindering one's ability to acquire new information (Cross & Parker, 2004). Bridging social capital provide more opportunities for acquiring informational benefits as they refer to the network's potential to connect different actors regardless of time and place (Cross & Parker, 2004).

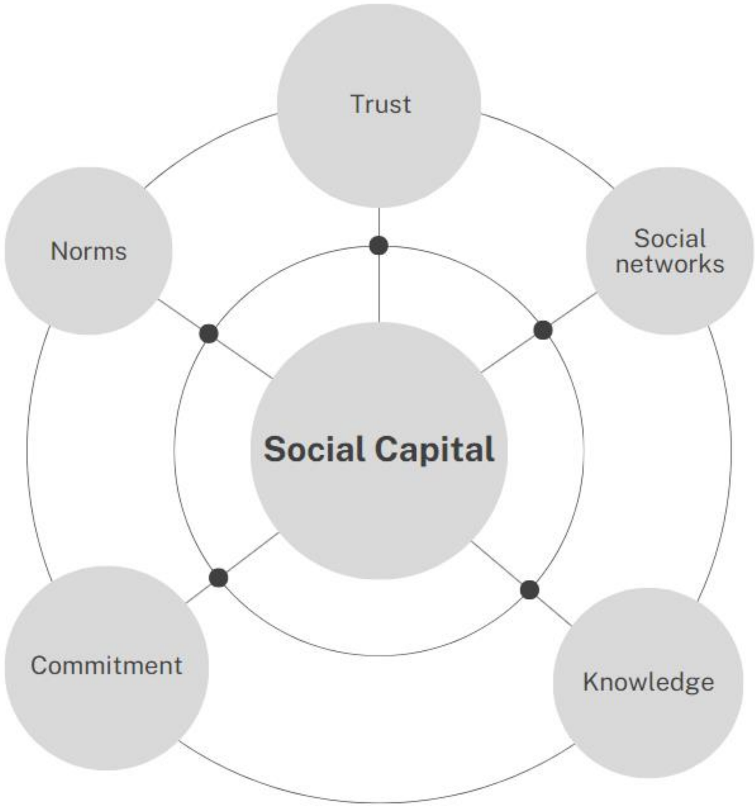

Figure 4. Factors related to social capital (Glanville & Bienenstock, 2009).

Bourdieu (1986, pp. 248-252) argues that belonging to a network and relationships between individuals are symbolical. Symbolic capital involves respect, trust, relevance, and esteem (Glanville & Bienenstock, 2009, p. 1508). These factors are portrayed in figure 4. Moreover, if individuals lack symbolic capital, it becomes more difficult for them to function in networks. Thus, individuals are only able to form useful networks if they can gain reputation and respect within them. As a result, social capital is often considered as a strength at group level, but it can also develop into an individual weakness. If an individual wants to deviate from the network's policies, social capital can become a constraint on social mobility (Alpino & Mehlum, 2023). According to Giddens (2006, p. 301), the formation of social capital requires awareness of the similarities and differences that emerge through socialization. In defining the power relations of networks, symbolic capital gives individuals notable leverage as it allows individuals to define the functionality and nature of the network. This power structure appears as an acknowledged position inside the network (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 241-258).

3.3 Strong and weak ties

Graph theory, a mathematical framework for networks, describes a social network as a collection of nodes. These multilateral ties are interconnected by shared nodes, creating a structure of interdependence known as a social network. These nodes may represent individuals, organizations or countries, for instance. Nodes may be connected for a variety of reasons, including a friendship, a family relationship, or any other similar connection between two or more actors. (Kleinberg et al., 2008).

According to Granovetter (1973), one can intuitively assess whether the bond or tie between individuals is weak or strong. Strong ties are formed by people close to their immediate circle, family, friends, and other people with whom one regularly interacts. Weak ties are characterized by being active for only a short period of time. Therefore, weak ties are mainly established between casual acquaintances or strangers. The strength of a tie can be defined by four key attributes: amount of time, emotional intensity, intimacy (mutual trust), and reciprocal services (Gong et al., 2020; Granovetter, 1973; Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993; Lin, 2001, pp. 66, 76).

Building upon the concept introduced by Granovetter (1973), other theorists have further developed and refined the categorization of ties. For instance, Haythornthwaite (2002) provides a new viewpoint by identifying a completely new tie in what were previously referred to as “absent ties”, which are now known as “latent ties”. Latent ties are characterized as connections that are theoretically available but have not yet been initiated through social contact, meaning that they hold the potential to evolve into weak ties (Haythornthwaite, 2002).

The premise of network theory is that the stronger the bond between two people is, the more likely their other social connections are to be interconnected to each other. Moreover, they also have additional connections to the same third parties, from which the network emerges. In figure 5, A and B have a strong tie and B, and C have a strong tie. Thus, it can be argued that A and C have an increased possibility of establishing at least a weak tie. (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011, p. 1170).

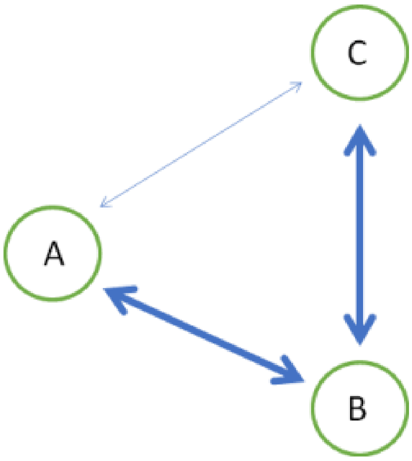

Figure 5. Strength of ties (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011; Granovetter, 1973).

Granovetter (1973) argues that the importance of strong ties in the dynamics of individuals has been overemphasized, while the significance of weak ties has not been fully internalized. He argues that weak ties are more important in terms of new information and knowledge flowing into the network. Early adopters of innovations enter the network via weak ties. Granovetter (1973) states that individuals with numerous weak ties is in an ideal position to distributing complex innovations or changes because they serve as bridging ties across intra-organizational clusters as a high number of weak ties increases the spread of new information over a wider area (Cross & Parker, 2004). Therefore, a bridging tie or a weak tie enables actors to share information that is not being shared by the nodes in their immediate proximity. Figure 6 illustrates the bridging tie between two actors connecting clusters A and B. (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011, p. 1171; Granovetter, 1973).

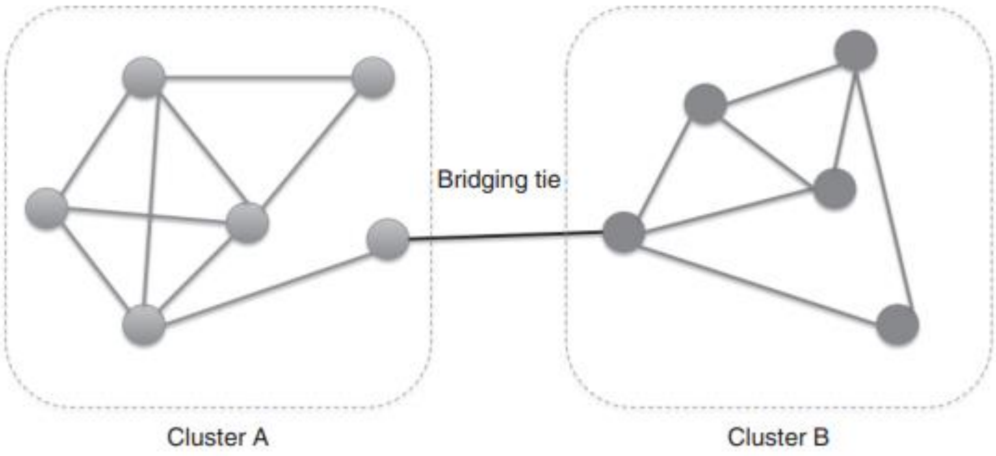

Figure 6. Bridging ties (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011; Granovetter, 1973).

3.4 Opinion leadership in social networks during change

The concept opinion leadership is founded on the two-step flow of communication model developed by sociologists Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz in 1944, which proposes that specific individuals, known as opinion leaders, interpret and give meaning to different phenomena (Lazarsfeld & Katz, 1955). In other words, opinion leaders are able to influence the perspectives of others and shape their views, mindsets, and behaviors within a social network. Watts and Dodds (2007, p. 441) claim that the attitudes of individuals are "influenced more by exposure to each other than to the media". Most commonly, opinion leadership has been regarded in marketing research as a means of influencing consumer's purchase decisions. The concept, however, is also relevant in organizational research as opinion leaders who are part of an organization's networks may have an essential role in making change initiatives successful (Oueslati et al., 2024, p. 642). In this study, it is examined through resistance to change in intra-organizational social networks.

In organizational setting, opinion leaders serve as the nodes of social networks as they tend to have a large number of contacts in the organization and oftentimes are at the center of their networks, being at the closest distance from all other nodes and social cliques (Valente & Davis, 1999, p. 57; van Eck et al., 2011, p. 189). This social status enables them to spread their messages quickly and extensively as they often provide support and assistance to their surrounding formal and informal network. Thus, especially during periods of change, opinion leaders may significantly shape the organizational milieu (Roch, 2005, p. 110). This can be compared to a snowball effect, in which the opinions of a larger group start to shape other individuals' perceptions related to the issues of new phenomena. It should be noted that opinion leadership is not necessarily based on a formal position in the organization, although this can be a consequence of opinion leadership but on their expertise: comprehensive knowledge, experience, and skill of the subject area. This enables the opinion leader's perspectives to be highly valued and respected. However, opinion formation inside a social network during change is not exclusively dependent on opinion leaders. As Watts and Dodds (2007, p. 442) argue: "Most social change is driven not by influentials but by easily influenced individuals influencing other easily influenced individuals".

Opinion leadership theory offers two key findings that are crucial for change management and specifically resistance to change. According to Dearing (2009, p. 507), opinion leaders can facilitate the process of spreading new innovations and ideas more effectively when they are involved in the change process compared to a less efficient top-down approach. As a result, opinion leaders reduce the amount of time for the change adoption process to proceed (van Eck et al., 2011, p. 187). Secondly, opinion leaders have the power to permanently change an organization (Levitan & Visser, 2009, p. 1057). Opinion leaders shape the opinions and behaviors of others due to having exposure to information, maintain relationships with a large number of people both inside and outside social networks. Consequently, opinion leaders have the ability to manage resistance to change by reducing negative perceptions associated with the organizational change (Fidler & Johnson, 1984).

According to the current research on resistance to change, change facilitators are recommended to collaborate with opinion leaders in order to utilize opinion leaders' positions to influence other change recipients in the organization (Kim, 2015, p. 148). However, the majority of the research of this issue has concentrated on the consumer and marketing perspective (Cho et al., 2012). Thus, there is a gap in the academic literature on the effects of opinion leadership on resistance to change within informal intra-organizational social networks.

3.5 Summary of the theoretical framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework, which summarizes and integrates the two key theoretical entities in the study, resistance to change and informal intra-organizational social networks. Furthermore, the objective is to understand how these key themes are interconnected and ultimately influence the implementation of organizational change initiatives. The theoretical framework provides a summary for the reader and a rationalization the chosen research methods to addressing the research problem and question: *How do informal intra-organizational social networks influence resistance to organizational change?*

The first theory chapter introduces resistance to organizational change as a phenomenon. The term organizational change describes how an organization's structures, processes, and culture evolve. Although change is required for an organization to remain competitive to thrive, it frequently faces psychological and behavioral resistance responses from individuals or groups opposing the change (Oreg, 2006). Various factors, including uncertainty, fear of losing one's job, mistrust in leadership, or past negative experiences with change initiatives can lead to resistance (Erwin & Garman, 2010). Piderit (2000) has identified three core dimensions of resistance to change, which are cognitive, affective, and behavioral resistance.

Change does not happen in a vacuum; it necessitates interaction between individuals. Thus, the second main theoretical chapter introduces the social networks and their characteristics. Organizations are structured through both formal hierarchies and informal networks, which are naturally occurring relationships and communication channels between employees (Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993). These networks develop through shared interests and experiences, mundane interactions, and professional collaborations. A key concept in network theory is social capital, which highlights shared values and resources in social relationships that promote collaboration and knowledge transfer in organizations (Putnam, 2001). Horak et al. (2020) argue that social capital is vital, especially during change initiatives in organizations, as individuals tend to depend on informal relationships through which emotional support, collective sense-making, and information can be shared.

In this study, Granovetter's (1973) theory of the "strength of ties" is utilized in understanding how both strong and weak ties affect the networks during organizational change. Strong ties refer to close relationships characterized by trust and frequent interactions. Such ties often provide emotional support and trust but can limit the access to more diverse perspectives outside the group. On the other hand, weak ties are more distant relationships that are argued to be important in bridging separate social networks, enabling access to new information, ideas, and opportunities that would not be accessible within closely-knit groups. (Cross & Parker, 2004).

According to Watts and Dodds (2007), individuals tend to be prone to social influence when forming an opinion on a certain phenomenon. In organizations, opinion leaders are central individuals who shape attitudes toward change, not necessarily due to their formal authority, but because they hold informal influence due to expertise, experience, or social capital (Valente & Davis, 1999; van Eck et al., 2011). Thus, their influence can accelerate change adoption, reduce resistance, and reshape organizational behavior (Dearing, 2009; Levitan & Visser, 2009).

In conclusion, the summary of theoretical framework highlights the interplay of resistance to change and informal intra-organizational social networks. While resistance to change often originates from individual concerns, it can be increased, minimized, or adjusted through social relationships. Thus, organizations should increase their understanding of social networks and resistance to organizational change.

4 Methodology of the study

This chapter presents the research methods chosen for this study. The choice of research methods is determined by the research problem and the research questions derived from it as well as the nature of the theoretical framework and the target group of the study. The structure of this chapter follows the research onion model by Saunders et al. (2019), which is illustrated in figure 7.

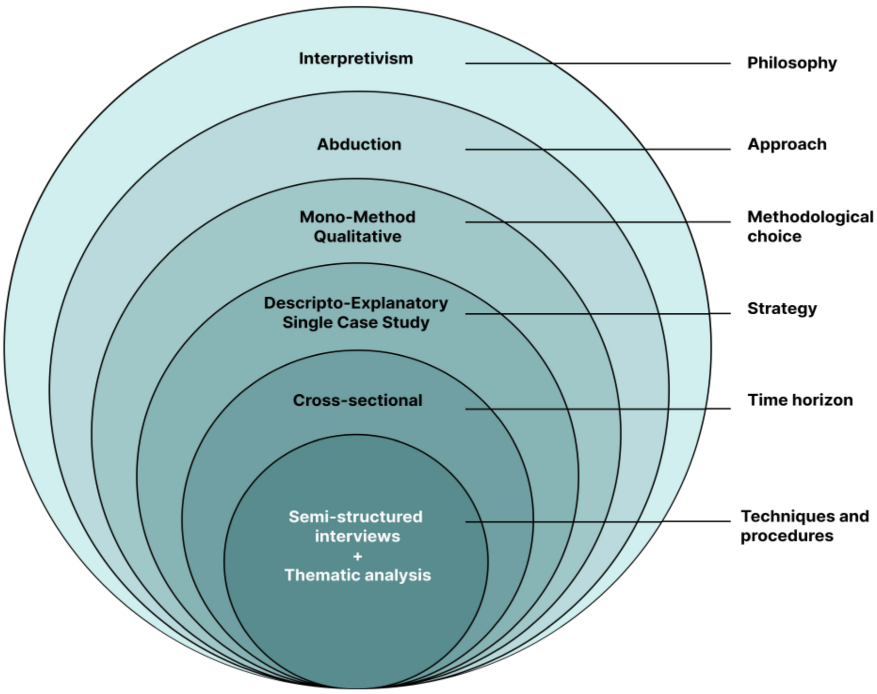

Figure 7. Research onion (based on Saunders et al., 2019).

The chapter progresses from the outermost layer inwards. First, the research philosophy of the thesis is presented. The second section discusses the research approach and methodological choices. In the third layer of the research onion, research strategy is outlined, providing an overview of how the study will be conducted. Next, time horizon of the study is presented and subsequently the data collection and analysis method are discussed. Lastly, trustworthiness of the data is determined.

4.1 Research philosophy

The concept of research philosophy conveys a framework of "beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge" (Saunders et al., 2019). Since being the first layer of the research onion, the research philosophy establishes the framework for all subsequent methodological decisions. Moreover, the choice of research philosophy influences how the researcher formulates their research objectives, choice of methodologies, and analysis of the research data.

In business and management research, the five most common research philosophies are positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, postmodernism and pragmatism (Saunders et al., 2019). *Positivism* emphasizes on the identification of visible, quantifiable facts and patterns to acquire accurate data. Moreover, positivism seeks to make universal, law-like generalizations through fact-based data. *Critical realism* acknowledges the existence of "an observable world, independent of human consciousness". Simultaneously, it posits that our comprehension of the phenomena is socially produced through experiences (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). *Interpretivism*, according to Saunders et al. (2019), assumes that people and their social environments cannot be examined in the same manner as physical phenomena. Consequently, interpretivists criticize positivist efforts to identify definitive, law-like generalizations applicable to all, as individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, under varying circumstances and at different times, experience different social phenomena. *Postmodernism* opposes scientific research's positivist, logical, and generalizable foundation, which aims to view the world from an objective perspective. Additionally, postmodern research aims to question the traditional perspectives by providing recognition and validity to the overlooked and marginalized views that have been disregarded in the past. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015; Saunders et al., 2019). Finally, *pragmatism* is defined as a philosophy that focuses on empirical study, in which data is examined from various viewpoints while prioritizing practical outcomes over theoretical implications (Saunders et al., 2019).

Since the purpose of this study is to gain more in-depth qualitative understanding of resistance to change in the informal intra-organizational networks, interpretivism was considered to be the most appropriate research philosophy. As a result, it is possible to choose such research approach, method, and strategy that support the objective of this study to understand more abstract, interpretative, and context-dependent phenomena.

4.2 Research approach and method

Upon establishing the research philosophy, the second and third layer of the research onion (figure 7) specifies both the research approach and the method (Saunders et al., 2019). According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015), the three primary research approaches are deduction, induction, and abduction. Deductive reasoning is part of logical thinking that is utilized in problem-solving, decision-making and critical analysis. It is the process of deriving a particular conclusion from a general principle or statement, from theory to data. In other words, theories and hypotheses can be based on established norms and prior knowledge, and then examinations are carried out to determine whether those established principles are accurate in a particular situation. On the other hand, induction is a form of logical reasoning in which general conclusions are derived from specific observations or evidence, from data to theory. Induction is a bottom-up approach, where specific cases or examples are examined to generate broader generalizations or theories. (Saunders et al., 2019). Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015) argue that researchers rarely utilize only deduction or induction, rather, they are oftentimes combined, and this is called abduction. Moreover, abductive approach is a logical process that begins with an incomplete collection of observations and determines the most likely explanation for the evidence.

Furthermore, an abductive approach is utilized in this research. The use of abductive approach is frequently used in qualitative research in order to gain a deeper understanding of a certain phenomenon, but where absolute certainty or generalization remains unachievable due to its subjective nature.

Next, the research method is presented. The research methods may vary significantly based on the nature and objectives of the study. Justifying the choice of research method while conducting research is essential for several reasons. Firstly, it strengthens the credibility, validity, and relevance of the study by demonstrating a clear and logical connection between the research objectives and questions, methodology, and data collection. Thus, a comprehensive awareness of methodologies enables the researcher to select the most suitable approach for their specific research context and objectives. (Hirsjärvi et al., 2018). Generally, there are three research methodologies, and they are quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods that combine elements from both quantitative and qualitative methods (Saunders et al., 2019).

Quantitative research aims to measure the phenomena and variables related to the research problem as accurately as possible using numerical and statistical methods. In order to conduct reliable study, the researcher must define an adequate and fundamental population, namely, the target group. The results collected from a sample are described in numerical terms and it is typically utilized in research where extensive amount of data need to be systematically analyzed to identify causal relationships and interdependencies. (Puusa et al., 2020). Qualitative methods, on the other hand, is more descriptive by nature. Thus, it seeks to define the characteristics of the certain phenomenon by addressing to research questions “how” and “why”. The qualitative research methods are oftentimes utilized, when one is examining phenomena that are hidden, more abstract and interpretative, and bound to time and place. (Juuti et al., 2020). As the main objective of this study is to seek deeper understanding of resistance to change within informal intra-organizational networks, the research method used to conduct this research is qualitative.

4.3 Research design and strategy

This chapter describes and argues the choice of the fourth layer of the research onion, research strategy. According to Saunders et al. (2019, p. 186), the most commonly used research strategies are exploratory, descriptive, explanatory, or a combination of them.

Exploratory studies, as strategy, often examine research problems that have not yet been thoroughly investigated yet. In other words, exploratory research is essentially about discovery as it can often act as the starting point by establishing the foundation for more detailed and systematic research or theory formation (Saunders et al., 2019).

Descriptive research, as the name suggests, describes the features of the certain group, circumstance, or phenomenon without aiming to establish causal relationships. Its main objective is to provide an accurate overview of the given situation in a certain setting. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). As a result, the descriptive method puts emphasis on understanding “what” instead of “why” in research. According to Saunders et al. (2019, p. 187), descriptive research can be “an extension of a piece of exploratory research or a forerunner to a piece of explanatory research”.

The third research strategy, explanatory, is a method that considers the reasons behind phenomena. Therefore, it is often used to examine causal relationships between variables or how various phenomena may have an impact to another. (Saunders et al., 2019). This research combines both descriptive and explanatory methods, thereby classifying it as a descripto-explanatory study. During the data collection phase, the aim is to apply a descriptive method by describing the characteristics of the interviewees, whereas in the data analysis phase, the objective is to examine whether these descriptive characteristics influence or explain the experience of resistance to change within informal intra-organizational networks.

4.4 Data collection

As we go deeper into the research onion, this chapter discusses the data collection method used in this study. The first step in choosing a data collection method is to determine which of the various methods best supports the research topic. Therefore, the research problem is the main driver of how the research data will be gathered. In qualitative research, the researcher may utilize both primary and secondary data. Information collected by the researcher for the research problem is referred to as primary data, while previous research, academic journals, and other databases are examples of secondary data. Later, the researcher examines the collected data and draws conclusions from the research findings. (Hirsjärvi et al., 2018, p. 186).

In the initial phase of data collection, the researcher may not know certainly how many interviews will be conducted. In fact, data collection should continue if the interviews provide new information relevant to the research problem, if feasible. The research data is sufficiently saturated when the interview responses of the target population begin to be repeated and replicated. Therefore, the data collection and analysis phases are interconnected. (Hirsjärvi et al., 2018, p. 181).

Due to the nature of the research problem in study, the primary data is collected via semi-structured interviews by interviewing the employees of the single case study organization. As the study aims to explore the resistance to change experienced by individuals in the context of the informal intra-organizational networks, semi-structured interviews are conducted as one-to-one interviews to enhance the reliability of the study due to its sensitivity. From a standardization perspective, semi-structured interviews are situated in between questionnaire-like structured interviews and unstructured interviews that do not use any pre-established themes or questions in the interview process (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 438). In a semi-structured interview, the interview questions originate from the theoretical framework of the study, but the order and exact format of the questions are not fixed. Consequently, the same themes are discussed with each interviewee, but depending on the interviewee, their answers, and the flow of the conversation, semi-structured interviews offer the researcher the flexibility to ask clarifying and more detailed questions of subjects beyond the pre-determined themes, if considered relevant. As this research only utilizes qualitative semi-structured interviews as a data collection method, it is classified as mono-method qualitative study (Puusa et al., 2020; Saunders et al., 2019, p. 437).

4.4.1 Sampling

The sample of this study consisted of seven participants, all of whom worked in the case study organization at the time of conducting this thesis. Moreover, all of the participants were Finnish. The interviewees were selected by the researcher to ensure including a participant from each function of the organization with the objective of achieving the most comprehensive and representative data feasible for analysis of the data. Additionally, as shown in the table below, interviewees with differing tenures in the organization, and respondents of different ages were selected for the interviews. Lastly, one criterion was that participants also had different number of positions during their career in the organization in order to understand if individuals who have held more positions have developed broader social networks within the organization than those who have been working in fewer positions during their tenure.

Code	Age	Years in the organization	Number of different positions in the organization	Interview duration
1A	42	5,5	3	34 min
2B	56	23	6	45 min
3C	63	40	8	32 min
4D	29	3	1	41 min
5E	61	35	4	27 min
6F	62	36	5	42 min
7G	35	2	1	50 min

Table 1. Description of the interview participants

4.4.2 Single case study

In this sub-chapter, the chosen research strategy, case study, is presented. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015) argue that case studies have proven successful in collecting “holistic and contextual in-depth knowledge" by utilizing various data sources. Moreover, qualitative case studies can provide a framework for researchers to examine complex phenomena in their actual context. As a result, case study research usually answers the "how" and "why" research questions. Additionally, case study research can be conducted in several manners based on the research problem, such as single case study or multiple case study. In this research, single case study is used as the purpose is to understand the phenomenon within a single company. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015).

4.4.3 Cross-sectional time horizon

This sub-chapter discusses the time horizon of the study. Time horizon indicates the number of points in time that the researcher will be collecting the research data. The two different options are longitudinal and cross-sectional time horizons. (Saunders et al., 2019). In a longitudinal study, data is gathered from the same sample or target group over an extended period of time. Thus, a longitudinal time horizon can be used to analyzing the development of phenomena, but on the other hand, such research requires a lot of time to be conducted. Contrastingly, a cross-sectional study is used to collect data from a sample at a single point in time or over a short period. (Saunders et al., 2019). Due to time constraints and the nature of this study, cross-sectional time horizon is utilized. Since the objective of this study is to address the research problem of resistance to change during a specific organizational change, the choice of cross-sectional time horizon is justified.

4.5 Analysis of the data

This chapter introduces the analysis of the collected data. The purpose of analyzing and interpreting the data in qualitative research is to add clarity, structure, and relevance in the research. Analysis of the research data is critical to the research process as it allows conclusions to be drawn by answering to the research problem presented at the beginning of the study. (Hirsjärvi et al., 2018, p. 231).

In the case of qualitative semi-structured interviews, the data collected from interviews should be recorded to ensure that notetaking does not disrupt the flow and interactivity of the situation. After the interview, the recording can be transcribed in order to improving the reliability and integrity of the data. To analyze the collected data, the researcher should select the method of analysis that is best suited to address the research problem. The analysis method chosen for this study is thematic analysis, in which the theory and empirical data are strongly interconnected. (Saunders et al., 2019). As a method of qualitative analysis, thematic analysis seeks to group and categorize data based on pre-determined themes found in the theoretical framework.

After the interviews were reorganized according to themes, the analyzing process began one theme at a time. From the fully transcribed interviews, recurring and relevant themes were extracted and a table was created to illustrate the analysis. By observing the number of interviewees who expressed their insights associated with the certain themes, the level of saturation of the data could be identified. Ultimately, direct quotes from the interviewees could also be used in the findings chapter.

4.6 Trustworthiness of the data

The trustworthiness of a study is assessed by the clarity of the researcher’s conclusions and by the extent to which the study can be replicated by someone else (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). Reliability and validity are used as measures for evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative research. A study’s overall trustworthiness is assessed at each phase of the research – whether the theory has been collected in such a way that it provides an accurate overview of the background of the research problem, whether the interviews have been conducted in accordance with research ethics and if the collected data are trustworthy, and finally whether the conclusions from the results are consistent. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015).

Reliability refers to the consistency of the results and the ability for another researcher to replicate the study by achieving similar results. Scientific research aims to achieve the highest possible level of objectivity. However, in qualitative research, it should be recognized that the researcher and the interviewees form a special relationship that cannot be imitated. Also, the researcher and the interviewees interact with each other and the conclusions reflected in the ‘discussion’ chapter require the researcher’s subjectivity. In assessing the reliability of the qualitative study, objectivity is thus enhanced by identifying and highlighting the subjectivity bias. (Saunders et al., 2019).

Validity of the study ensures that the right things have been examined, specifically, the quality of the study’s design and how well this research design was adhered to. Moreover, validity is considered to be the researcher’s method of navigating between theory and empirical data (Saunders et al., 2019). Therefore, research findings should be supported by evidence. Reliability and validity should be considered from the very beginning of the research and maintained throughout each individual phase. As a result, the quality and integrity of the study is ensured.

In this study, emphasis has been placed on reliability and validity throughout the whole research process. A comprehensive, yet a critical approach was adopted during the formation of theoretical framework in relation to the research problem. Furthermore, efforts have been made to describe the research process in a detailed and systematic manner, enabling possible replication by other researchers. The different chapters of the study are interconnected and aim to represent a coherent entity. Additionally, this research has been conducted in alignment with scientific standards. The interview questions were designed to minimize the researcher bias. In addition, the interview questions were pre-tested in a pilot interview in order for the interviewees could understand the questions from the perspective of the research problem. In the pilot interview, the order of the questions was tested so that they were in a logical order in relation to the research theory. Before the interviews, the final interview template was sent in advance to the respondents.

Also, the confidentiality of the organization and the interviewees of this case study research has been respected during the research process as the interviewees have given their consent to participate in the study. Moreover, they have been informed that the results of the study will be used only for the purposes of this thesis. However, due to the research problem, nature of case study as a research method, and the cross-sectional time horizon of this study, it should be noted that possible future research could provide different research findings as the phenomenon of resistance to change within organizations' intra-organizational networks is dynamic rather than static.

5 Findings

This chapter presents and describes the empirical findings of the study. The findings are categorized into themes based on the research question and objectives, and the subsections are in the following order: description of change and resistance to change in the case organization, informal intra-organizational social networks as part of resistance to change, and lastly the role of opinion leadership in perceived change resistance within social networks. Moreover, this chapter aims to establish an empirical foundation to address the research question of the study.

5.1 Resistance to organizational change

This sub-chapter presents the findings regarding the interviewees' experiences on resistance to organizational change in the case organization. As previously mentioned, organizations nowadays face perpetual external and internal pressure to continuously evolve in order to stay competitive (Dievernich, 2015, p. 9). Similarly, the changes in the case organization were described as numerous and frequently recurring by the interviewees four, five, and seven.

> *"There is a huge amount of change in these 35 years in the firm. To be honest, some of them have been very challenging and wild, especially when there have been collective redundancy negotiations, they are always depressing and miserable. Right now, the big change is the reduction of hierarchy through lowering the organizational levels. But every year, there have been all sorts of changes – some of which are bigger and others smaller." (5E)*

> *"If I recall those early days in the organization, the pace of change has certainly accelerated. Previously there were longer periods of static phases where there were no major changes, for example in the responsibilities, but now there seem to be changes all the time." (6F)*

> *"There have been quite a lot of changes, and I would describe them as quite extensive as well, as they have been related to strategy and new operating systems. The way we work every day has changed quite extensively during these three years*

when I have been in the organization, and it seems that there is always a big change ongoing, if not several at the same time." (4D)

"I would say that there have been a lot of changes, but of course the scope of them is very broad, so some of the changes are smaller and perhaps have a much less significant implications on ways of working, while others are affecting specific tasks or positions on the organizational scale more broadly. I do think that the number of changes is very big, but not in the sense that all changes are revolutionary." (7G)

Regardless the length of their employment in the organization, each participant described that the case organization had undergone many changes in recent years. As it can be understood from the answer of participant number six, the pace of change has nowadays accelerated in comparison to previous decades.

The interviews revealed that attitudes on change are multifaceted and context-specific rather than just positive or negative due to the volume of changes. Attitudes on change are influenced by personal traits such as general optimism or pessimism, and a desire to support the functional ability of the work community. Despite the large number of organizational changes, on a personal level, the majority of interviewees described their attitudes towards change as open and optimistic.

"Overall, I perceive change as positive. This might a philosophical cliche, but I think change is necessary in business world as well as in nature, where immobility is usually associated with death. The world keeps changing and we must change with it." (1A)

"Mainly I am very positive about changes. For sure, I occasionally ask myself "why on Earth are we doing this?", but basically, I want to be involved in the change process as I like new things and development. Generally speaking, I tend to remain positive as it's just my nature as an optimist." (2B)

"I have a positive attitude towards change because I believe there's always a rational reason behind it. It shouldn't be in a company's interest to implement bad changes, so I believe that decisions are based on careful consideration." (7G)

The responses from participants one, two, and seven suggest that an individual's values, personality traits, and attitudes towards change determine their level of openness and readiness to change despite the quantity and complexity of changes (Erwin & Garmin, 2010, p. 45). However, although the changes were mainly perceived positively on a personal level, resistance to change was evident widely at the organizational level on varying degrees.

> *"Resistance to change is certainly visible, sometimes very strong, of course depending on the change and its nature. Usually, there is a sense of uncertainty and anxiety concerning what should be learned and if I have enough information about things." (3C)*

> *"I sense that there is a lot of resistance to change in the organization. One reason might be that changes are perceived as unnecessary and burdensome, which makes it hard to see any sensible justification for them. I often hear people say, 'we just went through a change, why another one already?', meaning that people find the pace of change to be too fast. Especially if the advantages of the change are not clear, learning new processes can be demanding as the early stages of change often slows down work by increasing resistance as people are already feeling stressed." (5E)*

> *"There's a fair amount of resistance to change in the organization. I think that people feel that the change is pointless, and it just increases the already high workload if they don't see any sensible reasons why the change should be implemented." (7G)*

The responses from interviewees number three, five, and seven highlight the most frequently identified and described root causes of resistance to change on the organizational level as being related to the nature of the particular change and the uncertainty it causes. At the organizational level, the extensive on-going restructuring process due to which hierarchical levels are being reduced has increased resistance to change and uncertainty about their own and their colleagues' job security appeared to be a key concern, which is consistent with the current theory in that one's fundamental basic needs about safety and security must be fulfilled in order to reach self-actualization and thus decreasing resistance. (Hubbart, 2023, p. 1; Warrick, 2024, p. 435).

> *"Especially because of the recent organizational change, lately there's been increased strong resistance since everyone is likely to be afraid of losing their own job". (5E)*

The finding described by interviewee number five is consistent with previous research by Oreg (2006, p. 79), which shows that particularly strong negative feelings and resistance to change occur when a change undermines one's job position.

According to numerous studies (Alas & Vadi, 2006; Awardi, 2019; Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005), employee involvement has been associated in decreasing resistance, thus increasing the likelihood of successful change outcomes and overall employee commitment. Moreover, all interviewees emphasized the importance of participation as the most effective means of reducing resistance to change.

> *"I believe that resistance to change can be significantly reduced if employees are involved in the planning phase. When you understand why a change is being made and you can influence it yourself, it is much easier to commit to it." (4D)*

However, in the case organization most of the change initiatives have been implemented through a top-down approach, led primarily by senior leaders. Consequently, individual employees have generally perceived their ability to influence changes relatively limited.

> *"In my opinion, employees are not given enough possibilities to influence (to change). I have never really had a change to significantly impact any changes. People feel that most decisions are made at the top levels, and maybe that's exactly why there's so much resistance to change within the company. People don't see the process as fair when they are not given a change to share their professional perspective." (6F)*

> *"On organizational level, the ability to influence changes has been very limited. Understandably major strategic decisions are made at top level, to which individual employees have little to say. But even in smaller changes, the opportunities to participate in change planning has been quite minimal. In practice, it is more about adapting to changes rather than being actively involved in shaping them." (3C)*

Despite the limited ability to influence the changes, a paradox can be identified on level of the perceived resistance to change on personal and organizational levels as interviewees were mostly optimistic about changes. This partially contradicts the generally accepted theory that a lack of opportunities for participation increases resistance to change (Alas & Vadi, 2006; Awardi, 2019; Juuti & Virtanen, 2009, p. 36; Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005). The study findings suggest that in situations where formal opportunities for influence are weak, individual characteristics such as optimism, openness for change, and resilience can act as protective factors for change resistance. They enable positivity even in the midst of uncertainty (Hubbart, 2023, p. 3; Piderit, 2000, p. 785). On the other hand, same resilience does not seem to apply at the organizational level within the same context. This reinforces the idea that relying on individual characteristics alone is not enough to sustain readiness to change more broadly on organizational level.

At the organizational level, resistance to change is almost always expressed through talk rather than action. Particularly in instances, where the rationale or objectives of the change remained unclear, interviewees have observed that such change initiatives trigger the need to discuss the change with colleagues. Subsequently, employees seek to understand the consequences of the change through informal conversations with each other, in case the formal communication is insufficient. Oftentimes, this informal discussion emerges as gossip, speculation, or critical reflection within the work community.

> *"It manifests itself as a need to talk to other people. If I don't get the background information of the change or any justifications right away, I want to hear other people's opinions to see if I understood correctly what was said. In such moments the desire for information is enormous." (2B)*

> *"Resistance to change remains at the level of speech. I think that Finns in general do not behave in such a way that they rebel by not doing their work, but rather grumble and complain with each other". (6F)*

> *"There's a really strong need to talk with others, and sometimes it comes across as gossiping in a way. People feel a strong urge to discuss things when the reasons have not been fully understood or accepted. The need to talk and exchange*

thoughts and opinions often stems from wanting to make sure people understood correctly what this might entail." (5E)

Based on the responses from interviewees number two, five, and six, once individuals recognize that change is occurring, they begin to interpret and analyze the situation as people seek meaning in unfamiliar or surprising situations (Piderit, 2000, p. 786; van den Bos, 2008). Such informal discussions enable employees to fill in knowledge gaps, interpret the change collectively, and clarify how the change might affect their day-to-day operative work. Moreover, these discussions are a coping strategy for handling emotion and uncertainty in an instance where official communication and influence opportunities are scarce.

5.2 Informal intra-organizational social networks

Previously, it was observed that when employees are not involved in the change process planning, they turn to each other at the organizational level to better understand the implications of the change. Since the objective of this study is to understand how informal intra-organizational social networks influence perceived resistance to change, this sub-chapter focuses more closely on the role and characteristics of these networks in shaping resistance.

> *"Since my role involves interacting with numerous functions and departments within the organization, I do view my own social network as being quite vast as it includes people from basically every department, not only those in my close team. Also, I think that despite of having been in the same position for the whole three years in the company, my responsibilities have changed quite a lot, which has enabled me to build those contacts and expand my network." (4D)*

> *"I have been working at the company for a long time, so I do have quite an extensive social network within the organization both nationally and globally. The network has also developed because I have worked in many different positions. I consider my social network to be broad and that has been always my intention as it is useful to have a wide range of people you can turn to for different matters, to exchange ideas, even if those topics are not directly relevant to your own work. That is the only way to get things done." (5E)*

> *"My social network is fairly extensive, and it includes colleagues from various subsidiaries globally within this organization. Also here in Finland, having worked in different departments, roles, and projects has enabled me to get many people, which builds a network almost automatically." (6F)*

According to Bernoux (2002), organizational change is a social phenomenon constructed through the relationships between members of the organization. As can be understood by responses from participants number four, five, and six, who also stated being mostly optimistic during change initiatives, considered to have broad social networks within the organization. Having established extensive social networks did not require a long working experience in the organization or even several job positions if the nature of their position required them to interact with people outside of their immediate team on regular basis.

On a personal level, the interviewees described their own extensive social networks, especially those consisting of weak ties, as the most effective means of mitigating personal resistance to organizational change.

> *"My social networks definitely have an impact on how I view change. For example, if people in my network reacted either very positively or negatively to certain change, I believe that my own attitude would be affected. Also, I also think that the broader the network the higher the possibility for me is to understand the change. Someone might have more information or be better at explaining the change, which can influence my own view in a more positive way." (4D)*

> *"When changes are introduced, I discuss it extensively with members of my social network. Maybe their department or team has received diverging information about it, and if I hear more detailed explanations or varying perspectives, it does affect my attitude on change as it tends to soften it. I am very eager for information, and the more I get it, the better." (5E)*

Interviewees number four and five reflected how more extensive social networks can expose individuals to a wider range of perspectives on change. Lin (2001, p. 29) states that social relationships function as bridges through which information can be transferred from one person to another. Furthermore, participant number five emphasized that the more an individual is exposed to varying perspectives of change, the better the individual is able to choose one's own attitude towards change.

However, due to side effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, many interviewees highlighted a change in the extent of their own or their colleagues' social networks within the organization over the past few years. Due to the dynamic nature of social networks, even if an employee had been working within the organization for a long time, their social networks could decrease over time if they shifted primarily from on-site to remote work due to the reduced number of casual encounters and interactions. Additionally, a decrease in one's social networks was identified if they had changed job position to one that did not require as extensive interaction with other members of organization than one's own team. In such instances, the number of social relationships, especially weak ties, were seen to reduce.

> *"Usually these days, I work with my own team most of the time. I feel like I am dealing with a relatively small group of people right now while couple of years ago I was more in contact with individuals from other teams." (3C)*

> *"During COVID19 outbreak I switched my position from daily operative duties to project work. When I returned back to office after a couple of years of working remotely, I noticed that my social circle had decreased. Previously I used to know basically everyone, but nowadays there are so many unfamiliar faces who I don't even know what they do in the organization. Of course, I still know my close team members and those with whom I am involved in the project." (2B)*

> *"I admit working alone a lot nowadays and I have observed that something has changed. During the couple of last years, some of the people I previously used to interact with at the office frequently does not happen anymore. Obviously, plenty of new employees have joined the organization after the pandemic and I don't really know most of them." (6F)*

Contrastingly, those who continued working on-site did not experience the same reduction in network size nor quality. For instance, participant number four highlighted having expanded their social relationships and ties.

"[…] But then again, I do not work 100% remotely myself, actually I am more often at the office. Face-to-face interactions, such as lunch and coffee breaks give me a chance to not only maintain existing relationships but also build new ones, even with people I don't necessarily work with at all. For example, in the office canteen, you may end up sitting at the same table with people you know, but also with unfamiliar colleagues. In teleworking, such situations are far less likely to occur." (4D)

Moreover, it was noted that social networks have the ability to both accelerate or obstruct the change initiative. The findings suggest that if the tone of discussion in social networks is highly critical or skeptical, this may increase resistance to change. Skepticism was perceived being more likely in close-knit social networks that are not connected to other social circles on a frequent basis. While strong ties within a close-knit team were often mentioned to provide support and a sense of security, interviewees also mentioned certain limitations, particularly if the team is small and consists of the same individuals over years. In such instances, there is a risk that group-thinking becomes too homogenized and negatively inclined. (Huning et al., 2015, p. 24; Oueslati et al., 2024, p. 642).

"Working closely with one's immediate team has a huge impact on attitudes towards change but also on the general atmosphere of the workplace. In my case this influence has been positive, but I do know many teams within the organization where all the members have a tendency to view everything negatively right from the start." (1A)

"My view of my close team is somewhat divided. On one hand, I know my team member the best, and many of the relationships have lasted for a long time. It is easy to turn to them for support or assistance. On the other hand, if my team members react very critically to a change, it can affect how I feel about it too. I assume that this might be due to a certain sense of loyalty and collegiality towards team members as you somehow feel that you should align with your closest colleagues. As such it can be more difficult to state a different view or to disagree with the rest of the group, even if I do not agree with them." (7G)

"It is certainly easier to talk about change and resistance to change in a more neutral way with those who you don't know so well for the very reason that there is less detailed and specific topics and as a reason we talk at a more generic level, which tends to eliminate any kind of bias." (5E)

> *"If you always work with the same team, and there's no turnover in employees, and you don't talk to other teams very often, then you will get tunnel vision and be blinkered about what really happens around you, so to say, overtime, and your own work and views certainly doesn't develop nor evolve." (6F)*

Additionally, interviewee number one and five mentioned that the psychological atmosphere of the team influences the group identity and participant number seven emphasized collegial loyalty as part of strong ties. Moreover, depending on the atmosphere, collegial loyalty or peer pressure can, at its worst, lead to a situation, where a team member may refrain from expressing divergent views as one may not want to break team spirit or betray one's colleagues. On the contrary, collegial loyalty may also support the expression of one's opinions if the team culture is open to discussion and encourages diversity. (Portes, 2010, p. 412).

Finally, the participants reflected how the perspectives of others in the social network can either increase or decrease the collective resistance to change. Employees who are more open towards change tend to promote their positive views on change with others who share their views. Conversely, individuals who are more prone to resistant or pessimist behavior also group together, which can strengthen the negative attitudes within some social networks of the organization.

> *"At the beginning of a change initiative, almost always people lack information about it. And like any vacuum, if it's not intentionally filled, it will nevertheless fill one way or another, whether you like it or not, often through informal channels during coffee and lunch breaks within your social network. In this case, people have the ability to shape how that information void is communicated as members of social network. The way you talk about the change shapes how others perceive it. It might be that the others who have not yet heard the official information, will be affected by your words, tone, and perspective by further promoting their views forward in their networks. So, depending on the positive or negative views that are shared in the network, will either support or hinder the change process." (2B)*

In conclusion based on the participants' responses, informal intra-organizational social networks have the potential to both mitigate and promote resistance to change. On a personal level, individuals who possess extensive social networks consisting of weak ties expose them to diverse perspectives and increase the likelihood of reducing personal change resistance. However, within more siloed teams, the exposure to diverse perspectives were found limited and was simultaneously identified as a risk factor for increased skepticism as individuals may become reluctant in sharing diverging views due to collegial loyalty or peer pressure. Additionally, the data highlighted the dynamic nature of social networks. Individuals who previously experienced having extensive social networks, and being change optimistic, and who had shifted working mainly remotely, revealed a decrease in their network size, thus exposing them to narrower views of change.

5.3 Opinion leadership in informal social networks

In the previous sub-chapter, it was revealed that an individual's experience and perception of change can vary depending on the social network to which one belongs within the organization. Therefore, this final sub-chapter presents the findings on both opinion leadership and opinion leaders as part of perceived resistance to change in informal intra-organizational social networks.

The study findings suggest that opinion leadership was associated with the position or hierarchy level within the case organization in their own teams, and thus the higher an individual is on the organizational level, the more one can influence the opinions being formed in the informal social networks.

> *"I personally feel that the information that I receive from my manager has been the most important in terms of influence, so that has the greatest significance to me." (5E)*

> *"In my experience, opinion leaders can be found at different levels of the organization, but most often they tend to be in managerial positions at executive levels." (3C)*

The participants highlighted observations that in the case organization's hierarchical and formal structure, specifically teams and working units consisting of strong ties often reflect the attitudes of the leaders and managers towards each change initiative. That is, the views of the managers are passed down to the below organizational levels, thus affecting the teams' formation of opinions about the change. Participant number one pointed out that the team's perception and receptiveness to change is oftentimes directly related to the attitude of their manager in the organization. (Diefenback & Sillince, 2011; Laumann et al., 1971).

> *"Throughout my career in this organization, I have noticed very clearly that teams are often like their managers, particularly during change. The opinions of the managers influence the thinking and behavior of the team, either consciously or unconsciously." (1A)*

> *"[…] But if someone visibly has a negative attitude by shows it openly, it does affect the attitude of the group as a whole. Especially given if that person is in an influential role in the organization. (4D)*

The main reason why many of the interviewees associated and personified opinion leadership specifically with position and being a manager, is the access to information (Diefenback & Sillince, 2011). This was seen as a natural consequence of the fact that the management level generally has more information about the upcoming change, thereafter, have a more comprehensive understanding of its implications. Furthermore, due to being hierarchical organization in the past, managers have been able to get more visibility in, for instance, site level meetings, where new processes are introduced. Therefore, the position of an individual was the most common response to being an opinion leader in formal social networks. This finding is consistent with van Eck and colleagues (2011, p. 189), where opinions leaders serve as the nodes and bridging ties of social networks.

> *"At least in my department it is more common for the manager to interact with other teams and departments in the company and as a result they have more visibility. Also, I think that certain expectations have been placed on managers due to their position because they have had the power to make decisions. And if the manager has a strong personality or a strong view on change, it can easily be so that employees want to maintain good relationship with them and avoid questioning or criticizing their opinions." (3C)*

However, on further reflection, participants suggested that the same principles may not be applicable in future in informal social networks once hierarchy levels are reduced in the organization due to restructuring.

> *"Values that I believe to be very important in the future of our organization are humanity and empathy. Working life can be a bit harsh in many ways, and the stress and rush that comes along it bring a lot of negative side effects to it. That's why it's essential to remember that we are human, and that positivity feeds positivity. I'm not saying that problems should be swept under the carpet, but both positivity and negativity can form self-perpetuating cycles. Empathy is one of the most underrated skills to have in my opinion, and in the past, it was maybe considered as a weakness. But personally, I think that it is one of the real superpowers an individual can have in the future in the era of change, especially as we will need to be more self-managed in the future." (1A)*

The participants described people who are trusted and whose opinions are listened to with special attention. In such networks, opinion leadership was closely emphasized with the personal characteristics of the individual, such as charisma, expertise and know-how, trustworthiness, and importantly relatability. Their impact is not solely limited to what the opinion leader says, but also how they act and what kind of atmosphere they are able to create within the social network. (Huning et al., 2015, p. 24; Lamertz & Aquino, 2004)

> *"The ones I consider as opinion leaders seem to be open to new perspectives. Also, some of them clearly want to take the lead, while for some it is just the way they are and how they express themselves makes others follow them, maybe even against opinion leader's intention. Some become opinion leaders by nature because others can identify and relate to them and perceive them as trustworthy." (7G)*

> *"In my network, I see opinion leaders as experienced and seasoned experts who have seen it all during their long careers in the firm. They know the policies of the organization well, what to expect, and can justify their views through many examples from the past. That's why they are often consulted when help is needed." (4D)*

> *"[…] But opinion leadership is not necessarily always about the amount of experience in the organization. Sometimes a fresh perspective and especially the ability to articulate your feelings in a relatable way is what is needed." (7G)*

> *"There is a certain charisma that comes with being an opinion leader. That person (speaking a of retired colleague) was full of charisma and positive energy. When she walked into the room, you could just sense it even if you didn't know her. It's a mind-boggling and inexplicable phenomenon." (2B)*

According to respondents, opinion leaders have a significant impact on the organization's informal network and overall culture of change resistance. Moreover, interviewees interpreted the role of opinion leaders as dualistic. On the one hand, opinion leaders who are generally positive about change can act as internal ambassadors for change by explaining the context for change, reducing people's fears, and encouraging others to participate in implementing the change and by so supporting both the individuals and the organization. On the other hand, interviewers also noted that they recognize opinion leaders within the organization who are generally pessimistic and negative about change, who also have gathered a following of like-minded colleagues. (Roch, 2005, p. 110).

> *"It really depends on the opinion leaders themselves, there are both sides. When you have seen many different kinds of people during your career, some are always ready to embrace change with a positive attitude: 'Yes, let's go and do it, this is a good thing!' And then there are those who see everything with the attitude of 'it's not going to work anyway.' When you have opinion leaders from both extremes, it does affect the whole organization, and it can be an inspiring or discouraging force." (2B)*

The importance of opinion leadership and informal influence was seen to be emphasized particularly during periods of change (Roch, 2005, p. 110). The participants reflected that they often listen to those who are seen to share similar day-to-day experiences that they can sympathize with. While opinion leadership was not necessarily solely seen as managerial role, however, it was seen of strategic importance (Dearing, 2009). Moreover, interviewee number two underlined that opinion leaders who are often negative about change should be in the center of change planning process. Although such individuals may sometimes be perceived as challenging, they were mentioned to be key individuals affecting the workplace atmosphere. Consequently, such individuals should be involved in the planning process as they are able to influence their following who tend to be more unconstructive in their resistance to change. (Kim, 2015, p. 148).

> *"When someone's tendency to resisting change is already understood beforehand, they should be incorporated in the decision-making process. These people often have a lot of authority over others and are able to win people around to their stance. When their following sees that 'even that person is involved', it can lead them to getting on board too." (2B)*

6 Discussions and conclusions

The sixth and final chapter concludes the study by outlining the key research findings and responding to the research question. Furthermore, the theoretical contributions and managerial implications of the study are presented, followed by the limitations of the study. Lastly, suggestions for future research are proposed.

6.1 Key findings

This qualitative case study was conducted to explore and understand how informal intra-organizational social networks influence the perceived resistance to change in the selected case study organization. The empirical part of this study was conducted by interviewing employees of the case study organization on their views and experiences of organizational change and resistance to change during their tenure in the company. Additionally, the participants were interviewed about their perceptions of their own informal intra-organizational social networks and opinion leadership in relation to resistance to change.

The interviewed agreed that change, in general, in a business context is a prerequisite for an organization to remain successful in a highly competitive environment. Thus, the consensus was that change, as a phenomenon, is required. While the need for change was clear for the participants, the most challenging aspect of organizational change is its sheer, simultaneous and overlapping, volume.

When discussing the reasons for resistance to change, several observations emerged among the interviewees. The most critical observations and concerns that the participants noticed in the case organization were related to uncertainty about either their personal or colleagues' job continuity, and the ability and capacity to perform tasks assigned to them midst the growing pressures and new demands of change. According to Oreg (2006, p. 79), particularly strong change resistance often emerges should one feel uncertain about one's employment. Although majority of the interviewees perceived themselves as change optimists, they mentioned witnessing resistance to change widely across the organization. These observations are similar to those of previous studies on resistance to change. For instance, Dent and Goldberg (1999, p. 26) state, that people do not necessarily resist the change itself, but rather all the uncertainty and potential negative consequences associated with it, such as increasing job demands, alterations to required skills, and job security.

The participants suggested that resistance to change is oftentimes rooted in the experiences of past changes. Therefore, the current attitudes towards change are reflecting the success, or as in this case, shortcomings, of past changes. (Patalano, 2011, p. 255). As a result, it was assumed that resistance to change is an instinctive reaction that originates from the need to maintain a sense of permanence in the face of change fatigue due to the high amount and pace of change, especially during recent years in the organization. According to Zantvoort (2015, p. 342-345), old routines can enable individuals feeling in control of their environment. Furthermore, Küçükatalay and colleagues (2023, p. 123) concluded that the amount of stress and rush an individual is already under can undermine their readiness to change.

The research findings of this study indicate that, in the past, employees have generally considered to have limited influence on change. There were two primary explanations for this: either the changes were managed from top organizational levels with little to no possibility to influence by the lower organizational levels, or the operational workload alongside change initiatives has been perceived so burdensome that employees have simply lacked the resources to participate in change planning processes. In numerous previous studies (Alas & Vadi, 2006; Awardi, 2019; Pasmore et al., 2019, p. 68; Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005) have shown a positive correlation between employee involvement and reduced change resistance. In case the organization cannot engage employees in change processes, for instance, due to a lack of resources, the process of internalizing changes and their outcomes tends to be prolonged. Consequently, in such instances, as Errida and Lotfi (2021) point out in their research, changes are more likely to fail as happens in approximately 70% of cases.

Due to lacking opportunities to influence the change initiatives, the research findings indicate that resistance to change oftentimes shows in informal day-to-day conversations as gossip, skepticism among colleagues. Interviewees noted that the need for informal discussions with peers increased especially if the timing or content of the organization's official communication was inadequate. As a result, informal conversations serve as platforms and channels for exchanging emotions and opinions (Corr, 2020). According to the Kübler-Ross Change Curve by Kübler-Ross (1969), this illustrates how an individual's transition from stages of denial and frustration towards acceptance as information is gathered to make sense of the situation.

The interviews highlighted that the role of informal intra-organizational social networks is significant is both creating and sustaining resistance to change in the case organization. The way in which the participants noticed employees dealing with change and forming their opinions was perceived to be strongly linked to their social networks. The experiences, emotions, feelings, and discussions that individuals exchange in informal social networks had notable impact on how employees responded to change.

Moreover, the role of informal social networks was considered as dualistic as they could either reinforce or mitigate resistance to change as it was found in previous studies by Boonstra (2013), Mattila (2007, p. 35), and Tsai (2011, p. 1). Thus, social support, sharing of information and experiences were mentioned as factors contributing to a positive attitude towards change. On the contrary, critical views on change could spread within social networks, if they highlighted skepticism or mistrust towards organizational leadership.

The findings confirm that employees with extensive social networks are able to reflect their perspectives on change more diversely, and therefore gain a broader overview of change initiatives (Putnam, 2001). This helps reducing uncertainty, which is seen as the root cause of resistance to change (Zantvoort, 2015, p. 342-345). Furthermore, via extensive social networks, individuals can see the advantages of change but importantly offer them more opportunities in participating in the planning and design of change. Thus, extensive social networks can increase the social capital of an individual and support them in dealing with the stress that is oftentimes intertwined with change. As a result of increased social capital, one may increase their knowledge and expertise and thus become perceived as opinion leader themselves in the organization, which can enable the engagement of such individuals in the flux of change (Lin, 2001, p. 29; Son, 2020).

The research findings also confirm the core argument of the theory of The Strength of Weak Ties by Granovetter (1973) in challenging the assumption that only strong ties are valuable, as interviews revealed that employees with more limited social networks or those, whose social networks mainly consist of strong ties with their immediate close-knit teams, tend to be more vulnerable to resistance to change. In such instances, views and opinions of change initiatives are often formed within a narrower social circle. Moreover, if the members of such social groups have limited social ties to other networks, there is less exposure to varying perspectives (Cross & Parker, 2004). If there is a negative atmosphere within these smaller close-knit teams, this can foster both individual and organizational resistance to change. This underlines the importance of the breadth and quality of informal social networks in supporting the readiness for change (Bekkers et al., 2008).

In the case study organization, where several hierarchical levels have previously existed, but where efforts are now undertaken to reduce them due to the recent change initiative, the role of the individual in distributing knowledge and information becomes even more important (Huning et al., 2015). As the reduction of organizational levels will most likely result in fewer managers and superiors in the future, interviewees considered that the role of informal opinion leaders will increase as opinion leaders were found having a central role in shaping and spreading attitudes, both positive and negative, towards change (Oueslati et al., 2024, p. 642). Their influence was often based on relatability, expertise, and social capital in addition to their hierarchical position. It was discovered by Sinkovics and colleagues (2011, p. 39 that the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors of employees are affected by the attitudes of managers. Therefore, it can be argued that similar logic applies to opinion leaders as well. In the future, communication of change will not be solely on the responsibility of leaders and managers alone, rather it should increasingly rely more on interaction via informal intra-organizational social networks. Lastly, the interviews also highlighted the importance of soft skills, such as empathy and humanity to being the "superpower" as a characteristic of both social networks and opinion leaders. Via such skills opinion leaders and individuals can help creating an environment of openness and support. In the future, this can foster a corporate culture that supports openness, transparency, and the development of bridging social ties between various departments within the organization, which can be reflected in the readiness of the whole organization for change.

6.2 Theoretical contributions

The objective of this study was to understand how informal intra-organizational social networks influence perceived resistance to change within the case study organization. The study findings support previous research that particularly attitudes towards change are constructed through interpersonal relationships and interactions (Huning et al., 2015; Oueslati et al., 2024; Palmer et al., 2006). Thus, cross-functional social networks are an important resource for an individual during the organizational change process. They not only reduce uncertainty and consequently resistance to change, but also enable the sharing of perspective richer information and social capital.

However, not all informal intra-organizational social networks prevent resistance to change. In the research it was discovered that social networks can reinforce resistance, particularly if individuals are socially tied solely to close-knit, like-minded groups, which can be aligned with the findings of Granovetter's (1973) theory of the strength of weak ties. In such instances, social networks may become channels through which the negatively associated behaviors of resistance to change, such as rumors and gossips, can spread more widely within the organization. Strong ties to narrower social circles without weak ties to extended social networks may therefore increase the possibility to one-sided interpretations of change.

The findings of this study align with the suggestions of previous studies in that the scope and quality of an individual's informal intra-organizational social networks are strongly linked to their ability to engage and influence the change itself as part of readiness for change (Alas & Vadi, 2006; Awardi, 2019; Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005). Furthermore, individuals who were involved in broader social networks were in a better position to understand the reasoning behind the change, contribute to informal discussions, and thus ensure that their needs and perspectives are taken into consideration during change planning processes (Cross & Parker, 2004). However, while previous literature has mainly focused on how the expansion of social networks diminishes resistance to change on organizational level, the study findings also highlight the dynamic nature of resistance to change in social networks. Moreover, a change or variability in one's ways of working or environment, for instance due to Covid-19 pandemic, such as shift from on-site working to working fully remotely or changes in intra-organizational job positions might increase resistance to change even among individuals who previously perceived themselves as change optimists and having vast social networks.

Previous studies on opinion leadership have mainly focused on influencing consumers' purchase decisions as part of marketing research (Cho et al., 2012; Watts & Dodds, 2007). However, its role in organizational context, especially as part of perceived resistance to change within informal social networks has received little to no attention. Consequently, this thesis contributes to the existing literature in the context of organizational restructuring and hierarchy flattening as the removal of hierarchical layers tends to shift the responsibility of collective opinion formation from senior leaders to individuals at lower organizational levels. As a result, rather of relying on formal position, informal influence increasingly depends on personality characteristics, through which resistance to change may either increase or decrease in informal intra-organizational social networks.

In conclusion, the findings of this study underline that the success of organizational change is highly dependent on how individuals collaboratively create, internalize, and communicate the meaning of change through their cross-functional social networks. In order to successfully lead change, organizations must understand the complex and emergent nature of informal intra-organizational social networks. By doing so, change is not only implemented, but also co-created.

6.3 Managerial implications

This sub-chapter presents the managerial implications based on the research findings and conclusions. The results of this thesis offer a variety of in-depth insights that can benefit both the case study organization, and largely other organizations in successful implementation of change initiatives. Particularly, this study emphasizes the importance of informal intra-organizational social networks in decreasing resistance to change, and how these social networks could be approached strategically.

Firstly, organizations should commit in creating an organizational culture and environment that promotes networking, increases transparency and opportunities in decision-making within its everyday activities. Such a culture does not develop on its own, rather, it requires strategically planned efforts and leadership that encourages both cross-functional cooperation and communication. As a result, change initiatives should not only be dictated to them, but be an active part of its planning and implementation.

Secondly, organizations should also actively promote its employees to expand their social networks beyond their immediate team and departmental boundaries. This will create more “bridging ties” into the organization, which could result in a more diverse exchange of information, thus enabling individuals to understand the implications of change more comprehensively. (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011, p. 1171). Especially, when organizations are seeking to reduce hierarchical positions and levels, people with broad social networks are more likely to share information, support, and perspectives of change, thus supporting the requirement for more self-directed approach teams and individuals in the future. Lastly, organizations should not underestimate the importance of informal opinion leaders with regards to organizational change and its resistance. Many of them serve as linkages between otherwise disconnected networks, and if opinion leadership and engagement become more distributed across the organization, reliance on specific individuals decreases. (Kim, 2015, p. 148; Levitan & Visser, 2009, p. 1057).

6.4 Limitations of the study

In this qualitative single case study, resistance to change was explored as part of informal intra-organizational social networks while also considering the effects of opinion leadership. As noted in the methodology chapter of this thesis, all studies are subject to their limitations based on the chosen research methods (Saunders et al., 2019). First, the context of this study was limited to only one national subsidiary of a global organization, which might limit the generalizability of the results to other subsidiaries located in other countries due to possible cultural differences, let alone generalizable to other organizations operating in another industries. Secondly, the sample size of seven interviewees might further limit the generalizability of the research findings. While the interviews provided rich and in-depth information about the research topic, in a cross-sectional qualitative case study it could not have been possible to have an equally comprehensive representation of all employee groups of the organization due to time constraints.

Thirdly, qualitative research can be prone to researcher bias. In this study, the researcher has worked in the case organization before and during the research process. While the data of the study has been analyzed systematically, the influence of the researcher's subjectivity during data analysis and interpretation cannot be completely excluded. However, the researcher has had the opportunity to select the participants in the study, thus ensuring that the sample of interviewees is as broad as possible and includes individuals with a variety of backgrounds and work experiences.

The last potential limitation of this study is the sensitivity of the research topic. Thereafter, the interviewees may have responded with caution when reflecting their possibly critical experiences and attitudes towards organizational change, and their own informal intra-organizational social networks and colleagues, which may affect the reliability of the research data.

6.5 Future research proposals

This sub-chapter outlines the proposals for future research. The phenomenon of resistance to change has been widely studied subject especially during the last decade through a variety of theoretical and disciplinary approaches. However, the topic remains relevant as the research field is broad, and resistance to change continues to exist during different change initiatives regardless of industry sectors. As the world evolves, and since change is always contextual to interpersonal relationships, new challenges are likely to emerge in the future as well. Consequently, there are several possible directions for future research based on both the limitations and findings of this study.

First, as this study was conducted in only one national subsidiary of the global organization, in future research to conduct a multinational comparison to assess how cultural factors influence the forms of resistance to change and the dynamics of informal intra-organizational social networks. Secondly, the data was collected from the interviewees in a cross-sectional manner. In future, it would be fascinating to conduct the same study with same participants by longitudinal approach to explore whether the development of the change process of reducing organizational levels affects the perceived resistance to change within the social networks in the organization. Thirdly, one possibility for future research would be to examine the findings of this qualitative study with a larger sample size by utilizing quantitative methods in the same organization. Consequently, it would be feasible to examine the generalizability of the findings.

Fourthly, in this study it was suggested that during organizational restructuring opinion leadership might not be based on position, but rather on personal characteristics in the future. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate how informal opinion leadership affects resistance to change in organizations of low hierarchies as part of decentralized decision-making. Lastly, an investigation into the development of opinion leadership in informal social networks in relation to resistance to change in rapidly expanding, previously flat small and medium-sized enterprises that are adding hierarchical levels, for instance, due to internationalization or more centralized decision-making would be intriguing. This would provide a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities of the dynamics of opinion leadership and resistance to change face as a company expands and experiences structural change.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview questions

Interview questions:

1. **Background and experience in the organization**

   - Age?
   - Years in the organization?
   - How many different positions have you worked in the organization?

2. **Forms of resistance to change during change initiatives**

   - Have there been many change initiatives in the organization during your tenure? How would you describe them?
   - Generally, is there resistance to change in the organization? If yes, how does it occur? Can you provide examples?
   - What kind of emotions do you personally experience during change? What do you think are the causes of them?
   - How did you react to your previously described changes? Was your reaction mostly positive, negative, or mixed? Did your reaction change as the change initiative progresses?
   - Does the organization generally give employees sufficient time, resources, information, and opportunity to influence change processes?

3. **The role of informal intra-organizational social networks as part of resistance to change**

- How extensive do you consider your own social network in the organization to be? Can you describe your network?
- How frequently do you interact with colleagues other than your own immediate team members?
- Do you gain any advantages or disadvantages from working with your close team? What about with colleagues outside of your team?
- How do you build and maintain your networks within the organization?
- Do you think thank your social networks influences your perception of change? How?
- Have you seen resistance to change spread through social networks and interactions? Can you give examples?
- Do you notice a difference in how close colleagues (strong ties) and more distant colleagues (weak ties) influence your opinion on change?

4. Opinion leadership in social networks as part of resistance to change

- Are there individuals in the organization from whom you have asked for advice or received information that has changed your point of view?
- Are there individuals in your organization who are seen as informal opinion leaders? If so, what makes them influential in your organization?
- How do opinion leaders communicate their views on change and how does this impact other individuals' perception of change?