



Implementation plan for how leaders can support their employees' Sense of Coherence

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1 INTRODUCTION

Due to the pandemic outbreak, the world stands before chaos in almost every aspect of life, and a paradigm shift is visible in almost every work sector. In our study on how leaders can help support employees' sense of coherence we found, based on the literature, a need for change in communication and support during the COVID-19 crisis. This was especially evident in the healthcare sector, but we do not see it as a limitation for it to be true in other occupations as well. For that reason, the implementation plan structured here is meant to be available to all fields of work.

The study's result indicates that the Sense of Coherence theory (SoC-theory) crafted by Aaron Antonovsky would be viable to help employees move towards greater health. This implementation plans focus lies on how the result could be translated more into a practice and as a tool for leaders to help employees move towards greater health.

In this implementation plan, a walkthrough of the possible challenges and opportunities of an implementation will be accounted for and if an implementation is at all necessary in today's occupational context. The topics of change management and strategic change management will be discussed and knowledge from these will be applied to the argument for change and the implementation process itself.

Change can be perceived in various ways, depending on one's state of mind.

“Change has a considerable psychological impact on the human mind.

*To the fearful it is **threatening** because it means that things may get worse.*

*To the hopeful it is **encouraging** because things may get better.*

*To the confident it is **inspiring** because the challenge exists to make things better.”*

– King Whitney Jr

This implementation plan will strive to infuse hope for a better, mentally healthier workplace.

2 BACKGROUND

Taking a step backwards before grinding through the implementation plan itself. Let us focus for a moment on the needs to implement change and the possible challenges to change found in the literature.

To implement something is defined by Cambridge Dictionary as “start using a plan or a system.” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021) One could ask when are implementations necessary or when are implementations naturally discussed in a company or other occupational context?

Maribel Olvera states that when something radically changes how the business operates, leaders naturally start to implement processes. She further opens the concept of implementing changes as something that can cause internal struggles due to the leaders wanting change and the employees not wanting to be engaged in a change process. This is a common train of thoughts in businesses wanting to maximize growth and implementing processes can be the only way to scale a business. (Olvera, 2021)

If translated into the context of the current situation with the COVID-19 pandemic, which has started chain reaction of processes, changes, implementations, negotiations etc. The noticeable difference in the example of a pandemic outbreak and a company wanting to scale would be that the employees want a change or some improvement during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ones slow to change are the leaders. The lack of good communication (Kisely et al., 2020; Sampaio et al., 2020) support (Cai et al., 2020; Goodare, 2020; Kisely et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2020) and the need for the leadership to be transparent (Halper-Bogusky, 2020; Kerrissey & Edmondson, 2020; Orangefiery, 2020; Rosa et al., 2020) are some of the improvement's employees have been requesting during the pandemic outbreak.

Olvera exemplifies which challenges can be seen in people when implementing change; People does not understand the process they are engaged in and why it is necessary, too many changes are happening and it can be too overwhelming for the employees. People can be hesitant to change and can be resistant to the idea that someone tells them what to do and how to do it. She summaries her thought with: “*The key to successful*

implementation of new processes or process improvement is the same key to any successful business strategy: getting the people part right.” (Olvera, 2021)

2.1 Strategic change management

Strategic change management focuses on achieving “... *clearly identified strategic objectives*”. (Lynch, 2009) and to implement strategic change, the organization often needs to involve new strategies to proactively find new ways of working. (Lynch, 2009). Thomas Lauer identifies the strategic change management as something that “... *seeks optimal adaptation to the environment*”. (Lauer, 2019)

To summarize, strategic change management is to find the optimal strategy to adapt to the environment and that the strategy should have identifiable goals for the organization to accomplish. (Lauer, 2019; Lynch, 2009)

2.2 Change management

Change management is defined by Thomas Lauer as an inward directed change towards the company or the members of an organization during the change process. Implementations inside an organization have been seen as an automatic mechanical process but has shown to be much more complex when taken into practice. Lauer argues that it probably is because any change needs the support of the organization’s employees. People have their own agendas, needs, experiences, ideas etc. and because of this, Lauer identifies that there are no simple ways of managing change, and that different management techniques and methods may be required to be successful. (Lauer, 2019)

Lauer recognizes one particular trait amongst leaders that can help change processes succeed. Leaders should change their attitude regarding seeing themselves as autonomous designers of the change process, and to recognize that employees are independent acting beings that have lives of their own and will move around without a strategist guiding them. (Lauer, 2019)

To summarize the change management, the aim is to take the identifiable optimal changes derived from the strategic management and internally implement them in the organization and to strive for and optimal internal adaptation. (Lauer, 2019)

Lauer argues that the key for successful change is to find both the optimal strategy and an optimal implementation of the strategy for the organization. (Lauer, 2019) Supporting these claims are the ones recognized by Price & Chalal (2006) who found factors that contributes to a successful implementation to change being that the change should be well-planned, the change process should be efficient and effective, and the organizational culture should help support the implementation. (Price & Chalal, 2006)

2.3 Our study's results in the context of an implementation plan

In our study we came to the same conclusion as Massanotti et al. 2020 that good communication and a clear view on roles and responsibilities could improve comprehensibility amongst nurses. That the leader should articulate what is expected of the worker and give relevant information during the circumstances. This already answers some of the issues expressed in the literature, communication and transparency. Furthermore, Massanotti et al. and our study both found that resource and workload management could be crucial to help employees raising their sense of manageability. This fact combined with the opportunity to influence your own work will help create something that can feel more meaningful, voice a need for a supporting and listening leader. This could answer one major issue found in the literature, the lack of support.

In summary, the findings of our study and with the help of equivalent findings in previous studies, we can suggest that implementation of our findings in an occupational context could meet the asserted needs in the literature.

Because the aim is not to implement a suggested change into a specific organization or community, the proposed implementations are targeted to be adapted for any leader. The argument why an implementation of our kind would fit every occupation or organization is that we will suggest changes to a leader's way of communicating with their employees, therefore nothing organizational specific will be addressed. If an organization is open to a new concept of wrapping their arms around their employees, then these implementations would be right up their ally. Communication, support, transparency and overall questions about leadership are no news per se, but the implementation of the SoC-theory as a concept for the leader to use as a lens to see their employees with is not overly

used and discussed in the literature or organizations. This is what we want to bring to the table.

3 IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

When implementing something in the business world, there is a possibility to adapt both the game theory and the implementation theory to further analyze the possible outcomes of a specific process. The difference between the game theory and the implementation theory is that using the game theory the game is given and using the implementation theory the game is something to be designed. To access the implementation plan, one needs to design the wanted outcome and then reverse engineer the process to access the game theory's starting point. (Jackson, 2001)

To simplify this process and make it more attainable and less theoretical for the working field, the idea is to create an implementation plan that not only is theoretically possible but also feels practically plausible.

To start the implementation process, an optimal or preferred outcome must be established. Our study's headline is *How leader can support employees' Sense of Coherence* and the outcome must be relevant to this. In its most simplistic form, the outcome would state that; *the employee experiences an adequate Sense of Coherence*. This statement includes both a possibility to increase ones SoC and to maintain a good or *adequate* SoC. The aim is not to solely increase the employees' SoC ones, but also include the possibility to maintain and continually uphold an adequate SoC. We want to see the leaders not only scoring a homerun but also to win the whole Superbowl with the team.

To get a sense of what is needed to see a successful outcome, the next step would be to reverse engineer the process from this outcome back to the starting block. When going through the possible steps to achieve this outcome five steps could be identified. These five steps from start to finish are: Recognize, Arrange, Communicate, Maintain and Optimize (RACMO). This RACMO process will be analyzed with a SWOT analysis with the intention to critically review and to find real actions that can help the implementation plan to succeed. (Sørensen, 2020)

Recognize the need

Recognizing the need for change is the first step in any change process. If you cannot see that there is a problem, the problem will probably never get solved. The possible first step at any workplace would be to do surveys to evaluate the employee's needs. If the need is clearly visible, for example that; employees are feeling tired, overworked, experiencing early stages of mental health problems or are feeling discouraged at work. These outcomes would indicate that SoC-theory could be helpful to be implemented into the leadership in order to help the employees gain greater health.

Arrange the scene

After recognizing the need and dealing with the threats and weaknesses of the first step, the next would be for the leaders to arrange the scene. This means arranging proper education in the SoC-theory and how it can be used in the context of supporting employees acquiring an adequate SoC. Arrangements of a place and a time for the employees to have a moment with their leader, more as a mentor meeting or a professional development meeting. Structuring of which leader is accountable for which employee. With good arrangement the actual implementation phase will feel easier.

Communicate the change

After proper arrangements have been made, and the leadership is ready to embark on a new journey with the employees, it is time to communicate the change. Communication channels, email, phone calls whatever is used at the workplace to get in touch with the employees. Because the arrangements are already established, the only thing is to invite the employees to discuss. As Maribel Olivera states earlier, to get the people part right is one of the most crucial part in a successful implementation. The leader should communicate why this process is now on trial and what benefits it would have for the employee.

Maintain sense of coherence

In order to maintain something, it needs regular check-ups. As a car need its mechanic, the employee may need its leader. As mentioned earlier, we want the leaders to win the

Superbowl with the team, and in order to do that we advocate for a regular check up with the employees to see how they are experiencing their SoC. Once every year, half-year whatever timeframe is found suitable and workable in the workspace. If the organization or the team is small enough, consider if there are possibilities to make it as organic as possible. Can conversation about one SoC occur over lunch, after a meeting, during coffee breaks or as “copy machine talks”? Anything that can be integrated as an organic structure of an organization will be more integrated and functional than a meeting with the leader once a year. This will be up to the organization and the human relations at work.

Optimizing the process

Lastly to not stagnate and only sit comfortably in the seat, the need for proper evaluation of the process is called for. We live in a time when things can change radically and rapidly, in order to stay up to date, the last step would be to try to optimize the process regularly. Yearly meetings with the leaders to evaluate the outcome of the SoC-theory as a tool to help employees gain greater health. What works, what does not. Is this something that can be integrated more organically into the workplace culture, as already mentioned in the maintenance-section.

The RACMO process as an implementation plan for leaders to use the Sense of Coherence theory as a tool to support the employee’s overall health at the workplace evaluated in a SWOT analysis.

<p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys can easily be made. • Can be made so that it won't take too much time to complete. • Well known method of gathering data. • Smaller organizations or teams will have it easier to implement. • Potentially beneficial for the organization to have employees that experience their workload as manageable and sees meaning in their work assignments. 	<p>Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys can have negative associations. • Employees can answer them rapidly without giving them much thought • Can be hard to visualize as a responder, the end goal with a survey. • Not all organizations are ready to implement change. • The bigger the organization the more time it takes to implement something. • The process not seen as needed in the organization.
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<p>Opportunity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valuable information of how employees' experiences their situation right now. • Increases the communication between levels in the organizational hierarchy. • The employee may feel heard and noticed. • The increase in stress tolerance and coping possibilities. • Better performance if the culture and atmosphere is positive and forward moving. • May enable a smoother transition in a change process if the change is human resource linked. 	<p>Threats:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys almost never get a 100% response rate. • Hard to change a culture. • Some organizations may need more maintenance than others, thus increasing time and effort in implementation. • New implementations are never easy to establish. • Change can be seen as a threat from both the leader's and the employee's point of view.
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A unique situation where an employee could use the fundamentals of the SoC-theory to help deescalate a situation where a change process caused distress amongst the other employees was presented during the time of writing the article. In chapter five, a presentation of the situation, how the knowledge of the SoC-theory was useful to the employee and as an addition, how the RACMO-process could have aided the organization to help maintain an adequate Sense of Coherence amongst the employees from the start.

4 EXAMPLE OF IMPLEMENTATION

An example of an external decision proposing a structural and a human resource change in an organization.

The change

Due to an external decision not previously known to the organization, caused an abrupt need to plan for a future change for the organization. This would cause change both for the organizations' structure and for many of the employees. Seeing this through Bolman and Deals, reframing organizations lenses, we can identify both the structural and the human resource aspect of a possible reframing of the organization. (Bolman & Deal, 2017) For this example, the sole focus is on the human resource aspect.

The first problem analyzed was that when the organization got the information about the change that inevitably will happen in the future, the leaders communicated this change plain and simple: when this change happens, the employees that will be affected of the change, must be transferred to another unit. That is the harsh reality presented to the employees. The internal panic and frustration grew amongst the employees because they could not comprehend the situation and were left with no tools to manage their emotions or frustration. Some employees even started to search for alternative jobs during this time, because of the emotional distress they were experiencing.

When the information was first released to the employees it was broadcasted on the unit's internal monthly information debrief. After this broadcast, a meeting was set up for the employees possibly affected by the future structural change. During this meeting the employees were left with more questions than answers, the leaders had so little information yet regarding the upcoming change that the most common answer was, overly simplified, "we don't know yet". This meeting was online and many of the employees felt that this caused many to stay silent.

SoC-Theory as a lens to analyze the situation

During this tumult, seeing it all unfold through the lens of Antonovsky SoC-theory, one could visualize that almost every employee lacked sense of coherence in one or more of the three dimensions, comprehensibility, manageability or meaningfulness.

Some expressed the headache of not knowing, not understanding how this could happen, not grasping the possible difficulty that the leaders also were facing in midst of all this. All feelings can be summarized as lack of comprehensibility.

Due to the lack of comprehensibility, many of the employees faced internal struggles to handle the situation, as Antonovsky explains in one of his books, "what is known is easier to manage." In comparison to our study, these employees here were not overworked, just did not have the comprehensibility in the situation, thus lacking manageability.

When someone feels discouraged, let down, confused, stressed or any other negative emotion due to a change or some stressor in one's life, it is easy to lose the sense of meaningfulness in the situation. As for some of the employees, the sense of meaningfulness dropped to an almost zero after hearing these possible future changes. Some did not see the meaning of doing their areas of responsibility to the full extent just because they felt discourage about the news. Some even felt like they wanted to prolong their sick leave just because they did not sense any meaning to work in an organization where they won't be working in the future.

The turning point

One employee who was also affected by these changes and who had realized the lack of coherence in the co-workers and had experienced similar emotions as many of them, broke the streamline of speaking internally with co-workers and wrote an email to the leader of the unit who had articulated all these changes in the internal broadcast.

In this email some of these experiences perceived by the employees previously mentioned were addressed and the analysis with the SoC-theory lens was presented. As a response to this email, the leader wanted to meet up for further discussion with the employee.

During this meeting, the leader explained the complexity of the situation, how the information was limited and in order to not create a possibility for any misunderstanding, the leader wanted to address the change as simple as possible for everyone to understand, knowing that it could sound harsh and cold. He had already sensed an emerging distress during the online meeting with all the affected employees, but he noted that if no one is coming forward and talks about their experienced emotional chaos, he won't know how to respond or to help support the employee in the situation.

During this meeting an idea was born to help ease the possible emotional chaos experienced by many of the employees. A second meeting, now face-to-face with the leaders and supervisors leading this part of the unit, where everyone was welcomed to join for a discussion about the situation and the possibility to pose questions and concerns. This meeting was a great success where concerns were addressed, and it had the same function as the one-on-one meeting with the first employee. The aftermath of this meeting is that

the leaders realized that this way of meeting up with the employees, and for them to be able to articulate their concerns in a safe environment will be used in the future as well.

This was the result of one employees sensemaking of the situation and the identifying of the distress caused on all three levels of the SoC-theory. How could this situation have been handled better from the start? If we apply the RACMO implementation plan, we can distinguish a few key points that could have eased the stress level amongst the employees.

Implementing the RACMO-process

Recognizing the need for support. During the period consisting of both the first information broadcast and the online meeting, if the leader sensed a distress amongst the employees or if the implemented organizational change in any way could be interpreted as something negative for the employees affected, the leader could have started with actively recognizing the distress. As a leader you may have many subjects to deal with, and you must prioritize and sometimes just do the bare minimum to not overwork. In this case it would not have taken much to simply recognizing the need, and in a way the leader in the example recognized it but it did not spark anything to help the situation for the employees.

Arranging the scene for the employees. After initially realizing that the level of distress amongst the employees was high, a possible arrangement of a personalized meeting would have been a possible solution. To arrange into the leader or the possible leaders schedule several possible dates during a two-week period or even a month could be beneficial to enable the employees to choose a suitable date. The problem with outsourcing the decision making to the employees may cause extra labor for the leader to gather all the dates and controlling the wills of all the employees. If a leader knows that the times if of the essence and cannot afford to put in more work than necessary, then articulating two possible dates should be appropriate.

Communicating the arrangement and the change process for the employees. After the time and place has been established, communicate it through the unit's information channels and prepare to have your information about the change is fresh memory. Communication is sometimes more effective when listening as it is when talking. In this example the employees had many questions and concerns that many was afraid of articulating via

a videocall. With setting up a face-to-face meeting with anyone interested can ease the distress and increase the level of comprehensibility, thus possibly increasing the overall manageability. This face-to-face meeting did occur, even though this implementation plan was not used, but the initiative was from the employee recognizing the need for it.

Maintaining Sense of Coherence. After a meeting and giving the possibility to express concerns, questions and hopefully supporting the employees Sense of Coherence in this instance, it is important to communicate a possibility to further give room for questions or concerns that may surface along the way. This falls mainly under the concept of good communication but is distinguished as a measure to invite the employee to be open and transparent with their feelings to the leader. Any leader knows that their time is limited, and their resources does not always allow for active check-ups. By communicating this to the employee and by inviting them to raise questions, to come and speak in person if anything is on their mind, or by inviting them to write an email if the leader is not physically present at work. The leader oversees how he or she wants to maintain the sense of coherence amongst the employees and there is no right or wrong as long as the employees feels that they can approach the leader with their concerns.

Optimizing the process. Change is required often, either on a micro or macro level in an organization. In this example optimizing the process could mean to start implementing this way of handling change every time necessary as the leader of the organization already mentioned, finding ways to optimize the structure of the RACMO to fit the organization better.

As for analyzing the wanted outcome of this implementation plan that, *the employee experiences an adequate Sense of Coherence*, the real-life example where the SoC-theory's fundamentals were used as a tool to analyze the situation and optimally lead to a solution to help raise the employees SoC, advocate for the outcome of this implementation to be fully possible.

5 CRITICAL REVIEW

In this case, the need for something to change was noticeable from the start, the main obstacle many seem to face is that they are afraid of telling the truth face-to-face with their leader. An open, honest and transparent conversation where one can address the status quo and bring forth the concerns. Although leaders may articulate to the employees that they are welcomed to open for discussion if there is ever anything that they feel is needed to be addressed, it is up to the employee to take the first step, no one can force anyone to speak their heart. Because this is something deeply personal, and nothing that one can learn from reading a particular book, it may come down to the organization's culture and perceived atmosphere that will enable open and transparent discussions.

When looking at the implementation plan and analyze for whom it is for, and whose responsibility it would be to implement, one can notice that it can be both the employee and the leader who can be the one initiating the process or opens the discussion about a possible implementation. The problem is that any implementation can be seen as a threat from both the employee's and the leader's angle, as well.

Although an implementation may be called for, obstacles can hinder or slow the process. Not having the right strategy from the start can hinder any specific change to be successful, but also to think that change is something that can be implemented as a mechanical process. Problems with the implementation plan can be identified as: that the implementation plan is a general tool for the leader to use in any change process and the outcome can be hard to measure because it is a subjective feeling for an employee. Although the plan has steps to follow, any concrete actions are not included so the implementation plan needs to be translated into the situation at hand and can interpreted differently in each unique change process. This can also be seen as a strength because it can function in various situations and be implemented generally in any change process. It is also possible that there are other more optimal strategies to better be adopted to the environment that is requiring the change.

As the literature suggests, any change process includes people, and getting people onboard is one of the main challenges in any process. This implementation plan is aimed to help employees during the process of implementing change and is therefore already

inclusive for the employees. The struggle may be to get the leaders onboard on a change that is requiring stronger effort from the leaders to actively lead the employees during a change process.

Summary

The wanted outcome of this implementation plan is that the employee experiences an adequate Sense of Coherence. With implementation of the SoC-theory's fundamentals as a lens for the leader to use in any kind of situation but especially in those that can cause an increase in the employees' stress levels, for example change, we see the possibility for the outcome to be successful. Following the steps of the RACMO process, the leader can in a structured way implement the SoC-theory as a lens in the change process to analyze and help support the employees' SoC during the time of change. This proposed change is requiring more of a leader during a change process and may be found challenging if the leader does not have the required time to actively lead the employees during a change process. Considering that the organizational culture and getting people onboard are two of the most important in successful change management.

This proposed implementation plan can have a long-term positive outcome for any organization lead change, because supporting the employees Sense of Coherence will both positively affect the organizations culture and that employees' wellbeing.

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