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How Change Recipients Become Rivals: Legitimacy Dynamics and 'Cooptive Rejection' in Organizational Change

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ABSTRACT Our study challenges a commonly held assumption in the legitimacy and organizational change literatures: that the legitimacy of a change project is closely tied to, and dependent upon, the legitimacy of the change agent promoting it. Drawing on an in-depth, three-and-a-half-year qualitative study of a major transformation within a French public organization, we identify a surprising dynamic – instances where a change initiative gains support and is judged as legitimate even as the legitimacy of the change agent deteriorates. To explain this dissociation, we develop a theory of *cooptive rejection*, a process through which change recipients appropriate and endorse the content of a change while actively distancing themselves from, or even undermining, its initiator. We unpack the mechanisms that enable this dissociation and highlight the crucial role of recipient agency. Our research contributes to legitimacy theory by revealing how multiple objects of legitimacy can evolve independently – and even in opposition – over time. We also advance organizational change scholarship by illuminating the competitive nature of transformation processes.

Keywords: ethnography, legitimacy, organizational change

INTRODUCTION

Planned organizational change can be defined as a deliberate effort aimed at altering the form, functioning, and practices of an organizational entity (Battilana and Casciaro, 2012; Van de Ven and Poole, 1995). It is well established that such change is a challenging endeavour that may elicit reticence or even resistance from organization

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members – especially when the proposed change appears likely to disrupt existing power structures, norms, values, and routines (Bartunek, 1984; Konlechner et al., 2019; Pettigrew, 1985/2013). Thus, the *legitimacy* of a planned change project is crucial to its success (Huy et al., 2014; Landau et al., 2014; Reihlen et al., 2022).

Legitimacy is typically defined as a social judgment concerning the desirability or appropriateness of a specific entity or object (Deephouse et al., 2017; Suddaby et al., 2017; Tost, 2011). In their comprehensive review, Suddaby et al. (2017, p. 452) suggest that the study of legitimacy involves consideration of three types of entities: (1) an 'object of legitimacy' (the entity or actor that is subject to judgments of desirability or appropriateness); (2) a 'change agent' (an actor who attempts to change how the object of legitimacy is evaluated by relevant audiences); and (3) an 'evaluator' (the actor rendering legitimacy judgments about a particular object of legitimacy) (Deephouse et al., 2017; Siraz et al., 2023; Tost, 2011).

Extensive research in both the legitimacy (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006) and organizational change literatures (Battilana and Casciaro, 2012; Kotter, 1996; Malhotra et al., 2021) has examined the strategies adopted by 'change agents' to legitimate various 'objects', such as new organizational structures and practices (Balogun et al., 2019; Heinze and Weber, 2016; Vaara and Monin, 2010), emerging occupational roles (Daudigeos, 2013; Reay et al., 2006; Treviño et al., 2014), and innovative technologies (Hargadon and Douglas, 2001). Legitimation strategies may include discursive approaches, such as rhetoric, framing, or narrative (Baba et al., 2021; Landau et al., 2014; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005), and the mobilization of coalitions and networks (Battilana and Casciaro, 2012; Hardy and Maguire, 2017; Kotter, 1996). They may entail aligning controversial ideas with broadly accepted values (Malhotra et al., 2021) or underscoring the benefits of change through 'small wins' (Kotter, 1996; Reay et al., 2006).

Crucially, however, *change agents may also be seen as objects of legitimacy in themselves*, even as they work to legitimate other objects. Positions of authority, expertise, or centrality in social networks within and around organizations may confer a priori legitimacy on change agents that can help them achieve acceptance for change projects (Balogun et al., 2019; Battilana, 2011). Conversely, change agents who lack such characteristics will likely need to work harder and use more strategies to achieve the same goal (Treviño et al., 2014; Wylie et al., 2014).

Overall, the legitimacy literature tends to suggest that while change agents and their projects can be seen as distinct objects of legitimacy (Huy et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2006; Walker et al., 1986), the two are generally *associated*: perceptions of one tend to shape views of the other. Thus, proposals advanced by actors perceived as legitimate are more likely to gain acceptance, while those put forward by individuals lacking such legitimacy tend to be dismissed (Walker et al., 1986). The change management literature emphasizes that trust and constructive relationships between change agents and recipients are crucial for securing project buy-in (Furst and Cable, 2008; Heyden et al., 2017; Oreg and Sverdlik, 2011; Stouten et al., 2018). At the same time, legitimacy judgments are shaped by the nature of the activities in which change agents engage (Tost, 2011), meaning that scepticism towards a proposal can easily turn into doubts about the agent themselves (Huy et al., 2014). Taken together, these insights suggest that change agents who lack a strong foundation of legitimacy – whether derived from their structural position or the

quality of their relationships – may find it difficult to advance change initiatives. In such cases, building support for their own role often becomes a prerequisite to legitimizing the change itself.

Yet, is this always the case? This article was prompted by an unexpected empirical finding emerging from a study of organizational change and legitimation dynamics at Region Alpha, a major unit of the French civil service. We followed the activities of a newly created 'change-agency unit' – the Transformation Department (TD) – over its three-and-a-half-year lifetime, drawing on ethnographic observations and interviews with organization members at all levels. The TD never gained legitimacy with key change recipients, and indeed the process culminated in the complete rejection of the unit. Nevertheless, the change project itself, initially viewed as negative and countercultural, was successfully appropriated. In other words, *legitimacy judgments of the change agent and change project became dissociated over time* – a phenomenon that appears counterintuitive in relation to most of the existing literature and warrants further explanation.

Unpacking how and why related objects of legitimacy become dissociated – particularly how change recipients may embrace a change project while rejecting its initiators – holds both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it enriches our understanding of legitimacy dynamics by extending recent work on the interplay between legitimacy strategies and audience judgments, and how these interactions shape organizational outcomes (Balogun et al., 2019; Bitektine and Haack, 2015; Huy et al., 2014; Loos and Spraul, 2024; Siraz et al., 2023; Tost, 2011). Practically, it sheds light on the dilemmas faced by change agents operating in contexts where their own legitimacy is contested (Caldwell, 2003a; McDermott et al., 2013). Accordingly, we ask: *(1) How and why does dissociation between related objects of legitimacy – specifically the change agent and the change project – emerge and evolve over time*? and *(2) How do change recipients contribute to this dissociation?*

To address these questions, we position our study at the intersection of the organizational change and legitimacy literatures, responding to calls for more fine-grained analyses of legitimacy dynamics during change implementation (Battilana et al., 2009; Huy et al., 2014). We introduce the concept of *cooptive rejection* to explain how the legitimacy of initially associated objects can come to diverge. This concept contributes to the organizational change literature by unpacking the competitive legitimacy dynamics that may unfold during implementation, and by challenging the prevailing assumption that a change agent's legitimacy is a necessary condition for the success of the change they champion (Huy et al., 2014; Oreg and Sverdlik, 2011; Suddaby et al., 2017). More broadly, our findings enrich legitimacy theory by illustrating its dynamic, contested, and often 'double-edged' character (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990; Suchman, 1995).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: LEGITIMACY DYNAMICS AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Exploring the Association between the Legitimacy of Change Agents and their Projects

Research on organizational change and legitimacy highlights *a strong association between the legitimacy of change agents and that of their projects* (e.g., Battilana and Casciaro, 2013;

Huy et al., 2014; Stjernberg and Philips, 1993). Walker et al. (1986, p. 621) encapsulate this by stating that 'the legitimacy of an act depends not only on its own legitimacy, but also on the legitimacy of the actor performing the act'. In essence, this implies that legitimate change agents are more likely to secure stakeholder support, whereas those perceived as lacking legitimacy encounter significant resistance in advancing their proposed changes.

A longstanding stream of legitimacy research highlights the central role of change agents' legitimacy in shaping the reception of organizational change. For instance, in a study of planned change at a telecommunications firm, Huy et al. (2014) showed how middle managers' resistance intensified as top managers lost legitimacy by failing to uphold their commitments. Similarly, Vaara and Monin (2010) found that while early support for a pharmaceutical merger hinged on proponents' perceived legitimacy, the failure of the deal led to those same individuals being scapegoated. These studies underscore a recurring pattern: legitimate change agents are more likely to secure support for their initiatives, whereas those lacking legitimacy face resistance and blame.

Supporting this claim, prescriptive change models emphasize the importance of credible leaders, robust coalitions, and the engagement of legitimate stakeholders to ensure project success (Beer et al., 1990; Kotter, 1995, 1996; Stouten et al., 2018). Empirical studies in change management also highlight the impact of change agents' ethical leadership (Babalola et al., 2016), competencies (Battilana et al., 2010), and quality of relationships with recipients (Oreg and Sverdlik, 2011; Rafferty and Simons, 2006) on the acceptance and legitimacy of change. Trust in the agent's motives emerges as a critical element: when management's intentions are viewed with suspicion, both the agent and the proposed changes tend to lose legitimacy (Stanley et al., 2005). Moreover, change is typically more accepted when driven by immediate supervisors rather than distant senior leaders (Heyden et al., 2017; Hill et al., 2012).

The literature also examines how change agents' legitimacy can either facilitate or hinder organizational change. Top managers often draw on positional authority, access to resources, and visibility to drive change (Chakravarthy and Gargiulo, 1998; Denis et al., 2001; Heyden et al., 2017), while middle managers act as crucial intermediaries, translating strategic intent and mobilizing peer support (Balogun et al., 2005; Huy, 2002; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). In contrast, the legitimacy of specialized change-agency units – staff teams tasked with supporting internal change processes – tends to be more precarious (Caldwell, 2003b; Sturdy et al., 2013; Wright, 2009). These units often play an ambivalent role, which can undermine their legitimacy in several ways.

Change-agency units' positioning outside the formal hierarchy may often deprive them of managerial authority, exposing them to pushback (Heyden et al., 2017; Treviño et al., 2014; Wylie et al., 2014). Their role may also overlap with other staff functions (e.g., HR, project management), leading to turf conflicts and contested jurisdictions (Balogun et al., 2005; Buchanan and Badham, 1999; Caldwell, 2003b). Moreover, these units frequently navigate conflicting demands between change sponsors and recipients, making it difficult to maintain trust and legitimacy across constituencies (Sturdy et al., 2013; Wylie et al., 2014). As a result, the literature suggests that dedicated change-agency units must actively construct and defend their legitimacy to be effective in driving organizational transformation.

Therefore, while the strong association between the legitimacy of change agents and their projects is well established, recent work suggests that this relationship can become more nuanced – especially in contexts marked by multiple stakeholders, competing demands, and divergent legitimacy judgments. We now turn to literature that offers initial insights into how dissociation between the legitimacy of agents and their projects may emerge.

The Potential for Legitimacy Dissociation Between Change Agents and Their Projects

To examine how legitimacy across related objects might become dissociated over time, we adopt a process perspective on legitimation, which conceives of legitimacy as a socially constructed, continuously negotiated outcome of interactions, language, and meaning-making across multiple levels (Drori and Honig, 2013; Langley, 2007; Suddaby et al., 2017). This perspective foregrounds the agentic nature of legitimation, shaped by the strategies of legitimacy seekers (Human and Provan, 2000; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). Yet, recent work calls for a more dialogical approach that considers both legitimation strategies and audience judgments (Loos and Spraul, 2024; Siraz et al., 2023). While most process perspectives assign recipients 'the passive role of spectators' (Human and Provan, 2000, p. 463), we examine how change agents' strategies shape recipients' judgments and response moves (Balogun et al., 2019; Huy et al., 2014). As legitimacy 'resides in the eye of the beholder' (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990, p. 177), we focus on its ongoing negotiation, shaped by the reciprocal agency of seekers and audiences. Based on this view, we identify two underexplored concepts that could potentially help to explain legitimacy dissociation between change agents and their projects: heterogeneity in legitimacy judgments and internal rivalry. These will receive deeper attention in our empirical analysis.

Heterogeneity in legitimacy judgments. Research has shown that legitimacy judgments may be based on instrumental, relational, or moral dimensions (Suchman, 1995; Tost, 2011), and that these evaluations may vary across stakeholders or audiences (Bitektine and Haack, 2015; Siraz et al., 2023). The instrumental dimension reflects an entity's alignment with the evaluator's goals, emphasizing 'effectiveness, efficiency, or utility' (Tost, 2011, p. 693). The relational dimension concerns whether interactions affirm 'social identities' and 'self-worth' (p. 690), while the moral dimension gauges adherence to prevailing norms, values, and beliefs (Suchman, 1995). Although these dimensions tend to reinforce one another (Bitektine, 2011; Bitektine and Haack, 2015; Tost, 2011), recent scholarship highlights the need to examine how they may diverge or interact in more complex ways (Balogun et al., 2019; Huy et al., 2014; Siraz et al., 2023; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). In contested settings, change agents and their projects may be judged differently across dimensions – seen as effective yet lacking authenticity or normative alignment, which may vary across audiences (Siraz et al., 2023; Waeger and Weber, 2019). For instance, in a study of healthcare reform, Sonpar et al. (2010) show that change agents gained legitimacy with policymakers while simultaneously losing support among physicians.

Moreover, legitimation strategies may intensify these tensions: pragmatic appeals can weaken moral credibility, while moral claims may provoke scepticism (Howard-Grenville

et al., 2017). Suchman (1995; see also Jones and Pittman, 1982) refers to this as the 'self-promoter's paradox' (p. 599) – where assertive legitimation invites doubt – and Ashforth and Gibbs (1990) similarly describe legitimation as a 'double-edged sword'. These dynamics can complicate efforts to build legitimacy – and could, in some cases, contribute to its dissociation across related objects.

Internal rivalry. A second notion centres on the competitive dynamics between change agents and recipients. Far from passive, recipients often appropriate, adapt, or reframe change initiatives to serve their own ends (Courpasson et al., 2012; Ford et al., 2008). Risi and Wickert (2017), for instance, show how the growing institutional legitimacy of corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices led line managers to absorb responsibilities once held by CSR specialists – hinting at underlying jurisdictional tensions. Organizational change is inherently political (Battilana and Casciaro, 2012), shaped by complex micro-dynamics of influence and rivalry (Buchanan and Badham, 2020, 1999). Recipients' cognitive and emotional responses to change (Oreg et al., 2018; Piderit, 2000) are often grounded in legitimacy judgments, which translate into actions that can support or contest change. Crucially, interactions between agents and recipients, especially when both seek recognition from top management or external audiences, may blur roles, generate jurisdictional disputes, and fragment initiatives – fuelling competition rather than cooperation (McDermott et al., 2013; Mikel-Hong et al., 2024). These dynamics highlight the importance of examining legitimacy not only as a matter of individual judgment, but as a potentially contested outcome of agent–recipient interactions.

In conclusion, while existing research often assumes a close association between the legitimacy of change agents and their projects, the position of certain actors – such as change-agency units – reveals more complex dynamics. Adopting a process perspective, we identify the potential for legitimacy dissociation between agents and projects, driven by heterogeneity in legitimacy judgments and internal rivalry. These complexities call for further research into how legitimacy dissociation arises and its implications for organizational change.

METHODS

Research Setting

We conducted a longitudinal study of a change programme in Region Alpha (a pseudonym), a French civil-service organization responsible for distributing government subsidies, managing public transportation, and maintaining high schools. The organization employs over 5000 people, including 1000 at its headquarters. Of the workforce, 85 per cent are civil servants with lifelong job security – 86 per cent of whom are unionized – while the remaining 15 per cent are on short-term contracts. Region Alpha is led by a President, a political figure elected for a 6-year term alongside members of the regional assembly. Civil servants, both high-level officers and field agents, ensure technical expertise and institutional continuity.

In 2015, the incoming President launched a major transformation plan, beginning with an HQ Transfer project that consolidated seven urban offices into a single suburban

headquarters, saving €7 million annually. However, this project caused a backlash among civil servants, who opposed the new site because it reduced their professional stature and increased commuting time, leading to three nationally publicized protests.

In a second phase of the transformation, coinciding with the move to the new facility, the President launched an initiative to adopt 'liberation management' principles, inspired by Carney and Getz's (2009) concept of 'liberated firms'. This approach promotes greater workplace autonomy and proactiveness, aiming to revamp an administrative culture that is seen as excessively bureaucratic. To lead the change, the President appointed Marie, a loyal friend and former colleague, as Vice President (VP) of Human Resources (HR). Marie pleaded for the creation of a new TD within the HR division to implement the change. The organization chart in Figure 1 situates the TD within its organizational context as a specialist change-agency unit outside the main line hierarchy.

The TD, officially endorsed by the President in April 2018, faced legitimacy challenges from the outset. It was led by Thomas, a 32-year-old former consultant, assisted by Nicolas, a 35-year-old civil servant. The team comprised ten short-term contract workers and external consultants, many of whom had overseen the controversial HQ Transfer project. This fuelled scepticism among civil servants, who viewed the 'liberation' principles as a fad.

While the President supported the TD's objectives, she strategically distanced herself from it, aware of the potential political pitfalls. Though she maintained a close relationship with Marie, her trusted ally, she avoided direct engagement with Thomas. Marie, however, was fully aligned with Thomas and committed to the mission. Such dynamics are common, as newly appointed leaders often navigate politically sensitive environments, and sponsors distance themselves from change units to retain flexibility in case of failure (Sturdy et al., 2013).

We initially sought to explore the 'liberation of the French administration' and the implementation of organizational change by a new change-agency unit. However, the resistance and legitimacy challenges triggered quickly became focal points. From observing the TD's dynamics and strategies, we began to consider audience judgments and reactions more deeply.

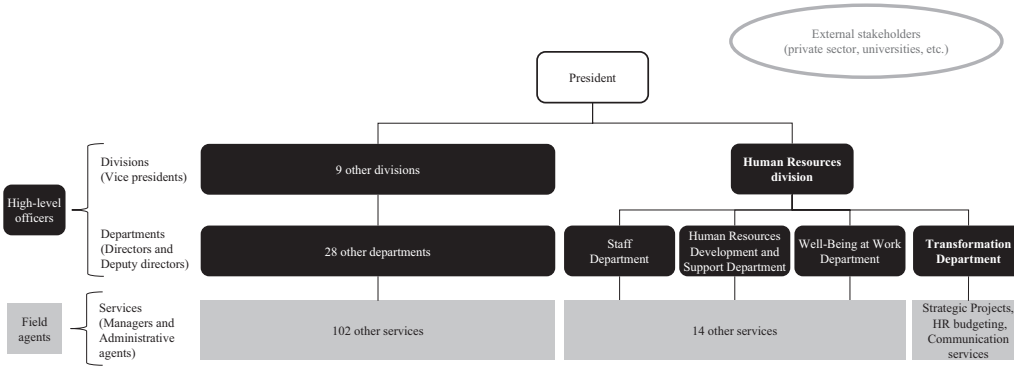

Figure 1. Organizational chart of Region Alpha and audiences of the Transformation Department (TD)

Data Collection

Data collection spanned three and a half years and combined observations, interviews, and archival data (Table I). Thomas first contacted the first author about the HQ Transfer project in December 2017, leading to a research agreement. Starting in September 2018, the second author conducted a year-long ethnography, spending 4–5 days a week in the field. The first and second authors also carried out 72

Table I. Data sources and use

Data source	*Type of data*	*Use in the analysis*
Observations	Descriptive notes resulting in 251 single-spaced pages of field notes (Emerson et al., 2011)	
	Field notes from attending events. Detailed records of interactions, conversations, and actions observed in events with members of the TD	Produce a map of practices that were used or produced as members of the TD engaged in these practices. Triangulate informants' accounts from interviews
	Informal conversations. Casual chats with members from all over the organization ranging from brief exchanges to longer discussions	Familiarize ourselves with the organizational context, gain informants' trust, discuss insights from observation, clarify uncertainties regarding department-related decisions, and support emerging interpretations. Enrich our understanding and substantiate interviews
	Audio-recorded meetings. Recordings of 47 formal meetings with members of the TD, resulting in 50.2 hours of audio recordings	Provide extensive and detailed illustrations of practices used and/or produced by members of the TD
Interviews	72 semi-structured interviews (1734 single-spaced pages of transcripts) with civil servants at all levels between 2017 and 2021, selected according to theoretical, convenience, and snowball sampling techniques	
	Preliminary interviews (10) with Marie and Thomas to investigate Region Alpha's culture, governance, and work processes	Familiarize ourselves with the organizational context and the change project
	TD interviews (16) with members of the team	Integrate observations with informants' accounts to improve our understanding of social dynamics and department- and project-related decisions and practices
	Audience interviews (46) with high-level officers (16) and field agents (30) throughout the organization, including adversaries, to capture a full range of views	Investigate audience's assessments regarding the change project and TD
Archival data	Electronic and paper documents totaling 2.12 GB of data	
	Administration-related documents: Organization charts, memorandums, economic and social assessments, press articles, etc. *Department-related documents*: Meeting minutes, social media posts and comments, emails, service offering presentations, reports, etc.	Familiarize ourselves with the research setting and triangulate and integrate the evidence derived from interviews and observations

semi-structured interviews with participants and audiences over time. While the second author's ethnography with the TD fostered trust with informants, this closeness might raise concerns about his involvement. Therefore, the first author, an experienced researcher with more distance from the setting, conducted biweekly peer-debriefs (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) with the second author to encourage reflexivity. He also occasionally joined the fieldwork, encouraging high-level officers to share their viewpoints and capturing the varied perceptions of audiences, including critics, over time. After the initial participant observation, the first and second authors continued monthly visits to gather additional data. Midway through data collection, the third author joined the team, providing an outsider perspective without direct informant engagement, forming an 'insider-outsider' team (Bourgoin et al., 2020; Gioia et al., 2010) to balance involvement and enrich theory-building.

Data Analysis

We adopted a process perspective (Berends and Deken, 2021; Langley et al., 2013) to analyse phenomena over time. Data analysis occurred in four steps, initially focusing on the temporal interplay between the TD's legitimation strategies and audience judgments. As analysis progressed, we examined the emergence of legitimacy dissociation between the change-agency unit and the project, leading to a process model and propositions capturing our key insights.

Step 1: Identifying and coding the TD*'s legitimation strategies*. First, using the NVivo software, we developed an initial inductive categorization of the TD's legitimation strategies. We then engaged in axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1997) to group themes into more abstract codes. We identified six main legitimation strategies, labelled (1) *anchoring*, (2) *selling*, (3) *embodying*, (4) *networking*, (5) *performing*, and (6) *external selling*. These are defined and illustrated in our findings. While these strategies are not the primary contribution of our study, they are important mid-level constructs that enabled us to comprehend the sequence of events and connect the TD's proactive efforts with audience assessments.

Step 2: Identifying and coding legitimacy judgments over time. We observed that the TD's legitimation strategies elicited audience judgments, which increasingly diverged between the unit and its project over time. Therefore, in the second coding step, we focused on legitimacy judgments, drawing primarily from interviews with civil servants, including those conducted later, to capture changes in perception. While legitimation strategies were coded based on observations and TD interviews, legitimacy judgments relied on external audience accounts.

To analyse legitimacy judgments, we categorized audiences and coded their reactions. Initially, we focused on internal audiences: high-level officers (VPs, Directors, and Deputy Directors) and field agents (managers and administrative agents) (Figure 1). While their perspectives largely aligned, high-level officers focused on structural dynamics and jurisdictional disputes, whereas field agents emphasized operational outcomes. We generally refer to all internal audiences as 'civil servants', but distinguish between these subgroups when relevant. In later phases, the evaluations of external stakeholders, particularly private companies, became more evident.

After mapping audiences, we conducted further coding to analyse the types of legitimacy judgments voiced by distinct groups. These judgments emerged in evaluative comments about the TD and its project. Initial analysis identified primary themes grouped into categories reflecting the instrumental, relational, and moral dimensions proposed by Tost (2011) and adopted by Huy et al. (2014) and Balogun et al. (2019). The first and second authors independently coded these dimensions, reviewing and resolving disagreements to ensure alignment.

Step 3: Identifying and coding recipients' responses and phases in the dissociation of legitimacy judgments. Throughout our analysis, we observed that the team's legitimation strategies were intertwined with the legitimacy judgments of their audiences, influencing change recipients' response moves. As active participants, recipients react to change agents' strategies (Ford et al., 2008) through, as described by Courpasson et al. (2012), deliberate and concrete activities aimed at (re)shaping the change process. We thus engaged in a third round of coding to analyse and group response moves into more abstract codes, resulting in the identification of six recipient responses, labelled (1) *guarding*, (2) *discrediting*, (3) *collaborating*, (4) *translating*, (5) *competing*, and (6) *severing*, that caused the TD to reorient their behaviour. These response moves are defined and illustrated in our findings. Our emergent data structure – highlighting the TD's legitimation strategies, audience legitimacy judgments, and recipients' responses (Gioia et al., 2013) – is presented in the Supporting Information (Figure S4).

As noted in previous work (Oreg et al., 2018), recipients' responses constitute specific events and turning points that are pivotal to the change process. To analyse them, we used a temporal bracketing strategy (Langley, 1999) to distinguish phases in the evolution of the process of dissociation between the change project and the change agent. While we do not suggest that these phases necessarily have generality beyond our case, they did allow us to see how activities in one phase had consequences that could explain what happened next (Langley, 1999). We identified three phases, which we label 'negative legitimacy association', 'nascent legitimacy dissociation', and 'consolidated legitimacy dissociation'.

Step 4: Building a process model. In the final round of analysis, we refined our initial categories by linking them to prior literature on the dynamics of legitimation in the context of change discussed earlier (Balogun et al., 2019; Huy et al., 2014), seeking to theoretically untangle the interactions between legitimation strategies, legitimacy judgments, and responses in each phase (Siraz et al., 2023). As we did so, we noticed that the legitimation strategies could be clustered further into two broader categories that we label 'self-promotive' and 'service-oriented' legitimation strategies, with the first oriented towards promoting the change agent's distinctive role and the second oriented towards serving recipients' needs. These, in turn, appeared to be associated with different kinds of judgments and recipient responses. We further grouped recipient responses into the two broader categories of 'appropriating the change content' and 'undermining the change agent' (see Figure S4). As we pulled the concepts and the linkages between them together, we arrived at an explanation of how related objects of legitimacy can become dissociated through what we call 'cooptive rejection', culminating in a process model and three propositions that draw together the main findings. Figure 2 below shows how legitimacy dissociation emerged over time at Region Alpha, closely following the empirical findings.

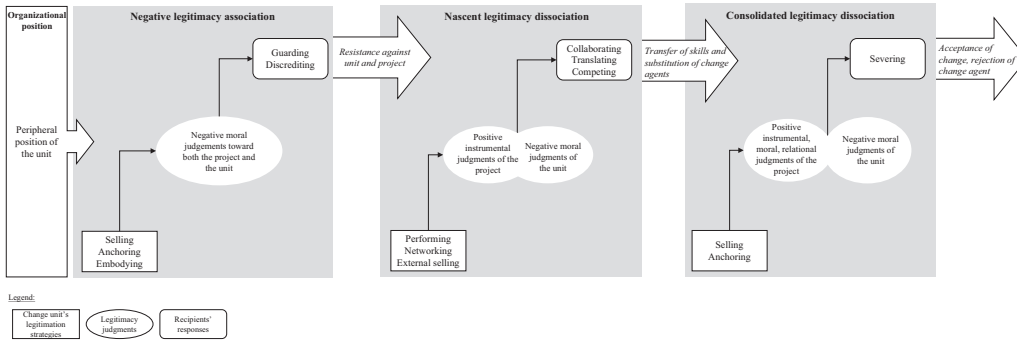

Figure 2. Process of dissociation between the legitimacy of the change project and the change unit at Region Alpha

We begin by presenting a detailed empirical narrative grounded in our first-order findings and informed by relevant theoretical concepts. We then develop a second-order theoretical narrative that integrates these insights into a process model of legitimacy dissociation (Berends and Deken, 2021).

FIRST-ORDER FINDINGS: TRACKING LEGITIMACY DISSOCIATION OVER TIME

In our first-order findings, we trace the emergence and development of legitimacy dissociation between a change agent and their project over a 3.5-year period. While the TD struggled to secure its own standing within the organization, the project it promoted gradually gained traction among recipients. The findings unfold across three phases (see Figure 2), each detailing: (1) the legitimation strategies deployed by the TD; (2) the legitimacy judgments expressed by key audiences; and (3) the recipients' responses to the change process. Additional data for each phase are available in the Supporting Information (Tables SII–SIV).

Phase 1: Negative Legitimacy Association

In this phase, Thomas and his seven-person team, supported by their sponsor Marie, initiated a change project that challenged established civil-service norms and values. Simultaneously, they began positioning the new TD as the driving force behind this change, defining its purpose and embedding it in the organization's administrative structure. Through what they viewed as a revolutionary project, the TD sought to bring their sponsor's vision to life.

Legitimation strategies: Selling, anchoring, and embodying. The TD engaged in three legitimation strategies: *selling*, *anchoring*, and *embodying*. *Selling* refers to the practice of attempting to create a compelling rationale for the change, while *anchoring* involves inserting the new unit into the administrative structure and carving out its mandate. Finally, *embodying* implies exemplifying the proposed cultural transformation in the team's own behaviours.

Thomas and Nicolas framed the creation of the new unit as a cornerstone of an ambitious change programme that would transform the administrative culture at Region Alpha. An assertive communication campaign (*selling*) advocated for the 'liberation of the French administration'. The project's rationale was that a 'cultural revolution' was needed to propel the administration into modernity. The vision revolved around fostering 'openness', spurring 'innovation', and revitalizing civil servants' sense of purpose (TD Mission Statement-DOC[1]-050718). This vision had two main pillars: encouraging new forms of work via new open-plan, flexible offices with hot-desking ('flex-office') and agile work methods, and increasing workers' autonomy through teleworking (remote and home working).

The communication campaign yielded over 25 press articles, an internal newsletter, corporate videos highlighting the benefits of the new HQ for 'liberated personnel', and organized visits to other 'liberated organizations'. The team also showcased presentations by outside experts on topics, such as 'happiness at work' and 'collective intelligence', including hands-on exercises with Lego to foster managerial agility (FN-190418).

Alongside *selling*, another legitimation strategy involved *anchoring*, aimed at strengthening the team's formal position within the administration and carving out its mandate. While devising the unit's blueprint, for instance, Thomas was insistent that it be officially designated a 'department'. This would bestow on him the title of Director, and on Nicolas the title Deputy Director – designations that would grant them access to executive committees and a top-tier management training programme. This was viewed as essential to enable their participation in pivotal decisions and facilitate interaction with high-level officers on an equal footing. Administrative regulations stipulated that the label 'department' could only be applied to a team of a specific magnitude. As Thomas explained:

> Ever wonder how importance is gauged in this administration? It hinges on the number of personnel in your team. That's why managers vie for larger teams, even when it's unnecessary. (IC-190418)

Therefore, with Marie's support, Thomas and Nicolas expanded the TD by absorbing two existing divisions: the seven-member Internal Communications team and the 10-person HR Financial Budgeting team, for an enlarged headcount of 25, fortifying the TD's standing.

Once official, the TD worked to carve out its mandate in relation to other administrative units. The team designated itself as an 'internal consulting unit' focused on all matters of change management. Their goal, too, was to facilitate other departments' 'liberation initiatives' (Nicolas-ITW-291018) by equipping them with an array of management tools – ranging from project scorecards to agile toolkits and visual management systems. Thus, the team dedicated a series of meetings to fashioning a comprehensive 'service offering' encompassing various levels of assistance in 'project scoping, oversight, and impact evaluation' (Service Offering-DOC-061118).

In the final legitimation strategy of this phase, *embodying*, Thomas and Nicolas urged their team to 'walk the talk' (TM-151018) on the new methods they preached. For instance, to embrace flex-office concepts, they switched workstations twice daily. A Kanban board laden with Post-Its and cartoonish illustrations adorned the entrance to the TD's workspace, where it was clearly visible to passers-by. Almost every day, the team conducted stand-up meetings in the open-plan office, actively showcasing agile methodologies (FN-271118). The team also extended autonomy measures to themselves by eliminating performance appraisals and allocating responsibilities based on merit rather than seniority. 'We need to be the vanguard of liberated departments within this administration', asserted Thomas (TM-151018). The disruption of conventional norms was also embodied in office spaces that were deliberately distinct, featuring comfortable sofas, clustered workstations, and artistic posters. The team took pride in its non-conformity, with an average age of 30 rather than 49 and a men's dress code characterized by 'beards, glasses, and fashionable suits' in contrast to the more conventional attire of the typical male civil servant (Nicolas-IC-201118).

Legitimacy judgments: Negative moral judgments towards the project and the unit. During the first phase, civil servants passed unfavourable moral judgments on both the project and the unit, which were strongly associated with each other. Regarding the project, several respondents openly ridiculed the visual management tools and managerial jargon, viewing them as an import of Anglo-Saxon, private-sector practices. High-level officers also took issue with the transformation's stated ambition, which 'came off as arrogant' (HL19-IC-101218) by portraying administrative staff as outdated compared with the TD's consultants. Several respondents questioned the sincerity of the liberation management discourse, suspecting that the project's true aim was to cut operational costs – a priority openly endorsed by the new President (FA03-ITW-171218).

As a unit, the TD still lacked visibility within the administration, and those who had interacted with them often expressed wide-ranging moral criticism. The team was described as a 'standalone groupuscule' doing 'God knows what' on Marie's behalf (HL06-ITW-171218). Judgments centred on scepticism towards outsiders who were pushing for a cultural shift in the administration despite lacking any administrative track record themselves. Notably, civil servants criticized the TD's 'showy' conduct, referring to their 'so-called expertise' and wondering how the TD could possibly 'blow so much air with so many Post-Its' or convince themselves that 'chilling on sofas and playing with a mini-basketball hoop makes them cool' (FA27-28-29-FN-111218; see also Table SII).

The underlying sentiment was one of strong moral disapproval: the TD was seen as emblematic of a broader trend – replacing experienced administrative staff, 'burdened by regulations and paperwork', with 'unskilled and expensive contractors' (HL05-ITW-171218). This resentment deepened after the forced integration of existing units, which left the Communication Director 'filled with resentment', as one team member noted (FA02-IC-291018). To several high-level officers, this was more than a structural shift – it was perceived as a threat. The TD's rapid expansion and privileged access to strategic committees and executive forums were seen as a disregard for institutional norms and professional hierarchies (FN-27112018).

Recipients' responses: Guarding and discrediting. Despite its early unpopularity among civil servants, the TD received strong backing from the President – who made the transformation a top priority – and consistent support from Marie. High-level officers responses reflected this ambivalence: most adopted a defensive posture we call *guarding* (see Table SII), remaining passive towards the change while protecting their own jurisdictions. Of the nine VPs, only three responded promptly to the TD's outreach, and just two agreed to meet (FN-121118). By the end of this first phase, fewer than 20 per cent of units had adopted flex-office, and 'fewer than 30 per cent of HQ employees regularly engaged in telework' (FN-231118). Thomas and Nicolas believed that officers were deliberately stalling, often 'ghosting [them]' by ignoring meeting requests (FN-121118). Others simply asked for more time, arguing that 'cultural change cannot be rushed or adhere to a strict timeline' (HL01-ITW-231018).

Some officers took concrete steps to keep the TD out of their domains. The head of the Modernization Department, for instance, negotiated with Marie to confine the TD's role to internal support functions, excluding public service reform altogether (Thomas-IC-131118; FN-131118). In HR, the director of the Human Resources Development and Support (HRDS) opposed the TD's involvement in manager training. After 'weeks of rivalry' (HL04-ITW-171218), Marie brokered a compromise: HRDS would oversee career planning, while the TD would focus on work practices (FN-140918). Similarly, the Department of Work Wellbeing dismissed the TD's promotion of 'happiness at work', arguing the concept fell within their own area of expertise (HL14-IC-260918). Most high-level officers rejected the TD's service offering outright, asserting that change management already fell under their mandates. One meeting made this resistance visible: as officers scrolled through their phones during the TD's presentation, one bluntly responded,

> You're positioning yourselves as project experts and reducing us to administrators. But you've missed the point: implementing projects is our role; we are the managers. (HL20-FN-201118)

High-level officers also engaged in what we term *discrediting*: actively eroding the TD's credibility, often by targeting its leadership. In the first month, some directors organized 'free speech meetings' that gave rise to sharp criticism of the TD's 'arrogance' and 'inconsistencies' (FA07-IC-201118). Others questioned Thomas's 'credentials, expertise, and credibility' (HL45-IC-181218), with one director claiming he had 'a sixth sense for detecting empty rhetoric' and that 'those who reinvent the wheel rarely last long' (HL05-IC-171218). The attacks intensified when an HR officer filed a complaint of nepotism over Thomas's appointment by Marie, alleging that the role had not been properly advertised internally, in violation of civil-service procedures. This led to an administrative court investigation (FN-261118). Soon after, a leaked internal document sparked a national newspaper article accusing the TD of unethical behaviour – specifically, collusion between Thomas and the consulting firm hired to support the transformation. The ensuing internal inquiry dealt a serious blow to the team's reputation.

Summarizing legitimacy dynamics in Phase 1. In sum, the first phase was marked by negative legitimacy judgments towards both the project and the TD. The team promoted a bold

vision of transformation (selling), secured a formal position within the organization (anchoring), and visibly modelled new work methods (embodying). But all these efforts were widely seen as self-promotive and out of step with administrative norms, provoking strong moral disapproval. In response, high-level officers disengaged and defended their turf (guarding), while also eroding the TD's credibility and leadership (discrediting), ultimately weakening the unit's reach (see Table SII).

Phase 2: Nascent Legitimacy Dissociation

Following the previous phase, the TD's leaders acknowledged that their efforts were falling short. The project faced growing resistance, the service offering had failed to engage high-level officers, and accusations of unethical behaviour raised concerns about the unit's viability. While the team, along with Marie, dismissed the allegations as politically motivated – and even as signs that the project was gaining visibility (Thomas-IC-171218) – Thomas recognized the need to restore legitimacy. 'We're on the radar', he warned during a crisis meeting, 'and if we don't reverse the trend, we'll be cornered for good' (Thomas-TM-070119). In response, the team shifted its approach, moving from promoting their distinctiveness (self-promotive strategies) to servicing the operational needs of civil servants as well (service-oriented strategies).

Legitimation strategies: Performing, networking, and external selling. To achieve their goal, the TD focused on a strategy we call *performing*, which refers to delivering tangible operational results. Nicolas elaborated on this approach:

> Our main concern now is to implement projects operationally. We must understand that for now, in people's eyes, there is nothing concrete, no 'product' from our team. (TM-070119)

The TD prioritized the rollout of flex-office and telework policies. Although widely announced, these measures were unevenly implemented – only a handful of services had the tools and support to apply them effectively. To address this gap, the team organized several 'collaborative development workshops' with other departments to redesign workspaces and co-create a 'new methods charter' promoting positive behaviours in open spaces. They also trained staff in the use of flex-office equipment (e.g., ergonomic desks) and telework tools (e.g., videoconferencing software), and introduced 'team schedules' to better coordinate remote work (FN-230419).

The TD also identified a flagship initiative, the 'Efficient Meeting Project', designed to meet the operational needs of civil servants. This addressed a prevalent issue in the administration: too many poorly structured meetings. Many civil servants considered these meetings a significant waste of time, criticizing them as 'symbolic rituals' that merely served to 'barter information' or 'demonstrate power by arriving late' (HL24-IC-220119). To make meetings more effective, the team shadowed managers and diagnosed best practices to establish metrics. They offered turnkey meeting packages and helped internal services implement them. They 'welcomed feedback' and strove to adapt their tools to the needs of each division rather than pushing ready-made solutions (FN-28032019).

While helping civil servants to advance operational tasks, the TD also worked to reinforce their personal ties with them through a *networking* legitimation strategy. Within the administration, they primarily sought support from higher-level officers. Thomas and Nicolas, for example, personally met with each VP to understand their needs and explore potential collaborations, moving away from their previous approach of unilaterally promoting their services. As Nicolas observed, 'building our reputation is crucial. We need to concentrate not only on our value proposition but also on understanding and meeting the needs and expectations of top managers' (Nicolas-TM-230119).

In parallel, the TD launched a legitimation strategy centred on *external selling*, aiming to counter internal resistance and gain the recognition Thomas felt was lacking from high-level officers. They organized conferences, hosted social events, and ramped up their social media presence – regularly posting about appearances, interviews, and guest talks at private companies to spotlight their innovative work methods. The team also led carefully staged tours of their new headquarters – presented as spaces 'for all Region Alpha's citizens'. These visits highlighted stand-up meetings, Kanban boards, and design-forward features, such as 'egg' chairs, where employees were encouraged to take 'micro-naps' (FN-290319). Together, these initiatives formed part of a broader 'charm offensive' (FN-300119), through which the TD actively engaged administrative bodies, universities, and private-sector actors – particularly those involved in Region Alpha's economic development. As Marie remarks:

> The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. They [private-sector managers] felt, perhaps for the first time, that the administration was mirroring their reality and genuinely grasping their experience. (IC-030419)

Showcasing the project to the private sector became a central goal of the team:

> We've displayed a vast map of France on the wall, labeled "The Tour de France of Transformation." Every time we engage with private companies, we mark the location with a pin. Our aim is to pepper the entire map. (FN-110419)

Legitimacy judgments: Positive instrumental judgments on the project; negative moral judgments on the unit. The team's operational results helped to restore some degree of legitimacy to the project, as reflected by an increase in positive instrumental judgments. For instance, field agents started to acknowledge the merits of the methodological packages:

> At first, when they used the SWOT matrix, participants were like, "What is this bullshit?" A few minutes into the workshop, however, we were seriously caught up in the discussion and, in the end, proud of the output. (FA14-ITW-120719)

Others testified to a deeper appreciation of flex-office and telework. One respondent noted, 'Telework truly is a boon. It fosters trust to boost productivity—a concept previously unknown in the administration' (FA09-ITW-100719). Another observed that the open-plan environment favoured 'more transparent communication, leading

to a wholesome atmosphere and a level of social interaction previously absent' (FA15-ITW-180719). Even union leaders quietly acknowledged the benefits of teleworking, with one noting: 'It's a novel approach, adopted by only a handful of administrations, yet universally lauded' (UR02-ITW-100719).

High-level officers, for their part, saw growing enthusiasm for the project within their teams – but their own positive assessments focused less on internal improvements than on the project's external visibility. The TD's external selling strategy had clearly drawn attention: 46 LinkedIn posts garnered 150,000 views and 2353 likes; Thomas received 69 invitations to high-profile events, including conferences with management gurus and TV appearances; and his 22 keynote speeches attracted over 3000 participants (internal report-DOC-040619). The project even received a 'Transformation of the Year Award' from a prestigious business school for its 'innovative efforts to modernize the civil service' (Social media-DOC-180919). For some high-level officers, this external recognition offered instrumental value – particularly as a way to enhance the administration's image and, by extension, their own standing. As one put it: 'The drive to modernize our operations resonates deeply with our stakeholders. The traction that the TD garners in this domain underscores the gravity of the issue' (HL08-ITW-250419).

Gradually, several high-level officers began to endorse the underlying critique of administrative inefficiency. One noted that 'simple tasks, such as approving a purchase, turn into formidable challenges' (HL10-ITW-110719); another described the administration as a 'labyrinthine structure with sluggish leadership' in urgent need of reform (HL07-IC-040419). A third reflected, 'the term 'liberated administration' may be trendy, yet I believe it captures our desire and determination to transform how the administration operates and how people work' (HL32-IC-110719).

Although the project began to receive positive instrumental evaluations, perceptions of the unit behind it remained negative – especially among high-level officers. While a few field agents acknowledged the TD's support, most senior managers issued strong moral criticisms, accusing the team of being 'two-faced', exaggerating its achievements, and promoting a distorted image of progress (FN-23072019). They pointed to a disconnect between the TD's polished public narrative and the difficult, often strained internal reality. One civil servant noted the prevalence of burnout – 'a topic not discussed on platforms like LinkedIn or in the media' (FA19-ITW-300719). Above all, many believed the TD's efforts were less about meaningful reform than about courting private-sector approval and building its own visibility. As one high-level officer remarked:

> They talk about 'liberation,' but they should stop dreaming. What we really need is effective tools and support for process reengineering rather than bullshit from start-ups about 'new ways of working.' (HL26-IC-100719)

High-level officers remarked that the TD could 'not offer more than what has already been seen' (HL12-ITW-150719) and stressed the 'necessity for civil servants to unite and champion changes in their behavior to drive meaningful reform' (HL11-ITW-110719). By the end of this period, a recurring theme had taken hold in their discourse: the belief

that true transformation should come from within the administration – led by civil servants themselves and grounded in their everyday realities.

Recipients' response: Collaborating, translating, and competing. During the second period, several internal units began *collaborating* with the TD, facilitating the implementation of change initiatives. Specifically, ten administrative units actively engaged in adopting flex-office and telework. By June 2019, nearly 500 civil servants had transitioned to flex-office arrangements, and 1200 were teleworking regularly. Some high-level officers also participated in TD initiatives, such as the 'Efficient Meeting Project'. Additionally, several directors sought the TD's change expertise, reviving its service offering. For instance, the Education division requested help to address the 'failure to involve [its] teams' in a departmental reorganization. Together, they developed a 'bottom-up' approach with workshops, team-building seminars, and branded templates to enhance engagement (FN-260419). Through their collaboration with the TD, each unit appointed a 'change relay' – often the director or deputy director – who was trained by the team in conceptual change frameworks, project management, and agile methods (FN-090419), enabling the transfer of key skills to operating units. The units also leveraged the TD's network with external stakeholders, resulting, among other initiatives, in a partnership between the Modernization division and a technology company 'to support a telemedicine project within Region Alpha' (FN-190319).

As high-level officers increasingly engaged with the change process and learned the tools, they began *translating* the project by adapting it to their local contexts, expertise, and values. For instance, the Director of Personnel Administration digitized HR files and pay-slips to 'reduce burdensome paperwork' (HL07-ITW-040419) and restructured seven services into a 'collaborative hub' with a flat structure to 'prevent isolation' and improve decision-making (HL36-IC-110419). Similarly, the accounting department adopted agile methods to digitize and streamline supplier invoice processing (HL12-ITW-150719). While these initiatives aligned with the TD's transformation goals and made use of its tools, high-level officers framed them as tailored to their units' own needs, focusing on 'addressing the administration's genuine operational challenges' (HL08-ITW-250419). As they reorganized their workspaces following TD guidelines, handwritten signs declaring 'WE are Region Alpha' and '#Proud to be civil servants' (FN-100519) further reflected both ownership of the change and pride in administrative values.

While some internal units collaborated with the TD, others – particularly those with functional mandates – began *competing* with them. Several departments used their authority to launch overlapping initiatives. For instance, the Director of the Staff Department introduced her own 'transformation programme', including digital dashboards, communication tools, and wellness initiatives (FN-250419). HRDS bypassed the TD to run parallel activities, such as a competing hackathon (FN-190319). The Modernization Division created its own task force on administrative reform, despite TD objections (FN-030719), and its VP later joined forces with the Legal VP to negotiate directly with the President for control over a centralized digital programme – excluding the TD entirely (FN-270619). These response moves signalled growing contest, with established units seeking to reclaim control of the reform agenda, pushing the TD to the margins (see also Table SIII).

Summarizing legitimacy dynamics in phase 2. To recover from earlier setbacks, the TD adopted a dual strategy. Internally, it shifted towards service-oriented strategies – focusing on tangible results, building relationships, training staff, and responding to operational needs. Externally, it doubled down on self-promotive strategies towards external audiences to gain visibility and support. This dual approach deepened the divide between perceptions of the project and the unit. Field agents began to see the project's potential to enhance efficiency, while high-level officers recognized its growing external traction, resulting in more positive instrumental evaluations and responses of collaboration and translation. However, the external communication campaign invited negative moral judgments of the unit because the messages seemed misleadingly self-promotive, aimed at impressing outsiders while ignoring real issues. This stimulated rivalry between high-level officers and the TD for ownership of the change, which was facilitated by the transfer of skills from the TD to operating units that had occurred during project work.

Phase 3: Consolidated Legitimacy Dissociation

The change project's wider traction across administrative units, juxtaposed with the competing responses from high-level officers, elicited mixed feelings within the TD. On one hand, they welcomed its broader adoption as validation of their efforts. On the other, they feared their role as 'catalysts of the cultural revolution' was slipping away (Thomas-IC-280819). More troublingly, the emergence of other units as leaders of the transformation raised doubts about the TD's continued relevance. In response, the team shifted focus towards reclaiming credit for the project's success, prompting a revision of their legitimation strategies.

Legitimation strategies: Selling and anchoring. The TD returned to earlier legitimation strategies, *selling* and *anchoring*, to bolster their stature as initiators of the reform. Specifically, the team launched a new communication campaign (*selling*) highlighting the 'contemporary ways of working of a forward-thinking administration' (TM-250919). The TD carefully crafted messages to ensure they were recognized for the inception of the transformation programme. As Thomas affirmed, 'Marie and I, we started this. We're the real architects behind this revolutionary shift in public administration and always will be' (IC-120919). To reinforce this narrative, the TD commissioned a visually striking book highlighting the project's milestones and the TD's pivotal role at each stage. The book was shared with internal units, displayed at headquarters, and featured in the team's speaking engagements.

Furthermore, the team drafted a programmatic article theorizing their 'liberating work' methodology, intended for publication in a national newspaper with plans for the President to co-sign it, 'branding' their 'transformational manifesto' (Thomas-IC-041119). This effort aimed to position the TD as pioneers of a replicable cultural shift, turning Region Alpha into a model for reform across the French administration. While occasionally highlighting local initiatives, such as the Transport division's mobile app, the TD integrated these seamlessly into its own overarching programme. When Thomas invited ten managers to accept a transformation award on his behalf from a professional association, he disseminated the footage widely within the administration and across social media (FN-180919) to amplify the TD's perceived impact.

Parallel to their selling strategy, the TD reintroduced anchoring efforts to solidify their structural position. For example, by emphasizing the connection between the transformation project and the physical layout of the new building, they proposed to integrate the 40-person General Services department. This, they argued, would allow them 'to modernize and innovate the reception desk, enhancing the user experience throughout the building in line with the change' (FN-100919). Despite Marie's support, the President declined due to opposition from its director but did approve the reception area transformation project. The TD also sought to expand their influence through new 'cross-functional programmes', such as the 'connected area programme', aiming to 'extend their domain of competence throughout the administration' (Nicolas-IC-300819). Simultaneously, Nicolas focused on strengthening the department's resources, increasing staff to 33, with particular attention to recruiting highly qualified administrative professionals.

Legitimacy judgments: Positive instrumental, relational, and moral judgments of the project; negative moral judgments of the unit. During this final phase, the TD's legitimation strategies sharpened the dissociation in change recipients' judgments – intensifying positive assessments of the project while reinforcing negative evaluations of the TD as its proponent. The project itself – flex-office, telework, new managerial tools, streamlined structures, and the aim of 'freeing the administration from its excessive bureaucracy' (HL12-ITW-150719) – was widely praised for its instrumental value, as well as its relational and moral appeal, particularly once high-level officers assumed leadership of its implementation. Respondents highlighted the value of local initiatives in 'cutting through layers of unnecessary administrative procedures' and 'improving collaboration through tailored working methods and tools' (FA18-IC-041119). These instrumental judgments were further reinforced by relational evaluations of high-level officers, who gained influence as change leaders by mobilizing their teams around the initiative. As one field agent put it:

> We've implemented a flex-office system, embraced telework, and enhanced our proactive approach. Our VP played a crucial role in this change—listening, supporting, and when necessary, decisively leading. He challenged what we once considered unchangeable. (FA47-IC-121019)

This provided the final moral validation for the project. Instead of seeing the initiative as alien to the administrative ethos, civil servants now argued that it was their own values that clashed with the outdated, bureaucratic mindset. As one field agent remarked: 'We must keep moving forward, truly freeing the administration from its hierarchical constraints!' (FA41-IC-031019). A high-level officer described the redefinition of senior roles as a move towards 'serving as facilitators, amplifying their teams' initiatives' (HL42-IC-241019). Criticism now turned towards opponents of the project, who were increasingly labelled as 'hardliners' or 'reactionaries' (FA14-IC-241019).

However, the project's growing recognition did not extend to the TD itself, which remained the target of sustained critique on moral grounds. Many condemned what they perceived as a fundamental hypocrisy: while the TD publicly celebrated local initiatives as catalysts for change, it simultaneously claimed authorship of the broader

transformation. One civil servant denounced this as 'political hijacking' (FA35-IC-031019), while a high-level officer noted he was 'unfortunately familiar' with what he called the 'politicization of the process' (HL30-IC-241019). Another accused the TD of using the project as a vehicle for personal advancement at the expense of collective recognition: 'While I understand the importance of working towards career or political advancement, I believe the interests of public service must come first' (HL36-IC-251119). The TD's emphasis on communication was similarly criticized as superficial – favouring visibility over operational substance. In response, civil servants increasingly valourized their own local leaders, contrasting their grounded contributions with the TD's perceived opportunism. These dynamics crystallized into stark moral judgments: 'true civil servants' (FA47-IC-121019), with hands-on legitimacy, were opposed to a TD team dismissed as political mercenaries, advocating 'change for the sake of change' (FA09-IC-041119).

Recipients' response: Severing. At this stage, high-level officers – now leading their own change initiatives with growing autonomy – adopted a more assertive stance towards the TD, effectively severing its remaining ties to the project. This shift marked the completion of the TD's gradual substitution, positioning high-level officers as the new custodians of the change agenda. Externally, they reshaped the narrative by leveraging media contacts and communication platforms originally established by the TD, now used to spotlight their own leadership while omitting any reference to the team (Social media-DOC-141019). This reframing was tacitly supported by the Internal Communications Director; as one field agent observed, her 'known resentment towards Thomas facilitated the omission of the TD from communications' (FA21-ITW-180220). Internally, competing departments rebranded TD-developed tools and initiatives, systematically erasing the team's involvement. Events such as the *Public Administrations & Managers in 2030 Conference* publicly celebrated the transformation while making no mention of the TD (FN-031019).

The ongoing severing of the TD from the project extended to increasing restrictions on collaboration and access to resources. High-level officers terminated joint initiatives, invoking 'project maturity' or 'operational independence' (FN-120919), and excluded the TD from key developments, including major application upgrades affecting all headquarters employees (FN-241019). Resource withdrawal compounded the marginalization: divisions refused to allocate funding or staff to TD-led initiatives, such as an internal incubator. The HRDS further blocked the team's access to the managers' academy (FN-251119), cutting off recruitment for critical programmes. Within weeks, the TD appeared to be fully sidelined. Thomas and his team felt their contributions had been rendered nearly invisible, and their ability to influence the transformation was drastically reduced.

Two external events further accelerated this shift. First, in the fall of 2019, a public transport strike disrupted travel for millions, including over 5000 workers at Region Alpha. Second, the March 2020 pandemic lockdown paralysed much of the country's public administration. Civil servants swiftly transitioned to mass remote work, compelling even the final holdouts to adopt telework. Uniquely among French public administrations, Region Alpha had its teams operating remotely within 3 days, leveraging telework, IT infrastructure, and digital processes (HL11-IC-090620). The President and Regional

Council members highlighted this 'resilience' as a result of civil servants' substantial change efforts (Social media-DOC-160420). By this point, the project had been fully embraced, with high-level officers leading initiatives virtually and effectively excluding the TD from any involvement (see also Table SIV).

Summarizing legitimacy dynamics in Phase 3. In the final phase, we witness the TD's attempts to reclaim ownership of the change initiative from high-level officers through strategies of *selling* and *anchoring*, which further undermined the TD's moral standing internally. Civil servants generally perceived the TD's efforts as motivated more by personal political ambitions than genuine transformational goals, despite growing acknowledgment of the necessity for change. In response, high-level officers engaged in *severing*, gradually cutting the ties between the TD and the change project. In doing so, they implicitly positioned themselves as the owners of the transformation agenda, effectively substituting for the TD in that role.

Epilogue. On 25 March 2021, Thomas was summoned to an urgent meeting by Marie. There, the VP of HR outlined various challenges facing the TD, including resistance from high-level officers and allegations of misconduct, which could jeopardize the change project and impact the President's upcoming regional election campaign. Following Marie's counsel to protect their achievements, Thomas decided to resign (Thomas-ITW-230421) and left Region Alpha definitively that same evening. The team was informed of these developments over subsequent days, with Nicolas becoming interim department head.

Three months later, on 27 June 2021, the President secured a decisive re-election victory. A pillar of her successful campaign was the transformation of the regional administration, exemplified by the relocation, flex-office, and telework – initiatives she attributed to dedicated civil servants who had worked diligently to 'liberate the French administration'. Soon afterwards, Marie decided to dissolve the TD 'in its current form' (Nicolas-IC-290921), aiming to integrate ongoing projects into the administrative structure. The team was downsized and reoriented towards 'enhancing the working experience of civil servants' (ibid.).

COOPTIVE REJECTION: UNPACKING THE PROCESS OF DISSOCIATION BETWEEN RELATED OBJECTS OF LEGITIMACY

Our findings trace the evolution of a change initiative that led to an unexpected outcome: the widespread adoption of the project despite the rejection of its change agent. To explain this, we introduce the concept of *cooptive rejection*: a process where *change recipients appropriate a change project while simultaneously undermining the responsible change agent*. Rather than fully collaborating, recipients gradually take control of the project, severing the change agent's ties and ultimately supplanting them. Cooptive rejection thus captures how dissociation can unfold between related objects of legitimacy. Anchored in a process perspective on legitimation (Langley, 2007; Suddaby et al., 2017), we argue that this dynamic is co-constructed through the interplay of agents' strategies and recipients' evolving judgments and response moves. Rather than viewing audiences as passive, we emphasize their active role in negotiating legitimacy. Figure 3 presents our conceptual process model, which aligns with three theoretical propositions unpacking the mechanisms of cooptive rejection.

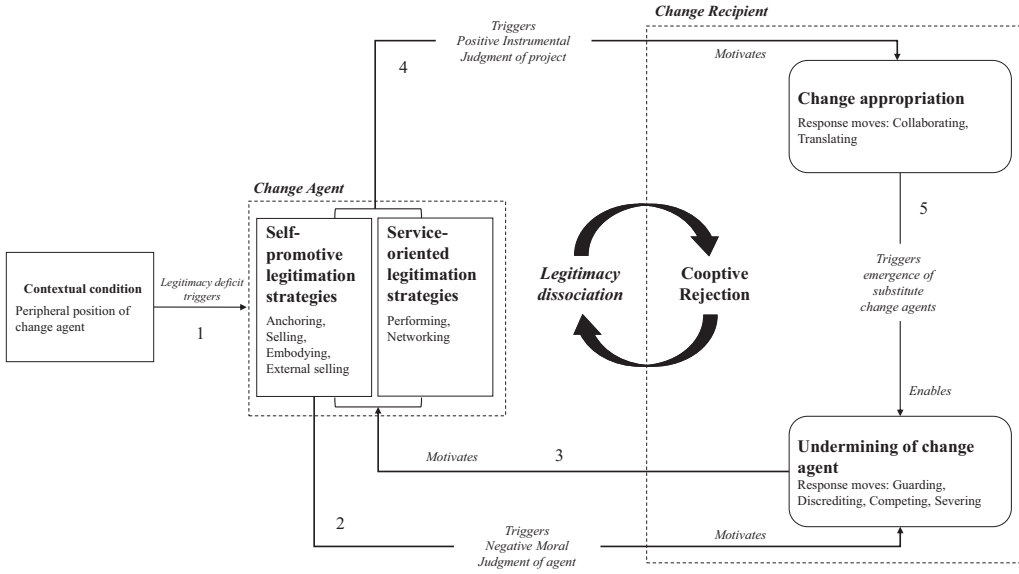

Figure 3. Process model of cooptive rejection

Prefiguring Cooptive Rejection: Undermining Legitimacy Through Self-Promotive Strategies

As illustrated in Figure 3, Link 1, change agents in peripheral positions often begin with significant legitimacy deficits – lacking recognized authority, structural embeddedness, or a demonstrable track record (Tost, 2011; Wright, 2009). This reinforces the view of legitimacy not as a binary condition, but as a dynamic, fluid position along a spectrum from legitimacy to illegitimacy (Siraz et al., 2023). Starting with a low 'reservoir' of legitimacy, one might expect change agents to prioritize building acceptance among recipients – through pragmatic steps or relational engagement that signal alignment and trust (Reay et al., 2006; Treviño et al., 2014). Yet, agents in weak positions may often turn to assertive, symbolic, or moralizing strategies to compensate for their fragile standing (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990). Our findings show that such self-promotive strategies – when not underpinned by instrumental or relational efforts – are likely to backfire, eliciting negative moral judgments and ultimately prompting recipients to undermine the agent's position (Figure 3, Link 2).

This dynamic exemplifies the *self-promoter's paradox* (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990; Suchman, 1995), in which overt legitimation efforts raise doubts rather than resolve them. Instead of fostering support, they may be interpreted as inauthentic, top-down, or dismissive of existing norms and values. Moralizing frames, in particular, are prone to backlash when they suggest audience inferiority (Howard-Grenville et al., 2017). In our case, the agent's early reliance on symbolic communication and embodiment accentuated their outsider status and was perceived by civil servants as a challenge to their own managerial role. We conceptualize this as an early mechanism in cooptive rejection: a pre-emptive erosion of moral and relational legitimacy that sets the stage for recipients to challenge the change and reject its initiator:

Proposition 1: When change agents use self-promotive legitimation strategies from a position of legitimacy deficit, they risk weakening both their own legitimacy and that of their project.

Initiating Cooptive Rejection: The Dual Effects of Service-Oriented and Self-Promotive Strategies

The literature suggests that change agents facing legitimacy deficits often adopt repair or defensive strategies (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990; Huy et al., 2014; Suchman, 1995). Studies on professionals highlight tactics, such as aligning with institutional norms, achieving incremental wins, and cultivating relational trust (Daudigeos, 2013; Reay et al., 2006; Treviño et al., 2014). These 'service-oriented' strategies enhance both instrumental and relational legitimacy of the project, reinforcing the association between project and agent (Huy et al., 2014; Walker et al., 1986). In our case, the agent adopted such strategies in response to strong resistance from recipients, while simultaneously engaging in self-promotional efforts aimed at external audiences (Figure 3, Link 3). This dual approach ultimately triggered a dissociation of legitimacy judgments between the project and the agent, driven by two interrelated mechanisms that have not been theorized in conjunction before.

The first centres on change appropriation. By clarifying a project's value and addressing recipients' pragmatic concerns, service-oriented strategies elicit positive instrumental judgments and motivate appropriation (Figure 1, Link 4). Crucially, this also enables skill transfer and contextual adaptation, allowing recipients to implement the change autonomously – effectively turning them into substitute change agents (Figure 1, Link 5). Risi and Wickert (2017) observe a similar shift: as CSR practices became institutionalized, line managers absorbed the skills needed for implementation, rendering CSR managers redundant. More broadly, change champions may facilitate their own displacement by embedding new knowledge into the organization (Stouten et al., 2018). In our case, civil servants' appropriation enabled them to enact the project independently, reshaping the agent–recipient dynamic.

The second mechanism more directly involves the undermining of the change agent. Prior research suggests that external endorsements can bolster a project's internal legitimacy (Drori and Honig, 2013; Heinze and Weber, 2016). In our case, the change agent turned to self-promotive strategies targeting external audiences. This served to strengthen the project's instrumental legitimacy (Figure 1, Link 4) – as predicted in the literature. However, it also triggered negative moral judgments of the agent, enhancing the motivation to undermine the agent, now perceived as a rival for project ownership (Figure 3, Link 2). This marked a turning point in the *dissociation of legitimacy judgments*: the initiative gained value, but the agent lost standing.

As illustrated in Figure 3, legitimacy dissociation both fuels and is reinforced by cooptive rejection in a recursive loop. At the heart of this dynamic lies, again, the paradoxical dynamics of self-promotion. While the 'self-promoter's paradox' warns of a backlash when promotional efforts appear inauthentic or dismissive of others (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990; Suchman, 1995), our study suggests a more complex effect: self-promotion targeted at external influencers may spark enthusiasm for a project while simultaneously provoking efforts to displace its agent.

Specifically, in our case, high-level officers – politically skilled actors attuned to status dynamics and adept at issue-selling – were drawn to the project's external visibility, even as they contested the moral legitimacy of the agent, perceived as displaying symbolic-substantive inconsistencies (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990; Suchman, 1995). Attraction to the project intensified the internal rivalries seeded previously. By this stage, however, recipients were no longer relatively passive resisters. They had acquired the skills to implement the change and therefore reframe the initiative to align with their own values, positioning themselves as its rightful stewards. This enabled them to deploy moves that undermined the agent (Figure 3, Link 5).

This dynamic extends prior work showing that self-promotion, though often perceived as arrogant or self-serving, can also enhance perceptions of competence, influence, and project desirability. Jones and Pittman (1982) categorize self-promotion as a key impression management tactic aimed at signalling expertise and achievement, particularly in competitive or evaluative contexts. Harvey (2025) further demonstrates that self-promotive strategies can increase audience engagement by framing the initiative as visionary or high-impact – thereby elevating the visibility and perceived value of the project. However, both authors also emphasize the double-edged nature of self-promotion: while it may attract attention and support, it simultaneously subjects the promoter to heightened scrutiny and moral evaluation. In our case, self-promotion bolstered the project's legitimacy while inviting moral critique of the promoter, ultimately supporting cooptive rejection.

Unlike Risi and Wickert's (2017) collaborative handoff – where shared values between change agent and recipient enabled a smooth transition – our case reveals deep misalignment and internal rivalries. As research on the politics of change has shown, the 'frontstage' of transformation often masks 'backstage' struggles over credit, control, and legitimacy (Buchanan, 2003; Buchanan and Badham, 1999). We conceptualize the dual effects of service-oriented and self-promotive strategies, central to cooptive rejection, as follows:

> *Proposition 2:* When change agents combine service-oriented and self-promotive legitimation strategies, they simultaneously foster positive instrumental judgment of the change and moral rejection of the unit. This dual effect motivates and enables recipients to appropriate the change while undermining the agent.

Consolidating Cooptive Rejection: Reinforcing Change Agent Rejection Via Self-Promotive Strategies

The final proposition highlights how internal rivalry for the ownership of change (Buchanan, 2003; Buchanan and Badham, 1999), once triggered, can escalate over time and ultimately entrench cooptive rejection. Prior research characterizes the 'overreacting actor' as a distinctive expression of self-promotion – managers who, in defensive positions, 'overstate their case through self-aggrandizing or inflammatory claims, or overcompensate in defending organizational legitimacy' (Suchman, 1995, p. 190). Suchman also notes a form of appropriation paradox, in which sector leaders promote isomorphism to gain moral legitimacy while simultaneously resisting diffusion

to protect strategic advantage (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994). A similar dynamic emerged in our case: as recipients appropriated the change and increasingly substituted for the agent, the agent's response was marked by ambivalence – oscillating between tacit encouragement of the appropriation and a fallback to initial self-promotive legitimation strategies (Figure 3, Link 3).

Yet, competition between staff change agents and line-based change leaders is fundamentally asymmetrical. Research on change acceptance emphasizes the legitimating force of proximal, relational ties – particularly when change is championed by immediate supervisors (Furst and Cable, 2008; Heyden et al., 2017; Hill et al., 2012). Legitimacy theory offers further insight: Tost (2011) posits that intrinsic orientation – grounded in group identification – amplifies the salience of relational legitimacy. Change efforts led by familiar, embedded actors are thus more likely to succeed, as recipients privilege relational over moral or instrumental judgments (Huy et al., 2014; Oreg and Sverdlik, 2011). In jurisdictional contests, legitimacy tends to accrue to actors with stronger relational embeddedness (McDermott et al., 2013; Mikel-Hong et al., 2024). In our case, field agents aligned with high-level officers, perceived as more authentic and internally anchored than the external change agents. As these officers assumed control, they reframed the initiative to reflect prevailing norms and values, thereby reinforcing the project's legitimacy across all three dimensions – instrumental, relational, and moral (Tost, 2011). This dynamic leads to our final proposition:

> *Proposition 3:* When change agents deploy self-promotive legitimation strategies to reclaim ownership of a project appropriated by recipients, they risk weakening their own legitimacy, deepening the dissociation between the legitimacy of the project and that of the agent.

DISCUSSION

This study adopts a process perspective on legitimacy to conceptualize *cooptive rejection* – a process that helps explain the dissociation of legitimacy between change agents and their projects. By unpacking this process, we contribute to research on legitimacy and organizational change. Our analysis makes three key contributions: It illuminates how legitimacy becomes dissociated between related objects; how distinct forms of legitimacy evolve and interact over time; and how internal rivalries fuel the reconfiguration of change agency from within.

Advancing Knowledge on Legitimacy and Organizational Change

Explaining the dissociation between related objects of legitimacy. We contribute to both the legitimacy and change management literature by tracing the dissociation of related objects of legitimacy and by demonstrating that *the legitimacy of the change agent is not necessarily a prerequisite for the successful implementation of a change project*. Existing research suggests that the legitimacy of related entities tends to evolve in tandem (Huy et al., 2014; Vaara and Monin, 2010), emphasizing the association between the legitimacy of the change agent and their project in the eyes of recipients. This link is

often attributed to trust, ethical leadership, and relational proximity, which are viewed as critical for fostering change acceptance (Battilana and Casciaro, 2012; Furst and Cable, 2008; Oreg and Sverdlik, 2011; Stjernberg and Philips, 1993). Our study offers an alternative empirical case and theoretical account. The concept of cooptive rejection captures a dynamic in which change recipients legitimize and appropriate the change while simultaneously undermining its promoter. This process ultimately severs the link between agent and initiative, enabling recipients to replace the original champion, recast as a rival.

Our research, in turn, advances a process model of legitimation that captures the evolving interplay between change agents' strategies and audience responses. Anchored in a process perspective (Langley, 2007; Suddaby et al., 2017), our study answers recent calls to move beyond depictions of recipients as passive spectators by integrating their evaluative agency into process models of legitimation (Loos and Spraul, 2024; Siraz et al., 2023). Given the methodological difficulty of tracing both change agents and recipients over time, few studies have employed a longitudinal, multi-perspective design to examine legitimacy dynamics (e.g., Balogun et al., 2019; Huy et al., 2014). Yet, this approach is crucial for surfacing dynamics, such as *cooptive rejection*, which remain obscured in more linear or agent-centric accounts. We show how a change-agency unit employed strategies, such as selling, anchoring, embodying, performing, and networking to legitimize their initiative. These efforts shaped recipients' judgments – across instrumental, relational, and moral dimensions (Tost, 2011) – and triggered varied responses, including guarding, discrediting, collaborating, translating, competing, and severing. Over time, this gave rise to substitute change agents who engaged in *cooptive rejection*, recursively deepening the dissociation between related objects of legitimacy.

Self-promotion and the heterogeneity of legitimacy judgments. Conceptual work on legitimacy has long acknowledged that its various forms – instrumental, relational, and moral – may be difficult to disentangle in practice and may even come into tension, calling for more empirical inquiry into their interaction over time (Suchman, 1995; Tost, 2011). Change management research remains inconclusive on how these types of legitimacy evolve and interact throughout organizational change processes (Balogun et al., 2019; Huy et al., 2014; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). Our study offers such an empirical account by tracing the evolution of legitimacy judgments surrounding a change-agency unit seeking to promote a change project from a weak legitimacy position. A key mechanism underlying *cooptive rejection* lies in this asymmetry: While change agents ultimately succeeded in fostering perceptions of instrumental legitimacy for the project – whether for task advancement, political positioning, or external signalling – they failed to elicit positive moral and relational evaluations of themselves. This misalignment between types of legitimacy not only fuels cooptive rejection but also reveals the layered nature of instrumental legitimacy: For some actors (e.g., field agents), it derived from practical utility; for others (e.g., high-level officers), it signalled career advancement or influence-building.

Along these lines, we extend research on the 'double-edged nature' of legitimation efforts (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990), which highlights how attempts to secure positive evaluations can backfire when perceived as manipulative or insincere. This paradox is captured in the

notion of 'protesting too much' (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990, p. 177) and the 'self-promoter's paradox' (Suchman, 1995, p. 599; Jones and Pittman, 1982). While our findings confirm that self-promotive strategies often trigger rejection by casting the agent as arrogant or self-serving, they also reveal a more nuanced dynamic: these strategies may simultaneously enhance the project's instrumental appeal. This contributes a novel explanation for the *self-promoter's paradox*, not only echoing earlier insights (Harvey, 2025; Jones and Pittman, 1982) but grounding them in the interplay between distinct forms of legitimacy. It also underscores the risk of deploying 'moralizing frames' (Howard-Grenville et al., 2017, p. 524) form a peripheral position, without first securing instrumental and relational legitimacy. Our findings also align with studies that call for 'an independent focus on the legitimacy of human actors' – particularly judgments grounded in relational authenticity (Huy et al., 2014, p. 1676) – and suggest that audiences assess agents differently from their initiatives. Finally, we show that self-promotion can resonate with external audiences who share the underlying values, triggering an *outside-in* legitimation dynamic, whereby external endorsement precedes – and potentially enables – internal acceptance.

Internal rivalries in organizational change. This study advances research on the political and competitive dynamics of organizational change (Balogun et al., 2005; Buchanan, 2003; Buchanan and Badham, 2020, 1999) by showing how change efforts can spark rivalries between agents and recipients (Risi and Wickert, 2017). Taking seriously the notion that legitimacy is a negotiated, multi-actor, and multi-level process requires shifting attention from the change agent's self-promotion strategies as the main cause of dissociation to the recipients' role in engaging in cooptive rejection. In our case, recipient responses acted as counter-legitimation strategies: the recurring charge of ambivalence and duplicity aimed at the agent could just as easily be turned back on recipients, particularly high-level officers.

What our study shows, in turn, is a distinct form of substitution likely fuelled by rivalry and a growing inclination to push out the agent. Through cooptive rejection, recipients appropriate the change while undermining the agent – gradually taking ownership in ways that ensure the agent's exclusion. While Risi and Wickert (2017) describe such dynamics in contexts where agents hold central positions and share values with recipients, our study captures the heightened contestation that arises when agents intervene from the margins and face early resistance from politically skilled recipients. Rivalry intensifies when recipients perceive the agent's strategies as threatening their own standing or misaligned with their values or interests. As recipients assert ownership of the change, the agent's efforts to reassert control escalate – ultimately triggering a severing response. While such substitution may advance the change itself, it poses an existential threat for agents whose legitimacy depends on continued alignment with key internal actors. Ultimately, the primary sponsor withdraws support and adopts a posture of strategic distancing (Sturdy et al., 2013; Wright, 2009).

Finally, the dynamic of cooptive rejection offers new insights into organizational change by foregrounding the ambivalent role that change recipients can play in the process (Oreg and Sverdlik, 2011). While existing research often highlights the proverbial benefits of recipients as local champions of change (Stanley et al., 2005), our findings suggest that *intense* – or even *excessive* – championing can blur the line between agents and recipients, leading to a shift in control (McDermott et al., 2013; Risi and Wickert, 2017). This raises a critical question: should such championing be seen as a form of acceptance

or resistance? Our study suggests reframing resistance as a mechanism for reconfiguring change initiatives, rather than merely disrupting them (Beer et al., 1990; Kotter, 1995), thus extending perspectives on its constructive potential (Mikel-Hong et al., 2024; Thomas and Hardy, 2011). In doing so, we challenge the traditional binary view merely opposing resistance and compliance (Piderit, 2000; Ybema and Horvers, 2017). Cooptive rejection recasts resistance as a blend of subversion and compliance, echoing Ybema and Horvers' (2017) concept of *backstage resistance*. Yet, whereas their work emphasizes subtle disruptions, our findings show that resistance can catalyse profound transformations – culminating in a decisive reconfiguration of agency.

Transferability of Findings and Boundary Conditions

As with any qualitative study based on a single case, the question of transferability (Schwandt et al., 2007) comes into focus: Can readers meaningfully apply our findings to other contexts? We believe they can. First, the concept of cooptive rejection extends beyond intraorganizational settings as a distinctive, competitive form of cooptation. It helps illuminate situations in which peripheral change agents have their ideas appropriated by more powerful actors, leading to diminished recognition and legitimacy (Child, 2015; Jaffee, 2012; Kim and Schifeling, 2022; Van Wijk et al., 2013; Wright and Zammuto, 2013). The underlying mechanism – rooted in a discrepancy between types of legitimacy – is particularly telling: when a project is valued for its instrumental utility, but its promoter lacks relational or moral support, dynamics of competitive appropriation are likely to unfold.

Second, *cooptive rejection* may represent a generic risk for internal change-agency units – particularly those pursuing disruptive change that challenges entrenched structures. Positioned in a liminal space and often cast as 'fall guys' for top management (Wright, 2009; Wylie et al., 2014; Wylie and Sturdy, 2018), these units must navigate the tension between driving transformation and preserving internal legitimacy. Our case illustrates how bold, self-promotive, and occasionally abrasive strategies can stimulate change while simultaneously triggering relational and moral rejection of the unit itself. This paradox raises a critical question: Can change-agency units achieve ambitious outcomes without incurring such backlash, or is marginalization an inherent condition of pursuing deep change from within? Incremental, consensus-based approaches may reduce resistance (Reay et al., 2006), but risk weakening the transformative thrust of the initiative. Unlike external consultants – who operate under different normative systems and can more easily absorb scapegoating (Armbrüster, 2004; Ram, 1999) – internal units are judged by those they seek to disrupt. Our findings underscore a core contradiction at the heart of internal change agency: To succeed, they must destabilize; to survive, they must conform.

That said, our case also reflects important boundary conditions. The context of French public administration – with its dual political and bureaucratic dynamics – renders managerial authority more ambiguous than in typical corporate settings. Furthermore, the change agent's own approach – whether interpreted as bold or blundering – shaped how resistance and legitimacy unfolded.

Certainly, the dynamics of the case would have been markedly different had the change agent not faced such a profound legitimacy deficit from the outset. A stronger

initial position might have fostered a more positive – or at least less negative – association between the agent and the project, facilitating collaboration with recipients (Mikel-Hong et al., 2024; Oreg and Sverdlik, 2011). The unit's trajectory was also shaped by three critical turning points, where alternative strategic choices might have led to different outcomes. In Phase 1, Thomas could have opted for a more incremental approach, cultivating relational legitimacy through small wins (Reay et al., 2006). Yet such strategies often involve compromise and risk diluting the original vision (Ford et al., 2008; Stensaker and Langley, 2010) – a trade-off the team rejected in favour of preserving the 'purity' of its initiative. In Phase 2, the unit could have prioritized internal legitimacy by strengthening ties with recipients before seeking external validation (Human and Provan, 2000), as such relationships tend to enhance acceptance and credibility (Furst and Cable, 2008; Oreg and Sverdlik, 2011). However, cultural distance and perceived rivalry made this difficult, leading the team to cultivate external alliances – a move that advanced the project but further eroded their standing internally. In Phase 3, rather than rebuilding trust through affective cooptation (Battilana and Casciaro, 2013), the unit doubled down on asserting ownership – a strategy that ultimately sealed its rejection. Even a more conciliatory strategy, however, might not have resolved the deeper irony: that the more successful a change initiative becomes, the more likely it is to render its initiators obsolete.

CONCLUSION

Our study delves into the intricate process through which the legitimacy judgments of a change agent and its project may become dissociated over time. Drawing on an ethnographic study of a change-agency unit driving a major transformation, we show that such units' risk *cooptive rejection*: their efforts may succeed in advancing the change, yet fail to secure legitimacy for themselves. As a result, they must navigate a delicate balance between invisibility and overexposure – between fading into irrelevance and 'protesting too much' to the point of rejection. The ultimate irony exposed by our case is that the successful appropriation of a change initiative may not only render the change agent obsolete – it may result in their elimination. Heads roll, but ideas remain.

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NOTE

[1] We use acronyms throughout the case to describe respondents and data sources: TD refers to members of the TD, HL to high-level officers, FA to field agents, UR to union representatives, FN to field notes, IC to informal conversations, TM to team meetings, ITW to interviews, and DOC to archival data.

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