

NO CHANGE IS AN ISLAND: HOW INTERFERENCES BETWEEN CHANGE INITIATIVES EVOKE INCONSISTENCIES THAT UNDERMINE IMPLEMENTATION

ROUVEN KANITZ

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU Munich)

QUY NGUYEN HUY

INSEAD

JULIA BACKMANN

University College Dublin

MARTIN HOEGL

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU Munich)

Organizational change research has concentrated on the challenges of implementing isolated changes, paying little attention to the interactions among concurrent change initiatives. Our longitudinal real-time study of a multinational technology firm examines how two corporate change initiatives interfered with each other. The interfering initiatives provoked inconsistency judgments (cognitive, normative, and procedural) and the emergence of collective emotions that undermined change performance. Top managers' responses fueled the sharing of inconsistency judgments and emotions that fed into a recursive process that, over time, provoked emotional uncertainty, elicited moral emotions, and eroded emotional attachment to change. Our process model reveals inconsistency judgments as a previously overlooked socio-psychological mechanism underpinning interferences between change initiatives. We reveal the limitations of examining organizational change in terms of isolated initiatives and call for research that considers the dynamics between change initiatives.

Implementing organizational change is laden with challenges (e.g., Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008; Huy, Corley, & Kraatz, 2014). These become acute when leaders engage in strategic change, which usually requires big shifts in a firm's resources, structures, and processes. Strategic change inevitably requires adjustments in several domains (e.g., structure, technology, or branding), which are often tackled using multiple change initiatives (Darragh & Campbell, 2001). Some scholars argue that the success of

strategic change depends on the synchronization of initiatives (Kunisch, Keil, Boppel, & Lechner, 2019) “carried out by multiple actors in multiple series of events” (Bartunek & Woodman, 2015: 170). Through this lens, it becomes important to explore “change interactions”—or how multiple concurrent change initiatives influence one another—with relevant theoretical insights.

Organizational change researchers have too often ignored the reality that, generally, “change never happens singly or in a vacuum” (Kunisch, Bartunek, Mueller, & Huy, 2017: 1074), and, specifically, that most organizations engage in simultaneous change initiatives. This is despite a growing body of evidence that a context of multiple initiatives has an impact on change outcomes, as emphasized by practitioners (Hollister & Watkins, 2018) and strategy scholars (Kunisch et al., 2019). The overall degree of ongoing changes in an organization, such as “excessive

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change” (Stensaker, Falkenberg, Meyer, & Haueng, 2002), can influence employee receptiveness to specific initiatives (Herold, Fedor, & Caldwell, 2007). Prior empirical work has touched on, without explicitly addressing, the dynamics between initiatives (e.g., Balogun, Bartunek, & Do, 2015; Huy, 2011; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017), but the insights tend to be only adjacent to the issue of interactions between change initiatives (Mantere, Schildt, & Sillince, 2012). Hence, the challenges associated with implementing multiple change initiatives—particularly initiatives that might be perceived as contradictory—have been underexplored and imprecisely conceptualized (Weiser, Jarzabkowski, & Laamanen, 2020). As a result, change researchers risk misattributing the reasons for resistance and poor change performance. This limited understanding leads us to ask the following research questions: How do interferences between change initiatives emerge? And what are the mechanisms linking those interferences to change outcomes?

While studying a strategic change at a leading global technology company (“TechCorp”), an unexpected announcement of a second change initiative gave us the opportunity to explore interference between two large-scale simultaneous change initiatives. Following TechCorp’s change efforts for over three years, we saw an intriguing series of events unfold. TechCorp had launched an internally focused change project (i.e., “Foundation”) to align processes and structures with new strategic priorities. Although Project Foundation got early buy-in across the organization, it soon lost momentum—a shift driven in large part by the sudden introduction of a second change initiative (“Rebranding”), which revealed inconsistencies between the two. This had serious consequences: three years later, the initial change aspirations remained unmet.

Taking an interpretative lens, we look at the way actors socially construct the meaning of change and conceptualize interference between change initiatives—a process driven by subjective sensemaking rather than objective reality (Weick, 1995). We find that employees assess strategic change initiatives on consistency criteria (for reviews, see Gawronski, 2012; Gawronski & Brannon, 2019). If judged to be inconsistent—that is, there is a perceived lack of agreement between initiatives—they trigger emotions that are shared and feed into how people respond to initiatives.

Our study makes two contributions to the literature. First, it extends theories of how to navigate large-scale change by offering novel insights into how the interactions between change initiatives can shape

their implementation. Our model goes further than past research by specifying the cognitive–emotional mechanisms through which one change project can interfere with another. Our evidence shows how people undergoing changes at an organization make sense of multiple initiatives based on consistency criteria, and, from this, we develop a consistency perspective on interacting change initiatives. This perspective advances scholarly understanding of how various judgment dimensions (e.g., cognitive, normative, procedural) guide individuals’ sensemaking about large-scale change. These insights are highly relevant, given that organizations often tackle multiple change initiatives simultaneously, and yet this is an under-investigated area of research. Our second contribution is to the literature on emotions and organizational change. We show how change recipients’ perceptions of inconsistencies trigger their emotional reactions, and we demonstrate the degree to which social sharing activities and top managers’ responses amplify the emergence of collective emotions. This, too, has been underexplored by change researchers despite its relevance to today’s work environment.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Interfering Change Initiatives during Change Implementation

Successfully navigating strategic change constitutes one of the major challenges for management teams (Bartunek, Balogun, & Do, 2011; Stouten, Rousseau, & Cremer, 2018). Top managers (TMs) face the challenge of gaining employee support throughout the organization (Sonenshein & Dhokalia, 2012). As strategic change requires efforts on several fronts, TMs often launch multiple change initiatives simultaneously. Even when perceived as a stand-alone initiative, strategic change is often broken down into multiple initiatives (Kunisch et al., 2019) that may influence one another in a dynamic process. For instance, a firm that evolves from being a technology manufacturer to a service provider will have to adjust its internal processes (i.e., a restructuring initiative) and reposition its brand vis-à-vis external stakeholders (i.e., a rebranding initiative). These initiatives usually occur quasi-concurrently.

The phenomenon of interference between change initiatives has received initial attention from scholars. Some studies have documented concurrent strategic change initiatives, but have not explicitly investigated their interaction (e.g., Huy, 2011; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017). Others have described cases wherein a firm’s broader restructuring was coordinated poorly

with local change projects, harming both (Balogun et al., 2015), and where the introduction of a sustainability strategy (Hengst, Jarzabkowski, Hoegl, & Muetzel, 2020) provoked legitimacy conflicts with the mainstream strategy. Focusing on the volume or number of changes, other researchers have found that a context of “change turbulence” created by several ongoing changes at once can influence an employee’s response to a specific change (Herold et al., 2007) and “excessive change” characterized by “several, seemingly unrelated, and sometimes conflicting changes simultaneously” (Stensaker et al., 2002: 302) can be a source of underperformance. Gradual changes in micro-processes within organizations can generate broader institutional change (e.g., Smets, Morris, & Greenwood, 2012), and strategic initiatives can trigger changes in unexpected places within the organization (Wiedner, Barrett, & Oborn, 2017). In short, it is clear that change initiatives can prompt intended and unintended shifts in other organizational domains, including other concurrent initiatives. Yet, we know little about the mechanisms underlying this process.

A Consistency Perspective on the Response to Interfering Change Initiatives

Organizational change implies novelty, which triggers sensemaking among members (e.g., Balogun et al., 2015; Mantere et al., 2012). “Sensemaking” (Weick, 1995) is the process of “creating intersubjective meaning through cycles of interpretation and action” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014: 67) and can take various forms. In terms of content, sensemaking can include ethical considerations (Sonenshein, 2009), interpretations of the degree of expected change (Sonenshein, 2010), or perceived gains and losses from change (Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph, & DePalma, 2006; Nag, Corley, & Gioia, 2007). In terms of process, it can include, for instance, how employees work through paradoxes (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) during change, or how TMs’ “sensegiving”—attempts to direct others’ meaning construction (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991)—tactics initiate change. Change implementation involves the interaction of TMs’ sensegiving and recipients’ sensemaking, and discourse among both groups is crucial to realizing change (Maitlis, 2005). Yet, exactly how employees use consistency-based criteria to make sense of change and how these judgments influence their responses to change is far from clear.

If, as we posit, employees make sense of change initiatives based in part on consistency judgments, a review of the related literature is in order. Drawing on

the consistency literature in social psychology (e.g., Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958; Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955), inconsistent cognition is a core psychological driver because it signals inaccuracies in sensemaking that demand further attention. Consistency theories focus on the human tendency to avoid and resolve inconsistent cognition (see Gawronski, 2012; Gawronski & Brannon, 2019, for reviews). Inconsistency is aroused when employees are confronted with information inconsistent with their beliefs. For the purpose of our study, we define “inconsistency judgments” as the subjective perception that two (or more) change initiatives lack agreement, and their relationship is somewhat contradictory. For example, an employee may perceive a lack of agreement between the respective objectives or procedures of change initiatives.

Scholars have suggested a three-stage sensemaking process of inconsistency (Gawronski & Brannon, 2019): (1) identification of inconsistency, (2) emotional reaction, and (3) resolution attempts. First, inconsistencies arise in situations in which two cognitions are simultaneously activated that are contradictory and propositional—that is, perceived as “true or false by the individual” (Gawronski, 2012: 653). For example, an employee may feel positive about a change perceived to increase collaboration and support, but be confronted by a second initiative that is perceived to increase efficiency and competition within the organization. This may prompt notions of inconsistency that arise from the perceived conflicting goals. Second, identified inconsistencies can provoke emotional reactions (Festinger, 1957). Following current research, we differentiate between the identification of inconsistent cognitions and the triggered emotions (Gawronski & Brannon, 2019). At the individual level, emotion is a process that “begins with a focal individual who is exposed to an eliciting stimulus, registers the stimulus for its meaning, and experiences a feeling state ... with downstream consequences for attitudes, behavior ...” (Elfenbein, 2007: 315). The degree of emotional activation depends on the subjective relevance of the inconsistent cognition. It may be particularly high if a strongly committed employee identifies inconsistencies related to a change they are currently involved in (Harmon-Jones, Amodio, & Harmon-Jones, 2009), depending on how they appraise the changes’ impact on their personal environment (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003). The third step captures attempts to resolve the inconsistency (Gawronski & Brannon, 2019), either at the individual level (e.g., adapting cognitive elements) or by reducing negative emotions from inconsistencies (Harmon-Jones et al., 2009)—for example, telling

themselves that the change “is not that bad” or reducing its relevance (“It doesn’t make any difference to me”)—to decrease the sense of unpleasantness.

Consistency judgments and emotions are not confined to individuals. At the collective level, inconsistencies and emotions can direct group attention to the source of inconsistency while reducing attention to other events (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003), activating a social process in which people share the source of emotions. Individuals experiencing the same change may attend to similar events, and share inconsistency judgments and emotions, resulting in analogous judgments and reactions (Elfenbein, 2014)—referred to here as “collective” (Von Scheve & Ismer, 2013). The novelty of change initiatives triggers continuous sharing of experience among people (Rimé, 2009) to collectively make sense of change (Maitlis, 2005), by which we mean communicating the experience and surroundings of one emotion-evoking event to another (Rimé, 2009), including sharing inconsistencies and their dissonant emotions with others (Peters & Kashima, 2007). These cues from others “are appraised in addition to the appraisal of the event *per se*” (Manstead & Fischer, 2001: 222). Sharing can lead to emotion transfer from one person to another (Barsade, 2002), and intensify when the initiatives are appraised to impact a group that people strongly identify with (Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007). Changes that are perceived as having consequences for a group can elicit group-focused emotions, although an individual’s interests may not be directly affected (Huy, 2011). Hence, people undergoing the same change may experience similar inconsistencies and emotions, which, when shared, result in collective action (Elfenbein, 2014).

To summarize, when strategic change is carried out through multiple initiatives, recipients make sense of initiatives based on consistency-based criteria, and experiences related to one change may influence the individual’s response to another. Despite calls to investigate the dynamics underpinning how and why multiple initiatives influence one another (Kunisch et al., 2017), the precise mechanisms at work and the organizational outcomes thereof are insufficiently understood.

RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODS

Our study took place at TechCorp, a business-to-business technology manufacturer with revenues of more than \$10 billion per year. Since the 1990s, TechCorp’s primary products have dominated their markets; since 2000, revenues at the group, which is

part of a multi-industry conglomerate, have more than tripled through a mix of organic growth and targeted acquisitions. A central characteristic of TechCorp is a strong engineering tradition with a focus on quality and technological excellence. Several employees described the culture as hierarchical and bureaucratic: formal processes, rules, and top-down decisions guide employees’ behaviors.

In response to changes in the industry, TMs developed a new corporate strategy, the main thrust of which was to transform TechCorp from a producer of technology goods into both a producer and a full-range service provider—a strategy known as “servitization” (Vandermerwe & Rada, 1988). In the years following the strategy’s unveiling, TMs launched two change initiatives to move TechCorp into this new direction. Both were in line with the CEO’s vision, as summarized in Table 1. The first initiative, Project Foundation (hereafter abbreviated as “Foundation”), sought to adjust internal processes at TechCorp to develop a cultural foundation for the new strategy. We were invited to observe this process and began our data collection. Our evidence gathering suggested that, at first, many employees felt good about Foundation, calling it a great opportunity and an important project. Ten months after its introduction, moreover, TMs were satisfied with the rollout; communication had been executed as planned and the feedback was satisfactory.

Two months after this assessment, TMs launched a second major change initiative, this time in corporate branding (hereafter abbreviated as “Rebranding”). This was a surprise announcement for everyone outside of top management (and for us, too), and wound up interfering with ongoing change activities related to Foundation. We observed as Foundation lost momentum, triggering our interest in investigating how the recipients of change respond to interfering initiatives.

Data Collection

After initial meetings, the firm agreed to collaborate on a research project. A contact team coordinated access to data sources. To ensure trustworthiness (Eisenhardt, Graebner, & Sonenshein, 2016), the first and third authors engaged deeply with the partner by visiting TechCorp regularly. To ensure sufficient in-depth information and to enable triangulation, a variety of sources was used during data collection, as summarized in Table 2. Data collection was stopped once we felt that we had sufficient data to support our theorizing on interfering change initiatives. Our study

TABLE 1
Overview of Strategic Change Initiatives

	Project Foundation	Project Rebranding
Intended change	Development of internal culture, structure, and processes to enable the execution of the new strategy	Development of a strong brand for internal and external stakeholders to reposition the firm and support the new strategy
Core elements	Institutionalization of shared business principles to guide decision-making and to align processes and practices	The launch of a new corporate brand including new name, design, brand positioning, and sales strategy
Scope	All functions worldwide	All functions worldwide
Initiation process and phases	1. Top down, presented at a top managers' meeting 2. Bottom-up dialogue-oriented activities	1. Top down, presented at brand ceremony 2. Top down through formal processes
Time horizon	Long term (3–7 years)	Medium term (within 2–3 years)
Target audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal: all functions worldwide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal: all functions worldwide • External: capital markets, customers
Governance responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategy and innovation department • Human resource department 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing and communication department • Sales department
Illustrative subprojects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural change reflection workshops • Adaptation of incentive system • Redesign of performance appraisals • Rework of decision-making processes • Worldwide cultural toolkit workshops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revamp of all communication materials • Brand education program • New customer value propositions • New high-performance work system initiative • Reorganization of departments

is longitudinal and real-time (Yin, 1994), and examines the interaction between two change initiatives at TechCorp.

Interviews. We conducted 94 semi-structured interviews with 65 informants over a period of three years. To ensure a diversity of perspectives, interviewees came from different hierarchical levels and functions. The interviews lasted between 20 minutes and 2 hours, were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews focused on the change initiatives (see Appendix A). We interviewed core informants two or three times to capture their evolving reactions over time.

Open survey responses. We conducted surveys to gather additional insights into the process. One survey was conducted several months before the rebranding was announced; all the others were conducted after the announcement. The surveys included open questions¹ and focused on employees' experience with the changes (see Appendix B).

Archival data. The contact team provided corporate documents. These included reports about the purpose and progress of the changes, communication material (e-mails, presentations, etc.), implementation maps containing completed activities,

and intranet information. In addition, we consulted external documents such as annual reports to better understand the competitive environment. We also collected a variety of newspaper articles and comments on online blogs.

Field observations. We included insights from field observations in our study. The first author—and, partly, the third author—visited the company several times to attend meetings and workshops related to the initiatives. The on-site meetings (e.g., two-day change agent workshop) mainly dealt with the implementation progress and challenges faced by local agents. The observations also offered an opportunity to participate in informal conversations. During the observations, we took notes on every issue discussed and as many quotes as possible. The observations were transformed into field notes resulting in 63 pages of notes.

Video material. We included corporate communication material as well as publicly available privately recorded videos of the rebranding announcement.

Data Analysis

Our abductive analysis (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Bamberger, 2018) was driven by our observation of consequential interferences between change

¹ The questionnaire also contained quantitative measures that are not part of our analysis.

TABLE 2
Overview of Data Sources and Use in Analysis

Source of data	Type of data	Use in analysis
Semi-structured interviews (<i>N</i> = 94)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 94 interviews with 65 informants, including TMs, MMs, change agents, and employees • First year: initiation of PF (<i>n</i> = 19) • Second year: during initiation of PR (<i>n</i> = 35) • Third year: <i>n</i> = 40 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capturing informants' judgments and emotional reactions to interferences • Comparing differences and commonalities across groups and over time • Tracking the implementation process and key events related to both initiatives
Open survey responses (anonymous) (<i>N</i> = 1,684)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First year: initiation of PF (<i>n</i> = 343) • Second year: interference of PR (<i>n</i> = 687) • Third year: interaction of change initiatives (<i>n</i> = 654) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tracking the unfiltered judgments and emotional reactions • Comparison of comments before and after change interferences • Getting an impression of the collective reactions toward interfering initiatives
Corporate documents (<i>N</i> = 29)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slides related to PF and PR • Employee email newsletters • Further change communication material (e.g., posters, storyboards) • Information on intranet or social network (e.g., FAQs) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documenting the official corporate communication on the change initiatives, including TMs' corrective actions • Identifying ongoing challenges related to implementation and agents' reactions
Further archival data (<i>N</i> = 53)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newspaper articles • Comments on web blogs • Annual reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constructing the external reactions to strategic change • Documenting the external pressure on TechCorp and understanding employee reactions to media
Observations and field notes (84 hours, 64 pages)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MMs/change agent meetings • Informal post-meeting discussions • Telephone conferences • Trainings and workshops on change implementation • Feedback sessions on research project (member checking) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generating a timeline of key events • Validation of inconsistency judgments discussed in meetings (e.g., procedural inconsistency) • Insights into change agents' real-time implementation challenges and actions
Video material (<i>N</i> = 2 videos)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee rebranding ceremony • MMs video messages promoting PF 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of the change outcomes • Reconstructing the reactions to the rebranding ceremony

Note: TMs, top managers; MMs, middle managers; PF, Project Foundation; PR, Project Rebranding.

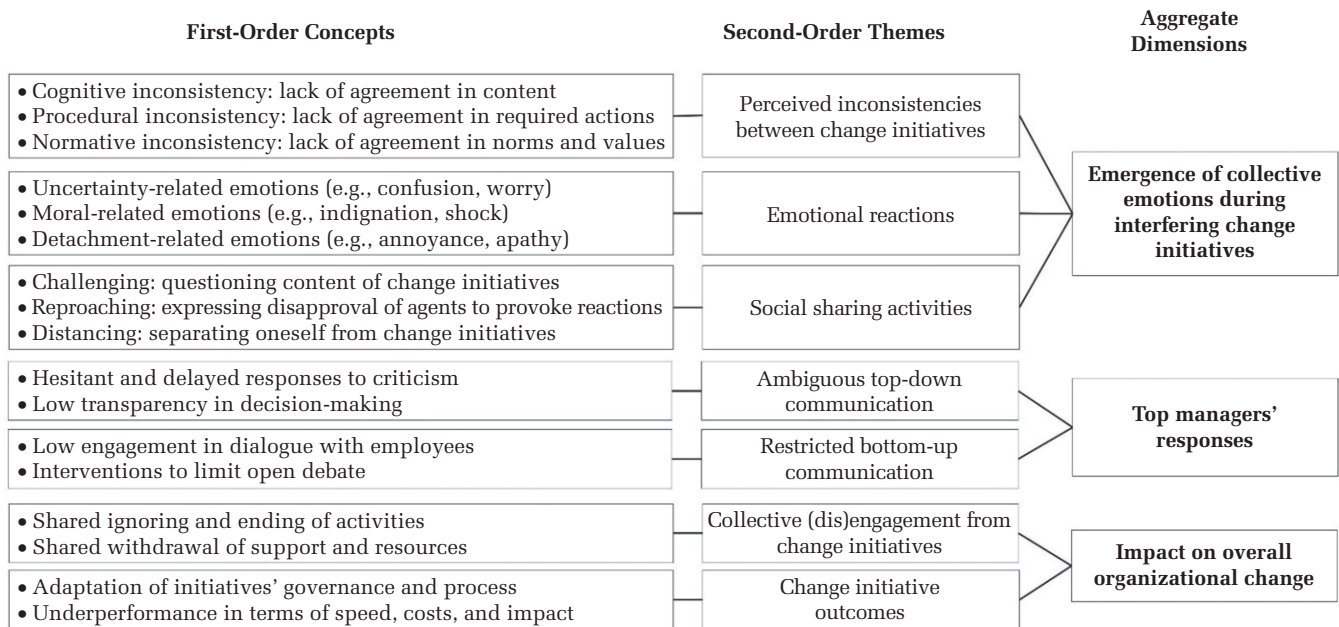
initiatives, which we then sought to explain. Our analysis moved through iterative cycles (Miles & Huberman, 1994) between relevant literature and empirical themes (Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2008) to identify the most revelatory insights. We reached what were deemed to be the most novel insights by focusing on consistency judgments (Gawronski & Brannon, 2019) and emotions (Elfenbein, 2007) underpinning the interfering initiatives. The extreme reactions could not be as richly explained through other lenses.

To better understand the unfolding events, we created an in-depth case description (Langley, 1999). Figure 2 (presented in the Findings section, below) shows events across change initiatives. Several months after the rebranding launch, many informants talked emotionally about the inconsistent change initiatives, although the interviewer did not

specifically ask about this. This prompted us to look more carefully at inconsistencies between the initiatives. Our first step was to code interviews and open survey comments using an open coding approach and collecting all comments related to both initiatives (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We then identified quotes relevant to our research question; these were then compared with one another and used to develop more abstract themes (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). The resulting data structure is shown in Figure 1.

In our analysis, we first concentrated on the dynamic interplay between the initiatives, and noticed the evolving tensions between the initiatives. At this point, we turned to the literature on inconsistency judgments, which helped us to focus our analysis (Gawronski & Brannon, 2019). We collected inconsistency judgements from our informants and

FIGURE 1
Data Structure



categorized them in an iterative coding process as “cognitive” (related to the initiatives’ content), “normative” (related to the initiatives’ values and norms), or “procedural” (related to the initiatives’ required actions). Table 3 provides examples.

Next, we focused on the consequences of inconsistency judgments. While we found few inconsistency codes and several positive emotional codes in the early phases of the change, we noticed a substantial increase in inconsistency judgments and negative emotions following the introduction of Rebranding. The numerous survey comments over time were helpful at this stage because they recorded the rising shared negativity toward the interfering change initiatives over time. The field observations (e.g., change agent workshops) further enriched our understanding of how employees experienced the changes. At this point, we started coding specific emotional expressions based on cognitive appraisal theories of emotion (for a review, see Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003) as used in previous empirical studies (e.g., Huy, 2011; Vuori & Huy, 2016). Research shows that experiences of specific emotions (e.g., annoyance) are related to particular sets of appraisals (e.g., Smith, 1989). These appraisal dimensions involve pleasantness (i.e., fostering one’s well-being), control, certainty, goal congruence, and compatibility with social norms (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003). For

example, when employees feel *worry*, they are likely to articulate thinking that the event is rather unpleasant because of pessimism about the expected outcomes, that they are uncertain about what is happening, and whether it adheres to social norms. This pattern is different to that of *indignation*. When people feel indignation, the event is perceived as unpleasant and reducing personal well-being, compatibility with salient social standards are perceived as low, and the consequences are relatively certain.

Table 4 illustrates how employees’ inferred emotions were supported by our data. We then aggregated these specific emotions into broader categories that facilitate conceptualization. Our analysis revealed three emotional processes that were shared by a significant number of employees in response to the interfering changes: (1) “uncertainty-related emotions,” such as confusion or worry (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003); (2) “moral-related emotions (e.g., Haidt, 2003),” such as shock and indignation; and (3) “detachment-related emotions” based on expressions of decreasing affective commitment to change (Jasper, 2011), such as annoyance or apathy.

After having identified the inconsistency judgments and emotions, we focused on explaining how they became collective and the sharing activities—particularly through field observations and interviews—that gave rise to a process of emotional

TABLE 3
Definitions and Illustrative Examples of Inconsistency Judgments

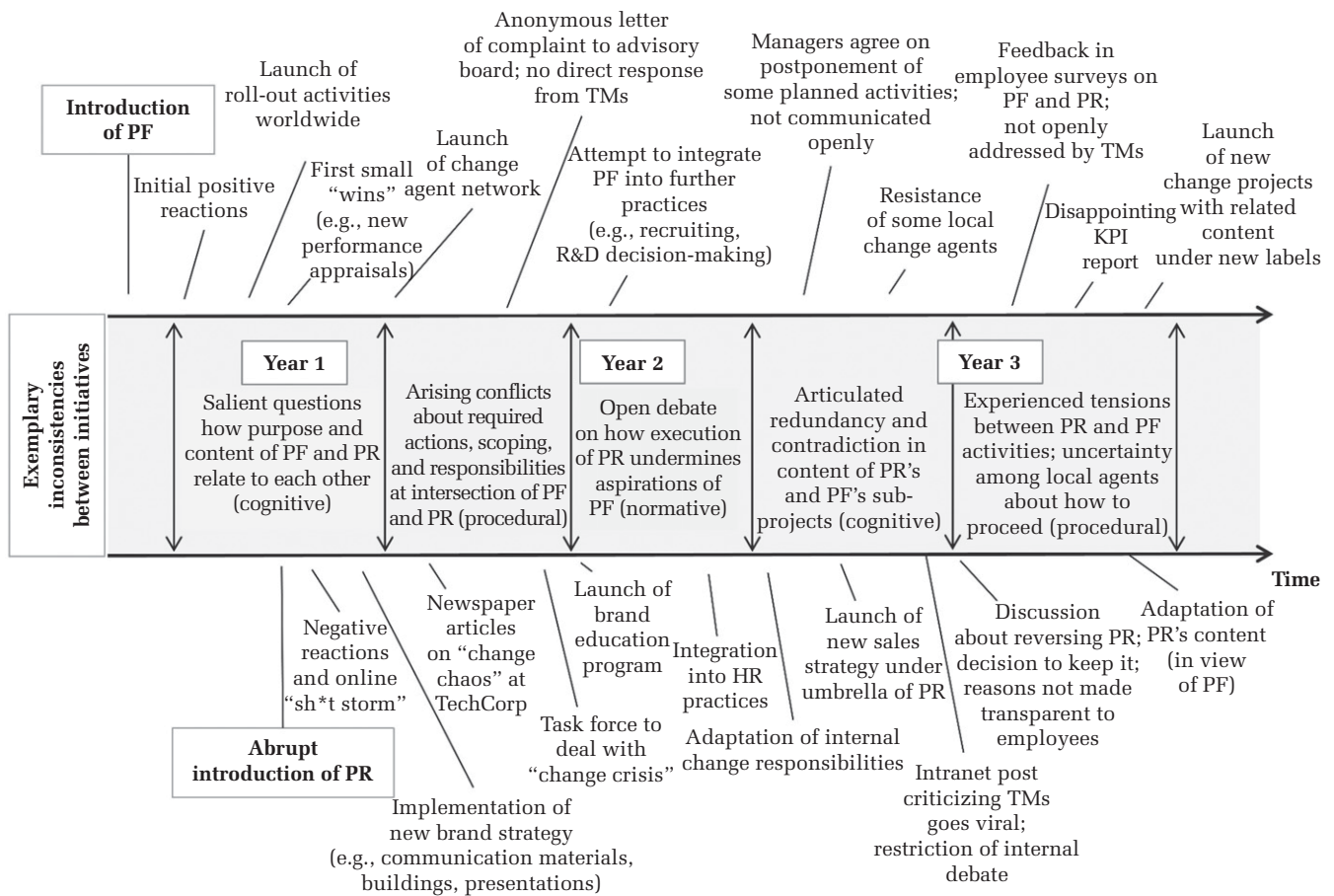
Categories	Definition	Illustrative example
<i>Perceptions of inconsistency</i>		
Cognitive inconsistency	Judgments related to a lack of agreement between the initiatives' laid out content (i.e., the "what" related to motives, objectives, or scope)	<p>"I am aware that there are people who are not sure if Foundation and Rebranding really align. In particular, they feel that the way the principles from each initiative work across initiatives hasn't been thought through. So they have open questions related to how these various principles and objectives relate to one another." (Int_41)</p> <p>"We are currently going through times of uncertainty. Nobody would deny that. How do I see the big picture of the change? Not sure. At least to me, I don't see the common theme running through the content of these initiatives [Foundation and Rebranding]. And I think the same is true for our leaders here." (Su_M2341)</p>
Procedural inconsistency	Judgments related to a lack of agreement between the initiatives' course of activities to achieve objectives (i.e., the "how" related to integration, coordination, or resources)	<p>"Yeah, so, if I look at my unit right now, it was just when Rebranding became relevant, where you thought, 'Let's do something about it.' But we had just gone through a change process [Foundation] with many workshops and surveys and follow-ups on results, et cetera. So our unit management said, 'Please, no further big action on Foundation now.' This does not mean that the leadership team is against it or anything, but they did not want to schedule the staff into further workshops or anything like that because there was a lot of irritation about the timing and the exact activities that would be required, which seemed to be incoherent and redundant across initiatives." (Int_79)</p> <p>"We are asked to drive the cultural change [as laid out by Foundation] and work on it despite criticism and skepticism. But suddenly resources and energy get shifted to secure the rebranding. How should that work well in practice?" (Int_91)</p>
Normative inconsistency	Judgments related to a lack of agreement between the initiatives' conveyed values and norms	<p>Managers discussed change implementation plans. One of the voluntary change champions raised his hand and said: "Project Foundation is what we as an organization want to be and how we become that. The disaster surrounding Project Rebranding denotes the opposite: unprofessional, superficial. What we don't want to be." (FiOb_X2)</p> <p>"The whole thing reminds me of brainwashing. The principles formulated in Project Foundation seem to be a 'creed.' But I am at work here, not in a religious community. Thus, there is rather low identification with it. The new Rebranding symbolizes more efficiency (which I can understand) executed through new processes, formalism, and micro management. Optimization through making employees adapt to unwelcome but necessary processes. Employees become well-lubricated, documented tools for efficiency optimization. However, Project Foundation calls for passion, the willingness to take risks. This feels like a contradiction between the 'propaganda' and the real experience. Sorry!" (Sur_C1_313)</p>

TABLE 4
Illustrations of Exemplary Inferred Emotions

Emotions and appraisals		Illustrative examples
<i>Uncertainty-related emotions: unpleasant feeling states; uncertainty about goals and outcomes; rather skeptical about impact</i>		
Confusion	Feeling puzzled by change events and information	<p>"I honestly don't know how to feel about the ongoing transformation process here. There is a lot of happening in terms of changes from the renaming [Rebranding] to cultural development activity [Foundation] and I still haven't reached a state of clarity about this. What I can say is that it is difficult—'confusing' would be a good word." (Int_4)</p> <p>"But is it really important? I do not know that. What is culture? How do you fit the strategy initiatives of Foundation and Rebranding with the Big Picture? It is completely unclear." (Int_66)</p>
Worry	Feeling that change will fail to meet expectations	<p>"Not sure. I expect overarching strategic change to basically disappear without major impact, as usual here. One has to make a big fuss again every year [referring to Foundation and Rebranding]. That is my concern." (Int_3)</p> <p>[Asked about how he feels about the situation following the new rebranding:] "So my concern is, and I'm pretty sure that it will happen, that the complete concept of Foundation will perish. And I'm sure, if it goes on like this, that it will come to an end, because nobody cares about it anymore." (Int_69)</p>
<i>Moral-related (other-oriented) emotions: unpleasant feeling states; certainty about negative outcomes and who is to blame; violation of social standards</i>		
Indignation	Feeling that something goes against moral standards	<p>"There is no need for such PR fireworks [Rebranding]. And I think it is mainly the management who doesn't hold its own promises [Foundation] they demand that we live up to these standards and ignore them themselves. This is hypocritical." (Int_34)</p> <p>"The ongoing change chaos impressively illustrates how little management cares about employees. They should model the changes instead of 'pushing' us in such a way. This is not fair." (Sur_M271)</p>
Shock	Feeling that something wrong and unexpected has happened	<p>"We thought, 'What the hell did they think?' The introduction of rebranding comes out of nowhere. TMs have initiated a transformation process and have executed things at certain levels here and there [Foundation], but, the transformation process as a whole, they haven't really carefully looked at that." (Int_101)</p> <p>"Many felt that the sudden introduction of Rebranding was overwhelming them. That was a shock." (Int_92)</p>
<i>Detachment-related emotions: unpleasant feeling states; certainty about rather negative outcomes; rather skeptical about importance or value</i>		
Annoyance	Feeling that change is bothering or distracting	<p>"We currently have several initiatives next to each other and, frankly speaking, they all have been initiated 'somehow' but are not completed yet. There were certain activities related to both changes that have been partially completed and there are still activities going on in parallel, which annoys people here." (Int_59)</p> <p>"I think we have gone through a lot of change recently. ... But, you know, after the new rebranding, most of the people are sick of change." (Int_51)</p>
Apathy	Feeling of indifference toward change	<p>"For me, these change activities [Foundation and Rebranding] are pure marketing that can be seen positively or negatively. It does not really touch me." (Int_61)</p> <p>"Many certainly lost interest in the top-down change initiatives over time. This is what happens when the signals sent become so heterogeneous—yeah, mixed in a sense—people start to withdraw and mind their own business." (Int_93)</p> <p>"Who cares? Let's get back to our work." (Sur_M1132)</p>

Note: TMs, top managers.

FIGURE 2
Timeline of Events and Emerging Inconsistencies between Change Initiatives



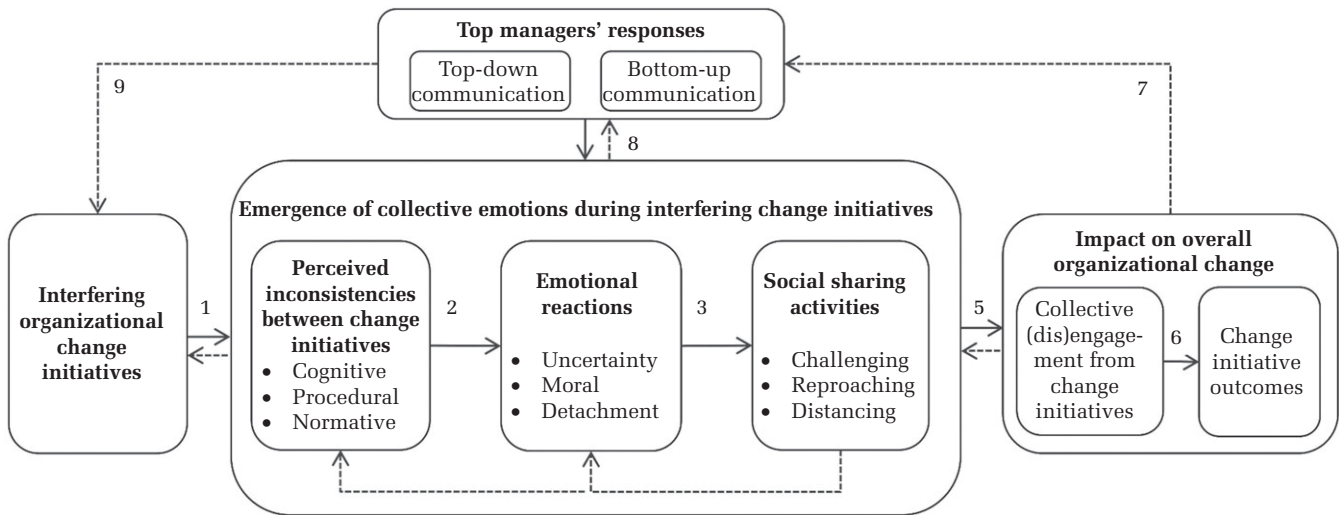
Notes: The timeline summarizes exemplary events and perceived inconsistencies across change initiatives. KPI, key performance indicator; PF, Project Foundation; PR, Project Rebranding; TMs, team managers.

convergence (Von Scheve & Ismer, 2013). We consulted the emotion sharing literature (Peters & Kashima, 2007; Rimé, 2009) to better understand our insights. We more closely examined people who reported how others shared judgments and emotions as well as observed instances of real-time sharing in meetings, from which three sharing activities emerged: (1) *challenging* inconsistent changes, (2) *reproaching* actions, and (3) various *distancing* activities. At this stage, we also noticed influencing factors that fostered the sharing of emotions. Mapping of events underlined the role of TMs' responses as triggers of sharing. Figure 2 (see Findings) displays a timeline and summarizes the main events.

Finally, we developed a theoretical model that brings our various themes together. Figure 3 (again, presented in the Findings section following) shows

the relationships among the themes to explain how inconsistency judgments emerged and led to change underperformance. During this phase, we also presented our insights to our contact team ("member-checking")—who were not part of the TM—to summarize our findings and get feedback. We discussed our insights openly with this group and gained insights about details of the change performance and further planned activities. Our contact partners found the inconsistencies articulated by our informants were interesting and revealing. Using different data sources (e.g., survey comments, articles, interviews, and observations) enabled us to triangulate our findings and validate insights across various sources. Our real-time data collection should help reduce the risk of ex post rationalization and retrospective biases (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2007).

FIGURE 3
An Inconsistency-Based Perspective on Interfering Change Initiatives Impacting Overall Organizational Change



Note: Solid arrows denote suggested main relationships between the themes; dashed arrows represent suggested feedback loops between the themes to emphasize bidirectionality.

FINDINGS

As TechCorp's change implementation unfolded, it became apparent that the two ongoing initiatives interfered with each other in a way that held back the overall strategic change. Our aim was to investigate this phenomenon from the perspective of the change recipients. Figure 2 summarizes the key events related to both initiatives and provides a high-level overview of their evolution. In this section, we review the content of the two change initiatives and the related change agent actions; we then describe how perceptions of inconsistency emerged, and how this activated collective emotional processes; finally, we describe how these emergent cognitive and emotional processes affected change outcomes.

Interfering Organizational Change Initiatives

TMs aimed to introduce and enact TechCorp's new strategy through two change initiatives: Foundation and Rebranding. They first launched Foundation as a cultural change initiative. A team of 50 managers developed Foundation's content during a global leadership workshop in which they articulated a set of principles as the new basis on which TechCorp should operate. Each principle was meant to be integrated into everyday work at the company and to guide decision-making. The principles included business- and people-oriented themes such

as lean management, quality, future orientation, listening, integrity, and risk-taking. The core thrust was to change a culture characterized by hierarchy and formalization into something more flexible, customer focused, innovative, and collaborative without abandoning the history and identity of the firm. TMs devoted substantial resources to Foundation and sought to communicate about it via a variety of channels, including newsletters, intranet, and workshops, seeking to increase awareness and involve employees. Teams of middle managers (MMs) realigned formal processes such as R&D decisions and practices such as performance appraisals with the new principles as their guide.

One year after introducing Foundation, TMs announced a second major change initiative: Rebranding. They delegated responsibility for driving the two initiatives to different departments. This resulted in the initiatives being developed and enacted separately. The strategy department coordinated Foundation, with local HR departments supporting its execution. In contrast, the rebranding initiative, which included a new name, a new design (e.g., logo, company colors), and new brand positioning, was developed by a team of TMs with support from the marketing department. The hope behind Rebranding internally was to generate enthusiasm and boost momentum for the strategic change already underway through Foundation. The external aim—arguably, the driver of the change—was to

position TechCorp more clearly in the market. Rebranding fundamentally changed the way TechCorp presented itself to the world. It also had considerable implications for sales and marketing processes. The separation of the two initiatives resulted in their quasi-autonomous execution, with MMs in charge focusing narrowly on activities for their own initiative and ignoring how these activities might affect the other initiative and its activities. Half a year after Rebranding was introduced, one leader summarized the situation:

There are different change processes on different levels and I feel that nobody here in this company is really aware of all the ongoing changes and what is happening. You have a differentiation process at the highest level [Rebranding]. At the same time, TMs have initiated an integration process below that [Foundation] to more strongly integrate the previously powerful business lines. This means—now we come to the interesting part—that there are change initiatives here at various levels, which has led to extreme instability of the whole organization. I probably would describe this organization as traumatized. (Int_46)²

Perceived Inconsistencies between Change Initiatives

Introducing Rebranding caused internal “paralysis,” as many employees experienced it as an unwelcome surprise, inconsistent with the ongoing Foundation initiative. Instead of sending a message of optimism that would strengthen the overall change momentum, events provoked employees to perceive inconsistencies between the initiatives (see Table 3).

Cognitive inconsistency. In the aftermath of the Rebranding launch, employees became increasingly concerned about what we labeled “cognitive inconsistency”—judgments related to a lack of agreement between the initiatives’ content, such as their motives, objectives, and scope (i.e., the “what”). TMs thought of Foundation and Rebranding as coherent sub-initiatives under the umbrella of their strategic vision. Lower-level employees often saw it differently. They used expressions such as “unaligned,” “clashing,” or “conflicting” to describe how the

changes related to each other. People in this engineering-dominant organization began raising logic problems and argued that the initiatives’ goals and scope were “poorly chosen.” Some construed the initiatives as substituting for one another, while others saw them as competing. One employee commented: “The initiatives are partly contradictory and unacceptable” (Sur_M2_109). This confusion was exacerbated by the decision to connect the new brand name to Foundation. One leader elaborated on the cognitive inconsistencies:

To achieve such a fundamental change, initiatives should support each other, build on each other in a way that is, yeah, somehow plausible and understandable for people. But, in this case, there seems to be more friction than fit. I think this is mainly due to the overlapping scope in what people think these represent or aim to achieve. Just to give you one example, it is unclear why we have two initiatives that speak to the “basics,” in the form of principles and values, of how we aim to make business, work together, and make decisions. Especially when some of this content is redundant across the initiatives, and other content can be seen as conflicting. (Int_13)

Others’ focused on what they saw as different content. During a change agent meeting, one MM said he struggled to understand the scope of the initiatives, and asked, “Why are there two different ‘systems of principles’ and how do all the elements relate to each other?” (FiOb_X3) Another manager asked, “Why are there seemingly similar ideas but with different labels [across changes]?” It became obvious that nobody in the room had good answers.

Employees had trouble explaining the “why” of Foundation, a challenge that was exacerbated after the introduction of Rebranding. Procedural issues related to actions required across initiatives triggered further cognitive inconsistency. One manager reflected on the challenge of understanding how the initiatives fit together, and how to deal with that:

There was a little bit of chaos because the branding development was not integrated with the overall strategic change of the company, but the integration of content came afterwards. We already had some projects out there [Foundation], but, because you did not know what Rebranding really was in relation to those, you could not say where Foundation fit in here, or how does everything come together. I am in charge of the brand, so for me it is really important to understand what the company story is that we want to tell. I had to make up these things. (Int_100)

Procedural inconsistency. Although TMs had conceived of the initiatives as complementary elements of

² We label quotes from the different sources using the following abbreviations: “Doc_” labels documents, “Int_” labels interviews, “FiOb_” labels direct notes from real-time field observations, “Sur_” labels employee surveys, “Vid_” labels video material; “*” refers to the assigned number of the informant or document.

the new strategy, employees identified what we call “procedural inconsistencies”—judgments related to a perceived lack of agreement between the activities organized to achieve each initiative’s objectives. If cognitive inconsistencies focused on the “what” of the changes, these focused on the “how.” Following the rollout of Rebranding on top of the ongoing Foundation activities, employees felt increasingly confronted with integration issues, coordination challenges, and resource conflicts at the intersection of initiatives. One salient procedural inconsistency related to the integration process across initiatives. MMs disagreed over how to integrate the initiatives in practice. HR managers, for instance, had already developed a plan for applying Foundation to HR practices such as promotion, training, recruiting, only to have to later respond to new employer branding content springing from Rebranding. Within the HR department, debates arose not only over who should rethink the plan with the seemingly inconsistent new rebranding in mind, but also with respect to whether the rebranding should be integrated at all.

Some MMs at TechCorp tried to artificially integrate both initiatives; others ignored the rebranding, viewing it as “a completely different issue.” The confusion was not restricted to one region, or department, which became clear during a change agent workshop at the headquarters after the introduction of Rebranding. One expressed his uncertainty over how to proceed:

It is again the issue of executing Foundation. And then the question is, “Do I have to create and explain a ‘link’ to Rebranding?” What does all this have to do with the strategy? (FiOb_X1)

As many MMs were involved in conducting workshops on Foundation, the rebranding change came as an unwelcome distraction. Indeed, many questioned the timing and overlap of activities that seemed poorly harmonized. One manager elaborated how Foundation activities were abruptly paused due to uncertainty over how to coordinate them with those of Rebranding:

I experienced the situation as contradictory. For instance, there was this big event here to kick off the cultural toolkit activities in the last week where we discussed the budgets and responsibilities [Foundation]. Now, this week, suddenly the follow-up meetings were all canceled because of lack of clarity on how to proceed, given the Rebranding situation and the launched brand education program. There are some open issues concerning overlap between the two initiatives and how to prioritize. This back and forth has generated quite a bit of confusion and annoyance here. (Int_31)

Another aspect of procedural inconsistency perceptions addressed resource allocation and prioritization of activities across the initiatives. Lower-level managers were expected to reach for the high aspirations of Foundation, then suddenly instructed to champion and execute the “mega brand fun” of Rebranding, as one manager put it sarcastically. Foundation incorporated a bottom-up mobilization program to be enacted by MMs; these MMs now felt overwhelmed by “disjointed” change activities. One said: “Current change activities that I see here at the ‘frontline’ are all over the place. The left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing and has already done” (Int_73). Many sensed that procedural inconsistencies originated from decisions made higher up and felt that solving these inconsistencies was beyond their control. In particular, MMs who had been initially positive about Foundation felt its initial aspirations were endangered by the interfering activities of the rebranding. Some MMs saw Rebranding as superseding Foundation because it had been introduced more recently. Others disagreed, leading to clashes over resources. Money was one issue, and employees’ time another. Even though Foundation was supposed to be “activated bottom up,” department heads were not willing to support “endless workshop marathons,” which they saw as distractions (FiOb_X2). As a result, different departments at TechCorp ended up executing different activities. Further complications arose when TMs from the headquarters introduced further activities under the umbrella of Rebranding that some people felt belonged to Foundation. One employee commented on the procedural inconsistencies:

It will be very difficult to realize Foundation because other changes [Rebranding] in our environment counteract it: short-term focus, budget uncertainties, conflicting targets ... Managers asked to implement Foundation can’t therefore demonstrate and role model the change in expected ways. (Sur_C1_268)

The procedural inconsistency was not identified early enough by TMs, and, even when it was, their attempts to clarify their vision did not filter down to lower levels. As one leader said:

We were asked to drive Foundation, which we here approached with a substantive cultural work program spanning more than two years. Now we suddenly receive requests from higher levels for driving the new branding program. It seems that there is no overarching execution plan. I mean, we don’t have the time to do all of this. And, if we now cut the budget for the cultural work [Foundation] here that I praised as “so critical” to encourage participation, people

won't take me serious anymore. So, how to deal with these requests? (Int_11)

Normative inconsistency. The rollout activities also triggered normative inconsistency judgments related to a perceived lack of agreement between the values and norms the two initiatives conveyed. For instance, employees perceived inconsistencies between the way the rebranding had been launched and the behavioral norms outlined in Foundation's principles. The Rebranding launch ceremony was live-streamed to all locations and watched by thousands of employees. The CEO (Vid_1) presented the new brand. A performance by a troupe of dancers dressed in "bizarre and futuristic" costumes accompanied the announcement. Employees described the group dancing in "bad co-ordination" around the "timidly hopping" TMs, all singing the chorus of a new corporate song (Vid_2; Doc_45). One informant recalled: "This was done as a huge, over-the-top party with a song—yes, seriously, a song. My colleagues and I really felt infantilized seeing this" (FiOb_4). Many in attendance considered the artistic ceremony to be a poor fit for the culture articulated in Foundation. Employees remembered it months after the event and felt it did not represent the values Foundation stood for and which employees were expected to ascribe to—such as high-quality work, long-term orientation, and engineering excellence. One said: "Foundation reinvents our basic cultural assumptions. This is jeopardized by the rebranding. That does not go together for me" (Int_09). Another person wrote: "I am afraid the current issue of the rebranding is in conflict with many of these values" (Sur_C294). For some, the branding exemplified a violation of the values of "lean" and "listening." One MM explained how the launch undermined Foundation:

I also believe that the issue with the rebranding and its costly introduction are much more present in people's minds—and in a negative way. I don't know anybody in my professional and private environment who likes it even a little bit. Not to mention the damaged reputation of TechCorp. The big question is: "Why would you do that?" And this question has not been honestly answered. Some rumors say that it sells well in China. But, if such motives are behind the gigantic show and expenses, one has clearly not applied our new values of "lean management" [Foundation] here. (Sur_C233)

Other employees felt upset because they perceived the change events as devaluing their identities as proud members of TechCorp—as formulated in

Foundation. The way Rebranding was launched violated their expectations of appropriate ways of communicating. Others' normative judgments were more linked to change-related decisions. One person explained how he perceived managers' behaviors related to the rebranding crisis:

You keep some things to yourself, and say some things externally differently to what you disclose internally [Rebranding]. Of course, that brutally contradicts the values which we formulated in Foundation—that we are honest, we do what we say. (Int_92)

Emotional Reactions

These perceptions of inconsistency elicited emotional reactions because employees felt the inconsistency negatively affected their work environments and TechCorp as a whole. Many employees had spent most of their professional lives working with the firm. Being an employee of TechCorp was central to their identities. They observed the change initiatives closely. We describe uncertainty-, moral-, and detachment-related emotions that we observed in response to the inconsistencies. Table 4 provides additional insights and data on emotional reactions.

Uncertainty-related emotions. The perceived lack of consistency between initiatives provoked uncertainty-related emotions such as confusion and worry among employees. One emphasized: "I am really not sure where this transformation is going. I have my doubts" (FiOb_X1). Another wrote: "Given the current change dynamics in this organization, many things are possible. I am not sure where this is going" (Sur_M279). Uncertainty-related emotions were salient among MMs because they were expected to enact the changes amid larger change turmoil. One MM described the origin of his confusion:

The organization is already flooded with information because they introduced too many symbols, elements, repositioning. You have the overall strategy everywhere, the sub-strategies and the rebranding. There are the principles of Foundation. Below these initiatives, there are three or four additional pieces of information that describe each of those. The "whole package" is irritating. (Int_49)

Another expressed his worry in the following way:

With the many change initiatives and topics that exist simultaneously, is anyone really listening? Are changes based on Foundation really noticeable somehow? And, if a defined change initiative, which has been going on for some time [Foundation], suddenly

further radical changes are made [Rebranding], so that nothing fits together anymore, I start to seriously doubt whether we as TechCorp are really heading in the right direction. (Sur_MR2_214)

In later phases, one employee noticed: “I have strong reservations whether Foundation has already ‘landed’ and I’m still not completely convinced that this change is the right direction” (Int_49). As TMs showed little initial effort to respond and defend the initiatives, uncertainty-related emotions were continuously expressed. As one MM asked: “How should I drive this change here when there are conflicting signals from the top and pushback from the frontline?” (Int_19).

Moral-related emotions. By this time, moral emotions arose—“feelings of approval and disapproval based on moral intuitions and principles” (Jasper, 2011: 287). Employees felt moral-related emotions because they believed that events related to the interfering initiatives had violated moral standards. For instance, Rebranding’s launch had elicited feelings of shock and indignation among some employees. In response to the rebranding event, one employee said: “Many people were appalled by the event. This costs millions and, at the same time, people are being laid off here. Many here were shocked. Me too” (Int_69). Another explained the emergence of moral emotions:

I think management has dug a hole for themselves. They have initiated a large-scale change [Foundation] that promoted new values and principles to reorient this organization for the future. But now, people are seeing that activities related to further changes [Rebranding] walk all over these “vitality” important things, our new values. Of course, this causes quite a stir here. (FiOb_X3)

Some employees felt treated unfairly, with increasing discomfort thanks to increased media attention. These emotional reactions were not associated with Rebranding alone. The negativity spread and employees referred to Foundation after the launch of Rebranding as making them feel “indoctrinated.” New sensegiving by TMs about Foundation was interpreted as blaming employees for “doing something substantially wrong,” or a “slap in the face.” One wrote: “A job creation scheme for upper authorities, psycho-torture for employees” (Sur_M47). Others wrote “I feel belittled,” “That is absurd,” or “Seriously? What are they thinking?” to express their indignation related to the interfering change initiatives. By expressing their indignation, individuals conveyed perceptions of normative inconsistency

about the strategic change. Employees repeatedly mentioned “hypocrisy” and labeled the initiatives as “bad” and “empty promises.” A general theme was contradictions between what Foundation “preached” and employees’ concrete adverse experiences with Rebranding. As one employee put it:

Promoting Foundation is ridiculous. Every employee who is seriously doing his job already lived by these values. The rot starts at the top, as exemplified by Rebranding, and to hell with supporting this nonsense in front of others. (Sur_MR2_236)

Detachment-related emotions. An increasing number of employees became aware of the inconsistencies and displayed similar feelings about the change initiatives. However, employees’ ability to solve the sources of inconsistency was limited because the inconsistency-provoking events originated from dynamics at higher levels in the organization. Over time, people started to detach from the changes. The detachment manifested itself in increasing annoyance and apathy. Many articulated their detachment by talking about the projects as “boring,” “big fuss,” or “waste of time.” One employee elaborated:

And then there was the branding ceremony, and many people were just horrified by it. People can no longer identify with Foundation because there was this other radical change introduced overnight [Rebranding]. A branding that is heavily criticized. So, there are a lot of things happening during this transformation process that many people didn’t like and therefore feel more distant from the company. (Int_69)

Further emerging perceived inconsistencies, which were attributed to inadequate planning, contradictory actions by change agents, or faltering execution across initiatives increasingly annoyed employees. All of this further eroded attachment to the change. MMs who engaged as change agents were frustrated and annoyed about the salient inconsistencies. They had felt excited and optimistic about Foundation in the early phases, but now experienced, in one informant’s words, a “cooling down.” Another employee described why people felt annoyed:

There are too many lodestars in the company. There is this main lodestar that we want to become the enabler for our customers’ worldwide strategy. But then there is another lodestar communicated through Foundation and then there is a lodestar related to the branding, and then there is a business lodestar here, then there is a lodestar there. My impression based on my conversations with colleagues is that people can no longer bring these lodestars together and get annoyed. (Int_46)

As one employee put it, "This turned out to be a boring, vague, and bizarre effort. I cannot relate to this anymore." Open survey comments such as "don't care," "exhaustion," "fed-up," and "not interesting" conveyed low levels of attachment. One concluded: "Unfortunately, not even the managers are behind it and it is perceived rather as a joke now, which is a pity" (Sur_V169). Another wrote:

I don't understand this circus about Foundation and the new brand. I hear too much about these artificial expressions, such that I've developed apathy towards them. (Sur_CT101)

Social Sharing Activities

Inconsistency judgments and emotional reactions energized sharing activities among employees. Some employees engaged in continuous sharing activities that made their thoughts and feelings more salient to other employees, who responded to the activities with approval, sympathy, or criticism. Through these sharing cycles, the sense of inconsistency and the emotions in response moved from an initially modest number of employees to increasingly larger groups. Conversations among employees discussing inconsistencies often ended with employees feeling more negative about the initiatives, even among groups that had been relatively neutral at the start.

The use of social media intensified the sharing process. The uncertain situation surrounding the interfering changes motivated employees to engage in sharing via social media, including group instant messaging, blogs, and TechCorp's internal social network. As one person said:

In the [internal] social media network, there were [critical] voices that want management to give answers; and others stood behind the management. I am just saying, if 20 out of 44,000 people share positive comments ... the interesting thing is that the voices that say "it's not that bad," "it's great," and "we are transforming well," there are very few. Yes, so the attitude at the frontline is still such that many say, "All of this is far from ideal." (Int_75)

People expressed their emotions more openly on social media than when speaking directly with their managers. The speed and ease of use associated with these technologies had a significant impact on the emotion sharing process. On social media platforms, colleagues practically responded in real time to one another. Conflicting information shared via social media triggered rumors about potential mergers, dismissals, reversals of the changes, and adjustments to

the TM. A lack of accurate information and conflicting perspectives made employees crave more information, and rising organizational uncertainty motivated them to use what information they had to make sense of what was happening and how this could impact their work. Three types of sharing activities were triggered by the interfering initiatives.

Challenging. One sharing activity that spread emotions involved challenging activities that occurred in meetings, intranet posts, and emails. These activities made inconsistencies between the changes more explicit to other employees and called into question various aspects of the proposed changes. Challenging was linked to critical comments about the "unaligned" initiatives.

We also observed many challenging activities in meetings. For instance, an HR manager pointed out cognitive inconsistencies through challenging activities during a meeting of MMs tasked with implementing the changes:

MANAGER: So, there is this logical flow from the strategic objectives of this company to acting as one company through Project Rebranding and Foundation.

HR MANAGER (*interrupting, replying*): But I, personally, I want to challenge this. I think most people haven't understood this [logical flow]. Maybe I'm the only one who thinks this way. But I also simply don't get this. (FiOb_X3_1)

Another employee shared with his colleagues in a workshop: "I question the value of the current transformation approach. Seriously, why are we doing it this way?" Other challenging activities involved dismissing the initiatives as "futile" and as "corporate nonsense that interferes with us getting on with our jobs." These activities revealed employees' uncertainty about outcomes and detachment from the changes. Given that challenging spread the idea that the value of the changes was "not concrete" or "questionable," people who were initially positive started feeling disoriented and de-energized as they noted their colleagues' challenging activities.

Reproaching. Another common sharing activity involved reproaching behaviors. These related to criticizing not only the content of strategic change but focused on TMs. The activities helped employees let off steam but often triggered responses in others. Some employees made their reproaching public, hoping in part to persuade colleagues of their opinions. They felt a public forum would add to pressure on TMs to hear their complaints

and respond appropriately. Employees reproached others in various forms, including in face-to-face conversations, via e-mails, and on internal social media platforms. As one employee said:

This was a tough time for our [top] management. They received a great deal of criticism for their way of managing change. Obviously, the press picked up on this. But employees did not hold back with their criticism either. (Int_17)

For example, when someone uploaded a home-made video of the rebranding ceremony to a publicly accessible online platform, dozens of comments were made within a few hours; most commentators mocked the TMs and argued the event was inappropriate for TechCorp, and several said they were embarrassed for everyone involved. Similarly, as soon as criticism aimed at inconsistencies between initiatives became internally public, online reproaching among employees intensified. Newspapers reported on a communicative “breakdown” and called the change events a “failure” (Doc_5-7), and journalists later wrote pieces that included language like “chaos” and “TMs’ mistakes” (Doc_45) when describing the strategic change. Some employees forwarded links to these articles to their colleagues, accompanied by their own reproaching commentary. As one recipient of such an email chain told us:

Everything started with the song and the video of the launch and the famous online “sh*tstorm.” Up to now, I’ve rarely read the online comments posted below videos, but, here, I wound up spending lots of time reading them and they really affected me. (Int_58)

Another striking example with a broad impact occurred when a group of anonymous critics wrote an emotional letter of complaint to the board speaking about “unintegrated changes,” “fragmented ownership,” and “false strategic priorities.” The letter was posted on the intranet and promptly shared through social media channels. Despite the authors remaining anonymous, the letter’s content suggested that the reproaches came from people in senior positions. The CEO then shared a redacted version of the letter with the comment “feel free to form your own opinion.” Many employees felt this was not a response that constructively addressed the criticisms, amplifying their sympathy for the claims made by the authors. The letter was leaked to the press, and a leading newspaper published an article about “frustration at TechCorp” (Doc_15). This article was shared widely among employees,

again triggering antagonistic emotional reactions. One said:

Yes, the change initiatives were an issue for all of us. Some colleagues did not hide that they were pretty annoyed and everybody definitely read the letter of complaint. This created a work environment that dragged you down. (Int_75)

Distancing. Another form of sharing activity involved distancing behaviors, which tend to be more subtle emotion-sharing activities that lack an explicit articulation of the emotion-evoking circumstances. Distancing activity became common in later phases of the change process and underpinned many employees’ emotional detachment. Some people distanced themselves verbally, others did so implicitly through observable actions. In terms of verbal distancing, employees called the changes “uninspiring,” “generic,” and “vague.” As one change agent shared with his colleagues during a workshop: “I don’t care much about Foundation and the principles themselves anymore. I also don’t remember them all to be honest” (FiOb_X3_2). Another distancing behavior involved observable actions by high-status managers that signaled low attachment and elicited emotional reactions among other employees. For instance, several employees reported instances in which senior managers did not attend change-related workshops that had been labeled “high priority.” As one employee explained:

For example, there was a meeting where I went and most of the management team didn’t turn up. They were expected to come. But they hadn’t even sent the cancellation. And we came out of this meeting thinking about the principles, and this was a bit of a tongue-in-cheek thinking: “Sure. Missed opportunities are our major threats” [emphasizing violation of Foundation]. So, I felt this was kind of rude on behalf of the management team not turning up to the meeting. (Int_20)

Over time, most employees came to be involved in social sharing—whether by sending or receiving emotional cues, or both.

TMs’ Responses

Ambiguous top-down communication. TMs, meanwhile, did not appear to know how to deal with this intensified sharing. During this collective emotional uproar, TMs’ ambiguous top-down communication—which is to say, their delayed and non-transparent responses—spurred sharing activities. TMs were seen as “hesitant” and as having failed to seriously engage

in timely attempts to explain the situation. The perceived lack of TMs' willingness to address, appropriately and in a timely fashion, mistakes related to the clashing initiatives became an important topic in employees' sharing activities. Even employees more moderate in their criticism described TMs' responses as "unsatisfactory." As one MM reflected:

TMs wanted to turn this organization—with good intentions, I guess—upside down overnight. And they have done it, but so badly that they got these intense reactions, sh*tstorms, and were then incapable of responding to them. Now they partly try to correct the overlapping initiatives, but they do it in such a way that it provokes information overflow and uncertainty for people. (Int_102)

To make matters worse, employees perceived TMs' communication as opaque. They felt TMs were not communicating openly and honestly in view of the salient criticism. Following newspaper reports on the upheaval at TechCorp, TMs had decided that all internal communication activities should be reviewed more carefully. This vetting further delayed communication and led to a reserved and hyper-rational style of communication. Many employees felt they were getting less information than before, or unhelpful information, and perceived TMs' approach as "passive."

One employee wrote:

Another management strategy that has been implemented with little or no thought as to how it actually refers to employees. Open communication is severely lacking. No time is given to really explaining anything. (Sur_UT2164)

And one communication manager recognized:

The issue of "messaging" was flagged a lot. Basically, explaining "why are we doing all this at all?" That must also be worked on. (Int_84)

One action that fueled perceptions of low transparency centered on the TMs' decision to keep the rebranding. During a strategy workshop, a group of MMs questioned the legitimacy of the inconsistent changes and called for a reversal of the rebranding. However, TMs chose to stick with it. Some MMs believed this was because a majority of investors was positive about the rebranding, and this view became shared among employees; whether or not this was the case, TMs did not make sufficient effort to convey their reasoning to employees. The perception that TMs chose investors' opinions over employees' opinions, and that they were not being open and clear about their reasoning, further

exacerbated employees' sharing activities. Inconsistencies lingered as emotion-laden concerns.

Restricted bottom-up communication. As a further response, TMs showed little engagement with bottom-up communication about the interfering change initiatives and limited their interactions with employees. This amplified employees' perceptions that the distance between higher and lower levels in the organization had widened. Employees used words such as "managers' ivory tower" and "communication gap." Many criticized the missed opportunities for "open" and "bottom-up" communication. One said:

What are the employees' questions? What are their concerns? Where do they see contradictions? What do you do with these contradictions? Our upstream communication is underdeveloped, in my view—communication in the sense of real interaction, not communication in the sense of "we send messages, slide decks, and do a survey." (Int_99)

Another wrote:

TMs seem to be ignorant about how change is implemented in this company, and this is harmful. With every further action, it becomes more evident how little TMs listen to the employee base and how they lost touch with the base. (Sur_MG2109)

Meanwhile fierce debate over the ongoing change initiatives continued on the company's intranet. Employees criticized and debated the change initiatives, some apparently with the hope of influencing TMs' decisions. This led TMs trying to restrict discussions, thereby amplifying feelings of uncertainty and detachment. One example of such a restriction referred to the decision to delete content from the internal social network. As one employee described it:

There was a very critical post on the intranet in which somebody wrote an open letter to the CEO [personally attacking him]. The letter listed several issues related to the changes that hadn't been implemented well, in the writer's opinion, and called for a response. That letter was deleted from the intranet. The person was confronted, then relieved of his duties until further notice, and finally fired. ... But, if TechCorp claims it has a culture of open discussion, then there needs to be room for critical voices. (Int_39)

Impact on Overall Organizational Change

Collective (dis)engagement from change initiatives. Over time, the interfering change initiatives had substantial impact on collective motivation for overall organizational change as manifested in an

increasing number of disengaged employees. Shared emotions were a significant driver: employees who had been active in implementing change now doubted its vision and relevance; they ignored requests, ended ongoing activities in their units or put them on hold, or withdrew their support and resources. Some openly expressed low engagement; others were more diplomatic, suggesting that the organization should “reflect a bit over how to better handle the change.” Results of employee surveys indicated that collective responses had shifted and underlined shared disengagement.³ The employee survey conducted three years after Foundation’s start included questions about both changes. Responses to questions about the rebranding were among the most negative, but feedback about Foundation also showed low engagement. One said:

There is the time before the rebranding and the time after. It is certainly harder now to have a fruitful conversation about how we can adapt our processes and behaviors to these new strategic priorities of Foundation. (FiOb_X2)

Even people who initially championed the change became disengaged and hesitant about how to move forward and struggled with their dual roles: being expected by their TMs to deliver results and needing to respond to criticism from below. They experienced their subordinates’ negative emotions first-hand during workshops, with other employees canceling plans to attend. One MM summarized:

I had some ups and downs emotionally as well because we put so much effort into it. So, my key takeaway after all these things now—and this was also then the reflection with our management team—is that, at the moment, we should digest a little bit and not continue setting off fireworks of activities. (FiOb_X4)

³ A two-wave survey in one business unit supported our observation that judgments shifted over time. Paired *t* tests of matched data from 170 employees (five months before and five months after the rebranding) show that employees rated statements (using a 1 to 5 agreement scale) such as “All in all, Project Foundation will add value for TechCorp” ($M_{t1} = 3.66$, $SD_{t1} = 1.01$; $M_{t2} = 3.46$, $SD_{t2} = 1.12$), $t(169) = 2.52$, $p < .01$, or “Overall, I could name more opportunities than challenges in relation to Project Foundation for TechCorp” ($M_{t1} = 3.71$, $SD_{t1} = 0.90$; $M_{t2} = 3.46$, $SD_{t2} = 1.00$), $t(169) = 3.01$, $p < .01$, significantly lower after the branding announcement. These findings validated our observation that collective responses shifted.

Change initiative outcomes. The collective disengagement triggered adaptations in the hope of reducing salient inconsistencies between initiatives. For instance, TMs sanctioned MMs in charge of the initiatives. One manager responsible for communication had been a frequent target of employee criticism, and his abrupt and forced exit was perceived as a “cheap” attempt to deflect responsibility. Moreover, TMs recognized the need to integrate the ongoing initiatives, and consolidated responsibility for managing them into a single team working closely with the TMs. The new team started working on internal communications connecting the initiatives using a consistent narrative and invested additional resources to get employees on board (e.g., a brand education program). When these changes alone failed to buoy the changes’ progress, TMs launched additional change projects. Some of these projects were framed under new labels, but in fact addressed the same topics as Foundation. This introduction of further change subprojects refueled perception and sharing of inconsistency.

The adaptations and employees’ responses led to change underperformance. Employees’ responses dampened the initiatives’ performance in terms of speed, costs, and impact. Foundation suffered in particular. Three years after initiation, its progress was considerably behind expectations. For instance, more than a few manufacturing sites had not undergone planned training or performance management interventions (FiOb_X6). Several key activities were canceled or left incomplete due to scoping conflicts and lack of resources. The initial idea had been to excite people about an internal transformation that would make the company more collaborative, digital, and innovative. But, as one MM commented:

The whole change process, the way it was launched, and how it was implemented over time was so highly unprofessional and such a bad signal to the external world that we will probably need two or three more years or even longer, compared to the time it would have taken had we managed the change process more reasonably. (Int_46)

The responses drove up costs related to implementation. The adjustments, the legal branding issues, the restructurings, and the communication efforts resulted in “exceeding budgets.” As one MM put it: “This change has cost us real money.” Another said:

TMs don’t comment externally on the sh*t-storm that happened worldwide. There is this “babble” here in terms of “bad press is better than no press.” But, the

question is, how much shareholder value has been destroyed? They have initiated the strategic change process and have not been able to handle it, because it has suddenly spread out in a completely different direction than expected. (Int_39)

Discussions continued in TechCorp about the low impact of the initiatives, particularly in light of the significant investment that went into them.

DISCUSSION

Strategic change is a challenging endeavor that often fails to meet key stakeholders' expectations. The reasons for this are varied, but empirical research has underexplored the interactions among multiple concurrent initiatives. Our longitudinal study allows us to reveal the mechanisms by which interfering change initiatives affect change outcomes. Our research makes two key contributions: (1) it develops an inconsistency-based view of interfering change initiatives and (2) advances emotion research in organizational change by showing how inconsistency judgments trigger emotion and sharing activities that drive the emergence of collective emotions.

Developing an Inconsistency-Based Perspective on Interfering Change Initiatives

Although scholars have highlighted the importance of studying interfering initiatives (Bartunek & Woodman, 2015; Kunisch et al., 2017), the interactions between initiatives during strategy enactment remain underexplored empirically and imprecisely conceptualized (Weiser et al., 2020). As we have noted, scholars have explored tensions between dual strategies that must be co-enacted (Hengst et al., 2020) or cases of excessive change (Stensaker et al., 2002). Strategy consultants have also reported cases of "too many initiatives" (Hollister & Watkins, 2018), and researchers have noted that launching multiple disconnected initiatives in a relatively short time span can hurt change outcomes (Kunisch et al., 2019). These works have provided valuable insights but have not investigated sufficiently the deeper mechanisms that explain how interferences between change initiatives can radically alter employees' receptivity to the overall change effort.

Our study enriches this stream of work by providing an inconsistency lens to explain the dynamics and organization-level consequences of interfering initiatives in strategic change. Studying change initiatives in isolation risks overlooking the true origins

of resistance and the unintended but serious consequences of interactions between initiatives. Our study shows that, at TechCorp, although TMs construed the two initiatives as strategically aligned, they underestimated the inconsistency judgments of employees and failed to respond appropriately. The actions and lack thereof by managers across various initiatives can provoke stronger resistance than the processes of any one initiative. While a superficial assessment of what happened at TechCorp might merely identify poor planning and execution, our model (presented in Figure 3) proposes a more nuanced explanation by theorizing an inconsistency-based view of interfering change initiatives. Without such new theorizing, the present case and other multi-initiative change processes risk being understood only superficially. Below, we elaborate on the mechanisms connecting our themes and integrate insights from the literature to strengthen the transferability of our proposed relationships (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2007).

Interfering organizational change initiatives trigger inconsistency. Most generally, our research enriches theorizing on the iterative interplay and orchestration between multiple initiatives over time (Bartunek & Woodman, 2015; Kunisch et al., 2017). We suggest that interfering initiatives trigger sensemaking about inconsistency between salient initiatives (link 1 in Figure 3). For instance, when the governance responsibility for initiatives is delegated to managers with narrow fields of control or who are embedded in autonomous governance structures, with insufficient coordination mechanisms in place, inconsistency across changes is more likely to surface. Managers independently implement changes with a narrow focus on the initiative alone, and with limited attention to the holistic social milieu that was likely already under stress from other ongoing changes. When managers pay little attention to the social context created by other changes, they are more likely to launch activities that are perceived to some degree as inconsistent with concurrent changes. In addition, the process of change itself can create a sense of inconsistency. An abrupt and secretly prepared downsizing in the aftermath of a compassion-driven cultural change would likely elicit such perceptions.

Emergence of collective emotions during interfering change initiatives. We identify three interlinked mechanisms that explain how change interferences relate to outcomes. Our model shows how the impact on overall organizational change stemming from interfering change initiatives is driven by combined cognitive and emotional processes,

rather than just the influence of either cognition or emotion alone. The overarching logic is that sensemaking about perceived inconsistencies triggers emotional reactions (link 2, Figure 3), which mobilize people to share their thoughts and feelings about the inconsistent initiatives (link 3). The continuous sharing activities spread cues (link 4) that reinforce collective sensemaking through which people strive to understand and respond to the interfering changes (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). This process can aggregate disengagement (link 5), ultimately shaping initiative outcomes (link 6).

Amid the high levels of uncertainty that often surround interfering change initiatives, employees engage in an intensified process of sensemaking (Balogun & Johnson, 2004) to restore a coherent understanding of the organizational functioning (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014) and maintain continuity in their work life (Huy, 2002). Inconsistency judgments are a threat to this sense of continuity. We speculate that a person who identifies a lack of consistency will pay attention to further inconsistencies that may otherwise have not reached conscious sensemaking (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). The three types of inconsistency judgments we identified (cognitive, normative, and procedural) are not mutually exclusive. Some types are more likely to co-occur. For instance, our findings suggest that cognitive and procedural inconsistencies sometimes appear intertwined. We observed procedural inconsistencies triggering people to later identify further cognitive inconsistencies. We also note that inconsistency judgments are a matter of degree and dynamic. Their strength can fluctuate over time and influence recipients' sensemaking and willingness to oppose or support change. Our work emphasizes a more granular perspective when studying the experience of inconsistency in strategic change, which we argue is more complex and dynamic than prior strategy research suggests (Weiser et al., 2020).

One might be tempted to conclude that a purely cognitive focus—that is, inconsistency judgments—would be sufficient to explain the consequences of interfering changes. Why are emotions important to explain how interfering initiatives shape outcomes? Organizational change can be full of inconsistencies (Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016)—some scholars have suggested that organizations are “naturally” replete with tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011)—but employees do not always experience these as threatening. How can we empirically distinguish inconsistencies that employees are indifferent to versus

those that could derail a change effort? One answer lies in identifying the degree to which inconsistency judgments elicit emotions (link 2, Figure 3). The link is supported by psychological research that emphasizes how inconsistencies provoke emotional reactions (Harmon-Jones, 2001). Inconsistency judgments can pose a threat to one's personal belief system and, thus, elicit negative emotions. The intensity of emotional reaction depends on the degree to which people perceive inconsistencies as relevant to their own well-being or the well-being of entities with which they strongly identify (Elfenbein, 2007).

Our model also shows that emotions mobilize social sharing activities (link 3). Some emotions motivate individuals to engage in social rather than solitary sensemaking (Maitlis, Vogus, & Lawrence, 2013). People engage in social sharing to seek validation and support from others (Maitlis, 2005). Employees are not just passive receivers of top-down sensegiving, but actively engage with one another to drive their own sensemaking (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Sonenshein, 2010). Sharing activities that are imbued with emotions convey important information to colleagues (Elfenbein, 2007), alerting them, for instance, to potential threats signaled by perceived inconsistency (Rimé, 2009). Some recipients of sharing adjust their judgment and respond by expressing sympathy or indignation, which triggers new cycles of sharing.

In our model, the arrows re-connecting sharing activities to emotions and inconsistency (link 4) show that social sharing is a continuous cycle that can spread cues and feed on itself over an extended time, fostering the emergence of collective emotions (links 2, 3, and 4 in Figure 3). Research has shown that individuals who experience emotions—elicited from judgments they suspect may differ from those of other colleagues—harbor self-doubt about the appropriateness of their emotions and feel less confident in acting on those feelings (Huy, 2011; Smith et al., 2007). By contrast, sensing that others share similar emotions increases one's propensity to share and join in collective action. Overall, social sharing activities can foster convergence in emotions over time (Elfenbein, 2014) through cycles of sharing and responding, focusing groups' attention on the inconsistent changes. The uncertainty caused by interfering changes increases the attention employees pay to others' sharing activities—particularly on easily accessible social media platforms—which amplifies the rapid diffusion of inconsistency and sharing across a large audience. Interfering changes breed uncertainty, and people experiencing uncertainty

seek to validate their perceptions and feelings with people with whom they identify (Huy, 2011). Perceived consensus within individuals' groups helps define reality for them (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). This constructed reality conveys mutual understanding, and reduces uncertainty during strategic change (Huy, 2011). Increased uncertainty, on the other hand, amplifies employees' search for consistency and attention to others' sharing. These are the dynamics we observed at TechCorp.

TMs' responses. Our findings also demonstrate the role of TMs' responses in amplifying or reducing the emergence of inconsistency-induced emotions (link 8). Employees are attentive to TMs' actions and make sense of them because TMs hold resources (e.g., knowledge, power) that allow them to influence the direction of strategic change. Therefore, TMs' responses can calm recipients or help them to work through inconsistencies (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008), reducing negativity. Conversely, a lack of responsiveness by TMs and a reluctance to engage in dialogue with recipients may worsen the spread of negative emotions. While TMs at TechCorp could have used emotions to improve a dynamic situation, their ambiguous response instead further exacerbated negativity.

Our findings related to TMs' responses to interfering change initiatives are consistent with prior research that highlights the role of TMs' sensegiving as a source of implementation challenges (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Research on sensegiving (Maitlis, 2005) has highlighted that it is important that TMs engage in open dialogue with various stakeholders and carefully craft and communicate messages that are perceived as meaningful by receivers. TMs' ambiguous communication undermined the quality of their sensegiving. To make matters worse, perceived low transparency in decision-making made it difficult for employees to make sense of the rationale behind TMs' actions. Many employees who openly displayed skepticism or raised criticism were silenced by TMs, thus impairing open dialogue between the two levels.

What could TMs have done to address emerging inconsistency and emotions? Instead of delaying and restricting dialogue, TMs might have attended to the emotional cues shown in recipients' sensemaking (Huy, 2002) and responded with purposeful acts of sensegiving. Research has indicated that dialogical processes that build on the sensegiving acts of sensebreaking, sense specification, and sensehiding could facilitate the enactment of strategies (Monin, Noorderhaven, Vaara, & Kroon, 2013). In

the case of TechCorp, TMs could have steered the course of implementation by explicitly problematizing ways of thinking about the interfering change initiatives (i.e., sensebreaking) or by explaining the symbolic importance of both initiatives and how they could jointly advance strategic change (i.e., sense specification). Instead, TMs seem to have restricted emotion-laden voices opposed to the change (i.e., sensehiding). We also speculate that early expressions of humility (Owens, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2013)—in particular, conveying the willingness to correct oneself and openness to feedback from employees—could have helped to improve change receptivity. Based on employees' responses to these sensegiving acts, TMs could have gathered feedback to further shape the course of change implementation (Monin et al., 2013). Thus, using emotional reactions as early feedback cues to shape the sensegiving process could have attenuated employees' judgments and sharing of related emotions.

Impact on overall organizational change. Over time, inconsistency judgments and emotions fuel collective (dis)engagement (link 5 in Figure 3). Collective emotions drive collective behaviors and it is collective behavior that affects change outcomes (e.g., Vuori & Huy, 2016)—not the abstract cognition of inconsistency. As emotions represent a primary factor in motivating behaviors (Frijda, 1986), the more similar the emotions among people, the more likely these emotions are to result in collective responses (Elfenbein, 2007). In turn, collective disengagement affects the outcomes of change initiatives (link 6). Widely shared engagement or disengagement can influence the progress of change initiatives. In addition, the interim change outcomes prompt TMs to respond (link 7) and address recipients' shared emotions (link 8), or adjust the characteristics of interfering change initiatives (link 9). When TMs adjust the governance of interfering initiatives in a responsive manner, they may attenuate perceptions of inconsistency. For example, TMs can set up a centralized transformation team to plan and assess the process of various change initiatives, including monitoring cross-initiative interactions, addressing both task- and emotion-related issues.

Our proposed model of interfering change initiatives, inconsistency-induced emotions, and behaviors constitutes a dynamic and holistic account of how interactions between initiatives affect change outcomes. But we do not wish to suggest that all interfering changes generate harmful effects. Our model allows for sensemaking processes that could lead to

more positive outcomes than those we observed at TechCorp. One could posit that, to the extent that social sharing generates the perception that managers constructively address sources of inconsistency and negative emotions, employees might increase their constructive behavior and tolerate some moderate inconsistency. Moreover, inconsistencies are not the only sources of underperformance. Initiatives that are in themselves inadequate to solve problems or that lack resources can perform poorly independent of any inconsistencies.

Advancing Emotion Research in Organizational Change

In addition to our main contribution, our study enriches the scant body of work examining the role emotions play in organizational change (Balogun et al., 2015; Bartunek et al., 2006; Huy, 2011). The bulk of empirical research on emotion and organizational change has focused on individuals' varied emotions and behaviors in response to change projects (e.g., Balogun et al., 2015; Seo, Taylor, Hill, Zhang, Tesluk, & Lorinkova, 2012); studies that examine collective emotions and how they spread during an organizational change process are scarce (rare exceptions include Huy, 2011). Contributing to this body of research, our model proposes mechanisms by which inconsistency judgments and emotions spread. However, we do not wish to assert that one type of inconsistency judgment always triggers one type of emotion (e.g., normative inconsistency and moral emotions). Our theorizing highlights that these judgments elicit diverse emotions through a process of sharing (including via social media technologies), and that these collective emotions can assume a life of their own and influence cognitions and behaviors that support or oppose change.

Our study identifies three emotional processes that shape responses to interfering change initiatives: those related to uncertainty, morality, and detachment. Although we treat these as conceptually distinct for more precise theorizing (Jasper, 2011), we do not suggest they are independent in practice. We observed that some emotions were more salient than others at different phases. Uncertainty-related emotions (e.g., worry, confusion) were dominant in the early phases of the interfering initiatives, whereas other-oriented moral emotions (e.g., shock, indignation) fluctuated over time and peaked soon after critical events. In contrast, detachment-related emotions (e.g., apathy, annoyance) became salient in later phases and were the most dominant emotion process

observed. Although high-arousal negative emotions (e.g., indignation) could explain active resistance to change, low-arousal negative emotions, such as annoyance, could lead people to disengage as a form of passive resistance (see Oreg, Bartunek, Lee, & Do, 2018).

Furthermore, this study enriches our understanding of how collective emotions emerge, which is critical to understanding collective responses to change (Sanchez-Burks & Huy, 2009). We observed a case of "convergent linkage" (Elfenbein, 2014), in which groups of employees shared similar emotions in response to evocative interferences, thereby offering some empirical "meat" to the underexplored "bones" of emotion sharing (Rimé, 2009). More specifically, inconsistency-induced emotions seem to play a role in generating social rather than solitary sensemaking (Maitlis et al., 2013). Inconsistency between expectation and reality arises when peoples' belief systems are challenged by interfering change initiatives, generating emotions that people share with others (Festinger, 1957). People communicate about the arousing event with others to help reduce their sense of inconsistency and discomfort. This may occur because people use inconsistencies as warnings of potential threats to well-being—conceivably, an evolutionary instinct (Baumeister et al., 2001; Tooby & Cosmides, 2008).

We posit that some shared emotions fuel the sharing process more strongly than others. Negative emotions are more likely to trigger stronger responses than are positive emotions because negative emotions typically signal threats (Baumeister et al., 2001). Interestingly, our study suggests that sharing other-oriented moral emotions (e.g., indignation) may serve as a "hot button" trigger (Haidt, 2003) that generates unpredictable and contagious energy shaping responses and redirecting change processes at the collective level (Wright, Zammuto, & Liesch, 2017).

Research on collective emotions has identified some of the psychological mechanisms that underpin contagion (Elfenbein, 2014), but has paid less attention to the contextual factors that could amplify or dampen the sharing processes, such as communication technologies. The ways in which omnipresent social media, for instance, enable the emergence of emotions remain insufficiently understood. Social media allows content to be shared and that this content becomes rapidly accessible to many employees (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017). Consistent with Toubiana and Zietsma's (2017: 922) observation of how social media can serve as an emotional "echo-chamber," our case reveals how technology like companies'

internal social networks can amplify the sharing of emotions. We propose that many change initiatives may have underperformed because change agents underestimated the magnitude and speed with which diverse stakeholder groups' share their emotional responses virtually and thus fail to address diverse collective emotions in a timely manner.

Limitations and Future Research

Our study suffers the usual limitations of a single case study and our insights need to be validated by future research in other settings. Although our findings provide robust evidence for the inconsistency explanation of the interference dynamics, we cannot entirely rule out that the outcomes were also driven by other factors such as the cultural context of the study. We propose several avenues for future research. First, our breakdown of inconsistency judgments could be translated to other contexts. Do similar judgments arise if employees perceive a change as inconsistent not with another change but with, say, an organization's history or identity (Ravasi & Phillips, 2011)? Hypocrisy is another promising avenue for research; which is to say, inconsistency between espoused organizational values and the cues sent by leaders across the organization (Cha & Edmondson, 2006). Further empirical studies could examine the usefulness and validity of inconsistency judgments in diverse contexts.

Our study also suggests a need for empirical and theoretical research that probes the mechanisms underlying "enabling interactions" in strategic initiative portfolios (Kunisch et al., 2019). We speculate that a single, stand-alone initiative may be judged as less legitimate than one embedded in an orchestrated portfolio of initiatives. Multiple interacting initiatives that are perceived as consistent may reinforce TMs' signaling and overall change legitimacy, strengthening momentum for strategic change. We note that the underlying mechanisms and consequences of mutually enabling initiatives may differ from the dynamics observed in our case and need to be explored in future research.

Furthermore, we propose a narrative lens (Vaara, Sonenshein, & Boje, 2016) as a promising path for research. Scholars might consider studying the temporal interplay of TMs' framing and recipients' retelling across initiatives. In so doing, they may examine the rhetorical means through which progression in strategic change involving multiple change initiatives can be achieved. Our study shows that TMs' communication relating to one initiative

can have unintended consequences on employee responses to the same and other initiatives. TMs at TechCorp failed to convey a persuasive narrative that framed the integration of change initiatives in a meaningful way. Instead, employees started sharing a divergent narrative that framed the initiatives as inconsistent and harmful to the company. Although TMs intervened, they were not able to redirect the conversation in a timely manner. TMs' inability to establish consistency between the two change initiatives underscores the importance of mastering the rhetorical game within strategic change implementation. Recent research (Sorsa & Vaara, 2020) examining strategic change in a pluralistic organization demonstrated that rhetorical practices can enable organizations to establish consensus among heterogeneous actors involved in the change. Thus, the role of rhetorical arguments and practices in integrating multiple initiatives and mobilizing a heterogeneous workforce provide an important vantage point for future research.

Beyond calling for examinations of inconsistency judgements, we invite research that explores collective emotional processes in other contexts. In particular, we are interested in how different emotions spread. Research up to now has concentrated on negative emotions and the harmful consequences of emotions. We call for research that explores the dynamics of positive, future-oriented emotions—such as hope or optimism—and their role in the trajectory of organizational change. Here, too, social media as a contextual factor should be considered.

Conclusion

Our work has shown that, when strategic change is carried out through multiple, interacting initiatives, recipients' consistency judgments, emotional reactions, and social sharing play a critical role in influencing the entire process of strategic change. This reveals the value of shifting from the traditional research focus on single change initiatives toward examining the multifaceted interactions of the multiple initiatives that are so often part of strategic change.

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Rouven Kanitz (kanitz@lmu.de) is assistant professor at the Institute for Leadership and Organization at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU Munich). His research focuses on strategic change leadership and the human side of organizational change.

Quy Nguyen Huy (quy.huy@insead.edu) is the Solvay Chaired Professor of Technological Innovation and professor of strategy at INSEAD. His research focuses on the relations between social-emotional factors such as emotion and symbolic management and macro-strategic processes.

Julia Backmann (julia.backmann@ucd.ie) is assistant professor at the University College Dublin. Her main research interests include collaboration and leadership in challenging contexts, such as multinational or innovative environments.

Martin Hoegl (hoegl@lmu.de) is head of the Institute for Leadership and Organization at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU Munich). His main research interests include leadership, collaboration, and innovation in organizations.



APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE AND ILLUSTRATIVE QUESTIONS

TABLE A1
Semi-Structured Interview Guide and Illustrative Questions

Opening	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduction of interviewer and objective of the interview• Confidentiality and anonymity
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduction of interviewee (e.g., tenure, function, position, leadership)
Strategic change (<i>illustrative questions</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do you think about the strategic change at TechCorp? Why?• How do your colleagues react to the change? Why? Please give examples.• Which challenges and opportunities do you see?
Initiatives and implementation (<i>illustrative questions</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Which change initiatives are ongoing in your organization? Why?• What do you think about the initiatives (Foundation, etc.)? Why?• How do you perceive the implementation activities? Why?• What are benefits or harms from your perspective? Why? Please give examples.
Personal consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How important are the initiatives for you personally? How do you feel about that?
Future perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What has changed (for you) since the introduction? Why?• What do you expect to happen in terms of the change over the next three to five years?
Last comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is a best- and a worst-case scenario? Why?• Have we missed an important aspect in our discussion?• Do you have additional comments on what we have talked about?
Ending	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thank you• Follow up

APPENDIX B: OPEN SURVEY QUESTIONS

TABLE B1
Open Survey Questions

1	How do you personally assess the change at TechCorp?
2	What do you think about [name of initiative] in relation to your daily work?
3	How do you perceive the change implementation? Do you have suggestions for improvement?

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