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**Managing employees' commitment
towards change:
The influence of leadership gestures**

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Abstract

Organizations must adapt to ongoing organizational developments, which require change management. However, managers are struggling to manage employees' commitment towards change properly, which is crucial for successful change initiatives. Managers lack wisdom on realizing desired employees' commitment towards change. Moreover, there is no insight into how leadership gestures could contribute to the enhancement thereof. In theory, the concepts are underexposed and the relationships between the concepts are not explicitly addressed in literature. The aim of this study is to provide an answer to the research question: *How should employees' commitment towards change be managed, and how can leadership gestures influence this?*

The goal of this qualitative deductive study was to obtain a clear understanding of these relationships at the employee-level in practice. Therefore, data was collected and analyzed by conducting interviews with six nurses and six managers, who are working in a Dutch hospital. The research shows that the relationships and effects between the concepts largely correspond with the theory. The perspectives and experiences of employees and managers are not always aligned. Managers fulfill a crucial role in ensuring boundary conditions for employees' commitment towards change, consisting of the change management model and components. However, this does not guarantee success. Leadership gestures can positively influence normative commitment, mostly through the sense of community, which is treasured. The strongest impact is on affective commitment, which is also the most preferred. Leadership gestures are highly valued and can help to understand employees' commitment towards change. To maximize the insights of this study, more focus should be on gestures, more awareness should be created, practice-oriented training should be provided to managers, and there should be continuous consultation with employees to ensure correct application. By enhancing the context of this study, through more extensive research, knowledge for business practice will be broadened and improved.

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1) Introduction

This section introduces the cause and context, in which the problem is highlighted. Thereafter, the relevance will be discussed. Finally, the objective and research question are formulated.

1.1 Cause and context

Organizations are being faced with many internal and external environmental changes. In order to remain competitive, organizations have to effectively and efficiently manage change (Shin, Taylor & Seo, 2012). Change becomes the norm, and change management should be used to approach business improvements (Hiatt & Creasey, 2012). Change management refers to the strategic organizational transformation process, through the engagement of employees in order to completely implement changes (Neves, Almeida & Velez, 2018). The purpose is to enable each affected employee to successfully transition. Changing each individual, can jointly lead to the desired transitioning of the organization (Hiatt & Creasey, 2012). Organizations implement change management initiatives to respond to challenges.

Employees' commitment towards change is a key factor. Managers should understand the impact on, and of employees' commitment in organizational change, and recognize the importance hereof (Aujla & Mclarney, 2020). Employees' commitment entails both the attitude and behavioral intention (Ahmad & Cheng, 2018; Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). Commitment to change helps to make use of change effectively. It is the glue that brings employees and transformational goals together, which makes it important for organizations (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). Employees' commitment provides valuable insights into the change management context.

Leadership behavior is suggested to affect employees' commitment towards change. Hereby the focus is on the role of leadership in engaging employees in a change effort (Herold, Fedor, Caldwell & Liu, 2008). Managers have the most influence on employees' motivation to change and are therefore crucial in bringing about successful change outcomes (Ahmad & Cheng, 2018; Hiatt & Creasey, 2012). The focus should be more on social interaction between managers and employees (Katan, 2021). Gestures fulfill an influential role in social interactions. However, in reflection on managers in organizations, usually the importance of gestures, such as trust and appreciation, is completely forgotten. This is due to the existing lack of awareness of gestures in the leadership context. Nonetheless, the relationship between management and gestures deserves reflection (Singh, 2018; Taylor, 2020; Ten Bos, 2011, 2012). Especially in the context of change management, it can be

interesting to further dive into what leadership gestures concretely could contribute to employees' commitment towards change.

1.2 Problem

Organizations experience increasing pressure to initiate and implement environmental changes. This is necessary to cope with changing markets, central government decisions, tighter budgets and technological advances (Ahmad & Cheng, 2018; Kuipers et al., 2014). However, while expectations are high, unsuccessful organizational change initiatives seem to be the norm rather than the exception (Shin et al., 2012). Hence, the survival of organizations is at risk (Hashim, 2013; Kumarasinghe & Dilan, 2021). Organizational changes can be challenging for employees (Aujla & Mclarney, 2020). Employees' commitment towards change is considered a critical factor, or rather a prerequisite for successful change (Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph & DePalma, 2006; Choi, 2011; Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). In particular, many change initiatives are not working out as desired, a reason for this is that the influence of employees' commitment is often underestimated or misunderstood (Armenakis, Harris & Mossholder, 1993; Bartunek et al., 2006; Van der Voet, Kuipers & Groeneveld, 2015). Leadership is an important determinant of change commitment, since managers are considered to have the most influence on employees' attitude and behavior (Ahmad & Cheng, 2018; Stouten, Rousseau, & De Cremer, 2018). However, often managers can not effectively implement changes, since they are unable to properly manage employees' commitment (Hiatt & Creasey, 2012; Van der Voet et al., 2015). Organizations do experience difficulties in realizing desired employees' change commitment (Indradevi & Veronica, 2018; Machokoto, 2019). Generally, change management models are not used correctly. Moreover, using these models in practice does not ensure change success (Jones, Firth, Hannibal & Ogunseyin, 2019). There is a need to approach change management from a more behavioral context (Ford, Ford & Polin, 2021). Furthermore, gestures are underexposed in change management, and there is incompetency in the application of gestures, since there is a lack of insight into what makes them effective (Ten Bos, 2011, 2012). There is a lack of wisdom in business practices regarding employees' change commitment and leadership gestures, resulting in insufficient implementation of organizational change initiatives.

1.3 Relevance

Organizational change occurs with increasing frequency and magnitude. However, current research concerning organizational change is mainly focused on the sector or national level instead of the

individual level (Ahmad & Cheng, 2018; Kuipers et al., 2014). Moreover, there is little empirical evidence of how direct managers influence employees' commitment towards change (Burke, 2010; Herold et al., 2008; Neves et al., 2018; Van der Voet, 2014). There is a need to research change management at the employee level more deeply. This perspective has been greatly underexposed, however it is essential to empirically investigate the extent of these relationships (Ahmad & Cheng, 2018). It is necessary to bridge theory and practice in order to truly understand organizational change in strategic management (Battilana & Casciaro, 2013). Additionally, more research is needed on the impact of social interactions on employee motivation (Lin, 2011). The concept of gestures in relation to leadership is fairly new and underdeveloped in the academic context. Only a minimum of studies have researched this (Taylor, 2020; Ten Bos, 2011, 2012). Especially, leadership gestures in the context of change management are in uncharted territory. Therefore, insights into the contribution of leadership gestures in increasing employees' commitment are of added value.

Analyzing the role of employees' commitment and leadership gestures in change initiatives has largely been overlooked. Lack of employees' commitment is inherent to change. Although, persistent resistance is problematic (Hiatt & Creasey, 2012). Resistance is considered valuable, as it can point to inefficiencies and deepen the discussion about employees' needs and desires (Ford & Ford, 2010). To better interpret this, commitment throughout the organization must be identified, understood and managed (Hiatt & Creasey, 2012). Maximizing the level of employees' commitment towards change will enable organizations to retain employees and successfully implement change initiatives (Ahmad & Cheng, 2018; Aujla & Mclarney, 2020; Lundy & Morin, 2013; Ouedraogo, Zaitouni & Ouakouak, 2021). It is crucial for managers to have adequate knowledge and expertise to increase employees' commitment and manage the change processes (Aujla & Mclarney, 2020; Kumarasinghe & Dilan, 2021). For business practice, it is valuable to increase knowledge about a new more behavioral approach of interactions between managers and employees (Ford et al., 2021). Leadership gestures might help to shed light on how leaders can better, more effectively respond to the needs and desires of employees during change (Caringal-Go, Teng-Calleja, Franco, Manaois, & Zantua, 2021; Singh, 2018; Taylor, 2020; Ten Bos, 2012). Wisdom into how leadership gestures could contribute to increasing employees' commitment towards change is valuable for business practice success.

1.4 Goal and research question

The goal of this study is to get a better understanding of employees' commitment to change, and the influence of leadership gestures in this regard. This can lead to practical advice for managers enabling

them to successfully implement organizational change initiatives. Therefore, the central research question of this study is:

How should employees' commitment towards change be managed, and how can leadership gestures influence this?

The outline of this study is as follows. First, the theoretical framework is discussed, including an elaboration of the main concepts based on literature. Hereafter, the methods section will explain the choices within this research. The research context of this study is nurses and managers in a Dutch hospital. Furthermore, the results of this study will be presented, in which the outcomes of the interviews are analyzed. In addition, the answer to the central research question is given in the conclusion. Finally, the discussion describes the implications, reflections and recommendations of this study.

2) Theoretical framework

In this section the main concepts and the relationship between these will be explained and discussed. The conceptual model will illustrate the relationships.

2.1 Change management

Organizations are faced with many challenges. The organizational environment is dynamic, these changes require organizations to adapt (Hashim, 2013). Change management is engaging the energy and passion of employees around a common shared vision, in order to achieve that the change becomes an integral part of their work and behavior (Hiatt & Creasey, 2012). The people-side of change management is a critical organizational skill, in which organizations have adopted the ability to transition to new ways of working allowing them to embrace new developments (Flanding, Grabman & Cox, 2018). Change management enables employees to adopt a change, empowering organizations to realize goals. The closer to 100% engagement, the closer to achieving 100% of the desired outcomes (Kumarasinghe & Dilan, 2021). In this context, it refers to planned changes. Planned change is a process of moving from one fixed state to another through pre-planned steps. Particularly planned changes struggle with the cooperation of employees to transition. Therefore, these are heavily reliant on the role of managers to engage employees (Bamford & Forrester, 2003; Katan, 2021; Piderit, 2000; Stouten et al., 2018). Change management is valuable for transitioning the organization.

2.1.1 Change management model

Change management requires guidelines for the implementation of new plans in challenging environments. Kotter's eight step-change model (appendix 1) can be used by managers as a tool to make the changing world work for employees (Kumarasinghe & Dilan, 2021). The model is valuable since it outlines a method to successfully manage change and avoid traps triggering failed change initiatives (Kavanagh & Thite, 2009). Despite this, there is also criticism on Kotter's model regarding the usability in practice (Appelbaum, Habashy, Malo & Shafiq, 2012; Sittrop & Crosthwaite, 2021; Stouten et al., 2018). Moreover, the model does not prove its effectiveness in practice, since it does not guarantee change success (Jones et al., 2019). The steps are: (1) Establishing a sense of urgency - (2) Building the guiding team - (3) Creating a vision - (4) Communicating the vision - (5) Empowering the action and removing obstacles - (6) Creating short term wins - (7) Consolidating improvements - (8) Anchoring new approaches in the culture and making change stick (Eayrs, Cadrin & Glass, 2014; Kotter, 1995, 1996, 1998; Kumarasinghe & Dilan, 2021). The change management model could partly help to expand the understanding.

2.1.2 Change management components

The change management components are needed in change management. Knoster's model of managing complex change (appendix 2) states six components that need to be present in change management to realize the intended desired change (Ebert, 2018). The components are considered a tool for guiding managers in directly influencing attitudes and behaviors (Benson, 2021; Caredda, 2020). The six components are: vision - consensus - skills - incentives - resources - action plan. If even one of the components is missing in the change management, the change will be negatively impacted by unfavorable reactions (Ebert, 2018). This will prevent organizations from successfully implementing change initiatives (Bartunek et al., 2006; Choi, 2011). The change management components provide guidelines to influence employees' reactions.

2.2 Employees' commitment towards change

Employees' commitment is valuable to analyze during change. Employees tend to manage and implement changes smoothly, when they feel comfortable with this (Higgs & Rowland, 2010). Commitment to change can be defined as the psychological alignment with the change, the intentions to support it and the willingness to work toward successful implementation (Herold, Fedor & Caldwell, 2007; Herold et al., 2008).

Employees' commitment towards change can be divided into affective commitment and normative commitment. Both have shown to be unique and relevant (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). Affective and normative commitment to change emerged as the strongest determinants in change outcomes and these are likely to be directly linked to leadership behavior (Cunningham, 2006; Gebert, Heinitz & Buengeler, 2016). Affective and normative commitment constitute employees' commitment towards change.

2.2.1 Affective commitment

Employees can be affectively committed to change. Employees can be bound to a course of action through a desire to provide support for organizational change, which is based on a belief in its inherent benefits. Employees want to support the change (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). It is considered a sincere free choice. Affective commitment includes the identification with, emotional attachment to and involvement in the change process (Le Blanc & Gonzales-Roma, 2012). This results in favorable assessments of the change initiative (Herrbach, 2006).

Employees who are affectively committed to change believe that the change is valuable. They are convinced that the change is a good strategy for the organization. These employees believe that things will be better with the change. Moreover, they recognize that the change serves an important purpose and is necessary. The level of affective commitment is formed based on these perceptions, as constituted by Herscovitch & Meyer (2002), of which the appropriateness has been proven (Herold et al., 2008; Ouedraogo et al., 2021; Rafferty & Restubog, 2009). Hence, affective commitment is based on desire.

2.2.2 Normative commitment

Employees can also be normatively committed to change. A sense of moral obligation to provide support for organizational change can bind employees to a course of action. Employees have the feeling that they ought to support the change (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). It triggers the pressure of moral duty, which goes beyond their personal interest, to behave appropriately and engage in the change initiative (Bono & Judge, 2003; Liu, Loi & Ngo, 2018). This can even happen when employees are not necessarily open to or ready for the change (Herscovitsch & Meyer, 2002).

Employees who are normatively committed experience a feeling of obligation to support the change. They experience a feeling of duty to work towards the change. The employees would feel bad about opposing to the change and would reason that it would be irresponsible to resist the change. The level of affective commitment is formed based on these perceptions, as constituted by Herscovitch & Meyer (2002), of which the appropriateness has been proven (Herold et al., 2008; Ouedraogo et al., 2021; Rafferty & Restubog, 2009). Thus, normative commitment is based on obligation.

2.3 Leadership gestures

2.3.1 Leadership

Leadership has a major role in organizations. Leadership concerns a dynamic and reciprocal interaction between managers and employees. It concerns the resulting outcomes of leadership behaviors and employees' perceptions (Ahmad & Cheng, 2018; Lord, Brown & Freiberg, 1999). Managers are the first hierarchical level above the operating level of the employee, and should provide psycho-emotional and work support (Caringal-Go et al., 2021; Van der Voet et al., 2015). Employees have expectations and preferences concerning leadership behavior, which should be the center point for inspiration (Caringal-Go et al., 2021). The alignment between expectations and reality is even more imperative in changing contexts (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Epitropaki & Martin, 2004). It will demonstrate how employees will respond to their managers and perceive their

effectiveness (Magsaysay & Hechanova, 2017). Leadership wisdom can provide important insights into perceptions and effects on employees.

2.3.2 Gestures

Gestures, that are experienced as positive, can be helpful for managers. The link between management and gestures appears to be evident. This is based on its inherent meaning, in Latin languages gestures express management (*gestione* (Italian) & *gestion* (French)). However, gestures themselves can hardly be precisely defined (Ten Bos, 2011, 2012). It is described as an expression of oneself, which is experienced by another. A gesture expresses goodwill and is a response to employees' need for sincere praise and approval (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson & Sowa, 1986; Settoon, Bennett & Liden, 1996; Ten Bos, 2011, 2012). A gesture can be defined as a social interaction between people, which desirably engenders a stimulus for other individuals to adjust their behavior (Weiss, 1943).

However, somehow gestures have been forgotten, or managers no longer dare or cannot give the complexity a proper place in organizational practices. The recipient's interpretation is difficult to influence and indicate, which makes effects uncertain. Managers have to ensure the right timing and amount of gestures, along with correct reception of what he/she intends to signify. Even though it is difficult to manage properly, it is important for correct operation of gestures to maintain expressive quality (Knowlson, 2006; Ten Bos, 2012). Employees have the need for a deeper more authentic sense of humanity in organizations. It is valuable to think a little smaller, to act a lot more humbly, and to elevate the person-to-person interaction. Personal connection is essential for managers, because it helps to build a culture of compassion, family and respect. Small gestures can send big signals (Taylor, 2020). Gestures are desired in management.

2.3.3 Leadership gestures

Gestures are associated with corresponding behavior. However, it is hard to define good gestures since it is a personal experience. The focus will be on the social aspect of gestures, since these are more related to leadership and advisable to implement in business practice (Manzoor, Wei & Asif, 2021; Shin et al., 2012; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998).

Employees especially appreciate expressions of empathy and understanding of what they are going through during organizational change (Lunenburg, 2010; Sharif & Scandura, 2014). Managers should allow voice by including employees in the change initiative to come to a collaborative solution. Check-ups and lifting up the spirits are welcome (Den Hartog, 2015; Caringal-Go et al., 2021). Additionally, expressing trust to employees is essential, since it can be seen as a transformational

process, which broadens the work of employees. It tells something about the way a manager thinks of an employee (Ten Bos, 2012). Employees truly appreciate it if they will receive responsibilities (Crant, 2000). Increasing freedom and decision-making power in their work by means of autonomy, is complementary (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). Furthermore, employees expect their managers to stick to promises and be accountable (Ellis, 2007; De Hoogh & Den Hartog 2008). This could be, for example, a commitment to realize something, and if this turns out not to be feasible, take responsibility for this. Making apologies, implies an acceptance of personal responsibility of managers, while explicitly acknowledging the caused wrongfulness (Ten Bos, 2011). This can fulfill an important social function (Lazare, 2005). Besides, recognition can serve as a positive reinforcement for employees (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). This can be done by honoring efforts or service anniversaries. Compliments, such as a smile, a pat on the back or a verbal appraisal, make employees happy (Hoogenboom, 2017). Taking this further, to express appreciation, managers could send handwritten birthday/anniversary cards, thank-you notes and messages for a job well done to each of their employees (Taylor, 2020). Moreover, celebrating successes with employees is very important, but unfortunately too often overlooked (Hiatt & Creasey, 2012). These gestures should be incorporated into leadership practices.

2.4 The relationship between change management, employees' commitment towards change, and leadership gestures

Change management is fundamental in realizing employees' commitment towards change. Change management will enable organizations to achieve desired outcomes through the engagement of employees to transition into new ways of working (Hiatt & Creasey, 2021; Kumarasinghe & Dilan, 2021). The change management model provides insights into the required steps, which managers need to take for change success (Kavanagh & Thite, 2009; Kumarasinghe & Dilan, 2021). Moreover, the change management components need to be present in order to influence employees' attitudes and behaviors as preferred (Benson, 2021; Caredda, 2020; Ebert, 2018). The approach of change implementation strongly influences employees' commitment (Yilmaz, Ozgen & Akyel, 2013).

Managers are considered to have a profound impact on employees' commitment towards change. In dynamic turbulent environments of change, employees attempt to reduce uncertainty before acting (Huy, 2002; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1993). Managers fulfill a central role in this, as they should provide guidance in transforming insecurities into opportunities and potential accomplishments (Bass, 1985; Waldman, Ramírez, House, & Puranam, 2001). This draws on the impactful relationship of managers and employees, and the social exchanges between them (Kacmar, Bachrach, Harris & Zivnuska, 2011;

Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes & Salvador, 2009). The fulfillment of employees' needs and expectations serve as a starting point for employees' intentions and behaviors (Bordia, Resubog, Jimmieson & Irmer, 2011; McDonald & Makin, 2000). If the received treatment is positive, employees want to reciprocate this by providing loyalty to managers (Rahaman, Camps, Decoster & Stouten, 2021). Support from managers can stimulate employees to go beyond their job description and act beneficial for the organization (Jaros, 2010; Neves et al., 2018).

Extending on this, leadership gestures can contribute to the enhancement of employees' commitment towards change. Managers can strongly influence employees' behavior through gestures (Singh, 2018). Gestures serve as a starting point for support, since these are tightly connected by authenticity, integrity and credibility of managers (Ouedraogo et al., 2021; Ten Bos, 2011). Managers can create a social bond connecting employees (Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012). In doing so, a good working atmosphere is created (Katan, 2021). Gestures allow for a certain kind of homogenization, which helps to foster a feeling of community (Agamben, 2001; Ten Bos, 2011). The component of social rewarding will generate further cooperation (Blau, 1964). Committed employees take supportive initiatives and strive to achieve organizational goals. Additional accompanied benefits are higher job satisfaction and lower turnover intentions (Tang & Vandenberghe, 2020; Rafferty & Restubog, 2009).

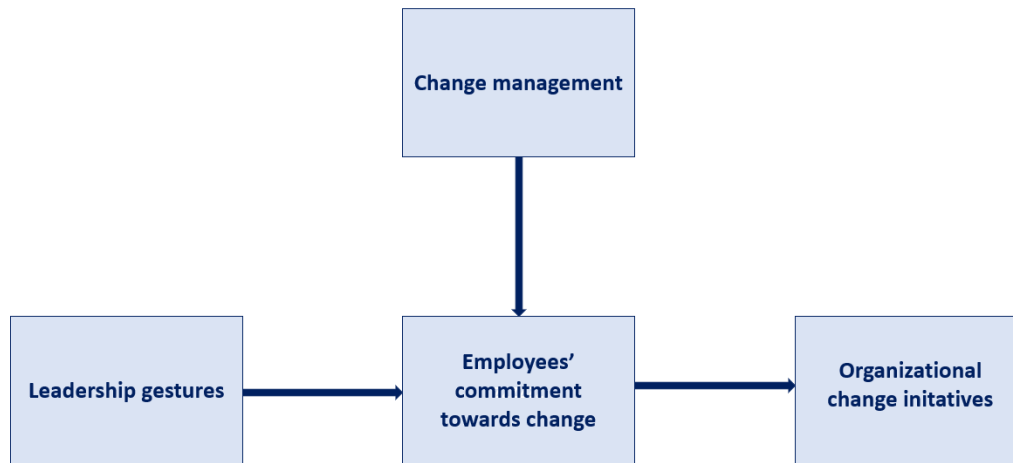
Understanding what change management, employees' commitment and effective leadership gestures entail, removes the guessing game and gives managers a head-start (Caringal-Go et al., 2021). To summarize, the change management model and components are boundary conditions for realizing employees' commitment towards change, and leadership gestures can provide wisdom into the enhancement of employees' commitment towards change, which is crucial for organizational change initiatives (Herold et al., 2008; Rahaman et al., 2021; Wright, Christensen & Isett, 2013). To increase the effectiveness of change management initiatives, it is imperative to challenge these approaches in business practice.

2.5 Conceptual model

The conceptual model provides a visual representation of the link between the above-mentioned concepts. Change management is paramount in realizing employees' commitment towards change, and leadership gestures contribute to the level of employees' commitment towards change. Subsequently, the degree of employees' commitment influences organizational change initiatives. It is in line with expectations that all relations are positive. The exact relationship between the indicators will be further analyzed.

Figure 1

Conceptual model



3) Methods

In this section, the research design and strategy, operationalization, selection of data sources, methods of data collection and analysis, and the quality and ethics of the research are argued.

3.1 Research design and strategy

This study has a qualitative research design. Qualitative research focuses on the attribution of meaning to a complex social phenomenon in practice (Silverman, 2020; Sullivan & Sargeant, 2011; Vennix, 2016). The goal is to explore behaviors, meanings, values and experiences of individuals in their context (Gerring, 2017; Kitto, Chesters & Grbich, 2008). Given the essence of this research, it is valuable to obtain explanations of answers and dive into the individual perspective. In doing so, more clear relationships between the concepts will be uncovered, which thereafter can be understood and interpreted clearly (Mortelmans, 2013). Qualitative research fits well with the aim of this study.

A deductive research approach has been chosen, because overall there is sufficient knowledge of the separate concepts in this study (Verschuren & Doorewaard, 2010). Deduction is a top-down method from general to specific (Blackstone, 2018; Vennix, 2016). It is being examined whether the implications also apply within this study and the existing theory will hereby be revised (Blackstone, 2018; Locke, 2007; Nola & Sankey, 2007). However, this study will also include an inductive component where necessary (Symon & Cassell, 2012). This is important for this study as it analyses new relationships between the concepts (Blackstone, 2018).

3.2 Selection of data sources

There is a lack of empirical evidence on the influence of leadership on employees' commitment to change, especially in the public sector (Fernandez & Pitts, 2007; Van Der Voet, 2014; Van der Voet et al., 2015). The distinctive differences of public sector organizations from private ones are not taken into account (By & Macleod, 2009; Coram & Burnes, 2001; Isett, Glied, Sparer & Brown, 2013; Van der Voet et al., 2015).

Hospitals are being affected by many ongoing changes. This concerns social developments, technological innovations, budgets and rules/regulations. These can only be pursued through support from a dedicated workforce. Within hospitals, nurses are considered one of the primary outputs, since it is a people-intensive service business. Hospitals are social systems, which require optimal employee commitment (Indradevi & Veronica, 2018; Nayak, Sahoo & Mohanty, 2018). Unfortunately, employee commitment is rather low within hospitals. This increases turnover

intentions, which will lead to even further workforce shortages. The majority of nurses feel the need for better support from their managers, who are highly valued. Therefore, employee commitment should be enhanced by managers, but difficulties are experienced in managing commitment (Machokoto, 2019; Maurits, De Veer & Francke 2016). Hence, hospitals are an interesting relevant domain to further dive into the management of employees' commitment towards change, and the contribution of leadership gestures herein.

The aim is to interview twelve respondents in total. The respondents will consist of six nurses and six direct managers within the Radboud UMC. This number should be sufficient to derive adequate data (Dworkin, 2012). The respondents have been working for the hospital for at least 3 years and have been involved in organizational change initiatives. Selection takes place using convenience and snowball sampling. These are the most accessible methods and suit this study. The own network and platforms, such as LinkedIn, will be used for this.

3.3 Methods of data collection

Interviews are used as a data source to acquire information for this study. Social interaction can motivate people to express things that otherwise might not be articulated (Bleijenbergh, 2015). Semi-structured interviews with open questions have an important role in qualitative research (Mortelmans, 2013; Vennix, 2016). The precise order and wording of the questions are determined during the interview, allowing for appropriate depth (Evers & De Boer, 2012; Payne & Payne, 2004; Stuckey, 2013; Vennix, 2016). This gives respondents the opportunity to color the interview somewhat, to obtain a better picture of how theory connects to practice. This will gain insight into personal interpretation of respondents, which is among others the aim of this study (Boeije, 2005; Horton, Macve & Struyven, 2004).

An interview guide with clear instructions is drawn up (Stuckey, 2013), which can be found in appendix 3. In addition, there is an extensive operationalization, serving as a starting point for the question formulation (Bleijenbergh, 2015). A list of interview topics and questions, give direction to the interviews (Payne & Payne, 2004). The interview questionnaire can be found in appendix 4. The best way to conduct interviews is by means of face-to-face contact. Therefore, this is the aim (Bleijenbergh, 2015). However, when this is not possible, the interviews will take place through video contact. This is used as suitable alternative for a form of personal contact (Bleijenbergh, 2015).

3.4 Methods of data analysis

The interviews will be audio recorded. To display all information thoroughly, the interviews will first be transcribed (Bryman, 2016; Cope, 2016). This provides a basis for coding, in which the data is organized (Denicolo & Becker, 2012). Deductive coding will be applied in this study. The coding is guided by expectations from theory and will be from indicators to dimensions to concepts. These are displayed in the concepts scheme (Bleijenbergh, 2015). This is in line with this study's aim, because in this way it is examined whether proposed relationships from theory correspond to business practice. There is also some room for adaptation. If information of respondents is deviating from the coding table, inductive coding is used to avoid misconceptions (Bleijenbergh, 2015; Symon & Cassell, 2012). The inductive coding process is based on the input from respondents (Bleijenbergh, 2015). The combination of both deductive and inductive coding is called abduction (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). Fragments are highlighted in the color of the concept and labeled accordingly. The coding table is displayed in appendix 5. Patterns will be identified, which provides guidelines for analysis (Payne & Payne, 2004; Thomas, 2006).

3.5 Operationalization

The table below shows all concepts with the corresponding theoretical definition, which is also used in this study. The concepts scheme visually displays a clear representation of the concepts.

Table 1

Operationalization

Concept	Description
Change management	Engaging the energy and passion of employees around a common shared vision, in order to achieve that the change becomes an integral part of their work and behavior (Hiatt & Creasey, 2012).
Employees' commitment towards change	The psychological alignment with the change, the intentions to support it and the willingness to work towards successful implementation (Herold et al., 2007; Herold et al., 2008).
Leadership gestures	The expression of oneself, a social act that expresses goodwill to respond to employees' need for sincere praise and approval, engendering behavioral adjustment (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Manzoor et al., 2021; Settoon et al., 1996; Shin et al., 2012; Stajkovic & Luthans, 2000; Ten Bos, 2011, 2012; Weiss, 1943).

Table 2
Concepts scheme

Concept	Dimension	Indicator
Change management	Model	Sense of urgency
		Guiding team
		Vision
		Communication
		Empowering action
		Short-term wins
		Improvement consolidation
	Components	Change anchoring
		Vision
		Consensus
		Skills
		Resources
		Incentives
		Action plan
Employees' commitment towards change	Affective commitment	Valuable change
		Good strategy
		Important purpose
		Improvement
	Normative commitment	Necessary change
		Duty
		Obligation
		Feeling bad about opposing
Gestures	Leadership gestures	Irresponsible to resist
		Empathy and understanding
		Voice allowance
		Check-ups
		Lifting up the spirits
		Trust
		Responsibility
		Autonomy
		Promises
		Accountability
		Apologies
		Recognition
		Compliments
		Appreciation
Celebrating successes		

3.6 Research quality and ethics

The focus is on maximizing validity and reliability, to establish a high-quality study. In qualitative research, validity refers to the suitability of the process and data used. Reliability entails the reproducibility of the process and results of the study (Leung, 2015). Continuous reflection on the research process attempts to ensure that the information is relevant to the study, contributing to internal validity (Bleijenbergh, 2015; Vennix, 2016). The rich description of methods for data collection and analysis, and the use of the interview guide and questionnaire, will result in a more clear focus and uniform structure, which contributes to reproducibility (Richards, 2020; Stuckey, 2013; Tracy, 2010). The reliability of this study is ensured by using multiple nurses and managers as respondents, of which results can be compared (Bleijenbergh, 2015; Stuckey, 2013). By interviewing both nurses and managers from different departments it is attempted to establish a representative case. This creates a more detailed and useful depiction of this study and allows qualitative acceptable substantive conclusions (Bleijenbergh, 2015). However, external validity is rather low, because of unfulfilled triangulation of methods and a contextual study (Bleijenbergh, 2015; Vennix, 2016). This study can only investigate a fraction of a large whole, due to lack of time and resources. Additionally, there is a risk of bias. Interviews are active interactions between people instead of neutral data collection. Additionally, the researcher's interpretations might influence results. This leads to more context-dependent results and should be taken into account through reflexivity in interpretation (Halldén, Haglund & Strömdahl, 2007; Tracy; 2010).

To guarantee the highest ethical standards in this study, five general principles for ethics are used as a guideline (American Psychological Association, 2017). The research aim and methods are fully transparent and the researcher is aware of the corresponding responsibility of its role. By applying a reflexive approach through critical self-reflection, there will be more awareness of researcher's biases affecting this study. Respondents participate voluntarily and will be informed about the research and interview goal and purpose. Consent for recording will be verbally agreed upon beforehand. Furthermore, anonymity and confidentiality are guaranteed by discrete handling of information by limited access and non-identifiability. If at any point, for whatever reason, respondents want to withdraw from the study, the respondent is free to do so. To start with, the respondents are made feel comfortable. They should feel safe to share everything. The respondents are asked to answer honestly, since there are no right or wrong answers. As an introduction, the first questions are of low threshold. The data will be stored in a safe environment, personal online vault, for the duration of the study. Since the goal is to provide practical advice, the results will be shared in an adequate manner. This is valuable for the respondents, since it might be applied in their organization.

4) Results

This section analyzes all data obtained from the interviews. The concepts with the corresponding indicators are analyzed and thereafter the relationships are discussed. For each concept/indicator, the first paragraph is from the perspective of nurses and the second paragraph is from the perspective of managers.

4.1 Change management

4.1.1 Model

The respondents find it helpful to understand the urgency and vision of change initiatives, which is often unclear. Open communication can save a lot of misery (Respondent 2). Managers should empower employees to participate and act as a guiding team to get all nurses aboard. Attention to short-term wins serves as motivation. During the practical implementation, adjustments are still necessary to make the change stick properly as explained by the respondents.

The experience of the managers is that good substantiation helps for understanding. Nurses need loads of communication and attention to progress. *“In conclusion, with a change, from having the conversation together, and the involvement and attention, then you establish commitment with each other.” [Concluderend bij een verandering is dat je dus vanuit het gesprek voeren met elkaar en de betrokkenheid en de aandacht, commitment met elkaar neerzet.]* (Respondent 8). The nurses have to make the change fit for the team. The biggest challenge is to successfully anchor change.

4.1.2 Components

First and foremost, *“I think it is very important that you as a team also know which path will be followed.” [Ik denk dat het heel belangrijk is dat je als team ook weet welke koers er gevaren wordt.]* (Respondent 2). It is essential that everyone is on the same page, which is hard to realize. The respondents advocate that incentives are needed as stimulus for ongoing support. Additionally, managers must ensure that all required conditions are present.

During major changes there is no blueprint, which causes confusion among nurses. This negatively impacts the energy. *“You have to get everyone on board anyway.” [je moet toch iedereen meekrijgen.]* (Respondent 11). The more nurses will be on the same page, the more support there will be. As a manager you should make the required capabilities available. Moreover, managers could stimulate the nurses' commitment.

4.2 Employees' commitment towards change

4.2.1 Affective commitment

A change is considered valuable when it is in the interests of and it benefits the nurses, the team and especially the patient. This truly engenders enthusiasm. Generally, the respondents see added value, which will make them committed to the change. *"We would like that, because it allows us to improve healthcare."* [Dat willen we graag, want daarmee kunnen wij een verbetering maken in de zorg.] (Respondent 3). The change should serve this important purpose. For nurses' compliance, it is very important to understand the 'why'. Moreover, the work of nurses should be made easier and more efficient to improve the workload. People then are able to recognize the improvement and necessity. *"It is very simple, if it brings us benefits, then there is positivity."* [Het is heel simpel, als het ons voordelen brengt, dan is er positiviteit.] (Respondent 4). This is considered the most important determinant of commitment. On the contrary, *"not all changes are improvements"* [niet alle veranderingen zijn verbeteringen], states respondent 3. Over time, more people start to think that the change that is being implemented is a good positive strategy (Respondent 5). Nurses who have affinity with change, are easier to get on board. The nurses seem more motivated towards affective commitment from intrinsic motivation. This results in better positive motivation, which is preferred.

It is the managers' job to provide justification for change initiatives. Respondents 9, 10 & 11 explain that for commitment it is essential that nurses understand the purpose, benefits and necessity. The respondents believe that in general nurses can see added value for patients, and eventually for themselves in terms of more efficient work processes. The purpose of nurses is to provide the best care for patients, serving as main motivation for more commitment to change. This also helps to understand the 'why' and intention. All respondents indicate that it is important that they can really see this improvement. Recognizable problems are always very appealing to nurses (Respondent 10). Employees who are more open to the change also feel more commitment (Respondent 12). *"You actually want employees to be or become intrinsically motivated to go along with that change."* [Eigenlijk wil je dat medewerkers intrinsiek gemotiveerd worden of raken om die verandering mee in te gaan.] (Respondent 9). Managers think that it is important that nurses themselves really believe in the change initiative.

4.2.2 Normative commitment

The respondents often feel changes as imposed and pushed through by management. They are forced to go along without any consultation, which is perceived as bothersome. Over time the

respondents come to terms. *"That is a bit of nursing inherent, isn't it. ... That is typical nursing thinking, so to speak. We more often push our own interests aside for a patient or for the organization."* [Dat is een beetje verpleegkundige eigen, hè. ... Dat is wel typisch verpleegkundig denken, zeg maar. We schuiven vaker ons eigen aan de kant voor een patiënt of voor de organisatie.] (Respondent 4). Nurses have a strong morale to provide the best care for patients, and a sense of duty to make it work for the team. This makes them move along more easily. Respondents 1 & 5 respectively explain: *"that is terrible for everyone of course. When people resist."* [voor iedereen is dat vreselijk natuurlijk. Als mensen met de hakken in het zand gaan.]; *"I should go along too. It is the responsible thing to do."* [moet ik ook maar meegaan. Het is het verantwoordelijke om te doen.] Normative commitment seems to be more based on extrinsic motivation, since there is not really a sense of inherent positive support.

The respondents state that some changes are obligatory. Changes can be extremely one-sided and top-down. Often not everyone agrees, which is perceived as troublesome (Respondent 12). Sooner or later, nurses try to make the best of it. The sense of duty serves as an important stimulus. Respondent 10 explains: *"you work together as a team. They understand that if you resist, it will not only affect you, but also your colleagues."* [je werkt met elkaar als team. Ze snappen wel dat als jij met de hakken in het zand gaat, dan doet dat niet alleen iets met jou, maar ook met je collega's.] Everyone ultimately has a sense of responsibility and wants things to go well. Respondents 11 & 12 add that a nurse even would feel bad when he/she is the only one opposing the change.

4.3 Leadership gestures

4.3.1 Empathy and understanding

All respondents indicate that empathy and understanding expressed through words is very important. *"We are seen more as a person and not as a number that just has to come and work there."* [We worden meer als persoon gezien en niet als een nummertje dat gewoon daar moet komen werken.] (Respondent 4). It can be difficult for nurses to experience empathy if this is not shown, while there is certainly a need for (Respondents 2 & 5).

Managers seem to be mainly concerned with keeping the workload manageable for nurses (Respondents 8, 9 & 12). They realize it is not easy for nurses and it is important to acknowledge this. Managers appear to be consciously concerned with empathy and understanding. However, they

seem less concerned with explicitly expressing this to nurses.

4.3.2 Voice allowance

Most nurses do feel empowered to speak up. There is enough freedom to provide feedback. However, negative feedback is not always received well (Respondents 2 & 6). It is crucial that everyone can think along (Respondents 1 & 3). Managers should stimulate this by asking for input.

All respondents agree, it should be low threshold to voice opinion for nurses. It is about showing that their opinion matters. The managers believe that nurses dare to say everything. However, giving and receiving feedback can be challenging. *"It is about feeling like we are doing this together."* [*Het gaat om het gevoel hebben van we doen dit samen.*] (Respondent 8).

4.3.3 Check-ups

All respondents consider it pleasant if the manager regularly does check-ups to see how things are going. A manager should keep an overall eye on things. The role of managers is to support nurses and ensure well-being. Respondents 2 & 6 both need a little more interest from the manager, respondents 4 & 5 acknowledge this importance.

All respondents try to be in regular contact with nurses in several ways. The managers are convinced they are actively checking in. The nurses indicate that there is enough attention to signaling (Respondent 10). It is important to know what is going on and what is needed. Conversely, respondents 11 & 12 think there might be a little more check-ups.

4.3.4 Lifting up the spirits

Managers fulfill an essential role in maintaining positivity during change. A good manager should motivate as a role model, and prevent too much commotion in the team (Respondent 5). *"That is important that you get some courage from your manager"* [*Dat is belangrijk dat je toch even moed krijgt van je teamleider*] (Respondent 2). Moreover, there must be the possibility of laughter (Respondent 3).

Managers recognize that employees sometimes need positive stimulation for new energy. *"For every disappointing thing, there is something positive to think of. If you can transfer that, that is very good."* [*Voor ieder ding wat tegenzit, is iets positiefs te bedenken. Als je dat kan overdragen, dat is*

heel goed.] (Respondent 10). Regularly, humor is used to keep things lighthearted. Laughter works therapeutically (Respondents 9 & 12).

4.3.5 Trust

The respondents state that managers should have complete trust. *"Employees are professionals, so they do know what to do."* [Medewerkers zijn professionals, dus die weten wel wat ze moeten doen.] (Respondent 3). Trust is often expressed by asking employees for participation or by giving freedom. Overcontrolling is perceived as unpleasant (Respondents 3 & 6). Trust is not always explicitly mentioned, which means it is not always experienced.

Mutual trust and the expression hereof, by just saying this, is highly valued. As a manager it is very important that you provide all elements of trust, leave task maturity and ownership within the team (Respondents 9 & 12). It is not a big deal if they make mistakes (Respondents 7 & 12). The managers have much confidence in the nurses and they are under the assumption that they also express this.

4.3.6 Responsibility

Regarding change initiatives, nurses are given the opportunity to actively fulfill roles. It is a manager's job to divide tasks properly and place responsibilities on the nurses. This will stimulate them to take a step forward and to look for solutions and possibilities together (Respondents 2 & 4). Only respondent 6 is limited in performing the actual role.

All of the respondents preferably stimulate and facilitate nurses to fulfill a role during change initiatives. They see the positive influence. *"So it increases the task maturity and sense of responsibility, also the involvement and energy"* [Het vergroot dus de taakvolwassenheid en verantwoordelijkheidsgevoel, ook de betrokkenheid en energie.] (Respondent 9). It is new that the nurses are allowed to participate so much in shaping a major change, states respondent 10.

4.3.7 Autonomy

The respondents generally experience freedom and decision-making power if possible. A high degree of independence and self-direction is experienced. However, this is only the case for bottom-up initiatives. Respondent 3 believes that nurses should be made much more in the lead. A manager should only step up when this is necessary, adds respondent 1.

The respondents are in favor of substance giving by the team and placing as much leadership as

possible within the team. Nurses should have a certain degree of control and their own room for maneuvering and decisions. Nonetheless, respondents 6 & 11 find it difficult to hand over reins and give mandate. Really letting go might be harder than it seems for some managers.

4.3.8 Promises

Promises are not often made. If these are made then these are well thought about (Respondents 4 & 5). Respondent 6 even has really bad experiences regarding promises, since the manager does not act upon these. The most important thing is that the manager keeps his/her word and sticks to promises (Respondents 4 & 6).

All managers say they are aware of the value and consequences of promises. For this reason, clear boundaries and conditions are established. *"we are not going to make commitments or promises if we can not deliver them."* [*we gaan niet zomaar toezeggingen of beloftes doen als we dat niet waar kunnen maken.*] (Respondent 9). It seems that respondents have some kind of fear of negative consequences, and really try to keep promises.

4.3.9 Accountability

For the respondents it is very important that the manager honors commitments. *"There's no real accountability about something like that, that's quite easily dismissed and covered up."* [*Wordt er niet echt verantwoording genomen over zoiets, dat wordt toch vrij makkelijk weggedaan en in een doofpot gestopt.*] (Respondent 2). Generally, managers do not seem to really take responsibility if something does not work out. Admitting mistakes would be appreciated instead of making excuses.

The respondents state that it is very important to practice what you preach. Managers do indicate that they recognize that it is a good thing to admit misjudgments and take accountability, it makes you human. Only respondent 11 admits that accountability may not be taken so explicitly.

4.3.10 Apologies

Almost all of the respondents, except respondent 5, do not have experience with apologies from their managers, while the situation did occur. Managers find this hard, and even try to make excuses for their own shortcomings (Respondents 3 & 6). Conversely, the manager of respondent 5 would say sorry if it does not work out.

Managers indicate that they would apologize, should the need arise (Respondents 7, 8, 10 & 12).

They do not have to be flawless. As a manager you cannot expect employees to admit mistakes, while you are not doing it yourself (Respondent 8). However, respondent 11 rather puts it away.

4.3.11 Recognition

Nurses do experience recognition from their managers. The managers are truly satisfied with the nurses. They express this by paying tribute to their efforts. It is nice to hear that managers are happy with or grateful for the work they perform. Most nurses often receive words of thanks. However, respondents 2 & 6 desire more recognition. This would be welcome.

The respondents express recognition mostly by words. It is about recognizing efforts and achievements, but mostly paying attention when someone manages to overcome the struggle. The nurses should have the feeling of being seen (Respondent 10). There is also recognition for service anniversaries through cake or flowers. The managers present themselves to be able to comply well with their role of providing recognition.

4.3.12 Compliments

Compliments are about the little things. Compliments give respondents a very pleasant feeling. It is about the golden mean and sincerity is important. Respondents 2 & 4 do not necessarily desire a pat on the back for just doing their job, but rather for extra efforts. However, respondent 6 indicates more need for compliments from the manager.

All respondents do give compliments, by saying that they are doing a great job or they are proud of them. *"I think everybody is sensitive to that. It is always nice to hear" [Ik denk dat iedereen daar gevoelig voor is. Het is altijd fijn om te horen]* (Respondent 7). It is not clear and there is no agreement whether you can receive enough compliments. The managers believe that they give sufficient compliments.

4.3.13 Appreciation

Appreciation is seen as essential by nurses. This appreciation is expressed by flowers, treats, cards and small gifts. Respondent 5 is convinced that changes are part of your profession, and it is not necessary to receive something for that every time. However, respondents 2, 3 & 6 definitely do not experience sufficient appreciation. Receiving appreciation makes you feel that you matter, which is highly cherished by nurses.

The respondents are under the impression that they express a lot of appreciation, like flowers, cake, cards, small gifts and team outings. It is seen as very important and beloved. People even count on it too much, causing the effect to be lost (Respondents 7 & 10). Managers do believe in appreciation, but it should remain something special.

4.3.14 Celebrating successes

In practice, successes are not often celebrated. When something is achieved as a team, this is celebrated with an informal get-together, cake or just mentioning (Respondents 1, 3, 4 & 6). The needs for celebrations and the extensiveness thereof are mixed. Nurses are pretty down-to-earth. They prefer celebration in the little things.

All respondents indicate that during change, celebration of successes is valuable.

This is often done by pointing out successes in the team, of which they can be proud (Respondents 7, 8, 9, 11 & 12). However, respondents 10, 11 & 12 indicate that it would be good to pay a little more attention to this. Managers are not into all the bells and whistles, big celebrations are rather exceptions.

4.4 Additional findings

4.4.1 Listening

Really listening to you as a person, is seen as something essential and extremely pleasant by all respondents. *“What is important for the manager is that you listen to the team and really listen to their needs.” [Wat belangrijk is voor de teamleider, is dat je naar het team luistert en ook echt luistert naar de behoeftes.]* (Respondent 6). The respondents long for a sense of being heard. Therefore, listening can be seen as a leadership gesture, which should be applied in practice.

The respondents identify listening as most important, inherent to good leadership, especially during change. You can always listen and make them feel heard (Respondent 7). It is about being able to give it a place, and take away some frustration (Respondents 8 & 10). A manager already wins a lot by just listening. Listening is considered the key between managers and nurses during change.

4.4.2 Community

Most respondents have a good connected relationship with their manager. Managers make the

difference in uniting a team, which majorly impacts the team atmosphere. *"It is about creating a culture where people help each other, support each other and are there for each other. That is just an essential basis in everything you do."* [Het gaat erom dat je een cultuur creëert waarin mensen elkaar helpen, steunen en er voor elkaar zijn. Dat is gewoon een essentiële basis in alles wat je doet.] (Respondent 3).

A manager must ensure a pleasant safe working environment, and always be there for the nurses. Togetherness is seen as vital. *"A certain culture is then created in which people can work more pleasantly and better together."* [Er ontstaat dan een bepaalde cultuur, waarin mensen prettiger en beter met elkaar kunnen samenwerken.] (Respondent 12).

4.4.3 Resistance

The indicator resistance has been used to indicate the opposite of commitment.

4.5 Relationships

The change management model and components are prerequisites for employees' commitment, as experienced by the nurses and managers. Resistance is generated if these are not handled properly. *"Communicate more and more clearly why we are doing it and how we are going to do it. I think that is the most important thing."* [meer en duidelijker communiceren waarom we het doen en hoe we het gaan doen. Ik denk dat dat wel het belangrijkste is.] (Respondent 5). It will be easier to implement change initiatives. When consensus is created there will be more acceptance (Respondents 1, 3, 4 & 7). *"Sometimes people are very motivated to get something done, but they also constantly run into mountains. And then it does not work out, and then the commitment drops."* [Soms zijn mensen heel gemotiveerd om iets voor elkaar te krijgen, maar lopen zij ook continu tegen bergen op. En dan lukt het niet, en dan zakt de toewijding weg.] (Respondent 1). The guiding team can turn resistance into commitment. *"The moment you do succeed uh, you will see that uh the dedication increases again."* [Op het moment dat het wel lukt uh, zul je zien dat uh de toewijding weer wat groter wordt.] (Respondent 1).

Leadership gestures are an important determinant of the experienced employees' commitment, according to the nurses and managers. The nurses really value when they are seen and heard. Showing interest by means of check-ups and listening, gives the nurses a positive feeling (Respondents 5 & 10). Respondent 4 adds: *"they are certainly very compassionate, sympathetic and*

thoughtful in what they can mean. That is certainly appreciated.” [zij zijn zeker heel meelevend, meevoelend en meedenkend in wat ze kunnen betekenen. Dat wordt zeker op prijs gesteld.]

Commitment will come automatically when there is mutual trust (Respondents 11 & 12). The nurses consider it important to be able to think along and to participate independently. *“if you do that, that people will also be finally much more supportive in the eventual implementation of that change.” [als je dat doet, dat mensen ook veel meer achter staan met het uiteindelijk ook doorvoeren van die verandering.]; “Then you see that people start working in a different way.” [Dan zie je wel dat mensen op een andere manier gaan werken.]* (Respondents 2 & 10). The lack of getting responsibilities during change even leads to turnover intentions of respondent 6. Respondents 2, 4 & 11 state that if you are appreciated more, you are more motivated to go the extra mile, and more job satisfaction is provided. Enthusiasm and positivity help to give the nurses new energy to achieve the next milestone (Respondents 5, 7 & 10). Respondent 12 concludes: *“It stands or falls whether employees feel involved in the change initiative” [Het valt of staat of medewerkers zich betrokken voelen bij het veranderinitiatief]*. Leadership gestures create a pleasant culture, which gives the respondents a feeling of community. This sense of community benefits the willingness to change and participate. In particular, the respondents experience that a lack of leadership gestures is negatively influencing commitment, and it can even result in resistance.

5) Conclusion

In this section, conclusions are drawn based on previous analysis. The problem and purpose are explained, whereafter a conclusion is given to the separate concepts. Finally, the answer to the research question is formulated.

The problem addressed by this study is the lack of understanding employees' commitment towards change and the lack of insight into leadership gestures. Managers have no wisdom on how to realize desired employees' commitment towards change, and how leadership gestures could contribute to this. This study aims to answer the central research question: *How should employees' commitment towards change be managed, and how can leadership gestures influence this?*

All steps and components of change management are somewhat covered. The guiding team is seen as the connecting factor. Overall, the respondents are empowered to take action. In general, the required conditions are facilitated. However, it could help if the sense of urgency and vision were more clear through better communication. An action plan could help in this. Moreover, consensus should be the main point of focus. Employees need incentives for re-energizing. Therefore, there could be more attention to short-term wins instead of only end goals. In practice, it appears to be rather difficult building upon change and anchoring this within new ways of working.

Normative commitment takes to overhand at the beginning of change initiatives. There is a high aversion to the sense of obligation. Employees have a strong sense of duty. For their team and for the patients they want to go along with the change, otherwise it would make them feel bad and irresponsible. Over time affective commitment grows. It is important that the change provides added value. Employees will then be able to recognize the important purpose and necessity. They will see that it is an improvement, which makes them consider it a good strategy. The respondents believe that affective commitment is the most desired kind of commitment.

Leadership gestures are applied in practice, which is cherished by the respondents. It is highly appreciated if empathy and understanding are explicitly expressed. There are regular check-ups, but there is room for more interest from managers. Employees desire positivity to re-energy their motivation. Mutual trust is seen as crucial. Nonetheless, there could be more expressions of trust. They have freedom to voice their opinions. However, negative feedback appears hard to receive for managers. Giving employees responsibilities and autonomy during change is preferred by both employees and managers, even though some managers find it hard letting go. In practice, managers

turn out to be reluctant to make promises, since they are struggling with apologizing and taking accountability. Furthermore, sufficient recognition and compliments are provided by managers. Moreover, appreciation is seen as the most important by employees. Successes are not really celebrated, and the needs for this fulfillment are mixed. Listening is another important gesture that has been discovered in practice. An additional element, resulting from leadership gestures, is the sense of community. A good working culture is created with a great team atmosphere, which is seen as vital.

Altogether, the influence of leadership gestures on employees' commitment towards change is experienced by employees and managers in practice. Almost all gestural indicators can contribute to the increasement, since these are highly valued by employees. Although, managers currently do not seem to be fully aware of this relationship. The leadership gestures are mostly impacting affective commitment, which is most valued. Additionally, leadership gestures can also impact normative commitment mostly through the sense of community. Furthermore, the components and steps of change management are required for commitment. The lack of any of the elements leads to dissatisfaction. Absence or improper application of gestures and change management indicators has a negative impact on employees' commitment.

In conclusion, managers do make the difference for employees. This is acknowledged by both managers and employees. The change management model and components are boundary conditions for realizing employees' commitment towards change, but do not ensure change success. Leadership gestures can help to understand how managers could enhance employees' commitment towards change. This relationship is strongly experienced as such in practice.

6) Discussion

This section entails this study's discussion. The theoretical implications and methodological reflection are debated. Hereafter, suggestions for further research and recommendations for practice are explained.

6.1 Theoretical implications

The results from the analysis are partly in line with expectations of existing theory. However, the theory does not concretely address the relationships between change management, employees' commitment towards change, and leadership gestures. This study found that not all relations and effects of the concepts are experienced in practice as proposed. These differences can partly be explained, since this study approaches a new angle, domain and level of the concepts based on theoretical assumptions.

In practice, it appears that it is indeed important to follow all steps of Kotter's eight step-change model during change (Eayrs et al., 2014; Kotter, 1995, 1996, 1998; Kumarasinghe & Dilan, 2021). All steps are rated as relatively equally important by both employees and managers. In addition, all components of Knoster's model of managing complex change are recognized as boundary conditions, corresponding to theory (Benson, 2021; Caredda, 2020; Ebert, 2018). Employees seem to be tired of change. As expected, despite the model and components, change initiatives are still unsuccessful in practice (Appelbaum et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2019; Sittrop & Crosthwaite, 2021). The respondents express that the behavioral approach is more important and effective, as suggested in theory (Ford et al., 2021).

Both affective and normative commitment are present during change initiatives. Affectively committed employees want to support change themselves, and normatively committed employees have the feeling that they ought to support change (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). In practice, obligation is experienced as aggravating, which negatively impacts the perceived commitment. Therefore, obligation appears not to be a representative indicator of normative commitment, contradicting theory (Herscovitsch & Meyer, 2002; Ouedraogo et al., 2021). The respondents express that affective commitment is based on intrinsic motivation, and normative commitment arises from extrinsic motivation. Moreover, affective commitment is clearly preferred by both employees and managers. This is an addition to existing theory.

It is stated that managers fulfill a major role in change management and serve as an important determinant of the level of employees' commitment towards change (Bordia et al., 2011; Jaros, 2010; McDonald & Makin, 2000; Neves et al., 2018). The value of social interactions is confirmed by the respondents (Katan, 2021; Lin, 2011). In theory, the link between gestures and managers is presented as evident (Ten Bos, 2011, 2012). In practice, there is a connection. However, this is not recognized explicitly by all respondents. The most important leadership gestures according to employees and managers are empathy and understanding, voice allowance, trust and appreciation. The remaining gestures are also considered valuable. Conversely, promises and celebrating success are considered less impactful. This ranking is not made in literature. Additionally, listening as an essential gesture is established from practice. Besides, the correct application of gestures is hard to precisely define, because this is a personal experience (Ten Bos, 2011, 2012). Theory and practice are aligned in this regard.

The relationships between change management, leadership gestures and employees' commitment towards change are suggested to be positive (Ebert, 2018; Kumarasinghe & Dilan, 2021; Singh, 2018; Taylor, 2020; Yilmaz et al., 2013). This is strongly confirmed in practice. The effects show similarities between practice and theory. The sense of community is even more valued by the respondents in practice (Agamben, 2001; Ten Bos, 2011).

The interviews clearly show that employees and managers do not always have similar perspectives on indicators/concepts. This difference is not yet emphasized in current literature. Furthermore, from this study, the assumption can be made that leadership gestures could contribute to ensuring the change management model and components, which might further increase the impact of gestures on employees' commitment. This can be seen as an enhancement of the acknowledged relations, serving as contribution to current theory.

6.2 Limitations and future research

It is attempted to guarantee the quality of this study as much as possible, but there are some limitations that need to be taken into account when interpreting the results. This research has laid the foundation into employees' commitment towards change and the interesting relationship with leadership gestures.

Firstly, the respondents participated in the study voluntarily. Therefore, it might be likely that respondents have affinity with or alternatively aversion to the topic, both causing biased results. Hence, the sample might not be entirely representative. Future research could try to attract respondents with a different approach. Moreover, there is a danger of socially desirable answers. By guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity, and asking indirect questions, it is attempted to reduce this chance. Secondly, the researcher's interpretations might influence the results, due to own assumptions and bias. This was attempted to minimize through reflexivity.

Thirdly, the transferability of this study is rather limited, and conclusions cannot be applied as hard guidelines. The research has been conducted among nurses and managers within one Dutch hospital. A quite low number of respondents were interviewed, which means that the sample does not constitute a good complete reflection of the entire population. Although all respondents met the criteria, further empirical research is necessary to increase generalizability. This study should be reexamined with a higher number of respondents. Reproducibility of the study is tried to guarantee by comprehensive description of methods for data collection and analysis, and the interview guide and questionnaire. Fourthly, transferability and credibility of this study could be enhanced by triangulation. Future research could use more and various data sources combining qualitative and quantitative research methods, during various moments. Additionally, future research could study hospitals or other public sector organizations in the Netherlands or even in other countries. It would be valuable to study this at the employee level and their direct managers. It would be interesting to retrieve results from a broader context of the study. Future research will increase the knowledge extensiveness.

Lastly, gestures can also be experienced as negative. However, this study focused on the positive experienced leadership gestures, leading to employee commitment. Conversely, it would be refreshing to take upon a more negative perspective by looking into the relationship between leadership gestures and employee resistance. This will broaden the knowledge about desired and undesired gestures, and the impact thereof. A more complete picture can be helpful for successful applicability in business practice.

6.3 Practical recommendations

The study shows that there is still room to improve the understanding of managing employees' commitment towards change, and how leadership gestures can contribute to this enhancement.

The first recommendation is to raise awareness among managers of the impact of employees' commitment and leadership gestures in change initiatives. It has become clear that there is not sufficient consciousness about this importance in practice. It is significant to consider that employees' commitment is cumulative, which implies the necessity to maintain high levels. It is relevant to note that the sense of community and recommended leadership gestures should also be present unrelated to change initiatives. With regard to change initiatives, it would be good to keep the change management model and components clearly in mind when making decisions. The visuals, from appendix 1 & 2, should continuously be made available to managers as a reminder that employees should always be the guiding principle. However, the model and components are not sufficient for success in practice. Therefore, managers should take a more behavioral approach. In realizing employees' commitment towards change, it is recommended that the main focus should be on the social interaction of people, through gestures.

This study shows that leadership gestures are currently not realizing their full potential. There is room for improvement in the application, which can increase effectiveness. The most important is that gestures are aligned with needs and desires of employees. Correct reception of gestures is hard to determine, since this is very person specific. It is recommended to continuously discuss needs and desires with employees in order to accomplish the correct application. Additionally, it is recommendable to provide practice-oriented training to managers, in which managers learn how to properly apply gestures during change. Besides, it can be valuable to share experiences among managers during change. This will lead to valuable insights and prevent missteps. Personalized gestures are the most valuable and therefore advisable. Gestures are presented as a panacea. However, it is important to mention that it is not a silver bullet for employees' commitment towards change in practice. Furthermore, this study found that having a feeling of community is extremely valuable for employees' commitment. It is advisable to positively facilitate this and make use of the accompanied benefits. Managers should create a pleasant culture, in which employees can flourish. It is suggested that this feeling of community can be created through proper application of gestures. Managing employees' commitment towards change and correctly applying leadership gestures, will contribute to successful organizational change initiatives in business practice.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Kotter's eight-step Change Management Model

Figure 2

Kotter's eight-step Change Management Model



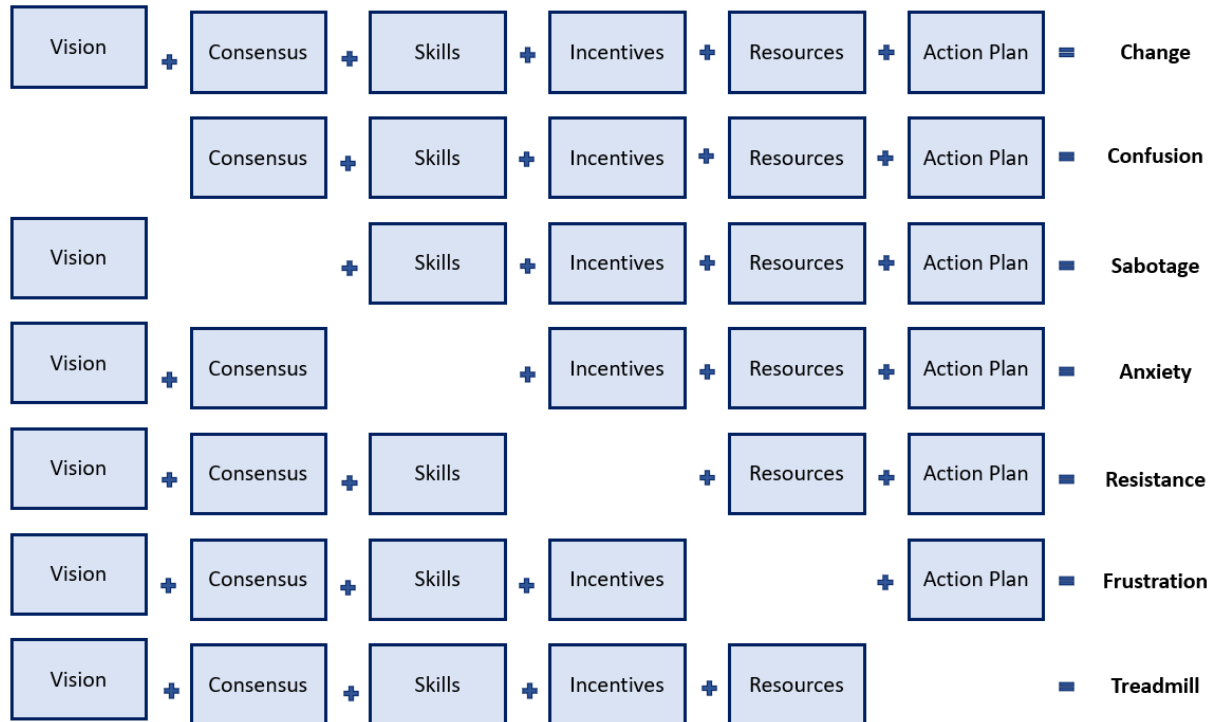
Source: Eayrs et al. (2014, p. 56)

Appendix 2

Knoster's Model for Managing Complex Change

Figure 3

Knoster's Model for Managing Complex Change



Source: Ebert (2018, p.8)

Appendix 3

Interview guide

The interview will be recorded, if the respondent provides consent. This allows the interview to be clearly and conveniently transcribed. To ensure privacy no names or other personal information will be used in this study. In addition to the recording, short notes are made for further details during the interview.

The interviewer role will be fulfilled by the researcher. The main task of the interviewer is to keep the interview relevant and within the research area. The interviewer will adopt a reserved attitude. This means that a lot of space is given to the interviewee to give extensive answers to the questions (Bleijenbergh, 2015).

Prior to the actual interview, the researcher and the research are introduced to the respondent. Information about the researcher herself and her role is provided. Additionally, the researcher will explain exactly what is being investigated and what the purpose of the interview and the study is. After the interview, the respondent will be thanked and asked if it is possible to contact them further for any required additional information and for sharing the results of the study.

The questionnaire with associated concepts is shown in appendix 2. This provides guidelines during the interview. The interviews are semi-structured and the answers will be open (Bleijenbergh, 2015).

Appendix 4

Interview questionnaire

Introductie

- Kunt u iets vertellen over uzelf?
- Kunt u iets vertellen over uw werk?
Hoelang bent u al werkzaam bij deze organisatie?
Hoelang bent u al werkzaam in deze functie?
- Kunt u iets vertellen over uw relatie met uw manager?
Kunt u iets vertellen over uw relatie met medewerkers?

Change management

- Wat zijn uw ervaringen met voorgaande veranderingsinitiatieven?
- Bent u tevreden over huidige veranderingsinitiatieven?
- Wat zou u hieraan willen veranderen?
Steps + components
- Wat is volgens u de reden van eerder mislukte veranderingsinitiatieven? Wat zijn leerpunten?
- Op welke wijze denkt u dat dit bevorderd kan worden in uw organisatie?
- Welke rol speelt toewijding van medewerkers hierin in uw ervaring?
- Hoe ervaart u dit?

Employees' commitment towards change

- Wat is uw mening over veranderingsinitiatieven binnen uw organisatie?
- Wat is uw rol hierin?
- In hoeverre voelt u zich toegewijd aan (huidige) veranderingsinitiatieven?
- Wat is de reden hiervoor? Waarom ervaart u dit op deze manier?
Affective / normative
- In welke mate is toewijding van medewerkers een prioriteit in veranderingsinitiatieven?
- Hoe zou dit vergroot kunnen worden door uw manager?
Hoe zou u dit kunnen vergroten bij medewerkers?
- Wanneer merkt u dat u weerstand biedt tegen veranderingsinitiatieven?
Wanneer merkt u dat u enthousiast raakt van veranderingsinitiatieven?
- Wat stimuleert u tot verdere toewijding aan veranderingsinitiatieven?
- Wat doet u hier zelf aan om dit te vergroten?
- Merkt u dat uw manager uw toewijding kan vergroten?
Merkt u dat u de toewijding bij medewerkers kunt vergroten?
- Welke waarde hecht u hieraan?

- Bent u tevreden over uw toewijding aan veranderingsinitiatieven?
Bent u tevreden over de toewijding van medewerkers aan veranderingsinitiatieven?

Gestures

- Wat is goed leiderschap in uw ogen? En welke invloed heeft dit op medewerkers?
- In hoeverre volstaat de ondersteuning van uw manager voor, tijdens en na het veranderingsinitiatief?
In hoeverre denkt u dat uw ondersteuning volstaat voor, tijdens en na het veranderingsinitiatief?
- Wat verwacht u van uw manager?
- Hoe ervaart u deze gebaren?
Hoe ervaren zij dit en hoe ervaart u dit?
Empathy and understanding – voice allowance – check-ups – lifting up the spirits – trust – autonomy – responsibility – promises – accountability – apologies – recognition – compliments – appreciation – celebrating successes
- Waar ligt uw voorkeur? En waarom?
- Wat is volgens u de juiste toepassing (*hoeveelheid/timing*) van verschillende gebaren?
- Wat werkt niet goed voor u? En waarom?
- Aan welke gebaren van uw manager heeft u behoefte?
Aan welke gebaren hebben medewerkers behoefte volgens u?
- Hoe denkt u dat dit van invloed kan zijn op u? Op welke manier merkt u een gedragsverandering (toewijding)?
Hoe denkt u dat dit van invloed kan zijn op hen? Op welke manier merkt u een gedragsverandering (toewijding)?
- Is uw manager actief bezig met gebaren en uw toewijding tot verandering?
Bent u actief bezig met gebaren en toewijding tot verandering van medewerkers?
- Bent u tevreden over de gebaren van uw manager?
Bent u tevreden over uw eigen gebaren?

Afsluiting

- Wat is naar uw mening de belangrijkste conclusie van dit interview?
- Heeft u verder nog op- en/of aanmerkingen?

Appendix 5

Coding table

Concept	Dimension	Indicator
Change management	Model	Sense of urgency
		Guiding team
		Vision
		Communication
		Empowering action
		Short-term wins
		Improvement consolidation
	Components	Change anchoring
		Vision
		Consensus
		Skills
		Resources
		Incentives
		Action plan
Employees' commitment towards change	Affective commitment	Valuable change
		Good strategy
		Important purpose
		Improvement
	Normative commitment	Necessary change
		Duty
		Obligation
		Feeling bad about opposing
Gestures	Leadership gestures	Irresponsible to resist
		Empathy and understanding
		Voice allowance
		Check-ups
		Lifting up the spirits
		Trust
		Responsibility
		Autonomy
		Promises
		Accountability
		Apologies
		Recognition
		Compliments
		Appreciation
Celebrating successes		