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# *Addressing Resistance: The Change Agent Perspective*

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How change agents interpret and respond to resistance

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Organisational Design and Development

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## Preface

In front of you is my master thesis: “*Addressing Resistance: The Change Agent Perspective*”. This research is conducted as part of my master’s degree in ‘Business Administration’ with the specialization in ‘Organisational Design and Development’ at the Radboud University in Nijmegen. This research was conducted from January until August 2024.

After completing my bachelor's degree in ‘Business Administration’, also at the Radboud University, I applied without hesitation for the master’s specialization in ‘Organisational Design and Development’. Over the course of the academic year, I have gained many valuable insights during the various courses. The article by Ford et al. (2008) on the concept of resistance specifically sparked my interest. This thesis provided me the opportunity to further deepen and apply my interest in resistance.

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. H.S. Heusinkveld. We did not always agree on the usefulness of scientific research in the field of business administration, but without your insights and feedback, I would not have been able to finish this project. I would also like to thank Dr. M.J.P. van Berkel for his feedback. Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to all the respondents for their time and their insights. Each and every one of you provided me with great insights into the concept of resistance. Insights that I have used for this thesis, but also insights that I will take with me in my professional and personal life. Thank you all!

Roel van der Meijde

Rheden, august 2024

## Abstract

In recent years, management ideas have been at the forefront of both academia and practice. In addition, resistance has been one of the most reasons for failure of implementing management ideas. While existing literature predominantly views resistance to change from a change recipient perspective, this research shifts the focus to a change agent perspective. Hereby, with the use of a sensemaking perspective, this research deepens our understanding of the role of human agency during the implementation of management ideas. By conducting 12 semi-structured interviews with external and internal change agents who have experience in Lean, this research explores how change agents interpret and respond to resistance. The findings of this research identify four key interpretations of change recipients' behaviour and outline seven corresponding responses by change agents based on their interpretation. By highlighting how change agents respond to resistance based on their interpretations, this research offers new insights into how resistance can be addressed more effectively during the implementation of management ideas.

## Keywords

Management ideas; organizational change; change agent; sensemaking; resistance

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## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a growing emphasis in academia on how management ideas (also referred to as ‘concepts’, ‘practices’ or ‘fashions’) are accepted, adopted, and adapted (Birkinshaw et al., 2008; Reay et al., 2013; van Grinsven et al., 2020). Especially in recent years, academic interest in innovative management practices has attracted resurgently (Ansari et al., 2014). In addition to the increased academic interest, management ideas are also under increased attention from organizations, since organizations are investing many resources in the implementation of management ideas (Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016). Organizations are investing in management ideas because management ideas can help organizations in dealing with organizational problems and challenges (Sturdy et al., 2019). “While the rationale behind organizational adoption of innovative management practices is well researched, the subsequent implementation and adaptation of these practices needs more attention” (Ansari et al., 2014, p. 1314). Especially variations during the implementation of management ideas within organizations need further research (Kostova & Roth, 2002; Volberda et al., 2014).

The implementation of management ideas “denotes significant change in the way that managerial work is performed” (Volberda et al., 2014, p. 1246). Therefore, “any discussion of the adoption and consumption of management ideas would be incomplete without some consideration of resistance” (McCabe et al., 2019, p. 1). Since “resistance to change is one of the most reasons for the failure of change initiatives, it is important to deepen this field while exploring organizational change” (Gerwing, 2016, p. 23). The academic literature consists of various perspectives on resistance to change, and “the meaning of resistance has widened in recent years” (McCabe et al., 2019, p. 2). McCabe et al. (2019, p. 2) describe resistance to management ideas as “non-conformant acts and subjectivities in relation to management ideas”. However, resistance is more than an acceptance-resistance dichotomy, rather resistance is a continuum of change recipients’ responses (Ford et al., 2008; McDermott et al., 2013; Van Grinsven et al., 2020).

Even though resistance is a continuum of change recipients’ responses, it is still predominantly framed from a dysfunctional perspective (Ford et al., 2008; McCabe et al., 2019). Resistance is not viewed as an action of thoughtful consideration and as a resource for effective change, although it has been found that resistance is the product of thoughtful consideration and has also been shown to be functional for management (Ford et al., 2008). Therefore, resistance

“needs more research to unpack the productive side; conditions under which it emerges and effects it produces” (McCabe et al., 2019, p. 16).

In a change process, such as the implementation of a management idea, two groups can be identified: those who implement the change (change agents, also referred to as ‘leader’, ‘manager’, ‘champion’ or ‘master’) and those who receive the change (change recipients) (Gerwing, 2016; Lunenburg, 2010). There is a predominant frame in academic literature of change agents being “undeserving victims of irrational and dysfunctional responses of change recipients” (Ford et al., 2008, p. 362). Resistance is characterised as a negative response of change recipients, independent of the change agent (Ford et al., 2008). However, “there is no consideration given to the possibility that resistance is an interpretation assigned by change agents to the behaviours and communications of change recipients, or that these interpretations are either self-serving or self-fulfilling” (Ford et al., 2008, p. 362). So, to better understand management innovations, the role of human agency needs to be better articulated or spelled out change agents play an important role in the process of implementing management ideas (Volberda et al., 2014).

Management ideas have been extensively researched by scholars for many years. Management ideas are also very present in everyday organizational life. However, a more in-depth understanding of the role of human agency in connection with resistance to change is needed to better comprehend the implementation of management ideas (Volberda et al., 2014). First, more research is needed to understand how change agents interpret change recipients’ behaviour as resistance (Ford et al., 2008). Second, focusing on how change agents respond to resistance, helps to build a better understanding on how change agents could potentially misinterpret change recipients’ actions as resistance and how change agents’ interpretations could be self-serving or self-fulfilling (Ford et al., 2008). By researching both how change agents interpret change recipients’ behaviour and how change agents respond to resistance, we create a more comprehensive understanding on how resistance to change can be used as a productive resource for organizational change (McCabe et al., 2019). Scholars such as McCabe et al. (2019) have considered resistance to change in the analyses of the implementation of management ideas. However, an understanding of how resistance to change can be used as a productive resource for the implementation of management ideas is still lacking.

To bridge this current research gap, this research aims to answer the following research question:

*“How do change agents make sense of resistance during the implementation of management ideas?”*

To answer this research question, a sensemaking perspective will be applied. “Sensemaking has been defined as the attribution of meaning to a target (experiences, events, or other stimuli) via the placement of this target into a mental model or framework, otherwise known as a frame” (Cornelissen et al., 2014, p. 701). In current literature, change agents are treated as if they exist independent from resistance to change (Ford et al., 2008). However, this ignores the fact “that change presents both agents and recipients with potential problems that are an occasion and trigger for sensemaking” (Ford et al., p. 363). Thus, a sensemaking perspective helps to obtain a more comprehensive understanding on how change agents interpret change recipients’ behaviour. Moreover, applying a sensemaking perspective helps us to expand the literature on management ideas, by better articulating the role of human agency in relation to resistance during the implementation of management ideas.

Moreover, for this research, qualitative research methods will be carried out by conducting semi-structured interviews with external and internal change agents. “For major organization-wide changes, companies will frequently hire external change agents” (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 1). In addition, external change agents are favoured over internal change agents for organization-wide changes, because they are “not bound by the firm’s culture, politics, or traditions” (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 1), and “they provide legitimacy and expertise in many different phases of the process” (Birkinshaw et al., 2008, p. 832). “In very large firms, the organization sometimes has its own in-house change specialist. This person replaces the external consultant and works directly with the organization’s management team to facilitate change efforts” (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 1). Therefore, both external and internal change agents are suitable for this research. This research focuses on the management idea of Lean, since Lean is not a one-size-fits-all philosophy, rather Lean is a management idea which has room for various interpretations in its adoption (Chen & Taylor, 2009). Also, Lean is one of the world’s most influential management ideas (McCann et al., 2015).

The primary aim of these build upon existing literature. First, this research will deepen our understanding of the role of human agency during the implementation of management ideas by offering insights into how change agents’ interpretations shape their responses to the behaviour of change recipients. Second, this research aims to extend the current literature on resistance by reinforcing the concept that resistance is a continuum of behaviours. Hereby highlighting the

complexity of resistance. Third, this research aims to reinforce the emerging idea that resistance can be seen as a productive resource for organizational change. In addition, this research will also aim to offer practical implications as this research aims to offer insights on what responses to change recipients' behaviour might be applicable for change agents based on their interpretation of this behaviour.

This research is structured as follows. First, an overview of the existing literature will be discussed, covering insights on resistance to management ideas and the concept of sensemaking. Hereafter, the methodology section will explain and motivate the methodological choices made in this research followed by a thorough discussion of the findings. To conclude, the discussion will elaborate on the theoretical and practical implications, the limitations and some indications for future research.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In this chapter, relevant insights from existing literature on resistance to management ideas and the concept of sensemaking will be discussed.

### 2.1 Resistance

Resistance is a crucial aspect of organizational change since it is a fundamental tenet that people resist change (Ford et al., 2008; Ybema & Horvers, 2017), but also because resistance from change recipients is likely to inhibit the successful implementation of change (Sturdy et al., 2019). Resistance is however a natural and normal response to change, because change often involves going from the known to the unknown (Bovey & Hede, 2001). Therefore, resistance is arguably the most important aspect of organizational change, making successfully managing resistance a major challenge for change agents (Bovey & Hede, 2001).

Resistance to change is often viewed as a strict acceptance-resistance dichotomy, placing resistance in a negative paradigm (Birkinshaw et al., 2008; Courpasson et al., 2012; Ford et al., 2008; McCabe et al., 2019; McDermott et al., 2013; Ybema & Horvers, 2017). However, resistance is not a “fixed opposition between irreconcilable adversaries” (Courpasson et al., 2012, p. 816), and change recipients are not passive (McCabe et al., 2019). The way resistance is viewed in current literature is in line with the ‘change agent-centric view’ as described by Ford et al. (2008). “This change agent-centric view presumes that resistance is an accurate report by unbiased observers (change agents) of an objective reality (resistance by change recipients)” (Ford et al., 2008, p. 362).

The change agent-centric view sees resistance as an objective reality, but resistance is subjective and more than an acceptance-resistance dichotomy, it can take place in many forms. “Resistance might arise in relation to given management ideas, the way in which the ideas are interpreted or the speed in which they are introduced. However, resistance is also connected to the historical, contemporary and political work context” (McCabe et al., 2019, p. 3). Moreover, individuals experience change in different ways, while also differing in “their ability and willingness to adapt to change” (Bovey & Hede, 2001, p. 372). In addition, personal circumstances and their work environment also play a role in how change recipients react to change efforts (Birkinshaw et al., 2008). Resistance can therefore be seen as a contextual occurrence and a situated performance.

Scholars such as McCabe et al. (2019) and Ybema & Horvers (2017) have written about many forms of resistance to change in relation to management ideas. However, “resistance is complex, multifaceted and often contradictory”, and “clear-cut distinctions between individual and collective resistance can also be misleading” (McCabe et al., 2019, p. 3). When seeing resistance as a contextual occurrence and situated performance, one distinction can be made: frontstage and backstage resistance. As Ybema & Horvers (2017, p. 1249) state, “these are not univocal categories”. However, they do help us to distinguish the various forms of resistance which can help us to better understand change agent sensemaking in relation to resistance to management ideas.

With frontstage resistance change recipients are openly opposed to the change efforts, however these change recipients support the change efforts backstage (Ybema & Horvers, 2017). Frontstage resisters protest openly and behave subversively to correct the change efforts that are unnecessary in their view, these recipients do support the change backstage (Ybema & Horvers, 2017). The effects of frontstage resistance are signals of discontent and unrest, which can hinder the change efforts frustrating the change agents. Frontstage resisters can receive status from other change recipients, but they run the risk of being targeted by the change agents as ‘troublemakers’.

Backstage resisters comply on the frontstage by defending change efforts as necessary, yet they are opposed to the change efforts backstage (Ybema & Horvers, 2017). These backstage resisters avoid open protest against the change efforts to avoid being targeted by the change agents as ‘troublemakers’ (Ybema & Horvers, 2017). However, these resisters critique the change efforts backstage. Effects of backstage resistance are a sense of autonomy and identity, and unmanaged space for complaining and conspiring with colleagues. Backstage resisters are released from engagement in change activities, causing delays and destabilizing the change process through their actions (Ybema & Horvers, 2017).

As stated earlier, the change agent-centric view presumes that resistance is an accurate report by unbiased observers (change agents), however it is not often considered that resistance is an interpretation by change agents to behaviours and communications of change recipients (Ford et al., 2008). Resistance is rather resisted by change agents than managed in a way so that it can benefit the change process (Bovey & Hede, 2001; McCabe et al., 2019). Resistance is still mostly seen as dysfunctional (Courpasson et al., 2012; Ford et al., 2008), and the change agent-centric view does not consider resistance “as a potential contributor to, or resource for effective

change” (Ford et al., 2008, p. 363). “If resistance were to be reconsidered for its productive implications and framed accordingly, it could help to redefine negative conceptions of resistance” (McCabe et al., 2019, p. 17).

Courpasson et al. (2012, p. 801) argue for the notion of ‘productive resistance’; “Resistance concerned with concrete activities that aim to voice claims and interests that are usually not taken into account by management decisions. Its goal is to foster the development of alternative managerial practices that are likely to benefit the organisation as a whole”. It includes “a mix of compliance and outright confrontation” (Courpasson et al., 2012). Resistance can become productive in various ways. First, resistance can keep conversations in play, which is important since new conversations have difficulty competing with existing conversations because they “suffer from the liabilities of newness, inexperience, and unfamiliarity” (Ford et al., 2008, p. 368). Second, resistance shows a higher level of commitment than acceptance, since resistance is a thoughtful reaction to change efforts (Ford et al., 2008). Third, resistance is a form of conflict, and conflict has shown to strengthen and improve the quality of decisions and the commitment to the implementation of those decisions (Ford et al., 2008). All in all, productive resistance can result in coproduction of change (Courpasson et al., 2012).

Ford et al. (2008, p. 369) argue that the potential of resistance depends on change agents, since they have the power to decide to listen to the “comments, complaints, and criticisms for cues to adjust the pace, scope, or sequencing of change and/or its implementation”. With this, Ford et al. (2008) insist that the change agents have the control over what to classify as dysfunctional resistance and what as productive resistance. Courpasson et al. (2012) argue against the fact that the change agents hold all the power in deciding whether resistance is productive or not. “Resistance is likely to be productive when it is couched as a challenge to normal relations of power and founded in established, specific, and legitimate power/knowledge relations” (Courpasson et al., p. 814).

Resistance to management ideas is very complex because of its context dependency and the possibility for misinterpretation. How and why change recipients’ behaviours are seen as resistance requires more research into the reasoning behind the change recipients’ behaviours. This research will contribute to the literature by focusing on how change agents interpret the behaviours of change recipients. To achieve this contribution, sensemaking requires theoretical explanation.

## 2.2 Sensemaking

The change agent-centric view presumes that resistance is an accurate report by unbiased observers (change agents), however there is no consideration given to the possibility that resistance is an interpretation assigned by change agents to the behaviours and communications of change recipients, or that these interpretations are either self-serving or self-fulfilling. “Change present both agents and recipients with potential problems that are an occasion and trigger for sensemaking” (Ford et al., p. 363). Change agents are faced with change recipients’ responses to their change efforts, of which the change agents need to ‘make sense’. To interpret the change recipients’ behaviours, change agents engage in sensemaking.

Many definitions of sensemaking can be found in literature, many include ‘meaning construction’ via a ‘framework’ to understand or ‘make sense’ of experiences (e.g. Cornelissen et al., 2014; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Thomas et al., 1993). Some view sensemaking as an individual process, others argue that it is a social process. Maitlis & Christianson (2014, p. 67) have come up with an overarching definition of sensemaking based on a literature review: “Sensemaking is a process, prompted by violated expectations, that involves attending to and bracketing cues in the environment, creating intersubjective meaning through cycles of interpretation and action, and thereby enacting a more ordered environment from which further cues can be drawn”.

The process of sensemaking is dependent on the context, it can differ per group and even per individual in organizations (Balogun et al., 2015; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Sensemaking takes place in a relational context and in an interpretive context. In a relational context, collective meaning is cocreated through interacting with and observing others such as superiors, subordinates, and peers. “Actions of structurally linked colleagues shape meanings through processes of affirmation or disaffirmation”, and shared assumptions are central to meaning construction (Balogun et al., 2015, p. 962). “The collective act of building up common ground around a common framing of the situation is crucial to enable coordination between individuals and to ensure that each individual has a sense of what is expected of them” (Cornelissen et al., 2014, p. 702). Sensemaking in a relational context shows that an individuals’ sensemaking is influenced by shared assumptions and actions of others.

Sensemaking also takes place in an interpretive context, this concerns contexts defined by shared cues and interpretations. How individuals understand and respond to change efforts is

shaped by their frames of reference (also called interpretive schemes), which are based on collective and shared historical contexts (Balogun et al., 2015). The interpretive context is similar to ‘enacted environments’; “processes by which a particular framing is established in prior episodes of communication and as such provides the source for future expectations” (Cornelissen et al., 2014). Prior constructs of meaning, play a major role in constructing meaning in new situations.

Maitlis & Christianson (2014) further explain the three core aspects of sensemaking; 1) how do events become triggers for sensemaking? 2) how is intersubjective meaning constructed? and 3) what is the role of action in sensemaking? Hereunder, these three core aspects of sensemaking will be elaborated on in relation to change agents.

### **How events become triggers for sensemaking**

Cues, e.g. issues, events or situations, for which the meaning is ambiguous and/or outcomes are uncertain, trigger sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). In situations of organizational change, individuals are faced with an interruption of their normal patterns, creating a gap between expectations and experiences (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Ford et al., 2008). Not every gap triggers sensemaking, it only occurs when the gap is big enough, this is subjective and can create violations of expectations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). For change agents, a violation of expectations could be that they expected change recipients to comply with the implementation of a management idea, but they experience that change recipients are opposed to the management idea. “Much sensemaking research has been carried out in the context of change interventions, which, despite initial planning, frequently violate expectations and generate considerable uncertainty, ambiguity and confusion for those involved” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 76).

### **How intersubjective meaning is constructed**

In organizations, meanings are constantly contested among many actors who may understand a sensemaking cue somewhat similar, but construct meaning different because contextual factors like position, interests, and backgrounds (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Intersubjective meaning can be constructed in two ways, depending on how sensemaking is viewed. First, sensemaking can be seen as taking place within an individual, in this case collective meaning is constructed as individuals advocate for a particular view (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Second, sensemaking can be seen as unfolding between individuals, here intersubjective

meaning is co-created when individuals try to understand a sensemaking cue together (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Intersubjective meaning can also have its downside, as it can act as a double-edged sword. “While commitment has the potential to create helpful meanings in the wake of ambiguity, it can also create dangerous blind spots” (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p. 562). Overcommitment has been seen as an important source of sensemaking failure (Cornelissen et al., 2014), because it entraps sensemakers and impedes their ability to be mindful (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). For change agents, intersubjective meaning can help them to understand the change process together with other actors. However, when overly committed to a particular meaning (e.g. that change recipients who voice their concerns are hindering the change process), sensemaking could fail in the form of only viewing recipients who voice their objections as a threat to the change process neglecting the potential benefits of resistance.

### **The role of action in sensemaking**

Sensemaking is more than cognitive interpretation, it conjuncts with action (Thomas et al., 1993). “In organizations, people take into consideration the realized or likely outcomes of their own actions or those of other significant stakeholders in trying to understand what to do next” (Gioia et al., 1994, p. 365). Actions are important for sensemaking for two reasons. First, actions generate additional cues for sensemaking, learning more about a situation “by taking action and paying attention to the cues generated by that action” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 84). Actions hereby help people make sense of what is happening. Second, actions can be used to test “provisional understanding generated through prior sensemaking” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 84). Action and cognition are thus recursively linked. When change agents make sense of change recipients’ actions as dysfunctional to the change process, they might act different as opposed to when they make sense of change recipients’ actions as supportive of the change process.

Sensemaking helps individuals and groups within organizations to understand what is happening around them, by individually and/or collectively creating meaning. This makes sensemaking critical to learning from error (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). This ties in with productive resistance; when making sense of resistance as something dysfunctional, the opportunity to learn from the change recipients’ objections is unavailable. But, when making sense of resistance as a productive resource for change, the change agents can learn from the change recipients’ objections.

There are however serious downsides to change agent sensemaking, this happens when change recipients' behaviours are wrongfully interpreted by change agents. Moreover, these interpretations could also be self-serving or self-fulfilling (Ford et al., 2008). Change agents' interpretations can be self-serving. "It is reasonable to expect them [change agents] to give accounts in which they take credit for successful changes and blame other factors, such as resistance, for problems and failures (Ford et al., 2008, p. 364). When change agents view resistance as something "over there, in them" (Ford et al., 2008, p. 362), it facilitates a position for the change agent to attribute the failure of a change process to resistance. Change agents' interpretations can also be self-fulfilling, because when "change agents go into change expecting resistance, they are likely to find it" (Ford et al 2008, p. 364). In these instances, change agents will look for change recipients' behaviour that can be classified as resistance, thus confirming that recipients are resisting. When their experience is false, it will wrongfully validate the expectation further sustaining it (Ford et al., 2008).

### 3. Methodology

In this chapter, the methodological choices of this research will be elaborated on. This chapter contains the research design, the research context, data collection and data analysis. Furthermore, the quality criteria and research ethics are reflected upon.

#### 3.1 Research design

Qualitative methods are applied to answer the research question: “*How do change agents make sense of resistance during the implementation of management ideas?*”. Qualitative methods are focused on studying social and cultural phenomena, allowing the researcher to explore motives, reasons and actions of individuals (Bleijenbergh, 2016; Myers, 2020). Furthermore, this research has an interpretive approach since it aims to better understand the research topic rather than to test theory (Myers, 2020). Since the interpretation of change recipients’ behaviour by change agents cannot be directly empirically observed, a qualitative approach is fitting for this research. Because of these reasons, this research fits the constructivist paradigm. In the constructivist paradigm, knowledge is actively constructed by the learner rather than passively taken. Since, “the investigator and the object of investigation are assumed to be interactively linked so that the findings are literally created as the investigation proceeds” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). This research will have an inductive approach, because this offers the potential to uncover novel insights and patterns within the data without prior hypotheses. Also, a sensemaking perspective will be applied. The sensemaking perspective will help to better understand how external change agents interpret change recipients’ responses to change efforts as resistance (Cornelissen et al., 2014; Ford et al., 2008).

#### 3.2 Research context

This research focuses on the management idea of Lean. “Lean manufacturing (or ‘Lean’) is one of the world’s most influential management ideas” (McCann et al., 2015, p. 1558). Lean management emphasizes small batch sizes, and the elimination of ‘muda’ (Japanese for waste) to make sure all activities along the value stream create value (Arnheiter & Maleyeff, 2005). Lean is fitting for this research concerned with the implementation of management ideas, because Lean meets the vision, characteristics, and interpretive space of a management idea. Moreover, by focusing on one management idea instead of multiple, the transferability of the findings will be higher.

### 3.3 Data collection

For this research, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with change agents. These change agents are external change agents such as consultants, and internal change agents such as in-house change experts. External change agents are expected to play “a major role in management innovation because they provide legitimacy and expertise in many different phases of the process” (Birkinshaw et al., 2008, p. 832). Moreover, “for major organization-wide changes, companies will frequently hire external change agents because they are not bound by the firm’s culture, politics, or traditions” (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 1). “In very large firms, the organization sometimes has its own in-house change specialist. This person replaces the external consultant and works directly with the organization’s management team to facilitate change efforts” (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 1). Therefore, both external and internal change agents are suitable for this research.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for this research because these improve the chance of novel data, while maintaining a structured approach to question delivery. Moreover, the possibility to discuss subjects which are not on the topic list remains open (Myers, 2020). Respondents were purposefully sampled via LinkedIn and via my own network. To ensure a sufficient number of respondents, the snowball technique was applied. With the snowball technique, the researcher asks interviewees to suggest other potential respondents who might be suitable for the research (Parker et al., 2019).

The interviews were conducted using an interview guide, the interview guide was adjusted after the first six interviews to better suit the flow of the interviews. The interview guides are shown in Appendix I & Appendix II. The interviews were conducted in three ways; one interview was conducted via telephone (because of technical difficulties with the online medium), one interview was conducted physically, and the remaining ten interviews were conducted via online mediums (Microsoft Teams or Webex). Whether the interview was conducted physically or via an online medium, was decided based on the respondents’ preference and availability. Janghorban et al. (2014) found that interviews conducted via video calling produce similar data, in terms of data quality, to those conducted in person. Moreover, research has shown that respondents are more likely to share information in a familiar environment (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Weller, 2017). Interviews via online mediums also increase respondents’ willingness to participate due to its flexibility (Sullivan, 2012). All interviews were conducted in Dutch, since Dutch is the respondents’ mother tongue. Thus, eliminating any hindrance of a

language barrier. The interviews being conducted in Dutch, means that quotes had to be translated by the researcher. The quotes were translated with care, however it could be possible that some meanings of the respondents' words were adjusted.

### 3.4 Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim in order to use them for data analysis. The grounded theory approach by Strauss and Corbin (1998) was used to analyse the data in this research. The grounded theory approach involves generating theories directly from data through a systematic process of data collection and analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach offers flexibility as theory evolves as data is gathered and analysed rather than starting out with a hypothesis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The interviews were coded in three steps: open, axial and selective coding. The interviews were coded with the use of 'Atlas.ti'. This software offers efficiency and the advantage of enforcing a specific coding format, enabling to systematically organize and replicate work more reliably at different levels (Bleijenbergh et al. 2022).

In the first step, the interview transcripts were read and open codes were assigned. Sentences or paragraphs, which are of significance important considering the context of the research, are summarized into short codes (open codes). These open codes are descriptive, while staying as close as possible to the respondents' words. These open codes help to identify and categorize various phenomena observed in the text. This step resulted in 451 individual open codes.

In the second step, open codes were categorized into axial codes. The objective of this step is to combine related codes into an axial code which covers the content of the open codes at a higher theoretical level. For example, the codes 'people who cannot get over their objections, look together to say goodbye' and 'saying goodbye to people who really don't want to come along' are both part of the axial code 'parting ways' because both codes share the notion of parting ways with those who do not want to come along with the change process. During this second step, axial codes were iteratively redefined to cover the content of the open codes as best as possible. For example, 'connecting with employees in the workplace' was redefined into 'connecting with the workplace'. As the first code only focuses on connecting in the workplace, it does not include the involvement of the workplace outside of said workplace. By redefining this code, the code became more applicable in involving the workplace, in- and outside the workplace itself. Also, as part of the iterative process, some axial codes were combined into a new axial code. For example, the codes 'deviating from agreements' and 'actively engaging

others to resist' were combined into the new axial code 'sabotage', since both codes cover the notion of actively behaving in such a way that sabotages the change process. This step ultimately resulted in 73 axial codes.

In the third step of selective coding, axial codes were further categorized into core concepts. These core concepts are used for the theory building of this research. In this step, some core concepts were deemed irrelevant, because they lacked significant connections to other core concepts for them to be used in theory building. For example, the core concept of 'Lean', consisting of axial codes such as 'Lean misses the change management side of organizational change' and 'Lean is a philosophy', was deemed irrelevant since there was no significant connection found among the respondents connecting their interpretation of change recipients' behaviour or their responses to those behaviours with core concept of Lean. Ultimately, this step led to two selective codes: 'Interpretation of behaviour' and 'Response to behaviour'.

### 3.5 Quality criteria

In this section, the four evaluation standards for qualitative research will be assessed. These four evaluation standards are: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These evaluation standards shed light on the establishment of the trustworthiness of this research.

Credibility is concerned with whether the provided evidence is an authentic representation of what happened (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure credibility, the respondents will be given the opportunity to member check their interviews. The transcripts of the interviews were sent to the respondents via email, giving them the opportunity to check the transcripts for any misinterpretations. Four respondents provided feedback on their respective transcripts, their adjusted transcripts were used for the data analysis.

Transferability is concerned with whether the extend of the findings' applicability have been considered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure transferability, this research uses rich descriptions in detailing the research context and unit of analysis. The focus of this research is on change agents, who can be internal (e.g. in-house change specialists) or external (e.g. consultants). In addition, this research focuses on a Lean context, both the research context and the unit of analysis have been extensively elaborated on previous in this chapter.

Dependability is concerned with whether researcher bias is minimized or accounted for (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure dependability, the process of analysing data is thoroughly documented in a research diary, in order to reduce the likelihood of different findings by other researchers.

Confirmability is concerned with whether alternative explanations have been considered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure confirmability, rigor is established throughout the research process. This involves a systematic and transparent approach to data collection, analysis and interpretation. The data collection has been extensively elaborated on, previous in this chapter.

### 3.6 Research ethics

It is crucial for any research to consider research ethics, various research ethics were applied in this research. First, respondents were asked for consent to record the interviews and for this thesis to be uploaded in the Radboud repository. Second, informed consent is a critical ethical principle in qualitative research according to Myers (2020). Therefore, respondents were informed that their cooperation to this research is voluntary and that they can halt their cooperation at any given time. Third, it is important to make the respondents aware of the relevance of this research and of the value they add to the research (Orb et al., 2001). Therefore, during the interviews, the research will be introduced in terms of its subject, purpose, and what is expected from the respondents. Fourth, the respondents will be given the opportunity to member check their interviews to prevent any misinterpretations by the researcher. Lastly, the identity of the respondents, as well as organizations, teams, or persons they name will be anonymized for the publication of this thesis.

## 4. Findings

This chapter will discuss the findings of this research. Data analysis resulted in the identification of two core concepts regarding sensemaking by change agents: ‘Interpretations of behaviour’ and ‘Responses to behaviour’. Both core concepts will be discussed in more detail as well as how the responses of change agents are based on their interpretation of change recipient behaviour.

### 4.1 Interpretations of behaviour

When engaging in change efforts, change agents try to make sense of change recipients’ behaviour. As respondent 5 says:

*“I think that almost always when you interact with people, you project your experience on the behaviour of someone else. You always look for recognition in order to be able to interpret, because that’s what humans do. We are constantly trying to interpret what other people do, or say, or feel, or think.” (Respondent 5)*

As this quote indicates, change agents are actively engaged in interpreting the behaviour of change recipients. This process of interpretation is not just a passive observation but a dynamic effort to find patterns and recognition in the behaviour of change recipients. Resistance by change recipients comes in different forms, as one respondent said:

*“It’s a combination of verbal and non-verbal communication”. (Respondent 8)*

Among the respondents, four main interpretations of change recipients’ behaviour were discovered: outspoken resistance, unspoken resistance, sabotage, and flogging a dead horse. Each interpretation of change recipients’ behaviour will be elaborated on below.

#### **Outspoken resistance**

The first interpretation of change recipients’ behaviour found among the respondents is ‘outspoken resistance’. The respondents speak of outspoken resistance when change recipients openly voice their objections or concerns regarding the change process. As one respondent said:

*“And a number of people are sitting there looking a bit blankly ahead of them, but one person stands up and says: what the fuck is happening here, why don’t we know anything about this, what quantities are involved? And I think, ah, I have to have that.”*  
(Respondent 8)

This quote illustrates how a change recipient voices their objections or concerns about the ongoing change process. It also shows that the change agent appreciates that the recipient is so outspoken. The respondents do not experience resistance as purely dysfunctional, rather as a productive resource to the change process. As the following quote shows, outspoken resistance gives information to the change agents. As respondent 10 said:

*“It [outspoken resistance] means that you receive information that you, as a change agent, may not have been aware of, or not yet sufficiently aware of.”* (Respondent 10)

Outspoken resistance is also seen as a sign of commitment, as a respondent 3 said:

*“You will also see that a very large proportion of people who resist are not people who don’t care a bit and have dropped out. These are people who are emotionally invested in that work and do not believe in what you do.”* (Respondent 3)

Another respondent corroborates that outspoken resistance is a productive resource to the change process, as outspoken resistance gives change agents the opportunity to figure out where objections or concerns are coming from. Respondent 2 said:

*“So I would rather have them all stand on their heads and say, what are you doing? That I can then ask questions about, well, what arouses negative feelings for them, because then I can do something with it. Then I can act on it, I can respond to it.”*  
(Respondent 2)

This quote shows the respondent’s appreciation for outspoken resistance, as it offers valuable insights into the objections and concerns of change recipients. The respondent sees an opportunity in this outspoken resistance to adjust the change efforts, ultimately leading to a more effective outcome and greater alignment with the needs of the change recipients.

## **Unspoken resistance**

Not every change recipient voices their objections or concerns towards the change agent. Some change recipients choose to not voice their objections or concerns to the change agents, but to keep their objections or concerns to themselves. Respondent 11 said:

*“Resistance is also underground. You just know that if you propose things that affect people in a work situation, the moment I close the door behind me, people will talk about it. That’s a certainty.” (Respondent 11)*

This quote shows that change recipients do not voice their objections or concerns to the change agent, even though they do have objections or concerns about the change process. It is difficult to see whether change recipient behaviour is unspoken resistance or something else. As one respondent said:

*“It is sometimes difficult to estimate [which behaviour counts as unspoken resistance]. With the example I just gave, that people do not show up for a work meeting, or have not prepared the work. It can sometimes feel irritating, but there are sometimes other reasons behind it. There may also simply be personal reasons behind it, because people just haven’t gotten around to it.” (Respondent 4)*

This quote shows how the change agent struggles to determine the behaviour of change recipients as unspoken resistance, because the motives for such behaviour are unknown. The lack of clear communication by change recipients about the reasons for their behaviour makes it challenging for the change agent to correctly interpret their behaviour.

## **Sabotage**

Another interpretation of change recipient behaviour by change agents that became apparent through data analysis, is sabotage. This interpretation suggests that some change recipients actively work to disrupt or obstruct the change process. Respondent 5 said:

*“There are also a lot of people who say, Yes, let’s do it, and as soon as you turn around they don’t do it. Or people who just don’t say much, but then just don’t do it.” (Respondent 5)*

At first glance, sabotage overlaps with outspoken and unspoken resistance. Both have the notion of disagreeing with the change efforts. However, sabotage involves actively engaging in behaviour that obstructs the change process. As respondents said:

*“People start very positively and gradually you just hear, it sounds a bit whiny, and everything you say always comes out yes but, yes but. It really is literally what people say. [...] But yes, then you really sabotage, or delay so that you cannot continue with the desired change.” (Respondent 7)*

*“Not agreeing with the changes and really actively dealing with them, also to activate others not to go along with this change.” (Respondent 4)*

*“Work councils and group committees that only obstruct, up to and including very large strikes that simply shut down the union for a whole day” (Respondent 3)*

The quotes above illustrate how the change agents encountered change recipients who actively tried to obstruct the change efforts.

### **Flogging a dead horse**

The last type of interpretation of change recipients' behaviour that was found among the respondents was flogging a dead horse. This interpretation refers to situations in which it has become clear that a change recipient will not come along in the change process, despite futile efforts by the change agent. As a respondent said:

*“And in the end you only have a few people, a few who may not come along in the end. Yes, then you enter a different phase. Then you talk more about what are we going to do with that.” (Respondent 12)*

In these instances, change recipients remain steadfast in their objections or concerns, showing no willingness to adapt to the proposed changes. Their resistance indicates a deep-rooted unwillingness to move beyond their objections or concerns. Respondent 10 said:

*“And sometimes it's the case, if it's really the case, then people will either have to settle or ask themselves if this is the way the organisation, the process goes, do I still want to work here. Sometimes it is good that people say, yes, but I can no longer support this.” (Respondent 10)*

## 4.2 Responses to behaviour

Change agents will respond to the behaviour of change recipients. These responses are based on their interpretation of change recipients' behaviour. Some responses overlap multiple interpretations of change recipients' behaviour. Respondent 8 said:

*“My general tip is: if people are emotionally involved with resistance, emotion blocks them from looking ahead. It does not work. If you are emotional, you're angry, you're frustrated, or you're disappointed, then you cannot say, well you know what, come on, we are going to look forward, we are going to get to work. But that's not going to happen. These people must first be able to deal with that frustration. So you have to give space for that.” (Respondent 8)*

As this quote illustrates, change agents must give change recipients the space and opportunity to deal with their objections or concerns. Change recipients can and will not come along with the change process if they cannot get over their objections or concerns. A good solution to a problem is needed for successful change, but change recipients must also be on board for change efforts to be successful. As a respondent said:

*“If it ultimately turns out that no people are involved at all, then you have a very nice solution, but it is not supported. The other way around, maybe you have something that everyone is cheering for, but the solution is actually a mess and it actually solves very little. So yeah, what's best? That's somewhere in the middle. So, kind of a good solution and a high acceptance rate.” (Respondent 12)*

Seven responses to behaviour were found: 'listening to objections', 'turning those who voice their objections into ambassadors', 'measuring resistance', 'connecting with the workplace', 'intervening by management', 'parting ways', and 'having a conversation'.

### **Listening to objections**

When change recipients choose to voice their objections or concerns, it is found among respondents that it is crucial to listen to their objections or concerns. By listening to the change recipients, they feel heard and as a result part of the change process. Respondent 4 said:

*“And in that change there is literally a phase where you say okay, in this phase frustration comes to the fore and we’re just going to listen. We’re not going to convince anyone. We will mainly look at what are the objections. We’re going to collect them and unless it’s very urgent, you don’t immediately do anything with it at that moment.”*  
(Respondent 4)

This quote shows how the change agent listens to the objections and concerns of the change recipients without immediately trying to persuade them of the validity of the change process. By just listening to the change recipients and not trying to convince them, the change agent allows the change recipients to fully express their objections or concerns. Another respondent adds onto the importance of listening to change recipients’ objections or concerns, because you as a change agent might not always be right. As one respondent said:

*“You can never completely rule out the possibility that someone else also has a brilliant idea.... Get off your horse and just listen to what people have to say.”* (Respondent 8)

### **Turning those who voice their objections into ambassadors**

Those who voice their objections or concerns are giving information to the change agent, showing their commitment to the organisation and giving information that change agents might not yet be (sufficiently) aware of. Change agents can try to turn those who voice their objections or concerns into ambassadors of change. Ambassadors of change are those in the workplace who advocate in favour of the change process to others in the workplace. Respondent 2 said:

*“I hope to convert them into an ambassador. Those are ultimately the one..., because they are the talkers. Then I ultimately hope that I have been able to help them, in the sense that at some point it will be with them. So I made them complicit in quotes and we changed something that made them happy with it. I hope that I can find ambassadors in them because they are in the workplace.”* (Respondent 2)

This quote shows how the change agent hopes to turn those who voice their objections or concerns into ambassadors. The change agent can use those who now have become an ambassador to advocate in favour of the change process in the workplace to try and convince other change recipients of the validity of the change process. Another respondent adds:

*“What I often see is that there are one or more people in a group who suddenly think, wait a minute, I see all kinds of opportunities here. These are things I’ve been thinking for years. So they take a step forward and then you see other people thinking, wait a minute, why is he suddenly at the front? Because I’ve also had good ideas for years, maybe I should, you know. Then I draw the energy and let it release in the group and I actually let that largely solve the resistance. (Respondent 11)*

This quote shows how ambassadors of change can help the change agent in dealing with resistance, by using the ambassadors to lure other change recipients out of their resisting behaviour.

### **Measuring resistance**

It is found among respondents that unspoken resistance is challenging to identify, because objections and concerns are not openly voiced to the change agents. As one respondent said:

*“If that unspoken resistance is there, if they don’t show it to you, it’s damn hard to find out if it’s there.” (Respondent 8)*

Change agents can measure the behaviour to find out if the behaviour of change recipients is a form of unspoken resistance. As one respondent said:

*“Initially we start with just being a flying wall, using observation forms that we have created for this purpose in which we actually determine how this conversation proceeds and when things are seen, are they measurable? Are there actions to be taken to achieve the goals? Are the goals known? How well are they working together? Are introverted people also sufficiently involved? Is there clear communication?” (Respondent 4)*

This quote shows how a change agent makes the behaviour of change recipients measurable by using observation forms. With these forms, the change agents can better determine whether or not change recipient behaviour is a form of unspoken resistance. Measuring unspoken resistance is important because a gut feeling can be wrong. As respondents 3 and 7 stated:

*“Just measure by simple survey. There are existing surveys to measure this, to provide insight into those groups.” (Respondent 3)*

*“Not just from gut feeling, but also simply by measuring. So measuring is knowing, I’m really convinced of that. That it is important.” (Respondent 7)*

### **Connecting with the workplace**

It was found among respondents that it is important for change agents to be actively involved with the workplace in order to get a more comprehensive understanding of the objections and concerns of the change recipients. As one respondent said:

*“Ultimately, you see much more in the workplace than just what you’re told.” (Respondent 4)*

Connecting with the workplace can be applied with both outspoken and unspoken resistance. In the case of outspoken resistance, change agents actively involve employees from the workplace to hear their objections and concerns. As respondent 8 said:

*“I actively organize that. So I had another meeting last week, with all kinds of bigwigs. And then I say; yes, but which employees are there? They say; employees? Yes, because they will soon have to carry out the process, so it is at least useful to hear their voice and then I organize two employees to join a bigwig meeting, to make that voice heard.” (Respondent 8)*

In the case of unspoken resistance, connecting with the workplace is done with the objective of getting more information from the change recipients. Information that the change agents were missing because of the lack of outspoken resistance. As the following quote shows, the change agent actively engages with employees in the workplace to find out what their objections are.

*“Well then we go active, so for example we have now put up a screen where we explicitly asked them to report all the issues they encountered in a form. But, no notifications came in. Well, that’s a bit odd of course. I mean, it’s almost impossible that you won’t run into anything. And besides, when you come to the workplace, they say that they had something, but then they didn’t report it. So what we’re going to do now, is even more explicit towards the people; how come I don’t hear anything? You know, have you started working on it? Or well, I connected with people myself last week and then I just talk to them about: hey, open it up, just work with that for two hours and indicate what you encounter. So we’ll actively approach them.” (Respondent 5)*

### **Intervening by management**

In the case of sabotage and flogging a dead horse, a conversation might not be enough to convince a change recipient to be in favour of the change process. The change agents have no hierarchical influence over the change recipients, since they are not the managers of the change recipients. In both the case of sabotage and flogging a dead horse, the change agent can turn to the manager of the change recipient. As respondent 12 said:

*“You have a client [manager] and that client is the sponsor. The sponsor is extremely important. He takes the iron out of the fire for you. If there is a stakeholder [change recipient] who doesn’t cooperate for reasons of his own that you don’t know because he is keeping his agenda close to his chest. Then you go back to your sponsor and say; hey sponsor, listen, I have a stakeholder, a jerk, who just doesn’t want to cooperate. He doesn’t want to give his people time to implement the change. Yes it bothers you, it keeps you awake at night. And the sponsor, quote unquote, is kept awake by the process that is not running well. That has to change and you as a change agent can’t get it done because that rogue stakeholder is among them. Who wants to know that? The sponsor wants to know that. So you cry to the sponsor. Amazing! So it’s a shared part of culture, something they have to tackle themselves.” (Respondent 12)*

This quote highlights the manager’s role in addressing resistance when the change agent lacks hierarchical influence over the change recipients. In such instances, it is essential for the manager to address the resisting behaviour of change recipients accordingly. Hereby preventing or remedying the change agent’s ability to effectively perform the change efforts from being impeded.

## **Parting ways**

In the case of flogging a dead horse, it seems to the change agents that there is nothing left for them to do in order to convince the change recipient to be in favour of the change process. In such instances, it seems to be best for the change recipient to part ways with the organization.

As respondents 9 and 10 state:

*“But in the end, you participate, otherwise you just go work somewhere else.”  
(Respondent 9)*

*“If people really can’t get over their objections, then yes, you should go and look together to part ways.” (Respondent 10)*

## **Having a conversation**

For change agents, having a conversation about the objections and concerns with the change recipients is the only response which is unconditional to their interpretation of change recipients’ behaviour. By having a conversation about the objections and concerns, an understanding is created between the change agent and the change recipients about the change process and objections or concerns. As respondent 10 said:

*“If you bring all perspectives into one room, an understanding will arise and people will grow closer to each other, so that people will no longer show obstructive behaviour, but will cooperate.” (Respondent 10)*

It is not always possible for change agents to have a conversation with all change recipients, because there can be too many change recipients to talk with. In these instances, the change agent has to must come to a select of change recipients who can represent other change recipients. As one respondent said:

*“I do this [selecting representative change recipients] in two ways. On the one hand, I ask the client himself, who is useful to ask? On the other hand, we also organize a kick-off to introduce people to what we’re going to do. It is always interesting to ask: are there volunteers to talk to?” (Respondent 6)*

In the case of outspoken resistance, change agents have conversations with change recipients about what the objections or concerns of the change recipients are and how to overcome these objections or concerns. Respondent 2 said:

*“I’m currently working on a project. We had a day meeting and first asked with a dashboard, a Mentimeter, how they are doing. Then sometimes it’s like, oh shit, are they putting that in? But this is actually good. Because they put certain things in it, like I can’t do anything with it or it’s completely rubbish, it said. Well then I said, well it’s anonymous, so of course it’s completely fine. But I see ‘rubbish’ here. So if the person who filled it in feels called to explain it, and again it’s not necessary because I said it’s anonymous, but if you’d be happy to explain it. Tell me, what’s so bad? Well, then it was told honestly and then I can do something with that. Because then I have a conversation about it, okay you work with this system. You said it took too much time. [...] I’m very happy that you’re explaining this now, because then we have to look at how we can adjust the implementation so that it is truly beneficial for you and is workable and that it does not take so much time. And I wouldn’t have found that out otherwise.” (Respondent 2)*

This quote shows how having a conversation with the change recipients about their objections and concerns, made the objections and concerns clearer for the change agent. Without this conversation, the change agent would not have known why there were objections or concerns and what these were about. In the case of unspoken resistance, when the change agent notices that people are not voicing their objections or concerns, but they are also not doing what they are supposed to do, change agents have conversations with change recipients to find out what their objections or concerns are. Respondent 5 said:

*“Well, keep having the conversation. Continue to involve people. Figuring out what their needs are, also providing feedback on that. That’s really just the most important thing.” (Respondent 5)*

This quote illustrates that is important to remain in conversation with change recipients in the case of unspoken resistance. Only by having a conversation with the change recipients, can the change agents better comprehend their objections and concerns. It can however be tricky to have a conversation about unspoken resistance. Especially when the is unspoken resistance is there because a safe environment in which change recipients can openly voice their concerns is lacking. Respondent 8 said:

*“I could name it [unspoken resistance] and I could ask what the hindering circumstances are, but I’m always very careful with that. For example, in which company do you do that? How do you ask? Do you do that in a one-on-one? Or do you ask the group to respond to that? There is a whole range of tools you can use to talk about [unspoken] resistance. And one of the criteria I use, for example, is how safe it is in the group. Do people dare say something? Because I’ve been through many meetings in which people eventually burst into tears and you really have to manage that. You can’t go past that. (Respondent 8)*

This quote shows that naming outspoken resistance in an unsafe environment, can cause change recipients to burst out into tears. Therefore, it is important to make sure that there is a safe environment in which change recipients can openly voice their objections or concerns. In the case of sabotage, change agents have a conversation with the change recipients to explain the change more in depth from the organizations’ perspective and to find out why the change recipients are actively sabotaging the change process. Respondent 3 said:

*“The only thing you can do is to stand at ease and sit back down at the table with those people and ask, well guys, apparently it’s not clear or it’s going to fast and how can we make sure things become manageable? And that just means another step backwards. (Respondent 3)*

In the case of flogging a dead horse, change agents have conversations with the change recipients to explain the change more in depth from the organizations’ perspective and to discuss the future of the change recipient in the post-change organization. As respondent 1 said:

*“Look I’m of course not the manager of these people, so I at least try to indicate in conversations and find out where their resistance is. And if it is really so decisive for them that they say, we cannot agree to this. Yes, if the organization and the board want something and I know in advance that the change is coming, I will have a conversation with them to prepare them. In any case, to indicate that you always have a choice. So if it’s implemented, you always have a choice to say, then I will do something else.” (Respondent 1)*

This quote shows how the change agent is aware of the fact that the change recipient will not agree to the change that the organization is undertaking. This however does not stop the change agent from having a conversation with this change recipient. The change agent remains in conversation to discuss what the subsequent actions might be for the change recipient.

In short, change agents interpret the behaviour of change recipients in four ways. These interpretations can be viewed on a continuum ranging from constructive resistance to dysfunctional resistance. Based on their interpretation, change agents respond to the behaviour of change recipients in various ways. Different interpretations require different responses, but some responses overlap with multiple interpretations. The model shows that the responses of change agents are done in a specific sequence. Based on these findings, the following model (figure 1) can be presented:

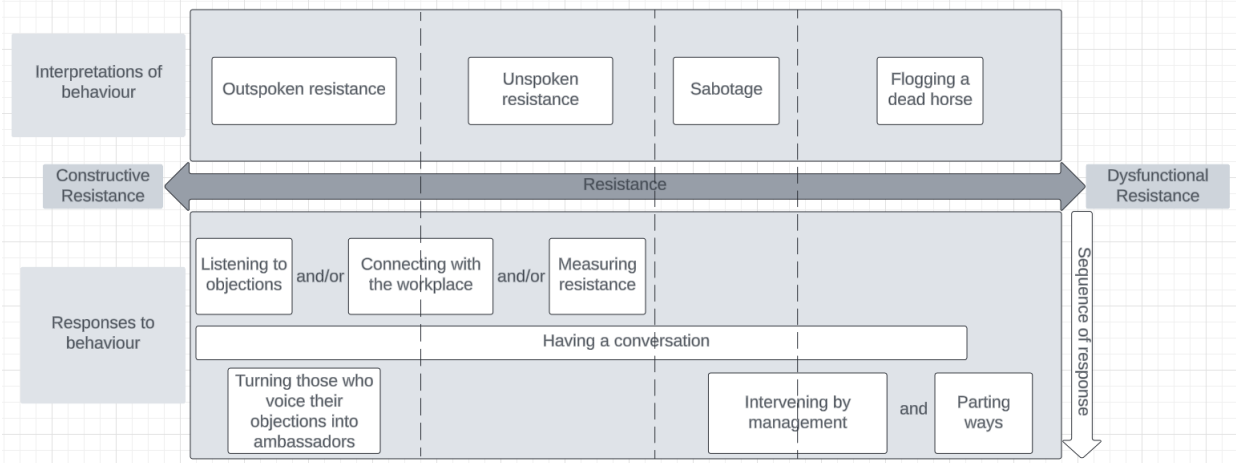


Figure 1: Model of change agents' interpretation and responses

## 5. Discussion

This research set out to answer the research question: “*How do change agents make sense of resistance during the implementation of management ideas?*”. This chapter will provide an interpretation of the results, theoretical contributions and practical implications, limitations and directions for future research, as well as a reflection on the role of the researcher.

### 5.1 Interpretation of results

This focus of this research was to gain insights on the role of human agency during the implementation of management ideas. By using a sensemaking perspective, this research has explored how change agents interpret the behaviour of change recipients, as well as how change agents respond to the behaviour of change recipients. This research introduces a model that identifies four interpretations of change recipients’ behaviour, highlighting how change agents distinguish between these behaviours. These interpretations guide change agents with potential responses to the behaviour of change recipients. The model presents seven responses to change recipients’ behaviour, each based on the interpretation of change recipients’ behaviour although some responses overlap for multiple interpretations. The model also shows that change agents’ responses follow a specific sequence.

This research concerned with the implementation of management ideas, was conducted in a Lean context. However, it was striking that no connections were found between Lean and the behaviour of change recipients, the interpretation of change agents or the responses of change agents. Therefore, we can assume that the Lean context does not have a decisive influence on resistance to organizational change, or on change agents and their interpretation of change recipient behaviour.

### 5.2 Theoretical contributions and practical implications

This research has extended the knowledge on the implementation of management ideas and on resistance to organizational change in several ways. First, this research has deepened our understanding of the role of human agency during the implementation of management ideas by presenting how change agents interpret and respond to the behaviours of change recipients. This research shows how change agents’ interpretations shape their responses, thereby influencing the behaviour of change recipients and thus the course of the change process. This underscores the importance of human agency, not only in enacting change but also in dealing with the

complex issue of resistance which is inherent to organizational change. Second, this research contributes to the existing literature by reinforcing the idea that resistance is more than an acceptance-resistance dichotomy. Instead, this research argues that resistance exists on a continuum, placing a variety of behaviours on a range from constructive to dysfunctional resistance. By examining how change agents interpret and respond to change recipients' behaviour, this research presents multiple forms in which resistance can take place amongst this continuum. These interpretations by change agents, highlight the complexity of resistance by showing resistance as a multifaceted phenomenon. Third, while resistance is predominantly viewed as dysfunctional in existing literature, some scholars have already argued that resistance can be a productive resource for organizational change. This research builds upon this emerging perspective by providing examples of how resistance to change can be a productive resource for organizational change. This research shows that resistance can stimulate critical reflection, foster dialogue, and that resistance is a sign of change recipients' involvement with the change process.

This research also has three practical implications. First, this research can offer insights for change agents on how particular behaviour of change recipients can be interpreted. Moreover, this research can offer change agents insights in possible responses to change recipients' behaviour in order to deal with resistance. These responses are not motivated by the idea that resistance should be 'get rid of', but rather by a motive that resistance can be used as a productive resource for organizational change. Second, this research can also give change recipients insight in how their behaviour might be interpreted by change agents. Thereby giving insights into how their behaviour might have the most impact on the change process, in both a constructive and a dysfunctional manner. Finally, this research shows the importance for change agents to tailor their response to resistance based on their interpretation. This research has shown that there is no one-size-fits-all response to resistance, and that it is of crucial importance to handle each form of resistance appropriately.

### 5.3 Limitations and directions for further research

This research naturally comes with its limitations. First, a qualitative method was chosen to conduct this research. Although this approach is fitting for the nature of this research, it comes with drawbacks. Qualitative data are not exact representations of reality. The interaction between the interview and the respondent can potentially influence the conversation introducing biases or perspectives. In addition, the outcomes are significantly influenced by the

respondents' ability to properly express their experiences through language (Boeije, 2009). Second, this research focuses on how change recipients' behaviour is interpreted by change agents. This however does not consider the change recipients' motives for their behaviour. It cannot be ruled out that change agents themselves contribute to the behaviour they face. Hence, a fruitful direction for future research would be to deepen our understanding of the behaviour by change recipients, in particular their motives for their resistance and how change agents might contribute or how change agents might possibly stir up such behaviour. Third, this research was conducted in a Lean context, however no decisive connections were found between Lean and change recipients' behaviour, or change agents' interpretation and their responses. This does not exclude that Lean had any influence. It could have been that Lean influenced the respondents subconsciously. Therefore, the transferability of this results is low. In addition, as Lean is a management idea, it cannot be argued that management ideas in general do not influence change recipients' behaviour, or change agents' interpretation and their responses. It could very well be, that a different management idea impacts the results of a similar research. Therefore, more research is needed to shed light on the possible relation between management ideas and change recipients' behaviour, or change agents' interpretation and their responses. Another direction for future research is the importance of a safe environment for change recipients to openly voice their objections or concerns, as was cited by several respondents. However, it remained unclear what exactly such a safe environment is and how it is established. More research is needed to discover the elements, conditions, and the advantages of a safe environment in which change recipients can openly voice their concerns.

#### 5.4 Reflection on the role of researcher

The researcher, having a bachelor's degree in business administration and pursuing a master's degree in the same field, had acquired prior knowledge on the concepts of organizational change, resistance, sensemaking and Lean. Moreover, the researcher has had experiences with organizational change and resistance in his personal life. The increased interest in and experiences with resistance have led to the personal belief that resistance can be a productive resource. Although the researcher aimed to minimize any possible influence, it cannot be excluded that has been some effect. On one hand, this could have made interviewees feel understood and comfortable enough to share their insights. On the other, this could have led to steering questions, or interviewees adjusting their insights to be in line with more desirable answers. Additionally, the researcher struggled at first to find a balance in listening to the interviewees' responses and ensuring that the discussion remained focused on relevant topics.

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# Appendices

## Appendix I: Interview guide 1

Welkom bij dit interview! Allereerst wil ik u alvast bedanken voor uw deelname aan mijn onderzoek. Uw bijdrage is van cruciaal belang voor mijn onderzoek. Zoals ik in de uitnodiging al heb vermeld, doe ik onderzoek naar de implementatie van managementideeën. Hierbij richt ik mij op de rol van ‘change agents’ [iemand die initiatief neemt en veranderingen binnen een organisatie orkestreert] in het interpreteren en omgaan met weerstand tijdens de implementatie van Lean-praktijken.

Voordat we beginnen, zou ik om uw toestemming willen vragen om het interview op te nemen zodat ik deze kan transcriberen. De opname zal alleen door mij beluisterd worden, om het interview te kunnen transcriberen. Zodra ik het transcript heb, zal ik deze met u delen. Zo heeft u de gelegenheid om te controleren of mijn interpretatie van uw antwoorden juist is. Uw naam evenals namen van organisaties, teams of personen die u noemt zullen niet gebruikt worden in dit onderzoek, maar ik zal gebruik maken van een pseudoniem om anonimiteit te garanderen. Als laatste wil ik u vragen of het toestaat dat dit onderzoek wordt gepubliceerd in de Radboud Repository [de digitale opslagplaats om als Radboud onderzoeker je onderzoeksresultaten te publiceren, zodat ze ook voor anderen zichtbaar zijn]?

→ Start opname

Het interview zal ongeveer 45 minuten duren. Ik zal beginnen met een paar inleidende vragen over u en uw werk. Daarna zal ik u vragen naar uw kijk op Lean en uw kijk op weerstand om vervolgens dieper in te gaan op hoe u weerstand interpreteert.

Inleidende vragen

1. Kunt u, heel beknopt, beschrijven voor welke organisatie u werkt?
2. Wat is uw functie in deze organisatie?
3. Kunt u beschrijven welke taken u uitvoert in deze functie?
4. Hoe lang werkt u al voor deze organisatie en deze functie?
5. Hoe lang heeft u al ervaring met Lean?
6. Kunt u een paar korte voorbeelden geven van de meest noemenswaardige Lean-projecten waaraan u heeft gewerkt.

## Kijk op Lean

7. Hoe zou u Lean omschrijven?
8. Hoe bent u in aanraking gekomen met Lean
9. Waarom zouden organisaties Lean moeten implementeren volgens u?
10. Hoe en waar heeft u Lean toegepast?
11. Hoe verschillen Lean-projecten van elkaar?
12. Welke factoren maken dat projecten verschillen of gelijk zijn?

## Weerstand

13. Hoe kijkt u naar weerstand tijdens de implementatie van Lean?
14. Kunt u situaties omschrijven waarin u te maken had met weerstand?
15. Welke vormen van weerstand heeft u toen ervaren?
16. Hoe bent u omgegaan met de weerstand die u ervaarde?

## Productieve weerstand

17. Ziet u in weerstand ook iets wat positief bijdraagt aan een veranderingsproces?
18. Kunt u een voorbeeld geven van een situatie waarin weerstand een positieve bijdrage had?

## Interpretatie van weerstand

19. Welke verwachtingen over weerstand heeft u voorafgaand aan een Lean-project?
20. Hoe bepaalt u welk gedrag van mensen onder weerstand valt?
21. In hoeverre heeft weerstand invloed op het succes van een Lean-project?
22. In hoeverre heeft uw interpretatie van weerstand invloed op een Lean-project?
23. Heeft u uw interpretatie over weerstand moeten bijstellen tijdens een Lean-project? Zo ja, wat was hiertoe de aanleiding.

## Contextuele invloed op interpretatie

24. Welke contextuele factoren (bijv. organisatiecultuur) beïnvloeden uw interpretatie van weerstand.
25. Kunt u hier een voorbeeld van geven?

## Gezamenlijke interpretatie

26. Hoe werkt u samen met stakeholders tijdens een Lean-project om tot een gezamenlijke interpretatie van weerstand te komen.
27. Kunt u hier een voorbeeld van geven?

## Leren van weerstand

28. Hoe zorgt u ervoor dat u blijft leren van ervaringen met weerstand, om toekomstige projecten beter te maken?
29. Welke lessen heeft u geleerd die u nu toe past tijdens nieuwe projecten?
30. Welk advies zou u overige Lean-consultants of organisatieadviseurs geven, die te maken hebben met weerstand?

## Afsluiting

We zijn aan het einde van dit interview gekomen. Is er iets waar u op terug wilt komen of wilt u iets toevoegen?

Dan wil ik nogmaals bedanken voor uw tijd en bijdrage aan mijn onderzoek.

→ Stop opname

Zoals ik al vermeld had, zal ik u het transcript toesturen zodat u deze kunt controleren. Ik stuur het transcript binnen een week naar u toe. Daarna zal ik het transcript gebruiken voor de analyse van dit interview. Als u wilt kan ik u een kopie van het onderzoek sturen als het klaar is. Mocht u nog vragen hebben, neem dan gerust contact met mij op! Mocht u nog mensen kennen, wie van toegevoegde waarde zouden kunnen zijn voor mijn onderzoek, zou ik graag met hen in contact komen.

Bedankt!

## Appendix II: Interview guide 2

Welkom bij dit interview! Allereerst wil ik u alvast bedanken voor uw deelname aan mijn onderzoek. Uw bijdrage is van cruciaal belang voor mijn onderzoek. Zoals ik in de uitnodiging al heb vermeld, doe ik onderzoek naar de implementatie van managementideeën. Hierbij richt ik mij op de rol van ‘change agents’ [iemand die initiatief neemt en veranderingen binnen een organisatie orkestreert] in het interpreteren en omgaan met weerstand tijdens de implementatie van Lean-praktijken.

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→ Start opname

Het interview zal ongeveer 45 minuten duren. Ik zal beginnen met een paar inleidende vragen over u en uw werk. Daarna zal ik u vragen naar uw kijk op Lean en uw kijk op weerstand om vervolgens dieper in te gaan op hoe u weerstand interpreteert.

Inleidende vragen

1. Kunt u, heel beknopt, beschrijven voor welke organisatie u werkt?
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5. Hoe lang heeft u al ervaring met Lean?
6. Hoe bent u in aanraking gekomen met Lean?
7. Kunt u een paar korte voorbeelden geven van de meest noemenswaardige Lean-projecten waaraan u heeft gewerkt.

## Kijk op Lean

8. Hoe zou u Lean omschrijven?
9. Waarom zouden organisaties Lean moeten implementeren volgens u?
10. Hoe verschillen Lean-projecten van elkaar?
11. Welke factoren maken dat projecten verschillen of gelijk zijn?

## Weerstand

12. Hoe kijkt u naar weerstand tijdens de implementatie van Lean?
13. Kunt u situaties omschrijven waarin u te maken had met weerstand?
14. Welke vormen van weerstand heeft u toen ervaren?
15. Hoe bent u omgegaan met de weerstand die u ervaarde?

## Productieve weerstand

16. Ziet u in weerstand ook iets wat positief bijdraagt aan een veranderingsproces?
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## Interpretatie van weerstand

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24. Kunt u hier een voorbeeld van geven?

## Gezamenlijke interpretatie

25. Hoe werkt u samen met stakeholders tijdens een Lean-project om tot een gezamenlijke interpretatie van weerstand te komen.

26. Kunt u hier een voorbeeld van geven?

#### Leren van weerstand

27. Hoe zorgt u ervoor dat u blijft leren van ervaringen met weerstand, om toekomstige projecten beter te maken?

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Bedankt!