



## Emotions in Organisational Change Processes: A Qualitative Case Study of an Agile Team

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### Abstract

Organisational change processes are often analysed from structural, strategic, or process-oriented perspectives. However, emotional dynamics among employees remain an underexplored dimension of organisational transformation. This study investigates how employees in an agile organisational environment experience and interpret emotions during a change process. Adopting a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees affected by a structural change within an agile team. The interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis, combining deductive and inductive category development. The results demonstrate that emotions play a crucial role in shaping how employees interpret and engage with organisational change. Emotional responses varied significantly across different stages of the change process and ranged from uncertainty and frustration to curiosity and engagement. The findings highlight that emotional dynamics are not merely individual reactions but emerge within organisational contexts and communication processes. From a practical perspective, perceiving and addressing emotions in change processes can support organisational learning and collaboration. The study contributes to organisational change research by emphasising the practical relevance of emotional dynamics and by illustrating how qualitative research can capture the complexity of organisational transformation.

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### 1. Introduction

Organisations today operate in an increasingly dynamic environment characterised by rapid technological development, global competition, and growing complexity. Concepts such as the VUCA world—referring to volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity—describe the conditions under which many organisations must adapt and transform their structures and working practices (Scheinpflug und Stolzenberg, 2017). In response to these challenges, organisations increasingly implement agile working methods and new organisational structures in order to remain competitive and adaptable (Kaune *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[10]</sup>.

Despite the widespread adoption of change initiatives, research consistently shows that many organisational transformation projects fail to achieve their intended outcomes. One reason for this phenomenon is that organisational change is often approached primarily from a rational and structural perspective, while emotional reactions among employees receive less attention (Schöffner, 2020).

However, emotions are an inevitable component of organisational life and play a crucial role during change processes. Employees interpret organisational changes through their personal experiences, expectations, and perceptions, which can evoke a wide range of emotional responses. These emotions influence how individuals engage with the change process, how they collaborate with colleagues, and how they interpret organisational decisions (Deutinger, 2013) <sup>[4]</sup>.

The present study therefore focuses on the emotional dimension of organisational change. Specifically, it explores how employees in an agile organisational environment experience emotions during a structural transformation process. The research question guiding this study is:

Which emotions do employees experience during an organisational change process, and how do these emotions evolve over time?

By examining emotional experiences within an organisational context, this study aims to contribute both to organisational research and to practical change management by highlighting the importance of emotional dynamics in organisational transformation.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations

### 2.1. Organisational change in modern organisations

Organisational change refers to significant alterations in the structures, processes, or behaviours within an organisation. Such changes may involve the introduction of new technologies, organisational restructuring, or new forms of collaboration.

While change initiatives often focus on structural or procedural adjustments, they also affect the social environment of employees. Changes can influence roles, responsibilities, communication patterns, and working relationships. As a result, organisational transformation processes often generate uncertainty and emotional reactions among employees.

Managing organisational change therefore requires not only technical and strategic planning but also an understanding of human experiences within the organisation (Stolzenberg und Heberle, 2021) <sup>[21]</sup>.

### 2.2. Emotions and their role in organisational contexts

Emotions are complex psychological phenomena that involve affective, cognitive, and physiological components (Frenzel *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[8]</sup>. Although defining emotions precisely remains challenging, most psychological perspectives agree that emotions are characterised by affective experiences, intentionality, and limited duration. Emotions relate to a particular object or situation (Eder und Brosch, 2017) <sup>[6]</sup>.

In organisational contexts, these objects may include organisational decisions, leadership behaviour, workplace relationships, or future expectations (Eder und Brosch, 2017) <sup>[6]</sup>.

Importantly, emotions differ from moods and attitudes. While moods tend to last longer and are less intense, emotions are often triggered by specific events or perceptions. This distinction is relevant for organisational research because emotional reactions often emerge in response to specific organisational events, such as the announcement of structural change.

### 2.3. Emotional reactions in organisational change processes

Organisational change processes can trigger a variety of emotional responses among employees. These responses may include anxiety, frustration, curiosity, hope, or enthusiasm (Deutinger, 2013).

The nature of these emotions depends on how individuals evaluate the change process. If employees perceive the change as beneficial or aligned with their interests, they may experience positive emotions such as excitement or motivation. Conversely, if they perceive the change as

threatening or uncertain, negative emotions such as fear or anger may arise (Oreg *et al.*, 2018 in Pundt *et al.*, 2023) <sup>[16, 17]</sup>.

A useful framework for understanding emotional reactions in organisational change is the circumplex model of emotions, which categorises emotions along two dimensions: valence (pleasant vs. unpleasant) and activation (high vs. low arousal).

Within this framework, emotional responses in organisational change processes may include (Larsen and Diener, 1992 in Huy, 2002; Eriksson, 2004) <sup>[7, 9, 14]</sup>:

- High activation / unpleasant emotions: anxiety, anger, resistance
- High activation / pleasant emotions: enthusiasm, excitement
- Low activation / unpleasant emotions: disappointment, withdrawal
- Low activation / pleasant emotions: calmness, acceptance

These emotional reactions influence how employees behave during the change process. For example, highly activated negative emotions may lead to resistance or criticism, while highly activated positive emotions may encourage active participation in the transformation (Pundt *et al.*, 2023) <sup>[17]</sup>.

### 2.4. Emotional phases in change processes

In addition to emotional types, several models describe emotional reactions during change as evolving through different phases (Deutinger, 2013; Kaune und Wagner, 2016; Streich, 2016) <sup>[4, 11, 22]</sup>.

One widely discussed model describes a sequence of emotional stages during organisational change, including anticipation, shock, resistance, rational acceptance, emotional acceptance, exploration, and integration.

During early stages, employees may experience uncertainty or denial when first confronted with change. As the implications of the change become clearer, resistance or frustration may emerge. Over time, individuals may begin to accept the change and explore new possibilities (Roth, 2000 in Kaune und Wagner, 2016) <sup>[11, 19]</sup>.

Although such models should not be interpreted as rigid sequences, they provide useful insights into the emotional dynamics that often accompany organisational transformation (Deutinger, 2013) <sup>[4]</sup>.

### 2.5. Agile work environments and organisational change

Agile working methods represent a growing trend in contemporary organisations (Kaune *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[10]</sup>, particularly in technology-driven environments. Agile approaches emphasise flexibility, collaboration, and iterative learning.

Frameworks such as Scrum organise work into small, self-organised teams that collaborate closely and regularly reflect on their work processes (Kuster *et al.*, 2022) <sup>[13]</sup>. Agile teams typically consist of defined roles such as product owners, developers, and Scrum masters (Schwaber und Sutherland, 2020) <sup>[20]</sup>.

While agile approaches aim to improve organisational adaptability (Kuster *et al.*, 2022), they may also introduce new forms of collaboration and responsibility. These changes can generate emotional responses among employees, especially when organisational roles or team structures are modified.

Understanding emotional dynamics within agile environments is therefore essential for successfully implementing organisational change.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design in order to explore emotional experiences during an organisational change process. Qualitative research is particularly suited to studying complex social phenomena because it focuses on understanding subjective perspectives and contextual meanings (Misoch, 2019) <sup>[15]</sup>.

Rather than measuring emotions quantitatively, the study aims to reconstruct how employees interpret and describe their emotional experiences during organisational change.

The research is based on a single-case study conducted within Maschinenfabrik Reinhausen GmbH, a medium-sized technology company in Regensburg, Germany. The company operates globally and employs approx. 5,500 employees. The analysed change process occurred within a department responsible for automation technologies.

Within this department, several agile teams were reorganised in order to improve collaboration and clarify product responsibilities. The change involved restructuring teams and redefining the role of product owners within the organisation.

#### 3.2. Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews with employees directly affected by the change process.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow researchers to explore personal experiences while maintaining a consistent structure across interviews (Belina, 2023) <sup>[2]</sup>. The interview guide included questions about participants' emotional experiences at different stages of the change process.

The sample consisted of five participants:

- four product owners who were directly affected by the role changes,
- one developer who collaborated closely with the product owners.

Participants were selected based on their direct involvement in the organisational change.

The interviews were conducted online and lasted approximately one hour each. To ensure a comfortable interview environment, the conversations began with open introductory questions before gradually addressing more specific aspects of the change process.

#### 3.3. Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using qualitative content analysis.

The analysis followed a combined deductive–inductive coding approach. Initial categories were derived from the theoretical framework on emotions and organisational change. Additional categories emerged inductively from the interview data.

The coding process involved:

- identifying relevant text passages,
- assigning them to thematic categories,
- refining categories through iterative comparison.

This method allowed the study to capture both theoretically informed insights and context-specific observations from the interview data.

### 4. Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed several key insights into how employees experienced emotions during the organisational change process.

#### 4.1. Emotional diversity during change

Participants reported a wide range of emotions throughout the change process. These emotions included uncertainty, frustration, curiosity, and optimism.

Immediately after the announcement of the change, several participants described feelings of uncertainty and confusion. The restructuring of roles and teams created questions about future responsibilities and collaboration structures.

These reactions illustrate how organisational change often disrupts established routines and creates temporary ambiguity within the workplace.

#### 4.2. Emotions as responses to perceived impact

A second finding concerns the relationship between emotional reactions and perceived personal impact.

Employees who believed that the change would affect their responsibilities strongly tended to experience more intense emotional reactions. In particular, uncertainty about future roles triggered anxiety or frustration.

Conversely, participants who perceived the change as an opportunity for improvement reported more positive emotions, such as curiosity or enthusiasm.

This observation suggests that emotional responses to organisational change depend strongly on how individuals interpret the implications of the transformation.

#### 4.3. Emotional dynamics over time

The interviews also revealed that emotional reactions evolved over time.

During the early stages of the change process, uncertainty and scepticism were common. As the change progressed and employees gained more information, these emotions gradually shifted towards acceptance or engagement.

In later stages, several participants described feelings of increased clarity and motivation as they began to experiment with new working structures.

This temporal development partially aligns with theoretical models, although some deviations can be observed. Individual experiences varied in part, with some participants diverging from the commonly assumed trajectory or continuing to experience emotions associated with a particular phase even at a later stage of the process. This supports the view that emotional dynamics do not necessarily follow a linear pattern and highlights the need for a more differentiated, constructivist understanding of employees' emotional responses to organisational change.

#### 4.4. Organisational communication and emotional experiences

Another important finding concerns the role of organisational communication.

Participants emphasised that transparent communication and opportunities for discussion significantly influenced their emotional experiences during the change process.

When employees were given space to express concerns and

participate in discussions, emotional tensions decreased and constructive dialogue became possible.

This finding highlights the importance of communication practices in shaping emotional dynamics within organisations.

#### 4.5. Practical implications for organisational change

From a practical perspective, the results underline that emotions should not be treated as disruptive elements in organisational change processes.

Instead, emotional reactions can provide valuable information about how employees interpret organisational developments. Recognising and addressing these emotions can support organisational learning and improve collaboration.

Managers and change facilitators can therefore benefit from creating environments where emotional reactions are acknowledged and openly discussed.

#### 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored emotional experiences among employees during an organisational change process within an agile team environment.

The findings demonstrate that emotions are an integral component of organisational transformation. Emotional reactions varied significantly across individuals and evolved over time as the change process unfolded.

Importantly, emotions were closely linked to how employees interpreted the personal and organisational implications of the change. Transparent communication and opportunities for participation played a crucial role in shaping these emotional experiences.

From a practical perspective, organisations can benefit from recognising emotional dynamics as part of the change process. Rather than suppressing emotional reactions, organisations should create spaces for dialogue and reflection.

The study also illustrates the value of qualitative research for understanding complex organisational phenomena. By exploring subjective experiences in depth, qualitative approaches can reveal insights that remain hidden in purely quantitative analyses.

However, the study has limitations. The findings are based on a single organisational case and therefore cannot be generalised to all change contexts. Future research could examine emotional dynamics across multiple organisations or compare different organisational cultures and change strategies.

Such research could further deepen our understanding of how emotions influence organisational transformation and how organisations can create supportive environments for change.

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