

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Surviving downsizing: Navigating stress, tensions, and contradictions

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the intricate nuances of the tensions and dualities that underlie the stress experienced by survivors of a downsizing process, encompassing the embodied dimensions of these tensions. Data was analyzed from a large public organization located in Canada, providing empirical evidence of the various tensions experienced by individuals while responding to the changes brought about by downsizing. It was suggested that these tensions could be understood as discursive strategies employed by members to navigate the stress and uncertainty of the process. To examine these accounts more closely, communication ventriloquial approach was utilized, offering a robust framework and analytical method that proved instrumental in dissecting the responses of organizational members as they confronted the multifaceted challenges stemming from the downsizing process. This research presented a tension-centered perspective of change, challenging traditional approaches to change. This approach enabled a deeper understanding of individuals' communicative strategies and discourses during this period. By tracking figures, and tensions, the analysis shed light on preoccupations constituting the downsizing process. The analysis revealed three main tensions during the change process: supportiveness vs. equity, effectiveness vs. authority, and accountability vs. collegiality. It has been proposed that recognizing the communicative construction of these tensions is pivotal in effectively addressing issues of change and employees' concerns throughout this process. The current literature did not explain how employees voiced their concerns or how these preoccupations interacted with one another to create multiple tensions. The findings suggested that employees' preoccupations and concerns provided a deeper and more global picture of their experiences during the organizational change process, offering a better understanding of the tensions that were also part of the change process.

Keywords: organizational change; discourse; tensions; figures; ventriloquism

1. Introduction

Downsizing refers to reducing a company's full-time workforce to adapt to external events^[1-4] or crises. Consequently, downsizing often results in changes in work processes, prompting individual responses, like uncertainty and stress, associated with change. However, even if downsizing can have a major impact on organizations, terminated employees, and remaining employees^[5], the majority of research on individual responses to downsizing tends to center on layoff victims rather than survivors^[1]. This means that the experience of those who survive the process is often neglected in the literature. The majority of research on survivors has, for instance, focused on the analysis of employees' psychological states rather than on employees' discursive responses to change processes (for some exceptions, see the study of Aggerholm^[6], as

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well as the study of Spreitzer and Mishra^[7] who emphasizes how survivors used different strategies to deal with this kind of process).

This study presents a novel perspective on downsizing, viewing it as a dynamic communication process rather than a rational or linear planning approach. Drawing from Aggerholm's postmodern organizational perspective^[6], which portrays organizations as social constructs emerging from discursive interactions, downsizing is envisaged as the orchestration of dialogical communication processes, encompassing multiple actors and stakeholders, aimed at purposefully diminishing employee numbers. Through a communicative lens, we can discern the pivotal function of communication in the execution of such a process. Extant literature highlights that downsizing frequently results in inadvertent adverse outcomes, affecting both individuals and the organizational realm^[8]. These unintended outcomes can create awkward situations that exacerbate tensions, stress, and contradictions during the process, ultimately resulting in further negative repercussions. Attending to the communication occurrences narrated by stakeholders engaged in this process could serve as an effective approach to formulate downsizing strategies aimed at mitigating levels of stress and uncertainty. Traditionally, organizational change theory addressed these contradictions and tensions through prescriptive change models^[9], viewing tensions as barriers to overcome or problems to solve. We posit that channeling increased focus into examining the expression of these tensions within discourses could yield valuable insights for managers and employees contending with downsizing processes. This paper proposes an alternative approach to studying organizational change tensions. It argues that a comprehensive understanding of organizational change requires insights into the nature and embodiment of these tensions. To demonstrate this, the study employs a ventriloquial framework^[10] to identify organizational tensions^[11] in the discourse of survivors. The research was conducted over one year in a large public organization in Canada.

The study makes a threefold contribution. Firstly, it presents a tension-centered approach that challenges prevailing assumptions about tensions and their impact on the well-being of employees and managers during downsizing. Secondly, it complements existing research on downsizing by using a ventriloquial approach to unveil the tensions embedded in employees' and managers' discourses. Thirdly, the study illustrates how these tensions are communicatively constructed through various figures in the discourse of employees and managers. These figures mirror the undercurrents of contradictions and unfavorable consequences that are entwined within the downsizing phenomenon. The initial sections of the paper delve into the significant role tensions play in change processes. Subsequently, the research setting, methods, and the study's findings and implications are discussed in detail. Through this innovative approach, the study aims to inform organizational practices and foster a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in managing change effectively, ultimately promoting a healthier and more resilient workplace environment during downsizing and other organizational transformations.

2. Literature review

Much has been written about tensions that emerge from planned change initiatives^[12,13]. Often these change initiatives create contradictions between old and new business processes. Tensions, or dualities, are thus defined as oppositional forces—polar opposites that often work against one another^[14,15]. They are associated with “stress, anxiety, and discomfort in making choices, responding to, and moving forward in organizational situations”^[14]. Similarly, Fairhurst et al.^[8] characterize tensions as a clash of ideas, principles, and actions as well as any subsequent feelings of discomfort. Their study focuses on contradictions organizational members discursively construct during a downsizing process. Subsequently, in the forthcoming section, we will delve into how these constructed discursive tensions and contradictions serve as a lens through which we can delve deeper into understanding the intricate nature of stress amidst the downsizing process.

2.1. Downsizing negative outcomes and organizational tensions

Numerous studies have unequivocally demonstrated^[16,17] that downsizing introduces a plethora of stressors into the workplace. Authors have effectively identified these stressors, which include interpersonal conflicts^[18,19], job insecurity, perceptions of fair treatment toward employees^[17], and more. While previous research has extensively documented the negative consequences of downsizing and the pivotal role of these stressors in the process, only a limited number of studies have delved into the deeper intricacies of the tensions and dualities that underlie the stress experienced by survivors. Cameron^[20] identified a dozen negative organizational attributes that could potentially be linked to downsizing. For example, they illuminated how downsizing constrained communication due to restricted information sharing, stemming from feelings of apprehension and mistrust. As such, it becomes imperative to focus on communication processes that can dismantle these barriers and facilitate more open communication. They presented results from an examination encompassing 30 organizations that underwent downsizing over a period of four years. They elaborated on the systemic strategy as a framework for approaching downsizing. Within this framework, organizational members take center stage in the downsizing process, actively participating in the organization's transformation. By adopting new values and attitudes, they become integral contributors to this process. Notably, communication plays a significant role in nurturing the assimilation of these values among employees. Furthermore, as highlighted by Frone and Blais^[21], their study underscores that the repercussions of organizational downsizing extend beyond job loss. Those who navigate through a downsizing event experience an array of deleterious secondary effects, linked to work conditions, interpersonal relationships, rewards, and security.

The complex nature of downsizing-related stress necessitates a deeper exploration of the underlying dynamics that shape employees' and managers' experiences. Understanding the interplay of these tensions and dualities is vital in developing more holistic downsizing strategies to support surviving employees during organizational change. By uncovering and examining the conflicting expectations and pressures faced by survivors, we aim to provide a more nuanced understanding of their experiences. This research endeavors to contribute valuable insights that can aid organizations in crafting more effective support mechanisms and communication strategies to alleviate stress and foster resilience among employees impacted by downsizing. In the forthcoming section, we will delve further into the role of communication and elucidate how adopting a discursive perspective can facilitate the unraveling of the experiences of both employees and managers.

2.2. Organizational discourse and downsizing

Since the linguistic turn in the 1980s^[22] and the emergence of research focused on organizational discourse, discourse analysis has become an important tool for studying organizational change. As a result, organizational communication scholars and practitioners are increasingly interested in the relation between organizational discourse and change processes^[23]. Using a discursive lens to understand downsizing is useful for at least two reasons: first, these approaches raise different questions about the micro-dynamics of change; second, they can shed new light on sensemaking processes in times of change. As Weick^[24] explains, various events and efforts are set into motion during times of change that do not necessarily fit together. Consequently, actors involved in the change process must engage in discourse to make sense of the situation and determine how best to proceed. Sensemaking activities are intimately connected to change activities.

At the micro level of analysis, other researchers have focused on how communication reveals dualities. For example, for Barge et al.^[12], the change process is riddled with tensions that must be addressed. Their work reveals principal tensions that manifest during the change process, and their research focuses on the ability of change agents to set the context for change through specific practices. Change agents are defined as experts who can resolve possible organizational tensions. Another example of micro-level analysis is the study of

Tracy^[25], who examines how corrections officers' emotional lives are structured by contradicting directives. The research findings show that individuals frame their dilemmas and often transcend contradictions or are paralyzed by them. Tensions, therefore, can trigger feelings of stress that can paralyze individual actions.

In accordance with this viewpoint, Putnam et al.^[11] propose the adoption of a constitutive approach to delve into the intricate fabric of organizational tensions within the realm of organizing. Within their perspective, this constitutive stance also assumes a pivotal role in placing processes at the forefront of paradox studies. Putnam and colleagues highlight that within a constitutive approach, discourse tensions come to the forefront—tensions that are brought to light through language utilization in social interactions, as well as textual content that reflects clashes among different discourses or oppositional aspects within texts.

Consequently, communication perspectives, particularly those inspired by the communicative constitution of organization (CCO) framework, center their attention on interaction and discourse. In the subsequent section, we will expound upon the theoretical underpinnings of this approach. Guided by the tension-centered approach advanced by Trethewey and Ashcraft^[26], our research seeks to explore the intricate dynamics that exist within organizations. According to Trethewey and Ashcraft^[26], organizations represent conflicted sites of human activity, where organizational members often find themselves pulled in opposite directions while navigating various organizational events. For these authors, terms like 'contradiction', 'paradox', and 'irony' capture the broad range of tensions that are part of organizational life. Moreover, in this view, contradictions are associated with irrationality and are considered a normal life condition. Their work shows how tensions manifest and are managed in mundane interactions. Although their study focuses exclusively on tensions in gendered discourse, their tension-centered approach allows us to move beyond a view of tensions as anomalies or deviations in organizational life and processes.

3. Conceptual framework

In this paper, we adopt a constitutive perspective on organizational discourse and change, using members' discourse to identify tensions and preoccupations that arise during the change process. We view discourse as a powerful tool that shapes reality, including the organizational change process^[23]. Change also depends on what Ford^[27] calls conversational responsibility. According to this author, each organizational member can be held accountable for what they say during the change process. Thus, he sees members as 'creators of organizational reality' since they use language to explain their interpretation of what is happening, which is a way of saying that what is happening also gets expressed or enacted through what they say. Ford also points out that, in every conversation, there is a great deal of improvisation. In other words, even during planned changes, the conversational script develops during the change process. Furthermore, to the extent that several conversations may occur simultaneously or sequentially, organizations can be seen as polyphonic sites.

By extension, change also becomes a polyphonic phenomenon through which several themes or narratives can emerge, become established, be maintained, or be removed by conversations. Additionally, Bakhtin's^[28] vision of speech allows us to consider tensions as continually occurring in discourse. These tensions arise because human relationships consist of contradictory forces, which Bakhtin identifies as centripetal and centrifugal forces, which we can recognize in dialogue and discourse. In Bakhtin's view, discourses are connected in a dialogical way, creating patterns we can observe, identify, and analyze.

Drawing on Bakhtin's work, the ventriloquial approach developed by Cooren^[29] also provides an alternative view of organizational tensions by highlighting the communicative practices through which tensions express themselves in employees' and managers' accounts. More specifically, this conceptual lens reveals the constitutive role of communication by showing how tensions can be considered communicatively constituted. In keeping with CCO research^[30-34], the ventriloquial approach considers organizational members

to be in fact driven by principles, values, interests, ideologies, norms, or experiences, which Cooren et al.^[32] refers to as figures.

Communication is thus a process by which figures express themselves when, for instance, people invoke them in an interaction or through official documents. Interaction and discourse must therefore be understood as a much broader phenomenon than generally perceived, with multiple figures interacting in a communicational flow. By adopting this theoretical lens, we can see that these figures express themselves in members' discourses and are frequently in opposition to each other, thus revealing organizational change tensions and a stressful situation.

As Cooren et al.^[35] note, "tensions that are inherent in an organizational change process are performed into existence in discourse"^[35]. For this reason, it seems that analyzing the various figures that are part of employees' and managers' discourse could help us identify the tensions that drive or animate them, which could constitute, we contend, a key element in the process of change itself. Therefore, these tensions can also be seen as constitutive of the organization and the change project itself.

This literature review leads to the following research questions that guide this study:

RQ1: How do the embodiment of tensions manifest in manners that mirror the concerns of both employees and managers throughout the downsizing process, and how do these tensions contribute to heightened stress when it comes to adapting to change?

RQ2: How are these tensions communicatively constructed through organizational change discourse, and how do they contribute to a stressful environment?

4. Method

The author of this article conducted this qualitative study. This study explores the downsizing process of a large public organization. In this qualitative study, we wanted to respect a socio-phenomenological approach^[36]. This approach recommends studying the experience of subjects rather than objects of the external world when studying a phenomenon. This approach allowed us to search for the meaning of facts according to the perspective of employees within the context of organizational change. Therefore, we gave considerable importance to the subject's experience as perceived by them. Qualitative research tends to preserve and analyze the form, content, and experiences of social actors rather than analyzing them based on statistical considerations^[37]. In the interpretive perspective underlying qualitative methods, the goal of the research is understanding, i.e., the search for meanings that members attribute to their situation through the interpretation of their actions, language, and gestures^[38]. The qualitative method thus uses different interpretive tools to decode the experience of social actors. Our objects of analysis are the different discourses constituting organizational change. The chosen organization was in the midst of implementing a major downsizing that had sparked strong reactions from its employees, making it an ideal field setting to study the change process during this downsizing and reorganization of key activities across different sectors. It was a public organization with approximately 700 employees, most of whom were located at the headquarters. The author of this article spent more than a year within the organization, serving as a non-participant observer of the ongoing changes in one of the organization's departments. While the name of the organization cannot be disclosed, we can say that this organization operates in the field of advanced technologies.

The collection of data was executed employing a combination of semi-structured interviews, observations, and organizational documents. The inclusion of documents serves to provide a foundational backdrop, aiding in the contextualization of certain information during the interview phase. The author has attentively reviewed the documents, making a concerted effort to highlight pertinent details regarding the downsizing process,

including the affected department, relevant employee communication, and other relevant aspects. Additionally, through non-participant observation, we were able to infuse further context into the analytical process, shedding light on interactions and informal discussions pertaining to the ongoing downsizing process. By implementing this triangulation of data sources, we have been able to attain a more comprehensive and profound comprehension of the data.

The author conducted nine interviews, one with the vice president, three directors, and five employees from different professions. Data collection was conducted in the form of semi-structured interviews, observations, and a document study. The vice president, three directors, and five employees with different professions were interviewed during the fieldwork. Each interview took place at the organization's main office, took between one and two hours, was recorded, and then transcribed carefully. Concretely, we asked employees to talk to us about how they experienced this period of change, anecdotes related to it, and concerns or questions that the change raised for them and their colleagues. We also questioned them about their understanding of the discourse and messages surrounding the change. Finally, we asked them about the impacts of such a change in their daily lives. Semi-structured interviews were the main method of collecting data in this study. Interviews provide insight into social actors' experiences and perspectives^[37]. Respondents, of course, may sometimes fail to mention certain facts relating to the change process, and they might embellish details or distort certain situations.

Nevertheless, the interview's unique character is the possibility for organizational members to share their interpretations of what is happening in the change process. During the data collection process, we contacted employees—mainly by email—from different departments and hierarchical levels. Employees and managers who were interested in sharing their experiences made appointments with us for an interview.

5. Data analysis

We analyzed the data collected by looking for figures (ideas, values, beliefs, etc.) that could be reconstructed as animating employees' and managers' discourses in times of change. To find these figures, it was necessary to read the transcripts of the interviews one by one. Once the figures were identified for each interview, we selected relevant excerpts. From this, it was possible to identify the main tensions and concerns employees and managers were staging in the interviews. According to the ventriloquial approach^[35], tensions can be analyzed by identifying figures that appear to animate/drive employees' and managers' discourse. In this organizational context, employees and managers implicitly or explicitly position themselves as acting in the name of these figures they ventriloquize. The notion of figures can thus refer to past experience, ideologies, values, interests or principles that they mobilize/ventriloquize to justify/explain what they do during downsizing. To illustrate this type of analysis, let's see an illustration. In this excerpt, an employee positions herself as animated by two figures that appear in conflict with each other:

(Extrait 50/Employee C):

Do I want to continue to work this way? Should I leave and go to the private sector? At least I could be hired and work without worrying every two or three months about staying or leaving. It's difficult. Am I in the right place at the right time? Do I want to continue? Is this what I really want to do?

In this example, the employee wonders about her desire to stay or leave the organization. Reading this excerpt, we can ask ourselves: What values this employee is implicitly ventriloquizing to talk about the tension that appears to inhabit her in this time of change? From a ventriloquial perspective, we see her torn between her desire for a certain stability (which is curiously represented here by the private sector) and her desire for a certain continuity (which the institution she is working in right now represents). Two figures—stability vs. continuity—can thus be identified as driving her toward two incompatible decisions: staying or leaving.

This is an illustration of the way we can identify figures within employees' or managers' discourses. Also, to ensure that our identification method was appropriate, we conducted data sessions with members of our research group. These sessions involved meetings with other researchers to analyze the interviews. These meetings were important in helping us avoid a form of over-analysis or over-interpretation. In the process of these sessions, we shared our analyses with the other researchers and validated our interpretations by seeing them come to the same conclusions with the same methodological tools. The identification of figures allowed us to identify certain tensions that seemed to characterize the employees' and managers' discourse during the change process. While a discourse can express several tensions, we only retained the tensions that could be repeatedly identified throughout most of the interviews we conducted. The first tension we identified was supportiveness vs. equity. This tension was related to the figure of mutual aid as opposed to the one of competitiveness over limited resources. The second tension we found was effectiveness vs. authority. This tension was related to the figure of time, which made us realize that there was a tension between employees' desire to respect organizational deadlines and their obligation to follow internal business processes. Finally, the third tension we identified was accountability vs. collegiality. The figures, in this case, were concerns with the organization, which required employees to be made further accountable for their actions, and distrust of some internal clients with regard to employees' actions towards them. In the next section, we discuss the nature and expression of these tensions.

5.1. Navigating stress through the downsizing process

Prior to delving into the tensions, we can see through our analysis that employees and managers mentioned stress as an important ventriloquial "figure" during the change process. Budget constraints and the reduction of human resources are factors that can potentially heighten the level of daily stress. The four managers (director and vice-president) mentioned stress as a major concern during periods of change. For example, directors, through their leadership roles, must shoulder increased responsibilities during the implementation of organizational change. In the following excerpt, one of the directors explains how stress is indeed a significant element to consider during periods of change.

(Excerpt 40/Director D):

Well, as I say. Depending on the role, you have in the organization, you have to... For me, change and stress, there's a connection. I always think that in certain positions within organizations, you're like... I always used to say there are certain positions where you're like a stress transmitter. Something happens, and you absorb it. You have to transmit it, but correctly, bit by bit, in small pieces and all. That's how I think an organization can progress, and similarly, change for me is a bit the same. There are these key positions that serve as change transmitters, and you have to be able to control the change and then transmit it little by little so that it doesn't fall as is on someone else at a lower level and all that.

In this excerpt, we see how the director presents his role during times of change. He states, "I always used to say there are certain positions where you're like a stress transmitter. Something happens, and you absorb it. You have to transmit it, but correctly, bit by bit, in small pieces and all." Even if, according to this interviewee, directors are imbued with this sense of stress, they must be cautious not to let it show too much. In this extract, the director positions himself as someone who absorbs stress to then disseminate it in small doses to their subordinates. Even though they convey the stress he himself experience, he makes an effort, to absorb a significant portion of it so that employees are not overly affected. This appears as if they are assuming a protective/diffusion role concerning their subordinates.

Therefore, we can observe an implicit theorization of ventriloquism here, as this director sees themselves implicitly in the roles of the puppet and the ventriloquist. A puppet because they are subjected to pressures

coming from their superiors, pressures that correspond to the changes they initiate. A ventriloquist because they position themselves as translating these change pressures in a way that diffuses them and thereby makes them less stressful for their employees. This is, in any case, their version of the situation they experience, a version that casts them in a favorable light (the stress absorption implying that they themselves undergo this pressure without unloading it by venting it onto their employees), but which could obviously be contradicted by their employees. Now let's examine another excerpt that confirms the directors' concern about the level of stress they face:

(Excerpt 41/Director C):

But it's a big change for me. It's positive in the end. So, stress has been experienced (...). All levels have experienced it, I believe. I'm not sure if employees also realize that senior management, they're excessively stressed as well. It's easy to point the finger often. If stress seems to affect all members of the organization during periods of change, it's the managers who most often mention this feeling of pressure in their narratives, this way of experiencing and responding to change.

The interviewed manager uses the word *excessively* to describe the level of stress he and his colleagues face. It's also evident that he has concerned about a sense of injustice, related to what he presents as the false idea spread among employees that managers wouldn't experience stress during times of change. This leads us to analyze excerpt 42, which not only reports the stress experienced by managers but also one of the direct consequences of stress: professional burnout.

(Excerpt 42/Director A):

If you consider all the members within this Department. The turnover rate for these people last year was 57%. It's almost unbelievable, and I'm aware that about four managers have already experienced burnouts, whether they had a burnout and completely left the Department or they chose a completely different job. Because there's a lot of pressure due to transformations and cutbacks. Or they had a burnout and had to take a few months off to refresh, recharge their batteries. We can observe from reading excerpt 41 how the stress linked to the implementation of an organizational change can lead to professional burnout.

This manager mentions that the pressure is significant and sometimes it risks overwhelming the members of the organization. This risk must constantly be taken into account by the managers when they take on new responsibilities or try to respond to new demands. The manager remains vigilant about cases of overwork and questions about whether he is also at risk. It's because managers see themselves as stressed that they seem particularly interested in analyzing the possible effects of stress, the people affected, and the level of stress to which the members of the organization are exposed. This concept of stress thus seems very present during the process of change, which in itself confirms what we already know about the processes of change and their effects on employees and leaders. Mentioned repeatedly by the interviewed managers, it's evident that it receives special attention, whether they present themselves as trying to absorb it to reduce its effects on employees or when this pressure leads to cases of burnout that need to be detected and anticipated. This concept, which constantly recurs in their statements, thus concerns the managers and seems essential in the landscape of change they depict. A portion of the stress can also be linked to the tensions communicatively constituted through the employees and managers discourses. We will present these tensions more explicitly in the next sections.

5.2. First tension: Supportiveness vs. equity

The first key tension noted in this study is the clash between supportiveness and equity, intricately intertwined with the values upheld by organizational members. As highlighted earlier, we discern how

organizational members find themselves tugged in divergent directions. At times, downsizing mandates a shift in organizational culture and values, engendering stress and uncertainty. The results revealed that managers often positioned themselves as having a responsibility to support and assist their subordinates during times of change. They portrayed themselves as genuinely concerned about their employees' future, indicating a strong sense of duty towards them. For instance, Director C (Excerpt 48) expressed this sentiment by stating, "You put your employees first. I think it is a responsibility we all have. I don't think it is out of hypocrisy or a lack of integrity. I think it's more a sense of duty." As we see, the director positions himself as driven by a sense of duty. He presents himself as wanting to help his employees to find new alternatives after their job loss. This sense of duty not only guided the actions of individual directors but also influenced the decisions made by the entire board throughout the downsizing process. Practical examples of this support included temporarily hiring employees who lost their jobs in other departments, as illustrated in Director A's (Excerpt 49) statement: "What happens to us sometimes is that they ask us if we want to accommodate someone who has been affected. I did it at least twice if not three times. But this has been beneficial for them. In certain cases, a person who was affected finds a job... and uses us as a reference. It's a good thing. It's a way to help people find a new job."

From a ventriloquial perspective, we observed that directors projected themselves as driven by a sense of duty toward their employees, which seemed to be a response to counterbalance the negative effects of the downsizing process. By taking supportive actions, directors found solace in the positive outcomes that occasionally emerged from this challenging situation. Director A's (Excerpt 50) statement further reinforces this perspective, "Although it is difficult to advise people, it's hard to see people who have been affected and... work with them. We want to help them sometimes... when we have the opportunity to help them, it feels good." Also, Director C (Excerpt 47) expressed experiencing the same uncertainty as other employees during the downsizing process. They voiced concerns about the possibility of further reorganizations in the future, even after the current changes. This uncertainty added to the challenges faced by managers and directors, who, like everyone else, had to grapple with unpredictability. Director C acknowledged the difficulty of managing their staff's uncertainty while also motivating them to perform at their best. To navigate this situation, they emphasized the importance of setting aside personal feelings to handle the complex and ever-changing circumstances.

However, this figure of supportiveness often clashed with the figure of equity, which was presented as driving directors' actions and decisions. This conflict arose due to competition over limited resources, creating a rivalry among colleagues. Director C (Excerpt 34) expressed the competitive atmosphere, stating, "At first, I loved going to the management committee. I loved meeting my colleagues and the other directors and all that. At one point it became a little more competitive in the sense that... 'Well, you got a lot of administrative staff, for example. We have just two, and then you've four or five. You are less in your department than we are. How many people do you really need?' 'It's the kind of thing like that...' I felt I..., I began to love less the management committees because I felt like everyone was looking at me more closely." Although the subordinates were not directly involved in this rivalry, the managers faced a tension between their desire to act as representatives of their employees' interests (supportiveness) and the need to appear equitable vis-à-vis other directors (equity). This led to a challenging climate in the organization, especially for those directors who wished to collaborate and provide assistance to their colleagues during the downsizing process. This figure of supportiveness seems, however, often in contradiction with the figure of equity, which is presented as driving the directors' actions and decisions. This is due to a rivalry over limited resources, where the apparent scarcity of financial and human resources created a rivalry between colleagues. As we can see, competition seemed to take place between colleagues of the same level. Even if the subordinates are not directly involved in this competition, the managers appear to face a tension between their desire to act as representatives of their

employees' interests (what we identified under the figure of supportiveness) and the need to appear equitable vis-à-vis the other directors (what we identify under the figure of equity). The directors who wanted to work together and help the others faced a competitive climate in the organization.

As we delve into the first tension of supportiveness versus equity, a profound realization emerges—the downsizing process perceives organizational members as active creators of organizational reality. Their use of language to interpret and narrate the unfolding events empowers them to effectively express and enact the ongoing changes through their words. This profound understanding sheds light on the intricate ways tensions surface and evolve throughout the change process. These insightful excerpts offer valuable glimpses into the complexities of the downsizing process, underscoring the pivotal role of language in shaping organizational realities. Furthermore, existing literature emphasizes that downsizing often gives rise to unintended negative consequences, be they personal or organizational in nature^[8]. These consequences may manifest in various forms, such as competition between managers or a heightened sense of duty among organizational members. Such unintended outcomes can lead to awkward situations that heighten tensions, stress, and contradictions during the downsizing process, subsequently resulting in further negative repercussions and outcomes. Acknowledging the inevitability of tensions, we recognize them as an integral part of the change process.

5.3. Second tension: Effectiveness vs. authority

The second tension—effectiveness vs. authority—is linked to the figure of time. On the one hand, employees wanted to adapt their activity to meet new internal deadlines, which means that they appeared driven or animated by imperatives of effectiveness. On the other hand, however, they had to face heavier bureaucratic processes, which means that they felt their action was constrained by imperatives of authority (they had to abide with new rules). For example, the organization implemented additional levels of approval for travel expenses in order to increase the monitoring of public spending. This, however, introduced new bureaucratic burdens. Primarily, these were office employees who, in contrast to the managers, appeared to have different concerns that gave rise to tensions associated with operational imperatives. As noted earlier, we observed that managers also had concerns related to their roles, which led to potential conflicts of values. For the employees, it seems to be somewhat distinct, with the tensions they experienced being linked to their tasks and the directives they received. This was noted in the following excerpts:

(Excerpt 26/Employee B):

Something it takes much longer to deliver something. Normally a claim should be made in, I would say, two to three days. And if it takes a week to make a payment, because it stayed a week in the finance department. It now takes a week or two before the traveler will be paid.

(Excerpt 27/Employee B):

Are all of these detours necessary for something so simple? We can achieve the same result, but this is how they want to play... Not play but this is how they want to do things, so we are following them and moving further.

In Excerpt 26, the employee implicitly compares the present situation with how it used to be before, noting that “it takes much longer to deliver something”. While it used to take “two to three days” to process claims, it now takes “a week or two before the traveler will be paid”, a situation that she implicitly deplors because she appears to care for the quality of service she is providing to the travelers (effectiveness). In Excerpt 27, we see how the bureaucratic processes are explicitly portrayed as detours, which raised questions among employees. Although there are more and more obstacles to overcome in her work, she has to respect the authority in the organization and follow the new bureaucratic processes.

Another employee also said that following certain changes in internal business processes, the risk of errors

increased because the time required to receive signed and approved documents also increased. The extra time that she needed to get approval left her less time to do her work, and thus errors in the execution of tasks increased dramatically. In the following excerpt, she highlighted a problematic situation that arose in this context, which created a real dilemma. After making an error, she needed to cancel a business-class ticket she was not supposed to buy and exchange it for another ticket that was supposed to be less expensive.

(Excerpt 1/Employee B):

On a daily basis, you can tell yourself that you cannot go beyond, it is the rules, we must apply the rules because it is safe. After an audit and if an auditor comes and sees that an employee travel on business class while he has no right, how you justify it?

(Excerpt 2/Employee B):

If you cancel this ticket, it will cost \$200 plus tax. Now buying a new ticket is three times more expensive than the ticket we bought business class (laughs). So you imagine, you're like, you want to save, you want to cut, but ultimately you also have to consider how you cut your cost. What are we doing here? In the end, are we going to spend more or less?

As we see, this employee implicitly positions herself as driven by two imperatives that seem to contradict each other. On the one hand, she is supposed to abide with the new bureaucratic rules, which now forbid the purchase of business class tickets (authority), but she also feels that she has to save money, given the financial situation of the institution (effectiveness). She asked for clear instructions to rectify a situation that she considered to be problematic, since she faced two choices and did not know which one would solve the problem optimally. She then asked, "what are we doing here?" (Line 61). Should she adopt the solution A or B in such circumstances? This excerpt shows that in some situations employees are forced to make difficult or impossible decisions. Also, in the other excerpt below another employee is questioning the efficiency of some business processes.

(Excerpt 1/Employee A):

Lately, there are new rules in terms of conferences..., conferences and travel. We verify the requests and they have to be authorized by the managers. There are also more documents to fill in, you fill the document to say finally that it's okay we don't need to make any correction that the request respects the directive. Just to fill this document this increased our workload. But ultimately it is the managers who decide if we apply certain rules or not. If the traveler paid a little more for a hotel room, because there was an error at the hotel, do we have to tell the manager: they paid a bit more but it's \$10 more per night for two nights it's \$20. Is it worthy to spend so much time convincing the manager that the traveler paid more than he was supposed to? Is it worth spending so much time for \$20?

In this excerpt, we see the employee complaining that they have to deal with new traveling rules for employees. These new rules are, according to her, impacting the internal business processes. Employees have more documents to fill in and now they have to check every little detail on the requests and on claim forms. It takes more time and the employee feel like this may not be the most efficient way to treat these demands. This employee thus positions herself as torn between two principles: in the name of effectiveness, she thinks she should not bother her superior about an overspending. However, in the name of the lines of authority she is supposed to abide with, she knows she is supposed to do so. These conflicting obligations contribute to heightened stress during this period, as the employee grapples with demands pulling her in multiple directions.

5.4. Third tension: Accountability vs. collegiality

The third tension stems from an organizational principle that is the obligation for employees to account for their work. Our analysis allowed us to identify a tension, which was common, between the need employees

felt to be accountable to the management for their work (accountability) and their desire to look trustworthy vis-à-vis their colleagues (collegiality). Often times, they experienced situations where this imperative of accountability seemed in contradiction with this collegiality they wanted to maintain with their coworkers. Within the context of this downsizing initiative, the organization is not solely constrained to implementing layoffs; it must also exercise resource restraint in order to attain its financial objectives. The ramifications of downsizing extend far beyond mere job losses; they cast their influence across every facet of work and available resources. In this intricate landscape, administrative employees find themselves compelled to adopt a heightened degree of financial discipline, meticulously scrutinizing budgetary expenditures and prompting employees to provide more comprehensive expense reports. This is shown in Excerpt 24:

(Excerpt 24/Employee A):

I just need to know the mileage. There are some for whom their address in the system is in another city, but they are working here and they do not want to give their addresses here. I will not pay mileage unless I know the real distance between your home and the airport. There are times with this questioning that they are feeling a little... “Are you trying to tell me I’m a liar?”

(Excerpt 14/Employee A):

Now we systematically check the mileage (on each travel claim). Travelers have not been advised. You start to ask questions. Then travelers are saying: why you are asking questions? It seems to bother many people and they feel a little hounded.

In these excerpts, the employee explains how an internal customer thought she wanted to know a little too much about his private life while she felt she was just trying to follow the new rules regarding accountability. This customer’s reaction manifested a form of distrust and suspicion. As the change took place gradually, uninformed internal customers refused to follow the new procedures. In this other excerpt this employee explains that internal customer also feels attacked when she is asking questions about their business trip.

(Excerpt 2/Employee A):

It’s not all negative time when you ask questions. But there are many who feel attacked and wonder why you are acting like the police. This makes things difficult. It would be nice to have clear rules. If the person claims 5 km more than what Google tells you. What are you doing then?

As we can see, the tensions arise from the relationships that employees maintain with their colleagues, which appear to be more strained and contribute to new sources of stress. This surge in workload, as discussed by authors such as Cameron^[20], and Frone and Blais^[21], seems to function as a pivotal catalyst. This assertion is upheld by a multitude of scholars, reflecting a consensus that this augmented workload serves as a breeding ground for the emergence of interpersonal conflicts within the survivor community. This multifaceted interaction of factors creates an intricate environment that both strains existing employee relationships and magnifies the stressors stemming from the rapidly changing rules, thereby accentuating the challenges wrought by the downsizing process.

6. Discussion and implications

This study set out to answer two research questions: Q1: How do the embodiment of tensions manifest in manners that mirror the concerns of both employees and managers throughout the downsizing process, and how do these tensions contribute to heightened stress when it comes to adapting to change? Q2: How are these tensions communicatively constructed through organizational change discourse, and how do they contribute to a stressful environment? Initially, our investigation underscored the pivotal role of stress within the

downsizing process, prominently evident in the micro-discourse of managers. This cohort of individuals candidly expressed their experience of stress during the downsizing period. This insight further illuminates the manner in which organizational members collectively contribute to shaping an organizational reality. In doing so, they lay bare the interconnectedness between downsizing and its potential to engender negative outcomes, thus amplifying stress and uncertainty within the organization. Moreover, the process of identifying distinct figures enabled us to pinpoint some of the underlying tensions that defined the discourse of employees. This analytical lens allowed us to discern and articulate the intricate dynamics at play, shedding light on the nuanced ways in which employees navigated the complexities of the downsizing experience. The first tension concerned the figure of supportiveness, which often appeared in contradiction with the one of equity. The directors who wanted to support their subordinates had to deal with other directors who felt that these employees had to be let go in the name of equity. Here, the values or principles of supportiveness thus appear in tension with the principles of equity. In other words, what is explicitly or implicitly done in the name of equity (e.g., laying off employees in a given department because they appear too numerous in comparison with other departments) can appear incompatible with what should be done in the name of supportiveness (e.g., keeping as many employees as we can and even hire them again sometimes). Moreover, the lack of supportiveness, in this case, could lead to more stress and anxiety for directors who sometimes feel responsible for the consequences of downsizing.

The second and third sets of tensions were part of the employees' change experience. The second tension, effectiveness vs. authority, is linked to the employee interpretation of the change process. In this period of change, they think that the implementation of new rules is leading to inefficient work processes. The third primary set of tensions, accountability vs. collegiality illustrates an opposite stance, that is, the employee has been guided with a sense of professionalism. However, in this case internal customers are feeling persecuted by the employee because of a lack of clarity about new processes. Thus far, we have seen that tensions are found in certain situations where certain principles are confronted with other principles or values that, from an employee's perspective, are obstacles to their willingness to cope with organizational changes and could affect their well-being. Also these tensions reveal preoccupations (like helping others or following the rules) that employees and managers must maintain during the change process. In short, we might say that the emerging tensions inform us about situations that employees and managers experience in such times. They also reveal the complexity of such a process because employees do not always come to an agreement when they have different points of view or values. For example, the tensions show that employees may have difficulty communicating with other members of the organization.

Notably, while certain tensions are evident in employees' discourse, they might not be as prominent in managers' discussions, and vice versa. This observation highlights that contradictions are framed based on how these tensions are perceived, contingent on an individual's hierarchical position. Consequently, we can posit that these contradictions contribute to a collective sensemaking process, where individuals at similar hierarchical levels communicate their shared comprehension of "what is happening" during the change process. As employees and managers engage in this sensemaking endeavor, they collectively generate ongoing changes founded on their interpretation of events, replete with contradictions. This research can contribute to Cameron et al.'s systemic strategy framework by emphasizing the pivotal role of communication in elucidating significant tensions that occasionally culminate in adverse outcomes and stress amid downsizing initiatives. As evidenced in the preceding analysis of Cameron et al.'s framework, individuals within the organization occupy a central role in the downsizing process, actively engaging in the organization's metamorphosis. Moreover, they bear the responsibility of shaping a novel organizational reality throughout the downsizing journey.

Also, the constitutive view of tension^[11] and the change process can help us understand that these tensions are an inevitable part of the downsizing process. This research enriches our understanding of how tensions or contradictions are shaped through organizational discourse. We glimpse the values, principles, and rules invoked by employees and managers, which constitute integral facets of the change process. This insight assists us in recognizing how these tensions are embodied in specific communication events during downsizing. These tensions inherently form part of the organizational dynamics during downsizing and, if overlooked, can amplify stress levels. This realization can guide downsizing strategies, as explored in the subsequent section.

7. Practical implications

The findings of this research can be particularly useful for change managers who are responsible for guiding employees and managers during the change process. By paying attention to discursive tensions, managers can identify potential situations that may cause stress and anxiety for downsizing survivors. This can help attenuate the “survivor syndrome” experienced by those who are fortunate enough to keep their jobs. Therefore, we should view them as an opportunity for growth rather than a negative occurrence. In summary, the insights gained from this research can aid change managers in supporting employees and managers during times of organizational change and can provide a positive framework for understanding and managing the inevitable tensions that arise during the change process.

In a succinct summation, the insights garnered from this research offer valuable support to change managers as they navigate the task of assisting employees and managers during periods of organizational upheaval. This body of knowledge presents a constructive framework for understanding and effectively managing the inevitable tensions that invariably arise during such transformations. As Frone and Blais^[21] point out, organizational leaders need to understand the “broad adverse impact of downsizing on survivors and develop both top-down and bottom-up approaches”^[21] to minimize their impact on surviving employees. Adopting a holistic perspective can also serve as a mechanism to utilize communication as a means of gaining insights into how individuals personally experience the downsizing process. This multifaceted approach can foster a more profound comprehension of the nuanced dynamics at play.

8. Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature on organizational change and tensions by demonstrating how tensions are constitutive of the change process and can be reconstructed from members’ accounts. The findings illustrate that employees make sense of the change process by evoking figures that reflect values, principles, and preoccupations that can arise in this process. Also, this study centers on the constitutive role of communication and shows how tensions engender and create particular realities during the change process for both employees and managers.

Moreover, this study underscores the predominance of contradictions and tensions across multiple hierarchical levels. Further research could explore the movement of tensions across hierarchical levels and different organizational groups. Finally, this research offers insight into individuals’ responses and sensemaking activities during a change process. It may also expand our thinking by moving organizational change theory away from a rational or linear model of change and suggesting ways of developing a dynamic model by focusing on communication and discourse.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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