

# Narratives of Organizational Change: Employees' Voices on Transformational Leadership

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore employees' narratives of organizational change, focusing on how transformational leadership is perceived and experienced in shaping communication, engagement, emotional responses, and organizational outcomes. A qualitative research design was employed, using semi-structured interviews with 19 employees from medium and large organizations in Greece. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diverse perspectives across gender, age, and organizational roles. Interviews, conducted in Greek, lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. NVivo 14 software was used to support thematic analysis, which followed an iterative process of open coding, category development, and theme refinement. Analysis of employee narratives revealed four overarching themes: leadership communication, employee engagement, emotional responses to change, and organizational outcomes of leadership. Within communication, clarity of vision, transparency, and consistency were identified as critical for building trust. Engagement was fostered through participation in decision-making, recognition, empowerment, and learning opportunities, although some employees expressed resistance and ambivalence. Emotional responses ranged from anxiety and frustration to optimism and resilience, reflecting the dual nature of organizational change. Finally, participants reported positive organizational outcomes, including improved collaboration, enhanced performance, cultural transformation, retention, trust in leadership, and organizational learning. Narratives emphasized that while transformational leadership facilitated adaptation, inconsistencies or unmet expectations could undermine employee confidence. The findings underscore the central role of transformational leadership in shaping employees' experiences of change, particularly through transparent communication, empowerment, and emotional support. At the same time, the study highlights the persistence of ambivalence and resistance, suggesting that leadership effectiveness must be understood within cultural and contextual dynamics. These insights contribute to both theory and practice by illustrating how employees' voices provide critical perspectives for understanding and managing organizational transformation.

**Keywords:** Transformational leadership; organizational change; employee narratives

## Introduction

Organizational change has become an unavoidable reality in contemporary work environments characterized by globalization, technological innovation, and competitive pressures. Organizations across industries are compelled to adapt their structures, processes, and cultures to survive and thrive in volatile conditions. Scholars argue that successful adaptation to change is not merely a structural or strategic issue, but fundamentally a human process mediated by leadership and employee experiences (By, 2021; Armenakis & Harris, 2009). Within this context, the narratives of employees—how they interpret, make sense of, and emotionally respond to organizational change—



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provide vital insights into both the challenges and opportunities of transformation. Leadership, and particularly transformational leadership, has been identified as a crucial driver shaping these narratives by influencing employees' engagement, emotions, and perceptions of organizational outcomes (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Eisenbach, Watson, & Pillai, 1999).

Research on organizational change has long highlighted that structural and technical adjustments are insufficient without active buy-in from employees. Change efforts often fail not because of poor strategies but due to resistance, mistrust, or lack of communication at the employee level (Kotter, 1995; Oreg, Vakola, & Armenakis, 2011). Employees are not passive recipients of change but active sense-makers who construct stories around their experiences (Sonenshein, 2010). Their narratives reflect interpretations of leadership behaviors, organizational values, and the emotional meaning of change, influencing both individual and collective outcomes (Brown, Gabriel, & Gherardi, 2009). Thus, examining employees' voices through qualitative inquiry is essential for understanding how transformational leadership fosters—or hinders—organizational change processes.

Transformational leadership theory offers a useful lens for exploring how leaders engage employees during organizational change. First introduced by Burns (1978) and later elaborated by Bass (1985), transformational leadership emphasizes inspiring followers through vision, motivating them beyond self-interest, fostering innovation, and attending to individual needs. Meta-analytical evidence confirms its positive association with job satisfaction, commitment, and performance across cultures (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011). In the context of organizational change, transformational leaders are expected to provide a compelling vision, communicate transparently, and create trust, thereby shaping employees' attitudes and emotions (Herold, Fedor, Caldwell, & Liu, 2008; Caillier, 2014). Importantly, transformational leaders also help reduce resistance by empowering employees and framing change as a collective journey rather than an imposed mandate (Bommer, Rich, & Rubin, 2005).

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of transformational leadership in managing change remains contested. Critics argue that the concept can be overly idealized and may overlook structural constraints, power dynamics, or cultural differences that affect leadership impact (Tourish, 2013). Furthermore, while quantitative studies have extensively examined correlations between transformational leadership and organizational outcomes, fewer have investigated the subjective, narrative dimensions of how employees experience leadership during change (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Understanding these lived experiences requires qualitative approaches that capture the meanings employees attribute to leaders' communication, emotional tone, and support mechanisms. Such insights are particularly valuable for contexts where organizational change is frequent, disruptive, and emotionally taxing.

Employee narratives provide a rich source of knowledge on the human side of change. Narrative inquiry highlights how individuals make sense of events, reconstruct identities, and negotiate meanings in organizational contexts (Czarniawska, 2004; Gabriel, 2000). During times of transformation, stories about leadership communication, trust, and empowerment influence collective memory and future organizational culture (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). For example, employees may frame leaders as inspirational guides or as distant and inconsistent figures, and such narratives affect morale, retention, and performance. Moreover, narratives reveal the emotional complexities of change, such as anxiety, hope, or ambivalence, that are often invisible in survey data (Kiefer, 2005). Examining these stories thus contributes to a deeper understanding of how transformational leadership is enacted and experienced in practice.

The Greek context provides an especially relevant setting for exploring these dynamics. Greece has experienced significant economic, social, and organizational transformations in the past two decades, particularly in response to financial crises, austerity measures, and integration with European Union directives. Organizations have undergone restructuring, downsizing, and modernization initiatives that have profoundly affected employees (Makri & Scandura, 2010; Karakas & Sarigollu, 2012). In such turbulent contexts, leadership plays a critical role in guiding employees through uncertainty and fostering resilience (Xenikou & Simosi, 2006). Yet, empirical research examining how Greek employees narrate their experiences of change under transformational leadership remains limited. This study seeks to fill this gap by amplifying employees' voices and analyzing their stories of organizational change.

The present study adopts a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with 19 employees from diverse organizations in Greece. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of employees' sense-making processes and captures nuances that quantitative methods might overlook. The research aims to identify the thematic patterns in employees' narratives regarding transformational leadership, focusing on leadership communication, employee engagement, emotional responses to change, and perceived organizational outcomes. By doing so, it contributes to three areas of scholarship.

First, it enriches transformational leadership literature by grounding theoretical concepts in lived experiences. While prior studies have demonstrated statistical associations, this research uncovers the mechanisms and meanings through which leadership behaviors are interpreted by employees (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer, 1996). For example, consistency of messages or leaders' accessibility may be perceived as trust-building, while ambiguity or distance can create disillusionment.

Second, it advances organizational change research by centering employees' voices. Much of the literature focuses on managerial perspectives or success/failure outcomes, but employees' narratives illuminate how change is emotionally and socially constructed (Thomas, Sargent, & Hardy, 2011). These insights reveal both supportive and resistant dynamics, offering a more holistic view of change processes.

Third, the study contributes to cross-cultural leadership research by examining transformational leadership in the Greek context. Cultural values influence how leadership behaviors are enacted and perceived (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). In collectivist or high power-distance cultures, for instance, empowerment may be interpreted differently than in individualist contexts (Pasa, Kabasakal, & Bodur, 2001). By analyzing Greek employees' stories, this study provides context-specific knowledge that can inform leadership practices in Southern European and Mediterranean settings.

In summary, organizational change is both a strategic necessity and a human challenge, mediated by leadership and employee sense-making. Transformational leadership offers a promising framework for guiding change, yet its effectiveness must be understood through the lens of employees' lived experiences. Narrative inquiry enables researchers to uncover the meanings, emotions, and cultural nuances embedded in employees' stories. By focusing on employees in Greece, this study provides new insights into how transformational leadership is experienced during change, offering implications for leadership practice, organizational development, and future research.

## Methods and Materials

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore employees' narratives of organizational change under the influence of transformational leadership. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants

who had direct experience with organizational change processes in medium and large organizations in Greece. Nineteen employees participated in the study, representing a range of sectors including education, finance, and services. Participants were selected to capture diverse perspectives in terms of age, gender, and years of work experience. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning no new themes or significant insights emerged from subsequent interviews.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to freely articulate their experiences while ensuring that the interviews covered core themes related to organizational change and leadership. An interview guide was developed, including open-ended questions that prompted reflections on leadership practices, communication during change, employee involvement, and perceptions of outcomes. Interviews were conducted in Greek, either face-to-face or via online platforms, depending on participants' availability and preferences. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. Recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and richness of the data.

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, supported by NVivo 14 software. The analysis followed an iterative and inductive process, beginning with initial open coding to capture meaningful units of text, followed by the development of categories and broader themes. Constant comparison was applied across interviews to refine categories and identify patterns in employees' narratives. Coding and theme development were conducted collaboratively within the research team to enhance rigor and minimize bias. The final themes were validated against the raw data to ensure they reflected participants' perspectives faithfully.

## Findings and Results

The study included 19 employees from medium and large organizations in Greece. Of the participants, 10 were female (52.6%) and 9 were male (47.4%). Participants' ages ranged from 27 to 54 years, with the majority ( $n = 11$ ; 57.9%) between 30 and 40 years old. In terms of work experience, 7 participants (36.8%) had less than 10 years of professional experience, while 12 (63.2%) reported more than 10 years. Regarding organizational roles, 8 participants (42.1%) were in mid-level managerial positions, 6 (31.6%) were in entry-level or junior roles, and 5 (26.3%) held senior management responsibilities. This distribution ensured a diverse range of perspectives across age, gender, and organizational hierarchy, contributing to a richer understanding of employees' narratives of organizational change.

### Reporting the Data (Findings)

Below is a narrative-style reporting of the table you requested. Each subcategory is explained in one paragraph, integrating open codes and supported with direct participant quotations. This can go directly into your Findings section.

#### Category 1: Leadership Communication

**Clarity of Vision.** Participants consistently emphasized the importance of leaders communicating a clear and compelling vision. Employees noted that when leaders articulated simplified messages and future-oriented goals, they felt more confident in the change process. One participant stated, "Our manager explained the new direction in very simple words; I could see how my daily tasks fit into the bigger picture."

**Transparency in Change Process.** Many employees highlighted the value of open sharing and honesty during change initiatives. Transparency helped reduce rumors and uncertainty. As one participant observed, “Even when the news wasn’t good, knowing the truth made us feel respected.”

**Emotional Tone of Communication.** The emotional quality of leaders’ language emerged as a key factor. An empathetic and reassuring tone instilled confidence, while enthusiasm from leaders motivated employees. A respondent recalled, “Her excitement was contagious; it made me want to give my best.”

**Listening and Responsiveness.** Employees valued leaders who created genuine feedback loops and responded actively to concerns. “When I voiced my worries, the director didn’t dismiss me. He asked questions and came back with solutions.”

**Consistency of Messages.** Participants pointed to contradictions as a source of confusion. Consistency across communication channels was seen as a marker of credibility. One employee remarked, “It’s frustrating when HR says one thing and our team leader says another.”

**Accessibility of Leaders.** Several narratives emphasized the symbolic and practical importance of leader visibility. Open-door policies and informal conversations built trust. “Seeing our CEO walking around and chatting with us gave me the courage to speak openly.”

#### Category 2: Employee Engagement

**Participation in Decision-Making.** Involvement in planning and meetings fostered ownership and reduced resistance. As one employee noted, “When they asked for our input, I felt the change was partly mine too.”

**Recognition and Appreciation.** Acknowledgment of effort was repeatedly mentioned as a motivator. Simple thanks or symbolic rewards boosted morale. “A small note from my supervisor saying thank you kept me motivated for weeks.”

**Empowerment.** Trust and autonomy were cited as critical for employees’ engagement. One participant shared, “They trusted me to lead part of the project, and it gave me confidence I never had before.”

**Motivation Drivers.** Employees reported feeling driven when change aligned with their personal values or offered growth opportunities. “I wanted to be part of something meaningful, not just another task.”

**Resistance and Ambivalence.** Despite positive experiences, some narratives reflected skepticism or nostalgia for the past. “I still think the old system worked better; I wasn’t convinced we needed this change.”

**Peer Support Networks.** Informal collaboration and emotional support among colleagues were strong themes. “Talking with my peers after meetings helped me process and accept the changes.”

**Learning Opportunities.** Training and coaching were identified as supportive mechanisms. One employee remarked, “The workshops made me feel more prepared and less anxious about what was coming.”

#### Category 3: Emotional Responses to Change

**Anxiety and Uncertainty.** Employees described insecurity and stress due to unpredictable outcomes. “For weeks I couldn’t sleep, thinking if I would still have a job.”

**Hope and Optimism.** At the same time, optimism was reported, especially when trust in leaders was high. “I truly believed our manager would guide us through successfully.”

**Frustration and Disappointment.** Some participants expressed disillusionment when expectations were unmet. “They promised more resources, but we ended up with less support than before.”

**Adaptation and Resilience.** Narratives also showed personal growth. Employees shared strategies of reframing challenges. “At first it was overwhelming, but later I realized I had grown stronger and more capable.”

Identity Shifts. Several participants noted a shift in their professional identity and sense of belonging. “The change made me rethink who I am in this company—I feel like I belong to a new culture now.”

#### Category 4: Organizational Outcomes of Leadership

Improved Collaboration. Transformational leadership was associated with increased teamwork. “We started cooperating across departments like never before.”

Performance Enhancement. Productivity and efficiency gains were widely reported. “We managed to hit targets that seemed impossible last year.”

Cultural Transformation. Employees described a shift toward inclusivity and openness. “Before, hierarchy was everything. Now, I feel my opinion matters.”

Employee Retention. Many participants said they stayed because of trust in leadership. “I had offers elsewhere, but I stayed because I believe in what we’re building here.”

Trust in Leadership. Credibility and integrity emerged as critical. “He didn’t just say the right things, he acted on them. That’s why we trust him.”

Organizational Learning. Finally, participants highlighted continuous improvement and knowledge sharing. “Every mistake became a lesson; we learned together as a team.”

## Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted ways employees in Greek organizations experience transformational leadership during periods of organizational change. By analyzing employee narratives, four overarching themes emerged: leadership communication, employee engagement, emotional responses to change, and organizational outcomes of leadership. Together, these themes demonstrate how transformational leadership practices are perceived as shaping trust, reducing resistance, and fostering positive organizational cultures, but also how inconsistencies or unmet expectations can generate ambivalence and frustration.

One of the most salient findings concerns the role of leadership communication. Employees emphasized the importance of clarity of vision, transparency, and emotional tone in how leaders conveyed change messages. The data revealed that transparent communication reduced rumors and mistrust, while inspiring language and empathetic tones enhanced morale. This resonates with previous scholarship stressing that communication is the backbone of successful change initiatives (Kotter, 1995; Armenakis & Harris, 2009). For example, Herold et al. (2008) demonstrated that transformational leaders’ ability to frame a compelling vision significantly predicts employees’ commitment to change. Similarly, Bommer, Rich, and Rubin (2005) found that consistent and transparent messages help mitigate cynicism, a theme echoed in this study’s participants who voiced frustration when leaders’ messages contradicted one another. The findings thus reaffirm that communication is not merely the transfer of information but a relational process that establishes credibility and emotional resonance (By, 2021).

Another key theme was employee engagement, where employees’ participation in decision-making, recognition, empowerment, and opportunities for learning were recurrently highlighted. Narratives revealed that employees felt more ownership of change initiatives when their input was solicited, aligning with Sonenshein’s (2010) view of employees as active sense-makers rather than passive recipients. Recognition and appreciation were also significant; participants described how even small gestures of acknowledgment sustained motivation, supporting previous findings that recognition is a critical motivator in times of uncertainty (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Empowerment, trust in competence, and opportunities for skill development were likewise central to engagement.

These align with Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Bommer's (1996) study, which found that transformational leaders enhance organizational citizenship behaviors by fostering empowerment and individualized consideration. At the same time, this study uncovered persistent ambivalence, with some employees expressing nostalgia for previous systems or skepticism toward change motives. This reflects Oreg, Vakola, and Armenakis's (2011) conclusion that resistance to change remains an enduring psychological and cultural phenomenon, even under supportive leadership.

The third major theme, emotional responses to change, demonstrated the duality of organizational transformation. While some employees reported anxiety, stress, and uncertainty, others described hope, optimism, and resilience. This emotional ambivalence reflects Kiefer's (2005) observation that negative emotions are common during ongoing change but can coexist with positive emotions that motivate adaptation. Employees in this study who trusted their leaders were more likely to report optimism and confidence in the process, confirming the findings of Eisenbach, Watson, and Pillai (1999), who emphasized the role of transformational leadership in building emotional commitment to change. Additionally, some employees experienced identity shifts, redefining their roles and sense of belonging, which resonates with Thomas, Sargent, and Hardy's (2011) claim that change processes often involve negotiations of identity and meaning. Importantly, resilience emerged as a coping strategy among employees, reinforcing research that transformational leadership fosters adaptive capacities during crises (Xenikou & Simosi, 2006).

The final category, organizational outcomes of leadership, included improved collaboration, performance enhancement, cultural transformation, retention, trust, and organizational learning. Employees recounted how transformational leaders fostered teamwork across departments and created shared goals, aligning with Wang, Oh, Courtright, and Colbert's (2011) meta-analysis, which confirmed that transformational leadership is positively associated with team performance and innovation. Moreover, participants highlighted cultural shifts toward inclusivity and openness, supporting Rhodes and Brown's (2005) findings that leaders' narratives can reshape organizational culture. The evidence that employees chose to remain in organizations despite external opportunities due to trust in leadership is consistent with research showing that transformational leadership predicts higher retention and organizational commitment (Caillier, 2014). Finally, the emphasis on organizational learning as an outcome reflects Bass and Riggio's (2006) assertion that transformational leaders cultivate environments of continuous improvement and innovation.

Taken together, these findings underscore the critical role of transformational leadership in shaping the human side of organizational change. They suggest that leadership behaviors are not experienced in isolation but interpreted through narratives that combine communication, engagement, emotions, and perceived outcomes. The Greek context adds further nuance, as cultural values such as collectivism and respect for authority influence how employees interpret empowerment and accessibility of leaders (House et al., 2004). For instance, while some employees appreciated autonomy, others viewed it as a sign of abandonment, reflecting cultural expectations of leader involvement. These context-specific insights align with Pasa, Kabasakal, and Bodur (2001), who emphasized the need to account for cultural factors in leadership studies.

The study also contributes to theoretical debates. While transformational leadership is often portrayed as universally positive, this research shows its limitations when communication is inconsistent or when employees perceive a gap between rhetoric and reality. This echoes Tourish's (2013) critique of transformational leadership as potentially over-idealized and insufficiently attentive to structural or contextual barriers. Employees' ambivalence

suggests that even under transformational leadership, resistance to change cannot be fully eliminated, highlighting the need for a more balanced view that integrates both leadership influence and systemic factors.

Overall, the findings affirm the relevance of transformational leadership while expanding our understanding of its lived experience. By foregrounding employees' voices, this study reveals how leadership practices are filtered through personal and collective narratives, shaping organizational outcomes in ways that are both predictable and contextually specific.

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### Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

### Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

### Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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