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## 5. Engaging Employees via Digital Technologies: An Integrative Model of Change Management and Communication via Internal Social Media

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**Abstract:** Internal social media (ISM) has increasingly gained relevance as a networking platform on which employees can share content and actively engage in conversations across functions, regions, and hierarchical levels. Many employees have been working from home, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, using a variety of ISM platforms—a trend that could continue to increase. While the COVID-19 pandemic is only one example of how organisations must continuously change to adapt to a new context, research shows that it is difficult for management to implement changes successfully among employees, and most change initiatives fail. ISM provides a dynamic and interactive communication arena in which employees can participate in sharing ideas and opinions related to their daily work. However, theoretical efforts to explain the use of ISM in a change situation from an employee perspective are currently limited. This chapter aims to propose a theoretical framework—co-creating organisational change in ISM—that explains factors influencing participative and dialogic change communications between managers and employees using ISM.

**Keywords:** internal social media; change communication; public relations; organisational culture; leadership style; employee participation

## Introduction

Organisational change has been and continues to be challenging for modern organisations. While a common statement in the management literature is that ‘*organisations must change, and they must do so constantly*’ (Cheney *et al.* 2011, p. 323), many change initiatives in organisations are met with failure (Hay, Parker and Luksyte 2021). Consequently, a central concern for managers is how to encourage and effectively lead ongoing organisational changes to avoid negative consequences, such as uncertainty, stress, and resistance to change, among employees (Lewis 2019; Zorn, Page and Cheney 2000). The COVID-19 pandemic is a recent example of organisations needing to change their internal work processes overnight to adapt to a new and unforeseen context (Heide and Simonsson 2021). Many organisations had to shift to remote work arrangements, which meant that employees had to carry out nearly all their work activities through a variety of internal social media (ISM) platforms—a trend that may continue to increase (Leonardi 2021). Scholars agree that internal communication plays a vital role in triggering and implementing organisational change (e.g., Lewis 2019). When employees find themselves in a changing situation (e.g., the pandemic), they often attempt to form coherent accounts of what is happening and how it will influence them and their organisation. According to Weick (1995), employees independently and socially try to make sense of the situation, particularly communication from management. However, even though researchers have begun to pay more attention to employees as responsible communicators and active dialogue partners, the change communication literature tends to focus on how communication can be used as an effective tool by management to declare and explain planned changes to employees (Heide and Simonsson 2011; Johansson and Heide 2008). Lewis (2019) argues against this traditional one-sided view of communication and suggests that management should encourage and invite employees to participate in dialogue and decision-making processes during times of change to lower resistance and avoid failure.

According to Heide and Simonsson (2011), ISM provides a new space in which employees and managers can communicate and interact. In the field of organisational communication studies, ISM is defined as an interactive and dynamic communication arena in which organisational members can interact, discuss, negotiate, and make sense of their work and organisational lives (Madsen 2017). ISM platforms have been found to possess the affordances of visibility, editability, persistence and association (Treem and Leonardi 2012). Due to these unique affordances, we suggest that in a change situation, because employees may experience stress and uncertainty, management should encourage and invite employees to participate in dialogue and create change solutions to generate support and lower the risk of frustration and failure. While ISM could become an important organisational space for discussing changes, we must ask, which factors influence employees' participation in creating and discussing change solutions via ISM during times of change? How can management use ISM to communicate with employees and enable their participation in the creation and discussion of change solutions?

Theoretical efforts to explain ISM use in a change situation from an employee perspective are currently limited; thus, this chapter has two purposes. First, it offers an integrated model, combining the main factors related to organisational culture, leadership, change management and change communication influencing employee participation in discussing and creating change solutions in ISM (Figure 5.1.). Second, it offers a normative theoretical framework—*Co-creating Organisational Change in ISM (COCISM)*—for managing changes via ISM through a participative approach, where employees are empowered to become initiators of change. The chapter is structured as follows. First, we present the structure of our literature review in an integrative model of change management and communication via ISM, which

highlights the main identified conditions or factors influencing employee participation in ISM during times of change. Next, we introduce the COCISM framework, which is based on some elements from the integrative model. Finally, we highlight the conclusions and suggest future research directions.

<INSERT FIGURE 5.1. HERE>

### **Antecedents of change management and communication via ISM**

When planning participatory changes in organisational settings, several factors need to be considered that pertain to the nature of management in the organisation and the type of change sought. Here, we explore the main factors related to both the organisational context and the change context that the literature has identified as prerequisites for the governance of organisational changes.

#### *Organisational context*

There is a consensus among organisational communication scholars that organisational culture and leadership style are the key factors affecting managerial approaches to change and communications and the role of employees (e.g., Parry and Solidoro 2013). In the following, we outline important discussions on these two factors.

#### **Organisational culture**

While many authors have explored organisational culture, and numerous definitions have been proposed, communication scholars seem to agree that culture can be understood as ‘a multilevel system of artifacts, values, and assumptions’ (Keyton 2014, p. 550). Organisations comprise various, and sometimes competing, value systems, which constitute different

subcultures with their own values, artefacts, and assumptions (Keyton 2014). Hence, a variety of organisational characteristics on the cultural level that promote creativity, change and innovation can be found in organisational settings. These cultural characteristics can pave the way for more participative and inclusive approaches in change management. Among the most important cultural characteristics, Dawson and Andriopoulos (2014) mentioned the following: a) a focus on idea generation through, for example, open communication and forums of debate, b) the support of a continuous learning and creativity culture, c) the encouragement of risk-taking (e.g. a risk-tolerant atmosphere is created, where mistakes are viewed as learning experiences), d) the tolerance of mistakes (e.g. acknowledgement of failures and opportunities for employees to openly discuss mistakes to promote their creativity), e) supporting change through behaviours that promote creativity and innovation and f) conflict handling (e.g. through promotion of constructive feedback) (pp. 358–359). Other elements of organisational culture that have been found to play a role in the managerial choice of change management and communication are related to employee readiness for change. Jones, Jimmieson and Griffiths (2005) found that employees who perceive their workplace to be dominant on values like teamwork and participative decision-making have a higher level of readiness for change. Research also suggests that organisational culture influences employees' behaviour on ISM. For example, Parry and Solidoro (2013) found that employees would only participate in debates on ISM if the existing culture supported an open and honest dialogue. Therefore, we propose that organisational culture plays an important role in promoting employees' participation in discussing change on ISM.

## Leadership

Strategic leadership in an organisation directly or indirectly determines structural forms, organisational culture and climate and communications (Men and Stacks 2013). Leaders also

influence processes, typically by energising people to achieve goals or produce change (Cheney *et al.* 2011). Different approaches and metaphors to describe leadership exist, from functional theories of the 1940–60s to style theories from the 1940–70s, moving to contingency theories from the 1970–80s and the transformational, charismatic and teamwork and facilitation theories dominating today's perceptions of leadership. All seem to conclude that employee participation in organisational activities is contingent on top managers' preferred leadership styles (Cheney *et al.* 2011). Johansson, Miller and Hamrin (2014) developed a theoretical framework of communicative leadership and identified four central communicative behaviours of leaders: a) initiating structure (the leader sets goals and expectations, plans and allocates tasks, selects team members and provides sensemaking or interpretations of events), b) facilitating work (the leader coaches and trains employees, seeks and provides feedback and engages employees in problem solving via participatory decision-making), c) managing relational dynamics to contribute to a respectful communication climate (the leader creates space for openness, demonstrates supportive behaviour and seeks to solve conflicts in a respectful manner) and d) representing employees (the leader represents the team and seeks to provide resources for their units) (pp. 151–152). Based on their findings, Johansson, Miller and Hamrin (2014) provided the following definition of a communicative leader: *'A communicative leader is one who engages employees in dialogue, actively shares and seeks feedback, practices participative decision making, and is perceived as open and involved'* (p. 155). Research in communicative leadership also suggests that a communicative leader involves employees through dialogue and feedback rather than giving orders and making decisions without consulting employees, thereby treating them as passive actors (Hamrin 2016). Martin, Perry and Flowers (2015) found that even though management introduces ISM with the best intention of facilitating employees' voices, it does not always mean that employees are willing to share their opinions. In this connection, the employees'

perceptions of personal control, autonomy, and prior experience with organisational management–employee communications and ISM had a significant influence on their willingness to use it to express themselves. The honesty of signals from management and middle managers on respectful dialogue instead of a monologue was also emphasised as an important prerequisite for employees to feel engaged to speak up on ISM. Consequently, a communicative leadership style that focuses on social interaction and respectful dialogue with employees may play a significant role in encouraging employees to participate in discussing change on ISM.

#### *Change context*

The next antecedent influencing the choice of change communication approach is related to the nature of the change and how change is conceptualised in organisations.

#### *Change types*

Organisational changes often occur due to rapid and unpredictable changes in the external environment, such as fluctuations in business cycles (e.g., an international financial crisis), market globalisation, laws and regulations, increasing competition, development of new technologies, changing customer demands and global pandemics (e.g., COVID-19). To respond to these external pressures/crises, managers tend to change their organisations through reengineering, restructuring, downsizing or the introduction of new management systems (Dawson and Andriopoulos 2014; Zorn, Page and Cheney 2000). Change in organisations can also be triggered by internal factors, such as technology change, development of new products, new ways of doing business or a campaign to change the organisation's corporate identity (Cheney *et al.* 2011; Dawson and Andriopoulos 2014). The literature also shows that the nature of the planned changes influences how organisational



change is conceived and carried out. In this respect, two major types of changes have been identified: first- and second-order changes. First-order changes are minor adjustments and improvements that involve only certain parts of the organisation. They do not change the core of the organisation (e.g., hiring new staff). Second-order changes are fundamental changes that alter the organisation at its core and are irreversible (e.g., bankruptcy) (Cheney *et al.* 2011).

### Change conceptualisations

The change literature seems to be dominated by two conceptualisations of change: the rational perspective and the interpretive/sensemaking perspective (Johansson and Heide 2008).

Scholars within the traditional rational perspective view change as something episodic, intermittent, and discontinuous that can be planned and controlled by management (Weick and Quinn 1999). Within this perspective, change is regarded as a rational and linear process that is relatively uncomplicated, as long as a programmatic step-by-step sequence is followed in a change model (e.g. Kotter 1996). Studies on organisational change via this perspective have mainly focused on explaining change processes and have especially explored why these often seem to fail. In this respect, employee attitudes, receptions and reactions towards change have been a topic of major interest for scholars within the field. Employees' cynicism and resistance to change are commonly identified as causes of and contributors to failure (e.g. Cartwright and Holmes 2006; Stanley, Meyer and Topolnytsky 2005). The emerging interpretive/sense-making perspective regards change as a continuous process, which means that change tends to be ongoing, evolving, and cumulative (Weick and Quinn 1999). Here, change is not perceived as an *ad hoc* activity that organisations implement in response to fluctuations in their internal and external environments. On the contrary, it is a strategic decision-making process in which an organisation sees change as an opportunity to further

develop. Organisations that perceive change as an ongoing, cyclical activity develop and implement strategies, tactics and operations that support an adaptive environment. Therefore, we expect that both the nature of change and how organizations conceive change affects an organization's preferences for change management and communication approaches.

### **Managerial approaches to change management and communication**

As Figure 5.1. illustrates, factors related to the organisational and change contexts may influence how managers approach change situations and change communication. According to Lewis (2019), communication is critical during change because it serves '*as the means by which people construct what is happening, influence the constructions of others, and develop responses to what is being introduced to them as change*' (p. 49). In the next section, we present and discuss different approaches to change communication and the most important factors related to employees' participation in change solutions via ISMs.

#### *Change communication approaches*

Depending on the change type and preferred change conceptualisation, some approaches to communication are preferred over others. The choice of change communication approach is also highly influenced by the overall managerial goal to involve/not involve employees and whether or not ISMs are used to foster such participation. Overall, the literature includes four types of change communication approaches: a) rational, b) interpretative/sense-making, c) social transformational and d) co-creative.

According to Johansson and Heide (2008), in the traditional *rational* approach, change communication is a tool for information and explanation of the planned change from a sender (the management) to a passive receiver (the employees). As long as employees are well

informed and the right medium is used, communication will reduce employee uncertainty and resistance to change. However, there are several limitations to this approach, as employees make sense of a change situation in different ways when they need to cope with an uncertain and ambiguous organisational situation (Weick 1995), and simply conveying information would not address their uncertainty.

An alternative is the *interpretive/sense-making* approach, where change is considered a phenomenon that occurs within communication. A change process is created, maintained, and constituted by communication, and it occurs as a result of people communicating (Ford and Ford 1995). Here, communication is a reciprocal process in which meaning and reality are socially constructed through the words, symbols and actions of employees (Putnam 1983). Through the interpretive/sense-making approach, communication has the main function of helping the organisation make sense of planned changes, which are seen as '*an occasion when new and social realities are produced through communication*' (Johansson and Heide 2008, p. 294).

A third approach emerging from the understanding of change as a cyclical process implies a type of communication that is oriented towards *social transformation* and in which the dimension of power and dominance plays a great role. Hence, change is not something decided, communicated, and implemented by management; it is the result of several interactions between management and employees, and it is negotiated and performed through discourse.

The last approach is grounded in the emergent participatory perspective based on *co-creation*, which has gained increasing prominence because it presumes sharing responsibilities between

an organisation and its stakeholders and requires a redistribution of power among participants (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004). It is essentially about ‘*creating value for organisations together through platforms of engagements and environments of interactions, purposefully designed and configured to address the interests and needs of participating individuals*’ (Ramaswamy and Chopra 2014, p. 12). A co-creation approach in discussing change solutions can thus be a useful strategy for change management because it shifts the perspective of changing processes as something decided by management to something jointly planned and agreed upon with employees. The choice of a change communication approach is also highly influenced by the types and forms of employee participation that managers should obtain. In the next section, we review literature related to organisational structures and processes that allow employee participation.

#### *Organisational structures and processes for participation*

The concept of participation is associated with many factors, including voice, soliciting input, feedback, upward communication, empowerment, and workplace democracy (Lewis 2019). In this chapter, in terms of understanding employee participation, we refer to ‘[...] organisational structures and processes designed to empower and enable employees to identify with organisational goals and to collaborate as control agents in activities that exceed minimum coordination efforts normally expected at work’ (Stohl and Cheney 1996, *as cited in* Stohl and Cheney 2001, p. 357). Most scholars argue that the concept of participation should be defined as a multidimensional phenomenon (e.g. Black and Gregersen 1997; Heller *et al.* 1998; Joensson 2008; Wilpert 1998) because there are various dimensions of employee participation, such as approach, form, degree of influence and type of decision (Heller *et al.* 1998). Each of the different managerial choices of participation implies different understandings of the degree of the employees’ involvement in changes. Concerning the

*symbolic versus resource-based approach*, Lewis (2019) argued that these two approaches to employee participation are two sides of a participation continuum describing the real power that employees have to influence organisational matters. A symbolic approach means that stakeholders are encouraged to provide input, but their feedback is seldom considered by management. A resource approach exists when stakeholders are given decision-making power and feedback is regarded as a resource by management.

Concerning the *participation form*, a direct form of participation allows employees to be involved in the decision-making process and to discuss their preferences and opinions with other organisational members. Indirect participation is decision making via employee representatives appointed by management (Black and Gregersen 1997). The *degree of influence* concerns the extent of influence or power an employee obtains through participation (Wilpert 1998). The last dimension concerns the different types of change decisions: strategic and tactical (Sagie, Elizur and Koslowsky 2001, p. 460). Strategic decisions are related to whether or not the present situation in the organisation should be changed, while tactical decisions are concerned with what and how to change and who should make the change.

#### *Internal social media uses in change situations*

The body of literature on ISM has steadily grown over the last decade, adding both empirical and theoretical knowledge on how to use ISM and on its effects (e.g. Leonardi 2021; Madsen 2017; Martin, Parry and Flowers 2015). Accordingly, four possible major usages of ISM can be foreseen in the context of change, which are highly coupled with the expected employee participation roles, as defined by managers:

1. When employees are seen simply as targets of change information, ISM platforms are essentially digital communication channels for forwarding updates, plans and

information related to otherwise decided changes. Communication here is unidirectional, often highly controlled by senior management and only meant to increase awareness among employees.

2. Some organisations may allow two-way communications on ISMs, with the possibility to ask questions, ask for clarifications and allow employees to discuss the received information about the proposed change. Organisations are then relinquishing part of the communication control, yet they still have no interest in including employees' feedback and suggestions into the change management plan.
3. A third approach sees these platforms as a sort of virtual collectors of ideas and thus as internal organisational spaces for discussing proposed solutions. There is a mutual exchange of digital content between managers and employees pertaining to suggested changes. However, the employee participation role and level of influence are still moderate because employee feedback is used to test employees' readiness for change and to eventually revise and finalise the change solution proposal.
4. The most participatory use of ISM that goes beyond communicating and informing about proposed change solutions: anyone in the organisation can submit suggestions at any point and start a discussion about possible changes. ISMs are used as virtual spaces where ideas for changes are shared and discussed and later crystallised into concrete change actions. Managers and employees are co-creators and producers of change situations and can take the initiative to propose some form of change. Change communication here is an empowering means to construct and define the types of ongoing changing actions that an organisation may need to implement to remain competitive and/or survive rapid market disruptions. Control of the digital content that is shared on ISM platforms is governed by clear internal policies defining the types, forms, and objectives of ISM within an organisational context. This last use shifts the

role of employees from passive receivers of change information to active dialogue partners and initiators of change activities.

Notably, the success of any managerial approach to change management and communication is highly dependent on the extent to which employees collaborate and embrace their manager's overall approach. However, other factors at the individual level also significantly influence employees' willingness to participate. In the next section, we highlight the most important factors at the individual level that may hinder or facilitate the success of managerial choices for change management and communication via ISMs.

### **Employee participation factors**

Employees' different perceptions of the change context, such as their personal experiences with participation in past change processes, their perceived risk/benefit of voicing their concerns, their level of control and autonomy in the change process and their evaluation of the organisation's need to change, will affect their reactions to, concerns about and tolerance for change (Lewis 2019). Thus, accounting for early experiences with senior management communication approaches and with past changes can predict the likelihood that employees will respond positively or negatively to new changes. Additionally, Armenakis and Harris (2009) identified five change beliefs among employees that play a significant role in their support and behaviour during change. These five beliefs include: a) discrepancy (the change is needed), b) appropriateness (the change is the correct one to address the situation), c) efficacy (the change can be implemented), d) principal support (management supports the change) and e) valence (the change is beneficial to the employee) (p. 129). Further, Allen, Shore and Griffeth (2003) argued that if management offers participation but is not open to receiving input and/or does not act on it, then employees are unlikely to feel that the

organisation truly offers participation, which will consequently affect their participation in a negative way. Finally, employees' prior use and experience with ISM can also affect their willingness to use these technologies in change situations.

### **Possible outcomes of internal social media use in change situations**

There are three possible outcomes that organisations can expect when using ISMs in change management and communication situations. A first outcome is increasing awareness of the change process. The speed and reach of these technologies allow managers to communicate quickly with employees across units, divisions, and different offices. ISMs are powerful channels of communication that can support other means of information distribution in organisations and thus reinforce and increase awareness among employees as a result of change information. A second outcome is increasing employee's understanding of the change plan, particularly when ISMs become virtual spaces for discussion. From previous research, it is evident that resistance to change is also a result of not understanding the purpose of changing and the benefits resulting from it (Lewis 2019). When ISMs are used to allow employees to ask questions, share concerns and get clarifications, they become tools for deeper understanding of the change plan. A third possible outcome is increasing employees' acceptance and readiness to change. If managers decide to allow a higher level of employee participation, including offering feedback, evaluating, and amending proposals, offering counter proposals, or even initiating conversations about possible future changes, these platforms become the means through which employees increase their power and control over organisational matters, which then increases employees' acceptance of and readiness for change. This is because these changes are not imposed on them; rather, they are the results of employees' contributions and ideas.



### **COCISM: Co-creating Organisational Changes in ISM**

In this last part, we propose a normative framework to address change management and communication via ISM through a participatory approach. We argue that a more inclusive, participatory, and empowering role for employees in times of change would create a more beneficial relationship between managers and employees as they help each other create and make sense of changes in ISM. Hence, we suggest that organisations should develop organisational structures and processes that allow for more direct, resource-based approaches to participation and where employees can make higher-level decisions regarding organisational matters. Our proposed normative theoretical framework—COCISM—sees change and employee participation via ISMs as an opportunity to reduce resistance to change and instead increase employees' understanding of participation in and readiness for change (see Figure 5.2.). It is normative in that it offers guidance for ethically managing organisations and employee relations in change situations. It suggests that a truly participatory organisation should consider change a process to engage its employees in the organisation's strategic decision making through participatory change communication interactions.

<INSERT FIGURE 5.2. HERE>

This theoretical framework (in Figure 5.2.) emphasises an understanding of change as something that is cyclical, continuous, and never ending and which can originate from the bottom up by the willingness of certain employees. In other words, change is not simply conceived as an organisational adaptation or response to external stimuli or an internal prompt by senior management; change can be internally promoted across ranks and organisational positions by anyone for different reasons. From this perspective, employee participation in both strategic and tactical decisions and the planning and implementation processes is

situational but characterised by a truly participative approach, as proposed by Stohl and Cheney's (2001) definition. It is co-creational (i.e., equally promoted and managed by employees and managers). Responsibilities and tasks related to the planning, management and implementation of change are shared across organisational workers in senior and junior positions and across managerial and technical functions. When clear roles and expectations of the type, form and nature of participation are communicated, situations of actively engaging employees in co-creating change solutions can emerge under prepositive organisational context factors that promote and incentivise such participation. Within this perspective, ISM platforms can transform from mere communication channels into new virtual spaces for employee engagement and collaborations with more democratic and transparent decision making to manage organisational changes. Due to the complex nature of second-order changes, we expect the framework to work better on first-order changes, which are less radical and are where the knowledge of employees may play a more central role in creating change solutions. Several individual factors may be important to employees' reactions to change and their willingness to engage in dialogue and discussions in ISM. We argue that the combination of individual factors, such as employees' perceptions of their degree of influence, their experiences with prior changes and participation, management communication, employees' feelings of control and autonomy, their change beliefs, and their perceptions of the risks of providing input, have implications for their participation (Lewis 2019).

## **Conclusions**

This chapter offers an integrative model of change management and communication via ISM that maps and explains the most important factors influencing employees' participation in creating and discussing change solutions on ISM. The integrative model is a heuristic attempt

to consider multiple factors and their influence when planning change management and communication. However, these factors can be combined and/or become relevant differently in different organisations and different change situations. Thus, even when an organisation understands change as a linear process, it could try to promote a co-creating change communication approach for a single, defined issue. Similarly, organisations that see change as cyclical and ongoing processes in their organisational lives may still perceive change communication as a rational activity and have no intention of involving their employees. From this perspective, ISM use is primarily for sending information about the change. When organisations understand change as cyclical and embedded in their organisational lives, communication can be expected to reflect a reciprocal process in which employees mutually interact to understand, negotiate, and make sense of the change (Johansson and Heide 2008). Within this perspective, the establishment and use of ISM could be extremely relevant for supporting dialogue and knowledge sharing across units, departments, and offices. While organisations need to consider different factors, including their organisational goals and current level of preparedness, and they may choose different managerial approaches to change and communication via ISM, the most ethical and democratic approach that we suggest is reflected in our proposed COCISM framework. Accordingly, organisations should engage their employees in creative dialogue when seeking innovative change solutions rather than simply communicating changes that were predetermined by management. The development of the COCISM framework is a first step towards approaching change as a continuous part of organisational life that is truly inclusive and engaging. It should not be considered an attempt to reduce organisational complexity in change management and communication. As the model is normative, it can be understood as a guiding principle for managers seeking more employee participation. The factors and conditions influencing the effectiveness of COCISM

as well as the barriers to its implementation deserve further research attention, as change is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon to capture.

### **Key lessons for future research**

- To reduce employee resistance to change, organisations should empower their employees and allow them to become co-creators of change solutions via ISM. Thus, future research could address how employees participate in co-creating change solutions on ISM.
- Multiple change communication approaches are possible via ISMs. Their success is highly dependent on whether these approaches are in line with the organisational culture and leadership style. Consequently, future research could investigate leaders' behaviours when they interact with employees on ISM during times of change.
- Employees' experiences with change and diverse personal factors influencing their participation in ISM in change situations should be explored more thoroughly to grasp the applicability of the COCISM framework in organisational settings.

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**Figure 5.1. Integrative model of change management and communication via ISM**

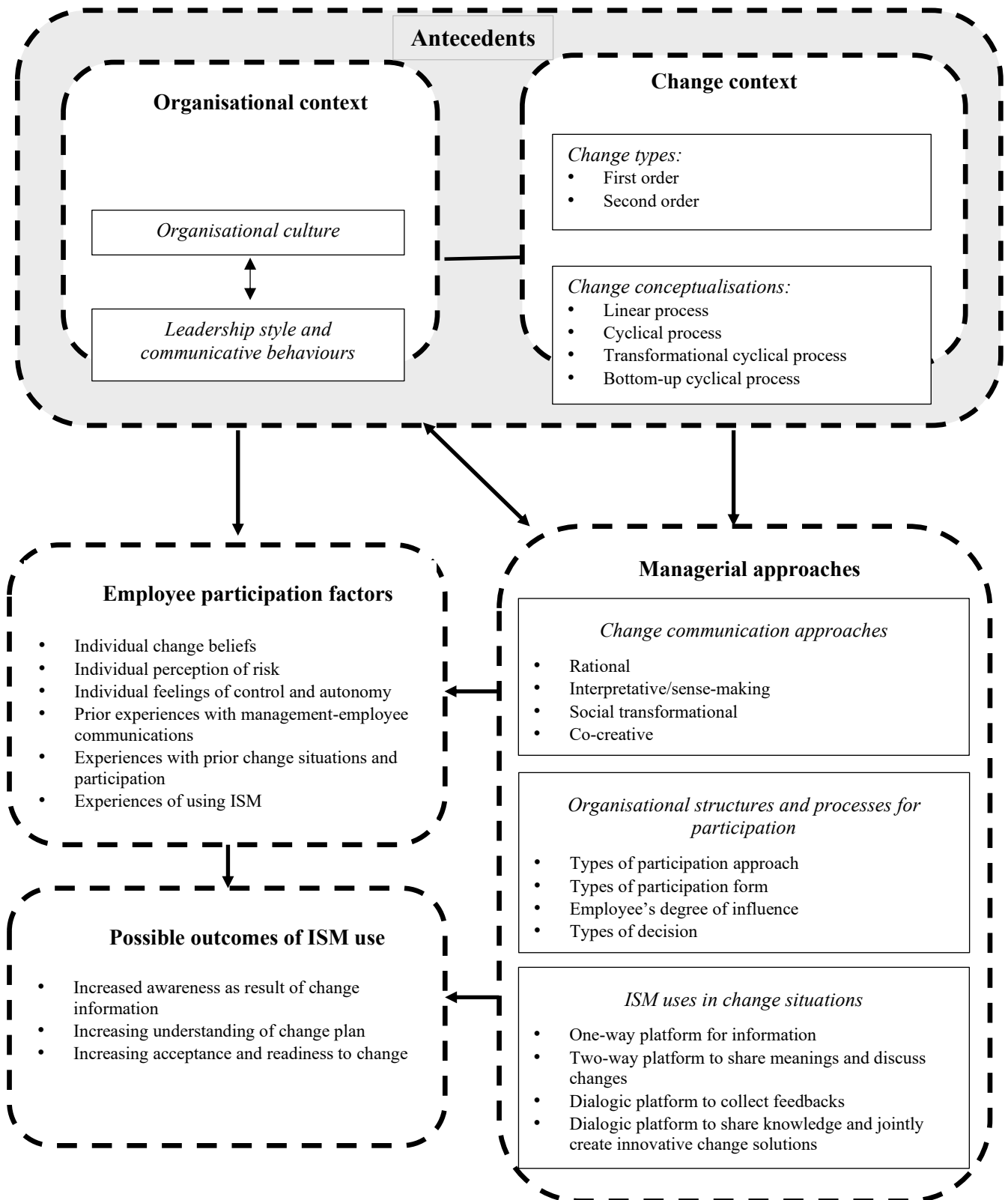


Figure 5.2. COCISM Framework

