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# Blurred limits and threat of isolation? Employees' fears in transition to self-determined organization

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Today's organizations face constant structural and cultural changes at an accelerated pace, with a growing focus on self-determination to improve employee motivation and organizational performance. The shift toward a self-determined organizational culture allows employees greater autonomy in making decisions related to their work which are found to provide many positive organizational- and individual-level outcomes. However, adapting to an autonomous work culture is a complex process and demands cognitive capacity, which is especially challenging for those who have previously experienced low autonomy in their work. Consequently, individuals are found to experience mixed feelings as they make sense of ongoing changes and fear potential dangers that change entails. The purpose of the present study is to understand what employees perceive as frightening in a self-determined organizational culture, which is generally associated with a positive image and that so many organizations are increasingly leaning to in that direction.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In this study, we collected ten in-depth-interviews from employees from a case company, Finnish financial services company that was undergoing an organizational change toward a self-determined organizational culture. We approached data from grounded theory perspective that revealed that fear was explicit in participants' narration, which then led us to focus on fears. By applying the Gioia method to the analysis, we recognized how individuals made sense of change through fears.

**Findings** – In our findings, we recognized that individuals made sense of the change in an organization's culture through processing fears on three levels: fears of doing, being, and becoming. This revealed that individuals do not fear an organization's cultural change only because they need to adjust to new ways of working but because they themselves must change too. While individuals are experiencing enormous changes at work, they are engaging in a process where they try to make sense of expectations and struggle to create new meanings and behaviors. Expressing worries of an organization's actions and development can be one way of distancing oneself from the change while evaluating one's own position.

**Originality/value** – This study provides an understanding of an ongoing organizational culture change in the context of a transition to a self-determined organizational culture. Although the benefits of self-determined organizing and culture have been strongly emphasized, this study points out the challenges that an increase in autonomy causes among employees and how demanding the process in adapting to a new culture can be.

**Keywords** Fear, Self-determined organization, Self-management, Change management

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Today, organizations face constant structural and cultural changes at an accelerated pace, with a growing focus on self-determination to improve employee motivation and organizational performance (Burton *et al.*, 2020; Martela *et al.*, 2021). The shift toward a self-determined organizational culture involves transferring decision-making power from central management to the entire organization, allowing employees greater autonomy in making choices related to their work. One example of this is the right to decide on the ways work is done and the power to

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decide on work goals and priorities (Lee and Edmondson, 2017; Martela *et al.*, 2021; Ryan and Deci, 2000a).

The idea of a self-determined organization has its roots in self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000a), which is linked to three basic psychological needs: the need to feel autonomous, the need to feel competent, and the need to belong to a group and be accepted. When these needs are realized in an organization, they are found to support an individual's intrinsic motivation and produce greater work engagement and commitment to work (Deci *et al.*, 2017; Ryan and Deci, 2000a, b, 2018). Intrinsically motivated individuals are also featured by emotions such as joy and excitement (Güntert, 2015). Altogether, self-determination is found to provide many positive outcomes, both organizational and at an individual level, and as such it is understandable that organizations are adopting more approaches to autonomy and organizational design to increase employee motivation.

However, as autonomy increases, individuals not only need to adopt a new way of working but also to adopt a more autonomous approach to work, which as such requires processing and adjusting to changes and overcoming routines (Choi and Ruona, 2011; Vakola, 2014). Consequently, and paradoxically, organizational change requires an individual to learn and adapt to predetermined ideas, thus "undermining one's autonomy" (Nesterkin, 2013, p. 573). And despite the acknowledged benefits of increased autonomy on performance and satisfaction, adaptation to a newly gained autonomy is a complex process and demands cognitive capacity and is especially challenging for those who have previously experienced low autonomy in their work (Niessen and Volmer, 2010).

As a result, it is not surprising that organizational changes trigger emotions (Smollan and Sayers, 2009) as perceptions of future and working conditions are in mind (Kiefer, 2005). Individuals are recognized as going through a cognitive-emotional process, during which they try to understand their experiences, feelings, and overall meaning of change for themselves (Lazarus, 1991; Liu and Perrewé, 2005). From a psychological perspective, it is natural that in the initial stages of change, individuals experience mixed emotions that are anticipatory in nature and do not readily support change. Indeed, individuals fear dangers that they believe change entails and they therefore feel a loss of control (Rafferty *et al.*, 2013; Weeks *et al.*, 2004). Despite the fact that emotions are not stable and may evolve and change during the process of change, at the very beginning, emotions are especially important to recognize and thus have a strong influence on an individual's coping process (Liu and Perrewé, 2005) and also on how an individual attends to changes (Fugate *et al.*, 2008; Helpap and Bekmeier-Feuerhahn, 2016). As emotions are often collective and contagious in nature (Hareli and Rafaeli, 2008), the affective element of implementation should not be undermined as an indicator of success of the organization's change process (Rafferty *et al.*, 2013).

The context of the present study is an organization in the middle of implementing new organizational self-determined operating models, which has involved changes at every level of organizing work – not just structural but also in the whole culture and practices. As less hierarchical organizing meant the establishment of self-directed teams and new managerial design, the whole personnel has consequently been affected. In particular, negative emotions are inherent byproducts of organizational change (e.g. Kiefer and Müller, 2003) since future changes, working conditions and organizational support raise questions among employees (Kiefer, 2005). Following this notion, we pay our attention to fears as they are strongly linked to a feeling of uncertainty and are characterized as an emotional reaction toward the unknown (Tiedens and Linton, 2001). Previous studies relate fears to the possibility of unpredictable events, risks and harmfulness to employees' personal interests (Allen *et al.*, 2007; Armenakis and Harris, 2009; Fugate *et al.*, 2008). Despite the "affective revolution" in organization studies (Kish-Gephart *et al.*, 2009), fear has been referred to only in a number of studies (e.g. on organizational silence: Kish-Gephart *et al.*, 2009; change readiness: Weeks *et al.*, 2004; organizational change: Appelbaum *et al.*, 1998; Mealiea, 1978), and often with the perspective of predicting change and preventing possible resistance (Weeks *et al.*, 2004). In our study, we claim that as change is clearly an emotional issue and "people are willing to change, they just

don't want to be changed" (Wissema, 2000, p. 74), we should move our focus from simply the fear of change to understanding reasons that foster fears in a particular context. In the same manner that Kiefer (2005) studied antecedents of negative emotions in a company merger, we explore the antecedents of fears in a company that is going through a cultural shift. Instead of focusing on experience of change *per se*, the purpose of the present study is to understand what employees perceive as frightening in an organizational culture, especially a culture which is generally associated with a positive image and in the direction of which so many organizations are increasingly leaning to.

This paper builds on and informs three bodies of literature – namely, the literature on self-determination, organizational change, and negative emotions – to understand what employees' fears reveal about ongoing organizational change toward self-determined culture. In the following sections, we begin by reviewing the literature on characteristics of self-managed organizational culture, followed by discussion on organizational change and the role of emotions in change. We then proceed to describe the method and results, before finally discussing our findings and implications to current theory and practice.

## Theoretical framework

### *The ideal of self-determined organizations*

In recent years, the increase in self-determination can be seen as one of the major operational changes in organizations, aiming at both a better motivation of employees and increased organizational performance (Martela *et al.*, 2021). The move toward the culture of a self-managed organization refers to the decentralization of decision-making power from central management to the whole organization, i.e. to a radical dismantling of the hierarchy, for example, by reducing the number of managers (Lee and Edmondson, 2017; Martela *et al.*, 2021; see also Burton *et al.*, 2020) while bringing also more freedom to employees to decide on matters relating to their own work (Morikawa *et al.*, 2022; Ryan and Deci, 2000a).

The idea of a self-determined organization has its roots in self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000a) which is linked to three basic psychological needs that, when realized, enable self-determination (Deci *et al.*, 2017; Gillet *et al.*, 2013; Ryan and Deci, 2000a, b, 2018). These basic needs are autonomy, i.e. the right to do things one's own way; competence, i.e. sufficient knowledge, challenge, learning and development of opportunities; and relatedness, i.e. the need to belong to a group and be accepted (Ryan and Deci, 2000a). According to self-determination theory, the fulfilment of basic psychological needs plays an essential role in facilitating optimal growth and adaptation according to natural tendencies as well as constructive social development, intrinsic motivation, and personal well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2000a).

The reasons for the increase in self-determination can be seen in the desire of the current generation of workers for a less formal hierarchy and having more control over their work in the workplace (Lee and Edmondson, 2017; Turco, 2016). Less hierarchical organizing has been seen to include, for example, self-directed teams (delegating management authority to groups of people), participative management (increasing employee involvement, such as committees where employees can influence issues related to their work experience, starting with working conditions), and empowering employees (managers empowering employees to make decisions and act within the limits of their own authority within the scope of their job-related expertise) (Lee and Edmondson, 2017). In practice, self-determination provides autonomy related to how individuals perform and manage their work but also how employees develop the organization. In a self-directed organization, an employee's ability to use their discretion in how and where they perform their work (e.g. choice of work location; remote working vs. office work) and their ability to determine the goals they promote in their work (e.g. target setting, managing one's own calendar, etc.) are practical examples. Though the self-directed model does not only touch upon individuals' tasks, individuals' involvement in organizational decision-making (e.g. strategic planning), and the development of collective

action (e.g. planning joint events) is also expected (Billinger and Workiewicz, 2019; Morikawa *et al.*, 2022).

Although the prevailing discourse describes self-directed organizations with “optimistic and upbeat tones” (Billinger and Workiewicz, 2019, p. 1) and emphasis is on the freedom and power given to employees (Lee and Edmonson, 2017), there are increasing concerns related to productivity and efficiency in self-directed organizational structures as managerial role and responsibilities of individual change significantly (Billinger and Workiewicz, 2019; Bunderson and Boumgarden, 2010). Self-directed organization requires employees to take more responsibility, but people’s ability to self-direction and self-motivation varies; thus taking initiatives can be challenging for some (Martela and Kostamo, 2017). Drawing from studies on self-directed teams, change to self-direction may also hinder any possibilities of experiential learning and continuous improvement if organizational structures and hierarchies are seen as restricting and self-direction is interpreted too simplistically in organizational change (Lemmetty, 2021). Since clear responsibilities, roles and guided supervision have been noted to promote individual learning (Bunderson and Boumgarden, 2010), the latest studies question the individual-driven nature of self-directedness and highlight the meaning of organizational structures and frames that rather create the possibility for self-directedness instead of expecting it (Lemmetty, 2021). However, there is very little empirical research on working in a self-directed organization and especially on situations where change from the traditional organizing of work has happened in recent times and where personnel are still making sense of the implementation of new ways of work and its reflections on the whole organization (Vuori, 2021).

#### *Linking organizational change and fears*

Organizations are in a constant state of change as technological development, changing customer demands and increased competition push organizations to transform (Brandt *et al.*, 2019; Hubbart, 2023). Though organizational changes are often responses to both external and internal influences (Rutigliano *et al.*, 2017), simplified, organizational changes occur due to “problems that need fixing or some new goals that need to be achieved” (Schein, 2004, p. 319). On a practical level, organizational change can be a process through which an organization makes structural adjustments to address operational cost, productivity, or service quality issues or to identify new growth opportunities (e.g. Hubbart, 2023; Kotter and Schlesinger, 1979). In the present study, our focus is on organizational cultural change, which is described to be the most challenging and lengthy change as it transforms both the culture, practices, and underlying assumptions in an organization (Smollan and Sayers, 2009). Since an organization’s culture comprises artefacts, espoused beliefs and values and underlying shared assumptions (Schein, 2004), as such it means that changing culture requires “unlearning” and giving up routines as well as learning something new (Schein, 2004, p. 301). Thus, major changes challenge individuals’ perceptions of the future and may create negative emotions on future working conditions and lead to questioning actions by organizations (Kiefer, 2005; Smollan and Sayers, 2009). In the case of transitioning to a self-determined organizational culture, Manz (1990) found in their early study that organizational change to self-managed teams required a very significant adjustment, especially from managers, and it was experienced uncomfortable as they found that new work design threatened their own status and power. Further, Manz (1990) claimed that the transition to a new culture meant adapting entirely to a new thinking and philosophy.

In this paper, we approach organizational change from an employee perspective and lean on Klarner and Diefenbach (2011) definition of organizational change. This includes sequential and simultaneous changes as intentional changes, planned at the top organizational level, which influence employees at multiple hierarchical levels, requiring them to implement and cope with said changes. Seeing change as a dynamic process, acknowledges the evolving emotions during the process, but also accepts the multiple emotions to coexist (Klarner and

Diefenbach, 2011). Focusing on negatively experienced emotions, we draw on Kiefer and Müller's (2003) notion of negative emotions reflecting identity-relevant issues that are tied to the organization, such as strategies and policies in general, and seeing that emotions inform us about how individuals interpret organizational change and view their position within it (Klarner and Diefenbach, 2011).

As change threatens one's stability and continuity, it easily causes negative feelings and resistance to change (Goswami, 2022; Liu and Perrewé, 2005; Luo *et al.*, 2016). Negative reactions are also found to reflect on employee withdrawal and reduced performance (Weeks *et al.*, 2004) and as such are detrimental to the whole organization and possibly lead to a failure of organizational change. This is all part of the cognitive-emotional process that individuals go through during organizational change while they try to make sense of the change, struggle with emotional tensions, and choose their ways of coping (Liu and Perrewé, 2005). According to cognitive appraisal theory, individuals try to make sense of and try to understand the relevance of ongoing events (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Smith and Kirby, 2009). If an individual perceives change as unfair or uncertain, it tends to be associated with negative appraisals such as fear or threat (Smith and Ellsworth, 1985). Then, depending on how an individual interprets and judges events, it triggers or constitutes emotional responses (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Although change has been recognized as triggering different negative emotions (Kiefer, 2005; Liu and Perrewé, 2005; Smollan and Sayers, 2009), fear is seen as one of the most significant causes of resistance to change (Goswami, 2022). Fear is characterized as "*an unpleasant often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger, anxious concern reason for alarm*" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023). Although most studies about fear suggest that fear results in dysfunctional behavior, fear is recognized as inducing significant and rapid behavioral changes (Welbourne, 1994). Moreover, it has been found to affect an employee's level of psychological resources, change commitment, efficacy, and future expectation (Helpap and Bekmeier-Feuerhahn, 2016).

In recent years, fear has been studied in relation to, e.g. organizational climate (Ashkanasy and Nicholson, 2003), organizational culture (Austin and Claassen, 2008), organizational readiness for change (Weeks *et al.*, 2004), and employee silence (Kish-Gephart *et al.*, 2009). Despite studies having recognized the importance of fear as an underlying influencing factor in organizational changes (Goswami, 2022; Liu and Perrewé, 2005; Weeks *et al.*, 2004), fear of change has rarely been brought to the front before. However, fear has been associated with different negative behavioral implications (Liu and Perrewé, 2005). For example, Weeks *et al.* (2004) studied organizational readiness for change and found that fear of change had hindering effect on sales managers' performance. Also, Fugate *et al.* (2008) noticed that fear is associated with reduced control and increased negative forms of coping, namely escape coping. In their work, Lawrence *et al.* (2014) state that the length of change process alone is found to be emotionally charging and long processes can raise doubts and fears throughout the process. In our study, we define fear as "the result of anticipation of a threat or danger . . . associated with people's feelings of uncertainty in terms of what will happen next" (Liu and Perrewé, 2005, p. 265). Taking into consideration that emotions are contagious, meaning that they can shape the emotions of other people in organization as well (Barsade *et al.*, 2018), it is crucial to understand what individuals are afraid of in a self-determined organizational culture.

## Methodology

### Case study

The case organization under study was a Finnish financial services organization which since 2019 started to move toward more self-determined operating models. This meant changes in every level of organizing work, not just structural but also changes in the whole culture and practices. Less hierarchical organizing lead to the adoption of, e.g. self-directed teams and a new managerial design. The company employs around 100 people in total, and the organization can be characterized as a professional and service organization, with

geographically dispersed small units with a wide range of staffing levels, managed from the central office in the region.

Our approach to the case study is descriptive as it is used to describe phenomenon: here, a specific kind of organizational transformation in the real-life context (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003). Moreover, Yin (2009, p. 18) claims that the case study method is especially convenient when “the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”. Although there is much understanding on how organizational change affects individuals (e.g. Helpap and Bekmeier-Feuerhahn, 2016; Kiefer, 2005; Nesterkin, 2013), there is less knowledge about how individuals perceive change toward self-determined organizations (Niessen and Volmer, 2010).

Our empirical data consists of ten individual interviews with employees, selected using dimensional sampling, which is an especially applicable method when only a small number of participants are under study but where the aim is to provide a purposive sample representative of whole organization (Arnold, 1970). This approach was chosen because the organization made it possible to interview only a smaller number of participants. Nevertheless, we aimed to gather as diverse a representation of organizational members as possible. Following Arnolds (1970) logic of purposive sampling, we recognized the most important dimensions that differ employees from each other when studying organizational change toward self-determined culture. We defined the following as the most important dimensions: *job role, gender, location*. At the end of the May in 2020, we received a list of employees. The HR-specialist had listed 94 workers by their self-determined work role, 47 of which belong to self-determined workers, e.g. worked in self-determined teams, experts or as supervisors, and 47 to workers whose role was not defined as self-determined, for example, in a customer service role. Because we wanted to study the employees’ voice, we started by excluding individuals in executive roles (4). Though the company was location in seven different locations, one of them had only a small number of employees. Therefore, to preserve anonymity, we chose participants from only six locations. In addition, since we recognized that 75% of the employees on the list were females and the remaining 25% men, we wanted our data to represent a similar ratio as well.

Since we were able to choose a small number of interviewees, after carefully taking into consideration different dimensions, aiming to select participants with various combinations of dimensions, we ended up choosing ten participants. Finally, we had five individuals from a self-determined role and five from a non-self-determined role. Of those, seven were females and there were men (F/M) from six locations (A-E) (see Table 1).

As the target organization did not permit face-to-face interviews during the Covid-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted in teams by the second author. The interviews were recorded and transcribed into word, after which the data were pseudonymized by the

**Table 1.** Dimensions of participant characteristics

Participants	Gender	Location	Role
Participant 1	F	A	self-determined
Participant 2	M	A	non-self-determined
Participant 3	F	A	non-self-determined
Participant 4	F	B	non-self-determined
Participant 5	F	C	non-self-determined
Participant 6	F	D/E	non-self-determined
Participant 7	F	E	self-determined
Participant 8	F	F	self-determined
Participant 9	M	A/C/E	self-determined
Participant 10	M	A	self-determined
<b>Source(s):</b> Authors’ work			



interviewer, who was the only one with access to the code keys. In total, the interviews yielded 135 pages of transcribed text.

This particular study represents a part of a larger study that is focused on individuals' experience in the middle of ongoing organizational change. For the individual interviews, we used the semi-structured interview method, which is a flexible way of exploring the interviewees' interpretations and meanings from a subjective point of view and gaining a rich understanding of the phenomenon. The themes were designed based on the basic psychological needs that guide the design of self-determined organizational design. The themes of the interviews were related to the basic psychological needs of autonomy (e.g. the challenge of the job, own independence and own skills), competence (what the job requires and how the interviewee feels she/he can cope with it, and support), relatedness at work (the state of helping, interacting and socializing), and the change toward increased self-determination (e.g. a person's experience of the change process) (e.g. [Deci et al., 2017](#)).

### *Method of analysis*

Our inductive study, guided by grounded theory approach, included several rounds of reading raw interview data and during the process, we recognized that individuals highlighted fears and worries related to change. This led us to refine our research focus and we narrowed down the topic to exploring fears. In the same vein as [Glaser and Strauss \(2017\)](#) outlines, we tried to keep our minds free of preconceived literature and explore data as "investigative journalists" ([Murphy et al., 2017](#), p. 294) and prioritize the lived experience and language of participants. Though we were aware that negative emotions are inherent byproducts of organizational change (e.g. [Kiefer and Müller, 2003](#)), we were surprised by the strong emphasis on fear-talk. Indeed, emotions typically associated with the intrinsic motivation, the core concept of self-determination, were positive, e.g. joy, interest and excitement ([Güntert, 2015](#)), and also studies highlight almost only the positive outcomes, e.g. job satisfaction and psychological well-being ([Gagné and Deci, 2005](#)), of self-determined organizing ([Gagné and Deci, 2005](#)).

When analyzing data from the perspective of fears, we depended on [Fugate's et al. \(2008, 2012\)](#) conceptualization of fears as fear appraisals rather than as experiences *per se*, i.e. the individuals' evaluations of the meaning of the situation and threats they recognized as influencing them, their colleagues or organization. In our analysis, not only did we include explicit expressions of fear, but we also interpreted expressions of worries, concerns and threat in the same way as [Fink and Yolles \(2015\)](#) equate fear with anxiety and concern.

We chose to apply Gioia-method to guide us to analyze our data, as it provides clear steps and visual framework that informs readers about data structure ([Murphy et al., 2017](#)). Following the ideas of [Gioia et al. \(2013\)](#), we first began to distinguish expressions that handled fears from raw data. The analysis was done by comparing each interview with another and by gradually recognizing patterns that were organized as first-order codes. As first-order categories were informant-centric terms, at that point we thus leaned on expressions that were used in the data, whereas at the second-order stage, we searched for and generated emerging themes and concepts that could describe and explain the phenomena. In all, we recognized eight second-order categories: *fear of changed requirements*, *fear over workload*, *fear of isolation*, *fear of coping*, *fear of blurred roles*, *fear of forthcoming steps*, *fear of pace of change*, and lastly *fear of the unexpected*. Second-order categories moved our analysis to a higher hierarchical level in abstraction and guided us to the final step, to aggregate dimensions, during which we recognized that participants discussed fears on three discursive levels: *doing*, *being*, and *becoming*. This level of abstraction is named as a "larger narrative" by [Gioia et al. \(2013\)](#) (p. 20) and in this case this narrative describes the individuals' sensemaking process as individuals make sense of what they do, who they are and what is unknown. Throughout the analyzing process, we applied researcher triangulation ([Puusa and Julkunen, 2020](#); [TENK, 2023](#)) so that both researchers participated in the analyses and classification of the data. For us, this meant that we read interview data separately, made notions, discussed findings, and



conceptualized and created the final table together through feedback and rounds of critical discussions.

Empirical findings

We begin by presenting our findings in a table that leans on the structure of the analysis process guided by Gioia method. The table presents selected quotes from participants that provide examples of data in parallel categories and dimensions drawn from the data. Following this table that summarizes our findings, we explain the themes one-by-one to open the content and our process toward these interpretations and conclusions (see Table 2).

Doing

This dimension could be characterized as task-related fears as it includes themes that deal with characteristics and the nature of work itself, what they do and how they work. The identified themes include *fear of changed requirements* and *fear over workload*.

Table 2. Data structure

Aggregate dimensions	Second-order themes	Expressions
Doing	Fear of changed requirements	<i>“At some point I felt that, wait a minute, I don’t have time to delve into these things . . . as learning new errands took time to absorb.”</i> (5) <i>“It is hard for me to define what I should do. Sometimes, different managers have a different outlook then, that they too are against the fact what is expected of me . . .”</i> (1)
	Fear over workload	<i>“I am a bit afraid of my workload growing . . . how am I keeping up with the other tasks so that those don’t get forgotten?”</i> (7)
Being	Fear of isolation	<i>“It has definitely increased in my team and in our whole house during the past years that we just do things alone”</i> (10) <i>“..now there are just empty rooms compared to old times, when there were lots of colleagues and time to discuss with them both about work and private matters . . . today, there is obviously a lot less of that.”</i> (4)
	Fear of coping	<i>“It’s just that you have to take care of yourself. The employer does not come to say, hey, let’s lower your goals”</i> (1)
	Fear of blurred roles	<i>“There should be more guidance on new roles . . . now I am in a situation where there is no one to ask for advice here at the office.”</i> (5) <i>“I am not sure about the expectations . . . what do they expect me to achieve?”</i> (10) <i>“It would be good as well to get support on how to succeed and how to adapt to upcoming changes”.</i> (3)
		<i>“We have had it fairly often, that it is not rationalized, or any arguments given about why we are going through these changes . . . we lack understanding behind these decisions.”</i> (1)
Becoming	Fear of forthcoming steps	<i>“. . . the situations change so quickly when the need for orientation comes up, and then the job changes accordingly, so it’s a bit difficult, you can’t organize it directly, you don’t know what I’m going to do next month.”</i> (1)
	Fear of pace of change	<i>“I have been following these changes to self-determined and agile culture already for years and it feels that it has always led to downsizing actions.”</i> (7) <i>“We have been talking a lot about being and becoming agile, but then you start noticing things that are far from being agile.”</i> (2)
	Fear of the unexpected	

Source(s): Authors’ work

In this study, the dimension of *changed requirements* referred to individuals' experiences and worry over how their current level of knowledge and expertise is sufficient and suitable in the organization's future cultural change. Individuals discussed changed personal responsibilities and skills and compared their abilities to survive in the future. Changed requirements also reflected on the way employees had to perform certain tasks. In their responses, the interviewees saw it worrying that requirements toward them increase and change so much, that they are not able to fulfil the expectations of their employer but also of their customers. They also discussed changed expectations, *fear over workload* in relation to workload, and described how they experience that the amount of work has increased tremendously which also raised questions on how to prioritize and how the amount of work will affect the quality of work. In addition, they suspected that some tasks may be neglected as other tasks will require more input.

In this category, fears about change were experienced as very personal and related to the employees' individual abilities. Moreover, in this dimension, employees' fears were related to the impact of change on the pressures of meeting new work expectations.

To summarize, the discussion related to *fears on doing* focused on increased autonomy that was seen to challenge the belief of one's ability to take the initiative on work related decisions and a new, more entrepreneurial type of working that either did not feel familiar or in which it was difficult to relate to both work and its expectations. At this level, the discussion touched on practical, task-related worries, change of daily routines and overall practices in the organization.

### *Being*

This dimension includes individuals' fears that are related to who they are and where they belong to and, in addition, how they survive the position they are in. Characteristic to this dimension was that individuals made sense in relation to the community and this was as such a social approach to the changes. The identified categories in this dimension include *fear of isolation*, *fear of coping* and *fear of blurred roles*.

The *fear of isolation* category included fears over the participants' ability to survive on their own. In their responses, individuals discussed managing their own autonomy and movement from collective actions to individual isolated doing. *Fear of isolation* not only reached the individuals but also their colleagues as their responses highlighted the empty halls and offices in which no one meets anymore. Increased autonomy was seen as one of the reasons that led to social isolation and was especially found to threaten individual's well-being but also to enjoying time at work. Work culture was seen as individually-focused while the past work culture was remembered as a time when there was a stronger community and more communication between each other. In this category, fears about change were related to tasks and roles as well, but unlike the previous category where fear was related more to the content of tasks, *fear of isolation* referred to the nature of work and its social aspect.

*Fear of coping* was linked to the discussion around oneself and taking care of one's own well-being when limits of working seem invisible. However, unlike in the previous category, the term coping was related to a new work culture, adjusting to new habits. Nevertheless, the discussion about coping was partly presenting solutions of autonomies. Indeed, it seemed that participants had begun to find ways of coping to preserve their well-being and that they perceived their role as managing their own well-being.

The category of *fear of blurred roles* included fears related to the difficulty of defining clear expectations and rules on how to apply autonomous culture to the employees' work. Individuals described how blurred lines existed when defining rising expectations all the time and how the organization did not seem to hold the same perception on upcoming changes and their impact. Participants' responses were targeted to question the actions, guidance, and knowledge by front-line and top management level. In their responses, participants not only wished for guidance to support work tasks but also to adapt to new roles.

The blurred image between autonomy and restrictions also caused doubts on the possible abuse of the situation and the freedom given, i.e. withdrawing from tasks or ignoring the quality of tasks. Moreover, autonomy was interpreted as a framework where employees needed strict rules to prohibit wrongdoing and possible unethical behavior. Consequently, it can be interpreted from the responses that there was still a need for support and guidance from frontline staff and management in the work community.

To sum up, the discussion that was related to *fears on being* was about fearing over being enough and the right person to cope with future expectations. Inevitably, as the transition to a self-managed culture pushes individuals to rearrange their roles and duties in an organization, it clearly initiated reflection on a personal level as well. This level was about doubting one's own capabilities to survive and moved on a very personal level. Indeed, *fear of being* was an introspective fear of managing oneself and discovering new sides for oneself.

### *Becoming*

The dimension of *fear of becoming* includes individuals' fears that are related to where they are heading as a community, what they will turn into, and how they will reach future goals. Characteristic to this dimension was that individuals made sense in relation to the community and, as such, this was a social approach to the changes. The identified categories include *fear of forthcoming steps*, *fear of pace of change*, and *fear of the unexpected*.

The category of *fear of forthcoming steps* referred to a general interpretation of the organization's strategy and vision and implementation of the process. Participants raised feelings of experiencing unclear expectations but also understanding the ongoing process, though its forthcoming steps were unclear. Further, participants found that they were missing rationalization on why this self-determined organizational culture and new ways of working were chosen, and on what these decisions were based on. To motivate individuals about the reasonable next steps, employees were hoping to understand decision-making better. However, individuals also understood that large organizational changes require everyone's proactivity, and information can be ambiguous while creating new habits and culture. Self-determination was also understood to be an abstract concept that does not necessarily have self-evident steps to take.

The category of *fear of pace of change* was related to fears about change happening too fast and change that was not well planned. In their responses, participants discussed that they might not have enough time to adjust to their new roles and learn new tasks. Instead of changing ways of acting too quickly, they hoped for more time to adapt to the new culture and prepare themselves for upcoming changes. Employees also experienced doubts on the competence of front-line staff and management to support them in change in a reasonably short time.

The category of *fear of unexpected* was related to expressions where employees saw ongoing change to be a sign of something bigger coming up in the future, for example, downsizing. Previous experiences of change processes within the company were strongly reflected in experiencing ongoing change, which supported the employees' fear on that more changes are to come. Participants also discussed that although they are moving toward a state of being more agile, they also recognized that certain aspects of change, planned changes, did not fulfil their understanding on being agile and they did not believe that those particular changes support becoming agile as an organization. Following this, the participants suspected that change would lead to something else than it is expected to.

As a summary, the discussion that was related to fears on becoming reflected fears about future directions and future needs, especially on the contextual level, and doubting whether the current context supports or decreases the possibility to develop to a new kind of culture. The *fear of becoming* moves to a more collective level as it problematizes the overall challenges and possibilities of the whole community and organization to survive in coming changes.

## Conclusions and discussion

Recent years have shown an increased interest in self-determined organizations (Martela and Kostamo, 2017), in which power shifts from central management to the organization, allowing employees greater autonomy. Following this, employees' work will face a tremendous change. Thus, it is natural that individuals experience mixed emotions while they struggle with feeling a loss of control, making sense of upcoming changes and adopting new ways of working (Rafferty et al., 2013; Weeks et al., 2004). However, individuals' emotions provide insights on the needs for development or readjustment and signal misunderstandings. As such, emotions are a valuable angle to understand how an employee experiences ongoing change. In the present study, we explored what individuals perceived as frightening during the major organizational change to a self-managed culture in an organization previously managed from the top down.

Through collected qualitative interview data from an organization that was going through a major organizational renewal to create a culture with an emphasis on self-determined work and team design and a new managerial approach, we gained an insight of a situation which requires individuals to adopt new ways of working and thinking. Our study makes the following three contributions to the literature on organizational cultural change and its relation to negative emotions in a rarely studied context of transitioning to a self-managed organizational culture. First, our study answers scholarly calls for empirical investigation of the role of fear in organizational change and instead of treating fear as an outcome of change (Goswami, 2022; Liu and Perrewé, 2005; Weeks et al., 2004), we suggest that fear is intertwined in the adaption to organizational change. We recognized a cognitive pattern in making sense of aspects that cause fear and found that individuals made sense of change through processing fears on three levels: fears of *doing*, *being*, and *becoming*. Fear of the unknown is naturally attached to the organizational change, where individuals lack an understanding and information on future roles and tasks and are still adapting to new ways of doing (*doing*) (Rafferty et al., 2013; Weeks et al., 2004). In addition, fears moved from hesitating about one's own capabilities and skills to being afraid of not being enough and managing as an individual (*being*). This is in line with the view on organizational change as a process which not only changes how we do things but also how we feel about who we are (van Dijk and van Dick, 2009). Reissner (2010, p. 287) refers to "revision to biographical selves" as individuals make sense of the past and give meaning to the future during an organizational change. In addition, in our study, individuals handled fears also on a more organizational and collective level (*becoming*), problematizing changes, and the organization's capability to support change. Making sense of fears from the perspectives of doing, being and becoming reveals that individuals do not find organization's cultural change scary only because they need to adjust to new ways of working but because they themselves must change too. This is in line with Reissner's (2010) view on individuals engaging in identity work while they experience enormous changes at work. This is result of individuals struggling to create new meanings and behaviors while they make sense of expectations and reality at the workplace. Expressing worries of an organization's actions and development can be one way of distancing oneself from the change while evaluating one's own position (Kiefer and Müller, 2003). However, individuals' identity work may also result in reduced self-esteem and self-worth if individuals experience that their expectations are not met and they feel a loss of control (Reissner, 2010).

In addition, making sense by moving between different levels ranging from the individual and personal to organizational confirms that individuals are making sense of their own capabilities to survive in change. Moreover, individuals consider the organization's role in supporting the individual and see that change not only requires adaptivity from individuals but also from other organizational levels. A readiness to change and eventually success of change is seen to be dependent on how organizational members believe that change is needed and whether they evaluate the organization's ability to cope with the change as effective (Vakola, 2013). Consequently, an individuals' evaluative identity work is not only personal but creates reflections on change process on a wider scale (Reissner, 2010).

Secondly, our empirical study allowed us to shed light on understanding of a self-determined organization and organizing from an individual perspective and uncovered that self-managed organization harms individuals' sense of relatedness. On the contextual level, we recognized that the transition to a self-managed organizational culture created fears because individuals interpreted changes to a self-determined organizational culture to bring uncontrollable and unpredictable aspects to their work, which further created scenarios of unlimited amount of work. While individuals dealt with their fears related to their work tasks, they also saw that changes in their work culture may also be reflected on social dynamics and shake their feeling of belonging to group. Despite the fact that the self-determined theory emphasizes the individual's need for relatedness and a need to develop close relations and a sense of communion (Ryan and Deci, 2000a), an ideal of relatedness seems challenging to build in a self-managed organization. Indeed, the initial reaction to more autonomous work seemed to rather create an image of dispersed community. Additionally, one individual evaluated the outcomes of increased autonomy on their peer workers and pondered whether some might utilize the freedom for some act of wrongdoing. The point of view on colleagues' possible misbehavior and doubting whether peer workers can be trusted highlights the hesitation on how self-management organization works and is managed. Although self-management scholars emphasize the crucial role of managerial trust and suggest avoiding surveillance and micromanaging behavior to produce discretionary behavior among employees, it requires new managerial approaches and clear communication on organizational expectations too (Jensen and Raver, 2012).

Third, our study contributes to the current research on organizational change by providing understanding on implementation stage, instead of exploring fear of change as soon-to-be implemented change (Nesterkin, 2013) or forthcoming change (Weeks *et al.*, 2004), by collecting data during the large organizational change. Moreover, studies approaching change as forthcoming present results on negative reactions and even change resistance (Nesterkin, 2013) as individuals make sense of their organizational futures by interpreting communication targeted for employees. However, in our study, we capture the perceptions of individuals who already have experience of living the change. Instead of studying a speculative interpretation of future, the context of our study showed that despite implementation being already underway, experiences in implementing and succeeding in change may raise new concerns and threats. In addition, we noted that emotions during the implementation stage are not just self-focused, but an individual rather evaluates change on a wider scale and interprets collective emotions and an organizational state to cope and manage the change. Though attention to collective emotions is important, as individual level emotions are found to calm down over time, a group activates stronger emotions within organizations (Goldenberg *et al.*, 2020). Thus, if surrounding teams and colleagues experience strong negative feelings, which can be contagious to everyone and activate feelings to last longer. Collective emotions are an important signal of emotional responses of the whole organization and can provide information on how change related practices and processes are received, indicating what kind of support employees need or even help redefine the way change is implemented. Our findings strengthen the idea from previous studies on organizational change being intense and emotionally challenging (Smollan and Sayers, 2009) and show that especially cultural change requires time and an acceptance that new uncertainties emerge even after a longer period. As adaptation to new practices, roles and culture may require more time than expected, emotional responses should therefore be taken into consideration throughout the implementation of change and developing an organization further.

Nevertheless, it is important to remain aware of the present study's limitations. Though our data is part of a larger project that studied the dimensions of self-determination theory, the participants were not asked explicitly to describe their experiences of fear. The idea to approach data from this angle was raised later as we became familiar with it and noticed that participants' speech reflected many worries and pondering about the future of their work, themselves, their community, and the organization. As organizational change literature often

implies that fear is a natural part of the change process, this gave us the possibility to focus solely on fears and concerns. Thus, we encourage further studies to study change to a self-determined organization by focusing solely on fears and trying to capture how emotion develops in time and what impacts diminishing fear.

One must also bear in mind that this study represents one snapshot of an employee's experiences and perceptions of ongoing change so it does not describe their experience of change as a whole. Emotions do change in time and even several emotions can coexist and be mixed (Liu and Perrewe, 2005; Klarner and Diefenbach, 2011). Thus, instead of seeing emotions that need to be "managed away" and "overcome" to success in organizational change (Kiefer, 2005), scholars should uncover the sources of fear of changes and provide knowledge on how to accurately recognize emotions to support the leader's ability to manage emotionally turbulent situations that are characteristics of strategic change (Rafferty *et al.*, 2013; Sanchez-Burks and Huy, 2009). Yet, at the organization level, employees' representations of fear should not be "sanitized" but rather taken as a valuable opportunity to learn and inhibit reflective practice (Antonacopoulou and Gabriel, 2001; Fulop and Rifin, 1997).

There are several opportunities for future research. Further studies on learning outcomes in relation to fear would provide more knowledge about transforming fear into growth experiences, both from the individual and organizational perspectives. Second, it might be fruitful to broaden this study to observe managers and their fears and concerns: how managers in between employees and upper management cope with tensions and concerns and how those impact on their support to employees. Finally, it would be important to understand how individuals in general balance fears caused by an organization's cultural change, especially in the context of the increasing trend of change toward a self-determined organizational culture that shapes individuals work and ways of doing work in an autonomous way.

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