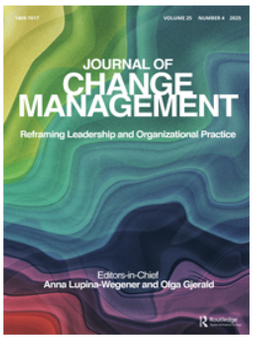

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Wavering Between Readiness and Resistance: How Do Organizational Members in a Swedish Municipality Respond to an Ambiguous Change Initiative?

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ABSTRACT

We aim to generate new knowledge about the responses of organizational members facing ambiguous change initiatives (i.e. initiatives not only featuring unclear outcomes after being launched, but also unclear goals, resources and interventions before being launched). Ambiguous change initiatives have often been studied throughout industries where ad hoc decisions abound, whereas such initiatives have seldom been studied within centralized and bureaucratic organizations where *ex ante* routines and procedures instead abound. This abundance of routines and procedures can make ambiguous change initiatives particularly difficult to implement. Utilizing rich qualitative data from a municipal care unit in Sweden where managers launched an ambiguous change initiative depending on bottom-up implementation efforts, we find that few employees were fully ready for or fully resistant to the initiative; instead, most of them responded by dynamically wavering between readying and resisting. Wavering employees ascribed ambivalent meanings to what they regarded as a highly agreeable – yet also a loosely formulated and, in terms of routines and procedures, potentially inconceivable – initiative. Our findings advance extant change management literature by highlighting how wavering moves beyond a traditional readiness-or-resistance dichotomy, and by foregrounding how ambiguous change initiatives can become especially significant sources of wavering within centralized and bureaucratic organizations.

MAD statement

Contemporary organizations are increasingly launching ambiguous change initiatives to address urgent challenges involving climatic, economic and/or demographic developments that escape clear solutions. Ambiguous change initiatives typically feature unclear goals, resources and interventions, and we demonstrate how such an initiative produced wavering responses within a centralized and bureaucratic organization where employees were bound by routines and procedures. Wavering employees regarded the ambiguous change initiative as agreeable, yet also

KEYWORDS

Change readiness; change resistance; change ambivalence; municipality; Sweden

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as potentially inconceivable due to clashes with routines and procedures. These wavering responses are not necessarily a failure though; they can instead become nuanced feedback for managers seeking to implement successful change initiatives.

Introduction: Launching Ambiguous Change Initiatives for Contemporary Challenges

Change initiatives are common fixtures in all organizations, and, today, such initiatives increasingly deal with climatic, economic, demographic and other large-scale challenges featuring unpredictable and continuous characteristics (Feuls et al., 2025; Hernes & Schultz, 2020). Yet, despite these characteristics, a wide range of research on change initiatives (cf. Bartunek et al., 2025; Cable & Bartunek, 2024) tends to depart from traditional change models, such as Lewin's three-step model (Lewin, 1947) and Kotter's eight-step model (Kotter, 1996), that assume managers set concrete goals, allocate earmarked resources, and devise top-down interventions before launching change initiatives. These models visualize change as a plannable and episodic phenomenon (cf. Weick & Quinn, 1999), making them ill-fitted for organizations facing large-scale challenges featuring unpredictable and continuous characteristics. Such challenges may instead require novel initiatives that cannot be extensively detailed before being launched (Stouten et al., 2018).

An aspect that is commonly highlighted in extant change management literature as being crucial for the success of change initiatives concerns organizational members beyond managers. Change readiness denotes the willingness of organizational members to embrace change initiatives launched by managers (Endrejat et al., 2020; Gigliotti et al., 2019). Readiness as a desired characteristic is reinforced when failed initiatives are blamed on change resistance, which instead denotes the unwillingness of organizational members to embrace change initiatives launched by managers (Cable & Bartunek, 2024; Grønvad et al., 2024). Change readiness and resistance have co-evolved as dichotomous concepts with substantial presence in change management literature. Indeed, already 15 years ago, Bouckenooghe (2010) concluded that, up until then, over 90 percent of conceptual work on responses to change initiatives had concerned either readiness or resistance. But how do organizational members respond to change initiatives that cannot be extensively detailed before being launched because they concern challenges featuring unpredictable and continuous characteristics? Particularly, how do readiness and resistance map onto change initiatives when organizational members do not know what they, in terms of responses, would be readying for or resisting to? Such questions are growingly being addressed in extant change management literature (e.g. Bartunek et al., 2025; Cable & Bartunek, 2024; Grønvad et al., 2024; Repovš et al., 2019), albeit researchers have long focused on change initiatives featuring concrete goals, earmarked resources and top-down interventions that are specific enough for organizational members to direct their eventual readiness or resistance towards these goals, resources and interventions (cf. Stouten et al., 2018).

Our aim in this paper is to generate new scholarly knowledge about the responses of organizational members facing 'ambiguous change initiatives' – that is, change initiatives surrounded by 'credible and contrary beliefs' (Sanner, 2019, p. 103), which are breeding grounds for confusion. Like all change initiatives, ambiguous change initiatives feature

unclear outcomes after being launched by managers. Unlike traditional models of change initiatives, however, ambiguous change initiatives also feature unclear goals, resources and interventions before being launched by managers. Whereas such initiatives have previously been studied throughout the IT, R&D and other project- and matrix-based industries where ad hoc decisions abound (cf. Hepworth et al., 2017; Sloot et al., 2024), we approach our aim by examining an ambiguous change initiative within a centralized and bureaucratic context where *ex ante* routines and procedures instead abound. To generate new knowledge, we thus turned towards a centralized and bureaucratic mid-size municipality in Sweden where care employees faced an ambiguous change initiative. This initiative was launched in a top-down manner by care managers who broadly and loosely envisioned increased user involvement, internal collaboration and stakeholder engagement as ways to sustain current welfare services for an increasing number of ageing citizens. Despite operating within a centralized and bureaucratic organization, managers tasked employees with implementing the ambiguous change initiative in a bottom-up manner, providing no specific guidance and offering no additional financing for said implementation. We know little about the responses of organizational members to ambiguous change initiatives as they unfold within centralized and bureaucratic contexts.

Utilizing rich data from 64 interviews, 13 observations and 9 documents within a municipal unit delivering eldercare, healthcare and social care services, we find that, in terms of responses, most organizational members were neither fully ready for nor fully resistant to the ambiguous change initiative. Our findings instead indicate most organizational members responded by what we call 'wavering' between readying and resisting, dynamically ascribing ambivalent meanings to what these members regarded as an agreeable initiative that was, at the same time, regarded as incompatible with legal frameworks, subunit necessities and budgetary shortages. Wavering members longed for steps and instructions coming from top-down implementation directives, while simultaneously recognizing that such directives would have been antithetical to the bottom-up implementation activities expected by managers.

We propose our findings contribute to change management literature in two ways. One contribution highlights how organizational members ascribe ambivalent meanings to ambiguous change initiatives in responses that simultaneously encompass the concepts of readiness and resistance. These responses do not represent readiness and resistance; rather, they represent a dynamic blend of readying and resisting that merits deploying wavering as an additional concept.

Another contribution foregrounds how ambiguous change initiatives may become particularly salient sources of wavering within centralized and bureaucratic organizations, where the broadness and looseness associated with such initiatives can make them difficult to implement among members who usually follow *ex ante* routines and procedures during daily work tasks. Although managers may perceive wavering as a failure, we discuss the potential benefits of encouraging wavering responses in organizations seeking to deal with large-scale challenges featuring unpredictable and continuous characteristics.

Literature: Responding to Ambiguous Change Initiatives

Throughout past and present change management literature, researchers have consistently emphasized the necessity of understanding how organizational members

respond to change initiatives (e.g. Bartunek et al., 2006; Cable & Bartunek, 2024; Phillips, 1983). The success or failure of such initiatives has, indeed, regularly been explained by considering how members respond. And, in terms of responses, change readiness and resistance have emerged as dominant concepts (Bouckenooghe, 2010).

Positive responses among organizational members to change initiatives are captured through change readiness (Endrejat et al., 2020; Gigliotti et al., 2019). However, researchers have traditionally come to expect negative responses from members (cf. Bartunek et al., 2025; Cable & Bartunek, 2024), and such responses are captured through change resistance (Grønvad et al., 2024; Klonek et al., 2014). This expectation is reflected in how change resistance as a concept has developed since first being credited to Kurt Lewin (1947). It initially appeared as part of Lewin's three-stage change model, within which resistance referred to the 'unfreezing' stage, focused on breaking mental models and social habits among organizational members (see also Burnes & Bargal, 2017). That said, Lewin 'introduced the term as a systems concept, as a force affecting managers and employees equally' (Dent & Goldberg, 1999, p. 25), suggesting change resistance can be located anywhere throughout organizations. The earliest references focusing on change resistance as negative responses among employees appeared in McMurry (1947) and, perhaps most famously, in Coch and French (1948). Resistance has, since then, primarily been viewed as an individual problem, with employees displaying a 'natural' tendency of responding negatively to change. This view has, in turn, engendered a flurry of research offering prescriptions for managers to curb and overcome resistance when it is identified among employees (e.g. Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Grønvad et al., 2024; Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979).

While change readiness and change resistance have typically been studied as opposed concepts, growing numbers of researchers are suggesting these concepts should be studied as related responses to change initiatives. Repovš et al. (2019), for instance, suggested change readiness and resistance should be approached as distinct, yet not opposed, responses among organizational members facing change initiatives. Readiness may thus be expressed towards certain aspects of initiatives, while resistance can also be expressed towards other aspects. Grønvad et al. (2024), moreover, recommended going beyond a change readiness-change resistance dichotomy to avoid approaching readiness and resistance as concepts possessing stable characteristics. These concepts should, in line with Grønvad et al.'s recommendation, be understood as analytical tools that help researchers discuss the evolving responses of organizational members to change initiatives. Cable and Bartunek (2024) ultimately indicated that a nuanced understanding of readiness and resistance reflects how these two concepts are fluid constructions deriving from sensemaking processes among members (see also Bartunek et al., 2006). Organizational members will seldom be fully ready or fully resistant; instead, their sensemaking often creates partial readiness for and partial resistance to different aspects of change initiatives. This, by extension, implies that change initiatives can create a range of partly overlapping responses from organizational members.

We build on this nuanced notion of change readiness and resistance as fluid constructions when examining how employees within a municipal care unit in Sweden responded to an ambiguous change initiative. Our inspiration for going beyond readiness and resistance comes from research on ambivalence, a concept Ashforth et al. (2014, p. 1454) defined as 'simultaneously positive and negative orientations' encompassing the thoughts and feelings of organizational members responding to 'an object'. Rothman

et al. (2017) expanded this definition to also include orientations towards tasks, persons, or situations (cf. Piderit, 2000). Concentrating on change initiatives, we argue that organizational members who simultaneously display positive and negative orientations towards such initiatives are responding to them by wavering. In our definition, wavering denotes responses featuring dynamic ascriptions of ambivalent meanings to change initiatives. Equipped with this definition of wavering, we shift focus from individual-based thoughts and feelings firmly anchored in emotion and cognition, to group-based meanings fluidly constructed through talk and text.

Our departure point when examining how employees within a municipal care unit responded is that ambiguous change initiatives constitute important sources of wavering responses in organizations. Ambiguous change initiatives not only feature unclear outcomes after being launched by managers but also unclear goals, resources and interventions before being launched, and we know little about how employees respond to such change initiatives as they unfold within centralized and bureaucratic organizations. This unclearness in terms of outcomes as well as in terms of goals, resources and interventions can become fertile soil for ambivalent meanings among municipal employees.

Setting: 'Rolling Out' an Ambiguous Change Initiative in a Swedish Municipality

Municipal employees in Sweden have historically been responsible for a wide variety of public sector services, ranging from education to parks and sewages (Montin, 2015). Swedish municipalities are, however, facing climatic, economic, demographic and other large-scale challenges that make it increasingly difficult to continue providing services as usual. Municipal managers regularly claim these challenges require change initiatives characterized by rapid and radical actions (Syssner et al., 2017). Supposedly attempting to promote grassroot ideas and efforts among employees, managers have begun launching change initiatives without outlining concrete goals, without allocating earmarked resources and without devising top-down interventions beforehand (cf. Feuls et al., 2025; Hernes & Schultz, 2020). Such initiatives can create doubts among employees, who may worry about the relative absence of goals, resources, and interventions as dimensions that are otherwise typically specified *ex ante* through routines and procedures within centralized and bureaucratic organizations like municipalities. Are municipalities supposed to provide less or different services than usual? If so, what services will be prioritized? And who should decide?

The context of our study is Beta,[1] a mid-sized municipality where managers in 2022 launched Target 2035 as an ambiguous change initiative to transform how eldercare, healthcare, and social care are being provided. This change initiative would affect a wide range of municipal care employees, with professionals including nurses, assistant nurses, home service attendants, social security administrators, and physical and occupational therapists. The Target 2035 initiative was portrayed as a new vision reflecting an ideal, yet vague and sweeping, future state for eldercare, healthcare and social care provision. Although this vision was formally launched in early 2022, preparations had commenced two years before, when managers sought to identify how climatic, economic, demographic and other large-scale challenges could affect Beta's future care provision.

Contrasting with previous change initiatives in Beta, managers now attempted to involve employees from the very start.

Municipal managers began to roll out the Target 2035 initiative across Beta's care unit from 2022 onward. 'Rolling out' consisted of two distinct activities. First, managers delivered a series of presentations through which the change initiative was widely communicated, albeit in a rather vague and sweeping manner. These presentations sought to spread awareness about the Target 2035 initiative by associating it with large-scale challenges affecting most Swedish municipalities, including Beta. Whereas this change initiative was labelled a 'target', no specific target appears to have been detailed throughout the presentation series. Second, managers arranged a series of workshops through which employees would generate their own suggestions and proposals for how to operationalize and implement the change initiative. Employees were expected to think freely and creatively about new structures for collaborations, novel ways of using digital technologies, or other dimensions that could improve future eldercare, healthcare, and social care provision in Beta. Such thinking would be promoted by select employees who had received formal roles as change agents from managers. The operationalization and implementation of Beta's change initiative was nonetheless in flux, as managers hardly specified any means and ends.

Methods: Collecting and Analysing Data to Study an Ambiguous Change Initiative

Beta managers contacted our university in late 2022 with a request to study the Target 2035 initiative. Managers were generally interested in learning about the launch process and particularly interested in learning about how municipal employees responded to it. We were offered complete flexibility in terms of research strategy. We were, in terms of data collection,[2] also offered full access to Beta's municipal care unit, consisting of eldercare, healthcare and social care as three structurally equivalent subunits.

Bolstered by this flexibility and access, our research strategy was to design and conduct a cross-sectional case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006, 2011) of the Target 2035 initiative, approaching it as an ambiguous change initiative in Beta. As for responses, we examined how municipal care employees, through talk and text, ascribed meanings to Beta's initiative after its launch in 2022. Our data collection therefore included interviewing employees and managers, observing presentations and meetings, and gathering relevant documents.

We collected our core data through 64 interview instances (= 68 interview hours), conducted during 2023 across the care unit in Beta. Specifically, we interviewed 2 managers in unit leadership as well as 16 managers and 46 employees within the eldercare, healthcare and social care subunits. Our interviews followed a semi-structured protocol that included questions about roles in and views on the change initiative, as well as about perceptions of its current progress and intended outcome. We recorded all interviews, before transcribing them *verbatim*. Our interviews are unevenly distributed because the subunits are unevenly sized in terms of employee numbers. This uneven distribution reflects how healthcare is the smallest subunit and social care is the largest subunit, with eldercare in between. The imbalance in interviews is thus largely justified on a proportional basis.

To supplement these interview data, we carried out 13 observation instances (= 21 observation hours) throughout Beta's care unit. The observations were, just as our

interviews, conducted during 2023. We observed 2 presentations by managers from unit leadership as they described the Target 2035 initiative for employees. We also observed 11 meetings through which employees working part-time in formal roles as change developers attempted to inform and motivate employees who would soon start working part-time in formal roles as change agents.

Across our observations, we sought to grasp what impressions managers generated among employees during presentations as well as how developers and agents discussed the Target 2035 initiative during meetings. There were important overlaps between our interviews and observations, as most employees we interviewed could be found among the employees we observed during presentations and meetings. Three of the authors took detailed notes during all our observation instances.

As a further supplement, we gathered 9 document instances (= 159 document pages) containing educational materials that managers had distributed during 2022 and 2023 across the care unit in Beta. These materials included 2 documents containing visionary reports devised by managers in unit leadership to illuminate how Beta's large-scale challenges could be handled. Our 7 remaining documents contained similar visionary reports devised by managers within the eldercare and social care subunits as well as change agent guidelines devised by managers within the social care subunit.

We provide a data overview in Table 1.

Our data analysis unfolded in parallel with our data collection. Through interim data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) during early data collection, we gathered that many municipal care employees seemed ambivalent to the Target 2035 initiative in Beta, considering they largely moved between supporting and contesting said initiative. Such meanings highlighted the value of turning to change management literature on readiness (Endrejat et al., 2020; Gigliotti et al., 2019), resistance (Grønvad et al., 2024; Klonek et al., 2014), and ambivalence (Ashforth et al., 2014; Rothman et al., 2017), with additional literature indicating readiness and resistance can be regarded as fluid and overlapping constructions generating ambivalence among organizational members (Bartunek et al., 2025; Cable & Bartunek, 2024; Repovš et al., 2019).

Table 1. Data overview featuring conducted interviews and observations as well as gathered documents within municipal care unit in Beta.

Sites	Interviews (instances; hours)	Observations (instances; hours)	Documents (instances; pages)
Unit leadership	• Managers (2; 2.25)	• Target 2035 initiative presentations (2; 3.5)	• Visionary reports (2; 73)
Subtotal	2 instances; 2.25 h	2 instances; 3.5 h	2 instances; 73 pages
Eldercare subunit	• Managers (4; 4.5) • Employees (13; 14.25)	• Change agent and change developer meetings (6; 8)	• Visionary reports (2; 33)
Subtotal	17 instances; 18.75 h	6 instances; 8 h	2 instances; 33 pages
Healthcare subunit	• Managers (3; 3.25) • Employees (7; 5)	• N/A	• N/A
Subtotal	10 instances; 9.5 h	N/A	N/A
Social care subunit	• Managers (9; 9.5) • Employees (26; 28)	• Change agent and change developer meetings (5; 9.5)	• Visionary reports (2; 11) • Change agent guidelines (3; 42)
Subtotal	35 instances; 37.5 h	5 instances; 9.5 h	5 instances; 53 pages
Total	64 instances; 68 h	13 instances; 21 h	9 instances; 159 pages

Through abductive data analysis (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014) during later data collection, we thus deployed formal coding rounds that were guided, but not constrained, by change management literature. In a first step, we conducted an open coding round, scanning our interviews, observations and documents for text passages where employees described their responses to Beta's Target 2035 initiative, widely exploring them through the concepts of change readiness and change resistance. This open round rendered multiple first-order codes that we categorized as readiness (e.g. 'Advocates individualising implementation activities') or resistance (e.g. 'Employees sensing few novelties'). As our open coding round progressed, we noticed several passages that would not have been relevant to categorize along the dichotomous lines of either readying or resisting. Many passages instead contained descriptions where employees moved back and forth between readying and resisting as they recounted their responses to the change initiative in Beta.

Our second step was therefore to carry out a refined coding round that would not only capture the responses of employees who seemed ready or resistant, but that would also capture the responses of employees who wavered in moving back and forth between readying and resisting. During this refined round, we created further first-order codes (e.g. 'Agreeable contents lacking concrete steps') by incorporating the concept of ambivalence, which proved particularly helpful in nuancing readiness and resistance as fluid constructions that could simultaneously be expressed through dynamic meanings when employees described their wavering responses to Beta's Target 2035 initiative. During this round, we also realized how readying, resisting and wavering as different responses to the change initiative did not map onto organizational subunits or professional roles. Readying, resisting and wavering were instead present across subunits and professions throughout the care unit in Beta. Our coding ultimately came to reflect employee groups featuring individuals who were ready, resistant, or wavering in their respective responses.

In a third step, we considered various ways of arranging our first-order codes to make their connections evident. We eventually connected these codes to each other as well as to change management literature through second- and third-order codes on various abstraction levels (e.g. the first-order code 'Municipalities facing acute challenges' being an underlying manifestation of the second-order code 'Urgency notions', which, in turn, is an underlying trigger for the third-order code 'Readying for change' that denotes a response). To visualize this arrangement, we drew inspiration from Gioia et al.'s (2013) recommendations for the presentation of connected codes as structures.

Figure 1 contains our code structure, while Table 2 offers example quotes underpinning this structure. We elaborate on our findings throughout the next section.

Findings: Readying for, Resisting to, and Wavering Over an Ambiguous Change Initiative

Unit leadership managers and subunit managers regularly described Beta's Target 2035 initiative as an inevitable necessity. This initiative could, according to managers, not be avoided by the municipal care unit. Such sense of unavoidability is exemplified by the following quote from a unit manager:

> If I am to be straightforward, there is no alternative to this []Target 2035 initiative. We will not be able to uphold our services. If we do not do this change, we will end up in a situation that

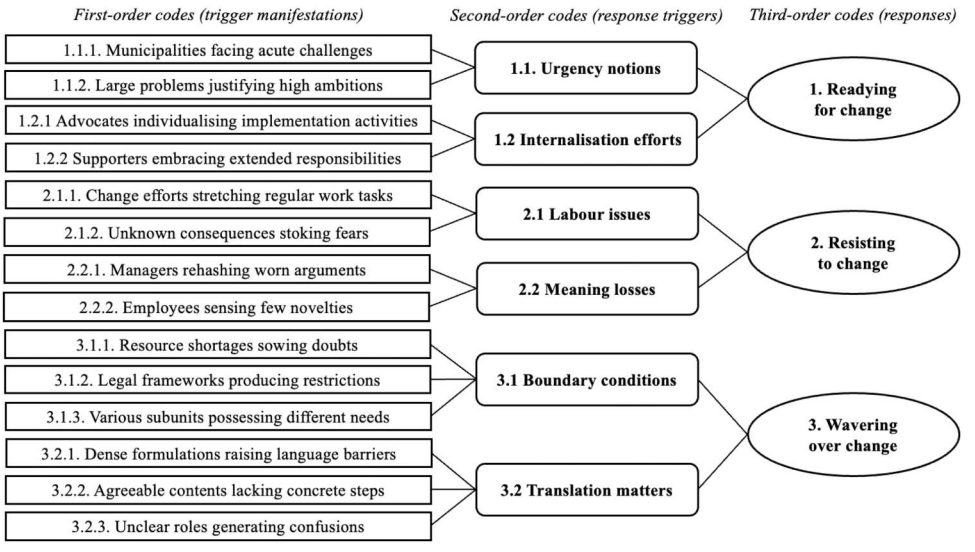

Figure 1. Code structure encompassing analysis of data collected within municipal care unit in Beta.

> … well, I do not even know. So, we need to do something … It is very important that we managers clearly signal to our employees that this Target 2035 is not some sort of choice. We cannot choose if we will digitalise or not; we need to do it to handle the future challenges we will soon be facing (Interview–Manager 2–Unit leadership).

When writing about the Target 2035 initiative, unit leadership managers similarly claimed that 'we [managers and employees in the municipal care unit] must change our operations to deliver care in line with new conditions' (Document–Visionary report 1– Unit leadership).

This sense of unavoidability had, in turn, partly diffused across the eldercare, healthcare and social care subunits, within which various professionals were employed. There was an understanding among employees that they would not receive a pre-packaged change initiative consisting of top-down implementation directives, but instead a local-level mandate to engage in bottom-up implementation activities. While managers claimed the Target 2035 initiative was an inevitable necessity, and while employees understood they would not receive a pre-packaged initiative, employees nonetheless approached this supposedly needed change initiative in different ways: by readying for or resisting it as well as by wavering over it. Readying, resisting, and wavering as different responses were present across the municipal care unit in Beta, and these responses did not follow boundaries associated with organizational subunits or professional roles. Instead, readying, resisting and wavering coalesced into three employee groups defined by how employees, in terms of responses, variously and dynamically ascribed meanings to the Target 2035 initiative. The response defining each group was, in turn, driven by triggers and exemplified by manifestations (see Figure 1).

Readying for Change

As we will demonstrate throughout this first empirical subsection, one group of eldercare, healthcare and social care employees seemed rather ready for change. Readying as a response defining this group of employees was partly triggered by urgency notions

Table 2. Example quotes showcasing analysis of data collected within municipal care unit in Beta.

Third-order codes	Second-order codes	Example quotes from first-order codes
1. Readying **for change**	1.1 Urgency notions	• 1.1.1: 'Municipalities haven't prepared for this demographic development. But now the knife is close to the throat. As a municipality, we could have changed things before, but now we are in a hurry instead … If we don't change now, things will quickly worsen' (Interview–Employee 8–Eldercare subunit). • 1.1.2: 'We often talk in the employee group about setting the bar high because the municipality is actually dealing with complex societal challenges … So, what happens if we fail? Well, we'll probably have learnt something, and this will help us in the future' (Interview–Employee 24–Social care subunit).
	1.2 Internalization Efforts	• 1.2.1: 'I remember hearing about Target 2035, and, after a while, feeling that 'well, I really agree with this picture of what we need to do. These could have been my words' … So, I try to create that feeling as a change agent when I talk about the [Target 2035] initiative' (Interview–Employee 1–Eldercare subunit). • 1.2.2: 'Society is changing, and I want to be a part of that change … And I think it's great with some new thinking in the municipality, that we don't always do stuff as usual … Target 2035 is going to require a lot of work, but I am willing to go the extra mile' (Interview–Employee 3–Healthcare subunit).
2. Resisting to **change**	2.1 Labour Issues	• 2.1.1: 'It would be nice to hear from managers like 'this week, there's been a lot of work with the [Target 2035] initiative, so you'll get help with some of your other tasks'. At times, I feel like we are just doing and doing and doing. How will it all equate?' (Interview–Employee 22–Social care subunit). • 2.1.2: 'I can't say this [Target 2035] initiative has made any difference yet … It would be great to receive some instructions, like what we should concretely improve, and how we should do it, because, without instructions, we are kind of lost right now' (Interview–Employee 12–Eldercare subunit).
	2.2 Meaning losses	• 2.2.1: 'Recently, there have been some great thoughts and opportunities raised, but those of us who have worked in the municipality for some time know that, without real commitment in the form of resources, this Target 2035 will be difficult to realise' (Interview–Employee 1–Healtcare subunit) • 2.2.2: 'I like this idea with digitalising some of our services, and the Covid pandemic kind of forced us to digitalise a bit … But, besides the pandemic, digitalisation has been touted for many years now, and nothing has really happened' (Interview–Employee 12–Eldercare subunit).
3. Wavering over change	3.1 Boundary conditions	• 3.1.1: 'Change agents logically seem pretty open to new ideas. One challenge though is that the ideas do not seem to be supported with resources, and even the most devout change agents appear a bit frustrated' (Observation–Change agent and change developer meeting 4–Social care subunit). • 3.1.2: 'It is positive to start working differently across boundaries, you know, going outside the box … But how does all this Target 2035 stuff fit with the integrity laws we have to respect in our daily work? Can we, for instance, freely share data between subunits?' (Interview–Employee 5–Healthcare subunit). • 3.1.3: 'Maybe it is wrong to see this Target 2035 initiative as one initiative. There are so many different activities and services within the care unit that we probably need to see this as many initiatives … Some parts will work in eldercare, others in healthcare, and so on' (Interview–Employee 5–Social care subunit).
	3.2 Translation Matters	• 3.2.1: 'We actually reworded parts of the Target 2035 materials … Like, the word 'shift' was quite difficult to understand, and some colleagues got stuck in that word and missed the rest of the text … So, we simplified certain words without changing the content' (Interview–Employee 16–Social care subunit).

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Third-order codes	Second-order codes	Example quotes from first-order codes
		• 3.2.2: 'When we start trying to change something, this also requires that we change this there and that there … If responsibility X is to be delegated, then we need to change all these other routines … I am positive to change, but I am also realistic about the work required' (Interview–Employee 3–Eldercare subunit). • 3.2.3: 'The idea with change agents has been to … Well, at least as I understood it, to gather thoughts about Target 2035 from colleagues and communicate this to managers. But the communication part has not really happened. Maybe it will get going soon?' (Interview–Employee 7–Healthcare subunit).

(1.1). Although a minority, these employees were aligned with managers in stressing how the Target 2035 initiative was an urgent initiative.

As a trigger, urgency notions were manifested in two ways. First, employees who appeared ready for change suggested its supposed urgency was exogenously fuelled by rapid demographic developments – or 'problems' (Interview–Employee 3–Healthcare subunit) or 'bombs' (Interview–Employee 9–Eldercare subunit) – that could not be sidelined or downplayed. Such developments allegedly implied that growing proportions of older persons (65 years and over), alongside decreasing proportions of working-age (and full tax-paying) persons (15–64 years), throughout Western societies would soon engender acute economic challenges for public sector organizations, in general, and for municipalities failing to change, in particular (1.1.1). Embracing change was thus often emphasized in connection to upcoming economic challenges:

> A lot must happen in short time so that significantly larger segment groups can be handled … We [employees] are in the middle of a demographic development that will become a considerable challenge otherwise … Our resources will not be enough (Interview–Employee 7–Social care subunit).

Second, when it came to manifestations of urgency notions, employees in the group defined by readying also claimed Beta's change initiative, and its accompanying vision denoting an ideal future state for care provision, should be associated with far-reaching ambitions. Because this vision incorporated large-scale challenges that would quickly morph into large scale-problems if not addressed (or so it was believed), employees claimed these challenges also had to be accompanied by large-scale ambitions (1.1.2). Anything else was portrayed as impossible:

> Sometimes, I think the [Target 2035] vision is very, very lofty. But, regardless of how, we must all move in that direction [toward the vision]. It is not possible to continue working as we have done up until now (Interview–Employee 24–Social care subunit).

Readying was also partly triggered by internalization efforts that transformed the change initiative into a perceived obligation (1.2). 'Everyone', as stated by eldercare subunit managers in writing, 'must be ready to try, to develop themselves, and to become a part of the [Target 2035] change' (Document–Visionary report 2–Eldercare subunit).

Internalization efforts that triggered readying were manifested in two ways. First, employees in the group who seemed ready for change had largely internalized their supposed urgency. Many of these employees had also formally assumed roles as change

agents, implying they were expected to expend efforts in advocating for change, and gathering suggestions and proposals on how it could be implemented, during the workshop series, but also during daily workplace encounters. Agents attempted to engage employees by individualising the vision of bottom-up implementation activities that could improve future eldercare, healthcare, and social care provision in Beta (1.2.1). Creating such engagement relied on making employees internalize an understanding of the Target 2035 initiative as a requirement:

> [Change agents] must really try to rally and motivate employees … Agents should underscore that "the change initiative depends on you" []employees, and that everyone needs to turn inward for inspiration (Observation–Change agent and change developer meeting 3–Eldercare subunit).

A healthcare employee *qua* change agent elaborated on this alleged need to both individualize and internalize the change initiative outlined by managers:

> The [Target 2035] initiative is not only about work; this change is also about building a future … What future do I want to build for myself, for my kids, and for my users? We need to stop seeing ourselves as employees or as private persons and instead begin seeing ourselves as society builders. So, there is an incredible number of shifts that must be made in our heads … It is easy to only see this [change initiative] as something coming from above, but now we also have to start understanding that this change initiative is not packaged and ready; it is actually something I need to actively engage myself in (Interview–Employee 2–Healthcare subunit).

Second, when it came to manifestations of internalization efforts, employees in the readying group willingly supported and accepted extended responsibilities for non-remunerated, change initiative-related implementation activities. These activities would be squeezed into crammed schedules that already encompassed a full range of daily work tasks, such as caring for older persons or providing support to socioeconomically deprived citizens (1.2.2). Certain employees even appeared to approach the change initiative as an individual calling:

> I want to feel that, regardless of how this [Target 2035] change pans out and ends up, I have been able to contribute. That I have done my best. I do not know what else I can do (Interview–Employee 7–Eldercare subunit).

The group of employees that seemed ready for Beta's change initiative embraced its premises in various ways. This was not the entire picture, however. As we will illustrate throughout a second empirical subsection below, another group of employees appeared resistant to the change initiative. They mistrusted its premises, and exposed aspects that employees within the group readying for change had internalized.

Resisting to Change

Adding to the group of eldercare, healthcare, and social care employees aligned with managers, another group of employees therefore diverted from managers. This latter group largely seemed resistant to the Target 2035 change initiative. Resistance as a response defining this group of employees was partly triggered by labour issues (2.1). This resistance was, as shown in what follows, expressed through doubts and

concerns that reduced employees' enthusiasm for and engagement with said change initiative.

As a trigger, labour issues were manifested in two ways. First, resistant employees were concerned about an alleged shortage of earmarked resources to devise and conduct bottom-up implementation activities. This shortage was supposedly compounded by myriad daily work tasks that required the same attention and energy as usual (2.1.1). Employees felt squeezed:

> We [employees] experience that our time is not enough. I have also heard from others that their time is not enough, and that they have no extra resources that can be used for this [Target 2035 initiative]. Simultaneously, we constantly have the demand for change with us (Interview–Employee 10–Social care subunit).

A healthcare employee specifically described how cross-boundary collaboration, often emphasized by managers when promoting the change initiative in Beta, could even generate suspicions when resources ran short:

> I was told by a manager that my work was not boundary-crossing when I was trying to make sure that the most basic responsibilities [in our subunit] were being carried out … "Your refusal to work across boundaries is not in line with our change initiative" is what I was told. Well, I said "we still lack resources to educate our own personnel in basic hygiene measures". Do you see what I mean? It turned into pressure … To go in and do the work of others is not to work across boundaries when you do not even have the resources to first do your own basic work responsibilities (Interview–Employee 1–Healthcare subunit).

Second, when it came to manifestations of labour issues, employees in the group defined by resistance not only perceived that resources were running short, but also that information was running short. These employees perceived crucial information about the consequences of devising and conducting bottom-up implementation activities was missing in Beta (2.1.2). The lacking information stoked fears among employees who were supposedly accustomed to 'being told exactly what they should do, and how they should do it' (Interview–Employee 14–Social care subunit) through rules and routines characterising a centralized and bureaucratic organization:

> Many [employees] are used to following a detailed protocol or checklist that they tick off … Suddenly, now we have to "do what feels best" and "solve things in dialogue with others" … This [Target 2035 initiative] is a long way to go for many [employees], and it probably creates a lot of insecurity (Interview–Employee 4–Healthcare subunit).

Resistance was also partly triggered by meaning losses stemming from perceptions that Beta's Target 2035 initiative, more than anything else, constituted a managerial ideology with little or no substance (2.2). 'It []the Target 2035 initiative has become a religion for many managers' (Interview–Employee 12–Eldercare subunit).

Meaning losses triggering resistance were manifested in two ways. First, employees in the group defined by resistance emphasized how managers merely risked repeating worn arguments if no additional resource and information flows were facilitated. Worn arguments in combination with resource and information shortages could even engender mistrust (2.2.1). Resistant employees regularly stressed how their distrust derived from managers who did not 'invest" themselves in the change initiative:

> Our managers need to invest in this [Target 2035] initiative if we want to bring it home. We have heard the same old talk about changing on so many occasions before, and then nothing has really happened … It is of no help to just say something up there [among managers], like "now we will change this or that" (Interview–Employee 6–Healthcare subunit).

Second, when it came to manifestations of meaning losses, resistant employees saw few, if any, novelties contained in the vision outlined by managers. 'Same old talk" suggested the alleged message underlying this vision was nothing new: all subunits in the municipal care unit must cut costs. Employees in the group defined by resistance indicated they worked within a sector where cost-cutting measures had intermittently been launched for several decades. The current change initiative was therefore interpreted as just another cost-cutting measure that had not left its footprint in daily working life yet (2.2.2). An eldercare employee in Beta emphasized how

> There is this idea that we will save money by changing so that the individual user can affect his or her life situation, and that he or she will partly participate in the planning of different measures. That is a nice thought. But it is most often just that—a nice thought (Interview–Employee 2–Eldercare subunit).

Similarly, another social care employee mentioned that

> It feels like we are just endlessly babbling and babbling … When my colleagues get to work at eight in the morning, they do not see what is different today and what will be different tomorrow (Interview–Employee 13–Social care subunit).

The two groups analysed this far were defined by employees who responded to Beta's change initiative by either leaning towards readying or towards resisting. However, a third, and the largest, group was defined by employees who wavered in their responses. As we will show throughout a third empirical subsection below, wavering employees moved back and forth between readying and resisting, dynamically ascribing ambivalent meanings to the change initiative.

Wavering Over Change

The third group thus featured eldercare, healthcare and social care employees who, in being ambivalent, wavered over change. Wavering, as a response defining this group of employees, was partly triggered by boundary conditions (3.1). Such conditions kept the simultaneous readying and resisting of wavering employees in check. They regarded the Target 2035 initiative as a difficult but far from unfeasible, change initiative to implement in Beta.

As a trigger, boundary conditions were manifested in three ways. First, wavering employees saw a restricted universe of possibilities for change deriving from bottom-up implementation activities. Resource shortages were, in this sense, once again emphasized. However, these shortages were now emphasized by employees who otherwise remained motivated to engage in change. Resources shortages sowed doubts among employees who actually appeared more ready for change than resistant to change (3.1.1). Their motivation was put to test:

> The persons sitting here are good-hearted, but they are facing challenges that seem slightly disproportionate. At times, it feels as these employees are confused … They are expected to do what many managers generally fail at [successfully implementing a change initiative], and

> to do it with next to no resources (not even the booked room is allowed to incur expenses) and with no formal education in these questions (Observation–Change agent and change developer meeting 2–Eldercare subunit).

Second, when it came to manifestations of boundary conditions, employees in the group defined by wavering also contemplated whether legal frameworks governing a centralized and bureaucratic organization would generate restrictions for change deriving from bottom-up implementation activities. Wavering employees highlighted co-production, another idea that was often emphasized by managers when promoting Beta's change initiative, and these employees curiously reflected about the juridical status of producing care services together with users (3.1.2). Without discarding co-production, legal frameworks were therefore openly discussed as potential restrictions for co-produced care:

> We have had interesting discussions during the workshop series about how the role of case workers could be transformed in the future … But, at times, it feels as if we forget what we actually work with. We work with laws, and we cannot change them much … How much can a user have like … well, be a co-producer and those things in legal terms? I don't know about this delegation (Interview–Employee 11–Eldercare subunit).

And, third, in terms of boundary conditions, employees who wavered also emphasized that no change initiative, however vague and sweeping when initially launched, could subsequently be expected to fulfil all demands found throughout Beta's municipal eldercare, healthcare, and social care subunits. These employees described how they felt limited in imagining bottom-up implementation activities that would hone numerous, and potentially competing, subunit demands (3.1.3). Despite such limitations, employees in the wavering group did not abandon hope when it came to realizing Beta's Target 2035 initiative:

> We have such an enormous breadth of responsibilities throughout our subunits, ranging from neonatal care to home-based nursing care … It is certainly a challenge to find paths into the organisational change initiative that fit all subunits … Maybe it []finding paths can be done (Interview–Employee 5–Healthcare subunit).

Wavering was also partly triggered by translation matters that concerned the specific operationalization of bottom-up implementation activities (3.2). Although wavering employees were not against engaging in implementation activities, these employees were unsure about how they should translate the change initiative into their respective subunits without further information or additional resources.

Translation matters that triggered wavering were manifested in three ways. First, employees in the group defined by wavering hesitated when thinking about how to operationalize what they regarded as a densely formulated change initiative. The initiative supposedly contained dense formulations that created language-related obstacles among employees who, for various reasons, struggled to understand these formulations (3.2.1). A social care employee described how

> We have many persons employed who do not have Swedish as their mother tongue, and some parts of the organisational change materials have been very academically written … There are also many who have a hard time with academic language in general (Interview–Employee 11–Social care subunit).

Second, when it came to manifestations of translation matters, employees who wavered also pondered on how they should operationalize a change initiative featuring no concrete steps. These employees largely believed the Target 2035 initiative was a logical pursuit, and they agreed with its contents in light of rapid demographic developments and sparse municipal budgets (3.2.2). However, employees in the wavering group often returned to their reflections about an initiative that was experienced as rhetorically compelling yet operationally challenging within a centralized and bureaucratic organization:

> "Look, you [employees] will no longer be micro-managed, and we [managers] will instead focus on following up [the outcomes of work tasks]". Yes, that sounds good, but this also needs to be implemented in reality. Right now, it is unclear how we will go about this []operationalising the Target 2035 initiative into bottom-up implementation activities (Interview–Employee 16–Social care subunit).

Finally, in terms of translation matters, wavering employees indicated the supposed absence of concrete steps equalled an absence of clear roles. 'I think the [Target 2035] change [initiative] can be a good thing', as mentioned by a social care employee, 'but we do not know how to work with it or who is supposed to work with what' (Interview–Employee 19–Social care subunit). This alleged lack of clear roles generated confusions that were, perhaps surprisingly, also present among employees who held formalized roles as change agents (3.2.3). Such confusions surfaced when a health employee attempted to explain what the change agent role entailed:

> Well, it []the change agent role is about talking about this organisational change and so on … But this role is kind of vague when you have nothing concrete to talk about. You can always talk about a meeting, and how the change was discussed; I have done that. But I have nothing concrete that we can create or implement in our department. Nothing like that (Interview–Employee 7–Healthcare subunit).

At times, change agents almost seemed uninformed about their roles:

> I actually have an unclear picture [about the change agent role] … I have not sat down with my subunit manager to talk about what I am supposed to do throughout this change the Target 2035 initiative, what the ambitions really are up there in the municipality at unit leadership level, and so on … It the change initiative does not feel so prioritised (Interview–Employee 6–Eldercare subunit).

Sensations of a mismatch between unit leadership ambitions and unit leadership priorities were common among employees in the wavering group. These employees seldom appeared ready for or resistant to the Target 2035 initiative; however, most, if not all, of their time was already consumed by daily work tasks. Wavering employees thus sensed they could not squeeze a wide-ranging change initiative into their schedules. One social care employee instead suggested there was power in a tit-for-tat, trial-and-error approach to change:

> I think there is a tendency to complicate things … Sometimes, it is enough to just pick up the phone and make a call; we don't always have to go with "let's gather the whole crew for a meeting" … We talk about decreasing micro-management, but, with all these people who think strategically, this [the Target 2035 initiative] has become something enormously complicated … Maybe we should just test our way forward, like "we do this little adjustment and see what happens. Do we see any benefits or not?" (Interview–Employee 16–Social care subunit).

Discussion: Organizing Responses to Ambiguous Change Initiatives

In this paper, our aim has been to generate new insights about the responses of organizational members who face ambiguous change initiatives. Drawing on rich qualitative data collected in Beta, a Swedish municipality where managers launched an ambiguous change initiative to transform its municipal care unit through bottom-up implementation activities, our findings are twofold. First, we found that certain groups of employees either readied for or resisted the change initiative, largely based on whether they had internalized it as acute and novel or not. Second, however, we also found that most employees were neither wholly ready for nor entirely resistant to the initiative. Our findings instead show that most employees responded to Beta's ambiguous change initiative by ambivalently wavering between readying and resisting. Wavering employees ascribed ambivalent meanings to the change initiative, stressing how it featured agreeable content, but also emphasizing how it was stifled by extant legal frameworks, current resource shortages, and different subunit needs. Within a centralized and bureaucratic organization like Beta, municipal employees wavered in yearning for steps and instructions coming from top-down implementation directives, while simultaneously understanding that such directives would be antithetical to the bottom-up implementation activities expected by municipal managers.

Advancing Beyond Readying or Resisting

Our paper advances extant change management literature through two contributions that foreground the salience of wavering throughout responses to ambiguous change initiatives. One contribution consists of foregrounding organizational members who waver between readying and resisting in their responses, dynamically ascribing ambivalent meanings to ambiguous change initiatives. Researchers have previously highlighted wavering responses to problematize the traditional dichotomy of readiness and resistance (Bartunek et al., 2025; Cable & Bartunek, 2024; Grønvad et al., 2024; Repovš et al., 2019). Although this research remains valuable, it is nonetheless based on the dual concepts of readiness and resistance. We push change management literature forward by leveraging ambivalence (Ashforth et al., 2014; Rothman et al., 2017) as a third concept, highlighting how organizational members ascribe ambivalent meanings to ambiguous change initiatives in responses that simultaneously encompass the concepts of readiness and resistance. These responses do not constitute readiness and resistance; instead, they constitute a dynamic blend of readying and resisting that merits deploying wavering as an additional concept. When wavering between readying or resisting unfolds in connection to change initiatives featuring concrete goals, earmarked resources, and top-down interventions, wavering may be understood as reflexive responses from organizational members who, based on information they can gather about the focal initiatives, consider various factors, dimensions, and perspectives, instead of immediately settling for categorical, either-or responses (Bartunek et al., 2025). Such reflexivity may, as our findings have shown, also be achieved by organizational members facing ambiguous change initiatives, although the lack of clear goals, resources, and interventions throughout these change initiatives can turn them into moving targets that are difficult to debate and contest.

Another related contribution is to foreground how ambiguous change initiatives may become particularly salient sources of wavering within centralized and bureaucratic organizations, including municipalities like the one we studied. Ambiguous change initiatives have often been studied throughout the IT, R&D, and other industries where ad hoc decisions abound (cf. Hepworth et al., 2017; Sloot et al., 2024), whereas these initiatives have seldom been studied within centralized and bureaucratic organizations where *ex ante* routines and procedures instead abound. Within such organizations, the broadness and looseness of ambiguous change initiatives can make them difficult to implement, considering their implementation often requires ad hoc decisions that may cause discomfort among organizational members who usually follow *ex ante* routines and procedures throughout daily work tasks (cf. Johannessen, 2025; Monteiro & Adler, 2022). Lacking clear goals, resources, and interventions, ambiguous change initiatives can become potent breeding grounds for confusions (cf. Sanner, 2019) and, by extension, cauldrons of wavering responses. This unclearness across goals, resources, and interventions would appear to be especially confusing for members working within organizations where tasks are typically arranged along the lines of routines and procedures required by law (cf. Johannessen, 2025; Monteiro & Adler, 2022).

Curating Tensions to Support Wavering Responses

Throughout change management literature in which resistant responses to change initiatives are treated as negative responses that should be curbed and overcome (e.g. Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Grønvad et al., 2024; Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979), wavering responses and ambiguous change initiatives would probably be considered expressions of failed management. That said, we suggest managers may benefit their organizations by accepting, and not by curbing and overcoming, wavering in the wake of ambiguous change initiatives. Rather than 'curing' organizations from wavering responses, managers can instead attempt to 'curate' such responses.

Curating may consist of welcoming productive tensions between arguments for readying and arguments for resisting in connection to specific change initiatives (cf. Bartunek et al., 2025). Such tensions can foster ambivalence that ultimately supports reflexivity, as managers and other organizational members get the chance to consider various arguments before making decisions and taking actions (Ashforth et al., 2014, pp. 1471–1472; Rothman et al., 2017, pp. 43–45). Curating wavering responses, however, requires sensitivity to situations when tensions between readying and resisting may become too pronounced, potentially resulting in cynicism or burnout among organizational members. Sensitivity, by extension, also means remaining cognizant of members that are perhaps not interested in being actively involved throughout change initiatives (cf. Knights & McCabe, 2000). Striving to involve organizational members in change initiatives through bottom-up implementation activities will, as such, not always be worthwhile. This is why change agents, as actively involved organizational members who are positioned in formal roles between managers and other members, may be the most appropriate addressees for efforts to curate wavering responses.

Wavering, and efforts to foster and support reflexivity by curating such responses, gain particular importance in times when change initiatives are launched as ways of dealing with 'distant futures' (Feuls et al., 2025; Hernes & Schultz, 2020). These 'futures' comprise

impactful developments that are 'distant' because they stretch beyond the temporal horizons usually considered by managers. Such developments include climatic, economic, demographic and other large-scale challenges that will seriously affect organizations tomorrow, but that urgently require preparations starting already today. Considering these challenges, fostering and supporting wavering responses could become a key managerial competence, as it may not be feasible (or even possible) for managers to set concrete goals, allocate earmarked resources, and devise top-down interventions before launching change initiatives (cf. Stouten et al., 2018).

Researching the Various Effects and Contexts of Wavering Responses

We finish this paper by pointing to limitations that also provide future research avenues. One limitation concerns our focus on wavering, and, in particular, our focus on ambiguous change initiatives as salient sources of wavering responses. This particular focus implies we disregarded the effects of wavering responses. Attempting to study the specific effects of employees who wavered would perhaps have been premature in Beta, considering its Target 2035 change initiative was only launched by managers three years ago. Future research avenues could thus include identifying ambiguous change initiatives that were launched a significant number of years ago to study what effects wavering responses generate within organizations over time. For instance, how is the process and progress of ambiguous change initiatives affected by wavering responses? How are relationships between managers and other organizational members affected by wavering responses to ambiguous change initiatives? And how do wavering responses to ambiguous change initiatives affect daily work tasks within organizations?

Another limitation concerns our reliance on a single context when studying wavering responses to ambiguous change initiatives. This reliance implies we centred on a single case municipality to study how ambiguous change initiatives are launched within centralized and bureaucratic organizations facing large-scale challenges. Although focusing on a single case enables deeper examination, such focus can also impair wider examination through comparisons across cases (Ragin & Becker, 1992). Future research avenues could thus include studies comparing several centralized and bureaucratic organizations within which ambiguous change initiatives are launched. For example, municipalities across the Nordic countries face similar economic challenges associated with growing proportions of older persons and decreasing proportions of working-age persons, unfolding amid historical commitments to provide equal and universal welfare services (Knutsson et al., 2017). These similar, albeit not identical, challenges create possibilities for comparative studies of ambiguous change initiatives within centralized and bureaucratic organizations across Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden to examine the change initiatives that are currently being launched. What core characteristics can be identified throughout ambiguous change initiatives unfolding within municipalities across the Nordics? How are these change initiatives formulated in terms of goals, resources, and interventions? And what is the expected role of managers and other organizational members? We believe questions like these deserve attention because they can help expand our understanding of change initiatives launched within centralized and bureaucratic organizations across the Nordic countries and beyond.

Notes

1. We use a pseudonym for our focal municipality to withhold the identities of its managers and employees.
2. See 'Funding details' for information about the financing of this research.

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