



The uses of ambiguity by managers in a change context : an ethnographic study

Caroline Rieu Plichon

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**The uses of ambiguity by managers
in a change context.
An ethnographic study.**

THESE

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DOCTORAT ÈS SCIENCES DE GESTION

Par

Caroline RIEU PLICHON

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Les usages de l'ambiguïté par les managers en contexte de changement. Une étude ethnographique.

Résumé : Cette thèse étudie comment, pour faire face à un changement organisationnel, des managers produisent et gèrent différents types d'ambiguïtés (en réduisant, niant ou augmentant ces ambiguïtés). Elle montre comment ces managers mobilisent des capacités complémentaires, dites positive et négative, selon leurs préférences, pour faire face aux incertitudes du changement, et deviennent ainsi des dompteurs d'ambiguïté.

A travers une étude ethnographique de deux ans, et en tant qu'observatrice participante, nous analysons dix-sept managers, leurs subordonnés et leurs directeurs. Nous montrons comment ces managers sont amenés à mobiliser ambiguïtés et capacité négative (ou capacité de demeurer dans les « incertitudes et les doutes sans chercher les faits ni la raison », Keats, 1970 ; 43) comme des ressources pour gérer le changement.

Mots clés : ambiguïté, managers, changement organisationnel, capacité négative

The uses of ambiguity by managers in a change context. An ethnographic study.

Abstract: This dissertation studies how, in order to face an organizational change, managers produce and manage different types of ambiguities (by reducing, expanding or denying those ambiguities). It shows how these managers mobilize complementary capabilities, so-called positive and negative, according to their preferences, in order to face the uncertainties of the change, and thus become ambiguity tamers.

Through a two-year ethnographic study, from the position of participant observer, we analyze seventeen managers, their subordinates and their directors. We show how these managers mobilize ambiguities and negative capability (i.e. the ability to remain in “uncertainties and doubts without reaching after fact and reason”, Keats, 1970; 43) as resources for change management.

Key words: ambiguity, managers, organizational change, negative capability

“To come to what you know,
You must go by a way where you know not”

St John of the Cross (The Ascent of Mount Carmel, I13:11)

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INTRODUCTION

Ambiguity, managers, and change: one can wonder why these concepts have been selected to be studied in the first place, and second, why they have been chosen to be combined, in this research. Personal reasons as well as theoretical foundations motivate this choice.

To begin with, we live our lives in the midst of **ambiguity**, whether it is our personal or our professional lives. We go through ambiguous situations, we interpret ambiguous information and we make decisions in ambiguous contexts. The very human condition is said to be ambiguous, between its greatness and glory on one hand, and its fragility and impermanence on the other hand. Put in another way, what is actually particularly clear and transparent in our lives? Ambiguity is also there when we transform our thinking into action: “Any particular action has a degree of existing ambiguity – it will not be clear, unequivocal and unanimous to all actors” (Sillince, Jarzabkowski & Shaw, 2012; 647). So not only is ambiguity “environmental”, coming from the environment we live in, but it is also something we seem to produce.

Several reasons incited me to study **ambiguity**. The context of this research also plays a role in choosing to investigate ambiguity. This research occurred in a company of Scandinavian

origins, valuing clarity (or maybe clarity of the importance of agreeing collectively) possibly more than firms from other cultures would. This company operates in the retail industry, and, as an example, the assembly instructions - enclosed with the furniture purchased - interestingly come with no words on, only visuals. For these reasons, I found interesting to investigate ambiguity in this organization, all the more so that the term was hardly pronounced during the two years spent on the research fieldwork (it actually happened once, and was formulated by a top manager). Would ambiguity represent a taboo word in organizations? On a more personal side, coming from a dual culture (French and Cambodian) may have fueled my interest for duality and built a cultural context for ambiguity.

A motive for choosing to focus on (middle) **managers** is that, having occupied such position for some years - managing project and/or people - I feel concerned and interested in observing this intermediate position, target of paradoxical injunctions, and thereby exposed to ambiguity. I also happened to have worked with a colleague – let us call him Ian - with a rather undivided personality. Ian was a skilled and generous colleague, but happened to have trouble with compromises and concessions that his hierarchy was expecting from him, given his managerial position. As I worked with him on a very regular basis, I did see his unease and almost suffering of being in such a situation. In the department, he was the one coping with ambiguity the least. Ian left the company, for different reasons, but I believe that one of them was his blatant inability to deal with ambiguity. Ian may have inspired my wish to investigate it.

As for **change**, this topic first seemed to me as a vast constellation in research, a paradigm on its own, somehow too massive and too broad to be tackled in a Ph.D. dissertation. Yet change has the power of accelerating processes and social phenomena, which is why I found change particularly interesting and relevant as a context to study ambiguity. Former positions I occupied for a couple of years, as a project manager, and as a change manager (the role I was employed for, during my fieldwork) made me experience “from within” this acceleration of processes and activities, and also participated in the reasons for studying change. Last but not least, I realized that, on a personal level, I (my parents, actually) had moved five times (over four countries) in my first six years. And I numbered twenty movings so far, in my life (in seven countries: Cambodia, Morocco, France, Iran, United Kingdom, Spain and Sweden). Change therefore seems to be very central in my life.

This was the brief genesis of the multiple **personal** (at times professional, too) **motives** why ambiguity, managers and change have been chosen as main components of my research. Let us

now dig into the **theoretical foundations** of this choice, as well as, beyond the selection of these three distinct concepts, how we thought interesting and relevant to relate them and thereby defined the main research question of this work.

The first theoretical reason for choosing these three concepts may lie in the scarcity of the literature gathering them all (Randall & Procter, 2008). The following associations are namely to be found in the literature. **Change** is often associated to **a type of ambiguity**: identity ambiguity (Bouchikhi & Kimberly, 2003; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Lindeberg, 2007), role ambiguity (Rizzo, House & Lirtzman, 1970; Yousef, 2000), causal ambiguity – in the strategy literature (Reeds & De Filippi, 1990; King & Zeithaml, 2001; Ambrosini & Bowman, 2010), and goal ambiguity (Calciolari, Cantù & Fattore, 2011; Jarzabkowski, Sillince & Shaw, 2016; Pandey & Wright, 2006). **Change** is also associated to **managers** (Isabella, 1990; Furnham, 2002; Rouleau, 2005; Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Herzig & Jimmieson, 2006; Conway & Monks, 2011). **Change** is of course related to **ambiguity** (Dutton, 1986; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Denis et al., 1996; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia, Nag & Corley, 2012; Jarzabkowski, Sillince & Shaw, 2010). Last but not least, **managers** are also related to **ambiguity** (Noordegraaf, 2000; Caldwell, 2003; Pandey & Wright, 2006; Marginson & Ogden, 2005). So out of the three concepts that are ambiguity, managers and change, literature is abundant for each, and also gathers them two by two, but seldom reunites the three of them together.

Although definitions of ambiguity seem to converge in positioning it as a **cognitive** construct, ambiguity covers multiple definitions, which also vary according to the **level** where ambiguity is situated: organizational or individual.

For March and Olsen, ambiguity means ambiguity of history, of preferences and of technology (Noordegraaf, 2000; 321) and is thus positioned at the organizational level. Carson et al. (2006) see ambiguity as a lack: lack of clarity, lack of precision or lack of knowledge (“Too little is known”, Pich et al., 2002; 1009) in the environment, and therefore seems to stem from the organization. Corley & Gioia (2004) also locate ambiguity at the **organizational** (meso) level, as ambiguity affects organizational identity.

Some authors, though, consider ambiguity as a micro concept, anchored at the **individual** level. Ambiguity is “the condition of admitting more than one meaning” for Giroux (2006; 1228). For several authors – like Giroux - ambiguity means equivocality.

This may constitute the second theoretical reason for this work: **developing** the literature on **ambiguity** at the **individual** level, particularly the managerial one.

Literature on ambiguity also distinguishes the **types of consequences** attributed to ambiguity and to its usage. Two opposite approaches prevail. Some authors see these consequences as predominantly **deleterious**, harmful, and negative, while others see them as predominantly **virtuous**, favorable, and positive.

Sonenshein (2010) points out that too much ambiguity engenders **confusion**, while for Denis et al. (2011), ambiguity opens the door to paralysis, to “escalating indecision”, i.e. successive decisions without action. Some authors also consider ambiguity as a necessary evil, as “both a problem for organizational action and a feature of many organizations” (Sillince, Jarzabkowski & Shaw, 2012; 648).

On the other side, Eisenberg (1984) was one of the first researchers not only to draw attention to the presence and role of ambiguity in organizations, but also to underline its virtues. One of the main virtues of ambiguity seems to allow **accommodating differences**, i.e. accommodating multiple and possibly divergent perspectives (Eisenberg, 1984; Davenport & Leitch, 2005; Giroux, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010; Krause-Jensen, 2011; Abdallah & Langley, 2014). It thus brings about a “unified diversity” (Eisenberg, 2006; 9) and gathers multiple interests (Star & Griesemer, 1989). Ambiguity, when acknowledged, also enables to develop coping strategies through collaboration (Walker, Davis & Stevenson, 2017).

The **third theoretical motivation** of this work is the **development** of the reflection on **ambiguity as a virtue**, since, in this research, we indeed draw from this second approach of ambiguity. We do acknowledge that ambiguity represents a feature of organizations - at least, a feature in the organization we observed. Yet we contend that, despite the discomfort and risks it may produce, ambiguity and its uses, if properly managed, represent more of an asset, a virtue, and a source of richness **for both organizations and the people working inside them**.

Ambiguity's first approach was an economic and organizational one. Ambiguity is a concept very much used in Economics – considered as uncertainty with unknown probabilities - based on figures and quantitative models (Ellsberg, 1961; Einhorn & Hogarth, 1985; Camerer & Weber, 1992). Ambiguity produces different consequences, such as two opposite reactions: aversion or tolerance. Thus, in Economics, reactions to ambiguity seem to be **cleaving**. In the Management literature, ambiguity is not seen a type of uncertainty, but more as a feature of it. In Management, ambiguity also appears to be something one is **seldom indifferent to**. For

ambiguity usually engenders discomfort, minimizing it, even avoiding it, or else, resolving it – as we try and resolve an issue or an enigma – often is a temptation, if not a tendency in organizational life. Ambiguity thus became a more socialized, individualized and managerial concept (Ho, Keller & Keltyka, 2002; 2005). **Managers** constantly experience ambiguity inside the organization, which makes it the central theme of *Moral Mazes* (Jackall, 1988). Middle managers are confronted to **ambiguity**, particularly through leading **projects**. **Receivers** of this ambiguity, they are also in charge of **managing it**, in a way or another, for their subordinates. What are their **attitudes and practices** in such a context? This is what the present research intends to explore in the peculiar, but also very ordinary, context of a change project.

Literature on middle **managers** and change tends to position them between resistance (Mantere, 2005; Sillince & Mueller, 2007; Guilmot, 2016) and initiative, with regards to this change they are in charge of (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Rouleau, 2005; Halme et al., 2012), that is to say in a rather **committed** role. Managerial work has been observed for a long time, but seems to be still a current point of interest, as a recent special issue of *Human Relations* (March 2019) evidences it. Middle Managers are also seen as umbrellas for their subordinates (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2019), protecting them from what may be unnecessary or harmful. In the frame of a change project, even a mere adaptation or adjustment recovers issues such as: project progression, comfort (or discomfort) of the managers and of their team, and in the end, success (or not) assigned (or not) to the manager. Recommendations usually made are in the direction of involvement, conviction, leadership, i.e. in the direction of lessening, if not removing, uncertainty and ambiguity. **Would there be one and only way to manage ambiguity?** Can we not consider to “make do” with it in a more open manner? A call for future research had namely been made on managers and ambiguity: “**Future research** could also focus on **the effect of individual differences middle managers may have, such as tolerance for ambiguity**” (Greco and Roger In Herzig & Jimmieson, 2006).

Change in organizations is “an experience of cognitive disorder” (Herzig & Jimmieson, 2006; 629) for those whom live it and even more so, for those in charge of managing it. Managing the gap - between what is decided by top management and how it is implemented by middle managers -, reducing it or adjusting it is, by nature, a situation of discomfort and of uncertainty. Moreover, if, in a classical conception, change is seen as a moment of exception, as an episode isolated of organizational life, the current literature considers it is so much constitutive of this

very life that it became the normal condition (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Despite the admitted benefits, for an organization, of having its main stakeholders participating rather early in the making of a change project, top-down change is very much adopted in practice (Dunphy & Stace, 1988). In top-down change, “senior managers conceive, middle managers coordinate and employees are expected to embed change, although they hardly intervene in the decision-making process” (Ryan et al., 2008; 27). In the current research, top-down change is the change we are observing.

A somehow **performative** vision of change, whether individual and/or organizational, seems to prevail throughout the literature. The terminology used for change reflects this: change is something to “achieve”, to be “assessed” whether it is “successful” or not, through economic success “criteria” (such as profitability, market share, “bottom line” criteria). Even the change “effort” is evaluated, successwise. Research on change is much guided towards **usefulness**. This performative vision of change opens the door to a **prescriptive** list of recommended actions, in order to increase efficiency and effectiveness. Change management is for example rather developed from an operational angle (“change implementation”). Diagnostic models help managers succeed in change management, minimize resistance/maximize receptivity to change, and eventually build commitment to change.

Change management is also –yet less often- developed from a **comprehensive** angle (“understanding change”). **This is the one we will expand in the current research.**

Middle managers have also been identified as “change recipients”, whose **sensemaking** had a “critical shaping role” (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; 543; 546). In this research, we would like to draw on this view of the middle managers, through paying attention to their uses of ambiguity, both in their change management process and in their sensegiving process. How are managers **change recipients** and **sense recipients** at the same time?

Based on these reviews of the literature, we focused on the following research questions, which the present research aims at investigating:

How do managers use ambiguity in order to cope with a change context/process?

How (by which process) is ambiguity conveyed/transformed/processed from top managers to middle managers to subordinates?

To explore this question, we observed **the practices of managers**, on the occasion of an organizational change. Through an ethnographic study of almost two years, at a global furniture retailer, as the change and communication manager of an e-invoicing project, we observed **financial managers** whose subordinates – accountants - were likely to be impacted by this change externalizing part of their jobs.

This research comes in four parts. The research literature review (part 1) focuses on the population of managers situated in a change context on one hand, and on the concept of ambiguity, on the other hand. Managers in the midst of an organizational change (chapter 1) presents (1.1) middle managers; (1.2) middle managers in a change context (as project managers, as change agents and as sensemakers). Ambiguity in management (chapter 2) presents (2.1) ambiguity in organizations with the existing types of ambiguity and with the role played by the organizational culture in ambiguity management; (2.2) managers and ambiguity. We show managers making sense, for their subordinates, of the change and of the ambiguity it contains. We then introduce the concept of Negative Capability, the state in which a person “is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” (Keats, 1970; 43)

The research methodology (part 2) starts with presenting what working in a Scandinavian multinational (chapter 1) can mean. It introduces (1.1) the Scandinavian culture (the organization studied, the project studied, the peculiar status of projects in this organization and the status of ambiguity in this organization; (1.2) the access to the fieldwork. The research design (chapter 2) aims at showing the ethnographic study (chapter 3) as particularly relevant to study managers’ ambiguity and to answer the research question. The ethnographic study, based on observing (a lot), listening (and silencing), presents (3.1) the organizational ethnography; (3.2) the data collected and (3.3) their analysis. The ethnographic study goes with an auto-ethnographic study (chapter 4) for two reasons. First, the research is conducted from within (participant observation), and second, the position of the researcher coincides with a managerial role observed in the research.

The results of the research (part 3) are introduced: producing and managing ambiguity (chapter 1), through the project seen from different viewpoints (1.1) as well as the project seen in one process (1.2). The viewpoints come from different voices (1.1): the voice of the senior

managers, the voice of the managers observed in the change, the voice of the managers' subordinates (the accountants), my own voice, as manager in the project, and the voice of the project itself. The dynamics of the project (1.2) is then presented, through different phases, from an ambiguity angle. The narratives are analyzed (1.3). Producing ambiguity is analyzed too (1.4). So is managing ambiguity (1.5); managers become ambiguity tamers (1.6). Another result of the research is mobilizing managerial capabilities, so-called negative and positive (chapter 2). We tried to operationalize this concept of managerial capabilities through the construction of a grid of criteria identifying and differentiating the Negative Capability from the Positive Capability (2.1). This capability grid was tested on the seventeen managers (2.2) to identify their preferred capability. The study of two particularly contrasted cases, Jeremy and Irene, brought more details to the analysis (2.3). Both managerial capabilities are then compared. The results end with considering ambiguities and capabilities as resources for an organizational change, for the individual as for the organization. We also propose our definition of ambiguity and of ambiguity management.

The discussion (part 4) starts with debating managers in change and in ambiguity (chapter 1). Wouldn't the managers, change agents, become ambiguity tamers? (1.1). Couldn't we consider the idea of bounded ambiguity? (1.2) What about combining both managerial capabilities? (1.3). The discussion follows, considering Negative Capability as a habilitating skill for managers (chapter 2), through sensemaking (2.1) and through an alternative human resource management valuing and developing negative capability (2.2). Yet, chapter 2 ends with the possible limits of Negative Capability (2.3).

The conclusion summarizes the results of the research, and its contributions. As theoretical contribution, we propose a grid of five criteria identifying each capability mobilized, operationalizing this concept. We also theoretically contribute on the discretionary role of the manager (expanding, denying or reducing ambiguity) in a change context, and becoming an ambiguity tamer. We lastly theoretically contribute in our description of how change unfolds, through an ambiguity angle. As managerial contributions, our research first rehabilitates ambiguity and uncertainty in organizations (considered more as a source of organizational sustainability than a weakness), then values the mobilization of both complementary capabilities in an organizational change, according to the change phases. Our last managerial contribution is a change anti-manual for managers.

PART 1.

RESEARCH LITERATURE REVIEW

PART 1.

RESEARCH LITERATURE REVIEW

PRESENTATION OF PART 1

Part 1 presents the theoretical foundations of this research.

Part 1 unfolds the context and the concept of managerial ambiguity. This part aims at presenting, on one hand, different elements producing uncertainty and present in managers daily life, such as ambiguity and change, and, on the other hand, the managers' reactions described in the literature, how they deal with these elements, their sensemaking/sensegiving process and the concept of managerial capabilities – positive and negative.

Part 1 is divided into two chapters. Chapter 1 presents the context of ambiguity observed for the present research: managers in the midst of an organizational change. Chapter 2 focuses on the concept of ambiguity and positions it in the aforementioned context, describing different ways to manage it, particularly through managing with negative capability.

CONTENT OF PART 1

Chapter 1. Managers in the midst of organizational change

Chapter 2. Ambiguity in management

CHAPTER 1. MANAGERS IN THE MIDST OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

CHAPTER 1 GOALS

Chapter 1 aims at presenting literature reviews on middle managers, whom represent the population observed in the present research, and on organizational change, which is used as a context in this research.

CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY

Chapter 1 shows how relative and sometimes undefined is the role of middle managers. Yet, change steers this role, almost clarifying it, towards the role of project managers, change agents and sensemakers.

1.1. MIDDLE MANAGERS MANAGING

1.1.1 A NON DEFINITION AS A DEFINITION

Jackall, in *Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers* (1988), depicts managers considering their world as having not much order and being defined by others - as being the locus the judgment of others (Jackall, 1988; 40). Girin proposes a situational definition of managers: managers are situated at the meeting of a confused mandate and of a complex activity (Girin, 1995; 259 in Laroche, 2000; 7). Managers seems to be defined either **relatively** or **by what they are not**, by what they are **'becoming'** (Thomas & Linstead, 2002).

These non-definitions sometimes did/do not help them in valuing their role. *Journal of Management Studies* recent call (2019) for a special issue on “(Re)conceptualizing Middle Managers’ roles in modern organizations” highlights the “increased pressure to justify their existence and value for the modern organization”. “**Managerless**” organizations seem to be the choice done by some companies (Puranam & Håkonsson, 2015), or to represent a phase of agile management (Kerr, Gabrieli & Moloney, 2018).

1.1.2 ON MANAGERIAL ROLES

Henri Mintzberg (1973), in *The nature of managerial work*, identified and described **ten managerial roles** and characterized managerial works. He, among other things, highlighted that managers attention was much drawn by events, current events.

Thirty years after Mintzberg work, Tengblad (2001, 2012), through a new survey on (Swedish) managers, admitted that managerial work, a few tasks aside, was a rather stable phenomenon, confirming Mintzberg statement that “in essence, managers work today as they always have” (Mintzberg 1973: 161). Tengblad, Swedish researcher observing Swedish companies and leadership, seems to us relevant to mention in our Literature Review because the company we base this research upon has Scandinavian roots. Jönsson (1995) characterized Swedish leadership, reporting about the “vagueness of directives” (vagueness expressed by “a reluctance to give people detailed commands”) and a “preoccupation with consensus seeking and an international orientation” (Jönsson, 1995 in Tengblad, 2001: 7). Edström & Jönsson (in Czarniawska 1998: 167) highlighted the manager’s trust in his/her subordinate’s capability of

making sound judgments of their own (based on the “see what you can do about it” response of the manager to his/her subordinate reporting an issue). Work organization in Sweden indeed focuses on autonomous and empowered work teams (Bäckström, 1999). For Hofstede (1980), Swedish professionals strongly value cooperation and good relations. Besides, they seem to cope rather well with the uncertainty of not having clear instructions, which means they show little uncertainty avoidance, not being afraid of embracing it. This **mindset** and **cultural frame favors** the occurrence and the development of **ambiguity**.

Edström & Jönsson (1998) put forth that a leader, far from being an administrator or a boss, should lead through communicating ideas, instead of imposing rules. Tengblad stressed on the significant managerial extra work effort (+60% compared to Mintzberg’s study), and on their “moving all around” to get to talk with their teams. A top manager said so, in a feedback session: “You can’t build a culture or create commitment for company goals and visions by sending written instructions from the head office. You have to meet and talk with the people where they work”. Besides, Tengblad’s study revealed that top managers spent “much more time on exchanging information (60% of their time), particularly giving information (four times more), and less time on strategy. He incidentally compared the role of the top managers he observed to that of **high priests**, through communicating values and creating faith and commitment towards company. He thereby initiated a paradigmatic **shift** on the role of top managers, changing **from administrators to value communicators and symbols handlers**.

The possible roles played by managers, numbered at ten by Mintzberg, increased with time and with other authors. Among the roles that the managers take on, the literature mentions the “manager diffuser/sprinkler”, “manager regulator”, “manager negotiator” (Mintzberg, 1973), but also “manager agile” (Barrand, 2012).

1.1.3. IN THE MIDDLE

Gjerde & Alvesson (2019) explored the role of middle managers as sandwiched, using the metaphor of an umbrella carrier, in order to shelter their subordinates from unnecessary information coming from the top and to thereby lower the pressure. This position, in the middle, makes managers produce a form of countermanagement.

Out of this profusion of texts, we will select a few managerial features that we identified as relevant for the current research, namely their role of **absorbers, sensors, resistant to change, and heed givers** in the organization.

MANAGERS AS ABSORBERS

Sometimes, what is expected does not occur, or what was not expected does occur. This generates gaps (Weick, 1995a). “The manager is first of all an administrator and a gap absorber. The manager carries out a whole work on these gaps: a work of interpretation, of categorization, of rating, of connection, a work of staging later on. Far from being only a drive belt, the manager slows down or accelerates, retains or repels, twists, hides or unbends dynamics engendered by organizational dynamics” (Laroche, 2000; 14). The manager absorbs problems. “It is the manager’s function to collect the non-compliant and to find out ad hoc solutions.”

MANAGERS AS SENSORS / NON RATIONAL BEINGS / CAPTORS OF INFORMAL/HEED GIVERS

Weick and Roberts (1993) characterized **heed** as a **specific quality of attention** that nurtures collective action. Studying aircrafts carriers, they describe the alertness that binds the landing team as heed, a form of active, cognitive but also relational attention. The heed is also a way of animating a temporary setting/temporary team in a limited period of time (Laroche, 2000; 16-17).

MANAGERS AS RESISTANT TO CHANGE

Managers have been sometimes identified as resisting change, as change may have undermined their autonomy and their power (Ryan et al., 2008).

“If there were no ambiguities, no messy conditions, there would be no need for management” (Noordegraaf, 2000; 10). **Ambiguity and uncertainty** are the **context wherein managers live**. Environment uncertainty and ambiguity set “constraints of perception (which information to identify and how to behave accordingly?) and constraints of interpretation” (Théron, 2015; 33).

1.1.4. MANAGING

Managing seems to be an activity difficult to determine or to delineate, for it gathers many practices and (sub-) activities.

After *The nature of managerial work* (1973), Mintzberg used the gerund *Managing* as the title for his book (2009). Rosemary Stewart (1988, first edition 1967) chose to study (160) managers throughout time: what they actually do at work (what they spend their time doing). Her study seemed to unveil quite different situations. Yet, on average, the work week amounted to 42 hours (though longer, for sales managers, who spent more time traveling). On average (again, covering extreme situations), half of their time was spent in their own offices, and **some time** was also spent in **inspection. Discussing, especially informally**, took **half or their time** and “committees” to attend were not numerous (on average: half a day per week, and the same amount of time was dedicated to phone calls).

Today, managers work longer hours and, on a regular basis, partly work from home (which hardly happened at that time - and if ever, non-regularly). Information technologies enabling this, today managers spend a lot of time on emails (several hours a day, up to 6 hours) and on many more meetings (distance meetings are enabled through visio conferences).

Strong leadership is at times seen as imposing change and using coercive methods to overcome resistance. In this research, however, we support a different idea of leadership, based on **listening and sensing** in the first place, in order to manage organizational change.

1.2. MIDDLE MANAGERS IN A CHANGE CONTEXT

This section pictures elements of context in this research (change, project management, uncertainty...), from a managerial position, and focuses on the two following managerial roles: the role of change agent and the role of sensemaker.

Change is a concept extensively discussed whose size almost amounts to the one of a discipline. In the present research, we choose to study change as an element of context – element of importance, yet not the most important – to investigate the concept of ambiguity. The following literature on change is therefore purposefully not extensive, but focuses on **top-down change**, on **change as a process**, and on **symbols for change**, such as metaphors or visual data.

DEFINITION OF AN ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Change in organizations is “an experience of cognitive disorder” (Herzig & Jimmieson, 2006; 629). This disorder has been dealt with in different ways, with different approaches, and different reactions.

Change has initially been studied through **Kurt Lewin’s (1951) theory or model** of change might be the most known – and criticized, for its enunciation seems simplistic. It consists in three stages, namely unfreezing, moving and freezing, which represent three successive phases through which an organization experiencing change goes. Change is thus a rather **practical process** composed of a certain number of **stages**, starting from a phase of stability, leaving this stability, and ending with a new phase of stability. Building on Lewin, yet opposing to him, Hendry (1996) proposes a definition of change as an unfreezing process only, i.e. without stages but one only state. Both approaches see change as a process, either in stages, or on-going.

To precise the definition, adjectives or names are affixed to change. Change is defined and characterized **through various criteria**. Most authors define change through its possible **anticipation**: a change is **planned** or not (in which case it is emergent). **Planned** change often looks like “off-the shelf standardized solutions” (Weick, 2012; 235) localised on a single matter, and emerging from top management. For Weick, a planned change is interesting to use for the organization and for top managers, because it is a pretext for changes that are considered advantageous to carry out anyhow, as a way to show a rational program and because of its clear mandate, may be simpler to spread (Weick, 2012; 232). Planned change thus often seems to be **top-down**.

Much has been written on change. Many articles have mentioned the **importance** of managing or leading change (Hartley et al., 1997; Worren et al., 1999; Huy, 2002; Todnem By, 2005; Herzig & Jimmieson, 2006; Conway & Monks, 2011; Langley et al., 2013; Cummings et al., 2016). Indeed “the primary task for management today is the leadership of organizational change” (Graetz, 2000; 550). Beside managing change, a lot has also been written on managing **perceptions** of change (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006; Rafferty & Jimmieson, 2017; Gover et al., 2016), and also, on managing **reactions** to change (Shapiro & Kirkman, 1999; Self et al., 2007; Conway et al., 2014).

Weick defines change through its **duration** or its finitude, opposing **episodic** change to continuous change. The change also emphasizes the following reality in organizational life: the boss, or the group of people “above” in the hierarchy, might not be much capable or eager to clearly express what they actually expect, because it is hard to explain or because, they just do not have a clue (Laroche, 2000; 7). This is all the more so the case in a change project, and is a welcoming context for ambiguity.

SITUATED CHANGE

Orlikowski (1996) proposed the perspective of *situated change* as an alternative to planned change. Situated change corresponds to an “ongoing improvisation” (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; 310), i.e. an adaptive process, through incremental adjustment. It is considered as an individual coping strategy. As a consequence, she considers a change as successful when elements of bureaucracy and control are replaced by flexibility and self-organizing.

TOP-DOWN CHANGE

Change is considered as ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’ according to the roles played by managers (Heyden et al., 2017; Burgelman, 1983; Raes et al., 2011). In top-down approaches, Top Managers are considered as change initiators (Carpenter, Geletkanycz, & Sanders, 2004), and Middle Managers, as reluctant executors (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Guth & MacMillan, 1986).

Despite the admitted benefits for an organization of having its main stakeholders participating rather early in the making of a change project, top-down change is very much adopted in practice. In the current research, it is also the case of the change we are observing.

As mentioned earlier, planned change often looks **top-down**. External pressure to change and possible internal resistance are acknowledged as substantial reasons justifying a top-down change (Dunphy & Stace, 1988). In top-down change, “senior managers conceive, middle managers coordinate and employees are expected to embed change, although they hardly intervene in the decision-making process” (Ryan et al., 2008; 27). Top-down change has the asset of establishing and displaying senior management’s vision of change and of providing top level support. Yet, it presents some limitations. Overall, it lacks acknowledging neither the complexity nor the uncertainty of organizational change processes (Dawson, 1994). More

precisely, a limitation is that it may bring potential dispute among senior managers. A second limitation is that it supposes that change is a linear process (McNulty & Ferlie, 2004). A third limitation is that top management willingness for change (which might not be echoed as much at lower levels) does not suffice to sustain the change in the long run (Herbst, 1976; Worren et al., 1999). A fourth limitation of the top-down approach is staff resistance to change, particularly strong when people have not been much involved beforehand and remain with their fears and concerns related to the change (Coram & Burnes, 2001). A fifth limitation of the top-down approach, as of the bottom-up one, is that they do not succeed in engaging neither middle managers nor employees whom both feel the change is coercive (Ryan et al., 2008; 34). For managers, a **centre-down** approach is expected to be more suitable as it enables them a more active role as change initiators and interpreters (Ryan et al., 2008), still addressing real issues. **Centre-out** approach allows horizontal and matrix coordination. Top-down change therefore needs to be complemented by other approaches, such as centre-down or centre-out.

The change observed seemed to be initially thought of and structured in a top-down way. The recommendation from the headquarters, after the change had been implemented in a couple of subsidiaries, of recruiting a change manager, in addition to the project manager, may have been decided to supply this hierarchical approach, complementing it with a more centre-down approach. The change manager expected role was indeed to liaise and consult with the different stakeholders. The change manager expected skills were indeed “people skills”. Effective change is actually deemed to be based on the “ability to facilitate positive relationship between employees and to communicate the purpose and process of the change to stakeholders” (Ryan et al., 2008; 28, quoting Bass, 1985, 1990).

The change we observed thus seems to correspond to a planned top-down change *ex ante*, revisited or completed with a centre-out, a centre-down and a bit of a bottom-up approaches during the change process. The centre-out approach is embedded in the collaboration of the project team (led by the project manager Liv, and composed of a change manager, myself, and accounting and finance managers from the head office) and finance managers from the stores. The centre-down approach reflects all the work carried out around the change by the managers towards their subordinates accountants. The bottom-up approach is expressed in the creation of a shared space (a dedicated file on a dedicated server) enabling employees to voice their questions, doubts and concerns on the change to the project team, thereby providing

regular feedback on the change dynamics from employees (and showing the latter a consultative attempt from their hierarchy), in a possibly anonymous way.

So ex post, the change resulted in a combination of approaches in different ways.

For Nonaka (1994), change cannot be completely mastered by companies' leaders. This observation opens the door to a necessary ambiguity which conveniently enable to "make it look like the change is mastered enough" and thus bounds resistance to change, but also allows some freedom for the stakeholders to drive and support the change. Therefore, **change seems to foster ambiguity.**

Reactions to change are attempted to be "monitored". Change management follows "strategies" that are sought to be continuously improved (change thus seems to have been particularly studied by the discipline of **strategy**).

In many articles (Burke & Litwin, 1992; Vollman, 1996; Barnett & Carroll, 1995), **success** seems to be the ultimate criterion and the focus is thereby on content factors (such as strategic orientation, organization structure...) which impact the change success. Change "champions" are looked after and carefully identified. A somehow **performative** vision of change, whether individual and/or organizational, then seems to prevail throughout the literature. The terminology used for change reflects this: change is something to "achieve", to be "assessed" whether it is "successful" or not, through economic success "criteria" (such as profitability, market share, "bottom line" criteria). Even the change "effort" is evaluated successwise. Research on change is much guided towards **usefulness**. Change management is for example rather developed from an operational angle ("change implementation"). It is also –yet less often- developed from a **comprehensive** angle ("understanding change"). This is the one we will expand in the current research.

This performative vision of change, which is sought to be effective, opens the door to a **prescriptive** list of recommended actions, in order to increase efficiency and effectiveness. An element possibly limiting success is for instance **resistance to change** (sought to be minimized in that purpose). Diagnosing what enables managers to identify the factors ("what") and the moment ("when") to focus on, for a successful change, has been investigated by Burke & Litwin (1992). Identifying the magnitude of a possible change in order to avoid underestimations has

been carried out by Vollman (1996), through a matrix – a rather large one, presenting, on one hand, the different issues addressed, and on the other hand, the organizational dimensions and resources. Kelly & Amburgey (1991) investigated the impact of context (environmental change, age of the organization, size of the organization, repetition of the change) on change while the impact of contextual factors on organizational change has been studied by Barnett & Carroll (1995).

A **binary** and **polarized** vision embedded in a peculiar terminology seems to emerge around change. Change can namely be either planned or emergent, either episodic or continuous, either resisted or received/adopted. A change attempt can result in its success or in its (statistically more likely) failure.

Change has been tackled through the following **themes: success for change and elements of diagnostic, context for change** (conditions, organizational slack, previous change experiences), **change dynamics** (Sastry, 1997; Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999), **organizational inertia...**

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Change has been studied through **characteristics**, trying to identify its main features: organizational dimensions and resources, such as culture, configuration, coordination, people, information, or technology (Vollman, 1996). Change has also been studied through **categories**. Senior (2002) defines change according to its occurrence, to how it arrives and to its scale, thereby delineating three categories.

So all in all change has been investigated through different **sectors or industries**: health care (Meyer et al., 1990), airlines (Kelly & Amburgey, 1991), banks (Fox-Wolfgramm, Boal & Hunt, 1998), hotel (Okumus & Hemmington, 1998), public organizations (Ryan et al., 2008)

When it comes to the **methodological approaches** to change, models have been numerous (Lewin, 1951; Burke & Litwin, 1992; Barnett & Carroll's, 1995; Vollman, 1996), some of them being mathematical models (Gresov, Haveman & Oliva, 1993; Huff, Huff & Thomas, 1992; Sastry, 1997). Change has also been explored through case studies (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Ryan et al., 2008), through meta-analysis (Damanpour, 1991).

“Change almost invariably creates a sense of uncertainty until a new steady state is achieved. To minimize uncertainty and restore balance, targets may either resist or accept change efforts by anchoring in either the past or the future” (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1992; 246). These authors thus consider that uncertainty is to be dealt with, by lowering it as much as possible.

CHANGE AS A PROCESS

Change has been considered as a process, going through different successive phases, whose number varies, often divided in a set of phases about understanding (in which “change targets progress”, Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; 304) and another set of phases about implementing change (in which “change agents act”).

“This process [organizational change as a social process] is always full of surprises and unforeseen feedback loops, and never matches the simplifying sequential visions of rational planning.” (Friedberg in Pichault, 2013; 11)

“Change is challenging. With any organizational change come unknowns. With unknowns come ambiguities” (Corley & Gioia, 2004; 173). Change is thus tightly related to ambiguities, in the way that change seems to produce ambiguities – through producing unknowns.

Some researchers have divided change process issues into two types phases or stages: issues related to **understanding change** as a process and issues related to **implementing change** as a process. Change is something one **operationalizes**. **Planning and implementing** change as a process aims at offering “guidance for successfully implementing change” (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; 302). Implementing change as a process actually started with Lewin's successive unfreezing, moving, and freezing.

“The process employed in implementing change can influence not only the perception of change, but also the involvement of those affected by the sequencing of the change activities.” (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; 299)

Many change **implementation** models (Armenakis et al., 1999; Galpin, 1996; Isabella, 1990; Jaffe et al., 1994; Judson, 1991; Kotter, 1995; Lewin, 1951) exist when it comes to change. The lessons “learned” from these models are two-folded. First, these steps are numerous and particularly time consuming (and any effort to skip some of them does not lead to any satisfactory result). Second, any mistake in any steps may cancel hard-won progress (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; 303). Our research builds upon Isabella’s model describing the different stages an individual goes through, all along the change journey.

The change **process** is described through **stages, phases, or typologies**. Stages, that compose change, are many and differently labeled. Jaffe et al. (1994) identify four stages: denial, resistance, exploration and commitment. A typology of change has been designed to categorize reactions to change, through the Greek letters alpha, beta, gamma (Golembiewski, Billingsley & Yeager, 1976). These authors define as alpha change the experience of affective or behavioral change, as beta change, the participants’ recalibration of the meaning of the change, and as gamma change, their redefinition of the meaning of the organizational constructs.

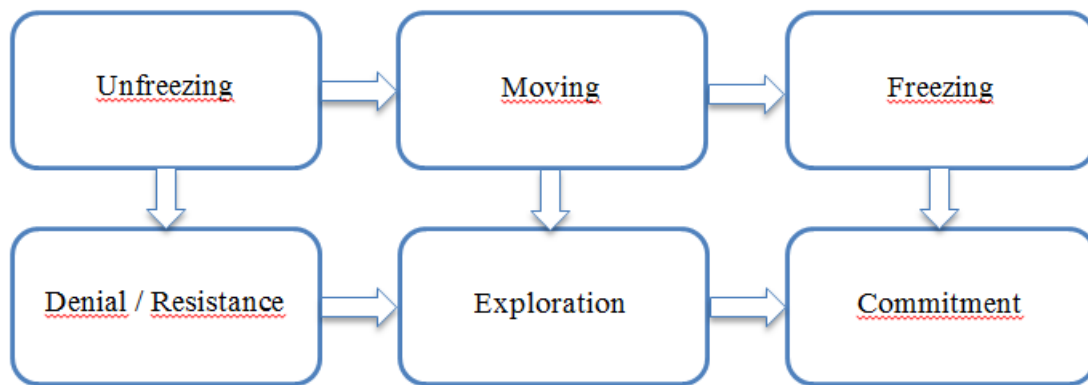


FIGURE 1 - CHANGE PROCESS

(SIMPLIFIED FROM "CHANGE AGENT PHASES AND CHANGE TARGET STAGES", IN ARMENAKIS & BEDEIAN, 1999; 305)

SYMBOLS FOR CHANGE: METAPHORS AND VISUAL DATA OF/IN CHANGE

Metaphors are abundantly used to describe organizational change and to inspire stakeholders. “If carefully selected, metaphors are one way to draw attention to specific messages” (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1992; 246). Maybe one of the most famous change metaphors is

Lewin's (1951) three-step change theory: "unfreeze" the old equilibrium, "move", and "refreeze" the new equilibrium. So change is like **water**, whose state mutates (liquid **or ice**) through different phases. Metaphors of/in an organizational change might embody **different roles**. Metaphors may be used as facilitators or accelerators towards the acceptance of change. "It is our belief that metaphors (as schemata) are useful because they allow experienced (or well-trained) change agents to arrive at problem diagnoses and solutions rapidly" (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1992; 243). This quote reveals the role of **catalyst** played by metaphors. These authors distinguish between "within" and "between" metaphor to convey a meaning about change. They also distinguish between **constructive and destructive powers** carried by metaphors, and warn against the latter. Metaphors can convey symbolism through **real-life events** (an exercise asked groups of blindfolded managers, related by ropes, to locate objects. The first group who found an object helped and coached the other groups to locate the other objects. This exercise symbolized intergroup cooperation). Metaphors can also convey symbolism through **objects** (a gold desk clock was given as a reward to managers. This object symbolized a timepiece – the clock- as well as a winner retribution – gold). In the previous two examples (an event, an object), a rather strong **intention** lies behind the metaphors used.

Yet metaphors are most of the time used through **words**, and at times, in an **unwitting** manner. No wonder that the lexical field or the terminology of change is about **metrics** in organizational change management (success vs failure, indicators of success...).

UNCERTAINTY AS A DEFAULT MODE

Uncertainty certainly is an ingredient of ambiguity, favoring it, as well as part of the manager's daily life. Uncertainty appears under the form of a limited visibility in time: "Our horizon is today's lunch" is a manager's quote reported by Jackall (Laroche, 2006; 446). Uncertainty also appears under the form of point of intersection or inflection, where the either-or options meet. In this moment of uncertainty, there is the possibility for the "action to become" either positive or negative, an "open-ended quality of unfolding" (Weick, 2012; 70). So uncertainty almost appears under the form of a limited visibility in space, in the route chosen. Therefore, uncertainty is often dreaded and sought to be minimized. To maintain it as far as possible, defense mechanisms are used. For example, organizational members may attempt to cope with the uncertainty of change by going through **denial** (e.g., this change is not needed) and

resistance (e.g., stalling, sabotage, absenteeism, turnover)” (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; 308, building on Jaffe et al., 1994).

Change in organizations is “an experience of cognitive disorder” (Herzig & Jimmieson, 2006; 629) for those whom live it and even more so, for those in charge of managing it. Between the change project as it is decided by top management and the change project as it is implemented by middle managers, the gap may be substantial. Managing this gap, reducing it or adjusting it is, by nature, a situation of discomfort and of uncertainty. Moreover, if, in a classical conception, change is seen as a moment of exception, as an episode isolated of organizational life, the current literature considers it is so much constitutive of this very life that it became the normal condition (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

Yet, Journé, Grimand & Garreau (2012) invite us to revisit, or to rethink, our relationship to uncertainty, not to pretend to rationalize it nor to exclude it, but to see **uncertainty as an opportunity** (p.18), despite the difficulty to arbitrate between several possibilities, because of the information overload. This is the approach we chose in the present research.

1.2.1. MANAGERS AS PROJECT MANAGERS

Not only do managers manage people, but they also, on top of that, manage projects. A project is considered as a set of simultaneous and sequential activities, i.e. as a network of activities. In its simplest form, project management is about “planning, executing and monitoring these activities” (Pich, Loch & Meyer, 2002; 1011).

These authors identify **three strategies for project management: instructionism, learning and selectionism**, the two latter of which, when combined, present, according to them the most effective and fruitful approach. These authors show that ambiguity and complexity are the factors explaining the co-existence of these strategies.

The instructionist approach is based on contingent action through task scheduling and risk management: contingency plans and decision trees based on likely scenarios. This strategy avoids or lower uncertainty (considered as foreseeable) through a near deterministic set of actions, and implies a slowly changing environment.

Learning is an approach fitting a more complex situation wherein “unknown unknowns” or “unk-unks” (Pich et al., 2002; 1013) arise, i.e. truly unforeseen events (in contrast with “known

unknowns” of the instructionist approach). Unlike contingent action, learning can not be planned beforehand, but happens “opportunistically, by paying attention to new information that may arrive from the environment”. Learning is thus costly in time and in psychological effort, and is therefore often resisted. Risk management techniques used in an instructionist approach are insufficient to deal with “unusual events”. Yet, “quickly recognizing an unk-unk when I see one requires continuous scanning of the environment” (Pich et al., 2002; 1019) as well as the capacity to learn in order to develop an appropriate response.

Selectionism is a more iterative and experimental approach, wherein several solutions are tested in parallel, one of which is eventually selected when identified as best among all others (“the best from the pool of trials”). Selectionism is the opposite of optimization and seems especially suitable in a fast changing or highly uncertain environment.

Project managers have “an intuitive feel for what to do in the presence of risk factors that are identified but whose outcome is uncertain” (Pich et al., 2002; 1008). Among other things, they think of identifying and introducing slack, flexibility, through technologies and processes, or project buffers when designing the project, in the beginning. These buffers can be time (schedule) and cost (Leach, 1999). However their intuition in managing projects is often limited by a rational organizational mindset, such as the pressure of executing scheduled tasks (“do as planned”). Existing work seem to consider almost impossible to manage events that can not be foreseen (Pich et al., 2002; 1010). Yet, focusing beyond what could be and “developing capabilities rather than simply a plan of what to do” should be considered (Pich et al., 2002; 1010 citing Hamel & Prahalad, 1994; 82-108).

1.2.2. MANAGERS AS CHANGE AGENTS

Not only do managers manage people and projects. They are also expected to take part in organizational changes and to play an active role in them, such as a role of change agent.

Much has been written on the roles change agents play in the change process. Historical reviews on change agents (Ottaway, 1983) remind that they were first defined as helpers (Lippitt, Watson & Westley, 1958) and seen as professionals (Bennis, 1964). They were also as “a heterogeneous group” gathering researchers, trainers, consultants, counsellors, teachers, and at times even line managers (Ottaway, 1983, on Bennis). They may also be “those people, either inside or outside the organization, who are providing technical, specialist or consulting

assistance in the management of a change effort” (Beckhard, 1969; 101). For Argyris (1970; 20), change agents are interventionists. More recently, Herzig & Jimmiesson (2006) highlighted three types of roles in change management: **implementers, designers and creators**. For these authors, middle managers during change are facilitators and “**barriers to uncertainty management**”. Managers as change agents have been observed through the angle of moral and managerial courage (Furnham, 2002).

Some define the change agents **in relation to the process**: to Hall & Williams (1973) they are “those who bring about constructive change”. Others defined the change agents **in relation to the task**: consultants for Reddin (1971; ix), psychologists, almost regardless of the situation, for Pearl (1974; 292-293), to “make the individual fit the society”. Authors have even been classified according to whether they followed or not the “Lippitt and al. tradition” on planned change, which considers change agents as collaborators and facilitators. Lippitt, Watson, and Westley (1958) drew on Lewin’s three step change theory focusing more on the role and responsibility of the change agent. Change agents have also been studied through **an educative role** (Havelock, 1973), be it parents (Johnson & Katz, 1973) or teachers (Badley, 1986) - people playing a mentoring role. They have been analyzed according to their (cognitive) styles (Slocum, 1978; Ganesh, 1978). They have been listed in chronological order, **according to their role in the change process: change generators, change implementers, or change adopters** (assumption number 4 of Ottaway’s taxonomy). Although some viewed managers as **resistant** to change (Wai-Kwong *et al.*, 2001), others, on the contrary, saw them **easing** the change. Weir & Mills (1973) started to talk about the supervisor as a change agent, who needs to be “informed and brought into the process” not to be too resistant. A lot has been written on **external change agents, i.e. consultants**, who were presenting the asset of representing less “indigenous sources of change” (Pascale & Sternin, 2005; 1) than managers, and therefore, experts to “import best-of-breed practices” to better “dig deep to uncover the root causes of problems”. Finally, a call for future research has been made on managers and ambiguity: **“Future research could also focus on the effect of individual differences middle managers may have, such as tolerance for ambiguity”** (Greco & Roger *In* Herzig & Jimmieson, 2006).

Observing change agents and managers in a change context

Change agents have been widely investigated through questionnaires and through case studies (Jones, 1969; Rogers, 1969) based on journal, monographs, books, empirical and nonempirical reports. Some observed them through action-research (Hartley, Benington & Binns, 1997). The

need of observing change agents in their working environment, in their organizing has been underlined: **“better specifications of the characteristics of (effective) change agents is necessary to develop a more comprehensive understanding of a complex process of planned organizational change”** (Porras & Robertson, 1992 ; 753).

1.2.3. MANAGERS AS SENSEMAKERS

Most importantly, Weick **relates change and sensemaking** (see later), the process of making sense of what is happening, and especially requires efforts to make sense of events that may not cohere (Weick, 1995). When it comes to planned change, Weick claims that its **mechanisms** prevail on its content (Weick, 2012), the **how** matters more than the what, for he believes that four indispensable elements or **practices** make this process key. These practices are that the change “(1) animates people and gets them moving and experimenting, (2) provides a direction, (3) encourage updating though closer attention to what is happening; and (4) facilitates respectful interaction to enable a stable interpretation of what people experience” (Weick, 2012, p. 226). If these four practices are so important it is because they “make it easier or harder for people to **make sense collectively** of what they currently face and to then deal with it”. For Weick, a organizational change implies a trial of collective sensemaking. “People need to act in order to discover what they face, and they need to talk in order to discover what is on their mind (...) Sensemaking appears to be the root activity when people deal with an unknowable, unpredictable world” (ibid, p. 235) This is all the more so true when it comes to change.

Those four practices presented as necessary for change actually corresponds to the conditions for a “successful” sensemaking, namely that people “(1) stay in motion, (2) have a direction, (3) look closely and update often, and (4) converse candidly.”

Aside from being considered as change agents, middle managers have also been identified as **change recipients**, and whose **sensemaking had a “critical shaping role”** (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; 543). Managers not only change makers, they are sensemakers too. In this research, we would like to draw on this view of the middle managers, though paying attention to their uses of ambiguity both in their sensemaking process and in their sensegiving process, during the change.

CHANGE AND ITS MANAGEMENT

The “cognitive disorder” and the ensuing discomfort are therefore in the destiny of organization members. As a result, change produces a certain resistance amongst middle managers (Guilmot, 2016). Change indeed puts them in front of the double difficulty of managing the tensions of the change, on top of everyday tensions which are themselves compounded by the lack of time to deal with them. Supposed to embody roles at times opposite, managers thus occupy a “paradoxical place” (Desmarais & Abord de Chatillon, 2010; 71), between function and activity.

MANAGERS IN CHANGE: MANAGING ROLES

In managing projects, managers manage processes. And meanings. “Because managers manage meanings, managing judgments is part of the manager’s job”, “managers manage themselves – as they are the symbols of what they are doing” (Laroche, 2006; 443). So managers manage projects, meanings, and themselves. During an organizational change, middle managers seem therefore to have taken on a variety of roles. Weir & Mills (1973) started to talk about “the supervisor” as change agent, whereas middle managers have been identified as “change recipients”, whose sensemaking process involves a “**critical shaping role**” (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; 543; 546).

Managers are particularly empowered in the center-down approach as this approach significantly reinforces the change process at the middle levels of the organization and make **middle managers especially active, through a variety and a plurality of roles**. Managers indeed have a role of communicator (communicating change), a role of interpret (interpreting change) and a role of translator (translating top management’s change vision into action) (Ryan et al., 2008; 39). So managers manage roles. Managers have also been observed through the angle of moral and managerial courage, during an organizational change (Furnham, 2002).

In this research, we would like to draw on this view of the middle managers, though paying attention to their uses of ambiguity both in their change management process and in their sensegiving process. For Wai-Kwong *et al.* (2001), they are considered as “resistant to change”. For Herzig & Jimmieson (2006), on the other way, managers are easing the change, they are viewed as change “facilitators” and “barriers to uncertainty management”. However, to limit

their possible resistance, they need to be kept informed and integrated in the process. Ambiguity may help them do so - managing meanings, judgments, people, projects, and roles.

CHAPTER 2. AMBIGUITY IN MANAGEMENT

CHAPTER 2 GOALS

Chapter 2 aims at presenting ambiguity in its organizational context, under different forms, or types of ambiguity, and how managers may deal with it.

CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY

Chapter 2 defines and describes ambiguity and introduces elements of context for ambiguity (change, organizational culture...). Ambiguity may be something we experience or use, but it also is something we try to manage. Managing ambiguity implies making sense of it, and in the attempt to do so, we introduce the concept of negative capability, as a somewhat different way to manage ambiguity.

2.1. AMBIGUITY IN ORGANIZATIONS

Ambiguity surrounds us, be it in our professional or in our personal lives. What information (data, decision, situation...) can indeed be found so clear and understood so clearly that it is considered unambiguous? Would such a world even be desirable? “It is the age of ambiguity” (Gioia et al., 2012; 1), as the era we live in is deemed to be tumultuous and unsettled.

2.1.1. DEFINITIONS

Different literatures make of ambiguity a field of reflection and of research.

Literature **in Economics** considers ambiguity as uncertainty with unknown probabilities (it distinguishes ambiguity from risk – considered as uncertainty with known probabilities, and designs decision-making models based on this distinction). Economics literature also studies the two opposite reactions to ambiguity: aversion or tolerance. People namely express aversion or tolerance through attitudes and behaviors they may adopt towards ambiguity, according to different preferences – preference for a source of uncertainty over other sources, in the following contexts: consumer choices, asset markets, weather conditions, or outcomes of medical procedures (Kahn & Sarin, 1988; Epstein & Schneider, 2010; Trautmann & Van De Kuilen, 2015). Yet we chose not to focus on this literature in our review –we may only evoke it.

Literature **in Management** distinguishes **ambiguity** from **types of ambiguity** (i.e. several **ambiguities**). Yet, in the Management literature, the concept is at times positioned at the meso-level (organizational level), at times at the micro level (individual level), and at times, it is not so clear at which level, maybe at both. March & Olsen (1976) for instance seem to situate ambiguity at the organizational level, the levels of the goals and of the technologies chosen by an organization; however, the participant level they mention reflects the individual level. So there seems to be **an ambiguity on the level of analysis: meso and/or micro**.

Literature on ambiguity can be divided into two main approaches, if we consider the **consequences** attributed to ambiguity and to its **usages**. Some authors see these consequences as predominantly deleterious, harmful, negative, while others see them as predominantly virtuous, favorable, positive.

2.1.1.1. AMBIGUITY

In this section, we review different definitions and meanings of ambiguity.

Ambiguity's first approach was an organizational and economic one, based on figures and quantitative models (Ellsberg, 1961; Einhorn & Hogarth, 1985; Kahn & Sarin, 1988; Camerer & Weber, 1992). Ambiguity then became a more socialized, individualized and managerial concept (Ho, Keller & Keltyka, 2002; 2005).

In economy of decision, ambiguity constitutes the imprecise probabilities of occurrence of an event. More precisely, ambiguity expresses the degree of trust of the decision maker in his/her choice. Put another way, ambiguity translates a form of doubt of this decision maker in his/her judgment (Ellsberg, 1961). In cognitive psychology, and in general in everyday life, ambiguity refers to "the plurality of possible interpretations, the diversity of meanings carried by a word, an expression or a situation" (Cabantous & Hilton, 2006; 261). These authors, through a psychological lighting on a concept initially economical, established that a plurality of attitudes towards ambiguity.

Antonyms also represent a way to qualify such a vague term as ambiguity: certainty, clarity, clearness, definiteness, explicitness, lucidity. All of these terms evoke an absence of doubts or of shadow. Their more precise or clearer meaning, enables to better define ambiguity, even if, at times, negatively (by its absence or its lack).

For some authors, there seems to exist **an ambiguity on the definition of ambiguity** (or a **plurality of definitions** for a same concept). For Levine (1985), ambiguity means EITHER "two or more meanings" (which can also be the definition of equivocality, see above) OR "unclarity" (p.8). For Abdallah & Langley (2014), ambiguity (in strategy texts) may take three forms or dimensions: (structural) duality, (linguistic) equivocality and (content) expansiveness. Duality is to be found in the dual dimensions of the strategy text (i.e. creative vs commercial), while equivocality is to be found in the different interpretations of a same word (i.e. "relevant"), and expansiveness, in the multiplicity of possible actions enabled by the strategy text. These authors also stress on a **contextual definition** of ambiguity. Ambiguity is defined according to its context, here strategy texts).

However, many authors choose a definition for ambiguity. Some authors thus consider ambiguity as **vagueness**, or **unclarity**. For example, March and Olsen (1976) find that ambiguity relates to “goals that are **unclear**, technologies that are **imperfectly understood**, histories that are difficult to interpret, and participant who wander in and out” (March & Olsen, 1976). It thus appears to embody duality, through a conflict of sense. For March and Olsen, ambiguity thus means ambiguity of history, of preferences and of technology (Noordegraaf, 2000; 321). Ambiguity is “(either) unformulated or nebulous” (Corley & Gioia, 2004; 200). Ambiguity is also seen as “the **degree of uncertainty** inherent in perceptions of the environmental state” (Carson et al., 2006: 1059). In Economics, ambiguity is namely uncertainty with known probabilities. It thus appears as a **lack of clarity**, as an absence of precision. Related to unclarity, ambiguity appears in the form of the **unknown**: events being unknown or (their) causality being unknown – “Too little is known” (Pich et al., 2002; 1009). Ambiguity refers to a **lack of awareness** of about certain states of the word (Schrader et al., 1993). For Weick (1995), “the problem in ambiguity is not that the real world is imperfectly understood and that more information will remedy that. The problem is that information may not resolve misunderstandings.” (p. 92). The difficulty with ambiguity is therefore the **misconception** of the nature of difficulty that ambiguity raises.

Other authors consider ambiguity as the **multiplicity of interpretations**, or multiplicity of **meanings**, i.e. **equivocality** (which may also be seen as a consequence of the previous definition of ambiguity: vagueness, i.e. the confusion induced by this multiplicity of meanings). For instance, ambiguity exists when exists “a state of having **many ways of thinking about the same** circumstances or phenomena” (Feldman, 1989, p. 5 *in* Sillince, Jarzabkowski & Shaw, 2012). Ambiguity can be defined as “**an ongoing stream** that supports several **different interpretations** at the same time” (Weick, 1995; p. 91), or as “the **multiplicity of meanings** conveyed by information about organizational activities” (Daft & Macintosh, 1981; 211). For Giroux (2006; 1228), ambiguity is “the condition of admitting more than one meaning”, but also “a textual and inter-textual phenomenon, realized in the choice – strategic or inadvertent – of polysemic words and equivocal grammatical structures.”

Noordegraaf characterizes his approach of ambiguity as **empirical** (as opposed to the radical approach of March and Olsen). He defines ambiguity as “absent or conflicting interpretations of event” or as “lack of clarity and consistency” or “confusion and contradiction”. Because of the presence of ambiguity, people do not know either what they want or how to do what they

want, even with much information. Ambiguity thus questions the individuality of preferences and the causality of some relations, especially in decision-making (the “decision theory school”, Noordegraaf 2000; 320). In ambiguous environment, managers tend to do what is “appropriate”, and not what is “best”, so ambiguity goes more with appropriateness.

All definitions of ambiguity positions it as **a cognitive construct**.

THE VIRTUES (AND THE LIMITATIONS) OF AMBIGUITY

As mentioned earlier, based on the implications of the usage of ambiguity, and on the different reactions to it, one part of literature on ambiguity values the overall bright side of ambiguity and sees ambiguity as more helpful while the other part more acknowledges its darker side, and sees ambiguity as more harmful, even though neither part is monolithic.

Eisenberg (1984) was one of the first researchers not only drawing attention on the presence and role of ambiguity in organizations, but also underlining its virtues. One of the main virtues of ambiguity seems to allow **accommodating differences**, i.e. accommodating multiple and possibly divergent **perspectives** (Eisenberg, 1984; Eisenberg, 2007; Davenport & Leitch, 2005; Giroux, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010; Sonenshein, 2010, Tracy & Ashcraft, 2001; Krause-Jensen, 2011; Abdallah & Langley, 2014) and thus brings about a “unified diversity” (Eisenberg, 2007, p. 9) and gathering multiple interests (Star & Griesemer, 1989). Ambiguity thus seems to represent an interesting and reasonable solution to minimize conflict and may even allow cohesion and collaboration between social groups still enabling the freedom needed for flexibility and creativity. Ambiguity may then act as a “social lubricant, reducing potential friction” (Giroux, 2006; 1230). Ambiguity also represents **an organizational tool of adjustment** enabling progressive moves from one point of view to another, from one interest to another. Another virtue of ambiguity is that it allows for the creation of a space of resistance for employees (Kelemen, 2000). With regards to change, ambiguity may support it because it enables, at the same time, shifts in the meaning of goals and metaphors, and some continuity. Ambiguity allows **loss of face avoidance** (Eisenberg, 2007), when context changes, or when change may change. As a result, some authors (Davenport & Leitch, 2005; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Tracy & Ashcraft, 2001) view ambiguity as a constructive trait only.

Sillince et al. (2012) and Abdallah and Langley (2014) adopt a more balanced view on ambiguity, which they see as a double edge. They namely identify ambiguity (in a strategy

discourse) as an organizational enabler (of strategic development and change). Yet they also identify ambiguity as troublesome over time, as it hosts the roots of disillusion and internal cleavage, and thereby of **strategy reorientation**.

Sonenshein (2010) points out that too much ambiguity engenders **confusion**, while for Denis et al. (2011), ambiguity opens the door to paralysis, to “escalating indecision”, i.e. successive decisions without action.

Krause-Jensen (2011) also grants that ambiguity enables accommodation, i.e. accommodating “the strategic aims of the organizations with the (...) aspirations of the employees” (Krause-Jensen, 2011; 276), and that the ambiguity lying in a concept (such as “values”) may look appealing (as blurring the differences between individual and organization). Yet he finds ambiguity (contained in the word “values”) rather confusing (bringing looseness and uncertainty, both hard to handle) and cleaving, as it produced a split within staff. Clarity and precision may make divergences more conspicuous and salient and may therefore open the door to discordance and conflict.

AMBIGUITIES

Ambiguity has been characterized in literature, with several adjectives, drawing a beginning of typology of ambiguity. Extant literature on ambiguity thus identify the following types of ambiguity, or ambiguities.

2.1.1.2. TYPES OF AMBIGUITY

Different **types** of ambiguity appear in the literature. An ambiguity encountered frequently enough is the so-called “strategic ambiguity”. Other types of ambiguity can be found, such as **temporal** ambiguity, **role** ambiguity, **causal** ambiguity, **positional** ambiguity...

LINGUISTIC, LEXICAL OR DISCURSIVE AMBIGUITY

A few authors (Astley, 1985 ; Hirsh & Levin, 1999) mention “linguistic ambiguity” as an umbrella concept enabling the loose use of ideas “to encompass and account for a set of diverse phenomena” (Hirsh & Levin, 1999; 200) and creating some sense of order out of complexity (Astley, 1985). Lexical or linguistic ambiguity corresponds to the ambiguity conveyed in the

very words. Lexical ambiguity is supposed to be part of linguistic ambiguity (along with syntactic ambiguity, semantic ambiguity and pragmatic ambiguity) but often both terms are used the one for the other. Lexical ambiguity has been studied through experiments and models. Given the use of many similar adjectives (linguistic, lexical, semantic, discursive...) to qualify this ambiguity, we chose to talk about **discursive** ambiguity in our research.

STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY

Several authors in Management (Eisenberg, 1984; Eisenberg, 2007; Jarzabkowski, Sillince & Shaw, 2010; Denis, Dompierre, Langley & Rouleau, 2011; Abdallah & Langley, 2014) affix the adjective “strategic” to the common name “ambiguity”. Interestingly, the same expression of “strategic ambiguity” also appears in the Politics literature (Shepsle, 1972; Aragonés & Neeman, 2000) even though we will not dig into that field.

By strategic ambiguity, these authors refer to two somewhat different things. Drawing on Eisenberg (1984; 2007), who defined it as purposefully equivocal communication, some authors refer to a voluntary, intentional, deliberate ambiguity, an intentional use of it, an ambiguity so-called “**by design**” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Sillince, Jarzabkowski & Shaw (2012) thus oppose the exploitation or construction of strategic ambiguity (towards one’s own interest), yielding strategic action, to emerging ambiguity. The other authors refer to an ambiguity **used in a context of strategy**, i.e. ambiguity embedded in the strategy documents (Abdallah & Langley, 2014). Some of them even refer to ambiguity used in a strategic context while not using the expression “strategic ambiguity”: Gioia, Nag & Corley, (2012) namely talk about “visionary ambiguity” in a strategic change.

Yet, Giroux (2006) shows that the use of ambiguity may not be always intentional (“I want to keep my distance from ‘strategic’ ambiguity because I strongly believe that the emergence, dissemination and use of ambiguous constructs are not always intentional (although they frequently are)” (Giroux, 2006; 1232). Instead of “strategic”, she affixes the adjective “pragmatic” to ambiguity.

PRAGMATIC AMBIGUITY

Giroux shaped this concept of “pragmatic ambiguity” and defines it as “the condition of admitting more than one course of action” (Giroux, 2006; 1228). She namely pinpoints that

equivocality of concepts opens the door to different courses of action, actually enabling collection action. So for her, ambiguity is pragmatic because it “follows the pragmatic reality of organizational life” and equivocality is a practice. Giroux also advances that pragmatic ambiguity is **both the result and the resource** of a collective process.

TEMPORAL AMBIGUITY

Temporal ambiguity may relate to different temporal sensemaking processes, within a same organization (Wiebe E., 2012). Surprisingly, temporal ambiguity does not seem to have been much developed in the literature.

SPATIAL AMBIGUITY

Ambiguity's locus may not be clearly situated, i.e. ambiguity may have either several loci, or no particular locus. “Organizational change is now so ubiquitous that the experience of change has become something of a constant in modern organizations.” (Corley & Gioia, 2004; 199). So there seems to be a spatial ambiguity about change.

ROLE AMBIGUITY

Role ambiguity is often related to role conflict. Rizzo, House & Lirtzman (1970) showed that role ambiguity is present in complex organizations. Role ambiguity has mainly been studied through a quantitative approach, through scales.

CAUSAL AMBIGUITY

The idea of “causal ambiguity” has been developed through quantitative approaches (Reed and DeFillippi, 1990) and has counter-intuitively being identified as a positive element, and setting a barrier to imitation, protecting competitive advantage and making it sustainable.

Noordegraaf (2000) identifies **four** types of ambiguity: **ambiguity of issue linkage** (unstable issue linkages), **ambiguity of impact** (unclear impact), **ambiguity of opposition** (continuous contestation) and **ambiguity of exposure** (permanent risk of -public- exposure).

The following table shows an overview of the management literature on ambiguity, through a certain number of features. These features – nine - are the **objects** of the ambiguity (i.e. what ambiguity applies on), the **types** or forms or dimensions of ambiguity, the **means** of ambiguity, (how ambiguity is expressed), the ambiguity's **outcomes or roles**, the **contexts** where ambiguity occurs, the **levels** at which ambiguity is observed, the **people** experiencing ambiguity; the **methodology** used to study ambiguity and the **sector** where ambiguity is observed.

On the feature of levels of ambiguity, identifying the levels where ambiguity could be spotted is actually somewhat ambiguous. Corley & Gioia (2004) examined an ambiguity located at the organizational (meso) level, since ambiguity affects an organization's identity. Yet, it also positions ambiguity at the individual level, since the answer to the question "who are we?" revisited by the identity change, may not be only organizational. This feature is then maybe the one with the most open to interpretation.

Seven articles, that we found particularly relevant for the present research, and that presented most of the above-mentioned features, have been chosen to be compared, in table 1.

Ambiguity features	Krause Jensen (2011)	Corley & Gioia (2004)	Abdallah & Langley (2014)	Denis et al. (2011)	Giroux (2006)	Sillince et al. (2012)	Gioia, Nag & Corley (2012)
Objects of ambiguity (ambiguity applies on...)	Ambiguity on management values	Ambiguity on organizational identity	Strategic ambiguity (embedded in strategy texts)	Strategic ambiguity	“pragmatic” ambiguity in collective action	Strategic ambiguity (yielding strategic action)	Strategic change goals
Types / forms / dimensions of ambiguity	Terminological ambiguity	Through labels and meanings (to describe identity): label confusion + meaning void	Structural (duality), linguistic (equivocality), content (expansiveness)	5 practices: equivocal language, inflation, postponement, preservation of right to participate later, equivocal commitment	Ambiguity, generality, vagueness (three “modalities”)	Protective, invitational and adaptive ambiguity	“visionary” ambiguity (intentionally ambiguous vision)
Means of ambiguity (how is ambiguity expressed)	In the very word “value” (intrinsic worth vs monetary worth)	Through internal + external documents, oral (speeches) + written (memos, intranet web pages)	Through text, in strategy discourse	Practices of reification + practices of strategic ambiguity	In text and inter-text	Through (common and specific) values	Strategic change terminology
Outcomes / roles of ambiguity	Split between staff (although it was supposed to congregate)	Temporal identity discrepancies?	Double role: Enabling role (Strategic change enabler + contradicting role (towards strategy reorientation)	Escalating indecision (little strategic action produced): networks of indecision	Both result and resource of a collective process	Ambiguity as a rhetorical resource	Alignment: local - larger organizational goals (revising org. knowledge)

Contexts for ambiguity	Management shift from 'culture' to 'value'	Organizational identity change (Spin-off)	Strategic planning + enactment of planned strategy	Strategic orientation decision (hospital merger)	Collective action during a (new) management approach (TQM)	nationalization strategy	Strategic change (initiation)
Levels of ambiguity	Organizational + individual	Organizational (collective identity ambiguity)	Organizational + groups	Organizational + individual	Organizational (texts)	Organizational + individual	Organizational
People concerned with ambiguity	Company's employees	top managers (mostly) + managers (a few) + subordinates (a few)	Organization's members	Members of 3 hospitals + civil servant in charge of the process	Stakeholders (consultants, managers, workers, politicians...)	Managers + academics	Organization's members
Methodology	Ethnographic fieldwork	Inductive case study	Case study	In-depth longitudinal case study	Longitudinal analysis of Total Quality Movement (TQM) texts	Longitudinal case study	Theoretical paper
Sector observed	Home electronics producer	Global technology service provider	Cultural organization	Hospital	N.A.	Business School	Politics?

N.A. : Not Available

TABLE 1 – AMBIGUITY IN THE MANAGEMENT LITERATURE

2.1.1.3. AMBIGUITY AND CHANGE

“Ambiguity might be a feature of most change efforts” (Corley & Gioia, 2004; 173). “Understanding ambiguity is pivotal to understanding change. All change involves some process from moving from an existing clarity of understanding to doubt, uncertainty and/or ambiguity, and ultimately to a state of renewed clarity, an observation that echoes Lewin’s (1951) longstanding characterization of change as broadly involving the stages of “unfreezing”, “moving” and “refreezing” (Corley & Gioia, 2004 ; 174).

If we namely apply this sentence to a simplified Lewin’s change process, we obtain Figure 2. The change process is thus starting with a phase of (relative) clarity (1), then goes through ambiguity to evolve into a phase of relative clarity (2), somewhat different to the first phase of clarity. Figure 2 here under thus revisits Figure 1, incorporating two phases of ambiguity (first, inherited, then managed) that would correspond to the “Moving” or “Exploration” phases, and phases of – relative - clarity (relative clarity 1 would correspond to the “Unfreezing” and “Denial/Resistance” phases, while relative clarity 2 would correspond to the “Freezing” and “Commitment” phases).

(Relative) clarity 1 – Inherited Ambiguity - Managed Ambiguity - (Relative) clarity 2

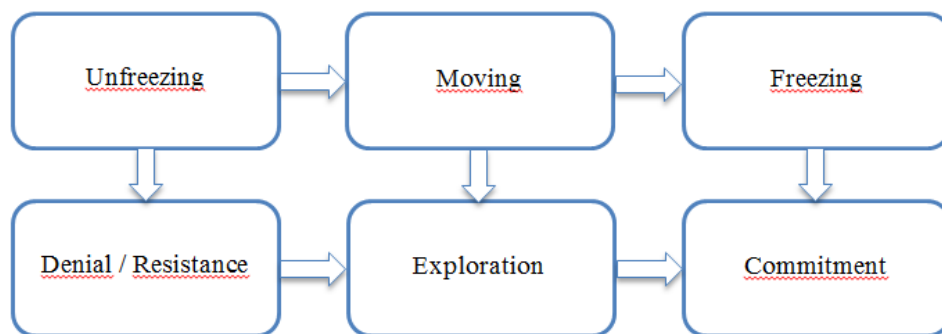


FIGURE 2 - CHANGE PROCESS WITH AMBIGUITY (FIGURE 1 REVISITED)

2.1.2. AMBIGUITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) evoke ambiguity at an organizational level. For them this ambiguity is also strategic, i.e. intentional, as well as circulating throughout the organization. March, J. (1978) also seems to consider ambiguity at this meso level. Ambiguity is thus often latent, almost floating, in organizations and sometimes in organizational cultures.

2.2. MANAGERS AND AMBIGUITY

In this section, we will first go through managing ambiguity. We will then investigate how to make sense of ambiguity through leading by legitimizing doubt. We will, lastly, focus on the concept of capability, used to manage. We will start with its negative acception – which is the one most known – before going through its positive acception.

2.2.1. MANAGING AMBIGUITY

Managers constantly experience ambiguity inside the organization, which makes it one of the central themes of *Moral Mazes*. On top of external or environmental ambiguity, managers face high internal ambiguity (Laroche, 2006; 442). Nonetheless, ambiguity, however prevalent, is seldom acknowledged, and tend to be denied instead. As the reality managers experience may be only momentary, they are prone to use flexible meaning sheltering them from inconsistencies. Ambiguity can help them do so.

The very position of the middle manager, representing at the same time distance and closeness, control and trust, in order to “absorb the gaps” and set some coherence, seems to be make this role embody ambiguity in organizations. "Having to constantly deal with incompatible demands, middle managers should not only be considered as linking pins but as paradox agents" (Vas & Guilmot, 2015). The second reason is that instead of stressing to make hard choices, middle managers need to act on ambiguity to adopt an approach that combines and optimizes rather than split apart. From this perspective, these authors suggest that the role of ambiguity can be helpful in paradoxical situations as managers may rely on their agency to adapt their action to the way they interpret the duality encountered. Managers absorb gaps. Ambiguity **can**

facilitate the gap absorptions for managers. Managers also experience and undergo the **instability of assessment criteria**. Ambiguity therefore might help them do so.

MANAGERS AND AVOIDANCE

Avoiding or hedging (to decide, to commit) is managers' job. Ambiguity is a way to enable it. Avoidance strategies. Managing avoidance is related to managing ambiguity.

MANAGERS, PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND AMBIGUITIES THROUGH A PROCESSUAL LENSE

While ambiguity appears to imply *meanings*, project management appears to imply *mechanisms*. To try and answer this “double” research question, a processual lense seems here relevant (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010), as it might bring some interesting light on both aspects. Through the use of ambiguity in project management, we also observe the possible “transformation (...) of organizational practices” (Langley et al., 2013: 3) through a “temporally evolving phenomena” (*ibid*). “Process studies that examine how changes in practices are implemented, and how their influence spreads and interacts with existing organizational contexts offer a move closer towards a dynamic understanding of how to improve them” (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010).

2.2.2. MAKING SENSE OF AMBIGUITY: LEADERSHIP AS THE LEGITIMATION OF DOUBT

Karl Weick (2012) revisited theories on leadership in different ways. We focus on four of his “revisits”: how he relates leadership to doubt, leadership to sensemaking, leadership to direction, and leadership to action. He introduced a somehow counterintuitive idea on leadership: according to him, **leadership shall legitimate doubt**. He indeed finds the ability to doubt of paramount importance in organizations – **particularly** when these organizations are facing **complexity**. He considers for example that doubt enables porosity to change. As a result, he is warning against certainty, which carries the risk of reifying things: “certainty is insensitive to change and doubt is one of the few means to restore that sensitivity” (Weick, 2012; p. 261). He thus invites to revisit or to re-interpret events which may be other than what they look like.

He indeed explains that it is easier to doubt a sense of what has been faced and easier to change it, replacing it with a newer sense, which can also be revisited again.

In the exercise of leadership, Weick considers the sentence of the answer “I don’t know” (particularly after a silence) as a strong act of leadership, not as a weak one, since, in so saying, the leader establishes his or her credibility in an unknowable world, formulating a non-stereotypical response (he is meant to know). The strength of such act of leadership also relies on the fact that such leader thereby shows he or she is strongly human (or at least not afraid of showing his or her humanity), giving up omniscience and expert authority, and doing it genuinely and publicly. This deed reinforces (managerial) relationships.

Weick positions the sensemaking phase between the “don’t know” phase and the decision making phase. For Weick, what prevails is the sensemaking process - for sensemaking enables to stay in touch with context - and not the decision making process – which, in his view, should appear at a by-product of sensemaking, and that would take place a later stage.

When it comes to leadership, Weick values the search for a direction and not the search for a location. A compass thus seems to him of much greater usefulness than a map, in order to “navigate” for two reasons. First, if people don’t know and leaders acknowledge they don’t either, both are more likely to mobilize resources for direction rather than for performance and, second, in case locations of the map are changing, then a compass is a tool more reliable than a map is (Weick, 2012; p. 264). Weick also values direction over decision, for changing direction represents much less stake than changing decision. Weick values action when it is oriented towards (better) knowing (“Action is crucial because doubt, by itself, is dangerous” (Weick, 2012; p. 262). In such situation, he sees action as a link towards the quest of relevant information and better knowing (“staying in motion”, “moving, observing, updating”, Weick, 2012; p. 265).

Through the ways Weick relates leadership to doubt, to sensemaking, to direction, and to action, he values uncertainty. He indeed believes that effective leadership requires a deep awareness of one’s personal ignorance (“I don’t know”). To deal with doubt, improvisation and lightness then seem to him particularly suitable. Improvisation suits particularly well the situation when one is “thrown into an unknowable, unpredictable environment” (Weick, 2012; p. 267).

Accessing lightness is about dropping (our usually heavy tools of) logic and of rationality, which enables to reach the lightness of listening and exploring, through intuition, feelings,

awareness in the moment or empathy, all of which represent non-logical activities and open the door to interpretations.

To manage change successfully enough, Weick believes that the change program needs to engage the different components of sensemaking which correspond to four activities: animation, direction, updating and respectful interaction. If the change project actually animates people to make them move, if it provides a direction, if it fosters updating and if it eases respectful interaction, then, whatever the change is about, the odds of success are high.

How do managers make sense of ambiguity? Let us investigate their reactions to ambiguity.

REACTIONS TO AMBIGUITY / POSITIONS TOWARDS AMBIGUITY

Ambiguity, being uncomfortable to experience and uncontrollable, has largely been considered as an element to avoid or to fight. “Organizing [has been developed] to reduce ambiguity” (Weick, 2001: 3). Ambiguity seems to be something man tolerate or not, or something man resolve or not, something man is averse to or not.

Intolerance to ambiguity has been studied in psychology (Budner, 1962). It was defined as “the tendency to perceive (i.e. interpret) ambiguous situation as sources of **threat**”, while tolerance to ambiguity was defined as “the tendency to perceive ambiguous situation as desirable” (Budner, 1962: 29). Research on intercultural management values tolerance for ambiguity in performance in global work environment and cross-cultural settings (Herman et al, 2010). Different quantitative tools seem to exist to assess this tolerance for ambiguity (mention the existing measures, and the Tolerance for Ambiguity Scale (TAS).

Specific **positions** towards ambiguity have thus been analyzed, such as **intolerance/tolerance** to ambiguity or **aversion** to ambiguity. It is interesting to notice that these positions highlight the negative or **rejecting** approach of ambiguity by default (intolerance, aversion). Ambiguity is *a priori* something man and managers fear. Ambiguity reduction generally is the wished way: “ambiguity shall be corrected to enable to go back to the system’s equilibrium” (Desmarais & Abord de Chatillon, 2010 ; 74).

SENSEMAKING ASPECTS RELATED TO AMBIGUITY

In this section, we identify and develop the aspects of sensemaking which seem to us relevant to ambiguity.

Sensemaking is a particularly profuse framework, multiple and modular, with many articulations. Weick (1993:635), who originated/gave birth to it, explains sensemaking as follows: “The basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from **efforts to create order** and make retrospective sense of what occurs”. “Sensemaking is a process of making do with whatever resources are at hand” (Weick, 1995; p. 145), “Sensemaking is an ongoing effort to deal with that which is unique and transient” (ibid, p. 171). “It is the transformation of raw experience into intelligible world views (...). Sensemaking lends itself to multiple, conflicting interpretations, all of which are plausible” (Weick in Coutu, 2003; 88). For Feldman (1989), it is an **interpretive process** “for organizational members to understand and share understandings about such features of the organization as what it is about, what it does well and poorly, what the problem it faces are and how it should resolve them” (p. 19). For Thomas, Clark and Gioia (1993), it is the “reciprocal interaction of information seeking, meaning ascription and action (p. 240). Sensemaking is **how people “structure the unknown”** (Waterman, 1990, p. 41). Sensemaking is also made necessary “by the conditions of ambiguity in organized life” (Weick, 2001: 4)

Sensemaking is made up of five Weickian elements among which **improvisation**, **requisite variety** and **heedful interaction** will be particularly illustrated and discussed in this research.

Sensemaking seems to us relevant to mobilize in this research because of the elements of “ongoingness” and of “efforts to create order” that take part in the use of ambiguity, and also because of its relation with time. Indeed, “how can I know what I think of this task until I see how I’ve done” – the definition of retrospective sensemaking (Weick, 2001) – can also be used to retrospectively illustrate prospective ambiguity.

An illustration of the relation between sensemaking and ambiguity is carried out by McCaskey (1982), through his description of 12 characteristics of ambiguous situations (p. 93). Thus are triggers for sensemaking an unclear definition of a problem, the amount or reliability of the information needed to “solve” the (unclearly defined) problem, the coexistence of multiple and conflicting interpretations, the emotional clash of values, the coexistence of multiple and

conflicting goals, the shortage of resources (such as time, money or attention), the emergence of contradictions and paradoxes, the vagueness of roles and responsibilities, the lack of success measures, the poor understanding of cause-effect relationships, the use of symbols and metaphors and the moving identity of the decision makers.

For Weick (2009, p. 91), ambiguity and uncertainty constitute two **sensemaking occasions** in organizations, through two types of “**shock**”, confusion for the former, ignorance for the latter. Ambiguity confuses because of too many interpretations while uncertainty incapacitates any interpretations.

For Weick (1995; 261), “doubt is adaptability (...), certainty is insensitive to change, and doubt is one of the few means to restore that sensitivity”. In this research, we support this viewpoint, we would like to go beyond and show that “doubt” could be replaced with “ambiguity” in the previous sentence: ambiguity, as an alternative to doubt to maintain sensitivity to change context, doubt creating ambiguity, itself consolidating doubt.

MANAGERS AND SENSEMAKING / SENSEGIVING

The link between ambiguity and sensemaking is somehow developed in the managerial literature (Mintzberg, 1973; Stewart, 1982, 1994; Huy, 2001). The literature also shows some link between sensemaking et sensegiving (Weick, 1979, 1995; Gioia, Maitlis 2005, 2007). Indeed, “Attentive leaders experience a “sensegiving” imperative” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Yet the connexion between ambiguity and sensegiving is less developed.

For Maitlis (2005: 21), the construction of meaning, or sensemaking, “allows people to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity by creating rational accounts of the world that enable action. Sensemaking thus both precedes decision making and follows it: sensemaking provides the “clear questions and clear answers” (Weick, 1993:636) that feed decision making, and decision making often simulates the surprises and confusion that create occasions for sensemaking”. Gioia & Chittipeddi (1991), through analyzing the processes in the initial phase of a strategic change, draw a parallel between sensemaking, comprehension and cognition on one side, and sensegiving (the construction of meaning for others), influence and action, on the other side. They namely define sensegiving as “the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others towards a preferred redefinition of organizational reality”

(1991: 442). According to Maitlis (2005: 22), “research highlights the importance of sensegiving as a fundamental leadership activity within organizational sensemaking”. Rouleau (2005) shows the key role of middle managers, as interpreters and sellers of a strategic change, to build and give sense, through their daily micro-practices. From a managerial viewpoint, sensegiving therefore happens to be prevalent in a supervising activity.

2.2.3. MANAGING WITH NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

Organization Theory has been valuing reason for a long time and the paradoxical approaches in management participated in renewing the glance on the organizational dynamics of change (Grimand, Oiry & Ragaigne, 2018). Neither dilemma nor deny, the mobilization of positive and negative capabilities illustrate a combination of what may be deliberate and exploited (positive capability) and of what may be emergent and explored (negative capability).

Strangely enough, this concept of capability has been first introduced through its negative side. It is by opposition to commonly identified and praised managerial virtues that a certain number of authors (Needleman, 1990 ; French & Simpson, 1999 ; Simpson & French, 2006 ; French, 2001 ; Simpson et al., 2002 ; French et al., 2009 ; Ou, 2009 ; Cornish, 2011 ; Crossman & Doschi, 2015) qualify of negative capability a set of resources enabling to stand discomfort without intending to eliminate it.

2.2.3.1. NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

The poet John Keats conceived the concept of “negative capability” in 1817. In a letter to his brothers, he described it as a state in which a person “is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats, 1970:43 *in* Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002). Conceived about poetic creativity, negative capability has been imported to other fields and contexts, such as religious experience, the practice of teaching and the psychoanalytic method (Milner, 1973: 260; Bion, 1978: 8-9).

In the literature and religious realms, Scott reports that’s “what is deepest in the human mystery gives way only before a negative capability” (Scott, 1969; xii-xiii). Likewise, in his paper on “psychoanalytic praxis”, Eisold defines negative capability as “precisely the ability to tolerate anxiety and fear, to stay in the place of uncertainty in order to allow the emergence of new

thought or perceptions” (Eisold, 2000: 65). This expression was more recently borrowed by organization studies (Bennis, 1998; 2000; Handy, 1989; French, 2001; Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002). The expression can also be found in the plural – negative capabilities. However, for reasons of consistency and simplicity throughout this research, we will use the expression in the singular.

Negative capability was thus further defined as “the **ability to resist dispersing** into defensive routines when leading at the limits of one’s knowledge, resources and trust”. **Dispersal** is, according to the philosopher Needleman, “the diversion of energy away from engagement with the task, into distraction” or “the breakdown of this receptive state of intense and alive waiting... In particular when the anxiety of encountering the unknown cannot be born, we tend to disperse into explanations, emotional reactions or physical action” (Needleman, 1990; 167 *in* Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002; 1213-1214). Interestingly, explanations, emotion and actions, all three usually valued in organizational life, seem to be the results of dispersal, thereby downgraded or depreciated, in Needleman’s eyes. “However important it may be to have the right understanding, ‘being right’ is often a manifestation of dispersal that can involve these three elements” (Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002; 1222). Dispersal is also seen as a “dispersal **of energy** into an activity generated out of habit, panic, denial, and avoidance”, as an example of “**losing the capacity to think** or, of **thoughtlessness**. The role of the leader in such situations is to retain the capacity to think, even under pressure” (Simpson and French, 2005: 280). For Simpson and French, enhancing the capacity to think requires three things.

Another definition of negative capability is “a disposition, a state of mind, a way of being that allows one to bear the experience of encountering an edge (Simpson and French, 2001; 68)

This capability is “described as ‘negative’ for different reasons. First, because it involves the “ability *not* to do something, to resist dispersing into actions that are defensive rather than relevant”. Second, because it occurs in ‘negative’ circumstances, i.e. circumstances of lack (lack of knowledge or information, lack of resources, lack of trust). It thus “contains aspects of a situation that are themselves ‘negative’ (not knowing what to do, not having resources, not trusting or being trusted)”. Third, Negative capability can also be defined in comparison with its opposite, positive capability, because it is “at the opposite pole to action”, even though it is not negative *per se* (Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002; 1210). “Where positive capability

supports ‘decisive action’, negative capability supports ‘reflective inaction’ (Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002; 1209). Without any moral judgments, positive and negative capabilities have a “metaphorical sense similar to that of positive and negative polarities in an electrical or magnetic field” and therefore are “connected rather than self-contradictory or mutually exclusive” (Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002; 1211).

Negative capability can be considered as “underlying this capacity to hear the meanings that are often obscured as much as revealed by words, and then to convey them to others.” (Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002; 1217). Thus, according to Howard Stein, in his essays on culture’s elusiveness, “the organizational consultant’s most valuable skill – like the poet’s and the psychoanalyst’s alike – is cultivating this “negative capability”, one which listens for the hidden story to emerge” (Stein, 1994: 339). Negative capability is built on receptivity and empathic listening (Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002; 1218). It calls out to Keat’s idea of “**humility** and the capability of submission’ and on the chameleon poet who becomes nothing, in order to identify with, and thereby understand, the other” (Simpson, French & Harvey, 1222). It is present in “waiting, observing and listening” (Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002; 1210) before acting, and represents containment (of emotions) as well as a form of resistance (to automatic action). Negative capability is a **resisting capacity**, an ability to “resist the pressure and temptation to “disperse” his energies into a reaching for fact and reason” (Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002; 1213).

At times, this capacity only unfolds in the very end of a moment, for instance, in the phrasing phase of this moment. In a case study of Simpson, French & Harvey (2002; 1217), it is exemplified through Nicholas, the leader of a negotiating team for a joint venture between Russia, China and South Korea:

“Nicholas clearly recalled thinking “Okay, say nothing, say nothing.”

“The ability to say nothing is very non-Western, but very powerful. Just to wait, to sit there and do noting and say nothing. To sit there and see what happens. Very powerful.” Nicholas, negotiating team leader

The parallel between organizational behavior and literature, between a leader and a poet, is elaborated by Symons according to whom they both embody a similar intention and desire: “to be a voice, a vision; to pass on a message, translating it, flawlessly, into another, more easily apprehended tongue” (Symons, 1901: 1627). Simpson, French & Harvey suggest that “Through

the exercise of negative capability, the leader becomes like the strings of a lyre, an instrument – not for music or poetry, but for (...) action.” Simpson, French & Harvey (2002; 1218).

This concept of negative capability is based on a view of reality according to which the reality of the **here and now**, or “**truth-in-the-moment**”, or “ultimate reality”, symbolized by the letter “O” for Bion, can not possibly be known, intellectually (Simpson and French, 2001) “O does not fall in the domain of knowledge; it can “become” but it can not be “known” (Bion, 1984a, p.26, *in* Simpson and French, 2001, p. 55). Therefore, for Bion, O is not knowledge but can generate learning, hence knowledge. The notion of edge is also crucial in Bion’s world, implying that the creation of knowledge takes place in a liminal space, a liminality.

The painter’s brushstroke, the confident tennis stroke, or the scientist insight, all of these three moments have been possible because the painter, the tennis man or the scientist have been in touch with truth-in-the-moment. “In none of these situations can the moment of insight be either controlled or predicted” and it happens “only when one stops thinking about it” (Simpson and French, 2001; 55). According to these authors, interpreting Bion, “the boxes themselves can become a distraction or a seduction, if we become preoccupied with how things *are* to the exclusion of what they *are becoming*. (ibid; 62) What matters is the ability to strive constantly to find a new edge without “someone who KNOWS filling the empty space” (Bion *in* Simpson and French, 2001; 62). How to do that? How to get there, at the edge between knowing and not-knowing? “Discard your memory; discard the future tense of your desire; forget them both, both what you knew and what you want, to leave space for a new idea” (Bion, 1980, p. 11 *in* Simpson and French, 2001; 71).

In short, “Keats was describing the poet’s capacity to wait – and to tolerate the emotional experience of waiting in a state of not knowing” (ibid). Negative capability can be described as an aptitude to deal with uncertainty (Goellnicht, 1976 ; French, 2001 ; Saggurthi & Thakur 2016), especially « under the pressure to act » (1214). One might even draw a parallel of negative capability with **Freud’s evenly suspended attention**.

This concept of Negative Capability, originating from literature (poetry) more than a century ago, and used by psychoanalysis, has been hardly mobilized in management. Yet, it seems interesting and relevant to us to mobilize in the present research for two reasons. First, its expression as such – an oxymoron – evokes a paradox. The term “capability” namely usually

relates to the presence of a feature (“positive”) and not to its absence (“negative”). Second, this concept of Negative Capability appears as a potential means to manage ambiguity. Negative Capability indicates the “capacity to live with and tolerate ambiguity and paradox, to remain content with half knowledge” (Ward, 1963; 161) and thereby to engage in change in a non-defensive way, resisting to the impulsion to react to pressures related to risk taking (French, 2001; 482). In change contexts, this impulsion to react – and thus the preference to mobilize Positive Capability – is generally expected and even encouraged: the manager is expected to make multiple decisions and actions (Mintzberg, 1973, 2009 ; Spreitzer et Quinn, 1996 ; Huy, 2001 ; Crossman et Doshi, 2015). Nevertheless, by making a decision too quickly, implying to make a counter decision, the managers run a significant risk of attrition, exhaustion and depletion of resources, theirs as well as the organization’s. Accepting a certain level of tensions may then translate not a passivity but a capacity to resist decisional pressure and subsequent possible decisional fatigue. Therefore, the notions of capabilities, positive as negative, seem interesting, relevant and complementary to analyze change management and ambiguity management, as well as management of manpower, through change.

Yet, precisising more these notions remains to be done. That is what we tried to do, through our proposition of a capability grid (see in Part Chapter 2. Construction of the capability grid). This grid aims at identifying the preference for mobilizing one of the capabilities (either the positive or the negative), through five criteria. These criteria are certainty, emotions, action, parole and decision.

NEGATIVE CAPABILITY FOR MANAGING CHANGE

For the psychoanalyst Bion (1978; 8-9), it is the ability of the therapist to “stand alongside” his patient. In management, it is the “capacity to contain” (French, 2001; 480). “In organizations, someone has to do the hard work of (emotional) “containment”: facing up to, understanding and managing the emotions inevitably aroused by change”; for “anyone managing organizational change, it is the ability to think “under fire” (ibid; 481), the “capacity to live with uncertainty and yet still to act.” (ibid; 490)

“When the pressure is on, the ‘default’ position proves to be control” (Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002; 1223). To react to this, negative capability is (also defined as) the ability that “can create an intermediate space that enables one to continue to think in difficult situations”

(Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002; 1213), even though “capacities such as negative capability, which are intrinsically un-measurable, will tend to be ignored, by being excluded from dominant organizational discourses” (Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002; 1223). This corroborates Bion’s idea that “in analytic work, new insight depends on resisting the tendency to fill with knowing the “empty space” created by ignorance. To “leave space” for the emergence of a new idea, Bion recommended his colleagues to “forget both what they knew and what they wanted, and wait with “patience for a pattern to evolve.” (Bion, 1984:124 *in* Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002; 1213). “The changing conditions of organizational life increasingly demand a capacity to remain ‘content with half knowledge’ (Keats, 1970: 43). This capacity to tolerate ambiguity and paradox may enable one to explore new ways of working in conditions of uncertainty.” (Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002; 1223). “The capacity for reflective inaction seems particularly necessary for leaders in the uncertain conditions of organizational life today” (Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002; 1224).

DISCOMFORT AND AMBIVALENCE OF THE EDGE (OF UNCERTAINTY)

“It is important to emphasize that the experience of reaching the edge of our knowing can be unsettling as well as stimulating and fruitful. It can, as a result set in motion well-worn defensive routines. The edge is not a comfortable place to be” (Simpson and French, 2001; 63). The edge of not knowing thus opens the door to emotions, to “an emotional experience” (*ibid*). It gives rise to a certain degree – at times high - of discomfort as well as to ambivalence. This emotional experience might become a possible emotional ordeal, as one needs to “give up their hold on knowing” which “uncovers their state of inner dependency on knowing” (“at every level we clothe ourselves with our knowing”) and their “resulting anxiety of not knowing (“anxiety of one’s nakedness”)” (*ibid*; 64).

“However, I also could not shake the dark mood that has settled upon me, nor could I get away from the feeling that I was missing the point. The more we talked the greater was our sense of confusion and despair at ever finding a way of intervening. The sense of incompetence and mild panic that arises when we don’t know was palpable” Peter Simpson, consultant (*in* Simpson and French, 2001; 67).

This quote exemplifies the high level of discomfort one can experience when responsible of solving an uneasy situation.

“The uncertainties aroused by the encounter with not-knowing are often unsettling and anxiety-provoking, confusing and even terrifying. They can inspire a sense of incompetence and loss of control, and can obliterate all sense of role and identity of the task in hand” (ibid; 69). This description of disarray and loss of landmarks may as well be the one of the Weickian collapse of sensemaking (quote, Weick, 1995)

This **edge** or boundary between knowing and not knowing therefore represents a paradoxical place full of both fears and promises. “To put it most simply, the disposition required to stay at the edge of uncertainty is one of waiting; not dead or inert but intensely alive and accurate... an alert readiness” (Eigen, 1983; 12 in Simpson and French, 2001; 70). This quote illustrates quite well the paradox/oxymoron of active/alive/alert waiting.

“The attempt to work at the edge of uncertainty demands what might be called a “sophisticated naivety” or a “knowledgeable ignorance” (*docte ignorance*”, de Cues, in Bibard, 2014). This naivety is defined as the “ability to be alive to the impact of each new moment, as though “born again” in each instant: “naïve” being derived from the Latin verb “to be born”. If “naivety” involves openness to truth-in-the-moment, the “sophistication” required is the ability at the same time to remain in touch with context and, as a result, to maintain the ability to differentiate between “truths”. Sophisticated naivety therefore requires us to recognize that there are indeed many truths in every moment” (Simpson and French, 2001; 65). So not only would there be unique a truth-in-the-moment, but maybe one interpreted or deciphered by a given person, i.e. several truths-in-the-moment, when many people experience a “same” situation. “The ability to select among available truths-in-the-moment depends on the ability to work at the edges between knowing and not knowing; that is, to recognize a variety of edges, and to recognize limitations as well as possibilities. For example an edge we see as important may be a step too far for the client” (ibid; 66)

NOT KNOWING/SUSPENDING KNOWLEDGE FOR MANAGING CHANGE

It is completely accepted and even appreciated in everyday life not to know, as a form of humility. It is based on a conception of knowledge as infinite, which therefore can not be gathered or mastered. One can not know everything. A “know it all” is thus a derogatory and ironical term to characterize a person who probably knows a lot, but most certainly believes

she knows everything. In organizational life, however, such thing is not as much valued. Not to know everything is tolerated, for no-one can question the endless of knowledge, but not knowing enough to cope with any arising situation is hardly accepted, let alone valued. Let alone when this arising situation is a change.

However “the truth of that moment was indeed that neither of us knew what we were talking about – and acknowledging that brought about an immediate change. The recognition of not-knowing enabled us to explore other possibilities.” (Simpson and French, 2001; 64). For these authors, any possible learning is in this move away from our naive assumption that we always know what we mean. “Any attempt to cling to what he knows must be **resisted**” (Bion, 1984a, p. 184) recommends Bion for the role of analyst.

2.2.3.2. POSITIVE CAPABILITY

We will first define Positive Capability and then consider its assets.

Negative Capability is a concept created by the British poet Keats, in 1820, which consists in the “capacity to remain in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts without reaching for facts and reason” (Keats *In* French & Simpson, 1999, p.4). The concept was mobilized by the psychoanalyst Bion (1978; 8-9) as the ability to “stay aside” his patient. The concept later moved to management. One mobilizes a so-called negative capability when one experiences not knowing (French, 2001 ; Ou, 2009 ; Crossman et Doshi, 2015) and manages to “contain emotions” (French, 2001 ; 480), i.e. accepts and manages the emotions provoked by the situation and yet, to continue to think and act under a lot of strain. In short, it is the ability to “live with uncertainty and yet to act” (French, 2001; 490).

Positive Capability is then defined by opposition to Negative Capability. We may choose to affix the qualifier “positive” to this opposite capability – as Simpson and French did (French, 2001 ; Simpson et al., 2002) – or we may choose not to add anything at all to the common name, by considering it suffices for itself. In this research, we decide to keep the adjective “positive” as these authors.

Positive Capability corresponds to the attributes and competences usually mentioned in a rather classical conception of leadership, enabling to promote action, even in uncertainty, and value work, accomplishment and success (Simpson et al., 2002 ; French et al., 2009). For example,

Positive Capability enables the following actions: planning, scheduling a task, making sequential decisions, “making do” something by someone else implementing a structure, allocating resources, developing a system, a product or a market, or else, to cut off an issue in smaller issues seemingly manageable. These competences enable to develop influence and control, by applying the knowledge acquired in a former experience. For French, positive capability is what we seek when we ask consultants for help (French, 2001). Given the importance it gives to what is planned or expected, Positive Capability favors the implementation of routines (Simpson et al, 2002; Crossman & Doschi, 2015). For Needleman, (1990; 167), Positive Capability is also a source of “dispersal” of our energy in “explanations, emotional reactions or physical action” when we do not stand the discomfort of not knowing or of not being right. Interestingly, PC can remind of Fayol’s POCCC (Plan, Organize, Coordinate, Command, Control) in 1916.

Why Positive Capability has been so praised in organizations

Positive Capability (PC) proves to be very useful and relevant for structuring and managing organizations. Performance assessment, for example, relies on it, for it “makes things happen”. “In the competing discourse within organizations, primacy tends to be given to decisive, action oriented, knowing leadership” (Simpson and French, 2005; 280). From this viewpoint, PC is a key helper to design and coordinate decision and control tools, thereby bringing legitimacy to those building and using them.

Limits of Positive Capability

First, PC can rather easily be pretended. One can “look” busy, active, focus and concerned... PC can be displayed through alleged and staged behaviors. Jackall (1988; 61) considers the manager as “one of the greatest actors of our epoch”. Second, the use of PC might not be enough to manager complexity. Anticipating, cutting a piece in small bites, organizing options and structuring implementation may be suitable and efficient in a rather stable and known environment (at least, with limited unexpected). However, this strategy may no longer be relevant to deal with complexity. Yet, the pressure to follow this strategy is strong. “The practical, political and emotional pressures on us to *know* are constant and almost irresistible”

(Simpson and French, 2001; 69). “Consultant, manager, teacher – and even ironically, research – are all roles where one is inevitably perceived as “the subject who is supposed to know” (Lacan, 1979, p. 232). The fear induced by the sense of not-knowing what one is doing really is significant (Simpson and French, 2001; 70). Therefore, in spite of its assets, PC does not seem to be able to answer all situations in organizational life.

PART 2.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

PART 2.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

PRESENTATION OF PART 2

Part 2 presents and explains the methodology chosen for this research. Part 2 first describes the context of the research methodology. The fieldwork of the present research is the focus of chapter 1. Chapter 2 then introduces and justifies the chosen research design, while chapter 3 actually presents the ethnographic study. The position of the researcher in this fieldwork, situated within, requires a further particular analysis, an auto-ethnographic study: it is developed in chapter 4.

CONTENT OF PART 2

Introduction

Chapter 1. Working in a Scandinavian multinational

Chapter 2. Research design

Chapter 3. Observing, observing and listening: the ethnographic study

Chapter 4. The auto-ethnographic study

INTRODUCTION

Prior to getting into the details of the fieldwork and of the research design, I will be explaining why the research took place in this very fieldwork, why this very subject was studied on this fieldwork, and also, why I am (or was) on this fieldwork.

WHY THIS FIELDWORK?

The reasons for identifying this fieldwork to be the one for my research are many, yet they will be split between why this fieldwork seemed relevant for my research and how this fieldwork was possible.

WHY RELEVANT?

First, my interests, as a practitioner and later as a researcher, covered the themes of uncertainty and complexity, as well as the population of middle managers.

As mentioned in the introduction of this manuscript, my personal history, punctuated with numerous moves and relocations, in my first years of life, in countries sometimes politically unsettled, may have had its influence on this interest. The position of middle manager, which I occupied during a couple of years of “practice” in “the industry”, before moving to Academia, may have had its influence too. I was then in quest of a fieldwork enabling to observe these themes and this population, particularly. Change thereby appeared as an interesting setting or space to observe, as it would intensify uncertainty and probably increase complexity. So a change about or through managers –directly or indirectly affecting them, or both – appeared appealing, as a context, to study what I wished to study.

As to the type of organization relevant to observe, I first thought that an organization prone to uncertainty as much as an organization working to limiting uncertainty could have been

interesting contexts, for different reason. Observing uncertainty and complexity in a quite uncertain environment would have triggered certain reactions and processes, while observing uncertainty and complexity in an environment keen on reducing uncertainty would have triggered other reactions and processes. Finally, the company where my fieldwork took place probably corresponds to an in-between situation, which also proved to be interesting and relevant. The company I studied indeed is an organization that I believe is trying to limit uncertainty as much as it can. Yet it seems particularly uncomfortable with handling conflict, which then tends to increase the uncertainty they first tried to limit. Therefore, the situation might be blended, with a company handling neither a particularly high nor a particularly low level of uncertainty. This situation may correspond to many (most?) organizational contexts, and is all the more so interesting to observe.

HOW POSSIBLE?

My access to the fieldwork was possible because of a long preliminary relationship I had with the company. Prior to the fieldwork, I namely worked for the company for years. I was then considered as an insider for I was employed full time by this company. Gaining entry into this multinational corporation would probably not have been possible with a non-insider position. Before moving into Academia and Research, I was working with Sales and Marketing (as national Shopping Experience Manager) and when I asked them to work part time on a change project in another department, they offered me the position of change manager of a project for dematerializing invoices, amounting to an average of 50% of the time.

WHY THIS SUBJECT ON THIS FIELDWORK?

As presented earlier, I was originally personally interested in uncertainty and managers. The subject of ambiguity management and of the possible uses of ambiguity also emerged from both my review of the literature and the fieldwork itself: I spotted some gap in the literature, which got finetuned through the fieldwork and, thanks to the fieldwork. More precisely, the gap was spotted at the intersection of several literatures: ambiguity, managers, and change. Furthermore, I found it particularly appealing and “a propos” to study ambiguity in an organization valuing clarity, even transparency, and in a Do-It-Yourself company whose products come with an assembly instruction manual with no single words on.

WHY BEING ON THIS FIELDWORK?

My presence on this very fieldwork resulted from several reasons. It first resulted from the answers of the two previous questions (Why this fieldwork? Why this subject on this fieldwork?). It became also possible for the following reason. The – momentary - need in the observed organization of some competences that I happened to be able to bring. They were namely looking for a person with international experience in project management and familiar with the company, but not too familiar with the department where the change would occur – the accountancy and finance department (i.e. an insider outsider position). They so happened to have the budget for a half time position, only. It could hardly be better... I exchanged a couple of emails with the Human Resource Director and met the CFO who had seen me presenting a project or two to the management team, years earlier. He – Duncan – and the Accountancy and Finance Director – Violet, agreed that I took this position. I thereby endorsed the role of “change and communication manager” of a project aiming at dematerializing invoices (“paperfree” or e-invoicing project).

CHAPTER 1. WORKING IN A SCANDINAVIAN MULTINATIONAL

CHAPTER 1 GOALS

Chapter 1 aims at describing the context of the present research – a Scandinavian multinational, in order to see and comprehend the environment, and its features, where ambiguity unfolds.

CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY

Besides depicting the Scandinavian cultural values and working processes, this chapter unveils the particular place of project management and of ambiguity in the organization studied. It eventually elaborates on the access to the research fieldwork.

1.1. THE SCANDINAVIAN CULTURE

If you walk the streets of a Scandinavian country, you will see no curtains on windows, and if you are invited for dinner at a Scandinavian home, your host may show you each and every room of the place – an extensive visit! So transparency seems to be anchored in the society. The Scandinavian culture is also known to value compromises and consensus, cohesion and concertation. Yet, to foster them, transparency may not always help.

In the following section, we will describe and comment the organization studied, the project studied, the status of projects in the company, the status of ambiguity in the organization and our access to the fieldwork.

1.1.1 THE ORGANIZATION STUDIED

“Exploring the distinct characteristics of organization” (Garsten & Nyqvist, 2013) seems to be a relevant exercise in order to situate the wider organizational context of our research, but also to compare it to what we do observe in the field.

1.1.1.1 THE GLOBAL ORGANIZATION

The organization studied is a multinational corporation, whose activity is selling furniture and interior design objects. It is a global retailer of furnishings, a global « furniture dealer ». The company, of Scandinavian origins, family-based and not on the stock market, employs over 150 000 people worldwide, through more than 400 stores. Over the years, the company evolved from occupying the outsider position in the furniture industry to a leader position, it is considered today as a global key player.

ORGANIZATION’S CULTURE AND VALUES

The organization’s culture and values reflect its Nordic and Scandinavian origin. The company’s culture and values take a large place internally and can be considered as strong. “I like that you talk about values in the everyday work” Mona, Centre Manager. Values and storytelling about them are thus a significant part of life at work. “I think that is my

responsibility to make the values come alive in our work. Because if you don't do that as a leader it will only be words on the wall" she says later on. Because of the prevalence of the company's values, enacting them seems to be crucial, as a manager.

SIMPLICITY AND CLOSENESS AS (PEOPLE) VALUES

As an example of value, simplicity appears many times on the company's website. Simplicity is expressed and marketed through products but also through people: it reflects (or wishes to) how people, managers and senior managers, are working and communicating together. Related to simplicity, closeness also proved to be much evoked as another company's trait, by its employees. "It really is a family", Sonia, Customer Relations employee. "My manager and my co-workers are people just like everyone else and that's inspiring for me" she adds, later on. "We all see each other as equals. Even the manager is treated like an equal. We all have a voice", Jeanette, a team leader. Closeness and the feeling of a flat hierarchy transpires in the company's 2017 summary's front page "Making the company more accessible".

SIMPLICITY AND NEUTRALITY AS (PRODUCT) STYLE

Products are as simple but often as neutral too, in style. Some customers say that the brand of the company had "no style", or actually that "there is style but style is lost when too many people buy the same brand". Simplicity, both as people value and as product style imply organizational values that are remote to ambiguity.

CARING AND HUMANISTIC COMPANY

The company positions itself as a caring employer, i.e. willing to take care of its co-workers as much as of its customers. A subtle implication of such a trait is that criticizing the organization might be deemed as disloyal. Pressure lies in a situation where you not be seen as an ungrateful employee. Many sentences starting with "I shouldn't complain but...", or "I am so lucky to be where I am, however..." are often heard in the corridors or at the cafeteria. Such company's trait is therefore likely to host ambivalence: you blame things on the company, after feeling a certain amount of gratitude.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

“When you make a decision as a leader, you can ask yourself whether you are leading by example. If yes, you should do it” Mona, Centre Manager. In this organization, leadership looks rather participative, and managers are encouraged to lead by example. When you are incited to lead by example, pressure is high on your manager’s shoulders. Working for a caring company and leading by example seem two unambiguous features and maintain a certain pressure on employees and managers. These two sources of pressure, added to the standard pressure of management, spread a particular atmosphere in the organization, filled with...

ARCHITECTURAL VIRTUES AS CORPORATE VALUES

It is interesting to notice a certain slip from architectural virtues over to corporate values, surreptitiously. Some “iconic” features and words of the furnishing world are indeed merged into and adopted in the business discourse, all the more so that they correspond to vivid metaphors (visual represents the favorite sense for architecture). For instance, **inspiration** is a term highly present in architecture, reflected in many workbriefs of the company’s architecture department. Inspiring also proves to be a particular valued and frequently used adjective as the ultimate achievement for a leader. Becoming an inspiring leader might yet be true in most firms, however in this company, it is blatant. Likewise, **simplicity** is a key word for the design of a product. Interestingly enough, the same term exists and is marketed as a core value in the company (see above), especially for management behavior and communication. Another example exists with the expression “**democratic design**” which represents the company’s signature and is associated with the expression “**for the many people**” (usually preceded by “producing goods”). These two expressions do not remain exactly as they are in the business word but are translated into the goal of **maximizing sales** and into the idea of a worldwide business model (the product prices are so low that everyone should afford to buy them).

An exception to this is formulated by Jocelyn Interior Designer “Everyone is appreciated for what strengths they bring. This company in general is good at bringing out the best in people, instead of making everyone the same”. It is the opposite with pieces of furniture, though. The company is good at selling out the same products, the global furnishings.

YET, TENSIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS INHERENT TO CORPORATE VALUES

To the opposite of the fusion of architectural virtues into corporate values, appear tensions related to those corporate values. On one side, business pressure is there: business pressure shows through pressure on customers and on cost (cost consciousness).

“The customer is our biggest responsibility” Elton, Sales & Supply Manager

“It is important to always put the customer focus first, everything you do should be for the customers” Monika, Center Manager.

“Always keep the customer top-of-mind” Sue.

Yet, on the other side, “Togetherness” (Jake, Salesman) is a core value of the company, which is seen as caring for its employees.

“We are inclusive and we want everyone to have a better life” Hans, Project controller.

Yes but what if everyone includes employees?

A **contradiction** can be expressed by a same person, **in a same sentence**:

“I really feel like people give you the chance to think outside the box. That keeps my creative fantasy. At the same time, I need to show stuff that sells” Jocelyn, Interior Designer.

“Always keep the customer top-of-mind. Apart from this be yourself and follow your heart” Sue, Warehouse Manager.

Some sentences can be interpreted with a **double meaning**.

“If I were to give an advice to someone thinking about working for this company, I would say it’s a lot more than you think!” Jocelyn, Interior Designer.

It can be interpreted as even better or greater than you think. It can also be interpreted as much harder, with a bigger workload and mental load than you can imagine.

Seemingly resolved contradictions appear in the following sentences.

“We are very much focus on being our best version. Being our best version is a win-win situation: it is good for each of us, and it is also good for the business. It is really profitable!” Alex, Human Resources Manager.

PRESSURE ON MANAGERS

Being a manager in the company makes you cumulate different types of pressure. You undergo the pressure to lead by example, the pressure to take care of your subordinates (the company is

positioned as caring and humanistic), the pressure to look nice and friendly, the pressure on cost (cost-consciousness), and the pressure of the customer's always right.

"You have to be a people person. You have to be able to interact with people and tolerate stress. You have to be positive the whole day and have a smile for everyone" Jeanette, Team Leader.

There seems to be not much of a choice, for team leaders, and managers in general.

1.1.1.2. THE FRENCH SUBSIDIARY

The French subsidiary amounts to 10 000 employees and to over 30 stores throughout the country, it is composed of stores and of a national headquarter, located in Paris suburbs. The French headquarter is a "service office", an office designed to be (also) at the service all the stores in the country. The service office is located by a store, showing a will to be "close to the shop floor", close to reality, close to business, and close to co-workers.

The French subsidiary, both the service office and the stores, reflects the headquarters' culture, itself reflecting its Scandinavian roots. The French subsidiary embeds the Scandinavian values of the group, making those workplaces a mix of French and Nordic – at times contradictory - ways of working, i.e. hierarchical and not so clear for the former, participative and rather transparent for the latter.

1.1.2. THE PROJECT STUDIED

The project studied is a change project aiming at dematerializing invoices, managed from the finance and accountancy department. Beside its management control and accountancy orientation, the project studied implies the following managerial questions:

- **How (financial) will managers manage their (accountant) subordinates** in a context wherein the latter might expect **some of their work externalized**?
- **How will managers experience the risk of losing their managerial position** (should the number of their subordinates decrease significantly, at least for some of them)?
- **How**, given the two previous questions and the possible implications thus depicted, **are managers going to deal with such a change, both for themselves and for their**

subordinates? Job reduction (whole or partly) both for the accountants and for their financial managers is therefore a strong risk.

The project, composed of different phases, takes place over a couple of years, two of which I observe (2013-2015).

1.1.3. THE STATUS OF PROJECTS IN THE ORGANIZATION

PROJECTS AS JOBS

Working for the company, even through a long term employment contract, implies two types of phases. In the first type of phase, you occupy a job you were interested in and applied to, which you usually hold for a couple of years (say between three and five years). In the second type of phase, you occupy another job which you were rather interested in (at least at the beginning), eventually applied to, and which you hold as long as you get (back to) a first type job – which is almost never the previous first type of job you occupied. As you can see, the types of phases relate to the types of jobs. Some manage to avoid the second types. Many do not. So most people's career in this company alternate the two types of phases/jobs. Careerwise, two sensitive points have to be dealt with: the first and main point is that it is fully up to the person to find out what is coming next and it may be surprisingly demanding, time consuming and uncertain – sometimes it means another country, which itself means (international) commuting. The second sensitive point is that sometimes, the type two phase lasts longer than the type one.

The type two job often corresponds to a project management position.

“I see that no matter where you start, you can end up anywhere.” Salma, team manager

“You can go all over the world and do so many things. There really are endless possibilities in the company” says Steffi, a Marketing and Communication manager.

IMPLICATIONS OF HAVING PROJECTS AS JOBS

Stress related to the search of the next job, be it a phase one or a phase two, are then prevalent, and add up to the ordinary strain of the job itself. When the next job is found, the employee feels relieved and even grateful to be over such an uncomfortable phase. The person feels thankful to his/her new manager and to the company that made this possible.

The organization communicates indeed a strong will to develop its employees and positions itself as a caring company “When people grow, the company grows too. Our co-workers are essential for our continued growth. We see every person as a talent with the possibility to develop” (web site in April 2018).

1.1.4. THE STATUS OF AMBIGUITY IN THE ORGANIZATION

STRUCTURE

The organization’s structure seems rather clear and simple. A Foundation is the basis and covers the Group. The Group gathers different entities or branches, such as the Centers, Retail, and different Group Functions. At the first sight, the organization’s structure presents a limited number of blocs in a minimalistic way. Square and sleek design, as the furniture they produce. Yet, the foundation enables many organizational ramifications and the structure is not so much simple and transparent as it looks like.

Complexity of the real structure, complexity due to the actual significant size of the company, complexity due to the phase of development the company is going through (managing maturity is more complex than managing an early phase of development), might get far away from the ideal of simplicity proclaimed both outside and inside the company.

THE POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS OF CULTURE AND VALUES ON THE PERCEPTION OF AMBIGUITY

Simple, straightforward, clear, transparent values seem rather far away from ambiguity. Yet, the following remark of a logistic manager “There is an omerta on certain things in here” Hilda, a former logistic manager might question or at least shade such simplicity, accessibility and closeness.

TERMINOLOGY

The company does no much use the term employees to define the people it hires, but prefers the term “co-workers”. This term actually entails a double meaning. Co-worker means the entry/lowest level in the hierarchy but also being employed by the company, so that both a truck driver in the warehouse and the Human Resource Director at the Service Office are co-workers. A quite usual term thus has two meanings.

An implication of this double meaning can be a blurred, if not removed, authority. This outspoken simplicity in the hierarchy might be hard to reflect in reality all the time.

Another term used in different contexts is family. Some employees use it to qualify the caring and protective relationship of the company. It also happens to be a range of products sold by the company, on which loyal customers (that joined the club after they asked for) are allowed to get a discount. So family also appears on a category of products, located in the dedicated area in the store, and on customers' loyalty card. The same term is therefore used both internally and externally, as an internal value and for business purpose. Family members can apply to co-workers, inside the company, as well as to customers, outside. One could say that under family lies ambiguity.

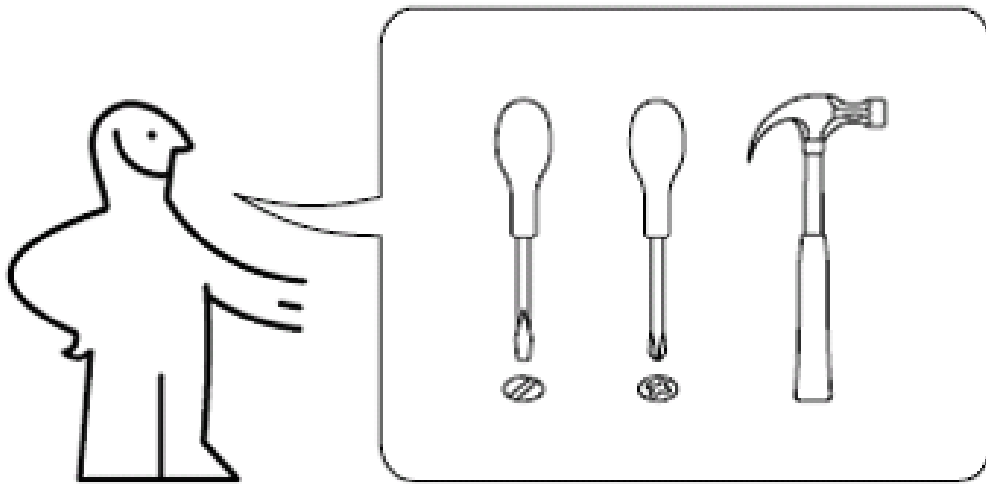


FIGURE 3 - FURNITURE ASSEMBLY INSTRUCTIONS: NO WORDS, ONLY PICTURES

Figure 3 shows an extract of furniture assembly instructions. They come with no words, only with pictures. Maybe one of the reasons reflects in the company's motto, which is to produce furnishings "for the many people". The assembly instructions then seem easy to understand (almost naive), intuitive and fun, in order to help as many users as possible. Such clear helping support might appear remote from ambiguity.

1.2. ACCESS TO THE FIELDWORK

“Gaining entry into and doing fieldwork in an organization share essential characteristics with fieldwork in (...) anthropological environments. But the ethnographer is also faced with specific challenges related to the boundary that organizations are prone to maintaining: exclusive membership, protection of ideological or financial interests and secrecy around key resources.” (Garsten & Nyqvist, 2013; 2)

Accessing the fieldwork had been possible because of my long preliminary relationship with the company, which I had been working for, first, in its Scandinavian country of origin and later, in its French subsidiary. I was indeed already working for the company for seven years (at different functions in sales & marketing), two of them in global project management and internal communication, which seemed to be key to get the position that allowed me to access the research fieldwork. Gaining entry into this multinational corporation would probably not have been possible with a non-insider position.

More precisely, after seven years of employment in the company, as I was interested in academy, I decided to apply for a Master Research in Organization. However, I was unsure as to whether I would enjoy this new paradigm. Yet, to follow and complete it properly, I asked Human Resources for an individual training leave (“Congé Individuel de Formation” or CIF) of one year, which was granted to me, and which would enable me to go back to the company at the end of the leave. By the end of the year, I quite made my mind to quit the business world and jump into the academic one. As I graduated from my Master Research and decided to undertake a Ph.D. journey, I was therefore about to resign when my research supervisor hinted that going back to the company employing me working part time could be an interesting option for my Ph.D. research fieldwork. This was a possibility I never really considered hitherto, because I was doubtful that they would reintegrate a manager part time. My constraints were a half time position, in a department wherein I would have had no experience whatsoever. My concern was indeed work overload and overtime, which would have been a high risk, should I have remained in one of my former departments (sales and marketing).

MY INSIDER OUTSIDER POSITION

So I asked about that possibility (getting back to the same company but in a new department) and a possibility, there were, under the form of a position related to project management, and to the finance and accountancy department. More precisely, I was reintegrated as the “change and communication manager” of a project aiming at dematerializing invoices, in the Service Office of the French subsidiary. Duncan, the financial director of the company, whom interviewed me, admitted: “I value that you are somehow an insider outsider. It is good that you are coming to our department with a fresh eye, but that you already know the company, the people and how things work in here”. That was one of his reasons for hiring me in the position I hold during this research. Indeed, working for the company already, but from a different department, made me at the same time familiar and not familiar with my new environment and my new colleagues.

I subsequently endorsed the position of insider outsider from two points of view. From an organizational member’s viewpoint, I was coming from within, yet from a different “within” (from a different job and a different department), while, from a researcher’s viewpoint, I was in the position of participant observer, i.e. inside the company and working for the company, but with a researcher’s eye. These two positions or viewpoints of my positions could be called “insider” insider outsider and “outsider” insider outsider.

From a legal viewpoint, after a year off, I was back to my working environment, with about the same legal status: a mere clause specifying that I was working part time (50%) was appended to my long term employment contract.

CHAPTER 2. RESEARCH DESIGN

CHAPTER 2 GOALS

Chapter 2 aims at showing the relevance of the research design chosen for the present research, to try to answer, in the richest possible way, the research question(s):

- How are managers using ambiguity to handle organizational change?
- How are managers using ambiguity to manage their team in the midst of a change?

CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY

To do so, chapter 2 reviews the different methodologies that have not been selected to investigate the here above research questions, and explains why not. This chapter also shows how observing a change project may be relevant and insightful to study ambiguity.

So I was observing an organization from within, actually a given department – accountancy - and, inside it, a given population – middle managers - for (almost) two years. My observations, assembled in a fieldwork diary, gathered descriptions of attitudes and behaviors of people whom I worked with, in this change project: mostly middle managers but also some of their subordinates, and a couple of top managers. One may wonder why interviews were ever needed, on top of the observations. Why observation alone would not suffice for the research?

Conducting interviews, on top of observations, was interesting and fruitful for the present research, for at least three reasons. First, it enabled me to access the ideas, viewpoints and interpretations of those I observed, which one might not get through observation only, so it complements the data collected through observation. Second, it could show how consistent (or not so much) people may be, between how they behave and how they (believe they) think or interpret. In particular, with involuntary ambiguity, people may experience it or convey it, but may all the same ignore it, or even deny it. Third, for a similar given behavior (e.g. managers communicating to their subordinates though a lower level of ambiguity compared to the one they received from top managers), conducting interviews may identify different reasons (e.g. wising to shelter themselves, or wising to shelter their subordinates). For these three reasons - accessing mindsets, spotting (un)consistency between behaviors and (expressed) thoughts, and identifying possibly different discourses behind similar behaviors - I also used interviews, in complement to observation, for this research.

I consider (along with some other researchers) that the methodology employed for this research falls under the appellation of **ethnographic** study. Yet, not 100% of the aspects of the methodology I used actually are ethnographic. In the following paragraph, we will identify, in my approach, what could be deemed as ethnographic, from what may not.

One can namely find, in the present research, a few elements “typical of” ethnographies. Our methodology used **direct observation**, i.e. observation done by the researcher herself, and not by any people not involved in the research process, and thereby corresponds to Gobo’s definition of ethnography (“a methodology based on direct observation”, *in* Silverman, 2011), particularly if this direct observation has been **active**, which is the case for participant observation.

Observation is considered to be participant when it shows the following features: the researcher establishes a direct relationship with the actors, stays in their natural environment with the purpose of observing their actions, interacts with them and participates in their daily life at work, and learns their code in order to understand the meaning of their actions (Silverman, 2011). In the present research, being employed by the company namely first enabled me - as a researcher - to be physically present in the fieldwork (it could not have been possible otherwise), i.e. at the service office of the French subsidiary of the Scandinavian company studied, and therefore, to remain in the natural environment of the people I observed, i.e. the managers.

As I was working with them on communicating and implementing the change, my job and tasks generated constant interactions - implying the development of a direct relationship - with them, contributing to their daily work life. I was thus in a situation to socialize with their ways of being at work, with their codes, allowing an interpretation work of their actions and behaviours "in context". Having worked for the Marketing & Customer Relation department for the previous couple of years, I knew by sight - but by sight only - people of the Accounting department. Thus, working in their department made me discover their working environment, references and norms - that would still be congruent with the company's values, but distinct from the working environment, references and norms of the Sales & Marketing department. For instance, while staff members from Sales & Marketing were working in one rather big shared space, staff members from Accounting were occupying space somehow differently. While Sales & Marketing people were conspicuously and loudly filling their workspace at the first floor of the Service Office building, Accounting people were scattered in several corners of the ground level, and separated with relatively high pieces of furniture (according to the Accounting sub-department they belonged to), sheltering - yet isolating - their discreet work. Political and personal agenda was common among Sales & Marketing people, who happened to take up many improvised coffees, as many strategic meetings and juicy exchange of information. Accounting people, on the opposite, were usually to be found at their desks, and the coffee breaks they took were sub-department organized, very regular, timed, "neither loud nor quiet", and containing no much conspiracy or secrecy (that I could have noticed, at least). **Observing, listening and talking to people** thus were my daily activities in this organization, and notes have been collected in a **fieldwork diary** - regularly quoted in the present research.

The **fieldwork** lasted about two years, and with a quite intensive presence (still 50% of the time), so it can be deemed as a rather **long amount of time**, both in length and in the sum of hours spent, which corresponds to an ethnographic feature.

Furthermore, and I acknowledge it is a personal and therefore highly subjective point, I **felt as an ethnographer** observing whatever could be observed around me. In the beginning of the fieldwork, I may have felt still a bit like an employee of the organization. Yet being away from the organization a whole year, during which I was immersed in research (doing a Master Research in organizations), with no project of getting back to this organization, yet eventually getting back to it unexpectedly, in a different department in the organization (not located at the same place, actually not at the same floor), may have helped me to feel less and less like an employee. I therefore felt as **becoming an ethnographer** throughout the months of the project observed.

Lastly, we believe that the **material both collected and shown** in this manuscript goes beyond semi-structured interviews – the typical material for qualitative research, as it involves fieldnotes, observations, archival data, and many informal interviews – far more than the formal ones (for the material collected), work documents (anonymized), descriptions, vignettes and narratives (for the material shown).

Therefore, from our viewpoint, these many reasons account for categorizing the present research into the ethnography label, particularly through the direct observation of the researcher who played a quite active role.

Yet, other elements in this research may disclose it as **not so much ethnographic**. The first of them lies in the relative closeness of the environment to the researcher whom observed it. “Foreignness” or “alienness” to the culture studied is indeed expected in ethnographies (Watson, 1996). Yet, I was already employed by the company where the present research took place long (several years) before I started my fieldwork. My already existing employment at the company observed thereby did not enable to consider this corporate culture as so foreign to me. How indeed could I study native viewpoints, being myself native in the environment I observed? So I was an insider, not because I became an insider but because I was already one.

One can argue that some elements of foreignness were instilled into the situation as I spent a year away from this organization (studying), as I changed department (moving from Sales & Marketing to Finance & Accounting), and also as I changed role (Change Manager instead of Shopping Experience Manager). The fact that I changed the proportion of time dedicated to

working in this organization (from full time to part time – fifty percent) also helped me de-familiarize with it, by working in another environment the other fifty percent of my time – the research environment and courses. My perception and representation of the company I knew before, as I knew it, was no longer the same.

Yet this pre-existing familiarity and closeness to the fieldwork at times prevented me from embodying the ethnographer's role first. My dual role of long-time employee and recent researcher-ethnographer made me sometimes act and think as an employee first. Confusion in my two roles, and in the prevailing one (the researcher-ethnographer should come first, but even if this was easy to keep in mind, this priority was not so easy to be embody and experience). For this reason, and for its implications, the present research somehow moves away from typical ethnographies.

2.1. RELEVANCE OF ETHNOGRAPHY TO STUDY MANAGERS AND THEIR AMBIGUITY

How can managers make use of ambiguity in order to deal with the uncertainty of an impactful organizational change? In order to observe complex phenomena such as uncertainty and ambiguity, with blurred boundaries, a comprehensive approach seemed appropriate (Silverman, 2007). Also, in order to be at the same time in exploration (of phenomena) and explanation (of a process), organizational ethnography (Eberle & Maeder, *in* Silverman, 2011) was deemed to be particularly relevant: “Overall, ethnography focuses on interpretation, understanding and representation” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008: 152). Furthermore, organizational ethnography appeared especially suitable for “understanding how managers manage, how organizational change comes about, how micropolitics operate, and how employment relationships are shaped and maintained” (Watson, 2011: 204). So our intention, given our topic, was to go observe and to tell what was going on actually (what we perceived to be going on and what the others said as to be going on).

2.1.1. ORGANIZATIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY, AN ATTEMPT OF DEFINITION

Originating from anthropology, ethnography or ethnographic studies focus on an observation over a rather long period (years). Among them, we can find Van Maanen (1988, 1995, 2011),

Spradley (1979), Bate, Kunda, Watson (2011), Czarniawka-Joerges (1992). Some researchers consider ethnography as “both a methodological approach and an analytic process” (Van Maanen, 2011: 218). Others see ethnography as “the *outcome* of research. Ethnography is the product and not the method of production (...). A rather complete definition could be that ethnography “is most usefully defined as a style of social science writing which draws upon the writer’s close observation of and involvement with people in a particular social setting and relates the words spoken and the practices observed or experienced to the overall cultural framework within which they occurred” (Watson, 2011: 205). Others again do not much acknowledge it as a research method: “It is helpful not to define ethnography, as many do, as a research method” (*ibid*). “Ethnography is not a research method. It is a way of writing and analyzing social life (...). Whilst it prioritizes close and intensive observation in the gathering of information and insights, it may additionally use any of the full range of other research methods” (Watson, 2011: 202). **Ethnography gives access to what the observed “give off” (Goffman, 1959): non verbal and unintentional features.** It is even seen as “a craft” (Watson, 2011: 203).

Compared to other methodologies, ethnographies possess the unique asset of unveiling a lively reality for managers, which is “messy, complex and filled with human drama, making it unlikely that it can be completely understood using ‘hands-off’ methodologies such as surveys and archival analyses” (Rynes, 2007b; p. 1048). Examining organizations and phenomena *in medias res*, compared to using fixed material, by browsing archives or by studying second-hand narratives, remains the richest approach. “There is nothing quite like being there in real time. Observing processes in action and wondering what will happen next”. Especially when it comes to observing a change and its progressive and processual unfolding, “Rather than starting with known outcomes (...), there is a golden opportunity to understand how the change will interact with its context and penetrate the organization.” (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010; p.12)

Process research often chooses qualitative or ethnographic methodologies to capture processes and their subtleties in organisations (Langley et al., 2013).

Besides, seems to come along with organizational ethnography a certain discomfort, an ethnography-related discomfort. “You don’t do fieldwork, fieldwork does you” (Simpson, B. in Hobbs & Wright, 2006: 125). Ethnography is “a painful way of doing research (...). I would confess that I have been a reluctant ethnographer (...) [because of] the fear of having to find the enormous amount of nervous energy and emotional resilience to be

able to work for long hours ‘in the field’” (Watson, 2011: 204). Maybe experiencing this productive discomfort is part of the ethnographic endeavor necessary for the research.

Obviously, ethnography can be differently interpreted, but most of the time it appears as an “outside of the frame” concept, by representing an approach from within, a living approach (the frame representing a more distant and colder approach to the data).

My approach of ethnography happens to be the broad one, the **Watson approach**, ethnography picturing much beyond the outcome of the research. As Watson, I found myself a **reluctant ethnographer at times, but a highly curious and concerned observer all times**.

MANAGERS AND SCANDINAVIAN COMPANY THROUGH ETHNOGRAPHIES

Studying managers throughout ethnography has been deemed to be worth and relevant by researchers, at several times. Collinson (1992), *Managing the shopfloor*, and Garsten (2013) are such examples. Krause-Jensen (2011) carried out an ethnographic study, observing a Scandinavian (Danish) company, Bang & Olufsen.

2.1.2. HOW TO GRASP / OBSERVE AMBIGUITY?

In Economics, ambiguity has been grasped or analyzed through its contrary concept of ambiguity aversion, and through a quantitative approach, linking it to – comparative - ignorance (Fox & Tversky, 1995), or testing it vs it to conflict aversion (Cabantous, 2009), apprehending it through preferences (Maccheroni et al, 2006). Ambiguity has also been approached through the concept of uncertainty and risk aversion (Camerer & Weber, 1992 ; Liu & Colman, 2009). After ambiguity aversion, tolerance for ambiguity (Norton, 1975; Bengley & Boyd, 1987) seemed to emerge, sometimes relating it to creativity (Tegano, 1990 ; Zenasni et al., 2008). Ambiguity intolerance (Millon, 1957; Faircloth, 1981; Ghosh, 1992) appears to be not as strong as ambiguity aversion.

Ambiguity is not an easy concept to identify or qualify in organizations, all the more so that it is often denied in (see earlier). Ambiguity is hard to ask. Yet ambiguity can be observable. So a list of open questions has been elaborated based on the project observed (such as “what do you find difficult in this change?”, “how do you manage the uncertainty of the project?”, “How did you know about the project?” “How did you communicate it to your subordinates?”). The

idea was to avoid mentioning the word “ambiguity”, not to put the word in the mouth of the respondent.

2.2. METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

This research raises the question of how managers are using ambiguity (for). In this chapter, we look through different methodologies, and we explain why we find them either irrelevant or incomplete to try to answer this question.

2.2.1. WHY NOT OTHER METHODOLOGIES?

2.2.1.1. *WHY NOT A QUANTITATIVE APPROACH?*

In so far as Economics and Psychology have shown interest in ambiguity, quantitative approaches have been mobilized to study this topic. To express ambiguity aversion, probabilities have been used (Ellsberg, 1961; Camerer & Weber, 1992; Schmidt, 1996). Experiments have also been developed in Economics and Psychology (Cohan, Jaffray, Said, 1985; Lauriola & Lewin, 2011; Viscusi & Chesson, 1999) to show more complex preferences expressing a mix or a plurality of attitudes towards ambiguity. Thus, ambiguity has been much studied through the variables of aversion or preference. Ambiguity has also been studied as an element of information adequacy in order to select suitable project management strategies (Pich, Loch & De Meyer, 2002).

Why not a questionnaire? Given the possibly sensitive and personal aspect of our topic (ambiguity appears somewhat taboo in some organizations), using a questionnaire as a method did not seem relevant to us. Besides, quantifying ambiguity is anything but our wish for the current research. As a result, answering our research question on the managers’ uses of ambiguity cannot be carried out through quantitative models.

2.2.1.2. WHY NOT OTHER QUALITATIVE METHODS?

WHY NOT A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY APPROACH?

(Longitudinal) case studies have been used (Corley & Gioia, 2004) too, to study identity ambiguity and change, strategic ambiguity (Denis et al, 2011), or pragmatic ambiguity (Giroux, 2006). They offer an interesting insight on ambiguity mechanisms / processes when it comes to how ambiguity arises, develops or unfolds. A multiple case study approach to look into managers' ambiguity would have been a, interesting approach, from our perspective. Nonetheless, our interest in the individual level and at the inter-individual boundaries seems to require a broader approach than the case study (less bounded), more personal and intimate.

WHY NOT AN INTERVIEW-BASED RESEARCH?

Interviewing managers would answer our research question. Interviewing managers gives an account of what they say they believe or want to express, or what they want to be heard about, if not an account of what they do think. Basing a research on interviews exclusively however leaves a doubt on the authenticity of their testimonies, or at least does not enable to compare what they say they think to how they behave. Thus we find interviewing managers relevant to investigate our research question, though partly only. We suggest that a complementary method should be added to interviews.

WHY NOT AN OBSERVATION-BASED RESEARCH?

Observing managers would also answer our research question. Observing managers gives information on how they behave and what they do. Thus we find observing managers relevant to investigate our research question, though partly only. We suggest that a complementary method should be added to observation.

2.2.2. WHY NOT MIXED METHODOLOGIES?

In so far as a quantitative approach would not have helped much to answer our research question (see above why so), a methodology combining quantitative and qualitative methods would not help more. Yet, mixed methodologies could actually be interesting, with a different research

question, such as the inference of an element on another one, with a qualitative research as exploratory study.

2.2.3. RELEVANCE OF A CHANGE PROJECT TO STUDY AMBIGUITY

WHY OBSERVING CHANGE?

Observing a project team to try and answer the above research question seemed relevant since “in a project organization, the project members experience a high level of ambiguity on what can and what is to be done in the present situation” (Garreau & Mouricou, 2012, our translation). Besides, “getting over uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity constitutes pivotal project management matters” (Pich et al., 2002, in Garreau & Mouricou, 2012).

Furthermore, doing an organizational ethnography by joining a **change project** allowed the following: “Rather than starting with known outcomes, the researcher has access to a major change initiative that is just beginning. Here is a golden opportunity to understand how the change will interact with its context and penetrate the organization.” (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010; p.12).

WHAT, WHOM AND FROM WHERE TO OBSERVE?

What, whom and from where to observe, when observing managers and their uses of ambiguity in a change project? What to observe: daily organizing, daily work, daily interactions, official meetings, unofficial meetings. Whom to observe: managers, but also their subordinates (one level below) and their own managers (one level above, senior managers), other people related to the project. From where to observe: from the same level and from a similar position: I, manager in the project which I am studying.

2.2.4. INTERNAL VALIDITY OF THE RESEARCH

“In order not to lessen the internal validity of the research, the researcher/object relationship needs to be managed and controlled” (Giordano, 2003, ch. 1, p. 15). For this reason, but also to foster perspective and reflexivity in my research process, a “detachment committee” has been formed. It was composed of three professors from different fields: one professor in management

control, one professor in organizational behavior and my dissertation supervisor, professor in organization theory, all of them with possibly complementary mindsets to enlighten my research process. The goal of this detachment committee was threefold: first, it was to help me distance myself from my natural environment and my data. As a matter of fact, even though I have been able to integrate a department where I never happened to have worked, in order to minimize a too strong familiarity with my work environment (“being native”), I nevertheless know the company from within, for a couple of years. So a support for distancing is needed. Second, it is to deepen and enrich my reflections. Third, it helps me deal with my ambivalence - due to my very position in this ethnography, dual as such - and transform my discomfort of participant observer into a reflexive analysis. This detachment committee met on a semester basis. Indeed “Jay (2013) emphasizes the importance of reflexivity in managing such deep and ongoing interactions with a research context. In some cases the involvement of both insider author and outsider authors offers a means to balance differing perspectives, combining intimacy with local settings and the potential for distancing” (Langley et al, 2013 ; p.6).

CHAPTER 3. OBSERVING, OBSERVING AND LISTENING: THE ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

CHAPTER 3 GOALS

Chapter 3 aims at unfolding the ethnographic study.

CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY

Chapter 3 presents the organizational ethnography as well as the data (primary and secondary), collected and analyzed, of the present research.

3.1. THE ORGANIZATIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

During almost two years, I was part-time (50%) employed by a company as the internal “change and communication manager” of a project aiming at dematerializing the company’s invoices. This project was expected to have a direct impact on several teams, and an indirect one on their managers. I had thus the occasion to experience disorder and complexity of the real world of managers (Rynes *in* Langley et Tsoukas, 2010). So the field research was a two-year organizational participant ethnography of a change project.

I also conducted a reflexive observation (**auto-ethnography**) **on my own ambiguity**, as participant observer and as manager in the project studied (see later).

MY POSITION IN THE RESEARCH/ETHNOGRAPHY

My position in the research was observant participation. I unveiled my identity of researcher but was still participating to the daily tasks of the project. My job’s goal was to « drive and lead the change process throughout the project life cycle » (excerpt of my job description) for the different project stakeholders: country management, store managers, finance managers, accountants and trade unions. I mainly worked at the service office of the French subsidiary, but I also worked in several stores, in the Paris area, and in the country side, in order to support the finance managers and their accountants to face the change and train them to the new e-invoicing process and the new invoice software.

“I started working in the project at the beginning of October 2013. My presence in this project is due to too things. As far as I am concerned, after a year off the company (when I was doing my Master Research within the framework of a training leave called CIF, “Congé Annuel de Formation”), I wished to return to the company fifty percent of the time, in order to conciliate fieldwork, studying, teaching and (some) money. As far as the company is concerned, they somehow seemed satisfied enough with my work for the previous seven years and did thus consider with certain goodwill to get me back on board. They tried to figure out something satisfying for both of us, which arose with the need of half a resource – a half time position – in a project: a position of change and communication (C&C) manager in a project aiming at dematerializing invoices. The global headquarter of the company indeed recently recommended to hire a C&C manager for as many change projects as possible, since that such a position in a project seemed highly beneficial for the project: it improved its operation, its results and also its adoption from the shareholders. Projects seems to work much better

when this function existed in their structure, and that this role was played by someone else than the project manager himself of herself. Darcy, the CFO of the French subsidiary, recruited me into the project. We met occasionally at board meetings, he saw me presenting marketing issues. Besides, I suppose that my experience of project coordination and project adaptation at a global level brought me enough legitimacy to be considered for this position of C&C manager. Darcy gave me a very good impression, and looked respectful and honest. I know very little of Vera, his accountancy director, who would be my manager, but she seemed to me professionally engaging. I feel satisfied to have been able to negotiate such a return to the company who is been employing me for the past seven years. I am happy to earn some money again too and I feel grateful to Sybil, the HR director, to have made the whole thing possible. The context of my arrival into the project is more chaotic: my two bosses disagree on the added value of the change project. And I discover the project is to be presented to be unions' representatives and voted by them." excerpt of my fieldwork diary

I was thus observing "from within" – my position in the research was the one of a participant observer - but also from a change agent-manager's viewpoint. In this change project, my job, reporting to the project manager, had the purpose of "leading and driving the change process throughout the lifecycle of the project" (as written in my job description). My mission implied that I did so for the different stakeholders of the project, who were the country management, the store managers, the finance managers, the accountants, and last but not least, the labor unions. I mainly worked at the service office of the subsidiary. I also worked in the stores for a couple of weeks, to help the finance managers and their accountants deal with the change, and to train them to the invoice new process and software. So from October 2013 (and until June 2015), I am working half time in this global retail company, as the change and communication manager of a project aiming at dematerializing invoices and invoices management. My job description ("competence profile" or "role description") appears here under, in Figure 4.

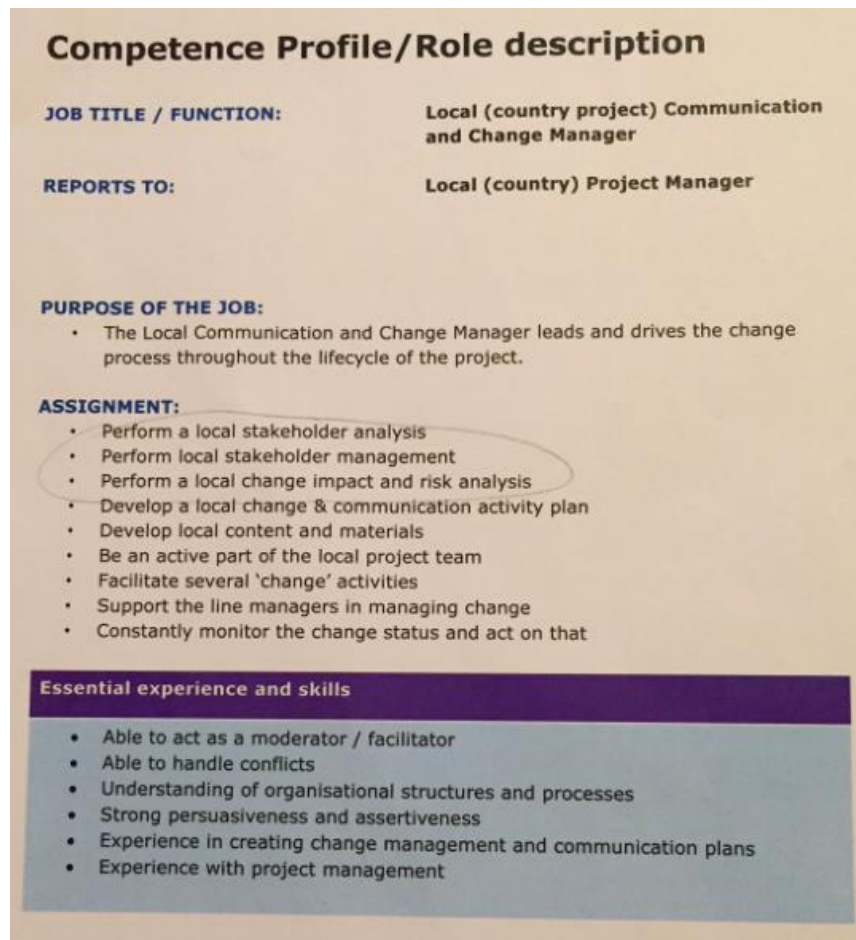


FIGURE 4 - COMMUNICATION & CHANGE MANAGER, COMPETENCE PROFILE

“The presence of such a function in the project structure is recommended by the global headquarter. It seems that this function or role is systematically suggested to be fulfilled in all project structures of the company, because this role would fluidize the project, and would anchor it in its organization. This role of C&C manager is either cumulated with the project leader function (in “small countries”: countries where the brand has only few stores) or, for the said “more complex” countries (over a certain amount of stores, the national and local management of these stores becomes more complex – France is considered as a complex country), this role is held a different person, a distinct position, part-time.

My main goal, as responsible for the change management during the project, is actually to “drive and lead the change process throughout the project lifecycle”. It contains training and communication about the change. Concretely, I am going to make the tour of France (where the stores are located) to co-animate, with someone knowledgeable in accountancy, a training on the change and on the new invoice software, for the store finance managers and their team. My job also contains a legal aspect: the case of the change is to be presented to the unions representatives (“CCE” in French, i.e. “Comité Central d’Entreprise”), then relayed

to the store level unions representatives (“CE”, i.e. “Comité d’Entreprise”, and “CHTCT” i.e. “Comité d’Hygiène, de Sécurité et de Conditions de Travail”). The last aspect of my job is the elaboration of an intranet website dedicated to the project. Besides, I am reporting on a weekly and monthly basis to the global project management group” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

3.2. DATA COLLECTION

From October 2013 until June 2015, in the French subsidiary of a global furniture dealer I thereby observed the managers of the accountancy department (finance managers located at national headquarter and in the stores) experience the dematerialization of the invoices sent to the company and how they manage their subordinates (accountants). The project was expected to impact the accountants’ job, since the new process implied the externalization of part of their tasks. As a result, the change might have an incidence on the managers’ job themselves: should their teams be too much reduced, they could happen to merge. The **time** I spent on the project **officially amounts to 950 hours** (based on a 7 hours work per day – this information was required from the global project manager throughout the project), but most certainly **exceeds the 1000 hours in reality**.

I collected a massive amount of diverse data, both primary and secondary data, involving real time participant observation of the project. I kept a fieldwork diary (150 pages). I participate to a considerable amount of informal discussions and hallway conversations. I collected minutes of management meetings and numerous other documents / a wealth of organizational record data (over 120 pages of power point project presentations to the different stakeholders, over 100 pages of project training documents - designed for accountants and finance managers, and over 600 emails). The project stakeholders were country management, accountants, finance managers, and trade unions.

Eventually, I conducted comprehensive interviews (25, 17 of which with managers). In comprehensive interviewing, the engagement is mutual, since “the one doing the survey actively engages in questions, to provoke the engagement of the one surveyed” (Kaufmann, 2014; 18-19). There is no hierarchy any more between the surveyed and the surveying, the tone is close to a conversation between two equal individuals, and the interview’s frame may be forgotten.

Another source of organizational data is a questionnaire designed by the project organization – namely by the global the change & communication manager – and aiming at assessing the change adoption. XX answers were sent back from finance managers and their teams (both from the national headquarter and from the stores). A particularity here is that given my position in the project, I co-produced part of these data.

THE PROJECT

Among its different changes wished and modernization projects, the group requires a turn in the invoices management process of each country towards dematerialization. After two years of trial and implementation in relatively small countries (small from a retail viewpoint: with only a few stores in the country), this dematerialization process is to be unfolded in countries with more stores, i.e. with a more complex retail network. It might be interesting to know that in the retail world, a network twice as dense means a more than double complexity... In other words, in the retail industry, complexity is not linear, but more exponential like.

About two years prior to the beginning of this research, three people from the finance and accounting department of the French subsidiary – the finance director, the accounting director and a finance and accounting manager - went to a business service center, located in Poland, for a visit. And almost forgot about it (or at least wanted to). Time went by, countries in Europe were reported to implement the new invoice process, not much was heard about it. One hypothesis made by the French subsidiary for this absence of special comments and reactions was that the short history of these countries (where the brand was only recently implemented) implied much more recent habits and might have reduced the magnitude of the change. Belgium, which implemented the new process six months earlier, nevertheless gave a more mixed critical feedback on the project, despite a theoretical reduced complexity management (in terms of number of store). They said that even some months after the implementation of the new process, they were still struggling with problematic issues, more than they expected...

In order to follow the headquarters requirements (any more delay was no longer an option for the French subsidiary), and also in order to really improve the current invoice management process, some extra resource has been planned: a full time project leader (who will arrive later in the project) and a half time change and communication manager - myself.

Three phases stand out from the project. The **first** phase is a phase of **observation**, reflection and discrete action. It is the **not-yet-official** phase, the prior-to- telling-the-trade-unions phase. The **second** phase is the **officialization**, formalization and unfolding of the project. The **third** phase is the **training** sessions in the stores, opening the door to facing the implications of the new invoices process.

THE CHANGE PROJECT OBSERVED, ITS CONTEXT AND ITS IMPLICATION

What is the change project observed? What is it all about? What is its context? What are its possible issues and implications?

The change project observed has “zero paper” as a nickname. It is called P2P, which is the acronym for “Procure To Pay”. It delineates a process starting with an order (“procure”) until with its invoice payment (“pay”). It is composed of three axes. The first axe is the implementation of an electronic system to receive invoices (including a scanning system, hence the “zero paper” nickname: no more paper invoices) ; the second axe is the implementation of a software of invoices management (to register the invoices received, and to approve their payment) ; and the third axe is the collaboration with a shared services center, located in Poland.

One of the most tricky and sensitive points of this project lies in its second axe. As a matter of fact, this software of invoice management enables an automatic approbation of the invoices, as soon as certain documents are matched (as soon as the relevant document arrives in the software to match the document expected for this approbation). However, when, for some reason, the automatic matching of documents can not occur (i.e. no relevant documents arrive in the software), a human electronic approbation is to take place... This human approbation is actually planned to take place in the shared service center in Poland.

The foreseen – and dreaded – implications of P2P are mostly two. The first feared immediate implication is the reduction of accountants jobs/positions, both at the national headquarter and in the stores, possibly of 25%. The second implication, arisen later but not less feared, is the risk of identity change in the accountant job, which might have another content, the discourse says “less data entry and more control and analysis” but what will that be in reality?

The change project followed the development and evolution of most projects, with a first rather slow part, and a second one, much more intense, almost suddenly intense, with a heavy, even overwhelming workload and a lot of stress and strain.

“I am not sure I will make it”, a finance manager

“The months we are living are “hefty”, very much loaded with lots of things to absolutely do”, Liv, project leader

3.3. DATA ANALYSIS

In order to analyze these varied and numerous data, I used an inductive approach.

I coded the different parts of this material: the interviews, but also my fieldwork diary and some of the company data. I first coded manually (coding by themes), I then aggregated the themes, making up categories. I also used free-floating attention (Freud), to make themes emerge from the data.

The data has been analyzed three times, at three different periods, remote of six months each. The first analysis took place six months after the end the fieldwork. The second analysis took place six months after the first analysis. The third and last analysis therefore took place one and a half years after the data collection, and seemed to give much more matured results than even the previous wave. In retrospect, each six months allowed, by putting more and more temporal and spatial distance with the data, not only to detach my emotions from the fieldwork and the company, but also to increase my understanding of the complexity of the organizational change observed. From a coding perspective, I started coding by theme every sentence. Next time/phase, I coded paragraph by paragraph. The following time/phase, I mobilized my free-floating attention, to try to make sense of the data before my eyes, beyond the themes identified as coming from the two codings. Nevertheless, these two coding phases, by reassuring me, enabled me to use my free-floating attention, which I could never assume of soliciting earlier.

Consequently, the two levels/layers of coding and the free-floating attention allowed me an enhanced perspective of the organizational change, as well as a multi-level stance on my data and on the unfolding processes.

CODING

Coding enables to minimize the risk of circularity (i.e. seeing in one's data what one expects or wants to see). It is also more methodical, therefore more replicable (Giordano, Y, 2003, p. 246). "Coding is one way to analyzing qualitative data (...). A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data." (Saldaña, 2013). Why is coding necessary? Because codes, under the form of tags or labels, enable to assign (units of) meaning to the data, through 'chunks' of different sizes – words, sentences, even paragraphs. (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The coding we used for the present research is a coding by themes, or multithematic coding (Giordano, 2003).

A source of inspiration in coding is the so-called "Gioia Methodology" (Gioia et al., 2013). It enabled us to build, from the research data, a two-level coding, the second level synthesizing the main themes, i.e. the red-threads of the data.

The Gioia Methodology we used involved the following different steps.

The first two are usual steps of coding by themes (independently from the Gioia Methodology)

- Cutting of the interviews in units of meaning, by sticking to the talk
- Identification of recurrent themes
- Re-coding of interviews (sometimes)

The last four steps are typical of the Gioia Methodology:

- Positioning of the recurrent themes in the first coding column featuring the Gioia Methodology (first level, first order)
- Grouping of first order concepts into second order themes
- Grouping of second order themes into aggregated dimensions (last column)

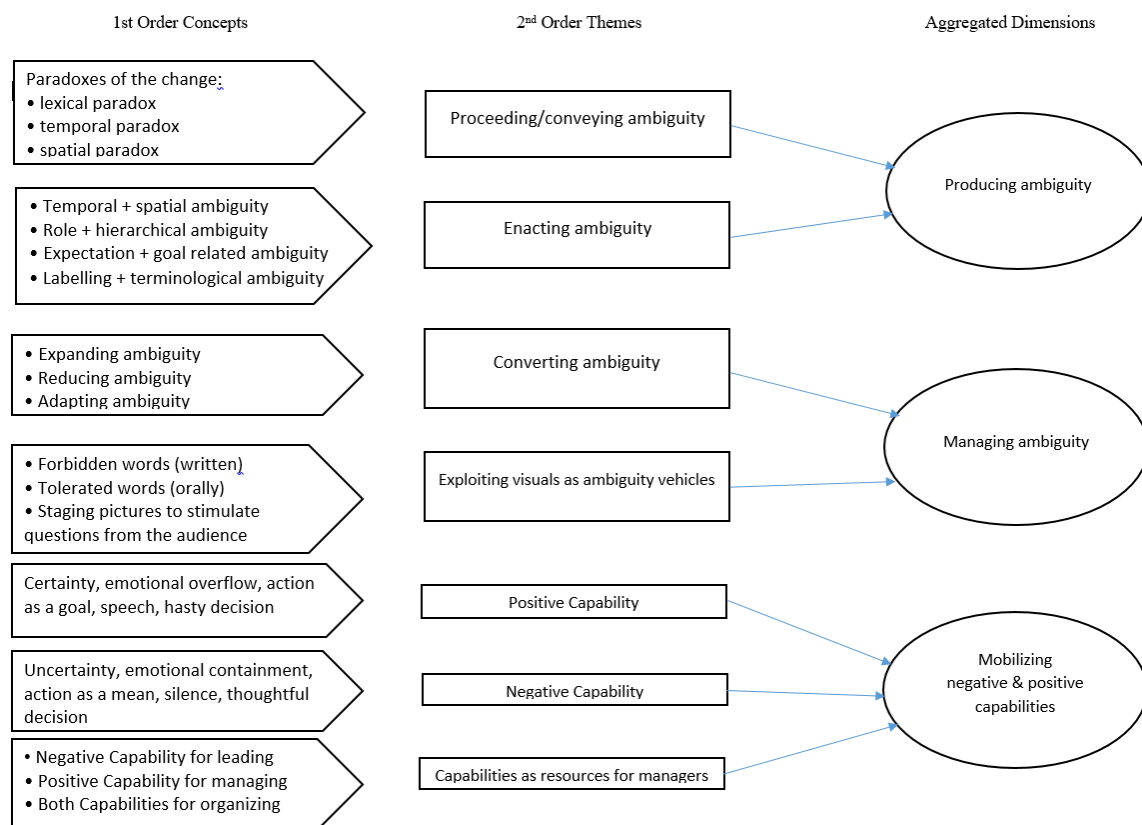
The Gioia Methodology is thus a gradual and structured way to turn (many) first order concepts into (much fewer) aggregated dimensions (through second order themes), and thereby to "climb in generality".

An example of the data structuration, following the Gioia Methodology (Gioia et al. 2013), is to be found below (Figure 5). This process enables to establish the main ideas of the research results.

In the present research, for the first level of coding we identified the following first order concepts: three paradoxes generated by the change (the lexical paradox, the temporal paradox

and the spatial paradox). These first order concepts, grouped together, escalate into second level or second order themes: conveying ambiguity.

Together with another second order theme, enacting ambiguity (based on different types of ambiguity: temporal, spatial, role, hierarchical... ambiguity, which correspond to first order concepts), they “aggregate” into an overarching dimension: producing ambiguity.



**FIGURE 5 - DATA STRUCTURATION & MAIN THEMES OF THE RESEARCH
(FROM GIOIA ET AL., 2013)**

CHAPTER 4. THE AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

CHAPTER 4 GOALS

Chapter 4 aims at presenting the ethnographic study from an introspective perspective: the auto-ethnographic study.

CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY

Chapter 4 unfold the auto-ethnographic process, following a chronological (yet somewhat rather logical) order: before (revising my personal reasons for this ethnographic work), during and after the fieldwork.

Studying managerial ambiguity and ambiguity management during an organizational change from an insider perspective, even from a manager's viewpoint, is no common situation. It raises a certain number of questions digging into the researcher's motivators and reflexivity.

In this chapter, I analyze elements of personal context that might have played a role in shaping the current research. I thus try to figure out why ambiguity, why change and why ethnography, from a personal perspective. For the auto-ethnographic process, I identify three phases: before the fieldwork (this phase covers my introspective analysis on why I am actually interested in the topics I am interested in), during the fieldwork and after the fieldwork.

4.1. BEFORE THE FIELDWORK

Long before the research started and I got into the fieldwork, my interest for duality, doubt and uncertainty seemed to already exist. More particularly, the idea of ambiguity – at that time it was only an idea in limbo to me - rang a bell somehow. Why so?

4.1.1. WHY AMBIGUITY IN THE FIRST PLACE?

Why did ambiguity become my research topic? Why, in the first place, was I enough interested in ambiguity to dedicate a couple of years investigating it *via* my research? I wondered myself. Several elements came to my mind, progressively and, I have to acknowledge, quite late actually, part of them long after I ended my fieldwork.

I start with the elements that seem closest to me, my professional environment, and I go on considering elements more personal – almost intimate, which might have played a more powerful role in my motivation.

4.1.1.1. PROFESSIONALLY: THE ORGANIZATION EMPLOYING ME

MY POSITION IN THE COMPANY

Given my position in the current research, i.e. already working *in* and *for* the organization I observed, I believe it is worth investigating what aspects of my work environment could have prompted this research interest. In the last position I occupied as a practitioner, right before

turning to research, I was working for a department called customer relation. I now remember that when I told friends what I was doing, at that time, they often seemed a bit puzzled. “Shopping experience? In Customer Relation?” they asked, often followed by some seconds of silence. “Aren’t you dealing with marketing issues?”. “Well, eh, yeah”. So, after a while, I stopped specifying the department I was working for – yet noticing that my interlocutors tended to relate it to marketing. One may consider that there is no big gap between customer relation and marketing, that they can even be considered as similar. However, I had a professional identity at work, and a slightly different professional identity out of work. This may be the case for most of us. Yet, my job description and my job identity contained some variance, or divergence, or at least some decoupling between the content of my job and its label, on one hand, and the entity it was referring to, on the other hand. At that time, I put up with this through being silent. Not specifying.

THE SCANDINAVIAN ORGANIZATION

Prior to choosing research, I realized that I might have experienced ambiguity in the organization employing me. What elements in my work environment would make me consider ambiguity as a research object? One element might be a cultural one: the Scandinavian aversion to conflict, as well as the Scandinavian inclination for transparency (in administration, in financial and environmental responsibility) - because transparency establishes trust and legitimacy. Both these two strong tendencies make ambiguity somehow unwelcome, perhaps even taboo. The general unease I noticed and experienced in situations of conflict and of vagueness probably anchored my perception that ambiguity was to be avoided. Another element - a more symbolic one - finds its roots in the installation manual that comes with each piece of furniture sold by the company. The installation manual, explains, without any words, how to assemble, step by step, the corresponding piece of furniture. Given the global audience for this manual, it seems much understandable to make scale savings, which are maximized when no translation is ever needed. On paper, words therefore seem unnecessary, making ambiguity a non-topic. On paper, there is no room, no space for ambiguity, ambiguity is nowhere to be seen. Furthermore, “glorious future” proves to be the company’s tag or catchword, and unveils its ambitious and positive thinking. Such corporate mantra does not seem to welcome much

hesitation - let alone alternative thinking. It could almost sound as an injection. The future will be bright.

My interest in ambiguity started with discovering and then acknowledging my own duality towards the company hiring me. My likely ambivalence (“simultaneously positive and negative orientations toward an object”, Ashforth et al., 2014) towards this organization started when I felt both (distance) remoteness and gratefulness towards it. Distance with this authoritarian and imposing way of seeing things – preferably positively (see above, the organization’s mantra) – and gratefulness for working in a varied environment that has the ability to find for you the next position in your career – whatever that is, a real (and often demanding) position or an in-between job, between two real positions. In my experience, ambivalence might have been a source of ambiguity, and I wanted to focus my Ph.D. dissertation on a more cognitive concept, such as ambiguity.

4.1.1.2. PERSONALLY: ELEMENTS OF MY STORY, ELEMENTS OF MY HISTORY

Several more personal elements – four of which I will share - might have played a role in the choice of the topic of my Ph.D. dissertation.

1975, Cambodia was under a civil war climate. I was a baby and I was sick. I had contracted staphylococcus aureus. My sick state with high fever prompted my parents (my father, French and my mother, Cambodian) towards Phnom-Penh’s French embassy. My mother’s family (my grandmother, my aunts and their husbands) fled the capital city, to hide in the bush while my parents and I moved to the French embassy. I got cured and I got saved. My mother, who had acquired the French nationality after she married my father, five years earlier, buried her – native - Cambodian passport and took away her French passport only. We took the last convoy from the embassy leaving Cambodia (the last plane had taken off long time before). I never met the rest of my mother’s family again, but her youngest sister, who managed to survive the war, a couple of years later.

A troubled, even chaotic, environment and strong tensions were thus surrounding me during my first two years of life. I might have been familiarized – even unwillingly – with uncertainty, absence of clarity and change, from always. It is not surprising that four decades later, I chose to anchor my research in a context reuniting similar elements.

The second thing – included in this first story - lies in the fact that something such as a bad news - a disease - saved my life (and, as a consequence, my parents'). So very early, I experienced that seemingly bad news can turn into an unexpected positive outcome. Very early, I experienced that a tricky situation can have a highly counterintuitive – hopeful - ending.

The third personal element may be found in my first name. My parents chose to call me Sorya-Caroline, one (compound) noun with two origins, because it was important for them that my name reflected both my French and Cambodian roots (Sorya meaning sun in Pali, the ancient and religious language of Khmer - as Latin is to French - and Caroline being easily pronounceable for Cambodians). It is my official name, the one that appears on my passport. Yet, given its length, no-one ever called me so, my parents call me by the second part only of my name – Caroline. It nonetheless already happened that some of my high school teachers called me Sorya, which generally took me a couple of seconds to realize I was the one being called, as it is not the name I am used to reply to. And I remember (so do my schoolmates) that each early September, back to school, was always a bit of a story. Teachers were going through the attendance list and making the call for the first time in the year. My full first name was on their list, and they were unsure as to whether Sorya was my second last name. So I felt I had to precise to each of them which was which and also that “You can call me Caroline, merely”. So a form of duality has always been present at two levels in my first name: by its double origin, and by its official vs usual utilization – which was also a cut off version of the original.

The fourth personal element lies in my Asian origins and Buddhist education. Asian culture and Buddhist metaphysics have a particularly smooth and de-tensed approach of uncertainty and change. They even greet them. Buddhism is also prone to duality. A disease and a double Cambodian and French nationality saved my life when I was a baby... Chaos and the unexpected were then something I was deeply familiar with, even without realizing the faintest element of this familiarity.

Ambiguity, as such or via related or sibling concepts such as decoupling, duality and uncertainty, therefore did not appear overnight as an interest, but, on the contrary, grew throughout both my personal and professional journeys, and was embedded in the construction of my personal and professional identities.

4.1.2. WHY CHANGE?

Some personal and professional elements that make me particularly interested in studying change are also evoked earlier. Theoretical reasons made me identify change as relevant for my research too.

On a personal side, I moved five times, over four countries, during my first six years, and even if my moving pace decelerated a bit thereafter, I realized I had moved twenty times overall, so far, over seven countries. On a professional side, I did not work in one and only organization, climbing the different positions and hierarchical levels of a same department, as some people may do (even though, fewer and fewer). I changed employers and types of job too. I namely worked in the luxury good industry, in marketing, then moved to a recruitment company, recruiting for sales and marketing positions, then worked in the retail industry on the customer shopping experience. Change has therefore much present both in my personal and private lives.

From a theoretical viewpoint, first, change is an accelerator of social phenomena, and, second, is much related to ambiguity (see above).

In the end, personal, professional and theoretical reasons motivated my choice of studying change in this research.

4.1.3. WHY ETHNOGRAPHY? EXPERIENCES OF THE UNKNOWN

The idea of realizing an organizational ethnography emerged for three reasons. The first one was a scientific reason: an ethnography approach seemed the best methodology to investigate a question (the uses of ambiguity by managers) to which other methodologies may not respond as richly. The second one was an opportunistic reason. I had the occasion of accessing an interesting field of observation, for quite some time and in quite some depth. In short, I had the occasion of doing ethnography. The third reason for realizing an ethnographic work might have been my personal experience – though this reason appeared much time later, in fact after the ethnography was done. Born in Cambodia, from a Cambodian mother and an French father, having lived a couple of years in Morocco and Iran when I was a child, and then some years in Sweden, as an adult, I used to live in environments and languages I was not much familiar with and in such context, experiencing the unknown was more frequent than exceptional. Having people talking to me in Cambodian, Arabic, Farsi, and later Swedish, without much

understanding them became in a way of a familiar oddness. Being ‘lost in translation’ was my daily life, at some point (before getting more familiar with the surrounding culture and language).

Observing ‘what could be’ proved to be a coping strategy for me, for I was left with not many other options since I was unfamiliar with what was surrounding me: the culture, the language, the people... This being said, these experiences probably contributed to develop the somewhat uncomfortable feeling of never speaking the right language, but this is not a relevant matter for the current research. So being familiar with observation as well as being familiar with (a certain) mis-comprehension might have played a role in choosing organizational ethnography as a methodology for my research – though I did not realize it first. Before the fieldwork, auto-ethnography materialized also in an **ante narrative** I drafted.

4.2. DURING THE FIELDWORK

During the fieldwork, I was studying how managers were experiencing and managing ambiguity with the particularity of doing it from a manager’s viewpoint – manager in the very project that I was observing. In this phase, auto-ethnography took the form of my **fieldwork notes/fieldwork diary** and **observation notes** that I produced during the nearly two years fieldwork.

During the fieldwork, auto-ethnography materialized also in a **narrative** I drafted.

4.3. AFTER THE FIELDWORK

The phase that started after the fieldwork proved to be an odd phase, mixing deep relief, unease, if not anxiety, and excitement. I felt deeply relieved of no longer having to drive sixty kilometers to work, no longer having to travel for the project. I also felt very much relieved of no longer having to switch between two professional places and activities: the job I was paid for, which also was my research fieldwork, and my research institution. After two years alternating homes as if with divorced parents, I was relieved to officially live at one only place.

Was that my mother's or my father's? This still remains unclear... The phase after the fieldwork was therefore filled with ambivalence, there too.

I then realized that I stopped censoring my writings a year after the end of the fieldwork. After the fieldwork, auto-ethnography materialized also in a distinct narrative I drafted that we call **post narrative**.

Spending almost too years in an organization I was already familiar with, yet in a department completely new to me, and in a dual role (change manager / researcher), where I used to embody a single role at a time (shopping experience manager being the last "single role" I occupied), is no neutral experience. Being employed in and by an organization, which enabled my fieldwork and therefore my research, but which employed me for reasons having nothing to do with my research is a strange experience too. My feeling of loyalty had been particularly high during several years, as an employee of the organization. "Collaborator" actually is the internal official term, substituting for "employee", and it took me a while to first, stop saying it, and second, to realize that it embodied a strong internal pressure to "work with" colleagues— sign of the organization's conflict averse culture pushing towards cooperation. I remember my manager asking me, some time before my last day in the organization, "So, would you consider managing another change project? There are a few coming, and some related to this one, so I was wondering..." "Er, well, you know I really have to write this Ph.D. dissertation to become what I want to become, and it was not easy actually to combine both things until now. So no, thanks. Not possible." I wondered myself if I had been ambiguous about the "after project". Had I been not clear enough on my own projects after this one?

The feeling of loyalty towards the organization that I mentioned above was replaced, during the last two years I worked there, fifty percent of my time, as I wished to, by gratitude for getting the flexibility I wanted and a rich fieldwork – one that could not be possible without an identity of employee. Turning from collaborator to employee/researcher was less easy than expected, and probably limited my critical thinking: when we are half out, we are still half in, and maybe more than that. Turning from employee/researcher to former employee, later, was certainly relieving and liberating, yet not much easier. Dis-uniting two roles and leaving one represented also a form of mourning I had completely overlooked. Part of this manuscript could not have been produced – and even considered – before the end of my fieldwork. It even took me a year after quitting the organization to be able to write certain parts, for example the parts

needing a more critical eye –an outsider perspective – such as the one on the organization, and the status of ambiguity in this organization. Recognizing my own ambivalence towards the organization also took me time. Likewise, I would never have dared to write a proposal of anti-manual for project managers facing change – it would not have even crossed my mind. The different elements related to negative capability were collected during the fieldwork, but my reflection on negative capability was, among the different results of the research, the one that took time the most. A reason is the very concept of negative capability needs perspective, but another reason is that I was neither be able nor did authorize myself to mobilize my own negative capability to reflect on the concept, the fieldwork and the research, until more or less a year after my fieldwork ended.

The three different phases described here above thus engendered three types of narrative: an **ante narrative**, a **narrative** and a **post narrative**.

PART 3.

RESEARCH RESULTS

PART 3.

RESEARCH RESULTS

PRESENTATION OF PART 3

The research question we try and answer, raised at the end of part 1, was how managers make use of ambiguity vis-à-vis their subordinates, in order to deal with uncertainty (and paradoxical demands).

Part 3 displays the different results of the research answering this question. Three main ideas arise: producing ambiguity (chapter 2), managing ambiguity (chapter 3) and mobilizing negative capability (chapter 4) as a resource to manage ambiguity. These three ideas are preceded by the results from my auto-ethnography (chapter 1), introducing part 3 and linking with part 2.

CONTENT OF PART 3

Introduction

Chapter 1. Producing and managing ambiguity

Chapter 2. Mobilizing Negative and Positive capabilities

Conclusion: Ambiguities and capabilities as resources

Towards an integrated definition of ambiguity. A proposal

Results synthesis

INTRODUCTION

As mentioned in the introduction and in the methodology, the change project we are observing for our research only appears as a context, and as a pretext to study the middle managers, i.e. 17 finance managers and myself, as change manager.

THE CHARACTERS/VOICES IN THE NARRATIVES (27)

Senior managers (3):	David ¹ , CFO Violet, Accountancy & Finance Director Chris, Senior Manager
Finance Managers (15):	Robin, store Finance Manager, also called BNOM (Business Navigator Operational Manager) John, store Finance Manager or BNOM Mia, store Finance Manager or BNOM Laura, store Finance Manager or BNOM Caitlin, store Finance Manager or BNOM Yan, store Finance Manager or BNOM Gianni, store Finance Manager or BNOM Maria, store Finance Manager or BNOM Kyle, store Finance Manager or BNOM Juliana, store Finance Manager or BNOM Jason, store Finance Manager or BNOM Celia, Finance Manager (French headquarters) Isma, Finance Manager (French headquarters) Irene, Finance Manager (French headquarters) Jeremy, Finance Manager (French headquarters)
Other Managers (2):	Liv, e-invoicing project manager Sylvia, warehouse Finance Manager
Subordinates (5):	Patsy, accountant (French headquarters) Chloe, accountant (French headquarters) Nathan, accountant (French headquarters) Ines, accountant (French headquarters) Miona, accountant (French headquarters)

¹ All first names have been modified

Around the project (2): Lorenzo, project manager
 Yasmineen, project manager

THE CHARACTERS/VOICES IN THE PROJECT ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

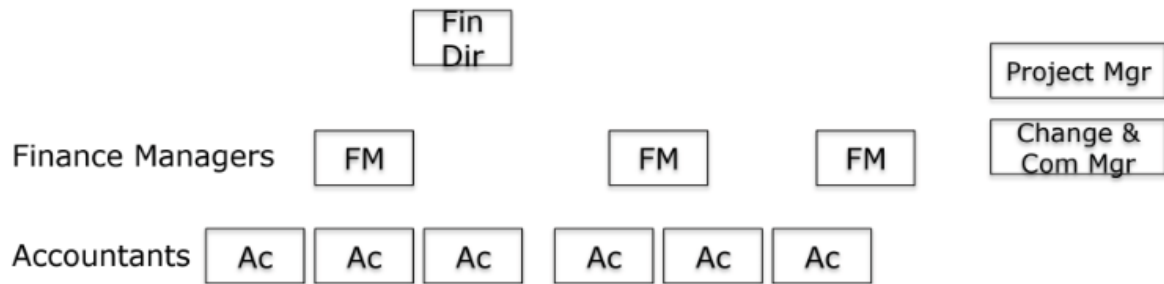


FIGURE 6 - ORGANIZATIONAL CHART (FRENCH HEADQUARTER)

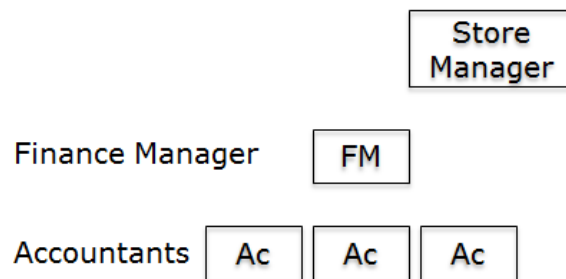


FIGURE 7 - ORGANIZATIONAL CHART (STORES)

CHAPTER 1. PRODUCING AND MANAGING AMBIGUITY

CHAPTER 1 GOALS

Chapter 1 aims at identifying how ambiguity circulates throughout the organization, from the material emerging from the organization, at different levels, i.e. through different voices. Chapter 1 identifies how ambiguity is produced and managed in the change project.

CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY

The chapter starts presenting a simplified version of the project, and is followed by five narratives. The first narrative carries the voice of senior managers. The second narrative carries the managers' voice. The third narrative echoes the subordinates' voice. The fourth narrative is my voice, as a manager involved in the project observed. The fifth and last narrative expresses the project's voice.

These narratives are then analyzed.

This chapter shows the results from the analysis of the organization and from the analysis of all the ones observed and interviewed in this research, working at three different levels: managers, subordinates, one level below, senior managers, one level above managers, and other people related to the project.

Chapter 1 presents, through different narratives, the different voices and viewpoints of the projects. Based on these narratives, we develop how managers produce ambiguity and how managers manage ambiguity.

In the current research, I will use the terms **“project”**, **“change”**, **“change project”** **invariably**, since as the finance manager Julia says, “I did a lot of project management. Each project is a change.”

1.1. THE PROJECT FROM DIFFERENT VIEWPOINTS

The project is presented through different viewpoints. The first presentation of the project (“in a few words”) is the most simple and most summarized. The second presentation of the project (“the voice of the project”), coming last, namely expresses its own voice, personifying it.

1.1.1. THE PROJECT IN A FEW WORDS

The change project we are observing is the arrival of an e-invoicing process, at a regional level (Europe). It is called “Procure to Pay”, or “P to P”, or “P2P”. As its name might indicate, this project was designed to tackle, from one side, the acquirement or the purchase of commodities, and from the other side, their payment. P2P was then initially designed to cover the two aspects of a commodity flow, i.e. the uphill and the downstream of a long process.

“E-invoicing” means that it aims at dematerializing invoices. It is led from the French service office of a global furniture retailer and is “inherited” from its headquarters in Scandinavia. The project is expected to unfold, through a new software, a new invoicing process in France, implying the French subsidiary to work with a service center. The service center, located in Poland, is expected to mutualize some tasks until then carried out by accountants in both the different stores and the service office of the country. Dematerializing invoices is deemed as

both a modernization for the company and for the accountancy work, but also as a threat for the accountant jobs.

Beside the discomforts of any organizational change The risks foreseen are some job losses and mainly target the accountant staff, as their workload is estimated to significantly lessen after the e-invoicing process is implemented, and their job content and job description (“competence profile”) is supposed to be modified too. Finance managers, to whom accountants report, are expected to manage their subordinates apprehension and fear, but also wonder whether, with a reduced team, their managing position would still be needed. We are studying this project from a position of participant observer at the French service office of the company, during two years.

1.1.2. THE PROJECT FROM AN OUTSIDER VIEWPOINT: THE DIFFERENT VOICES

To produce the different voices coming from an outsider viewpoint, we have elaborated different narratives, themselves built from the wealth of data (observation, interviews - formal and informal – as well as documents), and collected from our two-year ethnographic work and from our position of participant observer.

Senior managers were the first local recipient of the global change dynamics. We therefore start with their narrative. This narrative is inspired by three senior managers: Violet, accountancy and finance director of the company, David, CFO, who will move to the Scandinavian headquarters about six months after I started working on the project, and Chris, General Service Manager. The narrative is based on their interviews but also on many fieldnotes “around” them, relating them (their words or their behaviors), describing them, as well as on more general fieldnotes on the “upper layer” of the organization (Matilda, the new CFO taking over David, but also the Social Relations Director).

The second narrative is the managers’ narrative, as they represent the population we particularly observed in this research. 17 finance managers were interviewed face to face. The interviews started as semi-structured and evolved into more comprehensive interviews. Beside those rather official interviews, this narrative has been nurtured by meetings and by many other less formal interviews (corridor talks, chats over lunch at the canteen, chats over coffee...).

The third narrative is my voice, coming from I, ethnographer-researcher and I, manager involved in the project (change and communication manager). This narrative is mainly based on my field notes and on my fieldwork diary written out during these 20 months ethnographic work.

The fourth narrative is the subordinates' narrative, and is based on the interviews of X (4 ?) subordinates of the finance managers, as well as on information gathered during many informal talks with them. To the subordinates' voice is added other voices coming from other people related to the change project, such as other project manager, ...

In all narratives, comments inspired by the fieldnotes and the situation described, and written after I left the field, appear in italic.

1.1.2.1. THE VOICE OF THE SENIOR MANAGERS

Already from the upper layer of the organization, doubts, hesitations, tensions, and even reluctance seem to **surround the project**. Initially, the project was meant to be two-sided, one side related to procurement (i.e. purchasing) and the other side related to pay (i.e. invoicing), corresponding to the invoice of what has been purchased. Both sides relate in the very name of the project observed, called "Procure-To-Pay". Both parts, related by both logical and chronological links, are indeed meant to work together, in a continuous process. Yet they got developed by two distinct project teams, at different paces, so despite the efforts of some senior managers to merge them, the separation remained. The initial two sided project turned into two projects, both of which were asked by the headquarters to be implemented in the subsidiaries. "Procure-to-Pay, I thought at the beginning to make it one project, but in fact it is not possible. I mean it is semi-possible. To make this "movement" - I would rather call it movement instead of project - there are two projects, managed separately, mainly for the practical reason that the support teams on the global level are separate, so we can not let's say force them to actually change their organization. So that's why we have two teams for two different projects, but they should be close to each other. Hopefully in France, we can find project leaders who can match personwise, personalitywise and that's why at the beginning I have made an attempt to propose the communication position to support both of them, to create a point of contact, so that someone can fish a problem before it becomes really a problem..." (David). So the wish (from the CFO) that the position of change and communication manager embodied a uniting role, a

hyphen role, between the procurement part and the pay part of the project, probably influenced its creation and its opening. *So I was appointed to be the one who would fish problems before they might arise. The hope or ambiguity on this dual aspect of the role was maintained in the first months, and then progressively vanished as this linking role between the two projects stopped being mentioned, though the name of the project still comprises both names, under the a acronym "P2P".*

Senior managers seem to speak of **the project** and to define it in slightly different ways. Chris puts forward a process which appears simpler ("simplification, technics, human coaching"), while Violet puts forwards the end of materiality in invoicing "Dematerialization, mutualization" and David puts forward an improvement in the security aspect "Secure, harmonize and simplify our work" (*Simplification of our working methods, harmonization of these methods and security of the (accountant) flows.*) (Violet)

All senior managers share the use of the "ation" ending in whatever word they are using, as part of the discourse they craft of the project when (story)telling it, and the term "simplification" was pronounced twice [simplicity appears to be one of the company's core values].

The senior managers also identify somewhat **different reasons** for the change. One of the change's trigger is a series of internal studies, called "Game Changer studies", carried out in order to improve different aspects of the company, or at least to identify what aspects particularly need improvement. "One of these studies tackles the way people are working in the company, so it is about **improving working methods** by harmonizing them. It is also about making savings on "transactional needs", meaning the booking and the payment" (as transactions) said David. It is quite interesting to mix harmonization and savings, when expressing the project's goals, as if "savings", that can be seen as a rude word, needed to be compensated by a softer word, such as "harmony" or actually its process, "harmonizing". "Our company is very much based on trust & values which is good, but administratively we are not strong enough" (David). So a **lack** of administrative leverage and **of administrative rigor** also appears as a reason for the change. Chris almost **needs no reason** for the change and almost finds it self-explanatory so much he considers that "it is an abnormality that it did not already happen". For him, change is the normality. For Violet, a reason for the change is **more secure ordering** "because er well we realize today that the way we place orders is not er very secured." So an increased security in the process has been a trigger for the change.

Yet, a certain lack of trust, a form of mistrust maybe or of **reluctance** seems to emerge from senior management, inducing them to delay, as much as possibly acceptable, the arrival of the change. David almost uses the same words as for a **disease** spreading around, as if he was talking about the territorial, contagious, but also **fateful** aspects of the change. “This was done country by country, one by one, and would come to us one day, and for that, we planned to be the last or close to the last country” (David).

What is going to change is phrased differently according to the senior manager. It is once phrased in a simple, even simplistic way, almost simplifying the change. “We are going to change some of the tasks into non existing or very much simplified or replaced by other tasks.” (David). For Chris, what is going to change is the end of waste, or actually a significant reduction in waste. “Today, a huge amount of time is wasted on controlling invoices. Time, but also space and raw materials are wasted on producing and managing invoices. With this change comes lean management.” Chris sees the change as the massive arrival of efficiency. As for Violet, “What’s gonna change is their [the accountants] job.” Violet thus sees the change as an organization anew, a deep transformation of how the company and people in it work [What is going to change is phrased with different levels of impact, according to the senior manager. For David, the change looks instrumental, almost casual (“some [existing] tasks into non existing, simplified ones”). Chris is very impatient that the change – seen at the end of waste, the end of unsustainability – comes. For Violet, the change is deep and rather paramount as the change means to her that the whole company’s work organization shall change.] The **impact or the implications** therefore follows accordingly, for each senior manager. David thus expresses his view trying to rationalize the emotional process of the change “And of course the general expectation, the assumption today, is that we will not need as many people because informatics systems WILL do the job to a big extent. So the **challenge is how to accompany people through the change, keeping them motivated & involved in good work... At the same time to do it in a way where they don’t, well that they find something for them in the change.** Either an **opportunity to leave** and do something else, **or an opportunity to stay** and do something else, **or an opportunity to develop their skills** and capacity **to completely change their jobs, from the inside.**” (David). Violet estimates that the change induces **massive** implications. “Well, the goal of the project is to implement a solution suggested by the group, and implementing it requires that we revise our work organization, which is not an easy task.” (Violet). Chris mentions the implications of the project in terms of reclassification of people,

and in terms of trainings. How will the company handle the human aspect of automated processes? It has not been communicated.

The **first** identified as likely impacted by the change/ or likely “victims” are the **accountants**. People are scared. They are scared for themselves. They are scared for the future of their job. Everyone is scared. Everyone is scared with the change, with what will be happening. And what’s happening is a bit of a revolution. Some accountants are going to lose the job they had, they’re going to lose their accountant identity because they are going to do other tasks that have nothing to do with our accounting profession” Violet

Yet, the **finance managers** are the **second line** identified as collaterally damaged.

“The finance managers might keep their job, but their job is likely to change. Irene’s position is gonna change. Jeremy’s position is gonna change. Ingrid’s job is the least affected, but they are all gonna adapt to what they will do next. Many, many, many people will be concerned by the change” Violet.

Another implication of the change is that no one knows the scope of the change impact.

WHOSE JOB IS GOING TO CHANGE? / WHOM IS GOING TO (BE) CHANGE(D)?

The change might have an impact on the job of 110 people working with accountancy, 20 of which are based at the French headquarters and 90 are working in the different stores.

“I am not the one validating the invoices, what a shitty job!” The global project team has been very clear that the project would have an impact on the accountants work. By work, they meant both their job and their ways of working.” (Chris)

“They have justified uncertainty, so insecurity. And looking at the population who is concerned, to a big extent, specialists, administrative & accounting functions, who have chosen this job very often for its characteristics. So they might not be natural born sellers or commercial guys, so for them it will not be an easy perspective to realize an alternative career path or changes in their jobs. So from that point of view, it is on one side psychological human factor resistance to change... so we don’t need creativity, we need execution. As long it is the scope of the project... the more harmonized we are, the more controllable & the more secure the system is. And more easy to change in the future. And this is inevitable. Whether people like it or not, you have to do it, otherwise somebody will do it in a very very, in a violent way. So I think we can still do it in a good way, so let’s try to do it the best possible way & the violence is not of course in our culture or our values.” (David)

Concerning **to whom the senior managers** observed and interviewed **report** on the project, their answer does not appear particularly clear. Violet is almost reflecting loudly, with breaks, reflecting by talking, to figure it out. “To whom do I report for this project? [Silence]. Well, there are the steering groups. There is the steering group France, which is the “Low cost forum”

you know, and then there is also the steering group, well, international, which I had a webex with, two days ago. And well, I am telling you what I think, and I think that the level was... let's say not at a steering group level, in my opinion, they got into details way too much for... their level. "Yes, I am reporting to them through webex. There is a certain number of points that must be addressed. So they check if there is a problem or not, if it's done or not" (Violet). Chris mentions "Well it depends. I am managed by Liv, as project leader, and I am managed by the steering group, as final decision makers, but as for the steering group, it is actually the "project group" which reports to them, which sends reports to them, which is accountable to them. And Liv [active member of the project group, as project leader] asks me figures and statistics, technical information, Excel tables." David

It doesn't seem so clear whom they report to, about the change project. What is common to the three senior managers however is the fact that their hierarchical superior does not seem to "follow" neither how the change project is progressing nor how their subordinates themselves progress with and through the change. Violet, Chris and David all tell, at a high organization level, stories of a change managed through a matrix organization. Would that be different at a lower level? Maybe not completely, as matrix management has been deemed complementary to hierarchical management and for a long time, and particularly used for project management. Why it is important that this change project be reflected upon and implemented actually seems to rely of the will of one person (here, David), convinced that it will do more good than harm, himself probably influenced by the position of the country manager whom felt that he could no longer "decently" postpone the project ("I think that it's about time" David, interpreting the CEO of the French subsidiary).

THE PROJECT INTEREST AND LIMITS

Time saving ("it is a-ma-zing the amount of time spent today to control invoices", Chris), increased reliability, leaner management of accountants ("out of 5 accountants, 2 will remain, but what of the other 3? If I keep them, I have to develop them, make them grow on something new, so that they can bring an added value, something interesting/developing for them but also for the company (they should be more profitable too). The interest for the company is that the time spent on a stupid work/task should turns into a time spent on a more profitable work/task. The company thus becomes more socially responsible."

WHAT THE CHANGE SURPRISINGLY ENABLED/PRODUCED

“This project is the occasion for me to realize a mega audit just before the change. It is very interesting, it is an eye opener, but it is very time consuming, I did not plan it, and so it is stressful.” (Violet)

TIME IN THE PROJECT? WHEN DID THE PROJECT START?

About two years ago, we started to hear about the project. We tried to get familiarized with it. Three of us flew to Poland, visited the services center, to see how they were working, to try to understand what it was all about. One of us read all their process descriptions and summarized them somehow for the rest of us. We wanted to understand how the system worked. After this trip, we drafted a note to D., the CFO, on our comprehension of the project, on what should be done to succeed and on what were the blocking points. Then time went by when nothing was done. And it recently came back, the group pressured us [the French subsidiary] a bit to implement the project. Actually quite some time happened between our beginning of awareness of the project, our sensitization to the project, and... well the serious stuff phase.” (Violet)

“I believe I arrived in the middle of the project... Well actually I am not sure when the project started for me, I don't know. You know I might be stupid but for me the project is related to a person, so it is Liv, that's all” (Chris) “I had no bloody clue of the project before our first meeting. To me, the project was a black box until then.”

THE PROJECT PROCESS MAXIMIZING ALL POSSIBLE SCENARIOS AND THEIR ACCEPTABILITY

“To me, these three phases have to be respected for a successful project. The first phase is critical, because you are between high and low. You meet them [the people concerned by the project, subordinates...] and you need to oscillate between the dream and the ground, that's my vision at least. If you are too much into the dream, you are no longer credible, but if you are not enough in the dream, and too much on the ground, you just can not motivate them. But beware of not denying the uncertainties. It's a tricky thing, it's tightrope walking, continuously. Still, at the beginning, in the first phase, first meeting, we have to make them dream when you explain why the project, the whys of the project, because their expectations are high. The second phase is a phase of maturation, you only send a couple of emails while people digest what's been

communicated of the project. The third phase, you meet them for the second time, to deal with their uncertainties and resistance. You tell them that you don't have answers to all their questions, you have to be transparent with them. You have to transform an uncertainty into a certainty "yes, you might as well lose your job". There is nothing worse than saying that their uncertainty is ridiculous, there is no ridiculous uncertainty. You have to listen, you get off your cloud to comprehend them, to feed on their uncertainty, and you ascend again (in your cloud) with what you incorporated from what they told you, and you can release them (as a water bomber). So it is roller coaster, but it is not meant to make you feel like vomiting

WHAT DO YOU FIND MOST DIFFICULT IN THE PROJECT? THE DIFFICULTIES FORESEEN IN THE PROJECT

"Nothing appears difficult to me in the project, no really, I do not consider the project difficult, I find it just... normal. Often, I find that change is being dramatized, but we are so scared to death (it goes with the fear of the trade unions, the fear of the boss too) that we make it (the change) a real problem. To me, the only limit is your imagination. Why insist on the fear of change? Some people turn pale as soon as they hear the word "project". I believe in human. We do have good managers, we do have good communicators. Why fear?" (Chris)

"This project is not particularly simple and easy, there are a lot of things, it is complex, there is a lot of information coming from everywhere, and we have to structure, analyze and find the best way to make it a success." (Violet) after a moment of silence "Well, actually this is not particularly the project that I find most difficult. What bothers me is that I so much know that there are things that are not... optimal in the project, so what bothers me is to implement something and to replace it, and that maybe, in between people are gonna lose their jobs, because of something that would not be too good, that's what bothers me. And it often happens in this company, you implement things that are not completed and that are not so great. Sometimes, they are advances and sometimes they are not advances at all. What I really have trouble with is that, sometimes, you're gonna implement something although you do know it's not... not optimal, let's say, and it's supposed to be ok because the French subsidiary has to do it whatsoever [Silence]. What I'd like is that we [the group] drew consequences of what's been done, by acknowledging "So we have implemented the project in X countries, all right, and this and that are not ok, so we have to take the time to understand why not and to do things differently in the following implementations of the project... But no, instead, we are

implementing things whereas we are fully aware by experience that they are not working... properly enough, let's say" Violet

"What appears most difficult to me is to manage to get an overview. And to comprehend how the different topics fit into each other. And to manage to make a synthesis of the whole thing. And make sure that we do not forget any issues that would ruin the rest, if forgotten." (Violet)

WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU WOULD REMEMBER FROM THE PROJECT?

Silence. Until now, what I remember from the project is that it craves a considerable amount of energy, while I believe it should not be so much the case. I also remember to have paid much attention to how you say what I say, to adapt my communication all the time, it is just tiring.

When doing the exercise of guessing what their reactions would be once the project is implemented, as it was one of the questions I raised in my interviews, the senior managers showed different reactions here too. "[Drinking water while thinking]. My reaction? I don't know what my reaction will be. I might be relieved because we would have implemented something, or not relieved because we would have not. So either a huge frustration or a super thing. I would be relieved to have done it but, I might not be relieved if it is not well done, even if not because of our team. Just because it is complicated." (Violet). For Violet, a doubt remains on her own reaction, but she seems to bet on opposite, polarized reactions, either up or or down ("a huge frustration or a super thing"). David reacted in a very rational way "We have to look at the indicators. In order to follow them, since we are not so good in this company to follow up on how things work. I can think of indicators such as the – increasing- percentage of invoices processed, the percentage of people who did receive the training and maybe an updated version of the training, later on, the percentage of staff reclassification maybe also [those who are no longer working as accountants] Foreseen reactions from David.

"Violet seeks to understand things through details, to figure out in which direction it is important that we head to. Often we do not understand the process in detail, we do not bother to understand it really, and so we miss important things" Liv, about Violet

This attention that Violet seems to pay to details, and to dig into them looking for information and cues, to be the closest possible to things, illustrates her mobilization of negative capability, through the aspect of being "in medias res".

Tensions were to be found and sensed For Liv, as project manager, “it was not clear, not that clear” as to whether the company, as a group, wanted the project or not. Liv identified tensions between Violet, the finance and accountancy director, whom she reported to, and Matilda, recently promoted CFO, Violet’s new boss, with whom Liv had had the occasion to work years earlier. “I knew that Matilda wanted the project, but Violet must have said “aha” at some point, so Matilda expected it from me.”

VIGNETTE: VIOLET, ACCOUNTANCY & FINANCE DIRECTOR**HER COMMENTS ON THE CHANGE AND ON THE EVOLUTION OF THE ACCOUNTANT JOB**

Violet is leading the department called “accountant and finance services”, in the French subsidiary of the global retailer observed. 25 people, composing this department, are reporting to her, 8 of which are managers (I am one of them), whom report to her directly. Violet has been working for the company for about 25 years. Her position and her seniority in the department made her a “Random Access Memory” (RAM) in the company and she enjoys a reputation of being firm but fair, direct and dedicated to her department. She was an accountant long time ago – though shortly since she quickly evolved upwards, managed accountants and became responsible for more complex accountancy legal operations, to be today responsible for accountancy corporate operations.

Violet particularly shows some ambivalence, if not some reluctance, towards the change project. She is very experienced, she has gone through a certain number of global change projects, directly or indirectly related to accountancy. She mistrusts the discrepancy between attractive goals, beautiful ideas on the so called benefits of a global (therefore rather big) project in corporate discourses on one hand, and their application in reality, on the other hand, with numerous gaps and “deltas” to fill, adjustments to carry out, even regress to undergo sometimes. “There’s a big, very big project I experienced long time ago, it was the change of the till system, called Calypso. It was actually related to accountancy, more than planned, because it did impact till reports management. So it was a big global project and it was the moment when I discovered the “C world” [C being the company’s name], where things not so well tied turn up”. Violet has then been disappointed in the week design or preparation of some projects, at the global level.

So based on her experience, she became somewhat skeptical and puzzled when it comes to any upcoming change project. Her sense of responsibility and almost her sense of ethics are almost bullied. “What bothers me is not particularly the project as such. What bothers me is that I know... I know there are things which are not optimal in this project, and what bothers me is to put something into place, maybe to have to replace it, and that some people might loose their jobs, this is what bothers me most.” She expressed her views (her convictions?) at the three following occasions. Firstly, she stood up to David, who was much more willing to implement the invoice dematerialization process. She

considered that this new work organization, and this new work division weren't adapted to the French subsidiary. Her position was thus somewhat confronting the CFO's, i.e. her manager's. Opposing her boss, she demonstrates some courage, by questioning the relevance of the change project, both timely and also in its design.

Secondly, David and she negotiated with the global headquarters that France be the last country, among the company's subsidiaries, to take in the change. Thirdly, Violet thought about revisiting the collaboration modalities with the Shared Service Center in Poland. She still considered to work with them as partners in dematerializing invoices, still via a scanning company as asked and planned by the headquarters, but she questions one of the collaboration modalities. She questions the routine suggested in the project implementation according to which in case of anomaly, the service center manages it, but also overcharges it to the French subsidiary, whereas the skill to solve many issues do exist in the French subsidiary and with no over cost ("is it so necessary?"). While the system is designed to automatically match three documents (the scanned invoice, the goods receipt acknowledging the goods ordered have actually been delivered, and the purchase order originating the invoice), a type of anomaly can be the failure of this automatic matching (should one of the three expected documents be missing for example).

Violet is also the one having the responsibility of presenting the project in front of the trade unions (see, later, the vignette: **Change project, trade unions and power struggles**)

Violet got some knowledge of the dematerialization project two years earlier. She commissioned one of the finance managers in her department, Flora, to assess and summarize the project for her. Violet even traveled to Poland 24 hours, at that time, to visit the existing center, or Shared Service Center, already used by some subsidiaries of the company. From this time onwards, she, at the same time, got familiarized with the idea of the project as well as she fought against it, at least against the part of the project in which some of the tasks carried out by the accountants, "her" accountant teams, would be subcontracted to the center

Violet seems comfortable enough to sense and acknowledge emotions in her department – fear in this case. [or maybe she projects her own emotions on her team, or at least exaggerates the intensity of what she perceives around, accordingly. Indeed, she sees herself younger, when she was an accountant herself, or later when she managed them

directly. She subsequently shares their distress or maybe amplifies the perception of it, since she would not have appreciated that her employer made such a “dirty move” to her.]

VIGNETTE: CHANGE PROJECT, TRADE UNIONS AND POWER STRUGGLES

In the French work legislation, any change project with an expected impact on the employees' daily work is to be presented in front of the trade unions, at a national session, and is to be presented twice. The person presenting the change project can be the project manager, or a Director, or another person whose role or function legitimates that she presents the project (often at a managerial level). The first time consists in a presentation to inform to the trade unions (information phase). The second time consists in a presentation leading to a consultation, i.e. a vote, of the members of the trade unions attending the meeting (consultation phase). At the end of the first presentation, questions are also raised by the trade unions representatives, around the project and around its possible implications. The list of questions is precisely written down and the person representing the project is expected to answer them during the second presentation.

The trade unions are consulted, not on whether they agree or disagree with the project as such, but on whether they consider they have received enough information to understand the change projects and its possible implications for the future, and especially the future of the jobs possibly impacted by the project, as they are supposed to be the employees' representative and voice. Should they consider that they lack information at the end of the second presentation, they might abstain from voting. A mere member's abstention results in paralyzing the whole project process. The change project is required to be presented at the following trade union's national session, which usually takes place two months later, if there is room enough in the agenda. The trade unions power therefore does not lie in their vote of opposition, but in their use of abstention, and results in delaying whatever change project process. The postponing requirement from the trade unions is not acceptable too many times, but at least one, and at the following session, the person presenting and representing the change project in front of the trade unions is really expected to bring rather precise answers to their questions.

1.1.2.2. THE VOICE OF THE MANAGERS

The project is grasped in **relatively different ways** by managers. All managers retain its **dematerialized or dematerializing** aspect. Some, like Robin, mention its **centralization** aspect. Irene regards the project as “zero paper in the stores”, Mia sees it as “dematerializing invoices”, namely. So does Robin. Yan also talks about “a project of invoicing dematerialization”. Yet, despite what is communicated of the project, a few managers understand that invoices might actually not be dematerialized, at least not at first. “The project is meant to reduce the waste of paper. But the thing is: everything is still on paper! So the invoices received will be scanned. I would have preferred that we asked the suppliers to send us a pdf instead” Jeremy. At the beginning of the project, the suppliers are still expected to send their paper invoices, though to a scanning company (in France) that will work with the service center (in Poland) automating the process. Dematerializing invoices as such does not seem to be possible at the start of the project, it is the process of approving invoices by managers (“approval process”) which is dematerialized first in the sense that managers will no longer be signing paper invoices to approve them, but will approve them electronically instead. The dematerialization of invoices as such, in the form of pdf (and no longer paper invoices) produced by the supplier in the first place, is meant to take place later, “sometime” after the project is implemented. Yet again, despite what is communicated of the project, the new process, meant to streamline and decrease costs through automation, will actually not be fully automated. But this partial automation will not be corresponding to a lower pressure on the number of accountants, they will not be less downsized, but will be benefiting the service center instead, hiring or mobilizing human resources, that will be eventually invoiced to the French subsidiary. “Automated or let’s say semi-automated booking in Poland” Isma.

This aspect, this goal of dematerialization, be it the one of the approval process or the one of invoices as such some time later, has been **more or less anticipated by finance managers**. A few did sense a profound change upcoming in their subordinates’ job. It is the case of Yan. “My problematic, as a manager, is that the job that some people are doing in my team, in my store, will no longer exist. It goes much beyond P2P, which is not a big deal itself. It’s about the deep metamorphoses of their job, its mutations, well, for the career of the people in question, it will not be without impact. I comprehended it pretty early. I had a team of 4 accountants. I only have 2 today. One became staff planer, which was a job opening at that time, and the other went to the call center. I took the thing in hand.” Anticipating the consequences of the change on the

accountant job is also the case of Gianni “In my store, there was 2.25 accountants. In equivalent FTE [Full Time Employment: number of people working with a full time job] I mean. Now, there is only 1.75 accountants. Someone left my team, and I replaced him with a part time position, who’s also working with the tills, doing the cash reports. I also believe that there are parts of the BNOM job that can be delegated to some accountants.” For Gianni, exists a multiplicity of possibilities to replace the loss in accountant’s job with needed and maybe more interesting tasks. To him, lack of preparation and of anticipation represents the worst-case scenario “I think that those who didn’t prepare anything on the structure have issues now”.

“To me it was unconceivable to place my accountants in positions without analysis, since I see them as war machines – that either some were already, or I made them become. I can’t put them [working] on the tills, it is unthinkable.

This goal of dematerialization also generates **varied reactions**. Some managers view dematerialization as a **good** thing. Several reasons emerge for considering the project positively. First, it represents an up to date transformation, a way for the company to put up with modernity; in this case, dematerialization means **modernization**. “We entered the new technology era” Celia. “We’re modernizing” Robin. “To me, the project means simplification, time saving, modernity” Maria. “Our methods were archaic. Aren’t we supposed to be in an automated world with dematerialized documents? We were spoiling paper.” Sylvia. Second, it brings **efficiency**. Some managers welcome change because they see it as a way of increasing efficiency. “Because I can no longer afford to pay my accountants to produce, I have to pay them to analyze” Gianni. An increased efficiency also appears in the fact that the project enable to save space (hence money). “This way, we save archiving space. Invoices will be stored elsewhere, not in our store” Robin. Sometimes it is their own efficiency that managers are interested in, and they sound excited by the change challenge. It is the case of Kyle, “My job, as a store finance manager, is gonna change because I’m gonna save time. The department heads are gonna run their business, including validating their invoices, they’re gonna be responsible for this, and to do so, they’re gonna empower their service managers [their subordinates] on the expenses they incur. Today, they are placing the order and I am the one validating it. Thanks to both of them, tomorrow, I will be more efficient”. Later he will add “As any project, the implementation requires time and adjustments, but I don’t see anything difficult in this project. I am a former football competitor. Change values me because I believe that the others [other finance managers] won’t be at ease with the change, I assume that they’re gonna

suffer. Still, it's a game, and I have to be stronger than my buddies, I want to be the best finance manager so that my subordinates can progress. I want to grow to grow them." Kyle. Sylvia values that the new way of working would "optimize task management". Robin acknowledges the project to bring **both** modernization and efficiency. The modernization lies in the work method. "It's a new work method, more up to date, more from our epoch. Until then, we were running after people with folders under our arms to make them sign invoices eventually".

The project also introduces **sustainability**. "We will be saving paper and trees" Robin.

The change project brings about something safe, too: for Irene the project is about "automating to secure"; in this case, the end of materiality means **security**. "We entered an era which is more effective, more efficient, and more secure" Celia. "For the store, it will be more fluid and more secure, no invoices will be lost." Sylvia. Laura considers that the project "simplifies life, to secure, less archiving, no duplicate invoice", no "where on earth is the bloody original?" The new process also **enables to question** certain routines. "A big advantage of P2P is to reframe things. A given cost center for example, meant one person in particular and no one else. So we asked ourselves "One cost center per supplier, is it really necessary?" Laura. For Maria, the project **does serve the accountants** actually, **upgrading their tasks** "It makes them grow in competences and in responsibility". The change, embedded in the invoice management software, also brings about a frame, a structure, **a container**: "Now we have a structure, before, it was just... floating" Sylvia.

For others, the **negative** aspect prevails in dematerialization. Cost killing by downsizing: replacing an extant human process by a cheaper, more automated one, in another country, is only what it is all about, according to some managers. Downsizing by decreasing the number of accountants. "At the HR [Human Resource] level, what an impact on the accountants. Well then, we need them less" Sylvia. "The project aims at reducing our costs by subcontracting in Poland" Isma.

For Jeremy, the company is "externalizing the invoice process" subcontracting outside what it no longer wishes to carry out inside, using a utilitarian approach. Irene is afraid that machines and technology might take over **humans** "To me the change is a loss of human relations: the accountant will longer revive [a manager meant to approve an invoice], a mail will, instead. So we will be managed by a system, there will be less human contacts". Mia is doubtful about this change because she fears a loss of control. "Personally [as a store finance manager], I am saving

time and improving efficiency. But I believe it's a real loss in rigor. Maybe so much rigor was not worth it, but I believe there will be a real loss of control. I will only be approving the second level of invoices, so it gives the responsibility to someone else to approve the first level, but I am not sure that we accompanied this change for the ones meant to check the first level of approval. But all in all, if it is considered as an acceptable loss, it's ok" Mia

Neither positive nor negative, but seen as a **necessary evil**, a more or less interesting trade off, the quest for efficacy, through increased productivity and security and reduced costs, appears many times. "I see the project as outsourcing an administrative task towards a centralized platform, to be more productive. Yes, I'd say more productivity through centralization." Yan. Cost reduction is deemed by other managers as an "ok" reason. "The Group calculated that it would be less expensive this way, so it is a matter of cost. Well to find an invoice, it will be surely more convenient, and there won't be any invoices lost, so no duplicate will be needed. The human side of it looks much less funny, though." Jeremy

"Time will be saved, and the system will be modernized. Those in charge of entering invoices manually will end up doing something else" Celia.

Either positive or negative, the project appears, according to Gianni, as "somehow double or quits for the accountants. Quits in the way that it will bring less work for them, which worries them. Double in the way that it will save time". For Robin, it "bridles a bit, to better follow the costs, but it saves time, since the invoices are all the same place [same interface]."

The change also **produced unexpected positive secondary outcomes**. The first of them might be a way to find invoices "With the search function, you can find it all, you can search and find the very invoice you are seeking." Robin. The change thereby shows that there was some chaos in the previous invoicing system, and therefore there was room for improvement. "Before, you just wondered: "In which bloody box could it be?" Or sometimes, it was even quicker to call the supplier and ask for an invoice copy". Robin

"The project enabled a huge cleaning in the invoice system, before the new one" Jeremy. Gianni finds that "technically, P2P develops cooperation of accountancy with others and with other departments, so it's very good."

The change project brings about **difficulties and complexity** that do not seem to have been reflected upon previously, neither in the beginning when it was designed, nor later on, after

several implementations in different subsidiaries that could have been used as improvement occasions. For Yan and Jeremy, this is the absence of what did exist that puzzle them. Facing the “no more” is destabilizing. “Well, without the material invoices, we have the impression not to see anything any longer, as if we were blind, it’s a bit scary. There is also the anxiety for us of no longer managing our business, since we now analyze afterwards what was controlled beforehand.” Yan. “It is the work less, the work lowered, that I find difficult” Jeremy. Celia and Isma are more embarrassed by the complexity of the project. Celia finds it particularly hard (and somewhat frightening) to figure out the implications of the project complexity. Isma gets angry that no one (no other countries which implemented the change) seems to have much dealt with this complexity before. “Analyzing the whole thing, the whole project looks complicated and complex to me. I suppose I will better understand one everything is in place. I don’t know. I don’t know. Sometimes, I wonder” Celia. “What I find hard to accept is that we are one of the latest countries to “be implemented” and still there are some questions that should have been answered, that the Group should have answered, by then” Isma. Caitlin finds “the presentation [of the new invoice software] simple, but its use, complicated... according to where [whom] you are... But maybe I need to get a better overview.”

The project also **uncovers some complex and tricky situations** that were not much talked about previously. “Actually the problem is that we had **too many people** in the stores. Those people won’t have to do anymore the work they were doing. And we have to manage this gap that the company wants not violent. Technically, it’s not difficult, those habits can change. It is like going from the paper sheet to the excel file. But my problem as a manager is that the job some people in my store are doing will no longer exist” Yan. Coming almost as an anecdote, another tricky situation, under the form of **IT bugs**, happened several times during the trainings, “which did not enable the trainers to show the trainees how the system actually worked, and therefore did not enable the doubts to vanish. Network issues just didn’t help.” Caitlin.

This context of uncertainty, of complexity, of doubt and of makes managers hesitate on what to do and how to behave – if not on what to think sometimes, above all when they are scolded by top management for talking too much to their subordinates. “Violet once told us “Don’t say this or that”. Nelly [one of her subordinates] was interested in understanding the project. She reflected upon it. I sometimes told her things that I didn’t thought I should not tell. And there are things I sometimes omitted to say. And she [Nelly] never came to me saying “By the way, I won’t have no more job, will I?”. But I never let her believe that I didn’t know.” Isma

The finance managers **communicate** the change in **different manners**. Sylvia used distance, remoteness with her subordinates. When I asked her how she communicated the news of the change and the upcoming invoice dematerialization, she silenced and then confessed “I communicated little. Very little. I haven’t been much close to them [the accountants reporting to her]. We had to respect the legal instructions”. Robin communicated the project to his team at the weekly meeting, top-down, i.e. the standard way “After the store management committee in the morning, I passed the information over to my team, right in the afternoon. I used the same slides. That’s all.”

For Caitlin, “that’s precisely the com’ with the team part that I found particularly difficult. They don’t give a shit [of the communication about the new process] and then they suddenly realize that is important to them.”

The change occasions **learnings**, nevertheless one can wonder how come some of these learnings were not in the implementation packages, as “lessons learned” conveyed from other subsidiaries having dealt with and implemented the same project. “At the beginning, we were wrong. We implemented two stores one week apart. But we need at least two weeks gap, to have time enough to get some feedback from a store that just got implemented” Caitlin. This information could namely have been given by the global change project team.

Other learning: in order to pass the procedures over to the Service Center, a procedure manual must have been designed. To craft it, all procedures must have been identified, listed, categorized, explained or justified, almost decorticated and thought through. Strangely enough such a manual did not exist until then, the project of elaborating one was in the air for some time, but it never turned into reality until then. Laura evokes the unexpected **subversive** aspect of the change project. “It’s a little revolution, P2P, even though we’re not the first to make the revolution” she confessed, smiling. With the change and the software, Robin finds the **invoice flow** much **bigger** than before, which represents a somewhat **absurd** situation. An invoice reminder indeed happens, some invoice approvals are broken down in different parts, different approvals that need to be carried out.

Senior managers have also been **seen as evolving**, from their subordinates, the finance managers. “It is interesting how the position of top management at the [French] headquarters kind of changed. In the beginning, they were really hurried, like “in six month, it will be all

done”. Then they realized it might take a bit longer, and that everything was not so simple” Caitlin, finance manager.

Managers comment more or less **differently the reactions of their subordinates** the accountants to the invoice dematerialization. “Well, they [the accountants] experienced a little bit of uncertainty in the very beginning, but we talked. We talked of their apprehension, they had many questions.” Robin

The way managers consider their subordinates’ reaction is probably influenced by **the way they themselves perceive the change** “To me it is more of an asset, it’s the end of a tedious work for them. It is more of a help than “It sucks.” Robin. Who quickly added “I am rather close to them. And they didn’t tell a thing.” [Is Robin as close to his team as he believes he is? Is silence a good sign or even an ok signal?]. Jason, a Business Navigator and Operational Manager (BNOM) defines his role as “being at the initiative of things, identifying the good KPIs and deciding what can be worth working to impact business”.

The importance and impact of the project might also be quite relative “You know, I haven’t discussed the project with other BNOMS. We talked, but not of P2P” confessed Robin, laughing. After all, it was only a change project among many, there were many before this one, and there will be many after.

VIGNETTE: GIANNI**HIS COMMENTS ON THE EVOLUTION OF HIS JOB AS FINANCE MANAGER**

“Finance manager” is a generic term. It corresponds to a hierarchical position, manager, and to a department, finance. This is the term we chose to use in our research for it simply says what it is : finance managers manage people and / or projects in the finance department. The finance department includes accountancy. In the very company we are studying, “finance managers” do not exist as such, and at the time the research takes place, the corresponding job has just experienced a name change.

Gianni defines his job in this way : “well, we optimize. We optimize organizations and we optimize costs.” Gianni considers that his job has evolved a lot in a short period of time. Previously called “Responsible for Administration and Finance” (RAF), the position of finance manager has recently been renamed “Business Navigation and Operations Manager” (BNOM). Gianni comments. “This name change comes with an evolution, a redefinition even, of the job. Before, we were expected to reduce and control, we were focused on the question “How much does it cost?” We are now expected to optimize, and we focus on the question “Would that make money?” It is a much more business-oriented approach. To a new name, correspond both a new function and a new role. While being responsible for something implies being in charge of it, becoming a manager not only implies a charge but also, at least symbolically, an active coordination, an impulse, a dynamic. Manager becomes the new respected status, the ultimate title, be it of a range of products, of a project, of a process or of a country. “France’s CEO” has thus become “Country Manager, France.” The span of responsibilities is expected to be less visible through a standardized job title, particularly in a Scandinavian company. Business has become something to navigate, the idea of “business navigator” was also created so that finance managers have their share of “piloting” the activity with the other managers working in a store (sales manager, logistic manager...). Operation management includes “all that is miscellaneous”, i.e. maintenance, security, accountancy, purchases and also “some of the legal”. In the new name, BNOM, a field approach and a strategic approach seemed to be embroiled.

Gianni uses several metaphors to relate this change. The metaphors are rather lively: they illustrate immobility and motion, as well as different kinds of fluids. “It’s like going from a

photo to a film, from a role of stopping the bleeding to a role of putting oil in the rollings.” The BNOM is no longer a photo exhibitor but a moviemaker. He is no longer a fireman or a doctor being called upon when an emergency arises, but an engine driver whom can act much earlier in the process, fluidizing it.

These two names used for the function of finance manager have both been the object of irony, of mockery even, internally. Those disliking the function of RAF, or the people occupying it, joked that RAF sounded like “rat” somehow, that RAF were “admin rats”, or “control rats”, even “bureaucracy rats”. When the name changed and turned into “BNOM”, the joke became that it resembled the French noun “bonhomme” pronounced awkwardly – as by a child or by a foreigner - and thereby sounded a bit ridiculous, not very credible. It is interesting to note that what has been made fun of, sometimes laughed at, does correspond to a position historically anchored in legitimacy.

VIGNETTE: LAURA**HER COMMENTS ON THE EVOLUTION OF HER SUBORDINATES' JOB, THE JOB OF ACCOUNTANT, AND ON HOW TO MANAGE THIS EVOLUTION**

"We lack visibility on the accounting profession and on the job of accountant. They [the accountants] know that, in the story, they will spend less time on certain tasks, such as entering accounts. The accountants are people who need to be reassured and warned or informed in advance. I need to spend more time with them to make it go. Any, they're gonna grumble, but still, it's better if they [have reasons to] grumble less. I am fortunate enough to be able to keep my accountants and my hours worked, but with the evolution of their job, with what are we [managers] going to develop them? With more analysis? What is the long term vision? Some stores jumped into the "solution" very fast, too fast. They decreased very quickly their team of accountants, by not renewing temporary contacts. The accountants in my team, I sent them as backups in other stores. And I always ask an accountant to be there on Saturdays [peak day in terms of turnover and activity]. So the managers who diminished their team fast, they figured out they might have gone a little too far, a little too fast. For the expansion sake [new stores opening], it might be necessary to revise things. What do we do when there is a problem in a big Parisian store and that the store manager is asking around for help, help from accountants? We have to find the right balance, or a multi competence of accountants with another job, but accountancy is hard to mix with some jobs, with tills, for example. And often they have profiles that can't face the customer, they find it too uncomfortable to face the customer. But accountancy can be mixed with staff planning. And I only have one staff planner, I can do with a second one, or at least half another one, that's what Thomas [an accountant in her team] is doing. And Alistair [another accountant in her team] will probably work in the food department, because they still use the "entering account" skill in their purchasing journal. Everyone finds his way, everyone finds his arrangement. We, as managers, try to help them deal with "How to optimize my job while remaining confident? My accountants, they have been proactive. So they are not too much worried with the impact of the change I believe."

AMONG THE VOICE, PROJECT MANAGER'S VOICE: LIV'S NARRATIVE

Liv, responsible for the change project, the project leader or project manager, herself defines the project she is in charge of as the “implementation of a new software for invoice management, at the level of the French subsidiary. So it is a new process and a new tool, Basware [the software]. I have to say it's a pretty big change for France because we had a decentralized organization, with accountants in all stores. The process is therefore large and complex with massive change or many changes. Both in the stores and at the French headquarters.”

“Some countries implemented [the change] partly only” Liv

“I have to say I have been sometimes a bit surprised, almost puzzled, that for such a big project, we so much and so many times needed to search why we were meant to do this or that - the things we were expected to carry out. I came to understand that it was actually not so clear from the beginning, the “whys”. So in the training, we did insist on it, and I believe it's almost got into the project, as an operating mode, that we specify as much as we can and as often as we can why on earth we are doing the thing we are actually doing.”

Retrospectively, at the very end of the project implementation, Liv commented: “It took a year. I lived is as an enormous amount of work but with the support of a group of people very competent. We still managed to close it all the 7th of July, one and a half years after the startup, with the enormous endeavor of everyone. It's a pretty good result actually.”

“My first two days of vacation, I did work all the time, from 8 AM to 18 PM”

“I did have doubts on the real will of implementing a project in due time, within the expected timeframe. You know what? I almost wonder about sabotage. Because we didn't have the right people in the project. Because the people [the managers] were not coming to the meetings, which were not considered as important. They just told me “No Liv, I can't come” I had doubts, huge doubts. That was what I found the toughest in the project, actually”.

For Liv, as project manager, “it was not clear, not that clear” as to whether the company, as a group, wanted the project or not. Liv identified tensions between Violet, the finance and accountancy director, whom she reported to, and Matilda, recently promoted CFO, Violet's new boss, with whom Liv had had the occasion to work years earlier. “I knew that Matilda wanted the project, but Violet must have said “aha” at some point, so Matilda expects it from me”

1.1.2.3. THE VOICE OF THE SUBORDINATES

The reactions from the finance managers' subordinates, i.e. the accountants, to the change, seem to be **more homogeneous** than within the managers. Yet, as we could interview much fewer accountants, this perceived homogeneity is relative. The **de-materialization** of the new invoice management is often perceived as a **de-accounting**, and even a **de-humanization** (through automation, i.e. **de-manualization**).

"This whole e-invoicing is a very big change in the company, for us, for the managers, for the suppliers. Our work is challenged. Entering data manually, which sometimes represent 50% of our job, is questioned, and replaced by tasks that are meant to balance, but that are not accountant tasks." Nathan

Analyzing is supposed to be higher – more sophisticated- than manually entering figures, in the human qualifications, but analyzing what and how is not much clear for the accountants yet.

"I fear that my job specifications, as an accountant, will change. Maybe even the name of our job specification will change and will no longer be accountant. We heard that we would no longer enter the figures manually, that we would make analysis instead. We dunno. We are still waiting to know. The goals of the project are to save the time spent manually, and to have zero paper." Miona

The de-humanization also comes from the break of the team as a living working unit, as a social glue, the break of the group cohesion.

"So we might get redundant. It creates tensions in the team. The team cohesion is being threatened. There is one person in the team I am not talking to anymore." Miona

The **de-materialization** is also related to **dis-apparition** and even **blindness**.

"This morning, a supplier called me on the phone about an invoice. So I looked for it into imonitor [the new software] and I couldn't find any sign of it. We do know where the invoice is not (in the software, it is not where any of the different the managers should approve it, since their names appear in green, and the names in green say where – in which mail box, under which responsibility – the invoice is not), but we don't know where it is. So it's gonna be tricky to pay this supplier by the end of the week, and it is not a small amount: 115 000 euros!" Nathan

Not only does the blindness appear in the e-invoicing as such, but it is also in the implications ("inputs") of the new system.

“It scares me to walk blind. I don’t know if I would be impacted. What I find difficult is that the possibly interesting inputs of the project, well I don’t see them.” Miona

The feeling of dimness is all the more so prevailing for the subordinates when there is no manager anymore.

“For the time being, we have no manager [the manager resigned a couple of weeks earlier], we don’t know where to... We don’t really know where we are heading, we are in the dark”.
Nathan

“What I find difficult is that human beings will be replaced by a computer system, and sadly enough that’s the trend for administrative people.” Miona

Not knowing is also much shared by the subordinates, it is the not knowing of their becoming.

“We know that one person, maybe two, will have to leave our team, we don’t know who. I am not sure that there is a date for this. We know that the sword Damocles is there, we just don’t know when it is going to fall. Nor on whom.” Nathan

“We wonder who’s gonna leave first. What rule will apply to us? LIFO (Last In First Out) or FIFO (First In First Out)?” Philippa

Philippa here evokes management methods used for goods –inventory management methods. She mentions them to talk about management methods for humans, which tells that she feels de-humanized and commodified.

“A colleague in a store will have his workload drastically reduced. He told me recently
“Maybe I’ll be knitting this winter” Chloe

Chloe voices the feeling of aimlessness of her colleagues.

“The concept of the project is good, I believe, but it’s a pity that it goes with a downsizing. We are wondering “What will I become?” In the stores and at the headquarters alike.” Nathan

“We are worried about our future. What I find difficult is the unknown” Miona

Miona’s unknown is not a future full of promising possibilities; it looks more like a black hole.

“A lot of tasks should be done, and we don’t know much what to do.” Nathan

“I don’t know if I would be impacted. Or not impacted. By job cuts.” Miona

A perception of **being left out** by the organization is also palpable.

“What is harsh to me is to think that our team is perhaps going to be downsized. And that I am even not sure that the company saves any money for this. So, well, I try to convince myself that it’s the case. It must be the case, right?” Miona

The feeling of being left out lies here in the fact that she is not “even sure that the company saves any money for this”. Their job seem valueless, they seem valueless for the organization.

“I feel that we’ve jumped into the project only at the end of it, we got trained to the new way of working quite lately, and I happened to be away on holiday during the training, so I got trained after the implementation. The project was implemented the first of June, and I was trained even later, the ninth of June! I changed after the change! So well, I feel not very at ease with the new software, I feel... not much on top of it. We would have preferred to be involved in the workshop on routines from the beginning.” Miona

“We’ve been told that the new system was for the stores, no one ever came to see us although we are at the heart of the work on the invoice process. We’ve been left out at the beginning and included only at the very end. We have put in place something while the softwares around are not ready!” Nathan

“We don’t feel we received much information about the project. If we do not look for information ourselves, no one gives us any. We’re told that we’re gonna get meetings but meetings do not happen.” Philippa

This perception of being left out is worsened by (or may produce) a **loss of or lack of trust** from the subordinates in the system at large, i.e. the organization and the software.

“For the time being, we can see that there is still a lot of work to be done, so we will be busy. But then, will there be enough work? We’ll see. What is scary in this project is that we have to trust the company and the software But the system [the software] is not especially reliable, so far.” Philippa

One testimony though remained more hopeful and confident in the organization than the other ones.

“Well, frankly I find the project good, but on a human point of view [silence]... We just realized that we’re working for a big company which does like everyone. In this company, I think that they won’t let you down, but we don’t know how many positions [silence]... We have the feeling not to be supported enough. P2P was a secret project, so to accompany people it’s not simple, I prefer when things are said in advance, not to get informed overnight” Chloe

VIGNETTE: CHLOE, ACCOUNTANT**HER VISION ON THE EVOLUTION OF HER JOB**

Chloe does not think the change is a bad thing as such. “I have mixed feelings. On one hand, you have to live with your time and the new technologies. On the other hand, you’re losing control”. Yet, the change project implies that the job description of accountant - see appendix – would be, which seldom happens in the life of organizations (at least in the life of this one), only in case of a rather profound change.

The new job should cover some analysis of account, replacing the manual entering, but analyzing what and how is still to be defined. Yet, would this analyzing process be mentioned and in the new job description or will the new job description be minimal?

“What the project’s gonna change? The accountant’s job description, our job description, it will no longer valid? When you enter manually [the accounting account], you can check the consistency between the department and the account. In the software, you can modify the account but you’re not doing the whole thing: you don’t know what comes next. For the time being, we are stunned. The following is a bit abstract for us. I dunno what I will be doing. In the past, I worked with customer service in a store. It lasted one and a half years. I took 10 years physically. There were obnoxious customers who are barking as soon as they appear at the “after sales” desk. Maybe it was not a job for me. So the customer, I am not sure it’s a good idea for me to see him again.”

The evolution of the job of accountant sheds light on the available options for the accountants. In a retail company, the customer is never very far. When working with the customer did not or does not work, options are scarce, even though the organization may find a way for many of its employees.

The evolution of the job of accountant will be specified with time. “It’s a bit vague. In the beginning we got the feeling to have been put aside”, so we thought that if we were not informed it meant that we wouldn’t be too concerned. We were wrong. At the beginning of the project, we just had bits of information. Since the implementation the 1st of June, for sure, we see what it is.”

1.1.3. THE PROJECT FROM AN INSIDER VIEWPOINT: TWO VOICES

1.1.3.1. MY VIEWPOINT, MY VOICE, AS A MANAGER IN THE PROJECT

My own voice, as (ethnographer and) project change manager.

“Help people find either an opportunity to leave and do something else, or an opportunity to stay and do something else”, was David’s (CFO) expectations on me.

Accompany some people, accountants and/or finance managers, towards a possible new orientation (role, function or job, internally or externally), while keeping them motivated and involved in their current job might have been one of my missions as change and communication manager. “To lead and drive the change process throughout the project” was namely written as the purpose of my job (see figure 4 – Communication & Change Manager, competence profile).

There were initially two parts in the project I was recruited for: the procurement/purchase side of the project and the payment side. I was first also expected to do linking part between both sides.

As a participant observer, I was at the same time a manager (studying the other managers) in the project observed, and a researcher (studying an organization and people in it). I subsequently find particularly suitable, prior to the results presentation, to dedicate a chapter to how my very position in the research might have influenced both my research unfolding and my research interpretations. Chapter 1 therefore depicts results preceding the research on managers’ ambiguity and proceeding from a reflexive analysis called auto-ethnography.

The first section shows my own **process of ambiguity**, prior to the fieldwork. The second section shows the **ambivalence and ambiguities** experienced in/produced by my role of change manager, during the fieldwork.

PRECEDING THE FIELDWORK: MY OWN AMBIGUITY PROCESS

The organizational ethnography made me observe managers (and their use of ambiguity) from a manager’s viewpoint. I therefore found relevant to follow my own ambiguity process and to conduct a reflexive observation, or an auto ethnography, throughout the change project journey.

I realized, somehow rather late in the research process, probably during the second half of my fieldwork, two things that are likely to have played a significant role in the choice of my Ph.D. dissertation topic and what became my research question. The first thing is, **prior to the fieldwork**, my feeling ambiguity towards the company that was employing me for years, might have represented a significant starting point.

As an employee to the company, I did actually experience the **conflicting corporate values** presented earlier in this research: togetherness vs cost-consciousness, caring vs cost killing, transparency vs conflict avoidance (see part 2, chapter 1. Working in a Scandinavian multinational, 1. The company studied, tensions/contradictions/paradoxes inherent to corporate values). [In part 2, ch 1, add a paragraph on transparency vs conflict avoidance, as traits of the Scandinavian culture. Conflict avoidance: things left unsaid, taboo. Also in the “pressure on managers” paragraph, and as a result of conflict avoidance, add the “you should not complain” injunction, much internalized by company’s managers, that they should be grateful in absolute and relatively, i.e. to the company, of being in a such fortunate position, more paid than co-workers, with a more interesting job]

Conflict avoidance within a group also has an incidence on an individual and personal level: conflict avoidance thus leads to **internal conflict avoidance**. This situation is getting close to ambivalence and ambiguity.

As a manager (formerly shopping experience manager) in the company, I, in addition to these tensions, experienced the managerial strain previously described too, cumulating different types of pressure: the one of leading by example, the one of looking after your subordinates, and, last but not least, besides the aforementioned pressures, the pressure of looking reachable and agreeable. Right before starting the fieldwork, I, not surprisingly, felt thankful to the company for two reasons. First, it was enabling me to access what would become my Ph.D. dissertation fieldwork, a large fieldwork (different people, different places), for a long time (almost two years), with rich qualitative data, and conduct what they did not know to be an ethnographic study from within. Second, I was being paid by this company for doing that.

My own ambiguity process therefore started with the tensions I internalized and cumulated, both as an employee and as a manager, throughout several years working for the company. Those tensions turned into ambivalence towards the company, which transformed into ambiguity. So I started my fieldwork with **latent ambiguity**.

DURING THE FIELDWORK: I, CHANGE MANAGER

This section starts with one of the first excerpts of my fieldwork diary, and ends with one of its last. I found interesting to see that both excerpts reveal identity tensions/confusion.

This section depicts the evolution of my tensions and ambiguities as a change manager, through three phases: the beginning of the fieldwork, later in the fieldwork, and the end of the fieldwork.

A. Phase 1: the (very) beginning of the fieldwork...

Being an insider outsider: from geographical confusion to spatial ambiguity:

“Dear journal, today I am really experiencing what it is to have divorced parents. I mean symbolic parents –ESCP and the company hiring me – symbolically divorced. I realized I forgot three pages of notes that I had written out during my last webex followed from... a classroom at ESCP. These three pages of notes contain modifications on the project intranet page that I am about to launch are absolutely essential to me today, since the modifications are expected to be seen by the project group first thing tomorrow. But these pages are... on my desk at home! So I have hardly arrived to work that I have to head back home to fetch them. I have the feeling that not only am I living in a suitcase (professionally) but also things get stuck in the middle. In the middle of my (professional) parents. In the middle of my two universes.” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

B. Phase 2: later, in the fieldwork...

“In my readings, I came across this quote: “Business organizations have change a lot in the last twenty years: (...) downsized, streamlined, computerized, outsourced” (Laroche, 2006 ; 446). Err, I am afraid that would be “my” project, I am afraid it is P2P. We couldn’t describe it otherly, could we?” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

A TURN IN IDENTITY AND LOYALTY

“My former feeling of loyalty towards my employer turned into a feeling of loyalty towards my research” excerpt of my fieldwork diary

“I feel like I am replacing a discomfort with another one: my initial productive discomfort is substituted by an identity discomfort, as I am feeling I am now more of a teacher researcher, which makes some of my business tasks all the more so tedious and absurd. At the same time, I am experiencing the strange feeling that the best way to manage a discomfort is to replace it with another one” excerpt of my fieldwork diary

AMBIVALENCE

If I define ambivalence as the emotional side of ambiguity, as a conflict of feelings (vs. a conflict of meanings for ambiguity), my fieldwork diary shows at several times that I felt and experienced ambivalence first, prior to ambiguity. I felt ambivalence towards the change project, towards my half time job/fieldwork, towards my project leader and towards my employer. And for many things and people in between.

“I am feeling both highly stressed of seeing the workload with more details, and reassured that we were able to see it now” excerpt of my fieldwork diary

This excerpt comes from the second phase of the project – even the rather end of the second phase, when it is “uncovered” and that implementation, the third phase, is being concretely prepared. It tells my ambivalence within my role of manager in the project.

ROLE AMBIVALENCE AS AN INSIDER OUTSIDER

Often my feeling of ambivalence also arises from my two simultaneous roles: change manager on one hand and researcher on the other hand.

After more than a year in the project, and thanks to my detachment committee, I realize one of the reasons for my discomfort: my role in the project puts me in **utilitarian-positivist paradigm** (“leads and drives the change” is my objective as a change and communication manager) while my comprehensive approach in my research puts me in an **interpretative paradigm**. This contradiction generates internal tensions and role ambivalence.

DILEMMA AS A MANAGER IN THE PROJECT

“During my training sessions, I am surprised that the future users ask so few tricky or upsetting questions. Don’t they dare to ask them? Or don’t they even foresee them? And I do not want to give them answers to questions that they will not ask” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

Dilemma: should I tell them what they do not ask?

A FEW SURPRISES IN THE PROJECT

“I co-animated a couple of training sessions with a variety of employees from the accounting profession. One of them was an accountant eager to be promoted to the manager level, using this training animation as a strategic opportunity. Other co-animators were coming from different categories for wishing to participate in such a training: interestingly enough, a unionized accountant and an accountant who wanted to “see the change face up” and was for this reason mocked by a colleague of hers saying that through training the others to the change, she was contributing to sawing the branch she was seated on” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

The surprise here lies in the unexpected identity of some of the co-animators (all voluntary). A unionized accountant, who could be seen as “against the change”, was surprisingly willing to co-animate some training sessions. She wanted to be a voice, training others for training herself, convincing herself through others, expressing how she intends to work with the change in her store while animating the training. She was accepted as a training animator by the project group (part of which I was) for strategic reasons too. Better have a possible reluctant to the project in, with us, that we could have a closer look at, than out and far away. Better pact with a possible opponent to secure a manageable situation.

A store accountant, a “possible future victim”, in the very situation where she might be losing her job because of the invoices dematerialization, also applied as a training animator. Hence the mockery of one of her colleagues – a unionized man - according to whom she was foolishly “sawing her own branch”.

Both employees, the unionized accountant and the possibly sacrificed store accountant, seem to have paradoxical motivations for volunteering as trainers for implementing the change.

C. Phase 3: the (very) end of the fieldwork...

“This morning I am living what is supposed to be my very last (annual) assessment interview with my last manager. It therefore represents a critical and highly symbolical moment for me. I find it particularly difficult to prepare this interview. Maybe because nothing is at stake. In this interview I am meant to tell what I did, what I did not do, and my leadership skills. I am bringing my job description for my interview and I am leaving a copy of it to my manager since... well she does not have it. I start with summarizing my one and a half years (for some

reason, we did not do this interview last year, so it is my first in this position). Those 18 months have been rich but loaded and complex, both technically and humanly, with secret, confidentiality, discretion, and progressively more and more communication allowed (which is an irony, for a change and communication manager).

As a concluding thought, we can acknowledge that ambiguity was there, that **ambiguity was around and inside me, before I started to observe other managers' ambiguity** in the project.

1.1.3.2. THE VOICE OF THE PROJECT ITSELF

In this narrative, I made the project express its own voice, thereby personifying it.

My name is P2P and I was born in 2011 or so. I was actually baptized “Darwin” first, but I was then renamed. Everyone could guess Darwin might not sound particularly selling or marketing, as Darwin is not the kind of name that helps in life. And I am not quite sure when I was born. People seem to have different opinions as to when and where I was born. Some consider it was in Scandinavia, in the company’s headquarters, in 2010, because it was at that time and place that, the “idea of me”, the idea of something that would become me, seriously emerged. Others consider it was somewhere else, in Poland, and later, in 2011, because it was at that occasion that a sort of prototype of me, a model of me, a show project, in large scale, was viewed. Others again evoke France, 2013, because it corresponds to when I started to have dedicated people to take care of me and to manage me. So there have been some variances about my date and place of birth. Yet, there seems to have no less variances about why I was created. Some believe that the main reason why I was developed was to improve efficiency, the company’s efficiency through the people’s and the processes’ efficiency. Others think that it was because the organization was getting obsolete and too “un-modern”, getting out of step with the modern world. So it was about time to jump into the 21st century, and I would be a good enough occasion to help it. Others put forward cost reduction as a reason for my birth. Also called cost cutting, or cost killing. Others still, argue that “we couldn’t do otherwise. We could not not do it anyway.” They meant that for political reasons, my birth in France could no longer be postponed. The French organization already used to its full extent the argument according to which because of the size of the country (in number of stores) and its subsequent complexity, deploying and managing a project such myself needed to be carried out in the very, very end. After implementing it in every possible smaller countries (i.e. with less stores), in order to

benefit from their experiences and learnings. At some moment in time, this argument was no longer usable, that is when some considered I was born, forced to be brought into life in France. So “e-invoicing” was my second name. It meant dematerializing a process, dematerializing the invoicing process, and that was actually my scope. The midwife whom helped out my birth in France was Liv, the project manager or project leader, assisted by Caroline, the change and communication project manager.

My parents were more than two, they amount to a whole team actually, based in Sweden and in Poland. My older siblings were the P2P projects previously implemented in other countries (UK, Italy, Spain, and Belgium), but I know that some other P2Ps were also born/unfolded at the same time as me, in Germany and in the United States. Prior to my birth in France, I was a bit hidden, the preparations for my birth were confidential, a kind of secrecy preceded my coming. Was I illegitimate? After my birth, I became suddenly recognized and legitimate. So was the whole team dedicated to me, a French team and a global team (calling themselves the “project team”). People even volunteered to look after me and to become my godmothers and godfathers. They were finance managers and accountants, and they were willing to animate the training sessions in all stores, sessions to train staff to me, to how to use me, what my peculiarities are, to train staff to tame me. The finance managers played the role of more or less well-disposed nannies to take care of me and carry me to their accountant subordinates.

There is something I want to say. I find it funny that, according to some managers, a **criterion of success** about me, a criterion for measuring whether I am successful or not, is formulated by a euphemism or even by the negative. For Sylvia, for instance, would she be able to say “There haven’t been too many hiccups” about me, then it would mean I have been successful. Maybe, the ultimate success measure for developing and implementing a change project like me is similar to the one for creating and bringing up a human being: limited problems allowing a not too hectic life for the parents.

1.2. THE PROJECT IN ONE PROCESS / THE PROJECT CHRONOLOGY

When the respondents are asked what have been the key phases of the project, their answers differ significantly from one another (there are almost 27 different answers out of 27 respondents). Project time thus appears very subjective and relative. As an example, the global project team shows a distinct outline of the phases (see document in appendixes)

In order to describe the process of the project, we nonetheless tried to identify different phases, with punctuations related to key moves in **uncertainty and ambiguity**, on the basis of what the respondents mentioned, and from what I observed. These phases are described in Table 2.

Phases	Dates	Phase descriptions
Pre-project phase	September 2011	Idea of an e-invoicing project
Confidential phase	17 October 2013	The FAD (Finance & Accountancy Director) presents the change project to her finance managers
	March 2014	The FAD “informs” the trade unions of the project.
Going public / Coming out phase	March 2014 (right after the meeting with the trade unions)	The FAD informs the accountancy team at the French headquarters (finance managers + their subordinates accountants), about the change project, moment then baptized “The room 23 meeting”
	June 2014	The FAD “consults” the trade unions about the project.
Implementation phase	Until June 2015	The project team is trained and trains the future users of the new e-invoicing system in each store in France.

TABLE 2 - THE PROJECT PHASES

1.2.1. PRE-PROJECT PHASE

SEPTEMBER 2011: IDEA OF AN E-INVOICING PROJECT

September 2011 represents somehow the big bang of the project, even if it is a relative big bang, as considered from the French headquarter senior management's viewpoint. So from September 2011 to (the next phase, starting) October 2013, the idea of an e-invoicing project in France is floating around, after a physical trip of 3 people (the CFO, the FAD – Finance & Accountancy Director and a finance manager) to the already existing Service Center in Poland.

1.2.2. CONFIDENTIAL PHASE

17 OCTOBER 2013: THE ACCOUNTANCY HEAD PRESENTS THE PROJECT TO HER FINANCE MANAGERS

“So, with my direct team [direct subordinates], we had a first meeting in October 2013, to explain that we would be working on a project... So I started to speak and I noticed the reactions, people starting to realize when I spoke of the Shared Service Center. Only managers were invited to this meeting, and what has been very difficult for them is that I asked them not to tell anything. And it was heavy for them to carry. And they realized how tough it had been for me to keep such a thing for some time, but they saw that they would have to do the same, and that was hard, very hard.” Violet

MARCH 2014: THE FAD INFORMS THE PROJECT TO THE TRADE UNIONS (FIRST MEETING OUT OF TWO, WITH THE UNIONS).

For any national change project (having an impact on the everyday work of some employees) to be allowed to happen and to be implemented in France, it has to be presented to the trade unions first. This presentation takes place in two steps, i.e. two meetings with the unions. The first step is informative while the second step is consultative. In December 2013 occurred the informative step.

1.2.3. GOING PUBLIC / COMING OUT PHASE

DECEMBER 2013 (RIGHT AFTER): THE ACCOUNTANCY HEAD INFORMS HER WHOLE TEAM OF THE PROJECT

The accountancy team at the French headquarters informs her whole team (finance managers + their subordinates accountants), about the change project. This moment (“of revelation”, for the accountants) was then baptized “The room 23 meeting”.

“I am not sure how they [the accountants] reacted to the meeting, to what I said. Because we didn’t have the time to debrief. I don’t know. There are people who understand and people who don’t. I think that some need time to understand [what’s going on] and others who refuse to understand. Based on the questions they asked during this meeting, I could see that some had quickly understood. Because there are things I said clearly and some other things that you could extrapolate. So, according to who you are, you understand things more or less quickly, or sometimes you just don’t want to, but you don’t realize that you don’t want to understand, you act as if everything was fine.” Violet

JUNE 2014: THE FAD CONSULTS THE TRADE UNIONS ABOUT THE PROJECT (SECOND AND LAST MEETING WITH THE UNIONS).

The second meeting with the unions is consultative. It requires their consultative vote based on the level of information they deem they received for each project. If they consider that they did receive enough information, they vote “favorably”, not for the project but for the amount of information deemed necessary. If they consider that they did not receive enough information, they either abstain from voting or they vote “unfavorably”. In this case, another meeting with the trade unions is required to bring the information deemed lacking. Only then after can the project go on and “leave the project mode” to be moved into an official process.

1.2.4. IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

The project team is trained and trains the future users of the new e-invoicing system in each store in France, before the new process is implemented store by store (or wave by wave of stores). This phase ends in June 2015, when I am leaving the project as well as the company (“for good/for real”). Here under are two pictures of the “official” project timeline. They appear somewhat different from the project dynamics described above

1.3. ANALYSIS OF THE NARRATIVES

We propose here under an analysis of the different narratives, i.e. an analysis of the senior managers’ narrative, an analysis of the managers’ narrative, an analysis of my own narrative,

both as a manager and as an ethnographer, an analysis of the subordinates' narrative, and an analysis of the project's narrative.

THE TRANSFORMATION/CONVERSION OF AMBIGUITY ACROSS THE LEVELS

We begin with describing the top management understanding of and reaction to the change, followed by how they used ambiguity to communicate the change to the middle managers. Next, we discuss how middle managers made sense of this ambiguous communication and further communicated the change to the subordinates. We found that ambiguity was used at different levels - top management level, middle-manager level and subordinate level - in the change process. Specifically, communication between top managers and middle managers on the one hand, and between middle managers and their subordinates, on the other hand, was fraught with ambiguity in varying degrees. The tensions and the transfer of ambiguity across the levels concurred to an enlightened change, in the end.

1.3.1. ANALYSIS OF THE SENIOR MANAGERS' NARRATIVE

The project is not similarly considered from different members of top management. For example, the change is seen with different levels of intensity, different levels of upheaval. While Chris thinks that "It is an abnormality that it did not already happen", in a way implying that he finds the change somewhat obvious and of low intensity, David believes that "we are more in an evolution than in a revolution today", and Violets finds that "this project is completely a kind of revolution." These three senior managers express as many different reactions in how intense and how turbulent they might deem the upcoming change. As an implication/ an impact of the project, a **massive change in** accountancy-related **jobs** is expected.

Violet sees the change as an upheaval, almost an earthquake. (a bit of "a revolution"). In her experience, maybe no change ever impacted the accountant identity so much, since she started working, about thirty years earlier. Violet finds the situation somewhat absurd, overpaying for subcontracting skills that do exist internally ("is it so necessary?"). She does not speak out her doubts officially, but in hallway conversations, questions the Service Center's ability to manage such anomalies, and during official meetings, insists on the complexity of the existing process, very much context dependent. She then suggests to implement the project, but to limit the

change, i.e. she suggests to partly implement the change in the French subsidiary. By so doing, Violet avoids and embodies at the same time change resistance. She shows ambivalence to change but also to change resistance. Resistance to change is namely ill considered from a member of the management board. Violet therefore shows **different strategies** towards the change: **strategy of opposition** (against her boss, the CFO), and later, a **strategy of negotiation** of the change. This negotiation appears in two forms: a negotiation of the change in time (“last country”) and a negotiation of the change in space (considering a limited partnership with the Service Center). By so doing, Violet lowers power of the Service Center in the invoice process and therefore in the relationship with the French subsidiary.

David sees the change as an occasion – maybe the occasion – to “do something else”, expression that he repeated – whether they leave the company or whether they stay. The change pressures the finance managers to try to answer the question that their subordinates might ask them or ask themselves “what’s in it for me?” – maybe a question the managers started asking themselves. Probably a question that David, as CFO, already asked himself. His strategy is more a **strategy of opportunity**.

Chris is thoughtful by the human impact of the change, by the human change in the change. Yet he believes that the change should have happened a long time ago, that it was “about time”; Chris seems to see in the change a **strategy of modernization** of the organization.

When talking about the implications of the change, all three senior managers seem to express a combination of what they can grasp around from people possibly impacted by the change, and of their own projections, according to their professional experience and professional identity

TOP MANAGERS’ UNDERSTANDING OF CHANGE

Top management’s experience of change began as a response to an obligation, as the headquarters expected them to implement the change. Their understanding of change, at best, was characterized by ambivalence. To illustrate, while the top management, in general, was convinced about certain reasons for the change (e.g., process securing, mutualizing, time saving), they were also puzzled by how big the unclear part of the change seem to be, particularly in the beginning. For instance, they felt that they lacked requisite information (only little guidance to implement the change, hardly no specifications of the change intricacies). Perhaps, like in most change situations, there were no answers to several questions, and nuances

were lacking. Further, top managers faced uncertainty about their staff – what will happen to some accountants? Some may lose their job; others may have to change job (something that may threaten their identity as accountants). Finally, top managers had fears about the change (e.g., possibilities of negative outcomes, opposition from trade unions, resistance to change).

When speaking of the change project, the senior managers observed use different **metaphors**.

“This project, it is like building a house from the roof, the first thing you should build in a house, it is the foundations, right?” Chris.

“Or else, this project is like building a beautiful roof on a rotten house.”

TOP MANAGER’S COMMUNICATION TO MIDDLE MANAGERS AND USE OF AMBIGUITY

We analyzed how the top management built a case for the change. In particular, Violet, Finance and Accounting Director, communicated the expected benefits of change, but under communicated her doubts about the change. For instance, on the request of the Social Relations Director, she did not to put certain words in her presentation of change to the trade unions and as such, she left ambiguity in strategically in her presentation. Further, initially, Violet provided limited information to the middle managers. For instance, she communicated, the beginning, the end, and the goals of the change but was ambiguous about the process (e.g., how it would happen, who would be impacted). While with time, she tried to provide more information to the middle managers, there was always a gap between what she knew and what she told the managers. Thus, although she could infer what the unclear aspects of change may entail, in her communication, she used a language which left a lot for people to understand, imagine and interpret. For instance, she mentioned that some jobs may become redundant or change. This was interpreted differently by the accountants (while some feared losing their job, others interpreted that it would occur in the stores, and not at the service office where they worked). Furthermore, the change manager (i.e. one of the authors of this research), reporting to Violet, was seated away from accountants (to avoid risk of much communication) and was explicitly asked to not talk to accountants much in the first phase of the change (until it was presented to the trade unions). Finally, when a rumor, suggesting that the main reason for the change was to streamline the accountancy department, arose, Violet didn’t say the rumor was not founded either. Part of the reason why Violet did so was because she had been an accountant previously, and could understand what they might be going through. She empathized with them and, as

such, left the communication ambiguous not only to protect herself – as she didn't want angry subordinates – but also to protect them. Ambiguity helped her maximize options and gave her slack to figure out answers for the accountants.

1.3.2. ANALYSIS OF THE MANAGERS' NARRATIVE

MIDDLE MANAGERS' UNDERSTANDING OF CHANGE

The middle managers too were expected to have an active and rather positive role (somehow selling the) change, even though a few of them were not the fans of the change. Most middle managers were experienced people (40-50 years old) and had experienced several changes as well as changes that were intended but not eventually implemented in this company. As such, they waited for a while to react as sometimes change is not implemented. Like top managers, they were also ambivalent about the dematerialization - while they acknowledged the benefits of the change (e.g., modernization, efficiency, sustainability as less paper), they were also worried about the potential negative aspects. To begin, although the top management was ambiguous in their communication and presented a simplified view of change, the middle managers could spot the inconsistencies due to their operational experience. For instance, they could figure out that while the goal was to make invoicing paper free, the suppliers were asked to send paper invoices to the scanning company (and not pdf). Further, the process was expected to get simplified and faster, instead, on some aspects, it became longer. Moreover, middle managers also wondered how to communicate the news regarding the possibility of loss of few jobs to the accountants, in addition to worrying about their own jobs as a result of decrease in team size. Finally, the middle managers were also not happy about under-communication and that the lessons from similar change implementation in other subsidiaries were not passed over to them.

MIDDLE MANAGERS' COMMUNICATION TO SUBORDINATES

We found that the middle managers varied in how they communicated the change to the subordinates (i.e., the accountants). In particular, we could distinguish three categories.

The first category of managers includes those who communicated everything they knew, including their own interpretation of the ambiguous part of the change. When accountants asked questions on whether they should start looking for another job at some point, some managers

answered in affirmative (yes, I think you should). One of the managers was giving out all information – almost as if he was getting rid of all information.

The second category of managers includes those who communicated the beginning and the end of change, leaving the rest to the accountants' interpretation. Thus, they left gaps in their communication, allowing the subordinates with a possibility to fill the gaps. When the accountants asked them questions on whether they should look for another job, they gave vague answers ("maybe so...") and tried to adapt their answers based on the asked questions. They did not want to over-communicate and unsettle their subordinates. They also wanted to provide the right information later on, and used ambiguity to buy more some time.

The third category of managers includes those who were afraid of miscommunicating, so they told the accountants only about the change itself. That is, they did not answer questions, emails or phone calls they received about the change, and were not available to talk to accountants.

Thus, it seems that the middle managers communicated with their subordinates with varying levels of ambiguity. They, themselves, received ambiguous information from the top management and, when it was their turn to communicate to the subordinates, they used suitable ambiguity/manageable ambiguity. Perhaps, we could say that the middle managers played the role of ambiguity converters.

1.3.3. ANALYSIS OF THE SUBORDINATES' NARRATIVE

SUBORDINATES' RESPONSE TO CHANGE

In general, our interviews revealed that they had worries, for instance, about their future, how their job will change, about using technology, etc. There was also variation in how they reacted to middle managers' ambiguous communication.

Not knowing is also much voiced by the subordinates. It is a not knowing quite unsettling, close to feeling distraught and clueless. It is not the not knowing present when mobilizing one's negative capability. The not knowing is the not knowing of their becoming.

In the subordinates interviews, the **feeling of loss** ("down-sized", "de-materialized", "de-humanized", "de-managed", but also loss of sight, loss of vision, loss of trust even) is prevailing.

1.3.4. OVERALL ANALYSIS OF THE NARRATIVES

TOWARDS WHICH TYPE OF PARADOXES AND AMBIGUITIES DO THOSE NARRATIVES AND THIS PROCESS ORIENTATE?

The fear is not the fear of the project, but the fear... of the (accountants) fear of the project, the fear of the project handling

“That’s my fear with the accountants, the human aspect is not always included in their hard disk” (Chris)

“If the human aspect is not properly handled, the project is dead/over.” (Chris)

THE BIRTH OF AMBIGUITY/AMBIGUITIES

Goal Ambiguity appears through the expression “tightrope walking” pronounced by Chris,

Temporal ambiguity appears through elasticity of time, even track of time lost. People have their own succession of phases, all different, but also different from the corporate official timeline of the project.

SPATIAL AMBIGUITY

The story told by the CFO on the origins of the project starts as a contagious disease that one should be protected against as long as possible “it’s been taken country by country, one by one, into their scope, and that would come to us one day, and we planned to be the last country or close to the last” David

The project of e-invoicing as such, i.e. the dematerializing of invoices is not very obvious to figure out, in the first place. What will the invoices become? There is a lot of strangeness around this topic of virtualizing papers.

Second, representing the development of the project throughout space and places, its geography (ubiquity?), is a bit of a challenge, and might represent a useless task. Before the project gets concrete, it seems almost impossible to imagine it to other places: the project is “here and now”. All that was not in France was considered as “out there” and was vague. The project thereby seems to lead its own trajectory in space, through countries and through systems. It is hard for

people in the organization to attribute it to places. The strong tendency to telework (from another city, from another country, or from another region of the world), at least part-timely, contributes to increase the multi localization of the project and thus the vagueness around its spatial anchorage.

Therefore, through the concept of e-invoicing, through the difficulty of considering another place than yours for the project, spatial ambiguity appears, increase by telework.

“Well, now that I think of it, it might not optimum, it’s true that if we were scattered in less places it would be easier, but so it is.” Violet

TEMPORAL AMBIGUITY

Time perception in the project seems to be nonlinear. Either people do not remember much of certain phases or they do not remember the period *preceding* certain phases. The start of the project differs from one person to another, in the sense of the start of the project corresponded to the start of the project *for them*, so there is no absolute beginning (and we can wonder whether they would be any absolute end).

“The problem today with this project is that the wished position is [silence] imaginable, but when it comes to the timing, I think we are not completely capable to say exactly which outcome at which moment in time” Violet

TERMINOLOGICAL/LEXICAL AMBIGUITY

The mutualizing organization, initially baptized “Business Services Center”, turned into “Shared Services Center”. This transformation from Business to Shared evokes the will to humanize a standardized profit oriented process, and to market it as a cooperative dynamics. Yet we can wonder what exactly is going to be shared? The services? The methods? The jobs? The salaries? The careers?

HIERACHICAL/POSITIONAL AMBIGUITY

There seems to be a certain **floating** on the **top hierarchy of the project**. Violet, yet Accountancy head, still wonders to whom she is reporting on the project matter. Besides, the matrix hierarchy (the steering group) themselves seem to float on what and how they are supposed to manage the thing. So they somehow micro manage the project.

This vagueness on the top of the project also enhances the feeling of loneliness that she is facing in carrying the project, even without realizing it

“Well, otherwise, hierarchically I have been reporting to D. until he... err. Since he... left his position if I may say, I am reporting to Marianne [the Control Head, who got promoted to the position of CFO when D. moved away]. Well it’s true that since she arrived at this position, we didn’t have much time to talk because she is very, very busy. So well, I am managing the project as I believe I should.” Violet

Certain absurdity also. Violet is to report the project progression to a group which does not seem much knowledgeable on the matter, what she saw of them was merely a group of control, a tool of control, and felt rather disappointed.

EXPECTATION AMBIGUITY

The ambiguity on the expectations of the project first lies in the very name of the project, Procure to Pay, and on its initial ambition.

“I thought at the beginning to make it one project, but in fact it is not possible. I mean it is semi-possible”, David, CFO

Not only the parts or aspects of the project never merged, although wished by the CFO, but also the project team quickly focused on the second aspect of the project only, the payment aspect only. The semi possibility evoked by the CFO proved to be wishful thinking, and contains, in its terminology, ambiguity.

“We can’t make a pause on the running business, do our project, and then push the button “play” again. We have to do both at the same time with very similar resources, knowing that running business is already very complicated to run. So we try to make it flexible when it comes to expectations. I think the details will be built through project management” David, CFO

GOAL AMBIGUITY

There is a lot of pressure on the goals of the project, the first of them being: that the project be! Besides, which goal can have a project if its replication is known to include the replication of all of its flaws too, discovered in the first implementations?

“What I really have trouble with is that, sometimes, you’re gonna implement something although you do know it’s not... not optimal, let’s say, and it’s supposed to be ok because the French subsidiary has to do it whatsoever [Silence] (...). We are implementing things that we are fully aware by experience are not working... properly enough, let’s say” Violet

The replication of the project unveils the absurd situation of cutting and pasting a process, without even identifying, let alone reflecting upon, what can be and should be improved. Trying to upgrade what needs to be/ can be as a first goal for the next similar project seems to be not even considered. When the French subsidiary, through its senior management, tries to appropriate the project, the tendency is there to make the upgrade of the project as the new project goal, since it makes more sense for them to do so. Thus, adding this new goal for the project participates to the ambiguity on the project goals. Violet’s comment incidentally expresses the lack of responsibilities from the top management accepting such flawed conditions for implementing / replicating the project locally.

Uncertainty and ambivalence already appears from senior management, originating, or relaying the project. Violet expresses not knowing her future reaction when the project is implemented and over. She expects to be either relieved or not relieved, but she does not precise it more than that, with a certain modesty maybe?

1.4. PRODUCING AMBIGUITY

1.4.1. PARADOXES PRODUCING / PROCEEDING / CONVEYING AMBIGUITIES

In this section, we describe the paradoxes and the ambiguities that the organizational change spreaded.

Three paradoxes emerged from the organizational change: a discursive/lexical paradox, a temporal paradox and a spatial/scale paradox.

First, appears a paradox in the discourses, between the official and the unofficial, on the change causes/reasons. Officially, invoice dematerialization is justified and explained by the need to “secure and harmonize invoice management routines and procedures, by centralizing and systematizing, that is automating these processes” (Violet, CFO). Unofficially, there is an overstaffing of accountants for a couple of years, and some routines may have been added to

justify their work. Official figures do not reflect this situation, yet several top managers suspect it. Hence, a real reason for the change is to put an end to this overstaffing by justifying a reduction, even progressive, of accounting staff.

A second paradox, temporal, does exist between mid-term and long-term. It occurs on the change goals. The goal for dematerializing invoices is, in the long run, as indicated, to work paperfree, or invoicefree. Yet, for some reason, the scanning machine can not scan pdf documents, so the invoice papers have to be sent from the suppliers to the scanning company (the invoice approval becomes electronical, so paper is indeed not manually handled in the approval process). This seems absurd, contradicting the goal of “zero paper”.

This organizational change engenders a third paradox, the scale paradox, between the European level (including all subsidiaries in Europe), and the national level of the organization (the French subsidiary). This paradox is of financial order. At the European level, the investment is meant to be profitable through the mutualization of services said to be “of low added value”. Yet, the mistakes possibly made by a new team, paneuropean (at the new shared service center) learning to “translate” some national specific situations into standards, added to the usual bugs of the implementation a new system, are expensively re-invoiced to the subsidiary, by the shared service center. The cost results surprisingly higher for the subsidiary.

The three paradoxes described above engender ambiguities. To manage the discursive paradox, official-unofficial, on the reasons for the change, an ambiguity has been observed on the accountant role. The accountant is namely expected to support this change process, while experiencing a shift in his/her role. “In the beginning, we could feel that the finance managers were almost walking on eggs when they said “Ya, it won’t change much”. But actually yes it will, one has to read between the lines, it may as well change your life” John, finance manager. To manage the temporal paradox, long-short term, on the change goals, temporal ambiguity characterizes the change transition. Invoice dematerialization not in the first step of the process, but at a later stage.

To manage the scale paradox, on the financial implication of the change, an ambiguity on the role of the shared service center, which is expected to be beneficial to the subsidiary through mutualizing and securing processes, but whose learnings and trials and errors reveal unexpectedly costly for the subsidiary .

The different paradoxes described here above therefore engender two types of ambiguity (paradox on the change reasons, role ambiguity of accountants ; paradox on the goals, temporal ambiguity ; financial paradox, role ambiguity of shared service center).

Transition

“You can tell, but do not write” is the requirement from the labor relations of the Human Resource department, when briefing us for the official presentation that we were required to make in front of the trade unions.

“During the training sessions, I realize that we came for teaching what to do when the automatic process... does not work actually!” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

The new process brought about by the change project is around the ideas of automating a system. So one could imagine that training people to this automated system could correspond to training them to how to deal with the automation. It therefore seems surprising and even paradoxical that **the training is about how to deal with... the failure of automation**. What, as users, you are supposed to do when the system fails. The training is about how, as human beings, to relate to the system failure and to take over the system. In a way it is understandable. For some reason I found that counter intuitive and recorded it accordingly in my fieldwork.

The following lines also illustrate an **organizational paradox** in the new process **or a processual paradox** that appeared with the new electronic process of validating invoices. In the old process, for the type of invoices with a same amount (e.g. electricity invoice), the suppliers were used to sending only a summary of the invoices, with the total amount and very few details. With this type of invoice, that was enough to be able to sign up the acceptance for paying the invoice. However, the new electronic process does not allow to accept the payment of an invoice if the very invoice is not enclosed (scanned). This paradoxical situation triggered the following comment from Mia finance manager.

“So we are re-materializing in order to de-materialize?!” Mia, finance manager

As a matter of fact, one of the key arguments for selling the change project internally was its “zero paper” aspect. With the invoices de-materialization, comes along an electronic approval of the invoice payment from, among other approvers, the finance managers. In order to electronically approve an invoice payment, a scanned version of the invoice has to be joined. The suppliers who were sending only invoice summaries (“relevés de factures”), saving time and paper, are asked to send a proper invoice, with the new system.

The relation between paradoxes and ambiguity can therefore be a cause and effect relation, but also an embedded relation.

1.4.2. MANAGERS PRODUCING AMBIGUITIES: MANAGERS AS AMBIGUITY ENACTORS

It is part of the managers' responsibilities to explain and promote the change and its would-be benefits to their subordinates, however at the same time, they are reluctant to convey information that actually puzzles them, they are reluctant to this change because it might impact their teams. To deal with these tensions, the middle managers observed produce and enact ambiguities. Ambiguity appears for them as a job facilitator.

The ambiguities appear to be produced following a certain dynamics in the project, according to the different phases of the change. The managers observed produced labeling, temporal and spatial ambiguities at the early stage of the change (pre-project phase and confidential phase). Then, they produced hierarchical/positional and role-related ambiguities at a later stage of the change (going public/ coming out phase). In the last part of the change (implementation phase), the managers produced terminological, expectation and goal-related ambiguities. Therefore there seems to be a relationship between the nature/types of ambiguities enacted by the managers and the project progression.

In the very early stages of the project (pre-project phase and confidential phase), the change is almost secret. Elements of negotiation for managers are not many. General label, time space amount to the few of them.

The following quotes combine quotes from the managers' interviews and excerpts from my fieldwork diary, as the change and communication manager in the project.

The first type of ambiguity I encountered in the project was based on **acronyms**, on the **overall labeling** of things. The change project observed was initially baptized "Purchase To Pay" and therefore had "P2P" as a nickname. However, most stakeholders gradually forgot the initial meaning of the acronyms, and occasionally replaced it by "Process to Pay" or "Peer To Peer"...

This kind of esoteric labeling, as if it were a secret code – quite common in project management, opens the door to a disembodied naming of the project and to a terminological ambiguity.

Another ambiguity I came across was **temporal** ambiguity. The following quote shows the negotiation between the subsidiary - where the change is being unfold - and the headquarter, on a delayed implementation and in several waves of stores instead of in all stores simultaneously.

“We are buying time”, John, finance manager

Temporal ambiguity is also something I experienced as a manager in this project of invoices dematerialization:

“I have been “recruited” in the project in October 2013. In November 2013, when “project introduction meeting” took place, the project was scheduled to end in September 2014, and I thought “likewise, the sooner, the better”. The following month, my better understanding of the implications of the change made me try and influence the negotiations with the global team to postpone the project end until February 2015 to “give more time to the accountants that might change or lose their job”. What was negotiated was the first wave of project implementation. The strategy I supported was three implementation waves overall, in order both to experience better learnings (from a wave to another), but also to buy some more time, giving accountants more job opportunities. As of today, the project end date seemed to be stabilized as June 2015.” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

Another type of ambiguity I could experience is a **spatial** / geographical ambiguity.

“A first surprising element is that my desk is nowhere close to my manager’s, it is not even at the same floor, but it is located instead by the desk of the person who recruited me in the project, the former CFO, who has changed job and moved to another country in the meantime. When I think about it, my desk is actually especially far from both my manager’s and the desks of the colleagues impacted by the change. I see in this situation a will and an unconscious strategy to keep the project confidential (at least when it was in its first phase), and discrete overall, as it deals with a sensitive matter. Now that the project has its confidential phase over, I could have asked to move my desk by the accountancy managers’ area or by my manager’s desk, which I haven’t done. Having my desk far away from some stakeholders of the project offers me the benefits of less control, and also probably

the feeling that if the project is scattered through different areas and floors in the building (in my case), it might look less powerful, less dangerous.” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

At a later stage of the change, the project is no longer confidential and becomes open, of public knowledge. This is the going public/coming out phase, in which the managers observed produced hierarchical/positional and role-related ambiguities.

“In the project, I hierarchically and officially report to a person (accountant and financial services director), whereas I functionally and unofficially report to another one (project manager). The standard international recommendation is that my role of change and communication manager hierarchically depends on the project manager, but I happen to get into the project before the project manager... I recently went through a little crisis with my project manager, about coercive – which I told her she used too much - versus participative management. I believe I kind of allowed myself to do it because she was not my hierarchical manager – I am not sure I would have dated if she were. So I let our little crisis unleash and did not feel pressure to find a quick solution to get back to peace.” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

After a quarrel with my project leader, who was upset that the project intranet page I was working on was not ready yet, I felt an urge to have a conversation about this issue with Vera, the accounting director of the company, I rushed to see her. Luckily she was at her desk. I reported her the tension between Liv’s never ending expectations and my 50% official workload.

Vera - You are the fourth person in the team who came to see me complaining about her

Me - You know what? The good news is she is not my boss. You are.

I was upset at Liv because she was pressurizing me as if she was bossing me around. Maybe my colleagues were too for the same reasons.

Another type of ambiguity I could observe is a **role** ambiguity.

“Officially, on my job contract, I am a “project leader”, which contrasts with my role of “change and communication manager” in the project team: role duality seems to be my identity. Besides I am managing no one. I realize I use the either an identity or the other to get some legitimacy, depending on the context: when I mention my past experience as project manager and my former experience with work council unions meeting, I use the project leader identity, and when I need some communication legitimacy, I use the change and communication identity.” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

Besides, with the new process implied by invoices dematerialization, the accountants job changes and “loses” some tasks, but the finance managers try to find them other tasks « to compensate » their « lost » workload.

«If the accountants see to ease, on a daily basis, the electronic flow between all managers who are each to “check” the electronic invoice, I believe they should get back at least 20% of their workload » Vera, finance manager.

An issue seems to arise between the Shared Service Center and the project group in France. The Shared Service Center fears that the French subsidiary does not introduce them “properly”, and therefore seems to be weakened in its role and identity.

“I perceive that the SSC is dreading illegitimacy and clandestinity”

“My webex with my matrix manager (global change and communication manager), located in Poland, confirmed that perception. The SSC fears that we “under introduce” them to the French stores. Later in the webex, when I tell her that we speak of the SSC as the international team dedicated to the invoice software, she sounds irritated. Her irritation further develops when I tell her we might be considering a contact person between the SSC and the stores, a new intermediary.” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

Where does the role of the SSC ever start and where does our role stop? It is unclear...

In the last part of the change (implementation phase), the managers produced discursive, expectation and goal-related ambiguities.

A **discursive** ambiguity appears in the invoice software, as well as tensions around a button/function.

“I realized the button “confirmation” in the new invoice management software can have different meanings. At the origin, the person responsible for the confirmation is meant to “confirm” that a delivery really took place. And not that you confirm the order has been placed. You ordered safety shoes for your store staff. You should “confirm” as soon as you know they got delivered at your store or warehouse. This confirmation is a step enabling the invoice matching automation. If you do not press the confirm button, the automatic matching can not take place. But the delivery really has to have occurred. The following day and the day after, in case of no confirmation, a message reminding you to confirm arrives in your mailbox in the morning, every morning. It is hard not to feel pressured to confirm. It is hard not to confirm, only to get rid of this reminding message...” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

The discursive ambiguity lies in the word “confirm”, which might be misinterpreted. What you confirm is that what had been ordered has just been delivered. You do not confirm that the order was placed. And you should not confirm, not to be pressured to confirm!

“Approver” seems a simple and factual word. It is often used in the project, and is a function/button on the invoice management software. Rather late in the project we realized that this word had two distinct meanings. It could mean the person validating the order or it could mean the person validating the payment of the invoice. They are two different persons.

Disambiguating by translating (from English to French):

“The translating exercise, from English to French, of some procedures, which is a long exercise, is interesting because it sheds light on what is not clear for us, before the translation. It sheds light on what we thought we understood of the system, but that we do not completely understand since we do not manage to translate properly (despite good enough English skills). Our hesitations in translating are related to the substance of the topic, and not on the technicality of the terms. Through translating, we get into the logics of the software and we reflect and question ourselves. We realize that English speaking countries do not have to bother with translating. However, they might not have had other opportunity to reflect and to question themselves. Maybe it is a reason for the limited success of the new process implementation in their countries?” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

For example, when working on the new procedures, starting with the old ones, some elements appear unclear or misinterpreted. The term “maximum amount” for instance is understood by some people as maximum amount for an order, and by others as maximum amount for invoice signature. As there can be several invoices for a same order, the rule is not the same at all. Translation can be seen as an understanding and disambiguating enabler. However it has been decided to keep some terms in English, since the software is in English (at least in the beginning) and it avoids any interpretation risk for the translation.

Another type of ambiguity I observed is expectation-related, i.e. **expectational**

“Vera asked two of her accounting teams to inventory and describe, on a written document, the list of their tasks. One team is responsible for the accounting on the suppliers (“accounts payable”), while the other team is responsible for the accounting on the clients. Vera told me the reason for her request. As she estimates that two positions (out of twenty) are going to be suppressed, she needs to know the real workload and the real tasks in order to reorganize the whole department the best she can. However the teams started to show some badwill and

to react saying that they would have to inflate the tasks. She answered them in a very direct way that if they were not willing to “play the game”, she would make the questions and answers on her own, without their help” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

Would they acknowledge that they might be overstaffed? Would they fear that she would use their document as an evidence of overstaffing and as a streamlining tool? Would they still trust her and her historical protective power? This sequence of questions shows an expectations related ambiguity.

A last type of ambiguity I observed is **goal-related**.

“What are the actual goals of the project? As many invoices as possible dematerialized? Or the list of KPI that nicely appears on the intranet page of the project and that each store will be able to follow and benchmark with others? Or lower costs for the company? But after how many years?” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

Managers therefore produce and enact different types of ambiguity from organizational paradoxes and from the different phases of the change (conveying, explaining and promoting a change they often lack information about). Ambiguity thus appears to be a particularly situated construct, in time and in space.

1.5. MANAGING AMBIGUITY

The results of the analysis of managers observed show that they use of ambiguity more **as a mean** than as an end. The observation of the managers’ behaviors and interviews of this organizational ethnography, tend to indicate that they do not seem to use ambiguity as a well prepared and purposeful strategy. They seem to improvise ambiguity instead. **Improvisation and bricolage** thus are the observable modalities of usage of ambiguity.

Not only do managers produce ambiguity, but they also manage ambiguity. They do so through three processes. First, to manage ambiguity, they juggle with different types of ambiguity (and thereby move the change process forward, which they are asked for, from their hierarchy). Second, to manage ambiguity, they use visuals as ambiguity vehicles (and thereby communicate to some stakeholders more information than what they are expected to). Third, to

manage ambiguity, they convert the ambiguity they received (and thereby produce their sensegiving process to their subordinates).

1.5.1. MANAGERS MOVING THE CHANGE FORWARD: MANAGERS AS AMBIGUITY JUGGLERS

Related to the previous result, another finding of the present research unveils that, in order to move the change project forward, the managers observed **juggle** with the different types of ambiguity above mentioned, using **ambiguity as a project management process** (Langley et al., 2013), as a dynamics interrelating all the ones concerned by the change.

Somehow puzzled by the change, these managers seem to juggle with the different ambiguities as if they were “balls” to handle and play with, each ball corresponding to a type of ambiguity (i.e. labelling, spatial, temporal, hierarchical, role, lexical, expectational and goal), itself corresponding to a phase of the change. Launching/throwing the different balls of ambiguity seems to help the managers observed move the project forward and manage the progression of the project. So managers juggle with several ambiguities, in order to manage not only puzzlement (their own as well as their subordinates’) and uncertainty, but also the very project process.

Figure 8 shows the seven types of ambiguity embodied in balls of ambiguity a manager can juggle with, as a project management process. Two dynamics/movements can be seen in this figure. The first dynamic relates to the balls of ambiguity while the second dynamic relates to the project management. The managers observed, and particularly the project manager coordinating the whole project, might be juggling with the different balls of ambiguity, linearly (one after the other) or more or less simultaneously (one with another). Another dynamic in this figure illustrates the trajectory of the project.

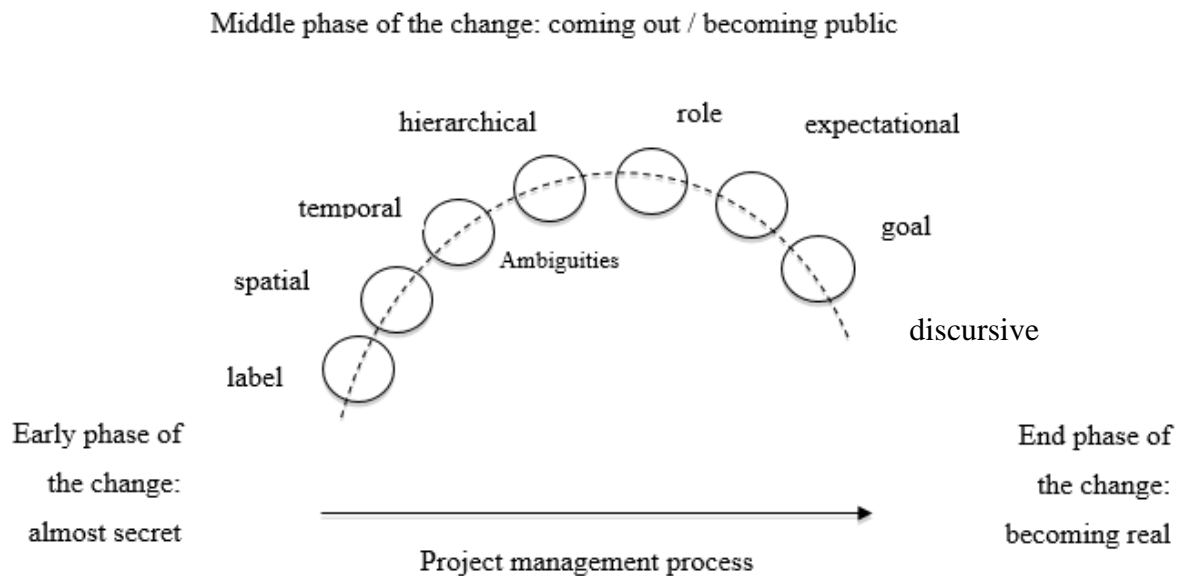


FIGURE 8 - MANAGERS AS “AMBIGUITY JUGGLERS”
WITH THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF AMBIGUITY

Besides enacting different types of ambiguity and juggling with them, the managers observed are also managing ambiguity. They are managing ambiguity in two ways. First, managers are managing it through a certain **support** (visuals) that they choose, in order to communicate the change. Second, they are managing it through a certain **process**, converting ambiguity in two opposite directions, by either expanding or by reducing the ambiguity they receive from their management. By so doing, they are making and giving sense of the change project to their subordinates.

1.5.2. MANAGERS USING VISUALS AS AMBIGUITY VEHICLES

Schemes, pictures, visuals have been used at different occasions during the change project. They have been used to communicate some aspects of the project to stakeholders.

In this section, we analyze two distinct visuals that have been chosen, when not designed, for the project, to be communicated at certain times.

The first visual, represented by figure 9, represents the new flow or new process for the invoices, after the change project.

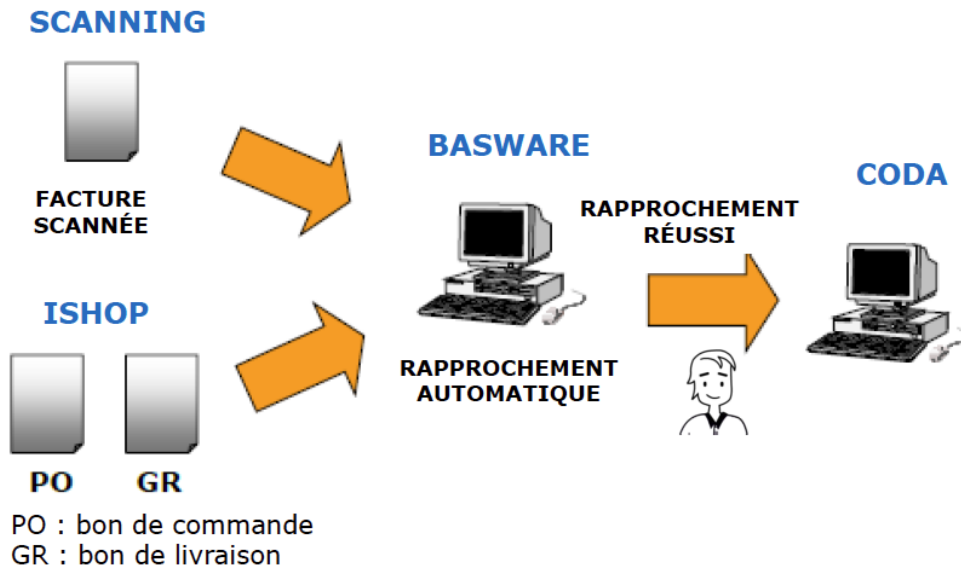


FIGURE 9 - THE NEW INVOICE PROCESS (E-INVOICING)

This picture is a slide extracted from a 20 pages power point presentation designed for a meeting aiming at introducing the change project to the trade unions, which constitute a particularly sensitive audience. The meeting represents a significant symbolic moment in the project life in so far as it is the moment when we can put an end to project-related confidentiality, the moment from which “we can go uncover”.

The figure contains pictures (of papers, of computers, a drawing of a person, and arrows) and expressions, words or letters situated under or above the pictures. All elements of this visual are left to the audience’s interpretation. The following excerpts of my fieldwork diary show the ideas intended to be communicated.

“As the”Petit Poucet”, we sowed small stones such as visual cues – the figure of a little man – with the hope that these cues would bring questions from the audience composed of trade unions representatives... Since we were allowed to talk about possible tricky matters but definitely not to write them, at that time of the project” excerpt from my fieldwork diary

This excerpt reveals how forbidden the use of words and sentences might be perceived (the less words, the better) and the subsequent strategy to prompt the audience to ask burning/nagging questions. With the official goal of using a visual channel (besides the auditive channel) to convey a message and help the audience visualizing the project, this figure hides a manipulation.

“This little man, who is he? Where is he working? In a store? At the headquarter?” These were the questions that we wished to hear, in order to be authorized to answer ‘This little man does not work in a store, nor at the headquarter, but in Poland, in a Shared Services Center’ But the question never arose at this trade unions meeting.” excerpt from my fieldwork diary

This second excerpt reveals the hopes, embodied in the figure and shattered by reality, and the final deception of the presenter on this matter.

“How to say enough, without being authorized to say much? How to say enough to make the project understandable – it is not this kind of project clear and easy to figure out? How not to say too much?” excerpt from my fieldwork diary

“We are not allowed to write ‘Shared Services Center’. We can not officially acknowledge either that accountants are overstaffed in the company, since no-one ever dared to say this. There are a few forbidden words or forbidden truths.” excerpt from my fieldwork diary

These last two excerpts show the deep wonderings when producing a communication with limitations, a communication with don’ts.

The second visual (figure 10) shows a metaphor of the project process. Its numerous arrows in a multiplicity of directions appear conspicuous.

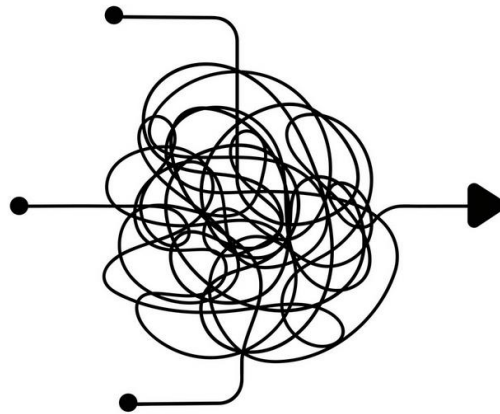


FIGURE 10 - METAPHOR OF THE PROJECT PROCESS

“It looks complicated but it is not” Elaine

The quote from Elaine, member of the global project team, seems almost ironical and funny, given the complex picture (Figure 10).

“I got hilarious” excerpt from my fieldwork diary

From the two figures, the lack of clarity of the visuals allows ambiguity to express the unsaid and the complex. Visual without words (or with very few words) can be ambiguity vehicles, facilitating ambiguity. By avoiding words and by avoiding to precise their context, visuals allow the richness and the convenience of possibly multiple interpretations.

1.5.3. MANAGERS AS SENSEGIVERS BY CONVERTING/ADAPTING AMBIGUITY

Another main result reveals that managers transformed for their subordinates the ambiguity they received from their management, producing a new ambiguity of their own, **through a sensegiving process** (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Balogun, 2003 ; Rouleau, 2005 ; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Managers thus appear as **ambiguity converters**.

When communicating the project to their teams, the observed managers showed two tendencies. Some of them expanded the ambiguity they received from their own boss, making the situation

even more unclear, even more ambiguous. On the contrary, other managers reduced it, clarifying messages. We further develop each tendency in the following paragraphs.

1.5.3.1. MANAGERS EXPANDING AMBIGUITY

Some of the managers observed transformed the ambiguity they received by increasing / further developing/ dilating / expanding it for their subordinates.

If we get back to the example used to illustrate the temporal ambiguity I experienced as a manager in the project observed, we can observe that this was a situation where I transformed the ambiguity by increasing it, since I recommended to the global project team and to the global project leader to use a longer period of time for “implementing” the project, to unfold the new process of dematerializing invoices over the different stores through three different waves. By so doing, I increased the transition period of “vagueness” for all the stores and the French headquarter, instead of having them “done” at once, in a more “clear cut” situation, that would have probably reduced the “don’t know” period.

“The strategy I supported was three implementation waves overall, in order both to experience better learnings (from one wave to the following), but also to buy some more time, giving accountants more job opportunities.” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

Likewise, the very example chosen to account for spatial ambiguity indicated that this “nowhere to be spatially rooted” situation, embedded in such an object as a desk, showed, after the surprise, the acceptance, the maintenance, and even the expansion of spatial ambiguity.

“Now that the project has its confidential phase over, I could have asked to move my desk by the accounting managers’ area or by my manager’s desk, which I haven’t done. Having my desk far away from some stakeholders of the project offers me the benefits of less control, and also probably the feeling that if the project is scattered through different areas and floors in the building, it might look less powerful, less dangerous.” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

Here under is a new example of ambiguity expansion. It is a reaction from a finance manager to the already vague message of his hierarchy, adding / crafting a further **ambiguity on the original ambiguity**, i.e. a “square ambiguity”, towards opacity.

"I do not say a word of this to my team, because it is a tsunami if I ever tell a word too many.
Or if I do not choose a proper word" Jeremy, finance manager

Jeremy is crafting / producing ambiguity on the original ambiguity. Later he is reflecting upon his own words:

"Well, between what we are not allowed to say and what we're not sure to have understood well, we are dreading putting a foot wrong. So we do not dare to say much and the teams are complaining that they lack information and communication" Jeremy finance manager

1.5.3.2. MANAGERS DENYING AMBIGUITY

Ambiguity denial can be considered a sub-category of ambiguity expansion, as ambiguity is there, although unacknowledged. Some managers seem to show a certain denial of ambiguity, by announcing to be transparent, but behaving in an ambiguous way.

"I am managing human relations at work as out of work: I say things. I try to adapt to people so I went smooth on that" Martine

There actually seems to be a contradiction between the beginning and the end of her sentence (see Figure 10).

"It looks complicated but it is not" Elaine, member of the global project team

1.5.3.3. MANAGERS REDUCING AMBIGUITY

After ambiguity expansion, let us now illustrate ambiguity reduction/disambiguating.

Lowering ambiguity can be matter of phase. In a first phase, a long enough phase of introduction, the change project was composed of elements that were confidential. This first phase was characterized with a thick ambiguity. In a second period, the wish to disambiguate what could be was particularly present, especially if the preceding ambiguity proved to be intense, and the period, long. This second period was characterized by a much lower ambiguity. A lower level of ambiguity can be the consequence of a manager's discomfort to handle ambiguity or of a manager considering his/her subordinates' discomfort to handle ambiguity. It can also be the consequence of a (rather long or intense) period of ambiguity, leading to a certain wish for a period with a much lower ambiguity. At this moment, appears the will to reduce ambiguity or to somehow disambiguate the situation.

Revisiting a quote used for hierarchical ambiguity, we might see that the situation unveils a decrease in ambiguity. I made it clear with the project manager was she actually not my hierarchical manager and used this clarified situation in order to confront her and deal with the conflict more easily.

“I recently went through a little crisis with my project manager. I found her too coercive and I told her so. I told her she should make more use of participative management. I believe I kind of allowed myself to do it because she was not my hierarchical manager – I am not sure I would have dared if she were.” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

A positional / hierarchical ambiguity existed from the day Liv, the project manager, entered her position. I was, on a daily basis, working for the project, significantly based on her inputs, which I was to act upon. The ambiguity that I might be working *for* her remained quite some time, though we both knew that we had the same manager, Vera, the finance director, so Liv was not my official boss. Yet, being my unofficial boss was a tempting thought for her and she might have behaved accordingly, unleashing her directive managerial style. The conflict, becoming open, and turning into confrontation between her and I therefore put an end to this ambiguous situation.

Here come several quotes from other managers in the project, also showing the search for a much clearer situation, meaning a reduction in ambiguity.

"I was not meant to tell them already at that moment, but I told them however, because I could not keep it for myself" Irene, finance manager

"I will not tell you fairy tales. As a transition manager, I was recommended to speak clearly and honestly, as there have been some misunderstandings, maybe due to the fact that English is not our mother tongue." Bertil, transition manager

It is interesting to precise that all participants to the meeting mastered English sufficiently well to avoid significant misunderstanding, so this looked more like an excuse to use for the transition manager to speak more freely, but it is interesting to see that he still need one to express himself that way – more directly than what business usually requires. Maybe, after a period of confidentiality and a feeling of clandestinity, a need to “talk freely and genuinely” appears.

"We should always choose the simpler over the cheaper." Darcy, finance director

One of the project official goals, considered as acceptable and legitimized in most change projects, is cost reduction, or cost cutting, marketed as cost *awareness*. This excerpt shows the moment when what is really important is being made clear by the finance director. Going for the cheaper, when not the cheapest, often is pronounced in official communications to justify big decisions. In this quote, ambiguity is removed from the discourse: “the cheaper” is presented as a wrong goal, as a fake good idea. A better goal, a more suitable goal replacing it is complexity reduction (“the simpler”).

The following quote is an example of self-disambiguation.

“05/01/2015. There it is. 2015. I am telling me ‘that’s it. That’s P2P’” Irene

It is with those words that Irene started the first weekly meeting of the year (year 2015), sounding as a wake a up call. Irene pronounced those words as some sort of announcement or statement, both to herself and to those attending the meeting. What for? An hypothesis would be to both clear her mind and to move her forwards for the rest of the year, pushing herself towards action: self-disambiguation could be seen here as a dynamo. Deadlines or key moments of the year (as year change) can also be used for good resolutions or as antidotes to ambiguity.

The next quote is a claim from Irene, finance manager, to Liv, the project manager who asked her to fill in a document, as an accountability process. The document was to be found in the project management platform used globally, called project place.

“Project place, I can’t find my way there. Would you send me this doc by email instead, please?” Irene

Irene shows here she has been annoyed to work with this web application. « Project place provides the tools you need to get things done (GTD) ». She wants to limit the space related ambiguity, even for document management! Too many things to do to get the bloody document, too many clicks.

Here is another example of disambiguation. It clarifies the change and communication part of the project and on my role, which was close to secrecy during the first phase of the project. The following quote shows the coming out moment of both this aspect of the project and my role.

“The decision committee meets on a weekly basis, on Friday mornings. It is probably the most official and important meeting for the project. Today is the meeting day. The four

people meant to attend this meeting are there. For once, we start the meeting with the change and communication part. “We often cut it off because it arrives last in the meeting.” says Liv, the project leader, grinning. I am joking, playing on the “poor parent” aspect of my role that has been left alone so long.” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

At last, the change and communication part of the project could, from then on, be talked about and debated, it was no longer taboo. Incidentally, it was the occasion for the project leader to control and measure the progress on this aspect of the project. Ambiguity was convenient (for me, as change manager) to limit or **blur performance measure**. The “end” – or at least the decrease - of ambiguity therefore seems to end this cosy-fluffy uncontrolled period. On the contrary, it pinpointed performance measure.

After a training session, at the end the two days, here is a comment we received from a store accountant participating to the session, after a moment of silence:

“The answers that were given at the first webex were not the same at the ones you gave us today.” A store accountant

“I attended the same webex, I was sitting by the person animating the webex, so I was there, and I can not remember such a thing, I can not remember any inconsistencies between what had been said at that time and what has been said the past two days.” Myself, excerpt of my fieldwork diary

Memory seems to be changing. So does interpretation.

“What seems clear to me though is that during the nine months between the two events, the store finance managers did not communicate much of the project updates (updates given through other webex) to their teams, most of the time. That’s what I figured out from my training tour throughout the stores. What I do understand is that at that time, any information about the project was hard to say, hard to foresee (hard to assess the risk on the store accountants), and moving... Besides, as a store finance manager, you are always rushing and running out of time, so this project about invoices dematerialization must not have been top ranked on their communication list. And probably it was not the only project left under communicated to their teams.”

What happened at the training session, almost a year after the first meetings and webex on the change project, disambiguated it in the way that what took place at the training session made converge all previous interpretations and reinterpretations of the project.

Those quotes happened after a long period of ambiguity for the project, at an early phase, as if this period opened the door to a new one characterized by attempts to “**disambiguate**” what could be, towards transparency.

The managers observed therefore transform for their subordinates the ambiguity they received from their management, not only **buffering** / decreasing **it** but also **amplify** /increasing **it**. This managerial ability to transform/convert ambiguity in order to try and make sense for their subordinates of what is said, but also unsaid in the change project, corresponds to both a process and a locus. Ambiguity management thus appears as a **sensegiving process** and as a **sensegiving space**, at the manager’s discretion. Both behaviours seem complementary and intertwined. Corresponding to different managerial roles (but also practices), they could be seen as the two sides of a same ambiguity coin.

Figure 11 illustrates the role of ambiguity regulators, played by the managers, through their sensegiving process of ambiguity reduction or ambiguity expansion, to their subordinates.

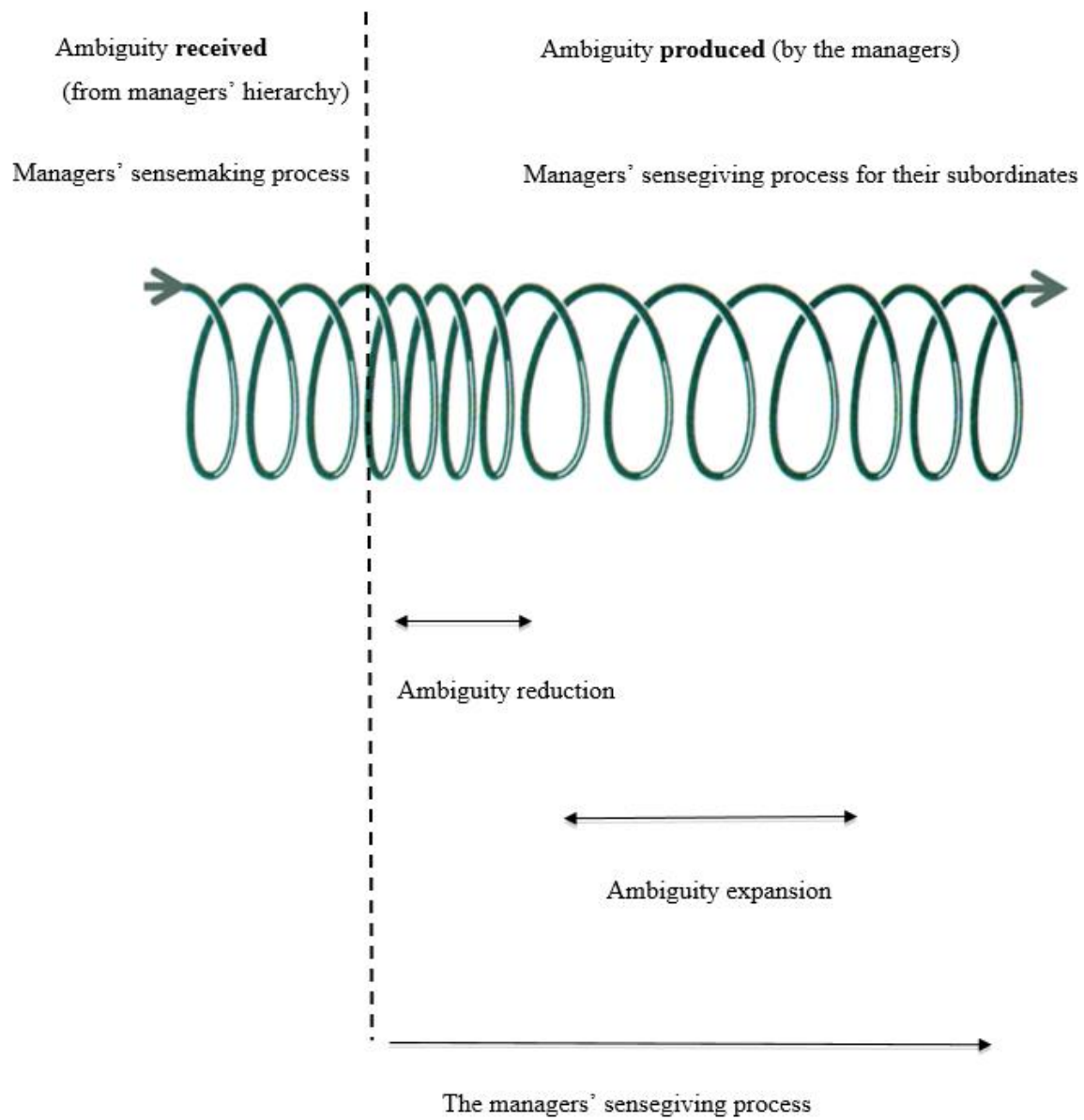


FIGURE 11 - MANAGERS AS AMBIGUITY REGULATORS IN THEIR SENSEGIVING PROCESS

1.6. MANAGERS NOT ONLY AS CHANGE AGENTS BUT ALSO AMBIGUITY TAMERS

Those results (managers as ambiguity converters) enhance or nuance the managers' role in their task of change agent, by introducing ambiguity. They therefore may be considered not only as change agents, but also as ambiguity tamers. This role of ambiguity tamers is embodied by the managers at two levels in the change process. They act as ambiguity tamers first, in their managerial use of ambiguity/ambiguities throughout the project management process, and second, during their process of ambiguity regulation (and of sensegiving) for their subordinates.

CHAPTER 2. MOBILIZING NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE CAPABILITIES

CHAPTER 2 GOALS

Chapter 2 aims at unveiling how, to manage a change, managers mobilize both Positive and Negative Capabilities, focusing particularly on Negative Capability, which is the capacity to remain comfortable in doubts and uncertainties.

CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY

To do so, chapter 2 presents first, the grid we constructed to identify Negative and Positive Capabilities (capability grid), and second, an analysis of all managers observed (17). Then, through the portraits of two contrasted managers, Irene and Jeremy, we compare Irene's positive capability to Jeremy's negative capability, to conclude that both capabilities are equally relevant and useful resources for managing ambiguities.

2.1. CONSTRUCTION OF THE CAPABILITY GRID

Negative Capability (Keats, 1970) is a concept scarcely referred to in management. However, it seemed relevant for us to mobilize in this research because it indicates the capacity to “live with and to tolerate ambiguity (...), and therefore to engage in a non-defensive way with change, resisting the impulse merely to react to the pressures inherent in risk-taking” (French, 2001; 482).

Despite the existing literature on Negative Capability (Goellnicht, 1976; French, 2001; Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002; Crossman & Doshi, 2015; Saggurthi & Thakur, 2016), we deemed that this concept might need further development. In particular, while we estimated Negative Capability was present in our fieldwork (in the interviews of the managers, as well as in our observation notes), we felt somehow difficult to explain why exactly. We therefore found that this concept might need more characterizing.

We analyzed the managers we observed in our research through a grid whose goals were first, to identify Negative Capability, by characterizing it through a certain number of criteria, and second (relatedly), to shed a light on how it differs from its opposite - Positive Capability. **We constructed this grid - the capability grid, as we can call it - on the basis of both our review of the literature, and our observation of the managers.**

We **intuitively** identified **five criteria** as characteristic of Negative Capability. Out of these five criteria, **three** appeared to us rather clearly from the analysis of the **literature** devoted to them. To do so, we gathered, for each criterion, the several related notions expressed by different authors in the literature. The other **two** criteria seemed to us not so explicit – we therefore **tested** them **on the seventeen managers** whom we observed and described. We, in the end, use *two contrasted cases* of managers in order to **analyze with more details** the nuances of the capabilities.

The three criteria that we plainly identified in the literature are **doubt** (or uncertainty), **distance to emotions**, and **suspension of action**. The first criterion, doubt, or uncertainty, is described by Chia and Morgan (1996; 55) under the form of resistance to the comforts of certainty, and by Simpson and French (2006; 254) under the form of transformation of uncertain experiences into something bearable and manageable. Tolerance to uncertainty is addressed by Saggurthi

and Thakur (2016; 182) while uncertainty is considered by Grint (2007; 243) as an opportunity for learning wisdom – possibly through failure. The second criterion, distance to emotions, is described through the capacity to contain emotions, one's own and those of others, while accepting them, and is a feature of negative capacity (French, 1999; 483). Emotional preparation for life's upheavals is an illustration of negative capacity (Chia and Morgan, 1996; 58); so is tolerance for anxiety - at a level that is not excessive (Grint, 2007; 241). The third criterion, suspension of action, was identified from the following related themes or expressions (used by their authors to describe Negative Capability) in the literature: “wise passiveness” or “diligent indolence” (Goellnicht, 1976; 88), thoughtful inaction and waiting (Simpson et al, 2002; 1210), active waiting (Saggurthi & Thakur, 2016; 182). Some authors (Crossman & Doshi, 2015; 1) described what Negative Capability is not – according to them- to suggest what it may be. Action, defensive and hasty, is such an antonym of Negative Capability, generating energy dispersal (French & Simpson, 1999; 221; French et al, 2009; 197) and thereby depicts the opposite capability, i.e. Positive Capability.

The other two criteria – recurrent enough in the description of Negative Capability in the literature, yet not so explicit – are the **scarcity of speech** (as opposed to its abundance) and the **relation to decision**. We thus propose to particularly **test them on the 17 managers** observed.

This is how, **based on a theoretical construction and empirical observation**, we propose the five criteria of the capability grid (Negative Capability and Positive Capability). This grid, thus deemed rigorous enough in its construction, will then be relevant to analyze all the managers we observed, also on the other three (theoretical) criteria.

In summary, we proposed **a grid of five criteria for identifying capabilities**, based on the presence (search for, abundance, lack) of **certainty, emotions, action, speech and decision**. These five criteria **distinguish** the mobilization of **Negative Capability** (scarcity of, or even opposite of those criteria) **from** the mobilization of **Positive Capability** (abundance of these criteria). Certain elements of this chapter have been published (Rieu Plichon, 2019).

2.2. THE PREFERRED CAPABILITY FOR THE 18 MANAGERS

If the managers differ in the way they face ambiguity, it may be because they mobilize personal abilities – the capabilities.

In the following section, we thus compare the managers, describing each of them, through their interviews – formal and informal – and through their behaviors, on their preference to mobilize one of the capabilities. We use the capability grid defined above, containing three criteria from the literature, that we trying to operationalize (the manager's relation to uncertainty, emotions, and action) and two criteria that we proposed (speech and decision) and that we are going to test through the analysis of these managers.

The analysis of the managers, through this grid, will give us an overview of their “preferred” capability to manage change (would there be a tendency to use more a capability to the other?), and will show, more precisely, how these managers embed each of the defined criterion, and how they would express it in their tasks and work in the project.

A chart summarizing and gathering the managers' preferred managerial capability appears later in the document (Figure 12).

The following 15 people described are finance managers, so, to avoid redundancy, we will not precise their function after their name.

1. CELIA

“We don't know where we are heading to, and that's precisely what is interesting. I believe I would find it hard to work without uncertainty.” Celia's attitude toward uncertainty is particularly tolerant. She does not hesitate to acknowledge “I don't know [silence]. I don't know. Sometimes, I wonder.” For example when I ask her what she finds the most difficult in the change project. She also mentioned that, with an entrepreneur husband, she found the uncertainty in her job very low (“maybe it is [uncertainty], and I may as well do not realize it is, since, according to me, there are options, potentials. I so much experienced uncertainty with my husband's company – with the tax system and with the ushers – that I have the impression that uncertainty is hardy here.”). For Celia, uncertainty is relative. And personal, when she expresses that she is unsure as to what to characterize as uncertainty. And maybe unconscious

even, since she “may not realize it [is]”. When she talks, Celia overflows emotions. She wriggles and giggles, at several occasions. She also deliberately distantiates herself from the change project (“I feel I am very much outside the project, alien to it, rightly or wrongly. I almost have the feeling the project does not exist.”). She may deny the project somehow. Would that be because it brings too uncomfortable emotions? Celia seems to think it through before acting. Among other things, her job asks her to make tax declaration reliable, so being thoughtful is something Celia particularly needs to be. During our interview, **silence is often present**. Before the beginning of an answer, after the last words of a sentence, or sometimes in the middle. Celia seems to be **comfortable with silence**. When she was informed, by top management, about the dematerialization project that would externalize invoice management, and was told not to share this information with her subordinates for some time, she **managed to keep quiet**. However, based on our data, it seems hard to tell if Celia shows any preferences in relation to decision (fifth criterion).

Celia therefore seems to show a preference for using **Negative** Capability when it comes to certainty, action and **speech**, and Positive Capability when it comes to emotions.

2. ISMA

In her interview, Isma acknowledged she struggled with “not knowing before” about the change, she seems to use her many technical skills to control, or at least limit uncertainty. So on the certainty criteria, Isma would mobilize her Positive Capability.

Isma seems to be a particularly stable person, emotionwise, and she is thoughtful - she acts after considering the different options she may have. Her presence is calm. On the criteria of emotion and action, her favorite capability is then the negative.

Out of the **managers** interviewed, Isma may be the one **using silence most**. **Not only during the interview, but also most of the time I saw her interacting** with others, it was striking how much she was comfortable with silence. In the interview, she was a bit more silent than other managers (actually, using much longer silences than other managers), but this feature became more conspicuous in her day-to-day behavior. When it comes to the criterion of speech, Isma thus definitely mobilizes negative capability. On the decision criteria, it is also here difficult to assess whether Isma’s preference is toward negative or positive capability, as I did

not have the occasion to see her pressured to make a decision, and that her manager job may be with more routines than other managers.

3. ROBIN

Robin mainly demonstrates features of and Positive Capability. However, he also shows he may mobilize Negative Capability. He **speaks** clearly and **loudly** and verbalizes everything, for example, he pronounces small words or onomatopoeia in our conversation. “Bam. Done. Ticked. Cleared. All good”. In **communication**, he believes that “one has to be **transparent and direct** with people”. He also particularly values efficiency. “When the project is implemented it would mean that we would not have wasted our time and energy for nothing”. **Particularly talkative, he speaks fast and with intensity.** Intensity also characterizes the way he expresses his emotions (“change boosts and drives me”). He manages tasks and projects by mastering them fully: “the projects I happened to lead in the past, I really had to know them 200%”, minimizing thus uncertainty. He seems **very comfortable** with recurrent **decision-making, driving and piloting** projects. He thereby mobilizes **Positive** Capability, through action, parole, emotions, and his relation to uncertainty.

Yet, he is able to acknowledge discomfort in some situations and does not hesitate to share his doubts (to some extent, at least): “To me, I believe it [the change project] is not completely clear, despite the training”. His way of working with complex situations reveals some wisdom “To manage a project, you have to present with your team. Physically. Or by phone, for a short call if need. Not only sending emails. You shouldn’t take people for idiots. And you mustn’t undergo projects.” Such situation management is revealing of the mobilization of Negative Capability. In his interview, Robin also mentions how becoming a manager was (still is) a learning process, he expressed how ordeals made him change method, and that he learnt from these difficulties. “I had a military approach when I was a manager in the food department. When I changed to be a BNOM, I took a big slip in the face. My management style no longer worked. I had to learn a new way of managing. Now I suppose I can use both methods [the authoritarian and the smoother one].” By being able to mobilize Negative Capability at times (in decision, by being able to revise it after experiencing doubts, or in project management), even with a large mobilization of Positive Capability, Robin shows a combination of both opposite capabilities.

4. JOHN

“There is anxiety in my team. There is uncertainty, too. I know they feel it and I think of it every day. I am also in uncertainty, with many questions left unanswered. What would be the impact of the change actually in the long run?” John does not appear embarrassed with the idea of uncertainty, which he does not hesitate to mention and which he seems to consider as part of organizational life. John also mentions “You are reminded of things, dates, deadlines, that your profession is going to change. It keeps you awake. It says that you are not dreaming. It prevents you from denial.” John evokes change as a possible dream, or implies that dream may be a risk or a temptation, a defense mechanism for facing change. What John mentions is far away from “reality” and from certainty. On the criterion of certainty, John thus mobilize Negative Capability. John seems to express his emotions, and to pay attention to others’ emotions (“I know they are worried. I am aware of it. I think about it [the change] somehow every day”), but without feeling overwhelmed by them (his or others’)... On the criterion of emotions, Johan show some Negative Capability. “In my viewpoint, change management requires time. At least six months before the change happens, and maybe up to twelve months prior to the change. When you know you have time, it is easier to be more patient towards the change or to patient with more serenity.” John here mentions time, the time needed for change, which often lacks in change projects. His approach of change, through time and patience, may oppose to others’ approach of change, through action (change as an implementation of new processes) for example. On the criterion of action, John seems to mobilize Negative Capability. John **hardly left any silences** during his interview; **he paused at times but neither long nor often**. When he talked about his subordinates, and how he interacts with them, ongoing dialogue seems to be his thing. On the criterion of **speech**, John appears to use **Positive** Capability. John can show some opposition, either by doing things he may not have been entitled to. “Violet told me “You shall not make them [the accountants of this store] participate [to the conference call for finance managers]”. But I wanted them to know. And come on, nothing revolutionary was said during the call, either.” Later in his interview, John expresses the feeling of being left out, implying somehow that he has to decide somehow autonomously; “The Service Office, I mean both the finance-accounting department, and also the social relations department, clear themselves completely. It is “do it yourself” in the stores.” John seems to mobilize **Negative** Capability when it comes to the **decision** criterion.

Overall, John shows a blended and rather balanced profile, towards a preference for Negative Capability.

5. MIA

“I manage uncertainty by saying “we’re gonna make it. And I’m there to accompany and support you. I am confident. We have a year to adapt, we know it’s gonna get shitty and that we’re gonna fix it”. I try to reassure them. Between me and you, I have doubts, but I don’t tell them.” In a way, Mia seems to be at ease with uncertainty, yet, she deals with it precisely by avoiding it, by replacing uncertainty with hope – maybe even a kind of faith [into the future]. With me, she acknowledges some doubts, but conceals them in front of her subordinates. On the criterion of certainty, Mia seems to mobilize both capabilities, yet we find that her preference is more towards Positive Capability. At several moments in the interview, Mia uses the word “high-energy consuming”. She describes her position of store Finance Manager as being such. She also uses the metaphor of the hemorrhage evoking issues in her job. “When you want to stop the bleeding, you may stop it at some place, but the hemorrhage will find another way. There is always something you missed, to stop it completely.” When she narrates her job, Mia sounds overwhelmed (she is sometimes acting for other manger’s position, on top of hers, her workload seems huge) and appears to find the “containing” part of it particularly difficult. Emotionwise, Mia mobilizes Negative Capability first. “Part of my job is to implement action plans.” Mia makes things happen and looks action driven. When she mentions how she deals with the change, she mentions “the first times, we do the process together. We sit side by side and we do the electronic steps together”. She does not do things “in lieu of”, but she engages much in doing “with”. On the criterion of action, Mia seems much Positive Capability oriented. In her store, when she organizes a meeting, she is driven and she is used to talking much, quite loudly. During our interview, Mia **talks fast, and leaves hardly no silence between her sentences, or between different ideas**. On the criterion of speech, she clearly shows a preference for **Positive** Capability. Mia is graduated from a School of Management and she is **used to making many decisions**, quickly. “**When the store manager is away for some reason, I am the one who is to make decisions.**” When it comes to **decision**, Mia mobilizes **Positive** Capability.

Overall, based on the five criteria, Mia shows a strong preference for Positive Capability.

6. LAURA

Laura declares to deal with uncertainty through coordination, meetings, and transparency. On the criterion of certainty, Laura shows a strong preference for Positive Capability.

Emotionwise, she seems very stable. She is apparently used to a heavy workload and doesn't appear particularly overwhelmed. She seems to well manage her workload, as well as her emotions. On this criterion, Laura clearly mobilizes Negative Capability.

“As the Business Navigator and Operation Manager of the store [store finance manager], you have to be organized. In a previous job, in another company, I worked in purchasing”. Laura is used to acting by controlling, both in her current and former positions. Yet, she showed she could be patient and take the time needed for her team to go through the first phase of awareness of the change. She respected their own pace because she wanted them to take the time to understand the reasons for the change, why it makes sense. “Some stores wanted to jump to the solution, quick. They put the cart before the horse. They went too fast”. “It is good not to go too fast, otherwise it crashes then and the solutions we develop are wobbly.” When it comes to action, Laura mobilizes both Negative and Positive Capabilities, maybe with a slight preference for Positive Capability, on a daily basis. During our interview, Laura **silenced a couple of times before answering**. I also observed **her behavior in the store. She is able to listen to subordinates for a long time, without restraining herself to speak**. On the criterion of **speech**, Laura seems to mobilize **Negative** Capability first. She seems to **make many decisions a day, from macro to micro**. Our interview was interrupted by a colleague asking her to **make another decision on the budget** for the works scheduled for the store – which she quickly and effortlessly did. On this criterion, she shows very **rational decision making** she shows **Positive** Capability.

Her profile portrays a rather Negative Capability oriented person (four criteria out of five), however, on many criteria, she combined both capability and the criteria identified is only slightly preferred. In the end, it is interesting to underline that although Laura looks much Positive Capability oriented, her profile may actually be more mixed and balanced than what it appears.

7. CAITLIN

Caitlin seems to be comfortable enough with doubts. “I didn’t understand whether I should have this role or not”. She has a communication role in her team of accountants, as their manager, but should she have the same role for the bigger unit, at the call center level too? It seems unclear, and she could have asked for clarification on this matter. Yet, she didn’t. Also, unlike many of other finance managers colleagues, Caitlin does not seem to long after control. On the criterion of certainty, she prefers to mobilize Negative Capability. I do not have much information on how she deals with emotions, but Caitlin seems to make a good job containing others’ emotions (customer service is often receiving negative feelings under the form of claims and angry feedback). On this criterion, Caitlin seems to use Negative Capability. Action may be a domain where she mobilizes Positive Capability first. In her daily work, maybe even more than her colleagues finance managers, she organizes, plans, structures. **I saw her listening to her subordinates, she made them talk to find out their fears and doubts about the project.** On the criterion of **speech**, she shows **Negative** Capability. “I am also what they call a ‘super user’ for the customer service system, the aftersales part. For a year, I have been ‘touring’ the stores, with a service manager assistant. This way, I feel I am at the heart of what they do, I can see how things are going, to meet people and understand how they actually work. I also invite them as well, so they can see how we work too.” **The information** she gathers **from her store tour** may constitute an **enlightened base for future decision-making**. On the criterion of **decision**, Caitlin shows **Negative** Capability.

In the end, Caitlin shows a strong preference for mobilizing Negative Capability. Far for “controlling”, she may be the finance manager the most prone to Negative Capability.

8. YAN

To Yan, it seems clear that the change situation is unclear “We don’t know the deadlines, we don’t know the extent of the project, and it [the dematerializing the invoice process] is everywhere [in all companies].” Yan seems all right with that not-so-clear situation. I know Yan from when he was working at the Service Office, before he became a finance manager in a store. Yan is comfortable enough to work in a not so certain environment. On the criterion of certainty, Yan shows some preference for Negative Capability. He detects others’ emotions and discomfort. He senses people “febrile, as walking on eggs” or “uncomfortably sitting between two chairs”, yet without being uneasy with those emotions he notices around. Emotionwise,

Yan seems to prefer Negative Capability. Yan is action oriented. This change is a “file” to be managed, and he finds this project not particularly difficult to handle. He talks about how he managed the project in his store: “We gave the staff a bit of meaning, the steps of the project, the timetable, and the trainings”, thereby showing some Positive Capability on the criterion of action. Yan often **listens with attention, and produces a couple of silences** during our interview. He **does not talk to “fill in” the conversation, each of his words is thought through**. He seems to use **Negative** Capability preferably on the criterion of **speech**. Yan is pushed to make decisions on many projects (his store is one of the biggest and one of the oldest in France), he is **used to deciding, often, on many topics**, “to make things happen” in the store. On the criteria of **decision**, Yan is used to mobilizing **Positive** Capability.

On the five different criteria, he shows a preference for using Negative Capability.

I actually found interesting the way he expressed the evolution of his job over the time. He sees his job as moving from “controlling, doing things in lieu of someone else” to “challenging, supporting, accompanying” people, and appears more in line with the new definition and expectations of his job. His description of his job “before” may sound like an expression of Positive Capability, while his description of his job “now” sounds more like an expression of Negative Capability. The very way he considers change also implies to reunite both capabilities: “We can’t unroll change mechanically.”

9. SYLVIA

Sylvia (and her team) publishes the Profit and Loss (P&L) reports of every store, analyses them and, based on them, builds up forecasts. She sounds very organized and structured in her job. When I ask her what she thinks of the project, she sounds surprised and reformulates the question “what I think of it?” as somehow incredulous. Obviously, no one asked her before, and she may have not even asked herself, either. Those elements, although not corresponding to the five criteria we identified from the literature review, seem to reflect Positive Capability for the first, and limited Negative Capability for the second.

In her daily work, Sylvia seeks to minimize uncertainty: every task is dealt with, in a highly structured way and she does not seem to leave much room for doubt. On the criterion of certainty, Sylvia mobilizes Positive Capability.

To deal with the change and the requirement of not telling the subordinates prior to the trade unions, she preferred to “stick to work itself” almost removing her emotions from the situation. “I wasn’t too close to them. The legal instructions had to be respected.” A specificity of Negative Capability is to contain an overflow of emotions but not to contain emotions as such. During our interview, I find her a bit unsettled too. On the criterion of Emotions, she is not comfortable with dealing with Negative Capability and she seems less uncomfortable with using Positive Capability. When I ask Sylvia what she finds difficult in the project, she answers a bit automatically, without taking any moment to reflect (no silence), as if I asked her what she found difficult in the program instead: “Difficult? I see it as an advantage. It’s easier to search for a given invoice. And I can see everything in the system. Now we have a structure. Before it was all floating.” Actionwise, she mobilizes Positive Capability. Her interview is filled with silences. **She seems to listen but she may be more relaxed (full listening) with her subordinates and more tense (preoccupied partial listening) with peers or superior.** On the criterion of **speech**, I believe she still prefers to use **Negative Capability**. **Decisionwise**, she mobilizes **both capabilities**. On one hand, she **frequently makes many small decisions quickly**. On the other hand, she **is striving to understand complex situations**: “I am really trying to comprehend, to understand the implications [of a project], **the more I understand before, the more I am going to understand afterwards. And I am curious.**” Let’s say that she mobilizes more Negative Capability on the criterion of decision.

Overall, Sylvia shows a rather balanced profile, yet, with a preferred use of Positive Capability.

An example of how she combines both capabilities is embedded in the way she talks about the new software. “In the new system, you’re framed. You have less leeway. So you have to rethink it differently, to find flexibility somewhere else.” She sees the constraining elements of new tool as an opportunity to seek some new free space, some new “possibilitating” space.

10. GIANNI

Gianni tries to anticipate whatever could be. However, in his viewpoint, dealing with uncertainty does not seem a manageable task and, therefore, not a fair expectation. “I don’t think my subordinates ever manage uncertainty. They just undergo it. And I don’t believe we [finance managers] manage it much better. We just adapt.” Yet, this sentence may also show some humility. At times, he may sound cynical: “When we can’t avoid the wall, at least we can

choose [to lower] the speed.” What Gianni seems to value is “what’s been well prepared, honest, transparent”. He will later say: “I’ve been transparent. No double discourse. Staff reduction, downsizing, it came with no surprises. We never have backlashes when we tell things as they are. When we prettify things however... I told the truth, it’s simpler.” Doubts do not appear to me much of his thing. On the criterion of certainty, Gianni seems inclined to mobilize Positive Capability. Gianni gives an impression of great emotional stability. He is also able to contain others’ emotions, “Sometimes, my subordinates have been worried... because other accountants, in other stores, were. I had reassuring words, so they didn’t worry for a long time”. On the criterion of emotions, Gianni appears to be comfortable enough mobilizing Negative Capability. He evokes the metaphor of “the communication chain” to diffuse the change, with everyone mechanically playing the role expected from them. He also uses the metaphor of “war machines” to speak about his subordinates (“I am lucky enough to have war machines”). The images he is using are operational and activity driven, people have a clear role and clear role expectation in a given structure. Gianni himself look very driven. On the criterion of action, he looks at ease with using Positive Capability. During our interview, Gianni paused a couple of times, and expressed some hesitation prior to answering to the question asked. I interpreted this hesitation as an expression of reflection in process, more than as a feeling of insecurity. So he showed signs of Negative Capability. Yet, he is **very talkative**, showing an **eagerness, if not an urge, to talk. He speaks fast. He also has a “sense of the formula” when he talks, as an orator.** On the criterion of **speech**, Gianni preferably mobilizes **Positive** Capability. He sees himself as “**an optimizer**” (“We [finance managers] are optimizing the organizations and we are optimizing the costs”). He **makes many decisions in a short time**. On the criterion of **decision**, Gianni prefers to use **Positive** Capability.

Overall, Gianni’s preference is rather clearly towards Positive Capability. Yet he formulated the evolution of the job of finance manager with the following metaphors. “We used to reduce and control. Now we are developing -people and business”. “We used to stopping the bleeding. Now, we are putting oil in the wheels, instead.” “We were controller, we were taking photos. Now, we are supporters and we are making the whole movie.” Would these metaphors mirror the move from a Positive to Negative Capability viewpoint?

11. MARIA

Facing uncertainty is something Maria acknowledges and does not appear to fear so much “I find it hard to figure out what we can do and what we can’t, therefore, it is hard to make the others understand where we are heading, what will be eventually possible and what will not.” She seems to find in uncertainty some sort of hope: “I try to reassure my team [accountants], I told them we don’t know all the ins and outs of the project”. The unknown part may bring about encouraging options, maybe even good news, for her team of accountants. On the criterion of certainty, Maria mobilizes Negative Capability. This quote can be also used for the criterion of emotions. By so doing, she contains the accountants’ fear and negative emotions. She knows that “the change of habits scares people” and she has this experience of managing others emotions in a change context. On the criterion of emotions, Maria mobilizes some Negative Capability. Maria manages everything, included our interview, which took place at two different moments. She did the first part of the interview while doing a store “tour”, walking and checking around, i.e. while working. She did the second part of the interview during one of her breaks, smoking outside the store (maybe this interview was not so important to her, either). Maria is in action, maximizing time and tasks. On the criterion of action, she shows a clear preference for Positive Capability. During the interview, Maria **speaks very fast, and shows clear opinions**. On the criterion of **speech**, she uses **Positive** Capability. I also feel that Maria **wants to be perceived as decided and precise**. She is **making several decisions a day, on behalf of the store**. Maybe she behaves as she believes people expect her to. So it is not clear if it is her original preference or if she shows a decisional intensity as she believes she is expected to, yet the criterion of **decision**, she uses **Positive** Capability.

Overall, Maria seems to mobilize Positive Capability first (on four criteria out of five).

12. KYLE

Kyle seems to embody Positive Capability: out of the five criteria analyzed, he showed a preference for Negative Capability only once. “To pilot, one has to control (costs)”. Kyle seems to have a straightforward view of what managing may be about. He sounds super positive and super (over?) confident about the change, mixing discourses and sincerity in his interview: “I am a competitor. I was a competitor in football when I was young. I know that the others will fear change and be much uncomfortable with it. They’re gonna have a hard time. So change values me. It’s a game. I have to be stronger than my little friends.” He is motivated by

performance: “I want to be the best finance manager, but to enable my subordinates to evolve upwards.”

Kyle sounds very much result-oriented: “my job is to support the store in bringing back as much as possible, while investing at least as possible.” Efficiency drives him, so does the logic of Return On Investment.

Among all the managers I interviewed, Kyle is the one fearing change - and the related uncertainty - the least. Emotionwise, Kyle seems to be able contain others’ emotions (he does not look overwhelmed neither by his own emotions nor by his subordinates’. On this very criterion, Kyle appears to use Negative Capability, first. On the criterion of action, when he mentions the possible difficulties of the change project, he spontaneously thinks of its implementation. He seems action driven: “For me, when something is not concrete, it’s not interesting.” On the criterion of **speech**, “**I communicate a lot**”. “**I try to be convincing. I think I often am**”. Decisionwise, he appears to be **very comfortable with making decisions – even those not so easy to make - and to do it on a frequent basis**.

On most criteria (four out of five), Kyle seems to prefer to mobilize Positive Capability.

13. JULIANA

Juliana seems to fear what she does not know much. Is this because she feels her subordinates’ fear of the change? Maybe so (emotional contagion). Is it because she has less control over what may occur during the change? Maybe so, too. On the criterion of certainty, Juliana seems to prefer to mobilize Positive Capability. On the criterion of emotions, Juliana appears to be particularly “porous” to others’ (subordinates’) emotions, it does not look easy for her to contain them, on the criterion of emotions she uses Positive Capability. Juliana has a large experience from the retail industry. She already had managerial experience in another retail group, prior to becoming a finance manager, and built some perspective from that. “To me, learning by doing has its limitations. Some topics are too important to be learnt by doing. This project of e-invoicing is one of them.” Juliana acts less frantically today than she used to do in the past. Today, she also pauses to think before acting, or before choosing not to act. On the criterion of action, Juliana mobilizes Negative Capability. She **pauses and silences quite often** during her interview. She **takes the time she needs to reflect on the question, before answering**. On the criterion of **speech**, Juliana uses **Negative Capability**. “**Sometimes, my decision style may be**

somewhat coercive, but, you know, I am also paid for that, to make decisions. Sometimes, I also experience that **adhesion** [from her subordinates] **may happen after coercion, but it takes time, it doesn't happen overnight.**" On the criterion of **decision**, Juliana may mobilize **both capabilities**, yet she seems to use **Positive** Capability more. Overall, Juliana shows a slight preference towards Positive Capability (on three criteria out of five).

The following two finance managers, Irene and Jeremy, will be described in detail later, yet, here is a short portrait of each, from the capability angle.

14. IRENE

Irene is not a fan of uncertainty; she tries to limit it as much as she can. In case of a doubt, she tries to clear it out. She expresses her emotions quite conspicuously, and intensely. She also is an action woman: she gets things done and some of them, by herself. On the speech criterion, Irene prefers to mobilize Negative Capability. Yet, during our interview, and also, in many interactions we had, and that I saw her having with her colleagues, Irene is not the one talking first. She listens to them a lot. She listened to me, too. She takes the time to reflect upon what her interlocutor has just said. On the **speech** criterion, she prefers **Negative** Capability. She is expected to make many decisions on a regular basis, and to do it quickly. On the **decision** criterion, Irene prefers to mobilize **Positive** Capability.

Despite a preference for Negative Capability on the speech, Irene seems to show a clear preference for Positive Capability on the other four criteria.

15. JEREMY

Jeremy seems to put up with doubts uncertainty quite well, compared to his colleagues. His emotions are not easy to capture, he seems to distantiate himself from them. He is doing a good job in procrastinating (yet eventually get the things done) and does not talk much. When he does, his sentences are quite short but often insightful. He seems to listen and to pay attention to everyone he is interacting with. When he is expected to make a decision, he decides as late as he possibly can. On both the **speech** and **decision** criteria, he prefers to mobilize **Negative** Capability. On the other three criteria, he shows a similar preference.

Jeremy seems to show a clear preference for Negative Capability on the five criteria.

The following two people are somewhat different. Both of them happen to be former finance managers and both still have a managing role. The first one, Jason, is a store manager, also acting finance manager for a few months (at the time the interview took place). The second one, Liv, is the project leader of the very change observed.

16. JASON, STORE MANAGER, ALSO ACTING FINANCE MANAGER

Jason does not seem afraid of uncertainty. He trusts his experience and learnings to “find a way” to face uncertainty. After “key meetings”, he uses to “collect what irritates people”, to reflect and work on it. On the criterion of certainty, Jason prefers to mobilize Negative Capability. About emotions, Jason perceives others’ emotions and acknowledges his (“I was also dreading the change, like the accountants”), yet he is not overwhelmed by them. He also seems to create a space to manage them: “They [the accountants]’re not gonna tell you everything. You have to create these moments, through dedicated meetings, on a regular basis, once a month. To share this space with them.” On the criterion of emotions, Jason prefers to use Negative Capability. He seems to be familiar with action. “Caroline, I have a problem with the restaurant. I am in the restaurant reserve right now. Can you call me back in half an hour?” (what he said when I called him for our interview may be just a result of hazard, but I would suggest it was quite telling of Jason’s life at work). Jason uses the “to do list” metaphor, he works “by elimination, by eliminating the things I have completed”. “Eliminating” is also a radical word. In his interview, he mentions “I did thing I had to”. Action is expected from his position. However, Jason also happens to get perspective when it comes to action. “The company doesn’t learn from its pilot projects. See, here we have a month between the end of the pilot and the actual implementation. One month is not much to learn from what would have been done.” So sometimes recommends not to jump into action. On the criterion of action, Jason mobilizes both capabilities, maybe with a little inclination towards Positive Capability. Jason also likes to talk. **“I talk a lot, formally, informally. I fill in my team [members] a lot.”** In his interview, **he does not stop, of pause, or silence much.** On the criterion of **speech**, Jason prefers to mobilize **Positive** Capability. As store manager, acting finance manager at the moment of the interview (until the new finance manager arrives), Jason sees himself as **“the captain of the ship, whom embodies the cape”**. On the criterion of **decision** (and of action, too, in this example), he seems to prefer to mobilize **Positive** Capability.

Overall, Jason shows a balance in the mobilization of both capabilities, yet with a preference for using Positive Capability.

17. LIV, PROJECT MANAGER

Liv defines the project she has the responsibility to lead as “part of a program more efficient in routines and administrative tasks, more automated.” She appreciates the smooth mechanics of the new way of working and managing invoices. Uncertainty does not seem to be anything scary for her. “Uncertainty somehow isn’t a thing that stresses me much. I know that we are moving forward. That we’re gonna find certainties at some point. I can live with uncertainty as long as we are conscious [of it] and that we are reducing it. [Having a] process is something reassuring, we do not need to get all answers from scratch. My problem is: we have to attack uncertainty, at one point.” This excerpt starts in a way that could be interpreted as a propensity for Negative Capability: a low level of fear in front of uncertainty, the subsequent relative comfort (or the limited discomfort) to move into uncertainty, and the absence of need for all answers. Yet, this introduction only reflects a preparation phase of a strategy to fight uncertainty. This excerpt could else be interpreted as reflecting both capabilities. It may be the case. However, based on the two years of work with Liv (she strived to minimize uncertainty), I would say that on the criterion of certainty, she mobilizes quite clearly Positive Capability. Liz appears to manage somehow her emotions. She does not let herself overwhelmed by them, even though it was sometimes borderline (her frustration and anger could be sometimes guessed). During the two years of the project, I saw her contain others’ stress about the change. On the criterion of emotions, she mobilizes both capabilities, but is still comfortable enough in using Negative Capability. Liv is action driven. She is used to making action plans and sticks to them as much as she can. For this change, she inherited of the “global project structure” that she found “very clear” and could “apply to the French subsidiary”. She could even “use it for future projects.” She speaks of the project: “We can actually make it, even for such a big project. We can actually lead a group wherein existed such inertia. We can make things move. By not letting go.” Holding to the plan is her mantra and her strong will help her to do so. Liv values speed (which is somehow related to action) and tends to get irritated by those moving slower than her. “They [the accountants] may have many tasks to carry out, but come on, they are accustomed to do things very slowly”. On the criterion of action, she mobilizes preferably Positive Capability. Liv may listen to people, yet **listening is not her main strength**. She

prefers to talk, especially under strain. On the criterion of **speech**, she uses **Positive** Capability first. Liv is also **keen on making decisions (small or bigger) as often as she can** (for example to lower uncertainty). **She decides on the timeline of the project stepstones**, to match the time expectations of the “global project team” at the headquarters. On the criterion of **decision**, she mobilizes **Positive** Capability first.

Yet, Liv “found it fantastic that, when we’re in a group and are sometimes stuck, someone always suddenly sees things clearly and has a vision”. She can thereby acknowledge and appreciate someone else’s Negative Capability. She also happened to change some of her working methods “With indirect management, with people not reporting to us [she is managing a group of people around a project without hierarchical power on them], we are forced to get into the “whys”. Why the change. Why this, why that. We have to behave as a salesperson in our approach.” Liv sometimes mobilizes her Negative Capability first. Yet, her trend towards Positive Capability often seems stronger. She relates how she worked with the communication of the project. “We have thought each and every email [sent to the project stakeholders] through. Everyone in the project brought their personal touch to the formulation of the mails. Really, we did try to be thoughtful in our communication. And we did check afterwards, with Violet.” This sentence mixes the concern for details and control, as well as the concern for reflection and collective action, i.e. both capabilities.

Overall, Liv therefore seems to combine Positive Capability, which she favors and mobilizes spontaneously, as a sort of default mode, with Negative Capability. At times, this combination can even happen in a same sentence (see her last quote here above)!

In the end, I tried to apply the grid to myself, as a manager in the project. Trying to analyze me from outside, as if I were an outsider to myself, was not an easy thing, yet I found the experience and the results not uninteresting.

18. CAROLINE, CHANGE & COMMUNICATION MANAGER

I believe I could live the change project with a quite high level of uncertainty and doubts – and they were many. Emotionwise, I experienced two phases in the project: in the confidential phase, I was quite neutral (also I was asked be so) while in the communication and implementation phase, I was much more extravert on my emotions. The change and communication job requires, according to me, a high level of energy and of action, which I can

spontaneously relate to, yet sometimes I found myself trying to stop Liv, the project leader because I found her too much into action, and that it was harming people around and also the project. In the beginning of the project, the confidentiality almost banned me to talk much. I had to be discrete, and evasive on what I was doing. Later yet, as in charge of the project communication, I did speak a lot, to many people involved in the change. Maybe **speech** is the criterion I am the more **balanced**, on capabilities. In the project, my spontaneous reflex has been to make decisions as many and as often as possible. Yet I learned to await for more cues, sometimes, and I also realized, that, working with a project leader making even more **decisions**, everything was relative. I was not that decision-oriented any longer and tended to prefer **Negative Capability** on this criterion.

My capability balance shows a mix of capabilities, as many other managers in the project. Yet I would say that I have a preference for Negative Capability on the uncertainty and decision criteria and for Positive Capability on the emotions, action and speech criteria. Overall, I therefore may show a natural preference for Positive Capability (three criteria out of five).

Some managers thus acknowledged the presence of uncertainty in the project and their attempt to deal with it (Negative Capability) while others managers only considered operational issues to be challenging (Positive Capability). Likewise, part of the managers observed used some certain emotional distancing (Negative Capability) while others showed an overt expression (if not an over-expression) of their emotions (Positive Capability). Some chose the suspension of action (Negative Capability), for a moment, while others preferred an immersion into action (Positive Capability). Some made a great use of silence (Negative Capability) while others made a great use of speech (Positive Capability). Lastly, some managers chose the suspension of decision - for a certain time at least (Negative Capability) while others preferred decision-making (Positive Capability).

We therefore tested the two criteria (speech, and decision) we proposed, through the analysis of the 17+1 managers. On the **speech** criterion, **Negative Capability** is preferred when the person remains **silent** (shows **scarcity of talk**) and seems **comfortable** to do so, **observes** a lot and shows **empathetic listening**, while **Positive Capability** is preferred when

the person produces **explanations** and **abundant talks**, and is eager to do so. On the **decision** criterion, **Negative Capability** is preferred when the person does **not** need to **decide quickly**, and seems comfortable to do so, or even **resists the pressure** to decide quickly, awaiting for some more cues to make a “decent decision”. **Positive Capability** is preferred when the person produces **rational decision-making**, looks **decisive** and is eager to take a given direction – whatever it could be.

The other three criteria, originating from the literature, were also operationalized through the 18 managers

Three main results emerged from the application of the grid to the managers.

First, the 17+1 managers we observed happened to **differ quite significantly**, the ones from the others, when it comes to **how they handle change and** how they behave in front of **ambiguity**.

Second, most managers (12 out of the 18 managers observed and analyzed) yet **preferably mobilized their Positive Capability**, while only a third (6 out of 18 managers) preferably mobilized their Negative Capability.

Third, apart from two extreme cases (see their comparison, later), **most** managers **mobilized both capabilities**, yet in different combinations.

If we develop the second result, we can see that the managers observed may show either a strong or a lighter preference towards a given capability. For example, Robin seems to strongly use his Positive Capability (Positive Capability on 4 criteria out of 5), while Sylvia’s preference (in her case, for positive capability) seems lighter (Positive Capability on 3 criteria out of 5). They may also, out of a similar level of preference, mobilize their favorite capability on very different criteria. For example, John and Caitlin show a similar overall slight preference for Negative Capability (Negative Capability on 3 criteria; Positive Capability on 2). However, John expresses his preference through the criteria of certainty, emotions and action (or suspension of...), while Caitlin expresses her preference through the criteria of certainty, emotions and speech (or suspension of...).

However, the manager's preference for a given capability did not distinguish between the managers mobilizing their favorite capability strongly (on four criteria out of five) from those mobilizing it mainly (on three criteria out of five). Neither did this overall result distinguish between a manager strongly mobilizing a given capability on a given criterion from another manager mobilizing the same capability on the same criterion, but "only" mainly (i.e. less). It is obviously a limitation of the grid in the research (and therefore, of the research). So is the limited number of criteria (five).

The eighteen managers observed were finance managers (two of whom being analyzed in the next paragraph), either at the moment of the interview (fifteen managers), or short while ago (two managers). As mentioned earlier, 12 of the 18 managers observed (me included) preferably mobilized their Positive Capability. We **thus wondered whether an overall tendency towards a capability exists first in the job of finance manager, and second, in some of its dimensions**. More precisely, would a general tendency towards Positive Capability be a feature in this job (whether cause or consequence)? In a way, it is not much surprising that being a finance manager implies limiting/avoiding doubts and being much driven, so it would make some sense. Would there also be a tendency, a "pattern", in the different criteria (approaches to certainty, action, and decision, emotion management and use of speech)? Two criteria appear more noticeable: the criterion of emotions and the criterion of action. While the criterion of emotions appears mainly negative, i.e. preferably handled with Negative Capability (for twelve managers out of seventeen), the criterion of action appears mostly positive, i.e. preferably handled with Positive Capability (for twelve managers out of seventeen). Should we draw a relationship between the type of job (here, finance manager) and its possible influence on the tendency to mobilize a type of capability, on certain criteria? Would being a finance manager implies that you contain emotions (yours and your subordinates)? Would the job also imply that you are likely to be action driven? Maybe. More research would be needed to answer this question.

Criteria Managers	Certainty	Emotions	Action	Speech	Decision	Overall	Main Managerial Capability
Celia	-	+	-	-	N.A.	1+ ; 3-	-
Isma	+	-	-	-	N.A.	1+ ; 3-	-
Robin	+	+	+	+	-	4+ ; 1-	+
John	-	-	-	+	+	2+ ; 3-	-
Mia	+	-	+	+	+	4+ ; 1-	+
Laura	+	-	+	+	+	4+ ; 1-	+
Caitlin	-	-	+	-	-	1+ ; 4-	-
Yan	-	-	+	-	+	2+ ; 3-	-
Sylvia	+	+	+	-	-	3+ ; 2-	+
Gianni	+	-	+	+	-	3+ ; 2-	+
Maria	-	-	+	+	+	3+ ; 2-	+
Kyle	+	+	+	+	+	5+ ; 0-	+
Juliana	+	+	-	-	+	3+ ; 2-	+
Jason	-	-	+	+	+	3+ ; 2-	+
Liv	+	-	+	+	+	4+ ; 1-	+
Irene	+	+	+	-	+	4+ ; 1-	+
Jeremy	-	-	-	-	-	0+ ; 5-	-
Caroline	-	+	+	+	-	3+ ; 2-	-

+ : Positive Capability

- : Negative Capability

N.A.: Data Not Available

FIGURE 12 - THE CAPABILITIES MOBILIZED: COMPARISON OF THE 18 MANAGERS

2.3. COMPARISON OF TWO MOST CONTRASTED MANAGERS: SIMILARITIES AND CONTRASTS

Out of the 18 managers (18 of whom rather mobilized their Positive Capability and 6 of whom rather mobilized their Negative Capability), I identified two extreme cases: two highly contrasted managers, for whom the data collected were particularly abundant.

TWO MANAGERS FACING CHANGE: AMBIGUITIES AND CAPABILITIES

Two managers, Jeremy and Irene, were selected amongst the 18 managers interviewed, in order to be analyzed in detail and compared, because they looked particularly contrasted in their way to manage/cope/deal with the double uncertainty which was their own and their subordinates', in this change context. From our observation of their behaviors and from their discourses (based on formal and informal interviews), we identify, first, a few similarities. We later extricate more elements of opposition between Jeremy and Irene, who seem to represent polarities on the capabilities aspect, through the grid presented above.

We chose to analyze in detail two managers, Jeremy and Irene, for three reasons.

First, these two managers particularly contrasted on the capability they each mobilized (extreme cases studies). Second, they were managers whom we could compare on many elements, such as career, experience, position (this data was available in our data collection). Third, Negative Capability, the core concept we chose to focus on, as its name indicates, may be considered as a concept of absence (of immediate action, of emotions expressed, of quick decision making), which is not always easy to explicit. By contrasting two cases, and by illustrating the opposite concept of "presence" (of action, of emotions expressed and of decision - i.e. the concept of Positive Capability), the initial concept of Negative Capability may seem clearer.

2.3.1. COMPARISON OF THE TWO MANAGERS: THE SIMILARITIES

Irene and Jeremy appear comparable when it comes to their positions in the company as well as to their professional experiences: both are experienced finance managers and have been working for the company for a "long time" (more than 20 years). They went through several organizational changes and they show perspective from new projects. They are concerned by

the e-invoicing project at a similar level. They can feel the mandatory, imposing, relentless aspect of the project.

“With such a project, we have no choices, we are forced” Jeremy

“We had to get there” Irene

A first element of similarity is the way - perceived as satisfactory by others - both managed the project.

If we compare the results, based on our interactions with Irene’s subordinates, Jeremy’s subordinates, country management and the project leader, the project seems well managed. From the viewpoint of the subordinates and of the organization, Irene and Jeremy appear as good managers, having successfully managed the project.

Another element of similarity is that both Irene and Jeremy adapt/convert/steer for their subordinates the ambiguity they received.

2.3.2. COMPARISON OF THE TWO MANAGERS: THE CONTRASTS

Our observations show that Irene and Jeremy adopt very distinct behaviors, particularly with regards to the ambiguity related to the project (yet, as said earlier, these differences do not turn into differences in the effectiveness of the project management). Therefore, our suggestion to explain this behavioral contrast between Irene and Jeremy resides in their mobilization of capabilities of different natures: essentially positive for Irene, while essentially negative for Jeremy. What follows reports Irene and Jeremy’s behaviors, through the five criteria of identification of the capabilities.

The compared portrait of two contrasted managers, Irene and Jeremy, then shows two opposite tendencies in relation to their use of ambiguity. By increasing the ambiguity he received from his own manager, making the situation even more unclear, one manager, Jeremy, mobilizes his negative capability, i.e. the ability to remain comfortable enough in uncertainty and thereby the ability to resist the many pressures to instantly act and decide). On the contrary, Irene, the other manager, by reducing ambiguity and clarifying messages, displays a capability defined as positive.

2.3.3. IRENE AND HER POSITIVE CAPABILITY

2.3.3.1. IRENE'S PORTRAIT

Particularly engaged in her job (she actively participates to several workshops and belongs to the “train the trainer” group dedicated the new invoice management process), Irene is one of the most experienced finance managers in the department, and knows well its history. She looks discrete and smiling, and does not deny issues (“we didn’t manage anything in here” – to mention some aspects of the project. She needs clarity, transparency even, and occasionally shares her doubts and anxiety with peers (“I am stressed that the project implementation is about tomorrow”). Quite joyful, she is not easy to get destabilized by adversity, nor impressed by change projects. Her sensitivity, her human experience and her expertise in accountancy made of her a reference in the department. She is listened to, and working with her is appreciated. In case of trouble, she is asked for help to “play the fireman and extinguish fires” (so she says) – which also happened during the change project – and also to “manage what comes afterwards”, after the fires are extinguished. Irene is considered as a wise woman, and as an expert in her field. Nevertheless, she experiences the change announcement as a sort of trauma (“it was as an shock to me, as an electroshock even”). This feeling of collapse is followed by a severe stress due to “the worry coming with all that was still to be prepared. That was just huge.” Irene shows an overflow in her emotions. Maybe to deal this this stress, she dives into action: she gets very much implicated in the project implementation. She intensively helps accountants and managers, at times playing the role of a hotline. To communicate the change to her subordinates, she talks with them a lot. She herself acknowledges she would rather say more than less: “I didn’t want to fool them. I didn’t want to use words such as ‘Don’t worry’”. When asked what she found the most difficult in the project, she immediately mentions operational problems “I particularly found difficult to manage daily tasks on top of the project at the same time.” She underlines the risks related to irreversible choices in the project, as well as the lack of control: “That was stressing to well understand it all, the vision and the impacts. For example, we had to make a national decision and we did hesitate quite a lot about it. We were to choose between two different modalities of invoice validation, “fix flow” vs “variable flow”, each of them having a different implication on the invoice flow (fix flow: the approvers of the invoice are planned and set names of managers: variable flow- the first approver of the invoice chooses the following approvers). And what if we made the wrong decision? What if we chose the ‘wrong’ flow? Besides, we were told that once our decision made, and it implied the whole

country, it would be difficult to invert it. Some managers wanted to secure the invoice flow, so they were considering the fix flow. But I didn't feel that was right. Yes, I was stressed for not controlling the impacts of the project, and of the decision." Irene seems to be reassured by the decisions made, by her or by others (the project leader's ability for decision making particularly reassured her).

Vis à vis the accountant role, and change of role, Irene appears uncomfortable: is their role expected to eventually change or not so much? Is the magnitude of the change of role acceptable, organizable, and plannable for her subordinates accountants? The uncertainty around the accountant change of role is difficult to bear for Irene. She is having hard time with the role ambiguity of her subordinates, she would have preferred to reduce this ambiguity.

Off the record, she acknowledged "I was not supposed to tell them, at that time [that early], but I told them anyway, because I just couldn't keep it for myself." Seeking a clearer situation, reducing ambiguity is Irene's preference.

As a manager reducing ambiguity, Irene mobilizes her positive capability.

2.3.3.2. IRENE'S PREFERENCES

When Irene describes the change project, what she seems to be the most sensitive to is its aspect "automated to secure", its aspect eliminating uncertainty. She also fears "not to control the impacts of the project." She may be also avoiding the idea of uncertainty. When asked about the main difficulty of the project, she thinks of operational issues. She also mentions in her interview "I felt the certainty, at some point, that I would always have a place, somewhere, in this company". Certainty is relief and she expresses it. On the criterion of certainty, she mobilizes Positive Capability. She evokes the announcement of the change project with particularly strong and figurative words: "a shock, an electroshock even". On the criterion of emotions, she uses Positive Capability. She sees one of her job responsibilities as playing an "alert" role: she is alerting her hierarchy in case of major enough problem. She also insists on the feeling of relief "each time we pass a step in the project". Action and certainty (the certainty that a stage happened the way it did) particularly reassure her. She values action, her action (she somehow dives into action), the progress of the action plan of the project, but also others' action. The project leader's for example "She is strong, she has control over the situation. She is not afraid of acting." On the criterion of action, she mobilizes Positive Capability. Irene may

speak up, but she seems particularly comfortable with silence or with a scarce parole. She let her subordinates express themselves without interrupting them – even without restraining herself from interrupting, and paused and silenced at times, during our interview. On the criterion of speech, Irene prefers to use Negative Capability. She is not afraid of making decisions, and is used to making quite a few on a regular basis. On the criterion of decision, she mobilizes Positive Capability.

2.3.4. JEREMY AND HIS NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

2.3.4.1. JEREMY'S PORTRAIT

Mysterious and cautious (“Well, this project is far from being over”), Jeremy seems first a bit reluctant to the change project (“it’s quite bad that we are gonna lose our technicity. We centralize, we centralize, and machines take over”). Jeremy has difficulty to show some solidarity to the project (he first refuses to put his photo on the intranet page of the project, while all his colleagues’ finance managers are visible on the page). He manages his discomfort through silence, or through humor (irony or sardonic euphemism). He may even demonstrate some bad faith (“I didn’t register for the training. Apparently, there is a file, but I may have received too many emails”). He nonetheless tries to justify why he was not more engaged in the project in the first place (“If you get people trained six months before, it’s useless, if it’s two weeks before, it’s good. A too early training is mere info, but it is not training.”). Even though Jeremy’s attitude may seem casual, our observations of his behavior show a great stability of humor and in his actions, he does not appear less cooperative than the other managers. Despite showing elements of withdrawal (through distance and irony), his actions in the project suggest that his seeming resistance may be actually some reserve, that his seeming mistrust may be wariness, that his seeming caution may be reflection.

Jeremy experiences the change project announcement with some emotional distance. He later chooses to discretely participate to the project, as, symbolically, he does not seem comfortable with a heavy participation in the beginning. He considers he plays a humble role in the project, but was willing to take part in the collective effort (“I looked after the mail part”, “I didn’t feel much concerned, but I wanted to participate, I did not want my colleagues to have everything on their shoulders”). Jeremy remains more laconic and less precise than Irene “I hardly communicate: it’s a too sensitive topic.”

When he gets to know that the invoice process may become ‘rematerialized’ for a very short time, to be properly dematerialized in the end, he hides a smile (he does not seem particularly destabilized by temporal ambiguity). Jeremy appears to put up quite well with the stress related to the evolution of the role of his subordinates the accountants, even though it may represent for him a risk of no longer being needed as a manager – should his team become too small to require a manager (he does not seem particularly destabilized by role ambiguity).

Jeremy’s behavior then seems to show a preference for keeping/maintaining or even increasing ambiguity.

However, for Jeremy, ambiguity does not equal “keeping things silenced and unsaid”. He incidentally mentions his boss’ behavior (Vera, Finance and Accountancy Director): “We are bound to secrecy, in accountancy, maybe a bit too much. We are expected to do things [such as managing the project confidentially], but without people knowing. It became complicated.” He also said of Vera “She usually waits for the very last moment to tell things, because she fears it will worry people. But they know the news already, and because it is not said officially, they suspect it may be really serious, I mean, worse than what it is. So the opposite effect happens.

2.3.4.2. JEREMY’S PREFERENCES

Jeremy is the only manager showing such a strong preference for Negative Capability on all criteria. Here follows a description of his behavior or quotes, illustrating his mobilization of Negative Capability on each criterion (certainty, emotions, action, speech, and decision).

He does not hesitate to mention uncertainty as the biggest difficulty in the project: “The most difficult to put up with is uncertainty, a project like that brings a lot of questions and a lot of doubts”. Emotionwise, he acknowledges “I was very scary in the beginning, but we have limited the possible damage [in the project].” Yet, based on my observation of his behavior, his fear did not seem to be contagious to his subordinates. He seemed to manage it well, as well as his subordinates’ stress related to the change. His relation to action appears quite thoughtful, almost intellectualized: “It is the ‘less work’ that I find complicated: we loose in technicity and get caught by machines.” Less action on a given area opens a reflection on its implications and on what the new space may be filled with. It is any better? On the criterion of speech, Jeremy evokes, in his interview, that he feels a pressure from above on “not to communicate much about the project.” Hinting on the implications of the change to his team of subordinates (“some

may realize what it means, some may not”), he “more or less announced the change to [his] subordinates, meaning [he] did it without much doing it.” When it comes to decision, Jeremy prefers to take some time before deciding, since “when a problem occurs, you may panic and you don’t necessarily know how to react.” So pausing, in this situation, before making a decision, sounds wise.

The portrait and preferences of Irene and Jeremy show their clear and strong preferences for mobilizing Positive Capability, for the former, and Negative Capability, for the later, through the five criteria of our grid (certainty, emotions, action, speech, and decision)

2.3.5. COMPARISON OF BOTH MANAGERIAL CAPABILITIES

To sum up, for Irene, the main difficulty of the project is operational. She quite clearly expresses her emotions, to the point that she becomes, at times, almost overwhelmed by them. She dives into action, through a significant implication in the project, and values decision making, which may reassure her. She seems to be uncomfortable with silence and communicates the project updates to her team on a regular basis.

Jeremy acknowledges that uncertainty is not an easy thing to deal with, and even sees it as the main difficulty of the project. He takes distance from his emotions, and prefers to suspend his judgment and delay his decision when he is unsure. In his communication, he speaks little and even cultivates silence.

The analytical framework of the five criteria grid – certainty, emotions, action, speech and decision – was applied to Irene and Jeremy¹, both finance managers, to compare, with more details than the other 15 managers, the capability they mobilize. They appear to mobilize different, even opposed, strategies, through a preferred capability, each, in order to manage the change project the ambiguity produced by it.

Criteria	Irene	Jeremy
Relation to uncertainty	Seek for certainty. The main difficulty expressed is of operational nature.	Uncertainty is acknowledged as the main difficulty expressed.
Emotions	Overflow of emotions (the change announcement is experienced as a shaking)	Presence of emotions (the change announcement is experienced with a certain emotional distancing)
Action	Visible implication in the project implementation (through training animation)	More discrete participation to the project
Speech	Eloquence and transparency to communicate the change project	Concision and imprecision, at times silence
Decision	Hasty decision making: Reassurance from (her or others') decision making	Suspension of the decision : Preference to wait before deciding
Managers' Capabilities	Positive Capability Ambiguity lessened or suppressed.	Negative Capability Ambiguity maintained or amplified.

TABLE 3 - CRITERIA FOR COMPARING IRENE AND JEREMY'S CAPABILITIES

An element of surprise is yet to be underlined in these results. If we use the definition of Negative Capability as the ability to remain in uncertainty, it seems, at the first glance, surprising, if not paradoxical, that Jeremy names uncertainty as major issue encountered in the project. Nevertheless, after reflection, the idea of uncertainty is seldom tackled in organizations, because somehow considered as taboo. By mentioning it, Jeremy reveals a comfort sufficient to talk about this discomfort; he seems enough at ease to talk about this topic often overshadowed in organizations.

Through these five comparison criteria (emotion, action, silence, difficulty and decision), both managers contrast strongly enough when managing change. One – Jeremy – seems to express

a suspension of emotions, a suspension of action too, as well as a relative suspension of decision. He demonstrates a disposition to, or an appetite for, silence, and sees uncertainty as a major difficulty of the project. The other manager – Irene – expresses rather clearly her emotions, dives somehow into action, through a strong involvement into the project deployment, and values decision making –which seems to reassure her. She appears to feel some aversion to silence (silence averse) and regularly communicates to her subordinates about the project. Her main difficulty is of concrete and organizational order: Irene talks about the difficulty of the double workload (usually coming with a double mental load, even though it is not evoked here), and about the implications of a possible “wrong” choice during the project (e.g. in choosing initial parameters, what if the choice made was not suitable to reality?)

If we analyze the two managers, Jeremy and Irene, through the above-mentioned five comparison criteria, we can induce that, in order to manage the project, Jeremy seems to put mobilize a relatively pronounced negative capability, while Irene seems to demonstrate an opposite capability. Both managers thus seem to embody different, if not opposed, strategies, to manage change. Yet each of these strategies seem relatively adapted, first, to the team which receives it, and second, to the manager who sends it out. It is interesting to notice that none of these strategies, based on Negative Capability for the one, and on Positive Capability for the other, seems to be more effective the one from the other, and eventually prove to complement each other for the organization.

Confronted to the same tensions and ambiguities, Irene and Jeremy **both managed** the change project **in a satisfying way, yet** relying on very **different personal resources**. If Irene, by mobilizing her Positive Capability, behaved as managers in large organizations are expected to, Jeremy adopted a more surprising behavior, relying on his Negative Capability, i.e. on the (temporary) acceptance of doubts and possibly uncomfortable uncertainties. **An alternative** therefore seems to loom, for managers and for organizations that employ them, an enrichment in the modes of managing change.

Another element may be underlined from these results: Jeremy’s caution and reluctance in the first times or phases of the change may actually reflect some **resistance to the change**. Jeremy’s first relatively negative reactions, through irony or even bad faith at times, could be viewed as an element of change resistance. This reminds of the pressure usually put on middle managers to support most change initiatives, as it is the case in this change project: managers are expected to voice top managers expectations to their subordinates. Finance managers are

expected to voice the expectations of the finance and accountancy directors forward to the accountants. This case is particularly striking and sensitive as it may jeopardize the accountants' job and accountants' job identity. Experiencing resistance towards the change project, for the finance managers, thus sounds completely acceptable. It may even become the default reaction in such a case. **Jeremy illustrates this reaction the most**, amid the 17 managers observed. Mobilizing what we have defined as Negative Capability may then appear as a way to cope with, at the individual level, his emotional dissonance, as well as, at the organizational level, the resistance to change. More precisely, mobilizing one's Negative Capability may illustrate **a constructive way to unearth and voice one's opposition to (some elements of) the change**. For the organization, enabling people to use their Negative Capability may represent a progressive way not only to deal with, but even **to build on, change resistance**, especially in a context of top-down change (as in this case), and in the long run, to enable the change initiative to become more sustainable in the organization.

RESULTS CONCLUSION: AMBIGUITIES AND CAPABILITIES AS RESOURCES

The results of the present research show that ambiguities and capabilities represent resources at different levels: the individual (micro) level and the organization (meso) level. Despite its affixed adjective “negative”, this capability proves to be a particularly valuable resource for both the person mobilizing it and the organization where it unfolds.

1. AMBIGUITIES & CAPABILITIES AS RESOURCES FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

In the literature review, we saw managers as change resistant, since change may decrease their autonomy (Ryan et al., 2008). Yet, in this research, we show managers using ambiguity to cope with change, whom may turn their own first resistance to the change into a less contrary position towards change.

In order to manage the change and the ambiguities it produces, managers use to combine opposite capabilities, so-called positive and negative; yet they tend to have a preferred capability, which they mobilize.

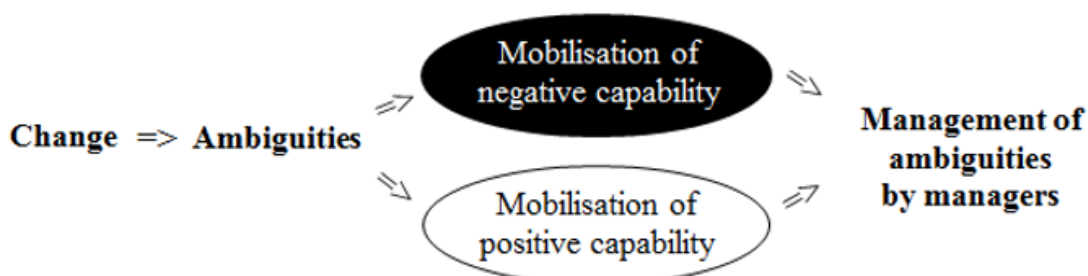


FIGURE 13 - AMBIGUITIES AND CAPABILITIES AS RESOURCES

Based on our results, **Positive Capability** may be particularly mobilized for **managing things** (i.e. organizing, anticipating, dividing, structuring and controlling). It also corresponds to scientific management (Fayol's principles of administrative management, based on planning, organizing, directing, coordinating, or Taylor's principles, based on command and control). Positive Capability could be used to manage **complicated** situations. We then suggest that Positive Capability seems particularly useful in the managing part of the middle manager's job.

Likewise, it emerged from our results that **Negative Capability** may be particularly mobilized for **leading people** (understanding situations – even more so if intricate; reflecting upon an uneasy decision to make; looking for weak signals). Negative Capability could be used to manage **complex** situations (for which Positive Capability may not suffice). We thus suggest that Negative Capability could be particularly useful in the leading part of the middle manager's job.

Positive and negative capabilities therefore appear as complementary resources for the individuals mobilizing them - in our research, managers.

Among these resources, negative capability may take the form of **humility and humanity**.

The mobilization of negative capability can be considered as a form of humility – by not knowing - in front of uncertainty, as an “in the situation humility” (Grint, 2007, p. 241). Using negative capability indeed implies that the person **accepts not to know for some time** (not even knowing until when this person would not know) but also accepts to be seen as not knowing by others. A situation that most people dread, for possibly delegitimizing them, and thereby find highly uncomfortable to take this risk.

“I don't know. I just don't” Jeremy

Mobilizing either ambiguity or negative capability can therefore be interpreted as an acknowledgement of humility. Ambiguity as humility implied by *phronesis*.(Grint, 2007), a practical or prudential, context dependent wisdom.

The use of ambiguity and the mobilization of negative capability reflect aliveness “**markers**” (Kanov et al., 2004), positioning them as forms of mankind and humanity.

These resources, ambiguity and negative capability, may also take the form of (managerial) **courage**.

Through not deciding and/or not acting, negative capability, through the use of ambiguity, illustrate a form of courage. Indeed, by preventing himself/herself from not deciding at once (or too quickly) or not acting straight away, some managers face up the pressures to swiftly decide and swiftly act.

2. AMBIGUITIES & CAPABILITIES AS RESOURCES FOR THE ORGANIZATION

Sometimes, different phases of a project are (too) automatically implemented, without paying enough attention to what exactly is relevant to implement and when. The automatic implementation often generates corrective actions, and then, sometimes, further correction of these corrective actions. This feeling of “going back and forth, one step forward, one step backwards, when it’s not two steps backwards”, as John, finance manager, said, opens the door to a loss of resources – both organizational and human – that could be severe.

“This is not the project that really bothers me actually. What bothers me more is that I do know that there are things... let’s say not optimal in this project, what bothers me is to implement something and to replace it, and maybe some people would have lost their jobs because of these not optimal things. This bothers me more...” Violet, accounting director

This excerpt shows that because of the fear to loose time or momentum, decisions are made, actions are carried out, that are sometimes invalidated (“replace”) by counter decisions and corrective actions. Lot of resources (in quantity and of different natures: financial, temporal, motivational...) are thus wasted in/by the organization.

In limiting their waste in resources (financial, temporal, motivational...), ambiguity and capability management may help organizations becoming more efficient. The acknowledgement and management of ambiguity, on one hand, and the mobilization of capabilities (both positive and negative), on the other hand, represent a resource for the organization, too, to apprehend complexity, uncertainty and maybe adversity.

3. ORGANIZATIONAL COMPLEXITY, IGNORED OR UNDERMINED

3.1. COMPLEXITY IS IGNORED

Project management often represents an occasion to reveal uncover a complexity... before the project. This already existing complexity could have been overlooked or even denied. Change management at times seems complex because it adds up to a situation already a bit complex, though previously ignored. Using ambiguity enables to manage change.

“I have the feeling that the project is an occasion of opening up a misarranged and messy cupboard. The project opens the door to a cupboard that was meant to be clean and tidy, but that was not” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

3.2. COMPLEXITY IS UNDERMINED

On the other hand, sometimes it is the complexity of the project that is undermined. This complexity is discovered and acknowledged “by doing”, by getting into the project.

“Actually we centralize AND we change the logics of the system at the same time” Violet, accounting director

As the change project unfolds, members of the change team realize that the organization implies to carry out two changes, that there are actually two changes in one.

Negative capability enables to reflect upon, comprehend and grasp the wholeness of a situation, through a sensitiveness and hyper alertness to any cues from the environment, also through a resistance to the pressure to act and decide quickly –A.S.A.P.–, and then, based on these elements, to make an insightful decision, in an often tricky, sensitive, complex and uncertain situation. Thinking through, observing, sensing, being infused or imbued by a situation are examples of activities illustrating the mobilization of negative capability.

Mobilizing negative capability enables, in situation of “not knowing”, to resist the surrounding pressure for making a(ny) decision, and to look for cues or signals, even weak, to better understand the situation until, when the cues have been gathered, having a better idea or sense on what to decide. Negative capabilities thereby offer a way to complexity management.

4. AMBIGUITY, IGNORED OR UNDERMINED, TOO

It is also interesting to note, maybe as a very last result of the current research that, over the two years of the project, that the term “**ambiguity**” **has been pronounced only once**.

“At the very end of this very day before the D day, the day of national meeting with the trade unions, after spending the whole day on designing and preparing the powerpoint of the project that she will present to the trade unions, Violet herself uses the word “ambiguity”. It is the first (and only) time I ever hear it from her (and from anyone in the company). Violet pronounces the word “ambiguity” to evoke the contradictory injunctions of senior management. “On one hand, we are asked to be transparent. On the other hand, we are forbidden to talk about the Service Center in Poland in front of the unions. There is ambiguity.” After recommending us transparency in our communication [of the project], they were suddenly requesting us not to mention the Share Service Center in Poland” Excerpt from my fieldwork diary

Ambiguity is almost nowhere to be said, in organizations. Is it the fear of the word and of its meaning and implications? Maybe, as ambiguity is often sought to be eradicated in organizations. Ambiguity is not something you mention as such, or refer to, in discourses. More veiled, it is rather something one can transform, use and manage. Yet, from Violet’s viewpoint, from a practitioner viewpoint, ambiguity does not seem to be considered as a resource at all.

Ambiguity and Negative Capability may take the form of **organizational resilience**. Being able to use ambiguity with enough ease, and being able to develop negative capabilities constitute forms of organizational resilience.

“The project opens the door to a cupboard that was meant to be clean and tidy, but that was not. The benefit is that solutions are thereby found to existing issues that, for being ignored, were kept unsolved.” Excerpt of my fieldwork diary

Ambiguity and Negative Capability may take the form of **organizational enigma**. In the very expression “ambiguity resolution”, ambiguity appears like an enigma to solve.

In moments of decision making (what to do or what to decide), the managers observed sometimes did not know what to decide, and they might even not know whether this moment of knowing would ever happen to them, when a in a middle of a tricky situation. Negative capability can thus be considered as a mystery, as an enigma.

“To me, this e-invoicing project is a bit ‘double or quits’ for the accountants” Gianni

It is still a mystery whether the project will be profitable (i.e. if they manage to make it profitable) or detrimental (i.e. experienced by the accountants as too detrimental in the short run to enable them to build on it to develop interesting options) for them.

Mobilizing Negative Capability may take the form of **experiencing mindfulness and epiphany**. By being able to await the moment when they know enough what to do or what not to, what to decide or what not to, some of the observed managers show their ability to pay extreme attention to signals and cues of their environment, and thereby reveal a particularly mindful mindset. When a manager awaits for signs to make a decision, and suddenly identify cues to make the decision, we might say that he/she experiences an epiphany.

“We can’t unfold change in a mechanically... [silence] Oh my God, you make me think. It’s been a while I didn’t think” Yan

In saying so, Yan seems to be fully present to the moment and almost wakes up from his automatic pilot mode. He may experience a moment of mindfulness.

TOWARDS A NEW DEFINITION OF AMBIGUITY AND AMBIGUITY MANAGEMENT. A PROPOSAL

Based on the results of this research, we would like to propose our definition of ambiguity and of ambiguity management, which are integrative (aggregating several elements) and contextual (change context).

The results of this research highlighted the following elements: some managers were making the most of vagueness in order to let both themselves and the situation be nurtured with some hints, clues, signals, in order to find out more about the change project and better understand its intricacies (mobilizing their negative capability preferably). Nevertheless, other managers were seeking more transparency and fewer doubts, to be able to “tame” the change and get more familiar with it (mobilizing their positive capability preferably).

Ambiguity may be considered as a bounded clarity - as little clarity as necessary and as much dimness as possible (for example, to maximize possible futures). Or vice versa – as much clarity as possible and as little dimness as necessary (for example, to enable people to project themselves in a likely future).

Managing ambiguity would integrate two aspects. The first aspect would be the vagueness/clarity aspect. The second aspect would be the comfort/discomfort aspect.

Ambiguity management may be seen as the ability to handle the discomforts (ones own, as well as others’) – especially the discomfort of not knowing - i.e. to keep them at a manageable level as well as to turn some discomforts into others.

RESULTS SYNTHESIS

Here comes a synthesis of the results of this research, presented in Part 3, emerging from the diverse data (observation, interviews, and documents) we collected during this two-year participant observation - or rather, observant participation - ethnographic work.

When the e-invoicing project occurred, it contained three types of paradox: a discursive paradox, on the official vs unofficial reasons for the change; a scale paradox on the subsidiary's vs the global financial implications of the change; and a temporal paradox, on the short vs long term goals of the change. When the change occurred and unfolded in an organization, it thus contained some paradoxes from within.

These different types of paradox produced different types of ambiguity, as ways to manage the paradoxes. The discursive paradox produced a role ambiguity for the accountants. The scale paradox produced a role ambiguity too, but for the shared service center. And the temporal paradox produced a temporal ambiguity. Table 4 represents the different types of paradoxes and the corresponding types of ambiguity they produced.

Type of paradox (contained in the change)	Object of the paradox	Type of ambiguity produced to manage the paradox
Discursive paradox	Reasons for the change (official vs unofficial)	Accountant role ambiguity
Scale paradox	Financial implications of the change (subsidiary vs global)	Shared Service Center role ambiguity
Temporal paradox	Goals of the change (short term vs long term)	Temporal ambiguity

TABLE 4 - TYPES OF PARADOX PRODUCING TYPES OF AMBIGUITY

So paradoxes intrinsic to the change produce ambiguities. Nonetheless, managers concerned with the change also produce ambiguity, and manage ambiguity.

Managers produce different types of ambiguity, such as labelling ambiguity, spatial ambiguity, temporal ambiguity, hierarchical ambiguity, role ambiguity, expectational, ambiguity, goal ambiguity and lexical ambiguity. Managers produce those types of ambiguity by enacting them.

Managers not only produce ambiguities but also manage them. They do so through three processes. They manage ambiguity, first by juggling with different types of ambiguity (and thereby move the change process forward, which they are asked for, from their hierarchy). Second, they manage ambiguity by using, more purposefully, visuals as ambiguity vehicles (and thereby communicate to some stakeholders more information than what they are expected to). Third, they manage ambiguity by converting or adapting the ambiguity they received into a ambiguity receivable to their subordinates (in their sensegiving process).

In their process of maintaining (transferring) or expanding ambiguity, managers usually mobilize their Negative Capability, i.e. their ability to remain in doubts and uncertainty without reaching for reason (Keats, 1970), through being rather comfortable with uncertainty, emotionally stable, acting after a thoughtful reflection, listening or being comfortable with silence, and able to suspend or delay decision when not convinced, despite the surrounding pressure to make one. In their process of reducing ambiguity, managers usually mobilize their Positive Capability, seeking for certainty, possibly overwhelmed by emotions (theirs or their subordinates'), action driven, talkative, and decision oriented.

Our proposal for a new definition of ambiguity would be a bounded clarity - as much as necessary to manage uncertainty with enough comfort, yet as little as necessary to keep the discomfort of not knowing to a manageable level. This proposal of definition remains situated in our context of study: an organizational top-down change.

Figure 14 shows the evolution of the project management process, before and after the introduction of ambiguity. This figure remains symbolical, as it represents the difference between an ambiguityfree project management in theory and a project management in practice, the latter incorporating ambiguity, more precisely incorporating the different dimensions of ambiguity we observed in our research. This figure illustrates two elements. First, on the project

management process, it illustrates the difference (the change?) between a two-dimension straight theoretical process and a three-dimension dynamic process in practice. Second, on project management role, it illustrates the difference (the change?) between a planned, prescribed and defined role of the manager (project manager, or any other manager involved in the project) on one hand, and a less defined real role of the manager under different pressures on the other hand. The manager namely bears the pressure from the hierarchy, expecting him/her to play an active and supporting role in any project; the pressure from the subordinates, expecting some support and shelter from their manager; the pressure from the organization, expecting some mimicry, especially when the project has already been implemented in other subsidiaries; and the pressure from within, his/her own internal tensions and ambivalence with regards to the change. The juggling may then, for the managers, express how they deal with all these pressures and still helping them to work, putting things in motion.

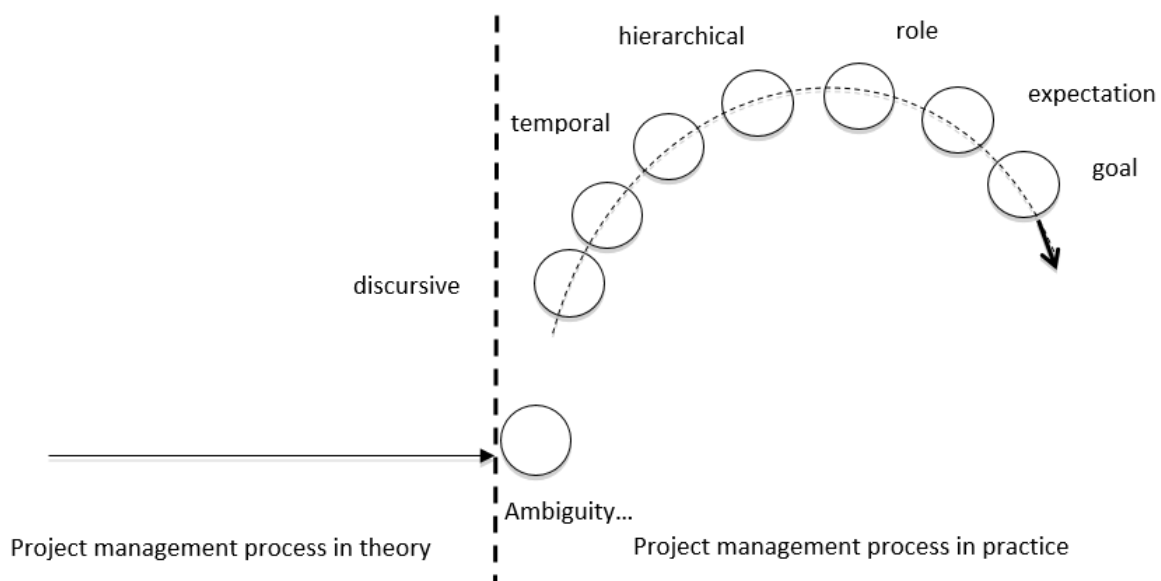


FIGURE 14 - PROJECT MANAGEMENT IN THEORY (AMBIGUITY FREE) AND IN PRACTICE (AMBIGUITY)

Figure 15 revisits Figure 14, Managers as ambiguity regulators in their sensegiving process, integrating the results on capabilities. This new figure illustrates the transformation of ambiguity, through their capabilities. To the process of expansion of ambiguity (transforming ambiguity by expanding it), corresponds the mobilization of Negative Capability (whose representative manager is Jeremy). To the process of reduction of ambiguity (transforming ambiguity by reducing it), corresponds the mobilization of Positive Capability (whose representative manager is Irene).

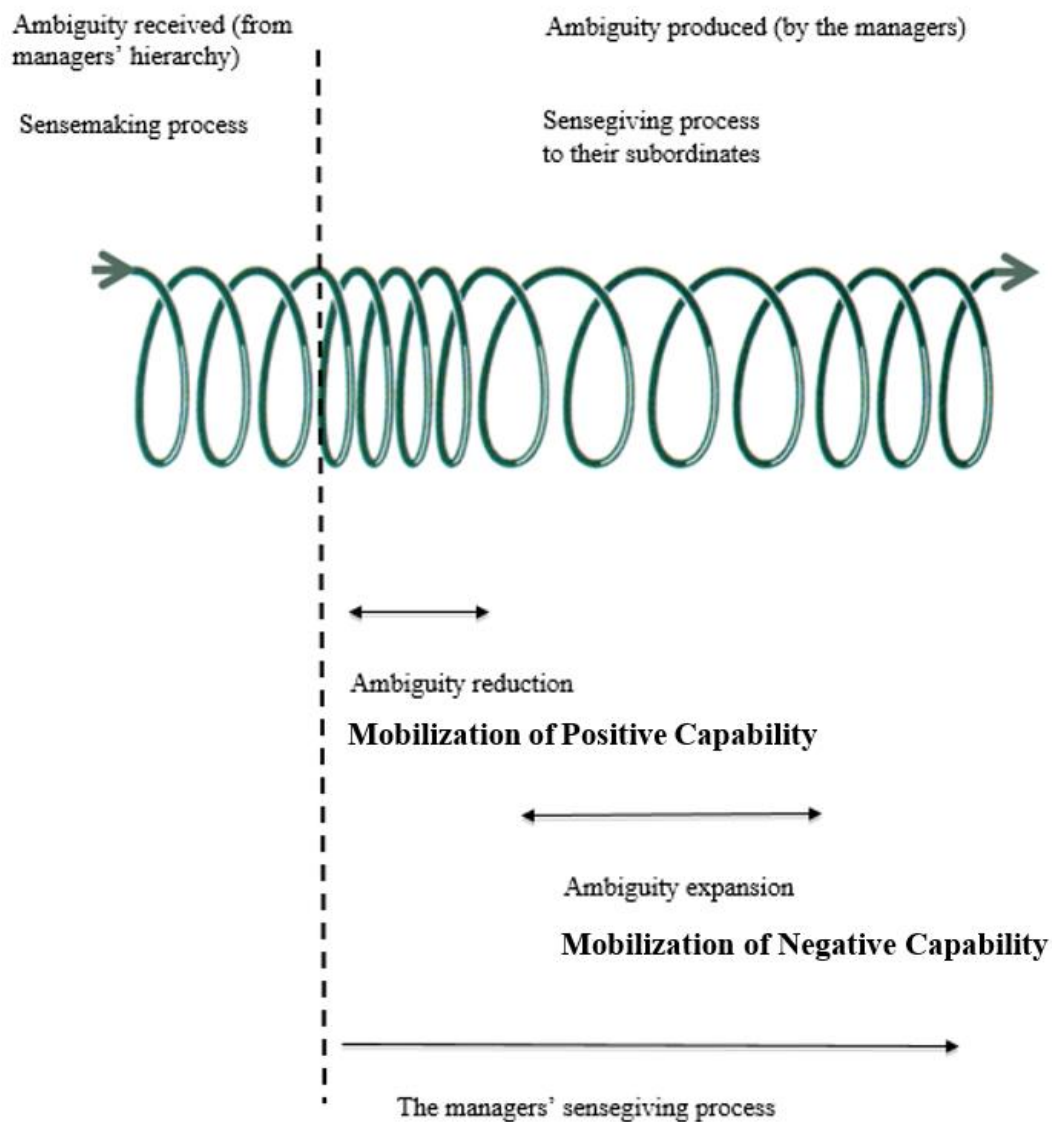


FIGURE 15 - MANAGERS TRANSFORMING AMBIGUITY THROUGH THEIR CAPABILITIES

Figure 16 integrates the main results described in this chapter.

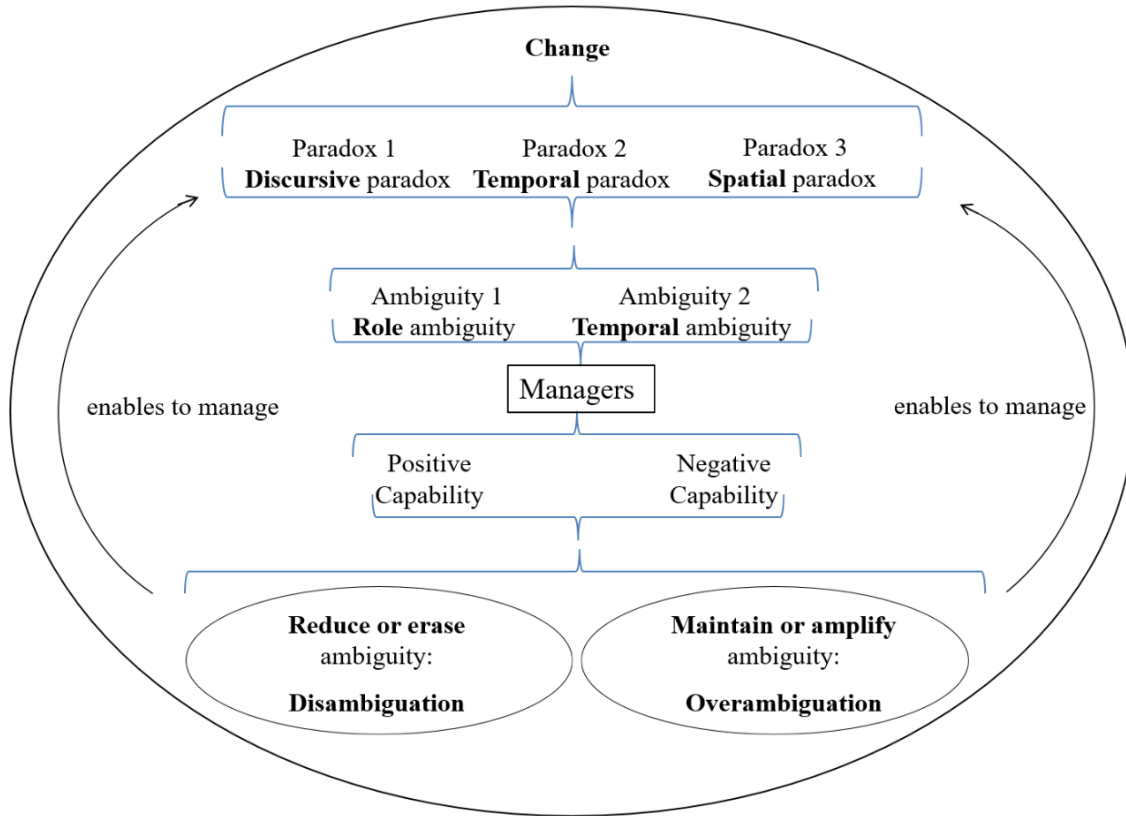


FIGURE 16 - INTEGRATED RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

The organizational change generated three paradoxes (discursive, temporal and spatial paradoxes), which themselves generated two ambiguities (role and temporal ambiguity). Aside from the role ambiguity and the temporal ambiguity produced by these three paradoxes, exist five other ambiguities, namely the hierarchical/positional ambiguity, the spatial ambiguity, the discursive ambiguity, the expectation ambiguity and the goal ambiguity. These five ambiguities might not be originated from the three above-mentioned paradoxes, but from the change, or might be amplified by the change. The observed managers used these types or dimensions of ambiguity to deal with the change, to manage the project, and to make and give sense of it to their subordinates. To do so, the managers mobilized two types of capabilities. The positive capability enables to decide and (re)act quickly, cutting a piece of work into smaller bites to make it manageable. Organizing, anticipating, structuring, clarifying and controlling are

examples of activities illustrating a positive capability. The negative capability has been described earlier. Ambiguity and negative capability to manage complexity and uncertainty, enables comprehend an often-complex situation, by embracing it. To be used at its most, negative capability needs positive capability to proceed AND to follow it, for only thanks to positive capability it can be enacted.

With positive capability comes disambiguation, the reduction of ambiguity, while with negative capability comes (over)ambiguation, the amplification of ambiguity. This mobilization of these capabilities (positive or positive-negative-positive) enables the managers observed to manage the paradoxes generated by the change.

PART 4.

RESEARCH DISCUSSION

PART 4.

RESEARCH DISCUSSION

PART 4 GOAL

Part 4 aims at discussing, both in theory and in practice, the findings of the present research, in the light of the literature reviews, and at rehabilitating uncertainty in organizations.

Part 4 discusses the virtues and limitations of negative capability as a constructive and habilitating skill for managers.

CONTENT OF PART 4

Introduction

Chapter 1. Managers in change and in ambiguity

Chapter 2. Negative capability as a habilitating skill for managers

Proposition of Anti-manual for (project) managers facing change

INTRODUCTION

The results of the present research show that in order to manage the change and its uncertainty, the managers observed produce ambiguity, manage ambiguity, and mobilize opposite capabilities (so called positive and negative), usually combining them, but also showing a preference for a given capability (either for the positive, or for the negative). This preference may depend on themselves (possible personal preference), but also on their context (position, role, hierarchy's expectations). These capabilities thus appear as resources both for the individual (here, the manager) mobilizing them, and for the organization where they are unfolded.

While Positive Capability are used for managing (i.e. anticipating, structuring, controlling...), Negative Capability, "the capacity to remain in doubts and uncertainty, without reaching for facts and reason" (Keats, 1970), are used for leading (i.e. understanding situations, reflecting, seeking weak signals, or managing complex situations...). These capabilities are considered as personal aptitudes that can be developed according to the context (company's values, type of position, type of role).

CHAPTER 1. MANAGERS IN CHANGE AND IN AMBIGUITY

CHAPTER 1 GOALS

Chapter 1 aims at discussing, in theory, the findings of the present research, in the light of the literature review, mobilized for managers in change and in ambiguity.

CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY

Chapter 1 discusses, for the managers change agents, the role of ambiguity tamers. It also discusses the notion, ambiguity, proposing the notion of bounded ambiguity, particularly adapted to a change context. It lastly describes the virtues of combining both managerial capabilities, in such a context.

In the literature review on ambiguity, we analyzed and compared seven articles that seemed particularly interesting and relevant to the present research, through different features. In the following table (Table 5), we discuss our contribution to the management literature on ambiguity – in the change process, on the same features.

Ambiguity	This research fieldwork
Nature of ambiguity	Mix : emerging ambiguity (mainly) + strategic ambiguity (some)
Type of ambiguity	Several types: temporal, spatial...
Expression of ambiguity (how is ambiguity expressed)	Unsaid + Visuals + texts
Ambiguity's outcome / role	Coping mechanism
Context for ambiguity	Organizational change: e-invoicing process
Levels of ambiguity	Individual
People concerned with ambiguity	Three: top managers middle managers subordinates
Methodology	Ethnographic study
Sector observed	Global furniture retailer

TABLE 5 - CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE PRESENT RESEARCH TO THE AMBIGUITY LITERATURE

“Individuals are likely to resist changing if they believe they stand to lose something of value as the result.” (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; 304) In the fieldwork we observed and analyzed, the “something of value” was the accountant’s job identity, if not job as such, and the possible consequences over the job of the accountants’ managers.

Based on the results of the present research, the following figures propose additions to the change phases. The first figure is a reminder of a previous one mentioned in the literature review (Figure 2, which incorporated ambiguity – first inherited, than managed), to ease the comparison with the following figure. The second figure (Figure 17) incorporates Positive and Negative Capabilities (PC in red and NC in green) to the change and ambiguity management process. From the results of the research, the capabilities would be situated on the arrows. Positive Capability seems to be necessary to mobilize from the Unfreezing phase to the Moving phase and from the Moving phase to the Freezing phase. Negative Capability seems to be necessary to mobilize from the Denial / Resistance phase to the Exploration phase and from the Exploration phase to the Commitment phase. Commenting the vertical arrows, Positive Capability also seems to be necessary from the Unfreezing phase to the Denial / Resistance phase as well as from the Freezing phase to the Commitment phase. Negative Capability seems to be more necessary to mobilize from the Moving phase to the Exploration phase.

In this paragraph, the capability highlighted (whether PC or NC) to be more necessary in order to move from one phase to another may not be the only one, but the one mostly mobilized. In most cases, a combination of both capabilities would happen though. This would therefore confirm that the ability needed around Exploration is mainly Negative Capability.

(Relative) clarity 1 – Inherited Ambiguity - Managed Ambiguity - (Relative) clarity 2

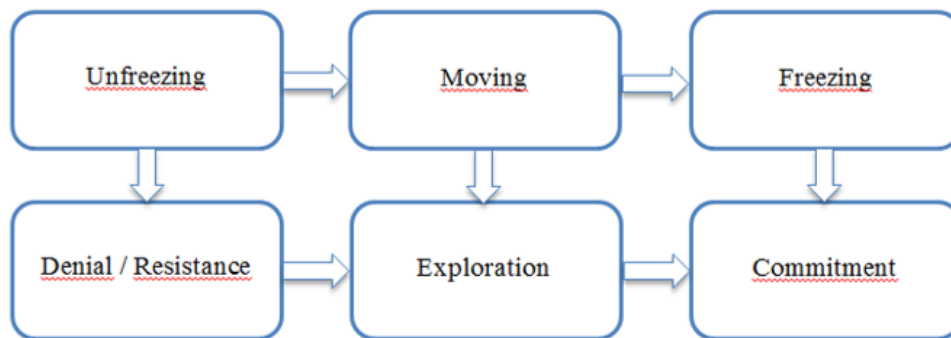
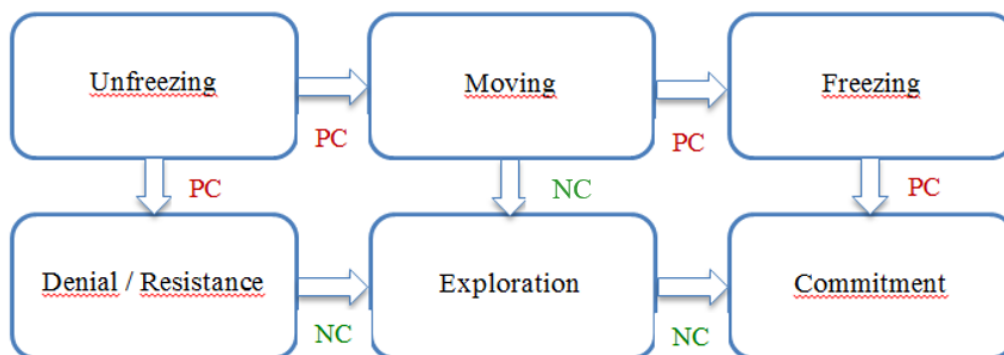


FIGURE 2 - CHANGE PROCESS (FIGURE 1) REVISITED WITH AMBIGUITY

(Relative) clarity 1 – Inherited Ambiguity - Managed Ambiguity - (Relative) clarity 2



PC: Positive Capability
NC: Negative Capability

FIGURE 17 - CHANGE PROCESS REVISITED WITH AMBIGUITY AND CAPABILITIES

1.1. MANAGERS: FROM CHANGE AGENTS TO AMBIGUITY TAMERS

Confronted to the same tensions and ambiguities, the managers observed **managed** the change project **in a satisfying way, yet** relying on very **different personal resources**. When mobilizing their Positive Capability, they behaved as managers in large organizations are expected to. Yet some adopted a more surprising behavior, by relying on their Negative Capability, i.e. on the (temporary) acceptance of doubts and possibly uncomfortable uncertainties. **An alternative** therefore seems to loom, for managers and for organizations that employ them, an enrichment in the modes of managing change.

The managers observed, playing the role of internal change agents in our research, did not seem to embody such separate and clear roles as the literature review mentions. Ottaway actually acknowledges that the change agents definitions and tasks presented in his taxonomy “change generators” as Lewin’s unfreezers, “implementors” – as Lewin’s movers, be them external and/or internal - and “adopters” – as Lewin’s refreezers “often appear too black and white and they are confusing overlaps among them” (1983; 388).

For example, we would like to confront one of Ottaway’s assumptions that appear behind his change agent taxonomy. Ottaway’s taxonomy namely distinguishes change generators from change implementors (external / internal), from change adopters. The taxonomy is also based on assumptions (7): everyone is a change agent (1); the change agents at the change start are well defined - but possibly more diffuse in the end (2); all categories of change agents are required in a change process (3); the required change agents appear in a chronological order in the change process (4); all change agents are of equal value in the change process (5); a change agent can function in only one category of the change process (6); and common values are shared by change agents in a change process (7).

We thus would like to confront assumption 6, that “a change agent can function in only one category in a change process. The most dysfunctional result of not applying this principle is that the change agent may be discredited. The greatest risk is present when the change agent moves from “generator”, to “implementor” (Ottaway 1983; 380-381). We do understand this recommendation to secure change adoption; however, it seems to us somewhat an ideal

assumption. In our research, change generators and change implementors may have overlapped. In fact I, as a change agent, may embodied both roles. Irene, as a finance manager, may have embodied two roles too, in her case, the roles of change implementor and of change adopter.

As a matter of fact, ambiguity has not much been taken into account in the change agents definitions, roles and taxonomies, and ambiguity could have helped the change agents-managers I observed to travel from the generator role to the implementor role. Two reasons might explain this. First each of these roles might have been quite unclear for them, and ambiguity allowed them to somehow maintain all (three) options open. Second, they could, in so doing, “test out their feeling about being a change agent in a later category in the process”.

Likewise, when it comes to the order of the change’s phases, we would also like to confront the idea that “the change implementors enter the change process after the work of the change generators is completed, which is, after a need for change is felt” (still in Ottaway’s taxonomy), even though he expressed that “the two may overlap in time” (1983 ; 384). As a matter of fact, change implementors might appear in the change’s scene before any need for change is felt. **Ambiguity could hence ease the overlapping of the phases** to take place for the managers experiencing it. Ambiguity allows managers who wish to postpone the “early adoption” of the change, or to help maintain the organization without resisting the change.

AMBIGUITY AS A SPACE OF FREEDOM FOR MANAGERS

With regards to the coercion of change and its implementation, using ambiguity appears for the managers observed as a non coercive way to enact it, as a space of freedom that they can craft. Ambiguity illustrates here a toleration of anxiety, since anxiety can not be eliminated from a change project. The toleration of anxiety therefore brings a toleration of ambiguity, as a coping mechanism.

MANAGERS AS ABSORBERS... OF AMBIGUITY

Managers have been described as absorbers in the literature review. We can now prolong the metaphor with the ambiguity. Their use of ambiguity showed the absorbing role of managers, whom convert and adapt – and not only transfer and forward- to their subordinates the ambiguity they receive from their superiors. Managers may absorb ambiguity to manage a change

Likewise, NC can be detected when managers can “contain” both overwhelming emotions and pressure to act or to decide.

MANAGERS AS SHAPERS

Managers’ sensemaking is said to contain a « critical shaping role » (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; 543). Through their active process of expanding or reducing ambiguity, the results of our research enhance this shaping role, all the more so critical that it is directed towards their subordinates.

NEW LOOK OF CHANGE AGENTS: AMBIGUITY TAMERS

We join Hartley et al. in their comment that the literature was more inclined to present “idealized lists of skills rather than detailed studies of the actual roles and activities of change agents in practice.” (Hartley et al., 1997; 62). Yet, unlike these authors, we did not have the occasion to experience, in our research the detailed preparatory process for the change that they describe in their research. No rounds of visit prior to the change in our case, since the project behind the change was still confidential at that time. No such preparatory and clarification interviews with the change participants, either. In our case, this happened much later, and the phases before and after the interviews they describe somehow appear to us as a luxury, given our experience of change. So getting to know the change agents to better define them seems to us a very relevant strategy, yet as it hardly happened this planned, it appears to us as an ideal model. That is why the **active and proactive role** associated to the change agent definitions somehow seems a bit **exaggerated**. Part of the literature shows almost ideal changes and almost ideal change agents while in the world of most organizations, it is **not so well designed and clear cut** at all.

Contrary to Wai-Kwong *et al.* (2001) who see managers as change resistant and following Herzig & Jimmieson (2006), we consider them as facilitators during the change. However while Herzig & Jimmieson also see them as “barriers to uncertainty management”, the results of our research tend to unveil managers as facilitators of uncertainty management, through the mobilization of their capabilities, particularly of their negative capability which enables them to remain comfortable (enough) in doubts, resist stress and pressure to act and decide, and eventually, find a wise, sometimes unexpected and maybe creative solution. Contrary to Herzig

& Jimmieson, we do not believe that fighting uncertainty eases change, we believe the opposite: that accepting – almost welcoming – uncertainty actually facilitates change. Given their both passive and active role in the change process, middle managers, from change agents, might then be considered as **ambiguity tamers**.

“The dragon is not killed, but mastered.” This quote (Simpson and French, 2001: 55) is a comment inspired from an icon painting, from the Eastern Orthodox tradition, of Saint Georges and the dragon. It revisits the common interpretation of this legend, by focusing not on the dragon being killed, but mastered instead. Like the dragon, **ambiguity** in organizations can also be considered as an element to master/manage, or even to tame, instead of to eradicate.

1.2. BOUNDED AMBIGUITY

The aforementioned results – the juggling with ambiguity families, the managerial regulation of ambiguity (expansion or reduction), the ambiguity denial, the wish/will to disambiguate – reveal a **“bounded ambiguity”**. Ambiguity seems indeed to be better beard when it is limited to some aspects of the project and if it is compensated with a kind of “counter ambiguity”, or even a hyper clarity on other aspects of the project. Bounded ambiguity would mean **manageable ambiguity**.

These results thus reveal ambiguity as an element (**sensegiving enabler**) needing to be used, but with moderation and caution. Managers should neither indulge in ambiguity nor be averse to ambiguity, but should be wary of ambiguity, cultivating it moderately. Ambiguity here appears as something not to be used too intensely. At other moments in the project, ambiguity seems better tolerated when limited to some aspects of the project and compensated with a “counter ambiguity” of some sorts, i.e. a hyper clarity or a hyper transparency, on other aspects of the project. The bounded aspect of ambiguity management can then be coming either from the evolution of a situation (from a confidential situation to a semi confidential situation, to a semi transparent situation) or from the simultaneity of rather ambiguous and rather unambiguous aspects of a same project. This way, a **“bounded ambiguity”** could be seen as a manageable option.

We might all have a level of ambiguity under which the situation remains manageable for us. Over this level, it becomes no more manageable. Ambiguity is manageable only if bounded to an acceptable level. When ambiguity is acceptable (bounded enough) for the person who experiences it, it seems to open the door to an organizational space with some trust and self-confidence enabling to mobilize one's negative capability, which favors heedful interaction (see later).

In the Weickian perspective of the confrontation to the unexpected, expectations are “a mixed blessing because they create blind spots” (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007, p. 23). People do not necessarily need to know clear answers, but they expect to be reassured on the change, on the new world the change brings. Bounded ambiguity (for example bounded expectation ambiguity) thus meets this accepted ambiguity and the manageable ambiguity evoked here above.

1.3. AMBIGUITY AND CAPABILITIES. THE VIRTUES OF COMBINING POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE CAPABILITIES

Noordegraaf (2000), in his approach of ambiguity, put forward that managerial issues were not solved by accumulating facts and reasons. He also highlighted the frequent situations of “not knowing” experienced by managers, despite a wealth of information sometimes. Interestingly, these two elements correspond to the very context for mobilizing Negative Capability.

As analyzed and presented in the results section, Positive and Negative Capabilities have each their own virtues, and can therefore be considered complementary abilities.

On one side, Positive Capability seems to be about clarifying situations and ideas, defining objectives, making decisions, organizing and structuring, designing processes and cutting them up in smaller parts. In short, they remind scientific management principles of command and control. On the other side, Negative Capability seems to allow wondering and doubting (at least, accepting doubt), containing emotional bursts, framing decisions, and exploring rather than jumping to solutions that would come from a narrow set of specific predefined options.

In the context of a change project, Positive Capability would correspond to organizing and implementing the change. Positive Capability is needed in phases if the change valuing clarity (if not transparency) and considers more short-term goals, while Negative Capability would correspond to framing and reframing the change, examining it, thinking it through, and possibly introducing a change – whether needed - within the change. Negative Capability is needed in phases of the change with uncertainty and ambiguity, and thus seems to be more appropriate in complex decision making, in VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) situations. Negative Capability may therefore consider longer-term sustainability, for the organization's sake. Negative Capability may also represent a source of efficiency in organizations in so far as it can avoid to make a quick bad decision. Its use would reduce a waste of resources, of decisions and of actions. Mobilizing negative capability – should it be at “a right time”- would then strangely appear particularly “right” and reasonable.

Receptivity to change may actually mobilize both Positive and Negative Capabilities. Receptivity may indeed be showed, almost exhibited, through Positive Capability, while it may be enacted or embodied through Negative Capability.

In this research, we analyzed a planned top-down change. Nevertheless, one may wonder whether ambiguity and ambiguity management would be similar with other **types of change**. That is why further research could be developed on bottom-up change, unplanned change, or with different combinations planned bottom up change...

In the next chapter, we focus on Negative Capability, its link with sensemaking, the possibilities to develop it in organizations, and also, its possible limits.

CHAPTER 2. NEGATIVE CAPABILITY AS A HABILITATING SKILL FOR MANAGERS

CHAPTER 2 GOALS

Chapter 2 aims at discussing the habilitating aspect of Negative Capability.

CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY

Chapter 2 further discusses sensemaking and Negative Capability, and a possible development of Negative Capability in human resource management. It also identifies the limits of Negative Capability.

The above mentioned results unfolded two - possibly imbedded - managerial roles that integrate ambiguity, the internal change agent-manager as an ambiguity juggler in managing the project forward, juggling with “ambiguity balls” as a project management process, and the internal change agent-manager as an ambiguity regulator or ambiguity converter in their sensegiving process (they expand or the reduce ambiguity, at their discretion).

Let us now discuss the ideas mentioned in the literature review in light of our results.

2.1. SENSEMAKING AND NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

How to make/give sense of / to others when we “just don’t know”, when we need to wait until we know? This seems to be a somewhat difficult situation.

At times, we can not make enough sense of the situation to be able to decide (collapse of sensemaking), in the way that we do not have a clue about what to do (neither in absolute, nor in relative, i.e. which option choose among choices available). However, for that very reason, this is a context fruitful for employing or enforcing negative capability. So it is sometimes a relative collapse of sensemaking that enables the mobilization of negative capability.

“There is more to life than decision making and rational models, and much of this “more than” precedes decision making” (Weick, 2001). Negative Capability might be part of this “more than”, thereby finding its place in Weickian’s sensemaking framework. Negative capability could unfolds in those “earlier pre-decision moments” (Weick, 2001: 4).

Using negative capability also allows to “find a little more leverage in human affairs” since also “it reaffirms what they feel and intuit firsthand as they organize”. It also reaffirms that “organizing is about fallible people who keep going” (Weick, 2001: xi)

Let us discuss here the elements of the Weickian sensemaking that have been identified as relevant to this research in the literature review.

REQUISITE VARIETY

It is the “idea that it takes variety to sense and control variety” (Weick, 2001). Using and developing one’s negative capability feeds this notion of requisite variety, in so far as the ideas

that come up in those moments of knowing might be each time different. Negative capability thus plays a role in developing a requisite variety. A possible implication of negative capability could be the supply of organizational requisite variety.

HEEDFUL INTERACTION, ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE AND POSITIVE ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES

NC implies not imposing one definition of what happens and being alert to how the situation unfolds. In change situation and collective contexts, how the situation unfolds means how people act and react. NC helps to be aware of these actions and of the resulting interactions. Therefore it can be proposed that NC favors heedful interaction / interrelating.

Contexts of vulnerability can produce positive organizing or “virtuous organizing”. In this research, we choose the Weickian approach of positive organizing as “being sensitive to mistakes that must be avoided and working to contain those that do occur” (Weick, 2009; p. 70). Weick sees wariness as possibly positive (“optimism, hope and encouragement”) and Positive Organizing as the form taken by **respectful interaction** at the **micro** level, **heedful interrelating** at the **intergroup** level, and **mindful organizing** at the **organizational** level (Weick, 2009; p. 74).

This research widens this counterintuitive and somewhat paradoxical view of positive organizing as “accepting the existence of error and fallibility” (Weick, 2009, p.70), from dramatic events to mundane organizational events such as organizational change.

WISDOM

“The essence of wisdom... lies not in what is known (...). To be wise is not to know particular facts but to know without excessive confidence or excessive cautiousness. To both accumulate knowledge while remaining suspicious of it, and recognizing that much remains unknown, is to be wise.” (Meacham, 1990: pp. 185, 187). Wisdom seems thus to be “animated by a dialectic” (p. 210) between knowing and not knowing.

It is interesting to notice that this Weickian definition of wisdom could as well be the definition of negative capability, the expression of “negative organizing”.

IMPROVISATION

The type of ambiguity we observed in this research is not an ambiguity by design, but more an improvised ambiguity. The “knowledge” or idea or solution that arises thanks to a sensemaking process not action driven, in a complex and uncertain situation under strain, can also be considered an improvisation. These elements of sensemaking were observed in extreme case studies depicted by Karl Weick, such as in a fire, a on a nuclear aircraft carrier, through medical errors... Nevertheless, they are to be found in ordinary organizational situations like the change we observed.

We saw in the Literature Review that the four practices presented as necessary for change actually corresponded to the conditions for a “successful” sensemaking, namely that people “(1) stay in motion, (2) have a direction, (3) look closely and update often, and (4) converse candidly”. It is interesting to notice that the two last practices also are part of the use of negative capability. It is indeed when one is at the same time very much focus on the issue and still doing things as usual that he/she can make use of his/her negative capability.

Feldman (1989) claims that sensemaking “often does not result in action. It may result in an understanding that action should not be taken or that a better understanding of the event or situation is needed. It may simply result in members of the organization having more and different information about the ambiguous issue” (p. 20).

This “**non actional**” sensemaking, not action driven, not followed up by action, is the kind of sensemaking this research illustrates, through the use of ambiguity and of negative capability.

The results of the present research show that far from being unimportant, middle managers embody a crucial role in organization, in particular when they are able to mobilize their negative capability, which this position “in the middle” may, more than another, use to move a change forward and to make sense of it, both for themselves and for their subordinates. Negative capability may thus illustrate the legitimation of doubt in leadership.

NEGATIVE CAPABILITY AND MINDFULNESS

The here above features, humility loss of rationality, improvisation, are critical ingredients of mindfulness. One can tell that the leader or manager capable of negative capability is mindful and demonstrates mindfulness. “Effective leadership involves seeing day by day, even moment by moment, what is actually going on, in contrast with what was planned or hoped for.” Simpson, French & Harvey (2002; 1220). The quote used to illustrate improvisation can also be interpreted to exemplify mindfulness.

Weick elaborated on positive organizing and virtuous processes, based on tragic events. He sees the avoidance of accidents as a virtuous or generous phenomenon. He underlines that “when people organize, they enact vulnerability as well as social support (Weick, 1990). He also points out “how complex and fragile and entropic and unknowable the organizing of people and technology can be (...). If organizing is vulnerable, then positivity tends to be expressed in acts that **contain** and repair that vulnerability as well as in acts that transcend that vulnerability.” (Weick, 2009, p. 67). As we saw, Negative Capability is about containment and could be an illustration of the Weickian sense of positivity or positive organizing.

Beside, Negative Capability is often solicited when managing the unexpected. Negative capability craves time, which converges with the fact that in Mann Gulch wildland fire, “a life-saving solution was enacted at the last possible moment” (ibid, p. 68). Since mobilizing NC seems to be as a way to manage the unpredictable, since NC may foster watchfulness and sensitiveness in front of the unexpected, and unanticipated, one may think of High Reliability Organizations (HRO) as an interesting context for mobilizing NC. Yet “in contrast to HROs, most companies today are hugely unprepared for the unpredictable. Managers are under the illusion that they know more or less what’s going to happen next or how people are likely to act? That’s both arrogant and dangerous” (Coutu, 2003; 86).

2.2. DEVELOPING NEGATIVE CAPABILITY. TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT?

REVISITING THE CLASSICS

If we analyze our research on managers, in the light of Rosemary Stewart (1967, 1988), we could say that an evolution between that time and today could be that introspection somehow replaced inspection. Nevertheless, emailing and sometimes passive meeting attending took over discussing. These evolutions may have an influence on the mobilization of capabilities – both negative and positive. A higher ability for introspection is expected to facilitate the emergence of negative capability while less active discussing (face to face and one to one) and more passive presence (in meetings), on the contrary, are meant to lessen it.

Mintzberg's study, based on a scientific approach of management, has decision-making and an administration-efficiency orientation. The sub-role "leader" is described in relatively administrative terms. Among those administrative terms however, maintaining "a certain degree of **alertness** in the organization" (p. 62) seems to us very contemporaneous as it could be interpreted as a sensibility to his/her negative capability.

Managers, spending much more time on exchanging information (60% of their time, particularly giving information (four times more), and on meeting with subordinates, according to Tengblad's study (2001), are for these reasons too, more likely to use ambiguity.

The concept of Negative Capability seems to be highly compatible with the one of situated change (Orlikowski, 1996), insofar as both appear particularly adaptive and improvisational. Negative Capability particularly allows flexibility and self-organizing.

Negative Capability may represent a means to organize doubt. "Leaders who legitimize doubt need also to legitimize attempts. That means modulating feelings of fear about what might happen" (Weick, 2012; p. 262). The "emotion" criteria, that we chose in the design of our grid to identify negative and/or positive capability, draws from this idea according to which overwhelming emotions might drive both doubt and attempts away.

Negative Capability is actually to be found in the expression of doubt, of one's acknowledgement that he or she just does not know, and that being a leader or a manager does not make it any different. The capability for lightness also very much lies in negative capability,

for mobilizing negative capability requires to drop knowledge, and to be sensitive to signals – particularly weak ones - to interpret. Positive Capability can be found in the use and the process of logic, knowledge management and acquisitions. Negative and positive capabilities can also be identified as follows. Compared to the latter, the former is “more about wisdom than knowledge, and more about dropping than acquiring” (Weick, 2012; p. 268).

MANAGING OTHERLY

One of the roles of the manager/leader is to keep people “on task” (Dartington, 1998 *in* Simpson and French, 2001; 280). To do so implies a couple of abilities. Managers need the ability to **contain pressures to enable** “members of the organization **retain the capacity to think**, even under pressure”. This contain-retain double process, one facilitating the other, originating from a manager and aiming at his/her subordinates or members of the organization, shows interesting opposite tensions.

NC ON THE BASIS OF PC

“Action, tempered by reflection, is the critical component in recovering from cosmology episodes” (by Weick in Coutu, 2003 ; 88). Likewise, PC needs to be tempered by NC. “Plans are not unimportant in organizations. They are important, but not for the reasons that people think. Plans are signals, games, excuses for interactions ; they are not good for micromanaging the unexpected” (by Weick in Coutu, 2003; 90) Contrary to plans, NC, going with “of the moment” skills, including improvisation, looks important to grow in organization, to deal with the unexpected.

Managers have been observed through the angle of moral and managerial courage (Furnham, 2002). Our results tend to reinforce this view, if the manager possesses the resource of negative capability and can use it to resist the environmental pressure. It is interesting to observe that both managers analyzed in detail were professionals of experience in their managing position, in their job as well as in the company. They had therefore already developed positive capabilities (deciding, acting... rather swiftly) and were both enough at ease with using them.

Negative capability can be seen as an ability that one could develop but only after developing one's positive capability. In other words, one has to master positive capability first and to have

enough experience of using it, in order to have perspective – and courage - to be able to distantiate from it – and sometimes to distantiate from others, too.

Throughout a change process, there would be an interplay/a cycle of development of positive and negative capabilities, positioning positive capability as a basis for negative capability development, but also as a necessity for action, after the use of negative capability to “think it through” or to think “under fire” (French, 2001; 481). The first phase of the change process would then be one of Positive Capability, the second phase would be one of Negative Capability, and the third phase, one of Positive Capability again - see Figure 18.

This proposal is also consistent with the previous one – see Figure 17 (the change process revisited with ambiguity and capabilities).

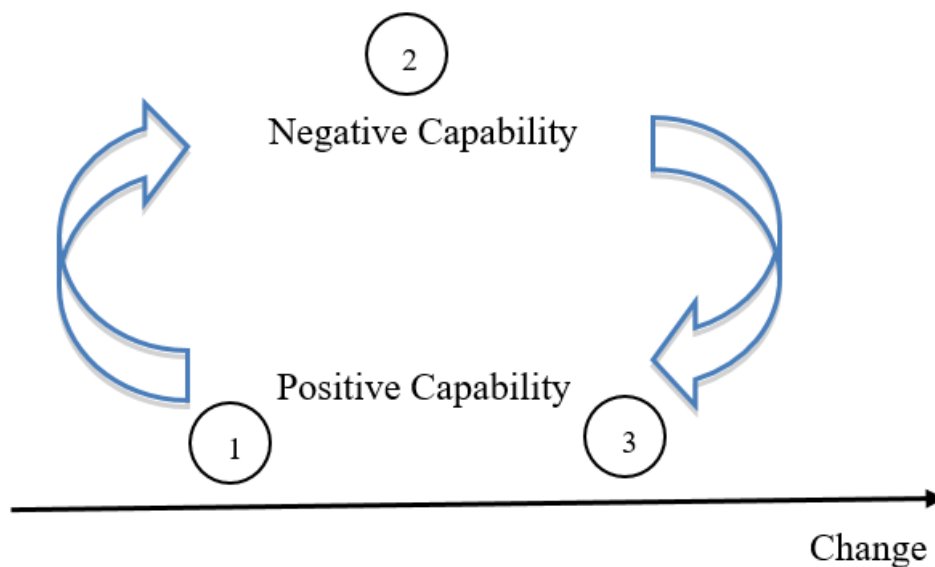


FIGURE 18 - POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE CAPABILITIES INTERPLAY

NEGATIVE CAPABILITY FOR MANAGING CHANGE

What if a change agent is not keen to playing any role in a change process? What if a change agent, without being resistant to the change, is not so much convinced on its supposed benefits? This is what seems to happen to the several managers I observed. Negative capabilities look like a way to **“contain”** the ambivalence of the managers as internal change agents dealing themselves with... ambiguity.

The change and change agent literatures show “positive capability” as it is usually the case when organizations and people in them are studied (through categories, taxonomies, definitions...), but with ambiguity management in a change project, “negative capability”, also seem to have a pivotal place, complementing the positive ones.

In what context is mobilizing one’s NC necessary? A typical case requiring the mobilization of one’ NC is the case of what Karl Weick calls a cosmology episode. A cosmology or cosmological episode is the opposite of a déjà vu experience and happens when everything seems unfamiliar strange, with the impossibility of making sense of what is happening (by Weick Coutu, 2003 ; 88). NC thus appears as a way for surviving and avoiding cosmological episodes. Mobilizing Negative Capability may appear as a way to deal with the progressive acceptance of the change and our feeling of ambivalence about the change.

In this part, we would like to discuss the NC as a further resource, relevant to add to one’s social resources (at the same level as credibility, reputation, trust, competences...), even as part of one’s social capital. NC would thus develop through an alternative Human Resource Management. Why not even consider re-enchanting work through the mobilization and development of NC, as a result of emancipation from the organizational pressures to act and decide?

NEGATIVE CAPABILITY AS A FORM OF SLOW MANAGEMENT

Negative capability implies accepting a **deceleration in deciding and acting**, and so, some deceleration in (at least the decision making and action enacting of) **managing**. Therefore negative capability opens the door to slow management. NC can be considered as the new **slack**, NC as a helper/ way/path to manage events that can not be foreseen.

DEVELOPING ONE’S OWN NEGATIVE CAPABILITY... TO DEVELOP OTHERS’ NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

In the same way as organizations play their role in enabling or not their leaders/managers to use of negative capability for theirs leaders/managers, managers might play their role too in enabling their subordinates to use this capacity. A managerial role might thus be to develop negative capability at another level, subordinates or even colleagues. This process of facilitating or developing negative capability for others can be part of the managerial sensegiving process.

Managing otherly is illustrated here by two processes between managers and their subordinates. One process is the managerial containment to allow their subordinates retention of their capacity to think. The other process, more active, is the managerial development of their subordinates negative capability.

How to develop a negative capability? This individual capacity, i.e. micro capacity, can be developed by an organizational context comprising certain favorable elements. Like for the psychoanalyst according to Bion, it is “to develop a level of awareness and attention that can make possible moments of insight” (Simpson and French, 2001; 59). So training awareness and attention could help developing negative capability. This implies a context with at least the two following elements. The first element is lesser level of organizational pressure on swift decision making. The second element is the organizational acceptance of, at times, not knowing, the acceptance that competence does not always equate knowledge.

NEGATIVE CAPABILITY AS A POSSIBLE MEANS TO DECREASE CHANGE-RELATED STRESS

The results of the present research unveiled an “alternative” capability, so-called negative – even though constructive. The mobilization of this negative capability represents an alternative Human Resource Management, within a private – and rather classical organization, because it enables to face the stress of uncertainty at work (Lazarus, Folkman, 1984) by illustrating a key managerial competence to “contain” the emotions produced by an organizational change. This ability also stands in the line of Seligman et al.’s work (2005), by helping out managers to face the difficulties of any change and by revisiting ambiguity in organizations, and considering it as an element to manage (no longer to eradicate), in order to make the same organizations more sustainable. Some studies show that, with foresight, the stress related to change can be improved (Wahlsted & Edling, 1997). We believe that, should decision makers mobilize their Negative Capability in leading a change, stress in the organization could decrease.

Is NC given to everyone? Some believe that it is not the case (Handy, 1989: 56). Others believe that is the case, yet recognizing that some people do own a particular disposition towards it (Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002; 1220),

CAN ORGANIZATIONS LEARN TO BE MORE MINDFUL?

An implication of NC would be this question. Can organization learn to be more mindful? Can they learn to unleash and develop NC? By refusing to simplify reality, HROs do. This vision lies at the opposite of the “Keep it simple and stupid” moto of many executives who underestimate the complexity of their own organizations and environments (Coutu, 2003; 86).

Which context would favor NC? For French and for Pitch et al., trust would. “A relationship characterized by trust relieves the management team of having to anticipate every little event and activity” (Pitch et al., 2002; 1019), Identifying contextual elements favoring NC would be an interesting question for further research.

TENSIONS/PARADOXES INHERENT TO NEGATIVE CAPABILITY, IN CONTEXT OF AMBIGUITY AND UNCERTAINTY

Mobilizing ones negative capability implies two simultaneous internal processes. One process is making oneself not so vulnerable to the pressure of one’s environment (to decide and to act), while the other process is developing one’s sensitiveness to detect weak signals (that will be decision helpers or triggers) from the environment too.

This situation therefore entails a paradox, a processual and internal paradox, fostered by a context of ambiguity and of uncertainty. So the concept of negative capability, an oxymoron (a paradox) *per se*, harbors a structural tension (a paradox) related to the environment against pressures of which one fights and to which ones is highly sensible.

Another paradox lies in the following situation: “Access to truth-in-the-moment may be uncertain, unpredictable and difficult to interpret. However, the disposition on which such insight depends is not random but disciplined” (Simpson and French, 2001; 71).

NEGATIVE CAPABILITY AND HUMILITY

“One of the tensions between positive capability and negative capability is that the practice of the latter requires a certain degree of humility and indicates a capacity for empathy.” (Simpson, French & Harvey, 2002; 1218-9). It also illustrates the ability “to tolerate a loss of self.” (Hutter, 1982: 305). Keats himself also evoked the loss of self. “By Negative Capability Keats meant the lack of personal identity, of preconceived certainty.” (Bridgewater, 1999: xv). Humility and the loss of self may thus be a possible pre-requisite for developing NC.

However, although the capacity for empathy has been often acknowledged as a leader’s asset, although humility has been at times acknowledged as a leader’s asset, notions such as loss (of self), and lacks (of personal identity, of preconceived certainty) not only are seldom valued for a leader or a manager, but appear rather depreciated instead. Leading usually is not a process defined in hollow and with negative terms.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AS A CONTEXT FAVORING OR DISCOURAGING NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

Organizations differ in their receptivity to change. Receptivity to change is therefore a possible moderating element for mobilizing negative capability. Accepting the idea of a “grace period” between organizational changes and promoting it may be beneficial (Huff et al., 1992; Sastry, 1997). We build on this recommendation, particularly in the goal of developing negative capability.

ORGANIZATIONAL INERTIA AS A NECESSITY BETWEEN TWO ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES

Accepting or even planning organizational inertia (“resistance to environmental reassessment and to change in social and structural relationships” Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; 299) may also favor and grow negative capability. The period between two organizational changes for example, may be an occasion to favor organizational inertia, which would help organizations and people inside them to develop Negative Capability.

2.3. THE LIMITS OF NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

Despite the theoretical and practical input/contribution mobilization of capacities such as negative capability, one can wonder about the limits of such theory. Two categories of limits for negative capability in a change context can be distinguished, that corresponds to two levels: **organizational and individual**.

The first category of limits is situated at the **organizational level**. In organizational life, the **environmental pressure** (in intensity or in frequency) on prompt decision making and on swift acting is high, by default. The hope for a lesser pressure **on prompt decisions** can then sound like a utopia. In organizational life, the pressure **on immediate knowledge**, for instance the knowledge expected from a manager, is also high. Managers are knowledgeable or are not. So the organizational acceptance of an even temporarily unknowledgeable manager can sound like a utopia, too. These two possible utopian situations represent two organizational limits for negative capability to emerge in a change context.

In these two organizational pressures, we can see that **time** plays a key role, in so far as the ideal manager is expected to make decision as well as to know, **in no time**. He/she is meant to be above time, she/he should transcend the constraint of time, acting as if in a **timefree** context, i.e. a utopian context.

The organization will be ok to wait a bit, by lowering – very momentarily - its pressure, only if the manager in question would have showed evidence of prompt enough decisions earlier. It means that the manager will have shown **prior evidence of Positive Capability to be legitimate** to mobilize her/his **Negative Capability** and that the organization will be able to show its **tolerance for** his/her use of **NC**. So, at the organizational level, **NC** are accepted **only** if built **on PC**. However, there is more. It seems that, for collective action to happen in organization, **PC** is required to mobilize after **NC**. Therefore, **mobilizing PC after NC after PC** seems the way to make the most of both capabilities and implies a large span of complementary competencies.

Another organizational limit is their **tolerance to errors**. Making mistake is not a right for most managers, and many organizations are highly reluctant towards mistake training (the more mistakes you make, the less you will supposedly...). So entitling their managers to make mistake to learn from and to benefit from, both at the individual and organizational levels, is often a tricky question to which most organizations show an ambiguous position.

A subsequent organizational limit is their position to knowledge and to its limits. Indeed some groups or organizations might want to “protect them(selves) against the recognition of the limits to their knowledge” (Simpson and French, 2001; 69). Hence the building of defensive habits from their members.

Another limit of NC, maybe at both organizational and individual levels, lies in the fact that it can be considered **useless for a performance management**: NC can simply not be used to manage performance socially.

The second category of limits is situated at the **individual level**: individual **tolerance to ambiguity** (see Literature review) and individual **tolerance to stress and pressure**

As a matter of fact, to be considered as a manager not able to make a decision – or not able to make it in due time – does sound detrimental to one’s career and legitimacy. To be considered as a manager not able to know enough, or worse, a manager who just does not know, might sound even more detrimental... Thus, the individual limit is the **stress tolerance** and the sensitiveness to pressure of the manager expected to quickly act or decide, and expected to know what to, and his/her **ability to contain pressures**. The risk of not possessing much of this ability is, for the manager, to be tempted to rush into **thoughtless activity** (i.e. dispersal).

This individual limit may lead to the following one: “some people may be more naturally disposed to living on the edge than others, rather in the way the capacity for tolerating frustration varies from one person to another” (Simpson and French, 2001; 68). The subsequent limit is then the **inequality/disparity in this disposition**. Some people - even trained - might still have trouble using it and some people might even be unable to use it, too uncomfortable in the position of the edge. “Bion and Winnicott both learned to wait and wait (...) And to wait can however the hardest thing to do” (ibid; 70). Patience is indeed neither the first quality of organizations nor the one of people working in them...

Besides, “reaching the edge of not-knowing and recognizing it as such is one thing; staying there is quite another” (ibid). So beyond this disparity in possessing this disposition, there seems to lie **another disparity in “digging” into it.**

Another limit, also individual, is the manager’s **sensitiveness to** environmental **cues** (often embedded in weak signals) thanks to which he/she will be able to make the rightful decision. This limit can be actually seen as a paradox to the previous one, which was about a defense mechanism against pressure, to put it away, while this limit is about a hypersensitivity mechanism / an absorption mechanism, to merge with the here and now.

Even with a non exclusive but inclusive approach of negative capability, i.e. considering this capacity as at least minimally given to everyone and to be individually developed, a manager would still need a suitable track decisional record to be enough legitimate/credible to use his/her negative capability. In other words, this manager would have to have already built trust and credit through his/her use of positive capability, and to be **confident in his/her** competence of **positive capability**, in order **to be comfortable** enough to use his/her negative **capability**. This limit actually represents the individual side of the above mentioned organizational limit, personal confidence or reluctance to use one’s negative capability echoing organizational tolerance.

Conversely, in case of a series of bad (or of one big bad) decisions made in the past, this manager will be both more sensitive to the organizational pressure and deemed as illegitimate to use his/her negative capability, despite his/her original capacity for negative capability which will remained undeveloped.

Beyond feeling trusted enough in one’s positive capabilities to be allowed to use one’s negative capability, a manager still needs to feel confident in his/her own negative capability. This confidence is to be strong enough to enable him/her to struggle when needed, to confront the not-yet-known.

“What helped us most was that we managed to continue working explicitly with the awareness that we did not know what to do – even to the point that not only did we not know what to do, we had even lost our sense of how do deal with not knowing.” Peter Simpson, consultant (*in* Simpson and French 2001; 67)

A further limit is therefore the **manager's confidence/faith in his/her own negative capability**, despite adversity.

Further research could be developed on **another population of observation**. In the present research, we focused on finance middle managers. It may be interesting to investigate other types of managers (sales, logistics...) and other populations: co-workers, top managers... Would Negative Capability be as widespread? Would those populations combine as much both capabilities? Does the type of job play any role in the preference for a given capability?

A last individual limit, echoing an organizational limit hereabove mentioned, is the **resistance to one's own pressure on one's positive capability**. Acknowledging, using and developing one's negative capability implies striving and succeeding in not rushing into action, out of a long habit. This may be influenced by one's personality but also one job and one position (see previous limitation).

Further research could be developed on another **type of organization (size and culture)**. The present research observed a multinational company with so-called participative management. What would happen in another multinational with more directive management? In an SME with a directive management? In a public organization? Would ambiguity be used in a similar way? Would negative capability prevail or, on the opposite, be particularly scarce?

As we can see, many limits, organizational and individual, even personal, to the emergence and use of negative capability can be identified. They are the temporal pressures on decision making and on knowledge (needed to make the suitable decision) – managers are to immediately decide and to know what to, the basis of acknowledged positive capability (and the prior necessary confidence in one's own positive capability), the organizational tolerance to errors, the stress/pressure tolerance/containment, the organizational disparity in this individual disposition, the sensitiveness to environmental cues and the resistance to one's temptation/pressure to use one's positive capability first.

LIMITATIONS OF THE CAPABILITY GRID

On a more formal angle (as the forms the capabilities took were apprehended through this grid), further research could also be developed on the capability grid. The grid we designed in order to define which capability (negative or positive) the managers we observed preferred to mobilize was based on five criteria: certainty, emotions, action, speech and decision. We identified these criteria by reviewing the literature on Negative (and occasionally Positive) Capability. Nevertheless **other criteria** may be relevant to add to those five, either by a further investigation of the literature (literature base) or through another method (from the observation of the managers first, i.e. empirics based). An example of new criteria could be listening (in the portrait we depicted of the 17 managers, we often opposed talking to **listening** – as during an interview it is hard to do both simultaneously, as respondent. Yet, a person may possess listening skills and be quite voluble too). A preference for being listened to could feature Positive Capability while a preference for listening could feature Negative Capability. Other examples of criteria could be pace (speed for PC, slowness for NC), or reflexivity/introspection (particularly high for NC)...

CONCLUSION

The present research asked the following questions:

How do managers use ambiguity in order to cope with a change context/process?

How (by which process) is ambiguity conveyed/transformed/processed from top managers to middle managers to subordinates?

The methodological approach identified and used to try and answer this question is an organizational ethnography, combined with an auto-ethnography.

During almost two years, in the French subsidiary of a global furniture retailer, I observed managers experiencing an organizational change likely to impact their subordinates jobs, an e-invoicing project, in the finance and accountant department. This ethnographic work has been carried out from a position of participant observer (if not observer participant, since employed by the company), which was the position of change and communication manager of the observed project.

Four **results** emerged from the research.

First, **ambiguity is transformed/converted across different levels.**

We found that ambiguity was used at different levels - top management level, middle-manager level and subordinate level - in the change process. Specifically, communication between top managers and middle managers on the one hand, and between middle managers and their subordinates, on the other hand, was fraught with ambiguity in varying degrees.

We showed that tensions and the transfer of ambiguity across the levels concurred to a more enlightened change, in the end.

Second, managers (co)**produce ambiguity**, by enacting **different types** of ambiguity (such as discursive ambiguity, temporal ambiguity, spatial ambiguity, positional ambiguity, role ambiguity, goal ambiguity and expectational ambiguity). They enact these ambiguities from organizational paradoxes and from the different phases of the change.

Third, managers **manage ambiguity**, using it more as a mean than an end. They manage an already existing ambiguity **by** using **visuals** to vehicle ambiguity and also by **converting (i.e. expanding or reducing)** the ambiguity they receive, thus **giving sense** of the change to their subordinates. The **juggling** with these ambiguities enables managers to move the change **project forward**. Ambiguity is used here as a **project management** process.

Following Journé, Grimand & Garreau (2012), our results consider uncertainty as an opportunity. Nonetheless, uncertainty needs to be dealt with and managed. Our research identifies **ambiguity** a further **coping mechanism** towards uncertainty, aside from denial and resistance.

Fourth, managers **mobilize capabilities** of two kinds, positive and/or negative, to manage ambiguities. Some managers particularly mobilize their **negative capability**, or ability to be comfortable with doubts and uncertainties, to deal with the uncertainty and the complexity of organizational change or project management. To do so, they need to first resist the environmental pressure to act and decide quickly (results of a positive capability, more known and valued in organizational life), and second, they need to listen to their negative capability inclining them to think and rethink the situation through, and make sense themselves of all cues they could gather.

Positive capability is likely to be mobilized for managing things, in the managing part of the middle manager's job (see Fayol's Plan, Organize, Coordinate, Command and Control, in 1916), while negative capability is likely to be mobilized for leading people, in the leading part of the middle manager's job (especially in the **resisting capacity**, i.e. the ability to resist both environmental pressure and dispersal).

This ethnographic work aims at producing **theoretical and managerial contributions**. The **main theoretical contribution** of our research draws on the works of French and Simpson (1999, 2001, 2009), not criticizing the positive capability, but acknowledging the negative capability and its virtues. Our research nonetheless adds to the extant literature with the

proposal of a grid of five criteria enabling to typify and characterize the **capabilities** mobilized to manage ambiguity and paradoxes in a change context. Both positive and negative capabilities appear to enrich each other to manage change. The positive capability is oriented towards action and decision making, discourse and justifications, and emotion overflowing. It focuses on the resolution of operational issues but often goes with a certain discomfort with respect to ambiguity. Managers with a prevailing positive capability tend to decrease, if not avoid, ambiguity. The negative capability, by allowing to suspend decisions, to limit communication and to contain emotions, enables to accept ambiguity and discomfort, and to acknowledge uncertainty. The results suggest that in a change context, **ambiguity management and negative capability development** might occupy a pivotal place, **in addition to positive capability**.

A **second theoretical contribution** draws from researches in economics and psychology on ambiguity. These researches show a certain complexity or mix of preferences towards ambiguity – its avoidance as much as its search – depending on characteristics of the decision maker (Payne, Bettman & Johnson, 1993). Our contribution nonetheless precises or **illustrates some characteristics of the manager**. For example, he might be particularly **averse to ambiguity** (Curley et al., 1986; Heath & Tversky, 1991; Taylor, 1995) when he does not “contain” the pressure to act, to justify or to decide, or even to talk, nor his emotions (or his subordinates) i.e. showing features related to the use positive capability.

A **third theoretical** contribution is the **manager’s discretionary role of either expanding or reducing ambiguity** to an acceptable level, both for them and for their subordinates, to make/give sense of the change. Thus managerial **sensegiving** occurs **through ambiguity**.

A **fourth theoretical contribution** of this research consists in the “how” (and to a certain extent, in the “why” too) a change unfolds. It consists in the sequence of events unfolding during an organizational change, which provide an inner comprehension of the change process.

The results of the present research also empower role played by middle managers in organization. Far from being negligible, middle managers – even more than other positions for their very location “in the middle” - may be crucial in mobilizing their negative capability to move a change forward and to make the change more suitable and sustainable.

Our research also opens avenues for further research. Our proposal of managers' inclination to mobilize rather their positive capability or rather their negative capability (being comfortable with ambiguity) is based on two highly contrasted managers but, to be confirmed, should be studied on a larger population of managers exposed to paradoxes and ambiguities, or in a same manager (combining both capabilities). In this research, by choosing to contrast two cases, we insisted on a form of choice between the two capabilities. However it is more likely that managers have to blend these two types of resources, with maybe more nuanced behaviors.

Likewise, our impression that mobilizing negative capability is based on, and also followed by, the use of positive capability deserves to be further investigated. Negative capability would appear as an in-between capability, in the middle of two uses of positive capability. More generally, our proposal should be explored in wider and more varied organizational contexts, to see whether it is responsive to the following factors: nature of the change, type of ambiguities, organizational environment (structure, culture, phase in the change project...), type of jobs, type of publics (those directly impacted by the change, those more remotely affected by the change...), intensity of time pressure, intensity of pressure to justification... This exploration might also require a deepening in the concept of negative capability, in two directions. First, this notion should dialogue with related concepts, such as management styles, leadership styles. How can negative capability be generated? Is it a personality trait? How can it be developed? Second, our proposal to operationalize the concept, by characterizing each capability on the basis of five criteria, should be further refined (different nuances could be identified for each criterion, for instance).

The main **managerial contribution** of this research lies in the **rehabilitation of ambiguity and of uncertainty in organizations**, by no longer considering them as elements to fight and to eradicate, but rather, to "manage". This research, by identifying and characterizing the negative capability, draws from the theories considering paradoxes as **sources of sustainability for organizations rather than weakness factors** (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Guilmot, 2016). This proposal opens the door to several managerial implications. First, **managing ambiguity** in a change context shall thus be accomplished with a certain **degree of freedom**, according to the manager's preference (with a potentially similar performance). Mobilizing one's negative capability would then represent a space for acknowledging, even welcoming, uncertainty, as well as a space for freedom. Second, this implies that **Human**

Resource policies (recruitment, staffing and personnel development policies) **take into account the negative capability**. Third, on a broader perspective, **initiators of a change project at the higher level** (general management) would be inspired in integrating this perspective not only among their strategies to **initiate or to drive change**, but also in their assessment methods for **project management**. More generally, the valuation of **negative capability represents a way to moderate managerial activism and its deleterious consequences** (waste of time, waste of attention, waste of resources, waste of motivation, and decisional fatigue) broadly and significantly reported under the label of psychosocial risks.

A second **managerial contribution** of this research resides in the use of both Positive and Negative Capabilities, as complementary abilities in a **change situation**, each particularly useful according to **the phases** of the change.

While Positive Capability may be of need especially in phases of defining and designing, Negative Capability may be of need in phases of rethinking, reflecting, and reframing.

The managers we studied indeed appeared rather far from being “bureaucrats and, almost by definition, resistant to change” (Murray, 2010 ; 21), but, on the contrary, they appear, at least some of them, particularly sensitive to (possibly weak) signals, and inclined to deeply listen “around”, to listen to the several voices of the organization. In the debate around the end of managers and the end of management, our results thus seem to show the opposite. They show that, through their abilities and capabilities – positive, but maybe, even more, negative - managers are still very much needed in organizations, particularly in a change context, in order to contain overwhelming emotions and to accept doubts and uncertainties. Our research therefore enhances the key role of middle managers, not only in communicating organizational change, but also in adapting this communication to their subordinates, dosing ambiguity. On this point, our research differentiates genuineness and authenticity from transparency. This research also represents, hopefully, a “call for humility for (change) managers” (Friedberg *in* Pichault, 2013; 13).

This ethnographic study removed rationality from the organizing and the decision making we observed. We thus draw on Weick’s comment that “organizing is never very tidy or foresightful, despite the necessity of its practitioners to make it appear otherwise. Efforts to maintain the illusion that organizations are rational and orderly are costly and futile.” (Weick,

2001: xi). “Negative capability illustrates a loss of rationality by trusting in the capacity to recreate oneself in another environment.” (Hutter, 1982: 305). Bounded rationality was a first step backward rationality. Negative capability in organizations might be an even bigger step backward the absolute rational as it is expressed as a “loss of rationality”.

This discussion has been the occasion of redefining managers and their role. (Not so) rational decision makers? Change agents? Ambiguity tamers? It may be interesting to recall that managers must define themselves, and autonomy is paradoxically what is constituting their selves definition. Autonomy is also exactly what enables them to mobilize their negative capability. Far from impression management (i.e. showing that we listen, looking busy, displaying that we care), the use of negative capability may arise when one both feels allowed to and dares to enact a form of countermanagement, anti-top-down and anti-leadership (Gjoerde & Alvesson, 2019).

We could imagine a third **managerial contribution**, under the form of “**change anti-manual**” that would revisit the traditional leadership guides. This proposition of anti-manual for managers or project managers facing change could also be named “**A practical anti-guide to change management**”.

Traditional change management guides would recommend the following principles:

1. Decision making is the way out from uncertainty and doubts
2. In case of trouble (if the decision made does not prove to be so good), reverting the decision is easy: it is always best to decide and to look determined and purposeful.
3. Implementing change, (almost) whatever it means and takes
4. Transparency is best
5. Mobilizing one’s positive capability by structuring and organizing, i.e. controlling as much as possible, this is the professional and safe way to tackle change.

When these principles are put into actions, it equals this “To do” list:

1. Make a decision – any. Look purposeful when so doing
2. Make the counter decision, if ever needed, later – i.e. in case of trouble (meaning the opposite decision might have been better in the first place). Look as much purposeful as in situation 1.
3. Copy/paste change, to implement it
4. Be clear
5. Look “in control”: structure, organize, divide and fix things

In counterpoint, our change management anti-guide could rather recommend the following principles, instead:

1. Resisting the pressure to decide swiftly (as it may result in a wiser decision)
2. Avoiding to make a wrong (unfortunate) decision (as it may save -avoid wasting- organizational and individual resources)
3. Never implement the change as it is proposed (as it may be more adapted and sustainable)
4. Ambiguity management may be more adapted to what the audience can or can not absorb
5. Mobilizing one’s negative capability, in addition to (before) one’s positive capability, through remaining in uncertainty and doubts may lead to a more fruitful and sustainable change.

Translated into a prescriptive list of actions / non actions:

1. Postpone decision making – at least until you get some more clues about what to decide
2. Procrastinate
3. Change the change – at least partly
4. Get to know your audience and adapt ambiguity accordingly
5. Stay in uncertainty and doubts - for a more sustainable change. It will help you develop your negative capability.

So as we can see, “Not to” lists may be as – and at times, more - urgent and important to follow than “To do” lists.

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APPENDIXES

LIST OF APPENDIXES

Guide d'entretien

Interview guide

Store accountant competence profile (prior to the change)

The change project timeline (overview of four phases)

The change project timeline in detail (key actions and “deliverables” per phase)

GUIDE D'ENTRETIEN

En quoi consiste ton travail ?

Pourrais-tu me décrire le projet de changement ?

Comment le caractériserais-tu en trois mots ?

Quels sont les objectifs de ce projet ?

En quoi penses-tu qu'ils vont changer les choses (pour l'entreprise et pour toi) ?

Quel est ton rôle dans le projet ?

Qu'est-ce qui te paraît difficile ?

Dans ce projet, avec qui travailles-tu ?

Comment les tiens-tu au courant de la progression du projet ? Quel reporting leur fais-tu ?

Quelles ont été pour toi les différentes étapes du projet ?

Que penses-tu, toi, de ce projet ?

Qu'as-tu ressenti lorsque tu as compris que ce changement allait arriver en France ?

As-tu eu l'occasion d'en discuter avec tes collègues managers (dont l'équipe est impactée par le projet) ?

Comment as-tu communiqué ce projet à ton équipe ?

Comment ont-ils réagi ? Comment as-tu réagi toi-même à leurs réactions ?

Comment fais-tu toi pour gérer l'incertitude dans ce projet ?

Comment penses-tu que les membres de ton équipe font, pour gérer l'incertitude dans ce projet ?

Si je te dis « Le projet est implanté ». Quelle est ta réaction ?

Peux-tu me raconter d'autres projets de changement que tu as vécus ? Comment les as-tu vécus ?

INTERVIEW GUIDE

What is your job about?

How would you describe the change project? In three words?

What are the goals of the project?

How do you think the project will change things for the company and for yourself?

What is your role in the project?

What seems difficult to you?

In this project, with whom are you working?

How do you update (report to) them on the project?

What have been, for you, the main phases of the project?

What do you think, of the project?

What did you feel when you realized that it was actually coming to France?

Do you happen to discuss the project with your colleague managers (those whose teams also are impacted)?

How did you communicate this project to your team (subordinates)?

How did they react? How did you react yourself to their reaction?

How do you do, to manage the uncertainty of the project?

How do you think your team does (subordinates do)?

If I say "The project is implemented". What is your reaction?

Could you tell me about other change projects you experienced? How did you deal with them?

STORE ACCOUNTANT COMPETENCE PROFILE

(PRIOR TO THE CHANGE)

Comptable magasin

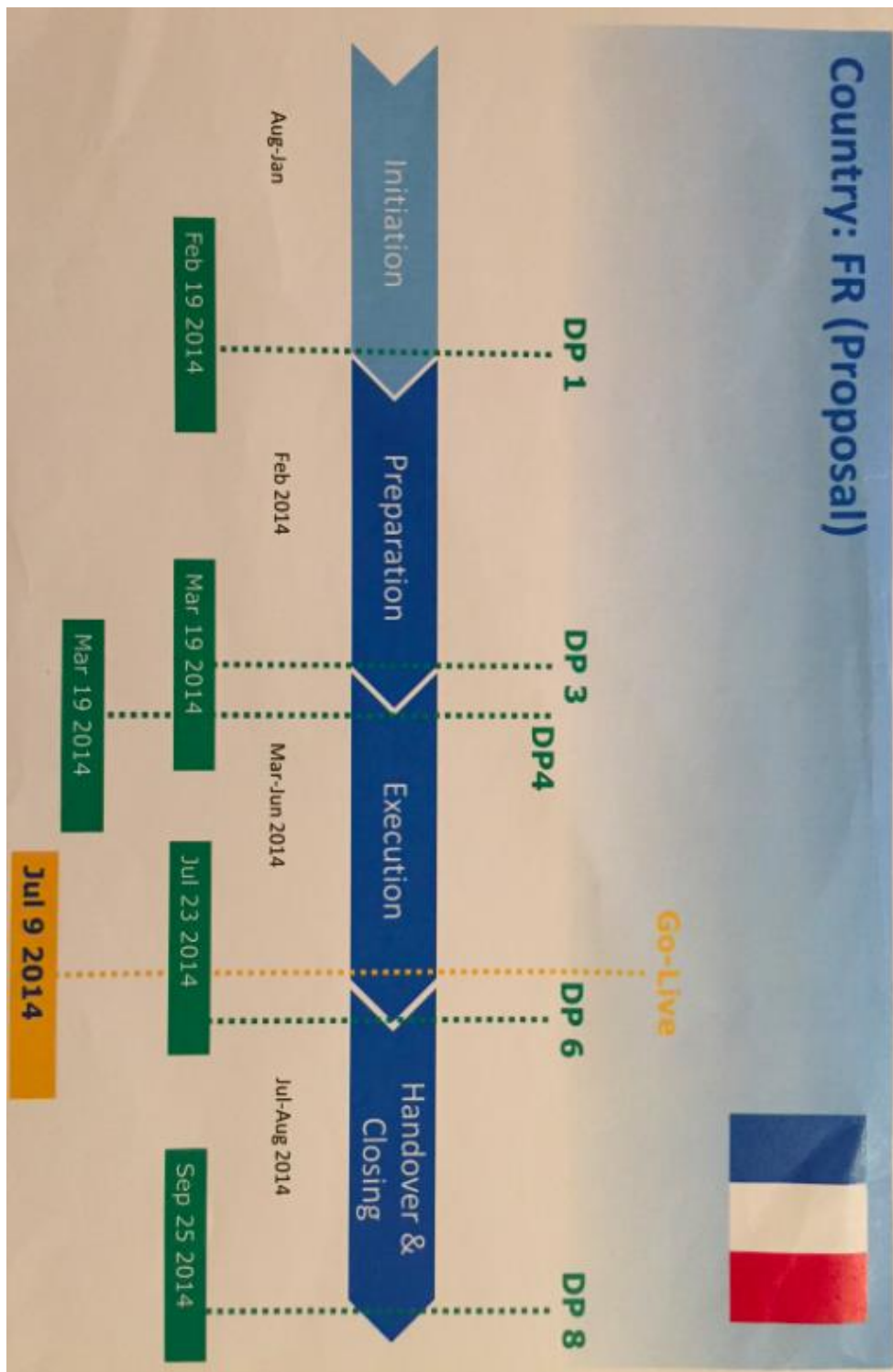
Finalité

- ✓ **Enregistre les pièces comptables suivant les procédures internes, dans le respect des normes comptables et fiscales, et des délais fixés.**

Activités dominantes

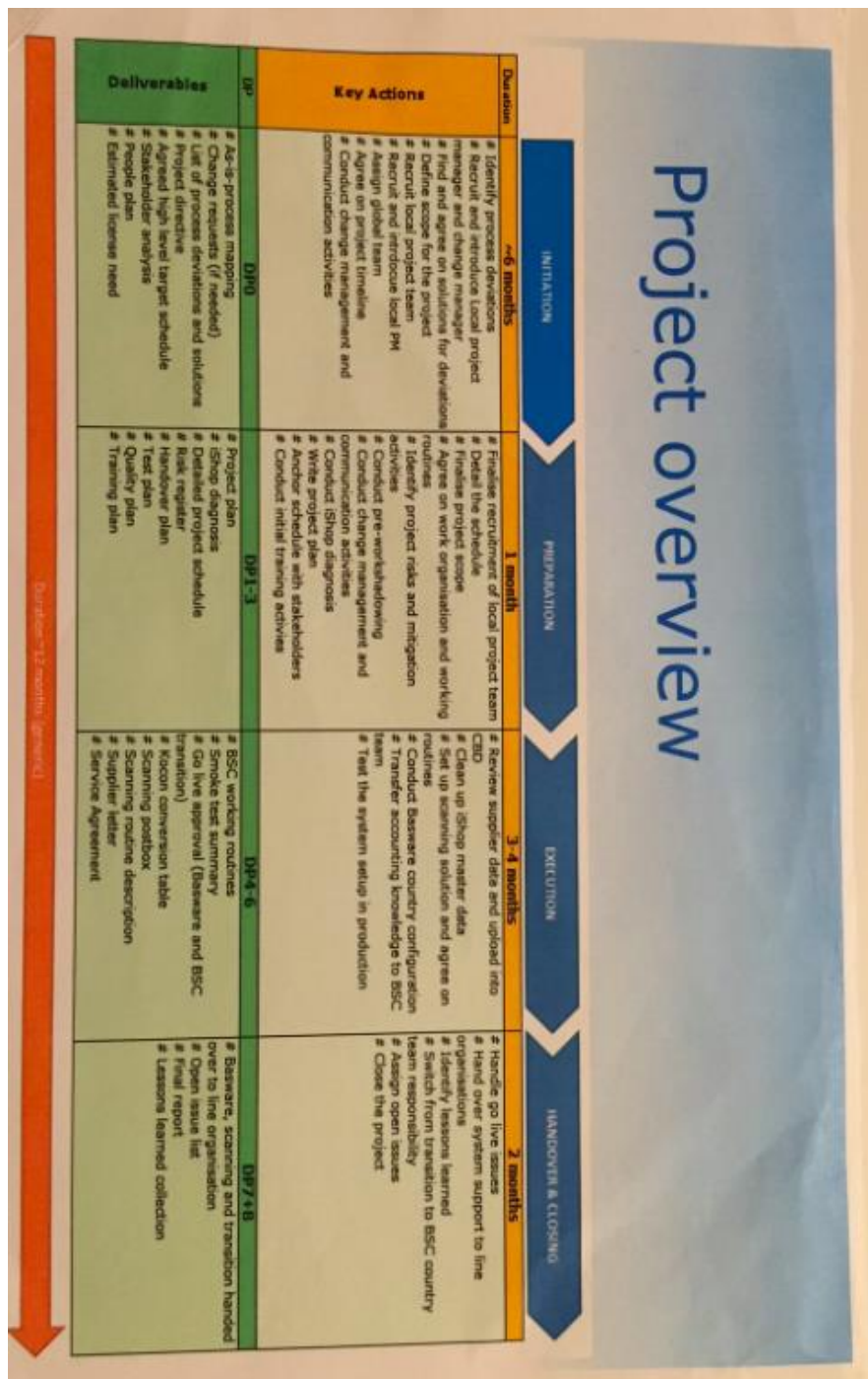
- ✓ **Comptabilise, contrôle et déclare le chiffre d'affaires et la TVA**
 - Saisit et contrôle les encaissements effectués en caisses dans le système de vente suivant les procédures établies
 - Rédige le ou les rapports de différences de caisse justifiées par les documents associés, dans le respect des procédures IKEA
 - Effectue les opérations de comptabilité générale liées à l'encaissement du chiffre d'affaires
 - Saisit les opérations bancaires et élabore leur rapprochement bancaire
 - Effectue les demandes de régularisation et relances auprès de la banque
 - Suit les encaissements family finances en collaboration avec la caisse centrale et les prestataires extérieurs
 - Procède au suivi du coffre
 - Suit les provisions des différents départements et alerte les responsables sur les écarts
- ✓ **Enregistre et suit les opérations de la Comptabilité fournisseurs et clients**
 - Enregistre les factures fournisseurs et les notes de frais suivant les procédures établies et en vérifiant la cohérence des pièces
 - Gère les litiges fournisseurs
 - Contrôle et enregistre les remboursements clients (return) en collaboration avec le service après-vente
 - Établit et suit les factures émises
 - Suit les impayés clients et réagit en transmettant les informations nécessaires à la Caisse Centrale pour éviter les récidives
- ✓ **Réalise la clôture des comptes et les analyse**
 - Réalise la clôture mensuelle et annuelle dans les délais fixés
 - Analyse mensuellement les comptes de bilan
 - Participe, avec le responsable administratif, à l'analyse des frais de gestion
 - Classe et archive les documents comptables

THE CHANGE PROJECT TIMELINE (OVERVIEW OF THE FOUR PHASES)



THE CHANGE PROJECT TIMELINE IN DETAIL

(KEY ACTIONS AND “DELIVERABLES” PER PHASE)



Les usages de l'ambiguïté par les managers en contexte de changement. Une étude ethnographique.

Résumé : Cette thèse étudie comment, pour faire face à un changement organisationnel, des managers produisent et gèrent différents types d'ambiguïtés (en réduisant, niant ou augmentant ces ambiguïtés). Elle montre comment ces managers mobilisent des capacités complémentaires, dites positive et négative, selon leurs préférences, pour faire face aux incertitudes du changement, et deviennent ainsi des dompteurs d'ambiguïté.

A travers une étude ethnographique de deux ans, et en tant qu'observatrice participante, nous analysons dix-sept managers, leurs subordonnés et leurs directeurs. Nous montrons comment ils sont amenés à mobiliser ambiguïtés et capacité négative (ou capacité de demeurer dans les « incertitudes et les doutes sans chercher les faits ni la raison », Keats, 1970 ; 43) comme des ressources pour gérer le changement.

Mots clés : ambiguïté, managers, changement organisationnel, capacité négative

The uses of ambiguity by managers in a change context. An ethnographic study.

Abstract: This dissertation studies how, in order to face an organizational change, managers produce and manage different types of ambiguities (by reducing, expanding or denying those ambiguities). It shows how these managers mobilize complementary capabilities, so-called positive and negative, according to their preferences, in order to face the uncertainties of the change, and thus become ambiguity tamers.

Through a two-year ethnographic study, from the position of participant observer, we analyze seventeen managers, their subordinates and their directors. We show how they mobilize ambiguities and negative capability (i.e. the ability to remain in “uncertainties and doubts without reaching after fact and reason”, Keats, 1970; 43) as resources for change management.

Key words: ambiguity, managers, organizational change, negative capability