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## Change Narratives: Theoretical Framework of Diverging Narratives Towards Organizational Change

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### Abstract

*The role of narratives is essential during organizational change. When organizations are ready to embrace change, the sense-giver gives a narrative about change. However, employees may accept it or resist it by making sense out of that narrative. Some employees show resistance towards the change and a multiplicity of narratives may emerge. Resistance towards change lets employees construct divergent narratives that influence people's attitudes, and then they may oppose organizational change. This paper proposed a theoretical framework of divergent narratives towards organizational change in the context of sensegiving and sensemaking. The framework is based on the sensemaking theory and discourse-based theory of organizational change. The suggested theoretical framework addresses the issues of i) why employees construct divergent narratives and ii) how to differentiate them meaningfully. This proposed theoretical framework can be used to undertake future research.*

**Keywords:** Strategic change, First order change, Narratives, Divergent narratives, Sensemaking, Sensegiving, Sensemaking theory, Discourse theory of organizational change.

### Introduction

In this era, change management is essential in both the public and private sectors (Zainol, Kowang, Hee, Fei, & Kadir, 2021). The rationale of the change is to renew and review organization processes and structures (Chowdhury & Shil, 2022). In today's highly competitive and continuously changing world of business, organizations must embrace change to survive and thrive (Gillon, 2018; Tariq, Dogar, & Arif, 2021). Moreover, change is the process of renegotiating certain dominant attitudes and values within an organization to implement new systems (Marshak, 1996). The question that arises here is: Why organizations are required to change; the changing workforce, globalization, advanced technology and competitive pressures are just a few of the forces that force institutions and their employees to deal with change (Czarniawska, 1997; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Islam, Furuoka, & Idris, 2020; Polkinghorne, 1995; Supriharyanti & Sukoco, 2023). Despite this, businesses are constantly striving to change and adapt their operations to changing conditions in a business environment that is complex and dynamic (Kanitz & Anzengruber, 2019; Shapiro,

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Buttner, & Barry, 1994). As a result, organizations must invest substantially to implement numerous changes to adapt to the new transformation (Bansal & King, 2022; Sancak, 2023). In addition, an organization's resources, positions, and capabilities undergo shifts due to strategic change (Tilley, 2023).

According to Neeb (2023) successful strategic change implementation can bring back an organization, whereas collapse can immediately lead to terrible outcomes, including the end of the business. When an organization undergoes a shift, it has a direct influence on its people, it is reasonable to expect employees to respond (Khalid, Dogar, & Arif, 2021). Further, the role of employees is essential during strategic change. Employees go through a process of making sense in times of change because of confusion, uncertainty, and surprise (Campos-Blázquez, Rubio-Andrada, & Celemín-Pedroche, 2023; Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Therefore, a language is required to implement strategic change in an organization (Dunford & Jones, 2000; Evered, 1983). According to Fairclough (1992) language has an active relationship rather than a passive one with reality. Similarly, according to Marshak (1996) successful change leadership requires effective language management (communication). The organization's language usually forms a narrative (Czarniawska, 1997). As a result, the textual structure of a narrative is used to support the story: events and happenings shaped (Campos-Blázquez et al., 2023; Polkinghorne, 1995).

Furthermore, according to Islam et al. (2020) the global "organizational change failure" rate ranges from approximately 70% to 90%. The question is: why the failure rate of organizational change is so high? According to Kanitz and Anzengruber (2019) one possible explanation is that resistance to change can result from high disbelief during organizational change. Therefore, employees' attitudes toward the change event may be influenced by divergent explanations, influencing whether people ignore, resist, or support the change for several reasons (Kanitz & Anzengruber, 2019; Shapiro et al., 1994). This paper proposed a theoretical framework related to the emergence of divergent narratives during organizational change in the context of sensegiving and sensemaking. Our contribution addresses the under-theorized problem: Why do employees construct divergent narratives during organizational change and how you can differentiate those meaningfully?

## **Literature Review**

### ***Organizational Change***

Change is an important, complicated, and consequential organizational activity. Organizational change is described as the shift of an organization from one state to another (Lunenburg, 2010). Organizational change is usually required to address new environmental demands, address injustices, address problems, revive participation's energy, satisfy stakeholders, and maintain competitiveness (Islam, 2023). Organizations would eventually become obsolete if they did not adapt to the shifting needs of the environment and circumstances. Implementing new ideas is called "organizational change" (Zorn, Page, & Cheney, 2000). However, People in and around

organizations suffer due to the change. Researchers have looked at a wide range of shifts, including mergers, reorganizations, cultural shifts, the introduction of new technologies, employee programs, production methods, process enhancements, policies, and requiring certain behaviours, among other things (Khan, Rehman, & Ghayas, 2022; Lewis, 2019).

Further, researchers typically differentiate between unplanned and planned change. Unplanned change has been referred to as continuous change because, it is ongoing, evolving, and cumulative (Lewis, 2019). Uncontrollable forces (such as a plant fire or government close down of production) and organization interactions (such as flow in practices, shifting employee demographics, erosion of skills, and shift in cultural acceptance of the organization's products and services) are examples of unplanned changes. Alternatively, planned changes are deliberate in their design and selection by management, i.e. technology advancement, machine improvement, etc. (Sancak, 2023). Furthermore, change management deals with transformational change or second-order change and first-order or incremental change. In most cases, the context and conventional organizational structure are unaffected by the first-order change. This research focuses on incremental change or transactional change. It is related to a change in skills, policies, procedures and task requirements (Grisard, Annisette, & Graham, 2020; Guarana & Avolio, 2022). On the other hand, transformational change involves shifting and realigning values, attitudes and belief score processes, vision, as well as culture, and assumptions related to reality (Brandt, Andersson, & Kjellstrom, 2019).

Furthermore, macro-level factors influence organizational change. There are two distinct streams: The first is about how and what organizational changes happen and how they affect people (Oreg, Vakola, & Armenakis, 2011; Weick & Quinn, 1999). In organizational change, sociologically grounded research is typically carried out by macro-OB scholars and strategy researchers (Burke & Litwin, 1992; Hannan & Freeman, 1984). However, micro-OB scholars usually conduct research in the area, which focuses on the psychological experiences and processes of change recipients during change, or "responses to change," as well as attitudes of recipients toward their personal level and job outcomes (Oreg & Michel, 2013; Oreg et al., 2011). However, change is incredible; people sometimes resist and sometimes seek. It would not be an exaggeration to propose that society is rife with change and questions regarding what, when, how, and in what ways to occur. Therefore, change can provide means to deal with many significant challenges related to philosophy, governance, policy, the rule of law, and sharing resources and information (Andreoni & Scazzieri, 2014; Craig & Douglas, 1996). However, organizational change challenges cover many sectors, including private sector organizations, public sector organizations, community, international and national governance, and nonprofit organizations (Lewis, 2019).

### ***Strategic Change***

Strategic change shifts "the organizations' goals and purposes" (Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994). However, Strategic change is a multifaceted process relating to different actors.

Furthermore, the strategic change allows firms to grab opportunities, deal with risk, and stay competitive in market settings (Kunisch, Bartunek, Mueller, & Huy, 2017). We use “strategic change” to refer to a complete or substantial overhaul of an organization’s previous activities, structures, and strategies. Additionally, this suggests a fundamental shift in employees’ perceptions of their organization (Kirtley & O’Mahony, 2023; Logemann, Piekkari, & Cornelissen, 2019).

An organization undergoes a strategic change, when its assets are redirected in a manner that is expected to improve its competitive position in the long term (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1990). However, strategic change stops inertia from occurring (Burgelman & Grove, 2007; Hannan & Freeman, 1984). Certainly, a company’s performance will suffer if it does not adjust its strategic approach to a shifting environmental situation (Burgelman & Grove, 2007; Wu, Richard, Zhang, & Macaulay, 2019). Strategic change continues to be risky and disruptive (Singh, House, & Tucker, 1986). Also, strategic change initiatives cost money because they require an organization to commit human, financial, and other resources. As a result, inadequate resources are cited as why strategic change objectives were not met. However, not every circumstance is the same; at times, the inability to achieve the goal of change is because of different understanding and meaning-making of the goal (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006).

Strategic change is executed through emerging or existing opportunities and dealing with threats. However, the organizational change appears to react to quickly developing markets and technology (Schaap, 2012). As a result, strategic change is the most crucial process that takes place; when managers of an organization use “symbolic” and “discursive” materials to change the system’s meaning to set a new strategic direction (Fiol, 2002). Further, how can pluralistic organizations bring about strategic change? The literature on strategic change offers at least four interrelated perspectives not limited to pluralistic organizations: construction of shared views, use of uncertainty to address multiple interpretations, co-orientation to usual issues, and joint account creation (Sorsa & Vaara, 2020). First, the need for consensus to strategic change has been a central argument in research (Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd, 2008). Second, other people have focused less on an agreement or fully shared viewpoints and more on the role of equivocality or ambiguity in strategic change (Cohen & March, 1986). Thirdly, another group of individuals has argued that rather than total agreement or agreement on all points of view, the same ideas should be co-oriented may be sufficient (Cooren, 2010; Schoeneborn et al., 2014). Fourth, the “joint account” concept is a crucial issue in achieving consensus among several points of view. Actors can pursue change using joint accounts without giving up their distinct points of view (Sorsa & Vaara, 2020; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017).

### ***Narratives***

The term “narrative” has gained importance in recent years, both in research fields and public debates (Beckert & Bronk, 2018; Jasanoff & Kim, 2015). Narratives of an organization are defined as “temporal discursive constructions,” which present meaning for organizational, social, individual

sensegiving and sensemaking. Narratives can be organized in different ways (Boje, 2008). Therefore, narratives can be used and copied in many other ways as a communication component with discourses (Boje, 2008; Ricoeur, 1983). The term story is derived from the action word 'narrate' (Latin: to tell, report, relate) (Fischer-Appelt & Dernbach, 2022). It is used as a noun to refer to narratives or oral or written accounts of events. There is much debate in the social and humanities sciences about defining the term "narrative" with the structures, functions, and purposes of narratives (Fischer-Appelt & Dernbach, 2022; Rudrum, 2005). According to Czarniawska (2016) narratives are per-formative because they direct social action. Narratives are not merely linguistic tools but central to the "social construction of reality" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Ninan & Sergeeva, 2022).

Further, different narrative perspectives have been used in research. Even though some employ the terms "story" and "narrative" interchangeably, predominantly in German-speaking debates, narratives are thought to perform particular purposes that are not shared by all types of stories (Fischer-Appelt & Dernbach, 2022; Rindova & Martins, 2022). However, it's not surprising: because change-related temporal development almost always requires a narrative representation. The multi-vocalist (multiple interpretations) or polyphony during change has been the primary focus of organizational change (Rindova & Martins, 2022). Narratives can provide important labels for organizational events due to the ambiguity that arises during change.

Further, people's interpretations of the events around them can be shaped by various narratives presented by multiple constituents with their interests (Vaara, Sonenshein, & Boje, 2016). Researchers have demonstrated how crucial it is to comprehend narratives' function in situations of transformation and uncertainty. Thus, they have significantly contributed to our understanding of how narratives use symbolic and cultural sources to explain the capability for the future strategies (Garud, Gehman, & Giuliani, 2014). However, less attention has been paid to how narratives are used to encourage the emergence of radically new beliefs regarding the possibilities in the future, how the present might vary from the future, and also what kinds of futures should or could be recognized (Rindova & Martins, 2022).

### ***Diverging Narratives***

Master and divergent narratives are closely related, but these are not "necessarily divaricated entities" but are intricately intertwined (Andrews, 2004). From a CCO point of view, divergent narratives can be defined as a narrative that proposes different explanations for the situation, i.e., alternative explanations for what the circumstances dictate, require, and command (Lundholt & Boje, 2018). Moreover, the idea of divergent narrative got its start from identity and sociology studies. According to Andrews (2004) divergent narratives are "those stories that people tell hold out conflict, either explicitly or implicitly, to leading cultural narratives". The concepts of divergent and master narrative have been utilized in a wide range of contexts, including the following: race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, educational attainment, social class, and organization

(Bamberg & Andrews, 2004; Hansen, 2018; Lindemann & Nelson, 2001).

According to Kuhn (2005, 2006, 2016) shared narratives are considered a vital part of construction meaning in the organization, who relates the word “authoritative texts” to show how the trajectory of an organization is authored inside through in-house narratives. Therefore, the concept of the divergent narrative is viewed as an “organizational constitution ever-present” component that saturates and infuses overall corporate narratives (Kuhn, 2016). The concept of divergent narratives is examined within the organizational context, offering various interpretations of the binary relationship between a master narrative and a divergent narrative (Frandsen, Kuhn, & Lundholt, 2017). “The reciprocal relationship between divergent- and master narratives is referred to as “co-creation” (Lundholt & Boje, 2018). During organizational change, most employees construct divergent narratives that influence people’s attitudes, and then they may resist organizational change (Lundholt & Boje, 2018).

Moreover, a master narrative can be challenged by drawing inspiration from other master narratives or critically examining specific elements, which provides new meaning and direction. We can consider here an example: the relationship of Islam with terrorism and war (Andrews, 2002; Bamberg & Andrews, 2004; S. Sandberg & Andersen, 2019).

### ***Sensemaking***

According to Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) a cognitive interpretation and action process known as sensemaking. Sensemaking is a reaction to new happenings and a decisive process during which strategic change is realized. Sensemaking is an active process that rarely involves just one person (Weick, 1995). Further, sensemaking consists of three distinct phases: scanning, interpretation, and action (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Zoonen, Rice, & Ter Hoeven, 2022). Therefore, in a discursive, iterative, and social manner, organizational members can observe cues and contrast various interpretations, then consider potential responses (Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph, & DePalma, 2006; Cornelissen, 2012). However, an organization’s members can also inspect, understand, and act as individuals, so sensemaking occurs as a discrete, innately cognitive process within organizations. “Sensemaking” refers to the process of attempting to comprehend issues or events “that are somehow surprising or confusing” Sensemaking procedure typically involves multiple individuals working together (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2015). However, producing narrative accounts of the events to develop a “joint sense of meaning” is the process of collective sensemaking (Gephart, Topal, & Zhang, 2010). When members of an organization confront issues and events that are unexpected or confusing, sensemaking takes place (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Weick, 1995). Thus, sensemaking is a social construction process in which members of an organization try to explain and interpret sets of environmental cues (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Maitlis, 2005).

Furthermore, sensemaking can take place formally through business procedures like planning in information sessions, meetings on management projects, and meetings on reviews of performance;

other than that, it can also take place informally and continuously in an organization (Abolafia, 2010; Cornelissen, Holt, & Zundel, 2011; Sims, 2003). Thus, narratives during organizational change are highly effective tools for making sense (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Kieran, MacMahon, & MacCurtain, 2022; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2011). Further, there are three primary formal components to sensemaking. According to Maitlis and Christianson (2014) there are three "sensemaking moves": (1) recognizing *cues*, (2) constructing interpretation (*frames*), and (3) *action*. Firstly, it deals with cues (present moment), that is, unexpected or baffling events or issues that people confront and attempt to comprehend. The frames (past moment) that are used to understand cues (Kujala & Sachs, 2019; Weick, 1995). The action is conducted based on sense already made from cues and frames (Kujala & Sachs, 2019).

For senior managers: activities of sensemaking such as scanning of environment and interpreting issues are essential tasks that persuade strategic change and organizational decisions (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995). Further, narratives are considered "discursive construction" that actors or employees use to give sense to others and make sense regarding events resulting from the collective construction of meaning (Balogun, Bartunek, & Do, 2015).

### ***Sensegiving***

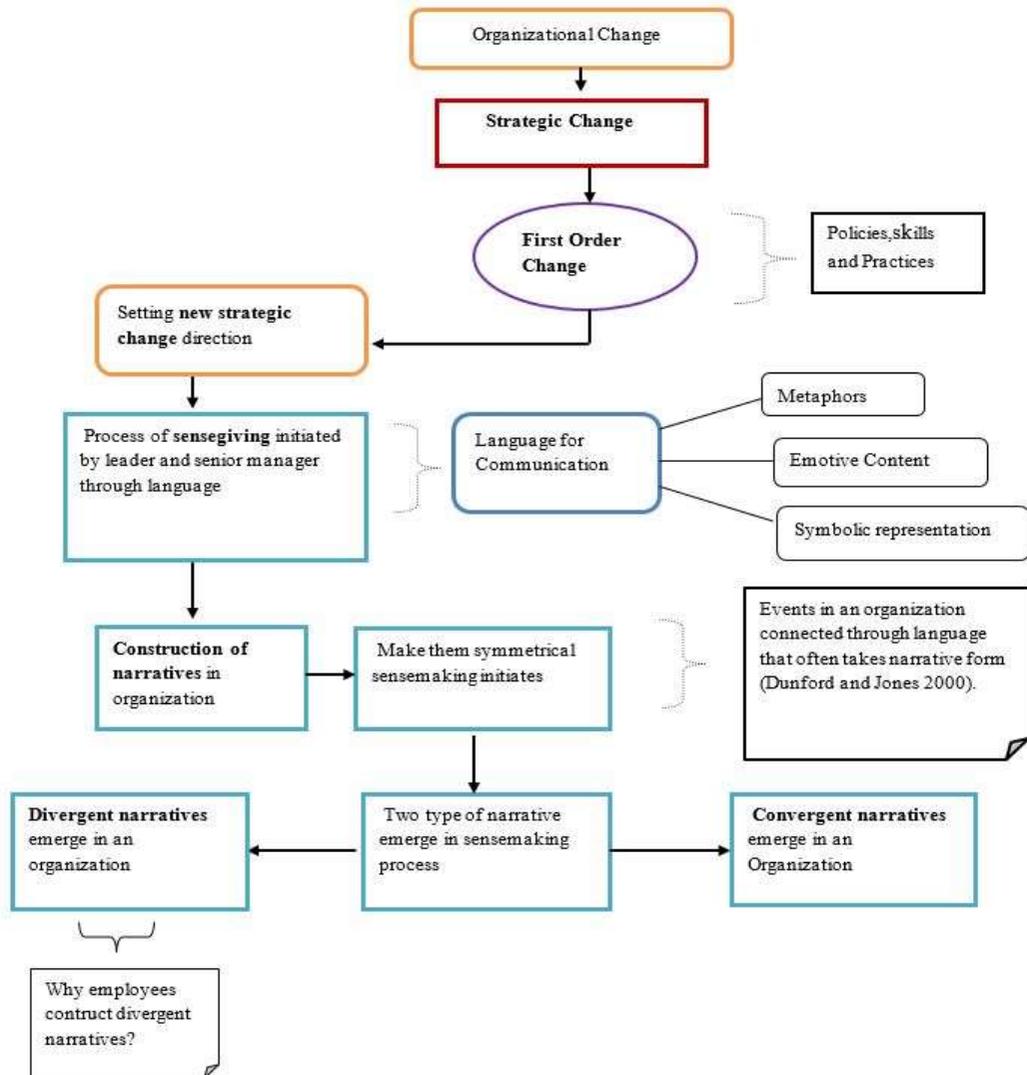
Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) coined the "sensegiving" term. "Sensegiving" is an interpretive procedure (Bartunek, Krim, Necochea, & Humphries, 1999) in which actors persuade each other by evocative or convincing language. Sensegiving "involves disseminating new understanding in front of the audience to influence their sensemaking for self" (Arvidsson & Johansson, 2019; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Robert & Ola, 2021).

Further, "sensegiving" is not just a popular activity in organizations, other than that also an important one in organizations. The term "sensegiving" refers to putting efforts and "influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others towards a preferred redefinition of organizational reality," whereas "sensemaking" refers to the process by which individuals work to understand ambiguous and uncertain events (Weick, 1995). Sense-giving refers to "acting." In addition, sensegiving is to take the role of influencing and directing other people's meaning-making (Gioia et al., 1994). The organizational actor (for example, a CEO) communicates the "new sense of the organization to stakeholders" (J. Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). As a result, sensemaking processes that focus on future rhetorical and temporal dimensions add to institutional legitimating (Yeomans & Bowman, 2021). Sensegiving is, including leaders or managers attempting to impact the organizational members' sensemaking via various techniques like pictures and images (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007).

Further, in sensegiving, metaphor is regarded as a rhetorical means to create a social identity and justify various actions (Cornelissen, 2012; Gioia et al., 1994). One more way to underline the job of a leader in sensegiving is to push the use of authority in uncertain conditions. Furthermore, leaders employ strategies and tactics to "lure" employees into accepting change (Kärreman,

Alvesson, & Wenglén, 2006; Robert & Ola, 2021). For instance, a management team can give sense to a top-down change process by breaking the change into smaller components and then employing a metaphor to provide an understanding of the process (Guette & Vandenbempt, 2017).

### Theoretical Framework



### Theories

#### *Sensemaking Theory*

In sensemaking theory, members of an organization make sense of different events through a course of action, interpretation, and selection (Weick & Roberts, 1993). This theory was initially

developed in social psychology. The sensemaking theory is viewed as non-linear; they are intertwined as a multiplicity. A multiplicity means “something continually inflowing into and breaching off combinations among other multiplicities” (Turner, Allen, Hawamdeh, & Mastanamma, 2023).

Sensemaking is defined as the “making of sense”, where sense refers to meaning and making refers to the activity of constructing or creating something (Turner et al., 2023; Weick, 1995). Although, making sense is an ongoing process, when members of an organization face unexpected or new circumstances, when there is no predetermined course of action, and when there is a high level of uncertainty or ambiguity (Weick et al., 2005). Weick refers to such events as a “shock” that intensifies sensemaking and inspires action (Anderson, 2006).

Sensemaking has primarily been utilized in Information system (IS) research to investigate the social facets of Information system (IS) execution (Jasperson, Carter, & Zmud, 2005; Vaast & Walsham, 2005). Many studies, focused on the following sensemaking theory concept i.e.: the sensemaking process is the form of particular presumptions, expectations, and technological knowledge (Orlikowski & Gash, 1994). Micro-level change mechanism means; when an Information system is implemented in organizations through bracketing, enactment, and identity. When organizations implement IS: “people must make sense of it” to interact with technology (Orlikowski & Gash, 1994). Therefore, organizational actors interact with specific items and events to attach and make sense of technology, also known as bracketing (Jensen, Kjærgaard, & Svejvig, 2009). The bracketing process involves the technology’s users identifying specific cues that indicate “desired preference and ends” (Jensen et al., 2009). However, users are likely to bracket different cues, indicating that the same technology does not always allow for comparable interpretations by various actors. The technology is adapted, managed, and contextualized during the bracketing process, which is ongoing.

Furthermore, when actors of an organization are interconnected with new technology, they connect events to construct a sense of that technology. Therefore, the same technology does not necessarily provide the same interpretations in diverse actor groups. However, technologies might be vague in the natural world, which involves numerous plausible and possible interpretations (Weick, 1990).

### ***Discourse-Based Theory of Organizational Change***

The theory of discourse has “its roots in the role that language plays in attaching meanings to text and the way we perceive the world” (Grant & Marshak, 2011). A discourse analytic approach has more significant potential for understanding the complexities and nature of change-relevant issues, especially those relating to the construction of change, stability, and the agency's role in bringing about change. This approach contrasts a cognitivist or

behaviourist standpoint of organizational change (Tsoukas, 2005). Therefore, how an issue or situation related to organizational change is framed and discussed significantly influences how affected employees, stakeholders, and change agents approach it (Grant & Marshak, 2011). Furthermore, texts in an extensive array of genres embody discourses, symbols, and acts of speech, including written documents and images (Grant & Hardy, 2004). Therefore, texts are utilized for various textual devices like metaphor, narrative, irony, humor, also rhetoric (Phillips & Hardy, 1997). According to Hardy, Harley, and Phillips (2004) textual devices persuade others, create meaning, reproduce social structure, and legitimize interests. Textual devices, known as narratives, connect a collection of ideas or events to a common theme or issue (Czarniawska, 1999; Polkinghorne, 2005)

Similarly, the conversation might bring a plan in which the only characters proceed out main events in the same way that the narrator saw them or wanted them to happen (Buchanan & Dawson, 2007; Taylor & Robichaud, 2004). Some theorists have used the terms “narrative” and “story” interchangeably due to these story-like qualities, as observed, while others uphold that these terms ought to be clearly distinguished to be useful analytically (Gabriel, 2004). Thus, the point is where the narratives become stories with a plot that tries to connect events and makes it easier to understand one event with others. According to Grant and Marshak (2011) changing the dominant stories, narratives, and so on that are approved by those currently and historically in authority and power is necessary for changing mindsets, consciousness and social agreement. For example, how change occurs in organizations, hierarchical structures, and women's position in organizations. For instance, Brown (1998) demonstrates, that for IT-related change program managers used a narrative to justify their interests and actions. Thus, stories and narratives have also been used to assist individuals in making sense of change and as diagnostic tools for comprehending organizational norms and values (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Boje, 1991; Dunford & Jones, 2000; Grant & Marshak, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

Our objective in this paper was to provide a proposed theoretical framework about narratives and divergent narratives in the context of sensemaking and sensegiving towards organizational change. Change is the process of renegotiating certain dominant attitudes and values within an organization to implement new systems (Marshak, 1996). Furthermore, change can provide means to deal with many significant challenges related to philosophy, governance, policy, the rule of law, and sharing resources and information (Andreoni & Scazzieri, 2014; Craig & Douglas, 1996). Organizations would eventually become obsolete if they did not adapt to the shifting needs of the environment and circumstances (Zorn et al., 2000). Therefore, organizations must invest substantially to implement numerous changes to adapt to the new transformation (Bansal & King, 2022; Sancak, 2023).

Furthermore, sensemaking and discourse theory of organizational change have been used in this paper. These theories emphasized the role of language and narrative. A language is required to implement strategic change in an organization (Dunford & Jones, 2000; Evered, 1983). According to Fairclough (1992) language has an active relationship rather than a passive one with reality. Similarly, According to Marshak (1996) successful change leadership requires effective language management (communication), which organizational members need during organizational change.

Although, the global “organizational change failure” rate is approximately 70% to 90% (Islam et al., 2020). Therefore, this raises the question of why the failure rate of organizational change is so high. According to Kanitz and Anzengruber (2019) one possible reason is that resistance to change can result from more distrust during organizational change. As a result, employees construct divergent narratives due to different reasons. It would not be an exaggeration to propose that society is rife with change and questions regarding what, when, how, and in what ways to occur. This conceptualization provides a potential framework for the implementation of change-related research.

Moreover, this framework can be used with the combination of other theories to implement organizational change (multifaceted process). This framework can be used in exploratory studies to understand the phenomenon in-depth. This proposed theoretical framework can be used in different fields of research. This framework can be used in any industry type for research.

## **Declarations**

### ***Consent for Publication***

Both authors consent for publication.

### ***Conflict of Interest***

The authors declare no competing interests.

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