

Navigating organizational change through a processual perspective on the transition toward the circular economy: Save The Duck case study

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Abstract

Purpose – By rooting our study in Lewin’s change management theory, we conduct an in-depth case study of a medium-sized fashion firm transitioning toward a CE. Through adopting a multi-level and processual perspective, we offer empirical evidence of the change process and elucidate the drivers and resistance to change factors.

Design/methodology/approach – We opt for a single in-depth longitudinal case study of a fashion firm that was born with a sustainable business model and that is in transition toward the CE. We involve multiple informants, and we adopt a processual approach to uncover the drivers and resistance to change factors at different organizational levels (i.e. top and middle management and operational levels).

Findings – Our findings enable us to highlight novel key drivers and resistance factors at the organizational level. Regarding the former, we reveal the involvement of top and middle management in the decision-making process and the recruitment of young people. For the resistance factors, we identify adaptation to structural change, reluctant mindset, internal divergence of ideas, and commitment of all organizational levels to the CE.

Research limitations/implications – The paper presents some limitations. First, our research is based on a single in-depth case study, which, while allowing for rich, detailed exploration, inherently limits the statistical generalizability of our findings. Focusing just on one organization located in a specific industry and geographical context means that our results may not be directly applicable to all organizational settings. Firms belonging to other industries would probably show different patterns of change due to industry-specific drivers and barriers. Also, the institutional and geographical contexts of our case study inevitably influence the cognitive and cultural aspects of the drivers and barriers we identified. Then, our research provides a processual yet not longitudinal view of OCCE, thus not fully capturing the long-term dynamics of the phenomenon.

Practical implications – Our findings underscore the critical role of visionary leadership, particularly stemming from the CEO, in driving CE transition. Leaders should articulate a clear vision for sustainability, foster a culture of experimentation and actively identify opportunities for CE implementation. Moreover, our results suggest that organizational culture plays a fundamental role in supporting CE transition. Creating a dedicated sustainability team to coordinate CE initiatives and counter the internal resistance, fostering the engagement of all organizational levels in CE initiatives, developing training programs to enhance CE knowledge and skills throughout the organization and recruiting young talents are some of the key recommendations we posit to firms aiming to start the process of CE transition.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the emerging literature on “Organizational Change toward a Circular Economy” (OCCE) by providing a processual analysis of organizational change toward the CE. Through an in-depth exploratory study of a fashion firm in transition toward the CE, we were able to identify



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drivers and resistance factors and to offer a visual map of our findings to graphically show the change toward the CE and the drivers and resistance to change factors that have thus far been under-investigated from an organizational level (Graessler *et al.*, 2024).

Keywords Organizational change, Circular economy, Drivers, Resistance to change

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The transition toward a circular economy (CE), defined as “an industrial system that is restorative or regenerative by intention and design” (MacArthur, 2013, p. 7), is praised for addressing the environmental crisis and aligning with the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12, which promotes sustainable production and consumption (Patala *et al.*, 2022). However, while the CE concept’s potential is well-valued, the transition remains complex and challenging for organizations, requiring significant changes across their value chains and internal processes (Graessler *et al.*, 2024). Shifting to a CE necessitates not only changes in business models (Bocken *et al.*, 2018) and mindsets (Bonchek and Libert, 2017), but also the establishment of new practices and relationships (Thomas *et al.*, 2011).

Van de Ven and Poole (1995, p. 512) define organizational change as the “empirical observation of difference in form, quality, or state over time in an organizational entity.” The change process may lead to resistance (Isern and Pung, 2007), which is among the main causes of implementation difficulties (Erwin and Garman, 2010) and the failure of change initiatives (Amarantou *et al.*, 2018), yet it is an integral part of the process (Haslam and Pennington, 2010). The seminal theory of change advanced by Lewin (1947) describes change as a three-phase process: (1) unfreezing, (2) changing (or transitioning), and (3) refreezing. These phases also include driving and resisting forces that either induce or inhibit change. Although this theory offers substantial insights, its application to the transition toward a CE has been limited (Yang *et al.*, 2021). Given that this transition is considered a very uncertain process (Hofmann and Jaeger-Erben, 2020), a deeper understanding seems necessary. Not surprisingly, organizational change toward a circular economy (OCCE) is emerging as a promising research field that integrates “organizational change” with the “circular economy” (Graessler *et al.*, 2024). In their review, Graessler *et al.* (2024) categorize OCCE into three types: technical, human, and organizational changes. The latter include structures, strategies, and capabilities, requiring changes in both “hard factors,” such as the implementation of a circular supply chain (Hussain and Malik, 2020), and “soft factors,” such as organizational culture (Bertassini *et al.*, 2021), which are pivotal for a successful transition (Chiappetta Jabbour *et al.*, 2019). However, the literature on OCCE remains fragmented, with few studies adopting a holistic approach that combines these three types of change and examines both soft and hard factors together.

Despite being praised for its positive impact on the environment, OCCE is at risk of remaining largely theoretical (Bertassini *et al.*, 2021), creating what could be described as a sort of “circular utopia” (Bocken *et al.*, 2023). While extant studies on the transition towards a CE identify emerging obstacles such as the need for an efficient circular ecosystem (Parida *et al.*, 2019) and greater public sector involvement (Patala *et al.*, 2022), there is still limited understanding of the organizational aspects that could guide firms towards a “strong circularity” (Bocken *et al.*, 2023). In particular, catalysts and obstacles from an organizational perspective remain under-investigated. Moreover, current studies typically focus on a single organizational level— be it individual (Muranko *et al.*, 2018), team (Brones *et al.*, 2017), firm (Wiesner *et al.*, 2018), or network (Rizos *et al.*, 2016)— without considering the multilevel interactions that are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the transition process (Graessler *et al.*, 2024).

These gaps are particularly evident in research about the fashion industry (Mishra *et al.*, 2021; Salmi and Kaipia, 2022). This industry urgently needs to adopt more sustainable practices, as it is

one of the most polluting industries, deemed responsible for over 92 million tonnes of waste per year and the consumption of 79 trillion liters of water (Niinimäki, 2020). Therefore, understanding how organizations in this industry transition toward the CE is of utmost importance.

Thus, this study addresses gaps in the literature by adopting a holistic, multilevel perspective on organizational change toward a CE in the fashion industry. Unlike previous studies, which often focus on isolated organizational levels or factors, our research integrates multiple organizational levels and examines both hard and soft factors in concert. By applying Lewin's theory of change to the context of the OCCE, our study advances the theoretical understanding of how organizations can navigate the complex and uncertain process of moving toward strong circularity. We provide new insights into the catalysts and obstacles at various organizational levels, offering a more comprehensive framework for understanding OCCE.

Thus, in this study, we address under-researched areas by addressing the following research questions: "How can organizations transition toward the CE? Which are the drivers and resistance to change factors?" We do so through an empirical analysis based on an in-depth case study approach, involving different organizational levels (i.e. top management, middle management, and operational level) within a firm in the fashion industry. We adopt a processual perspective to capture the dynamic nature of the transition.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we introduce the background literature on Lewin's theory of change and identify the gaps we aim to address. Second, we describe the methodology and research context within the fashion industry. We then present our findings and discuss their implications for the literature on CE transition. Finally, we conclude by summarizing our theoretical and managerial contributions.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Change management and Lewin's theory of change

Organizations are complex systems that, to survive in a dynamic environment, need to respond continuously to external changes through processes of self-organizing change (Lewis, 1994). Change requires creating a new system and institutionalizing new approaches (Kotter, 1996). The ability to manage change represents a core competence of successful organizations (Burnes, 2004). Transformational leaders play a key role in the change process, as they are able to recognize the need for change, create a new vision for a future that is attractive (see Kouzes and Posner, 1988), and then institutionalize the change (Tichy and Devanna, 1990). In doing so, transformational leaders need to take into account their stakeholders' underlying needs and values and stimulate their employees by setting challenging goals and motivating them to rethink outdated ways of doing business (Eisenbach *et al.*, 1999). Choi (2011) reviews the literature on employees' attitudes toward organizational change and she underlines that scholars unanimously acknowledge the efficacy of employee participation or involvement in change decision making, in change projects, or in training activities, meaning that HR managers aiming to implement changes are encouraged to develop employees' participative approaches. While Choi's (2011) work provides insights on employee participation, it is important to note that she calls for further empirical investigations to better determine the effects of their attitudes on organizational change.

Change management is defined as "the process of continually renewing an organization's direction, structure, and capabilities to serve the ever-changing needs of external and internal customers" (Moran and Brightman, 2001, p. 111), and it is considered a complex phenomenon (Jacobs *et al.*, 2013) involving several social aspects (Jansson, 2013). Resistance to change (RtC) is considered one of the main reasons for failure concerning change initiatives. Managers of all hierarchical levels are involved in the change process; however, to date, researchers have focused mainly on middle managers, as they play a central role in the whole change process, and they could simultaneously be both "victims" and "carriers" of change (Brower and Abolafia, 1995; Giangreco and Peccei, 2005). The lack of studies regarding other organizational levels such as top

managers and operational levels prevents the understanding of the whole picture, thus not providing support for organizations aiming to “unfreeze” the change towards CE.

RtC has barely been addressed in the current literature (Graessler *et al.*, 2024). Extant studies on RtC mainly adopt an individual perspective (Amarantou *et al.*, 2018; Srivastava and Agrawal, 2020), thus leaving the organizational perspective mainly underinvestigated. Warrick (2023) recently offers some recommendations to organizations to develop the necessary skills to manage change and resistance to it; among them, there are the training of transformational leaders and the development of a safe culture based on open dialogue. Shimoni (2017) advances a habitus-oriented approach to RtC by observing that resistance does not lie solely in the individual or in the social organizational context; rather, it is a social practice embedded within social systems and perpetuated by social agents’ habitus. Scholars acknowledge that organizational culture,– i.e. a set of shared values, beliefs, and norms that influence employees’ mindset and behaviors (Schein, 2010) – is key to overcoming resistance to change since it has the potential to show an organization’s members how to perceive and act (Schein, 2010).

In 1947, the father of social psychology, Kurt Lewin, advanced the seminal theory of change, which conceptualizes change as a process with three phases. (1) Unfreezing: this phase involves preparing the organization for change by breaking down existing mindsets, structures, and routines. Unfreezing can be achieved by communicating the need for change, creating a sense of urgency, and challenging the status quo. (2) Change process: once the organization is in a “thawing” state, it moves into the change phase, during which new procedures, structures, or ways of doing things are introduced. This phase may include changes in technology, roles, responsibilities, or organizational culture. Marked by uncertainty and ambiguity, this phase requires effective communication and support to address concerns and facilitate a smooth transition. (3) Refreeze: the final phase aims to stabilize the organization in its new state; it is about reinforcing and solidifying the changes introduced in the previous phase. The objective is to achieve stability by establishing a new equilibrium in which change is embedded in the organizational culture. This phase includes implementing new policies and procedures, providing training and support, and reinforcing desired behaviors.

2.2 Organizational change toward a circular economy: drivers and resistance factors

The transition to the CE has been increasingly investigated by organizational scholars. Bertassini *et al.* (2021) explore the organizational behavioral side of the CE transition and advance a theoretical framework that addresses the needs for the transition toward the CE from an organizational perspective. The framework has five components (i.e. mindsets, values, behavior, capabilities, and competencies) that are interconnected and influence each other, and all of them are involved in the transition toward the CE. The latter requires managerial commitment, as managers are expected to implement and spread circular competencies and capabilities to the entire organization (Centobelli *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, companies in transition to the CE tend to face conflicting issues and therefore need to implement organizational initiatives to overcome tensions such as introducing cognitively diverse managerial roles and collaborating with actors along the value chain (Tosi *et al.*, 2024). Very recently, Graessler *et al.* (2024) highlighted that the literature on organizational change toward the CE appears fragmented, as scholars adopt different conceptual and research approaches and differ in the levels of analysis they target. The authors summarize the drivers and barriers found in the literature in the OCCE, at the individual, team, organizational, and network levels.

Here, we aim to overcome the fragmented scenario by offering an holistic view on drivers and RtC factors thus addressing the following research question: “How can organizations transition toward the CE? Which are the drivers and resistance to change factors?”

In Table 1 below we illustrate the drivers and resistance factors as very recently summarized by Graessler *et al.* (2024).

Table 1.
Key drivers and
resistance factors
to OCCE

	Drivers to OCCE	Resistance factors to OCCE
Organizational level	<p>Culture, values, and beliefs: role of a participative organizational culture (Bertassini <i>et al.</i>, 2021) spread of circular values and stimulate motivation to adhere to circular principles (Svensson and Funck, 2019)</p> <p>Systems and metrics: green human resource management (including environmental recruitment and eco-focused trainings (Chiappetta Jabbour <i>et al.</i>, 2019). Environmental awards and performance measurement systems are proposed to evaluate circular goals (e.g. Sarja <i>et al.</i>, 2021) Innovation and experimentation capabilities as key enablers of OCCE (e.g. Hofmann and Jaeger-Erben, 2020; Lehtimäki <i>et al.</i>, 2020). Avoid silo-thinking and foster collaboration (e.g. Hofmann and Jaeger-Erben, 2020) Stakeholder engagement and participative management (e.g. Wiesner <i>et al.</i>, 2018)</p>	<p>Linear structures and thinking as they can result in path-dependency and lock-in (e.g. Lehtimäki <i>et al.</i>, 2020)</p>

Source(s): Adapted from Graessler *et al.* (2024)

According to the review by Graessler *et al.* (2024), drivers and resistance factors in the transition process toward the CE have rarely been investigated, and studies to date have not considered a multilevel perspective. Here, we address this research gap through a processual and empirical study involving different organizational levels (top management, middle management, operational level).

While these studies provide valuable insights into OCCE, they often treat organizations as single-level entities, overlooking the understanding of the process resulting from the interactions among various organizations' levels. Our study addresses this gap by examining OCCE through a multi-level lens, considering top management, middle management, and operational staff, as well as the overall organizational drivers and barriers encountered in the CE transition.

We do so by considering a case in the fashion industry as the transition toward CE is emerging as a priority in this industry since it is a high-polluting one (Mishra *et al.*, 2021) and it is characterized by a high level of consumption of natural resources and a consequential significant impact on the environment (Parisi *et al.*, 2015). OCCE differs from traditional organizational changes because it is more iterative and experimental, and it requires a systemic approach spanning all levels of an organization (Graessler *et al.*, 2024). Thus, the fashion industry presents a proper context for investigating OCCE due to its rapid product cycles, global supply chains, and increasing consumer demand for sustainability (Napier and Sanguineti, 2018). These factors underline the pressure from the market, while at the same time laying the ground for entrepreneurial opportunities in CE (Re and Magnani, 2022) as well as the spread of innovative sustainable business models (Todeschini *et al.*, 2017). For example, innovative business models like clothing rental may be introduced by established fashion firms and can coexist with traditional business models thus offering interesting examples of how CE principles can be introduced (Gray *et al.*, 2022).

3. Methodology

This study aims to investigate how organizations transition toward the CE, and which factors are the main drivers of and resistance to change factors in this process. The

exploratory nature of the research question requires a qualitative methodology (Patton, 1989). We opt for a single in-depth case study of a fashion firm that was born with a sustainable business model and that is in transition toward the CE. Choosing a single case instead of a multiple case study allows us to be more focused and analyze in detail the drivers and resistance to change factors at each organizational level.

We adopt a processual approach (Langley, 1999; Langley *et al.*, 2013) to uncover the drivers and resistance to change factors by involving multiple informants at different organizational levels (i.e. top and middle management, and operational levels). The complexity of process data requires the adoption of a strategy for sensemaking. Among the ones advanced by Langley (1999), we opt for the visual mapping, that is the most suitable for our purposes as it allows the “simultaneous representation of a large number of dimensions, and they can easily be used to show precede how precedence, parallel processes, and the passage of time” (Langley, 1999, p. 700).

Finally, we adopt an abductive approach (Magnani and Gioia, 2023) by continuously going “back and forth” (Dubois and Gadde, 2002, p. 555) from theory to data (our case study) and vice versa, to search novel conceptual insights (Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021).

3.1 Data collection

We started our data collection in 2023. We began our search by consulting reports and websites regarding fashion firms implementing changes toward the CE, such as the use of sustainable materials as input, and the post-consumer clothing collection and recycling. From the website Retail Institute Italy, we found out that six firms have led the foundation of the Erion Textiles consortium, which aims to drive the pursuit of sustainability goals in the fashion sector, while at the same time it acts as an interlocutor in the path towards Extended Producer Responsibility. This means that these firms are highly committed towards CE. Among them, we choose one that could be considered an “exemplar case” of the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015), i.e. a firm constantly implementing CE-related changes for the transition toward the CE: Save The Duck. This firm emerged as ideal for our analysis since it was founded with a sustainable mission and it has taken several steps towards a CE, to the point that it is considered a forerunner for circularity in the Italian fashion industry [1]. As the first Italian fashion company to acquire B Corp certification in 2019, it demonstrates industry leadership in sustainable practices. The company’s holistic approach to circularity, encompassing materials, product design, supply chain management, and end-of-life considerations, provides a rich context for studying OCCE across multiple dimensions. Moreover, the firm’s knowledgeable informants at different organizational levels (i.e. top and middle management, and operational levels) declared themselves available for in-depth interviews.

Overall, our data collection combines real-time with retrospective data ranging from the firm’s foundation (2012) to the present (2024). We collected data from both primary and secondary sources (Table 2). The primary data included six in-depth interviews at the top management (Sustainability manager), middle management and operational levels. These interviews were conducted via Zoom between June 2023 and March 2024.

To interview our informants, we employed a semi-structured interview scheme that included the following questions: (1) what are the organizational objectives in terms of transition towards the CE? (2) could you describe the organizational process of transition toward the CE and the main CE-oriented changes since the firm’s foundation? (3) what are the main internal drivers of the organizational change towards the CE? Provide some examples. (4) what are the organizational resistance factors during this transition? How have they been overcome? Provide some examples, (5) which changes occur throughout this transition in terms of organizational culture?

Table 2.
Data collection: data
sources

		Interviewee's role	Organizational level	Details	Length
Primary data	In-depth interviews	Sustainability Manager	Top Management	N. 2 interviews, June 2023/Feb2024	60'/50'
		Communication Manager	Middle Management	N. 1 interview, Feb24	80'
		Product Manager	Middle Management	N. 1 interview, Feb24	70'
		Interior and Product Designer	Operational level	N. 1 interview, Mar24	60'
		Responsible for e-commerce	Operational level	N. 1 interview, Mar24	60'
Secondary data	Sustainability Report 2022			N. 167 pages	/
	Company's data from Orbis database and firm's website			/	/

Source(s): Authors own work

3.2 Data analysis

We began our data analysis by carefully reading and rereading the interview transcripts. We then analyzed each interview by manually coding the interviewees' sentences according to our three variables of interest: (1) CE-oriented changes from the firm's foundation to the present; (2) drivers of CE changes; and (3) resistance factors to CE change.

By following a processual approach, we employed a visual mapping strategy (Langley, 1999) to illustrate our data, highlight the process, and include the different dimensions under investigation, i.e. CE-oriented changes, drivers of CE changes, and resistance to CE changes. We started our analysis by visualizing the data in a processual way by detailing the firm's historical events from its foundation in 2012 until today along a horizontal arrow. Then, we identified a set of changes in the firm's CE orientation that the firm introduced/implemented over time, and finally, we highlighted the firm's drivers and resistance to change occurring at the organizational level (Graessler *et al.*, 2024). To ensure internal validity, we triangulated our data source with secondary sources of information that include insights from the Sustainability Report 2022 (167 pages) and data from the Orbis database. Data triangulation (Denzin, 1978) is helpful in reducing the risk of retrospective bias (Jick, 1979), as employing multiple data sources allow to reconstruct events and processes also in the absence of primary data. We also opted for investigator triangulation (Jick, 1979), meaning that we shared and discussed the outcome of the data analysis within the research team.

4. Save The Duck: organizational change toward a CE

4.1 Context: OCCE in the fashion industry

Save The Duck is a fashion company founded in Milan in 2012 by Nicolas Bargi whose mission is to produce sustainably by avoiding the killing of animals to produce duvets and padding. The firm is increasingly investing in CE practices; for instance, it is using recycled/recovered and animal cruelty free raw materials at the core of the brand, and it encourages other actors to search for innovative and sustainable raw materials. Moreover, it has made a commitment to achieving carbon neutrality by 2030, and it was the first Italian fashion firm to acquire B Corp certification (in 2019). For these reasons, the firm represents an exemplar case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Patton, 2015).

The fashion industry is among the most polluting worldwide due to its high amount of carbon emissions, landfill waste, and wastewater production, and it is also well known for its

poor working conditions (United Nations, 2019). This industry now urgently needs to address the environmental and social impacts it causes at the global level. To do so, the adoption of CE-oriented practices such as product take-back, reuse, upcycling, and recycling (Kant Hvass and Pedersen, 2019) is praised for being a concrete path in this direction (Colucci and Vecchi, 2021); however, extant research addressing the opportunities and challenges of its implementation is still fragmented (Colucci and Vecchi, 2021). Understanding how organizations can change toward the CE is thus of utmost importance for promoting sustainable development and reducing the harmful environmental impact that the fashion industry is causing on the planet.

Table 3 illustrates Save The Duck’s key facts and figures.

Here, we report our research findings. Through our interviewees’ responses, we could identify the main changes toward CE occurring from the firm’s foundation (2012) until today (2024). We employ a visual mapping strategy (Langley, 1999) to represent them. By adopting a processual perspective and involving different organizational levels, we unveil how firms change toward CE. We analyze them through Lewin’s theory of change and through the processes of unfreeze, change, and refreeze (see Figure 1).

4.2 Organizational change: unfreeze the change

Save The Duck was born with sustainability at the core of its mission, but with a narrow vision of that was mainly tied to the “animal-free” concept, as the firm aims to be a changemaker, playing an active part in the movement to reduce the exploitation of animals and the related impact toward the environment and the biodiversity.

The change phase started soon after the firm’s foundation in 2012, when the CEO spread his vision and his forward-thinking perspective across the organization and gave employees the freedom to try, experiment, and propose projects and ideas. This represented an important driver in enhancing the firm’s research and development activities: the process leads toward a key CE-oriented change, namely the research and adoption of sustainable materials through close collaboration with suppliers.

The CEO represents the engine of change toward the CE, as underlined by the sustainability manager:

The will always starts from our CEO Nicholas. Even the freedom that each employee has in proposing projects and ideas comes from the fact that he allows research and experimentation. The desire expressed by the CEO has always been to try to excel in everything they did and faced.

The CEO’s visionary leadership style allowed him to seize opportunities where others saw barriers (for instance, in building a network of partners committed to sustainability and

Year and place of foundation	Industry	N. of employees	Mission	Turnover (2022)
2012, Milan, (Italy)	Fashion	76	Save The Duck mission is to be timeless and relevant for its people, accompanying them in every journey they want to embark on. At Save The Duck luxury is a matter of quality of life and connection to the beauty of nature, making it a clash of sport-inspired and eco-activist attitude, the ultimate lifestyle companion	>56 million euro

Table 3.
Save The Duck: key facts and figures

Source(s): Authors own work

driving the change). Establishing external partnerships also played a pivotal role in unfreezing the change.

4.3 Organizational change: change toward the CE

The change process involved the engagement of top and middle management in the decision-making process to spread sustainability values across the organization. In 2017, the CEO wanted the creation of a sustainability team to play a leading role in the change toward CE. The team initially faced some resistance among colleagues, especially from colleagues of other teams, who initially did not understand the value added by the sustainability team. As highlighted by the sustainability manager:

Actually, look, I will give you an example: there was some resistance from colleagues, years ago when I started, to whom I proposed activities that required part of their working time and they told me – ‘ah but you’re just making us lose time, so what counts is the part of the work that we do, which is what keeps the company going’. Well, some years later, the same people instead began to use what we proposed as an additional leverage.

Internal resistance has been gradually overcome through continuous internal communication explanations of the “why” underlying the need to change toward the CE. Additionally, hiring young people has allowed the firm to overcome internal resistance toward the CE, as young talent is familiar with environmental issues. As stated by the sustainability manager:

Now there is a group of very young new hires who are a great lifeblood because they see the potential of sustainability and embrace it as their cause. Very often they choose to work in Save The Duck for this reason.

The enthusiasm of the new generations for sustainability makes it easier to develop an organizational culture that has sustainability at its core and to overcome the resistance stemming from the lack of the same level of commitment to sustainability at all organizational levels. As highlighted by those responsible for e-commerce:

The sustainability team is the driver of this change toward circular practices; however, this change needs to get to be shared by all company functions and at all organizational levels.

A key step in the change process consists in developing new sustainable materials, which means also shifting from aesthetic research to the sustainability of materials.

As highlighted by the product manager:

Before my work was above all a beauty search; therefore, I was more concentrated on making beautiful garments, and I did more research on aesthetics. Now I research materials together with suppliers to create a sustainable product.

Suppliers are directly involved in this search for sustainability, and their role can become so crucial that they become co-creators of the firm’s new products. Internally, this turnaround had a significant impact at the operational level, as it fostered a sustainability-oriented mindset among employees and encouraged the adoption of more responsible behaviors in the workplace.

The search for new materials has not been devoid of internal discussions that slowed down the process. As highlighted by the product manager:

when we were looking for recycled material we asked suppliers many questions (for example “where does the recycled material come from”, “from which plastic bottles” and so on) and these questions generate internal discussions, which take up a lot of time – for example, sometimes I also argue with my colleague on these issues (for example, regarding the certifications to be given to suppliers).

4.4 Organizational change: refreeze the change

In the “refreeze” phase, overcoming the resistance factors was a priority for the firm to consolidate the path toward CE. Structural change was at the core of this effort as it was not easy to accustom the employees to core changes as the birth of the sustainability team and the shift from a family business to a structured company with more hierarchical and formal relationships and the demanding request to bring innovative solutions to the organizations.

Moreover, a key barrier that the firm had to face in the refreeze phase was that the adoption of CE practices was not straightforward, as it required changing habits and mindsets, thus meeting a certain internal reluctance during the transition, as already underlined. Thus, to create a shared culture based on sustainability lasting over time, it is necessary to involve all organizational members in the CE and encourage the commitment of all organizational levels toward CE. As highlighted by the sustainability manager:

Regarding the discussion of circularity and ethical behavior towards the planet and biodiversity, there are some who are a little reticent and are unable to have such a broad vision. Unfortunately, creating culture is sometimes not enough to break down walls that were built many years ago. It's not easy to change people's beliefs, especially when it comes to such abstract topics as circularity.

The efforts made in this direction to build an organizational culture focused on sustainability have made it possible to implement key CE-oriented change such as investing in eco-design and developing products that are long-lasting and increasingly recyclable.

To refreeze the change, employees' engagement at all organizational levels may still need to be increasingly fostered through appropriate communication and training courses that are currently missing, as underlined by the Interior and Product Designer:

The objectives achieved and the sustainability path that the company undertakes are shared with the company's staff, but no training courses or activities are carried out in this regard.

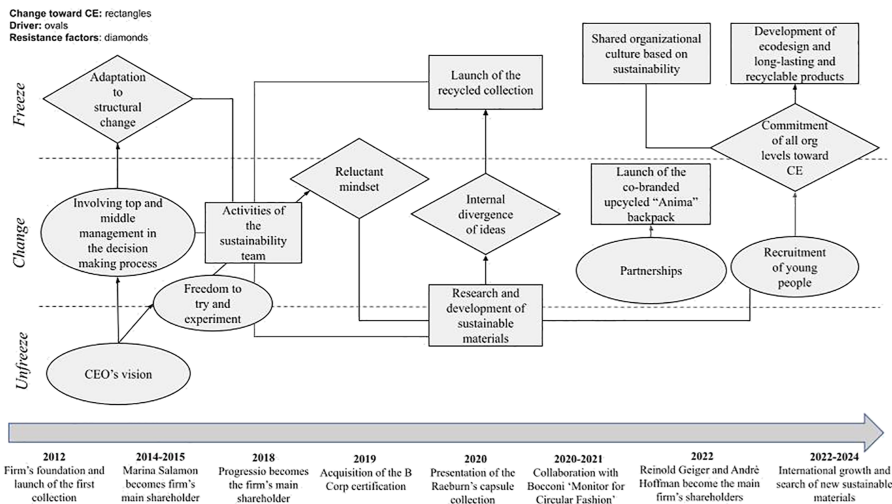
Thus, developing an organizational culture based on sustainability requires constant effort to develop a CE-oriented vision. As explained by the sustainability manager:

Over time the resistances always remain the same. People change but it is always a question of vision. We need to break down the walls of the visions that everyone has, which are often narrow and therefore it is more difficult to make them open to new horizons by explaining to them how broad the project can be and how much potential for development and growth there can be with respect to their scope, continuing the research and development activities on these topics. Figure 1 illustrates a processual perspective of Save The Duck's organizational change toward the CE. The form of the boxes shows whether the event described represents a key change toward CE (rectangle), a driver (oval) or a resistance factor (diamond).

5. Discussion

Our findings reveal the process of organizational change towards the CE by highlighting the drivers and resistance to change factors under the lenses of Lewin's theory of change. This theory enables tracking the process starting from unfreezing the status quo, transitioning through the phase of change, and concluding with refreezing it. While Graessler *et al.* (2024) theoretically summarize these factors at the organizational level, we empirically observe their emergence.

Our findings reveal several drivers highlighted in current literature and reported in Table 1. For instance, innovation and experimentation capabilities (Hofmann and Jaeger-Erben, 2020) manifest as the freedom to try and experiment, enabling all employees to advance projects and ideas, fostering a culture of trial and error. Similarly, stakeholder engagement (Wiesner *et al.*, 2018) is exemplified by suppliers becoming co-creators of sustainable materials, enhancing the firm's sustainability initiatives.



Source(s): Authors own work

Figure 1.
The Save The Duck
case study: a
processual perspective
of organizational
change toward the CE

Green human resource management (Chiappetta Jabbour *et al.*, 2019) takes on a different facet, particularly in recruiting young people, who often choose to work for the firm precisely for its orientation toward sustainability. This driver is specific to the CE context as the youngest are more committed to sustainability issues (Kadic-Magljajic *et al.*, 2019), and therefore their recruitment is key to overcoming the reluctant mindset of those that are less committed and to developing an organizational culture oriented towards circularity.

The dissemination of circular values in the organizational culture (Bertassini *et al.*, 2021) can be further enhanced through *ad hoc* training programs involving all organizational levels, fostering a participative organizational culture (Bertassini *et al.*, 2021) and stimulating motivation to adhere to circular principles (Svensson and Funck, 2019). This goal is achieved also through the involvement of top and middle management in the decision-making process: in doing so, the CEO's vision regarding sustainability objectives spreads deeper within the organization (Svensson and Funck, 2019). While acknowledging that this driver may apply also to other contexts, we see its importance in the transition to CE as the latter – due to its holistic nature – requires the alignment and engagement across all organizational levels.

Regarding the resistance factors, which have received less attention in the current literature (Graessler *et al.*, 2024), our study allows us to make them emerge empirically. We identify four of them, i.e. adaptation to structural change, reluctant mindset, internal divergence of ideas, and commitment of all organizational levels toward a CE.

Adaptation to structural change refers to needed adjustments arising when the change towards a CE involves changes in the organizational structure (for instance, through the creation of the sustainability team or through hierarchical changes). Reluctant mindset is related to the barriers (individual, team-level, and organizational) toward change that arise when the value of change is not yet understood. Explaining the “why” underlying the change process may be a possible path to turn reluctance into involvement. Commitment of all organizational levels toward CE regards the need for shared alignment concerning the objectives and the actions required to pursue them. As already underlined, fostering the engagement of all levels in the CE requires *ad hoc* communication and training programs that firms undertaking the process can implement.

We finally highlight that in unfreezing change the role of the founder (and CEO)'s vision is considered by all organizational levels as pivotal. This aspect underlines the importance played by transformational leadership in initiating change.

6. Conclusion

This paper contributes to the emerging literature on “organizational change toward a circular economy” (OCCE) by providing a processual analysis of organizational change toward the CE.

Through an in-depth exploratory study of a fashion firm in transition toward the CE, we were able to identify drivers and resistance factors and to offer a visual map of our findings to graphically show the change toward the CE and the drivers and resistance to change factors that have thus far been under investigated at the organizational level (Graessler *et al.*, 2024).

We identify novel key drivers and resistance factors at the organizational level. Regarding the former, we reveal the involvement of top and middle management in the decision-making process and the recruitment of young people. For the resistance factors, we identify adaptation to structural change, reluctant mindset, internal divergence of ideas, and commitment of all organizational levels to the CE.

As the first study to perform an empirical analysis of organizational change toward the CE in the fashion industry, this paper provides relevant theoretical and managerial contributions.

6.1 Theoretical contribution

From a theoretical perspective, we contribute to organization studies regarding organizational change toward a CE (Bertassini *et al.*, 2021; Sarja *et al.*, 2021) by offering an empirical study regarding driver and resistance factors within OCCE that are to date missing in the extant literature (Graessler *et al.*, 2024).

By applying Lewin's change management theory to the context of OCCE in the fashion industry, our study offers a structured and processual understanding of the CE transition through the lenses of unfreezing, changing, and refreezing stages. Through the adoption of a processual and multi-level perspective on OCCE, our study captures the drivers and RtC factors from an organizational perspective that are currently underinvestigated (Graessler *et al.*, 2024), yet that are key to understanding how firms can move towards a “strong circularity” (Bocken *et al.*, 2023). The insights gained from this holistic perspective suggest that successful CE transitions require more than just strategic vision from top management: they rather need active engagement across all levels of the organization. Our study shows that CE transition is not merely a top-down process, nor it is confined to isolated initiatives within specific departments. Rather, it necessitates broad-based engagement and alignment across the whole organization. Linked to this, our research identifies the recruitment of younger employees as a significant driver of CE adoption, reflecting their stronger commitment to sustainability issues (Kadic-Magljajlic *et al.*, 2019). This insight adds a demographic dimension to the understanding of OCCE, suggesting that generational differences within the workforce can play a role in shaping the pace and success of these transitions.

6.2 Practical implications

Our study offers valuable insights for organizations aiming to transition towards a CE. Our findings underscore the critical role of visionary leadership, particularly stemming from the CEO, in driving CE transition. Leaders should articulate a clear vision for sustainability, foster a culture of experimentation, and actively identify opportunities for CE implementation. Moreover, our results suggest that organizational culture plays a fundamental role in supporting CE transition. Creating a dedicated sustainability team to

coordinate CE initiatives and counter the internal resistance, fostering the engagement of all organizational levels in CE initiatives, developing training programs to enhance CE knowledge and skills throughout the organization, and recruiting young talents are some of the key recommendations we posit to firms aiming to start the process of CE transition. Finally, we highlight that to overcome or reduce the effect of resistance to change, it is of fundamental importance to enhance communication. Constant and effective internal communication explaining the rationale behind CE initiatives, sharing sustainability achievements, and developing structured training courses on sustainability and CE can maintain engagement and motivation across all organizational levels.

6.3 Limitations and future avenues for research

The paper presents some limitations. First, our research is based on a single in-depth case study, which, while allowing for rich, detailed exploration, inherently limits the statistical generalizability of our findings. Focusing just on one organization located in a specific industry and geographical context means that our results may not be directly applicable to all organizational settings. Firms belonging to other industries would probably show different patterns of change due to industry-specific drivers and barriers. Also, the institutional and geographical contexts of our case study inevitably influence the cognitive and cultural aspects of the drivers and barriers we identified. Then, our research provides a processual yet not longitudinal view of OCCE, thus not fully capturing the long-term dynamics of the phenomenon.

These limitations open up avenues for further research. We suggest future studies to investigate OCCE in a wider range of organizations, including those of different sizes, from small and medium enterprises to large multinational corporations with multiple organizational levels, and ideally located in different geographical contexts. This would help identify which aspects of OCCE are consistent across different organizational contexts and which are context-specific. Moreover, longitudinal studies observing OCCE over extended periods would provide deeper insights into the change process, capturing how drivers and barriers evolve over time, how organizations overcome challenges in the long term, and how the transition to circular economy practices unfolds across different stages.

Note

1. <https://www.esg360.it/circular-economy/fashion-made-in-italy-a-che-punto-siamo-con-la-circularita-la-misurano-bocconi-e-enel-x/>

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Further reading

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