Received 26 February 2024
Revised 26 August 2024
27 November 2024
16 April 2025
Accepted 27 May 2025

Humorous anecdotes and personified dramatization: how managers and the media discursively legitimize organizational change

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Abstract

Purpose – When introducing new ideas, a critical issue for top managers is to establish and maintain the legitimacy of the change they bring about. In this study, we explore how top managers can discursively legitimize organizational change by establishing a change narrative in interviews and media appearances. We also investigate the role of the media as an influential actor in and of itself in this legitimation process and compare and contrast its legitimation strategies with those of the top managers.

Design/methodology/approach – We undertook a case study of the adoption of the "agile" management fashion in the largest financial organization in Finland. We conducted seven interviews with its top management and collected over one hundred media texts of the organizational change, of which we selected the 36 most relevant for critical discourse analysis.

Findings – We found that the top management legitimized the adoption of agile and the accompanying organizational change through humorous anecdotes and an overarching narrative that presented "the new organization" and its agile culture as superior to "the old organization" and its hierarchical culture. We also found that the media dramatized and personified the change as "the old CEO vs. the new CEO," which complemented – and at times, complicated – the top management's strategies of legitimation.

Originality/value – We extend the framework of discursive legitimation strategies and contribute by uncovering how managers and the media can discursively legitimize organizational change and by examining their interaction. We also contribute by presenting the media as an influential discursive actor in its own right within the legitimizing process, not merely as a broadcaster of managerial discourse. Our study underscores the importance of coherent communication from top management and the potential impact of media narratives on the success of organizational change initiatives.

Keywords Qualitative research, Organizational change, Critical discourse analysis, Agile, Discursive legitimation

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Newly appointed chief executive officers (CEOs) often introduce ideas for organizational change when they enter their jobs (e.g. Chiu *et al.*, 2016; Greiner and Bhambri, 1989; Miller, 1993). This tendency is partly because new leaders often face pressure to demonstrate their competence and effectiveness, which cannot be achieved by merely maintaining the status quo (Ocasio and Kim, 1999). Additionally, they may be implicitly or explicitly encouraged to rejuvenate the organization by the board that appointed them (Westphal and Fredrickson,

The authors would like to thank Timo Ritakallio for fact-checking and for granting permission to identify him by name in the article, as well as Maija Laaksonen and Milla Mäki for their help with practical matters throughout the research.

Journal of Organizational Change Management
Vol. 38 No. 8, 2025
pp. 120-137
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 1758-7816
p-ISSN: 0953-4814
DOI 10.1108/JOCM-02-2024-0098

2001), and they are also likely to identify existing issues within the organization that their fresh ideas could address (Miller, 1993).

Many of these new ideas enjoy contemporary popularity in management and can thus be labeled management fashions, "transitory collective beliefs that certain management techniques are at the forefront of management progress" (Abrahamson, 1996, p. 254). When implementing any organizational change, but especially when it is based on a management idea that is currently in fashion, top managers must engage in legitimizing the change to employees, external audiences, and even to themselves (Wilhelm and Bort, 2013). Legitimation is crucial as it "serves to justify decisions to oneself and to others" (Demers *et al.*, 2003, p. 224), and this process typically involves corporate communication and discursive practices, which play a central role in legitimation (e.g. Demers *et al.*, 2003; Jansson, 2014; Jaynes, 2015). Such practices include interviews and press releases, where top managers work to construct a coherent narrative and establish a rationale for the change.

The media also plays an important role in legitimizing organizational change (e.g. Lamertz and Baum, 1998; Vaara and Tienari, 2008; Vaara *et al.*, 2006), because it is a powerful actor in setting the agenda of public discourse and framing the way we think about societal issues and events (Entman, 2007; Staw and Epstein, 2000; van Dijk, 1995). Media accounts of organizational change provide visibility to change initiatives, but the media can also create their own legitimation narratives, which might support the "official" company story but can also diverge from it or even delegitimize the change – and the narrative strategy chosen by the media is ultimately beyond the organization's control (Bednar, 2012; Tienari *et al.*, 2003).

In this article, we present a case study on how the organizational transformation into a more "agile" company was legitimized in OP Financial Group (OP), the largest financial institution in Finland, by its top management. Led by the new CEO, the adoption of agile represented a radical strategic shift only two years after the grand unveiling of the previous strategy by the former CEO. Thus, the transformation necessitated "discursive legitimation" (Vaara *et al.*, 2006) to assert that agile was not merely another flavor-of-the-month managerial fad. Accordingly, our study explores how top managers use discourse to legitimize the adoption of management fashions when implementing organizational change. We demonstrate how OP's top management legitimized agile through the discursive strategies of narrativization and rationalization, particularly by sharing humorous anecdotes which cast "the old organization" and its hierarchical culture in a questionable light compared to "the new organization," which was portrayed as less rigid and therefore better suited to operate in the changing business environment.

As OP's organizational change received widespread attention in the Finnish press, we also examine how the media can participate in the legitimation of organizational change and the adoption of management fashions – and at times, make coherent legitimation of the desired change more difficult. In our case, we contend that the media dramatized and personified the change at OP as "the old CEO vs. the new CEO," which complemented but also complicated the top management's strategies of legitimation.

Thus, our study is positioned at the intersection of organizational legitimation studies (e.g. Landau *et al.*, 2014; Suchman, 1995) and media discourse studies (e.g. Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1995). While some researchers have previously examined how managers legitimize change (e.g. Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2008; Green, 2004; Kotter, 1995; Suchman, 1995) and others have explored how the media legitimizes change (e.g. Bednar, 2012; Lamertz and Baum, 1998; Vaara *et al.*, 2006), few studies make the comparison between the two and their interplay. To address this gap in the literature, we contribute by comparing and contrasting the roles of top management and the media in discursively legitimizing organizational change. Exploring the legitimation strategies of managers and the media concurrently is important because there exists a symbiotic relationship between top managers who need "access to public discourse" and the media which needs "access to communicative events," and together these two sides hold significant power over how organizational change is perceived by the public (van Dijk, 1995, pp. 11–12).

Additionally, while previous studies have found that the media tends to discursively legitimize organizational change by referring to authoritative actors such as "the markets" and "experts" (e.g. Vaara *et al*., 2006) or by reproducing managerial narratives (e.g. Tienari *et al*., 2003), our contribution lies in specifically examining the conclusions that journalists themselves draw from managerial communications and actions. This aspect of our research is particularly important because it sheds light on the media's active role in shaping public perception and the discourse around organizational change, rather than merely echoing the views of others. Our message is that there is an "official" legitimation story that the company promotes to employees and external audiences, that top managers also need to legitimize the change to themselves, and that the media creates its own legitimation narrative, which might support the official story but also diverge from it and complicate the legitimation process – and this narrative is ultimately beyond the company's control.

Legitimation of organizational change

Legitimation by managers

Quigley and Hambrick (2012) argue that CEO change provides an opportunity for organizations to change trajectories and reduce "organizational inertia" by renewing their culture and routines. When a new CEO is appointed, there is an expectation for them to prove their worthiness quickly, and the boards that appoint new CEOs typically expect them to inject new life into the organizations (Westphal and Fredrickson, 2001). This necessitates moving beyond the status quo (Ocasio and Kim, 1999) and introducing ideas for organizational change (Chiu *et al*., 2016; Greiner and Bhambri, 1989; Miller, 1993).

When introducing these new ideas, one critical issue for top managers is to establish and maintain the *legitimacy* of their organization, themselves, and the change they bring about (e.g. Kostova and Zaheer, 1999; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Legitimation is the process by which top managers gain acceptance and support for change initiatives from stakeholders both within and outside the organization (Suchman, 1995). According to Landau *et al*. (2014, p. 1322), "achieving and sustaining legitimacy is a crucial managerial task particularly during periods of change because the organization may shed taken-for-granted characteristics such as structure, products, services, or even identity, while seeking to retain stakeholders' endorsement, support, and resources." Institutional theory suggests that organizations gain legitimacy by conforming to the rules and belief systems prevalent in their environment (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Therefore, by aligning organizational change with widely accepted norms, values, and trends, top managers can enhance the perceived appropriateness and necessity of the change.

Many of the new ideas for organizational change can be labeled as *management fashions*, temporary collective beliefs that certain management practices or principles represent the cutting edge of management progress (Abrahamson, 1996). These fashions are appealing because they are seen as modern and innovative solutions that can potentially propel the organization forward. However, according to the management fashion perspective, although top managers are expected to make knowledgeable and rational decisions, they frequently act with limited knowledge, imitate other companies, or follow the advice of management consultancies (Abrahamson, 1991). Thus, when top managers adopt management fashions, there is an increased need to legitimize their decisions to convince themselves and others of the fashion's legitimacy and of the rationality of the organizational change it brings (Wilhelm and Bort, 2013).

One way to do this is to engage in the "discursive legitimation" (Vaara *et al*., 2006) of new organizational models and practices to appear legitimate in the eyes of various stakeholders (Demers *et al*., 2003; Wilhelm and Bort, 2013). Discursive legitimation refers to the process by which organizations or leaders seek to justify their actions through discourse. It involves the deployment of various strategies in text and talk, such as normalization, moralization, authorization, rationalization, and narrativization, to gain acceptance and approval from audiences (Vaara *et al*., 2006; van Leeuwen, 2007). First and foremost, top managers in organizations are expected to behave rationally; Green (2004) suggests that the acceptance of change depends on how effectively managers can discursively rationalize its adoption. When the managerial justifications used to rationalize change are taken for granted, the change then becomes institutionalized as a new norm.

Further, top managers often construct multiple persuasive narratives around organizational change (Green, 2004; Landau *et al*., 2014), such as trying to establish a sense of urgency or inevitability for the change and creating a vision of the improved organization (Kotter, 1995). They may also employ narratives that depict the change as essential for survival or as an opportunity for growth (Heracleous and Barrett, 2001). Managers also tend to use metaphors and analogies to simplify complex changes – for instance, describing a merger as a "marriage" between companies (Demers *et al*., 2003). These narratives influence both the cognitive and the normative legitimacy of the change. Cognitive legitimacy is achieved when the change is perceived as necessary and inevitable, while normative legitimacy is related to the moral alignment of the change with societal norms (Suchman, 1995). Additionally, in the organizational change literature, there is an emerging "strategy-as-discourse" perspective, which highlights the importance of discursive processes to strategic change (Jansson, 2014; Jaynes, 2015). This perspective is concerned with how organizational actors discursively position strategic change within a broader societal context, drawing from "grand discourses" such as globalization and digitalization, which are assumed to be universal truths (Jaynes, 2015).

Legitimation by the media

A key intermediary that disseminates information from organizations to the general public is the media. Although its role as the gatekeeper for societal discourse has been disrupted by social media, the media remains a powerful legitimating actor. It can set the agenda for discussions and frame them through its own interpretation (Entman, 2007), select the perspectives it highlights and ignores (van Dijk, 1995), and promote or reject the realities that other actors aim to construct (Fairclough, 1995).

Staw and Epstein (2000) discovered that although companies associated with popular management ideas in the media did not necessarily show better economic results, they were still viewed more favorably, considered more innovative, and received higher ratings in management quality. Consequently, the media also plays an important role in the constitution of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of organizational change (Lamertz and Baum, 1998; Vaara and Tienari, 2008). The media can make the change appear more relevant and urgent by emphasizing its alignment with broader trends, and it can help in constructing a perception that the change is logically sound through selective presentation of facts, expert opinions, and success stories. Additionally, the media can act as broadcasters of management ideas (Barros and Rüling, 2019; Nijholt *et al*., 2014; Scarbrough *et al*., 2005), which serves to legitimize the ideas themselves.

Overall, positive media coverage can serve as a powerful tool for organizations to get across the reasons, expected benefits, and processes associated with a change (Bednar, 2012), and managers can thus use the media for communicating organizational changes and establishing their legitimacy in the eyes of both internal and external audiences (Ylä-Anttila, 2022). Top managers "have legitimate formal power" and "their talk and actions are often the primary focus of media attention" (Tienari *et al*., 2003, p. 379), so they are a key source of direct quotes and expert interviews which the media uses for their reporting. This can lead to a symbiotic relationship where media coverage helps to disseminate the managerial perspective and increase its legitimacy (van Dijk, 1995). However, few studies of discursive legitimation incorporate both managerial and media perspectives, comparing the two and examining their interplay. Further, those that do investigate the role of the media (e.g. Tienari *et al*., 2003; Vaara *et al*., 2006) often show that it tends to refer to authoritative actors such as "the markets" and "experts" or simply reproduces managerial narratives by directly quoting top managers or official company press releases. In contrast, we were specifically interested in exploring the conclusions that journalists themselves draw from managerial communications and actions, and how these narratives, actively constructed by the media, differ from those of the top managers and shape the perceptions of an organizational change. Accordingly, we set out to answer the following research questions: *How do top managers legitimize organizational change and the adoption of management fashions? What is the role of the media in this legitimation process?* We explored these questions in the context of OP Financial Group, a Finnish financial company that adopted the management fashion of agile – an organizational change which was subject to widespread interest in the Finnish media.

Research context: adopting agile at OP Financial Group

OP Financial Group

Our case company OP Financial Group is the largest financial services group in Finland. As of December 2021, it consisted of 121 independent cooperative banks and the central cooperative, i.e. headquarters. The group has three business segments: Retail Banking, Corporate Banking, and Insurance. Its share of the Finnish markets is around 40% in both mortgage and corporate loans and 33% in non-life insurance. In total, OP has more than 3.6 million banking customers – over half of the Finnish population – and a staff of over 13,000, making it the third-largest private sector employer in the country.

Compared to other industries, banking has traditionally remained quite stable. However, recent regulation – most notably the promotion of open banking – has made it more dynamic with new players from different industries entering the field. To respond to a changing industry landscape, including a growing number of *fintech* (financial technology) and *bigtech* competitors aiming to take advantage of the shift to mobile banking, OP initiated a major strategic shift under its previous leader in 2016 – and then another one in 2018 when Timo Ritakallio was appointed as the bank's new CEO.

2013–2018: the "diversified services company" strategy

The previous CEO of OP was appointed in 2007. His time at the helm of the group was largely characterized by a post-financial crisis macroeconomic and political environment: low interest rates, slow growth, and tightened regulation. Banks could no longer rely on their traditional earning models, but instead they needed to come up with new ways to stay profitable amidst the technological disruption of the financial industry. Accordingly, OP began rebuilding its mission and role within the Finnish society as more than a financial institution by establishing a network of five private hospitals around Finland. The CEO explained:

> The decision to expand the health and wellbeing business fits our basic mission, as our focus is on promoting the prosperity and wellbeing of our customers. . . . We believe that the health and wellbeing services we provide will develop into a significant new operating area alongside our traditional business areas, that is, banking, non-life insurance and wealth management. (*Press release*, 10 November 2014.)

A new long-term strategy was unveiled in June 2016, when OP announced that it aimed to "gradually change from a plain financial services provider to a diversified services company of the digital era" and invest up to 2 billion euros in digitalization over the next five years (*Press release*, 10 June 2016). In line with its new purpose and strategic direction, OP planned to open medical centers across all Finnish regions to supplement its hospital network, and also expanded into the mobility services sector by introducing a range of car rental services.

2018 →: the "OP Agile" strategy

Timo Ritakallio started as OP's new CEO in March 2018. By June, he had outlined the ways in which he wanted to renew the organization: sharpening its strategic focus and simplifying the organizational structure. Instead of branching out to new business frontiers to find new ways to remain profitable in the rapidly digitalizing world, OP would redirect its focus on banking and insurance. In response to new agile competitors, the bank would transform itself into an agile organization as well. Agile is a flexible approach to work and organizing, where small, autonomous, and cross-functional teams reorganize their project work into short cycles and hold daily meetings to stay updated on each other's progress, changing direction as needed (Rigby *et al.*, 2016; Sutherland, 2014). It has recently gained popularity across various industries and functions – today, adopting agile is commonly seen as a way for organizations to become less hierarchical, more flexible, and more responsive to a fast-paced and constantly changing operating environment (Annosi *et al.*, 2020; Rigby *et al.*, 2016).

A radical change in OP's direction was thus crafted only two years after the grand unveiling of the previous one. In January 2019, OP officially kicked off one of the most ambitious change programs in its history: "OP Agile", a structural and cultural change into a more agile company where employees work in self-managed teams and where hierarchy and the number of decision-making levels were reduced. The aim of the change was to gradually transition "to an agile, self-managed operating model, which will give freedom and responsibility to teams, speed up decision-making, and guide the work according to customer needs" (*Press release*, 13 November 2018).

Methodology

Data collection

This study developed from a larger, longitudinal research project about OP's organizational change, during which the first author collected various data at OP between 2019 and 2021. The second author is a member of OP's top management team and was therefore closely involved with the agile transformation. Although her views might be somewhat biased towards showing the company in a positive light, this uniquely reflexive insider's perspective is nevertheless invaluable for the purposes of our study, as it enriches the quality of our insights in the form of "engaged scholarship" (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006; see, e.g. Hatch *et al.*, 2015, for a similar argument).

Our primary sources of data for this study were the transcripts of seven interviews with top managers and 36 selected newspaper and magazine articles in the Finnish press connected with OP's old or new strategy. As such, our data has similarities with Vaara *et al.* (2006), who also analyzed Finnish newspaper articles – however, a key distinction is that we also include interviews to account for the managerial and organizational perspectives on the organizational change. Further, we browsed through 11 years of press releases as supplementary data to the interviews and to establish the timeline of OP's organizational and strategic changes. Table 1 summarizes the types and amounts of our analyzed data.

Comparing and contrasting the interviews and media texts provided us with insights into two distinct change narratives that were somewhat complementary but approached the change from different perspectives, and they enabled us to form a more multivocal account of the legitimation of agile. As our focus was on the legitimation strategies of top managers and prominent news outlets, we excluded social media, middle managers, and front-line employees from the present study to limit the scope of our article and highlight the "official" communication strategy of OP's organizational change.

Table 1. The types and amounts of data analyzed

Type of data	Amount of data
Interviews	7 interviews with top managers, including CEO Timo Ritakallio, 2020
Press releases	14 relevant press releases, 2011–2021
Media texts	22 newspaper articles, 2016–2021, and 14 magazine articles, 2017–2021

Source(s): Authors' own work

The seven interviews with top managers were conducted by the first author in October and November 2020 and lasted 55 minutes on average. We recorded all interviews and transcribed them verbatim in Finnish – the native language of both the researchers and the interviewees. The purpose of the interviews was to gain an understanding of the managerial perspective on OP Agile and the argumentation for the organizational change.

We also manually searched the most prominent Finnish news outlets for all articles related to OP between the launch of the previous strategy in June 2016 and the quieting down of the reporting on OP's strategic turnaround around July 2021. This search resulted in well over a hundred articles and news stories, which we scanned for relevance, identifying the texts that had at least some connection with OP's organizational change. We included all articles that discussed OP as an organization, described its strategy or leadership, or speculated on its new direction. We excluded, for example, texts that solely focused on reporting OP's quarterly earnings or on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on OP's business. Table 2 describes our final sample of 36 media texts selected for further analysis.

Data analysis

To analyze the collected data, we engaged in critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA is a research approach concerned with language as a social practice, and it examines how language is used to construct social realities and the (re)production of power relations (van Dijk, 1993) in any kind of textual material such as media texts and interview transcriptions (Vaara and Tienari, 2004). CDA emphasizes "the importance of studying texts as concrete instances of discourse use and of analyzing the microlevel linguistic elements therein" (Vaara and Tienari, 2008, p. 986), so it is well-suited for analyzing the discursive legitimation of an organizational change (Vaara *et al*., 2006; Vaara and Tienari, 2008). The characteristics of CDA include an aim to reveal taken-for-granted assumptions, the critical examination of power relations between actors, being able to place specific texts in their contexts, and understanding intertextuality – the linkages between different texts and the broader discourse(s) around the phenomena under study (Vaara and Tienari, 2004). We consider legitimation through managerial discourse as an instance of the reproduction of power in this study (see also Siltaoja, 2009).

Besides exploring the top managers' discursive legitimation of the decision to adopt agile at OP, we also paid attention to the powerful role of the media "in the complex production, transmission, and consumption processes that create senses of legitimacy/illegitimacy around specific organizational phenomena" (Vaara *et al*., 2006, p. 806). Importantly, we did not take our data at face value, but also performed a critical reading "between the lines" to explore the underlying meanings of interviews and media texts. Overall, our purpose was to "understand the micro-level discursive strategies used in legitimating contemporary organizational phenomena" (Vaara *et al*., 2006, p. 789) – here, an organizational change and the adoption of a fashionable management idea.

Table 2. The media texts analyzed

Publication	Abbreviation	Description	No. of texts
Talouselämä	TE	The leading weekly business magazine	11
Helsingin Sanomat	HS	The leading daily newspaper	10
Kauppalehti	KL	The leading daily business newspaper	7
Maaseudun Tulevaisuus	MT	Local newspaper [lit. "Rural Future"]	4
Suomen Kuvalehti	SK	The leading weekly news magazine	3
Iltalehti	IL	One of the two largest daily tabloids	1
Total			*36*

Source(s): Authors' own work

As a first step, we thematically analyzed the interview transcripts and selected media texts, following on the footsteps of Vaara *et al*. (2006). To organize the data thematically, we applied Vaara *et al*.'s (2006) framework of *normalization* (referring to normal behavior), *authorization* (referring to an authority), *rationalization* (referring to utility or function), *moralization* (referring to specific values), and *narrativization* (legitimation through the telling of stories) to make sense of the discursive legitimation strategies. For example, we identified instances of rationalization in the interviews, such as "The essential issue was to simplify our organizational structure and agile is an excellent way to do it," and "Our product and service development was really slow and agile has helped with it." Similarly, we categorized as narrativization instances such as "In the old regime, people were considered resources who stood in a corner and waited to be used," and "I'm not saying we had a bad atmosphere, but we had a culture where you tried to catch someone making a mistake." From the media texts, we identified narrativization instances such as "Ritakallio is hammering away the [former CEO]'s kingdom" (*TE*, 14 February 2020) and "Ritakallio's strategy is also, as an end in itself, distancing from his predecessor's world" (*HS*, 13 November 2019) [1].

Through this thematic analysis, we uncovered the overarching discursive strategies of OP's top managers and the media – their similarities, differences, and the power relations between the two. We found that the managers primarily engaged in narrativization and rationalization by using humor to contrast the old and new organizational structures and cultures of OP, whereas the media focused on narrativization and normalization by "making it personal" in almost every article, preferring to contrast OP's old and new CEOs. Following this observation about the media, we further narrowed our analysis to media texts that were particularly rich in terms of this personification of OP's organizational change. We now turn to the managerial and media narratives of our case.

The discursive legitimation of OP Agile

Overall, we argue that there are two distinct perspectives on the legitimation of agile at OP, illustrating how the same story is told in two different ways. These perspectives are partly intertwined and partly utilize the same legitimation strategies, but they also differ in terms of general tone, depictions of power, and the narrative they aim to construct. We discuss these points below, first from the perspective of the managers and then from that of the media.

How top managers discursively legitimized OP Agile

Management ideas often involve specific narratives that aim to convey the reasoning behind their adoption. This rhetoric establishes the appearance – whether accurate or not – that the adoption of a new idea is part of the rational progress of the manager's profession over time (Abrahamson, 1996). Accordingly, the top managers at OP legitimized agile mainly through a combination of *narrativization*, "legitimation achieved through the telling of stories" (Van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999, p. 110), and *rationalization*, referring to the benefits and positive outcomes of agile. Many stories used humor as a rhetorical device and specifically focused on delegitimizing "the old organization" as sort of a bureaucratic nightmare – hierarchical, slow, and unpleasant. In contrast, "the new organization" was rationalized as able to better empower employees through self-managed teams and increased autonomy, which were supposedly what all employees wanted:

> Of course, these ideas behind agile, such as self-management – they are not horrible ideas from the perspective of any employee, right? Quite the contrary! (Manager)

In addition, the new organization was rationalized to be able to create more value for customers by focusing on OP's core competencies of banking and insurance. It was also portrayed as a logical next step after successful small experiments with agile in parts of the firm, especially in the mobile banking unit. The interviewees argued that agile had been the preferred way of organizing already before its large-scale adoption, but its adoption throughout the company was previously not possible due to a lack of interest by the previous top management:

> Agile worked well within the mobile development organization, but the issue was that the group's leadership was not at all interested in it. It ran into an impenetrable wall at that level. (Manager)

Overall, there was a clear distinction between the "old" and the "new" organizations in the managers' rhetoric, with life in the pre-agile organization told through tongue-in-cheek stories and absurd or ludicrous situations:

> In the old organization, it was extremely typical that when something had to be decided, 20 people were invited to a meeting and in the end, none of them could actually make the decision! That was the kind of culture we had back then. (Manager)

Thus, when Timo Ritakallio started as the new CEO, it only took three months for OP to announce that the organizational structure and culture would be reformed. However, when planning the new organization, the top management first needed to legitimize the change to themselves, which was not always easy:

> I remember this one planning meeting, where many of us expressed doubts about agile. And one of my colleagues, he was so frustrated with us that if we had decided not to implement the change, I think he would have not only stormed out of the meeting room but also left the whole company! . . . So, this gives you an idea of the feelings at the time, that implementing agile felt like a taking a leap into the unknown. (Manager)

In the end, the "official" narrative established by OP's top managers aimed to incorporate different rhetorical elements into one coherent and rational story arguing for the need to become agile. First, the problem in need of fixing was OP's highly hierarchical structure, which resulted in unnecessary bureaucracy, slow decision-making, and few opportunities for having one's voice heard:

> I remember counting that there used to be four or five levels of hierarchy before you got down to someone like a product manager of OP Mobile. And now in this new organization, there is one! (Manager)

Second, the desire for less bureaucracy was linked to the digitalization of the banking industry, which required a better ability to adjust to "the new rules of the game" – thus, OP should become more responsive to the external business environment. Third, the annual R&D costs of OP had almost quadrupled in just a few years, because the diversified service company strategy of 2016 had quickly produced many "mammoth" projects which stayed neither on schedule nor within budget. Agile was then presented as able solve these three issues: Decentralization and self-management would reduce bureaucracy and transfer decision-making power to employees, which would enable teams to react to changes in the external environment faster. This in turn would show as smaller development projects and operational efficiency, which would translate into customer value. Overall, the interviews convey a managerial narrative that agile was not merely a random fad that was adopted on a whim – there had been small-scale experimentation with agile inside OP already since 2011 and results were promising, so the organization-wide adoption of agile was therefore considered a rational and legitimate option when the top management was planning organizational renewal.

OP's management also chose to share the organizational change intention with the media very transparently right from the beginning, which was a bold strategy as there were no guarantees that OP would succeed in its efforts. According to the managerial narrative, however, wide media coverage strengthened the feeling within OP that the management was serious about the change. Moreover, the CEO claimed that since the topic was discussed in a fairly positive light in the media, it also made OP's personnel feel they were doing something that was important and valued by others:

> You'd think why not come out after the change is finished rather than talk about a work-in-progress, but all the external communication also strengthened our own people's beliefs. And it happened so that outside they also began talking like "They're going through a big change there, looks smart actually." So internally, it strengthens the feeling of "Wow! We're doing big and important things!" (CEO Timo Ritakallio)

How the media participated in the discursive legitimation of OP Agile

Only weeks after Timo Ritakallio started as the new CEO of OP, he was quoted in the media as saying: "Our greatest mistake would be to become too infatuated with the new and forget all that is old and strong. . . . Even though we are a big company, we too have our limits, and we cannot expand infinitely. . . . We cannot do everything with everyone." This was interpreted as a departure from OP's diversified services company strategy, and the press wrote how Ritakallio "reins in the bank's drive for expansion" (*MT*, 28 March 2018).

Pitting Ritakallio against the former CEO in every turn soon became the dominant angle for how the media approached OP's transformation. Sometimes this took the form of radical rhetoric such as "The new CEO Timo Ritakallio is throwing his predecessor [former CEO]'s strategy into the trash bin" (*IL*, 27 March 2018) and "Ritakallio wiped the floor with OP's strategy which his predecessor [former CEO] had prepared for a long time" (*SK*, 4 January 2019). The editor-in-chief of Finland's leading financial magazine described Ritakallio's relatively prudent statements as him "issuing a storm warning" (*TE*, 24 April 2018). When pressed about the relations with his predecessor, Ritakallio tried to tone down the conflict narrative, stating: "Our relationship is totally normal, there has never been any grudge or conflict between us" (*SK*, 4 January 2019). However, this had no effect on the media's desire to dramatize the organizational change.

> Of course, it's always tempting for the media to compare and contrast things. And it had been such a "media-sexy" topic that a finance and insurance company was suddenly transforming into this diversified services company. (CEO Timo Ritakallio)

Other than the few initial drastic headlines, the media seemed to mostly side with Ritakallio's new strategy. The storyline became that OP had ventured too far from its core businesses of banking and insurance – and the former CEO was the one to blame:

> **The return to the essential, now!**
>
> *Let's get rid of the unnecessary splurge, opined OP financial Group's Timo Ritakallio. But there's still much to do.*
>
> When a firm's purpose is not maximizing profits, there's a risk of wasting money on needless follies. This is what happened in OP, owned by its 1.9 million customers, during the last years of its previous CEO [former CEO]'s reign.
>
> We can figure this out from everything the new CEO Timo Ritakallio has done within the past year. OP is again focusing on its core – banking and insurance. There's an ongoing diet, the goal of which is annual savings of a hundred million.
>
> A slew of consultants has been cleared out; the number of team leaders has decreased. Teams are in charge, which should also result in increased sales. . . . (*TE*, 8 March 2019.)

Like OP's top management, the media also engaged in the legitimation of OP Agile through *narrativization* – however, rather than focusing on the old and new organizations, the media narrative was *personified* and *dramatized* as a battle between the new CEO and his predecessor: "What [former CEO] built, Ritakallio has dismantled" (*KL*, 5 July 2021). In addition, instead of focusing on what benefits agile would bring, the media's rationale was geared towards *normalization* – implying that the financial group would be better off by sticking to its knitting than exploring new areas such as healthcare and mobility services. The organizational change was presented as a contest between Ritakallio and the previous CEO:

OP's Ritakallio begins emptying the "fortress of power" [former CEO] built

OP financial Group's layoff negotiations are repeating age-old maxims. A new fancy headquarters is always a sign of the end of times. And the task of the new CEO is to shut down the development projects his predecessor has started.

It's usually a sign of the end of times when the operational leadership of a company begins constructing massive headquarters, "fortresses of power."

That's exactly what OP Financial Group's Vallila, Helsinki, headquarters, finished in 2015 with a price tag of more than 200 million euros, is. It was a kind of monument of OP's previous leader [former CEO]. . . .

Another age-old maxim is repeated at OP Financial Group: The new leader dismantles the structures his predecessor has created.

[Former CEO]'s successor, Timo Ritakallio, began talking about clarifying the bank's focus as soon as he stepped into the position.

[Former CEO] hasn't commented on his successor's activities in public. Read between the lines, however, and you'll get a sense of sour grapes. Perhaps even acidic.

Now activities are becoming concrete. In practice, this means weeding out the runners created during the previous leader's era. OP's development projects and expansion projects were a dime a dozen. Digitalization is breaking barriers between industries, and OP was supposed to be a pioneer of the new frontiers.

The reasons partly made sense since it has become more difficult to profit from the run-of-the-mill banking business. But OP would hardly have anything substantial to contribute, for example, to the disruption of transportation. . . .

Like fortresses, OP too has had many levels of hierarchy. According to Ritakallio, the new way of working clarifies responsibilities, reduces decision-making levels, and guides activities according to customer needs.

[Former CEO], who became fond of runners, currently acts as the chairman of the board of the Finnish State Development Company. Hopefully he's able to restrain himself and will not start throwing the substantial funds reserved for the company at fluffy pipe dreams. (*KL*, 25 September 2018.)

The overarching narrative was that the former CEO had been carried away with the promises of digitalization and Ritakallio had corrected OP's course:

> Dazed by the digital age, OP set up a rental service business for electric cars, which is only remotely related to financing and insuring. . . . The time for electric cars will inevitably come. But it doesn't have to be connected to a profitable banking and insurance business. (*MT*, 29 July 2021.)

The media coverage quieted down after the last remnant of the former CEO's diversification strategy – the hospital network – was sold in the summer of 2021. In the end, the CEO change, the strategic turnaround, and the implementation of "OP Agile" received exceptionally widespread publicity in the Finnish press, but by and large, coverage remained positive.

Discussion

Establishing and maintaining the legitimacy of their organization is one of the critical tasks of managers (Kostova and Zaheer, 1999; Meyer and Rowan, 1977), particularly during organizational change (Landau *et al.*, 2014). Organizational change is often linked with introducing new management ideas – many of which can be labeled management fashions (Abrahamson, 1996) – and their adoption entails discursive legitimation of the underlying motives to maintain organizational legitimacy (Jaynes, 2015; Wilhelm and Bort, 2013). According to Wilhelm and Bort (2013, p. 429), "Managers are not only held responsible for what happens with popular concepts after their adoption, but also have to account for the consumption of concepts to a wide audience of stakeholders."

Our contributions stem from comparing and contrasting the roles of top management and the media in discursively legitimizing organizational change. First, while previous studies have examined how managers legitimize change (e.g. Birkinshaw *et al*., 2008; Green, 2004; Kotter, 1995; Suchman, 1995) and how the media legitimizes change (e.g. Bednar, 2012; Lamertz and Baum, 1998; Vaara *et al*., 2006), fewer studies incorporate both perspectives and show how they interact. We show that there is a reciprocal relationship between top managers who need access to the public and the media which needs access to organizational events (van Dijk, 1995), and that examining managers and the media together, rather than in isolation, provides a clearer view of the dynamic interplay between the two.

Second, our contribution also lies in studying the media as an influential discursive actor in its own right within the legitimizing process, not merely as a broadcaster of managerial discourse or a paraphraser of "the experts." Thus, we contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Van Leeuwen and Wodak's (1999) discursive legitimation strategies, which Vaara *et al*. (2006) applied to the media context. In their study about how the media legitimized a global industrial restructuring, Vaara *et al*. (2006) distinguished five legitimation strategies and called for a more detailed examination into them: "Each type of legitimation strategy deserves more focused attention" (Vaara *et al*., 2006, p. 806) – Table 3 presents our take on this.

First, we found that the top managers at OP legitimized OP's change through narrativization and rationalization, referring to the benefits and positive outcomes of agile in the current business environment. Many of their discursive strategies aligned with findings from previous research, including emphasizing the rationality of the change (Green, 2004), constructing a narrative that underlined the urgency and essential nature of the change for survival (Kotter, 1995), and presenting the change as an opportunity for improvement and growth (Heracleous and Barrett, 2001). The strategies established both cognitive and normative legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) for OP's change – perceptions that the change was necessary and in line with emerging societal norms and "grand discourses" (Jaynes, 2015) of increasing employee autonomy and self-management.

However, we also found that in narrating the change, the top managers frequently engaged in delegitimizing "the old organization" through humorous anecdotes to strengthen their justification for the necessity of the change. The use of humor and tongue-in-cheek anecdotes as delegitimation tools humanized the process and made it more relatable to employees, while simultaneously undermining the attachment to former ways of working. This informal, narrative-driven technique enhanced managers' formal rationalization strategies, and the combination of formal and informal methods speaks to the multifaceted nature of legitimating processes, where emotional resonance complements more structured arguments [2].

Table 3. Legitimation strategies and actions of top managers and the media

Actors	Legitimation strategies	Legitimizing actions
Managers	Narrativization	Establishing a narrative portraying "the new organization" and its agile culture as superior to "the old organization" and its hierarchical culture, e.g. through humorous anecdotes
	Rationalization	Referring to the benefits and positive outcomes of agile and portraying it as the logical next step after smaller experiments within the firm
Media	Narrativization	Publicizing, dramatizing, and personifying the organizational change as "the old CEO vs. the new CEO."
	Normalization	Implying OP would be better off by sticking to its knitting than exploring new business areas
Both	Authorization	Presenting the initiative for change as having come from employees, suggesting an "inverted" authoritative power relationship
	Moralization	Depicting managers as fulfilling their "moral responsibility" by listening to employees

Source(s): Authors' own work

Second, Vaara *et al*. (2006, p. 794) argued that the press has “a great deal of power to decide what issues to raise, which perspectives to take, whom to give voice to, which voices to marginalize, and what to leave unsaid.” The power of the media in shaping public perceptions comes through this agenda-setting and the associated process of framing, “culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation” (Entman, 2007, p. 164). In our case, the media decided to promote an interpretation of OP’s organizational change as a dramatic battle between two CEOs. Like OP’s top managers, the media also legitimized OP Agile through narrativization, but the narrative was personified and dramatized, and the underlying rationale was geared towards normalization – OP refocusing on its core businesses. This added intrigue to the story and helped to legitimize the new organization under the new CEO, but the media’s emphasis on the personal dynamics between CEOs detracted from the rational justifications presented by OP’s managers and directed focus on personalities instead. By showing this, we contribute to a more nuanced view of the discursive legitimation strategy of narrativization, suggesting that the media can engage in the personification of an organizational change to portray that it involves more drama than what has actually happened. This dramatization of events is rarely in the interests of the organization, but it is difficult to control the narratives that the media decides to put forward; the media holds a great deal of power over whether organizational actions are perceived as legitimate.

However, although media outlets should act as corporate watchdogs in their role as “propagators of legitimacy” (Bednar, 2012, p. 131), top managers can sometimes use the media for “driving the organization’s agenda and communicating the necessity of change to customers, stakeholders, and the firm’s own personnel” (Ylä-Anttila, 2022, p. 187). The media may reproduce managerial narratives to maintain access to organizations and their top managers, who are often needed as expert commentators for news events. Consequently, top managers can in some instances set the agenda and frame it in a certain way, thereby gaining control of the public narrative. This symbiotic relationship between top managers who need “access to public discourse” and the media which needs “access to communicative events” demonstrates the social discursive power they jointly hold (van Dijk, 1995, pp. 11–12.).

In our case, the *authorization* for the change was described by both the managers and the media to have come from OP’s employees who were tired of the extensive bureaucracy and a lack of direction for the company, and therefore, the *moralization* was implicitly portrayed as the “moral duty” of the managers towards employees in implementing the agile change to empower them. One concrete example of this was a story of how the new CEO sent an email to all employees on his first day and received thousands of responses that sparked his enthusiasm for organizational change; the story was repeatedly and uncritically broadcasted by the media in articles about OP’s change (*KL*, 5 April 2019; *KL*, 30 December 2020; *TE*, 23 March 2018). This anecdote was also repeated in the top managers’ interviews, and it helped legitimize the adoption of agile as something the employees wanted. In this instance, the media’s powerful role as critical examiners and legitimators of organizational actions was diminished, as OP’s top management was able to retain control over the media narrative related to the ethics and values that were supposedly the genesis behind the change.

Consequently, and as a final amendment to previous research on discursive legitimation strategies, we also present alternative views to the strategies of authorization and moralization. Our study demonstrates that employees can also be portrayed as authoritative actors, and managers can be depicted as fulfilling their moral (normative) responsibility by listening to their concerns. These depictions of “inverted” authoritative power, increased employee autonomy, and converging interests between organizations and their employees, can be thought of as universally accepted “grand discourses” (Jaynes, 2015) about modern organizations and work life, and linked to broader discussions about (rational and) normative ideologies (Abrahamson, 1997; Barley and Kunda, 1992), unitarist human resource management (Greenwood and Van Buren, 2017), and the use of ideology as legitimation (Seeck *et al*., 2020; Watson, 2003).

Managerial implications

Our findings have several implications for management practice. First, when embarking on a demanding cultural and strategic organizational change journey, it is crucial that right from the beginning, the CEO and top management share a common, solid story highlighting the “why” behind the change. We see this as important for creating focus and commitment within the company, and it also helps in establishing a clear rationale for the change. Creating a shared view, in practice, requires hours and hours of dialog among top management and is often overlooked when embarking on culture change endeavors.

Second, building on that shared story, managers leading and driving the desired change also need to formulate their own version of the narrative to personalize it and fully commit to it. Making the change narrative personal with anecdotes, concrete examples, and humor, as the managers in our case company did, shows that the managers driving the change understand and “own the change” and are fully committed to it. Adding personal views and perspectives to the change story also offers a vehicle for the managers themselves to reflect on “what do I and we as a team gain from committing to this change process.” One cannot be a credible and successful change leader without seeing personal benefits in it and, thus, showing a strong personal buy-in to the desired change.

Third, organizations do not operate in a vacuum. The media and the society at large are hugely interested in what happens in companies today and how they are led. Our case study revealed that the media can, in part, support the official change narrative shared by the organization, making the story more credible and legitimate in the eyes of the public and the employees of the case company as well. The bold decision by the case company to be very transparent about the desired change to the media from the beginning partially paid off. Reading about the change in the news underlined to employees that OP’s management was serious about the change it wanted to see in the culture. As the story created wider interest, managers saw that OP’s employees started feeling proud of being a part of the transformation that gained positive media attention.

However, our study also showed that media can add unexpected drama to events. Although the top management of the case company restricted commenting on the change to the media to the CEO and the chief human resources officer to manage the original rationale of the change, the media added its own twist to the narrative. The shift in strategy was framed by the media as a personal battle between the new CEO and the old CEO. This interpretation could have had unwanted consequences, for example, by affecting how committed employees felt about the change if the rationale was interpreted as a personal battle of the CEO. This, however, did not happen in the case company of our study. Given the power of social media today, another option to add transparency to culture change efforts is to empower and equip employees with the required skills to share real-life experiences about the culture change on social media platforms. Testimonials from employees are, at times, more appealing and credible to the larger audience than top management interviews in more traditional media. In conclusion, leaders cannot control what the media writes, but they need to be quick to react if the change narrative takes an unwanted and harmful twist in the media.

Limitations and avenues for future research

This study also has some limitations, which future research could tackle. First, one arena for communicating organizational changes is the social media (Aslam *et al*., 2018). To limit the scope of our research, we focused on how OP’s managers communicated the organizational change in the most prominent news outlets and official press releases and did not analyze any social media content in the present study. While we are fairly confident that in this particular case social media did not play an important legitimating role, future research could still investigate discursive legitimation strategies in social media, where discussions often become heated and the intended narrative can easily be distorted.

Second, although the focus of this study was on the legitimation narratives of top management and the media, it is equally important to understand how employees engage with these narratives (see, e.g. Siltaoja, 2009). Our limited scope meant that we did not elaborate on how employees reacted to the managerial and media narratives, but future research could investigate how employees interpret and respond to competing narratives from management and the media, and how their own discursive practices either contribute to or challenge the legitimation of organizational change. This would offer a more comprehensive view of the dynamics within the organization and the role of employees in the legitimation process. Further, future studies might also analyze whether the managerial narrative succeeds in establishing organizational legitimacy and "buy-in" for the organizational change in the eyes of the public.

Finally, our focus on a single case study within the financial service sector limits the generalizability of our findings. Based on our in-depth understanding of the OP Agile case, we have sought to provide a "contextualized explanation" (Welch *et al.*, 2011) of legitimating organizational change through managerial and media narratives. However, Finland ranks high in both freedom of the press and public trust in the news media, and OP is a company of significant national interest in a highly regulated industry. Therefore, future research is needed to explore how the discursive strategies used by managers and the media might vary in industries with less public scrutiny and in countries with different media environments.

Conclusion

As top managers are responsible for maintaining the legitimacy of their organization in the eyes of external stakeholders, organizational change and the adoption of new, fashionable management ideas warrants discourse that seeks to legitimize their actions (Wilhelm and Bort, 2013). In this article, we have contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the discursive processes involved in legitimizing organizational change, highlighting the critical roles and interdependencies of top management and the media. In particular, we have shown how top managers can use humorous anecdotes to delegitimize "the old organization" and thus humanize the rationalization process, distance themselves from the former ways of working, and portray change as necessary. Shaping public opinion, the media is also a powerful contributor to the legitimation and delegitimation of popular management ideas and the actors involved in their adoption, and it is within their interests to dramatize and personify organizational change to make it more appealing to the public. When the media coverage is positive, it can help to legitimize change, but emphasizing personal dynamics can also undermine the rational justifications for the change presented by top managers.

Accordingly, we found evidence of all five of Vaara *et al.*'s (2006) discursive legitimation strategies, but narrativization and rationalization were used more extensively in our case because the media benefits from the narrativization of news stories, and top managers are expected to be rational decision-makers. The main message of our study is that there is an "official" legitimation story that the company and its top managers promote to employees and external audiences, and the media creates its own legitimation narrative, which might support the official story but also diverge from it. This narrative is mostly beyond the company's control, so it might complicate the legitimation process or even delegitimize it. We hope this article inspires more research that investigates how organizational change is discursively legitimized by top managers in the media, as well as *by* the media as an important legitimizing actor in and of itself.

Notes

1. All translations of interviews and media texts are our own. When quoting the media texts, we refer to CEO Timo Ritakallio's predecessor as [former CEO] whenever the original quote uses his name.
2. We would like to thank one of our anonymous reviewers for this insight.

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