

Where's your happy place? The power of positivity following a major organizational change

Riikka Harikkala-Laihin

Turku School of Economics at the University of Turku

Abstract

Organizational change often triggers resistance and negative emotions. However, positivity can ease change as it increases motivation and employee engagement. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore how companies could help employees feel more positive towards post-acquisition change. This question is examined through a selected literature review and a comparative, illustrative two-case empirical study. Through a positive organizational scholarship lens, this paper offers novel insight on how to manage major organizational change in a positive way. The findings point out that positivity can indeed encourage and ease organizational change, and that a key way for increasing employee engagement and positivity during change is inclusive interaction.

Keywords: Organizational Change, Emotions, Positivity, Mergers and Acquisitions

Introduction

Would not it be great to feel happy at work? We spend roughly a third of every weekday at work, yet when asked to close our eyes and think about our happy place, most would picture a beach, a forest, or a familiar dwelling they identify with positive emotions. Arguably, very few would think about work. Happiness, according to cognitive appraisal theory, arises when events take us towards our personal goals, but displeasure occurs when they do not. (Fredrickson, 2001; Lazarus, 1991.) At work, displeasure – or negative emotions – are often triggered because of change (e.g. Dhingra & Punia, 2016).

However, for example 78% of Finns believe that in the future, the ability to adapt to change will increase in importance (Made By Finland, 2017). Nevertheless, change creates uncertainty, which feels unpleasant (cf. Lazarus, 1991). This is especially true when companies face a major change such as post-acquisition integration (e.g. Sinkovics, Zagelmeyer, & Kusstatscher, 2011). Unfortunately, previous literature concludes that emotions emerge primarily in the acquired company, that they are triggered by personal circumstances, and are mainly negative. Thus, they are assumed to cause poor organizational outcomes. (Graebner, Heimeriks, Huy, & Vaara, 2017.) However, acquisitions can also raise positive emotions, such as pride or happiness (Kusstatscher, 2006), and have positive

outcomes, such as identification with the new, post-acquisition company (Raitis, Harikkala-Laihinen, Hassett, & Nummela, 2017).

The purpose of this paper is to explore, how companies could help employees feel more positive towards post-acquisition change. This paper adopts a positive organizational scholarship (POS) lens. POS highlights positive human potential, through an emphasis on the enablers, motivations, and effects of positive organizational phenomena. In the organizational context, POS illustrates how positive contexts and dynamics are connected to positive states in individuals, groups, and organizations. One central theme in POS research is the generation of positive emotions. (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003.) Through the POS lens, this paper offers novel insight on how to manage a major organizational change in a positive way.

Literature review

Emotions in mergers and acquisitions

Over the past 30 years or so, increasing attention has indeed been paid to the human side of acquisitions (e.g. Cartwright & Cooper, 1993; Sarala, Vaara, & Junni, 2017). The human factor is especially important during post-acquisition integration, when a functioning whole is built from two previously separate entities. This stream of research has increased the depth of understanding acquisitions not just as hard cold facts, but as softer human processes (Cartwright & Cooper, 1995). The hard and the soft aspects of acquisitions have been combined into a typology of task and human integration, where the necessity of completing both at a satisfactory level is discussed as the key to a successful acquisition. Whereas task integration focuses on operational synergies, the objective of human integration is to create positive attitudes and unify organizational cultures. Consequently, focus on only one aspect causes sub-optimal outcomes. Concentrating only on human integration will create satisfied employees but prohibit the realization of operational synergies, whereas focusing only on task integration will enable achieving synergies but at the cost of employee welfare. (Birkinshaw, Bresman, & Håkanson, 2000.)

Acquisitions can be very stressful (e.g. Ager, 2011) and raise a myriad of emotions. Therefore, the emotions of the employees affected by the acquisition influence integration. Following this notion, acquisition researchers have studied emotions from various perspectives, including acquisition outcomes, culture, identity, employee behavior, change, emotion regulation, coping, and stress (e.g. Buono & Nurick, 1992; Clarke & Salleh, 2011; Durand, 2016; Fink & Yolles, 2015; Fugate, Kinicki, & Scheck, 2002; Gunkel, Schlaegel, Rossteutscher, & Wolff, 2015; Kiefer, 2002; Nahavandi & Malekzadeh, 1988; Reus, 2012). They have discovered that during acquisitions, emotions mainly arise as a response to challenges employees perceive in upholding organizational values or objectives. Thus, emotions may arise even before the deal takes place, and can significantly outlast formal

integration. Nevertheless, emotions usually peak at the time of public announcement or during integration. (Sinkovics et al., 2011.)

Positive emotions in particular are crucial for successful integration (Birkinshaw et al., 2000; Kusstatscher & Cooper, 2005). Indeed, a focus on positivity has been suggested as a very fruitful addition to socio-cultural integration research (Stahl et al., 2013). Whereas negative emotions can strengthen employee identification with the pre-acquisition organization, positive emotions may generate a stronger identity in the post-acquisition organization (Kusstatscher & Cooper, 2005; Raitis et al., 2017). But what exactly are emotions, and how could companies increase positivity?

Cognitive appraisal theory

Cognitive appraisal theory emphasizes the reactive nature of emotions. Appraisal reflects a degree of personal relevance; it is an evaluation of importance regarding the knowledge of a specific situation. Only by recognizing that a situation is relevant to personal well-being can a situation become “emotional”. (Lazarus, 1991.) Thus, it can be said that “emotions are judgements” (Solomon, 2003, p. 1). This implies that emotions are of short duration. They include a triggering event, an appraisal of said event, and a reaction to the outcome of appraisal. (Fredrickson, 2001.) Furthermore, once triggered, emotions activate motivational goals that modify behavior (Wang, Clegg, Gajewska-de Mattos, & Buckley, 2018). Thus, emotions create both psychological and physiological effects (cf. Cabanac, 2002; Ekman & Cordaro, 2011; Izard, 1972; Scherer, 2005). The psychological components include the cognitive process and subjective experience, whereas physiological symptoms are visible in bodily impacts and motor expression (Scherer, 2005). In addition, emotions can have an impact on behavior (Izard, 1972; Scherer, 2005).

What makes an emotion positive or negative is its hedonic quality; emotions feel good or bad (Gordon, 1987). However, in emotion theory positive and negative are not direct opposites. Instead, the concepts of pleasure and displeasure are more bipolar in nature. (Russell & Carroll, 1999.) In effect, both positive and negative emotions can have a high or a low state, and are in fact independent and uncorrelated. For example excitement, high positive, finds its opposite in dullness, low positive. Similarly, fear might be placed opposite relaxation. (Watson & Tellegen, 1985.) In addition, the pleasantness of the event arises from personal and cultural traits as well as the level of emotional arousal (cf. Bowen, 2014). In fact, emotions are organismic; they are complex reactions to individual perceptions of our well-being both physically and mentally, i.e. how well we are on the road to achieving our personal life goals (Lazarus, 1991).

Apart from valence (positive or negative), emotions are characterized by activation (Russell, 2003). The behavioral element in emotion stems from its activating or deactivating power. For example, anger and fear are both negative emotions, but due to the difference in activation,

they have very different behavioral outcomes. Anger is likely to aggravate and make an employee more impulsive, whereas fear may drive the same employee to withdraw from unpleasant situations. (Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017.) Thus, it would seem that activating positive emotions might be extremely beneficial for change efforts. But how could these be generated?

Managing positive organizational change

Positive organizational change refers to change that is more affirmative than harmful with respect to employee responses as well as organizational outcomes (Avey, Wernsing, & Luthans, 2008). If change is to be achieved at the employee level, integration should be considered an interactive process, where the managers and employees of both pre-acquisition organizations collaborate in order to succeed (Harikkala-Laihinien, Hassett, Raitis, & Nummela, 2018). Whereas management has traditionally been seen as a practice of rationality, more recent research has discovered that it includes an emotional aspect. Particularly, employees seem more disposed to change if it triggers excitement and positivity. (Karp, 2004.) This highlights the growth of management from a controlling task towards the duties of building commitment and promoting change receptiveness it includes today (Caldwell, 2003).

People have an innate tendency towards positive change, but our receptiveness to negative triggers, i.e. events or situations that trigger negative emotions, stifles this trait out as we grow older. This is why it is important to emphasize positive triggers during change. (K. Cameron, 2008.) Whereas negativity leads to instinctive fight-or-flight reactions, positivity enables broader thought patterns that may lead to more positive attitudes towards change (Fredrickson, 2001). Yet employees often react to change negatively, showing resistance. This is due to an aversion of the unknown, a reaction towards an unclear future. (Dhingra & Punia, 2016.) Such resistance may turn into negative attitudes or detrimental behavior (e.g. Waddell & Sohal, 1998), but creating positivity regarding change can help overcome resistance (Dhingra & Punia, 2016). Thus, if companies are able to create a working atmosphere, or emotional climate, where positive emotions arise more easily, they can help employees overcome change-related anxiety (cf. Bar-tal, Halperin, & DeRivera, 2007; Birkinshaw et al., 2000; Fredrickson, 2013).

One way for managers to try to increase positivity is to simply express positivity, because employees tend to mirror their emotions against managers' emotions. This increases the importance of managers' emotional displays as they communicate with employees. (cf. Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994.) Previous research has indeed shown that leader positive affect generates follower positive affect and organizational goal congruent behavior (Bono & Ilies, 2006; Gooty, Connelly, Griffith, & Gupta, 2010; Johnson, 2008; Newcombe & Ashkanasy, 2002). Moreover, managers can facilitate positive

change through both observable actions and internal awareness. Managers can facilitate discussion and promote agreement, encourage thinking, persuade and engage employees, and present their message passionately. They should have a clear target and be able to delegate tasks, walk the talk, reward success, and objectively evaluate the process. (Cameron & Green, 2012.)

Internally, the most successful leaders seem to possess emotional intelligence (e.g. Gardner & Stough, 2002; Goleman, 1998; Ovans, 2015). Emotional intelligence refers to the “ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 189). Emotional intelligence includes the ability to understand and explain emotions as well as the capacity of emotions to augment thought (Mayer & Caruso, 2002). It contributes to effective leadership in several ways. It can help leaders detect and manage employees’ emotions better, create and maintain excitement and optimism, manage employee reactions, hone decision-making, maintain a strong organizational culture and identity, and guide leaders in forming compelling goals (George, 2000).

Emotional intelligence is especially beneficial for managing change (Mayer & Caruso, 2002), because leaders with high emotional intelligence are more likely to detect and understand others’ emotions as well as respond to and even alter these emotions to enable effective change (George, 2000). Thus, emotional intelligence can play an important role also in positive change management. According to Whetten and Cameron (2011), positive change management includes five steps: establishing a climate of positivity, creating readiness for change, articulating a vision of abundance, generating commitment to that vision, and institutionalizing the change. These steps are well in accordance with the traits of emotionally intelligent leadership as suggested by George (2000). Table 1 links the notions of positive change and emotionally intelligent leadership to integration management.

Table 1 Positivity and emotional intelligence in integration management

Steps for creating positive change (Whetten & Cameron, 2011)	Forms of emotional intelligence (George, 2000)	Managing positive post-acquisition change
Establish a climate of positivity	Detect and manage employees' emotions better	Detect and understand employee emotions in order to encourage positivity
Create readiness for change	Create and maintain excitement and optimism	Communicate the positive aspects of integration, creating a sense of excitement and readiness
Articulate a vision of abundance	Form compelling goals	Form a compelling vision of the future of the integrated company
Generate commitment	Detect and understand others' emotions	Respond to employees' emotions in ways that encourage commitment to the integrated company
Institutionalize the change	Maintain a strong organizational culture	Strengthen the achieved integration through encouraging employees to identify with the new organization

Based on the notions of positive change and emotionally intelligent leadership, this paper suggests that managing post-acquisition integration as positive change centers on employee emotions. The focus on positivity highlights its important role in furthering post-acquisition integration (Birkinshaw et al., 2000). In the post-acquisition integration context, managers can facilitate change through adopting the steps of positive change management and portraying emotionally intelligent leadership. This connotes recognizing and reacting to employees' emotions, promoting positivity, increasing engagement and excitement, endorsing a beneficial future vision of the integrated organization, and increasing employees' commitment to the integrated rather than the pre-acquisition organization.

Positivity and communication

A key aspect of positive change seems to be communication. Indeed, it has been suggested that without successful employee communication, any change is impossible (Barrett, 2002). Whereas top-down communication can help managers alleviate the anxieties and uncertainty related to the acquisition (e.g. Angwin, Mellahi, Gomes, & Peter, 2016; Schweiger & Denisi, 1991; Weber & Tarba, 2010), social cohesion can be achieved primarily through open, two-way communication (Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2006; Morrison, 2002). Rich, frequent, and interactive communication, which is also reflective and positive, helps engage employees in the post-acquisition change and enhances socio-cultural integration (Angwin et al., 2016; Clayton, 2010). Moreover, involvement can greatly influence employees' willingness to commit and cooperate (Appelbaum, Lefrancois, Tonna, & Shapiro, 2007).

Participation can allow employees to understand the motivation behind the change better, and increase their perceptions that change is necessary and positive. Participation also gives employees a sense of ownership and control, which motivates them to work towards the change, increasing its success. Moreover, participation allows identifying the positive aspects of change better, thus prompting more positive emotions towards change. (Rafferty & Jimmieson, 2018.) However, in order to be engaging, it is important for participation to be direct. I.e., employees need to be involved directly instead of via representatives. (Simonsen Abildgaard et al., 2018.)

Inclusive participation has a positive influence on employee emotions (cf. Vuorela et al., 2017). Such positive engagement also drives innovative work performance (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen et al., 2016). Moreover, participation gives employees a sense of ownership over the change, which encourages them to make the change successful. At the same time, ownership of the change allows the decrease of worries and increase of positive emotions. (cf. Harikkala-Laihin, 2018.) Companies often focus only on alleviating negativity, but because emotions are contagious, the increase of positivity leads to even more positivity (cf. Fredrickson, 2013; Hatfield et al., 1994). A playful, positive climate is also a key component in work-related well-being (cf. Alatalo et al., 2018). Furthermore, a healthy, happy employee, studies have shown to be an effective employee (e.g. Russell, 2008). This is why it is better to boost positivity rather than just alleviate negativity following a major organizational change (cf. Dhingra & Punia, 2016).

Method

This paper uses a qualitative, comparative two case study methodology. This choice is justified as it allows the examination of real-life phenomena in their natural surroundings (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2001) and the collection of in-depth empirical evidence (cf. Welch & Piekkari, 2017) necessary for areas of research with limited existing theory (cf. Edmondson & McManus, 2007). However, the data collection and analysis combine qualitative and quantitative means. The findings from these two sets of data and analysis are subsequently integrated in the discussion. This approach has been determined especially fruitful for gaining deep understanding from a single case. (Hurmerinta & Nummela, 2011.)

The studies were conducted consecutively. First, a Finnish manufacturer, which had bought its German competitor to form a new entity, Alpha Group, participated in wide data collection. At Alpha Group, data was collected through interviews (n=13), two companywide employee satisfaction surveys (2015 n=681, 2016 n=1082), and participant observation (on one occasion in February 2015). Second, a small Finnish manufacturer, Delta, which had been bought by its German competitor, Gamma, participated in complementary data collection. Data was collected through interviews (2017 n=17, 2018 n=9), memo-like daily diaries (2017

n=44, 2018 n=21) and an employee satisfaction survey (n=56). The purpose of using two consecutive case studies was to substantiate the findings through different settings.

In both cases, the interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and coded into themes arising both from theory and the data. The survey data from Alpha Group was categorized according to emotional content into positive, negative, mixed, neutral and N/A based on Lazarus' (1993) classification. This allowed further qualitative exploration into why emotions emerged as well as the use of elementary quantitative means for pinpointing differences. Careful notes of the participant observation were used to inform the analysis of other types of data. The diaries and survey material from Delta were analyzed similar to the interviews.

Findings and discussion

Both Alpha Group and Delta portrayed an understanding of acquisitions as partly human processes (cf. Cartwright & Cooper, 1995). However, whereas Alpha Group paid much attention to the human aspects of integration, Delta needed to conform to the integration strategy of Gamma, which did not include the human aspect to the same extent. Alpha Group chose a “best of both worlds” approach to integration, involving both Alpha and Beta, and seeking to amalgamate the companies into a new whole. Conversely, Gamma chose a rather more traditional approach, maintaining much of Delta as it was for the first six months, and only then slowly bringing in Gamma procedures. Thus, it seems that Alpha Group was initially more successful in combining both task and human integration (cf. Birkinshaw et al., 2000).

Both at Alpha Group and at Delta employees experienced a myriad of emotions – namely happiness, pride, relief, anxiety, anger, sadness, jealousy, and hope (cf. Lazarus, 1993). At Alpha Group, emotions emerged both from individual and organizational concerns. Ensuring the continuity of the company and thereby one's occupation triggered happiness, and at the same time relieved distress over the future of the company. Employees also felt pride over experienced success of the deal. However, employees were anxious about how the future would unfold, and experienced anger over management decisions and actions seen as demeaning – for example, when employees perceived management as violating the company values. The loss of colleagues and the pre-acquisition organizational identity triggered sadness, whereas resentment over perceived favoritism of the acquisition partner triggered jealousy. Nevertheless, even if the future seemed uncertain, employees saw clear synergy potential, triggering hope.

Also at Delta emotions related to both individual and organizational concerns. Happiness was triggered by a perceived increase of development opportunities brought on by the deal, which also created relief as continuity was ensured. Employees were proud over Delta's best practices in everyday word, but angry that Gamma did not seem to appreciate them as desired, and sad that they were forced to change practices that were perceived more functional than the

Gamma alternative. Employees were also anxious about what Delta's place in the Gamma hierarchy would be. Nevertheless, employees were hopeful that Delta would eventually fall into its place within Gamma.

Whereas at Alpha Group, much of the positivity related to the deal and the advancement opportunities it brought, at Delta positivity arose largely from before the deal – from the practices to which employees were accustomed. This is a significant difference, when considering that at best, positivity can help employees identify with the post-acquisition organization (cf. Kusstatscher & Cooper, 2005; Raitis et al., 2017). This is significant also when considering the behavioral impact of emotions (cf. Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017; Russell, 2003). Although positivity has a broadening effect (Fredrickson, 2001), if positive emotions arise when events take us towards our personal objectives (cf. Lazarus, 1991), positivity regarding the post-acquisition organization seems much more likely to activate employees towards post-acquisition change than positivity regarding the pre-acquisition organization.

Negative reactions towards change seemed to stem from a lack of understanding the reasons behind the change. In addition, particularly at Alpha Group, seeing others violate the implemented changes raised negative emotions and de-motivated employees (cf. Waddell & Sohal, 1998). Particularly at Delta, change related negativity reflected perceptions that the “old ways” were better than “the new”. This does seem to echo an aversion of the unknown to some extent (cf. Dhingra & Punia, 2016), but at the same time possibly reflects a disliking of the acquisition partner – which in the long term might be a much more complicated problem.

Managers in both companies did try to express positivity through stating the positive aspects of the deal and appearing positive towards the deal themselves (cf. Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002). This portrays a wish to create more positivity and overcome change resistance (cf. Bar-tal et al., 2007; Cameron & Green, 2012). Although the data does not allow the evaluation of the managers' emotional intelligence, based on the employee reports it would seem that variation was found especially at Alpha Group. For example, some managers elaborated on their actions aimed at employee well-being, whereas employees reported others as violating the company values. At Delta, employees were very happy with their supervisors, and the supervisors themselves reported on their attempts to increase employee motivation and well-being. Emotionally intelligent management, however, also took a toll on managers at both Alpha Group and Delta, as sometimes they found it necessary to hide their own true emotions. Nevertheless, both Alpha Group and Delta were able to portray positive post-acquisition change management to some extent (table 2).

Table 2 Positive change management in the case companies

Managing positive post-acquisition change	Alpha Group	Delta
Detect and understand employee emotions in order to encourage positivity	Research cooperation centering on emotions; employee survey to discover emotions; value workshops to encourage positivity	Research cooperation centering on emotions; employee survey for evaluating employee well-being; company meetings to encourage positivity
Communicate the positive aspects of integration, creating a sense of excitement and readiness	Benefits from continuity, growth and internationalization; excitement and readiness through engaging value work	Benefits from continuity and investments; excitement and readiness through the continuity
Form a compelling vision of the future of the integrated company	Joint values guiding work	Continued existence
Respond to employees' emotions in ways that encourage commitment to the integrated company	Value workshops; increased communication based on research findings; variety of communication means	Increased communication based on research findings; variety of communication means
Strengthen the achieved integration through encouraging employees to identify with the new organization	Value workshops; promoting the new company name	Parent company presence

Looking first at Alpha Group, their willingness for research co-operation and their detailed, yearly employee-satisfaction survey show a desire to detect and understand employee emotions. At Alpha Group the integration centered on creating new, unified company values, which were introduced to every employee in specific value workshops organized locally in almost all Alpha Group locations. These value workshops created many positive emotions towards the post-acquisition organization and at the same time gave employees a sense of ownership over the integration process. Alpha Group successfully communicated the benefits of continuity, growth and internationalization to the employees, and was able to excite employees over the new company values, which they used to form a compelling vision of the joint future. They also responded to employee emotions not only through organizing the workshops but also through increasing communication on topics employees found most important and using a variety of communication means to ensure that the messages reached all employees. The value workshops also functioned as strengthening the image of the joint, post-acquisition organizations. In addition, Alpha Group management was careful to promote the new company name instead of the pre-acquisition names of Alpha and Beta.

Also at Delta the willingness for research co-operation and the use of an employee-satisfaction survey show a desire to detect and understand employee emotions. However, at Delta the survey was much narrower and conducted only every second year. Still, Delta also used quarterly company-wide meetings for all employees to share important information and encourage positivity. At Delta, the positive aspects of integration centered on continuity and future investments, which were central also in creating excitement and readiness for change. In contrast to Alpha Group where the compelling vision of the future was somewhat novel, at Delta the key was continued existence, which did not reflect the acquisition partner. Also at Delta communication on employees' worries was increased based on research findings, and a variety of communication means utilized. However, at Delta no clear means for strengthening the achieved integration were visible apart from the parent company name being added in internal communication and parent company presence through a new deputy managing director. In contrast to Alpha Group, at Delta the company names were deliberately kept separate, which did not encourage employees to see unity between them.

As discovered in the literature (e.g. Barrett, 2002), communication was a key aspect in getting employees on board. The difference between top-down information sharing and engaging interaction (e.g. Angwin et al., 2016) was rather clear also in the case companies. Alpha Group, mainly through the value workshops, was able to involve almost all employees personally in the integration process, which clearly increased their positivity towards change and allowed them to commit to the organization's objectives (cf. Appelbaum et al., 2007; Rafferty & Jimmieson, 2018). Conversely, at Delta communication centered on sharing information, which helped alleviate anxieties (cf. Angwin et al., 2016), but did not create positivity regarding change. Nevertheless, for optimal post-acquisition communication both information sharing and interaction seem necessary (table 3).

Table 3 Information sharing and interaction during organizational change

	<i>Information sharing</i>	<i>Interaction</i>
<i>Key means</i>	Presentations, newsletters, bulletin boards	Workshops, team meetings, informal gatherings
<i>Voice</i>	Mainly top-down, organization-led	Often initiated top-down, but most successful when all employees are invited to participate
<i>Key purpose</i>	To ensure that employees are informed	To ensure that employees are engaged
<i>Language choice</i>	Aim for individual understanding	Aim for shared understanding
<i>Involvement</i>	Level of individual involvement is minimal	Level of individual involvement is higher
<i>Importance</i>	Ensures day-to-day functionality	Ensures long-term motivation

At Alpha Group, it was evident that inclusive participation created many positive emotions (cf. Vuorela et al., 2017). Engagement also encouraged employees to work towards company objectives, increasing commitment and motivation (cf. Harikkala-Laihin, 2018). Although also Delta employees experienced many positive emotions, these were linked strongly to the pre-acquisition company. Thus, even though both at Alpha Group and Delta employees seemed to enjoy relatively high levels of work-related well-being connected with positivity (cf. Alatalo et al., 2018), only at Alpha Group did that positivity seem harnessed towards realizing change. Thus, it seems that creating positivity particularly regarding change is the key towards smoother and swifter change management.

Conclusion

This paper set out to explore, how companies could help employees feel more positive towards post-acquisition change. In doing so, it utilized a POS lens. In the literature, positive emotions were discovered to be of crucial importance following acquisitions (e.g. Birkinshaw et al., 2000; Kusstatscher & Cooper, 2005; Johanna Raitis et al., 2017). Such positivity stems from pleasant sensations (Gordon, 1987) linked to personal objectives (Lazarus, 1991). In harnessing such positivity during change it is therefore necessary to ensure the affirmative nature of the change process (cf. Avey et al., 2008). Based on the literature, five steps were identified for managers to consider during positive post-acquisition change (table 1). Both illustrative cases showed how – likely unconsciously – managers had followed these steps during the two post-acquisition integration processes.

In both literature (e.g. Angwin et al., 2016; Barrett, 2002) and empirical findings, a key concern in creating positivity was communication. Two distinct types of communication were identified: information sharing, and interaction. Whereas information sharing centered on everyday messages that ensure functionality, interaction could be used to create long-term motivation and engagement. Thus, interaction was seen crucial for managing positive change (cf. Appelbaum et al., 2007; Rafferty & Jimmieson, 2018; Vuorela et al., 2017). Based on the empirical evidence, interaction was the key difference between the illustrative case examples. Whereas at Alpha Group employee engagement was a main attribute of the integration process, at Delta communication relied mainly on information sharing. In these integration efforts, the engaging style clearly lead to more positive emotions towards post-acquisition change in general and the integrated company in particular. Of course, the integration strategies used in these illustrative cases also influenced the findings. Thus, future research is necessary to determine, how positivity could best be harnessed in different types of change contexts, including different post-acquisition integration settings.

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