Hooked on a feeling? An interpretive study of organizational identity (dis)continuity during strategic change programmes†

Riikka Harikkala-Laihinen[*]

Turku School of Economics, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how organizational members perceive identity (dis)continuity when they are caught in the crossfire during strategic change programmes. Illustrative data stems from a Finnish company that underwent a change from family ownership to corporate investor ownership, resulting in a broad organizational transformation. The findings indicate that organizational members perceive identity (dis)continuity during strategic change programmes in many ways, influenced by both the organizational context and personal experience. The organization's ability to signal continuity and the strength of the individual member's emotional bond to the old organization seem to be key elements in directing member perceptions towards identity continuity or discontinuity – in other words, liminality. The organizational identity perspective improves our understanding of the individual-level dynamics of strategic change programmes, helping managers engage and motivate members to execute the change. In effect, strategic change programmes where programme management understands and acknowledges the role of identity may improve organizational outcomes.

1. Introduction

As multi-project endeavours with long-term implications for the organization (Artto et al., 2009), strategic change programmes are often wide-reaching, critical events in organizations' lives. However, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the social and organizational context of such programmes (Näsänen & Vanharanta, 2016), including the viewpoint of strategic change programmes' clients as the recipients of change (Martinsuo & Hoverfält, 2018). Exploring member involvement in strategic change programmes allows for an improved understanding of how the planned change unfolds, particularly within the social context of the organization. This also answers the call for more research on how individuals' interests and actions shape strategic change programme implementation (Vuorinen & Martinsuo, 2018), offering strategic change programme management increased insights into the practical implementation of change projects.

Arguably, member willingness to execute the change is linked to organizational identity. Organizational identity refers to the personality attributed to an organization (Ashforth et al., 2020) based on its central, distinctive and enduring features (Albert & Whetten, 1985), and it can be considered a key element of the permanent organization. Yet, despite the importance of a link to the permanent organization (Lehtonen & Martinsuo, 2009), strategic change programmes often cause a drift in organizational identity (cf. Gareis, 2010; Stummer & Zuchi, 2010). These drifts cause members to lose the sense of *who we are*, threatening organizational identity. Such *identity discontinuity* is harmful for strategic change efforts, as it lowers member willingness to execute the change. In contrast, easing members' identity transitions through highlighting a lasting connection to the accustomed permanent organization (Fisher et al., 2016) can facilitate strategic change, in effect signalling *identity continuity*.

Despite the apparent importance of organizational identity when considering organizational members' willingness to execute strategic change, the relationship between programme management and organizational identity seems elusive in the existing literature. While research recognizes the importance of organizational identity, for example, in megaprojects (Ninan & Sergeeva, 2021) and inter-organizational projects (Hietajärvi & Aaltonen, 2018), research on identity in intra-organizational projects in general and strategic change programmes in particular seems largely absent. Answering the call made in the previous literature (cf. Venus et al., 2019), this paper analyses the relationship between strategic change programmes and perceptions of

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identity continuity by adopting an individual-level approach, which illustrates how organizational members' identity perceptions shape strategic change programme implementation. The research question guiding this paper is:

How do organizational members perceive identity (dis)continuity during strategic change programmes?

This special issue is concerned with transformative strategic change programmes, promoting, for example, idea generation from closely related fields of research (Martinsuo et al., 2020). The paper contributes to this discussion through an intra-organizational perspective, adopting an organizational identity lens for strategic change programmes. This approach highlights the crucial interplay between the permanent organization and the strategic change programme, as well as the underexplored individual member level, placing emphasis on context. As this paper centres on the programme–organization interface, while the fundamentally project-based nature of strategic change programmes is acknowledged, the discussion focuses on the programme level. In addition, due to the focus on organizational identity, adjoining identity concepts, such as identity work or role identity, are outside the scope of this paper. Moreover, to explore the individual-level perspective in depth, this paper does not discuss external stakeholders. The emphasis is on employee perspectives rather than management perceptions. Thus, alternate foci, such as the reasons behind organizational transformation or change management practices, are outside the scope of this paper.

Furthermore, this paper focuses on the often-ignored family firm status in business restructuring (King et al., 2021), centring on ownership change from a family business to corporate investor ownership. Ownership changes are radical transformations in organizations if the new owner's paradigm and organizational focus differ greatly from those of the previous owner (Yang, 2012). Therefore, the scope of this paper is limited to strategic change programmes dealing with ownership change. In effect, the focus is on goal-oriented programmes, reflecting extensive, one-time initiatives aiming to transform organizations through outlining, scoping and managing projects appropriately (Miterev et al., 2016; Pellegrinelli, 1997). While members make sense of strategic change both cognitively and affectively (cf. Guiette & Vandenbempt, 2014), the focus in this paper is on the affective, emotional element, because members' emotional responses guide their reactions towards change based on perceived favourability (Smollan, 2006).

This paper aims to contribute to the strategic change programme management literature in four ways. First, it *introduces a novel perspective* – identity – to the strategic change programme management literature. Second, it *extends* the discussion on strategic change programme management to the ownership change context. Third, it enables *improved understanding* during strategic change programme management through considering the individual member level. Fourth, building on the above, this paper offers a *novel solution* to the strategic change programme management literature in terms of understanding and managing individual member involvement. Finally, as identity and emotional attachment are relatively unknown areas in family business restructuring (King et al., 2021), this paper also contributes to the discussion on ownership change in family firms.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, an overview of relevant literature introduces the strategic change programme context and the role organizational identity and member identification play in that context, thus building the paper's analytical framework. Second, the paper discusses the methodological choices, detailing the key elements of the qualitative single case study conducted in a Finnish company undergoing a change from a family business to corporate investor ownership. Third, the paper details the findings from the empirical case in terms of member perceptions, highlighting identity and identification during strategic change. Fourth, the discussion reflects upon the findings from the viewpoint of the presented literature. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion on the implications of the findings for theory and practice, and suggests future research avenues.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The strategic change programme context

This paper adopts the definition by Turkulainen, Ruuska, Brady and Artto (2015, p. 817), where programmes "consist of a set of interrelated projects, which are managed in a coordinated manner to achieve a common overarching goal". More particularly, a change programme is defined as "a collection of inter-connected projects and actions that are coordinated, managed and controlled in a strategic way to achieve a pre-defined change in the parent organization" Vuorinen and Martinsuo (2018, p. 585). A *strategic* organizational change programme shapes the future strategic position of the company. Often, these programmes include objectives such as streamlining operations and gearing towards growing demands (Cowan-Sahadath, 2010). In effect, this study views a strategic change programme as a pre-designed, carefully managed organizational transformation through interrelated change projects aiming at achieving long-term strategic objectives.

Bridging organizational strategy with change projects (Näsholm & Blomquist, 2015) combines features of organizational development with strategic change management (Pellegrinelli, 2002). Separate change projects provide a dynamic platform for transforming organizations (Grundy, 1998). Consequently, programme management is essential in realizing organizational change (Pellegrinelli et al., 2007). The purpose of programme management is to improve organizational outcomes from separate yet interrelated change projects through integrated management (Nieminen & Lehtonen, 2008). Thus, strategic change programme management aims at the realization of a sum, which is more than its parts. In effect, the separate change projects together build towards achieving an overarching, more meaningful strategic change objective.

However, the objective of transformation potentially isolates the change projects from the permanent organization (Willems et al., 2020), which is detrimental to success (Lehtonen & Martinsuo, 2009). This seems particularly likely when strategic change is prompted by a change in ownership. The process of ownership change involves repositioning, rebranding and reorientation, aimed at a strategic shift in the market position, an upgrade to internal image and employee alignment with the new management philosophy, respectively (Yang, 2012). Within a programme life cycle (Thiry, 2004), ownership change would thus appear to have the most prominent effect on the organization and deployment stages, where projects are chosen, and operational procedures established in order to implement the change vision.

In general, ownership change, and particularly its management succession effect, is one of the most significant changes in a family firm's life cycle (Brockhaus, 2004). A change from family ownership to corporate investor ownership reflects a substantial shift. Family firms value family members' governance, ownership and control, and generally prefer generational transfers to external ownership changes (Bennedsen et al., 2010). Family firms are also often characterized by adaptability in terms of entrepreneurial orientation, seeking long-term survival and maturity (Zellweger & Sieger, 2012). Whereas family firms are often ideological, emphasizing insidership and leadership, corporate owners tend to value corporate strategy and the overarching balancing of resources (Sur et al., 2013). Indeed, corporate investors improve companies' environmental scanning ability, increasing external cooperation (Boh et al., 2020). Corporate investors also often emphasize re-investment in their strategic change planning, looking to generate productive returns (cf. Reilly et al., 2016). The contrast between these different paradigms and organizational foci is likely to trigger radical organizational transformation (Yang, 2012). Thus, it is possible that a change from family ownership to corporate investor ownership can create a significant strategic shift in a company, thus potentially prompting a strategic change programme to realize the intended transformation.

Previous literature has studied ownership change both as change in ownership form (e.g. Pinnington & Morris, 2002) and from a more

processual change management viewpoint (e.g. Yang, 2012). Family firm research reveals that a "family anchor" may be essential in establishing continuity before a full exit (Salvato et al., 2010), whereas acquisition research (e.g. Angwin et al., 2016; Teerikangas et al., 2011) reveals that members often view ownership changes as complex, lengthy processes, where building trust and a new sense of *we* is essential. Furthermore, acquired companies are always likely to undergo identity adjustment (Öberg et al., 2011), yet the relationship between family firm restructuring and organizational identification remains relatively unexplored (King et al., 2021).

While it is understood that a good context fit makes strategic change programmes easier to manage (Shao, 2018), organizational transformation often leads to a new identity (Gareis, 2010; Stummer & Zuchi, 2010). This threatens the strategic change programme's connection to the permanent organization. In effect, members perceive identity threats as a form of deviation from the accustomed permanent organization, which influences their willingness to execute change projects. When faced with an identity threat, members seek to mitigate or remove it, adopting threat-opposing behavioural tactics in the process (Van Os et al., 2015). Indeed, member resistance and an inability to operationalize new ways of working are key reasons for change failure (Lehtonen & Martinsuo, 2009). Therefore, careful management of the identity change prompted by a strategic change programme is essential in preserving a sense of continuity, thus enabling the renewal of organizational identity (Ravasi & Schultz, 2003) and member participation. This suggests that understanding organizational identity as an element of the permanent organization may be essential in successful strategic change programme management, particularly in terms of motivating members to execute the change.

In light of the above, previous research reveals surprisingly little about managing ownership change through strategic change programmes. Whereas strategic change programmes often fall within the field of organizational transformation or development (cf. Lannon & Walsh, 2020; Pellegrinelli, 2002), for example centring on ambidexterity (Pellegrinelli et al., 2015), agency (Vuorinen & Martinsuo, 2018) or context (Pellegrinelli, 2002), specific studies on strategic ownership change programmes are elusive. Nevertheless, previous research reveals that in programme organizations (temporary organizations set up to serve a client need), a common identity is a key element at the core of the organization, and operational management promotes a common identity among members (Frederiksen et al., 2021). This indicates that while the importance of identity as a feature of the permanent organization is recognized, as of yet, its role in potentially making or breaking a strategic change programme is poorly understood. Thus, this paper explores organizational members' perceptions of identity (dis)continuity during strategic change programmes in order to improve our understanding of the influence of organizational identity on member willingness to execute strategic change.

2.2. Organizational identity and identification

Organizational identity refers to the features of the organization that can be considered central, distinctive and enduring (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Ashforth & Mael, 1996). It emerges through members' shared perceptions regarding the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1996), which reflect a joint understanding of *who we are* (Gioia et al., 2013a). In effect, this sense of a collective self enables the organization to develop a personality, which facilitates a more memorable, engaging and motivating identity (Ashforth et al., 2020). This personality makes the organization more familiar, tangible and understandable; it is something real that members can know and identify with (Ashforth & Mael, 1996). Moreover, this sense of a collective self, the organizational *we*, encourages and assists employees to think, feel and act in identity-congruent ways (Ashforth et al., 2020). This has led to companies posting "Who we are" statements on their websites in order to promote a desired identity, but of course there may be a difference between the externally

claimed and the internally detected organizational identity. This paper is concerned with the latter: experienced organizational identity.

Members can detect signals regarding what is central, distinctive and enduring about the organization through diverse cues (Gioia et al., 2013a). Centrality is visible in the values, practices and offerings of an organization, observable, for example, in the history of the organization. Distinctiveness refers to the members' ability to separate one organization from others. What is enduring reflects the perceived continuation of the central and distinctive features over time. Such attributes tie members to the organization through identification: the perception of belonging to or being one with the organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). This sense of oneness and belonging links individual members to the permanent organization. Thus, members may have very personal, subjective reactions to perceived threats against the permanent organization.

In effect, organizational identification stems from two primary sources: cognitively *perceiving* and affectively *feeling* oneness with the organization (Johnson et al., 2012). In this paper, the focus is on affective, emotional identification. Emotional identification is a durable and positive mental bond formed to an existing organization (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which often reveals what members consider to be the most important attributes of the organization (cf. Humphrey et al., 2015). Emotional identification entails both the emotional attachment to the organization and the emotions that arise from organizational membership (Raitis et al., 2017). The strength and durability of emotional identification help the organizational identity endure, creating positive experiences of attachment and loyalty (Huy, 1999), forming an important social bond between organizational members and establishing belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Being "hooked on" the experience of emotional attachment is thus likely to decrease members' willingness to execute a strategic change that they perceive as a threat to the accustomed organizational identity.

Moreover, organizational identification leads members to define themselves in line with the attributes of the organization, building a link between the members' individual identities and the collective organizational identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Members who identify very strongly with the organization also tend to adopt attributes of the organization to define the self, indicating a strong psychological element of attachment (Dutton et al., 1994). At the same time, identification with the collective *we* creates social comfort among members (Ashforth et al., 2020). Thus, organizational identity threats may be experienced not only as detrimental to the collective *we*, but also on a personal level; members who identify very strongly with the organization may experience a need to redefine their personal attachment to the permanent organization.

In contrast, the social bond created through emotional identification can have significant positive consequences for organizations and their members. A shared identity encourages trust and cooperation (Williams, 2001) and increases members' commitment to the organization, boosting positive actions, such as organizational citizenship behaviour (Cardon et al., 2017). Whereas perceived identity threats and negative emotions often turn into change resistance (Lazarus, 1993; Oreg et al., 2018; Raitis et al., 2017), positive experiences of identification and identity can even become drivers of change (Dutton et al., 2010; Oreg et al., 2018; Raitis et al., 2017). In effect, members' emotional bonds to the organization influence sensemaking and behaviour during change (Kjærgaard, 2009), suggesting that emotional identification is an important aspect of perceived continuity (cf. Raitis et al., 2017). Finding a balance between the necessary strategic change and the equally important identity continuity is a key dilemma for organizations (Kjærgaard, 2009). Thus, it seems likely that if a strategic change programme establishes a clear link to the accustomed organizational identity, in effect maintaining the social bond created through emotional identification, members will be more willing to execute the change. It seems that identity (dis)continuity may play a significant role in the success or failure of a strategic change programme prompted by

an ownership change.

2.3. Identity (dis)continuity

Organizational identity is a temporal phenomenon, in that the past influences identity reconstruction and current identity claims influence how a vision for a future identity is articulated (Schultz & Hernes, 2013). There are two alternative routes to identity change: 1) a change in identity labels, such as a switch from a "service company" to a "solutions company", or 2) a change in the meaning given to a label, such as redefining what the "solutions" are (Corley & Gioia, 2004). Subsequently, identity transition, or the change from *who we were* to *who we are becoming* as an organization, occurs through a phase of liminality, where members perceive a sense of loss and let go of the old identity (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014). A transition is complete or successful when members are able to formulate a new sense of *who we are* following the change. Often, this occurs through *identity continuity*: a sense of preservation of an important attribute associated with the old organization. A transition is incomplete or unsuccessful when members are unable to let go of the old identity, or are unable to form a new sense of *who we are*. This often occurs due to *identity discontinuity*: an inability to sense the preservation of an important attribute associated with the old organization.

When members do not have a clear sense of *who we are* following a change, they experience identity ambiguity (Corley & Gioia, 2004). If members are unable to let go of the old identity, they may become permanently stuck in the phase of liminality, experiencing nothingness (Huy, 1999). Liminality refers to the social limbo between separation from something and incorporation into something else (Paton & Hodgson, 2016). It allows for the exploration of individual-level difficulties and pressures when switching between work contexts and identities (Söderlund & Borg, 2018). Liminality is present, for example, in project management, where it often appears through a contrast in work role and professional identity (Paton & Hodgson, 2016) or as flexibility during mobile project work (Borg & Söderlund, 2015). It seems likely that members who harbour strong emotional attachments to the permanent organization and have adopted features of the organization into their personal identity are at a greater risk of becoming stuck in liminality following a perceived organizational identity threat, as they experience a change in organizational identity on a more personal level.

Another potential reason for the emerging liminality during strategic change programmes is the discourse surrounding change. During strategic change programmes, organizational members adapt their attitude towards the change based on perceived discourses, enabling them to make sense of and act upon the situation (Nyberg & Mueller, 2009). Thus, a discourse of identity continuity is likely to help members execute the change. Organizations can influence the perceived discourse, for example, through sensegiving efforts (cf. Logemann et al., 2019). Members' identity transitions are often easier if organizations are able to portray the transition as an identity claim modification rather than as a wholly new identity. Identity claim modification refers to adaptations to new surroundings or demands, while simultaneously staying true to the central features of the old organizational identity (Fisher et al., 2016). In effect, an enduring organizational identity may also be dynamic (Gioia et al., 2013a), easing identity transitions. Thus, it seems that an optimal organizational identity may encourage a sense of belonging and purpose, on the one hand, but be amenable to changes when new opportunities arise, on the other hand (Batra & Sharma, 2017). It may also be necessary to allow members to mourn for the perceived loss of the old identity. Reflecting on the past enables members to let go and experience an emotional release, allowing them to become receptive to the new identity and develop a sense of the future (Huy, 1999). A mourning period may function as an additional means to make sense of the identity change on a personal level, allowing the emotional attachment to the old organization to loosen while re-establishing it in terms of the new organization, ideally maintaining a link between the old and the new.

Based on the above, within the context of strategic change programmes, identity change occurs at the organizational (changing attributes) and individual (members' identity transitions) levels. Figure 1 illustrates the analytical framework that guides the empirical analysis.

It is highly likely that a change from a family business to corporate investor ownership triggers the need for organizational transformation through a strategic change programme. In this change context, organizational identity change occurs through an identity transition within the interplay between the permanent organization and the strategic change programme. The organizational identity is at the core of the permanent organization, triggering the potential period of liminality as the strategic change programme alters what members perceive as central, distinctive and enduring about the organization. Ideally, the shift from the old identity to the new identity entails a sense of continuity, which eases members' adoption of the new organizational identity and thereby facilitates member engagement with the strategic change programme. However, perceptions of discontinuity may result in prolonged liminality.

3. Method

3.1. Qualitative single case study

This study adopted a qualitative single-case methodology. Utilizing an interpretive lens, the study searches for meaning created by the members, looking to understand subjective experiences (cf. Welch et al., 2011). A qualitative interpretive study structure is particularly suitable when exploring a phenomenon where understanding reflects individual voices and lived experience (cf. Corley & Gioia, 2004). More particularly, the case study methodology enables the researcher to explore real-life phenomena in their natural context (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Welch & Piekkari, 2017). A single case maximizes the richness of the description (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991), also allowing for a richness of understanding from multiple informants while describing a single setting in depth (Fletcher & Plakoyiannaki, 2011).

Due to the enduring nature of identity, exploring identity change is an intricate process. Thus, a study context where identity change was prominent enough to allow organizational members to acknowledge, make sense of and talk over the change was essential (cf. Corley & Gioia, 2004). Consequently, this study used purposive, selective sampling. Based on the purpose of this paper and the intricate nature of identity research, the selected case had to 1) portray a significant strategic change likely to trigger an identity transition and 2) allow access to individual members' perceptions. Finnish Sigma (a pseudonym) presented itself as a suitable target company due to a recent ownership change from a family business to corporate investor ownership, which initiated a broad strategic change programme. However, the unit of
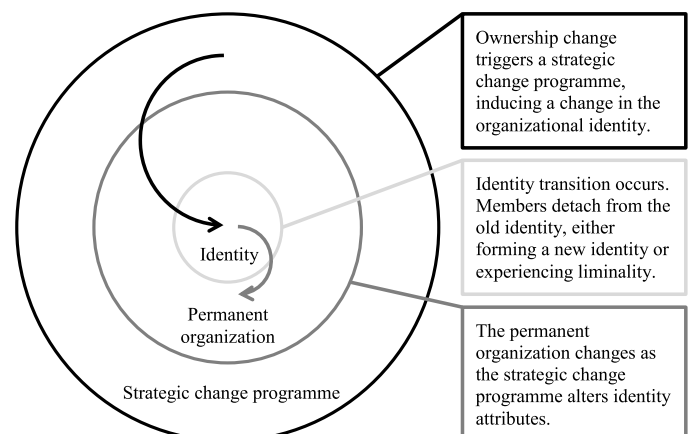

Figure 1. Analytical framework

analysis here is not the company, nor the strategic change programme, but the organizational identity change as perceived by Sigma members. Thus, the empirical unit is an individual member's perception of the organizational identity change. Figure 2 explores the "casing" of this study (inspired by Fletcher & Plakoyiannaki, 2011; Ragin, 1992).

3.1.1. Target company description

Sigma is an approximately 30-year-old Finnish company operating in the high-tech industry. A single entrepreneur established it, employing some ten members in the early years. After the first decade, a generation change triggered a period of rapid growth, which Sigma members identified as the core period of the organization. Sigma grew both organically and through acquisitions, but all subsidiaries continued as stand-alone companies. At the end of this era, Sigma had grown into a multi-regional company employing approximately 120 workers. Due to rapid growth, resources were soon depleted, and the owning family sold the company to corporate investors a few years before its 30th birthday in a friendly deal. This represents a relatively common, characteristic change in family firms, where resource concerns are one typical trigger for buyouts (King et al., 2021), further justifying the choice of Sigma as the illustrative target company.

The change in ownership at Sigma triggered the strategic change programme that is at the core of this study. In effect, due to the change in ownership, the core identity of Sigma switched from an entrepreneurial sphere to a corporate strategy sphere, making the Sigma strategic change programme particularly interesting and suitable for analysis in this paper. Figure 3 illustrates Sigma's timeline leading up to the strategic change programme.

During the investor ownership era, Sigma bought several new companies, quickly growing to employ some 300 workers. The former owning family members soon left Sigma, and a new management team initiated a strategic change programme driven by the wish to unify all of the different Sigma subsidiaries under one name and organizational structure. Research cooperation with Sigma began when this change was ongoing in autumn 2019, some three years after the initial deal, when the old owning family had only recently left the company.

3.1.2. The strategic change programme at Sigma

The ownership change from a family firm to corporate investor ownership triggered the strategic change programme at Sigma. However, in effect, the change began approximately one year later, after the recruitment of a new CEO. Essentially, the purpose of the strategic change programme was to create a unified, cross-locational team structure, where previously largely separate organizations with separate processes existed. At the same time, this unification meant new national-
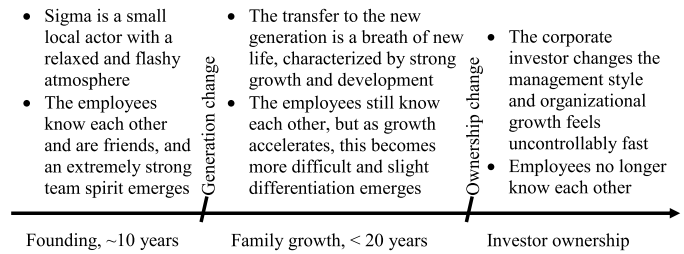
Figure 3. Sigma's timeline

level goals and objectives. Due to the new structure, where functions and tasks became team-based, behavioural patterns and procedures needed streamlining. The objective was to build a single operational mindset, where the service encounter would be identical regardless of which offices the customer dealt with. This was done to increase efficiency and ease cross-location cooperation, ultimately facilitating future growth.

The change was particularly visible in the management style and structure of Sigma as well as in the image of Sigma. The new CEO, along with his top management team, became the face of the strategic change programme, which occurred through two projects: organizational restructuring and employee reorientation (Figure 4). Due to the interest in member perceptions, the focus of this paper is on the internal change.

The first change project aimed at increased efficiency through restructuring: building a team-based organization, creating clear cross-
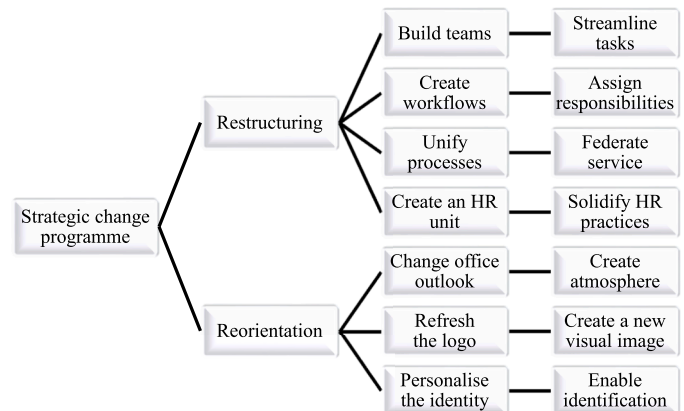
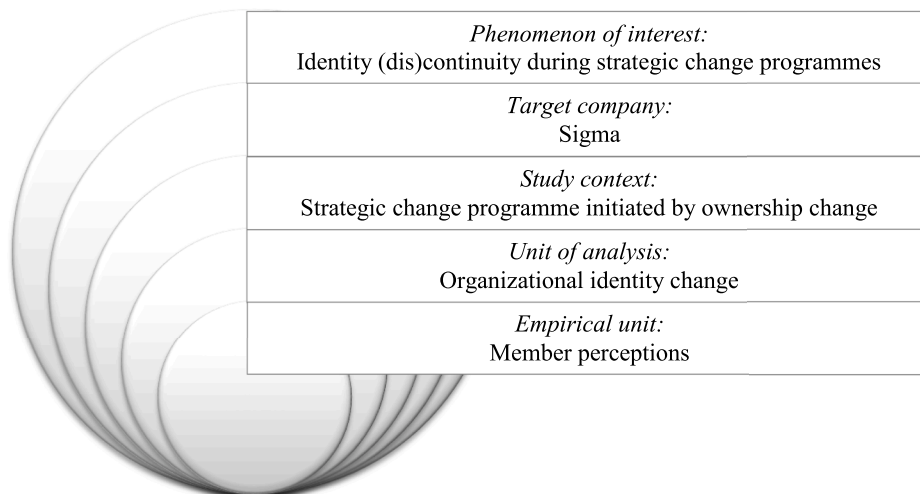**Figure 4.** How–How analysis of the strategic change programme (cf. Grundy, 1998, p. 45)

Figure 2. Multi-level casing of the study

functional workflows and unifying processes in order to streamline tasks, clarify responsibilities and unify the service experience for customers. The introduction of cross-location teams based on functional expertise transformed the organizational structure, which had formerly consisted of several stand-alone companies. At the same time, the aim was to unify systems and procedures. The purpose was to create internal unity as well as to increase Sigma's power as a national-level player rather than it remaining in the previous multi-regional sphere. Implementing the tasks and actions related to this project was the responsibility of functional managers.

The second change project centred on member reorientation, with the complete refurbishing of all offices, refreshing the logo and personalizing the identity in order to create a unified office atmosphere, rejuvenate the visual image of Sigma and enable personal identification. The logo received a facelift, long-standing employees inspired cartoon characters that were used in internal and external communications as a way to increase personality, and offices around Finland turned into flexipoints with the same furniture and colour schemes. In some locations, this also meant a physical move to new, more functional offices. Implementing the tasks and actions related to this project was the responsibility of the newly built HR team.

As the planned change was vast and involved the entire company at all of its locations, planning and implementation extended over years and eventually included every employee. The top management team drew up the change plans, while functional managers undertook day-to-day management of the change projects. The ultimate execution of the change was the responsibility of every employee. The change was most prominent approximately two years after the deal, one year after the recruitment of the new CEO, and continued actively for two years. The planned changes within this programme concluded in 2020.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

To collect primary data, I conducted semi-structured interviews in order to reveal in-depth information (cf. Saldaña, 2011) while ensuring comparability between different informants (cf. Tolley et al., 2016). The empirical study focused on perceptions of organizational members still working for the company; those who had left the company earlier were purposely excluded. In addition to the primary data, I used publicly available financial statements and press releases in order to gain a fuller understanding. Due to the sensitivity of the topic and the wish to remain completely anonymous, Sigma did not provide any confidential internal material as research data. Nevertheless, all participants provided member checks for the preliminary analysis, and a long-term representative of Sigma in possession of all internal materials regarding the strategic change programme has evaluated the truthfulness of the story presented in this paper prior to publication, increasing the trustworthiness of the interpretation (cf. Welch & Piekkari, 2017).

The interview questions reflected members' perceptions of the central, distinctive and enduring attributes of Sigma as well as significant changes that had influenced these attributes over Sigma's timeline. In addition, I asked the interviewees to reflect on Sigma as an employer and on the personal meaning of Sigma membership. The topics and questions were purposely open in order to allow interviewees relative freedom in answering. I conducted the interviews within a few weeks in late 2019, some three years after the initial acquisition, when the strategic change programme was still ongoing. They lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and were audio-recorded to enable transcription. My 24 interviewees represent different functions, hierarchical levels, employment lengths and locations at Sigma (Table 1).

In Table 1, Old HQ refers to the founding location, whereas New HQ refers to the current CEO location. To protect the anonymity of the company and the interviewees, I cannot reveal exact locations. For ease of understanding, I have named the other locations *subsidiaries*, and numbered them in order of geographical closeness to the founding location. These terms arose from the interviewees, although the official

Table 1
Interviews

Function	Tenure (years)	Location	Duration
Development Manager	1–2	Subsidiary 4	42 min
Finance	>10	Old HQ	1h 2 min
Finance	3–5	Old HQ	57 min
Human Resources	3–5	New HQ	1h 7 min
Human Resources	1–2	Subsidiary 4	53 min
Human Resources	1–2	Old HQ	1h 2 min
Marketing	6–10	Subsidiary 5	40 min
Marketing	>10	Subsidiary 4	1h 5 min
Production Manager	3–5	New HQ	55 min
Production Manager	3–5	Subsidiary 5	42 min
Production Manager	1–2	Subsidiary 3	54 min
Production, expert services	>10	Old HQ	51 min
Production, logistics	3–5	Old HQ	55 min
Production, logistics	1–2	Old HQ	55 min
Production, logistics	1–2	Subsidiary 1	43 min
Production, projects	<1	Old HQ	1h
Production, support	1–2	New HQ	39 min
Production, support	<1	Old HQ	39 min
Sales	>10	Old HQ	58 min
Sales	>10	Old HQ	58 min
Sales	6–10	Subsidiary 1	29 min
Sales	6–10	Old HQ	56 min
Sales	3–5	Subsidiary 2	54 min
Sales	1–2	Old HQ	54 min

team-based organizational structure of Sigma does not recognize an HQ, but rather the geographically dispersed top management team. I conducted most of the interviews face to face at the interviewees' offices, but due to long distances, two interviews occurred over Microsoft Teams. I conducted all interviews in Finnish, the mother tongue of both the interviewer and the interviewees. Consequently, I have personally translated all illustrative quotes in the findings section into English.

I used QSR NVivo12 software to ease the qualitative analysis, which occurred in two rounds. Appendices 1 and 2 illustrate the data structures for rounds one and two of the analysis, respectively, inspired by Gioia and colleagues (2013b). Careful notes taken during the interviews offered a starting point for categorization during the first round, where I started by coding the interview transcripts inductively into groups reflecting, for example, significant people, events and attributes. Second, I formed analytical categories based on iterations between the inductive categories and the literature under headings such as timeline, identity, emotion triggers and management. I used these categories to discuss the timeline of Sigma, the strategic change programme at Sigma and the identity of Sigma.

During the first round of analysis, I recognized three identity transition perspectives among Sigma members: discontinuity, in transition and continuity. These became the starting point for the more deductive second round of analysis, which categorized the interview findings based on the analytical framework reflecting the strategic change programme, Sigma's identity and the permanent organization. I formed inductive sub-themes separately for each identity transition perception in order to build a meaningful understanding of the potential triggers and drivers of each member experience. I used the understanding from round two in discussing the different identity (dis)continuity experiences at Sigma.

4. Findings

4.1. Identity and identification at Sigma

Entrepreneurial spirit was the key central and distinctive attribute of Sigma. This attribute already had its foundations in the founding era, with the family growth era cementing its position at the core of Sigma's identity. Members saw entrepreneurial spirit as an eagerness to take up and engage in tasks autonomously and ambitiously. Simultaneously, reliability, longevity and innovativeness supported the entrepreneurial

spirit, the importance of which increased with the continuous change experienced in Sigma's field of operation. Members also perceived entrepreneurial spirit in reflecting the purpose of Sigma as enabling meaningful work and being profitable. The investor ownership era shook the continuity of the entrepreneurial spirit, as members were perceived as becoming more cautious and risk-averse, sticking to their job descriptions.

The second central and enduring attribute of Sigma was *expertise*. This attribute was also embodied in the slogan "the most skilled mate in town", adopted by Sigma members as their mantra. The perceived importance of customer-centricity and flexibility reflected this attribute, as members reported their willingness to tackle work hands-on. Maintaining expertise centred on continuous development and learning, for example, by using the most modern tools and systems. Portraying approachability also reflected this attribute, as members saw customer service at the core of signalling expertise. This reflected the purpose of Sigma in helping customers become more successful through making the customers' lives easier with information technology solutions. The investor ownership era challenged this attribute, as members perceived solidifying the product offering as decreasing flexibility and customer responsiveness.

The third and final central and distinctive attribute of Sigma was *quirkiness*. Daring to be different, to embody a personality and a start-up spirit, were valuable parts of Sigma's identity. This quirkiness was visible in the easy-going atmosphere, where sociability and positivity were apparent. Sigma members characterized the company as open, youthful, energetic and eager, which the cartoon characters that were built based on real employees to give personality to the facelift of Sigma's brand reflected. It was also important to the members that this quirkiness and personality did not come out as being too posh, so that, at the same time, Sigma remained unpretentious and authentic. This attribute reflected the purpose of Sigma as being a renewing force in its field. Again, the investor ownership era challenged quirkiness, as standardization began to eat away at the personality, with members reporting fears of becoming faceless.

Nevertheless, the members considered Sigma and the sense of belonging to Sigma as extremely valuable. Sigma was considered to embody a good working atmosphere, even though the humour and the positive atmosphere were perceived as declining somewhat. In particular, those who had worked at Sigma for several years saw the meaning of Sigma as primarily that of a community, as something much more than an employer. Some even termed Sigma their "other family". This signalled a strong emotional attachment, which triggered negative emotions, such as grief, when Sigma was fundamentally changed.

Table 2
Identity transition perceptions

Perception	Illustrative statements
Identity continuity: a clear sense of *who we are* (7/24)	*It has formed mentally rather well, this one Sigma, in a surprisingly short time, which is very nice.* (HR, 3–5 years at the company)
	Right now, that we have a clear organizational chart and I have found my own place on it, I really like working at Sigma. I do not miss the old days. (Marketing, 6–10 years at the company)
	Although there's been a lot of new things, I feel like I belong. (Production, support, 1–2 years at the company)
	I feel very good about how things are. No one is watching over my every move. I'm an entrepreneurial person; I don't need constant supervision. (Sales, 3–5 years at the company)
	I haven't seen that much change; it hasn't really touched me. Well, there's more work due to growth, which means more customers and more salespeople. (Production, logistics, 1–2 years at the company)
	When I started, it was a bit unclear who does what. With growth, it's good that we have created different functions and teams to take responsibility for certain things and processes behind functions to make everything clearer. (Production, logistics, 1–2 years at the company)
	It's easy when you can stand behind the employer's words or strategy; it motivates. (Production, support, <1 year at the company)
In transition: liminality between *who we were* and *who we are becoming* (10/24)	*Little by little, things are moving towards being more organized, but there is still a long way to go.* (Development Manager, 1–2 years at the company)
	Under the surface, a new sense of togetherness at Sigma is developing, but it requires a bit of cultural and mental adaptation. Change is always difficult. (Production, projects, <1 year at the company)
	Still, people look to their own groups, and the relationships are different. We have been together for only a short while, mixing it up. (HR, 1–2 years at the company)
	There is a lot of work to be done, but I believe that the enthusiasm that is clearly driving the change and which pulled me in has spread. (Marketing, >10 years at the company)
	The idea was to create an actually uniform company from the many locations. It's gone well, but there are growing pains, particularly with the new acquisitions. And we need to figure out the correct organizational structure and how to develop further. (Production Manager, 3–5 years at the company)
	Our offices look the same, but the people, the atmosphere, and the ways of working are very different between locations. (Sales, 6–10 years at the company)
	I've never been along for such a ride. The pace of growth is so fast that it requires constant recalibration. Maybe not daily, but at least weekly. (Production Manager, 1–2 years at the company)
	In a way, the old identity is preserved and probably will be for a long time. (Production, expert services, >10 years at the company)
	Before it was a clearly polarized question in our staff survey that we are not one, united Sigma. But the polarization has tapered off and in HR, we now feel that the worst crisis is over. (HR, 1–2 years at the company)
	Objectives should be set so high that you don't always need to reach them all as long as you are progressing. (Production Manager, 3–5 years at the company)
Identity discontinuity: no clear sense of *who we are* (7/24)	*Before things were more personal, I thought that I had to make an effort for them* [the previous owners]. (Finance, 3–5 years at the company)
	Before I felt like I was working for them [the previous owners], *it was more personal.... It feels ... like in two years, their entire life's work has gone up in flames. And it feels awful, so awful.* (Finance, >10 years at the company)
	What makes me most upset is that we sometimes don't even make an offer and then we don't get the deal, because we are too focused on the worst-case scenario. (Sales, 6–10 years at the company)
	We lack the flexibility we used to have. Or, if you want to have it, you need to fight a lot of windmills along the way. (Sales, 6–10 years at the company)
	Before, this was home to me. Now it doesn't feel like that at all; it feels alien. (Sales, >10 years at the company)
	This company has grown too fast. No one seems to be managing the change from the old to the new. We have a clear management problem. (Sales, 1–2 years at the company)
	Lately, many people have been in very bad moods, and it's contagious. (Production, logistics, 3–5 years at the company)

4.2. Identity transition perceptions at Sigma

Table 2 summarizes the key employee sentiments with regard to identity (dis)continuity. The members who perceived that there was identity discontinuity were holding on to the past, onto how things used to be. The members whose identity transition was still ongoing looked to both the past and the future; most portrayed a sense of an ongoing change process. The members who experienced emotional release and had successfully completed their identity transition did not miss the old days but perceived identity continuity in the features that were personally relevant. It is important to note that these sentiments reflect identity (dis)continuity and are somewhat independent from the members' perceptions regarding the change programme in general. In effect, even those members who perceive identity continuity may still consider the change incomplete.

Whereas those who perceived identity continuity saw some of the central, distinctive and enduring attributes of Sigma still in existence, the group in transition perceived signs of continuity allowing them to make progress towards identification with the new organization. While this group had not completed their identity transition and thus had not entirely escaped liminality, the forward-looking nature of their sentiments seems promising in terms of forming a new emotional bond to the changed organization. However, the most problematic group in terms of both personal and organizational outcomes were those members whose perceptions reflected identity discontinuity, as they also experienced the full extent of liminality.

Strongly negative attitudes towards change appeared as repelling rather than fighting against change at Sigma. This is an important difference, as it signals that the interviewees experiencing strongly negative emotions were in a state of identity ambiguity without a clear sense of *who we are*. In effect, they were stuck in a state of liminality, unable to let go of the old identity or see continuity towards the new, and thus unable to rebuild and restructure their identity perceptions. In this state, active resistance seems impossible, as awareness of imperfection has not occurred. Thus, rather than resist change, members repel the idea of identity change altogether.

4.3. Identity (dis)continuity at Sigma

4.3.1. Discontinuity: Losing the sense of who we are

For the members experiencing discontinuity, the sense of loss began with the introduction of the new CEO. They experienced the initial acquisition as a shock, potentially leading to job losses, but when things did not change for a while, things calmed down – until the start of the strategic change programme. Despite the adversity, even these members perceived the employees as entrepreneurial, friendly and service-oriented. The issue was with Sigma as an organization, which was seen to have become more careful, confusing, rigid and faceless. The Sigma values appeared to be merely written words rather than being acted out. Overall, these members experienced that the difference between the old and the new Sigma was "like night and day" (Sales, 6–10 years at the company), questioning the possibility of changing identity.

They perceived the addition of middle managers to the new organizational chart as a weakness, complicating information flow. Due to the change, these members perceived that distances between employees, teams and functions had grown wider, and at the same time, work had become less personal. While even these members realized that a larger company must have somewhat unified practices in order to function, they questioned the strictness of the new changes. In particular, the team-based organization raised many complaints, as it was perceived to divide the employees into separate stalls, complicating and even preventing collaboration and communication. These members were of the opinion that management was drawing up nice figures and plans, but they were never really implemented or operationalized. The view was that management had not understood the job descriptions of the grassroots-level employees. The proposed changes were sometimes perceived as adding to workloads and making work slower and more rigid than before.

Feeling welcome in the new organization seemed important so that employees could appreciate the employer image and atmosphere. Yet, one of the issues raised by these members was the functionality of the new HR unit, which was seen to control rather than assist. HR was perceived as bureaucratic and rigid, and as having made poor decisions in terms of layoffs, even though these only included very few individuals. This was akin to the perception that new middle managers were so enthusiastic and willing to prove their worth that they actually started to change the teams' internal composition and task division just to show they were active. Justifications for the made changes seemed lacking, both within teams and regarding the overall change objectives. These members also experienced an inability to influence the change; they felt like the managers did not listen. This was a drastic shift from the previous CEO, who was seen as actively involved, and the loss of whom was experienced as particularly disheartening.

This also reflected the issue that these members perceived management as having moved away from them. They had seen the previous CEO as hands-on, but the addition of middle managers and the geographical spread of the new top management team created an image of a hierarchy, which was not welcomed. The top management team organized quarterly info sessions but did not actively appear otherwise. This created the perception that the new top management team was polishing Sigma for selling – without really knowing or caring about Sigma's history. Moreover, these members were very much aware that a corporate investor is not likely to hold onto a company for very long and were waiting for the next acquisition with mixed feelings. On the one hand, with excitement that it might be a return to the good old days, but on the other hand, with caution and anxiety that it might be another corporate investor or a huge conglomerate, which would amalgamate Sigma entirely.

4.3.2. Liminality: Moving from who we were to who we are becoming

These members perceived the change objectives as beneficial but were not yet able to form a picture of the new Sigma. They saw constant improvement and were approving of the change plans, but at the same time, were unsure what the new Sigma was like. Despite the turmoil, these members still saw Sigma's old entrepreneurial spirit in action in the eagerness to complete tasks and push through changes. Similarly, they saw members working together by way of joy and without unnecessary embellishment. A sense of quirkiness persisted in appearances, events and humour. In effect, these members still saw features of a unified identity and togetherness, even though geographical scattering diluted this somewhat.

These members were particularly appreciative of the chance to move to new offices, despite the pressures of the flexi-office. They viewed the facelift given to the brand as positive and were also appreciative of the new HR function, having had pleasant personal experiences. While change was still ongoing and even stressful at times, overall, it was desirable. Still, particularly differences stemming from the old location-based structure and the companies acquired before Sigma was sold to the corporate investor seemed to raise questions. The team-based structure was seen to create a juxtaposition between different functions, and even within teams, the old locations and old acquired companies were still visible. While within-team cooperation was perceived as functional, it became more complicated across locations. In particular, cross-team, cross-location communication was experienced as somewhat difficult. This made collaboration more complicated, and combined with a preference for electronic communication, triggered a sense of facelessness. Unification was perceived as a good effort due to the previous scattered nature of the "Sigma quilt" (HR, 1–2 years at the company), but many areas of detachment and scattering still existed. Members wished for more face-to-face meetings to help unification, and an open dialogue was called for to solve any persisting issues. Yet, these members did not see identity and cultural differences as solely a

hindrance, but also a source of location-based belongingness.

Nevertheless, the differences in culture and working routines between locations caused some frustration. Confusion also stemmed from the perception that the necessity of change was not explicitly justified on the grassroots level. Members found the top management's interests valid but called for more sensitivity and realistic plans to implement changes. While the coaching style of management introduced during the change was welcomed, overall, the added layers of management seemed to create a hierarchy. Still, these members trusted the management to do their best and to do the right things for Sigma, even though the pace of change was questioned. Some of the existing processes were seen as rather cosmetic, which meant that a change towards more concrete and actualized processes would have been welcome. Overall, while these members were appreciative of the change objectives and looked forward to the future, they were unsure of Sigma's long-term strategy.

4.3.3. Continuity: Finding a renewed sense of who we are

The members with a continuity perspective, while sensitive to unfinished changes, were still able to experience a sense of the Sigma *we*. They saw Sigma as open, relaxed, ambitious, helpful, friendly, entrepreneurial and youthful. The key attributes were still visible to these employees, even when the change challenged some of them. While Sigma had grown into a larger company, these members still saw the operational routine of a smaller company in practice: flexibility, taking care of people and being able to adapt to changes fast. Yet they hoped that the company would not grow too much so that they could sustain this culture. Understanding the history of Sigma was perceived as an important step towards understanding co-workers, but at the same time, looking towards the future and staying positive about change was valued.

These members perceived the accomplishments of the strategic change programme as more important than its incompleteness, feeling a sense of renewal. They saw the objective of having clear task descriptions and a clear organizational structure as valuable and already somewhat achieved. The flexi-office design was experienced as a sign of equality and a good way to interact with members of other teams. Even though the members did not feel that the objective of a unified Sigma had been completely achieved, they did identify with Sigma as a whole. In addition, while they saw different working routines in action, they instead highlighted the unity of the bigger picture. The overarching goal of becoming a national-level player was recognized and appreciated. Accordingly, these members thought that also highlighting locations other than the largest ones would be a good idea in order to prevent cliques. Nevertheless, they also expressed that not all changes had been well thought out and that deeper collaboration in change planning could solve this issue in the future. Deeper collaboration across teams and locations was also seen as lacking.

Despite some negative feedback, these members saw that the direction set by the top management team was good for Sigma and that it would create a positive image of a well-managed company. While the top management team remained somewhat distant to these members, they were still trustworthy. Nevertheless, even some of these members questioned the suitability of the new management to Sigma, in particular, finding that maybe someone else might "look more like Sigma" (Production, logistics, 1–2 years at the company). Still, the future looked strong and positive.

4.3.4. Comparing experiences

There are both similarities and differences in the stories told by members from different identity perception groups. For example, not much variation exists between the personalities of the different identity perception groups. Most members considered themselves as positive, and at least somewhat social. It seems as if Sigma had either been able to employ certain types of workers whose personalities fit the company, or the members' personalities had become akin to Sigma's. Similarly, all of the interviewees still found belonging to Sigma meaningful, and most

found motivation particularly from colleagues, who were also described as friends. While for the discontinuity perception group, this image was somewhat weakened by the change ("*Before* this was home." Sales, >10 years at the company, emphasis added), the wish for continuity of the "Sigma family" seemed uniform.

Although it seems reasonable that tenure length would increase the difficulty of identity transitions, the interviews did not fully support this notion. Indeed, while strong emotional attachment was perhaps more common among members of longer tenure, new employees also experienced identity discontinuity. In general, all perceptions appeared among members of all tenure lengths. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that employees from the Old HQ location had stronger identity perceptions and, therefore, more difficult identity transitions than others, but it is impossible to evaluate correlation or causality based on the qualitative data.

Attitudes also seemed to vary between these groups. Discontinuity perceptions seemed to trigger a rather negative attitude towards change, where identity change was particularly repelled. Being in transition seemed to reflect a questioning openness to change, a willingness to look towards the future, but at the same time a recognition of ongoing problems. Continuity perceptions seemed to highlight the anticipated end state and finding a subjectively comfortable and desirable place in the new Sigma. The variety of member perceptions from different locations indicates that their needs also differed; while former HQ members suffered from a perceived loss of centrality, former subsidiary members embraced the chance for perceived equality among Sigma locations.

5. Discussion

5.1. Organizational identity change during strategic change programmes

Previous literature (Turkulainen et al., 2015; Vuorinen & Martinsuo, 2018) defines change programmes as sets of interrelated projects managed in a coordinated manner. The strategic change programme at Sigma fits these criteria, as it consisted of separate projects with interrelated tasks and clearly signposted managerial responsibilities. Thus, learning from the Sigma case seems transferrable to other change programme contexts. While it largely confirms existing theory in highlighting the role of identity transition in organizational identity change, it brings novel insights into our understanding of the link between the permanent organization and strategic change programmes.

Building on Yang (2012), the findings indicate that a major contrast between the old and the new organization is likely to trigger what members perceive as radical organizational transformation. The findings indicate that when ownership change initiates a strategic change programme, the connection to the permanent organization may become doubly threatened: first, through the change in ownership, and second, through the strategic change programme. As owners may have fundamentally different organizational values and logic (e.g. Sur et al., 2013), and strategic change programmes aim at transforming operations (Lehtonen & Martinsuo, 2009), members may be caught in the crossfire.

In contrast to the suggestion that perceiving an identity threat causes mitigating behaviour and threat-opposing behaviour (Van Os et al., 2015), this study indicates that members may also experience overall emotional detachment from the organization. While such detachment may not be as visible in terms of active change-resisting behaviour, it may have more profound long-term implications through decreased employee wellbeing, motivation and performance. At Sigma, the detached members expressed hopes of being heard and being cared for, indicating a lack of communication on a human, emotional level. Thus, it is important to note that even when strategic change programme management has a clear purpose and plan for the change projects, if their communication does not explicitly include support for identity claim modification, identity discontinuity perceptions may emerge. Seeing as the previous literature suggests perceived discourse as a

potential trigger for liminality (Nyberg & Mueller, 2009), altering the discourse around change may be a key opportunity for signalling identity continuity.

As the previous literature proves, careful management is a key success factor for strategic change programmes (Cowan-Sahadath, 2010; Pellegrinelli et al., 2007). Thus, perceived problems in management are likely detrimental. At Sigma, while the new cross-locational team structure allowed for cooperation, it increased the perceptions that leadership was detached from the everyday work. In addition, among member experiences, particular attachment to the previous owners or the family growth era company seemed to indicate greater effort was needed for identity transition. Thus, it seems likely that perceptions of distant leadership and attachment to the previous owners complicate identity transition. Considering ways to make leadership visible at the grassroots level may benefit strategic change programme management, whereas also signposting continuity in management objectives may ease the transition from the old to the new ownership.

5.2. Members' identity transitions

At Sigma, members seemed unanimous in their description of the key attributes. Because organizational identity entails shared perceptions (Ashforth & Mael, 1996), this indicates that prior to the strategic change programme, Sigma had a clear identity. Members also had a clear description of what each identity attribute meant in their everyday work, indicating familiarity, tangibility and apprehension, encouraging identity-congruent behaviour. As behaviour is a key indicator of an organizational identity (Ashforth et al., 2020), it seems evident that Sigma's identity before the strategic change programme was strong. Members also seemed unanimous in describing the perceived challenges the investor ownership era brought to the continuity of the attributes. This indicates a detected identity threat. Thus, the findings of this study are likely transferrable to other contexts where a strong organizational identity becomes threatened.

At Sigma, members clearly differed in their identity transitions. While some perceived the changes to the core attributes as disheartening, others were able to cross the divide more easily. Nevertheless, as at least some members were able to connect the dots between the old and the new identity more easily, it seems likely that rather than new attributes altogether, the strategic change programme initiated a change in the meaning of the attributes (cf. Corley & Gioia, 2004; Fisher et al., 2016). Thus, the logic of Sigma was changing, but strategic change programme management seemed unable to communicate the change in a way that would have signalled identity continuity. In such cases, it is likely that some members will find identity transition difficult. This highlights the necessity of forming an appropriate discourse around change to ease members' sensemaking and identity transitions. Strategic change programme management may find it beneficial to consider how the logic of the company will change based on the designed identity claim modification. Considering this in change discourse will likely help members make sense of and commit to the change.

Still, negative experiences at Sigma seemed to stem from the strength of the emotional bond rather than the clarity of the identity or the need for transition. Because an emotional bond is inherently durable and positive (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), changes to the object of the bond are likely to be identity threats. Thus, members who experienced emotional identification seemed more vulnerable to negative outcomes from the identity change. However, members whose identification did not include such a strong emotional bond found it easier to transition. Notably, while a strong emotional bond seemed more common among members of longer tenure, newer members also identified with Sigma emotionally. This seems to explain why tenure length is not necessarily a reliable indicator of whether members will experience organizational identity change as difficult.

As Sigma members differed in their identity transitions, the outcomes also varied. Members who were able to complete their identity transitions experienced emotional release from the old organization. This is essential in becoming receptive to the new identity (Huy, 1999). The emotional release enabled these members to accept the change and start building an emotional bond to the new organization. While the meaning of Sigma's identity attributes was somewhat altered, finding a link allowed these members to make sense of the new organization and establish identity continuity. However, members who were not able to see continuity were hanging on to the past and repelling change, which they perceived as an identity threat. This caused identity ambiguity, as the surrounding Sigma changed, but the members were still stuck in the phase of liminality. In the long term, if these members are unable to re-establish their identification with Sigma, they may experience permanent liminality and emotional detachment from the organization, likely leading to lowered wellbeing and lower performance. This highlights the necessity of strategic change management considering organizational identity not just to ease member adjustment but also due to the drastic consequences that ignoring identity may have on the company's performance, should many members become detached.

5.3. Identity (dis)continuity in the permanent organization

A strategic change programme designed to bring about the new owner's vision for the company, particularly when designed by the new owner, may risk losing the link to the accustomed permanent organization, which is essential in successful strategic change programme management. This suggests the need for the new ownership to familiarize itself with the permanent organization before implementing a strategic change programme. Doing so can enable them to detect the core attributes of the organizational identity (see Mael & Ashforth, 1992), which again will likely help planning, implementing and managing the strategic change programme in a manner which signals continuity of the core attributes.

In addition, the Sigma members' wish for explicit justification for change plans signals a need to see the connection to the permanent organization. This indicates that although change project ownership was explicit, possibly overall strategic change programme management was somewhat lacking. In particular, member perceptions regarding changes in accustomed Sigma characteristics, such as openness, personalized service and close mental distances, seem to signal a move away from the organizational identity at the core of the permanent organization. Due to the necessity of a clear connection between the strategic change programme and the permanent organization (Lehtonen & Martinsuo, 2009), this misalignment likely complicated strategic change programme management. Thus, strategic change programme management may find it useful to justify change projects in language that highlights the connection to the permanent organization.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Implications for theory

This paper offers a more nuanced view of the social and organizational context of strategic change programmes through an explicit focus on the programmes' clients as the recipients of change. Exploring the link between organizational identity as a feature of the permanent organization and a strategic change programme as a potential trigger of organizational identity change, this paper highlights the benefits of signalling identity continuity. This paper shows how organizational members perceive identity (dis)continuity during strategic change programmes in many ways, influenced by both the organizational context and personal experiences. The organization's ability to signal identity continuity and the strength of the individual member's emotional bond to the old organization seem to be the most important elements in directing member perceptions towards continuity or liminality.

This paper contributes to the strategic change programme management literature in four ways. First, through *introducing a novel perspective*

– identity – to this literature. This novel perspective improves our understanding of the individual-level dynamics of strategic change programmes, informing strategic change programme management. While related literature acknowledges the importance of identity, the strategic change programme management literature to date has largely overlooked this perspective. The value of considering identity is in the way it offers a simple, clear opportunity for detecting and signposting the link between the permanent organization and the strategic change programme, helping managers plan and implement change projects with minimal resistance.

Second, this paper *extends* the discussion on strategic change programme management to the ownership change context. Exploring strategic change programme management in the ownership change context reveals specific concerns, which can help inform strategic change programme management more generally. Most importantly, a strategic change programme triggered by ownership change is likely to increase members' perceptions of ambiguity between the old and the new organization, emphasizing the importance of considering organizational members as the recipients of change, on the one hand, and the connection between the strategic change programme and the permanent organization, on the other hand. Particularly when the new owners initiate the strategic change programme, detachment from the permanent organization may occur, as the strategic change programme management may not have a clear understanding of what members perceive as central, distinctive and enduring about the old organization.

Third, this paper enables *improved sensemaking* (see Weick, 1995) during strategic change programme management. While previous research proves that leadership skills are essential in successful change programme management, how individual members perceive strategic change programmes is underexplored. This paper shows that understanding member reactions can help strategic change programme managers plan and implement the change projects in a way which engages and motivates members to execute the change. This link between members as the clients or recipients of change and strategic change programme management has, to date, been poorly understood. This paper offers one way of making sense of the relationship: members' perceptions of organizational identity (dis)continuity.

Fourth, building on the above, this paper offers an *improvement* to the strategic change programme management literature in terms of understanding individual member involvement. While members' willingness to execute the change is known to have an influence on strategic change programmes' success, this paper clarifies that member reactions may vary greatly. This paper presents an organizational identity perspective as a solution to improved organizational outcomes. In effect, strategic change programmes, where programme management understands and acknowledges the role of identity, may outperform identity-neglecting approaches – particularly during ownership changes.

In addition to the contribution to the strategic change programme management literature, this paper contributes to the discussion on ownership change in family firms. While identity and emotional attachment are relatively unknown areas in family business restructuring (King et al., 2021), this paper provides novel insights into how members' emotional bonds to the old organization influence their willingness and ability to attach to the new organization. This information is useful for family business restructuring, as it allows both the old and new owners to plan and implement ownership change in a manner that supports members' identity transitions and eases emotional attachment to the new organization.

6.2. Implications for practice

This paper has practical implications for strategic change programme managers, particularly with regard to understanding the link between the permanent organization and change through organizational identity. The findings indicate that a clear connection to the permanent organization is not only essential, but may be established through signalling identity continuity. This knowledge may be particularly important in family firms undergoing ownership change, but is also likely to benefit other types of strategic change programmes. Establishing continuity necessitates understanding organizational history and roots, as they are likely to indicate the central, distinctive and enduring attributes of the organization. Recognizing the identity attributes is essential to advocating their continuity through explicit signposting. Thus, strategic change programme management may find it useful to explore the identity attributes and consider how these could become a part of the change projects, thus clearly establishing continuity. While this paper suggests ways to signal, in particular, organizational identity continuity, practitioners may also be able to detect other means of signposting organizational continuity, for example, through organizational culture or values.

While strategic change programme objectives may be positive and beneficial, if members perceive the permanent organization to be threatened by the change, they are less likely to execute the change. This seems particularly true for members with a strong emotional bond to the permanent organization – those who identify with the organization emotionally. Signalling identity continuity will support members' identity transitions and thereby ease forming an emotional attachment to the new organization, encouraging trust, cooperation and commitment. Explaining possible changes in identity labels or meanings – in effect, encouraging identity claim modification – allows those who maintain a strong emotional bond to the old organization to experience an emotional release, enabling them to complete the identity transition. To encourage identity claim modification, strategic change programme management can display the former and desired meaning of an identity attribute and place it in the work context through showing how the renewed meaning is rooted in everyday tasks.

Conversely, when members perceive discontinuity, they are more vulnerable to extended periods of liminality. This may cause them to lose the sense of *who we are*, which is essential for organizational identity, and thereby increase identity ambiguity and emotional detachment from the organization. This perspective offers novel insights into the potential individual-level causes of change resistance. While employees' negative reactions to change are known to researchers, practitioners continue to be surprised by them. Considering and detecting all possible member reactions can benefit strategic change programme management in highlighting the appropriate discourse. Member reactions can be detected, for example, as changes in the working atmosphere through observation, or formally through employee surveys. Strategic change programme management may benefit from highlighting the detected continuity experiences and purposely signposting the continuity of the attributes causing discontinuity perceptions.

6.3. Limitations and suggestions for future research

This paper has explored strategic change programme management from a novel viewpoint through a qualitative single case study. Thus, the main limitations of this study emerge from the explorative nature of the research. While the qualitative single case study is highly applicable in this paper, further evidence from other contexts is necessary in order to evaluate the generalizability of the findings. Similarly, the cross-sectional data collection gives an impression of a single point in time, albeit utilizing retrospection. Moreover, data collection occurred while the strategic change programme was ongoing, meaning that this paper is unable to explore what happened after closure. Thus, longitudinal research may reveal novel insights about the pace of members' identity transitions.

Overall, the nature of the change from family ownership to corporate investor ownership likely influenced these findings. For example, a switch from a family-centric long-term orientation to a corporate investor-centric short-term orientation likely played a role in this study, influencing member perceptions of longevity and continuity. It may also be that the Nordic cultural setting has influenced these findings. In

particular, a long-term orientation and a tendency to refrain from portraying emotions stemming from the surrounding culture may limit the generalizability of the findings. This emphasizes the need for future research in different types of change settings.

Finally, the explorative nature of this study narrows down the scope of the research, leaving many interesting concepts and relationships outside of the paper's focus. Future research is particularly encouraged to explore the relationship between management actions and identity perceptions during strategic change programmes, the relationship between members' individual identities and emotional attachment during organizational identity transitions, as well as the relationship between the antecedents and actions that lead to positive or negative identity outcomes during strategic change programmes.

Declaration of interest

None

Appendix

Appendix 1
Data structure, round one

Illustrative quotes	Inductive category	Gained understanding
When [the previous CEO] came in, we clearly became our own company, we were Sigma. And we started to take the company in what I thought was the right direction.	Significant people	Forming the timeline; Describing the strategic change programme; Detecting member attachments
[The founder] was quite a bullet. There were upsides to him. What was a bit difficult was that he was very old-timey.		
Before the management was clearly the owning family, they led, and they told us what to do and how to do it. It was clear.		
The big change came with the new CEO. They changed everything.		
We have bought smaller competitors quite strategically all over Finland to increase our network.	Significant events	Forming the timeline; Connecting member reactions to certain events
When we were bought by the corporate investor, we did not realize it then, but that was it [the biggest change].		
We had to change the organization to make everyone come together. These were big changes, new offices, new visual image, new brand image, new markets.		
We have too few unified processes.	Challenges and failures	Potential sources of discontinuity
I can no longer serve the customers and offer everything just like they wish. When we were small and flexible, customers liked it and appreciated it.		
I wish people would experience that they are being heard.		
I have a very positive image of our HR.	Successes	Potential sources of continuity
We have quite wide services, of what we can offer, and skills and expertise.		
We have national teams ... our teams are everywhere.... This creates its own challenges, but in this way we can serve our customers better.		
Information gets a bit siloed.	Communication	Connecting member perceptions to (dis)continuity
It's good that I can even email the CEO to hash things out if I need to.		
What cooperation we have [between teams] is ok, but often we are too late to start with, we don't have joint [practices].... Often you can't think beyond your own team.		
The working atmosphere has always been good. There's a relaxed mood.	Working atmosphere	Connecting member perceptions to (dis)continuity
With the stakeholders I interact with, we have a great rapport, but inside we are a bit divided.		
Before when there were a few dozen employees, everyone knew each other. Now there are many unknowns around; the sense of community is not the same.		
In working routines and roles, we have very different ideas about who should do certain things.	Forming silos	Connecting member perceptions to (dis)continuity
Internally the teams are starting to work, but how they collaborate needs work, so that it starts to feel like we are actually working together and know who does what.		
What is entrepreneurial spirit is that we do everything to the fullest.	The core attributes of Sigma	Detecting identity attributes; Connecting member perceptions to (dis)continuity
We have amazing expertise. You can't think that we just do bulk stuff; we really have very skilled employees.		
Being unique is important; we operate in a market where everything is bulk stock in the end.		
Our value statements by way of joy and the most skilled in town are somehow reflected in our character.	Character of Sigma	Detecting identity attributes; Connecting member perceptions to (dis)continuity
We talk about things and are open.... There's no point in trying to flex your muscles and put yourself forward; that is great because it would be very annoying.		
We are relaxed, like I'm wearing a hoodie, there's no strict dress code.		
We help customers to succeed.	Purpose of Sigma	Detecting identity attributes; Connecting member perceptions to (dis)continuity
We are the IT mate close to you.		
To make profit.		
Before we used to be more personal.	Changes in Sigma	Describing the strategic change programme; Connecting member perceptions to (dis)continuity
Our willingness to take risks has decreased significantly.		
Responsibility has shifted much more to the employees.		
The company has changed since I came in. It was a small family company, and we were really close. The emotional bond is still very strong.		
We are still undergoing change and there are growing pains, but this is also the most fruitful time to see what Sigma is and where we are going.	Meaning of Sigma	Detecting identity attributes; Connecting member perceptions to (dis)continuity
Sigma is my employer, but it's more than that. It's our posse, our gang.		
It's like another family to me.		
Absolutely, I identify primarily with the local office. And secondly, we have built quite a strong team identity. Sigma comes in third.		
Developing internal processes is my thing, always has been.	Motives for working	Detecting identity attributes; Connecting member perceptions to (dis)continuity
It's the people, work is work anywhere.		
Being able to make a positive difference in someone else's life.		
Being at the centre of things, doing something meaningful.		

Appendix 2

Data structure, round two

Identity transition	Analytical themes	Inductive themes	Illustrative quotes
Discontinuity	Strategic change programme	Overall change	[The previous owner] *saw it early on, that the market was driving towards consolidation, to be bigger, to get the benefits of a bigger company, to get better prices in order to survive.*
			[The new CEO] *came in. That's when the turmoil started.*
			Nowadays we need to be a bit careful about what we can say.
			There are some growing pains. Although things look good on paper, the reality is different.
		Change projects	*We no longer have our own spaces, but a flexi-office, which was a big change to some.*
			We have moved to a more hierarchical, rigid organization. We lack the former flexibility.
			HR came in and started to intervene with what people said quite strongly.
			Well, if the aim is to be the most skilled mate in town, and relaxed and flexible, with this business model it will be a total failure.
		Communication	*When you meet someone, are able to put a face on a person, it is totally different working with them afterwards.*
			Well, the official channel would be through the supervisor, but sometimes it feels like kicking a concrete pole trying to push things forward through that route.
			Management should listen to the employees more.
			Personal contacts – if you know someone, you can share your views.
		Management	*If they want to just do something, but don't think about what would be the most sensible or economically productive option, it worries me.*
			I don't know if the managers know who does what here.
			Working together doesn't seem to concern management because we never see them, and they don't really seem to participate.
			The new managers only focus on their own stall and reaching their own figures to look good, and are probably already thinking about where to work next.
		Separation	*People have been placed in separate silos, and it makes cooperation more difficult. Without cooperation, motivation is also lower because you're just focused on your own task.*
			Before we were the old familiar gang. Now we are not.
			When there's no one managing the change, people just thwart back to the old processes and roles.
			If a sole company is bought entirely, they probably remain that old company for quite some time.
	Identity	Attributes	*Most of the employees portray entrepreneurial spirit.*
			We have a great deal of expertise in different areas.
			We have good written values, but they are not visible in everyday work.
			Nothing from the old Sigma has survived.
		Personality	*I think I take things rather positively in general.*
			I'm not as dominating or strict as some can be.
			I think I'm social and have a good sense of humour.
			I'm a typical woman, overachiever, conscientious, come to work unless my head is detached.
		Meaning	*Before it was a family. Many of my colleagues have been my colleagues for longer than my husband has been my husband.*
			That I've been here for so long means that it has been a good place to work.
			I've experienced a lot and learned much about working life at Sigma. I've become more confident.
			There's a big change ongoing, of course it changes my feelings a bit.
	Permanent organization	Good old days	*This used to be a small and tight community.*
			The focus chosen then was good, and we had a good group of people working on it. We were quite young then. We had a kind of unprejudiced business model, and we took chances.
			The group was tight then. One could say that messing with you was caring about you. But it was all in good faith, casual piss-taking.
			That's when we started to develop, and when we fixed many of the old mistakes, streamlining. And the CEO was always there, every day. That was the start of a different era, an era of growth.
		Future	*This can't be fixed anymore. That's obvious. But I think we are heading in the wrong direction.*
			The worst-case scenario is that we follow this road, forget about our customers, and just operate according to a set business model chosen by us. I worry we will lose more clients.
			Well, we know that a corporate investor does not hold on to companies for very long, so some change is coming, but no one knows if it's next year or in five years; that is on my mind constantly..
			Some people are just waiting for someone to buy us, so we can start doing things differently.
In transition	Strategic change programme	Change objectives	*We have too few unified processes.*
			People work really hard for HR here; it's one of the best things about Sigma.
			The new offices are great, but of course, the reality is that the office space itself creates additional pressure to change.
			There are many different groups visible. We are nowhere close to the target [of a unified Sigma].
		Communication	*We are going towards a direction where everything becomes faceless.*
			Sometimes it's fine, but sometimes there are lags, and there's still a bit of turmoil going on, but it's getting better.
			People do things differently because they are not informed on how they should do it; there has been no training. Or the people have just not adopted the new ways.
			We could justify decisions better. Not always, but often it's a question of haste.
		Management	*Management here has good intentions, but maybe recognizing the life cycle of the company, that we are here now, and the next step could be this, so that they don't leap so far away and cause chaos. There should be more sensitivity towards that.*
			Management is quite far removed from the everyday work, but I feel like they imagine they are closer.
			The seemingly low hierarchy means that they say anyone can talk to anyone, but that is not how it goes in people's minds. There are supervisors and managers and team leaders, it is not really all that low.
			The new CEO is more of a manager than a leader.
		Turmoil	*There are different ways of doing things, different roles, different ideas of which task belongs to whom. There have been very different roles in what is done by the salesclerk, or the service manager – where are the lines?*
			There's pointless fumbling going on, bickering and time wasting, because not everything is well thought out. That's when you feel like you are holding the ball alone and there's no one to throw it to.
			The processes and launching them and adopting them takes time, and people don't always know what to do.
			Sometimes they could calm things down so that we could make things work.

(continued on next page)

Appendix 2 (*continued*)

Identity transition	Analytical themes	Inductive themes	Illustrative quotes
	Identity	Attitude	*I had decided beforehand, as I knew the situation, that I'm not going to get upset over anything.*
			There's some frustration in the air, and talking to people, the reasons seem valid.
			I think the situation here is quite delicate right now. I don't want to provoke it.
		Attributes	*Stemming from the culture at Sigma, I have become more relaxed. I don't stress so much about things I used to stress about.*
			Entrepreneurial spirit is visible all around, hitting the ground running before the starter pistol goes off.
			Identity always matters, and knowing where you come from, it helps us understand others better.
			This is like a start-up.
			We have wide-reaching expertise, very wide.
		Personality	*I'm very development-oriented.*
			I'm overly positive and have a very positive and trusting attitude towards others.
			I'm quite direct and maybe even a bit blunt sometimes, but still more extroverted than your average Finn.
			I'm an introvert, but still very adaptable and accommodating, so that, sometimes I flare up when there's a lot of stress.
	Permanent organization	Image of Sigma	*Our brand is relaxed, it has a good buzz, we do things together and don't take ourselves to seriously.*
			They [the old HQ employees] have a stronger sense of the old Sigma, and how things were done there. I imagine it is more difficult for them to transfer to the new.
			We are genuinely present; customer servants can be themselves.
			The corporate culture is very strong. You can feel it when you walk into the office. You see it from the door.
		Future	*We have grown into a certain size category and now it's important to define the next stage of strategy.*
			The future looks good, but full of work.
			The future is full of opportunities. We have all the chances to still succeed better in everything, and we have only just started on this road.
			It's not all fanfares. It's a bit nerve-racking, what will happen when [the corporate investor] sells us.
Continuity	Strategic change programme	Change objectives	*There's been an incredible amount of work. Two years ago, there were no processes, no systems, and still we were one Sigma. We started to build this one Sigma from the bottom up.*
			The most important change is that we built the organizational structure anew, put it together and defined it.
			Before it was like "this is how we've done it, but if you think of a better way, you can do it that way".
		Change process	*The top management team has a desire to do things in a certain way. They talk a lot about a lean style of management.*
			[The corporate investor] bought us, and they probably wanted to have one Sigma instead of eight.
			In the beginning, when we were coming together, they [the old HQ employees] emphasized that the old HQ was the only actual Sigma. That made me feel like an outsider.
			We have many processes, which are still incomplete, there's always development and honing, it's like wait and see.
			There's been a bit of tenseness among the employees. I don't know if it's just that some people don't adapt to change and rapid growth as well.
		Communication	*Communication could be better; sometimes it's unclear to me what has been sold where.*
			We haven't had to think about anything but our own job. People work a bit like blindfolded, without seeing the big picture.
			I prefer personal contacts. It depends on the people, one of my colleagues complains about in-person meetings that could have been organized online.
			Collaboration works pretty well, but they [other functions] always contact us way too late.
		Management	*The managers are very professional. And they understand that they don't know it all.*
			The managers aim at and invest in giving a positive picture and developing wide-reaching expertise.
			I'm not used to not being able to do things myself but to handle things via my supervisor.
			I think that people don't have the courage to talk about it, or write about it, because the feedback goes to email. If it was anonymous, maybe it would work better.
	Identity	Attributes	*Sigma is relaxed but ambitious.*
			Sigma is a growing company, so there's a kind of youthful eagerness or enthusiasm, willingness to also take chances and do things differently.
			The atmosphere is open.
			We try our best and help our friends.
		Personality	*I try to look things on the bright side, positively. But I'm also very analytical and particular.*
			I'm quite calm. I don't lose my temper easily, at least at work.
			I like getting involved in new things.
			I'm very social and extroverted.
	Permanent organization	Community	*The community feels very tight-knit and nice.*
			The feeling is relaxed, I haven't experienced any dividedness among teams, one can talk to everyone also about things other than work.
			This doesn't feel like a job, it feels more like a great hobby.
			People enjoy spending time together; we do that in our free time too sometimes. We have WhatsApp groups and good humour.
		Future	*We are a powerful actor in the field, getting stronger still.*
			I think it looks bright.
			There's been talk of more acquisitions, but I think we could let things settle for a while.
			I think the future looks good because the field is growing.

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