

Critical Vulnerability in Leadership as a Key Factor in Successful Change Management Communication

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the relationship between the discovered phenomenon of critical vulnerability in leadership during organizational change and its successful outcome. The phenomenon under study is fundamentally distinguished from *vulnerable leadership*, which is covered in literature as a deliberate tactic leaders use to improve interpersonal relationships and performance. This study concentrates on challenging and uncontrollable leader vulnerability manifested as a decline in the authority and influence of the leader among stakeholders. The main reason for the observed critical leader vulnerability is hypothesized to be the gap in leadership mindset levels between the leader and stakeholders at the onset of the organizational change. It is also hypothesized that the change communication of an authentic leader, predetermined by a high level of leadership mindset, triggers the leader's vulnerability and, at the same time, paradoxically contributes to the evolution of stakeholders' leadership mindset. This, in turn, is a prerequisite for achieving remarkable prosocial results. Relying on the described assumptions, we executed preliminary research, aiming to identify the change communication patterns of leaders in the state of vulnerability (hereinafter referred to as "*vulnerable change communication*") and to explore how they catalyze the stakeholder mindset evolution. The final sample group involved 9 top managers who faced vulnerability while leading the change process and made significant contributions to the development of their organizations. The research methodology relied on qualitative methods—in-depth interviews on which narrative and thematic analysis was based. Leaders were asked questions to discover goals of change, the presence of periods of vulnerability, the causes and consequences of its occurrence, their communication patterns, and results achieved. The obtained data were analyzed by applying recognized frameworks such as the Michigan Model of Leadership with its Competing Values Framework (CVF), the Approach of Management of Organizational Change Paradoxes, Programmed and Adaptive Approaches to Change, and Stakeholder Communication Model of Change. The present study has taken the first steps towards

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confirming the existence of an unambiguous connection between certain patterns of leadership change communication, embracing vulnerability by leaders, and remarkable prosocial outcomes. We found that change communication strategy based on embracing personal vulnerability and a high level of leadership mindset characterized by a value-based position, commitment to outstanding prosocial results, and synthetic decision-making ensures the leader the following: 1) Construction of Shared Leadership. The leader creates an organizational culture that transforms stakeholder resistance based on self and group interests into the evolution of a stakeholder leadership mindset and consolidation of the company. The formula for combining the best of both programmed and adaptive approaches to change includes preserving the integrity of the vision and managing meaning and outcome on the one hand, and supporting the strategy by the deployment of communication and bottom-up initiative on the other. 2) Managing Organizational Change Paradoxes. The leader addresses institutional contradictions and stakeholder divergent interests that naturally arise during the change process and creates the basis for subsequent institutionalization on a much stronger and healthier foundation. The paradoxical effect of a leader's *personal vulnerability* on *organizational vulnerability* is that the leader helps to reduce the organization's risks by taking them on themselves. Further exploration of the phenomenon of vulnerability will allow us to consider the inclusion of this component in the framework of change management models, to identify *vulnerable leaders*, specify the *vulnerable communication model of change*, and develop a list of recommendations for leaders to more consciously navigate the difficult stage of vulnerability as a systemic and inevitable attribute of achieving remarkable prosocial results.

1. Introduction

This research explores the relationship between the discovered phenomenon of critical vulnerability in leadership during organizational change and its successful outcome, highlighting the paradoxical role vulnerability plays in change management communication. Over the course of our managerial career, we have identified empirical evidence of the emergence of painful vulnerability in business leaders who implemented large-scale organizational changes and ultimately achieved remarkable prosocial outcomes. The experience of vulnerability was also substantiated in the professional path of outstanding business leaders, including Tim Cook, CEO of Apple; John T. Chambers, former executive chairman and CEO of Cisco Systems; Frederick W. Smith, CEO and executive chairman of FedEx Corporation (Frock, 2006; Kane, 2014; Chambers, 2018).

The change usually needs to be dramatic. Sometimes that means changing businesses that aren't broken, discontinuing successful products that people like, acquiring companies that investors don't yet understand, and putting yourself in a place that makes you feel uncomfortable or even vulnerable. (Chambers, 2018, p. 85)

The next CEO <Tim Cook> didn't have the quasi-religious authority that Jobs had radiated. His every decision would be examined by current and former employees and executives, investors, the media, and Apple's consumers. He would also have to contend with the sky-high expectations that Jobs had conditioned the public to have for Apple. (Kane, 2014, p. 90)

The phenomenon under study fundamentally differs from the conventional concept of *leadership vulnerability* covered in literature, which refers to leaders' ability to ask for help, admit mistakes, and accept developmental feedback from others. This openness typically builds employee trust and enhances team cohesion and performance (Edmondson & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2020; Omadeke, 2022).

Such *deliberate vulnerability* is initiated, dosed, and controlled by the leader, and what is important is that it does not pose critical risks. This phenomenon is in the plane of the leader overcoming their ego. In contrast, the present study investigates challenging, unintentional, uncontrollable, and often painful vulnerability, which relates to the very essence of the leader mindset and is hypothesized to be an essential condition for accomplishing remarkable prosocial results. Such vulnerability is rarely a choice but rather an inherent part of carrying ambitious visions that challenge the status quo. ... Vulnerability may present as resistance or criticism from stakeholders—employees, partners, and shareholders—marked by distrust in leadership vision and, at times, active sabotage of decisions. In extreme cases, it might even lead to the termination of the leader's powers. (Savelev & Saveleva, 2024a).

Present research builds on the results of our first preliminary study when we examined a critical vulnerability in leadership as a catalyst for outstanding prosocial results. The key findings are as follows: 1) an authentic leader is characterized by a value-based position (Burns, 1978), a commitment to outstanding prosocial results (Spencer & Spencer, 1993), and a paradoxical synthetic decision-making (hereinafter collectively referred to as "*leadership mindset*"); 2) the behavioral and communication patterns of an authentic leader during organizational changes are predetermined by a high level of leadership mindset; 3) the vulnerability identified is not a random and localized state that a leader experiences when interacting with stakeholders during regular management activities; rather, it manifests as a systemic phenomenon amidst large-scale organizational changes implementation; 4) the unique behavioral patterns of authentic leaders at the moment of organizational change inadvertently expose them to the observed vulnerability but ultimately lead to remarkable prosocial results, which can form the basis of leadership legacy and subsequent recognition (Savelev & Saveleva, 2024a).

We wondered if there are common change communication patterns of leaders (hereinafter referred to as "*vulnerable change communication*") that first expose leaders to the discovered vulnerability and then contribute to the success of change. This provided the impetus for the present research.

The data obtained through in-depth interviews on goals of change, the presence of vulnerability periods, their nature, the reasons for their occurrence, leaders' communication patterns, and results achieved were analyzed through several recognized frameworks and approaches. To execute a thorough study of leadership mindset as the heart of communication patterns and the vulnerability dynamics during the change process, we applied the research of *organizational paradoxes and dualities* associated with change rooted in institutional contradictions (see, e.g., Seo & Creed, 2002; Stoltzfus et al., 2011; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2024). This approach allowed us not only to model the systematic emergence of vulnerability during periods of change but also to determine its positive role and creative influence. The Michigan Model of Leadership and its underlying Competing Values Framework (CVF) indicate that effectiveness of a leader is based on a unique leadership mindset that enables the navigation of opposing values within an organization, such as *robust results-collaborative community* and *strategic structures-creative change* (see, e.g., Cameron et al., 2006; DeRue et al., 2013; Sanger Leadership Center, 2024). It is assumed that a high level of leadership mindset allows a leader to implement organizational change by relying on the complex synthesis of all elements of the model, or on

the achieved unity that lies beyond the dialectical contradiction. However, our preliminary study also revealed that most stakeholders, unlike the leader, do not possess the synthesis in the nature of a decision-making process at the onset of change. They operate with separate competencies, competing values, self and group interests, role schemas, and emotional reactions (Lewis, 2019a), perceiving the company's transformation as a threat to their goals and comfort zone. In other words, they evaluate the leader while still caught in dialectical contradictions, shaping leadership vulnerability (Savelev & Saveleva, 2024a).

Based on the above, we hypothesized, that the main reason for the observed critical leader vulnerability—manifested as a decline in the authority and influence of the leader among stakeholders, unjustified negative feedback, rejection, irritation, dissent of stakeholders—is the gap in leadership mindset levels between the leader and stakeholders at the onset of the change process. This fundamentally complicates the interpretation of the leader's messages when communicating.

One of the key questions of this research stems from the opposition of *programmed* and *adaptive approaches to change*. The programmed approach is centrally controlled and designed, rule-bound and involves top-down dissemination of information, selling on “the wisdom of the chosen approach” (Miller & Barbour, 2014, p. 181). The adaptive approach (and associated *stakeholder communication model of change*), on the contrary, is flexible, autonomous, and open to redefinition or reinvention at any level of the organization, including the soliciting stakeholders' input and bottom-up communication of change adaptation ideas (see, e.g., Roberts-Gray & Gray, 1983; Roberts-Gray, 1985; Lewis, 2019a). The question remaining is related to the role a leader's vulnerability plays in combining the best aspects of these opposing approaches.

We also assumed that the change communication of an authentic leader, predetermined by a high level of leadership mindset, triggers the leader's vulnerability and, at the same time, paradoxically contributes to the evolution of stakeholders' leadership mindset. This can possibly prepare the company for an effective combination of both *programmed* and *adaptive approaches to change* and serve as a prerequisite for achieving remarkable prosocial outcomes. Thus, this study aims to take the first steps towards specifying the *vulnerable communication model of change* that facilitates organizational change success, albeit at risk to the leader.

2. Literature Review

The literature review focuses on examining sources that discuss the contradictory states of leaders who share similar properties with the phenomenon of vulnerability on the one hand, and on sources that reveal various aspects of the phenomenon on the other.

2.1. Perception of a Leader Implementing Organizational Change

The first focus area of the scholarship concerns the perception of the leaders implementing organizational change, particularly the extent to which they are perceived as risk-prone and vulnerable figures. Traditionally *leadership vulnerability* has been viewed through the lens of deliberate tactics used by leaders to improve interpersonal relationships and performance. The discourse primarily underscores the positive aspects of such vulnerability, emphasizing its power to foster trust, improve team collaboration, and encourage open communication and engagement (Brown, 2012). Vulnerability is seen as humanizing leaders, thereby engendering a supportive and collaborative work environment (Northouse, 2018), and cultivating learning and continuous improvement through admitting mistakes and seeking help (Edmondson &

Chamorro-Premuzic, 2020; Omadeke, 2022). As for *change management models*, they do not consider the leader as a figure at risk. These models focus on vision, strategy, organization values, and organizational culture (Lewin's change management model, The McKinsey 7-S model); project management approach (Kotter's change management theory); communication, staff training, and employee engagement (ADKAR change management model, Nudge theory). Some also address psychological problems of employees' change perception (Kübler-Ross change management framework, Bridges transition model, The Satir change management methodology) (Hicks, 2024). However, *authentic leadership theory* suggests that authentic leaders, by genuinely engaging with their roles, significantly influence organizational commitment and outcomes, "act<ing> on self-awareness by practicing their values and principles, sometimes at substantial risk to themselves" (George et al., 2007, p. 2). Next, the *concept of transformational leadership* highlights the high price to pay for those who challenge the status quo. Inspiring transformational leaders demonstrate a willingness to take personal risks, perseverance under stress, devotion to duty, and readiness to handle crises and manage conflicts (Bass & Riggio, 2005). Finally, scholarship contends that three equally important parts of the leadership system—leaders, followers, and contexts—undergo profound changes in relations with one another. "<Leaders are> exposed to the point of being vulnerable—no matter their status or station—the gap between leaders and followers shrinks to near the vanishing point." This shift in a balance between power and influence widens the 'leadership gap'—the distance between "what followers want and what leaders are able to deliver" (Kellerman, 2012; Kellerman, 2016).

2.2. Management of Organizational Change Paradoxes and Dualities

The second area covers the study of *organizational paradoxes and dualities* surrounding organizational change, which emerge from institutional contradictions (see, e.g., Seo & Creed, 2002; Stoltzfus et al., 2011; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2024). First, the aforementioned Michigan Model of Leadership and its underlying Competing Values Framework (CVF) describes how leaders must balance opposing forces within the organization, such as *robust results* versus *collaborative community* and *strategic structures* versus *creative change* (see, e.g., Cameron et al., 2006; DeRue et al., 2013; Sanger Leadership Center, 2024). Second, while exploring the management of organizational change paradoxes, scholars highlight that institutional contradiction of *organizational isomorphism* and *divergent interests* of stakeholders gives rise to three interdependent dualities: *stakeholder self-interest* versus *collective good*, *stakeholder inclusion* versus *exclusion*, *emergent stakeholder consensus* versus *leader-driven decision-making* (Seo & Creed, 2002; Stoltzfus et al., 2011). The difficulty of overcoming paradoxes is manifested in the fact that discursive strategies, embedded in the contradiction, ironically reinforce contradictions surrounding organizational change (Stoltzfus et al., 2011). In studying organizational paradoxes, scholars pose the question, "How can actors change institutions if their actions, intentions, and rationality are all conditioned by the very institution they wish to change?" (Holm, 1995, p. 398). Third, the present study aims to determine the place of authentic leader's vulnerability in relation to the widely discussed opposing concepts of a leader as both a *charismatic hero*—the object of admiration on the one hand—and a *servant leader*, dissolved in the team, on the other (Weber, 1968; Greenleaf, 2015).

2.3. Managerial Strategies for Communicating About Change

Managerial strategies for communicating about change is the next area of concern for the scholars. To begin with, the concept of transformational leadership examines leadership as a process of communication, concentrating on the establishment of relationships between leaders and followers that help followers reach their full potential (Gardner, 2003; Miller & Barbour,

2014). Next, the concept of *discursive leadership* replaces a simplistic view of communication as a mere tool for influencing followers. It posits that leadership itself is socially constructed through discourse and interactions of a dispersed group of actors in an organizational context, where expressed ideas are recognized by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems that matter to them. (Miller & Barbour, 2014). The exploration of change management communication pinpoints organizational change as an inevitable aspect of the processes through which organizations are constituted and reconstituted and leadership as a discursive process of *meaning creation and managing* (see, e.g., Fairhurst, 2001; Turner, 2003; Miller & Barbour, 2014). Scholarship underlines the importance of *framing* as a method for managing meaning through linguistic devices, where one or more aspects of a subject are selected or emphasized over others. This shaping of messages can help others see the world as leaders want them to (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Next, as stated above, scholars compare the *programmed approach* to change (centrally controlled and designed) and *adaptive approach* to change (flexible, autonomous and open to redefinition both top-down and bottom-up), (Roberts-Gray & Gray, 1983; Roberts-Gray, 1985). However, the question of under what conditions a company is ready for an adaptive approach to change—such that the premature solicitation of stakeholder input does not cause the communication process to fail, remains unexplored. It is argued that managerial strategies for communicating about change should be based on a *stakeholder communication model of change* to consider stakeholders' interests and ideas. Soliciting input from stakeholders can either be symbolic participation (information dissemination-focus, desire for control/fidelity, creating the appearance of support and buy-in during the change process) or participation as a resource (input-focus, lower-level employees/other stakeholders are empowered to design best use and form of change; ideas of change adaptation gained through participation are actually used in the change initiative) (Lewis, 2019a). Lastly, it is emphasized that the phenomenon of *resistance to change*, widely covered in literature, should not be simplistically attributed to ignorance, irrational anxieties, stubbornness, or some political interests. Such an approach blinds the implementer to potentially useful observations of flaws in the change initiative, leads to dealing with recipients of change in a paternal or therapeutic manner, eliminates self-correction, and supports groupthink, ultimately resulting in stakeholders' principled dissent (Blair & Bligh, 2018; Lewis, 2019a).

2.4. Development and Empowerment of Stakeholders

The fourth focus of the scholarship concerns changing the nature of team interaction through the *development* of stakeholders' mindsets and their *empowerment* (Bass & Riggio, 2005). First, transformational leadership emphasizes follower development as its principal aspect. By balancing between transactional and transformational approaches to maintain control over the change, transformational leaders help followers transcend their immediate self-interests by increasing their awareness of the larger issues and shifting goals away from defensive pseudo-solutions, personal safety, and security toward achievement, self-actualization, and the greater good (Bass & Riggio, 2005). A framework that also comprises three main domains of follower development includes *motivation*—arousing and satisfying followers' dormant needs (self-actualization); *morality*—internalization of the organization's moral values and collectivistic orientation; and *empowerment*—critical-independent approach, active engagement, and self-efficacy (see, e.g., Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Dvir et al., 2002; Mulla & Krishnan, 2009). However, it is suggested that future research should focus on the specific aspects of transformational leadership that contributed to the effects produced (Dvir et al., 2002), and there is a gap in the study of followers' responses to leaders' attempts to develop them.

In conclusion, the literature presents a complex environment that provokes leader vulnerability and tests their resilience and capacity to drive organizational change.

2.5. Research Purpose

The primary purpose of this research was to identify the change communication patterns of leaders in the state of vulnerability and to explore how they catalyze the stakeholder mindset evolution. This study sought to examine the previously unexplored phenomenon of the emergence of a leader's vulnerability and the effect of *vulnerable change communication* on the achievement of remarkable prosocial outcome.

2.5.1. Specific Objective 1

Identify Nonverbal Behavioral Change Communication Patterns. It is necessary to systematically identify and describe the specific nonverbal behaviors (Manusov & Patterson, 2006) exhibited by leaders during organizational change, including exemplification (Gardner, 2003), vulnerability as a nonverbal communication channel, and a listening strategy (Lewis, 2019b).

2.5.2. Specific Objective 2

Identify Verbal Change Communication Patterns. The goal is to systematically identify and describe the leadership communication strategy during organizational change, including the use of a programmed/adaptive approach to change (Roberts-Gray & Gray, 1983; Roberts-Gray, 1985), the communication model of change (Lewis, 2019a), the stages of change management communication, the content of communication, leadership narrative, and framing (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996).

2.5.3. Specific Objective 3

Identify Vulnerable Communication That Help Manage Organizational Change Paradoxes and Dualities. It is necessary to systematically identify and describe institutional contradictions and embodied dualities that naturally arise when implementing organizational change (e.g., *hierarchical leadership-shared leadership; prosocial aspirations-self and group interests; personal vulnerability-organizational vulnerability*, etc.) and to identify communication strategies that do not multiply, reinforce, or maintain paradoxes but rather manage, cope with, and dialectically transform them (see, e.g., Seo & Creed, 2002; Stoltzfus et al., 2011; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2024).

2.5.4. Specific Objective 4

Analyze the Impact of Vulnerable Change Communication on the Social Construction of Shared Leadership. The goal is to present a model of the evolution of the stakeholder mindset, focusing on how leaders' embrace of vulnerability contributes to the transformation of team interactions.

By achieving these objectives, the research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how change communication patterns of authentic leaders, when in a state of vulnerability, can become a powerful catalyst for organizational success. It offers both theoretical contributions to the field of organizational communication studies and practical guidance for leaders facing transformative challenges.

2.6. Research Hypotheses

2.6.1. Primary Hypothesis

Vulnerability manifests as a systemic phenomenon during large-scale organizational changes.

2.6.2. Secondary Hypothesis

The main reason for the observed critical leader vulnerability, manifested as a decline in the authority and influence of the leader among stakeholders, is the gap in leadership mindset levels between the leader and stakeholders at the onset of the change process.

2.6.3. Tertiary Hypothesis

The change communication of an authentic leader, predetermined by a high level of leadership mindset, triggers the leader's vulnerability and, at the same time, paradoxically contributes to the evolution of stakeholders' leadership mindset. This, in turn, is a prerequisite for achieving remarkable prosocial results.

2.7. Research Questions

- 1) How does change communication convey a *leadership principled dissent* on status quo and foster *stakeholders' principled dissent* (Blair & Bligh, 2018)? This question clarifies how the contradictions of a fixed mindset are replaced by a paradoxical synthetic leadership mindset and how narratives shape objective reality.
- 2) What is the difference in change communication outcomes between an authentic leader who *embraces vulnerability* and a quasi-leader who *controls* or *avoids vulnerability*? This question investigates the ethical choice and the difference between authentic and quasi-leadership narratives.
- 3) How does a leader's vulnerability relate to the organization's vulnerability during a period of change? This question explores the dialectics of *personal-organizational vulnerability* and their implications for achieving remarkable prosocial results.

These questions are designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of change communication patterns of authentic leaders through the dynamics of vulnerability.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

The research design for this study employed a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews to thoroughly examine the presence of periods of vulnerability during organizational changes, the causes and consequences of its occurrence, and to collect personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions of leaders during the change process. The study also aimed to systematize leaders' *vulnerable change communication* and examine its impact on stakeholder mindset evolution and remarkable prosocial outcomes. The hypothesized theoretical framework underlying the study posited that the change communication of an authentic leader, predetermined by a high level of leadership mindset, triggers the leader's vulnerability and, at the same time, paradoxically contributes to the evolution of stakeholders' leadership mindset. The logic behind the interviews was that identifying leaders who had gone through a state of vulnerability while significantly contributing to implementing successful changes and achieving remarkable results provides an opportunity to explore the characteristics of their change communication. This exploration offers a basis for specifying the *vulnerable communication model of change* that leads to the paradox of the *leader's vulnerability-remarkable prosocial outcome*.

3.2. Participants and Selection Principles

The selection of participants was governed by several key principles to ensure that the study results were robust and generalizable:

- **Relevance to the Research Questions:** The total sample consisted of 31 top managers who had led organizational changes. The final sample comprised 9 top managers who experienced vulnerability while leading the change process and made significant contributions to the development of their organizations. Selecting leaders based on these criteria ensured that the insights gained were relevant to the research objectives.
- **Diversity in Backgrounds:** Participants were selected from various industries and organizational sizes to capture a wide range of experiences and perspectives. This diversity enabled a better understanding of how different contexts influenced the experience and outcomes of change communication.
- **Voluntary Participation:** All participants were volunteers, ensuring they were willing to share their experiences openly and honestly— a crucial factor for the qualitative nature of the study.
- **Ethical Considerations:** Participants were selected and involved in the study following strict ethical guidelines. This process included obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and allowing participants to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

3.3. Data Collection Tools

Two in-depth interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data and further analyze the impact of leader change communication patterns on remarkable prosocial outcomes. Each interview was tailored to the participant's specific context but followed a guideline to ensure consistency in the information collected. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for thorough analysis.

3.3.1. In-Depth Interviews

First Interview with the Total Sample. The objective of the first interview was to ensure relevance to the research questions, namely, to select a target group of leaders from the total sample who simultaneously met two criteria. First, in their attempt to achieve remarkable results, they used communication that made them vulnerable as there was a gap in leadership mindset levels in leaders and stakeholders at the onset of the organizational change. Second, they achieved their aspirations for robust results through profound organizational changes without relying solely on accompanying external opportunities such as favorable market conditions or the availability of new information technologies.

Topics of the first interview:

- identifying change communication that caused, in the leader's opinion, unjustified negative feedback, rejection, irritation, and dissent of stakeholders;
- obtaining data confirming the actual presence of remarkable results due to organizational changes.

When formulating questions on the second condition, we encountered difficulties in defining the concept of the *remarkable result*, which did not always seem obvious. The interviews revealed that the results that the leader classified as extraordinary sometimes involved preventing or eliminating events that were negative for the organization or giving the organization properties that would positively impact its activities over an extended period.

Even when fully achieved, such goals were not always reflected in the financial statements. Therefore, financial indicators were used only as additional supporting arguments. The primary function of verifying the second condition was performed by questions about the degree of the leader's commitment to achieving remarkable results, the level of responsibility assumed, and their assessment of the actual outcome. Leaders were asked to articulate the goals of the organizational changes, their personal contribution to the result, the positive consequences of the changes, and to correlate the original plan and the results achieved. Thus, the recognition of the results as remarkable was based not only on a quantitative basis, but, to a greater extent, on a comprehensive, systematically presented narrative of the leader.

Second Interview with Final the Sample. The objective of the second interview was to explore the hypothesis that the change communication of an authentic leader, which is predetermined by a high level of leadership mindset, triggers the leader's vulnerability and, at the same time, paradoxically contributes to the evolution of stakeholders' leadership mindset in the long term, making it congruent with the leadership mindset of the leader and contributing to the consolidation of the company.

Topics of the second interview:

- exploring the basis for changing the stakeholder position, what had changed in the organization, and how these changes were related to the leader's communication. At this stage, it was essential to trace the consequences of vulnerable communication and how this communication influences the transformation of the state of *vulnerability* into the state of leader *recognition*.
- examining how leadership mindsets address institutional contradictions and embodied dualities that naturally arise during the change process, how paradox management strategy is reflected in change communication tactics, and what role embracing vulnerability plays in this.

3.4. Data Analysis Tools

The obtained data about leadership mindset, strategies, experiences, and vulnerable communication during the change process were used to conduct narrative and thematic analysis using recognized frameworks such as the Michigan Model of Leadership with its Competing Values Framework (CVF), Approach of Management of Organizational Change Paradoxes, Programmed and Adaptive Approaches to Change and Stakeholder Communication Model of Change. This comprehensive combination of models, frameworks, and approaches allowed us to take the first steps towards specifying the *vulnerable communication model of change* as an important aspect of achieving remarkable results.

4. Results

4.1. Results of the First Interview

During the first interview, 9 top managers out of 31 who had led organizational changes confirmed that they had an experience similar to our understanding of the state of vulnerability. It is important to note that 3 top managers experienced an unacceptable level of the vulnerability that did not allow them to continue the change process, which indicates the risky nature of this phenomenon for the leader.

Examples of vulnerability reported by 9 participants:

- “rejection of my strategy and management style”;

- “disapproval of my well-considered commercial policy”;
- “destructive pressure from shareholders”;
- “deliberate failure to implement my decisions”;
- “systematic failure to provide or distortion of information requested by me”;
- “excessive level of criticism of my decisions”;
- “the emergence of a conspiracy to discredit my authority”;
- “violation of ethical standards of interaction and subordination”;
- “deliberate spread of rumors about me”;
- “denial of my contribution to the change”.

These manifestations of vulnerability were noted by participants because they had no apparent rational reasons for their occurrence. They differed from the operational, transactional difficulties that accompany the implementation of most business tasks. They were systemic in nature and had a significant degree of influence on the leader, a wide scope and long-term influence among stakeholders. Most importantly, the period of rejection was paradoxical because it coincided with a period of creative activity of the leader, which, according to its plan, was supposed to cause support, not rejection.

9 participants confirmed that their communication with stakeholders was problematic and, in fact, became the basis for their vulnerability. Below is an abbreviated list of *vulnerable change communication* patterns identified by participants:

- the leader demonstrated high motivation to implement changes and was known as a careerist;
- the leader declared goals of changes that took into account the interests of stakeholders, which, however, were perceived by them as infringing on their capabilities;
- the leader involved and inspired, setting out a convincing vision of the future organizational culture and became known as a dreamer;
- the leader demonstrated faith in decisive organizational changes and looked overly optimistic;
- the leader proclaimed scientifically sound approaches to the implementation of the change and looked like a theorist far from practice;
- the leader acted in accordance with systemic thinking, and looked like a pedant incapable of decisive changes;
- the leader avoided showing their intellectual superiority and gave the impression of being insufficiently capable;
- the leader insisted on attracting specialists in organizational changes, and was recognized as insufficiently competent;
- the leader carefully analyzed the situation, consulted with specialists, and was known as indecisive;
- the leader declared the need for broad joint cooperation and was reputed as dependent;
- the leader talked about the complexity of the tasks and the change process and became known as an alarmist;
- the leader did not hide their doubts, possible risks, demonstrating high responsibility for the result and was known as indecisive;
- the leader was servicing the interests of clients and was accused by shareholders of wastefulness;
- the leader painted promising options for employees' professional development, but became known as a populist;

- the leader advocated for collegial decision-making and was reputed as a manager who shied away from responsibility;
- the leader attracted new talented employees and was considered to be oppressing experienced employees;
- the leader did not abuse administrative methods of punishment, counting on a trusting dialogue and initiative from below, and was known as weak-willed;
- the leader relied on the culture and value potential of the organization and seemed far from reality;
- the leader delicately advanced his point of view so as not to put pressure on employees and seemed dependent on the general opinion.

The presented data were used to test the following hypotheses: 1) vulnerability manifests as a systemic phenomenon during large-scale organizational changes; 2) the main reason for the observed critical leader vulnerability, manifested as a decline in the authority and influence of the leader among stakeholders, is the gap in leadership mindset levels between the leader and stakeholders at the onset of the change process.

The vulnerable change communication of 9 participants listed above was unusual, unexpected for stakeholders, but promising for them and the organization. The following change communication patterns of the remaining 22 participants who did not experience vulnerability while leading the change process are fundamentally different. They were more acceptable for stakeholders, but had a limited perspective for the organization, did not have the potential to overcome organizational contradictions, and achieve the remarkable result they declared:

- the goals of the change that motivated the leader did not have a prosocial basis;
- the leader avoided setting clear goals for changes in order to leave room for maneuver in case of a failure;
- the leader did not set a personal example in difficult situations, avoiding personal risks;
- the leader associated the company's outstanding results only with the introduction of new technologies, and not with overcoming organizational contradictions;
- the leader expected unreasonably fast results and forced their achievement, considering their decisiveness and speed of changes an advantage;
- the leader tried to meet the expectations of shareholders in order to ensure a positive perception of themselves;
- the leader took into account the interests of other stakeholders exactly as much as they themselves declared them;
- the leader neglected to discuss common prospects with the intention of inspiring employees due to underestimation of this opportunity or inability to apply it;
- the leader did not appeal to lofty values, not counting on understanding from stakeholders;
- the leader allowed themselves to ignore the value basis of changes, preferring to rely on more superficial factors, such as discipline and diligence of employees;
- the leader used their status to put pressure on employees if the issue got stuck in discussions, preventing progressive dissent;
- the leader did not support initiatives from below and suppressed the first awkward suggestions of employees, considering this an unjustified waste of time;
- the leader did not try to involve as wide a circle of employees as possible in the change process, focusing only on the direct subordinates in order to simplify and stabilize the change process;
- the leader preferred an administrative approach, which, in their opinion, ensured orderliness and stable results for changes;

- the leader encouraged practical skills, afraid to use theory and scientifically based approaches.

4.2. Results of the Second Interview

Having a relevant group of 9 leaders with experience in vulnerable change communication allowed us to go further and explore how vulnerable communication influences the achievement of a remarkable result, despite the leader's vulnerable state. Below are the changes in the behavior of stakeholders that occurred in the organizations, which, according to the interviewed leaders, had a positive impact on the success of the changes:

- the company got rid of a significant part of organizational contradictions and the inherent competing roles performed by stakeholders;
- the organizational structure of the organization did not undergo fundamental changes, but began to be felt as flatter;
- the shareholders stopped perceiving employees as a source of problems and increased the volume of various interactions with them;
- the employees assessed the direction of the leader's decisions and understood their personal benefits from worthy cooperation with them;
- the employees realized the authenticity of the leader's intentions and reciprocated him;
- the employees realized that the leader is not what they initially imagined them to be and admitted the error of their conclusions; some employees did this during personal communication with the leader;
- the stakeholders realized that changes are not a threat, but a more promising direction for their careers;
- stakeholders who had been burdening the development of change processes with their rejection of the leader gradually became their support for completing the changes;
- the suppliers offered more favorable terms of cooperation;
- the competitors began to focus more actively on the company's activities;
- the employees stopped perceiving management as a potential threat to their prospects;
- the employees realized that a collective way of achieving common goals is more promising than achieving personal goals alone;
- a significant portion of managers, who had groundlessly claimed promotion in the context of the company's desire for a remarkable result, switched to realizing their potential in their current position;
- the high-potential employees became an object of pride for the company and experienced recognition, rather than wariness from other colleagues;
- the employees began to take responsibility for the effectiveness of their work and initiate improvements without calls from the administration;
- the pockets of mutual support and friendship emerged in the company;
- the employees began to behave naturally, without trying to meet the expectations of management; the corridors of the company were filled with people with their genuine emotions and natural communication;
- an atmosphere of humor and ease arose among the employees, laughter in the work areas became an integral feature and a way to compensate for high professional workloads;
- the employees began to often discuss work matters even after working hours and outside the workplace;
- the employees became more active at joint meetings with the leader than the leader themselves; they used any opportunity to ask not personal questions, but questions about the

company's activities or make their suggestions; they began to care about the future of the company;

- having a separate office space ceased to be a value, while the company's public spaces began to attract employees because of the opportunities for collective interaction; some employees moved from quiet areas of the office to more crowded ones.

The presented data were used to test the hypothesis that the change communication of an authentic leader, predetermined by a high level of leadership mindset, triggers the leader's vulnerability and, at the same time, paradoxically contributes to the evolution of stakeholders' leadership mindset.

4.3. Stages of Change Management Communication

Per the results of the study, the stages of change management communication of high-achieving authentic leaders are as follows:

1) Top-down communication of prosocial meaning by the leader (Turner, 2003) in the form of a first-person monologue. The leader performs as a change agent with a solid, value-based position (Burns, 1978), a commitment to outstanding prosocial results (Spencer & Spencer, 1993), and a strategy based on the synthesis of competing values.

2) Mixed feedback from stakeholders, including concerns based on pro-self and group interests, uncertainty, schemata, emotional reactions, evaluation of alternatives and resistance of varying intensity (Miller & Barbour, 2014; Lewis, 2019a). Sophisticated strategy of an authentic leader built on a complex synthesis of all elements, values and needs of the organization turns out to be difficult to understand, seems intricate, “theoretical”, takes time, and violates the interests of certain stakeholders. Stakeholders, consciously or unconsciously, identify their interests with one or two values of the leadership model, leaving the rest unattended, and therefore perceive the company's transformation as a threat to their goals and comfort zone (Savelev & Saveleva, 2024a).

3) A period of leader vulnerability, which manifests as the consistent communication of their vision and the clash between the leader's and stakeholders' views, in which the leader maintains their dignity and that of the stakeholders. This stage is critical, as it leads to a gradual evolution of stakeholders' mindset, an increased awareness of broader perspectives and the value of the leadership approach, acceptance of the leader's vision, and the emergence of stakeholders' readiness to take initiatives from below in the context of realizing the leader's aspirations.

4) Empowerment of stakeholders (Bass & Riggio, 2005), the solicitation of input (Lewis, 2019a), and the manifestation of the collective intelligence that expresses itself in bottom-up communication by proactive stakeholders, who present their proposals and ideas for change adaptation in line with the leader's synthetic aspirations. This fruitful period leads to the consolidation of the company and the enhancement of its ability to implement the leader's vision.

After reaching such a state of organization, the vulnerability tends to subside, paving the way for stakeholder self-actualization, leader recognition, and remarkable organizational achievements (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

4.4. Change Management Communication Patterns

4.4.1. Nonverbal Behavioral Change Communication Patterns and Listening Strategy

Following the results of the study, nonverbal behavioral change communication patterns of authentic leaders are as follows: the deliberate initiation of changes that are necessary to achieve remarkable results, yet are perceived as excessive by stakeholders and, therefore, cause resistance; possessing a missionary-like drive to achieve organizational breakthroughs despite increasing vulnerability; embracing personal vulnerability, which initially hinders the leader from achieving the goal, but preserves the very possibility of achieving it; confronting unintentional vulnerability and chaotic tendencies with dignity, awareness, and emotional stability; the refusal to suppress dissent by proactive stakeholders (Blair & Bligh, 2018); supporting the strategic interests of stakeholders without beneficial alliance with any group of them; the awareness of stakeholders' concerns, self and group interests, role schemas (Lewis, 2019b); the willingness to listen to concerns in order to show higher perspectives; the willingness to cooperate on the basis of friendship; a respectful attitude towards stakeholders; the awareness of opponents' strengths; non-violence; social optimism; openness and perseverance; constructiveness, balance of mind, and absence of extreme emotions; managing the need for social and financial security.

4.4.2. Verbal Change Communication Patterns

In accordance with the results of the study, the verbal change communication patterns of authentic leaders are as follows:

Content of communication. Persistent, principled dissent against the status quo; maintaining the integrity of vision despite growing vulnerability; strategy based on the synthesis of competing values beyond contradictions of self-interests; congruence of strategy with prosocial values and results; high performance based on a culture of growth and flexible structures; ensuring a high level of consolidation; shared leadership as a community of like-minded people; developing a culture of innovation, research, and collective creativity.

Framing. Escalating the meaning to eliminate pockets of resistance, preventing chronic conflicts; raising issues to a higher level of cognition; no cutting corners; avoiding confrontation, compromise, or consensus; shifting goals away from defensive pseudo-solutions toward achievement and self-actualization; avoiding self-interests, as they deprive the company of the opportunities to accomplish remarkable results.

Leadership narrative. A person who aspires to unite stakeholders around a meaningful idea; no contradictions between words and actions; no self-promotion, self-defence, populism and manipulation; avoidance of demonstration power and superiority; objectivity; persuasiveness.

4.5. Organizational Change Paradoxes and Dualities

As a result of the study, the following organizational change paradoxes and dualities were identified (see, e.g., Seo & Creed, 2002; Stoltzfus et al., 2011; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2024):

4.5.1. Institutional Contradictions

- Organizational paradoxes and dualities

- *Hierarchical leadership* (leader)-*shared leadership* (team);
- *Prosocial aspirations* (authentic leader)-*self and group interests* (quasi-leader, majority of stakeholders) (Seo & Creed, 2002);
- *Leader driven decision making-emergent stakeholder consensus* (Seo & Creed, 2002);

- *Chasing profits (shareholders, sales department)-need for a comfortable team environment and reducing uncertainty (employees);*
- *Maintaining institutional stability and efficiency (production, accounting, legal department, IT support)-the need for continuous growth and innovation (departments of software development, product marketing, Research & Development).*

4.5.2. Change Management Strategies, Approaches and Patterns

- Organizational paradoxes and dualities

- *Programmed approach to change-adaptive approach to change (change agents) (see, e.g., Roberts-Gray & Gray, 1983; Roberts-Gray, 1985; Miller & Barbour, 2014; Lewis, 2019a);*
- *Paradoxical synthetic leadership mindset (authentic leader and minority of stakeholders)-fixed mindset (quasi-leader, majority of stakeholders);*
- *Solid value-based position, commitment to remarkable prosocial results and collective good (authentic leader) (Burns, 1978; Spencer & Spencer, 1993)-concerns and resistance based on self and group interests (majority of stakeholders) (Miller & Barbour, 2014; Lewis, 2019a);*
- *Embracing vulnerability (authentic leader)-avoiding/controlling vulnerability (quasi-leader);*
- *Personal vulnerability (authentic leader)-organizational vulnerability (quasi-leader);*
- *Charismatic hero-servant leader (leader) (Weber, 1968; Greenleaf, 2015);*
- *Leadership principled dissent-stakeholder principled dissent (Blair & Bligh, 2018; Lewis, 2019a);*
- *Rejection by stakeholders-developing stakeholders (authentic leader).*

5. Discussion

5.1. Vulnerable Leader as a Guarantor of Changes Leading to Remarkable Results

A leadership mindset, characterized by a value-based position (Burns, 1978), commitment to outstanding prosocial results (Spencer & Spencer, 1993), paradoxical synthetic decision-making, and ability to make innovative decisions, is a comprehensive indicator of a leader's potential. It determines the strength of a leadership influence and readiness to implement constructive changes that irreversibly transform the organization. Not all components of a leadership mindset can be fully reproduced by stakeholders, but the consequences of deploying it in the form of goals, objectives, behavior, and communication patterns are available for understanding and acceptance, and in the most striking cases, they can inspire and lead.

Facing vulnerability is an experience that an authentic leader who implements organizational change and practices the above communication patterns cannot avoid. It is an inevitable result of the gap between the level of the leader's well-conscious dominant prosocial aspirations, which they try to convey to the organization, the paradoxical synthetic nature of their decisions on the one hand, and on the other, the self and group interests of the majority of stakeholders who underestimate the power of their collective efforts and common prospects at the start of organizational change. The reason for sudden vulnerability and chaotic tendencies is often unclear to the leader. However, an authentic leader confronts this state with dignity, awareness, and emotional stability, without trying to avoid or control it. It allows them to maintain the platform for subsequent consolidation. This occurs as the leader is inextricably linked with the stakeholders, realizing that a consolidated and empowered team is a key resource to implement

successful change initiatives. Therefore, the leader not only does not try to “take revenge” for the vulnerability, but also supports stakeholders. The leader endures vulnerability, being motivated by the need for outstanding results (Spencer & Spencer, 1993) and the need to ensure such a level of stakeholders’ mindset that would let them fully participate in the transformation of the organization. There is no altruism or sacrifice in the leader's behavior but rather an unwavering awareness and acceptance of the path that leads to the result. The identified communication and behavior patterns exhibited by a leader during organizational change over time begin to serve as the exemplification (Gardner, 2003). After going through the vulnerability phase, an authentic leader becomes a role model of moral leadership (Burns, 1978) and resilience.

A sign that vulnerability has played a role in aligning the leadership mindset of the leader and stakeholders is a resonant improvement in the productivity of the company's employees and, ideally, the achievement of a remarkable result. According to our findings, the absence of leader vulnerability, which is usually clearly visible from the outside in the presence of a supposedly remarkable change outcome, is explained either by the hidden nature of vulnerability or by the exaggeration of the achieved results quality.

If things go well, the period of vulnerability is replaced by recognition of the leader. However, there is reason to believe that all the leader's activities are cyclically occurring states of *vulnerability-recognition* that replace each other and can also overlap.

Based on the above, we confirm the hypothesis that a leader’s vulnerability during the change process is not a random circumstance that can be ignored when forecasting. There is every reason to believe that this is: 1) an objective phenomenon in its nature and systemic in its manifestation; 2) a crucial aspect of the leaders’ activities, which fundamentally improves the possibility of achieving remarkable results and accompanies them throughout the entire period of their activity.

5.2. Change Communication Patterns of Authentic Leaders

Traditional linear change communication assumes the constant dominance of the leader under the conditions of their unchanging and unquestioned authority. Such communication acts as a shock absorber for the integrity of the leader's status, stabilizing interaction with stakeholders, protecting and promoting primarily top management decisions. In contrast, the discourse of an authentic leader is uncompromisingly focused on a remarkable prosocial outcome, without attempting to reduce risks. This approach of the leader allows them to concentrate on a discursive process of *meaning creation and managing* (Fairhurst, 2001; Turner, 2003) “purs<ing> truth over power” (Moore & Bazerman, 2022), searching for neither confrontation nor compromise or consensus. This dictates the perseverance of leadership behavior and communication when a paradoxical synthetic decision-making allows the leader to go beyond the divergent interests of stakeholders (Seo & Creed, 2002) and create the best prospects even for those who put pressure on them.

Leader's change communication patterns aim to attract employees to joint creativity within the framework of the adopted strategic decisions, and not to earn the sympathy of others. *Leadership narrative* is not colored by self-promotion, populism, and various kinds of manipulation. The nonlinearity of such communications lies in the leader's readiness to face pressure on themselves during the company's transformation. A leader communicates their position not through many promising messages, for example, using an omnichannel internal communication platform, but rather through daily decisions that consolidate and transform the organization. The authentic leadership narrative is tied to specific actions and, therefore, is not as effective as the narrative of people whose words are not connected to their actions.

The embraced vulnerability allows the leader to use *framing*, escalating meanings to eliminate pockets of resistance and rejection of promising approaches. The leadership strategic communication exacerbates the contradictions of leader and stakeholder mindsets. It exhausts them relatively quickly with an exit to a higher level of consolidation, preventing the conflict from becoming chronic.

Any other leadership communication that avoids or controls personal vulnerability, for example, by fighting with employees or entering into a compromise zone with them, impoverishes the process of creating an environment filled with constructiveness and innovations. It makes impossible the social construction of *discursive leadership* as a process of exchange and recognition of significant ideas (Miller & Barbour, 2014). The ability of a leader to create a new reality proves that a discourse that evokes a state of vulnerability has deeper positive consequences for the company.

5.3. Authentic Leader as a Source of Principled Dissent and Culture of Growth

Maintaining the integrity of vision by a leader without beneficial alliance with any group of stakeholders takes on the character of top-down principled dissent that challenges the status quo. The leader paradoxically becomes a source of proactive dissent and the toxic *minority* from the stakeholders' perspective. The balance of relations between the leader and stakeholders at the first stage of change is disturbed not by the proactivity and dissent of the stakeholders (as usually happens) but by the dissent of the leader. In response, proactive stakeholders also show dissent, which initially takes the form of resistance. To restore the balance, the leader systematically ensures the evolution of the stakeholders' mindset. By embracing their vulnerability and refusing to suppress dissent by proactive stakeholders, the leader simultaneously solves the problem of preserving the integrity of their vision on the one hand and the enthusiasm of proactive followers on the other. A paradoxical synthetic leadership mindset combined with embraced vulnerability creates an organizational culture of "*looseness*" (Blair & Bligh, 2018).

As the leadership strategy of organizational change communication unfolds, stakeholders' *principled dissent* transforms into creative *self-expression*. Proactive stakeholders are given the opportunity to re-evaluate the prospects of leadership initiatives, be involved in change reflection processes, and reach out to the leader's vision. This is the period when stakeholders' dissent must crystallize into proposals for worthy alternatives and change adaptation ideas in line with the leader's synthetic aspirations. Thus, the leader's principled dissent generates fruitful dissent from stakeholders. The leader consciously refuses to suppress the bottom-up dissent of stakeholders at the start of change as a dead end for the purpose of creating a team capable of achievement. This opens the way for a culture of growth and innovation.

Based on the above, we confirm the hypothesis that the main reason for the observed critical leader vulnerability, manifested as a decline in the authority and influence of the leader among stakeholders, is the gap in leadership mindset levels between the leader and stakeholders at the onset of the change process.

5.4. Developing Stakeholders into Strategic Partners of Change and Construction of Shared Leadership

In examining the impact of *transformational leadership* on follower development and performance, researchers note a gap in the study of follower responses to leaders' endeavors to develop them (Dvir et al., 2002). According to this study, these attempts in practice are met with misunderstanding and resistance. The concept of transformational leadership emphasizes

that the leader is prepared to face risks, crises, conflicts, and stress (Bass & Riggio, 2005). However, in our opinion, it tries to directly, head-on, overcome the accumulated organizational contradictions in the paradigm in which stakeholders work.

Present research revealed the fundamental role of the paradoxical behavior and communication of the leader, which can compensate for the contradictions that arise in the interaction of the leader and stakeholders. The period of vulnerability, which is an objective reality for the leader, essentially creates room for maneuvering for stakeholders. The leader does not seek an alliance with any group of stakeholders but involuntarily acts in their interests, betting not on diplomacy but on implementing a vision. Authentic leadership values are directly related to a remarkable prosocial result that serves the interests of stakeholders. A leader offers stakeholders the opportunity not to abandon their interests but to realize them at a higher level of *self-actualization*. In other words, the line between the vulnerable leader's interests and the interests of stakeholder groups is erased. Therefore, it can be said that the leader acts under pressure in the strategic interests of those applying the pressure.

The very *state of vulnerability* becomes a unique non-verbal communication channel that creates a space of constructive freedom and a platform for the clash and evolution of stakeholder views. The consistency of the leader's position, the first positive results of their paradoxical mindset, and the visibly improving organizational culture transform stakeholders' motivation into a higher need for self-actualization and reaching one's full potential; they also replace an outdated mindset characterized by self and group interests, defensive pseudo-solutions, competing values, role schemas with a leadership mindset characterized by a gradual awareness of higher perspectives, organization's moral values, and collectivistic orientation (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Dvir et al., 2002; Mulla & Krishnan, 2009).

The alignment of the stakeholders' motivation with the leader's values and vision creates the preconditions for stakeholders to take a strategic role in change initiative. Top-down communication of prosocial meaning by a leader (Turner, 2003) is supplemented by stakeholder input solicitation (Lewis, 2019a). *Hierarchical leadership*, as a monologue and transmission, is replaced by *shared leadership*, as dialogue and collective intelligence that expresses itself as an exchange of proposals and change adaptation ideas in line with the leader's synthetic aspirations.

An authentic leader performs dialectical transformations of *rejection by stakeholders* into *developing stakeholders*. Stakeholders, in turn, undergo a dialectical transformation from *resistance to change* through the *mindset evolution* to *self-actualization* and *empowerment*. The ability of authentic leaders to communicate change, embracing vulnerability rather than avoiding it, ensures transformations in the nature of team interactions, highlighted as a principal aspect of the concept of transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2005), develops stakeholders' social identities (Lewis, 2019a), contributes to the social construction (Miller & Barbour, 2014) of shared leadership, and serves as a prerequisite for consolidation of the company and long-term innovations.

5.5. Vulnerability as an Opportunity to Combine the Best of Both Approaches to Change

One of the key questions of this research was based on the opposition of *programmed approach to change*—centrally controlled and designed, which involves top-down dissemination of information and *adaptive approach to change* (and associated *stakeholder communication model of change*)—flexible, autonomous and open to reinvention at any level of the organization, which involves soliciting stakeholders' input (see, e.g., Roberts-Gray & Gray, 1983; Roberts-Gray, 1985; Lewis, 2019a).

Vulnerability appears as a missing link that contributes to the reconciliation of these two approaches. At first glance, leadership aimed at achieving remarkable results essentially embodies the programmed methods. However, this directive strategy selling on “the wisdom of the chosen approach” (Miller & Barbour, 2014, p. 181) suffers from a lack of initiative from below, valuable observations of flaws in the change and self-correction, making it challenging to implement the planned results. An authentic leader operates in a non-linear way, on the one hand, programming a remarkable result and the conditions necessary to achieve it, not accepting compromises, and, on the other hand, consciously refusing to suppress dissent. A creative organizational culture of “*looseness*” (Blair & Bligh, 2018) transforms stakeholders and serves as a breeding ground for change adaptation ideas in line with the leader's aspirations. The goal of a leader's *vulnerable communication* is not control and high fidelity (Lewis, 2019a), but rather empowerment of stakeholders (Bass & Riggio, 2005) for taking a strategic role in change initiative. The period of a leader's vulnerability prepares the company to effectively implement a combination of both approaches and stakeholder communication model of change, that views stakeholder participation as a resource. It eliminates prematurely engaging stakeholders who are in the grip of a fixed mindset which leads to communication failure (Lewis, 2019a). The present study, by exploring the causes and consequences of vulnerability, discovered a formula for combining the best part of a *programmed approach*, namely the *management of meaning* and outcome, with the best aspects of an *adaptive approach* that allows strategy to be supported by the deployment of communication and initiative from the bottom-up.

Based on the above, we confirm the hypothesis that the change communication of an authentic leader, predetermined by a high level of leadership mindset, triggers the leader's vulnerability and, at the same time, paradoxically contributes to the evolution of stakeholders' leadership mindset as a prerequisite for long-term innovations.

5.6. Managing Organizational Change Paradoxes and Dualities

In studying organizational paradoxes surrounding organizational change, scholars ask, “How can actors change institutions if their actions, intentions, and rationality are all conditioned by the very institution they wish to change?” (Holm, 1995, p. 398). According to the results of the study, it can be argued that the mindset and actions of an authentic leader, unlike most stakeholders, aren't shaped and channeled by the established institutional system, by the forces of external and internal institutional arrangements, such as power structures, field opportunities, and ideological orientation (Seo & Creed, 2002). The leader acts based on their aspirations to achieve a breakthrough prosocial result, which is beyond the institutional contradictions and divergent interests that give rise to paradoxes associated with organizational change. An authentic leader addresses institutional contradictions and embodied dualities that naturally arise during the change process, using paradox management strategy and change communication tactics based on a synthetic decision-making and embracing personal vulnerability. At the same time, the leaders do not act to resolve paradoxes as such; they may not be aware of all the contradictions they are dealing with. *Vulnerable communication* represents the leader's persistent attempts to overcome organizational contradictions, finally becoming the force that allows the leader to cope with them by achieving the evolution of a stakeholder mindset. However, such an attempt at the first stage affects the established institutional system and causes high resistance from stakeholders.

As for the organizational paradox a *charismatic hero-servant leader* pair, the phenomenon of leader vulnerability allows us to see a single whole in these concepts and overcome their apparent opposition. “Heroism” of an authentic leader manifests itself as openness to accept

vulnerability and significant risks when faced with a lack of understanding from those around them. As a servant, the leader pays the overall costs of the change process with the personal risks. However, instead of dissolving in the team as a servant leader, an authentic one, being in the thick of things, carries out strategic, systematic work to expand and evolve the stakeholders' mindset (Weber, 1968; Greenleaf, 2015; Savelev & Saveleva, 2024a).

The leadership dilemma during the change process is to demonstrate the full range of the leadership mindset and to embrace vulnerability and significant risks for the sake of achieving remarkable results or, on the contrary, an attempt to avoid vulnerability or control its degree aligning with the level of leadership mindset of stakeholders while simultaneously reducing the success of the change initiative (Savelev & Saveleva, 2024a). The leader faces the paradox and ethical choice of *personal vulnerability* (authentic leader)-*organizational vulnerability* (quasi-leader, anti-leader). The embracing of vulnerability by an authentic leader means that the risks fall on their shoulders, reducing the company's risks, for example, in the form of the emergence of chronic problems. A *quasi-leader*, even one with good intentions, chooses to control personal vulnerability, which excludes the achievement of breakthrough results. Leaders who avoid entirely their vulnerability by resorting to repression against dissenting stakeholders can be classified as *anti-leaders*.

The compromises at the level of goals or discursive strategies, as well as an attempt to control personal vulnerability on the part of the leader, cause new institutional contradictions to arise instead of existing ones (see, e.g., Seo & Creed, 2002; Stoltzfus et al., 2011; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2024). The following strategies rooted in the contradictions ironically maintain paradox and do not contribute to the reduction of institutional dependence of stakeholders and their mindset evolution:

- Struggle for power;
- Beneficial alliance with any group of stakeholders;
- Conflict or compromise with stakeholder divergent interests (Seo & Creed, 2002);
- Top-down dissemination of information within programmed approach to change (Roberts-Gray & Gray, 1983; Roberts-Gray, 1985; Lewis, 2019a);
- Attempting to prematurely implement an adaptive approach to change by asking for stakeholders input solicitation (Lewis, 2019a) before ensuring their mindset evolution and awareness of higher perspectives of change.

Thus, an attempt to control or avoid leadership vulnerability makes the company vulnerable.

On the contrary, goals, discursive strategies, and the moral choice of a leader do not multiply, reinforce or maintain paradoxes and dualities (Stoltzfus et al., 2011) but rather coping, dialectically transforming them into a reality of a higher level:

- *Leadership prosocial aspirations-rejection & negative feedback from stakeholders-embracing critical vulnerability-developing and empowerment of stakeholders;*
- *Top-down communication of prosocial meaning by leader (Turner, 2003)-stakeholder mindset evolution-bottom-up communication of change adaptation ideas by proactive stakeholders (Lewis, 2019a);*
- *Stakeholders' resistance to change-mindset evolution-empowerment and self-actualization;*
- *Organizational vulnerability-embracing vulnerability by leader-organizational consolidation.*

Despite the rejection from stakeholders, vulnerable change communication forms a gradually accumulating potential of the leader's influence on stakeholders. It overcomes the negative

pattern when new institutional contradictions multiply (see, e.g., Seo & Creed, 2002; Stoltzfus et al., 2011; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2024). Contrary to expectations, vulnerable change communication transforms the nature of the stakeholder's perception of the leader from *rejection* to *respect*. The evolution of the stakeholder leadership mindset is based on the long-term, systematic and patient influence from the authentic leader. This influence is not planned by the leader, it is dictated by a leadership mindset characterized by commitment to remarkable prosocial results, and it involves stakeholders in the implementation of leadership aspiration. The narratives of leaders convinced us that leadership that is able to take responsibility for the result is not drawn into the maelstrom of organizational contradictions inherent in the fixed mindset of stakeholders at the onset of the change. On the contrary, the leader, by their example, provides stakeholders with the opportunity to discover their less contradictory reality by the evolution of stakeholders' leadership mindset.

During the organizational change, leadership behavior and communication create the basis for subsequent institutionalization on a much stronger and healthier foundation, which gives the company a significant and stable impetus for development. Leader vulnerability is not a weakness but a strength that provides the ability to act paradoxically, confronting the paradoxes of the organization. Institutional contradictions accumulate problems and cause entropy in the organization, making it vulnerable to the challenges of the time. The authentic leader, by initiating fundamental changes and offering a new, more effective format of addressing institutional contradictions strategically and communicatively, eliminates dualities and reduces organizational vulnerability. However, the problem is that the leader's aspirations violate the status quo and initiate an increase in the leader's personal vulnerability. Thus, according to our findings, the paradoxical effect of a leader's personal vulnerability on the vulnerability of the organization is that the leader helps to reduce organizational vulnerability by taking it upon themselves.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of the *vulnerable change communication* showed that the leaders we considered provided stakeholders with countless reasons for their own rejection. Therefore, vulnerable communication looks like a network of many interconnected vulnerable messages of the leader, which are a failure for them at the moment, but in aggregate and over a long period of time promising for the gradual evolution of the stakeholder leadership mindset. The successive occurrence of moments of vulnerability is a risky use of creative dissent by the leader. By creating moments of vulnerability, the leader reveals to the stakeholders all aspects and the advantages of their approach and establishes a new order of affairs, which ultimately forms the necessary conditions for the implementation of leadership strategy. The facts of misunderstanding or rejection on the part of stakeholders signal the beginning of this transformational process.

The focus on the phenomenon of leader vulnerability as a key factor in successful change management communication opens up new opportunities in research in the fields of organizational communication and management. The present study has taken the first steps towards confirming the existence of an unambiguous connection between leadership mindset, certain patterns of change communication, embracing vulnerability, and the remarkable prosocial outcomes. By interviewing leaders who have experienced vulnerability and brought their companies closer to remarkable results, we could begin developing a *vulnerable communication model of change* for subsequent practical application. Further exploration of the phenomenon of vulnerability will make it possible to consider the inclusion of this component in the framework of change management models (Hicks, 2024), identify *vulnerable*

leaders, evaluate the depth and prospects of the change processes they are implementing, and develop a list of recommendations for them to more consciously navigate the difficult stage of vulnerability, accepting it as a systemic and inevitable attribute of the change process. At the next stage of research, it is advisable to concentrate on studying leadership communication at various stages of the change management process. We hypothesize that the strongest resistance to organizational change is fueled by an insufficient level of leadership mindset in the change initiator and an inability to embrace vulnerability. In such cases, the lack of “leadership potential difference” between the leader and stakeholders does not create the necessary paradoxical tension (see, e.g., Seo & Creed, 2002; Stoltzfus et al., 2011; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2024) as the prerequisite for the transformation of the organization; or may even cause principled dissent among stakeholders due to the flaws in the change initiative (Blair & Bligh, 2018; Lewis, 2019a). Dissemination-focus communication strategy, which is characteristic of leaders operating outside the vulnerability processes, provokes the emergence of more and more pockets of resistance to change due to a lack of balance between competing values. As a result, the organization does not become a system capable of turning *resistance* into a process of *consolidation* and preventing the conflict from becoming chronic. The company becomes vulnerable, and the likelihood of an unfavorable outcome of the change effort increases. Vulnerable communication, on the contrary, reduces the degree of resistance to change, comprehensively increasing the level of tasks and methods of solving them. This approach covers the needs of all stakeholder groups, as leadership communication unfolds and creates new horizons and perspectives they were not aware of. This leads the company from the vulnerability of a fixed mindset and the chaos of resistance to an innovative community.

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