Paradoxes in Organizational Change: The Crucial Role of Leaders' Sensegiving

Jennifer L. Sparr

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Jennifer L. Sparr

Department of Management, Technology, and Economics, ETH Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

In organizational change, both leaders and followers experience paradoxical tensions, to which they often react defensively. Therefore, a paradoxical lens is valuable to understand individuals' change reactions. While there is a rich discussion in the literature about the importance of leaders' sensemaking about and managing of paradoxes in organizational change, the follower perspective, and in particular the leaders' influence on followers' sensemaking about paradoxes have largely been neglected so far. To close this gap, a conceptual model is introduced that, based on uncertainty management theory, highlights the role of followers' fairness evaluations with regard to paradoxical demands. Leaders' sensegiving about paradoxes to followers, which is based on their own sensemaking processes and stimulates followers to engage in paradoxical sensemaking, is suggested as a crucial boundary condition for followers' fairness evaluations and their subsequent reactions to paradoxical tensions. The model thus combines the paradox and sensemaking–sensegiving literatures with the fairness literature to understand followers' reactions to paradoxical tensions in organizational change. In doing so, the model acknowledges the paradoxical nature of organizational change and offers a new and specific focus on how to influence individuals' change reactions positively. Testable propositions suggest directions for future research.

Introduction

The success or failure of organizational change is highly dependent on employee behaviour (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Oreg, Vakola, & Armenakis, 2011). Unfortunately, resistance to change, defined as 'a tridimensional (negative) attitude towards change, which includes affective, behavioural, and cognitive components' (Oreg, 2006, p. 74), is common (Oreg, 2006; Scheck & Kinicki, 2000). Critical reasons for this resistance are employees' experiences of uncertainty and disruptions in their sensemaking (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick, 1995). However, despite an extensive literature on predictors of employee change reactions (Oreg et al., 2011) and despite common knowledge of good change management practices (e.g. Kotter, 1996; Whelan-Berry & Somerville, 2010), followers' negative change reactions are still a threat for the successful

CONTACT Jennifer L. Sparr ✉ jsparr@ethz.ch

organizational change. In the following, the focus on the paradoxical nature of organizational change offers a new perspective on the still relevant question of how leaders can manage employees' uncertainty and support their sensemaking in organizational change (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

Paradoxes, defined as 'contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time' (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382), are particularly salient in organizational change (Lewis, 2000; Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016). Nasim and Sushil (2011, p. 186) even claim that 'managing change is invariably managing paradoxes'. Both leaders and followers experience tensions between the old and the new, are required to learn and develop while at the same time perform at their best, and struggle between the need to change and adapt and their desire for order and stability (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Unfortunately, individuals' reactions to paradoxical tensions are oftentimes defensive because individuals feel anxious, uncertain and threatened (Lewis, 2000; Schad et al., 2016; Vince & Broussine, 1996).

Recent research on paradoxes and change has focused on leaders' sensemaking and decision-making with regard to paradoxical tensions with promising insights and findings (Schad et al., 2016; Smith, 2014), also with a focus on organizational change (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). However, the role of follower sensemaking about paradoxes in organizational change has been neglected so far. Further, there is no research on the role of leadership in this process, although scholars have acknowledged its importance (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; p. 221). There are compelling arguments and evidence for the notion that to make sense of paradoxes is challenging for leaders (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Smith, Besharov, Wessels, & Chertok, 2012), in particular for middle managers in organizational change who have not designed the change themselves but are required to execute the change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). However, not only managers but also followers experience paradoxical demands and tensions in organizational change. For example, leaders expect their followers to deal with change creatively while at the same time maintain their efficiency (see also Miron-Spektor, Gino, & Argote, 2011). Followers often do not decide the direction of change themselves, usually have less information than managers have, and have the least discretion to shape the process of implementing change; these are conditions that create uncertainty (Bordia, Hobman, Jones, Gallois, & Callan, 2004; Kraft, Sparr, & Peus, 2016). Therefore, followers need support to deal with their paradox-related uncertainty and to restore their disrupted sensemaking (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Research has highlighted the role of managers' and leaders' sensegiving in organizational change (Bartunek, Krim, Neccochea, & Humphries, 1999; Foldy, Goldman, & Ospina, 2008; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Rouleau, 2005). Leaders both communicate the need for and the direction of change and aim to manage their followers' change-related uncertainty with suitable communication processes (Allen, Jimmieson, Bordia, & Irmer, 2007; Bordia et al., 2004; Kraft et al., 2016). However, until now, theory about both the roles of followers' sensemaking and leaders' sensegiving for followers' reactions to paradoxical demands in organizational change is scarce.

In the following, I suggest a conceptual model to fill this gap. In a first step, the model explains followers' reactions to paradoxical demands in organizational change with followers' fairness perceptions. Uncertainty management theory claims that individuals use fairness information to manage uncertainty (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002). Much of the resistance to paradoxical tensions might be due to followers' lack of understanding

and embracing the paradoxical nature of organizational change. They might feel treated unfairly when they experience tensions between paradoxical demands and react with resistance in consequence (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016; Schad et al., 2016). Following this rationale, paradoxical sensemaking is introduced as a moderator of the relationship between paradoxical demands and the fairness evaluations. In a second step, the relationship between leaders' sensemaking and sensegiving with followers' sensemaking is established and introduced into the relationship between paradoxes and followers' reactions to these paradoxes. The development of the model draws on both the paradox (Li, 2016; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011) and the sensegiving–sensemaking literature (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Kraft, Sparr, & Peus, 2015, 2016; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995).

The resulting theoretical model contributes to the literature as follows: First, the focus on followers' reactions to paradoxical tensions acknowledges the paradoxical nature of change and offers a new perspective on follower change reactions. In the model, the uncertainty management theory (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002) is used to explain followers' reactions to paradoxical demands which adds to our theoretical understanding of these reactions. Second, the focus on leaders' sensegiving about paradoxes in organizational change adds to our understanding of how to reduce high rates of change failure due to follower resistance. This extends both the growing literature on managing paradoxes in organizational change (Putnam et al., 2016; Schad et al., 2016) and literature on change reactions (Oreg et al., 2011). Taken together, the proposed model offers inspiration for organizations on how to prepare and support leaders and followers in organizational change to prevent unfairness perceptions and reduce the threat of resistance.

Model development

The following model development section is organized as follows (see also Figure 1): First, the paradoxical nature of organizational change is introduced. Next, the relationship between paradoxical tensions and followers' reactions to paradoxical tensions are established, with followers' fairness evaluations as crucial mediator in this relationship and their
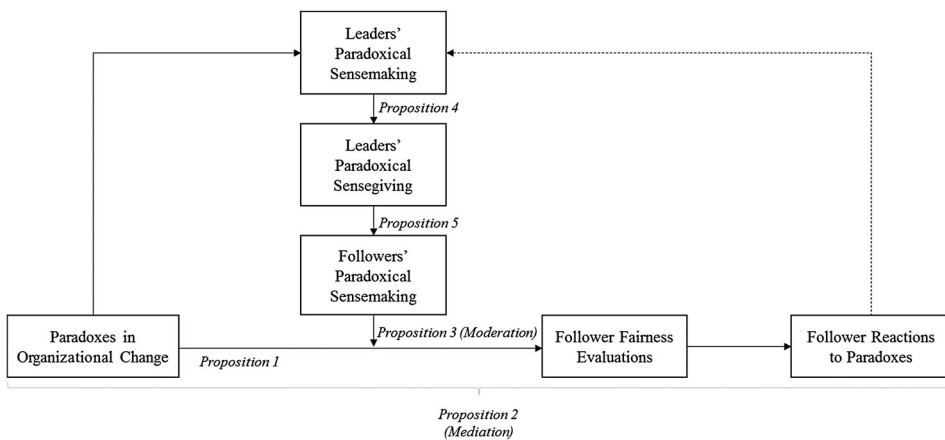
Figure 1. Conceptual model.

paradoxical sensemaking as an important moderator. Following this section, the case is made for the crucial role of leaders' paradoxical sensegiving for followers' paradoxial sensemaking. Consequently, the model development continues with leaders' sensemaking and sensegiving. Finally, in the last step, the relationship between leaders' paradoxical sensegiving and followers' paradoxical sensemaking is developed. Please note that dashed lines in Figure 1 acknowledge that sensemaking and sensegiving are ongoing social processes (Weick, 1995) and that leaders are also influenced by the followers' reactions.

The paradoxical nature of organizational change

Common definitions of paradox highlight three characteristics of paradoxes: their contradictory yet interrelated elements, the simultaneity of these elements and their persistence over time (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382; see also Putnam et al., 2016; Schad et al., 2016). Contradictions are 'bipolar opportunities that are mutually exclusive and interdependent such that the opposites define and potentially negate each other' (Putnam et al., 2016, p. 70). The dynamic tension between the opposite elements characterizes the contradiction (Hargrave & Van den Ven, 2017). The more one tries to separate the elements, the more tension is experienced which reflects the interdependence of the elements. Paradoxes have been described as 'unsolvable puzzles' (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 385), a metaphor which illustrates both the interrelatedness of the contradictory elements as well as their persistence over time.

The current literature describes at least four different ways of how paradoxes and organizational change are associated: First, pre-existing paradoxes in organizations become more salient in organizational change (Lewis, 2000; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). For example, the tension between following binding processes and the need for flexibility is more salient when circumstances change that affect these processes. Second, organizational change is paradoxical in nature and 'involve[s] building upon, as well as destroying, the past to create the future' (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 383). Nasim and Sushil (2011, p. 186) suggest that the change-specific paradox of 'balancing change with continuity' is crucial for successful change. The case study of Kolb (2003) shows how the latter is related to successful leader sensegiving and follower sensemaking: he describes the use of a storytelling technique to connect the long and successful history of an organization with the introduced change. When followers were able to see how the change connects with past successes, they were more ready to embrace it than without being aware of this connection to their much-valued past. Third, paradoxical tensions can initiate change, because they trigger organizational members to reconsider the involved polarities (Lewis, 2000). For example, when teams find it hard to balance the tension between binding processes and the need for flexibility, they will continuously change the processes to allow for more flexibility while at the same time keep the processes stable. Fourth, paradoxical tensions are prone to inhibit change, because individuals oftentimes react defensively in the first place (Lewis, 2000) and stick to what has worked in the past ('we have always done it like this') without accepting new approaches that meet current or future demands better.

Taken together, paradoxes become salient and are inherent in organizational change; they can both initiate and inhibit organizational change. Furthermore, scholars have pointed out that paradoxes are socially constructed and thus 'what creates a paradox to one person may suggest straight logic to another' (Lüscher, Lewis, & Ingram, 2006,

p. 499; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Only if individuals subjectively experience paradoxes they will become relevant to their actions (see also Keller, Loewenstein, & Yan, 2017; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Overall, contradictions are commonly created and perceived in ever-changing, ambiguous and uncertain environments (Sutherland & Smith, 2011), so that a paradoxical lens is valuable to study phenomena in organizational change (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). For the following analysis of the sensemaking–sensegiving process about paradoxes in organizational change, a process perspective of change is adopted (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Van den Ven and Poole (1995, p. 512) define change in terms of 'an empirical observation of difference in form, quality, or state over time in an organizational entity'. In complex, dynamic organizations, demands of change are ever-present (Taylor-Bianco & Schermerhorn, 2006). It becomes evident from this perspective that sensemaking and change are closely inter-related, as 'one never makes finite sense of a situation because things are always changing' (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p. 565).

Focus on the follower: paradoxes in organizational change and individuals' reactions to paradoxical tensions

Paradoxical tensions and followers' fairness evaluations

As described above, paradoxical tensions can stimulate positive change (Lewis, 2000) but oftentimes also foster ambiguity and uncertainty which in turn elicit anxiety and defensive reactions in individuals (Lewis, 2000; Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Vince & Broussine, 1996). Uncertainty is defined as an insufficient understanding of a situation or a lack of information about what is going on, including not being able to predict the future or facing incompatible cognitions, cognitions and experiences, or cognitions and behaviour (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002). As such, uncertainty is an aversive state that humans are motivated to resolve (e.g. Hogg, 2000). In the following, I draw on the uncertainty management model (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002) to explain the relationship between paradoxical tensions in organizational change and followers' reactions. The basic assumption of the uncertainty management model (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002) is that individuals are motivated to manage uncertainty and that fairness information is used to do so. In a series of experiments, the authors were able to show that fair treatment was more strongly related to outcomes like satisfaction under uncertainty conditions compared to no-uncertainty conditions (for an overview see Lind & van den Bos, 2002). They explain that fair treatment enhances individuals' confidence that they will receive good outcomes in the end and reduces anxiety in the face of possible loss, thus helping the individual to maintain positive affect and constructive behaviour even in uncertain situations. On the contrary, in case of unfairness, individuals feel the need to protect themselves. Further, different types of fairness (e.g. process vs. outcome fairness) substitute for each other: If something is resolved in a fair way, it does not feel uncertain any more (Lind & van den Bos, 2002). Lind and van den Bos (2002, p. 181) come to the conclusion that 'fairness and uncertainty are so closely linked that it is in fact impossible to understand the role of one of these concepts in organizational psychology without reference to the other'. In line with this notion, fairness evaluations have been shown to be negatively related to uncertainty and vice versa, thus indicating that uncertainty might trigger perceptions of unfairness while fairness perceptions might reduce uncertainty (Van den Bos, Heuven, Burger, & van Fernandez

Veldhuizen, 2006). The uncertainty management model was successfully applied to explain uncertainty-related phenomena in different uncertainty domains (e.g. lack of work-time-control and negative changes in the study of Elovainio et al., 2005; uncertainty about the self in the study of Thau, Aquino, & Wittek, 2007).

Fairness can be defined as 'global perception of appropriateness' (Colquitt & Zipay, 2015, p. 76). As such, fairness is widely acknowledged as an important influencing factor for individuals' change reactions (for an overview refer to Oreg et al., 2011). For example, Rodell and Colquitt (2009) found in their study that when individuals anticipate fair treatment, they are more willing to engage in change. Taking uncertainty management theory into account, I propose that the uncertainty elicited by paradoxical tensions in organizational change motivates followers to evaluate whether it is appropriate to be confronted with those tensions and whether they can expect to be treated fairly in the future (Proudfoot & Lind, 2015). This leads to the first proposition:

Proposition 1: *Perceived paradoxical tensions in organizational change trigger followers' fairness evaluations.*

Paradoxical tensions, followers' fairness evaluations, and followers' reactions

Meta-analyses summarize the impressive evidence for the positive relationship between follower fairness perceptions and a wide range of positive outcomes (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2013), including favourable follower attitudes to change (Daly & Geyer, 1994; Folger & Skarlicki, 1999; Marzucco, Marique, Stinglhamber, De Roeck, & Hansez, 2014) and follower change support (Rodell & Colquitt, 2009). Social exchange theory (Blau, 2008) is frequently used to explain these positive relationships: followers reciprocate fair treatment with their supportive behaviour (Colquitt et al., 2013). On the contrary, follower withdraw their support when they feel treated unfairly.

Above, I developed the argument that the uncertainty elicited by paradoxical tensions triggers followers' fairness evaluation. For example, consider a company that, after years of continuous growth, aims to optimize the work processes in order to save resources and increase productivity without having to hire new employees. This is an example of a learning–performing paradox (Smith & Lewis, 2011; 'How can we both learn and improve our processes and increase our efficiency and the production output at the same time?') that gets salient through a change in the strategy (hiring freeze). If followers conclude that these paradoxical demands are legitimate and expect positive results from dealing with the paradoxical demands constructively, they will show supportive behaviours. If, however, followers conclude that these paradoxical demands are illegitimate and impossible to deal with, they will resist those demands.

Proposition 2: *Fairness evaluations mediate the relationship between paradoxical tensions and follower reactions to these paradoxical demands.*

Followers' paradoxical sensemaking as crucial moderator

The first two propositions establish followers' fairness evaluations as a critical mediator in the relationship between paradoxical tensions in organizational change and followers' reactions to these tensions. In the next step, I introduce followers' sensemaking about the paradoxical tensions as an important condition for a favourable fairness evaluation

of paradoxical demands: only if followers recognize and accept paradoxes as a meaningful part of the organizational reality and engage in paradoxical sensemaking they will not feel treated unfairly by the contradictions and tensions.

Sensemaking is defined as 'a process, prompted by violated expectations, that involves attending to and bracketing cues in the environment, creating intersubjective meaning through cycles of interpretation and action, and thereby enacting a more ordered environment from which further cues can be drawn' (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 67). As such, sensemaking is an ongoing and social process (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). The outcome of successful sensemaking is that individuals are able to describe the meaning of their circumstances in a way that allows action (Weick et al., 2005). Moreover, there is an inverse relationship between meaningfulness and uncertainty: the more something is meaningful to individuals, the less it feels uncertain (Van den Bos, 2009).

In their dynamic equilibrium model, Smith and Lewis (2011) suggest that to successfully make sense of paradox, individuals need to accept, differentiate and integrate paradoxes (see also Lewis, 2000; Smith et al., 2012; Smith & Tushman, 2005). This model builds on earlier insights on paradoxical thinking (e.g. Clegg, Cunha, & Cunha, 2002; Lewis, 2000; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Smith & Tushman, 2005; compare also Hahn, Pinkse, Preuss, & Figge, 2014; Ingram, Lewis, Barton, & Gartner, 2016; Keller et al., 2017; Miron-Spektor et al., 2011; Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, & Lewis, 2017; Smith & Tushman, 2005). To accept paradoxes involves 'learning to live with the paradox' (Lewis, 2000, p. 764), that is, to recognize and embrace the conflicting tensions as 'persistent and unsolvable puzzles' (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 385). Acceptance enables individuals to open up to paradoxical tensions and reduces defensiveness. Next, differentiating involves 'separating distinct elements and honoring the unique aspects of each' (Smith, 2014, p. 1594). Furthermore, integrating means bringing different demands together such that the tensions between them become productive rather than intractable (Smith et al., 2012, p. 464). Thus, the dynamic equilibrium model describes an ideal reframing process of paradox – individuals move from either-or thinking (differentiating) to both-and thinking (integrating) (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008, p. 232); they seek ways of how to attend to both competing demands simultaneously (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Recently, Li (2016) criticized the both-and approaches to paradox and suggested Yin-Yang balancing as an improved approach. Li (2016) argues that both-and thinking recognizes synergy (see also Clegg et al., 2002) but denies trade-offs when it comes to paradox. Instead, the author suggests either-and thinking to recognize both synergies and trade-offs between the opposite elements of paradox 'in the same place at the same time' (Li, 2016, p. 58). The example of exploration and exploitation in innovation illustrates the difference between the two approaches. Both-and logic favours 'both exploration and exploitation in each aspect/stage as complementary for synergy' (Li, 2016, p. 68), while either-and logic favours 'either exploration Or exploitation as dominant in a balance between both elements as a pair in each aspect/stage as partially conflicting and partially complementary in balancing' (Li, 2016, p. 68). However, despite the differences between these two approaches, they both agree that the traditional Western thinking of either-or is not helpful for dealing with organizational paradoxes and stress the need to find an 'and' in dealing with the opposites in paradox. Further, the above described differentiation and integration of paradoxical elements is similar to the notion of partial affirmation and partial negation in the Ying-Yang approach (see Keller & Lewis, 2016) and also

reflects in the principle of 'consistent inconsistency' (Smith & Lewis, 2012, p. 228) which involves frequent and dynamical shifts in decision-making (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Smith, Lewis, & Tushman, 2016).

In line with this research, I define paradoxical sensemaking as individuals adopting an 'and' (including both/and as well as either/and thinking) frame when they deal with paradoxes. This frame allows individuals to understand paradoxes as contradictory but mutually enabling (Farjoun, 2010). This definition is related to research by Miron-Spektor et al. (2011, p. 229) who introduced paradoxical frames, defined as 'mental templates individuals use to embrace seemingly contradictory statements or dimensions of a task or situation'. In experimental studies, these authors found support for a positive effect of induced paradoxical frames on individuals' creativity. Later, these authors studied the paradox mindset, defined as a framework that helps individuals to interpret paradoxical demands and allows them to accept the paradoxical tensions as persistent (Miron-Spektor et al., 2017). Individuals adopting a paradox mindset see paradoxes as an opportunity rather than a threat and are ready to continuously manage the tensions instead of trying to remove them (Miron-Spektor et al., 2017). These authors' research supports the paradox mindset as a moderator in the relationship between paradoxical tensions and individuals' in-role performance as well as innovative behaviours: the relationships were positive for individuals with a paradox mindset but negative for individuals without this mindset. Similarly, Ingram et al. (2016) found paradoxical thinking, which they define as an individual's ability to embrace competing demands and find a synthesis, to be positively related to innovative behaviour in family firms.

Paradoxical sensemaking facilitates that individuals accept and embrace paradoxical tensions. They understand paradoxical demands as reflection of the paradoxical nature of complex, ever-changing organizations and are confident that addressing both poles of the paradox will lead to favourable outcomes (Ingram et al., 2016; Miron-Spektor et al., 2017; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Thus, when they are confronted with the uncertainty of paradoxes and evaluate their fairness, this evaluation is likely to be positive. On the contrary, a lack of paradoxical sensemaking, reflected in either-or thinking or complete withdrawal from the paradoxical demands, is likely to lead to a rejection and negative evaluation of the demands; the individual will perceive them as inappropriate and will feel threatened. Finally, as argued above, the fairness evaluation will result in either positive or negative reactions to the paradoxical tensions.

Proposition 3:   *Paradoxical sensemaking moderates the relationship between paradoxical tensions in organizational change and followers' reaction to the paradoxes as follows: if followers engage in paradoxical sensemaking, the fairness of paradoxical demands will be positively evaluated which facilitates positive reactions to these demands. If followers fail to engage in paradoxical sensemaking, the fairness of paradoxical demands will be negatively evaluated which facilitates negative reactions to these demands.*

Focus on the leader–follower interaction: leader sensemaking, leader sensegiving about paradoxes in organizational change and follower paradoxical sensemaking

In the previous section, I developed the fundament of the model with a focus on the follower, which highlights the importance of followers' sensemaking about paradoxes for their fairness evaluations and their subsequent reactions to paradoxes. However,

sensemaking is not taking place in a vacuum; rather, it is a social process (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking and sensegiving in organizational change are part of an ongoing process where leaders and followers continuously affect each other (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Kraft et al., 2015, 2016; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). Although this is a mutual process (the dashed line in Figure 1 recognizes followers' influences on leaders), leaders are in a privileged position for influencing their followers' sensemaking through their sensegiving (Kraft et al., 2015; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Moreover, oftentimes it is the leader who asks the followers to follow seemingly contradictory goals and directives and thus confronts followers with paradoxical demands in the first place (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). In other cases, paradoxical tensions become salient within the employees' working processes, for example, when increasing needs for flexibility challenge stable processes in the organization. In these cases, the employee is likely to turn to the leader, because usually leaders are expected to manage and reduce uncertainty for their followers (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; van Knippenberg, 2012; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, & van Dijk, 2000); thus, followers expect guidance from their leaders with regard to the paradoxical demands. However, when it comes to paradox, a simple, one-sided ('either-or') decision of the leader will not 'remove' paradoxical tensions as paradoxes, by definition, persist over time (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In the example, if the leader asks the follower to stick to stable processes and not to allow for flexibility and quick adaptation, the follower will still feel the flexibility demands. If the leader tells the follower to act flexibly, the follower will experience troubles within the stable processes. In both scenarios, the follower will most likely question the appropriateness of the leader's decision and perceive the leader as incompetent or ignorant of the given reality. In both cases, the follower will not be able and/or motivated to deal with the paradoxical demands and thus most likely show defensive behaviour or complete withdrawal. A paradoxical leader will ask the employee to find an integrative solution (Smith & Lewis, 2011) which satisfies both the need for flexibility and aligns this need with stable processes. For example, the leader can encourage the followers to define rules (stability) for dealing with different kinds of exceptions and deviations from standard processes (flexibility). These rules will allow them to make 'consistently inconsistent' decisions with regard to the stability–flexibility question (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Smith et al., 2016). However, these rules and processes might need continuous redefinition when demands keep changing. Therefore, it is crucial that the leader not just asks the followers to fulfil both demands for flexibility and stability or tells them how to do it but also explains why this is necessary and role-models how to do this continuously. The leader needs to give sense (Weick, 1995) to the followers about why paradoxical demands are a legitimate part of the organizational environment and how to deal with them constructively. If the followers do not understand why both demands are important and how they are connected, they will perceive their leaders' behaviour as either involuntarily or voluntarily inconsiderate ('the leader does not care about implications of contradictory demands for followers and just wants things to be done, no matter how'), illegitimate ('the leader should not be asking to fulfil seemingly contradictory goals') and obstructive ('anything I do will be wrong'). In short, they will feel treated unfairly not only by the organization or the circumstances but also and particularly by their leader. In further consequence, they will not only react negatively to the paradoxical demands (cf. Folger & Skarlicki, 1999) but also negatively evaluate their leaders' behaviours. On the contrary, when the leader helps followers to understand the

paradoxical demands, they will feel treated fairly by the leader and they will understand that paradoxical demands are part of the organizational reality that provide opportunities for improvement. Follower fairness perceptions of their leaders have been shown to be positively associated with both their judgments of leader effectiveness (van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & van Knippenberg, 2007) as well as their change support (Rodell & Colquitt, 2009). Therefore, in the following, I introduce the leader paradoxical sensemaking–sensegiving process as crucial influencing factor for followers' sensemaking about paradoxes.

Leaders' sensemaking and sensegiving about paradoxes in organizational change

The recent literature on paradoxes in organizations has highlighted the importance of leaders' sensemaking about paradoxes (e.g. Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2012; for a review see Putnam et al., 2016; Schad et al., 2016) for executing their leadership role (Waldman & Bowen, 2016), making strategic decisions (Smith, 2014), and dealing with paradoxes in change (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). For example, the study by Lüscher and Lewis (2008) illustrates how managers who struggled with paradoxes within organizational change were led through a process of defining the problem, differentiating between the paradoxical demands ('or' thinking) and integrating the demands ('and' thinking) and thus reached a state of 'workable certainty' (p. 228). If managers fail to engage in paradoxical sensemaking, their actions are likely to intensify the paradox. For example, Lüscher et al. (2006) point out that leaders who want to implement a change in processes oftentimes unintentionally act in a way that reinforces old patterns, for example, when they cling to extant rewards and systems, which reinforce the old instead of the new processes.

However, it is not enough for managers and leaders to make sense about paradoxes in organizational change for themselves; they also need to provide their followers with a workable certainty based on their understanding of the paradoxes (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Thus, they need to give sense to their followers. Sensegiving is defined as 'the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality' (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). Sensegiving behaviours include all 'statements or activities [...] constructing sensible environments for others' (Maitlis, 2005, p. 29). With sensegiving, leaders can strategically influence the sensemaking of their followers (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Further, the study of Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) illustrates that leaders' sensemaking and sensegiving are consecutive and recurring processes. Only if the leaders themselves engage in paradoxical sensemaking they can help their followers to switch from a dialectic 'or' frame to a paradox 'and' frame. Or, as Rouleau (2005, p. 1415) put it, 'sensemaking and sensegiving are two sides of the same coin'.

Proposition 4: *Leaders' paradoxical sensemaking is a necessary precondition for leaders' paradoxical sensegiving to followers.*

Earlier research shows that sensegiving is an important leadership task (Foldy et al., 2008; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) in particular in the complex and ambiguous situation of organizational change (Bartunek et al., 1999; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Dunford & Jones, 2000; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Effective leaders facilitate the process of follower sensemaking (Pye, 2005) and enable action by encouraging creative problem-solving and new behaviour patterns (Plowman et al., 2007) in particular in organizational change (Gioia &

Chittipeddi, 1991; Kraft et al., 2015; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Effective leaders tailor their sensegiving to followers' needs over the course of change (Kraft et al., 2016).

Leaders' sensegiving about paradoxes from an 'and' perspective can be considered successful when followers understand and accept the paradoxical demands as part of the organizational reality (Smith & Lewis, 2011) and feel energized by the paradoxical demands (Miron-Spektor et al., 2017). In short, leaders' paradoxical sensegiving is successful when followers start to engage in paradoxical sensemaking as defined above.

Leaders' sensegiving about paradox can take many forms. Among other sensegiving techniques, the use of framing of problems and solutions has been highlighted (Foldy et al., 2008). When the leader frames the paradoxical demands from an 'and' perspective, different solutions become available than when paradoxical demands are framed from an 'or' perspective. The study of Lüscher and Lewis (2008) illustrates how the involved researchers guided managers through the sparring process of 'working through paradox' in organizational change with the help of interventive questions (p. 227), thus allowing the managers to fully understand the paradoxical demands and find integrative ways to deal with those demands. Similarly, also leaders could use these questions to help their followers to achieve a 'workable certainty' (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008, p. 228). In addition, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) highlights the importance of leaders' role-modeling behaviour for followers to learn behaviour from their leaders (see also Zhang, Waldman, Han, & Li, 2015). Thus, leaders' sensegiving about paradoxes with the help of 'and' framing, questions, and role-modeling should help followers to engage in paradoxical sensemaking (Miron-Spektor et al., 2017; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Proposition 5: *Leaders' paradoxical sensegiving stimulates followers to engage in paradoxical sensemaking*.

Discussion

Organizational change is paradoxical in nature: latent paradoxical tensions become salient, paradoxes are inherent in organizational change and paradoxes can both stimulate or inhibit change (Lewis, 2000; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Therefore, the paradoxical lens (Smith & Lewis, 2011) offers a valuable perspective to understand followers' reactions to organizational change and leaders' influence on their reactions. For this purpose, I presented a conceptual model. First, I established the relationship between paradoxical demands in organizational change and followers' reactions to these demands based on the observation that paradoxes cause perceptions of uncertainty in individuals (Lewis, 2000; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). The uncertainty management model (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002) explains that individuals are motivated to manage uncertainty and use fairness information to do so. Thus, I propose fairness perceptions as a mediator in the relationship between paradoxes in organizational change and followers' reactions. Next, the positive moderating role of followers' paradoxical sensemaking in this process is introduced; only if followers make sense about paradoxes in an accepting and embracing way, they will perceive the uncertainty of paradox as part of the organizational reality and not as mistreatment. In the second part of the model, I highlight the important role leaders have in influencing followers' paradoxical sensemaking with their paradoxical sensemaking, which is dependent on their own paradoxical sensemaking.

Theoretical implications

The conceptual model (see Figure 1 for an overview) makes the following contributions to the organizational change and the paradox literature. First, the application of paradox theory (Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011) offers a new frame for our theoretical understanding of follower reactions to organizational change. The model can serve as a starting point to shed new light on the existing literature on change reactions (e.g. Oreg et al., 2011); factors that have been found to hinder or foster followers' change reactions can be investigated more specifically as factors that hinder or foster paradoxical sensemaking in organizational change. Second, uncertainty is a central topic in both the organizational change literature (e.g. Bordia et al., 2004; Herzig & Jimmieson, 2006; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006) and the paradox literature (Lewis, 2000; Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Vince & Broussine, 1996). The uncertainty management model (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002) is helpful to connect the two literatures and puts fairness evaluation at the core of the model. Thus, further research can make use of the rich fairness literature to understand followers' reactions to paradoxes in organizational change better. Fairness principles also provide guidance for the leaders' sensegiving behaviours, which need to be respectful (interpersonal fairness), honest and open (informational fairness), as well as transparent (procedural fairness). Third, managers' sensemaking about paradoxes in organizational change has quite extensively been investigated with promising insights and findings (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Schad et al., 2016) while the follower perspective and the influence of the leader on the followers' sensemaking have been largely neglected so far. The developed model raises the awareness that both leaders and followers face the challenge of making sense about the paradoxes they experience in organizational change and deal with the paradoxical tensions constructively. Thus, the model offers a starting point for an extended understanding about how individuals in organizations interact to deal with paradoxes.

Limitations and implications for further research

Future research is required to test the proposed model (see Propositions 1–5, Figure 1). So far, both research on sensemaking/sensegiving and paradoxes are mainly based on qualitative methods (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Schad et al., 2016). While qualitative interviews, observation, as well as action research (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) will be helpful to shed insight on *how* leaders' sensemaking affects leaders' sensegiving and *how* the sensegiving helps followers to engage in paradoxical sensemaking, experimental research is needed to test the assumed causality of the propositions. Further, survey studies are required to test the role of paradoxical sensemaking in the relationship between paradoxical demands, fairness evaluations and subsequent follower reactions in the field, thus providing external validity. In addition, the validity of the models' predictions needs to be tested over time when the change unfolds (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Kezar, 2013; see also Putnam et al., 2016).

   The proposed model does not claim completeness but, once empirically tested, offers a starting point for important extensions. First, the model has a strong cognitive focus and largely neglects the role of emotions. However, the experience of paradoxical tensions evokes emotions that influence individuals' responses to paradoxes (see the discussion

in Putnam et al., 2016). The literatures on paradoxes, sensemaking and fairness have independently from each other recognized the need to investigate the role of emotions (Cropanzano, Stein, & Nadisic, 2012; Helpap & Bekmeier-Feuerhahn, 2016; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Maitlis, Vogus, & Lawrence, 2013; Putnam et al., 2016; Schad et al., 2016; Vince & Broussine, 1996; Weick et al., 2005). Further research is required to integrate the emerging insights on the role of emotions from these literatures into the model. For example, Steigenberger (2015) discusses how emotions shape sensemaking processes in organizational change and are outcomes of these processes; in the developed model, this is relevant for both the leaders' and the followers' sensemaking but also for the leaders' sensegiving strategies. In addition, the fairness literature can be helpful to include emotions into the developed model as affect has been recognized as important process that connects fairness perceptions with outcomes at work (Colquitt et al., 2013). Further, recent insights on emotion regulation strategies for solving ethical dilemmas could be informative for theory on the role of emotions in dealing with paradoxes (Thiel, Bagdasarov, Harkrider, Johnson, & Mumford, 2012).

Second, context variables and boundary conditions of the sensemaking–sensegiving process need to be integrated into the model (Kraft et al., 2015; Thiel et al., 2012) and deserve attention by future research. These variables include individuals' dispositional reactions to tensions, uncertainty and ambiguity as well as available resources for the sensemaking–sensegiving process. In the model, paradoxical sensemaking refers to individuals' frames in any situation when individuals experience paradoxical tensions in organizational change. However, making sense of paradoxes is a recurring, ongoing and effortful process, which is precarious (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008, p. 17). An individuals' dispositional openness to paradoxical sensemaking – a more stable, trait-like paradox mindset – is likely to facilitate this process (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2010; Keller et al., 2017; Miron-Spektor et al., 2017). In addition, the relationship of this concept with related dispositional concepts like tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty avoidance (for a review see Furnham & Marks, 2013) should be investigated.

Further, individuals need appropriate skills to engage in paradoxical sensemaking (Miron-Spektor & Erez, 2017). For example, Zhang et al. (2015) investigated holistic thinking and integrative complexity as a predictor of paradoxical leadership and found positive relationships. Smith and Lewis (2012) suggest leaders' cognitive complexity, confidence, conflict management and communication skills as predictors for successful sensemaking about and dealing with paradoxes. Research and model by Lüscher and Lewis (2008) but also by Smith and Lewis (2012) suggest that these skills can be trained. In addition, leaders' sensegiving skills can greatly influence the success of the sensegiving efforts (Kraft et al., 2015; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Related to that, the model does not suggest which sensegiving strategies (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Kraft et al., 2016; Rouleau, 2005) are most effective. For example, recently Jarzabkowski and Le (2016) suggested that humour is effective to deal with paradoxes constructively. Further research is required to learn more about successful paradoxical sensegiving means and strategies.

Working through paradoxes is an effortful, multi-stepped process (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Sufficient cognitive, attitudinal and personal resources are necessary to tackle the complexity involved, including self-control, self-efficacy and resilience (Byrne et al., 2014). However, these resources are limited (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994).

Stressful change processes (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006; Wisse & Sleebos, 2016) might deplete both leaders' and followers' self-control resources and prevent them from effective sensemaking and sensegiving about paradoxes. Support for this assumption comes from research showing that stress impairs leaders' ability to deal with ambiguity (Selart & Johansen, 2011). Similarly, stress in the form of performance pressure has been shown to impair complex cognitive processes (Baumeister et al., 1994; Thiel et al., 2012). These factors need to be investigated to enhance our understanding of the sensemaking–sensegiving process with regard to paradoxes in organizational change.

Practical implications and conclusion

The developed model acknowledges the paradoxical nature of change and its relevance for individuals' reactions in organizational change. For organizations, to raise the awareness for the paradoxical nature of change and to encourage their employees to accept and embrace paradoxical tensions might be crucial for organizations to successfully adapt and change continuously. The model highlights the important role of leaders' sensemaking and sensegiving for followers' sensemaking about paradox. In fact, the leaders' role in organizational change is in itself paradoxical: they are expected to bring out change which comes with uncertainty (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006) and at the same time to manage and reduce uncertainty (van Knippenberg, 2012; van Knippenberg et al., 2000). Therefore, individuals who are expected to lead and drive change need to be selected for, prepared for, and supported in this role (see also Smith et al., 2012). Only if leaders and followers successfully make and give sense about paradoxical tensions in organizational change, they will excel in the tension between the old and the new that enables both change and continuity in ever-changing organizations.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Jennifer L. Sparr is a postdoctoral researcher in Work and Organizational Psychology at the Department of Management, Technology and Economics at the ETH Zurich, Switzerland. She obtained her doctorate at the University of Konstanz, Germany, in 2008, followed by three years of experience in consulting. Since then, she has published several articles in the field of leadership, sensegiving and change, following her passion for practically relevant research on leadership and team collaboration in complex, dynamic and ever-changing work environments. jsparr@ethz.ch

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