



Journal of Change Management

Reframing Leadership and Organizational Practice

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjcm20

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To cite this article: Thomas Koch & Claudia Fortkord (12 Nov 2024): Opinion Leaders in Organizational Change Processes: Insights from a Large-Scale Quantitative Survey to Identify, Characterize, and Classify Influential Employees within a Multinational Corporation, Journal of Change Management, DOI: [10.1080/14697017.2024.2426789](https://doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2024.2426789)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2024.2426789>



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Published online: 12 Nov 2024.



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Opinion Leaders in Organizational Change Processes: Insights from a Large-Scale Quantitative Survey to Identify, Characterize, and Classify Influential Employees within a Multinational Corporation

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ABSTRACT

The successful implementation of change processes requires efficient and effective communication. While previous research has explored various aspects of change communication, the role of opinion leaders – individuals who are more influential than others within their networks – has been largely overlooked. These opinion leaders could play a key role in driving the successful implementation of organizational change. This study aims to investigate the characteristics and potential existence of distinct types of opinion leaders within the context of an organizational change process. We conducted a quantitative online survey (n = 4,114) in a multinational corporation undergoing a significant change initiative. The findings reveal that opinion leadership is influenced by several factors: opinion leaders often hold leadership positions, possess strong personality traits, and maintain cross-hierarchical and cross-functional networks characterized by intense relationships. They also demonstrate high expertise related to the change process and exhibit strong commitment and positive attitudes towards it. Additionally, the study identified 300 opinion leaders and, through cluster analysis, categorized them into four types: 'The Expert Leader,' 'The Emerging Opinion Leader,' 'The Cross-Functional Connector,' and 'The Department Influencer.' These types vary in their network sizes, structures, and experiences.

KEYWORDS

Organizational change; opinion leaders; change communication; change agents; survey

MAD statement

In a rapidly evolving world, effective change communication is essential for building resilient and forward-thinking organizations. While research has acknowledged the pivotal role of communication in driving change, the significant influence of opinion leaders in this process has received limited attention. These individuals can be key to ensuring that organizational transformations are not only successful but also inclusive and sustainable in their impact. By understanding how to identify and engage opinion leaders in substantial change initiatives,

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organizations can develop more effective communication strategies that foster innovation, adaptability, and long-term success, ultimately contributing to more equitable, responsible, and successful organizational transformations.

In today's rapidly changing economic and social landscape, organizations face unprecedented challenges, as exemplified most recently by the COVID-19 pandemic (Bartsch et al., 2021; Choflet et al., 2021). To ensure their survival and success, change processes have become a necessary part of organizational life. However, implementing change can be challenging, and organizations must develop effective strategies for managing the process (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Kitchen & Daly, 2002; Weick & Quinn, 1999). Many change initiatives fail, often due to ineffective communication (Elving, 2005; Lewis, 2011; Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019). Research has highlighted the crucial role of change communication in facilitating successful organizational change (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Christensen, 2014; Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019).

Although change communication has been recognized as critical to successful organizational change, previous research has paid little attention to the importance of communicative networks within organizations. These networks, consisting of both formal and informal channels, facilitate information exchange among coworkers (Koch & Denner, 2022; Viererbl et al., 2022) and play a pivotal role in shaping collaboration, decision-making, and providing platforms for employees to share their opinions about the change process (Jones et al., 2004; Mohrman et al., 2003). Within these networks, organizational opinion leaders emerge as individuals who wield greater influence over their colleagues than others (Chan & Misra, 1990; Friemel, 2015; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). These opinion leaders are typically perceived as well-informed, persuasive advisors within their social networks, where their opinions are highly sought after and valued (Chan & Misra, 1990; Friemel, 2015; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Rogers, 2003; Weimann, 1991). Thus, they could play a crucial role in communicating the need for and benefits of a change process to others and are likely to be central to the successful implementation of organizational change (Brown et al., 2017; Lam & Schaubroeck, 2000; Valente & Pumpuang, 2007).

Previous research has extensively examined opinion leaders and organizational change independently; however, there is a notable gap in integrating these two areas (Lam & Schaubroeck, 2000). While studies highlight the role of opinion leaders in various domains and their potential influence on change processes (Brown et al., 2017; Valente & Pumpuang, 2007), the specific impact of opinion leaders on organizational change remains underexplored. Valente and Davis (1999) emphasize that opinion leaders are crucial for overcoming resistance and driving change by providing support and encouraging adoption.

Given the significant role opinion leaders play in the diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 2003), it is plausible that they also significantly impact organizational change. Identifying opinion leaders, understanding their characteristics, and determining the different types of opinion leaders are essential steps for exploring their role in facilitating change. Our study will address this gap using a quantitative online survey in a large corporation undergoing substantial change, aiming to provide insights into how opinion leaders contribute to successful organizational transformation.

Organizational Change and Change Communication

The rapid pace of social change and technological disruption has created a challenging environment for companies, requiring them to adapt to new business models, disruptive innovations, and ongoing digitization. Consequently, there is significant pressure on organizations to change. Organizational change refers to the adjustment of organizational strategies and structures in response to shifting external or internal conditions (Senior, 2002; Weick & Quinn, 1999). External conditions in this context refer to factors originating outside the organization that influence its operations. These can include changes in market trends, shifts in consumer preferences, technological advancements, regulatory requirements, economic conditions, or competitive pressures (Senior, 2002). In contrast, internal conditions encompass factors arising from within the organization that necessitate change. This may involve changes in leadership, organizational culture, employee dynamics, operational inefficiencies, structural issues, or the need to adapt to new strategic priorities or goals (Senior, 2002).

A change process is viewed as a temporary transition between two stable states within the organization. This implies that organizations undergo periods of stability marked by routine, during which changes are minimal, as well as phases characterized by significant change and adaptation (Lewis, 2011). Companies that can effectively manage change and stay ahead of the curve are more likely to survive and thrive over the long term (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Kitchen & Daly, 2002; Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019). To ensure that organizational change processes are successfully implemented, it is essential to manage them in an effective, efficient, and sustainable manner (Armenakis et al., 1993).

However, this change management poses a major challenge to organizations (Armenakis & Harris, 2009). Change processes often fail due to poor implementation, a lack of resources, vague goals, or disagreements at the management level (Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019). Therefore, 'communication is regarded as a key issue in the successful implementation of change programmes because it is used as a tool for announcing, explaining, or preparing people for change and for helping them understand the positive and negative effects of the impending change' (Kitchen & Daly, 2002, p. 50). These changes do not only affect organizational structures, policies, or procedures but also impact organizational culture (Denison, 1990; Schein, 1990).

Opinion Leaders in Organizational Change

The term 'opinion leaders' was first introduced by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet in their 1944 study 'The People's Choice.' The study revealed that mass media messages often reach these opinion leaders first, who then disseminate their interpretations to less active members of the population, thereby shaping public opinion. This concept formed the basis of the Two-Step Flow of Communication theory, which posits that mass media rarely exert a direct influence on the public. Instead, opinion leaders serve as intermediaries, relaying and interpreting media content for their networks.

Typically, opinion leaders are perceived as well-informed, persuasive advisors (Chan & Misra, 1990; Friemel, 2015; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Rogers, 2003; Weimann, 1991). They are well-connected individuals within their social networks, and their opinions are often sought out and valued by others. Opinion leadership can be classified into two types: polymorphic

and monomorphic (Merton, 1968). Polymorphic opinion leaders possess knowledge in multiple areas and can positively influence others across various domains. In contrast, monomorphic opinion leaders are domain-specific and have expertise in a particular field only (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Marcus & Bauer, 1964; Rogers, 2003; Weimann, 1991). For example, an opinion leader in politics may be well-informed about current events, hold strong opinions on political issues, and significantly influence the attitudes and behaviours of others regarding those issues. Similarly, an opinion leader in soccer may have extensive knowledge about the sport, be highly involved in soccer-related activities, and influence others' opinions and behaviours concerning soccer.

This idea can also be applied to organizations, where certain individuals are recognized as opinion leaders in different areas (Brown et al., 2017; Lam & Schaubroeck, 2000; Valente & Pumpuang, 2007; Vitale, 2008). For instance, some employees may be viewed as opinion leaders in office gossip, while others may be influential in driving specific changes or initiatives within the organization (Brown et al., 2017). Research has shown that opinion leaders can play a critical role in removing barriers to change (Valente & Davis, 1999). Therefore, identifying these opinion leaders is essential when an organization seeks to drive change or promote new ideas and behaviours (Lam & Schaubroeck, 2000).

For example, if an organization is looking to introduce a new change process, it may be beneficial to identify employees who are already recognized as influential in driving change within the organization. These individuals can provide valuable support and encouragement to others who may be less receptive to the new process, and their endorsement can help build momentum and increase adoption rates. Thus, they motivate their network to behave in a certain way and take action in favour of or against the change (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007). Opinion leaders can be game changers in an organizational change context due to their powerful influence within informal, intra-organizational networks (Lam & Schaubroeck, 2000). These individuals have the ability to sway the attitudes and behaviours of others within their network and can be valuable allies in driving change within an organization (Brown et al., 2017; Lam & Schaubroeck, 2000; Vitale, 2008). By leveraging their influence, they can help build momentum and increase adoption rates for new initiatives or behaviours. Additionally, they can provide social support and encouragement to those hesitant to embrace change, thereby reducing resistance and increasing the likelihood of success.

The influence of opinion leaders within organizations is rooted in their ability to effectively communicate and persuade others. They exert their influence through various informal and formal communication channels (Denner et al., 2024). Opinion leaders often possess strong interpersonal communication skills, enabling them to build rapport and trust with others in their networks (Lam & Schaubroeck, 2000). By effectively communicating the benefits and rationale behind proposed changes, opinion leaders can address concerns, dispel misconceptions, and motivate their network members to embrace new behaviours or initiatives (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007; Vitale, 2008;). Moreover, their influence extends beyond mere information sharing; opinion leaders play a crucial role in shaping collective attitudes and social norms within the organization.

In the present study, opinion leaders in organizational change processes are defined as organizational members who are more influential than others, who seek to persuade their colleagues regarding the change process, and who inform and advise others about it. It is assumed that these opinion leaders possess a combination of characteristics that contribute to their influential role within organizations. According to Katz (1957), opinion leaders

can be defined along three key dimensions. First, they are characterized by certain personal and professional traits, often referred to as 'who one is' (Katz, 1957, p. 73). These traits include sociodemographic factors and personality characteristics that enhance their influence (Friemel, 2015; Weimann, 1991). In the context of organizational change, additional factors such as leadership roles, commitment to the organization, and tenure may also be relevant, as these qualities can increase their capacity to guide others through change (Brown et al., 2017; Lam & Schaubroeck, 2000; Valente & Pumpuang, 2007). Second, opinion leaders hold strong social positions within their networks, or 'whom one knows' (Katz, 1957, p. 73). They often have large networks that enable them to connect with a wide range of individuals and facilitate the flow of information (Chan & Misra, 1990; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Rogers, 2003; Weimann, 1991). In organizational settings, these networks may span across hierarchical levels and functional areas, further enhancing their influence and reach. Third, opinion leaders are distinguished by their knowledge and experience, or 'what one knows' (Katz, 1957, p. 73). They possess a deep understanding of their areas of expertise, which not only establishes them as credible sources of information but also enhances their ability to provide valuable insights and guidance. In the context of change, these individuals are more likely to seek out information related to the process, possess extensive knowledge about it, and actively promote and support the change (Brown et al., 2017; Lam & Schaubroeck, 2000; Valente & Pumpuang, 2007). In addition to Katz's original dimensions, this study introduces a fourth dimension that considers the attitudes and behaviours of opinion leaders in the context of change, or 'what one thinks about the change process.' This dimension emphasizes the importance of their commitment to the change process, the personal relevance they attribute to it, their evaluation of the process, and their sense of being informed and involved.

Numerous studies have been conducted to identify the characteristics of opinion leaders, including demographic and socioeconomic factors, media exposure, social positions, and personality traits (Weimann, 1991). However, while much has been learned about opinion leaders in other domains, such as politics and consumer behaviour, relatively little research has focused on what makes an opinion leader in the context of organizational change processes. As a result, it remains unclear what specific characteristics or traits are most closely associated with opinion leadership in this domain. This highlights the need for further research to better understand the role of opinion leaders in driving change within organizations and to identify the factors that make certain individuals particularly influential in this context. Given the relative lack of research on opinion leadership in organizational change processes, we propose the following research question:

What characterizes opinion leaders in organizational change processes (RQ1)?

In addition to understanding the specific characteristics and traits associated with opinion leaders in organizational change processes, it is also important to consider whether there are different types of opinion leaders based on the structure of their social networks. This goes beyond demographic and socioeconomic factors and focuses on the size and composition of their networks, including the presence of cross-hierarchical and cross-functional structures, as well as the intensity of relationships within the network. Nevertheless, few empirically driven typologies of opinion leaders have been established to date, and those that do exist tend to focus on contexts other than organizational change (Chen et al., 2014; Langner et al., 2013; Trepte & Scherer, 2010). By exploring different types of opinion leaders, organizations can gain a more

nuanced understanding of the role that influential individuals play in the change process. For example, some opinion leaders may have larger networks that span across different departments or levels of the organization, while others may have more tightly-knit networks within a specific area of the organization.

Understanding the distinct characteristics and behaviours of various types of opinion leaders can guide the development of targeted interventions and strategies aimed at facilitating change and achieving organizational objectives. As such, the purpose of typologies of opinion leaders is to condense information about their traits and characteristics that could be useful from an organizational perspective in terms of their impact on creating successful organizational change. Therefore, the second research question is as follows:

What types of opinion leaders can be identified in the context of an organizational change process (RQ2)?

Method

Procedure and Sample

To address the research questions, a quantitative online survey was conducted within the context of a large multinational company undergoing a cultural transformation. This company, with a global workforce of 300,000 employees, was selected due to an active change process initiated by its board of management. It operates 13 central locations throughout Germany. For the survey, two locations were randomly selected, comprising a total of 10,899 administrative employees. One location, with 2,429 employees, is situated in northern Germany, while the other, with 8,470 employees, is located in southern Germany near the company's headquarters. The survey was conducted after the change process had been underway for nearly 1.5 years.

At the time of our survey, the change process had been active for approximately one and a half years, impacting all employees. The initiative aimed to fundamentally transform the organizational culture, which was deemed necessary for future success, alongside restructuring and strategic reorientation as a mobility provider. It was initiated by the corporate board and designed to be participatory, involving selected members from all levels and locations. Thus, the change process was not driven solely by top-down management decisions but rather by the collaboration of diverse organizational members, regardless of their role, department, location, or individual attributes. A permanent project organization was established, along with a network of culture ambassadors and an internal communication campaign. Leaders at all levels actively participated in workshops and conferences to effectively communicate and implement the cultural changes. Additionally, various events, workshops, and training sessions were conducted, accompanied by communication materials to ensure visibility of the process in employees' daily work routines. The cultural change process was a widely discussed topic within the organization. The timing of the research, conducted nearly 1.5 years into the change process, was strategically chosen to capture the effects and responses to the transformation at a point when initial resistance had likely been encountered and some adaptation had begun. By examining the change process at this stage, the study aimed to provide insights

into the evolving role of opinion leaders and their impact on the ongoing cultural shift, offering a clearer picture of their influence in a mature phase of the transformation.

We drew a cluster sample of 10,899 white-collar workers based at two locations of the corporation, representing various departments (e.g. purchasing, human resources, production planning) and levels of hierarchy. Participation was voluntary, and respondents did not receive any compensation for completing the questionnaire. The final sample included 4,114 participants, resulting in a response rate of 47.6%. The majority of participants identified as male (77.1%), while 22.9% identified as female. Due to the company's privacy policies, we were unable to obtain the exact ages of the participants. Therefore, we categorized their ages into four groups: up to 25 years (2.5%), 26–35 years (22%), 36–50 years (35.6%), and 50 years and older (39.9%).

Measures

We measured *opinion leadership* using Childers' (1986) opinion leadership scale, which is widely recognized in research on this topic. The scale is well-regarded for its ability to assess social influence within networks, making it particularly suitable for studying organizational change. Additionally, its flexibility allowed us to adapt the items specifically to the context of the change process. Participants responded on 5-point scales to the following items: 'In general, do you talk to your colleagues about the change process? (1 = never, 5 = very often)'; 'When you talk to your colleagues about the change process, do you give ... very little information (= 1) vs. a great deal of information (= 5)?'; 'During the past six months, how many colleagues have been informed by you about the change process? no one (= 1) vs. many colleagues (= 5)'; 'Compared with your circle of colleagues, how likely are you to be asked for your opinion on the current change process? Not at all likely (= 1) vs. very likely (= 5)'; 'In discussions with your colleagues about the change process, which of the following happens most often? Your colleagues inform you about the change process (= 1) vs. you inform your colleagues about the change process (= 5)'; and 'Overall, in all of your discussions with colleagues about the change process, are you not used as a source of advice (= 1) or often used as a source of advice (= 5)?' The six items were combined into an index ($M = 2.75$, $SD = .87$, $\alpha = .86$).

The survey was structured according to the four dimensions outlined earlier. The first dimension (*who one is*), related to personal and professional characteristics, included age and gender, as mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Additionally, we evaluated the strength of participants' personalities using the ten items provided by Schenk and Rössler (1997), measured on a 5-point scale ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.61$, $\alpha = .87$). The ten self-description items used in our study are as follows: 'I usually count on being successful in everything I do,' 'I am rarely unsure about how I should behave,' 'I like to assume responsibility,' 'I like to take the lead when a group does things together,' 'I enjoy convincing others of my opinions,' 'I often notice that I serve as a model for others,' 'I am good at getting what I want,' 'I am often a step ahead of others,' 'I own many things others envy me for,' and 'I often give others advice and suggestions.' We also asked whether respondents held a leadership role (22.9%) or not (77.1%). To measure the period of employment, we divided it into five ranges, as obtaining the exact duration was not possible due to company privacy policies: under 3 years (6.3%), 3–5 years (5.3%), 6–10 years

(12.3%), 11–25 years (34.4%), and 26 years and over (41.7%). Organizational commitment was measured using Felfe et al.'s (2014) scale, which consists of three items for each of the three dimensions (affective, rational, and normative). Participants indicated their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale ($M = 3.68$, $SD = .749$, $\alpha = .82$). Lastly, we asked whether participants volunteered at the company, such as in employee-volunteer programmes (CSR) or networks (20.3% did), and whether they held an official position in the change process (10.2% did).

The second dimension (*whom one knows*) focuses on the social network structure of opinion leaders, specifically their acquaintances. We examined the size of their network, cross-hierarchical and cross-functional network structures, as well as the intensity of relationships within their network. To determine network size, we asked participants about the number of colleagues with whom they regularly discuss the change process ($M = 8.51$, $SD = 11.94$). We also inquired about cross-hierarchical network structures, asking participants whether they primarily communicate with colleagues at their own hierarchical level or with those at different levels (55.2% at the same level, 54.8% at different or all levels). To evaluate cross-functional network structures, we asked participants if most of the colleagues they spoke to were from their own department or section (63.2% answered yes, 36.8% no). Finally, we used a five-point semantic differential to measure the intensity of participants' relationships with their colleagues, using the adjective pair 'very loose' vs. 'very tight' and asking, 'How close do you feel to these colleagues?' ($M = 3.51$, $SD = .78$).

The third dimension (*what one knows*) focuses on information search, knowledge about the change process, experiences with change processes in general, active promotion of change processes, and whether participants are actively driving the current change process. To measure information search behaviour, we asked participants if they were actively seeking information about the change process, either through the intranet or by asking colleagues. The majority of participants (62.5%) reported actively seeking information, while the remainder did not. To test participants' knowledge of the change process, we designed a knowledge test with five items, each having four answer choices (one correct and three incorrect, including the option 'I do not know'). The questions varied in difficulty, and the average score was 3.4 correct answers. To evaluate participants' experiences with change processes, we utilized a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree.' Participants rated their level of agreement with the statement 'I have personally undergone some major change processes in the companies I have worked for (or in this company)' ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.34$). To determine whether participants had actively supported change processes, we asked them to rate their agreement with the statement 'I have already assisted other change processes in this company/other companies' on the same five-point Likert scale ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.29$). Finally, we assessed whether participants were actively driving the current change process by asking them to rate their agreement with the statement 'I am helping to lead the current change process' on the same scale ($M = 2.30$, $SD = 1.15$).

The fourth and final dimension (*what one thinks about the change process*) encompasses participants' attitudes and intentions toward the change process. To measure their interest in the current change process, participants rated it on a five-point semantic differential scale, using the adjective pair 'no interest at all' vs. 'strong interest' ($M = 3.81$, $SD = .96$). We also assessed the personal relevance of the change process with two items,

employing a five-point semantic differential scale for the adjective pairs 'unimportant' vs. 'important' and 'irrelevant' vs. 'relevant' ($M = 4.14$, $SD = .86$, $\alpha = .84$). To evaluate participants' assessment of the change process, we used a five-point semantic differential scale for the adjective pairs 'positive' vs. 'negative' and 'well done' vs. 'poorly done' ($M = 3.57$, $SD = .81$, $\alpha = .70$). Additionally, we measured the perceived feeling of being informed about the change process with two items based on Szebel (2015): 'I feel sufficiently informed regarding all aspects related to the change process' and 'The company communicates adequately about this change process through various channels' ($M = 3.37$, $SD = .92$, $\alpha = .71$). We also assessed the perceived opportunity to participate in the change process with two items from Szebel's scale (2015): 'I think that I have a role to play in shaping the change process' and 'I see the change as a chance to contribute to the future of our company' ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.06$, $\alpha = .82$). Furthermore, we evaluated the perceived benefit of the change process for the organization using two items based on Szebel (2015): 'This change process will improve our company' and 'I believe that the change process is useful despite the effort' ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.01$, $\alpha = .85$). Finally, to assess commitment to the change process, we employed two items based on Krummacker (2007): 'I am deeply motivated to support the change process' and 'I am committed to doing everything in my power to help make the change process a success' ($M = 3.44$, $SD = .96$, $\alpha = .89$).

Results

Characteristics of Opinion Leaders in Organizational Change Processes

To address our first research question, we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis with opinion leadership as the dependent variable. The first block included sociodemographic and professional characteristics, representing the 'Who one is' dimension. The second block consisted of variables related to the 'What one knows' dimension. The network characteristics, falling under the 'Whom one knows' dimension, were introduced as the third block of variables, while attitudes toward organizational change, representing the 'What one thinks about the change process' dimension, were included as the fourth block. Overall, the variables in our model explained 64.0% of the variance in opinion leadership (see Table 1).

The first dimension, *who one is*, accounts for 32% of the variance, highlighting the importance of personal and professional characteristics in explaining opinion leadership within the context of an organizational change process. The strongest predictor in this block is personality strength, with opinion leaders in change processes tending to possess high personality strength ($\beta = .078$, $p < .001$). Additionally, data indicate that opinion leaders are often in leadership roles ($\beta = .061$, $p < .001$) and more likely to hold official roles as change agents ($\beta = .050$, $p < .001$). They also show a slightly higher tendency to participate voluntarily in employer-supported initiatives ($\beta = .027$, $p < .05$). An unexpected finding is that opinion leaders exhibit slightly lower levels of commitment to the organization ($\beta = -.040$, $p < .001$). Gender ($\beta = -.012$, $p < .001$), age ($\beta = .017$, $p < .001$), and length of employment ($\beta = -.020$, $p < .001$) do not serve as predictive factors for opinion leadership, which is an intriguing observation.

Table 1. Results of Linear Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Opinion Leadership in Organizational Change Processes.

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Block I – Who one is</i> ($R_{adj}^2 = .320$)					
Age	.001	.001	.017	.871	.384
Gender (female = 1)	-.025	.025	-.012	-1.012	.312
Period of employment	-.002	.002	-.020	-1.032	.302
Personality strength	.112	.019	.078***	5.841	.000
Leadership role (yes = 1)	.126	.028	.061***	4.494	.000
Organizational commitment	-.046	.014	-.040***	-3.202	.001
Employer-supported volunteering (yes = 1)	.059	.026	.027*	2.224	.026
Change agent (official role; yes = 1)	.145	.037	.050***	3.969	.000
<i>Block II – Whom one knows</i>					
Network size	.013	.001	.172***	13.277	.000
Cross-hierarchical network structures (yes = 1)	.108	.022	.061***	4.985	.000
Cross-functional network structures (yes = 1)	.092	.022	.051***	4.092	.000
Intensity of relations in the network	.085	.013	.077***	6.444	.000
<i>Block III – What one knows</i>					
Active informing about the change process (yes = 1)	.270	.024	.150***	11.321	.000
Knowledge about the change process	.082	.010	.115***	8.513	.000
Experience of change processes in general	.010	.009	.016	1.108	.268
Support for other change processes in the past	-.012	.011	-.017	-1.071	.284
Active support for this change process	.174	.013	.228***	13.131	.000
<i>Block IV – What one thinks (reg. the change)</i>					
Interest in the change process	.095	.016	.105***	5.819	.000
Personal relevance of the change process	.019	.018	.019	1.073	.283
Assessment of the change process	.014	.018	.013	.748	.454
Feeling of being informed about the c. process	.154	.014	.162***	11.141	.000
Perc. opportunity to participate in the c. process	.061	.014	.074***	4.296	.000
Perc. benefit of change process for organization	-.066	.016	-.076***	-4.023	.000
Commitment for the change process	.082	.016	.090***	5.058	.000

Notes: $n = 2451$; total $R_{adjusted}^2 = .639$; incremental R^2 Block I: .32, Block II: .10, Block III: .17, Block IV: .05; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$; $F(24, 2688) = 201.29$, $p < .001$; VIF = 1.09–2.87; Durbin – Watson = 1.94.

The second dimension, *whom one knows*, explains an additional 10% of the variance. This dimension focuses on the structure of participants' social networks. All four constructs – network size, cross-hierarchical structure, cross-functional structure, and relationship intensity – impact opinion leadership in the organizational change process. Network size exerts the strongest influence, with opinion leadership correlating positively with larger networks ($\beta = .172$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, opinion leaders tend to have cross-hierarchical ($\beta = .061$, $p < .001$) and cross-functional network structures ($\beta = .051$, $p < .001$), as well as more intense relationships within their networks ($\beta = .077$, $p < .001$).

The third dimension, *what one knows*, accounts for an additional 17% of the variance, underscoring its crucial role in explaining opinion leadership. Data demonstrate that opinion leaders are proactive in seeking information related to the change process ($\beta = .150$, $p < .001$) and possess greater knowledge about it ($\beta = .115$, $p < .001$). They are also more likely to actively support the change process ($\beta = .228$, $p < .001$), serving as advocates rather than opponents. Interestingly, opinion leaders do not necessarily have more prior experience with change processes in general ($\beta = .016$, $p > .05$), nor have they supported previous change initiatives ($\beta = -.017$, $p > .05$).

The fourth dimension, *what one thinks about the change process*, accounts for an additional 5.3% of the variance. The regression analysis reveals that opinion leaders exhibit greater interest in ($\beta = .105$, $p < .001$) and feel better informed about the change process ($\beta = .162$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, they report more opportunities to participate

in the change process ($\beta = .074, p < .001$) and demonstrate stronger commitment to it ($\beta = .090, p < .001$). However, opinion leaders do not perceive the change process more positively ($\beta = .013, p > .05$) or rate it as more relevant ($\beta = .019, p > .05$).

Types of Opinion Leaders in Organizational Change Processes

To address our second research question – focused on identifying different types of opinion leaders during an organizational change process – we first needed to establish who these leaders were. We employed Childers' (1986) scale, which consists of six items measured using a five-point Likert scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .864, M = 2.75, SD = .873$). Individuals who scored at least 4.0 on this index, corresponding to 1.5 standard deviations above the mean, were classified as opinion leaders. This criterion ensured that only individuals with high levels of opinion leadership were included in our analysis. Out of the 4,114 respondents in our sample, 300 individuals met the criteria for classification as opinion leaders. These individuals were further analyzed through a cluster analysis to distinguish between different types of opinion leaders.

To identify these types, we conducted a hierarchical cluster analysis using the Ward method as the clustering approach and squared Euclidean distance as the distance measure. The analysis focused on four variables from the 'whom one knows' dimension, which pertain to the structure of opinion leaders' social networks. Specifically, we examined network size, the presence of cross-hierarchical and cross-functional network structures, and the intensity of relationships within the network. We included two dummy-coded variables and two metric variables, transforming the scale from 1–100 into a 1–5 scale to ensure uniformity in the metric variables. The resulting dendrogram and agglomeration schedule indicated a four-cluster solution for the data. Consequently, we identified four distinct types of opinion leaders (Table 2).

The first type, *'The Department Influencers,'* represents the largest group, comprising approximately 42% of the identified opinion leaders. This group is characterized by relatively small networks, which are often confined to their specific functional areas within the company (e.g. finance, human resources, IT, or marketing). Notably, they exhibit the fewest connections across different levels of hierarchy. While they may be recognized as opinion leaders within their particular areas, their relationships within these networks tend to be very intense. This intensity likely stems from their networks being largely limited to their close environment, such as their own department or functional area, fostering stronger bonds through regular interactions and shared experiences. However, their interest in and support for the change process is comparatively lower than that of the other types of opinion leaders. Despite having experience with change initiatives, Department Influencers typically do not occupy official roles as change agents or in leadership positions. They often command the respect and attention of their peers, likely due to their tenure within the company and their exposure to various changes over the years. Nonetheless, they have not actively supported previous change processes as frequently as other opinion leader types and do not show the same level of active support for the current change initiative.

The second group of opinion leaders, referred to as *'The Cross-Functional Connectors,'* comprises approximately 28% of the total opinion leaders. Their networks are marked by intense relationships, enabling them to connect individuals and departments across

Table 2. Characteristics of the four types of opinion leaders identified through hierarchical cluster analysis.

	Type 1 The Department Influencer <i>n</i> = 124	Type 2 The Cross- functional connector <i>n</i> = 82	Type 3 The Emerging Influencer <i>n</i> = 70	Type 4 The Expert Leader <i>n</i> = 16
<i>Block I – Who one is</i>				
Age (in years)	45.01	43.90	42.14	47.78
Gender (% female)	25%	22%	17%	38%
Period of employment (in years)	20.85	17.30	16.78	22.44
Personality strength	4.12	4.22	4.05	4.48
Leadership role (% leaders)	52%	63%	49%	75%
Organizational commitment	3.67	3.61	3.59	3.67
Employer-supported volunteering (% yes)	36%	53%	50%	69%
Change agent (official role; % yes)	33%	41%	47%	80%
<i>Block II – Whom one knows</i>				
Network size	12.92	26.62	13.56	94.06
Cross-hierarchical network structures (yes = 1)	0.54	0.91	0.60	0.88
Cross-functional network structures (yes = 1)	0.25	0.93	0.74	0.69
Intensity of relations in the network	4.17	3.93	2.91	3.38
<i>Block III – What one knows</i>				
Active informing about the change proc. (% yes)	93%	93%	89%	100%
Knowledge about the change process	4.11	4.29	4.25	4.50
Experience of change processes in general	4.07	3.83	3.69	4.44
Support for other change processes in the past	3.20	3.37	3.28	4.27
Active support for this change process	3.54	3.76	3.67	4.44
<i>Block IV – What one thinks (reg. the change)</i>				
Interest in the change process	4.56	4.70	4.77	4.88
Personal relevance of the change process	4.67	4.75	4.79	4.78
Assessment of the change process	4.11	4.03	4.13	3.94
Feeling of being informed about the c. process	4.01	3.96	3.82	3.88
Perc. opportunity to participate in the c. process	3.78	3.92	3.90	4.50
Perc. benefit of change process for organization	4.28	4.23	4.36	4.47
Commitment for the change process	4.40	4.46	4.33	4.59

various functional areas within the organization. This ability to break down silos fosters collaboration and enhances communication throughout the company. Notably, Cross-Functional Connectors maintain networks that span different hierarchical levels, underscoring their role as vital bridges between disparate parts of the organization. Despite having medium-sized networks, the relationships they cultivate within those networks are both tight and intense. This may be surprising given the diverse nature of their

networks, but it can be attributed to many of them holding leadership roles within their respective areas, allowing them to forge strong connections with colleagues.

The third category of opinion leaders, *'The Emerging Influencers'*, represents around 24% of the total group, comprising approximately 70 participants. This group typically has smaller network sizes, but their relationships within those networks are characterized by lower intensity. Generally, these individuals are younger and have shorter tenures with the company compared to those in the first two categories. They are less frequently found in leadership roles and possess less experience overall. This group may reflect a new generation of opinion leaders emerging within the organization.

Lastly, the fourth type, known as *'The Expert Leaders,'* represents the smallest group, accounting for only 5% of the opinion leaders. The most striking characteristic of this type is their extensive network sizes, which span across various levels of hierarchy and departments. Often occupying leadership roles, these individuals are officially recognized as change agents in the ongoing transformation. Expert Leaders excel in knowledge compared to the other three types, possessing a deep understanding of the change process and extensive experience with prior initiatives. They have actively supported previous change processes and demonstrate a high level of commitment to the current initiative, more so than any other type. Interestingly, while they assess the change process slightly more negatively than their peers, their commitment remains steadfast. This combination of experience, extensive networks, and dedication makes them valuable assets in driving the change process forward, even in the face of reservations.

Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the characteristics and types of opinion leaders within the context of an organizational change process. To achieve this objective, we conducted a quantitative online survey involving 4,114 employees from a large multinational corporation undergoing a cultural transformation.

Results Summary and Interpretation

The study revealed that various characteristics determine opinion leadership. First, personal and professional qualities play a significant role: opinion leaders are more likely to hold leadership positions or serve as change agents. Notably, personality strength was strongly linked to opinion leadership, consistent with findings from previous research (Mangold, 2017; Weimann, 1991). Interestingly, sociodemographic factors such as age, gender, and length of employment did not significantly affect opinion leadership, aligning with previous studies (Weimann, 1994).

Second, our findings indicate that opinion leaders tend to have larger, cross-hierarchical, and cross-functional networks characterized by more intense relationships. These traits are typical of opinion leaders, who often maintain a wider range of connections than the average employee and engage with individuals at various hierarchical levels within the organization. This ability to bridge gaps facilitates communication between different groups, which is crucial in promoting change or disseminating ideas (Brown et al., 2017; Lam & Schaubroeck, 2000; Valente & Pumpuang, 2007). Furthermore, the presence of cross-functional networks allows opinion leaders to connect individuals from

diverse areas of expertise, fostering collaboration within the organization (Rydzak & Monus, 2018). The finding that opinion leaders cultivate more intense relationships suggests they can forge strong connections, enhancing their ability to influence others. By establishing trust and rapport, opinion leaders are often viewed as credible and trustworthy sources of information and advice (Weimann, 1983).

Third, the study demonstrated a strong connection between opinion leadership and knowledge and experience within their area of influence. Opinion leaders actively seek information related to the change process and possess extensive knowledge about it, making them more likely to support and promote the change. This finding aligns with the concept of 'informed opinion leaders,' who possess significant expertise in their field (Trepte & Scherer, 2010). Such expertise enables opinion leaders to offer valuable insights and guidance to their colleagues during the change process. Moreover, opinion leadership is associated with specific attitudes and beliefs regarding the change initiative. Opinion leaders exhibit greater interest in the change process, benefit from higher levels of communicative support, and have more opportunities to participate in the transformation. Their stronger commitment to the change process further underscores their pivotal role in facilitating successful organizational transitions (Brown et al., 2017).

The study also sought to identify opinion leaders and test whether there are different types. The sample yielded a total of 300 opinion leaders and uncovered four distinct types based on their network sizes and structures. The first type, 'The Department Influencer,' has rather small networks within their own functional area or department with intense relationships. These strong connections make them effective influencers within their own area, as their network members may place more trust in their opinions and suggestions. The strong relationships maintained by this type may be due to the fact that they work in the same department or functional area, see each other regularly, and have more opportunities for face-to-face interactions. They might also socialize informally, such as having lunch together or participating in after-work activities (Koch & Denner, 2022). These frequent and intense face-to-face interactions can foster a sense of community and trust among the network members, making it easier for them to persuade and influence others in their area.

The second type, 'The Cross-Functional Connector,' connects individuals and departments across different functional areas, with medium-sized but tight networks. This is a crucial type of opinion leader as they have the ability to bridge different parts of the organization and promote collaboration and communication across different functional areas. Their networks are characterized by tight and intense relationships, which is surprising given that their networks are often spread across different hierarchies and structures. Their ability to connect individuals across different functional areas and levels of the organization is essential for breaking down silos and promoting collaboration, which is necessary for effective organizational change (Rydzak & Monus, 2018). Therefore, this type of opinion leader can play a vital role in driving sustainable transformation within an organization.

The third type, 'The Emerging Opinion Leader,' has smaller network sizes with less intense relationships, and they are usually younger. This group is also characterized by having less experience and shorter tenures within the company compared to the other types. It is possible that this group of opinion leaders is more comfortable with

technology and social media, which could contribute to their potential to become influential opinion leaders. Additionally, as they continue to gain experience and tenure within the company, their networks may grow and their relationships within those networks may become more intense.

Finally, the fourth type, 'The Expert Leader,' has the largest network sizes, spanning across different levels of hierarchy and departments. Compared to the other three types, the Expert Leaders scored the highest in all knowledge categories, possess significant experience with change processes, and have actively supported change processes in the past. As they often hold leadership roles and are recognized as change agents, they likely have the authority to reach a large number of people through official channels, such as company-wide emails, departmental meetings, or town hall-style gatherings. It is also possible that their network size is a result of their extensive experience in the company, as they may have built up relationships and connections over time. Additionally, their commitment to the change process despite any reservations they may have can demonstrate strong leadership qualities, as they are willing to push through challenges and lead by example.

Practical Implications

The findings bear several practical implications for change management. Identifying and engaging opinion leaders in an organizational change process offers substantial advantages and strategic benefits for achieving successful transformation. By understanding the characteristics and roles of different types of opinion leaders, organizations can tailor change management approaches to leverage these individuals' influence and foster broader acceptance of change initiatives. This strategic alignment ensures that change efforts are effectively communicated and embraced throughout the organization, leveraging the social capital and credibility of opinion leaders. Opinion leaders, by virtue of their influential positions within their networks, possess the capacity to catalyze and amplify change efforts across the organization. First and foremost, leveraging opinion leaders can accelerate the diffusion of innovation and acceptance of change initiatives. These individuals possess established networks and strong interpersonal relationships that enable them to disseminate key messages, build consensus, and foster buy-in among their peers. By aligning opinion leaders with change objectives, organizations can tap into a powerful mechanism for overcoming resistance and driving widespread adoption of new practices and behaviours.

Furthermore, engaging opinion leaders enhances the credibility and legitimacy of change initiatives. Opinion leaders can serve as role models, showcasing desired behaviours and attitudes that align with organizational goals. Moreover, the presence of engaged opinion leaders can enhance the overall effectiveness of change communication and implementation strategies. These individuals act as conduits for feedback, conveying frontline perspectives and concerns to leadership and facilitating two-way dialogue. By involving opinion leaders in decision-making processes and change planning, organizations can leverage their insights to refine strategies, address potential pitfalls, and ensure that change initiatives are responsive to diverse stakeholder needs.

This might be in particular an asset in collaborative leadership environments (Archer & Cameron, 2008; Kramer & Crespy, 2011; Moore et al., 2023). Collaborative leadership refers

to a style of leadership that emphasizes working together across multiple stakeholders or organizations within a complex adaptive system (Getha-Taylor & Morse, 2013; VanVactor, 2012). Rather than being driven by a single individual or organization, collaborative leadership involves collective efforts and contributions from diverse actors to address complex challenges and achieve common goals. This approach emphasizes partnership, shared decision-making, and mutual accountability among participants, fostering a culture of cooperation and innovation (Archer & Cameron, 2008). Collaborative leaders prioritize building relationships, promoting inclusivity, and leveraging collective expertise to navigate dynamic environments effectively (Archer & Cameron, 2008; Kramer & Crespy, 2011). By engaging multiple stakeholders and facilitating collaboration, collaborative leadership ensures that all aspects of the system work cohesively towards desired outcomes, reflecting a person-centered and collective approach to leadership (Moore et al., 2023).

Identifying and leveraging opinion leaders as key figures within collaborative leadership environments could be particularly advantageous. As indicated by our research findings, these individuals are well-respected, well-informed, and possess extensive knowledge and expertise in their respective fields. Moreover, their expansive networks enable them to reach a wide audience, making them valuable assets in fostering collaboration and driving organizational change (Brown et al., 2017; Lam & Schaubroeck, 2000; Valente & Pumpuang, 2007; Vitale, 2008). This makes them ideal candidates for assuming leadership roles within collaborative initiatives, as they can effectively communicate, advocate, and mobilize support among diverse stakeholders. In collaborative leadership environments, leveraging opinion leaders can significantly enhance the effectiveness of collective efforts. Opinion leaders' extensive networks enable them to bridge organizational silos, promote inclusivity, and facilitate cross-functional collaboration, thereby fostering a culture of cooperation and innovation. By empowering opinion leaders and leveraging their influence, collaborative leadership can capitalize on their network capital to drive meaningful change and achieve collective goals.

The findings from our study have also several practical implications and opportunities for advancing scholarly and practical applications in leadership studies. Firstly, understanding the characteristics and roles of opinion leaders can inform leadership development initiatives. Organizations can use this understanding to identify potential opinion leaders within their ranks and provide targeted training and development opportunities to enhance their leadership capabilities. By investing in opinion leaders, organizations can cultivate a cohort of influential individuals who can effectively drive change and innovation. Secondly, the identification of different types of opinion leaders offers insights into leadership dynamics within complex organizational networks. Scholars and practitioners in leadership studies can use this taxonomy to refine existing leadership theories and models, incorporating the unique attributes and behaviours associated with opinion leadership. This can enrich our understanding of how leadership functions in collaborative environments and provide new frameworks for studying leadership effectiveness. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of network analysis in leadership research. By mapping opinion leaders' networks and relationships, researchers can gain valuable insights into the structural properties of leadership networks and how they influence organizational dynamics. This approach can lead to the development of network-based leadership interventions aimed at optimizing communication, collaboration, and knowledge sharing within organizations. Practically, organizations can apply

the findings to design targeted change management strategies that harness the influence of opinion leaders. By involving opinion leaders in change initiatives, organizations can enhance stakeholder engagement, build consensus, and promote organizational alignment. Opinion leaders can serve as change champions, advocating for transformational initiatives and mobilizing support across diverse stakeholder groups.

Identifying opinion leaders within organizations can be challenging, necessitating a profound grasp of the organization's dynamics and its constituent individuals. One effective approach is to observe informal networks and interactions to identify influential individuals. Therefore, it is crucial for organizational leaders to engage closely with employees and observe their informal interactions. This includes noting who employees turn to for advice, whom they consult in decision-making processes, and how they communicate within informal networks. By paying attention to these informal channels and engaging in ongoing conversations with team members, leaders can gain a deeper understanding of who exerts influence and effectively guide change efforts. This approach underscores the importance of informal communication in recognizing those individuals who truly shape opinions and drive organizational change (Koch & Denner, 2022; Viererbl et al., 2022).

Once identified, organizations should integrate them into change planning and decision-making processes, actively seeking their feedback and providing formal roles as change ambassadors or advocates. Here, organizations can capitalize on the unique strengths of each type of opinion leader identified in our study. For instance, 'Department Influencers' can spearhead change initiatives within their functional areas, fostering buy-in and support among peers. 'Cross-Functional Connectors' should be leveraged to bridge silos and enhance communication across departments, ensuring a cohesive change approach and enhancing interdepartmental collaboration. Similarly, nurturing 'Emerging Opinion Leaders' through tailored training and mentorship programmes can cultivate a new generation of change agents adept at leveraging digital platforms and social networks. Lastly, 'Expert Leaders' could assume prominent roles in change implementation, leveraging their extensive knowledge and experience to drive successful outcomes.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the reliance on a single organization may introduce context-specific factors that influence the findings, limiting the ability to generalize the results to other companies with different cultures or operational environments. Variations in organizational size, industry, and geographic location can affect the role and impact of opinion leaders, potentially altering their influence on change processes. As a result, opinion leaders in other organizations may possess varying characteristics and demonstrate different forms of influence compared to those observed in the company studied. Therefore, to enhance the robustness of our conclusions, future studies should include a diverse range of organizations to determine if the identified types of opinion leaders are consistent across different settings.

Second, the analysis focused on a specific change process. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings to other companies and change processes may be limited. The focus on cultural transformation means that our findings are particularly relevant to this context and may not fully capture the dynamics of other types of change, such as structural transformations. Future research should aim to replicate these findings across different

organizational settings and change processes. Such studies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how opinion leaders influence various forms of (different) organizational change processes.

Third, it is worth noting that the study was conducted within a large company, and it is possible that the types of opinion leaders identified in this study may not be applicable to smaller organizations. Therefore, caution should be exercised when applying these findings to organizations of different sizes.

A fourth limitation of the study is that there were some constraints imposed by the company regarding the length of the survey: Due to time and resource constraints, the survey questions had to be limited to a specific set of items.

Fifth, participants may not have been completely honest in their responses due to the sensitive nature of the topic. However, it is important to note that the survey was conducted anonymously, which may have helped to mitigate this issue. Participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential.

Lastly, self-reporting tools and the inherent subjectivity in assessing network size are well-documented limitations in research on opinion leadership. This study, like many others, is constrained by these limitations, as participants' self-assessments may not fully capture the complexity of their roles and network dynamics. To address this issue, future research could incorporate additional methods, such as asking participants whom they consult in specific situations or employing network analysis techniques.

Conclusion

In this study, we analyzed opinion leaders in a large-scale organizational change process. Using a quantitative online survey in a multinational corporation undergoing significant change, we identified and characterized 300 opinion leaders through cluster analysis, revealing four distinct types based on several specific characteristics. Thus, the study bridges a gap in the literature by integrating opinion leadership with organizational change processes. It underscores the importance of recognizing opinion leaders as pivotal catalysts in successful change communication strategies. By engaging with opinion leaders, organizations can create a more collaborative and supportive environment for change, ultimately leading to more successful outcomes. The study demonstrates that opinion leaders in organizational change processes are not homogeneous; rather, they exhibit diverse characteristics and network structures. Some opinion leaders excel in bridging organizational silos, while others wield significant influence within smaller, more homogeneous networks. Additionally, certain opinion leaders have large and diverse networks, highlighting the variability in their roles and impact on change initiatives.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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