Embracing sensitivity in change agents: a blueprint for authentic transformation - Exploring the nurturing of relational sensitivity in effective change leadership

Auteur : Martens, Jef
Promoteur(s) : 25274
Faculté : HEC-Ecole de gestion de l'Université de Liège
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Embracing sensitivity in change agents: a blueprint for authentic transformation

Exploring the nurturing of relational sensitivity in effective change leadership

Supervisor: Sven De Weerdt

Dissertation by Jef Martens

President of Jury: Jürgen Vogt

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1 Acknowledgements

In my search for an appropriate generalist program, I wanted to combine several things. The program had to offer a good foundation in people and self-management, leadership and change management. I was attracted to developing my soft skills because in today's workplace these soft skills can really make a difference. Let precisely these three modules be the reason for me to write my master's thesis.

The Strategic Leadership module focuses on love, a quality I have plenty to offer to others but sometimes lack for myself. During the People and Self-Management module, I discovered my strengths such as active listening, asking open questions and empathizing with others without judging. This sparked my interest to further develop skills in people management and coaching.

During the feedback sessions, expert Leon Vliegen suggested to look online for a self-test in the field of high sensitivity, because he observed behavior in that direction. The online test showed a remarkably high score, which made me want to delve further into this topic. During the weekend, I set myself the goal of no longer seeing sensitivity as a weakness but rather of using it as a strength in daily life.

The module strength-based change, focused on leveraging strong skills for further development, left a lasting impression. The importance of word choice in encouraging open and deep conversations and creating a safe environment is what stayed with me from this module.

For me as a freelancer, change is inherent in almost everything I do. Leadership and people skills are my fields of interest. Thought devoting my master's thesis to further developing my soft skills, rooted in (high) sensitivity, I aim to refine and leverage them as strengths in both daily life and change processes. I want to write a master's thesis that will help me personally and professionally and from which I will enjoy the benefits for the rest of my life.

But I am not alone, which is why I want to learn from other, more experienced change agents and leaders how they feel in life. How they apply their (high) sensitivity as a strength, how they avoid the pitfalls associated with it and despite everything continue to take care of themselves. This is going to help me to dare to live more authentically from my heart and, who knows, inspire other change agents and leaders to do the same.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone I was allowed to interview for my master thesis. I would also like to emphatically thank Professor Sven de Weerdt for believing in me, helping me, caring for me and being endlessly patient with me.

Thank you.

Jef Martens
Liège, August 2024

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3 Introduction

3.1 Motive and relevance

Organizations worldwide increasingly recognize the significance of employee well-being. Research by Hadžiahmetović et al. (2023) highlights the critical role of different leadership styles in enhancing employee well-being. The study identifies a growing trend towards authentic and transformational leadership from 2016 to 2022. Authentic leadership, as defined by George et al. (2007), focuses on self-awareness, relational transparency, and maintaining a consistent ethical foundation. Meanwhile, transformational leadership, according to Bass and Riggio (2006), aims to inspire and motivate employees to achieve positive change.

Leadership plays a pivotal role in effective change management. Battilana et al. (2010) describe the essential leadership competencies required for successful change implementation, such as communicating the need for change, mobilizing support, and evaluating the change process. Promoting collaborative interaction, fostering a supportive company culture, and ensuring equitable treatment are vital. Effective leaders create a common vision, motivate employees to embrace change, and monitor progress for necessary adjustments.

While extensive literature links leadership to change management and relational sensitivity, the intersection between relational sensitivity and change management is less explored. Managing change effectively is challenging, with leadership being a critical factor. Recent studies on high sensitivity—a relatively new area of research—have not extensively linked it to change management. This paper addresses the difficulty of managing change and the essential role of relational sensitivity in achieving successful outcomes. Relational sensitivity, characterized by heightened awareness and deep information processing, enhances a leader's ability to recognize and respond to the emotional needs of their team, facilitating smoother transitions and reducing resistance.

This paper will focus on the role of relational sensitivity in change management and how it can be leveraged for effective change. It will explore the key characteristics of high sensitivity influencing change management and relevant aspects of change management literature emphasizing sensitivity. Additionally, it will examine how relational sensitivity can act as a leverage within change management to guide people effectively.

To achieve this, the paper will draw on various theoretical models and frameworks, including authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006), emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995), and process consultation (Schein, 1999). Sensitivity training (Lakin, 1972) will also be explored for its potential role in developing sensitivity skills for change management.

3.2   Problem definition and objective

The main problem addressed in this paper is the lack of understanding of how change agents can leverage their (high) sensitivity to facilitate change effectively. Although leadership and relational sensitivity are individually linked to change, the intersection of relational sensitivity and change remains underexplored. There appears to be a lack of specific research on how change agents can develop into relational sensitive change agents in practice. This includes understanding the practical application of relational sensitivity traits, emotional intelligence, and personality characteristics in leading change, and effectively managing team dynamics and change processes. Therefore, there is room for further exploration and research on how change agents can use their relational sensitivity to bring about successful changes and promote positive team outcomes.

The problem definition of this paper is threefold:
1. Change is challenging and often met with resistance by those impacted.
2. Effective leadership is crucial for achieving successful organizational change.
3. Relational sensitivity is necessary for effective leadership, as it helps leaders recognize and address the needs and concerns of those involved in the change process.

The primary research question is:

"How can change agents leverage their (high)sensitivity traits to facilitate effective change?"

Supporting sub-questions include:

-   **What are the key characteristics of (high)sensitivity traits that influence change management?**
-   **What aspects of change management literature emphasize the importance of sensitivity?**

By addressing these questions, this paper aims to provide insights into the qualities and strategies that enable change agents with (high) sensitivity traits to effectively use their relational sensitivity as a leverage within change management helping them to implement change successfully.

The end result will be a framework, a blueprint for authentic transformation, providing change agents with the required building blocks to embrace, nurture and further develop their relational sensitivity as a catalyst for successful organizational transformations. This framework is designed to be a practical instrument that leaders and change agents can actively use in their day-to-day work.

By providing clear strategies and guidance, the framework empowers change agents to leverage their sensitivity traits to drive effective and empathetic change processes within their organizations. The ultimate goal is to equip change agents with a tangible tool that bridges the gap between theory and practice, enabling them to implement the insights gained from this research and create real impact. This practical orientation ensures that the framework remains relevant and applicable in the dynamic world of organizational change.

4   Literature review

4.1   Core concepts: definitions

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in four core concepts: sensitivity, change management, leadership, and the highly sensitive person (HSP). In the following sections, each of these core concepts will be discussed in detail, including their definitions, interrelationships, and relevance to the research.

By examining key studies and theoretical perspectives, this review lays the groundwork for the empirical investigation and helps to elucidate the importance of sensitivity in effective leadership and change processes.

- Sensitivity: The trait of noticing and reacting to subtle signals and stimuli, which can lead to deep information processing and strong emotional reactions (Aron, 1996). This definition aligns with the focus of this research on the role of sensitivity in change processes.
- Change management: The process of planning, implementing, monitoring, and stabilizing changes within an organization (Kotter, 1996). This definition is suitable because it encompasses the comprehensive process of change management.
- Leadership: The ability to influence and guide a group of people towards a common goal (Northouse, 2016). This definition is used because it emphasizes the influence and purposefulness of leadership.
- Highly sensitive person (HSP): An individual with a heightened sensitivity to environmental stimuli, who exhibits deep information processing and strong emotional reactions (Aron, 1996). This definition is relevant because it highlights the unique characteristics that can impact leadership and change management.

The relationships between leadership, sensitivity and change management are critical to achieving successful change within an organization. Leadership is essential to effective change management, as leaders are responsible for initiating, guiding and embedding change (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Sensitive leaders can be more responsive to the needs and concerns of their team members, which can lead to a more supportive and inclusive change environment (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Sensitivity helps change managers recognize subtle signals and reactions within the organization, allowing them to more effectively respond to resistance and provide support (Schein, 1999).

In the following sections, we will discuss the relationship between leadership and change management, then the relationship between leadership and sensitivity, and finally the relationship between change management and sensitivity. The concept of the highly sensitive person (HSP) will be used as an extension, both in the relationship between leadership and sensitivity and in the relationship between change and sensitivity. Additionally, these two sections will cover the main benefits and pitfalls of HSP that are relevant within the discussed relationship.

In this literature review, we examine the relationships among change and leadership, leadership and sensitivity, and change and sensitivity through a theoretical lens. Approaching a research problem from multiple theoretical perspectives allows for a comprehensive understanding. By examining these three relationships, we aim to provide a nuanced and multifaceted view of how sensitivity can enhance leadership effectiveness in the context of organizational change.

4.2 The relationship between leadership and change management:

4.2.1 Key scientific articles and models

Battilana et al. (2010) describes the relationship between leadership competencies and the activities required for successful change implementation. They emphasize the importance of effectively communicating the need for change, mobilizing others and evaluating the implementation of the change. This means that leaders must be good at communicating their vision and creating a common purpose. In addition, they must be able to motivate and inspire people to participate in the change and to take initiatives independently. Finally, it is important to monitor progress and make adjustments if necessary to keep the change on track.

Boonstra (2011) explores how leaders can deal with the complexity of change processes. This book offers practical tools for navigating the challenges associated with large-scale change. One of the key messages of the book is that leaders must take a systemic approach, recognizing the interrelationships and dependencies within the organization. This means that leaders must be aware of the various factors that affect the change processes within their organization, such as organizational culture, power structures and informal networks. By understanding and incorporating these factors into their leadership approach, leaders can more effectively navigate the complexity of change processes.

Schein (1999) offers an in-depth discussion of his process consulting model for change management. This book is an essential resource for understanding Schein's approach to change processes. Schein's process consulting model is based on the idea that effective change occurs when change stakeholders are actively involved in designing and implementing the change. Through a series of steps and techniques, the process consultation model helps leaders and employees work together to create a common vision and develop an effective implementation strategy. By incorporating this approach into their leadership approach, leaders can more effectively navigate the complexity of change processes while creating greater support for the change within the organization.

Verheijen (2014) introduces a positive approach to change and leadership by offering an alternative perspective on change management, focusing on strengthening positive aspects rather than addressing problems. The Appreciative Inquiry approach is based on the idea that organizations and people perform best when they focus on their strengths and successes. Through a series of questions and conversations, this approach helps leaders and employees create a shared vision and a positive and constructive atmosphere in which they can work together to achieve their goals. By incorporating this approach into their leadership approach, leaders can foster a positive organizational culture while more effectively navigating the complexities of change processes.

Avolio and Gardner (2005) argue that authentic leadership is based on self-awareness, transparency, ethical/moral standards, and balanced information processing. This theory is used because it emphasizes personal integrity and the building of credibility, which is important in change processes.

Bass and Riggio (2006) describe transformational leadership as a style in which leaders inspire and motivate their followers to achieve more than was originally thought possible. This model is relevant because it helps to increase the motivation and engagement of employees during change.

Verheijen (2014) describes Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as an approach that focuses on the positive potential of individuals, organizations, and communities. This approach can help facilitate change in a constructive and appreciative manner by emphasizing strengths and opportunities, rather than problems and deficits. AI encourages a collaborative process that involves all stakeholders in envisioning and co-creating a desired future, leading to sustainable and meaningful change.

4.2.2 Descriptive sub-questions

Based on the comprehensive literature review, the following descriptive sub-question can be formulated and answered to provide a deeper understanding of the interplay between leadership and change management.

How can leadership act as a leverage within change management to guide people effectively?

Leadership styles such as transformational and authentic leadership offer robust frameworks for leveraging sensitivity to inspire, motivate, and support employees during periods of change. Emotional Intelligence, as elaborated by Goleman (1995), provides valuable insights into how sensitivity and emotional awareness can enhance leadership effectiveness. Additionally, Schein's Process Consultation and Sensitivity Training highlight practical applications of sensitivity in change processes, demonstrating how these approaches can improve leadership outcomes. Leaders who embrace these principles can foster a more supportive and responsive environment, facilitating successful change management (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Goleman, 1995; Schein, 1999; Schein & Bennis, 1965).

4.3   The relationship between leadership and sensitivity:

4.3.1   Key scientific articles and models

George et al. (2007) discusses key aspects of authentic leadership and how leaders can discover and develop their authenticity. They emphasize the power of self-awareness, relational transparency and a consistent moral and ethical foundation. This means that leaders must know themselves well and have an understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses. In addition, they must be open and transparent in their communications and relationships with others. Finally, it is important to have a consistent moral and ethical compass and to demonstrate it decisively in leadership.

Hosking (2010) offers a relational perspective on leadership. She argues that leadership arises in the interactions and relationships between people, rather than an attribute of an individual. This means that leadership depends not only on the qualities and skills of the leader, but also on the quality of relationships within the team or organization. Therefore, an effective leader is someone who is able to create a positive and constructive atmosphere where people feel safe and valued, and where they can work together to achieve their goals.

Maarshall (1980) examines the relationship between leadership and sensitivity training (sensitivity training). He argues that sensitivity training can help develop the interpersonal skills important for effective leadership. This means that leadership depends not only on technical or functional skills, but also on the ability to effectively communicate, listen and cooperate with others. A high degree of sensitivity to the emotions and needs of others can be very important in this regard.

De Weerdt and Elsen (2011) explore the significance of cultivating emotional awareness, empathy, and self-regulation for highly sensitive individuals and leaders. These competencies are pivotal for enhancing leadership effectiveness and facilitating successful change management. Emotional awareness and empathy enable leaders to deeply understand and address the needs and concerns of their team members, fostering better communication and collaboration. Self-regulation, on the other hand, equips leaders to manage the stresses and challenges associated with leadership and change processes. By honing these skills, leaders can create a more supportive, resilient, and productive work environment.

Goleman (1995) defines EI as the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own and others' emotions. This model is used because it provides insight into how sensitivity and emotional awareness can contribute to effective leadership and change management.

Relational leadership is a theory that emphasizes the importance of relationships between leaders and followers in the leadership process. **Uhl-Bien (2006)** defines relational leadership as "a reciprocal, dynamic process of interaction and influence between leaders and followers, through which they enact shared meanings and accomplish mutual goals." This theory is used because it highlights the role of trust, communication, and collaboration in effective leadership, which are all critical in change processes.

4.3.2   High sensitivity and leadership

4.3.2.1   Benefits within leadership

HSPs can exhibit more effective leadership due to their deep information processing and strong empathy, especially in situations that require sensitivity and understanding (Goleman, 1995). Emotional Intelligence (EI), defined as the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own and others' emotions, provides insight into how sensitivity and emotional awareness can contribute to effective leadership (Goleman, 1995).

HSP leaders tend to be highly **empathetic and intuitive**, which helps them build strong relationships and develop a deep understanding of their team's needs (Aron, 1996). This empathy enables them to better understand and respond to their team members' emotions and concerns, leading to a more supportive and inclusive work environment.

Their sensitivity also enables them to better understand and respond to their followers' needs, contributing to **authentic leadership** (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Authentic leaders are seen as trustworthy and credible, which is essential for building trust and creating a positive organizational culture.

4.3.2.2   Pitfalls within leadership

HSP leaders can become **overwhelmed** by too many stimuli or emotions, which can affect their ability to function effectively (Aron, 1996). This can lead to stress and burnout, especially in busy and demanding work environments.

Their sensitivity can also lead to challenges such as difficulty in **setting boundaries** and an overemphasis on others' feelings, impacting their ability to make tough decisions (Aron, 1996). This may result in indecisiveness and conflict avoidance, undermining the effectiveness of their leadership.

Their strong empathy can lead to **overidentification** with their followers' needs, which can compromise their objectivity (Aron, 1996). This can result in prioritizing the team's interests over those of the organization, which is not always in the organization's best interest.

4.4 The relationship between change management and sensitivity:

4.4.1 Key scientific articles and models

Schein (2010) discusses the personal and professional influences that have contributed to his philosophies of change, education, consulting and culture. He emphasizes the importance of a deep understanding of organizational cultures and interpersonal dynamics. This means that leaders must be aware of the culture within their organization and how it can contribute to or hinder successful change processes. In addition, they must be able to effectively communicate and collaborate with people from different backgrounds and perspectives.

Yalom (1995) discusses the theory and practice of encounter groups, which are closely related to sensitivity training. This book offers insights into how such trainings can help develop emotional awareness and interpersonal skills, which are important for change management. This means that encounter groups and sensitivity training are important not only for personal growth and development, but also for learning skills needed for effective leadership and change management.

Schein (1999) provides a framework for change management through process consulting, in which the consultant facilitates the client to find their own solutions (Schein, 1999). This approach emphasizes the role of the consultant as a facilitator who helps the client to solve their own problems, which aligns with the empathic and intuitive nature of highly sensitive people.

Lakin (1972) introduced sensitivity training in the 1950s-60s, this training provides methods for developing emotional awareness and interpersonal skills (Lakin, 1972). This is extensively discussed in the book "Personal and Organizational Change Through Group Methods" by Schein and Bennis (1965). Sensitivity training can help highly sensitive people to effectively apply their sensitivity in leadership and change situations.

4.4.2 High sensitivity and change management

4.4.2.1 Benefits within change management

HSPs can better facilitate change due to their ability to recognize and respond to the emotional needs of their team members, which is important in change processes (Schein & Bennis, 1965).

HSPs can **facilitate change** better by their ability to recognize and respond to the emotional needs of employees (Aron, 1996). Their empathy helps them understand and address the concerns and resistance of employees, contributing to a smoother transition.

Their empathy and deep information processing can help them **understand and address resistance** to change, contributing to a smoother transition (Aron, 1996). By identifying the underlying causes of resistance, they can develop targeted interventions to overcome it.

Their sensitivity enables them to pick up on early signs of resistance and **respond proactively** (Aron, 1996). This helps address potential problems early and minimize the impact of resistance on the change process.

4.4.2.2 Pitfalls within change management

HSPs can become **overwhelmed** by the complexity and uncertainty of change processes, which can lead to stress and decreased effectiveness (Aron, 1996). The dynamic and often chaotic nature of change processes can be particularly challenging for HSPs.

They may struggle with **handling conflicts** and implementing disruptive changes that elicit emotional reactions from employees (Aron, 1996). This can impede their ability to drive necessary changes.

Their strong empathy can lead to **excessive concern** about the impact of changes on employees, which can impede their decision-making (Aron, 1996). This can result in delayed decisions or avoidance of necessary changes.

4.4.3   Descriptive sub-questions

Based on the comprehensive literature review, the following descriptive sub-questions can be formulated and answered to provide a deeper understanding of the interplay between high sensitivity and change management.

What are the key characteristics of (high)sensitivity that influence change management?

High sensitivity, as conceptualized by Aron (1996), is characterized by an increased sensitivity to subtle stimuli and cues, coupled with deep information processing. These traits can significantly contribute to recognizing resistance, providing targeted support, and building strong relationships during change processes. Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs) exhibit heightened empathy and intuition, allowing them to develop a profound understanding of their team's needs. This capacity to detect subtle cues and emotions among team members leads to more effective communication, decision-making, and overall change management.

What aspects of change management literature emphasize the importance of sensitivity?

The literature on change management, including seminal works by Battilana et al. (2010) and Kotter (1996), underscores the critical role of leadership qualities that are attuned to the emotional and psychological needs of employees. Sensitivity, in particular, enhances these qualities, enabling leaders to better facilitate change by recognizing and responding to the emotional needs of their team members. Empathy and deep information processing are central to this capability, as they help leaders understand and address resistance to change, thereby contributing to smoother transitions and more effective change implementation (Battilana et al., 2010; Kotter, 1996).

4.5   Conclusion

This literature review has examined the complex relationships between leadership, change, sensitivity, and highly sensitive persons (HSP) within organizations. Sensitivity plays a crucial role in effective leadership and change processes, enabling leaders to perceive subtle signals and emotional nuances within their teams, fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment.

The relationship between leadership and change was explored using various articles and models such as transformational leadership and process consultation. These models emphasize the need for leaders to communicate a clear vision, mobilize support, and monitor progress. Sensitivity and emotional intelligence facilitate these skills, allowing leaders to navigate the complexities of change management more effectively.

Next, we highlighted the relationship between leadership and sensitivity. Sensitive leaders, with their heightened empathy and deep information processing, can build stronger relationships and develop a deeper understanding of their team members' needs. These capabilities are essential for managing resistance and dynamics during change processes. HSPs can extend the relation between leadership and sensitivity. Their ability to detect subtle signals and early signs of resistance allows them to respond proactively, reducing potential disruptions. However, the literature also acknowledges the possible pitfalls of high sensitivity, such as stress susceptibility and difficulty making tough decisions, which can affect leadership effectiveness if not well managed.

Finally, we discussed the relationship between change and sensitivity, with the literature emphasizing the critical role of sensitivity in change management. HSPs can significantly contribute to change processes by recognizing and responding to the emotional needs of team members. Their empathy and deep information processing help them better understand and address resistance to change, leading to smoother transitions and more effective change implementation.

The benefits of high sensitivity within leadership and change management are clear, but there are also potential pitfalls to consider. HSPs must learn to channel their sensitivity effectively and find a healthy balance between empathy and objectivity, between connection and boundary-setting. By leveraging their strengths and acknowledging their weaknesses, highly sensitive leaders and change managers can contribute to successful transformations within organizations.

The next step in our research is to apply these theoretical insights to a practical context. In the following chapter, we will discuss the research methods we will use to answer our research questions and test our hypotheses. By using a qualitative method, we aim to gain a deep and nuanced understanding of how sensitivity plays a role in the practice of change and leadership.

With this research, we hope to contribute to the development of more effective and empathic leaders and change agents who are capable of tackling the challenges of a rapidly changing world and navigating the complexity of human relationships and organizational cultures.

5 Methodology

5.1 Research design

The research design employs a multi-step approach, combining a comprehensive literature review with in-depth interviews according to grounded theory principles. In this study, a pure grounded theory approach is not used. Grounded theory typically starts from a blank slate, without any prior knowledge, to build a new theory from the ground up. The main critique of grounded theory is that it is impossible to start without any prior knowledge, as researchers always bring their existing knowledge and perspectives into the study.

Therefore, this research begins with a literature review. This preliminary literature review provides a broad theoretical foundation, enabling the formulation of the interview questions to be as relevant as possible without relying solely on personal experiences and viewpoints. The study does not start from a clean slate for the interviews, rather, it follows an iterative process. After each interview, existing literature is revisited to refine the questions for the next interview, making them more precise and insightful.

As the model began to take shape, it was incorporated into subsequent interviews to achieve saturation. The insights gained from the interviews were then used to develop a new theoretical framework or blueprint for relational sensitive change agents.

5.2 Literature review

As discussed in the previous chapter, the literature review serves as the foundational step in this research. It provides valuable insights into existing literature, reports, and sources relevant to the objectives of this paper, helping to gain a comprehensive understanding of several key aspects.

Following each interview, we explored potentially relevant sources to support the interviewee's insights. This iterative process involved continuously refining the interview questions and expanding the literature base, ensuring a comprehensive understanding and validation of the information gathered. The section on coding process and conceptualisation will delve deeper into this process.

5.3 Embracing Grounded theory principles

Grounded Theory is a qualitative research method developed in the 1960s by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. The method is widely used in the social sciences and aims to develop theories based on empirical data. These are data resulting from scientific research by systematically collecting data from interviews, observations, surveys or (quasi)-experiments. In this way, as a researcher, you learn to understand social phenomena from the perspective of those involved, in our situation the change agents and leaders we interviewed.

Grounded Theory emphasizes the iterative process of data collection and analysis, allowing researchers to develop theories that emerge from the collected data itself rather than imposing preconceived hypotheses or theories.

This study used Grounded Theory principles to investigate the integration of relational sensitivity and behavioral competencies in change leadership. The research process involved several key stages, including theoretical sampling, data collection, coding and iterative analysis. From the data collected, there is always the reflex to always check it against the theory which ensures the validation of the research. In the next sections we describe the principles applied.

5.3.1   Theoretical sampling and data collection

Based on the initial research question and objectives, the recruitment process for a small sample group of change agents and leaders involved in successful organizational change started. This initial phase aimed to gather diverse perspectives and insights on the subject and identify common themes and patterns across different contexts. The recruitment process aimed to ensure diversity in participant backgrounds and experiences, enhancing the richness and depth of the data collected.

One of the criticisms of Grounded Theory is that you may remain too entrenched within the same network. This happens partly because you start from your own network and partly through referrals of that network. The risk, therefore, is that you keep fishing in the same pond. We also experienced this in our research. Some of the initial interviewees are familiar with each other and come from the same academic chair. We addressed this issue by intentionally seeking interviewees outside this network. In doing so, we achieved a broader distribution of interviewees with different backgrounds who are not acquainted with one another.

Data collection primarily involved conducting semi-structured interviews with the selected participants. Within these sessions we integrated Appreciative Inquiry principles, focusing on exploring positive relational experiences, challenges, and opportunities in integrating relational sensitivity and behavioral competencies in change initiatives.

Appreciative Inquiry principles were integrated through interviews, aiming to gain insight into:
-   Positive relational experiences with relational sensitivity, accompanying behavioral competencies, and key components of self-care in effective change initiatives.
-   Challenges and opportunities in integrating relational sensitivity, accompanying behavioral competencies, and key components of self-care in effective change initiatives.

5.3.2   Coding process and conceptualization

In grounded theory methodology, the coding process plays a fundamental role in the analysis of qualitative data. Coding is the systematic organization and categorization of data to identify patterns, themes and relationships within the dataset. Open coding is the first stage of coding, where fragments of raw data are examined and grouped into codes based on their content and meaning. These initial codes capture the essence of the data and provide a basis for further analysis. Axial coding is then applied to organize these initial codes into broader categories or themes, creating a more structured and comprehensive understanding of the data.

Throughout the research process, we oversee the cross-fertilization between the data collected during the theoretical sampling and the insights gained from the document analysis. For data from the sampling for which we have not yet examined documents, this means a new starting point for research work each time. By closely examining the interfaces between empirical data and existing literature, we aim to enrich the depth and breadth of our analysis and ensure that the theoretical framework remains grounded. This iterative process of cross-fertilization fosters a dynamic exchange of ideas and insights, enhancing the robustness and validity of the research findings.

Through iterative cycles of data collection and coding, we refined our understanding of the phenomena studied and developed a theory based on the collected data. This iterative process allows for continuous refinement and validation of the emerging theoretical framework.

Defining central ideas is the next, important step in the grounded theory methodology, where the researcher identifies and articulates the core concept or central theme emerging from the data analysis process. This involves merging the patterns, relationships and categories identified through coding into a coherent and meaningful overarching concept that summarizes the essence of the

research. This central idea serves as the focal point around which grounded theory is developed and provides a unifying framework for interpreting the data and generating theoretical insights.

By clearly defining the central idea, we as researchers can effectively communicate the main findings and implications of the research.

5.3.3   Grounded theory development

During the ground theory development phase, we synthesized the collected data and insights to build a comprehensive ground theory. This involved systematically organizing and analyzing the data to identify recurring patterns, themes and relationships. The aim of this research is to create a blueprint, a manual if you will, on how change agents can effectively embrace relational sensitivity.

This blueprint, informed by the findings and insights gathered during the research process, serves as a practical roadmap for promoting authentic transformation within organizations. In line with the essence of the thesis title, 'Embracing sensitivity in change agents: a blueprint for authentic transformation' and the subtitle 'Exploring the nurturing of relational sensitivity in effective change leadership', this blueprint offers actionable strategies and approaches for change agents to nurture, cultivate and harness relational sensitivity in driving successful organizational change.

This theoretical framework will outline the key qualities, strategies, and practices that enable change agents to effectively leverage their sensitivity in facilitating change. It provides practical guidelines for developing and applying sensitivity skills in change management contexts.

To ensure its robustness and relevance, the developed blueprint will be validated against existing literature. This validation process will involve comparing the blueprint with established theories and models in leadership, sensitivity, and change management. The aim is to refine the blueprint and ensure it aligns with the broader scientific discourse.

The results of this research will offer valuable insights for both the academic community and the practice of leadership and change management. By developing and validating a new blueprint for sensitive change agents, this research aims to contribute to the field of change management and provide practical tools for leaders and change agents to navigate complex change processes with sensitivity.

5.4   Role of the researcher and research situation

As the principal investigators, we play a facilitating role throughout the research process. We facilitate interviews and focus group discussions, providing a supportive and open environment for participants to share their experiences and insights. The research setting involves building rapport with participants, gaining their trust, and fostering open communication to obtain rich qualitative data. By maintaining a neutral stance and being mindful of our own sensitivities, we strive to minimize any potential bias, enhancing the objectivity and validity of the research results.

5.5   Validity and reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, we implemented a comprehensive approach during our study. The research methodology was carefully designed to integrate multiple methods of data collection, including literature review, semi-structured interviews following grounded theory methodology principles, and cross-fertilization to confirm findings from interviews with scientific research.

The conducted interviews were semi-structured and carried out in various organizational contexts, allowing for a wide range of perspectives from change agents and leaders involved in successful

organizational change initiatives. Each interview was meticulously documented, with participants' responses recorded, capturing key insights and contributions to the model, the blueprint. These can be found under Appendix 1: Key learning points from interviews, contributions to the model, and evolution of the model and point 12 List of resource persons.

Additionally, the grounded theory approach facilitated iterative data analysis, enabling the refinement and validation of emerging patterns, themes, and relationships. This iterative process fostered dynamic interaction between empirical data and theoretical insights, ensuring coherence and consistency in research findings.

To limit potential biases, reflexivity was incorporated into the research process, carefully considering the role of the researchers in shaping data collection and analysis. By maintaining a neutral stance and being mindful of our own sensitivities, we strived to minimize any potential bias, enhancing the objectivity and validity of the research results.

By adhering to these principles, we aimed to provide a robust and credible blueprint for embracing relational sensitivity among change agents, advancing our understanding of effective change management in contemporary organizational contexts.

The mixed methods approach of this research will provide an in-depth understanding of the role of high sensitivity within leadership and change management. The results of this research will offer valuable insights for both the academic community and the practice of leadership and change management. By developing and validating a new blueprint for sensitive change agents, this research aims to contribute to the field of change management and provide practical tools for leaders and change agents to navigate complex change processes effectively.

6   Results

6.1   Introducing the cyclical model: Reflect-Care-Guide as a Blueprint for sensitive change agents

The model, a blueprint for sensitive change agents, is a cyclical framework that helps leaders leverage sensitivity as a driving force in organizational change. Based on literature research, we will conduct interviews with change agents and leaders to explore how they manage and utilize their sensitivity. Using grounded theory, we will analyze the data through coding and categorization, ensuring that our findings are validated against existing literature.

The final model consists of three steps: Reflect, Care, and Guide. In the first step, Reflect, change agents learn to understand their sensitivity and how to strengthen their capabilities. In the second step, Care, they focus on self-care and the relational dynamics with others. Mastery of these aspects prepares them to step into the final phase, Guide, where they mentor others through change. Sensitivity is integral at each stage.

We also connect these insights to leadership, emphasizing that effective leadership begins with self-leadership. A strong understanding of one's own sensitivity and its impact is crucial for guiding others. The literature highlights that self-awareness is a key trait in authentic and transformational leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bass & Riggio, 2006), and self-reflection serves as the foundational step (Goleman, 1995).

Relational Sensitivity as a driving force within change
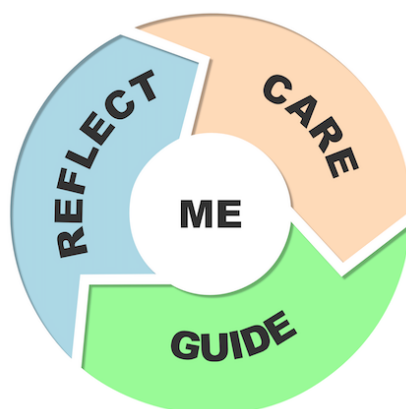
Figure 1: Relational Sensitivity as a driving force within change

The model shows three steps, Reflect, Care, and Guide. It is a cyclical model, which means that it does not matter where you start in the model; it is not a linear process. It is only a representation of the most important steps that you need to take to leverage sensitivity as a driving force within change. The model is cyclical because you take new learning points about yourself from the change trajectories that you guide, which you can reflect on within Reflect or something that you have learned about yourself in relation to the other within Care. If you follow the model, you have a blueprint to continuously adjust and improve yourself and your approach with the other based on new insights.

In the literature, we also find that both learning and leadership are subject to cyclical and iterative processes. Learning is relational, which means that you can reflect on new experiences with the other (Kolb, 1984).
With this model, we are putting forward an inclusive approach that enables change agents and leaders to leverage their relational sensitivity as a driving force within change trajectories. This has

an impact on both the change agent as an individual and on the relationship with the other and on the organizational level.

The cyclical approach of the model provides a structured approach to learning to embrace relational sensitivity in guiding change trajectories. You learn to leverage relational sensitivity as a strength and to improve it by continuously adjusting. We are convinced that it helps to improve the relational process that you go through with your team, but also to sharpen your own effectiveness.

In the presentation of the model, we start with Reflect. After all, you still have to learn what relational sensitivity means to you and how you can take the first step to gain better insight into yourself. By gaining insight into your behavioral patterns, triggers, reactions, and the impact of thoughts on your behavior, you can learn to steer yourself towards that new change agent that you want to be or towards that change agent that is needed in the situation and at that moment within change.

As a color within Reflect, we have chosen blue. Blue, for us, stands for calm, rest, introspection, and serenity. Soft blue, for us, corresponds to looking at yourself and being soft towards yourself. After some research, we find this back in the literature. Blue has a calming effect on the human psyche (Elliot et al., 2007; Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994), which makes the color suitable for linking with introspection.

Within Reflect, we have gained a good understanding of ourselves, and we know how to shape ourselves as a change agent. To become the person we want to be, we need to learn to care for our new self. We do this within Care. Caring for yourself is closely related to caring for the other. The entire process of care is, therefore, very relational, and sensitivity also has an important role to play.

A peach is a vulnerable fruit. You need some tenderness in your fingers before you can passionately sink your teeth into it. The color peach, for us, symbolizes warmth, for the soft, caring aspect that you need as a change agent to care for yourself but certainly also for the other. In the literature, we find that warm colors, for us, peach falls under this, evoke a feeling of intimacy and affectivity and can be associated with care (Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994; Terwogt & Hoeksma, 1995).

Within Guide, the next step in the model, you use all the insights from Reflect and everything you have learned within Care to effectively leverage them in your role as a mentor within change trajectories. After all, a good mentor also stands firmly in his shoes; how can you apply something to the other that you do not master for yourself?

Green, for us, stands for growth, renewal, guidance, and for the lively in nature. It also stands for being in line with your own nature. The color green is associated with nature, vitality, and restoration (Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994; Kaya & Epps, 2004), which makes it a suitable color for this phase within the model.

The model serves as a blueprint for leveraging sensitivity as a driving force within change trajectories. In the following pages, we will take you through all the steps that are necessary to get there.

6.2   Reflect

Within Reflect, we explore what relational sensitivity means for you as a change agent through self-reflection. How your own thoughts, triggers, and feelings impact your behavior and how these thoughts can unconsciously influence you, determining how you feel and act. It may seem like a straightforward process, but it is not so simple.

As a sensitive change agent, you aim to sensitively bring about change in others or in groups. You will notice that you encounter the same challenges there. Behavior, which we observe above the waterline, is shaped by what occurs below the waterline. As a change agent, you guide people, and as a mentor, you can also provide them with insights into themselves and the dynamics within the group. The question is simple: How will you achieve this for others if you do not have clarity for yourself?

Self-reflection helps you grow personally, shaping yourself in the direction that matters to you. For a change agent, this is especially important as it enhances your effectiveness and increases the success rate of change initiatives. By being more aware of behaviors, thoughts, and feelings that occur within you as a change agent, you are better positioned to make the right intrinsic decisions aligned with your values. It helps you evaluate and adjust yourself to be the change agent you need to be at that moment.

Self-reflection is seen in the literature as a core skill. It helps you take leadership in a self-directed manner. The importance of self-regulation and managing your emotional reactions to feedback helps promote your own development. Self-reflection helps to gain a clear picture of how your own actions and decisions contribute to the success or failure of change initiatives (Nesbit, 2012).

Self-reflection allows you to assess what you are good at and where improvements can be made. By looking back at your own leadership style and being both honest and critical about your own behavior, you learn to do better next time. Reflective leadership involves self-awareness, introspection, and the willingness to grow (Sosik & Godshalk, 2005).

Self-reflection also helps develop relational sensitivity. This is necessary to form warm and empathetic relationships. According to a study in the Journal of Relationships Research, self-reflection goes hand in hand with a better understanding of one's own emotions, skills, and behaviors. This enhances the ability to take the perspective of others (Gerace & Day, 2017).

We researched whether people practice self-reflection and whether they are capable of it. It turns out that it is not easily accessible to everyone. A review by Dimaggio et al. (2008) found that only 15-25% of the general population is well capable of self-reflection and mentalization (understanding one's own and others' thoughts and feelings). Many factors contribute to this, but it can indeed be learned. The ability for self-reflection can be developed with proper guidance and practice, such as through therapy or mindfulness training (Dimaggio et al., 2008; Sutton, 2016).

Cavanagh and Spence (2013) emphasize that coaching integrating mindfulness practices can lead to improved self-awareness, better emotional regulation, and overall well-being, which are important components of effective self-reflection. By integrating mindfulness into coaching, coaches can help their clients be more present, regulate their emotions better, and gain better insight into their behavior and thoughts (Cavanagh & Spence, 2013). Grant (2003) stresses that coaching involves guided self-reflection to enhance self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-efficacy.

Learning is a process of becoming more conscious. By creating a framework for yourself you bring this to development. This phase comes first because to listen well to someone else you must first learn to listen to yourself. What is it doing to me? And not only in case of feedback.

So, if you consider taking your self-reflection to a higher level, both coaching and mindfulness seem logical steps. For each chapter, we discuss the various tools and techniques that may be relevant for each court piece. For the Reflect section in general, it makes sense to be open and proactive in asking for feedback.

- 360-degree feedback, where you receive feedback from colleagues, subordinates, supervisors, and sometimes even customers, helps you understand how you come across to others. Reflecting on this can lead to personal development (Atwater & Waldman, 1998).
- Group feedback, where you receive feedback in a group setting, is direct and not anonymous. This can be more enriching than 360-degree feedback and strengthens team dialogue, leading to better communication and stronger empathetic relationships as you learn to take the perspective of others (Gerace & Day, 2017). This form of feedback is preferred but there is also such a thing as context.

Three steps in self-reflection
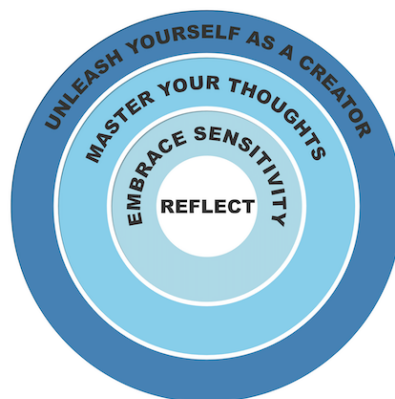
Figure 2: Blueprint Reflect

Sensitivity awareness:
This chapter focuses on becoming aware of your own sensitivity. Sensitivity, or sensory processing sensitivity, is a personality trait that involves heightened sensitivity to physical, social, and emotional stimuli. By becoming aware of their sensitivity, change agents can become more empathetic and effective in their roles.

Master your thoughts:
In this chapter, we explore the power of thoughts and their influence on behavior. Thoughts form the basis of our perceptions and actions, and by examining them, we can gain insights into the underlying beliefs and patterns that drive our behavior.

Unleash yourself as a creator:
This chapter focuses on shaping your future self by replacing old thoughts and patterns with new, constructive beliefs and behaviors. By consciously creating new thoughts and patterns, change agents can transform themselves and become more effective in leading change.

6.2.1 Embrace sensitivity

Learning to embrace sensitivity is the first step. Although it is often seen as a vulnerability, we try to redefine it here as a strength. It can help you grow both personally and professionally. In this first chapter, we attempt to understand sensitivity. By gaining a better understanding of your own behavior, you can uncover why you exhibit this behavior. Behavior manifests in patterns; you respond to things according to a primarily defined pattern in your brain. Mapping this is important within self-reflection but will also help you in change processes. In these processes, you will guide others if you want to give change a better chance of success.

Insights learned from the interviews:
- Sensitivity as a strength rather than a vulnerability.
- Importance of understanding sensitivity in both personal and professional growth.
- Sensitivity enhances empathy, decision-making, and leadership.
- Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) and its impact on behavior.
- Evolutionary advantages of sensitivity.
- Role of sensitivity in leadership and change processes.
- Understanding triggers and personal patterns of behavior.

To date, there is considerable societal skepticism about sensitivity. It is viewed as soft or irrelevant in professional environments (Aron, 1996). However, embracing sensitivity plays an important role in both leadership and effective change management (Goleman, 1995).

Learning to embrace sensitivity offers many benefits. It increases your empathy, allowing you to connect with others and understand their perspectives. It forms an important part of leadership and team dynamics. Moreover, sensitivity helps in decision-making by combining intuition with rational thinking, leading to better-informed and balanced decisions (Goleman, 1995).

Sensitivity is also described using the term sensory processing sensitivity (SPS). It is a personality trait characterized by heightened sensitivity to physical, social, and emotional stimuli from the environment (Aron, 1996). About 15-20% of the population exhibits a high degree of sensitivity (Aron & Aron, 1997). Within the entire spectrum from low to highly sensitive individuals, it is the highly sensitive persons (HSPs) who exhibit deeper cognitive processing and heightened emotional responses (Aron, 1996).

Sensitivity can be both genetically based and shaped by environmental factors (Pluess, 2015). Neurobiological studies show that HSPs exhibit differences in brain structures and functions, which explains their heightened sensitivity (Acevedo et al., 2014). Evolutionarily, sensitivity may have provided a survival advantage through increased vigilance and responsiveness to subtle environmental cues (Aron & Aron, 1997).

Sensitivity plays an important role in both leadership and change processes. HSPs are better able to pick up subtle signals and emotions from others, an important bridge to more empathetic leadership (Goleman, 1995). Their deeper processing of information enables them to come up with innovative solutions and make better-informed decisions (Acevedo et al., 2014). Moreover, due to their heightened sensitivity to both positive and negative experiences, HSPs can better address the needs of employees during changes (Aron, 1996).

Tools and techniques retrieved from the interviews:
From the interviews, we derive some tools that help you recognize your triggers. Triggers are seen as situations that elicit strong emotional responses. You react to the other, but actually, your behavior tells you something about yourself. It is this part you want to map out. Understanding these

positions helps you better regulate your behavior and become more effective in your communication.

Overview of the tools and techniques:

- Transactional Analysis (TA):
  - TA helps individuals identify the Child-Parent-Adult positions, clarifying how past experiences shape current reactions (Berne, 2016). From this, you can derive the things you need to reconcile with or work on and the things you should return to your parents.
  - Within TA, it makes sense to look at the "nurturing parent".
- Schema therapy:
  - Schema therapy techniques such as guided imagery, role-playing, and schema diaries. These help to identify early maladaptive schemas (EMS) and coping mechanisms that still influence your behavior today (Young et al., 2003).
  - Within schema therapy, it makes sense to look at the " healthy adult".
- Behavioral observation and journaling:
  - Carefully observe and record your own behavior in different situations in a diary. Note your reactions, emotions, and thoughts at that moment. This helps you recognize patterns and gain insight into what is behind your behavior (Eurich, 2017).
- Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT):
  - CBT techniques such as cognitive restructuring and thought recording help to identify irrational beliefs and cognitive distortions that lead to destructive behavior (Beck, 2011).
- Shadow work:
  - Through writing exercises, meditation, and visualization, you map the hidden parts of yourself, your blind spot. This is also about unconscious drives (Jung, 1953).
- Reflective questions and models:
  - Ask yourself targeted questions to understand your behavior and motivation, such as: "What does this behavior give me?", "What need does it fulfill?" (Goleman, 1995).

Your behavior can be both positive and less positive. You cling to the behavior you know, even the negative behavior, because there is a hidden benefit behind it. For instance, someone who likes to create drama often benefits by not having to do things themselves or take responsibility. It can be quite a challenge to map your behavior and uncover the hidden benefits behind it, especially when you're just starting out. That's why coaching can play an important role in self-reflection.

Uncovering deep-rooted patterns and hidden advantages is certainly not easy, but it will make you a stronger leader and change agent in the future. For a change agent, it is essential to learn to embrace sensitivity as a strength, for several reasons:

- You become a more empathetic leader, as you are able to pick up on subtle emotional and social signals from employees during change processes (Goleman, 1995).
- You become more innovative and better at problem-solving, as you understand and can respond to the needs and feelings of others (Goleman, 1995).
- You can make better-informed decisions by using your intuition and emotional intelligence, both for rational and empathetic decisions (Goleman, 1995).
- By mapping your own sensitivity and behavior patterns, you continue to develop yourself as a more authentic and effective change agent (Goleman, 1995).

As you examine your behavior, you will discover that your behavior is driven by your thoughts. In the next chapter, "Master your thoughts," you will learn about what thoughts are, how thoughts color your behavior, and how you can create calmness in your mind.

6.2.2   Master your thoughts

Thoughts determine your behavior and feelings. That's why it's important to delve deeper into those thoughts. During change processes, a lot of information comes at you from all sides. By maintaining control over your thoughts, you stay in line with who you want to be and you can refocus on what you are currently doing. This brings you peace, it gives you control over your thoughts, your inner monologue, the conversation you have with yourself.

Insights learned from the interviews:
- Thoughts determine behavior and feelings.
- Importance of maintaining control over thoughts during change processes.
- Cognitive theories suggest thoughts influence emotions and behaviors.
- HSPs are more sensitive to stimuli and emotional signals.
- Examining thoughts leads to understanding past experiences and self-image.
- Importance of aligning thoughts with true values and aspirations.

Thoughts are fundamental to your perceptions and actions. Cognitive theories suggest that your thoughts influence your emotions and behaviors (Beck, 2011). For example, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) shows how changing negative thought patterns can lead to changes in behavior and emotional states (Hofmann et al., 2012).

Highly sensitive people (HSPs) are more sensitive to subtle stimuli and emotional signals. This makes them more aware of their own thoughts and those of others (Aron, 1996). According to the literature, HSPs often tend to have their feelings overshadowed or dominated by their thoughts (Aron, 1996). It is therefore important for HSPs to realign their thoughts and behavior with their feelings.

HSPs often feel emotions intensely, which can dominate their thoughts and behaviors. The goal is to realign thoughts, behaviors, and intuition with these intense feelings. Recognizing the interplay between feelings, thoughts, and behaviors leads to more balanced decision-making. For example, if you feel anxious about a presentation, challenge the thought "I will make a fool of myself" with "I am prepared and capable" and adjust your behavior by practicing and presenting confidently (Aron, 1996).

The next step is to examine where those thoughts are coming from. This will lead you to past experiences, learned behavior, and your self-image. Research shows that your self-image has a significant influence on your thought patterns. A positive self-image promotes constructive thinking, while a negative self-image can lead to destructive thought patterns (Peifer et al., 2020)

Tools and techniques retrieved from the interviews:
- Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT):
- Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT):
- Self-compassion and cognitive restructuring:
- Reflective journaling and meditation:
- Strength training:

Cognitive-behavioral techniques (CBT) are a tool for understanding and managing your thoughts. For negative thoughts, you search for facts that support them. This way, you can determine whether those thoughts are true or false. Ask yourself whether your thoughts are fiction, to be supported by reality, or non-fiction, merely a story in your head. This way, you can learn to replace them with realistic, positive thoughts (Beck, 2011).

You can proceed step-by-step as follows:
- Be aware of negative thoughts.
  These thoughts are often automatic reactions to situations. For example, thoughts such as "I will fail" or "No one appreciates my opinion" significantly influence your behavior and emotional state (Hofmann et al., 2012).
- Determine whether the thought is valid.
  Is it a fact or fiction, a story in your head? Gather evidence for both fact and fiction. For example, if you think "I will fail," make a list of past experiences where you have succeeded to counter this belief. This way, you can distinguish between thoughts based on fear or wishful thinking and thoughts based on reality (Beck, 2011).
- Challenge irrational thoughts.
  Replace irrational thoughts with rational, evidence-based thoughts. For example, replace "I will fail" with "I have succeeded in similar situations before and can do it again" (Ellis, 1977)

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) focuses on identifying and challenging irrational beliefs and replacing those irrational beliefs with rational ones. This brings your behavior in line with your true values and aspirations (Ellis, 1991).

Techniques such as self-compassion and cognitive restructuring can help improve your self-image and, consequently, your thought patterns (Neff, 2003). Examining and reforming your self-image can help promote healthier thoughts and behaviors.

Trusting your intuition involves recognizing and learning to distinguish it from fear-based or wishful thinking. Intuition can provide insights that are not immediately apparent through any rational analysis. Learning to trust your intuition increases self-confidence in decision-making. However, it is essential to balance intuition with rational thinking to ensure that decisions are well-considered and grounded in reality (Gigerenzer, 2007). Resisting your intuition due to fear or self-doubt can prevent you from accepting it. Techniques such as reflective journaling and meditation can help you become more attuned to intuitive insights and integrate them into the decision-making process (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Thoughts and emotions are a comfort zone. Negative thoughts can hold you hostage in your mind. By evaluating and parking thoughts and emotions until a later time, you can learn whether they are fact or fiction. This way, you can learn to overcome them and trust your own intuitive abilities again. Journaling, mindfulness, and strength training have emerged from interviews as effective tools for building resilience. Journaling is an effective tool for recording and monitoring thoughts to revisit later. Research shows that journaling can improve mental health by reducing stress, improving emotional regulation, and promoting self-awareness (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016).

The idea "These are my thoughts, but I am not my thoughts" stems from mindfulness. This means that there is a separation between you as a person and your thoughts. You can view thoughts as temporary mental events that do not determine your identity, at least if you adhere to that idea. Mindfulness is a combination of Buddhist meditative practices and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011)

Keeping a journal: Daily note your emotions and reactions to identify patterns in your behavior (Eurich, 2017). Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) show how expressive writing about experiences and emotions helps achieve better mental health and aids in self-reflection. Meditation and mindfulness help calm the mind and contribute to self-reflection (Atwater & Waldman, 1998).

Strength training can also contribute to building resilience. This can help you both in sports and in life (Gordon et al., 2018). Strength training involves pushing your body beyond perceived limits, which requires mental fortitude. As you engage in strength training, your body can handle more than your mind allows. Your thoughts may urge you to stop, but by continuing, you build mental resilience. This process helps you learn to fight against your thoughts, you will learn to focus, strengthening your ability to endure and persist. This mental toughness developed through strength training translates into greater resilience in daily life.

It also helps you to park thoughts and refocus, which is important for people with a high degree of sensitivity (HSPs), who are often overwhelmed by their goals and expectations. Setting too many goals can be a pitfall for HSPs, as it can overload their resilience.

Gaining control over your thoughts, focusing more on the present, and not judging others allows you to listen better to others. It also helps you as a leader and change agent to reduce cognitive bias during a change process (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000).

The next chapter, "Unleash yourself as a creator," replaces old thoughts and patterns with new, constructive beliefs and behaviors. By consciously creating new thoughts and patterns, you increase your effectiveness as a leader and change agent.

6.2.3 Unleash yourself as a creator

By systematically replacing old thoughts and patterns with new, constructive beliefs and behaviors, you shape your future self and increase your effectiveness. This is done by taking responsibility for your own growth journey, starting from your inner strength.

Insights learned from the interviews:
- Replacing old thoughts and patterns with new, constructive beliefs and behaviors.
- Importance of creating a vision for oneself.
- Developing a positive attitude through self-awareness and introspection.
- Taking ownership and responsibility for growth.
- Importance of gratitude and self-reflection in personal development.

Tools and techniques from the interviews:
- Diamond model by Peter Koestenbaum:
- Five-step method by Dariel:
- Journaling and gratitude:
- Action-Motivation-Action concept:
- Behavioral activation:

A vision for yourself

Creating a vision for yourself is an important step. A clear vision provides direction, motivation, and helps you focus on your goals. This vision is in line with your values and ambitions and is a tangible reflection of yourself. Introspection allows you to lead yourself from the future while keeping both feet on the ground. Values and norms are important because they shape behavior and decision-making. Research by Schwartz (2012) emphasizes that values are motivational constructs that guide individuals in their actions and decisions. It is your own standard for evaluating your behavior and making choices that align with your personal and organizational goals.

Identifying and challenging irrational beliefs and replacing those irrational beliefs with rational beliefs brings your behavior in line with your true values and aspirations (Ellis, 1991).

The Diamond Model by Peter Koestenbaum is a model from the interviews that can help you with this. Koestenbaum (2002) states that expanding self-awareness means understanding four key dimensions: vision, courage, pragmatism, and moral values. Vision means identifying and being committed to your goals and ambitions, while courage is about taking risks and facing challenges. Pragmatism focuses on practical decision-making and effective action, and moral values relate to ethical behavior and integrity. Greatness, according to Koestenbaum (2002), means that the positive aspects of yourself come to the fore by engaging in activities that you love. This nurtures the core of your being. By doing what you are passionate about, you feed your inner core and are in line with your true self. Koestenbaum (2002) asserts that vision, courage, pragmatism, and moral values must be consistently reflected in both words and actions to achieve greatness.

The five-step method by Dariel (2010) for following your passion emphasizes the importance of identifying what truly excites and motivates you and aligning your intuition with purposeful action. In the first step, you identify what you are truly enthusiastic and motivated about. Being honest with yourself is very important in this step. In the second step, you align your passion with your intuition and your actions. In the third step, you create your vision, in which you create an image of yourself in the future when you have achieved your goals. This future image is your motivator and gives direction to your actions. In the fourth step, you connect with others who share your passion or who can help you achieve your goals. The fifth and final step is to affirm and acknowledge yourself and

that you are worth realizing your dreams and that you have the power and ability to achieve them. These steps are also a cyclical process.

Your attitude is also an important element. It represents the intersection where feeling, action, knowledge, and experience come together. Developing a positive attitude takes time and practice but is essential to bring your behavior in line with your values and goals. Research shows that attitude significantly influences behavior and outcomes (Ajzen, 2001). Developing a positive attitude helps individuals to tackle challenges with resilience and determination and to promote their growth.

Being honest with yourself about your strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement promotes a growth mindset. The research by Carol Dweck (2006) on mindset shows that a growth mindset encourages individuals to view challenges as opportunities for learning and development. It helps you to look at situations differently and to see them as a way to grow.
Being honest with yourself is also about taking responsibility. People may have a tendency to slip into the victim role to avoid their own responsibility. Taking ownership of your actions and decisions, instead of attributing them to external factors, gives you the power to control your growth. This ownership extends to acknowledging and learning from mistakes and turning them into learning opportunities. The hidden advantage of the victim role is that you get sympathy from others, but it has an impact on your future image (Romney et al., 2023).

Shaping your future self

Journaling gives you the opportunity to document your thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Pennebaker and Smyth (2016) emphasize that expressive writing through journaling can improve mental health and emotional well-being. Within journaling, it is important to include gratitude. Emmons and McCullough (2003) found that gratitude journaling can enhance well-being, increase positive emotions, and improve overall life satisfaction. Questions you can ask yourself are "What did I learn today?", "What am I grateful for?" By asking questions such as "who am I?", "Where do I want to go?", "which behaviors do I want to stop?", "Which promises do I make to myself?", "Which corrections do I want to implement in myself?", "Which behavior will I no longer tolerate from myself?", "Who do I need to be to lead better in change?", and "How can I turn negative experiences into positive growth opportunities?", you gain deeper insight into your motivations and behavior. In your journal, also examine which negative thoughts you express.

By expressing negative thoughts, you bring them to reality, even if this is not always the reality. Unconsciously, you are working towards the self-fulfilling prophecy (Romney, Harrison, & Benson, 2024). So, it is important to be aware when you express negative thoughts. Make yourself aware of it and form a counter voice.

Everything starts with taking small steps towards the ideal leader or change agent you want to be. Small and manageable actions contribute to the development of daily habits. In this way, you build on your well-being and learn to take care of yourself. The action-motivation-action concept can help you with this. Action can be a catalyst for motivation. For example, a study published in Advances in Psychiatric Treatment explains how behavioral activation helps individuals by breaking the cycle of avoidance and promoting proactive behaviors that enhance mood and motivation (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

Research published by the Association for Psychological Science (APS) supports the idea that acting confident can lead to real competence and confidence. The study highlights those initial actions, even if they are not backed by genuine confidence, can positively influence how others perceive you

and ultimately how you perceive yourself (Association for Psychological Science, 2024). By reflecting regularly in an open and honest way, you get to know and appreciate yourself better. This forms the basis for unconditional self-love and in the meantime? Fake it till you make it. (Romney et al., 2023)

Success is therefore working on yourself, doing the actions for yourself that you have to do. If you have unlocked yourself as your own creator, it means that you are aware of the thoughts in your head and that you recognize that thoughts influence your feelings, but you are not defined by those feelings. You have a simple choice: either you are a creator and follow the newly created positive thoughts, or you fall back into old patterns.

Being aware of this and learning to intervene at the moment you become aware of it forms the basis. In the next chapter, "Cultivate yourself," you will learn how to nurture and care for the new version of yourself.

6.3　Care

Care encompasses the importance of self-care and care for others. Care is the essence, it creates the connection between oneself and the other. It is a relational process for which one takes responsibility, not only for oneself but also for the other, thus making each other. Care starts with oneself and then extends to the other. The one strengthens the other. This in- and outflow process is important for personal growth and helps to build healthy relationships (Neff, 2003).

Self-care is done consciously and actively, whereby one takes care of one's physical, mental, and emotional health. This forms the basis on which one can effectively care for others. Self-care is not selfish, but a necessary condition. It is by first learning to care for oneself that one can bring more energy and empathy to the other without losing one's own resilience.

Self-care also helps one to understand and respect one's own needs and boundaries. This helps to enter dialogue with the other in an open and honest manner. Effective self-care also helps us to deal better with stress and conflicts, which contributes to emotional stability within change management (Thayer, Newman, & McClain, 1994).

Personal growth is not just about standing in front of the mirror, but about connecting with others. A feedback culture, in which open feedback is given and linked to introspection, can help to create good teams. Are you willing to share introspection with each other? Do you feel shame? Taking this risk can lead to authentic relationships and turn a bond into a covenant. This is done by entering into learning relationships with the other, see it as a psychological learning contract.

Highly sensitive people (HSPs) often have a highly developed empathic capacity, so they tend to notice and respond to the needs and feelings of others. This can lead them to prioritize caring for others over their own needs. They also tend to make themselves smaller and not like to be seen. This can lead to self-neglect and exhaustion. The tendency of HSPs to give priority to others has the hidden benefit that it is conflict-avoiding and preserves the harmony in a group. They often feel responsible for the well-being of others and have difficulty setting boundaries. The hidden benefit of this behavior is that they are often appreciated and loved for their care, which can increase their self-esteem. But this can be at the expense of their own well-being (Aron, 1996).

By creating a culture of care, one promotes an environment in which everyone feels valued and supported. Highly sensitive individuals should be aware of their tendency to give priority to others and actively work on self-care to not lose themselves. Responsibility and resilience are important for care and contribute to the well-being of individuals and communities (Kotter, 2012).

Creating a culture of care within a community or organization promotes an environment in which everyone feels responsible for the well-being of themselves and of others. This includes creating a supportive and empathetic environment in which open communication and mutual respect are central (Brown, 2012).

Responsibility in relationships means that both parties are aware of their own actions and the impact they have on the other. It also means taking responsibility without coercion and creating an environment in which openness and honesty are valued ("The Corporate Culture Survival Guide: Sense and Nonsense About Culture Change," 2000).

Resilience, or the ability to bounce back after setbacks, is also relational. Strong, supportive relationships can help us to better deal with stress and challenges. By investing in our relationships and caring for ourselves and others, we can increase our resilience (Fredrickson, 2001).

The relational aspect of care can, especially for highly sensitive people, also bring a feeling of emptiness. Things such as a superficial relationship, the lack of connection with the other, or the lack of a deep sense of connectedness can lead to a feeling of emptiness.

People with social anxiety often avoid self-disclosure and find superficial conversations an ideal way to protect themselves (Haensel et al., 2022). For highly sensitive people, however, small talk is a challenge because they often have difficulty with superficial conversations. For more sensitive leaders and change agents, it is good to be aware of this because it helps them understand the unique challenges they may face in social interactions and enables them to develop strategies to navigate these situations more effectively. A possible strategy to handle this is to ask probing questions that steer the conversation towards deeper and more meaningful topics. Questions like "What does this mean for you?" or "Why is this important to you?" can help uncover underlying motivations and feelings, making the interaction more engaging and satisfying for both parties.

Care is thus relational, from the inside out and back.

Blueprint Care
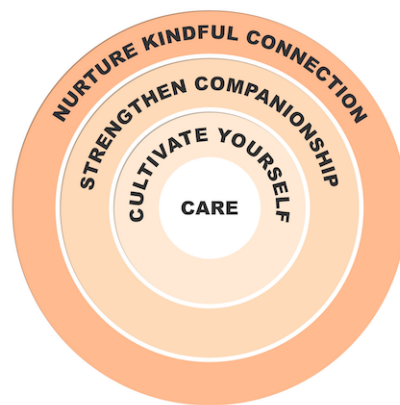
Figure 3: Blueprint Care

Cultivate yourself
Self-care is essential for sustainable personal and professional growth. Developing routines for physical, emotional, and mental well-being is important. This involves self-compassion, listening to one's body and managing energy effectively. Regular exercise, balanced nutrition and adequate sleep are fundamental. Mindfulness and emotional regulation help manage stress and maintain balance. For change agents, self-care prevents burnout and maintains resilience, supporting their effectiveness in leading change initiatives (Neff, 2003; Thayer et al., 1994).

Strengthen companionship
Building and nurturing relationships is key. Trust, empathy, and connected communication are foundational. Empathy, developed through active listening and compassion, fosters strong connections. Emotional intelligence enhances relationship quality. Creating a culture of feedback and mutual respect supports collaboration. For leaders, demonstrating vulnerability and humility strengthens team bonds and fosters a supportive environment (Goleman, 1995; Brown, 2012).

Nurture kindful connection
Understanding the impact of personal actions on others is important for influencing behavior positively. Kindness builds trust and encourages cooperation, essential for relational leadership. For highly sensitive leaders, these practices leverage their empathy and awareness to kindfully connect with others (Snowden & Boone, 2007; Mindell, 1993).

6.3.1 Cultivate yourself

Self-care is not a luxury, but a necessity for growth. Developing and cultivating self-care practices that support physical, emotional, and mental health is essential. This process involves becoming aware of and addressing one's own needs and applying self-care practices effectively. In the previous chapter on self-reflection, many things came to light that you concretely shape in this chapter. It is also important to reflect on your self-care and self-management practices. Self-care is, after all, also behavior. Reflect on why you do or do not give shape to this behavior and what is holding you back from doing certain things.

Insights learned from the interviews:
- Self-compassion is important and should be integrated into daily activities.
- Listening to your body to prevent overstimulation.
- Energy management is essential for resilience during changes.
- Movement and nutrition contribute to physical and mental well-being.
- The three dimensions of self-care: aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual.
- Self-prioritizing by setting boundaries and taking time for yourself.
- Work on self-love by regularly reflecting openly and honestly.

Tools and techniques retrieved from the interviews:
- Self-compassion exercises.
- Body awareness through regular reflection moments in your journal.
- Energy management techniques such as regular exercise, healthy nutrition, and adequate sleep.
- Developing routines for exercise and nutrition.
- Mindfulness, meditation, and deep breathing techniques to manage stress and maintain emotional balance.
- Keeping a journal to continuously reflect on self-care and self-management.
- Self-prioritizing by maintaining a schedule with sufficient time for rest and relaxation.

Within self-care, awareness of personal needs and priorities is important. Here are some ideas that emerged from the interviews:

- Self-compassion: Being kind and compassionate towards oneself is important. Researchers such as Kristin Neff, Brené Brown, and Tara Brach have extensively studied self-compassion. Neff (2003) defines self-compassion as treating oneself with the same kindness and understanding as one would treat a friend. It involves self-kindness, recognizing common humanity, and mindfulness. Integrating self-compassion into daily activities and interactions with others helps in shifting towards the person you want to be in various situations (Neff, 2003).
- Listening to your body: Learning to listen to your body is essential, especially for highly sensitive people (HSPs). Recognizing signs of overstimulation and knowing when to take breaks helps prevent burnout. Scheduling regular reflection moments in your journal helps maintain this awareness (Calm, 2024).
- Energy management: Energy management is important for resilience during changes. This involves setting boundaries, managing stress, and holding oneself accountable for self-care, feelings, behavior, and thoughts. Consider: regular exercise, healthy nutrition, and adequate sleep. Research by Thayer, Newman, and McClain (1994) emphasizes the importance of these practices in enhancing energy and reducing stress (Thayer et al., 1994).
- Movement and nutrition: Regular physical activity and proper nutrition are important for maintaining physical health and increasing mental resilience. Physical exercise helps reduce stress and improve overall well-being. Nutrition provides the necessary energy and resilience

to face daily challenges. Developing routines for exercise and nutrition is a key aspect of self-care (Health and Well-Being Matter, 2021).

- Three dimensions of self-care: The aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual dimensions are also important, especially for HSPs. Discovering what inspires and fills you with wonder is a source of energy. The aesthetic dimension involves appreciating beauty and creativity in daily life (e.g., nature, being outside, oxygen). The ethical dimension relates to aligning actions with personal and moral values (doing good for each other). The spiritual dimension involves connecting with something greater than oneself, which can provide meaning and purpose (being part of a collective) (Mindful, 2024).
- Mindfulness: Practicing mindfulness, meditation, and deep breathing techniques helps manage stress and maintain emotional balance. It promotes self-awareness and enables individuals to respond to emotions in a healthy and constructive manner (Mindful, 2024).
- Self-prioritizing: Prioritizing yourself means setting boundaries and taking time for yourself between the demands of work and personal life. It includes scheduling regular "me-time" in which you do activities you enjoy and find refreshing. Recognizing when to seek help and support from others is also part of self-prioritization (Health and Well-Being Matter, 2021).
- Work on self-love: Self-love is a lifelong journey that requires time and practice. By regularly reflecting in an open and honest way, you get to know and appreciate yourself better. This forms the basis for unconditional self-love.

In practice

For change agents, self-care is important because of the intense impact of leading change. This process can always be exhausting and stressful. In practice, it is all about implementing routines and reflecting on them to examine in your behavior because certain things go well and not well. Developing new habits and behaviors helps you face bigger challenges with authenticity and strength. It also helps you establish strong, supportive relationships.

Self- care gives you concrete form by managing yourself. In this, it is important that you keep an agenda with a schedule that you set for yourself. Keeping an agenda is important because it helps you build routines. Consistency in these areas supports overall well-being and resilience (Thayer et al., 1994). You combine this diary with the things from Reflect that you include in your journaling. Then reflect again on your behavior to n ate why certain things are or are not working for you.

Keeping an agenda helps maintain a balanced approach to self-care (Calm, 2024). In establishing your agenda, include the following in your planning:
- Adequate sleep, exercise and healthy eating
- Planning the things that are important to you (self-promotion)
- Space for mindfulness, wonder, me-time and social interaction
- Time for self-reflection, journaling

Journaling offers you the space to continuously reflect on yourself, thus incorporating reflection into your daily planning. Reflect to learn:
- Listen to your body
- Learn about your self-compassion
- How do you manage your energy
- Include the questions from Reflect.

During journaling, reflect on your own behavior, including that of self-care. Explore what is holding you back in your behavior, what the underlying thoughts are and how you can come back to the

here and now. Who do you need to be to make this happen? Finding inner peace and control over your thoughts creates peace in your upper room.

Journaling earlier in the evening, such as right after dinner, is recommended instead of immediately before bed. This is because writing about emotional or stressful topics close to bedtime can increase cognitive arousal, making it harder to fall asleep (Scullin et al., 2018).

Also be careful not to ignore signs of overwhelm. Highly sensitive individuals need to be particularly alert to signs of overstimulation and take proactive steps to manage their energy and stress levels (Calm, 2024). So don't plan your schedule too tightly. Caring for yourself forms the basis for caring for others. Self-care helps you establish strong, supportive relationships. In the next chapter, "Strengthen companionship," we will explore how to build and maintain these relationships.

6.3.2   Strengthen companionship

Self-care is important, but you are part of a reality, the world does not revolve around you. Building and nurturing relationships helps you take care of others and, ultimately, makes yourself stronger. This chapter emphasizes the importance of creating a safe environment with emotional intelligence and appreciative inquiry as essential tools.

Insights learned from the interviews:
- Creating a safe environment with empathy and vulnerability.
- Vulnerability shows courage and authenticity and fosters innovation.
- Empathy is crucial for strong relationships and trust.
- Emotional intelligence helps navigate social complexities.
- A good conversational foundation is determined by a safe environment.
- HSPs experience feedback more intensely and should explore these emotions.
- Recognize and address discrepancies between what we say and what we do.

Tools and techniques retrieved from the interviews:
- Practicing vulnerability by being open about strengths and weaknesses.
- Active listening to validate others' emotions and show compassion.
- Developing emotional intelligence through mindfulness, self-reflection, and feedback.
- Implementing non-violent communication
- Using the drama triangle and the Winner's Triangle to shift from negative to positive interaction roles.
- Applying Appreciative Inquiry to focus on strengths and create a positive foundation for change.

Creating a safe environment forms the basis for fostering trust and openness. Leaders must not be blind to the importance of empathy and must be willing to show vulnerability. Vulnerability in leadership means being open and honest about your strengths and weaknesses, admitting mistakes, and seeking feedback and support from others (Brown, 2012). This approach builds trust and encourages team members to be open and honest themselves. By doing so, you work towards a culture of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999).

Vulnerability is not a weakness but a demonstration of courage and authenticity. Leaders who dare to be vulnerable create an environment where team members feel safe to express their thoughts and feelings. This leads to better communication and stronger relationships (Brown, 2012). Vulnerability also fosters innovation, as team members are more likely to share creative ideas and take risks when they feel supported (Reiter-Palmon & Millier, 2023).

Showing empathy is also important in developing strong relationships. Empathy involves understanding and sharing the feelings of others. This fosters trust and connectedness. Empathy is promoted by actively listening, without getting lost in your own thoughts (Goleman, 1998), to validate the emotions of others and show compassion (Frey, 2024). Research by Frey (2024) shows that leadership skills focusing on caring for others during change processes are essential. These skills include effective listening, conflict management, and relationship building.

People can be very sensitive to how you convey the message. You must ensure that the other person hears the message, accepts it, and does not lose face. Carefrontation is a concept where problems are addressed directly while maintaining care and concern for the other person. This approach ensures that difficult conversations are handled with empathy and respect (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016).

Emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to recognize, understand, and manage our own emotions and those of others. It includes self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Goleman, 1995). Emotional intelligence is important in leadership and building relationships because it helps you navigate social complexities and foster positive interactions (Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2004).

To strengthen emotional intelligence, we rely on things we have previously discussed. Think of mindfulness, self-reflection, and feedback. Mindfulness helps you become more aware of your emotions and reactions, while self-reflection enables you to understand your emotional triggers and patterns. Feedback from others provides insight into how one's behavior affects others and helps make necessary adjustments (Zeidner et al., 2004).

High emotional intelligence leads to better interpersonal relationships, improved communication, and effective conflict resolution. People with high EI are more empathetic, which helps understand and address the needs and concerns of others. This fosters a supportive and collaborative environment, enhancing overall relationship quality (Mayer & Salovey, 2004).

The foundation of a good conversation is determined by a safe environment with room for vulnerability and empathy. During a good conversation, you actively listen and dare to discuss how you perceive the other person and what it does to you. You do not judge on the other person; it tells something about yourself. Such meaningful conversations help you understand others' perspectives and create a deeper connection. Besides a good feedback culture where everyone feels safe, it is useful to use the concepts of nonviolent communication, the drama triangle, and appreciative inquiry (AI).

Highly sensitive people (HSPs) often experience feedback more intensely, which can lead to feelings of guilt, shame, or anger. Dare to investigate (journaling) what these emotions say about yourself. They are valuable learning factors that provide insight into your behavior and emotional reactions (Neff, 2003). Guilt tells you something about your awareness of the harm you cause to others (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Shame tells you something about your own negative self-image and the feeling of not meeting personal or social norms (Brown, 2006). Anger can indicate unresolved inner conflicts or unmet needs (Neff, 2003).

Chris Argyris emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing discrepancies between espoused theories (what we say) and theories-in-use (what we do) as essential for self-development and organizational learning (Argyris, 1985; Schein, 2010).

It is worth delving into Nonviolent Communication. Developed by Marshall B. Rosenberg in the 1960s, this communication process helps to foster empathy and understanding in human interactions and is a useful tool for resolving conflicts constructively. The idea consists of four steps: observing without judgment, naming feelings, recognizing underlying needs, and formulating clear requests. By following these steps, people communicate more effectively and misunderstandings are prevented (Rosenberg, 2003).

The drama triangle, introduced by Karpman (1968), discusses a vicious cycle of negative interactions where people take on roles such as Rescuer, Persecutor, and Victim. These roles are complementary and reinforce each other, making it difficult to break these destructive patterns. People can switch between these roles depending on the situation, leading to repeated conflicts and misunderstandings without anyone taking responsibility for their behavior (Karpman, 1968).

To break the drama triangle, self-awareness is important. Recognize when you are in one of these roles and understand the dynamics of the drama triangle. Take responsibility for your own feelings, thoughts, and behavior instead of blaming or rescuing others. Treat others as equals and respect their autonomy. Open and honest communication without hidden agendas forms the basis for resolving this dynamic (Choy, 1990).

Acey Choy (1990) introduced the Winner's Triangle as a positive alternative. Here, the roles of Rescuer, Persecutor, and Victim are replaced by Helper, Assertive Person, and Vulnerable Person. These roles promote constructive and equal interactions. The Helper provides support without taking over responsibility, the Assertive Person communicates respectfully and directly, and the Vulnerable Person shows vulnerability and asks for help without seeing themselves as a victim. By adopting these positive roles, people can communicate and collaborate more effectively, leading to healthier and more constructive relationships (Choy, 1990).

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) focuses on strengths rather than weaknesses. AI involves identifying and building on what works well within an organization, rather than focusing on problems that need to be solved (Bushe, 2005). This strengths-based approach creates a positive foundation for change, inspires motivation, and enables individuals to contribute to the organization's success (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003). The AI process follows a cycle of four phases known as the 4-D model: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny. In the Discovery phase, individuals identify the strengths and core competencies of the organization. The Dream phase involves envisioning positive possibilities for the future. The Design phase focuses on creating ambitions and designing processes to achieve them. Finally, the Destiny phase outlines a collective path forward and makes personal commitments to contribute to shared ambitions (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

Resilience and vulnerability are both important in dealing with change. Resilience refers to the ability to adapt and recover from setbacks, while vulnerability involves recognizing and expressing one's emotions and uncertainties.

Both aspects are essential for effective change management. Resilient organizations are better equipped to handle disruptions and turn challenges into opportunities (Walsh College, 2024). Meanwhile, leaders who show vulnerability create a culture of trust and psychological safety (Brown, 2024).

Companionship plays a vital role in this balance by providing support and understanding. In a supportive environment, individuals feel more comfortable expressing vulnerability, knowing that they are not alone in their struggles. This sense of companionship fosters a culture where both resilience and vulnerability are valued, leading to stronger, more cohesive teams.

Acknowledging the past is also important in change management. Recognizing and valuing the history and contributions of individuals and teams helps build trust and respect. It also provides a foundation for moving forward and embracing new ways of working (Precision Partners, 2022). By acknowledging past successes and challenges, leaders can create a sense of continuity and stability, which is essential for gaining buy-in and support for change initiatives (Schuttner et al., 2020).

Creating a safe environment where vulnerability and empathy are central allows you, as a leader or change agent, to foster resilience within your teams. By emphasizing the positive, you take people along on the journey, increasing the success rate of a change trajectory. As we transition to the next chapter, "Nurture kindful connection," we will explore the impact of your behavior on others and how your behavior influences the behavior of others to achieve the desired behavior from others.

6.3.3   Nurture kindful connection

Nurturing friendly connections involves understanding the profound impact of your actions on others. You have the tools to positively influence and guide others' behavior. Therefore, it is essential to be aware of how others perceive and experience you by mapping out the effects of your actions on them.

Insights learned from the interviews:
- Gratitude, kindness, and relational leadership strengthen relationships and positively influence behavior.
- For HSPs, deep empathetic connections are both an advantage and a challenge.
- Expressing gratitude improves mental health, reduces stress, and strengthens social connections.
- Showing kindness boosts self-confidence and fosters a positive atmosphere.
- Arrogance negatively impacts relationships, communication and trust.
- Relational leadership promotes a supportive and collaborative work environment.
- Shared responsibility within organizational culture enhances teamwork and mutual support.

Tools and techniques retrieved from the interviews:
- Practicing gratitude to improve mental health and strengthen social bonds.
- Demonstrating kindness to boost self-confidence and create a positive environment.
- Avoiding arrogance by fostering humility and openness to feedback.
- Implementing relational leadership principles to enhance team cohesion and conflict resolution.
- Encouraging shared responsibility to promote teamwork and mutual support.
- Using deep democracy to ensure all voices are heard and valued in decision-making.

For highly sensitive leaders, deep, empathetic connections are both an advantage and a challenge. Their heightened sensitivity allows them to connect deeply with team members, fostering trust and collaboration, but it can also lead to emotional overwhelm if not managed properly (Aron, 1996).

Gratitude, kindness, and relational leadership are powerful concepts that help strengthen your relationships and positively influence others' behavior. Gratitude impacts both others and you, emphasizing the relational aspect of care. Gratitude promotes mental health by reducing anxiety and depression and increasing happiness and satisfaction (Francis, 2021; Maynard, 2022). Expressing gratitude can also improve sleep quality and lower stress levels (Francis, 2021). Additionally, gratitude strengthens social connections and increases relationship satisfaction (Erdinger, 2019; Körner et al., 2022).

Kindness has similar benefits. Showing kindness boosts self-confidence and fosters a positive atmosphere, leading to better collaboration and communication within teams (Schlosz, 2022; Top 5 Benefits of Relational Leadership Style, 2022) Kindness can also enhance the resilience and emotional well-being of both the giver and the receiver (Fredrickson, 2001; QH Health, 2023).

Arrogance has significant negative effects on both others and you. For others, arrogance can lead to damaged relationships, reduced communication, and a lack of trust, as arrogant individuals often ignore or belittle others' contributions and opinions (Psychologs, 2023; Mind Tools, 2023). This creates a hostile and stressful work environment, harming team dynamics and productivity (Silverman et al., 2012). For yourself, arrogance can lead to a lack of self-awareness, preventing you from recognizing your weaknesses and being open to feedback (Results Wise, 2023). This can result in poor performance, loneliness, and an increased risk of depression, as the need for constant

validation and superiority often stems from underlying insecurities (Long Island Psychology, 2023; NCBI, 2023).

Relational leadership, which focuses on building strong, positive relationships between leaders and their team members, promotes a supportive and collaborative work environment (What Is Relational Leadership? 2023). This leadership style enhances team cohesion, improves conflict resolution, and fosters trust and respect among team members (What Is Relational Leadership? 2023; Schlosz, 2022). Relational leaders are ethical, inclusive, and process-oriented, empowering their team members by providing autonomy and support (What Is Relational Leadership? 2023).

If you don't treat a person as a person, you won't get anything done. A person is not a means. By integrating gratitude and kindness into relational leadership, leaders can create a positive and supportive work environment. This leads to improved team dynamics, increased motivation, and an overall sense of well-being within the organization (What Is Relational Leadership? 2023; Schlosz, 2022).

"Leading by example is the only top-down strategy that truly works" (Wierdsma, n.d.).

Engagement in decision-making

Shared responsibility within the organizational culture ensures that everyone feels accountable for collective success. This sense of shared responsibility promotes teamwork and mutual support, improving overall performance and satisfaction (Schein, 1999). For highly sensitive leaders, fostering a culture of shared responsibility can help distribute the emotional burden and create a more balanced work environment.

Deep democracy is a decision-making process that emphasizes involving all voices and perspectives. This approach can play an important role in creating bonds between team members and increasing their engagement in the decision-making process. By ensuring that everyone feels heard and valued, deep democracy fosters a sense of belonging and involvement. This, in turn, can positively influence behavior by increasing engagement and responsibility (Mindell, 2014). For highly sensitive leaders, deep democracy aligns well with their empathetic and inclusive leadership style, allowing them to leverage the collective wisdom of their team.

Practical tips from the interviews

- Do not put yourself in a better light.
- Objectify matters by weighing them: double-check with your feelings to ensure you made the right decision. If it wasn't the right decision, analyze why.
- Take the first step yourself, go into action, see where it leads, and then re-evaluate.
- Don't take yourself too seriously.
- React in the moment.
- Show people what they are capable of.
- People live from reasons and excuses.
- Do not make distinctions in hierarchy.
- Start with: what does this do to me, it must be my fault. By indicating what your problem is, people are more willing to help you.
- By staying calm, the message lands; otherwise, people go on the defensive.
- You may not feel that the other person deserves an apology but do it anyway. It disarms the other person, creating more understanding for your point of view.

- You should be able to admit you are wrong; do not point out others' mistakes but focus on solutions all day.
- Meaningful interactions with colleagues, friends, and family members strengthen bonds and provide emotional support.
- Actively seek confrontation with the things holding you back and with the behavior of people that you are struggling with.

Also, include your vision for yourself from the third chapter. Consider how you want people to treat you and then adjust your behavior accordingly by applying the above points.

What we have learned about communication so far can be applied in the next chapter, "Create clarity". In this chapter, we will explore how to make clear agreements, clarify expectations about responsibilities, and foster a sense of accountability before starting to guide change.

6.4 Guide

Within this cyclical model, we have arrived at the final component, Guide. Guide is about the other and how we can enable the other to help themselves. Here, we apply everything we have learned about ourselves in Reflect. By asking the right questions, we encourage the other to think about the same issues. This strengthens the other, reduces resistance, and teaches them to view others from a different perspective. In Care, we learned to take care of ourselves and how self-care and caring for others are relationally connected. This way, we are also able to guide others in this process. It helps them reduce resistance, gain insights into themselves, and use the right tools to communicate and connect with others. All of this reduces resistance among cooperation and supports management in effectively implementing change.

In the Guide section, we gradually shift the focus to group facilitation, leveraging sensitivity as a key tool in the change process. Change is inherently linked to organizational life but remains one of the most challenging steps for any organization. Research shows that a significant number of change initiatives fail to achieve their intended results. According to a study by McKinsey & Company (2015), approximately 70% of all change programs fail, primarily due to employee resistance and lack of management support.

Leadership is indispensable in navigating change. Effective leaders not only provide direction but also inspire and motivate their teams to embrace new ways of working. Kotter (1996) emphasizes that leadership is about setting a vision, aligning people with that vision, and inspiring them to overcome obstacles. Leaders who possess these qualities are more likely to lead successful change initiatives.

Sensitivity, particularly high sensitivity, is increasingly recognized as an important trait in effective leadership during change processes. Highly sensitive leaders are characterized by their heightened empathy, intuition, and awareness of subtle cues in their environment (Aron, 1996). These traits enable them to better understand and respond to the emotional and relational dynamics within their teams. Highly sensitive leaders use their empathy and deep processing abilities to build trust, foster collaboration, and create a supportive atmosphere that facilitates change (Acevedo et al., 2014).

Sensitive leaders excel in creating environments where individuals feel valued and understood. This promotes engagement and reduces resistance to change, which is a primary cause of failure in change projects as previously discussed. By leveraging their natural empathy and intuition, these leaders navigate the complexities of change more effectively. They ensure that both the rational and emotional aspects of the change process are addressed (Goleman, 1995).

The importance of sensitivity in leadership extends beyond individual interactions to the broader organizational culture. Creating a culture that values and integrates sensitivity can lead to more resilient and adaptive organizations. This culture promotes open communication, inclusivity, and a collaborative approach to problem-solving, all of which are essential for successful change management (Brown, 2012).

The ability to successfully implement change is thus strongly influenced by the quality of leadership, the support of leadership, and the presence of sensitivity within the leadership approach to reduce resistance.

In Guide, we build relationships through conversations from which we will learn ourselves. You must lead that conversation. This may seem assertive, it is crucial that you guide the process to ensure it is productive and focused. For this, you must first know yourself and your relationship to the other. The quality of that relationship is the most important, and the responsibility for the quality of the relationship lies with both parties. Ask yourself the question: who must I be? You do this based on your own experience with yourself, only then do you apply it to the other.

While guiding others, you will encounter new unknown learning insights and blockages about yourself. Learning is also relational, and you learn in a group. You may not have been aware of these learning insights and blockages before or only latently. By taking these matters back to Reflect and Care, you internalize all learning points, sensitivities, and triggers instead of placing them on the other. This ultimately makes the model cyclical.

Within the layers of Guide, it is first about bringing clarity, making agreements, and discussing rules and responsibilities. Only then do we implement change in the other and finally in the group. You move towards a role as a mentor.

Blueprint Guide
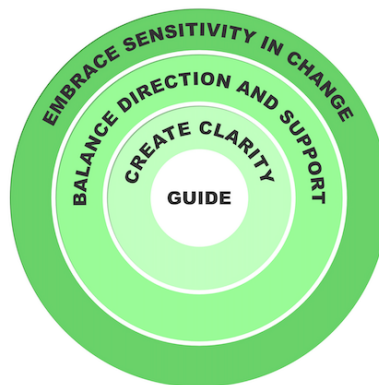
Figure 4: Blueprint Guide

Create clarity
Effective facilitators create the right cultural conditions for change, ensuring trust and shared responsibility (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Clear expectations, roles, and responsibilities help others understand their contributions to overall objectives (Whitmore, 2010). Creating psychological contracts outlines shared values and responsibilities, ensuring engagement and focus (Grant, 2014).

Balance direction and support
Knowing when to provide direction versus support can be challenging. This can be on an individual or group level. Adaptive leadership emphasizes sensing the appropriate approach based on the situation (Goleman, 2000). Developing coaching skills is important for leaders to support others in realizing their potential and effectively navigating change processes (Grant, 2014).

Embrace sensitivity in change
The final chapter brings together everything we have learned so far to become the change agent capable of utilizing sensitivity traits to guide and support organizational change effectively. This chapter emphasizes the application of key theories such as Schein's process consultation, Lakin's sensitivity training, and Corthouts and Vermeylen's fundamentals of sustainable growth. Sensitive leaders excel in creating supportive environments by recognizing emotional dynamics and fostering authentic relationships.

6.4.1   Create clarity

Before guiding others, individually or in groups, we enter a phase of making agreements. For a change agent, this ultimately means entering into a contract with the client. For a leader within the organization, it is about an internal psychological contract with the organization. In this phase, it is important to be clear in your communication. Here we need all the skills we learned in Reflect and Care. Creating clarity involves explicitly communicating expectations and responsibilities. Both the internal leader and the external change agent can take on the role of facilitator.

Insights learned from the interviews:
- Clear communication about expectations, roles, and responsibilities is crucial.
- Importance of alignment and attunement for successful collaboration and productivity.
- The facilitator's role in creating conditions for learning and change.
- Transformational leadership builds trust, fosters collaboration, and inspires employees.
- A safe environment leads to better communication and understanding.
- Organizational alignment and integrating care and empathy foster a supportive environment.
- Establishing psychological contracts to outline shared values and responsibilities.

Tools and techniques retrieved from the interviews:
- Creating a clear contracting framework.
- Alignment strategies to synchronize goals, roles, and responsibilities.
- Developing facilitation skills.
- Implementing transformational leadership practices.
- Documenting processes for clarity and consistency.
- Establishing psychological contracts with clients or team members.

This process also involves a level of sensitivity. Highly sensitive persons (HSPs) may be more prone to ambiguity and misunderstandings. When expectations are unclear, this can lead to stress and reduced productivity in HSPs, who generally thrive in a structured environment and a feedback culture. This benefit is also extended to the rest of the team (Acevedo et al., 2014; Aron et al., 2012).

Clear expectations, roles, and responsibilities are essential to help individuals understand their contributions to overall objectives. When leaders clearly define these elements, they align the team with the organization's goals, improve focus, and increase productivity (Whitmore, 2010).

Alignment and attunement help create an effective change environment. Alignment refers to synchronizing goals, roles, and responsibilities within the team, aiding in task understanding and contributing to objectives. This enhances focus and productivity (Goleman, 2000). Attunement encompasses the emotional and relational connection between team members, fostering camaraderie and mutual understanding essential for successful collaboration (Rock, 2006).

The role as facilitator:

The facilitator is an accepted third party whose role is to create the conditions for learning and change. This depends on the type and depth of change you want to implement. As a facilitator, you must be accepted in your role to do what is necessary. The right conditions lead to more learning and better change (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

It is about building trust and discussing responsibility. Responsibility is not one-sided but shared and must be at least verbally expressed. Shared responsibility within the organizational culture promotes accountability and teamwork. When everyone feels responsible for collective success, they are more

inclined to collaborate and support each other. This shared responsibility fosters a sense of ownership and engagement in the change process (Crant, 2000).

Transformational leadership is highly relevant for organizational change, emphasizing building trust, fostering collaboration, and inspiring employees (Busari et al., 2019; Lei et al., 2019). This leadership style closely aligns with the stages of contacting (engaging with stakeholders), contracting (establishing clear agreements), and acting (implementing changes). Transformational leaders build trust by demonstrating integrity and consistency, fostering a secure environment essential during change. They promote collaboration by encouraging open communication and involving employees in decision-making, enhancing engagement and commitment. They inspire employees by creating a compelling vision, aligning organizational goals with personal aspirations to motivate and drive change. Transformational leaders also empower employees by delegating authority and encouraging innovation, enabling proactive contributions to the change process. This approach ensures that all stages of change are supported by trust, collaboration, and inspiration, leading to successful and sustainable organizational transformation.

A critical aspect of this process is creating a safe environment, which directly contributes to clarity for employees. When employees feel safe, they are more likely to express their ideas, concerns, and feedback openly, leading to better communication and understanding within the team. This openness eliminates ambiguity and ensures that everyone is on the same page regarding goals, expectations, and responsibilities. By fostering such an environment, transformational leaders not only care for their employees' well-being but also create the necessary conditions for clear and effective change management.

Roger Harrison emphasizes the role of organizational alignment and the integration of care and love in the workplace to foster a productive and supportive environment. The link between alignment and contracting lies in ensuring that the organization's goals, strategies, and activities are consistent and supportive of each other. Organizational alignment means that the organization's goals, strategies, and activities are consistent and supportive of each other. Harrison discusses cultural alignment, structural alignment, and individual alignment. In cultural alignment, the organizational culture supports the goals and values. In structural alignment, organizational structures synchronize with work processes and objectives, and in individual alignment, roles and responsibilities align with individuals' skills and motivations (Harrison, 1972).

Harrison also emphasized the importance of creating an environment where individuals feel valued and cared for, arguing that such an environment leads to greater engagement, productivity, and well-being. This involves leaders showing empathy and providing support, building trust and respect within the organization, and developing emotional intelligence among leaders and team members to improve interpersonal relationships and the overall health of the organization (Harrison, 1995). The skills for this are found in Care. The big difference is that within Care you provide clarity about the safe environment at the individual level, within Guide it's about group level and guarding the culture as a shared responsibility. There should always be no ambiguity about this.

Building trust is about finding points of recognition in the other person. Recognition leads to finding common ground and leads to more understanding, mutual respect, and fosters collaboration. Using specific strategies to find common ground is important for effective collaboration (Tse et al., 2021)

These strategies include creating shared space and sufficient time for interaction, leading to an increase in shared knowledge and shared assumptions (Tse et al., 2021). This approach allows facilitators to improve communication and promote a positive, cooperative atmosphere. Research

emphasizes that finding common ground not only promotes collaboration but also contributes to conflict resolution and achieving joint goals (Tse et al., 2021).

By ensuring proper alignment as a facilitator with a psychological contract, whether with clients or team members, this contract outlines the shared values, expectations, and responsibilities guiding the change process. By aligning their actions with these values, leaders ensure the team remains engaged and focused on achieving desired outcomes (Grant, 2014).

Creating a clear contracting framework involves defining the scope, objectives, and expectations of the change process. This framework provides a roadmap for the team and guides their actions and decisions throughout the project. It also helps establish accountability and measure progress (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). As a facilitator, you must use your sensitivity to detect when objectives are not being met or certain values are not being pursued during the change process. At that point, you need to reconvene with your team or client to address these issues.

Documenting processes promotes clarity and consistency within teams and organizations. Good documentation ensures that team members understand their roles and responsibilities. This then serves as a reference point for future actions and decisions. Additionally, it helps prevent miscommunication and ensures that everyone is aligned with the organization's goals and procedures (Mårtensson, 2000).

Documenting processes also facilitates continuous improvement. It provides a basis for evaluating and refining business operations resulting in more efficient and effective workflows (Endalamaw et al., 2024).

In the next chapter, "Balance support", we will delve deeper into the question of when to provide direction and when to offer support based on the needs of the individual or team.

6.4.2 Balance direction and support

In "Balance support," we examine when to direct versus support team members as a change agent or leader. During this process, it is important to be aware of your own thoughts to avoid cognitive bias and to listen actively. We act from the change agent or leader we need to be (Reflect). We also maintain the relational level by applying everything we have learned in Care. In this chapter, we will explore what is needed next to guide team members. Specifically, coaching, the power of silence and delay, learning to deal with problems, and making agreements emerged from the interviews as important themes. Sensitivity is also woven into this.

Insights learned from the interviews:
- Understanding when to provide direction versus support.
- Adaptive leadership and its relevance for highly sensitive individuals.
- The importance of developing coaching skills to support others.
- Encouraging proactive behavior and taking initiative fosters a sense of ownership.
- The role of silence and delay in creating a reflective atmosphere.
- The significance of making and keeping promises to build trust and responsibility.
- Managing defensiveness to improve communication and relational closeness.

Tools and techniques retrieved from the interviews:
- Developing adaptive leadership skills to balance challenge and support.
- Implementing coaching techniques such as the GROW model.
- Encouraging proactive engagement and empowering team members.
- Using silence and delay to enhance reflection and thoughtful responses.
- Applying the Cynefin framework to categorize and address different problem contexts.
- Making strong promises and managing team expectations effectively.
- Strategies to manage defensiveness and promote productive communication.

Adaptive leadership is about sensing the right approach based on the situation (Goleman, 2000). Highly sensitive individuals (HSIs) can have advantages in adaptive leadership due to their heightened empathy and intuition (Acevedo et al., 2014; Aron, 1996).

Leaders must find the right balance between challenging their team to deliver top performance and providing the necessary support to help them succeed. Too much challenge without support can lead to stress and burnout, while too much support without challenge can result in complacency and subpar performance. The key is to offer a mix of high challenge and high support to foster a productive and motivated team environment (Goleman, 2000).

Developing coaching skills is important for leaders to support others in realizing their potential and effectively navigating change processes (Grant, 2014). Coaching starts from what the person needs to help themselves. As a change agent or leader, you help this person. The interviews revealed that it is best to do this from your own values and authenticity (Reflect). It should not feel like you are using techniques, as this does not come across as authentic to the other person.

Coaching increases self-awareness, helps overcome obstacles, and supports the development of relational sensitivity and leadership skills (Grant, 2014). Research shows that coaching, compared to direct supervision, leads to more learning and development in the long term (Jones et al., 2016). Effective coaching consists of active listening, asking insightful questions, and providing constructive feedback (Whitmore, 2017). Skills you can fall back on Reflect and Care.

Encouraging proactive behavior and taking initiative is an important aspect. Leaders must create an environment where individuals feel safe but also empowered to take action and make decisions.

Proactive engagement fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility, which improves overall team performance (Crant, 2000). Empowering others means recognizing and nurturing their capabilities and strengths. Leaders help team members realize their potential and provide opportunities for growth and development. This empowerment fosters a sense of trust and motivation.

Taking initiative is a relational learning process that helps people overcome passivity and develop a proactive mindset. You do this by encouraging team members to take initiative and supporting them. This approach fosters a culture of action and innovation (Crant, 2000). Studies have shown that coaching is more effective than direct supervision in promoting long-term development and self-reliance (Jones et al., 2016). While direct supervision can save time initially, investing in coaching ensures that team members are better equipped to handle future challenges independently.

An effective coaching conversation usually follows a structured model, such as the GROW model (Goal, Reality, Options, Will) developed by Whitmore (2017). This model helps the conversation identify goals, assess the current reality, explore options, and establish the will to act. Research supports the effectiveness of structured coaching models in improving individual performance and development (Passmore, 2010).

The GROW model consists of four steps:
- The first step is to set a clear and specific goal. This goal should be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) to ensure clarity and focus. Questions you can ask include: "What do you want to achieve?" and "How will you know when you have achieved it?" (Whitmore, 2017).
- The second step is to explore the current reality. This involves understanding the current situation, identifying obstacles, and recognizing resources. Questions can include: "What is happening now?" and "What have you tried so far?" (Whitmore, 2017).
- The third step is to generate a range of possible options to achieve the goal. This stimulates creative thinking and problem-solving. Questions to consider include: "What could you do?" and "What are the pros and cons of each option?" (Whitmore, 2017).
- The final step is to establish the will to act. This involves committing to specific actions and creating a plan for implementation. Questions include: "What will you do next?" and "When will you do it?" (Whitmore, 2017).

The power of silence and delay

Silence and delay provide calm, create an atmosphere of trust and safety, and give the other person the opportunity to reflect on themselves. Although silence and delay in a conversation may feel unnatural to many people, it is advantageous for (highly) sensitive individuals. Highly sensitive individuals benefit from this. Due to their heightened sensitivity and ability to process information more deeply, they can better pick up on emotions and subtle nuances in conversations (Acevedo et al., 2014). Slowing down conversations helps create a thoughtful and reflective atmosphere. It encourages both the coach and the coachee to process information more deeply and consider their responses carefully. This deliberate pace can lead to more impactful and lasting change (Rock, 2006).

In coaching conversations, the power of silence and delay cannot be emphasized enough. Silence provides space for reflection, allowing for deeper insights and more thoughtful responses (Kline, 1999). Highly sensitive individuals often have a natural tendency towards patience and attentiveness, making them particularly adept at effectively using silence. This ability to embrace pauses can lead to deeper and more meaningful coaching interactions (Aron, 1996).

Understanding and dealing with problems

The Cynefin framework emerges as a valuable tool for understanding and dealing with different types of problems. The Cynefin framework, developed by Snowden and Boone (2007), categorizes problems into five contexts: simple, complicated, complex, chaotic, and disorder.

Each context requires a different approach to problem-solving and decision-making:
- In simple contexts, the relationship between cause and effect is clear. For highly sensitive leaders, it is important to maintain clear communication and consistency in simple contexts.
- Complicated contexts require more expert analysis and knowledge. This can be done by involving specialists and examining the problem from multiple angles. Highly sensitive leaders have an advantage here due to their deeper processing skills and more empathetic understanding.
- In complex contexts, there is a lot of unpredictability and interdependence. Cause-and-effect relationships are only clear in hindsight. As a leader, you must be able to sense, feel, and respond appropriately. Highly sensitive leaders are driven by their intuition and sensitivity to subtle signals, which is beneficial in this context.
- In chaotic situations, there is no clear causal relationship. Immediate action is needed to stabilize the situation. Restoring order is the first step. For highly sensitive leaders, managing emotional regulation is important to remain effective under pressure.

When it is unclear which of the four contexts applies, we speak of disorder. As a leader, you must first determine what is actually going on. Highly sensitive leaders need to take enough time to think and gather information.

The ability to adapt to the context at play is especially valuable for highly sensitive leaders. They place more emphasis on relational dynamics in guiding their teams. Connecting rational and emotional aspects is important for comprehensive decision-making. Balancing logical analysis and emotional awareness leads to better-informed and balanced decisions (Goleman, 1995). For highly sensitive leaders, integrating their intuitive insights with rational thinking can lead to more effective leadership.

The importance of promises in building trust and responsibility

Making and keeping promises plays a role in fostering trust and responsibility within teams. The strength of these promises significantly influences team dynamics and overall performance. According to research, there are three different types of promises you can make:
- Weak promise: This involves committing to an action without genuine intention to fulfill it. You say you will do something but already know you won't. Such promises undermine trust and team cohesion.
- Conditional promise: Here, the promise is made with an unspoken condition that provides an excuse for not fulfilling it. You say you will do something but make it conditional or create something that prevents you from doing it. This ambiguity negatively impacts trust (Jody Michael Associates, 2024).
- Strong promise: A robust promise where you simply fulfill what you promised to do. This fosters trust and responsibility within the team (Sull & Spinosa, 2007).

By understanding and categorizing promises, you learn to manage team expectations and responsibilities. By having team members state that they have made a strong promise, you work on commitment. By having them repeat what you said, you bring clarity and see if the other person understood you. Periodically asking for heads-up provides you with insight into progress. People

don't want to be taken for granted, so it's important to check in with people, for example, by asking how you could have done better and asking for heads-up on tasks related to promises. When asking for heads-up, inquire about obstacles, lack of time? Where can you get to? How will you handle that? Don't come up with answers yourself unless the other person is stuck, or if you are not satisfied with the other person's approach, give options for them to choose from and ask the question: "Do you want to do that?".

Get people out of defense mode, let people see that with excuses they push themselves back to avoid doing anything. Defensiveness is a common reaction to perceived criticism or threats to one's self-esteem. It involves behaviors such as making excuses, shifting blame, and focusing on one's intentions rather than the impact of one's actions. These behaviors hinder productive communication and relational closeness (Gottman, 2024)

In the final chapter, "Embrace sensitivity in change," we explore what is additionally needed at the group level to embrace sensitivity to effectively guide and support organizational changes. This chapter summarizes everything we have learned so far and offers comprehensive strategies for effectively guiding change in teams.

6.4.3 Embrace sensitivity in change

In the final chapter, we guide teams as change agents or leaders. This chapter brings everything together. What you have learned in Reflect is used to provide others with insights. Thanks to care, we know how to nurture and sustain ourselves despite the challenges and impacts that group guidance demands of us. By applying the relational aspect of care, we ensure our connection with others, which in turn nurtures us and teaches us how to guide others in the desired direction. In Guide, we reflected on our role as a facilitator and coach. By first applying things to ourselves, we learn about ourselves and become strong enough to guide others. All these puzzle pieces are necessary to transition to group guidance, where we practice our role as mentors. Again, we learn about ourselves, our behavior, thoughts, inhibitions, and triggers. We can place these within ourselves rather than on others. By transitioning back to Reflect, we process what we have learned to come out stronger. All of this is imbued with leadership and sensitivity. Sensitivity is movement, bringing ourselves and others into motion.

Insights learned from the interviews:
- Emphasizing the importance of sensitivity in leadership for emotional and relational dynamics.
- Emphasizing sustainable growth through continuous learning and adaptability.
- Promoting inclusive decision-making through deep democracy principles.
- Recognizing tensions and maintaining boundaries as a facilitator.

Tools and techniques retrieved from the interviews:
- Process consultation techniques to help teams identify and solve their own problems.
- Sensitivity training methods to improve emotional awareness and interpersonal skills.
- Implementing deep democracy to ensure all team members' voices are heard.
- Group feedback sessions for direct and non-anonymous feedback to strengthen team dialogue.
- Techniques for managing and addressing tensions as a facilitator.
- Integrating ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions to create a deeper sense of purpose in facilitating change.

Embracing sensitivity in leadership means recognizing and valuing the emotional and relational dynamics within the team. Sensitive leaders are attuned to the needs and feelings of their team members, fostering a supportive and inclusive environment. By leveraging their sensitivity, these leaders strengthen team relationships. Through empathy and understanding, they connect with the team and transform a bond into a cohesive unit. Embracing sensitivity as a valuable trait aims for personal integrity based on honesty and congruence with oneself. Integrate ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions into your leadership, as this promotes resilience and flexibility.

The work of Edgar Schein on organizational culture and leadership emphasizes the importance of integrity and authenticity in effective leadership (Schein, 2010). Accepting and embracing your sensitivity can lead to a more empathetic and authentic leadership style, which is essential for leading change. Sensitivity can also lead to taking things more personally and being more deeply affected by interactions and feedback. Highly sensitive persons (HSPs) can experience these emotions more intensely. This leads to greater self-awareness and self-insight. Aron and Aron (1997) argue that the heightened sensitivity of HSPs enables them to process information more deeply, resulting in greater understanding and thorough work.

In this chapter, we return to key theories such as Schein's process consultation, Lakin's sensitivity training, and the foundations of sustainable growth by Corthouts and Vermeylen. The chapter also

emphasizes the importance of inclusive decision-making through deep democracy principles and the tensions that can arise for you as a facilitator.

Schein's process consultation emphasizes the consultant's role in helping the client diagnose and solve their own problems rather than providing solutions. This approach is based on the belief that effective change is best achieved when the organization identifies and implements solutions themselves. The consultant acts as a facilitator, guiding the organization through a reflective process that reveals underlying problems and growth opportunities.

Sensitive leaders can use this method to promote self-sufficiency and problem-solving abilities within their teams. By facilitating a process in which team members identify their own solutions, leaders foster a sense of ownership and engagement. This approach aligns well with the inherent empathy and attentiveness of highly sensitive individuals, who can create an environment of trust and openness necessary for effective consultation (Schein, 1999).

Sensitivity involves reading dynamics, sensing people, managing them, and moving both team members and you. Ask yourself, and reflect later: "What do I perceive versus what can I attentively observe?" During observation, it is important to listen actively, pay attention to body language, and engage in conversations with an open mind and without judgment. Only in this way can you set things in motion.

Lakin's sensitivity training involves developing emotional awareness and interpersonal skills, which are essential for creating a supportive and inclusive work environment. Lakin's model for sensitivity training focuses on improving people's ability to understand and manage their own emotions and those of others (Lakin, 1972). This training is particularly beneficial for highly sensitive persons (HSPs), as it builds on their natural ability to make deep connections with others while effectively managing their emotional responses.

The literature on the foundations of sustainable growth by Corthouts and Vermeylen emphasizes the importance of continuous learning, self-reflection, and adaptability in personal and professional contexts. Their framework highlights the need for lifelong learning and personal development as essential components of sustainable growth.

The theory outlines key areas for growth, including emotional intelligence, resilience, and ethical decision-making. By promoting these areas, individuals can better navigate the complexities of organizational change and contribute to a more dynamic and responsive workplace (Corthouts & Vermeylen, 2014). This approach aligns well with the needs of highly sensitive leaders, who benefit from continuous personal development and reflective practices to maintain their effectiveness and well-being.

Authentic relationships are based on mutual respect, empathy, and genuine concern for the well-being of others. Leaders who demonstrate these qualities can create a culture of transparency and openness. Highly sensitive leaders, with their natural empathy and attentiveness, are well-suited to foster these authentic connections (Brown, 2012).

Inclusive decision-making

Deep democracy involves recognizing and valuing different perspectives, encouraging open dialogue, and ensuring that all team members have a voice in the decision-making process. This approach not only improves the quality of decisions but also fosters a sense of community and engagement. For highly sensitive leaders, who are naturally attuned to the needs and concerns of others, the

principles of deep democracy align well with their inclusive and empathetic leadership style (Mindell, 2002).

In "Embrace sensitivity in change," deep democracy is distinct in its application as it emphasizes inclusive decision-making and addressing group dynamics during organizational change. Unlike in "Nurture kindful connection," where it focuses on fostering community and empathetic relationships, here, deep democracy is used to manage resistance and ensure all voices are heard in the change process. It underscores the leader's role in facilitating open dialogue and incorporating diverse perspectives to guide the team through the complexities of change effectively.

In addition to deep democracy, group feedback is an important tool in your toolbox. Feedback you receive in a group setting is direct and not anonymous. This can be quicker than 360-degree feedback and strengthens team dialogue, leading to better communication and stronger empathetic relationships as you learn to take the perspective of others.

For feedback, it is also important to learn to give it at the moment. About each other's behavior but also about the process. You can later give participants time to reflect on this but then you go back to the table to discuss matters further.

Tensions as a facilitator

As a mentor, you need to stand strong in your own shoes. We learned to avoid cognitive bias in Reflect and apply it here in group dynamics. As a facilitator, you don't want to come across as a guru or all-knowing, so it's important that the culture and conditions are right to name things without it being taken out of your account as a facilitator.

As a facilitator, you start with your own behavior. It is also a learning process for you by interacting with others. The relational aspect is more important than the individual. By having others describe how they experience the behavior of the other, you can talk about the other's behavior but it also says something about yourself. Learn in a group not to put it on the other but on yourself. From here, engaging in dialogue takes courage but forms the basis for group learning. You make everything relational instead of personal. As soon as a team member says that another team member is, for example, extroverted, teach the team member making the statement to describe what is meant by this, by letting them describe it on the one hand and reflect on what this says about them on the other hand. In this way, you make things relational, without exchanging a label. The tangible is the behavior, what plays below the waterline is brought up by opening up the conversation in this way.

As a facilitator or change manager, there can be a tension field where you mean the best for each other, but there is a danger that your own needs and boundaries are crossed. This tension often arises from the desire to help and support others, but it can lead to personal exhaustion and burnout if sufficient consideration is not given to your own well-being (Goleman, 1995). Therefore, it is so important to describe your own well-being in Care so that you learn to act accordingly. It is crucial as a facilitator to be aware of this pitfall and proactively set boundaries. This means clearly communicating your own needs and capacities and regularly taking time for self-care and reflection (Neff, 2003). By balancing supporting others and taking care of yourself, you can function more effectively and sustainably in your role as a facilitator (Schein, 2010).

Ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions add value to the role of the facilitator. By integrating these aspects, leaders can create a deeper sense of purpose and meaning in the change process. Connecting with nature, engaging in meaningful community activities, and fostering a sense of

wonder can enhance the overall experience of change. For highly sensitive leaders, integrating these dimensions can enhance their ability to lead authentically and inspire their teams (Goleman, 1995).

In a well-functioning group, there is a shared responsibility to help and support each other. This significantly reduces the dynamics of guilt and shame. When group members are open to actively listening and engaging in interactions with an open mind and without judgment, as symbolized by the acronym ALMOY (Active listening, Body language, Open mind, Without judgment), they can foster a safe and supportive atmosphere.

6.5   The model in practice

6.5.1   Reflect

In general:

- Find a coach that helps you to understand your behavior, your current reactions and to identify patterns and coping mechanisms.
- Integrate Mindfulness within coaching.
- Consider strength training for building resilience, learning to focus, become stronger in your mind. Getting physically stronger will make you stronger mentally.
- Be open and proactive ask for feedback from colleagues, friends and family. Use Group feedback or 360-degree feedback at the workplace if possible.

Sensitivity awareness:

Start journaling. Observe and record your own behavior in different situations. Recognize patterns and gain insight into what is behind your behavior. Identify irrational beliefs and cognitive distortions that lead to destructive behavior. Map the hidden parts of yourself, your blind spot. Ask yourself reflective questions "What does this behavior give me?", "What need does it fulfill?" There will be a hidden benefit to maintain this behavior. Try to figure out what it is. As you examine your behavior, you will discover that your behavior is driven and colored by your thoughts.

Master your thoughts:

Be aware that your thoughts are just your inner monologue, the conversation you have with yourself. It does not necessarily correspond to the reality, it's just your own reality you create within your head influencing your emotions and behaviors and that your self-image has a significant influence on your thought patterns. Gaining control over your thoughts, focusing more on the present, and not judging others allows you to listen better to others. Expand your journaling with:

- Writing about negative thoughts. Ask yourself whether your thoughts are fiction or non-fiction. Learn to replace them with realistic, positive thoughts.
- Write about your self-image and how it effects your thoughts and behaviors.
- Write about what is holding you back to trust your intuition. Balance intuition with rational thinking to ensure that decisions are well-considered and grounded.

Unleash yourself as a creator:

Being honest with yourself is also about taking responsibility and going into action, no matter how small this action may seem. Expand your journaling with:

- How you can go into action by taking small steps, small changes.
- Creating a vision (including values and norms) A clear vision provides direction, motivation, and helps you focus on your goals. It is your own standard for evaluating your (future) behavior. This future image is your motivator and gives direction to your actions.
- Figure out what you are passionate about, feed your inner core and be in line with your true self. What truly excites and motivates you will align your intuition with purposeful action.
- Identify and challenge irrational beliefs and replacing them with rational beliefs.
- Write about negative thoughts and stop expressing them to prevent bringing them to reality.
- Ask yourself: "What did I learn today?", "What am I grateful for?" "Who am I?", "Where do I want to go?", "Which behaviors do I want to stop?", "Which promises do I make to myself?", "Which corrections do I want to implement in myself?", "Which behavior will I no longer tolerate from myself?", "Who do I need to be to lead better in change?", and "How can I turn negative experiences into positive growth opportunities?", …

Please note you don't need to figure out your hidden benefits or your vision in detail. Going into action will eventually unveil the hidden benefits and giving yourself time will help you determine your vision. Don't let this stop you from going into action now.

6.5.2 Care

In general:
- Feedback: take the risk to share introspection to build authentic relationships.
- Use questions like "What does this mean for you?" or "Why is this important to you?" as a strategy to turn small talk into engaging and satisfying interaction.
- Practice meditation, and deep breathing techniques to reduce stress.

Cultivate yourself:

Cultivate yourself is about prioritizing yourself and holding yourself accountable for self-care, feelings, behavior, and thoughts. Keeping an agenda is important because it helps you build routines.
- Adequate sleep, exercise and healthy eating.
- Planning the things that are important to you (self-promotion).
- Space for emotions, mindfulness, wonder, me-time and social interaction.
- Time for self-reflection, right after dinner or a moment that suits you, you can write before bedtime but avoid reading, it will awaken your thoughts.

Expand your journaling with what is holding you back in your behavior, what the underlying thoughts are and how you can come back to the here and now. Who do you need to be to make this happen? Also, reflect on:
- Self-compassion: are you treating yourself with the same kindness and understanding as you would treat a friend?
- Listening to your body: do you recognize signs of overstimulation and do you know when to take breaks to prevent burnout?
- Discover what inspires and fills you with wonder as a source of energy.

Strengthen companionship:

Building and nurturing relationships helps you take care of others and, ultimately, makes yourself stronger. Creating a safe environment where vulnerability and empathy are central. U can use a range of techniques, keep in mind to remain genuine:
- Have the courage to be vulnerable. Be open and honest about your strengths and weaknesses, admit mistakes and seek feedback and support from others.
- Show empathy by actively listening, without getting lost in your own thoughts.
- Work on your emotional intelligence (EI). Recognize, understand, and manage our own emotions and those of others.
- Delve into Nonviolent Communication to foster empathy and understanding in human interactions and it is a useful tool for resolving conflicts constructively.
- Learn to break vicious cycles of negative interactions by using The drama triangle.
- Acknowledge the past. Recognize and value the history and contributions of individuals.
- Master Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Identify and build on what works well within an organization, rather than focusing on problems that need to be solved.
- Mind Carefrontation. Address problems while maintaining care and concern for the other.

Expand your journaling with what is holding you back in your behavior.
- Reflect on feelings of guilt, shame or anger. Dare to investigate what these emotions say about yourself.
- Reflect on self-awareness when breaking vicious cycles of negative interactions.
- During a good conversation, you actively listen and dare to discuss how you perceive the other person and what it does to you. You do not judge on the other person; it tells something about yourself.

Nurture kindful connection:
Include the vision for yourself from the third chapter. Consider how you want people to treat you and then adjust your behavior accordingly by applying this chapter.

- Gratitude impacts both others and you.
- Kindness enhances the resilience and emotional well-being of both the giver and the receiver
- Avoid arrogance, this has significant negative effects on both others and you.
- Invest in relational leadership, focus on building strong, positive relationships between leaders and their team members.
- Introduce shared responsibility within the organizational culture to ensure that everyone feels accountable for collective success.
- Use Deep democracy principles involving all voices and perspectives to create bonds between team members and increasing their engagement in the decision-making process.

Practical tips from the interviews:
- Do not put yourself in a better light.
- Objectify matters by weighing them: double-check with your feelings to ensure you made the right decision. If it wasn't the right decision, analyze why.
- Take the first step yourself, go into action, see where it leads, and then re-evaluate.
- Don't take yourself too seriously.
- React in the moment.
- Show people what they are capable of.
- People live from reasons and excuses.
- Do not make distinctions in hierarchy.
- Start with: what does this do to me, it must be my fault. By indicating what your problem is, people are more willing to help you.
- By staying calm, the message lands; otherwise, people go on the defensive.
- You may not feel that the other person deserves an apology but do it anyway. It disarms the other person, creating more understanding for your point of view.
- You should be able to admit you are wrong; do not point out others' mistakes but focus on solutions all day.
- Meaningful interactions with colleagues, friends, and family members strengthen bonds and provide emotional support.
- Actively seek confrontation with the things holding you back and with the behavior of people that you are struggling with.

Expand your journaling with how you are making progress, what is going well, what needs attention and what is holding you back in your behavior.

6.5.3 Guide

In general:
- Ask yourself the question: who must I be to lead this change?
- While guiding others, you will encounter new unknown learning insights and blockages about yourself. You internalize all learning points, sensitivities, and triggers instead of placing them on the other. This ultimately makes the model cyclical.

Create clarity:

As a facilitator, create the conditions for learning and change. This depends on the type and depth of change you want to implement. As a facilitator, you must be accepted in your role to do what is necessary. Creating a clear contracting framework involves defining the scope, objectives, and expectations of the change process. Transformational leadership helps to create clarity:
- Explicitly communicate expectations and responsibilities.
- Responsibility is not one-sided but shared and must be at least verbally expressed.
- Help individuals understand their contributions to overall objectives.
- Synchronize goals, roles, and responsibilities within the team.
- Ensuring that the organization's goals, strategies, and activities are consistent and supportive of each other.
- Watch over the relational connection between team members, fostering camaraderie and mutual understanding.
- Shared responsibility also includes creating a safe environment, discuss in group how a safe environment looks like for everybody individually, find common ground.
- Integration of care and love in the workplace
- Create shared space and sufficient time for interaction.
- Document processes for clarity and consistency within teams and organizations.

Expand your journaling with how you are making progress, what is going well, what needs attention and what is holding you back in your behavior.

Balance direction and support:

Know when to direct versus support team members as a change agent or leader. Adaptive leadership is about sensing the right approach based on the situation.
- During this process, it is important to be aware of your own thoughts to avoid cognitive bias and to listen actively.
- Find the right balance between challenging the team to deliver top performance and providing the necessary support to help them succeed.
- Develop coaching skills: start from what the person needs to help themselves. Guide from your own values and authenticity as learned in Reflect.
- Applying the self-reflection skills learned in reflect on team members will help them to gain insight in their behavior, thoughts, patterns and hidden benefits in their behavior.
- Encourage proactive behavior and taking initiative.
- Silence and delay within conversations provides calmness. It will help to create an atmosphere of trust and safety and give the other person the opportunity to reflect on themselves.
- Use the Cynefin framework as a tool for understanding and dealing with problems.
- Making and keeping promises plays a role in fostering trust and responsibility within teams.
- Periodically asking for heads-up provides you with insight into progress.
- Get people out of defense mode, let people see that with excuses they push themselves back to avoid doing anything.

Expand your journaling with how you are making progress, what is going well, what needs attention and what is holding you back in your behavior.

Embrace sensitivity in change:

Sensitivity is movement, bringing us and others into motion Recognize and value the emotional and relational dynamics within the team. Accept and embrace your sensitivity will lead to a more empathetic and authentic leadership style, which is essential for leading change. Leaders who demonstrate these qualities can create a culture of transparency and openness. Valuable insights you can master:

- Learn about Schein's process consultation. Let the organization identify and implement solutions themselves.
- Listen actively during observation, pay attention to body language and engage in conversations with an open mind and without judgment.
- Learn about Lakin's sensitivity training to develop emotional awareness and interpersonal skills, which are essential for creating a supportive and inclusive work environment.
- Implement a process for continuous learning as learned by Corthouts and Vermeylen as essential components of sustainable growth.
- In "Embrace sensitivity in change," deep democracy is distinct in its application as it emphasizes inclusive decision-making and addressing group dynamics during organizational change. Unlike in "Nurture kindful connection," where it focuses on fostering community and empathetic relationships.
- Be open for group feedback to strengthen team dialogue, leading to better communication and stronger empathetic relationships as you learn to take the perspective of others.
- Learn to give feedback at the moment. About each other's behavior and about the process. Give participants time to reflect and go back to the table to discuss matters further.
- Be open to share introspection in group. By having others describe how they experience the behavior of the other, you can talk about the other's behavior but it also says something about yourself. Make everything relational instead of personal.
- Integrating ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions on a group level.
- Foster a safe and supportive atmosphere as a shared responsibility to help and support each other. This significantly reduces the dynamics of guilt and shame.

Expand your journaling with how you are making progress, what is going well, what needs attention and what is holding you back in your behavior. Again, we learn about ourselves, our behavior, thoughts, inhibitions, and triggers. We can place these within ourselves rather than on others what makes the modal cyclical.

6.6   Answering the research questions

The primary research question is answered by the model:

How can change agents leverage their (high)sensitivity traits to facilitate effective change?
Based on the research findings, change agents can leverage their high sensitivity traits to facilitate effective change by harnessing their deep empathy, strong intuition, and heightened awareness of group dynamics. These traits enable them to understand and address the emotional and psychological needs of individuals within an organization, fostering a supportive environment conductive to change. By creating a culture of trust and open communication, sensitive change agents can guide teams through transitions more smoothly and effectively. Additionally, their ability to perceive and interpret subtle cues allows them to anticipate and mitigate potential resistance to change.

Supporting sub-questions are answered by literature review:

What are the key characteristics of (high)sensitivity traits that influence change management?
Key characteristics of high sensitivity that influence change management include:
- Empathy and emotional intelligence: high sensitivity often correlates with strong empathy and emotional intelligence, which are crucial for understanding and addressing the concerns and emotions of team members during change initiatives.
- Intuition and perceptiveness: sensitive individuals tend to have heightened intuition and perceptiveness, enabling them to sense underlying issues and dynamics that may not be immediately apparent. This allows for proactive problem-solving and the identification of potential areas of resistance.
- Reflectiveness and self-awareness: high sensitivity involves a tendency towards deep reflection and self-awareness. This characteristic helps change agents to continuously evaluate their own biases and behaviors, ensuring that their actions align with the goals of the change process.
- Communication skills: high sensitivity can enhance communication skills, particularly in conveying complex ideas and emotions clearly and empathetically. This is essential for explaining the rationale behind changes and for engaging stakeholders effectively.

What aspects of change management literature emphasize the importance of sensitivity?
The change management literature highlights several aspects where sensitivity is paramount:
- Human-centered approaches: literature emphasizes the importance of adopting human-centered approaches to change management, where the emotional and psychological needs of individuals are prioritized. Sensitivity is critical in understanding these needs and in designing interventions that address them.
- Leadership and trust-building: effective change management requires building trust and demonstrating authentic leadership. Sensitivity plays a vital role in building trust, as sensitive leaders are often perceived as more genuine and caring.
- Feedback and adaptability: sensitivity enhances the ability to receive and act on feedback. Change management literature underscores the need for adaptability and responsiveness to feedback, qualities that are naturally aligned with high sensitivity traits.

Conclusion: change agents can effectively leverage their high sensitivity traits by utilizing their empathy, intuition, and reflective abilities to foster an environment of trust and open communication, thereby facilitating smoother and more effective change management processes.

7 Discussion

The cyclical model of Reflect-Care-Guide, which emerged from the grounded theory analysis, was anticipated to encapsulate the essential components of effective change management and leadership. The expectation of the researchers was that sensitivity, self-awareness, and relational dynamics would play important roles in facilitating successful organizational change. The results of this research largely align with these initial expectations. This can be explained by the changing landscape of leadership and organizational behavior, where there is a growing recognition of the value of emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills.

The alignment of the results with expectations can be attributed to the initial hypothesis that sensitivity and emotional intelligence are critical for effective leadership and change management. The data consistently highlighted the importance of self-reflection, self-care, and relational guidance, which were core components anticipated in the model. This congruence validates the initial theoretical assumptions and underscores the relevance of these factors in practical settings.

The emphasis on vulnerability and authenticity in leadership can be linked to contemporary theories of transformational and servant leadership, which prioritize empathy, ethical behavior, and personal integrity. These leadership styles advocate for leaders who are not only competent but also emotionally connected with their teams.

Furthermore, the prominence of sensitivity in the findings aligns with the increasing focus on mental health and well-being in the workplace. As organizations strive to create more supportive and inclusive environments, the role of leaders as empathetic and understanding figures becomes more critical. This shift is supported by literature on positive psychology and organizational behavior, which highlights the benefits of empathetic leadership on employee engagement and organizational performance.

However, some aspects of the results were unexpected for the researchers. For instance, the emphasis on vulnerability and the need for leaders to openly share their weaknesses and emotions was more pronounced than initially anticipated. This finding suggests that the traditional view of leadership, which often emphasizes strength and stoicism, is evolving towards a more inclusive and emotionally intelligent paradigm.

The unexpected findings regarding vulnerability may be explained by the evolving societal norms around emotional expression and mental health. As stigmas around mental health issues decrease, there is a greater acceptance of leaders who demonstrate emotional openness and authenticity. This trend is reflected in the growing body of research advocating for psychological safety and its positive impact on team dynamics and performance.

7.1 New insights

This research contributes several new insights to the existing body of knowledge on change management and leadership. One of the significant contributions is the identification of sensitivity as a central trait for effective change agents. While previous studies have touched upon the importance of emotional intelligence, this research specifically highlights sensitivity as a multifaceted trait that encompasses empathy, intuition, and relational awareness.

Another important insight is the cyclical nature of the Reflect-Care-Guide model. This model suggests that effective leadership and change management are not linear processes but involve continuous reflection, self-care, and adaptive guidance. This cyclical approach aligns with modern views of dynamic and adaptive leadership but provides a structured framework that can be practically applied.

The research also underscores the importance of integrating personal and professional development. The emphasis on self-care and relational dynamics suggests that leaders cannot effectively guide others without first attending to their well-being and understanding their emotional landscapes. This holistic approach to leadership development is a valuable addition to the existing literature, which often treats professional competencies and personal growth as separate domains.

7.2   Limitations and implications

Despite the strengths of this research, there are several limitations that must be acknowledged. One potential limitation is the sample size and composition. Although the interviewees were diverse and experienced, the sample may not fully represent the broader population of change agents and leaders. Future research could benefit from a larger and more varied sample to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Another limitation is the potential for bias in self-reported data. The reliance on interviews means that the findings are based on the participants' perceptions, experiences and their theories of practice, which may be subject to personal biases and inaccuracies. Triangulating these findings with quantitative data or observations could provide a more comprehensive understanding.

The focus of the research was broad, encompassing various aspects of sensitivity, leadership, and change management. While this breadth provides a holistic view, it may also dilute the depth of analysis in specific areas. Future studies could focus more narrowly on particular elements of the model to provide deeper insights.

The implications of these limitations include the need for cautious interpretation of the findings and the recognition that they may not be universally applicable. Nonetheless, the insights gained from this research offer valuable guidance for practitioners and scholars in the fields of leadership and organizational change.

7.3   Recommendations

Based on the findings and the discussion of this research, several recommendations can be made for practitioners and future research:

For practitioners:
- **Embrace sensitivity**
  Leaders and change agents should cultivate sensitivity as a core competency. This includes developing empathy, honing intuition, and enhancing relational awareness.
- **Promote self-reflection**
  Regular self-reflection practices should be encouraged to help leaders understand their triggers, align their actions with their values, and continuously improve.
- **Foster a culture of vulnerability**
  Organizations should create environments where vulnerability is seen as a strength, promoting openness and authenticity among leaders and employees.
- **Integrate personal and professional development**
  Encourage leaders to prioritize self-care and emotional well-being alongside professional growth. This holistic approach will enhance their effectiveness and resilience.
- **Utilize the Reflect-Care-Guide Model**
  Implement the Reflect-Care-Guide model as a tool for continuous development. This model helps leaders and change agents to systematically reflect on their experiences, prioritize self-care, and seek guidance when needed, ensuring a balanced and effective approach to managing change.

For future research:

- **Expand sample size**
  Future studies should include a larger and more diverse sample of participants to enhance the generalizability of the findings.
- **Use mixed methods**
  Combining qualitative interviews with quantitative data or observational studies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of sensitivity and leadership.
- **Focus on specific elements**
  Conduct in-depth studies on specific aspects of the Reflect-Care-Guide model to provide deeper insights and validate the findings.
- **Explore longitudinal effects**
  Investigate the long-term impact of sensitivity-focused leadership development programs on organizational performance and employee well-being.

7.4 Conclusion

To conclude, we reflect on the paradox shared by one of the interviewees: "It is finished, but it is not finished; yet we lay it down." This sentiment captures the essence of our research journey. While this model of Reflect-Care-Guide may represent a significant achievement, it is also a foundation for ongoing exploration and refinement. Embracing this paradox, we acknowledge that the process of understanding and leveraging sensitivity in change is continuous, and we lay down this work as a step forward in that enduring journey.

8   Conclusions

The primary research question of our thesis is: "How can change agents leverage their (high)sensitivity traits to facilitate effective change?"" To answer this question, we examined the key characteristics of (highly) sensitive traits, their influence on change management, and the role of leadership in leveraging these traits to guide effective change.

Extensive literature review served as the foundation for the interviews conducted using the grounded theory methodology. we cross-checked the data from the interviews against existing literature to ensure robustness. The model developed in this research provides a nuanced understanding of the interaction between (high) sensitivity and effective leadership in change management. Through document analysis, we determined that high sensitivity is characterized by heightened empathy, deep cognitive processing, and strong awareness of subtle environmental cues (Acevedo et al., 2014; Aron, 1996).

These traits enable change agents to better understand and respond to emotional and relational dynamics within themselves and their teams. This understanding leads to reduced resistance within the team and promotes management support, both of which are critical factors in the success of change projects. The model presented helps to flesh out these dynamics and manage change more effectively.

Empirical research revealed that change management literature places significant emphasis on sensitive traits, particularly in fostering trust, collaboration, and communication (Goleman, 2000). Sensitive leaders excel at creating environments where team members feel valued and understood, which reduces resistance to change and improves overall team performance (Whitmore, 2010).

Leadership plays an important role in leveraging sensitivity traits. The Reflect-Care-Guide model developed in this research provides a structured approach for change agents to leverage their (highly) sensitive traits to make change projects successful.

Reflect emphasizes self-awareness and understanding one's own sensitivity, aligning with the fundamental theories of self-leadership and authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Care emphasizes the importance of self-care and relational care, fostering a supportive environment important to both individual and team well-being (Neff, 2003).

Guide focuses on using the insights gained from Reflect and Care to effectively lead and mentor others, in line with transformational leadership principles (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

In conclusion, the findings suggest that change agents who leverage their sensitivity traits can facilitate more effective and empathetic change processes. The Reflect-Care-Guide model serves as a practical blueprint for sensitive change agents, offering strategies for utilizing their natural traits for successful organizational change.

This research contributes to the field of change management by highlighting the unique strengths of (highly) sensitive leaders and change agents. The model provides a framework for the development of change agents and leaders to embrace their sensitivity in change processes, thereby increasing the success rate of change initiatives.

9 Recommendations for further research

The research has revealed that sensitivity does indeed have an impact within change management due to the strong relational nature of change processes. The study identifies which traits are necessary to promote sensitivity within change agents. Investing in the development of sensitive leaders as change agents can enable organizations and businesses to better adapt to changing circumstances and challenges. The recommendations below build upon the findings and analyses outlined in previous chapters. The aim is to provide practical suggestions for shaping sensitive leadership in effective change management across various contexts.

9.1 Recommendations for further research

9.1.1 Different types of organization or business

To what extent does the model require adjustments based on the type of organization or company? It could be that certain aspects carry more weight or less weight within certain contexts, or that the model itself needs to be adapted? Consideration of these possible variations in context is important to confirm the effectiveness and applicability of the model in different organizational settings or adapt it to the specific approach required by that context. This research can increase the relevance of the model in practice or elucidate the need for adjustments within specific contexts.

9.1.2 Different types of scope

Research could be conducted on how change can be brought about within groups, teams or individuals, examining the role sensitivity plays in these processes and whether the model holds up in such cases or needs to be adapted. This research could provide valuable insights into the applicability of the model outside the traditional change management context. Furthermore, it is essential to consider the possible outcomes or contributions of proposed adjustments to the model in these specific contexts.

9.1.3 Training and development programs

Research can be done on how training and development programs can be designed to support sensitive change agents in strengthening their sensitivity and relational skills. In addition, research can be conducted on the role of mentoring programs, peer support and corporate culture in promoting the development of sensitive leaders within organizations. Education and training programs for change agents are plentiful but such research contributes to the development of change agents in a way that especially focuses on raising awareness and strengthening the importance of the relational aspect within change management.

Due to the low success rate of change initiatives and the lack of relationally focused training for change agents that could improve this success rate a new approach can help ensure that more change processes also succeed effectively.

Existing training programs primarily focus on Emotional Intelligence, particularly empathy. However, the spectrum of skills required for a change agent is much broader than that. Current training programs are heavily segmented into time blocks where specific soft skills are taught. The Reflect-Care-Guide model demonstrates that a broader time aspect and higher interpersonal interaction are necessary. This model highlights the need for continuous development and integration of various competencies, ensuring change agents are well-equipped to handle complex change processes. It is recommended that training programs expand their scope to include comprehensive, ongoing development that aligns with the principles of the Reflect-Care-Guide model.

Despite the wide range of training opportunities, it is often mentioned that 70% of all change projects currently fail. Therefore, the principles of the Reflect-Care-Guide model are worth trying.

10 Appendices
10.1 Appendix 1: Key learning points from interviews and contributions to the model.

Thank you for the opportunity to interview with each and every one of you. Your enthusiasm and cooperation exceeded our expectations, and we are grateful for the time and effort you put into sharing your knowledge and experiences with me.
The model is constructed using both inductive and deductive approaches. The interviews contribute to the inductive process, aiming to create a new theory. Subsequently, all aspects of this qualitative research are tested against existing theories, forming the deductive aspect. By combining these two approaches, we aim to work thoroughly.

In this appendix, we provide a clear overview of which interviews contributed to the inductive part of the model and thus its construction. This is done to offer insight into the contribution and evolution of the model and to acknowledge the valuable contributions of each participant.

Once again, thank you for your willingness to participate and for the invaluable insights you all provided.

Interview with Felix Corthouts: Professor emeritus at Hasselt University

Reason for interview:
Felix was a professor at Hasselt University's Faculty of Applied Economics. There he taught the subject of organizational psychology and Innovative Human Resource Management. He was also active for 30 years as a consultant in cultural change processes in organizations and companies.

Time and duration of the interview(s):
Friday February 16, 2024: for about three hours

Summary of the key learning points:
Friday February 16, 2024:

Felix talks about guiding groups in three phases:
- Phase one is about becoming part of the group where the participant experiences fear of rejection and not being accepted. Feedback, both giving and receiving, is important here, as well as being able to name things correctly and finding common ground with others.
- Phase two involves becoming more sensitive in the relationship, both one-on-one and in the group. It's important for participants to reflect on their own experiences and how they come across to the group. Feedback is important here, focusing on what a reaction from others or oneself reveals about oneself. By reframing feedback in terms of personal impact rather than attributing it to others, individuals gain insight into their own reactions and motivations. Allowing others to provide feedback first and then discussing its impact fosters acceptance.
- Phase three addresses implementation within the group itself. Felix emphasizes the importance of addressing behavior before delving into theory. Understanding old patterns is key, and interaction serves as a learning tool. Relational dynamics take precedence over individual analysis. Describing observed behaviors helps clarify perceptions and their personal significance.

Felix also suggests that small talk, which the speaker viewed as a weakness due to information processing overload, stems from fear of self-disclosure. However, improvement is possible. Regarding feedback, timely delivery is paramount. Leaders should cultivate an environment where everyone feels safe expressing themselves. Reflecting on processes, acknowledging successes, and discussing areas for improvement contribute to a supportive climate.
Felix highlights the paradox of passivity and urges proactive engagement. Taking initiative is a learning process.

He stresses the relational nature of interactions, advising against labeling others. Describing behaviors without using labels fosters clearer communication.
People often make assumptions about others' behaviors based on their own experiences. Instead, individuals should reflect on how others' behaviors affect them personally. Self-reflection is key. Articulating one's own problems effectively encourages others to help.

Felix underscores the importance of emotional intelligence and recommends the book "Sensitivity Training."

Contribution to the model:
- Three Phases of Group Guidance:
    o Phase One: Integrating into the group, where participants experience fear of rejection. Emphasizing the importance of feedback, correctly naming things, and finding common ground.
    o Phase Two: Developing sensitivity in relationships, both one-on-one and in groups. Reflecting on personal experiences and how they are perceived by the group. Reframing feedback to focus on personal impact.
    o Phase Three: Implementing changes within the group. Addressing behavior before theory, understanding old patterns, and using interaction as a learning tool.
- Encouraging proactive behavior and taking initiative as a learning process. Overcoming passivity by engaging actively in group dynamics.
- Advising against labeling others. Describing behaviors clearly and fostering transparent communication to improve relational understanding.
- Understanding one's own emotions as a basis for perceiving and experiencing others. Encouraging individuals to reflect on how others' behaviors affect them personally.
- Emphasizing the importance of timely and constructive feedback. Reflecting on feedback processes, acknowledging successes, and discussing areas for improvement.
- Highlighting the significance of emotional intelligence. Recommending sensitivity training to gain insight into personal patterns and improve relational dynamics.
- Cultivating an environment where everyone feels safe to express themselves. Ensuring that participants feel secure in providing and receiving feedback.
- Prioritizing relational dynamics within the group. Understanding that learning occurs through relationships and that engaging with others provides greater self-awareness.
- Addressing the fear of self-disclosure that often underlies small talk. Encouraging participants to open up and share more deeply to enhance group cohesion and individual growth.
- Implement the three phases of group guidance, starting with integration and moving towards sensitivity and implementation. Encourage proactive engagement and clear communication without labels. Provide timely and constructive feedback to facilitate learning.
- Promote self-reflection on emotions and personal experiences. Emphasize the importance of emotional intelligence and recommend sensitivity training. Encourage individuals to reflect on how others' behaviors affect them and to use feedback for self-awareness.
- Create a safe environment for expression and feedback. Prioritize relational dynamics over individual analysis. Address underlying fears of self-disclosure to improve group cohesion and individual growth.

Interview with Sofie Herremans: Clinical pedagogue with knowledge of high sensitivity and owner of [Zegg](#) practice.

Reason for interview:
Sofie is the owner of Zegg, a practice where individuals can receive guidance and coaching. Zegg also has a strong focus on guiding organizations and businesses, emphasizing physical and mental well-being, engagement, communication, balance, awareness, and personal development.

Time and duration of the interview(s):
Friday March 29, 2024: for about two hours
Thursday April 25, 2024: for about two hours

Summary of the key learning points:
Friday March 29, 2024:

Sofie teaches me about awareness and self-care. She herself uses a model that highlights several aspects, such as self-management: keeping a diary and making a schedule, exercise and movement with a distinction between heavy and light exertion, me-time where you do something enjoyable for yourself, getting enough sleep and maintaining a good sleep pattern, time-in, where you reconnect with yourself and ask yourself if you are still on course, and finally, nutrition, oxygen, and spending enough time outdoors. A pitfall for sensitive people is wanting to set too many goals for themselves. This should be taken into account within self-management.

The relational emotional theory is about thoughts as the director of your behavior and feelings. Your thoughts are determined by values, norms, and your history. The feeling is the actor, both in emotion and physically. The more sensitive you are, the more likely you are to steer yourself with your feelings, but it is often a pitfall to let your thoughts dominate your feelings. For example, when someone comes to apply for a job, your gut feeling tells you something is wrong. Your thoughts seek confirmation that he or she can do it, perhaps through experience on the CV. In this way, the pitfall for sensitive people is letting your goal be overshadowed by your thoughts. Often, a few months later, your gut feeling about the new employee turns out to be right. As a sensitive person, it is important to realign your thoughts and behaviors with your feelings and intuition.

We discuss the difference between guilt and shame as pillars within your authenticity. With guilt, you are more likely to consciously hurt or harm someone, while with shame, it is more about feeling that you have not done something good for the other person. A pitfall for sensitive individuals is putting others first; you need to learn to put yourself back in the first place by trusting yourself. For example, Sofie talks about the reason why entrepreneurs work so hard. Often, this is linked to guilt, shame, a bullying past, or a bad home situation.

Furthermore, within intuition, we discuss focus and techniques you can apply. For example, by closing your eyes, you try to feel where the guilt is in your body, thus getting to know your body. As for tools and techniques, she talks about heart coherence because the heart reacts faster than the head. Through biofeedback, you can identify where your stress is and then regain peace through, for example, breathing exercises.

Finally, we talk about sensitivity itself. As a reader of a thesis, do you know what it is and what it means for yourself? Do I discover it in this thesis, in the model, or do I need to discover it first?

Summary of the key learning points:
Thursday April 25, 2024:

We discussed systemic therapy and schema therapy. A lot of information about this is available through the VZW Schema Therapy Flanders. It is also a good idea to look at coping, the survival strategies you apply in your behavior today.

Next, we talked about the framework needed before guiding a group. There are objectives to achieve, a financial framework to adhere to, and it is important to learn to understand who you are working with.

Additionally, Sofie discussed Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which shows that highly sensitive people have the pitfall of doing a lot for others while being very hard on themselves. ACT can help you recognize this. It also involves values, acting according to those values, accepting yourself, stepping back from your own context, and diffusion. An example of diffusion is learning to place your feelings, for instance: "I am sad, it is just sadness." It is important to take action and learn to feel in the here and now.

We then talked about mindfulness to learn to live in the present moment. Mindfulness is a combination of Buddhism and cognitive behavioral therapy and serves as a tool and technique within self-reflection. It helps you live more consciously in the present moment, and, for example, eat more mindfully.

Sofie indicated that working on yourself is good, but it should also be related to others, the company, or the organization.

Additionally, it is important to communicate connectedly and consciously choose what you still do for others and why you do it.

Contribution to the model:
-    Starting with a clear understanding of what sensitivity is and what it means to each individual. This foundation helps in guiding others effectively by recognizing and valuing their sensitivities.
-    Establishing a clear framework before guiding a group, which includes setting objectives, adhering to a financial framework, and understanding the individuals within the group.
-    Using techniques like Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to help individuals take action, align their behaviors with their values, and manage their sensitivities. This includes tools like heart coherence and biofeedback to manage stress and maintain balance.
-    Emphasizing the importance of self-reflection moments and integrating them into daily life. This includes techniques such as mindfulness and keeping a diary to stay connected with oneself.
-    Encouraging individuals to align their thoughts and behaviors with their feelings and intuition. This helps in maintaining authenticity and avoiding pitfalls where thoughts overshadow gut feelings.
-    Reflecting on the roles of guilt and shame in one's life and how they influence authenticity. Recognizing these emotions helps in managing them constructively.
-    Highlighting the importance of self-care, resilience, and energy management. This involves setting realistic goals, ensuring adequate sleep, exercise, nutrition, and making time for enjoyable activities.
-    Emphasizing that personal development should be related to others, the company, or the organization. Building connections and maintaining relational well-being is essential.

- Focusing on connected communication and consciously choosing what to do for others and understanding the reasons behind these actions. This helps in maintaining balance and avoiding burnout.
- Begin by understanding and valuing sensitivity. Establish a clear framework for group guidance, set objectives, and use techniques like ACT and mindfulness to help individuals take action and align with their values.
- Integrate self-reflection moments into daily life. Encourage individuals to align their thoughts and behaviors with their feelings and intuition. Reflect on the roles of guilt and shame to maintain authenticity.
- Emphasize the importance of self-care, resilience, and energy management. Foster relational development and connected communication to ensure personal growth is aligned with organizational well-being.

Interview with Johan Poisquet: Facilitator of entrepreneurial & innovation driven networks and communities of practice at VLAIO

Reason for interview:

Johan is experienced in change. He is a people and organizational development specialist with a demonstrated history of working in HR & O.D. consulting services and in post-academic professional development programs. Skilled in learning and development, process consultation, multi-actor collaboration, shared leadership and entrepreneurship.

Time and duration of the interview(s):

Friday February 16, 2024: for about three hours

Summary of the key learning points:

Johan draws an analogy with leadership. Just like in leadership, change begins with yourself, namely, how do you experience change yourself? What does this then say about yourself? Being addressed on things you enjoy touches you, while others may view this more rationally. This is the beginning of learning. Then you can delve into this, what do you learn about yourself on one hand and how do you then orient yourself or delve into change. It can be quite an emotional process because you become more sensitive to your inner dynamics and what happens with others and in groups. Only then can you apply it to others in a final phase.

Then we talk about guilt and shame as important learning moments. These are things that you naturally prefer to avoid, but they do form the basis in group learning works like sensitivity training where guilt and shame are learning factors, mechanisms that prompt learning. A good group manages each other's pitfalls, so guilt and shame don't play as much. Learning is a process of becoming more conscious. There are also incongruities between what you say you do and what others think you do; learning is about mapping out discrepancies.

More sensitive people tend to take things more personally, carry more with them, and think longer about things. They can therefore delve more thoroughly into them and gain more insights, which can lead to more thorough work. Johan sees purity from sensitivity as a rich exploration area, a source of learning, and links it to behavioral learning. More sensitive people are quicker to perceive what behavior colors above the waterline, they have a quicker view of underlying dynamics.

As a change agent, you also need to establish the right cultural conditions, create the conditions for cooperation, which depend on the change you want to create and the depth of development. The change agent as a facilitator needs to be an accepted third party. He needs to be accepted to do the things he needs to do. Support means asking for trust with an emphasis on shared responsibility and culture, which you also need to verbally express. He refers to a psychological contract that you make (contacting-contracting-acting).

Johan also talks about focus, to connect with your own body and refers to some founders. Mindfulness can be a good tool to access your body, to become more aware that you are part of reality but at the same time the world does not stop with you. A pitfall of mindfulness, however, is individualistic thinking. You must first learn to take care of yourself. Learning to take care of others is relationally developed, sustained or broken down and can lead to better self-care. It's about the connection between yourself and the other. You are responsible for yourself but also for the other. Resistance and accepting others are imperfections, leadership, parenthood, change, soft skills, etc., are relational. You need to be able to name things, to be able to say what's what without losing sight of caring for the other. Feedback is very important in this regard. He emphasizes the importance of group feedback instead of individual feedback just to not lose the relational aspect.

Then Johan talks about the importance of being amazed. The relational gives you new unknown learning insights and blockages that you can then take with you for yourself. These can be sensitivities or triggers.

This can give an extra dimension to the facilitator. He talks about aesthetic matters, ethical (doing good for each other), and spiritual aspects that can bring about a deeper sense of wonder. This can

be achieved by connecting with nature, doing meaningful things for the community, or being part of a collective.

Finally, we talk about different types of companies that you can see as different worlds, each with its own ecosystem. Some companies are more driven by management, while others emphasize more the connection between members. The quality of the relationship between these two is closely related to the context of the company or organization.

Contribution to the model:
- Reflecting on one's inner dynamics and understanding emotional processes, including guilt and shame, as important learning mechanisms. Sensitivity to these inner dynamics enhances personal and group learning.
- Reflecting on incongruities between self-perception and how others perceive one's actions. This reflection helps in mapping out discrepancies and enhancing self-awareness.
- Using mindfulness to connect with one's body and become more aware of being part of a larger reality. Reflecting on the balance between self-awareness and relational responsibilities.
- Emphasizing that caring for oneself and others is a relational process. This involves understanding that self-care is influenced by relationships and interactions with others.
- Ensuring the right conditions for support and cooperation, which involves establishing trust and shared responsibility within the organizational culture.
- Recognizing that ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual aspects add value to the facilitator's role. Connecting with nature, engaging in meaningful community activities, and fostering a deeper sense of wonder enhance the care aspect.
- Begin by understanding and experiencing personal change before guiding others. Establish the right cultural conditions and create a psychological contract with clients, focusing on shared responsibility and organizational values. Utilize group feedback to enhance relational learning.
- Reflect deeply on inner dynamics, including emotional processes like guilt and shame. Use mindfulness to enhance self-awareness and recognize the importance of relational responsibilities. Reflect on discrepancies between self-perception and external feedback to improve self-awareness.
- Emphasize the relational aspect of self-care and caring for others. Create supportive environments that foster trust and cooperation. Integrate ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions into the facilitation process to enhance the overall care and development experience.

Interview with Roger Goris: Lecturer emeritus at Sociale Hogeschool Leuven and former consultant in guiding change.
Reason for interview:
Roger trained as an organizational psychologist. He then retrained in process facilitation and sensitivity training by attending CIGO at UHasselt. Roger has 39 years of experience as a change consultant during which he himself provided sensitivity training.

Time and duration of the interview(s):
Friday February 16, 2024: for about two and a half hours

Summary of the key learning points:
Roger points out that there is a difference between involvement and obedience. Obedience can be easily enforced, whereas involvement requires a completely different approach.

People learn best from each other. This is done by bringing them together in groups and allowing them to interact. He describes what can then happen as mysterious, fascinating, and emotional.

He explains the success of models like MBTI through people's natural causal thinking. People love stories; our senses are wired that way. Tests or models that proclaim coherence are commercially successful but do not necessarily have value or are demonstrable. Human scientific action and the relational aspect are often lost here.

For Roger, sensitivity means using yourself as an instrument. This goes beyond knowing equals measuring. Knowing is more than just what is measurable. He also notes that there is still much disbelief about sensitivity, often seen as soft talk.

Roger underscores the importance of participation and authenticity. Hearing, seeing, feeling, and smelling each other gives the power to learn from each other. There is a great need for authentic contact. Roger sees the blocks reflect, care, guide as correct but says they need further documentation and deepening.

He refers to Peter Koestenbaum's model 'The Leadership Diamond' as a good instrument to increase self-knowledge and also to look at others. Greatness, as the model describes, is about bringing out the positive in yourself, feeding what you love to nourish your core. He describes the importance of developing a vision about yourself and the pragmatism to know your steel, know the market, and know yourself by obtaining objective feedback. In Courage, it is important to face your fears. Within Ethics, it is about applying moral values in your own words and behavior.

He also refers to Peter Koestenbaum's book "The Inner Side of Greatness" and Peddler's book "The Consultant's Handbook" as worth reading. Koestenbaum talks about intuition, which can be very good and useful if based on factual knowledge, but intuition can be just as dangerous as it is nurturing. He also links it to rational-emotive therapy.

Roger points out that sensitivity also has a major pitfall, namely vulnerability. As a change agent, you don't always have a thick skin and can be deeply affected by many things. He says it is best to accept that your feelings do their own thing. Vulnerability is important to accept and to include in the upbringing of children. There is still a lot of disbelief about sensitivity because it is often seen as soft talk.

Regarding attitude, he says this is the field where feeling, action, seeing, experiencing, knowing, and doing come together and must be in line with your personality. You need time to learn attitude.

Regarding organizational culture, he says it is related to attitude and mentality in general. He refers to Landa Grayson who states in her book that if you don't treat a person as a person, you won't get results. He also mentions that Neilsen's book "Becoming an OD Practitioner" is worth reading.

At some point, you need to turn the client's question into a project. To do this, you need to listen well to the other, but to do this well, he says you must first listen well to yourself. You need to involve yourself by asking questions like: What is going on with me? What does this do to me? Through self-insight, we build a relationship by engaging in conversation with others. In such conversations, we also learn and must actively lead that conversation. This may sound pretentious, he says, but you really need to know yourself well. The quality of the relationship is paramount, and both parties are responsible for it.

Roger points out that there is a paradox in personal growth. It is not by standing in front of the mirror but by interacting with others that personal growth is possible. In this context, good feedback and a good feedback culture are very important. He emphasizes that feedback should be linked to introspection and then to discuss it again the next day. Discussing intimate matters makes a team strong, forming the basis of learning together. There is no fixed formula for this; it is about social exchange. Learning is about giving and receiving feedback. The question is, are you willing to share introspection with each other? Or do you feel shy? Taking this risk forms the basis of authentic relationships. A bond must become a covenant, which you achieve through learning relationships, a kind of psychological learning contract.

Sometimes people are unable to express their feelings, vision, etc., in words. Ask if they might want to make a drawing or write a love letter or poem to express their feelings. You can give participants, for example, 45 minutes for this, but only when you already have a group. Within group dynamics, a relationship needs time, intensity, quality, and experience to develop. Confrontations and shared matters are an integral part of this.

If you are guiding a group, start the week on Monday, at the beginning of the week.

Contribution to the model:
- The importance of involvement
- People learn in groups due to the relational character
- Sensitivity = using yourself as an instrument
- The importance of participation and authenticity
- The importance of increasing self-knowledge but also seeing yourself in relation to others
- You need to bring out the positive in yourself and develop a vision of yourself
- Self-knowledge requires objective feedback from others
- Courage = managing your own fears
- The importance of moral values in words and behavior
- Intuition can be as dangerous as it is nurturing
- Attitude is where feeling, knowing, doing, seeing, experiencing, and acting come together
- The quality of the relationship is important; this is the responsibility of both parties
- Alignment: you need to translate the client's request into a project
- To learn to listen well to others, you must first listen well to yourself
- Be willing to share introspection with each other

Interview with Carmen Geafer: Design manager for construction and furniture design, candidate Open Borders MBA
Reason for interview:
Carmen is a fellow student in the Open Borders MBA. we have come to know her as a gentle, strong, sensitive leader with a big heart, high integrity, honesty, and a great sense of empathy and compassion. She lives from the heart, and we were just curious about how she does this.

Time and duration of the interview(s):
Monday April 22, 2024: for about two hours

Summary of the key learning points:
Carmen emphasizes the importance of being honest with yourself in all situations. This is about integrity, being truthful with yourself about where you are and where you want to go. The aim is not to settle into the situation but to take action and not get stuck. You need to be honest with yourself without putting yourself in a better light. As an example, she mentions hiring someone: you can weight criteria to make things more objective and then check with your feelings to ensure you make the right decision. If it turns out you didn't make the right decision, you need to analyze what went wrong and why. This helps you learn and grow.

She underlines the importance of creating an atmosphere of trust. Empathy will advance the business. During and after every interaction, you have the opportunity to reflect. You can look at each situation and learn about what you can do with it and how you will react and interact next time. She emphasizes the importance of honesty in this process. Personal development is important; she wants to learn in an honest way and it is also important to remain honest with yourself. She doesn't measure guilt but continually evaluates her feelings and interactions as a basis for personal growth. She also recognizes signals in herself, physically, when things don't feel right. She sees guilt as something to turn into a positive and uses her gut feeling to determine what she can do for herself and the organization.

She looks at situations from the perspective of how she can see them positively and how she can use them. She indicates that she quickly takes action, makes the first step, sees where it leads, and then re-evaluates. And above all, don't take yourself too seriously. She has no real plan for growth; she just goes into action, taking things in the moment without too much pressure, because then it can turn around and become a block. Even when she feels a certain flow in her work, she doesn't immediately see herself as important. She states that her private life, family, friends, contact with nature, and reading help her find peace and grow.

Carmen says that in the workplace, we are all human beings and everyone is needed. We are all people working together. For her, there doesn't need to be a hierarchy. She finds it important to positively influence people by letting them realize what they are capable of. This applies to everyone in the organization. She makes no distinction in her approach from director to cleaner; for her, everyone is important and everyone plays an important role in keeping the whole running. She despises arrogance and social standing. We all need each other, and everyone fulfills an important role. Showing respect is very important to her. Besides arrogance, she detests injustice, especially when certain things are targeted at her and the way people present things.

She points out that people can be very sensitive to how you say or present things. It is important to look at it from the other side and formulate the message so that the other person accepts it and maintains their dignity.

She also mentions that people often get caught up in their thoughts during a conversation. If you really want to listen, you need to park those thoughts and actively participate in the conversation.

For her, it doesn't feel authentic when people use a certain technique or methodology. That's why she places a lot of importance on choosing the right words and carefully considers how the message will be received by the other person. During an interaction, she also finds it important that you can and dare to admit when you were wrong. She doesn't point out others' mistakes but points out solutions all day.

Contribution to the model:
- Creating an atmosphere of trust and empathy is important. This helps in guiding individuals effectively and ensuring they feel supported.
- The importance of taking action and not getting stuck. As a guide, it is important to encourage proactive steps and continuous movement towards goals.
- Influencing people positively by helping them recognize their own capabilities is key.
- Reflecting honestly on your own position and intentions is important for personal growth. This involves acknowledging where you stand and where you want to go.
- There can be a conflict within yourself about where you are and where you want to go.
- After making decisions, reflecting on what went wrong and why helps in learning and improving. This process of reflection ensures continuous growth.
- Recognizing and reflecting on physical and emotional signals when things don't feel right is important for personal well-being and making better decisions.
- Acknowledging and accepting vulnerability, both in oneself and others, is essential. This creates a caring environment where people feel safe to express themselves.
- Treating everyone with respect and recognizing the important roles that all individuals play in an organization fosters a caring and inclusive atmosphere.
- Emphasizing the importance of a balanced life, including private life, family, friends, and nature, supports overall well-being and growth.

Interview with Leon Vliegen: Independent Business Owner at Fly Consult, Executive coach, mentor, keynote speaker, author book 'Risico verzilveren' and expert at the Open Borders MBA
Reason for interview:
I got to know Leon as a change expert during the Open Borders MBA. He has his own company, Flyconsult, where he trains executives in leadership and resilience, helps with talent acquisition, develops decision-making skills, and offers a wide range of training programs.

Time and duration of the interview(s):
Tuesday April 23, 2024: for about two and a half hours

Summary of the key learning points:
Leon talks about the importance of learning to recognize triggers in your behavior. Transactional analysis can help with this by mapping out the Child-Parent-Adult positions. Schema therapy can also be useful, as well as behavior and emotion therapy. A schema maps out your patterns. Within these patterns, there are things you need to reconcile with and patterns that are better given back to your parents.

Spoken language and body language are important. Leon refers to "body language" in terms of the images and metaphors you use rather than traditional body language.

In addition to sensing, it's also important to get things moving to guide groups, teams, and organizations in a different way. Along with his own book, "Mental Resilience," he references Otto Scharmer's books "Presence" and "Theory U" to learn to lead from the future. He also mentions E.H. Schein's book "Process Consultation" regarding reading, feeling, and managing dynamics to mobilize people. This also applies to yourself: think about what you observe and what you can attentively perceive. In a dialogue, it is important to engage sensitively by actively listening with an open mind. By an open mind, he means thinking about how broadly and deeply you perceive things without judgment and how you can use this to get things moving.

Mental agility, according to Leon, involves risk, unpredictability, and teaching people how to cope with these. In his book, he describes eight mental pitfalls that lead to poor choices. The key is to let people experience how they deal with uncertainty. There are also different levels of uncertainty, for which he suggests looking at the Cynefin framework, a model that maps out uncertainty. Leon emphasizes the importance of looking at yourself but also ensuring you don't get in your own way.

Emotion regulation can be learned through exercises. Leon refers to the module in the MBA that addresses this. He also recommends the book "Patronen doorbreken (Breaking Patterns)" noting that online exercises are also available.

Leon recognizes the cyclical nature of the Reflect-Care-Guide model, as nature itself is cyclical. He further emphasizes the importance of reconciliation; you have a foundation with its limitations and possibilities. It's with the possibilities that you move forward.

We also discussed influencing another person's behavior in a non-manipulative way, to guide their behavior. He suggests looking for literature on non-violent communication to become more connected and adaptable.

As a paradox, he mentions that something can be finished without being completely done, yet you still present it. This is a bit of advice for the thesis.

Contribution to the model:
- Regular reflection on emotional and physical signals helps in identifying when things are off balance. This self-awareness is critical for personal and professional growth
- Reflecting honestly about one's position, goals, and actions, without self-deception, is vital. This involves analyzing decisions and learning from mistakes.
- Reflecting on mental pitfalls and understanding how to handle unpredictability helps in making better decisions. Leon's insights on mental agility and the Cynefin framework provide a structured way to reflect on and manage uncertainty.
- Practicing and learning emotion regulation techniques is fundamental for maintaining well-being and fostering a supportive environment.
- Caring involves respecting others and reconciling with one's own limitations and possibilities. Understanding and accepting these aspects allow for a more compassionate and supportive interaction with others.
- Recognizing the cyclical nature of personal and organizational growth aligns with the natural cycles. This understanding can help in nurturing continuous development and resilience.
- Utilize tools like transactional analysis and schema therapy to help individuals recognize and manage their behavioral triggers. Encourage taking action and leading from a future-oriented perspective, while influencing others non-manipulatively.
- Foster a practice of honest self-assessment and reflection on emotional and physical signals. Understand mental pitfalls and employ frameworks like Cynefin to manage uncertainty and improve decision-making.
- Emphasize the importance of emotional regulation and reconciliation with one's limitations. Respect and support others in a non-manipulative manner, recognizing the cyclical nature of growth and development.

Interview with Paul Peeters: Senior Consultant Life Sciences, candidate Open Borders MBA

Reason for interview:

I got to know Paul as a fellow student during the Open Borders MBA. Paul is a very warm, intelligent, driven, and passionate person. He has already come a long way in terms of self-reflection, mindfulness, and self-development. We are curious to know where he stands now and what recommendations he can offer me from the journey he has undertaken.

Time and duration of the interview(s):

Tuesday April 30, 2024: for about two hours

Summary of the key learning points:

For Paul, modesty and self-love are important. A lack of self-love leads to avoidance, just as passing judgment on others does.

You need to think carefully about what others' statements do to you to understand what it says about yourself. It is also important to consider how you engage in self-reflection. He uses Frédéric Imbo's highways model.

The way you communicate messages is also important. He advises learning about non-violent communication. Internal Family Systems (IFS) can help, as can Richard Schwartz's model from Harvard University, "The 8 C's and 5 P's of Self in IFS." This is essential for shaping someone you want to coach. Paul finds it important to be present without judgment and to transform your inner critic into your greatest coach. All of this cannot happen without self-love, which is why he considers it so important.

Paul advises looking at Stephen Karpman's drama triangle to understand which roles you take on in different situations and how to break out of the drama triangle.

Paul talks about passion and following your passion, with intuition playing an important role. He uses Bashar's excitement formula, which teaches you in five steps to align with your true self and live your dream life. This tool has removed any reason for negative thinking. An important insight for him is distinguishing between your thoughts and who you are; you are not your thoughts.

Furthermore, he discusses coincidence and how he does not believe in it. "Coincidence is a refuge of ignorance," he quotes Spinoza. According to Paul, entropy is the chaos where knowledge ends and ignorance begins.

Past-life regression analysis has helped him better understand himself.

Prioritizing oneself is very important to Paul. He talks about action-motivation-action. Proactively working on oneself is important for him.

He also talks about contraction or expansion. Everything starts with oneself, for example, your thoughts. If these thoughts make you feel good, we speak of expansion; if they do not, we speak of contraction. By nature, we tend to put ourselves in contraction rather than expansion. You can break this by first becoming strongly aware of it.

Paul speaks about gratitude. Being grateful in every situation, for nature, and for the beautiful moments he experiences. He has taught himself to express his gratitude extensively. Paul also keeps a journal where he records things like thoughts, emotions, and especially gratitude.

Regarding self-management, he talks about "silence in the upstairs room." "I am not my emotion." He refers to the Stoics, who nourish themselves in expansion. He talks about feedforward cycles, from pure joy to his environment and back to himself.

Finally, we discussed Appreciative Inquiry as an important tool in your toolbox as a change agent.

Contribution to the model:
- Emphasizing the importance of modesty and self-love in guiding others. Ensuring that individuals prioritize self-love to avoid judgment and avoidant behaviors.
- Highlighting the significance of non-violent communication and clear message delivery. Tools like Internal Family Systems (IFS) and the "8 C's and 5 P's of Self in IFS" can help guide individuals in their personal development and coaching.
- Encouraging individuals to follow their passion and intuition. Using tools like Bashar's excitement formula to align with one's true self and live a fulfilling life.
- Utilizing models like Frédéric Imbo's highways model for self-reflection. Encouraging deep thought on how others' statements affect oneself to gain insights.
- Emphasizing the distinction between one's thoughts and one's true self. Encouraging reflection to recognize that thoughts do not define the individual.
- Highlighting the importance of prioritizing oneself and maintaining proactive self-care. Ensuring individuals engage in action-motivation-action cycles for continuous self-improvement.
- Teaching awareness of thoughts that lead to contraction (negative feelings) versus expansion (positive feelings). Encouraging practices that promote expansion and positive self-awareness.
- Encouraging the practice of gratitude and keeping a journal to record thoughts, emotions, and moments of gratitude. This helps in maintaining a positive outlook and self-care routine.
- Promote modesty, self-love, and effective communication. Use tools like IFS and Bashar's excitement formula to help individuals align with their true selves and guide them through their personal development.
- Utilize self-reflection techniques such as Frédéric Imbo's highways model. Encourage individuals to reflect on how others' statements affect them, understand the roles of guilt and shame, and distinguish their thoughts from their true selves.
- Emphasize self-prioritization and proactive self-care. Teach individuals to recognize and shift from contraction to expansion in their thoughts and feelings. Encourage practices like gratitude journaling to foster a positive and resilient mindset.

Interview with Marissa Martens: Directeur Ligo Limburg Zuid

Reason for interview:

I got to know Marissa through a mutual friend. She is the director at Ligo, the center for basic education. Upon her appointment as director, she encountered an organization in trouble. Gradually, she has transformed this organization into a warm and people-oriented environment, a process that continues to grow today. Despite sharing the same last name, Marissa and us are not related.

Time and duration of the interview(s):

Friday Mai 3, 2024: for about one and a half hours

Summary of the key learning points:

Marissa emphasizes the importance of values, such as equality, kindness, and openness. She believes that values are the glue that binds people together and enables them to achieve shared goals. Marissa's motto for growth is "I grow by helping others grow," highlighting the relational nature of growth in general. She believes in creating a safe space for people and not being blind to empathy. She is not afraid to admit mistakes, be vulnerable, and even cry at work.

When she was appointed, she had a psycho-social analysis and a BBB exercise conducted within the company, which focuses on what to preserve, banish, and achieve. She then integrated deep-democracy principles and inclusivity. As a company culture, she strives for a family-like atmosphere but also places great importance on loyalty within the organization. She ensures shared responsibility, with the needs of the organization not being forgotten.

Deep democracy is now used for almost every decision that needs to be made. Marissa usually starts with a proposal, which she then presents to the team. In the first phase, everyone stands at the 'YES' side to think about what is good about the idea. Then, everyone moves to the 'NO' side to explore what might not work. A new proposal is then developed, with people being the glue that leads to success. Marissa admits that she sometimes goes too fast for the group, which she finds unpleasant, but she also sees who is with her and can support her in the process.

Vulnerability is essential for Marissa, whether it is in the learning process or criticism that is more personal, which she quickly perceives as a personal failure. Personal contact with employees is important for her, even if it is just a short personal conversation.

Marissa starts with what is going well and then builds on it, learning from the experiences. It is okay for things not to go well, and she also communicates this to her employees, acknowledging that they can also make mistakes. She actively asks for help and provides what others need. Autonomy is essential for her.

She is building a resilient, agile, and vibrant organization with a sense of autonomy and connection. This is a learning process, as trust takes time. She offers space for ventilation, works with meaning and pleasure, and admits that avoidance is her pitfall.

Self-reflection is essential in this process. Finding herself is important, but also in interaction with others. She continuously reflects on projects and herself in the future, but giving shape to that future self is not yet as she would like.

Marissa also believes that you get back what you give. A small 'how are you' can make a world of difference. She likes to be open and, above all, remain curious and not focus too much on her mistakes, as it makes her insecure. Marissa starts from the question 'what does this mean to you

now?' to help her connect rational and emotional (head-heart) aspects. Resilience and agility are essential for her. Being able to respond quickly to change is the key.

In leadership, she believes it is essential to sense whether she needs to lead or support. She recommends reading Wouter Hart's book "Anders Vasthouden" for this. This way, she lets people think actively, but she also admits that people sometimes need guidance.

In change, she believes that acknowledging things from the past is essential. When someone is about to retire, she asks what this person still wants from now until retirement and what they want to leave behind when they leave.

Marissa also gives me a list of literature that has helped her on her way:
- 'Reinventing Organizations' by Frederic Laloux
- 'Van zondebok naar zebra' by Fanny Matheusen
- 'Inspirerend coachen' by Jef Clement
- 'Oplossingsgericht leidinggeven' by Frerike Bannink
- 'De 5 frustraties van teamwork' by Patrick Lencioni
- 'De kracht van reflectie' by Fred Korthagen
- 'Sociocratie 3.0' by Jef Cumps

As a quote, she gives me one from André Wierdsma: "example behavior is the only top-down strategy that works."

Contribution to the model:
- Encouraging continuous self-reflection and embracing vulnerability. Acknowledging personal faults and learning from experiences are important for growth.
- Actively seeking and giving feedback. Marissa emphasizes learning from what goes well and building on these successes while being open to the possibility of mistakes and learning from them.
- Balancing rational thinking with emotional awareness. Connecting head and heart to understand and respond to situations comprehensively.
- Establishing a safe environment where people feel secure to express their vulnerabilities and emotions. This includes allowing room for personal connections and emotional expression at work.
- Promoting a resilient and adaptable organization by fostering a sense of autonomy and connection among employees. Building trust and providing space for employees to voice their needs and suggestions.
- Valuing the contributions of all team members and using appreciative inquiry to foster a positive and proactive organizational culture. Encouraging curiosity and a focus on what works well.
- Lead with core values of equality, kindness, and openness. Utilize deep democracy principles for inclusive decision-making. Balance providing direction with offering support based on team needs.
- Encourage self-reflection and vulnerability. Seek and give feedback actively, learning from both successes and mistakes. Integrate rational and emotional perspectives to guide decision-making.
- Create a safe and supportive environment for emotional expression. Foster resilience and autonomy within the organization. Use appreciative inquiry to maintain a positive and proactive culture.

Interview with Marco Bruni: Former top athlete and owner of Health Designers

Reason for interview:

Marco is the manager and a personal trainer and coach at Health Designers. In his daily life, he trains managers and business leaders as a personal trainer in strength training and coaches them mentally to navigate life more resiliently. Marco is a former top athlete at the European level. He translates what he has learned in both mental and athletic domains to the business world. After all, running a business is also a form of top-level sport.

Time and duration of the interview(s):

Monday May 20, 2024: for about one hour

Summary of the key learning points:

As a coach, Marco emphasizes the importance of hiring a coach to help you grow on a personal level. It is less easy to accept things from someone who is too close to you. Marco underlines your own role in leadership. Who do you need to be so that the message gets across and is also executed? And was I the person I needed to be?

Marco reflects and lets others reflect in coaching on their own behavior to see what patterns emerge. What answers and what thoughts and behaviors lie behind this? Then you can think about who you should have been to get things done. He always places the responsibility on himself. He also emphasizes the importance of asking for a head-up from the team and proactively offering his help. In this way, he consciously or unconsciously puts pressure on the other.

He always asks for feedback in a group. Everyone is allowed to speak out about each other to make clear what can be improved and why. He often has the impression that people are afraid to give feedback but wants to know for himself how others see him and what story the other person has about him. This is to map out the reason why the other person does not want to address him.

Like others, Marco discusses that thoughts feed your feelings, but you are not your feelings. You need to map out what your brain does to bring about change. This applies to yourself but also to others. You need to create a new voice for yourself that goes against the old voice; only then can you shape your new self.

In teams, employees sometimes make mistakes. He does not point fingers but asks how it can be solved together. He looks at himself, what his thoughts are at that moment, what new thoughts he needs to create, and he acts from who he needs to be at that moment. He uses the term "shifting" to describe moving towards the person you need to be.

In a group, he describes communication as a network in which commitment arises. He examines what behavior needs to stop or what he will no longer tolerate from himself. Behaviors are fed by thoughts. You hold on to these behaviors because there is a hidden benefit somewhere.

Marco emphasizes the importance of first putting yourself first and then learning to apply it to others. It always starts with yourself.

Team members do not want to be taken for granted. By asking "how could I have done it better?" and "what are the stumbling blocks?" he examines the reasons why someone has not yet done something to make the underlying behavior and thoughts clear. He lets the other person come up with suggestions on how to tackle something and only comes up with ideas himself if those suggestions do not convince him. He also always asks for confirmation afterwards by asking if the other person really wants to do it.

In terms of leadership style, he prefers coaching. Directing is often done due to a lack of time, but he sees it differently; he makes time to coach so that the other person is able to tackle things themselves next time. Furthermore, we discuss confrontational conversations in which you examine what behavior the other person exhibits to map out the underlying hidden benefits.

He also emphasizes the importance of repetition. By letting the other person repeat what you have said, you can easily check if the other person has understood you.

Marco talks about three types of promises the other person can make: a weak, criminal, and powerful promise. Only the powerful promise matters to him, and he lets the other person express it. He indicates that he gets people out of defense mode.

To bring about changes in yourself or others, you need to start by doing 'something,' no matter how small, something you would not normally do.

Contribution to the model:

- Emphasis on self-reflection to understand personal behavior patterns.
- Importance of recognizing thoughts and behaviors to bring about change.
- Creating a new voice that challenges the old self to shape the new self.
- Offering proactive help and asking for interim feedback to maintain pressure and support.
- Always asking for group feedback to gain clarity on personal and others' improvement areas.
- Importance of understanding and managing thoughts that drive feelings and behaviors.
- Using mistakes as learning opportunities and focusing on collaborative problem-solving.
- Emphasizing the need for clear communication and commitment within teams.
- Encouraging team members to self-reflect and come up with their own solutions.
- Emphasizing coaching over direct management to foster independence and growth.
- Highlighting the importance of repetition and clear promises to ensure understanding and commitment

Interview with Lisetta Esveld: Developmental psychologist, system therapist, and author of the Book "De kracht van sensitiviteit".

Reason for interview:

After Leon Vliegen pointed out to me that we might be highly sensitive, her book was the first one we took to heart. It contained many recognizable elements for me and deeply moved me. For that reason, we reached out to her, and after some time, we received a response.

Time and duration of the interview(s):

Tuesday June 25, 2024: for half an hour

Summary of the key learning points:

Before the conversation took place, we had already developed the model relatively far. we had shared the preliminary final research results with her in advance. She indicated that she agreed with the model and found it complete, which for me was a confirmation of saturation.

Lisetta emphasized that we ourselves are the instrument to help us move forward. This is important for her in the cognitive field. She is a fan of self-reflection and the method we proposed, focusing inward and being aware of one's own body.

Trust is crucial; without trust, there is no foundation to build on. If you find something difficult, you reflect the emotion of others, which you can leverage.

Self-care is indispensable for her as a highly sensitive therapist. Nature is important for her; she can relax there and feels when it's necessary to immerse herself in nature. There are also conversations that energize her. When she needs advice, she taps into her network. Her body plays a significant role; she listens to what her body indicates and responds appropriately.

High sensitivity allows her to pick up on things before the other person is even aware of them. However, she cross-checks this because sometimes she thinks she feels something, but it's a projection of herself, leading to a misinterpretation. It's important to be aware that you pick up on things, but it also tells you something about yourself.

She stated that complementarity in group guidance is important. This way, you can present different mirrors, focusing more on experiences.

For her, values are about authenticity and feeling safe in contact. People should be able to be themselves, and kindness is important to her. For authenticity, you need to create the conditions yourself. Authenticity is also reciprocated by being authentic yourself. By creating safety, people dare to be themselves and perform at their best, as they truly are.

As tips, she emphasized the importance of positive self-talk, which stems from self-compassion. Additionally, she advised being a nurturing, encouraging, and positive parent to us. She referred to Carl Rogers' client-centered therapy to be gentle with oneself in thoughts. Often, voices from the past linger in our heads, and we need to be aware of how we talk to ourselves and do it in a nurturing way. Start with the notion "I deserve this" and shape a nurturing voice for yourself. Ask yourself why you are doing this to yourself.

In schema therapy, you can look at the healthy adult, and in transactional analysis, at the nurturing parent. This is where you want to go, with self-compassion.

Contribution to the model:
- Emphasize the importance of self-reflection and awareness of one's own body as key components in the cognitive field.
- Recognize trust as the foundational element in building effective relationships and fostering open communication.
- Highlight the necessity of self-care, with nature and energizing conversations as integral elements.
- Encourage awareness of high sensitivity and the need to verify perceptions to avoid misinterpretations.
- Value the importance of complementarity in group settings to provide diverse perspectives and reflections.
- Promote authenticity and creating a safe environment where individuals can be themselves and thrive.
- Advocate for positive self-talk and self-compassion, drawing from Carl Rogers' client-centered therapy.
- Focus on nurturing oneself through the concepts of the healthy adult in schema therapy and the nurturing parent in transactional analysis.

10.2   Appendix 2: Grounded Theory: coding process and central idea definition

10.2.1   Introduction to appendix 2

In developing a theoretical model using the grounded theory methodology principles, it is essential to conduct structured and detailed research. This appendix describes the coding process and the definition of the central idea, which together form the basis for the cyclical model developed in this study. The coding process is a fundamental step in the grounded theory methodology. During this process, data are systematically analyzed and categorized to identify patterns and themes. These themes are then translated into codes, which help to structure and understand the complexity of the data. The central ideas emerge from these codes and form the core of the theoretical model.

For the sake of readability, we will first present the central idea and the cyclical model, followed by a detailed description of the three main components: Reflect, Care, and Guide. Each of these components is further divided into specific chapters, with relevant codes derived from the coding process presented under each chapter. Under each component, the chapters are presented along with the relevant codes that illustrate the depth and breadth of each theme. This structured overview provides a clear picture of how the central idea was developed and how they contribute to the overall model.

10.2.2   Central idea definition

The central idea underpinning this model is:

Navigating change with sensitivity
Leveraging sensitivity traits for effective organizational change initiatives to empower change agents.

This concept highlights the importance of utilizing sensitivity traits to navigate and implement organizational changes. By embracing these traits, change agents can foster a more inclusive, responsive, and effective change process. This approach not only enhances the ability of change agents to lead and support others but also promotes a deeper understanding of the relational and emotional dynamics at play within organizations.
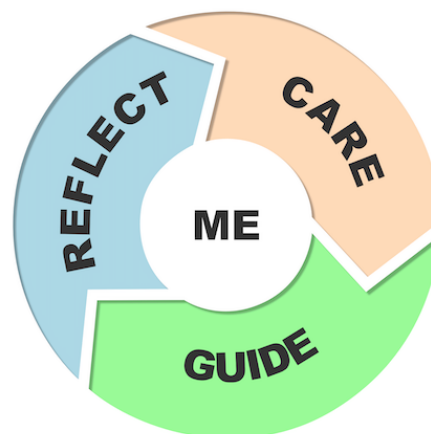

Figure 1: Relational Sensitivity as a driving force within change

This central idea serves as the foundation for the cyclical model of Reflect, Care, and Guide, each of which delves into specific aspects of leveraging relational sensitivity in the context of organizational change.

10.2.3 The coding process
Via the charts below, a listing of the most important codes by chapter.

10.2.3.1 Reflect
10.2.3.1.1 Embrace sensitivity

Code	Interview Excerpt
Awareness of sensitivity	"Understanding what sensitivity means for oneself and how it impacts personal growth." (Sofie)
Recognizing triggers	"Learning to recognize triggers in your behavior through transactional analysis and schema therapy." (Leon)
Sensitivity in learning	"More sensitive people tend to take things more personally, which can lead to deeper insights." (Johan)
Emotional processes	"Reflecting on emotional processes like guilt and shame as important learning mechanisms." (Johan)
Vulnerability acceptance	"Acknowledging and accepting vulnerability as part of personal growth." (Roger)
Personal impact of feedback	"Reframing feedback to focus on personal impact rather than attributing it to others." (Felix)
Role of emotions in behavior	"Understanding that thoughts direct behavior while feelings act." (Sofie)
Group sensitivity dynamics	"Becoming more sensitive in relationships within a group." (Felix)
Sensitivity as a learning tool	"Sensitivity to inner dynamics enhances personal and group learning." (Johan)
Disbelief about sensitivity	"Noting that there is still much disbelief about sensitivity, often seen as soft talk." (Roger)

Code	Interview Excerpt
Thoughts and REBT	"Using Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) to align thoughts with feelings and present actions." (Leon)
Present moment awareness	"Mindfulness helps you live more consciously in the present moment." (Sofie)
Intuition and insight	"Using intuition to guide actions and decisions." (Carmen)
Self-reflection techniques	"Utilizing models like Frédéric Imbo's highways model for self-reflection." (Paul)
Inner dynamics	"Reflecting on one's inner dynamics and understanding emotional processes." (Johan)
Focus techniques	"Using techniques like closing your eyes to feel where guilt is in your body." (Sofie)
Gut feeling	"Trusting your gut feeling to make decisions and understand situations." (Carmen)
Awareness of body signals	"Recognizing physical signals in yourself when things don't feel right." (Carmen)
Realigning thoughts and feelings	"Realigning thoughts and behaviors with feelings and intuition to avoid pitfalls." (Sofie)
Inner guidance	"Unlocking inner guidance through reflection and self-awareness." (Johan)

10.2.3.1.3 Unleash yourself as a creator

Code	Interview Excerpt
Setting values and norms	"Establishing personal values and norms to guide future actions and decisions." (Marissa)
Honesty and ownership	"Being honest with yourself and taking ownership of your growth." (Carmen)
Vision development	"Developing a vision about yourself and your future." (Roger)
Self-knowledge	"Self-knowledge requires objective feedback from others." (Roger)
Courage to face fears	"Courage means managing your own fears." (Roger)
Embracing vulnerability	"Accepting and working with your vulnerability is important for growth." (Marissa)
Personal development actions	"Taking action and not getting stuck in personal growth processes." (Carmen)
Creating positive impact	"Using values to create a positive impact on your environment." (Marissa)
Ownership of mistakes	"Acknowledging and learning from mistakes as part of personal ownership." (Marissa)
Developing self-insight	"Continuously developing self-insight through reflection and feedback." (Roger)

10.2.3.2 Care

10.2.3.2.1 Cultivate yourself

Code	Interview Excerpt
Self-care practices	"Implementing routines for energy management and overall well-being." (Sofie)
Emotion regulation	"Practicing and learning emotion regulation techniques is fundamental for maintaining well-being." (Leon)
Self-prioritization	"Prioritizing oneself and maintaining proactive self-care." (Paul)
Balanced life	"Emphasizing the importance of a balanced life, including private life, family, friends, and nature." (Carmen)
Proactive self-improvement	"Engaging in action-motivation-action cycles for continuous self-improvement." (Paul)
Managing stress	"Using tools like heart coherence and biofeedback to manage stress and maintain balance." (Sofie)
Recognizing self-signals	"Recognizing signals in yourself, physically, when things don't feel right." (Carmen)
Setting realistic goals	"Setting realistic goals to avoid overwhelming yourself." (Sofie)
Sleep and nutrition	"Ensuring adequate sleep, nutrition, and making time for enjoyable activities." (Sofie)
Reflection and growth	"Reflecting on personal experiences to foster growth and well-being." (Sofie)

10.2.3.2.2 Strengthen companionship

Code	Interview Excerpt
Behavioral analysis	"Analyzing personal behavior and understanding its impact on others." (Sofie)
Understanding relational impact	"Encouraging connected communication and understanding the reasons behind actions." (Sofie)
Relational learning	"Learning occurs through relationships; engaging with others provides greater self-awareness." (Felix)
Personal connections	"Maintaining personal contact with employees is important." (Marissa)
Trust and empathy	"Creating an atmosphere of trust and empathy is important." (Carmen)
Feedback culture	"Developing a good feedback culture is very important for team strength." (Roger)
Sharing introspection	"Willingness to share introspection with each other forms the basis of authentic relationships." (Roger)
Mutual respect	"Treating everyone with respect and recognizing their roles in the organization." (Carmen)
Building relationships	"Building relationships by engaging in conversations and reflecting on interactions." (Roger)
Connected communication	"Communicating in a connected way to maintain balance and avoid burnout." (Sofie)

10.2.3.2.3 Nurture kindful connection

Code	Interview Excerpt
Impact through kindness	"Demonstrating kindness to influence others and foster relational leadership." (Carmen)
Relational leadership	"Understanding that leadership is about balancing direction and support." (Marissa)
Creating a safe environment	"Establishing a safe environment where people feel secure to express their vulnerabilities." (Marissa)
Shared responsibility	"Ensuring shared responsibility within the organizational culture." (Roger)
Connection and support	"Building connections and maintaining relational well-being is essential." (Sofie)
Emotional expression	"Allowing room for personal connections and emotional expression at work." (Marissa)
Building trust	"Building a resilient, agile, and vibrant organization with a sense of autonomy and connection." (Marissa)
Appreciative Inquiry	"Using appreciative inquiry to foster a positive and proactive organizational culture." (Paul)
Valuing contributions	"Valuing the contributions of all team members." (Marissa)
Aligning rational and emotional	"Helping connect rational and emotional aspects to understand and respond to situations." (Marissa)

10.2.3.3 Guide

10.2.3.3.1 Create clarity

Code	Interview Excerpt
Setting expectations	"Clearly defining expectations and responsibilities in the change process." (Marissa)
Alignment and contracting	"Aligning actions with values and creating a psychological contract with clients." (Johan)
Responsibility sharing	"Ensuring shared responsibility within the organizational culture." (Roger)
Reflecting on processes	"Reflecting on processes, acknowledging successes, and discussing areas for improvement." (Felix)
Objective feedback	"Obtaining objective feedback to know yourself better and improve." (Roger)
Clarity in communication	"Setting clear and realistic expectations with employees and clients." (Marissa)
Contracting for success	"Creating a clear contracting framework to guide change processes." (Johan)
Shared values	"Aligning team and organizational values to ensure commitment." (Roger)
Process documentation	"Documenting and deepening understanding of processes for clarity." (Roger)
Accountability measures	"Establishing accountability measures to track progress and ensure commitment." (Marissa)

10.2.3.3.2 Balance direction and support

Code	Interview Excerpt
Coaching vs. directing	"Determining when to provide support and when to offer direct guidance." (Marissa)
Proactive engagement	"Encouraging proactive behavior and taking initiative as a learning process." (Felix)
Providing feedback	"Emphasizing the importance of timely and constructive feedback." (Felix)
Empowering others	"Helping people recognize their own capabilities and strengths." (Carmen)
Non-manipulative influence	"Influencing another person's behavior in a non-manipulative way." (Leon)
Leadership flexibility	"Sensing whether to lead or support based on the situation." (Marissa)
Shared learning	"Using group feedback instead of individual feedback to enhance relational learning." (Johan)
Initiative and learning	"Taking initiative is a learning process and helps overcome passivity." (Felix)
Feedback as a tool	"Feedback is important for learning and development." (Felix)
Adaptive leadership	"Adapting leadership style to meet the needs of the team." (Marissa)

10.2.3.3.3 Embrace sensitivity in change

Code	Interview Excerpt
Sensitivity in leadership	"Applying sensitivity skills to lead and guide groups effectively." (Roger)
Cultural conditions	"Establishing the right cultural conditions for support and cooperation." (Johan)
Ethical and aesthetic dimensions	"Recognizing that ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual aspects add value to the facilitator's role." (Johan)
Authentic relationships	"Building authentic relationships through sharing and introspection." (Roger)
Flexibility and resilience	"Promoting a resilient and adaptable organization." (Marissa)
Psychological contracts	"Making psychological contracts that emphasize shared responsibility and culture." (Johan)
Deep democracy principles	"Integrating deep-democracy principles for inclusive decision-making." (Marissa)
Sensitivity as a strength	"Using sensitivity as a strength in guiding change and development." (Roger)
Balance of rational and emotional	"Balancing rational and emotional aspects in decision-making." (Marissa)
Sensitivity and feedback	"Utilizing sensitivity in providing and receiving feedback to foster growth." (Roger)

11   List of resource persons

Below is a list of all the interviewed change agents and leaders, presented in the order of their interviews. Each individual offers unique insights and expertise in guiding transformation and leadership. Through their diverse perspectives, we aim to reach a point of saturation in our research.

List of Resource Persons		
Name	Description	Duration interview(s)
Felix Corthouts	Professor Emeritus at Hasselt University	App 3 hours
Sofie Herremans	Clinical pedagogue with knowledge of high sensitivity and owner of Zegg practice.	App 4 hours
Johan Poisquet	Facilitator of entrepreneurial & innovation driven networks and communities of practice at VLAIO	App 3 hours
Roger Goris	Lecturer emeritus at Sociale Hogeschool Leuven and former consultant in guiding change	App 2,5 hours
Carmen Geafer	Design manager for construction and furniture design, candidate Open Borders MBA	App 2 hours
Leon Vliegen	Independent Business Owner at Fly Consult, Executive coach, mentor, keynote speaker, author book 'Risico verzilveren' and expert at the Open Borders MBA	App 2,5 hours
Paul Peeters	Senior Consultant Life Sciences, candidate Open Borders MBA	App 2 hours
Marissa Martens	Director at Ligo, the center for basic education	App 1,5 hours
Marco Bruni	Former top athlete and owner of Health Designers	App 1 hours
Lisetta Esveld	Developmental psychologist, system therapist, and author of the Book "De kracht van sensitiviteit".	App 0,5 hours
	Total hours of interview	App 22 hours

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Executive Summary

Problem definition

The main problem in our research is the lack of understanding of how change agents can use their (high) sensitivity to effectively facilitate change. Although leadership and sensitivity are separately linked to change, the intersection of sensitivity and change remains understudied. The goal is to examine the role of (high)sensitivity in change management and how these traits can be used to improve the success rate of change processes. Our main research question is: how can change agents leverage their (high)sensitivity traits to facilitate effective change?

Methodology

In the research, we use a multifaceted research approach that integrates document analysis and grounded theory methodologies. Document analysis was used to review existing literature to understand current practice related to relational sensitivity in change initiatives. This document analysis served as the basis for the interviews according to the Grounded theory methodology. The data we collected according to this methodology was developed into a new theory in which we cross-check all collected aspects against literature.

Results

Key results indicate that high sensitivity is characterized by heightened empathy, deep cognitive processing and awareness of subtle cues from the environment. These traits enable change agents to better understand and respond to emotional and relational dynamics within teams. The Reflect-Care-Guide model developed in this research as a blueprint for (highly) sensitive change agents provide a structured approach for change agents.

Conclusion

The research concludes that change agents who leverage their sensitivity traits can facilitate more effective and empathetic change processes. This is because it helps them reduce resistance and support leadership in organizations. The Reflect-Care-Guide model serves as a practical blueprint for sensitive change agents and offers strategies for using their natural traits to drive successful organizational change.

Discussion

The study is considered valid based on document analysis and grounded theory methods. However, limitations include possible biases in reported data from interviews and the subjective nature of qualitative analysis. Further research, especially in the depth of the model would certainly be useful.

Recommendations

Further research should focus on designing training and development programs that enhance sensitive and relational skills, and on exploring the role of mentoring and corporate culture in fostering sensitive leadership. Additionally, the applicability of the model across different organizational contexts and roles should be examined to ensure its effectiveness and relevance.

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