

Bjerke, Rune

Article

Employee emotions during organizational change among Nordic academics: Health-promoting self-leadership as a coping strategy

Businesses

Provided in Cooperation with:

MDPI – Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, Basel

Suggested Citation: Bjerke, Rune (2025) : Employee emotions during organizational change among Nordic academics: Health-promoting self-leadership as a coping strategy, *Businesses*, ISSN 2673-7116, MDPI, Basel, Vol. 5, Iss. 3, pp. 1-20, <https://doi.org/10.3390/businesses5030027>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/338824>

Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

Terms of use:

Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.

You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.

If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Article

Employee Emotions During Organizational Change Among Nordic Academics: Health-Promoting Self-Leadership as a Coping Strategy

Rune Bjerke 

Department of Leadership and Organization, Kristiania University of Applied Sciences, Kirkegata 24-26, 0153 Oslo, Norway; rune.bjerke@kristiania.no

Abstract

The purpose of this conceptual and explorative study is to investigate whether health-promoting self-leadership could be used as a coping strategy enabling employees to deal with negative emotions in an organizational change process, providing a conceptual framework. A total of 18 faculty members from a Nordic university college were interviewed about their experiences, perceptions, and emotional reactions. The study reveals that new IT-systems; heavier workloads; and a lack of involvement, trust, and information, in particular, were stated to be the main reasons for negative emotions, detachment from the university-status aim, and the disruption of employee work–life balance. A few faculty members practiced fragments of what, in theory, is defined as health-promoting self-leadership to successfully manage the organizational change processes. Some were unconscious of their self-leadership practices, while others had no tools to enable them to cope with changes, leading to negative emotions. I discuss the findings regarding health-promoting self-leadership practice based on self-leadership, change management, and emotion theory. Based on both the findings in this study and relevant theories regarding self-leadership and coping strategies, I propose a health-promoting self-leadership-based coping model that could provide both individual and organizational health and performance benefits.

Keywords: organizational change; change management; involvement; emotions; coping strategies; self-leadership



Academic Editor: Lester Johnson

Received: 21 April 2025

Revised: 9 June 2025

Accepted: 23 June 2025

Published: 2 July 2025

Citation: Bjerke, R. (2025). Employee Emotions During Organizational Change Among Nordic Academics: Health-Promoting Self-Leadership as a Coping Strategy. *Businesses*, 5(3), 27. <https://doi.org/10.3390/businesses5030027>

Copyright: © 2025 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

This article investigates the emotional consequences of organizational change and shows how health-promoting self-leadership-based coping can direct the individual (here: academics) to a constructive route leading to positive emotions, good health, and performance outcomes. [Rieley and Clarkson \(2001\)](#) assert that organizational change is a fundamental component of organizational strategy. Similarly, [Burnes \(2004\)](#) posits that change is an omnipresent and dominant feature of organizational life. The term “change” is inherently multidimensional, encompassing a wide range of meanings. It is synonymous with concepts such as transformation, development, metamorphosis, transmutation, evolution, regeneration, innovation, revolution, and transition ([Stickland, 2002](#)). This broad spectrum of interpretations underscores the complexity and multifaceted nature of change within organizational contexts. Understanding these various dimensions of change is crucial for organizations seeking to implement effective strategies and remain adaptable in a dynamic business environment.

Organizational change frequently triggers a wide range of emotional responses among employees, which can profoundly influence their attitudes and behaviors. Fischer et al. (1990) define emotion as a “discrete, innate, functional, biosocial action and expression system” (p. 84), underscoring its evolutionary role in helping individuals adapt to environmental shifts. Change events in organizations often provoke emotional reactions that lead to cognitive appraisals, shaping how employees respond (Oreg et al., 2018). Even when changes are perceived as logical or beneficial, they may generate negative emotions such as fear, uncertainty, or a sense of loss (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1989). These emotional reactions—ranging from anxiety and anger to hope and enthusiasm—can either facilitate or hinder successful change implementation (Bartunek et al., 2011; Huy, 1999). Employees who experience strong negative emotions and hold skeptical attitudes are particularly prone to resist change, which represents a major obstacle to organizational transformation (Oreg et al., 2018; Santos de Souza & Chimenti, 2024). Unmanaged emotional responses may undermine the most strategically sound initiatives. Therefore, it is critical to investigate the emotional dimension of change.

Pekkola et al. (2022) argue that the Nordic countries have developed a hybrid logic regarding how to view higher education. The managerial public logic, which focuses on balancing measurable inputs and outputs, and the professional public logic, which embraces the idea of higher education and the dissemination of research-based knowledge as public goods, are vital for societal development. However, most Nordic universities have developed extended administrative structures, due to modernizing measures focusing on efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability, intended to support their primary activities (Geschwind et al., 2019). This development can be seen globally in recent decades, where the role of the public higher education systems has become gradually more complex due to growing requests for effectiveness, accountability, and societal relevance (Hazelkorn et al., 2018). Pulkkinen et al. (2019) also maintain that most Nordic universities have developed extended administrative systems, and Ekman et al. (2018) express concern that the higher education leadership domain (in Sweden) can be characterized as depersonalized, instrumental, scrutinized, and controlling. The effects of new management in Nordic academia have been documented by a decline in academic freedom, with limitations in regards to financial autonomy, but also concerning freedom of research, which has been constrained due to increased institutional autonomy (Nokkala & Bladh, 2014).

Litschka et al. (2006) argue that organizational structures, their management, and employee behavior are interrelated, meaning that human assets and organizational assets are connected. Intellectual and specifically, human capital, consisting of knowledge, skills and psychological health offered for potential use by organizations, requires a more integrative approach, and the health aspect should be incorporated. Wang et al. (2015) demonstrate how IT resources, as organizational assets, and IT management are valuable subsystems of the organization system, and that the interaction between them to positively influence organizational performance is crucial. Storti et al. (2023) refer to human resource management practices (HRMP) and advocate the promotion of social capital and mental health in organizations. They state that there is a gap in the literature regarding practices to promote mental health. Their qualitative study concluded that social support practices should be adopted as human resource protective strategies for mental health.

Building on Lazarus' (1991) theory of emotions (a cognitive–emotional model of individuals' reactions to planned organizational change), Liu and Perrewé (2005) conceptualize the consequences of organizational change processes and propose several research topics (hypotheses) linking emotions and behavioral reactions, e.g., mixed emotions, type of information communicated, involvement, goal congruence, proactive or passive coping, and internal or external attributions of outcomes. Planned changes are types of information

that is communicated which can trigger excitement or fear (to exemplify mixed feelings). These emotions ignite proactive or passive coping, which leads to individual outcomes and emotions like happiness, sadness, guilt, shame, frustration, pride, and anger.

Klärner and Diefenbach (2011) conceptualize and illustrate the role of emotions during sequential stages of organizational changes. Different emotions are triggered during and across change processes, and they should be addressed by coping behavior to reduce the possible negative impact of the emotional experience. Gæver and Hellesø (2010) explored negative experiences among nurses in an organizational change setting where new technology was introduced in a Norwegian hospital. Specific emotional reactions were identified, such as “resignation”, “anger/rage”, “guilt”, and “feeling incompetent”. Smith and Ulus (2020) ask, “Who cares for academics?” and address the importance of discussing and researching emotional well-being at academic institutions of higher education. The researchers challenge the taboos regarding being open about academics’ mental health and emotional well-being and call for attention to this topic.

In periods of organizational change characterized by uncertainty and negative emotions, human resource management practices (HRMP) have the potential to involve employees and maintain employee mental health. Given the positive outlook concerning the Nordic model and academia, where the human and intellectual capital is inevitable and where values such as openness and trust are essential, one could easily think that HRMP during times of change is an obvious strategic tool used in Nordic higher education. However, current research in Nordic higher education has yet to prove that organizational change and coping strategies are disseminated by managers or HR professionals.

To provide a theoretical foundation for the study, I apply an integrative framework grounded in the self-leadership theory (Manz, 1986; C. P. Neck & Houghton, 2006) and the cognitive appraisal theory of emotion (Lazarus, 1991). In the context of organizational change, employees undergo cognitive appraisals—evaluating the significance of the change (primary appraisal) and their perceived ability to manage it (secondary appraisal). These appraisals evoke emotional reactions that influence coping responses and behavioral outcomes (Oreg et al., 2018). Self-leadership refers to a set of self-regulatory strategies that individuals use to manage their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to enhance personal effectiveness and well-being (Ganti et al., 2025). It includes behavior-focused techniques (e.g., goal setting, self-observation), natural reward strategies (e.g., deriving meaning from tasks), and constructive thought pattern strategies (e.g., visualizing success, reframing beliefs) (C. B. Neck et al., 2023; Reichard et al., 2025). Recent empirical work underscores the role of self-leadership in promoting resilience, psychological capital, and positive emotions in uncertain environments (Zhang et al., 2025). For academic employees facing high autonomy demands and shifting institutional values, self-leadership can serve as a health-promoting internal resource that buffers against the emotional strain of change (Ganti et al., 2025).

To address how emotional appraisals are translated into specific behavioral responses, we draw on Lazarus’ (1991) cognitive appraisal theory, in conjunction with the self-leadership theory (Manz, 1986; C. P. Neck & Houghton, 2006). According to Lazarus, primary and secondary appraisals determine how individuals interpret the significance of a change event and assess their ability to cope with it. These appraisals not only shape the type and intensity of emotional responses—such as fear, anger, or hope—but also directly influence behavioral strategies adopted by individuals (Oreg et al., 2018). Self-leadership provides a mechanism through which these appraisals are transformed into adaptive behaviors. As C. B. Neck et al. (2023) explain, self-leadership equips individuals with cognitive and behavioral tools—such as constructive thought patterns, natural reward strategies, and behavior-focused techniques—that can reframe appraisals and guide effective action. For instance, self-goal setting and self-dialogue can convert feelings of uncertainty into

proactive task engagement, while natural reward strategies can shift attention from distress to meaning and purpose during change (Reichard et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). Thus, self-leadership acts as a self-regulatory bridge between appraisal and behavior, fostering psychological resilience and enhancing individual coping effectiveness.

Despite substantial literature regarding coping, organizational change, and self-leadership, several gaps remain. First, classical coping models (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Folkman, 2008) emphasize problem-, emotion-, and meaning-focused strategies but seldom integrate self-leadership as a sustained, health-promoting approach to coping with organizational change (C. P. Neck & Houghton, 2006; Bjerke, 2024). Second, while self-leadership has been positively associated with performance, self-efficacy, and emotional regulation (Reichard et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025), few empirical studies examine how it is actually practiced by employees as a coping mechanism during emotionally demanding transitions—particularly within the complex and evolving context of public higher education (Smith & Ulus, 2020; Storti et al., 2023). Third, the mental health implications of self-leadership remain under-theorized, especially in academic work environments shaped by high autonomy demands, workload intensification, and managerial reforms (Bjerke, 2024; Ganti et al., 2025). Lastly, much of the existing research adopts variable-centered or meta-analytic approaches, offering limited insight into the lived, qualitative experiences of employees navigating change (Zhang et al., 2025; Harari et al., 2021).

To address these gaps, this conceptual and explorative qualitative study investigates the emotional experiences of organizational change among faculty members at a Nordic university college striving for university status. Drawing on individual narratives and relevant theoretical frameworks, the study introduces a model of health-promoting self-leadership-based coping—a perspective that integrates self-leadership strategies with coping theory and employee well-being. To establish a foundation for this model and to understand how employees manage the emotional challenges of change, the study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the sources of negative employee emotions during the change process?

RQ2: What are the sources of positive employee emotions during the change process?

RQ3: Consciously or unconsciously, how do employees apply self-leadership techniques to cope with negative emotions?

2. Theory

2.1. Organizational Change and the Role of Management

Organizational change refers to deliberate efforts to modify structures, strategies, processes, or cultures within an organization to improve performance, adapt to environmental shifts, or pursue new goals (Burnes, 2004; A. M. Pettigrew et al., 2001). Change can be classified as planned, emergent, transformational, or incremental, and each type presents different demands on leadership and employees (A. Pettigrew & Whipp, 1992; Cao et al., 2000). Planned organizational change is typically guided by a structured, goal-oriented process driven by internal change agents or leadership (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Doppelt, 2017). Emergent change, on the other hand, evolves spontaneously in response to environmental dynamics and is shaped by ongoing interactions between individuals and systems (Burnes, 2004; Vlachopoulos, 2021). A comprehensive framework for analyzing change involves four interrelated elements: context, content, process, and outcomes (A. M. Pettigrew et al., 2001).

Context factors include both external and internal dynamics—such as industry disruptions, technological innovation, institutional culture, or organizational structure—that may trigger or constrain change efforts (Kuipers et al., 2014; Rieg et al., 2021). Content factors refer to what is being changed, whether it is strategic direction, organizational

systems, human resources, or educational practices, as elaborated by [Lozano et al. \(2015\)](#) in the higher education context. Process factors describe how change unfolds, including changes in leadership behaviors, communication practices, and the degree of stakeholder involvement. These elements are tightly interwoven and must be addressed systematically ([Barth, 2013](#)). Leadership plays a central role in managing these elements. Leaders function as change agents who not only initiate and implement change but also influence how change is perceived and experienced by employees ([Gilley et al., 2009](#); [Shaik et al., 2025](#)). Effective change leadership entails articulating a compelling vision, cultivating trust, motivating action, and fostering psychological safety ([Armenakis & Harris, 2002](#); [Denning, 2008](#); [Rieg et al., 2021](#)). Communication is foundational to this process. Transparent, timely, and meaningful communication can reduce uncertainty, build commitment, and increase the likelihood of successful change ([Kitchen & Daly, 2002](#); [Allen et al., 2007](#); [Lewis et al., 2006](#)). According to [Vlachopoulos \(2021\)](#), communication during change processes in higher education plays a key role not only in transmitting information but also in engaging and empowering staff, motivating them through clear vision, transparency, and relational support mechanisms that address emotional resistance. Clear communication also impacts decision-making quality and psychological security. If change is poorly communicated or perceived as top-down and imposed, employees may experience anxiety, resistance, or cynicism ([Cropanzano et al., 2007](#); [Skarlicki & Folger, 1997](#)). Effective change management thus requires leaders to provide regular feedback, acknowledge concerns, and involve employees in shaping the change process ([Carlisle & Murphy, 1996](#); [Glew et al., 1995](#); [Rieg et al., 2021](#)). Involvement enhances motivation, commitment, and a sense of ownership, which are all linked to successful transformation ([Morgan & Zeffane, 2003](#)). Conversely, lack of involvement can erode trust and psychological well-being, leading to increased resistance and reduced performance ([Dean et al., 1998](#); [Mathieu et al., 2006](#)). Research by [Ramstad \(2014\)](#) and [Marchington et al. \(1994\)](#) emphasizes the importance of high-involvement work practices that give employees real authority and responsibility during change. Empowerment is particularly vital when changes affect professional identity or challenge core values, which is common in complex organizational environments such as education and healthcare ([Rieg et al., 2021](#)).

A holistic understanding of change must also consider emotional and psychological dynamics. While many change models focus on systems, structures, and outcomes, they often overlook how individuals define the meaning of change and respond affectively ([Freis, 2025](#); [Shaik et al., 2023](#)). According to [Shaik et al. \(2023\)](#), emotionally intelligent managers—capable of empathy and emotional regulation—play a crucial role in helping employees cope with change. Supportive behaviors such as inclusion and dialogical reflection can enhance emotional resilience and reduce negative stress responses. Finally, the success of organizational change depends not only on formal strategies but also on informal dynamics—interpersonal trust, team climate, and cultural readiness ([A. Pettigrew & Whipp, 1992](#); [Anderson et al., 2002](#); [Batt & Valcour, 2003](#)). Integrating these insights into change practices increases both the human sustainability and the strategic effectiveness of change processes. This study adopts an employee perspective, focusing on how change is emotionally experienced and coped with, particularly when managerial support and process execution are inadequate.

While leadership behavior and change communication are critical at the organizational level, they also shape the psychological environment in which employees experience and respond to change. When organizational change is perceived as top-down, ambiguous, or misaligned with professional values, employees may experience increased emotional strain and diminished autonomy ([Woodward & Hendry, 2004](#); [Smith & Ulus, 2020](#)). In such contexts, coping becomes an individual responsibility, highlighting the relevance of health-

promoting self-leadership as a personal resource. Self-leadership enables individuals to self-regulate thoughts and emotions, maintain intrinsic motivation, and engage in meaning-making during uncertainty (C. P. Neck & Houghton, 2006; Bjerke, 2024). As prior studies suggest, in the absence of sufficient managerial support, internal coping mechanisms become essential for sustaining psychological well-being and performance (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2015; Stewart et al., 2011).

2.2. Emotions in Organizational Change

Freis (2025) presents an argument that emotions are central to organizational life, especially in the context of change. Organizational change is not only a structural or strategic process but also a deeply emotional experience for employees. Emotions influence how change is perceived, how it is responded to, and whether it succeeds or fails. During transitions, emotions can range from enthusiasm and hope to anxiety, resistance, or even despair, depending on how the change is managed and communicated. Therefore, understanding emotional dynamics is essential for effective change implementation. At the core of this emotional dimension lies appraisal theory, which posits that emotions arise from individuals' evaluations of how situations relate to their goals and well-being (Lazarus, 1991). Organizational change can trigger both primary appraisals (assessing relevance to personal goals) and secondary appraisals (evaluating one's capacity to cope), resulting in emotions such as anger, fear, sadness, or hope. These appraisals are shaped by leadership behavior, communication, perceived fairness, and employee involvement (Lazarus, 1991, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Ashkanasy's (2003) multi-level model of emotions in organizations remains particularly relevant. It distinguishes five levels of emotional experience: (1) within-person (mood and affective shifts), (2) between-person (traits such as emotional intelligence), (3) interpersonal (emotional labor and expression), (4) group (shared emotional climate and contagion), and (5) organizational (policies and culture influencing emotion norms). This layered framework allows for a comprehensive view of how emotions emerge and cascade across organizational levels during change. Recent studies highlight the dual nature of change-related emotions. Positive emotions, such as optimism and pride, can emerge when employees feel included and valued and when they understand the purpose of the change (Freis, 2025). In contrast, negative emotions—fear, resentment, confusion—often arise from perceived exclusion, inadequate communication, or a threat to job security. These emotional reactions can trigger resistance, disengagement, or defensive behaviors (Shaik et al., 2023; Woodward & Hendry, 2004).

Importantly, the role of emotion regulation in navigating change is gaining traction. Emotional intelligence, the capacity to perceive, understand, and manage one's own and others' emotions, is a critical resource in this regard (Goleman, 1995; Shaik et al., 2023). Leaders with high emotional intelligence can detect emotional undercurrents, respond with empathy, and create psychological safety, thereby fostering adaptive emotional responses among staff. Freis (2025) emphasizes that unacknowledged emotions during change processes may amplify emotional suppression, leading to exhaustion and reduced well-being. Emotionally intelligent organizations proactively address emotions by legitimizing them, facilitating open dialogue, and offering support systems such as coaching and peer support. Furthermore, emotional experiences during change influence long-term attitudes. According to Petty and Wegener (1998), attitudes toward organizational change reflect evaluative judgments shaped by emotions. Eagly and Chaiken (2007) argue that affective components of attitudes are powerful predictors of behavioral intentions, such as staying with or leaving the organization. These links between emotion and attitude underscore the strategic importance of managing emotional climates during change. Finally, it is

essential to distinguish emotions from related constructs. Emotions are often short-lived and triggered by specific events, whereas moods are more diffuse and enduring, and affect, in turn, is a broader umbrella encompassing both emotions and moods, typically measured along the dimensions of valence and arousal (Watson & Tellegen, 1985; Russell & Carroll, 1999). In sum, organizational change is an emotionally charged process. Positive emotional experiences can enhance engagement and resilience, while negative emotions, if left unmanaged, may derail change efforts. Thus, integrating emotional considerations into change strategies is not only humane but strategically vital.

2.3. Health-Promoting Self-Leadership-Based Coping

Organizational change often provokes uncertainty and stress, especially when routines are disrupted or when new work demands arise. These transitions can undermine employee well-being, making coping strategies essential for maintaining psychological health. Stress, in this context, is not only a physiological response to pressure but a dynamic psychological process shaped by appraisal and interpretation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Cognitive stress theory emphasizes how individuals assess potentially threatening changes and evaluate available coping resources. This makes stress highly subjective, influenced by prior experiences, personality traits, and self-regulatory capacity (Lazarus, 1993; Sarkar, 2025). During organizational change, employees often face role ambiguity, workload intensification, and diminished control—conditions known to elevate strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Woodward & Hendry, 2004). The job demands–resources model (JD–R) asserts that chronic demands and a lack of adequate resources can lead to burnout and disengagement unless counterbalanced by personal and environmental resources. Research highlights the importance of both structural support (e.g., leadership communication, participation) and personal resources (e.g., resilience, optimism, and self-leadership) for buffering the negative impact of change (Freis, 2025; Shaik et al., 2023, 2025).

In this study, I adopt a coping-focused perspective centered on self-leadership as a health-promoting personal resource. Self-leadership is defined as a self-influencing process through which individuals regulate their behavior, thoughts, and emotions via strategies such as goal setting, self-observation, visualization, self-reward, and constructive thought patterns (Houghton et al., 2012; C. P. Neck & Houghton, 2006; C. B. Neck et al., 2023). In change contexts, self-leadership helps individuals regain a sense of control and direction by focusing on internal standards rather than external uncertainty (Pearce & Manz, 2005).

Bjerke (2024) expands this perspective by introducing health-promoting self-leadership, a concept that integrates well-being, performance, and coping with personal growth. This approach includes three core orientations:

1. Value- and behavior-oriented self-leadership, where individuals act in alignment with personal and organizational values and take proactive steps to cope with value incongruence during change;
2. Energy-oriented self-leadership, which emphasizes the importance of managing one's physical and psychological energy through boundary setting, rest, and recovery practices;
3. Self-efficacy-oriented self-leadership, which focuses on enhancing confidence and perceived competence through mastery experiences and adaptive self-goal setting.

These orientations are particularly relevant during change because they promote adaptive responses to stressors and foster psychological flexibility (Sarkar, 2025). For instance, energy-oriented strategies help individuals monitor early signs of depletion and use restorative behaviors to maintain performance, while behavior-oriented strategies support meaningful and value-congruent engagement in turbulent environments (Bjerke, 2024; Ganti et al., 2025).

More broadly, health-promoting self-leadership can be conceptualized as a proactive, self-regulatory coping strategy that differs from traditional coping frameworks. Whereas Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model distinguishes between problem-focused coping (aimed at solving the problem) and emotion-focused coping (aimed at managing feelings), health-promoting self-leadership also encompasses meaning-focused coping—the process of reframing challenges in line with core values and personal growth (Folkman, 2008; Zhang et al., 2025). This makes it especially relevant in contexts of change in which employees may confront value conflicts or existential questions about their roles.

By integrating these layers, health-promoting self-leadership serves as both a buffer against emotional strain and a mechanism for psychological resilience. It supports cognitive reframing, motivates healthy routines, and fosters intrinsic motivation and agency—all of which are critical for maintaining well-being during periods of uncertainty (Reichard et al., 2025; Stewart et al., 2011). As such, it offers a multidimensional alternative to conventional reactive coping models, emphasizing the anticipatory and purpose-driven regulation of thoughts, behaviors, and emotions.

Moreover, this approach is supported by empirical evidence linking self-leadership to improved performance, job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and emotional stability under stress (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2015; Zhang et al., 2025; Boonyarit, 2023). The mechanisms through which it operates—such as constructive self-talk, visualization, positive reappraisal, and natural reward strategies—enable employees to transform potentially distressing appraisals into constructive engagement (C. B. Neck et al., 2023; Houghton et al., 2024). Especially in cases where leadership communication is lacking or trust in organizational change is diminished, employees can fall back on their internal coping strategies to maintain direction and coherence in their work (Woodward & Hendry, 2004).

In summary, health-promoting self-leadership is both a conceptually robust and practically relevant coping framework. It bridges individual strengths and psychological health with organizational adaptation. By anchoring behavior in values, regulating energy, and strengthening self-efficacy, employees are better equipped to manage emotional demands and maintain performance throughout change processes. To address the research gaps identified in the introduction, this study explores how faculty members in a Nordic university college experience and enact self-leadership strategies as a means of coping with organizational change. By focusing on emotional reactions, coping practices, and self-leadership behaviors, the study contributes a theoretically grounded and contextually rich perspective regarding health-promoting self-leadership-based coping.

3. Materials and Method

3.1. Intention and Design

The intention of this conceptual and exploratory study was to examine organizational change experiences among employees (faculty) in a Nordic university college aiming for university status. This qualitative research, with an explorative design (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), held the purpose of deepening the understanding of individuals to develop a theoretical coping model within the self-leadership domain. This study addresses the sources of both negative and positive employee emotions during the change process and identifies whether or not employees apply self-leadership techniques to cope with negative emotions. The objects of analysis were undergoing organizational change in terms of the introduction of new technology and administrative routines. Collecting data from academics belonging to various institutes and departments, this study established a comparative platform, was conducted to meet reliability criteria (Morrow, 2005; Shenton, 2004), and developed a credible representation (Shenton, 2004). Additionally, the study was grounded in both established theory and data-driven theory development. By employing

an exploratory strategy for data analysis, wherein relevant data from academics at different locations and institutes could be compared, new theories can be developed (Charmaz, 2014; Punch, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The in-depth interviews continued until no new findings (that could supplement meanings or theories) were revealed (Charmaz, 2003, 2006; Gray, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

To date, no studies regarding emotions and coping in a Nordic academic and organizational context have been published. This study provided an opportunity to develop themes within the reviewed theoretical landscape, as well as to discover relationships between them. Thus, the study became more focused on theoretical connections parallel to data collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

3.2. Data Collection, Sample, Themes, and Analysis

Qualitative data from 18 in-depth interviews were collected to explore the informants' experiences with the organizational change processes, using an interview guide reflecting seven overall themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Yin, 2013, 2018). The Zoom-based interviews took place in May and April 2022, lasted between 45 and 70 min, and were managed by one trained and experienced interviewer/moderator and one senior researcher with solid interview/moderating and research experience. Through the use of two interviewers, it was possible to cross-check for follow-up questions and interpretations and thus, strengthen the objectivity and trustworthiness of the study. We experienced a very positive willingness of the interviewees to contribute to the study, and the informants seemed to respond openly to the questions. They were all positive about being contacted if any follow-up questions were needed. Six informants agreed to the use of quotes. The sample of 18 academics consisted of 8 females and 10 males with different academic positions (see Table 1). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in line with ethical and national standards. Both the informants and the national ethical committee approved the study and methodology (an application to Sikt.no, the Norwegian agency for shared services in education and research, was approved).

Table 1. The informants.

Informant	Gender	Position
1	F	Head of BA program
2	F	Adjunct
3	F	Librarian
4	M	Associate professor and head of BA program
5	M	Adjunct
6	M	Adjunct and head of BA program
7	M	Professor
8	F	Associate professor
9	M	Associate professor
10	M	Dean/associate professor
11	F	Professor
12	M	Associate professor and course manager
13	M	Professor
14	F	Adjunct

Table 1. *Cont.*

Informant	Gender	Position
15	F	Associate professor
16	M	Adjunct
17	F	Associate professor and head of MA-program
18	M	Associate professor, head of BA program and research association representative

The focus of the study was on employees' experiences in the midst of organizational changes, and the interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The overall themes and theoretical concepts that constituted the interview guide were experience with organizational change in general, negative and positive experiences with the change process, sources of negative and positive emotions, types of emotions, perceptions of the role of management, coping strategies, and possible practice of self-leadership (as a possible coping strategy). The code sheet and themes were evaluated and adjusted according to the theory. The recorded interviews were transcribed to enhance reliability (Spiggle, 1994; Yin, 2013) and analyzed thematically based on the code sheet founded on the overall seven themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Spiggle, 1994; Yin, 2013). The pre-defined seven themes were used for categorization to establish meanings in line with relevant theories and concepts (Crotty, 1998). Sources of both negative and positive emotions and coping strategies emerged as the dominant themes. Therefore, the findings are organized into those three main categories. Sub-themes like perception of management dealing with change processes and types of emotion are integrated into the three main categories.

4. Results

4.1. What Are the Sources of Negative Employee Emotions During the Change Process? (RQ1)

The informants expressed that they accepted the change processes necessary to aim for the university status goal. However, the informants realized that these organizational change processes require several new IT systems and the continuous digitalization of administrative processes. The in-depth interviews revealed that all informants experienced pressure to work more to cope with new administrative IT systems. In addition, the informants reported an increased performance pressure, as their main tasks of teaching and researching were disturbed by negative experiences caused by challenges in coping with the IT systems. The learning of new systems and the switching from one system to another, perhaps 15–17 in total, according to a few interviewees, during their weekly operations, were described as increasing their workload significantly. All the informants claimed that they work in the evenings, on weekends, and during holidays because there is too much to do. Two informants specifically mentioned challenges with the administration of exams, as the exam office would no longer perform these tasks for the employees. The academics were now responsible for these tasks themselves through the use of an IT system. Extra tasks and complications in dealing with new IT systems were described by all informants as a significant reason for losing working time for "core business" and led to frustration and stress. One informant stated that "the stress arises from systems that do not work and using them consumes time". The female informant added that she may wake up in the night on several occasions with "anxiety", worrying that the exam system would not function properly. Also, one informant stated, "I haven't understood Leganto. It's always a mess because I rarely use it.". At the same time, this respondent communicated frustration with the travel reimbursement system. Several other informants also highlighted the

travel reimbursement system as a source of annoyance and a significant drain on their working time.

A respondent put it is this way: “a lot of work at weekends and in the evenings. New systems require a lot of time”. Of the 17 informants, 6 mentioned that it is specifically the administration that requires much of the time spent. A total of 17 out of 17 the informants stated that they work in the evenings, during weekends, and on holidays. One informant added that there is “a lot of work in the spare time. Weekends too. New measures and changes require that it takes time”. In the employee work plan, 6% has been set aside for administrative tasks. Asking if this percentage is sufficient to cover administrative work, all informants expressed significant frustration with this percentage, and all respondents expressed that they were spending considerably more time on administrative tasks. The informants were asked about how much time they thought they spent on administrative tasks. A total of 17 out of 17 informants believed that they spent considerably more time than what is set aside, and one informant said, “it’s a joke. The Work plan is not grounded in reality”. Another informant stated that the percentage set is “a mockery”. Based on the various estimates stated by all the respondents, the actual time spent on administrative tasks seems to vary. However, the range was between 15% and 35%.

As many as 10 out of 17 informants stated that their job and performance pressure affect their privacy, which they acknowledged as being a challenge. One informant expressed her frustration by saying that she was “tired of being in despair and spending four hours being frustrated by the fact that something doesn’t work.” She also emphasized that her private life suffered because of excessive work demands. Moreover, she needed to work even when she was sick because of the workload. Another informant noted that there are now too many systems to manage and said, “we implement new systems, but we never remove any.” A third academic pointed out the excessive number of communication platforms like Teams, Zoom, and Outlook and described the systems as “a jungle”. A fourth remarked: “As a researcher, I have worked 24 h a day. Working beyond normal hours is rarely acknowledged.” Several informants said that despite trying to cope with the systems and increased workload, they did not receive recognition from their managers. One informant expressed: “I work a lot but never receive recognition for the work I do.” Another informant claimed that this sector often expects employees to work around the clock, but still provides in little recognition, appreciation, or praise for extra effort.

Several informants specified that they felt low motivation for cooperating with the management and felt detached from the university ambition during this change process. When asked about potential sources of dissatisfaction with the change processes, the respondents claimed that dissatisfaction and frustration stem from lack of involvement and interactions with the management and amplified administrative tasks imposed due to the change process. Concerning the relationship with the rector’s office, 14 out of 17 informants expressed a significant lack of involvement and communication, and the academics were worried about centralized decision-making lacking participation and transparency. Consequently, several informants had distanced themselves from the change process. One informant expressed the sense of detachment, saying, “I couldn’t care less. I am more concerned with myself and my own role.” Two other informants also appeared indifferent and expressed less interest in the development over time. Another male informant expressed worries that many of his colleagues had said they were tired and frustrated.

Regarding the sensed top-down-led process, one informant said, “I have a strained relationship with the rector’s office”. Such an expression indicates that experienced work happiness and job satisfaction among the employees do not come from the top management or the school as an employer, but from the content of the job and their colleagues. Another respondent continued by describing that “the management has put a lot of guidelines at

the forefront. There should have been more openness about the process aiming at joint solutions, and not that everything that comes up has already been decided by them". Similarly, another informant stated that "our opinion means nothing" and adds that everything has already been decided by top management. A third also referred to a clear frustration with management's infrequent presence and said that we see examples of "management by walking away". Concerning the speed of the change processes led by top management, one informant said that the changes were happening too quickly, and that "we have a violent gas pedal". A second respondent also mentioned that she thought the change process was going too fast. She was positive at the start, but later she found that there were too many demands. A third informant maintained that the development of the school is too fast and that the change happens at the expense of the predictability the employees need. A fourth said that "it lacks coherence and understanding" and that she "struggles to identify with the change". A result of negative emotions triggered by these change processes, 15 out of 18 informants have a negative view and are skeptical or indifferent to the change.

4.2. What Are the Sources of Positive Employee Emotions During the Change Process? (RQ2)

Despite the challenges with IT systems, a heavier workload and performance pressure, lack of involvement, and dissatisfaction with top management, all the informants expressed that they still felt committed and "joy" in pursuing their main job (teaching and doing research). Some informants explained that due to their "passion" for the field they work in, good colleagues, and the time spent with students, their job was meaningful and enjoyable. The recurring explanations for joy at work and commitment include the desire to provide a quality learning experience for students and a strong commitment to their subject areas. One female informant emphasized the role of teaching by stating, "When you work with students, you naturally want to do a good job!" and added that she actively strives to make the lessons as effective as possible for the students.

A few respondents underscored the importance of good colleagues and stated that a sense of belonging arises from employee relationships rather than commitment to the school itself. Most of the informants appeared to be content with their current roles as quality insurers for students, without any desire for further changes affecting their positions and job content. Despite informants' limited recognition from managers, they still reported "work happiness" at the school. Several informants expressed that positive emotions like "passion" and "sense of belonging" lead to work happiness and that appraisals they receive from colleagues are sufficient to maintain a satisfactory level of job satisfaction. The respondents seem to agree that their relationships with colleagues contributed to a supportive teaching environment, where they can learn from one another. One informant underlined the importance of the school's quality-conscious environment and skilled faculty at department and institute levels.

Autonomy was highly valued by all informants, as it allows them to work where and when they choose, despite the heavier workload. One informant described it like this: "autonomy and freedom in the role are probably the best; there is a high degree of self-determination in the role." Another respondent described the role of autonomy in the same fashion: "flexibility and autonomy play important roles, and I can work when I want and take on additional responsibilities if desired." All informants seemed to agree on three key factors that contribute to their work happiness and job satisfaction: good colleagues and employee relationships, time spent with students, and autonomy. These factors were recognized as essential for work happiness by the informants. Most informants experienced challenges at work, but they realized that they had to solve these challenges themselves due to a general lack of managerial focus on this aspect of the change processes.

4.3. Consciously or Unconsciously, How Do Employees Apply Self-Leadership Techniques to Cope with Negative Emotions? (RQ3)

About two-thirds of the informants in this qualitative study stated that they do not practice self-leadership consciously to cope with negative emotions during the workdays. The remaining informants use self-leadership to varying degrees to create routines, reduce stress, and set limits for themselves. One male informant argued that he worked on being organized and structured in the workday in addition to doing physical exercises daily to, among other benefits, maintain a satisfactory energy level. He mentioned that he was not particularly stressed in connection with the change process, and he did not experience negative, energy-sapping reactions or the occurrence of significant negative feelings. This informant expressed that he was mastering the role and responsibility he had, despite that he worked a lot during the holidays and in the evenings. Another male informant stated that self-leadership is a large part of his life, and that he made use of several techniques to influence workflow and efficiency. This informant described himself as being somewhat indifferent to the change processes after a long period of dissatisfaction and a little emotional arousal, but now he did not experience stress.

A third female informant claimed that she experienced a great deal of work and performance pressure, short deadlines, and too little time at her disposal. Through thoughtful activity and organizing work into chunks and intervals, the informant felt only a little stressed or influenced by the change process. Three other informants stated that they integrated self-leadership practices into their everyday life. A common self-leadership strategy across those three was to regulate energy and work effort to achieve a balance throughout the week. Also, they reported some regularity in physical activity, although this varied, and it seemed that just becoming more conscious of the “energy in” and “energy out” balance was a tool to reduce stress, as those three did not sense any significant stress levels in the change process. Thus, their various conscious approaches and self-leadership techniques used to regulate their own working days seemed beneficial. Based on a short dialogue with a small number of informants practicing self-leadership as a tool to cope with negative emotions, it seems that these few experienced less or no stress or other negative emotions relative to the results for those who did not practice self-leadership. Most of the respondents, who seemed not to practice self-leadership, tended to have more negative thoughts in their minds and seemed more frustrated and stressed.

Based on the qualitative data that were analyzed, there are indications that the minority of the informants gained psychological benefits from practicing self-leadership techniques to better cope with challenges of everyday work in an organizational change context. Some informants engage in physical activity and focus on the organization of the workload. Based on these limited findings, there is an indication that those informants who are not familiar with self-leadership, or who are unconscious of it, experience higher frustration and stress levels than those who are.

5. Discussion

This conceptual and exploratory study examined how employees emotionally experience and cope with organizational change, particularly in a university context characterized by digitalization and administrative restructuring. The findings illustrate that negative emotions such as stress, frustration, and anxiety (RQ1) are primarily triggered by excessive administrative burdens, lack of managerial involvement, ineffective communication, and low recognition—despite employees’ intrinsic motivation and joy connected to teaching and research (RQ2). These emotional reactions, as well as the ways in which some employees consciously or unconsciously apply self-leadership techniques to regulate them (RQ3), are discussed below, considering the theoretical model (Figure 1).

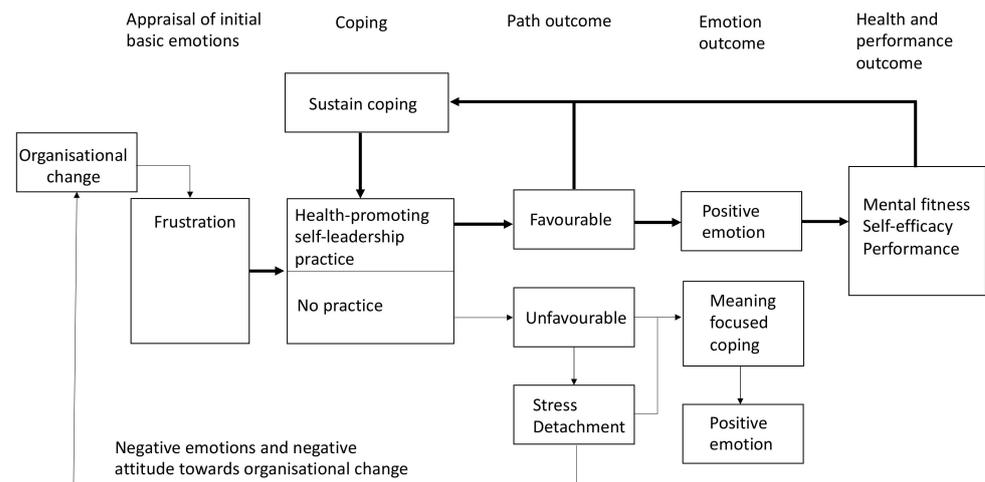


Figure 1. Health-promoting self-leadership-based coping (based on the study’s results and the coping model of Folkman, 2008).

The first key finding—that heavy administrative workload, lack of control, and insufficient support provoke frustration and stress—strongly aligns with the job demand–resources (JD–R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Woodward & Hendry, 2004) and the appraisal theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). When organizational demands exceed perceived resources, particularly in contexts where IT systems malfunction and job expectations escalate, employees experience high strain. The findings further illustrate that a lack of managerial presence, transparency, and dialogue compounds this stress, reinforcing the importance of emotionally intelligent leadership and psychological safety during transitions (Shaik et al., 2023; Freis, 2025). Importantly, many informants perceived the change as top-down and non-negotiable, leading to negative appraisals, which in turn triggered emotional detachment or resistance. This aligns with Kotter and Schlesinger’s (1989) theory that even rational or positive change can evoke emotional loss if it threatens predictability or autonomy. As the model in Figure 1 shows, negative initial emotions like frustration, when unaddressed, may lead to a negative path characterized by detachment, stress, and diminished well-being. Conversely, the findings also highlight sources of positive emotions (RQ2), such as a sense of meaning, autonomy, and collegiality. These intrinsic motivators represent personal resources that buffer against stress (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) and help maintain commitment during change. Autonomy was frequently cited as essential for job satisfaction, echoing the self-determination theory and literature on value congruence (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2006; Bjerke, 2024). Positive affect in the face of organizational pressure is also consistent with meaning-focused coping, in which employees reframe challenges in ways that reinforce personal values and purpose (Folkman, 2008).

The health-promoting self-leadership-based coping model (see Figure 1) illustrates how organizational change can trigger frustration as an initial emotional appraisal. Employees who engage in health-promoting self-leadership practices—such as structured routines, emotional regulation, and internal motivation—are more likely to sustain coping, leading to favorable outcomes and positive emotions, ultimately enhancing mental fitness, self-efficacy, and performance. In contrast, those who do not apply such practices may experience unfavorable outcomes, including stress and detachment. However, meaning-focused coping may help restore positive emotion, offering a secondary pathway to emotional recovery and performance stability. The model integrates both emotion- and problem-oriented coping mechanisms and highlights the dynamic interplay between appraisal, regulation, and health-related outcomes.

Crucially, the findings illustrate variations in how employees cope with negative emotions (RQ3). Some informants reported the conscious application of self-leadership techniques, including goal setting, energy regulation, and reflection on values—all core components of the health-promoting self-leadership framework (Bjerke, 2024). These individuals seemed more resilient, less emotionally exhausted, and better able to manage the uncertainty of change. Others, however, lacked such coping strategies and reported higher levels of stress and dissatisfaction. This supports Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) distinction between adaptive and maladaptive coping and underscores the value of developing personal resources such as self-awareness and behavioral self-regulation. The findings validate the utility of the coping model illustrated in Figure 1. Employees who practiced health-promoting self-leadership—especially those engaging in energy management and value-oriented behaviors—were more likely to follow a favorable emotional path, resulting in positive emotion, sustained coping, and they ultimately seemed to achieve improved mental fitness, self-efficacy, and performance, which is in line with the suggestions of Bjerke (2024). Those who lacked such strategies were more likely to experience emotional overload, detachment, and stress. Notably, the model captures the possibility of transition between unfavorable and favorable outcomes through meaning-focused coping, suggesting a pathway for intervention, even when initial responses are negative.

The theoretical integration across organizational change, emotional appraisal, and coping provides a robust framework for understanding how individual experiences with change are shaped, as well as how they can be improved. Managerial implications include the need for clear communication, emotional support, and promotion of employee autonomy. More fundamentally, organizations should view self-leadership as not only a performance enhancer but also as a protective health resource during turbulent transitions.

6. Conclusions

This study highlights the emotional complexity of organizational change, revealing how transformations in work structure—especially those involving digitalization and administrative intensification—can generate a wide range of emotional responses among employees. In the context of a university undergoing significant change, negative emotions such as frustration, stress, anxiety, and detachment were primarily linked to overwhelming workloads, unfamiliar and inefficient IT systems, inadequate recognition, and top-down decision making with limited employee involvement. These findings resonate with well-established theories of organizational stress, emotion, and coping, underscoring that when employees feel excluded from shaping change processes, emotional strain and organizational detachment become more likely.

However, the study also identified consistent sources of positive emotions that sustained employee engagement despite structural stressors. A passion for teaching and research, collegial support, and perceived autonomy were strong contributors to work happiness. These factors appear to act as internal buffers, reinforcing commitment and a sense of meaning, even in adverse conditions. Notably, autonomy emerged as a foundational psychological resource, enabling self-regulation and resilience. A key contribution of this study lies in its exploration of self-leadership as a health-promoting coping mechanism. While many employees did not consciously apply self-leadership strategies, those who did reported using practices such as structured routines, physical activity, boundary-setting, and energy monitoring to manage emotional strain. These individuals exhibited lower stress levels and a greater sense of control and balance during change. Drawing on theoretical perspectives such as Lazarus and Folkman's coping theory and Bjerke's health-promoting self-leadership framework, the study proposes that health-promoting

self-leadership-based coping offers a promising path for fostering emotional resilience and sustainable performance during organizational change.

To respond more explicitly to the variety of coping strategies observed, the findings can be systematized along two conceptual axes: problem- versus emotion-oriented coping, and internal versus external regulation. Problem-oriented strategies included behavioral self-leadership practices such as establishing daily routines, managing time proactively, and engaging in goal-directed activity. Emotion-oriented strategies, by contrast, comprised techniques such as reframing negative thoughts, accepting limits, and seeking intrinsic meaning in academic work—many of which align with constructive thought pattern strategies. In terms of regulatory orientation, internal strategies were dominant and included self-dialogue, energy awareness, and self-set boundaries between work and private life. External regulation was less common, but present in social support-seeking and peer validation. This categorization highlights the nuanced and multidimensional nature of coping during change and underscores the relevance of self-leadership theory in integrating these adaptive responses.

Beyond its practical implications, the study contributes to theory development by integrating cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1991) with self-leadership theory (Manz, 1986; C. P. Neck & Houghton, 2006) in a novel context—that of organizational change in higher education. It extends appraisal theory by showing that emotional appraisals are not only antecedents of emotion, but also part of a dynamic loop involving self-regulatory capacities that modify emotional outcomes. At the same time, it advances self-leadership theory by illustrating how behavioral and cognitive strategies can be mobilized to transform emotional appraisals into functional, health-promoting responses in complex institutional settings. By applying this integrative lens to the experiences of academics, the research underscores the importance of refining both theories to better account for the emotional and psychological complexities of knowledge-intensive professions. Future theoretical work could explore how different self-leadership profiles interact with appraisal processes and emotional trajectories over time and whether specific combinations of strategies yield more sustainable coping across various change contexts.

In terms of practical implications, the findings suggest several operational actions applicable to academic settings. For example, university leadership can encourage individual goal setting and task prioritization through time management workshops, support faculty in creating daily routines that align with core work values, and normalize discussions about emotional well-being. Academic departments can implement peer-coaching groups where colleagues can share effective coping practices, such as energy management techniques and boundary-setting tools. Institutions can also provide digital self-leadership training modules that emphasize constructive thought strategies and internal motivation tailored to academic roles. Human resource policies should be designed to explicitly promote autonomy-supportive environments, regular recognition practices, and accessible mental health support.

Future research should investigate how academic institutions can actively cultivate self-leadership capacities among their staff and how these capacities develop over time. Specific research questions could include: How do different self-leadership strategies influence emotion regulation and performance during prolonged change? And which contextual factors (e.g., leadership style, organizational culture, job design) facilitate or inhibit the development of self-leadership in academia? Methodologically, longitudinal mixed-method studies combining interviews, diary studies, and validated self-leadership scales would allow for deeper insights into the temporal dynamics of self-regulation and emotional adaptation. Experimental or intervention-based designs could also test the

efficacy of specific self-leadership programs and tools in improving resilience and well-being during change-intensive periods.

In conclusion, the findings emphasize the need for organizations to acknowledge and support the emotional dimensions of change. Leaders and HR professionals can benefit from integrating human-centered approaches that promote transparent communication, authentic involvement, and health-promoting self-leadership practices. By doing so, organizations not only mitigate the risks of emotional exhaustion and disengagement but also enhance employee well-being, mental fitness, self-efficacy, and adaptive performance. The proposed coping model offers a conceptual and practical guide for building emotional sustainability in change-intensive environments. Future research and practice should further investigate how organizational systems can systematically facilitate employee development of self-leadership capacities as part of broader change management and well-being strategies.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and further approval were not required by Sikt—the Norwegian agency for shared services in education and research. The research complies with national legislation represented by Sikt, as described below: “Carrying out a project without processing personal data: If your project processes anonymous information, you do not need to notify Sikt of this. You must then make sure that your data cannot in anyway or at any point in the project be traced back to individuals.” See: <https://sikt.no/en/tjenester/personverntjenester-forskning/personvernhandbok-forskning/carrying-out-project-without-processing-personal-data> (accessed on 10 June 2025).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data for the analysis are available from the author and could be provided upon request.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Allen, J., Jimmieson, N. L., Bordia, P., & Irmer, B. E. (2007). Uncertainty during organizational change: Managing perceptions through communication. *Journal of Change Management*, 7(2), 187–210. [CrossRef]
- Amundsen, S., & Martinsen, Ø. L. (2015). Linking empowering leadership to job satisfaction, work effort, and creativity: The role of self-leadership and psychological empowerment. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 22(3), 304–323. [CrossRef]
- Anderson, S. E., Coffey, B. S., & Byerly, R. T. (2002). Formal organizational initiatives and informal workplace practices: Links to work-family conflict and job-related outcomes. *Journal of Management*, 28(6), 781–787. [CrossRef]
- Armenakis, A. A., & Bedeian, A. G. (1999). Organizational change: A review of theory and research in the 1990s. *Journal of Management*, 25(3), 293–315. [CrossRef]
- Armenakis, A. A., & Harris, S. G. (2002). Crafting a change message to create transformational readiness. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 15(2), 169–183. [CrossRef]
- Ashkanasy, N. M. (2003). Emotions in organizations: A multi-level perspective. In *Multi-level issues in organizational behavior and strategy* (pp. 9–54). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2007). The job demands-resources model: State of the art. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 22(3), 309–328. [CrossRef]
- Bakker, A. B., & Demerouti, E. (2017). Job demands–resources theory: Taking stock and looking forward. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 22(3), 273–285. [CrossRef]
- Barth, M. (2013). Many roads lead to sustainability: A process-oriented analysis of change in higher education. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 14(2), 160–175. [CrossRef]
- Bartunek, J. M., Balogun, J., & Do, B. (2011). Considering planned change anew: Stretching large group interventions strategically, emotionally, and meaningfully. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 5(1), 1–52. [CrossRef]
- Batt, R., & Valcour, P. M. (2003). Human resources practices as predictors of work-family outcomes and employee turnover. *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society*, 42(2), 189–220. [CrossRef]

- Baxter, P., & Jack, S. (2008). Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(4), 544–559. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Bjerke, R. (2024). The multiple advantages of self-leadership in higher education: The role of health-promoting self-leadership among executive MBA students. *Administrative Sciences*, 14(9), 211. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Boonyarit, I. (2023). Linking self-leadership to proactive work behavior: A network analysis. *Cogent Business & Management*, 10(1), 2163563.
- Burnes, B. (2004). *Managing change: A strategic approach to organizational dynamics*. Pearson Education.
- Cao, G., Clarke, S., & Lehaney, B. (2000). A systemic view of organizational change and TQM. *The TQM Magazine*, 12(3), 186–193. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Carlisle, K. E., & Murphy, S. E. (1996). *Practical motivation handbook*. Wiley.
- Charmaz, K. (2003). Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (2nd ed., pp. 249–291). Sage.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory*. Sage.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage.
- Cropanzano, R., Bowen, D. E., & Gilliland, S. W. (2007). The management of organizational justice. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 21(4), 34–48. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Sage.
- Dean, J. W., Brandes, P., & Dharwadkar, R. (1998). Organizational cynicism. *Academy of Management Review*, 23, 341–352. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Denning, S. (2008). How leaders can use powerful narratives as change catalysts. *Strategy & Leadership*, 36(2), 11–15. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Doppelt, B. (2017). *Leading change toward sustainability: A change-management guide for business, government and civil society*. Routledge.
- Eagly, A. H., & Chaiken, S. (2007). The advantages of an inclusive definition of attitude. *Social Cognition*, 25(5), 582–602. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Ekman, M., Lindgren, M., & Packendorff, J. (2018). Universities need leadership, academics need management: Discursive tensions and voids in the deregulation of Swedish higher education legislation. *Higher Education*, 75, 299–321. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Fischer, K. W., Shaver, P. R., & Carnochan, P. (1990). How emotions develop and how they organise development. *Cognition and Emotion*, 4(2), 81–127. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Folkman, S. (2008). The case for positive emotions in the stress process. *Anxiety, Stress, and Coping*, 21(1), 3–14. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
- Freis, T. (2025). Emotion management in organizations: The transformation of unreachable feelings to modifiable communication in organizations. In *Frontiers in education* (Vol. 10, p. 1505275). Frontiers Media SA. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Ganti, M., Ashford, S. J., & Cormier, G. (2025). Personal growth in organizations: A review and integrative theoretical framework. *Academy of Management Annals*, 19(1), 180–229. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Geschwind, L., Hansen, H. F., Pinheiro, R., & Pulkkinen, K. (2019). Governing performance in the Nordic universities: Where are we heading and what have we learned? In *Reforms, organizational change and performance in higher education: A comparative account from the Nordic countries* (pp. 269–299). Palgrave Macmillan. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Gjæver, F., & Hellesø, R. (2010). Negative experiences of organizational change from an emotions perspective: A qualitative study of the Norwegian nursing sector. *Nordic Psychology*, 62, 37–52. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Gilley, A., Gilley, J. W., & McMillan, H. S. (2009). Organizational change: Motivation, communication, and leadership effectiveness. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 21(4), 75–94. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative inquiry*. Aldin.
- Glew, D. J., O'Leary-Kelly, A. M., Griffin, R. W., & Van Fleet, D. D. (1995). Participation in organizations: A preview of the issues and proposed framework for future analysis. *Journal of Management*, 21(3), 395–421. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. Bantam Books.
- Gray, D. E. (2009). *Doing research in the real world* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Harari, M. B., Williams, E. A., Castro, S. L., & Brant, K. K. (2021). Self-leadership: A meta-analysis of over two decades of research. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 94(4), 890–923. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hazelkorn, E., Coates, H., & McCormick, A. C. (Eds.). (2018). *Research handbook on quality, performance and accountability in higher education*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Houghton, J. D., Wu, J., Godwin, J. L., Neck, C. P., & Manz, C. C. (2012). Effective stress management: A model of emotional intelligence, self-leadership, and student stress coping. *Journal of Management Education*, 36(2), 220–238. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Houghton, J. D., Wu, J., Godwin, J. L., Neck, C. P., & Manz, C. C. (2024). Now more than ever: Emotional intelligence, self-leadership, and student stress coping revisited. *Journal of Management Education*, 48(6), 1020–1026. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Huy, Q. N. (1999). Emotional capability, emotional intelligence, and radical change. *Academy of Management Review*, 24(2), 325–345. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Kitchen, P., & Daly, F. (2002). Internal communication during change management. *Corporate Communications*, 7, 46–53. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

- Klarner, P., & Diefenbach, T. (2011). Employee emotions during organizational change—Towards a new research agenda. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 27(3), 332–340. [CrossRef]
- Kotter, J. P., & Schlesinger, L. A. (1989). *Choosing strategies for change* (pp. 294–306). Macmillan Education.
- Kuipers, B. S., Higgs, M., Kickert, W., Tummers, L., Grandia, J., & Van der Voet, J. (2014). The management of change in public organizations: A literature review. *Public Administration*, 92(1), 1–20. [CrossRef]
- Lazarus, R. S. (1966). *Psychological stress and the coping process*. McGraw-Hill.
- Lazarus, R. S. (1991). *Emotion and adaptation*. Oxford University Press.
- Lazarus, R. S. (1993). From psychological stress to the emotions: A history of changing outlooks. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 44(1), 1–21. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer.
- Lewis, L. K., Schmisser, A. M., Stephens, K. K., & Weir, K. E. (2006). Advice on communicating during organizational change. *Journal of Business Communications*, 43, 113–137. [CrossRef]
- Litschka, M., Markom, A., & Schunder, S. (2006). Measuring and analysing intellectual assets: An integrative approach. *Journal of Intellectual Capital*, 7(2), 160–173. [CrossRef]
- Liu, Y., & Perrewé, P. L. (2005). Another look at the role of emotion in organizational change: A process model. *Human Resource Management Review*, 15(4), 263–280. [CrossRef]
- Lozano, R., Ceulemans, K., & Seatter, C. S. (2015). Teaching organisational change management for sustainability: Designing and delivering a course at the University of Leeds to better prepare future sustainability change agents. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 106, 205–215. [CrossRef]
- Manz, C. C. (1986). Self-leadership: Toward an expanded theory of self-influence processes in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 11(3), 585–600. [CrossRef]
- Marchington, M., Wilkinson, A., Ackers, P., & Goodman, J. (1994). Understanding the meaning of participation: Views from the workplace. *Human Relations*, 47, 864–894. [CrossRef]
- Mathieu, J. E., Gilson, L. L., & Rubby, T. M. (2006). Empowerment and team effectiveness: An empirical test of an integrated model. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91, 97–108. [CrossRef]
- Morgan, D., & Zeffane, R. (2003). Employee involvement, organizational change, and trust in management. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 14(1), 55–75. [CrossRef]
- Morrow, S. L. (2005). Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 250–260. [CrossRef]
- Neck, C. B., Neck, C. P., Goldsby, E. A., & Goldsby, M. G. (2023). Pushing down on me: The paradoxical role of self-leadership in the context of work pressure. *Administrative Sciences*, 13(5), 117. [CrossRef]
- Neck, C. P., & Houghton, J. D. (2006). Two decades of self-leadership research: Past developments, present trends, and future possibilities. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 21(4), 270–295. [CrossRef]
- Nokkala, T., & Bladh, A. (2014). Institutional autonomy and academic freedom in the Nordic context—Similarities and differences. *Higher Education Policy*, 27, 1–21. [CrossRef]
- Oreg, S., Bartunek, J. M., Lee, G., & Do, B. (2018). An affect-based model of recipients' responses to organizational change events. *Academy of Management Review*, 43(1), 65–86. [CrossRef]
- Pearce, C. L., & Manz, C. C. (2005). The new silver bullets of leadership: The importance of self-and shared leadership in knowledge work. *Organizational Dynamics*, 34(2), 130–140. [CrossRef]
- Pekkola, E., Pinheiro, R., Geschwind, L., Siekkinen, T., Pulkkinen, K., & Carvalho, T. (2022). Hybridity in nordic higher education. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 45(2), 171–184. [CrossRef]
- Pettigrew, A., & Whipp, R. (1992). Managing change and corporate performance. In *European industrial restructuring in the 1990s* (pp. 227–265). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pettigrew, A. M., Woodman, R. W., & Cameron, K. S. (2001). Studying organizational change and development: Challenges for future research. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44(4), 697–713. [CrossRef]
- Petty, R. E., & Wegener, D. T. (1998). Attitude change: Multiple roles for persuasion variables. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & L. Gardner (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (pp. 323–390). McGraw-Hill.
- Pulkkinen, K., Aarvaara, T., Berg, L. N., Geschwind, L., Hansen, H. F., Hernes, H., Kivistö, J., Lind, J. K., Lyytinen, A., Pekkola, E., Pinheiro, R., Stensaker, B., & Söderlind, J. (2019). Does it really matter? Assessing the performance effects of changes in leadership and management structures in Nordic higher education. In *Reforms, organizational change and performance in higher education: A comparative account from the nordic countries* (pp. 3–36). Palgrave Macmillan. [CrossRef]
- Punch, K. F. (1998). *Introduction to social research: Quantitative and qualitative approaches* (1st ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Ramstad, E. (2014). Can high-involvement innovation practices improve productivity and the quality of working-life simultaneously? *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 4(4), 25–45. [CrossRef]

- Reichard, E. A., Smith, D. J., Reichard, R. J., & Houghton, J. D. (2025). Advancing the construct of self-leadership: A bibliometric review. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 32, 15480518251316085. [CrossRef]
- Rieg, N. A., Gatersleben, B., & Christie, I. (2021). Organizational change management for sustainability in higher education institutions: A systematic quantitative literature review. *Sustainability*, 13(13), 7299. [CrossRef]
- Rieley, J., & Clarkson, I. (2001). The impact of change on performance. *Journal of Change Management*, 2(2), 160–172. [CrossRef]
- Russell, J. A., & Carroll, J. M. (1999). On the bipolarity of positive and negative affect. *Psychological Bulletin*, 125(1), 3–30. [CrossRef]
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(1), 54–67. [CrossRef]
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2006). Self-regulation and the problem of human autonomy: Does psychology need choice, self-determination, and will? *Journal of Personality*, 74(6), 1557–1586. [CrossRef]
- Santos de Souza, F. D. O., & Chimenti, P. (2024). Emotions in organizational change: An integrative review. *Journal of Change Management*, 24(2), 137–176. [CrossRef]
- Sarkar, A. (2025). Self-dignity amidst adversity: A review of coping strategies in the face of workplace toxicity. *Management Review Quarterly*, 75(1), 881–910. [CrossRef]
- Shaik, S. A., Batta, A., & Parayitam, S. (2023). Knowledge management and resistance to change as moderators in the relationship between change management and job satisfaction. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 36(6), 1050–1076. [CrossRef]
- Shaik, S. A., Batta, A., & Parayitam, S. (2025). Unfolding the relationship between change management, employee engagement and productivity: Resistance to change and emotional intelligence as moderators. *Journal of Advances in Management Research*, 22(2), 153–182. [CrossRef]
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22(2), 63–75. [CrossRef]
- Skarlicki, D. P., & Folger, R. (1997). Retaliation in the workplace: The roles of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 82, 434–443. [CrossRef]
- Smith, C., & Ulus, E. (2020). Who cares for academics? We need to talk about emotional well-being including what we avoid and intellectualise through macro-discourses. *Organization*, 27(6), 840–857. [CrossRef]
- Spiggle, S. (1994). Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21(3), 491–503. [CrossRef]
- Stewart, G. L., Courtright, S. H., & Manz, C. C. (2011). Self-leadership: A multilevel review. *Journal of Management*, 37(1), 185–222. [CrossRef]
- Stickland, F. (2002). *The dynamics of change: Insights into organizational transition from the natural world*. Routledge.
- Storti, B. C., Sticca, M. G., & Pérez-Nebra, A. R. (2023). Production and reception of human resource management practices for health promotion. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1104512. [CrossRef]
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Vlachopoulos, D. (2021). Organizational change management in higher education through the lens of executive coaches. *Education Sciences*, 11(6), 269. [CrossRef]
- Wang, Y., Shi, S., Nevo, S., Li, S., & Chen, Y. (2015). The interaction effect of IT assets and IT management on firm performance: A systems perspective. *International Journal of Information Management*, 35(5), 580–593. [CrossRef]
- Watson, D., & Tellegen, A. (1985). Toward a consensual structure of mood. *Psychological Bulletin*, 98(2), 219–235. [CrossRef]
- Woodward, S., & Hendry, C. (2004). Leading and coping with change. *Journal of Change Management*, 4(2), 155–183. [CrossRef]
- Yin, R. K. (2013). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.
- Zhang, N., Ren, X., & Xu, Z. (2025). A latent profile analysis of self-leadership associated with coping styles among general practice students. *Scientific Reports*, 15(1), 1–10. [CrossRef]

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.