# Organizational Change and Sensemaking in the Veterans Health Administration

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*This study examined employee perceptions of change using qualitative and quantitative data from the VHA census of organizational climate, the All Employee Survey (AES). Using sensemaking theory and Freedman's (1997, 2010) realistic managed-resistance model as an integrative framework, we investigated differences in organizational climate perceptions between survey respondents who used the word "improvement" in free text responses and those who did not. We also examined the specific meanings in which respondents used the word "improvement." Employees suggesting improvement were least satisfied with their work environment, indicating possible resistance to change. Conceptual implications and future directions for research are discussed.*

The impact of organizational change is felt at many levels: the organization itself, its leaders, and the employees. At the organizational level, changes in structure are sometimes required for change to progress and be successful (Burke & Litwin, 1992). Leaders are called upon to present, implement, and manage change (Kotter, 1995). Employees play the role of change recipient and are affected the most by change initiatives. Their response to change – acceptance or resistance – is critical in affecting its success (Freedman, 1997, 2010). Incorporating employees' participation in change efforts leads to lower resistance and greater potential for success (Giangreco & Peccei, 2005; Lines, 2004).

Understanding employees' response to change is currently vitally important in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), the largest public healthcare system in the United States, which undergoes large-scale changes to address the needs of Veterans returning from two concurrent wars. The recently highlighted need for strengthening patient access to services has further increased a focus on organizational change in VHA, so as to improve effectiveness and efficiency of its operational systems. Freedman's (1997, 2010) realistic managed-resistance model is a framework adopted in the VHA for managing the organizational transformation (Osatuke, Yanchus, White, & Ramsel, 2014). This model

places employees at the center of the change process, conceptually accounts for resistance to organizational change, and explains how leaders can manage resistance during particular stages of the process.

Examining employee perceptions about change efforts, their status and success provides an in-depth understanding of the impact of change within the organization. The current study examined employee perceptions of change using qualitative and quantitative data from the VHA census of organizational climate, the All Employee Survey (AES). The survey includes Likert-scale questions assessing perceptions of specific workplace aspects, as well as two open-ended text questions asking to describe organizational strengths and areas of needed improvement. We investigated differences in organizational climate perceptions between survey respondents who used the word "improvement" in free text responses and those who did not, and examined in the specific meanings in which survey respondents used the word "improvement." Using employees' comments to understand the organizational environment is generally beneficial; they inform organizational actions in specific and relevant ways. Specifically, comments regarding outcomes of organizational change initiatives illustrate both the process and results of *sensemaking*: the interpretive activity of ascribing meanings to the observed change, which largely defines the impact of change on the organizational members and therefore the success of change efforts (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph & DePalma, 2006; Weick, 1995). Studying employees' direct experience of organizational change and using feedback to inform further process constitutes the classic recommended approach to organization development (e.g. Argyris & Schon, 1996). It nevertheless remains a highly atypical practice during organizational changes in real world settings (*cf* Bartunek et al., 2006), reflecting, to a large extent, the challenges involved in collecting and processing relevant feedback comprehensively and timely.

Our theoretical framework for this paper begins with a presentation of Freedman's (1997, 2010) realistic managed-resistance model followed by a review of the sensemaking research. We then link these two perspectives together to provide an integrated framework for examining employees' perceptions of and reactions to VHA large-scale change. This is followed by a summary of the workplace climate constructs examined in this study. We then explain the method, report the results, and conclude with a discussion of the impact of the study and avenues for future research.

**Freedman's (1997, 2010) Realistic Managed-Resistance Model**

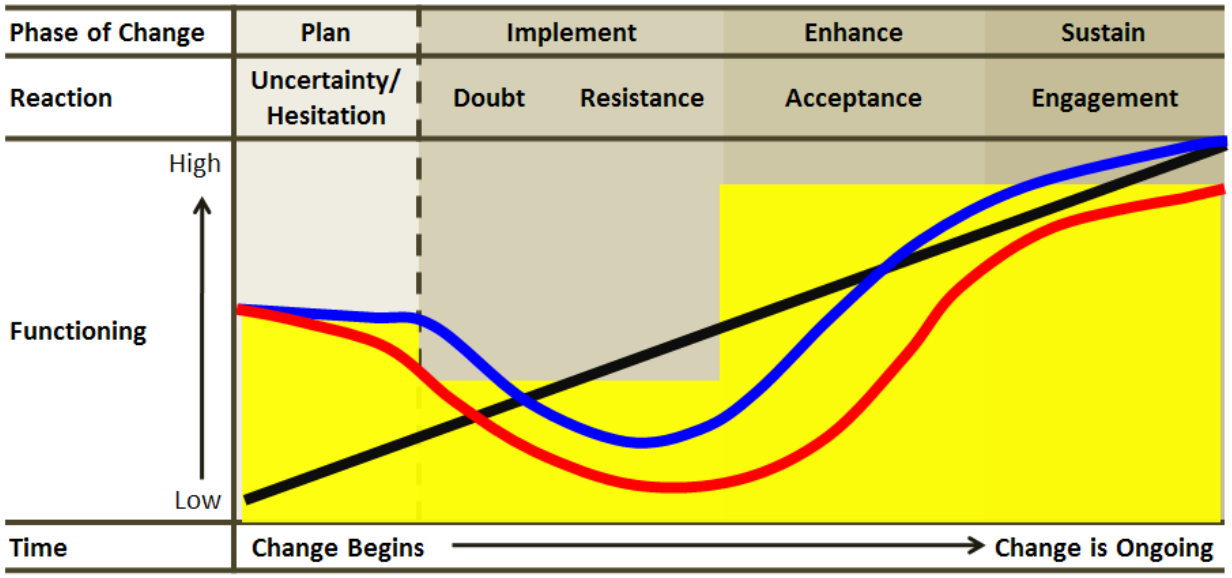
Freedman's (1997, 2010) realistic managed-resistance model rests on two basic tenets. First, change is messy and complex: it progresses through four overlapping phases through which employees and organizations learn to accept new ways of doing things. Second, employees are at the heart of organizational change, making it critical that leaders be cognizant of and attend to employees' reactions to their changing environment, particularly any resistance they might express. Employee resistance therefore is a serious issue that can hamper successful transformational change. According to Erwin and Garman (2010), resistance is frequently mentioned as the key reason for implementation difficulties or for failed change initiatives.

Figure 1 depicts Freedman's (1997, 2010) realistic managed-resistance model. Its first noteworthy feature is its contrast with the more common, stair-step approach to organizational change. The far background shows a block-like line depicting this more typical approach; 'stair-step' means that change process is understood as having a start, middle, and end stages, with clean and clear linear increases in performance as each stage progresses into the next one. The 'stair-step' model was originally derived from an interpretation of Lewin's (1947) 'freeze'-'unfreeze'-'refreeze' model of change process, as it was reformulated into a specific "stage" framework. While the stair-step interpretation realistically shows performance steeply dropping after a change effort is initiated, it depicts the following stages of change in a grossly unrealistic manner; performance is shown as steeply increasing to higher than pre-change levels after only a short amount of time (days) at being at very low levels. According to Freedman's model, this depiction is too simplistic and therefore falls short of a realistic, accurate portrayal of change. It creates a misleading expectation of rapid and linear progress of organizational change, as the model fails to

incorporate several key aspects of change process. These key aspects include resistance and the role of leaders as they continue to address resistance to change through phases of the implementation process.

In Freedman's model, the top curved line (Figure 1) shows a curvilinear process of change, comparing and contrasting how it is expected to proceed depending on whether the process is managed, or left to run its natural course. Several aspects are notable about this model. First, organizational change takes years, not days. Second, after the change is initiated, there is a gradual decline into (very) poor performance and a gradual incline into improved performance, which only modestly improves upon pre-change performance levels. Third, some undesirable behavior by employees and leaders is expected: e.g., employees may leave; leaders may be inflexible or, eventually, give up. In other words, although Freedman's model resembles other change theories in acknowledging that there are phases to change, their progression in Freedman's model is depicted as far from simple or easy (i.e. linear improvements within days neatly associated with specific stages). Osatuke et al. (2014) described in more detail the phases of change as conceptualized in Freedman's model and their implications for managing change, with an emphasis on leaders' and employees' reactions and behaviors associated with stages.

**FIGURE 1**
**FREEDMAN'S (1997, 2010) REALISTIC MANAGED-RESISTANCE MODEL**




Adapted from A.M. Freedman (1997, 2000): Realistic Managed-Resistance Model

*Note*: Black line shows the frequent but unrealistic expectation for the organizational change process. Red line shows the change process when left unmanaged. Blue line shows the change process when closely attended to and realistically managed by organizations.

Freedman's model of change is also unique in its focus on both leaders' *and* employees' experiences throughout the change process. It is more common for change theories to emphasize leaders' roles (Kotter, 1995) or to explain change at the organizational level (Burke & Litwin, 1992). These approaches, while useful, do not fully account for the process of change at the root level of the organization– the employees– where overcoming resistance and accepting change are critical for its success (Galambos, Dulmus, & Wodarski, 2005; Kouzes & Posner, 2002).

How employees make sense of transformational change provides insight into their resistance to change and helps leaders grasp how to successfully facilitate the change process. We now turn to sensemaking theory as an additional framework for understanding VHA employees' perspective on the

changes in their work environment; it specifically informs an examination of how employees' sensemaking underlies the progress of change.

**Sensemaking**

Sensemaking theory postulates that a culture is comprised of its members' activities, which creates a common framework of meaning for understanding the world (Gephart, 1993). "The cultural world is constructed or produced through sensemaking, [which is] the process whereby people interpret their world to produce the sense that shared meanings exist" (Gephart, 1993, p. 1469). Organizations are a sensemaking resource, and should be considered to be a linguistic entity constructed during sense-making activities. In other words, an organization results from a collective meaning shared by its members obtained through sources such as language and documents which provide interpretation of the organization as well as reasons for action. According to Gephart (1997), the shared meanings of sensemaking form the foundation of organizational behavior; disruption of sensemaking can shake and topple an organization.

The sensemaking framework provides a unique perspective for understanding change, by suggesting a method of examining shifts in common construed meanings about an organization. Bartunek and Moch (1987) present the concept of schemata and how it can inform our understanding of organization development, specifically the change process. Schemata are the organizing frameworks that guide cognitions, interpretations, and ways of understanding events. Schemata function to help identify objects or individuals and to stipulate connections among them. They guide behavior and give it meaning, providing implications for actions and enabling individuals to set and reach goals (Bartunek & Moch, 1987). Organizational schemata generate common meanings (or frames of reference) for the whole organization or for subgroups within it. These are maintained through organizational myths, stories, or central metaphors. They provide a guide for organization members to understand their environment, choose priorities, assign resources, and also influence behavior (Bartunek & Moch, 1987).

As an example of insights gained from applying this method, in a longitudinal case study, Balogun and Johnson (2004) investigated sensemaking in an organization undergoing an imposed shift from a hierarchical to decentralized structure. Prior to change, managers expressed, in diaries they kept for the study, a common understanding of the organization as a hierarchy. By the last measurement time, patterns of shared yet differentiated sensemaking developed. Overall, schemata change occurred through replacement of old schemata with new ones, followed by incremental adjustment to the new schema, which evolved from resentment and strain, to strain but contractual obligation, through processes of inter- and intragroup negotiation.

As another example of research questions that lend themselves well to the sensemaking methods of study, Balogun and Johnson (2005), using a longitudinal, real-time analysis of planned change implementation, examined how intended strategies led to unintended consequences during change. They focused on social processes of interactions between middle managers as change recipients who were trying to understand change interventions. Data were collected via diaries and interviews. They obtained both first- and second-level findings. For the first-level findings, they developed a causal network showing how and why the many interlinked change consequences arose. The second-level findings identified the significance of these processes and interpretations. Taken together, they found an ongoing, cyclical sensemaking process that turned change implementation into an emergent and unpredictable process. This occurred as change recipients developed interpretations about the imposed changes through their social processes of interaction (Balogun & Johnson, 2005).

Both of the above studies reflect the role of sensemaking in organizational change processes. Since organizations result from collective meanings shared by individuals, a necessary element in organizational change is the shifts in how individuals perceive the organization. As perceptions and sensemaking shift, so also does the nature and shape of the organization. An organization is composed of how its members view and make sense of it: shifts in their shared schemata reflect the process of change for the organization as a whole. Additional empirical research supports the integral role sensemaking plays in organizational change (Bartunek, 1984; Bartunek et al., 2006; Chaudry, Wayne, & Schalk, 2009;

Ericson, 2001; Gephart, 1993; Gephart, 1997; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994).

Since sensemaking is intertwined with organizational change, transformational change theories can provide a useful set of concepts and a supporting framework for examining organizational sensemaking. Specifically, Freedman's (1997, 2010) realistic managed-resistance model offers a context for understanding the sensemaking involved in resistance to change as well as how VHA employees overcome it and accept large-scale changes within the organization. For example, the interview excerpts in Osatuke et al. (2014) captured the language of change in quotes by VHA employees whose workplaces were undergoing organizational transformation. The current study uses the integrated framework that adopts the view of change processes as presented in Freedman's model, and draws upon methods used in the sensemaking literature. We apply this integrated framework to examine qualitative comments shared by VHA employees and articulate pragmatic implications for the organization as well as conceptual implications for understanding the process of organizational change in VHA in terms of the realistic managed-resistance model.

**Current Study**

We quantitatively examined differences in organizational climate perceptions between survey respondents who used the word "improvement" in free text responses and those who did not, and we qualitatively examined the variations in the meaning of the word "improvement" across survey respondents (i.e., how they used the term in the context of their comments). We categorized the different meanings and, depending on the category defined by the commenters' perceptions of improvement, explored the differences between groups in their ratings of organizational climate measures (within the same survey as the comments). Our research questions included: 1) exploring differences in perception of "improvement" by VHA employees, with a focus on the scope, nature, and organizing dimension of the differences; 2) evaluating whether potential differences in employees' perceptions of "improvement" are associated with different perceptions of the organizational climate. For this latter question, we used six AES measures of organizational climate (listed below). , These measures, are treated as indicators of organizational health within VHA; e.g. each subcomponent organization (medical centers, clinics, etc.) annually plan how to use the AES results to improve their work environment and worker satisfaction (see Osatuke et al., 2012).

*Civility* is defined as courteous and considerate workplace behaviors within the workgroup. Its specific dimensions are coworkers' personal interest and respect toward each other; coworkers' cooperation or teamwork; fair resolution of conflicts; and valuing of differences among individuals, both by coworkers and by the supervisor (Osatuke, Moore, Ward, Dyrenforth, & Belton, 2009). Civility is positively related to job satisfaction (Moore, 2010; Yanchus, Periard, Moore, Carle, & Osatuke, 2014) and to patient satisfaction with overall care as well as with its specific aspects, such as perceiving healthcare staff as courteous (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013).

*Workplace Performance* is a construct that includes elements of employee development, innovation, and planning/evaluation, and reflects the extent to which the work environment fosters employee growth. Organizations with high workplace performance are service- and customer-driven, and rely on strategic human resources practices. High workplace performance levels are associated with key organizational outcomes such as service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty (Scotti, Harmon, Behson, & Messina, 2007).

*Workgroup Psychological Safety* refers to individuals' perception of the consequences of interpersonal risks in work environments. It encompasses beliefs about how others will respond when one puts oneself on the line, such as by asking a question or reporting a mistake (Edmondson, 2004). Research suggests workgroups with lower psychological safety experience higher turnover intention (Yanchus et al., 2014).

*Supervisor Psychological Safety* refers to the extent to which supervisors provide an environment where employees' feel comfortable disagreeing or speaking up. It is important given the key role that supervisors have in shaping the psychological safety climate within their units (Edmondson, 2012).

*Supervisory Support* is formal or informal, instrumental or emotional, stable, consistent facilitation for employees' job tasks (Ng & Sorensen, 2008). Supervisory support can act as a buffer in stressful jobs (Cummins, 1990; Karasek, Triantis, & Chaudry, 1982). It also predicts job satisfaction (Babin & Boles, 1996; Baruch-Feldman, Brondolo, Ben-Dayan, & Schwartz, 2002).

*Burnout* is a three-factor construct consisting of emotional exhaustion (feelings of burnout on the job), depersonalization (feelings of being emotionally hardened by the job), and personal accomplishment (feelings of achievement on the job) (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Burnout can occur when job demands are excessive and job resources are depleted(Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001), and is frequently understood as a state that expresses the same dimension of experience as engagement, but its opposite end (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006).

## METHOD

### Participants

The Veterans Health Administration All Employee Survey (AES; Osatuke et al., 2012), is an annual census of satisfaction, civility, organizational culture, and other organizationally relevant constructs. In 2013, 160,124 VHA employees participated in the AES. Our sample included those who used the word "improvement" or its derivatives in their free text responses ($n$=2545). We selected "improvement" rather than "change" because these comments were more focused ("change" encompassed topics other than organizational change). Additionally, we were specifically interested in the meaning of *positive* organizational change, from the employees' standpoint. Respondents who did and did not use "improvement" were demographically similar, strongly supporting the representativeness of our sample of the VHA population.

### Measures

Participants' comments were in response to the AES question: "Please share any strengths about your workplace or aspects your workplace should keep supporting." The Likert-type AES scales that participants used to rate organizational climate perceptions appear in Table 1. Additionally, we used three items from Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI: Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1986), included in the AES with permission from the authors, to serve as short versions of the MBI scales measuring the three dimensions of burnout: "I feel burned out from my work" (exhaustion); "I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally" (depersonalization); and "I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job" (low personal accomplishment; reversed scored). (All AES items except burnout were rated on a 1-5 scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree.* Burnout items were rated on a 0-6 frequency scale from *never* to *daily*)

**TABLE 1**
**MEASURES USED IN THE QUANTITATIVE ANALYSES**

| Measure | Items |
|---|---|
| Civility (α = .88) | People treat each other with respect in my work group |
| | Disputes or conflicts are resolved fairly in my work group |
| | A spirit of cooperation and teamwork exists in my work group |
| | This organization does not tolerate discrimination |
| Workplace Performance (α = .89) | I am given a real opportunity to develop my skills in my work group |
| | New practices and ways of doing business are encouraged in my work group |
| | Managers set challenging and yet attainable performance goals for my work group |
| | Members in my work group are able to bring up problems and tough issues |
| | My supervisor reviews and evaluates the progress toward meeting goals and objectives of the organization |
| | Employees in my work group are competent to accomplish our tasks |
| | I have the appropriate supplies, materials, and equipment to perform my job well |
| Workgroup Psychological Safety (α = .85) | Members in my work group are able to bring up problems and tough issues |
| | It is safe to try something new in this work group |
| | Members of my work group communicate well with each other |
| Supervisor Psychological Safety (α = .87) | My supervisor encourages people to speak up when they disagree with a decision |
| | I feel comfortable talking to my supervisor about work-related problems even if I'm partially responsible |
| Supervisory Support (α = .95) | My supervisor is fair in recognizing accomplishments |
| | I have an effective working relationship with my supervisor |
| | My supervisor stands up for his/her people |
| | My supervisor does not engage in favoritism |
| | My supervisor provides clear instructions necessary to do my job |

**Procedure**

We used a textual approach (Gephart, 1993) combined with computer-based text search methods, for selecting comments based on key words hypothesized to capture perceptions of positive outcomes from change efforts. By this selection, we created textual exhibits (key passages) that illustrated perceptions of change outcomes.

We then examined these passages seeking to understand the concepts, terms, and vocabularies that organizational members used in their sensemaking about change. We interpreted individual meanings of the key word ("improvement") based on its specific use by the commenters, and categorized the passages to reflect important distinct uses by using an iterative approach based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Each category was described, noting the meaning of "improvement", any frequently associated contexts, representative examples, and the number of comments in the category as well as percentage that this category comprised from all the AES comments mentioning "improvement."

Finally, we used statistical analyses to systematically evaluate the relationship between these qualitatively derived categories and numeric (Likert scale and frequency scale) ratings of workplace

perception aspects by the commenters. Specifically, we used a series of t-tests and ANOVAs to determine whether ratings differed between the qualitatively defined groups.

## RESULTS

### Qualitative Analysis

The textual analysis of comments that used the word 'improvement' yielded three distinct categories:

1. Individuals who *observed* an improvement in their work environment ("Our claims filing process has improved.") This was often explicitly compared and/or contrasted with the earlier situation before the improvements took place. Typically, a specific party (e.g. the new supervisor; coworkers) were acknowledged for making the improvement (677 comments and 26.6% of all "improvement" comments) were in this category.
2. Individuals who *suggested* a specific area of their work environment needing improvement ("We need to improve the communications between doctors and staff."). The context for these suggestions included improvement to interpersonal aspects of the work environment, such as communication and teamwork, as well as the need to improve on staffing or leadership (451 comments and17.7 % of all "improvement" comments).
3. Individuals who said 'improvement' and positively commented on their work environment, but *did not mention a specific area for improvement* ("I love my workgroup. It's a very supportive environment which improves vet care."). These comments primarily came from frontline staff, not leaders, and positive comments were made about management, interpersonal relationships, and education/skill development (1417 comments and 55.7 % of "improvement" comments).

Representative quotes below illustrate the content of these three categories, providing a rich description on how employees make sense of improvement in their work environment.

*Observed Improvement*

The quotes below show how VA employees and make sense of improvements that they have observed occurring in their work environment. The use of language in these quotes and particularly, any comparisons made between past and present practices are of note; they reveal how employees come to understand that changes have been made.

> "Since I've been here we have not had the supervisor or direction that is conducive to a strong team that recognizes that all of members of the team have strengths that can utilized. In the past this team has been micromanaged and staff were not challenged to their potential. We now have a new supervisor that challenges us and give us much **improved** supervision and direction."
>
> "I feel that VA, and our VA is very conscious of the safety of our nurse, health care workers as we now have No Lift Policy and have resources to have safe transfers not only for the staff but for our Veterans. This has been a marked **improvement** to my earlier days. I would think it's a great recruiting point for working here."
>
> "Open communication and willingness to listen to ideas and opinions, regardless of education background/licensure has been extremely beneficial in my workgroup. Recognizing someone has valuable information and insight, then actually putting changes in place has **improved** patient care."

The first two quotes mention how things used to be handled; that serves as a referent to explain the way the situation has changed and improved. In the third comment, "recognizing someone has valuable information and insight, then actually putting changes in place...." indicates an acknowledgement of the present improved state vis-à-vis a different past behavior; i.e. the comment implies that in the past, changes were *not* put into place as they are currently.

*Suggested Improvement*

This next set of representative quotes shows how employees talk about specific suggested improvements. All three quotes emphasize aspects of interpersonal relationships, such as communication or teamwork. Of note, the commenters are also curiously positive about the situations for which they suggest the need of improvement.

> "I really enjoy working with the veteran patient population, who are a special group of patients. Overall we give great care. The hospital Staff needs to hear more praises and positive reinforcement. We need to have monthly or quarterly employee forums. Communication need to be **improved** throughout the Medical Center."
> "My work group, meaning the clinicians in the Mental Health clinic, are a very competent, compassionate and hard-working group. We respect and support one another as peers. I think that supporting the comradery and cohesiveness of the clinical staff would greatly **improve** morale. Allowing input into decisions affecting the staff would be great!"
> "We have a great team that accomplishes more when working as an integrated team. Events and activities that allow team members to come together outside of work related activities would likely **improve** team relations when they are engaged in work related activities."

Unlike the first set of quotes (Observed Improvement), these comments do not include a referent to how things compare from before to now, which makes sense because suggested improvements have not actually occurred. Instead, the commenters refer to what is working now, as well as what could be done better. In line with the definition of improvement, in these comments, employees discussed ways their work environment could be enhanced, and therefore, rather than simply complaining, they pointed to a change (or transformation) they wanted.

*Specific Improvement not Mentioned*

The third set of quotes includes mentions of improvement but not specific suggested improvements. The language in the comments reflects the lack of forcefulness with which the word improvement is used. In other words, *improvement* is not specifically expressing a change for the better, or a suggestion for enhancing the work environment, but instead is just one word among many other words in the comment, used in its common sense, with no particular salience or personal meaning attached.

> "I love my supervisor-he is dedicated, knowledgeable and sharing with great leadership skills and business acumen. He has made all the difference in my job satisfaction and ability to thrive at this facility. What I like most is that he does not have favorites-we all have equal access to our Chief and he works hard on planning and developing each clinical area to **improve** MH services to our veterans."
> "The working staff on the whole are extremely competent. My boss and co-supervisors are very easy to work with and are very competent. Our med tech program cannot be surpassed. The equipment is the state of the art. Benefits and job security are very good in the VA. There are tremendous opportunities for leadership training and self-**improvement**."
> "Very strong team and leadership structure of clinical and administrative professionals comprising highly diverse professional and personal backgrounds that contribute to a highly motivating, energetic, and enthusiastic working environment and culture set around continuous Patient Care process **improvement** initiatives and non-clinical(admin/research) forward-moving strategies and goals."

These quotes do not contain the more specific language found in the other two sets regarding change or improvement in the work environment. This non-specific use of the word *improvement* in these instances is in line with how employees mean *improvement* when it is used descriptively (as a *result* of activities) rather than actively (as the *process* of improving).

Overall, these comments provide insight into how employees make sense of improvement in their workplace, and this helps see how sensemaking by organizational members can impact change within the organization. In the Observed Improvement quotes, the term *improvement* could be considered interchangeable with *change*. Change involves a shift from one situation to another, and the way employees describe improvement in their work environment – from a past situation to a different present situation – captures that movement. On the other hand, when commenting on Suggested Improvements, employees maintain the meaning of the word *improvement*, discussing ways in which an already existing, working system could be made better. When *improvement* is used descriptively and not intended to signify change or suggested improvement, its meaning is more generic or vague.

**Quantitative Analyses**

The first step in the quantitative analyses was to evaluate the presence of differences on the organizational climate scales between individuals who used the word 'improvement' in their comments and those who did not. Using a set of independent samples t-tests, we found that these groups differed in perceptions of Civility ($t(143384)=5.92$; $p<.05$; mean difference = .12), Workgroup Performance ($t(139670) = 8.66$; $p<.05$; mean difference = .15), Workgroup Psychological Safety ($t(148330) = 8.44$; $p<.05$; mean difference = .17), Supervisor Psychological Safety ($t(2732.16) = 8.63$; $p<.05$; mean difference = .18), Supervisory Support ($t(2582.89) = 9.04$; $p<.05$; mean difference = .19), and Lack of Personal Accomplishment ($t(2828.89) = 7.30$; $p<.05$; mean difference= .24). There were no significant differences between the groups on Exhaustion ($t(2812.02) = 1.94$; $p>.05$) or Depersonalization ($t(155341) = 1.57$; $p>.05$). Of note, commenters who mentioned "improvement" in their responses had significantly lower mean scores on items asking if employees in their workgroup were provided with results from previous AES results ($t(151961)=5.68$, $p<.05$) and if changes have been made based on past AES results ($t(150579)=5.80$ $p<.05$). This difference suggests that a lack of information about organizational results and related organizational actions may partly explain these commenters' greater focus on "improvement."

In the second step of analyses, a series of one-way ANOVAs were performed to examine whether there were differences on the organizational climate scales between the three groups of individuals obtained in the qualitative analysis. To reiterate, these groups were: Category 1 = Observed Improvement; Category 2 = Suggested Improvement; and Category 3 = Specific Improvement not Mentioned. Differences on the six organizational climate scales were significant across all three categories: Civility, $F(2, 2337) = 7.99$, $p<.05$; Workgroup Performance, $F(2, 2335) = 8.07$, $p<.05$; Workgroup Psychological Safety, $F(2, 2448) = 8.69$, $p<.05$; Supervisor Psychological Safety, $F(2, 2458) = 4.93$, $p<.05$; Supervisory Support, $F(2. 2316) = 11.92$, $p<.05$; Exhaustion, $F(2, 2531) = 2.12$, $p>.05$; Depersonalization, $F(2, 2526) = 3.45$, $p>05$; and Low Personal Accomplishment, $F(2, 2533) = 6.20$, $p<.05$. Post-hoc Tukey tests were then performed to examine mean differences between the three categories on the organizational climate scales. Several significant differences were found at the $p<.05$ level and appear in Table 2.

Overall, the Specific Improvement not Mentioned group had the highest ratings on all of the organizational climate scales, followed by the Observed Improvement and the Suggested Improvement groups. The finding was reversed for the low personal accomplishment scale, indicating this group is less burned out, which is along the same lines as the other results. The findings suggest that individuals engaged in the change process – as indicated by the focus of their comments being on actual improvements – are less pleased with their organizational climate as they attempt to make sense of it. This is in line with Freedman's model in that employees are initially confused about and resistant to change, and then gradually show an acceptance of it.

**TABLE 2**
**POST-HOC ANALYSES: MEAN DIFFERENCES**

| | Mean Differences | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Measure | Groups 1 v 2 | Groups 1 v 3 | Groups 2 v 3 |
| Civility | 0.092 | 0.113* | 0.205** |
| Workplace Performance | 0.106 | 0.080 | 0.185** |
| Workgroup Psychological Safety | 0.095 | 0.115* | 0.210** |
| Supervisor Psychological Safety | 0.061 | 0.104 | 0.165* |
| Supervisory Support | 0.113 | 0.148** | 0.261** |
| Depersonalization | 0.127 | 0.216 | 0.203 |
| Low Personal Accomplishment | 0.058 | 0.258** | 0.200 |

Note: Group 1 = Observed Improvement; Group 2 = Suggested Improvement; Group 3 = Specific Improvement not Mentioned
**$p$<.01; *$p$<.05

## DISCUSSION

The current study progresses our understanding of sensemaking and change in VHA. The qualitative results reveal how VHA employees incorporate changes to their work environment into their organizational framework. The quantitative results support the qualitative results by showing that employees who directly experience change are more frustrated with the process than those who do not. These outcomes both confirm and further our understanding of Freedman's (1997, 2010) realistic managed-resistance model of transformational change.

In the qualitative analyses, which focused on the language employees use to describe their perceptions of workplace improvement, we reported two unique findings. First, when actual change was observed, employees comparatively framed it in a past/present dichotomy: what work environment had been in the past to what the work environment currently looked like. In terms of sensemaking theory, it appears as if employees are shifting their cognitive framework of their work environment in order to incorporate and accept new ways of functioning. According to Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), change involves a cognitive reorientation of the organization: employees must be able to understand and accept a new conceptualization of the organization. This can be achieved via leader initiated changes and employees' sensemaking of those changes (Gioia et al., 1994). In our study, employees do make sense of a past work environment that needed to improve compared to a present one in which things are better. This finding supports one of the key tenets in Freedman's model: employees in the latter phases of organizational change begin to accept that change has occurred and is beneficial. In our analysis of the AES open-text comments, this is what seems to happen with VHA employees as evidenced by their acknowledgement of change occurring but with an absence of negative language in their response (i.e., complaining about the change). This finding, combined with the employee quotes presented in Osatuke et al. (2014), offers additional evidence in support of Freedman's account l of how employees come to make sense of and accept change.

We also found in our qualitative analyses that employees commenting on suggested improvements to their work environment similarly refrain from using negative language. And while they do not complain that elements of the work environment could be better, they also do not directly call for large changes but instead request moderate improvements. We interpret this as evidence of employees actually resisting the overall organizational changes that are occurring. By focusing on smaller and possibly less consequential elements of the workplace, and suggesting minor improvements, it is almost as if they are trying to maintain some sense of control over their shifting work environment. Research suggests that employees'

perceived sense of control plays a critical role in organizational change. Lau and Woodman (1995) investigated the construct of organizational change schema, and found that locus of control was negatively related to participants' change schema, which then impacted their attitude toward specific change. Additionally, locus of control was related to perceptions of the impact of change, change salience, and personal control over the outcomes of change. According to Oreg, Vkola, and Armenakis (2011), research shows that employees who feel more control in the change process show greater acceptance of change, increased psychological well-being and job satisfaction, and lower psychological strain. Therefore, it is likely that employees who do not feel strongly in control of the change process will resist it, inevitably slowing or halting its progress. This response both supports and extends our understanding of Freedman's model in that first, employees do resist change; and second, that there may be an element of personal control in the response to change that potentially enhances resistance, which offers a new avenue to explore employee reactions to change as conceptualized within Freedman's model. The theoretical implication of this finding is the need to conceptually account for the role of job control as a possible element within resistance, while the pragmatic implication is the relevance of paying attention to how employees' job control is affected by the process and outcome of change initiatives.

The current study used Freedman's (1997, 2010) realistic managed-resistance model as a framework for understanding organizational change and employee sensemaking of change in VHA. Past research has also applied concepts from transformational change theory for explaining the ways in which employees experience and integrate change into their organizational framework. Such an integrative framework (concepts from a change model combined with methods from sensemaking research) helped better understand employees' experience of change, as illustrated, for example, by Bartunek (1984), which investigated the organizational restructuring of a religious order, and used second-order change, an element in several transformational change theories, including Tushman and Romanelli's (1985) punctuated equilibrium theory, to frame her explanation of the changes within that organization.

Specifically, Tushman and Romanelli (1985) indicate that second-order change in interpretive schemes includes much organizational chaos and uncertainty. Bartunek (1984) suggests that this type of change did occur in the religious order. (There was a great deal of tension among the different groups in the organization; there was fear of changing the organizational structure; and there was disagreement regarding how change should be implemented. Presence of these states is understood to reflect the stress experienced in second-order change, and how employees make sense of these changes.)

As illustrated by Bartunek's study and, we suggest, also by our current study, while methods of examining the data used in the sensemaking research methods were instrumental to deeper understanding of employees' experience of change, the set of theoretical (model-driven) expectations about perceptions of change allowed a comparison between the concepts postulated in the model, and observations based on the informants' data. Our current study used a similar strategy, in that we examined contextually specific meanings in which employees used "improvement" seeking to understand, and categorize, the underlying experience of organizational context, and also compared these perceptions to the theoretically-based expectations as defined by Freedman's model of transformational change. We suggest this strategy is useful; it allowed us to evaluate consistency of observations with the theoretical expectations yet also left us room to expand on the concepts of the model when they appeared insufficient to account for the meanings at hand. (For example, we noted a need to conceptually elaborate on employees' experience of job control, as our qualitative data suggest its potential relevance to resisting change).

Our quantitative analyses of comments that mentioned "improvement" revealed that the specific content of the commenters' response (how they used the word "improvement") was significantly and systematically related to how they rated their workplace climate on Likert-type survey measures. This is consistent with prior research that established the key importance of individual meanings in determining perceived outcomes of organizational change (e.g. Weick, 2005). Notably, individuals who wrote a general positive comment without mentioning specific improvements, either observed or suggested, scored higher on the Civility, Workplace Psychological safety, and Supervisory Support scales than those who noted improvements and those who suggested improvements. Not surprisingly, individuals who wrote about needed improvements were more burned out than those who wrote a general positive

comment. Commenters who wrote about improvements observed in their workplace were, however, also more burned out than those who shared general positive comments. Thus, while using the word "improvement" in free text responses was associated with more favorable ratings of climate, these differences in ratings were dependent upon how they used the word "improvement" in their responses.

The results of statistical comparisons show that, on all the aspects of organizational climate perceptions which we examined, significant differences existed between individuals who mentioned the word "improvement" in their comments and those who did not. Those who discussed improvements reported more favorable perceptions of various climate aspects that those who did not. Interestingly, however, in comparison to those latter, the former commenters also reported less sharing and less usage of past survey results in their workplace. Perhaps these individuals were overcompensating for the lack of organizational transparency (i.e. less feedback of past AES results) by tracking the status of improvements in their own metric; free text responses. Further analyses are needed to explore these results.

On all of the six climate scales which we examined, commenters mentioning the need for specific improvements had the lowest overall means, followed by commenters mentioning specific improvements they observed. Those mentioning improvement in a general positive context had the highest means. These consistent differences suggest that inviting and addressing employee suggestions during organizational change efforts is critical. Based on our results, commenters who note the need for specific improvements are those with the lowest perceptions of current environment, across a variety of climate indicators; hearing and incorporating their input in the subsequent change efforts is thus crucial to bringing these disenfranchised organizational members on board.

**Future Directions**

One avenue to explore regarding sensemaking and change is that of social contagion. For example, we wonder to what extent, within shared organizational environments, the Observed Improvement group (which has accepted change) would begin to influence the Suggested Improvement group, which appears more resistant. In other words, as more employees accept change and use and share schemata related to an improved work environment, does this also spread into the schemata and language of those resisting change so that they begin to make sense of change as a positive force? While "contagion" is more frequently used in emotion research (see Barsade, 2002), we believe that it also applies to sensemaking about change. (A similar concept of "spirals" has been applied to discussing the spread of civility—Osatuke et al., 2009, and incivility—Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Leiter et al., 2012). According to Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, in the face of uncertainty, people communicate with each other and subsequently develop socially derived interpretations of events and their meanings. Social information is thus used in developing perceptions of meaningfulness and importance. Additionally, Salancik and Pfeffer (1978) indicate that social influence structures a person's attentional processes, increasing or decreasing the salience of elements of the environment. "By noting certain aspects of the environment, by talking frequently about certain dimensions, coworkers cue an individual as to what to consider in the work setting. The dimensions salient can then affect the attitude formed" (p. 229). In this manner, the Observed Improvement group might influence the Suggested Improvement group to consider change as positive and important to accept. As employees increasingly share their positive sense of changes as improvements in the work environment, it is likely that their schema about the organization will gradually impact those showing resistance, so that they too begin developing a more accepting mindset about changes. Freedman's model would suggest that this is a real possibility: as the change process unfolds, increasingly more employees come to accept and embrace change. A future, longitudinal study could evaluate this possibility empirically.

**Conclusions**

Qualitative comments on employee surveys are an underutilized source of data that can provide a wealth of information about employee behaviors and attitudes. Among other uses, these data reveal sensemaking processes that shape employee perceptions of organizational change and to an important

extent define the impact of change efforts upon the organizational members. This study showed how specific meanings brought up in the discussion of "improvement" in the workplace were systematically and consistently associated with levels of perceptions of several key aspects of organizational climate. The findings suggest applications of qualitative comments data to informing change management efforts in organizational settings. The reported findings also provide additional evidence in support of a non-linear, "becoming worse before getting better" view of change process as outlined in Freedman's realistic managed-resistance model. Future studies, preferably with longitudinal designs, can further examine the specific interpretive shifts in perceptions of work climate which signal the beginning upward movement (i.e., the observed "improvement") of organizational performance as captured from the employee perspective.

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