

**The Emotional and Volitional Response Abilities of Intermediate Leaders in  
Profound, Unfair Change Processes**

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### **Abstract**

This paper studies the emotional and volitional responses of intermediate leaders in profound change processes that do not meet the requirements of a fair process.

Intermediate leaders are leaders who were not actively involved in a change and yet are required to promote the change. Through qualitative research applying interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), this paper illustrates the inner theater of intermediate leaders and how their leadership and followership identities interplay with emotions, choices, and the self. The focus is on clinical considerations, especially transference and defense mechanisms. The paper proposes an integrated roadmap, illustrating the options intermediate leaders choose in times of change, incorporating emotional, volitional, identity, and behavior aspects.

Keywords: *responsibility, profound change, intermediate leader, leadership, followership, emotions, volition, choice, defense mechanisms, relational identity, transference*

### **The Emotional and Volitional Response Abilities of Intermediate Leaders in Profound, Unfair Change Processes**

Leadership is a dynamic interplay between leader and follower, yet it is the follower who determines the success of leadership: change happens only when followers follow. But what if the change leader in question is also a follower who is expected to lead, who should lead, who must lead, and yet who does not want to lead through change? In most cases, organizational change is not solely brought about proactively; external factors influence and lead to managerial actions, or more precisely reactions to these external factors. On common reaction to changing external factors on a corporate level is profound organizational change. This change is a corporate top-down process initiated by the board or CEO. This calls all other leaders in the organization to process that change and translate it further down the hierarchy. In this common scenario, all leaders below the top are followers and are required to process the change in order to accept it, possibly against their will.

The focus of this thesis is on the leader who feels caught in the middle, one who is not directly involved in initiating the change yet is expected to buy into the change and lead others to buy in as well. For a manager, it might be enough that he “ought to” or “has to” manage and execute. Leadership without “want to” seems impossible. Therefore, I will discard the term middle manager and replace it with intermediate leaders.<sup>1</sup>

Hardy and Clegg (1996) describe power as “the ability to get others to do what you want them to do, if necessary against their will, or to get them to do something they otherwise would not do” (p. 623). In their article on commitment to change, Ning and Jing (2012) state that “employees can feel bound to support a change because they want to, ought

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<sup>1</sup> The expressions middle manager and follower carry ambiguous connotations. The German language uses “Sandwich manager,” or pejoratively, “Lähmschicht,” a word that is derived from the geological term “Lehmschicht” (bed of clay) in a combination with the similar sound “lähm,” meaning “paralyzed, lame.”

to, and/or have to” (p. 464). How difficult is it to get others to do what you want them to do? In particular, how difficult is leadership for the leaders if they are still processing their own anxiety and anger and their own resistance and (non-)acceptance of the change? Metaphorically speaking, what is the “bandwidth” (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky 2009) of these leaders, or what is their response ability? How can intermediate leaders get others to want what they do not even want, or rather what they should want? How can intermediate leaders make others buy into a change, a change they did not buy into in the first place?

How do these leaders accept the new reality and assume responsibility? Karl Weick illustrates the ideal response ability when he quotes Jill Hawk, a former park ranger of Mount Rainier National Park, who describes how rangers should respond to difficult situations by telling themselves: “It is what it is, it is in front of me, and I have to deal with it” (Weick 2009, p. vii).

I will illustrate the process, or more often, struggle of intermediate leaders in the change: how they process the change internally and how they intend to deal with their internal processes toward their corporate environment. Being inspired by Kets de Vries’ model on personal change (2006), I will explore and highlight the three conflicting internal forces that enable intermediate leaders to adapt to change: defense structures, emotions, and perception of (the) self. I intend to illustrate the inner theater of intermediate leaders: the emotions, will, and relational identity that intermediate leaders feel, choose, and adopt in a difficult challenging environment—a profound organizational change that is not considered a fair process in the sense of Kim and Mauborgne (2003). In a fair process, people are informed and involved and are able to understand the rationale behind the change-related decisions. Moreover, they understand what is expected of them and how they could engage actively. In short, a fair process is a change where people are respected and treated fairly (Kim and Mauborgne, 2003, p. 131).

### **Literature review**

There is abundant literature focusing on leadership (for an overview, see Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009), the role of effective leadership and the effective leader (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009; Yukl, 2012), and even on bad or destructive leadership and susceptible followers (Thoroughgood, Padilla, Hunter, & Tate, 2012; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). While much smaller in number, the literature on followership has been growing (Balogun, 2003; Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010; Collinson, 2006; Riggio, Chaleff, & Lipman-Blumen, 2008; Sy, 2010; Kelley, 2008, 1992). In the literature, it has also been widely recognized that leaders and followers co-create effective relationships (Hollander, 1992; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

As is noticeable from the literature, there is a shift in the role of middle managers from being seen as employees who are resistant barriers to change in the organization to being seen as “change intermediaries—both recipients and implementers of change” (Balogun, 2003). It has been researched how they negotiate their role and self (Bryant & Stensaker, 2011) and how they make sense and give sense (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Their crucial role in the change process has been highlighted by Conway and Monks (2011) and Huy (2002).

Bruckman (2008) provides a good overview of why people resist change in organizations: change threatens the status quo and personal security, and it increases fear and anxiety. People start thinking and reasoning defensively and begin to distrust and develop resentments toward their leaders. Balogun underlines the heavy burden that middle managers carry during change that “may make them appear to be resistant foot-draggers, when in reality they are struggling to cope and confused about priorities” (Balogun, 2003, p. 81).

The importance of the emotions that employees experience in change processes has been well established (Huy, 2012; Klärner, By, & Diefenbach, 2011). There is a vast body of

literature on how people deal with emotions (Stein & Book, 2011; Frijda, 1998) and how people experience, resist, or commit to profound change (Kets de Vries, 2006; Königswieser & Hillebrand, 2005, Kuebler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; Ning & Jing, 2012). Klärner, By, and Diefenbach (2011) lay out the research agenda of (employee) emotions during organizational change: “we need to understand what impact employees’ coping behavior has throughout the change process, rather than only at the end of the change” (p. 336).

The importance of leadership in change processes and how leaders should lead others through change has been elaborated on in the literature (Heitger & Doujak, 2012; Kotter, 1995; Pascale, Millemann, & Gioja, 1997), as has how people accept authority (Tyler, 1997) and the change that follows a fair process (Kim & Mauborgne, 2003).

This paper intends to contribute to the missing link regarding how intermediate leaders cope with change they have to implement and pass on to their employees. How do intermediate leaders process the change themselves in order to lead others? The paper focuses on the emotional process and the dynamic interplay in how the intermediate leader thinks and sees himself and how he processes wanting the change, that is, the shift in modality from “have to” to “want to.”

Huy (2012) supports this research focus: “the roles of various organizational actors—including top and middle managers—in perceiving and managing their own emotions as well as others’ emotions, and developing emotional capability, remain to be investigated more thoroughly” (p. 10–11).

As a consequence, the response abilities of intermediate leaders are the research aim and objective of this thesis. This paper attempts to determine how intermediate leaders see themselves in the change, how they deal with change, what emotions they experience in the change, and how they try make someone else’s will their own.

## **Methodology**

This thesis follows a mixed qualitative research approach in which I adopt a phenomenological perspective combining an ethnographic lens. In addition, I include an idiographic focus as used in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and a clinical perspective to gain insights into the current life-worlds, i.e. the reality intermediate leaders experience.

The ethnographic perspective was adopted to observe intermediate leaders in real situations (e.g., communicating an intended change at a town hall meeting), in learning environments (especially in change leadership workshops), and in-group sessions (especially in off-site facilitated meetings). This part of the methodology was mainly used to gain an understanding of the dynamics and constraints intermediate leaders face and how they report them. It was also used to select participants for the second and main body of the research.

The idiographic focus of the IPA was applied to the main body of the research, the narratives of intermediate leaders, to gain insights into how these leaders make sense of and deal with their emotional and volitional discrepancies in profound, unfair change. This part of the methodology was applied in qualitative interviews with participants, who were purposely selected based on the following criteria: being an intermediate leader and being in a profound and unfair change process.

IPA uses open-ended inquiry with few questions, allowing the researcher to take part in an inquisitive dialogue with the interview partner. It also offers a continuous reflection of the interpretations on the data and a constant dialogue between the data and the researcher to generate meaning (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011; Walsh, 2004; Lester, 1999).

As this is a thesis for a degree in clinical approaches to management, I intend to focus on a clinical perspective. I aim to use myself as an instrument and intend to perceive

phenomena, especially mental and sensational resonances such as images, bodily sensations, and emotions (“Gefühle”), through empathizing and mentalizing (van de Loo, 2007).

I further incorporate Finlay’s considerations of “reflexive embodied empathy” (Finlay, 2006, 2005). This phenomenological perspective highlights empathy (“Einführung”) between the researcher and participants: “Perception is regarded as the primary source of knowledge. Intentions and sensations make up the full concrete act of perception and allow the object to achieve full bodied presence” (Finlay, 2005, p. 287).

Reflexive embodied empathy and a clinical perspective through “listening with the third ear” (van de Loo, 2007, p. 230) may be the basis for a phenomenological interpretation and the understanding of the psychodynamic phenomena, such as transference, transference-like phenomena, and defense mechanisms, that may be in action in the participating intermediate leaders and in the researcher and in the relationship between the two. I borrow from Finlay (2006, p. 1) who quotes Walt Whitman:

“I do not ask the wounded peers on how he feels,  
I myself become the wounded person.  
My hurt turns livid upon me  
As I lean on a cane and observe.”

Finlay uses the metaphor of a dance between researcher and participant—a picture I favor for an open-ended dialogue between the participant, his life-world, the transcript, my life-world, and myself. The wounded peer and the dance may allude to a range of emotions, from pain to pleasure, from fear to joy, of the intermediate leaders, and the researcher as well: “When researchers empathize with their participant, just who and what is being revealed?” (Finlay, 2005, p. 289).

### **A life-world of profound, unfair change**

As IPA uses purposive sampling, I interviewed participants who experience similar life-worlds. These similar life-worlds met four criteria, two content criteria (organizational

role of the intermediate leader and role in the change) and two context criteria (profundity of the change and fairness of the change):

1. The participants are intermediate leaders. They are both leaders and followers.
2. The participants did not initiate the change yet were expected to carry it further through the organization and lead followers.
3. The change is profound. Participants reported the following characteristics of profound organizational change, both objectively (involving layoffs; considerable restructuring; change of ownership, name, or identity; strategic repositioning; key people leaving; and cost-cutting programs) and subjectively (it was difficult or almost impossible to cope with the change; they described fear, anxiety, and anger as their predominant emotions or as predominant in the organization)
4. The change is not a fair process. Kim and Mauborgne suggest that a fair process is necessary for a knowledge economy, where knowledge can only be created and shared adequately “when people cooperate voluntarily” (Kim & Mauborgne, 2003, p. 134). They found a direct connection between processes, attitudes, and behaviors: “Individuals are most likely to trust and cooperate freely with systems—whether they themselves win or lose by those systems —when fair process is observed” (p. 131). They continue: “Fair process responds to a basic human need .... We want others to respect our intelligence .... And we want to understand the rationale behind specific decisions” (p. 131). Kim and Mauborgne suggest three criteria that establish a fair process: engagement, explanation, and expectation clarity (2003). These criteria are prerequisites for a creative dynamic between leader and follower , creating “active cooperation” (von Hayek, 1945) beyond command and subordination, where mental, emotional, and volitional capacities can develop in a context of trust and choice: I will only fully buy in if I can process my thoughts, emotions, and

volition with dignity and respect, and I am able to process the transition from follower to leader in order to be prepared to lead others so they are able to buy in.

Another criterion that was frequently reported, and that may correlate with the other two context criteria, was not applied explicitly in selecting participants due to the highly subjective, projective interpretations of the emotionally loaded group discussions: the frequent report that the leadership capacities of the intermediate leaders' leaders seemed limited.

Intermediate leaders reported that their direct leaders did not buy into the change and rather acted "as-if". They described anxiety, fear, insecurity, and anger as predominant emotions in all forms and behaviors—from withdrawal, irony, cynicism, sarcasm, blame games, self-victimization, bullshit bingo, or disengaged engagement. They complained that the change was initiated at the top of the organization in some distant headquarters, behind closed doors or mindlessly following the analysis of some arrogant international consulting group. In all cases, they stated that the behavior of their top management lacked ownership, leadership, responsibility, or competency. This special flavor may add to the dynamics of a profound, unfair change process.

Listening to conversations in 15 different change management workshop group settings and applying these criteria, four out of eight organizations were selected. 16 participants agreed to participate in interviews for this thesis. These interviews were conducted weeks and months after the workshops to allow for sufficient life-world experience and to reduce the bias of both the participants and the researcher being in a double role of facilitator and participant (in the workshop) and researcher and participant (in the context of this thesis), respectively.

Three of these intermediate leaders were leaders of people who were also intermediate leaders; they were leading leaders. Six of these intermediate leaders were leading employees.

Before the interviews, the participants were asked again how they perceived the current profundity and fairness of the change process on a scale from 0 to 10. Only those participants who reported a high degree of profundity (7–10) and a low degree of fairness (0–3) were included in the analysis. Nine participants from two organizations were selected.

### **Description of the research setting**

The first, ethnographic part of the research setting was listening to group conversations of participants in change or change leadership workshops, where the researcher was able to either listen in or had an active part as trainer or facilitator.

A starting point for the discussion was the sequence of emotions, based on Kuebler-Ross and Kessler (2005), and the change practitioner's considerations (Königswieser, 1985; Kets de Vries, 2006) on how people (in organizations) process change through emotions. This model was introduced as a "living map." In a living map, the floor of a room is used as a map, where different qualities or intensities, aspects, or an aspect's relation to a question are symbolized by different positions on the floor. Participants do not only talk, they embody their perspective, in this case, their predominantly perceived emotion.

The living map in focus suggested five basic emotions: 1. insecurity/anxiety/fear, 2. anger/aggression, 3. grief, 4. interest/curiosity, and 5. joy/hope. A brief explanation of the particular emotion was given, how functional these emotions had been in the process of human evolution, some everyday examples on how these emotions might work and be expressed, and how difficult it sometimes is to process and express them properly.

Participants could relate and relax, and even very rational participants were able to share their emotional experiences.

Most importantly, a living map makes emotions visible and does not distinguish between positive or negative emotions. It also allows participants to process emotional and psychological pressure through airing, complaining, and acknowledging these emotions. In settings where the personal emotion might have been too difficult to express, such as low level of trust, different levels of hierarchy in the room, or a very rational setting, the living map of emotions was introduced differently, making use of the projective power of emotions.

Participants were asked to use the living map to answer the following question: “What would you consider the predominant emotion in the organization right now?” From the total number of participants (n = 180), 49 percent described anxiety/fear, 21 percent anger, 2 percent grief, 22.5 percent interest, and 4.5 percent joy/hope as the currently predominant emotion in the organization.

The core of the research setting included qualitative interviews following the aforementioned methodology. The interviews were face-to-face, normally at the participant’s workplace (in a quiet, undisturbed setting). The nine participants came from two different organizations (from both profit and non-profit industries) in central Europe. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were audio recorded. The interview language was German.

The interview was conducted as an open inquiry with a few interview questions (see Appendix, Table 2). To stimulate a reflection on the volitional responses, I prepared “modality cards” (in multiple copies) that I distributed during the interview when the question of tensions or volitional discrepancies was asked (see Appendix, Table 3).

### **How to translate leader and follower?**

Is poetry lost in translation (Robert Frost) or gained in translation (Joseph Brodsky, quoted in Rushdie, 2009, p. 4)? The interviews were conducted in German and were translated. The German language adopted many concepts and words from the English language. For example, leadership, management, leader, manager, sandwich manager, and CEO have become frequently used foreign words in German.

There are different translations for the word leader in German. Both leader and manager are normally translated into manager. Practitioners do not distinguish between these two terms and use these words interchangeably. Another term frequently used in the interviews was “Führungskraft.” “Kraft” means “power,” and as suffix, -kraft is used to nominalize a verb into a (rather neutral) person that executes this activity. Leader can also be translated as Führer, Leiter, and boss. Although the first is not used for historical reasons, the second is frequently used in compound words, e.g., “Abteilungsleiter” for department head or “Teamleiter” for team leader.

Resonating the hierarchical relationship, another word for leader/manager is “Vorgesetzter,” a term from the relational perspective of the employee to describe the boss, the “one who has been sat/positioned in front” of the employee. The term completing the dyadic pair and describing the follower or employee is “Untergebener,” which can be best translated as subordinate and has the connotation of servility.

Intermediate leader could be best translated as “mittlere Führungskraft”; the double meaning of “mittel” or “middle” being “in between” and also “average” is translated in the semantic realm of “middle manager.” “Mittler” is the nominalized form for somebody who goes between two others, such as an agent or a broker. Other words used in the interviews were “Zwischenvorgesetzter” (the “intermediate one who has been sat in front of”), “sandwich manager” (describing somebody who is sandwiched in between the boss and the employees), and also “middle manager.”

The participants most frequently used the word “Mitarbeiter” (co-worker) to describe the relational role of employee, a term that is normally used for people who are not middle managers or intermediate leaders but “only” employees. The words follower and followership, which enjoy more and more attention in the English language management literature, do not exist in German. Follower renders different, sometimes rather peculiar translations: “Anhänger, Gefolgsmann, Jünger” (disciple, fan, acolyte), “Nachfolger” (successor), “Mitläufer” (hack, tag-along, yes man), and “Gefolgsmann” (liegeman, henchmen, acolyte). German translations carry rather inappropriate, old-fashioned, or even derogatory connotations.

### **Data gathering and analysis**

Qualitative data was gathered from research participants through interviews and informal conversations. Applying IPA, I intended to generate codes from the data, both by listening to the recordings and by reading the transcripts.

Sensemaking is a construction of reality, where cognitive, mental, emotional, and volitional phenomena interact with self, role, and identity. It was my intention to analyze the interviews, highlighting important verbatim expressions as well as themes and super-themes. I also intended to develop a multi-dimensional process model of emotional, volitional, and identity work throughout a change process. This matrix took around ten revisions and might serve as a rough “working” blueprint (see page 50).

I was especially cautious using psychoanalytical terminology, especially with regard to defense mechanisms. However, applying clinical approaches to management, a curious “beginner’s” perspective on psychoanalytic theory, and its application to the phenomena seemed feasible.

## **Findings and Propositions**

### **Caught in the middle**

The conversations with intermediate leaders were like an abruptly opened pressure cooker: leaders were able to express their frustrations and emotions, which were predominately insecurity, fear, anxiety, and anger. They did not love (or even accept) the change, nor did they want to or could not change the situation. Also, they did not want to quit their role and leave. In absence of a fourth option, they struggled with how they could motivate others and lead them through when they themselves were not convinced and felt unled.

Leadership is not babysitting, but rather it is managing resulting distress when people are out of their comfort zones (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001). A leader thus seems critical. Followers like to follow when leaders give them feelings of significance, community, and excitement (Goffee & Jones, 2001). Also, self-determination and choice matter: “When there’s no choice—in reality or in perception—there can be no free will, no volition” (Goshal & Bruch, 2003, p. 53).

In the following section, I will describe how intermediate leaders respond to unfair change on an emotional, volitional, and identity level. With regard to emotions, leaders show a wide variety in how they feel and how they process their emotions. In order to preserve their identity or self, immature or mature defense mechanisms seem to operate. The change and the operating relational identity of a leader or follower trigger corresponding transference dynamics. Their responses may be described as depleting or completing, thus leading to exhaustion or closure, respectively. In summary, I will propose a response ability matrix describing the prototypical coping processes of intermediate leaders.

### **Emotional responses: Feeling through the change**

There is no unified perspective in philosophy, psychology, or neurobiology on how to distinguish between emotions, feelings, or affects (Frijda, 2008). For simplicity, I will use the terms emotions and feeling interchangeably. The semantic realm of the German word for feeling (“Gefühl”) seems to transport a softer and maybe more threatening connotation for male participants and interviewees. Emotion seemed more neutral and objective. The word affect (“Affekt”) was not used or mentioned in the interviews.

There is no change without emotion, and without emotions, no change. Leaders, just like any other person, process change through emotions. Emotions help people to adapt to a profound change, from rescuing ourselves and withdrawing from threats (fear) and defending ourselves or objecting to something or someone (aggression) to coming to terms with reality (mourning, grief). Then, through time, emotions allow us to focus on the new (curiosity) and the positive (joy). Profound change amplifies the fear and anger that are already present (through dependence on structural asymmetry), creating an explosive cocktail. The unfairness of the change (lacking procedural justice) adds further anger and frustration.

Basic emotions are evolutionary heritage and serve the purpose of survival. Emotions organize thoughts and actions, as well as perceptions of oneself and the environment. In essence, the affective, immediately experienced quality of emotions is functional. Accepting, owning, feeling, and containing these emotions allow somebody to “feel through” them, thus processing them. Resisting, splitting, denying, judging, suppressing, masking, blinding out, and faking other emotions hinder the natural process of feeling through. Emotions “go guerilla.” Defense mechanisms may be understood as specific mechanisms to process the emotional charge (List, 2012; Vaillant, 2000).

Some researchers, especially in the organizational context, distinguish between positive and negative emotions (Huy, 2011). Watson and Tellegen define positive emotions

as “a state of high energy, full concentration, and pleasurable engagement,” while negative affect is defined as “a general dimension of subjective distress and unpleasurable engagement that subsumes a variety of aversive mood states, including anger, contempt, disgust, guilt, fear and nervousness” (1985, quoted in Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006, p. 632).

It is already difficult for leaders to process or admit emotions of insecurity, fear, and anger; labeling these emotions as negative may further contribute to the splitting and denial of these emotions. Society and education do not really help, as one male participant reported: “When boys cried in our village, it was common to scold them: Don’t be a girl! Boys don’t cry!” As a consequence, I will not label emotions as negative or positive. Rather, I will distinguish between adaptive and creative emotions.

### **Adaptive and creative emotions**

Certain emotions serve similar functions and resonate with specific behaviors and identities. Anxiety, fear, anger, and grief are adaptive emotions as they allow the adaptation and acceptance of a new status quo. The function of grief is to let go and come to terms with the new reality. Only then are genuine creative emotions (curiosity and joy) possible.

Adaptive emotions are the emotions people experience before a profound change that are expected or feared as well as those they experience after the change has happened. In his interview, Christoph<sup>2</sup>, an intermediate leader describes this dilemma: “I do not know whether I will keep my job or my leadership function. I cannot inform my people because I do not have any information. I try to keep the emotions flat, not to be afraid, and to positively communicate to them.” He then pauses: “Of course, I am afraid.”

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<sup>2</sup> All participants are referred to by a modified first name in order to preserve confidentiality and their anonymity.

These emotions are also linked with our primitive response mechanisms of flight, freeze, and fight (Levine, 2010, p. 39–45) and come in different forms and intensities. Fear as insecurity, anxiety or panic, cold anger, passive aggression, or even hot wrath.

*Proposition 1. The role of the intermediate leader may impede the processing of adaptive emotions because of internal and external demands.*

In a profound change, an employee may feel afraid and angry and may not want to change. The employee who identifies as being a follower (or, rather, a non-follower) may experience transference of a rebellious child, and intensive defense mechanisms of splitting, acting out, passive aggression, or projection might be at work. Employees might allow themselves to behave that way, and, as a consequence, may feel adaptive emotions, helping them to process the change. The employee might side with his peers and might have a leader that allows the employee to process the change.

This is not so for the intermediate leader. The leadership role might forbid the emotions of anxiety and anger. The intermediate leaders might have more self-imposed and external constraints on how they should feel, what they should want, and how they should act. These discrepancies will add to the already existing discrepancy between their desires and the external requirements caused by the profound change, further jeopardizing their response abilities.

*Proposition 2. The profundity and unfairness of change may amplify adaptive emotions of anxiety and anger and may trigger transference dynamics.*

The interviewed intermediate leaders were not involved actively in the change. The change had been decided and initiated at a level above them. The leaders were confronted

with a change that may or may not have consequences for them and their followers, and they feel that their role is that as a “tectonic plate” or buffer, as Rita states:

“Currently, there is a lot of insecurity. People are very insecure. It is our responsibility to get people on board; we are already further down the way, and the employees are lagging behind. We are a kind of buffer between top management and employees.”

The changes is not fair, the intermediate leader was not sufficiently involved in the decision making, communication and explanation are scarce, and potential consequences are not (yet) made clear. The primary emotion of the intermediate leader may be curiosity at first, followed by insecurity and/or anger, as Nora recollects:

“It was decided that a change was necessary. We all agreed on it. It started well, initially; the process was participatory, I was involved, and my boss was involved. Then another profound change was initiated that had structural and financial consequences, where nobody was involved. From that moment on, we asked ourselves, ‘How does that go together? Isn’t it crazy to do that in parallel?’ Then it became out of control. It is still unclear how all fits together. I am very exhausted; I now have to keep my people motivated. They started to be afraid to lose their jobs. They were heavily involved in the last change; now, they are not. They are afraid that what they have done might be in vain.”

### **Feeling emotions vs. blocking emotions**

Intermediate leaders are tempted to deny their emotions. Many have learned to be “professional”; showing or admitting adaptive emotions was considered weak or childish. Male participants had difficulty in showing insecurity or signs of fear as these were not at all considered natural in their upbringing. A participant reported:

“They did not involve us. They just had this one town hall meeting, where they did not even answer questions properly. Well, actually, only one question was asked and that was about some minor detail. I guess they were happy that the town hall meeting was over. Well, I guess they were scared, as well.”

Emotional intelligence starts with recognizing and acknowledging one’s own emotions, not further denying or suppressing them or pretending to feel differently. In workshops, many participants misinterpreted “being emotional” as “acting out” emotions, as

John reported: “It is difficult to stand behind the change. What makes it even more difficult is that I feel I cannot express what I really feel and that one has to fake the positive emotions. That almost tore me apart.” What the leader cannot change, when he does not want to leave the organization or company, he has to love or at least to accept the change. Now, adaptive emotions do their work:

“This change is a new experience, because I am used to work in a growth environment, where we build things. Here and now, I am confronted with a tough situation, to let go of people, to reduce resources. I feel challenged not to execute that blindly, but to find creative solutions and to give employees a feeling of security. Yet, actually, I can’t and my people feel that.” (Philipp)

*Proposition 3. Intermediate leaders who feel through the change increase the possibility of completion.*

Feelings like anxiety or anger cannot be avoided. As irrational as these emotions and the entailing thoughts and actions might be, “The best way out is always through” (Robert Frost). Feelings want to be recognized, by one’s self and by others. Allowing space for these emotions without rationally arguing, defending, or criticizing facilitates the processing of them.

### **Challenging and accepting reality vs. resisting and denying reality**

*Proposition 4. Intermediate leaders may utilize anger to challenge the non-negotiables and to employ “sensegiving.”*

The intermediate leaders tried hard to understand and clarify the changes with their leaders. They negotiated the “non-negotiables” and “negotiables” with them. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) called this “sensegiving.” Intermediate leaders may utilize the positive function of anger as means of life preservation and a constructive fight so that the negotiable part of the change may be changed and the non-negotiable part of the change may be accepted. Henry, an intermediate leader, mainly saw himself as a follower when being confronted with the non-negotiable part of profound change. He felt frustrated, and

sometimes like a victim. He walked a fine line: to accept and stay or to not accept and leave. He described his volition by using the modalities describing that he “had to, did not want, should have, had to want, or should want”:

“Fundamentally, it hurts how people are treated. I fought my battles; it is not fun, and so far I have lost these battles at the cost of the team. Now, with fewer people, we have to do more. This is tiring for everybody. Maybe I should increase my resistance even more; maybe I should protect my people more. But I have no more energy.”

Grief may be seen as the pivotal emotion in coming to terms with reality and letting go of the old. This might also mean letting go of immature narcissistic fantasies and self-images and welcoming a healthy humility of a “good enough” intermediate leader, whose follower identity is not worse than the leader identity but is necessary and complements the mixed role.

### **Expressing authentic emotions vs. suppressing and developing guerilla emotions**

*Proposition 5. Suppressed or denied emotions may go guerilla and emerge as cynicism or sarcasm or lead to other defense mechanisms.*

I use the term guerilla emotions when intermediate leaders unconsciously or consciously suppress the adaptive feelings they experience, yet label them as negative and want to demonstrate positive feelings, such as joy, or express a motivational attitude. This discrepancy between felt and demonstrated emotions may widen throughout the change, especially when accepting the change for the intermediate leader is difficult, as Ivan described:

“Shit, was I angry. They went on and on with their nice slides with this stupid clip art. All that ‘blah blah’ about how great the change was, how wonderful the future would be, and then somewhere on the last slide a small note that they were evaluating the whole plant. Nobody spoke up, including me. After the meeting, standing outside, people were furious, yet when the boss passed by, people were smiling or brown-nosing.”

The interview partners report a growing degree of frustration, fatigue, cynicism, and disengagement, Michael being an example:

“Currently, there are situations that I do not understand, then it is difficult to execute. Then, I tell my people what I ask from myself: ‘This is an authoritarian decision that we have to follow’. Maybe there is a certain room for maneuvering. When there are explanations that I cannot understand, where I sense a hidden agenda, when there is something that is contradictory to my values, and then I catch myself in a role that is not professional. If they tell me bullshit or a blunt lie, then I discover that I am not speaking with the same voice, then I become cynical or let my people know between the lines what I think.”

The increasing efforts of intermediate leaders to not to show their real and authentic emotions may lead to a vicious circle. The gap itself increases negative emotions, as the leader’s effort to remain authentic fails, efforts to feel differently fail, and as a consequence, the employees will still notice the leader’s true emotions.

*Proposition 6. Even though they may try, intermediate leaders are not able to hide their feelings.*

The emotions the intermediate leader experiences clash with self-imposed or externally imposed demands of motivating others, providing security and direction, and radiating joy, interest, and confidence. Rita reports, how she shows and hides her feelings:

“Actually, I am somehow angry, no fear, a certain anger. I guess that is normal. I am not angry at someone, but I am angry that I have to let go what I do not want to let go. What I have created and built, I have to let go. I invested a lot of energy, and I do not want to leave that behind; that makes me angry. I guess I am somebody who does not admit that and rather pretends that it is not that bad and says, ‘Oh, yes, it’s okay.’ In certain situations, I pretend strength. I guess my boss often feels differently from what he says. I learned that, too, in the recent years.”

Nora has a different response: “There are a lot of insecurities that I try not to convey to my team. I tell them that there will be a good solution.” Then she laughs and continues: “I say that with laughter, because I am sure I communicate the insecurity.”

Henry describes how the demands to hide his emotions worsen the situation:

“I live under constant tension. I have a lot of information that I cannot communicate to my people ... I try to be open, yet I feel I cannot do anything. I am in a dilemma: ‘How can I get them to not notice how I feel?’ Actually, that is illusory, of course; they notice. The makes my tension even worse.”

Intermediate leaders who accepted and acknowledged their experienced emotions and were able to own them and communicate them both earned credibility for their authenticity and were able to process these emotions more productively. Michael states:

“I say, ‘Okay, let’s do it; it is like that, please don’t be mad, I would have done it differently, but that is like it is’ or ‘I don’t know myself, it is rubbish, yet we cannot change it.’ I cannot hide my personal frustration anymore; it shows .... My people told me that if I am not behind it, if I am not motivated, it is even more difficult for them. Now, I know it is difficult to keep a certain facade, of course. I communicate many things non-verbally; of course, I would like to scream, yet I try to suppress it. I have developed a code language, ‘Let’s not discuss it, you know my opinion’ or ‘Let’s not talk about it, otherwise I would have to say more and that would not help’.”

### **Leading and following vs. sulking and siding**

The intermediate leader may feel insecurity and anger. The leader wants to connect with the employees who will be experiencing the same emotional mix. Emotional leadership, and thus being some steps ahead emotionally, will be difficult, as Henry reports:

“I side with my people when I tell them that I am angry. Actually, I socialize my anger ... After this lamenting, it works better; maybe that is our team spirit. I do not know what my contribution is anymore. When I am angry with those above, then it is easier not to be frustrated with my team. I choose to have my head washed and not to transport it further to my people. It is anger at those above. Of course, communication and cooperation are difficult; well, it is my task how to deal with it, yet I have no idea how to do it.”

Emotionally, the intermediate leader and the employees may be in the same boat. The security the leader wants to give the team is not available to him. The leader may not listen calmly to the anxious or angry remarks of the team, but rather may have his own anxiety and anger resonate. Emotional understanding has become emotional solidarity or emotional projection:

“I need my team, but they cry for help, they all sink; at the same time, I am asked to reduce the staff further. I feel disoriented. I have the problem not to be able to communicate an objective to the people, as I do not have one. I can only say ‘Sorry, I do not know myself.’ Sometimes, I wonder how the team is able to perform under these conditions.” (Henry)

Those intermediate leaders who tried to blind out, suppress, or pretend emotions generated the same defense mechanisms in their followers and got stuck.

### **Containing/owning a feeling vs. becoming engulfed/flooded by the feeling**

*Proposition 7. Intensive adaptive emotions may lead to regression dynamics and a perceived passivity and may further exacerbate dysfunctional processing of adaptive emotions.*

In their identity as followers, the intermediate leaders will mainly experience adaptive emotions; the employees and the followers are the target of the change. Transference at work, a rather “immature” identity (in our case, the relational identity of a follower), and adaptive emotions interact; insecurity, fear, and anger are intensified, and so is the feeling of dependence and helplessness. The leaders might see themselves as passive victims, and they are more likely to be consumed and lose ownership and responsibility. They feel small, helpless, and vulnerable. They might feel abandoned, and they either become angry or depressed. They might regress into childhood and experience a mixture of emotions and unrealistic expectations: “Sometimes, I feel like screaming to our CEO, ‘Save me, you bastard!’” (Michael). A vicious circle might begin: people who see themselves as victims also tend to see themselves as victims of their own emotions.

Intermediate leaders who were able to recognize their emotions and consider them as an impermanent and natural process of change had a higher inclination to go through the change and the challenges the change posed. During the interviews, it became clear that those intermediate leaders who were able to reflect beyond a mere acting out or being engulfed in adaptive emotions seemed to have a higher propensity to choose their responses

in a conscious manner. They maintained a more responsible, mature identity; they were leaders who spoke from the heart, with bright eyes, telling about their own emotional journey of buying into a change that initially they did not want but now see as a good thing that they also believe in. On the other hand, there were also intermediate leaders with a monotonous voice, suppressing their own anger and covering it with lame jokes or cynical comments. Mere shadows of leaders show slides full of empty phrases of bullshit bingo. They resemble executioners with mental and emotional reservations, who just do their duty.

*Proposition 8. In the relational identity of follower, the intermediate leader might experience transference that may further lead to regression dynamics.*

Intermediate leaders who became engulfed in these adaptive or reactive emotions reenacted or reminisced about situations where they experienced similar levels of anxiety; regression started and a specific transference phenomena happened. An intensive discussion with Henry demonstrates this:

“Currently, I also feel angry, yet I suppress it as I am not an emotional type. I am angry that we run into the abyss. It is difficult to appreciate what the top management is doing. I sometimes have to ask myself, when they work like that, how they transport their messages to their directs. I am angry that we don’t make the best of what we could do. Many are afraid, some have been fired. It is what it is. I guess it is my job to change the situation.”

He becomes sad and his eyes become teary as he continues, “Maybe that’s why I am still here, yet, and I do not know whether I have enough energy.” He stifles the tears. It seems that he begins to grieve and accept the change. He starts drawing a picture of himself and the change and reflects: “It is my target to develop more options, to have more room to maneuver...” He draws a new picture, and becomes active for the first time in the interview. “Yes, there could be more options available. I am currently limited; what could I do to feel bigger?” He brightens, and laughs for the first time, relaxed. “I feel ineffective right now. I

invest a lot of energy into daily fights; this is not helpful. I need not be a friend, I can use less energy to do things and choose things.”

### **Forcing oneself vs. choosing to lead “good enough”**

*Proposition 9. During change, intermediate leaders experience an intensification of demands (“musts” and “shoulds”) that further amplify their follower identity and may lead to transference dynamics and regression.*

Michael describes his rebellion against internal demands:

“The ‘I must’ has to become an ‘I want to’, and because I am not able to do it, it is frustrating .... I demand something from myself, I force myself, the musts I have, it is the ‘shoulds’ that come from inside .... There are comparisons, how I do and how I should be able to do. An external ‘must’ is less uncomfortable than an internal ‘must’; the external ‘must’ gives orientation, or at least I can resist or rebel against it .... I force myself to do my job, actually, I would like to .... and that I do not know .... I doubt myself, that’s why I am still in the system .... Sometimes I question myself...”

In the interviews, the intermediate leaders used in a high quantity the modalities “must,” “have to,” and “should,” many of them self-imposed (Albert Ellis called this “musturbation”), especially with regard to their role as a follower who had to accept the change himself. The change seemed to attenuate their agency, ownership, and responsibility, and it fortified the follower role and increased the tension between these two roles, as Rita experiences:

“As a leader, I see the challenges; what is next, what will come? This looks much more colorful to me. I climb a sunny hill, here I am with my people. I communicate what will happen. This is challenging and interesting. As follower ‘I must want,’ as leader ‘I choose’ and ‘I want.’ This tension is absolutely difficult; walking this fine line is difficult, yet necessary. I feel tied in ropes. I feel I am in a glasshouse, running my rounds, yet have to stay inside. That does not feel good. I think I feel that I contributed a lot and the right moment will come. Actually, I am not convinced it is up to me whether I do it or not. I am not a sacrificial lamb, yet there is a contradiction between ‘I should’ be like that, yet I am not like that. The bottom line: ‘I must want’ and that does not feel good. And it does not feel good that I have to sell this

to the people. Do I lead by example or am I a follower?”<sup>3</sup>

Can Rita see herself “good enough” or not? Does she sacrifice herself, harbor all the suffering and anger. Is there a self-imposed aspiration of perfection and superhuman quality? Intermediate leaders ask a lot from themselves because they see themselves as driving forces for the change. Rita reports: “The profound change starts now. Now, ‘I must’ the current situation. It is the loyalty to the company, me as a horse that pulls the carriage. I feel obliged to my people. I am sure, I will again get to the point of I choose.”

A choice can only be made when the psychodynamic phenomenon has become conscious, otherwise some unconscious agent or agency chooses. Accordingly, defense mechanisms can be considered unconscious choices. Another participant, Nora, describes her dilemma by reflecting her volitional responses:

“I started with ‘I want to’ with regard to my department. ‘I want to’ restructure it customer-oriented and effectively. ‘I want to’ participate in the change process. ‘I must’ acknowledge that there have been top management mistakes that are the cause for the crisis of the organization. ‘I choose’ to stay for now. ‘I must’ follow their course, I have no choice, I feel exposed. ‘I must’ motivate my team. These are external constraints. Before, I felt self-determined; now it is the contrary. And ‘I should’ be productive, ‘I should’ achieve what has been planned before the changes. ‘I must’ or, let’s say, ‘I want to’ participate and contribute where I can. There is a lot of ‘I must’ and ‘I should.’ Actually, the ‘I want to’ is a dutiful ‘I want to.’ Well, actually it is ‘I must’; it is a self-imposed ‘I must’, yet I am not motivated because ‘I must want to’”. I see myself as leader with my team and our clients. I see myself as follower, or rather ‘directed.’ I am waiting; there is no clear direction. There is little trust that the solutions will be feasible. I have learned not to hope too much, not being too angry, think what I can do. I have the feeling that many things will get lost; it helps to confront myself with the feelings that are present without forcing myself to change them. With my people, I normally express my feelings, I do not hide them. Still, it depletes me. In general, it is very arduous to wait, to ask again and again, not to know what will happen, whether I have to let go of people. I think I am not able to endure it much longer. Instead of relaxing and recharging my batteries, I am now in the situation that I now need a lot of energy. I feel a lot of loss of power, standing, influence. There is nothing ‘I can’ change.”

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<sup>3</sup> She used the word “Mitläufer,” meaning “yes man.”

This statement illustrates the high discrepancy between desire, will and self-imposed or external constraints. To put it simple, a discrepancy between what “I want” (my desire or wish) and what “I have to/I must” (external constraints, organizational demands or requirements by the superior) requires adaptive psychological work. Individuals try to deal with these discrepancies through conscious adaptive processes, and, following psychoanalytical theory, unconsciously through defense mechanisms.

Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, and Tice draw on the work of Freud, who

“described the ego as the part of the psyche that must deal with the reality of the external world by mediating between conflicting inner and outer pressures. In his scheme, for example, a Victorian gentleman standing on the street might feel urged by his id to head for the brothel and by his superego to go to church, but it is ultimately left up to his ego to start his feet walking in one direction or the other. Freud also seems to have believed that the ego needed to use some energy in making such a decision.” (1998, p. 1253)

This discrepancy constitutes an adaptive challenge for the individual (leader), a challenge he can consciously choose to face or avoid. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, who described the concept of adaptive challenges on an organizational level, called this “work avoidance”: “people develop elaborate ways to prevent the discomfort that comes when the prospects of change generate intolerable levels of intensity” (2009, p. 84).

### **There is no fourth path**

Feeling active, having choices, being responsible, all of this helps the leader when facing change. Even in profound changes with intensive adaptive emotions, the awareness of being responsible and having choices brings the person back into the driver’s seat. This will not change the emotions immediately, as emotions take time to process, but containing the emotions and feeling responsible for them will allow for the taking back projections and will minimize defense mechanisms. It enables acceptance and letting go, as Patrick summarizes:

“Well, love it, leave it, or change it. If I absolutely cannot live with it, I would have to go. Well, reasoning helps, I do not trust the strong feelings. If I find a

reasonable thing anywhere, then I am able to adopt it and I will always find a reason. If I do not find meaning in the change itself, then there will be a positive aspect in the implementation. I can always make a difference, as I work ninety percent with people. I can always contribute as a leader.”

Patrick contains and observes himself and the emotions he feels from an adequate distance, thus allowing them to process. He remains aware of his identity responsibility and his choices.

Self-awareness allows active contemplation: “What do I have to accept, what can I change, and what do I have to leave behind? Do I have to leave?” And it will lead to responsible, conscious choices. Responsibility, the active self, fuels hope, reminds people of their abilities and resources and allows for the processing of adaptive emotions.

Table 1 below summarizes and categorizes the participants’ statements according to increasing degree of discrepancy between will and demand.

Desire/Need/Will	Context: Internal or External Constraint	Potential (Re)solutions	Fulfillment/Discrepancy Potential Consequences
“I want to do it.”	“I can do it. I am allowed/encouraged to do it.”	“I do it. It is okay.”	Desire/need fulfilled: No discrepancy
“I don’t want to do it.”	“I have to do it.”	“Okay, it’s not that bad, and it is my duty. I’ll do it.”  (No problem for a manager)	Little discrepancy: Resolved through mature defense mechanisms
“I don’t want to do it.” “I am angry.” “I need security.” “It does not make sense to me.” “I want to be a good leader and not become emotional.”	“This is not a fair process. I was not included.” “I should want and like it.” “I should make others want it.” “I should tell them that it makes sense.”	“I want to tell my people the truth but I can’t.” “I pretend that I want it, but my people will notice that I lie.” “I take some time to think about it, but what do I say to my people?”  (Problem for a leader)	High discrepancy: Regression  Transference  Defense mechanisms, e.g., denial, projection, repression, reaction formation, passive aggression, acting out  Ego depletion  Mature defenses, e.g., altruism, sublimation, anticipation, humor, wisdom

*Table 1. Prototypical volitional discrepancies intermediate leaders face and their psychodynamic consequences (developed by the author)*

### **Transferential dynamics and defense mechanisms: The double identity of intermediate leaders**

*Proposition 10. The relational identity of leader and follower trigger different transferential dynamics.*

The intermediate leaders assume two different relational identities. First, they are leaders: They fulfill this role and identity related to their followers, and the orientation is “down.” The intermediate leader might step into the transferential dynamics of being or being seen as the father figure, the grown up, the one who knows and is able. Yet, it also puts pressure on the intermediate leaders; they should know and should be able. Second, they are followers: They fulfill this role and identity related to their leaders, and the orientation is “up.” The structural asymmetry of a hierarchical relationship in an organization may constantly resonate feelings of dependence and accompanying emotions of insecurity and anger—following the transferential dynamics of a follower being both limited by and depending on his leader. Michael reports how he feels in the role as employee:

“I constantly fight and defend what my boss does and wants; I constantly match myself. Currently, we have some change topics. If I am not included and my boss makes the decisions, I do not question these decisions. If he sets boundaries, I do not question this. Actually, maybe I am defiant.”

A relationship with somebody I depend on and who is able to limit my options, someone who can direct me and ask me to do things I might not want to do, may create anger. The dependence on the same person and system that can influence my destiny, my role, my status, and my self-esteem through performance evaluations, job rotation, providing or taking away status symbols, and the right of dismissal might add insecurity, fear, and, again, anger. Change amplifies these emotions, and transference thus grows. Some interviews indicate a certain aggressive dependence (with the change, the boss, or the top management as aggressor), as Sigi reports:

“As leader, I feel proud, proud of the team and the success we have created. I feel responsible, with quite some pressure on my shoulders and a little insecurity. When feeling as a follower, it is frustrating, paralyzing, exhausting. One feels totally ‘I do not understand,’ in what a powerless state we are. When I see how they preach, they preach rubbish. When I see it is the wrong way, that is not enjoyable.”

Some other interviews indicate a certain anxious dependence (the change, the boss, or the top management as savior), as Rita reports:

“I see myself as follower and leader, equally. In my own view, I am mainly follower. I try to row with the others. The current image, jungle, the local board with machetes, I am one of the followers, and at the same time, I look back to see where my people are. And I always ask the board, ‘Please, look back.’ It is so important for me to have the employees on board. We are all in one boat, the board steers, and I am one of the employees. Actually, this interview is quite intensive, all these feelings ... I have not really thought about that.”

Patrick finds a different way to reconcile the different dynamics:

“I see myself as service provider, regardless whether I am leader or follower, I like to work with people ... when I can influence people positively, then I regenerate. I feel responsible, there are challenges, I can do things; when ‘I must’ implement something, it is clearly defined. Okay, it is my service, I choose discipline. I focus on the part that I can influence. Of course, in the hierarchy, there are situations where ‘Queen beats Jack’.”

He continues and works through issues of dependence, potential insecurity, and anger. By staying active, responsible, and mature, Patrick remains aware of his volitional response ability: “When I have to do it, and it is not legal or immoral, there is no choice that I cannot choose. Even when I have only one option, I can choose that one.” Yet, I could sense the potentially depleting quality of rationalization. It might be a question of continuous tension, leading either to not choosing that option and implicitly choosing another one: leaving or when holding on to depletion.

*Proposition 11. An active or passive self might mediate or amplify transferential dynamics.*

How much is the intermediate leader able to relate to an active or passive self when facing the challenges of the double identity? Participants who were able to hold on to an active, mature self were better able to deal with the contradictory demands of their relational identities of leader and follower. Philipp remains active and self-motivated:

“My boss cannot or does not want to be what I want to be for my people, so I have to motivate myself, as my boss cannot give me that. I feel like a leader in relationship to my boss. I remember one of the best compliments I ever got from him: ‘You really made the whole executive board dance to your whistle,’ then I thought, ‘Aah, great I moved something, I could influence the board.’ I really feel that as a leader I can create. Of course, I am a follower because I have to execute orders, yet my people will not have to know everything about how tough I am acting with my boss.”

On the contrary, Henry seems passive when he recounts: “How do I balance my roles? I guess that leads to the [health] symptoms, I have developed ... I notice what is going on; I see what is happening at the higher hierarchy levels, and yet I cannot do anything about it.” He describes his difficulties balancing his relational identities, which brings up images of passivity: “I feel like a tectonic plate.”

In times of profound, unfair change, the intermediate leader’s first identity is follower. He has to process the change himself; in other words, he leads himself through the change. The follower role might activate different dynamics of transference. As a follower, one might feel dependent, helpless, and therefore insecure and fearful. Feeling small, regression and aggression occur. As Sigi reports:

“I see myself as leader when I am with my team, or when I am in my local branch office. I see myself as follower when I am at headquarters; then I feel powerless, totally demotivated. When I drive home with my colleagues from ‘comedy central’<sup>4</sup> there is half an hour silence. I need at least the night to process this.”

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<sup>4</sup> he refers to headquarters

Profound change that, in addition to the follower identity, amplifies transference might deepen the narcissistic wound and might reveal whether the intermediate leader has developed a healthy or unhealthy form of narcissism, as Michael's statement may indicate:

"I rarely feel as an employee, yet it is really difficult to find myself in my organization because I hardly experience leadership by my boss. Consequently, it is difficult to feel as employee; as there are no decisions, I choose. Yet, there is no joy, as the decisions I make are only head decisions. Actually, my boss sucks."

Profound, unfair change poses threats to the individual and his identities. Anxiety and anger kick in, autonomy is challenged or lost, and connectedness is at risk. Depending on traumatic preconditions, more or less productive (ego) defense mechanisms begin to operate. Some participants tended to take the change and their leader's behavior personally and felt insulted, demonstrating anger that resembled narcissistic rage ("Save me, you bastard!"); other participants were able to preserve their self, could distinguish between themselves and others, and understood how to preserve their self and take care of their followers.

*Proposition 12. The leadership identity may nurture narcissistic needs.*

Profound, unfair change and the accentuation of the followership role might activate defense mechanisms both indirectly to defend the leader identity that more appropriately fulfills the psychological needs and directly to minimize the discrepancy between the individuals' desires and the new status quo. Change seems to challenge all psychological needs with regard to both identities, as Michael describes: "I have no ambition to leave ... just to be employee, not leader anymore ... I would like that even less, as the leadership role gives me power, the power I need."

When intermediate leaders recounted their role in the change, the gap between "me" or "us" and "them" widened. Irony, sarcasm, and cynicism filled the atmosphere when

speaking about the company, the boss, the strategy, and the change. The follower felt like a victim whose relationship to his leader harbors ambiguous emotions, thoughts, and self- and other images. The vocabulary focused on “must,” “should,” and “have to.” His role as leader reminds Michael of his power and his freedom in a context where he normally feels forced, frustrated, and drained:

“I am frustrated because I am working in a system that I cannot change. This means, I have to accept it, which I can’t or don’t want to accept. I am not able to draw the right conclusions and to leave, that is frustrating. Because I cannot change, I must stay. This drains my energy; I am not able to do something. I demand something from myself, I force myself, the ‘musts’ I have I create myself, the ‘shoulds’ come from inside. I constantly compare how I currently act and how I should be able to act. I force myself to do my job; actually, I would like to do something else and that I do not know. I constantly doubt myself, that’s why I am still in the system. Sometimes, I question myself: Do I have an ambition to free myself? The answer is no. I have no ambition to leave and just to be an employee, not to be a leader anymore. I would like that even less, as the leadership role gives me energy, gives me power, the power I need to get through.”

When intermediate leaders responded to profound change, beyond conscious choices to defend their self, unconscious defense mechanisms (Vaillant, 2000; Kets de Vries, 2006) seemed to operate. Defenses “reduce conflict and cognitive dissonance during sudden changes in internal and external reality” (Vaillant, 2000, p. 90).

*Proposition 13. The relational identity of leaders may trigger mature defenses, and the relational identity of followers may trigger basic defense mechanisms.*

In the following, I will describe the observed defense mechanisms and include corresponding statements from the intermediate leaders and the resonance phenomena I experienced as listener, when appropriate.

Regression (“I am helpless,” “I don’t know what to do”): In their relational identity as a follower, intermediate leaders tended to show signs of regression, especially when their predominant emotion was anxiety or anger. They felt helpless and became defiant, cranky,

and sulking. They somehow lost their adult composure and their age-related maturity, and their eyes got large and fearful. In the interviews, I wanted to hold their hands, hug them, and soothe them, and at the same time, I felt their anger, as exhibited insecurity, anxiety, and helplessness might cover anger.

Denial (“I am not angry. No, it is not that bad. Eventually, it will turn out fine”): Intermediate leaders tended to deny both the current and the future reality. Strong emotions, but also false hope, blurred their view. They tended to under- or overestimate their power. Also, some might have stayed in an environment where leaving would have been a healthier option. I felt pain to see the intermediate leaders struggle with reality. I wanted to scream and shake them or and run away.

Projecting (“My people need security,” “My boss should take responsibility”): Some intermediate leaders tended to attribute their strong feelings and sense of responsibility to others: intensive feelings of anxiety toward their followers, and feelings of anger toward their leaders. Those leaders who strongly identified with their role as follower tended to project their responsibility onto their leaders and tended to exhibit victim behavior, starting a vicious circle of regression and further projection.

Acting out (“I have to do something,” “We are on the wrong track, but we really advance”): A business environment favors doing over observing or non-doing. Participants report that their workload had increased tremendously since the profound change was initiated; they had new change projects, more reports, and more initiatives. Anxiety and anger seem to need a lightning rod. Participants talked and breathed faster, I could feel their hectic and fidgety nature, and I found it had to resist talking more and asking more questions.

Splitting (“It is their fault, we did nothing wrong”). This defense mechanism was expressed in statements of “us and them,” or “I” and “he”. Some participants tended to side with their followers as their own emotions and the emotions of their followers strongly

resonated and merged. Splitting makes change difficult as those who initiated the change tended to become seen as the enemy, and who, at the same time, were expected to help out of the difficult situation. Some intermediate leaders also gladly used their leader as a scapegoat to which to funnel all the aggressive energy and demands for help at the same time (“Save us, you bastards!”). Participants seemed to benefit from their anger and held on to it as it gave them an appropriate excuse to continue their splitting.

Passive aggression (“I think I am defiant,” “Everybody was applauding to this bullshit presentation”) seems to offer a shortcut from adaptive to creative emotions. Instead of feeling anxious and angry, some leaders quickly demonstrated joy and seemed to cheer the top management’s decisions when explaining the change. Cynicism and sarcasm were graspable; defiance and “work to rule” made listeners angry and created a tense, false harmony. As one participant reported, “After the presentation, when people were asked to share their opinion openly, nobody spoke up. I guess the management was relieved and thought everything was fine.” Again, passive aggression worsened the situation, authentic communication broke down, and people started to hide their emotions even more.

Reaction formation (“It really is okay with my boss”). Many participants who were angry hid this anger and spoke to their leaders in ways that were overly friendly, perhaps hoping to win their sympathies when times become rough. This is not a reaction formation but a conscious choice to fight for survival (“Maybe brown-nosing helps?”). Reaction formation could be sensed when participants talked favorably of their boss, especially if their boss was also an intermediate leader. Somehow, they sympathized with his struggle and his difficulties; yet I could sense some anger as they were not satisfied that their boss did not do more and did not pull himself together more.

Rationalization seemed to help in an environment where adaptive emotions were seen as negative. This may collude with the participants’ own concepts on how to hide or exhibit emotions. Rita recounts:

“There is a lot of tension in my role, I must leave the comfort zone, yet, and I think it will have a positive influence on our organization. First, I have to digest directives, there will be discussions, then it will take me one or two days to vent steam, to process this, think, maybe it makes sense. I tend to be emotional, so I walk some rounds in the parking lot, and then think, okay.”

Rita starts to rush her words, and then she freezes and becomes very rational:

“Everything has a positive aspect, I try to find that. Then, I try to sell this positive aspect to my people; I guess, it does not work hundred percent. I had a situation the other day, I was trying to find meaning, I found meaning, yet I found that I was not convinced and I sided with the employees. Eventually, I had to discuss it again with my boss to make him change his opinion. I try to discuss it, try to find a ‘halfway’ consensus; when there are situations that I do not like, I try to give my best and simply do it.”

After a long pause, a sigh, then with a low, soft voice of a young girl: “You know, I cannot sell the change to others.”

Suppression (“They will not see that I am angry,” “I have learned to be professional”) may be primitive, yet it may be a mature defense, using volition. Leaders choose, which is an expression of the self or, as Baumeister et al. (1998) describe:

“Many crucial functions of the self involve volition: making choices and decisions, taking responsibility, initiating and inhibiting behavior; and making plans of action and carrying out those plans. The self exerts control over itself and over the external world.” (p. 1252)

Victoria describes how she deals with the potential risk of depletion:

“My positive attitude helps; the glass is half full. When I sit quietly at home in the evening I recharge my batteries. I think of my team, what we can do, where we can move things, where we can implement things for our clients. I blind out the rest, then the positive things outweigh the negative ones.”

Leaders who were inclined to exhibit a passive self and a more reactive narcissism exhibited more intensive adaptive emotions and primitive defense mechanisms during profound change. An active self might allow for more mature defenses: anticipation, sublimation, suppression, anticipation, humor, and altruism (Vaillant, 2000).

Volition may include suppression and anticipation. Suppression “involves the semiconscious decision to postpone paying attention to a conscious impulse and/or conflict” (Vaillant, 2000, p. 94), and anticipation is “thinking and feeling about the future” (2000, p. 94). The “I want to” suppresses other impulses and anticipates the desired future results of the will. It may indicate an expression of the adult self (the ego, in psychoanalytical terms), whereas “I should” or “I must” indicates an internal discrepancy performed as an inner dialogue between the parent (the super-ego) and the child (the id), which results in stress, inner resistance, rebellion, or defiance. Patrick is able to always see a choice, in the sense of “If you cannot have what you want, want what you have.” He reports:

“When there is no other option, I can always do something. When there is a must, I can either say ‘Okay, we sink’ or ‘We try everything.’ That is great about being a leader—I have always an option to influence and choose. As long as we do something, it is better than doing nothing.”

Philipp describes how he tries to transform an “I must” into a “I want to” by rationally choosing and changing perspectives while aware that until his emotions are able to follow, the choice will not be a whole-hearted one at first:

“Well, first there is anger and frustration. Then, okay, I accept it and ask how to make the best out of it. I am old enough to know that there are always unexpected chances; I do not give up easily. I am mature enough and good enough, there is always a chance, and I can influence the situation. First, I can accept authority, Queen beats Jack; okay, it is like that. Then, what would I do? Of course, there are some points that are non-negotiable. I change perspective and think of the situations where I had excellent arguments and thought it was the greatest idea and my people still were not convinced, then I find another focus, another highlight, and then it is easier to accept it.”

He concludes:

“As a leader, I feel curious, there is some freedom, I have a real change willingness. As a follower, I am in a straitjacket and my curiosity and energy diminishes. Especially when ‘I must,’ then it is just a job that I have not bought in. Well, I do not have to buy in into everything. I can decide freely. When ‘I must,’ I still can find an advantage in the change. It is okay for me not having bought in, if I am not required to be deeply convinced.”

*Proposition 14. Volition and choice may be a product of rationalization, suppression, and anticipation. Volition and choice may prevent regression.*

This defense mechanism benefits from the tendencies that leaders should demonstrate: a professional, rational attitude. Participants reported that adaptive emotions were considered unprofessional, weak, and female. Intermediate leaders struggled with their emotions, especially when they demand of themselves to be motivated and “over it.” Participants who tried to suppress their emotions reported that their followers noticed anyway and questioned their own futile attempts. On one hand, I could understand this rationale, and yet I felt tired when listening to these responses. At the same time, I felt a mild anger because I missed honesty and authenticity.

The intermediate leader as leader might feel strong and responsible and may see it as his duty to care for his team members. Again, transference might be operating; the leader is the one who can give orientation, direction, order, and security. Narcissism may be nurtured, and a more mature identity may be actualized, as Patrick reports:

“That’s why it is easier as a leader in the change. I have more social bonding, relationships, commitment, obligation, allegiance<sup>5</sup> with the people. As employee, I would have left already. Of course, it is painful; yet I have assumed responsibility.”

Continuous suppression, repeatedly acting against one’s own needs, or wanting to fend off situations may lead to ego depletion: “One important part of the self is a limited resource that is used for all acts of volition, such as controlled (as opposed to automatic) processing, active (as opposed to passive) choice, initiating behavior, and overriding responses” (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, and Tice, 1998, p. 1253). “The core idea behind ego depletion is that the self’s acts of volition draw on some limited resource, akin to strength or energy and that, therefore, one act of volition will have a detrimental impact on

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<sup>5</sup> all these are translations of ‘Bindung’

subsequent volition.” (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, and Tice, 1998, p. 1252)

Intermediate leaders who have been through change and who remember the “change curve” are aware (not only in the Buddhist sense) that everything will pass. All emotions, all misery, will change, eventually. They are able to hope and to feel the joy and interest, even when adaptive emotions dominate. The majority of participants reported on the living map anxiety and anger as their current predominant emotions. They were asked to connect with joy or interest, and, after having felt anxiety and anger, they were able to feel those future emotions in that moment, putting all emotions into perspective, as Philipp indicates:

“It is more interesting to work in a company in crises, as I have much more options and learn more. In successful companies, there is only the ordinary. In crises, I have more possibilities I have to work with.”

Philipp’s statement may also allude to sublimation, the ability to transform emotional conflict into creativity, maybe art. Sublimation may promote the journey from adaptive to creative emotions. Participants who were able to perceive a profound, unfair change as a real challenge for personal development and growth, as a rite of passage, were better able to transform adversity into a challenging reality they could master.

*Proposition 15. Hope and the “ideal self” may be seen as the product of suppression and anticipation.*

Hope can be seen as a mental mechanism of the self, combining suppression and anticipation. Boyatzis and Akrivou (2006) propose the “ideal self” as “a primary source of positive affect and psychophysiological arousal helping provide the drive for intentional change” (p. 624). This ideal self consists of “an image of a desired future; hope (and its constituents, self-efficacy and optimism); and a comprehensive sense of one’s core identity” (p. 624). “Deep positive affect creates an affective tone of the specific cognitive processes that take place in the formulation and nourishment of the ideal self. The result harnesses

the will or drive for self direction, intentional change, and desired future accomplishments, or in selected cases providing the energy to maintain and sustain current ideal states in life and work” (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006, p. 625).

When the real self and the ideal self are not congruent, unique emotional and behavioral consequences might follow (Boldero & Francis, 1999; Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006), indicating the same detrimental effects that Baumeister et al. (1998) describes and that participants like Henry recount:

“I had to endure this for more than three years. I am at the end of the road. I feel desperate, frustrated. I started to develop bodily symptoms. I had a breakdown, lost all joy. Too much stress; actually, I ask myself why should I jeopardize my health. I am not the only one. There are a lot of intermediate leaders who do the same, the buffer, and pay the price .... I am quite pessimistic how we could regain dynamics. I felt very bad, exhausted. I was about to quit. I had an offer for another leadership position. I started to feel responsible, I saw the sun after a long thunderstorm, hope returned. Now this hope evaporated.”

Boyatzis & Akrivou (2006) believe “that the experience of hope drives the energy, through positive emotions, attached to the image or dream of a desired future. Without these positive emotions, we believe that the person becomes defensive, loses ‘hope,’ and withdraws energy or commitment to the effort of change” (p. 632). Philipp seems to be able to suppress and anticipate:

“Being optimistic helps, I do not take the things to my heart. Tomorrow is another new day; I can do something. There are many steps to be made on my way, I have two hands, and I can move one step further ... tomorrow, I have more information, more freedom, even if there is no way out; yet there will be something here. Suddenly, there is something to harvest; there is a fruit there. There is never the situation when I have to give up. Shedding the things is important. Really good leaders have gone through failures and difficulties.”

When is it helpful to anticipate a different future? A future somewhere else? Some intermediate leaders were not able to imagine or feel a different future. They lacked hope, and they lacked choice. Identifying with a victim identity, they had to expect, wait, and react. They felt as if they had no choice, as Michael reports: “I could do

something else, yet I do not want to give up my leadership role. I am frustrated and I bicker with my situation. I am angry, I could vomit. I am angry that I am stuck in that situation.”

For intermediate leaders who reported that they saw themselves at the mercy of somebody—their boss, the board, or headquarters—it seemed much easier to blame these individuals or groups of people and to project their responsibility onto these “aggressors.” In the follower role, this dynamic might amplify the victim state. In the leader role, it may lead to siding with the employees (“I am with you”), “us vs. them,” or one’s own (imagined) helplessness might be obscured in a helper’s syndrome, which is different from altruism.

*Proposition 16. The responsibility of a leader may be rooted in the mature defense of altruism.*

Altruism “involves getting pleasure from giving to others what people would themselves like to receive” (Vaillant, 2000, p. 92). Altruism, the care for others, the spiritual advice of “What you lack, give it to others, then you will find abundance” might be the Copernican Revolution to resolve the questions intermediate leaders frequently ask: “How can I give others security, when I am insecure myself? How can I motivate others, when I am not motivated myself?” Altruism and responsibility interact. One can *feel* responsibility; it seems to be an urge, a bodily sensation where somebody feels this call, this ability to respond, as Patrick recounts:

“It is a bodily sensation to get from ‘must’ to ‘want.’ For me, it depends how alone I am with it—as soon I am not alone, it is easier to get to ‘I want to’ because I can assume the clear role of a leader.”

*Proposition 17. Responsibility may be the strongest promoter of change, and the most effective transformation from “must” to “want to” is through feeling responsible.*

The relational identity of leader amplifies a more parental set of behaviors. The relational identity of leader in relation to the followers might reenact the transference

phenomena of the relational identity of a parent in a relationship with children, “good enough,” adult, mature, caring, and protective, as Patrick recounts:

“I see myself as leader, regardless whether I am part of the leadership coalition. Why? It is necessary because of human reasons; if I make the choice to be a leader, then I am part of it. I am there for my people, especially in crisis. Even in situation where I cannot lead or influence, I can always influence.”

It is as if responsibility is in the air, in the field, as if it is an invisible energy that can be picked up, that can be felt, as Philipp describes: “Being a leader and a follower is not a contradiction, not a paradox, but a confluent blend. It is easier to be a leader in a change that was ordered from above because of this *felt* responsibility in the change.” One can claim to ownership of it and then be responsible and feel responsible. Intermediate leaders who identified more with the follower in the change process brought images of a victim to mind: save me, help me, redeem me: “When ‘I must,’ I feel like a child or, rather, a rebel” (Philipp).

The leaders who did not feel responsibility, who gave responsibility away, or who projected it onto somebody else tended to stay in the reactive mode. The intermediate leaders who felt responsible throughout the change processed it more productively:

“Responsibility is seeing. I see an employee and see that he does not feel well, then I talk to him, I respond. Responsibility for people is full of surprises; it is responsibility to look after them, to coach them, not to have them unguided, to open doors, to give security, to give them a feeling that I stand by them. The decision to be a leader lets me see people differently and to respond.” (Philipp)

Patrick offered a vivid description of a leader’s responsibility using an analogy of a boat and of shipwrecked people:

“That boat is full of insecurity. There is fog, there is insecurity: Where to row? There should be somebody who makes the decision; out of a group of five shipwrecked people, I choose to lead that group. Then, I change from ‘I must’ to ‘I want to.’ When I am confronted with an ‘I must,’ as soon as I think how I can translate that for my people, this responsibility makes a ‘must’ a ‘want to.’ This is much stronger ... even in the most insecure

situation, I can decide who shares the oars, who sleeps. This is leadership, the social responsibility for the people.”

### **Completing and depleting responses**

*Proposition 18. Responses may be completing or depleting.*

During the interviews, I could sense an exhausting, depleting, or completing quality of the intermediate leaders' responses. I will distinguish completing from depleting responses. This describes a process orientating psychological forces or energies (cognitive, mental, emotional, and volitional—both conscious and unconscious) better than the dichotomies of productive/destructive, positive/negative, or functional/dysfunctional, as these carry a realm of judgment and lack a process perspective. I am inspired by the metaphor of an acupuncturist applying a needle to the right spot, where it may “hurt so good.”

Completing responses are responses that allow a process to come to completion or closure, processing the emotional cycle from struggling to acceptance, from adapting to creating, from immaturity to maturity, from struggling with reality to coming to terms with reality, from discrepancies between desires and internal or external requirements to (re)solution.

As Robert Frost stated that “the best way out is always through”, completing a process will lead to closure. A passage is taken, a *Gestalt* is closed, energy is liberated and is able to flow (again), similar to the acupuncture needle that stimulates the flow of energy, the “chimney sweeping” or “talking cure” that unfreezes energies bound in the unconscious. It may resemble the relief of an inspiring “aha moment” that normally denotes the completion of an otherwise transpiring, intensive pre-work process.

Depleting responses are responses where energies are suppressed, get stuck, or may find their way out somewhere else. Emotions may “go guerilla,” or may be acted out or

projected. If the discrepancies between desires, needs, and external or internal demands are denied, dysfunctional, more immature defense mechanisms may start to operate. This may lead to frustration, depression, exhaustion, and ego depletion.

Context factors such as the profundity or fairness of change are definitely contributing in a completing or depleting way. As the intermediate leader Nora reports:

“There is distrust of the competencies of those who are in charge of the change. Also, I doubt the transparencies; there are so many processes, I do not see who has got the overview. There is some participatory element you can apply; yet it is not clear what the criteria are, how and who they choose. Right now there is a kind of keeping up.”

Like any individual, intermediate leaders want to feel free, as Deci and Ryan (2000) suggest, “to follow their inner interest—this ‘internal perceived locus of causality,’ people feel like origins of their behavior—autonomy is essential to intrinsic motivation” (p. 234).

*Proposition 19. Volition and choice may point at the intermediate leaders’ perceived locus of causality.*

Repeated conscious choice of being a responsible leader may lead to the internalization of corresponding behaviors and attitudes. Philipp recounts: “At some point early in my professional career, I made the decision to be a leader. I like being a leader. I like to move things. I like to work with people. Maybe it is self-discipline and joy of work.” He describes his motivation:

“Why did I choose to become I leader? I wanted to create, change, and I wanted to have responsibility. If you say ‘Yes,’ regardless whether the organization grows or shrinks, I can create. As long as I can create, I feel well. I can influence. I can achieve goals. I do not feel well when I cannot influence things that are deeply frustrating. As long as I can coach, create, lead, have responsibility, then I am a very self-motivated, euphoric man.”

Ryan and Deci conclude that individuals can adopt and maintain an identity if basic psychological needs, especially relatedness, competence, and autonomy, are fulfilled:

“Identities vary in the extent to which they are actually assimilated to the self of the individual and therefore receive the person’s full endorsement and volitional engagement” (2012, p. 228).

*Proposition 20. The relational identity of leader seems to nurture important psychological needs much more than the identity of follower.*

Philipp recounts:

“I feel as leader, somehow, as a critical follower. I defend my people not because I want to have people around me, but I think I know what we have to do and how I will be able to achieve that with my team. I am no blind executioner. I try to co-create the objectives with my boss, and I only communicate them when I have re-negotiated these objectives with my boss, not before that.”

Patrick balances his roles by choosing rationally, “cooling down” his involvement:

“‘I want to,’ that is clearly me as a leader. ‘I like to,’ well, there are goals, there is room to create. ‘I choose,’ yes, I am a decision maker. ‘I do not want to,’ that’s when I draw a line. ‘I would like to,’ that’s me as a follower in this change. I would like to contribute more, engage myself more. ‘I must,’ that’s a clear order, a non-negotiable. ‘I must want,’ that is a rational choice where I did not really buy in. I see no tension between these two roles and perspectives; they complete each other.”

Aspects of a specific role and self-concept correspond to Grawe’s (2007, 2004) goal concept: “approach goals are assumed to be geared to need satisfaction, avoidance goals to the prevention of need frustration” (Grosse Holtforth, Pincus, Grawe, Mauler, & Castonguay, 2007, p. 1098). Approach goals resemble the inner dialogue of an intermediate leader in his relational identity as leader: altruism, recognition, status, autonomy, performance, and control (Grosse Holtforth et al., 2007, pp. 1097–1099). Avoidance goals mainly evoke the inner theater of an intermediate leader in his follower role: deprecation, accusation, dependency, and helplessness. Approach and avoidance goals complete or deplete the self, evoke specific feelings and identities, and may lead to different responses.

## **Discussion**

Intermediate leaders have to deal with a set of discrepancies. They experience emotions while wanting to experience other emotions. They are expected to support their employees in going through change while lacking emotional support from their leaders. They are expected to lead, give security, and create meaning to others and are not able to. They “must” and “should” while experiencing different desires and needs. They might feel small and helpless in a follower relational identity while wanting to feel mature and to be responsible leaders.

For the leaders interviewed, the longer the change lasted, the more they were strained, frustrated, and empty. The discrepancies between the relational identity as follower and the identity as leader seemed to wear out. When basic needs are not met, the ego may show signs of depletion.

Emotions, modalities, relational identities, and self-images interact. Adaptive, avoidant emotions evoke different modalities, identities, and self-images than creative, approaching emotions. In parallel, a certain self-image (active/reactive) determined whether the change was processed actively or passively, whether a responsible or a victim identity operated, and whether the intermediate leader felt through the change or got stuck. The structural tension between the intermediate leader as follower and leader accentuated the respective response abilities.

“Leader” and “follower” are identities that trigger transferential dynamics and different sets of adaptive or maladaptive defense mechanisms. An intermediate leader who developed a healthy narcissism and an integrated identity of leadership and followership demonstrated more adequate response abilities than intermediate leaders with a more

fragile, vulnerable, and passive self. The more self-determined the intermediate leader remained, the more robust and resilient he could act in the role of both leader and follower.

Even under challenging context factors (profundity of change, a lack of procedural justice and fairness, a lack of leadership by their superiors), some intermediate leaders could work through intensive psychological processes and demonstrated adequate response abilities that led to completion. These intermediate leaders were able to successfully change; they were able to make a transition—a successful passage with regard to cognition, emotions, choice and volition, and identity and self. I will describe these parallel passages briefly.

Cognitive passage—from illusion to reality: Interactive leaders who reasoned, not rationalized, who became “fluent in reality,” and were aware of psychodynamics in change processes were better prepared to process the profound change and balance their double roles.

Emotional passage—from adaptive to creative: Interactive leaders who were able to own, contain, and feel through the change while not defending (e.g., suppressing, acting out, or projecting) their emotions, and who were able to process their emotions, exhibit, and verbalize them authentically were better able communicate authentically as leaders.

Choice—from ‘must’ to ‘want to’: Interactive leaders who made conscious choices, who were conscious of their basic needs and desires, who reflected an adequate level of discrepancies between expectations and experiences to avoid ego depletion, who were aware of these incongruences, and who *were* congruent were better able to maintain an identity of a responsible leader. Intermediate leaders who were able to “choose duty” when needed and who chose the path of acceptance, change, or leaving without trying to

find a fourth path were better able to feel responsible and avoided signs of victimhood or spite.

Relational identity and role—from follower to leader: Intermediate leaders who did not over-identify with a role, who developed a healthy ambiguity tolerance and were able to reflect transferential dynamics, and who discarded a logic of “either/or” for a logic of “and,” thus being a follower *and* a leader were better able to process the contradicting demands of their roles. Intermediate leaders who developed role awareness and an understanding of the psychodynamic, clinical mechanisms at work were better able reflect their roles and to remain responsible.

Self—from reactive to active: Intermediate leaders whose active self was the source of their actions, who developed realistic hope and an awareness of their ideal self, who made a “deep” choice to be a responsible leader, who were conscious of defense mechanisms and remained responsible, and who were aware of their own choices, limitations, basic needs, and completing and depleting forces were better able to balance their roles, process their emotions, and remain responsible for themselves and their actions, feelings, and choices.

### **The emotional and volitional response ability matrix**

I propose a matrix that integrates emotional and volitional responses (see next page). I distinguish three paths of responding to profound change, one leading to completion and two leading to depletion. Two processes interact:

a) The emotional process (x-axis) where adaptive, avoidant emotions (anxiety, anger) change to creative, approaching emotions (curiosity, joy) through time, active responsible processing (owning emotions, active mourning), and feeling through these emotions.

b) The volitional process (y-axis) where conscious choice enables the transformation from a passive, reactive to an active self.

Numerals (1 2 3) describe the sequential process, and the plus and minus signs indicate potential completion (+) and depletion (-), respectively.

#### Completion (1- 2+ 3+++)

(1-) After a shock and certain feelings of dependence, anxiety, and anger (2+), the active self takes over, and the intermediate leader takes responsibility for his own emotional process and those of his employees. The leader is aware of choices, gradually (3+) creative emotions emerge, and the leader's own profound change becomes complete. Throughout, the leader is able to connect to employees authentically and guide them well enough through the same process. The leader makes a conscious choice of a self-responsible, leadership identity, sets boundaries, and actively chooses between accepting, changing, and leaving. This path completes a passage; the mature, active self is strengthened. Philipp and Patrick, and perhaps Nora and Christoph, seem to follow this path.

#### Depletion (1--)

(1-) The intermediate leader expresses certain feelings of helplessness and dependency remains. (-) He seems desperate or passive aggressive, sees hardly any appropriate choice, and projects his responsibility (victim self). (-) He seems to expect empathy, help, and maybe even redemption from others, including his employees, and he risks ego depletion. Henry and Ivan seem to follow this path. Michael may follow this path or the next.

Depletion (1- 2---)

(1-) Experiencing the same strong feelings of anxiety and anger, the intermediate leader tends toward suppression and splitting of emotions beyond mental reservations. (2-) He tends to project responsibility, blame others, and fake emotions, developing guerilla emotions. (-) He may exhibit reactive formation, use noticeably positive language: empty phrases may meet empty eyes. (-) The split between official happy talk and real emotions enlarges, and incongruity and sugarcoating are salient: masks meet masks. Sigi and John seem to follow this path; Michael, Rita, and Victoria may as well.

Active self, active choice	<p>Adaptive-active zone (2 +)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Owning the emotions</li> <li>• Commitment</li> <li>• Regaining self-determination and self-efficacy</li> <li>• Feeling through the change</li> <li>• Distinguishing what and what not to accept</li> <li>• Challenging the change</li> <li>• What is negotiable and non-negotiable?</li> <li>• Realistic hope</li> </ul>	<p>Creative-active zone (3 +)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling responsible, commitment</li> <li>• “Re-encouraging” oneself</li> <li>• Acceptance of change</li> <li>• Learned from it</li> <li>• Let go</li> <li>• Growth and strengthened self</li> </ul>
Reactive, passive self	<p>Adaptive-reactive zone (1 -)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Struggling with the change</li> <li>• Feeling fear, insecurity, anxiety</li> <li>• Avoidance impulse</li> <li>• “Flight”/”freeze” reaction</li> <li>• Feeling anger, aggression</li> <li>• “Fight” reaction</li> <li>• Resistance to change</li> <li>• Dependency</li> </ul>	<p>Reactive-(Pseudo) creative zone (2 -)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Victim mode: projecting</li> <li>• Defense mechanisms</li> <li>• Masking/pretending/as-if behavior</li> <li>• Developing guerilla emotions</li> <li>• Cynicism, sarcasm, blaming, “us versus them”</li> <li>• Bullshit bingo</li> <li>• Ego depletion</li> </ul>

Adaptive, avoidant emotions  
(anxiety, anger)

Creative, approaching emotions (curiosity,  
joy)

*Table 2. The emotional and volitional response ability matrix*

**Yes, we can?**

When to let go, when to quit? During research, all participants answered this question in the same way: they stayed for the time being. How high the price, how deep the suffering, they all experienced different emotional and volitional responses to the situation. I quote Salman Rushdie to summarize the ongoing challenge for intermediate leaders: “We are the constant adapters of ourselves, and must constantly ask ourselves the question: what are the things we cannot ever give up unless we wish to cease to be ourselves” (2009, p. 11).

Dirk Baecker calls organizations “behavioral impositions (Verhaltenszumutungen) for people” (personal communication, May 5, 2012). This is applicable much more so under conditions of profound, unfair change. Even these changes may be the result of collective defense mechanisms—acting out, suppression, displacement, denial, and undoing—that resonate with the defense mechanisms of intermediate leaders, creating intricate organizational and psycho-dynamics. This thesis intended to tap into the psychodynamics and response abilities of intermediate leaders. I researched the “I want to,” “I choose,” and the “I must.”

One question remains open: To protect the ego, when is it okay to say “I can’t anymore,” regardless of “I want” or “I must”? Philosopher Byung-Chul Han said the following:

“Our performance society is ruled by the modal verb ‘can,’ contrary to the discipline society that expresses prohibitions and uses ‘should’ instead. At a certain point of productivity, ‘should’ comes to its limit. To increase productivity, it is replaced by ‘can.’ The call for motivation, initiative, and project is more effective for exploitation than whip and orders .... The exploiter is the exploited. One is offender and victim at the same time. Self-exploitation is more efficient than being exploited by somebody else, as it comes with the feeling of freedom ... In reality, the neoliberal dictum of freedom is a paradoxical imperative ‘be free!’ It throws the performer into depression and exhaustion ... ‘You can’ exercises more constraint than ‘You should.’ Self-constraint is more fatal than external constraint, because one cannot resist oneself.” (2012, pp. 15–17, translated by the author)

### **Personal Reflections**

I could not help imagining a profound, unfair change as a ritual, a “rite of passage” from one state into another. One does not know how it will be; one does not know how *one* will be after the passage. One will definitely not be the same. One might have acquired new, more mature response abilities. One might be grown up, and one might assume responsibility and let go of helplessness, dependence, and victim behavior. One might have become a leader.

I came up with the idea of drawing my “relational identities” when I was pondering an appropriate research question (see Appendix, Figures 1 and 2.). Listening to the participants, and listening to myself, with all those helpless, anxious, angry, hopeful, mature voices has been quite a journey into the inner theater in times of change. Frequently, I felt small, sometimes I felt big (I compensated), and then gradually I started to feel quite right and “good enough.”

These pictures show two distinct states: One of feeling small, helpless, completely overwhelmed, under pressure, and never good enough. The other one realistic, able, and calm. This thesis was my profound change that even had me grapple with the concept of fairness: Is it fair that a 45-year-old mature man has to go back to school and write a thesis that will be graded? How humiliating and demeaning! It took a while, but when I found that the clinical approach was at work, I started to use myself as an instrument. I was feeling the same feelings as the participants, and I was no different in finding different responses to this situation.

Again, the writing of this thesis has been a rite of passage for me. I wanted to quit. I wanted to rebel. I was afraid. I was angry. Then, I started to hope. I chose. I wrote. I led myself. The best way out was through. A more mature identity entered the stage.

### **Limitations**

This thesis is about clinical approaches to management. It is exploratory and subjective in nature: both subjective in capturing the life-world of intermediate leaders and subjective with regard to me as the researcher using myself as an instrument.

This may be the implicit strengths or weaknesses of this thesis research: a subject that is emotional by nature, inquiring into defense mechanisms, tapping into the unconscious. The interview participants were selected through purposive sampling. The context was taken as is, and the profundity has been checked through rather objective criteria as well as subjective indications. However, the selection criteria—profound and unfair—heavily relied on the descriptions of the participants of leadership workshops.

The participants were interviewed during an ongoing profound change. Some participants indicated their struggle and exhaustion and the possibility of leaving their organization. It may be interesting to interview them again at a later stage.

The perspective of leading other intermediate leaders or employees was disregarded for the scope of this study.

I intended to carefully translate the interviews from German to English. Yet the translations are different because the main expressions of leadership and followership simply do not translate accurately.

This is a thesis about intermediate leaders. Being clinical, I could not help but to write a thesis about me: “Since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees. There is a fundamental narcissism of all vision” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 139, quoted in Finlay, 2005, p. 289).

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

Original question	Translation
Wenn Sie an den aktuellen Veränderungsprozess oder die aktuellen Veränderungsprozesse in Ihrem Unternehmen in Beziehung setzen...	When you relate to the current change processes or processes in your organizations...
Was sind, was waren Ihre Gefühle und Gedanken? Wie haben Sie sich und Ihre Rolle erlebt? Wie gehen Sie mit Ihrer Rolle als Folgender und Führender im Veränderungsprozess um? Wie gehst Du mit Deiner Rolle als Zwischenvorgesetzter um?	How do you and how did you feel? What do you think? How do you see yourself? Your role? How do you see your role as follower and leader? How do you see your role as intermediate leader?
Wo haben Sie Spannungsfelder erlebt (in Bezug auf Emotionen bzw. was Sie wollen, sollen oder müssen)?	Where have you experienced tensions or discrepancies (with regard to emotions, or with regard to what you want, should, or have to do)?
Wie akzeptierst Du den Change? Wie machst Du den Change zu Deinem? Wie sehr stehst Du hinter dem Change? Wie bringst Du den Change Deinen Mitarbeitern nahe?	How much do you accept the change? How did you make their change yours? How did you buy in? How do you lead your people?
Wie sehr empfindest Du Dich im Veränderungsprozess als Führungskraft/Leader? Und als Follower?	To what extent do you feel a leader? And a follower?

*Table 3. Interview questions*

### Interview modalities

These statements, written on small cards, were presented during the interviews.

Participants could use these modalities to describe the experienced phenomena.

Original version	Translation
Ich will nicht	I don't want
Ich muss	I must
Ich wähle	I choose
Ich will	I want to
Ich soll	I should
Ich kann	I can
Ich muss wollen	I must want to
Ich soll wollen	I should want to
Ich würde gerne	I would like to
Ich will gerne	I want to

*Table 4. Modalities*

**Overview of the response abilities of intermediate leaders, categorized into completing and depleting responses**

	Completing responses	Depleting responses
Context factors  The challenge of moderating and amplifying factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leading intermediate leaders (who might understand the role discrepancies and might contain their emotions)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>profundity of change</li> <li>unfairness, no procedural justice</li> <li>no/little leader support</li> <li>insecure/angry leaders/followers</li> <li>incongruent communication</li> <li>values at risk</li> <li>promises, bullshit, lies</li> <li>survivors' syndrome</li> <li>structural asymmetry of a hierarchy</li> <li>leading followers/employees (who might not understand the role discrepancies of an intermediate leader and may act out their emotions)</li> </ul>

	Completing responses	Depleting responses
Emotional responses	<p>As follower:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• adapting (through feeling insecurity and anger)</li> <li>• insecurity as protection, flight/freeze reaction</li> <li>• anger as protection, fight reaction</li> <li>• anger, not feeling as valued by others as we desire (Juil, 2012, p. 68)</li> <li>• processing, feeling through the emotions</li> <li>• recognizing, acknowledging, accepting the emotions</li> <li>• owning the emotions</li> <li>• constructive use of aggression (defending values, challenging non-negotiables)</li> <li>• accepting (through grief and mourning)</li> <li>• creating (through curiosity and joy)</li> </ul>	<p>As follower:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• resisting (through denying insecurity and anger)</li> <li>• engulfing in anxiety and/or anger</li> <li>• resisting emotions</li> <li>• acting out anger, e.g., useless fights and attacks</li> <li>• suppressing emotions</li> <li>• destructive use of aggression</li> </ul>
	<p>As leader:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• empathizing</li> <li>• acknowledging</li> <li>• relating and accepting</li> </ul>	<p>As leader:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• siding</li> <li>• rationalizing</li> <li>• denying and suppressing</li> <li>• projecting</li> <li>• socializing</li> <li>• pretending emotions</li> <li>• faking emotions</li> <li>• exhibiting “guerilla emotions”: cynicism, sarcasm, rationalizing, reaction formation</li> </ul>

	Completing responses	Depleting responses
Volitional and cognitive responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• becoming fluent in reality:</li> <li>• present: “It is what it is”</li> <li>• future: realistic hope and optimism</li> <li>• choice: “I can always choose” from three options:</li> <li>• choosing to work on acceptance: “love it” or</li> <li>• choosing to work on change—challenging the non-negotiables: “change it” or</li> <li>• choosing to work on leaving the situation: “leave it”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• distorting reality</li> <li>• present: denying reality</li> <li>• future: false hope, wishful thinking</li> <li>• “musturbation” (Ellis)</li> <li>• trying to find a fourth option</li> </ul>
Transference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• low</li> <li>• ego/self/adult responses</li> <li>• super-ego “good enough parent” (Melanie Klein),</li> <li>• father figure</li> <li>• active self</li> <li>• being responsible, assuming responsibility</li> <li>• (self) leader</li> <li>• self-determination (Deci &amp; Ryan, 2008)</li> <li>• ideal-self (Boyatzis &amp; Akrivou, 2006)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• high</li> <li>• id responses</li> <li>• “feeling small”</li> <li>• “rebellious child”</li> <li>• “helpless child”</li> <li>• “perfect parent”</li> <li>• “garbage bin”</li> <li>• “victim”</li> <li>• passive “suffering”</li> <li>• not being able to deal with leadership loneliness</li> <li>• being victim, projecting responsibility</li> <li>• victim</li> <li>• amotivation (Deci &amp; Ryan)</li> <li>• ego depletion (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven &amp; Tice 1998)</li> </ul>

	Completing responses	Depleting responses
<p>Clinical considerations</p> <p>Underlying defenses, defense mechanisms, coping strategies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• healthy ego defense, values</li> <li>• mature defense mechanism (Vaillant, 2000)</li> <li>• sublimation</li> <li>• altruism</li> <li>• responsibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• narcissistic rage</li> <li>• immature defense mechanism</li> <li>• regression</li> <li>• suppression</li> <li>• projection</li> <li>• acting out</li> <li>• passive aggression</li> <li>• splitting</li> <li>• blaming</li> </ul>
<p>Role/relational identity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• realistic aspirations and expectations: being a “good enough” leader and follower</li> <li>• distinguishing between self and role</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unrealistic aspirations and expectations: being a perfect leader</li> <li>• over-identification with leadership role: “I will fight for you,” “I will protect you”</li> <li>• over-identification with follower role or his/her followers: “I am one of you”</li> <li>• “We are in the same boat”</li> <li>• “Us and them”</li> <li>• giving up the leader’s role</li> </ul>

	Completing responses	Depleting responses
Potential consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• release</li> <li>• “the best way out is always through”—achieving acceptance and being able to experience and make use of creative emotions</li> <li>• integration</li> <li>• maturation</li>   <li>• further strengthening the self</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• energies get stuck, may “go guerilla”</li> <li>• cynicism, sarcasm</li> <li>• vicious cycle</li> <li>• manifesting defense mechanism</li> <li>• repetitive compulsion</li> <li>• lethargy</li> <li>• exhaustion</li> <li>• disengagement/ amotivation</li> <li>• frustration</li> <li>• ego depletion</li>   <li>• further weakening the self</li> </ul>

*Table 5. Overview of completing and depleting responses (developed and compiled by the author)*

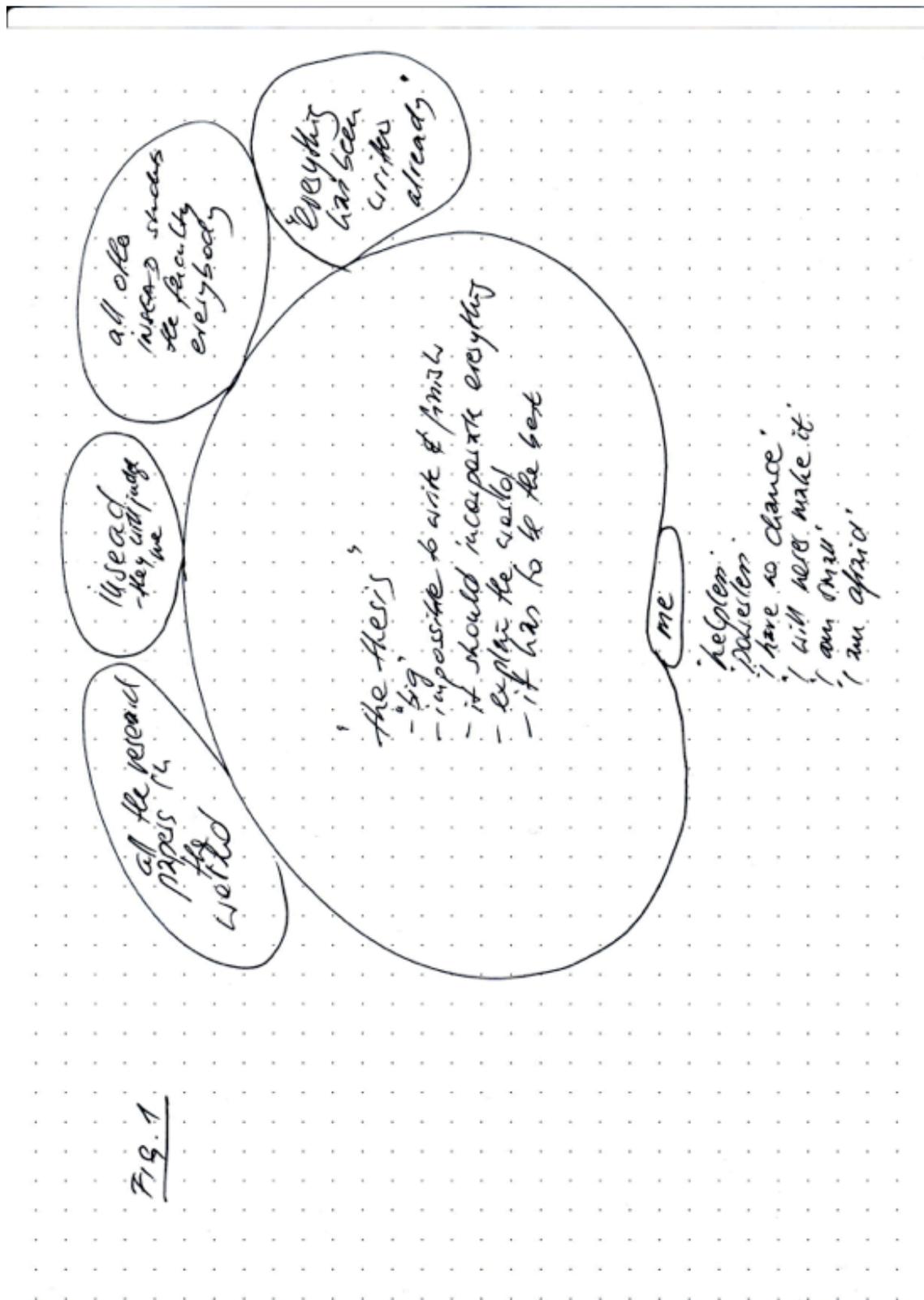


Figure 1. The authors imagined emotional and volitional responses as a helpless pupil

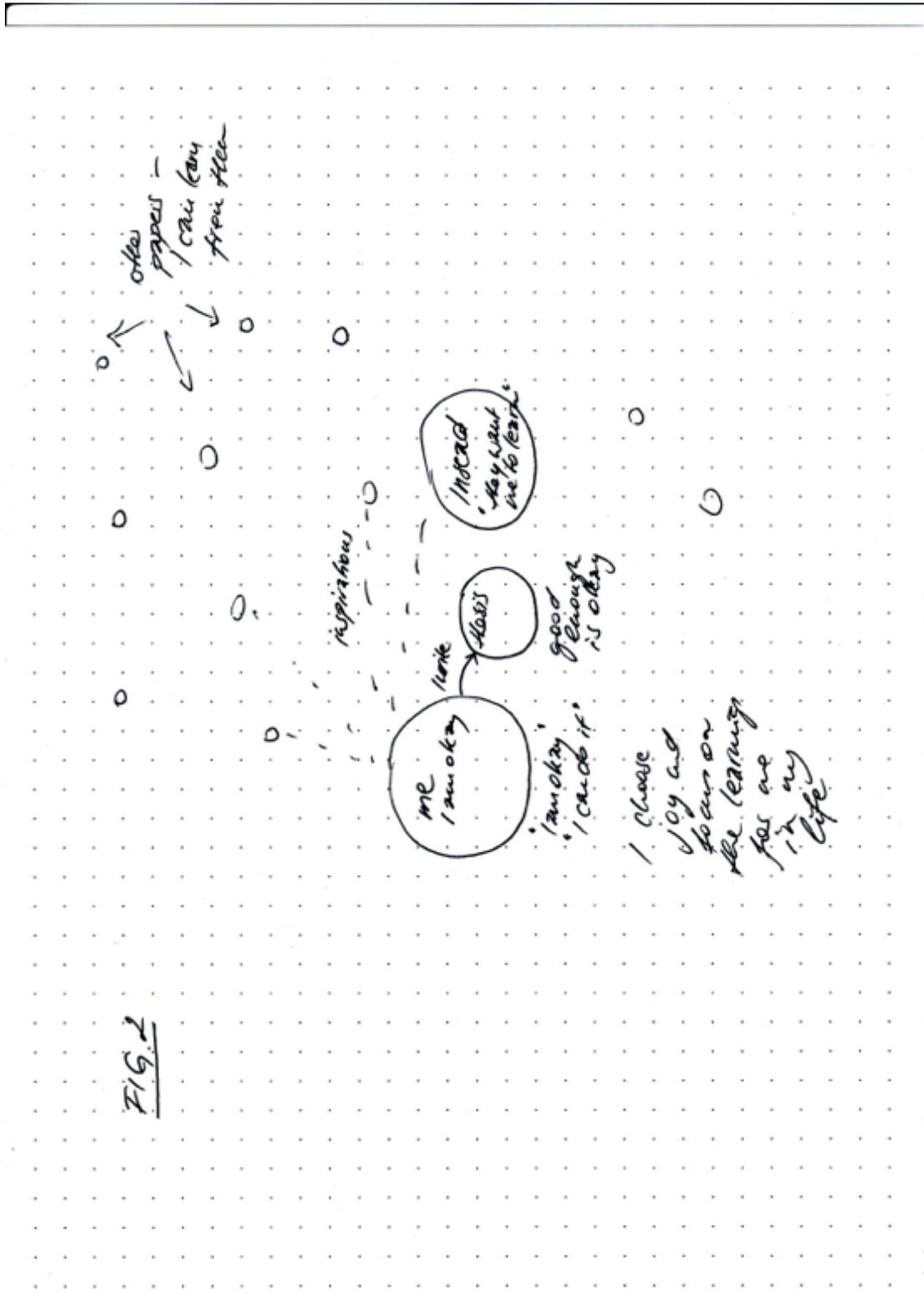


Figure 2. *Becoming fluent in reality: The author's mature emotional and volitional responses as a responsible individual*