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Leading digital transformation

A narrative perspective

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Leading digital transformation: A narrative perspective

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Abstract

Change communication is a critical dimension for leading digital transformation. Existing literature predominantly theorizes change communication as part of the earliest stages of the transformation, but how it evolves over time to remain relevant in this context is understudied. We address this shortcoming through a four-year study of a digital transformation initiative in a local government's health care department. Drawing on a narrative perspective, we offer a processual account and describe the ongoing communicative work of public managers as they attempt to shape frontline workers' expectations of digital transformation. We theorize three narrative types—aspirational, setback, and persistence—that work as communicative resources in dealing with hopes, delays, and emerging concerns. Our article contributes to the literature on leading digital transformation in the public sector by providing a narrative perspective that details how managers produce narratives, navigate existing ones, and tailor them to emerging concerns.

Evidence for practice

- Narratives are essential resources for public managers leading digital transformation efforts as they allow managers to create communications that emphasize the transformation's meaning to the organization and the individuals within it.
- Managers play a critical role in producing narratives and stories—as well as navigating existing stories—about digital transformation.
- Managers adapt their narratives about digital transformation over time in response to the reactions and concerns those narratives create.

INTRODUCTION

Interest in digital transformation is increasing and gaining traction in public administration research and practice (Mergel et al., 2019; Coulthart & Riccucci, 2022). Although public administration scholars have long acknowledged the transformative potential of digital technology (Danziger et al., 1982; Dunleavy et al., 2006), recent developments—including the Internet of things, sensors, artificial intelligence, and digital platforms—provide new and enticing possibilities for how public sector organizations can improve work practices and deliver services (Kim et al., 2022; Selten et al., 2023). Digital transformation, however, is also surrounded by stories of failure, and studies show that breakdowns and outright defeats are to be expected (Aaen & Nielsen, 2022; Anthopoulos et al., 2016; Kuhlmann & Heuberger, 2021) to an even greater extent than with other transformation efforts (Flyvbjerg et al., 2022).

Leading digital transformation is therefore fraught with challenges. While managers face a critical task in navigating the many stories about digital transformation, they also have a pivotal role in producing those stories (Flyverbom & Garsten, 2021). Attending to change communication, specifically the "stories and narratives" by which direction is constructed, is therefore an inherent part of leadership (Orr & Bennett, 2017, p. 517). Hence, by focusing on narrative production as a key change

communication dimension, we leverage a view on leadership as a social influence process (Bass, 1990) that emphasizes the "communication of an image of a future for a collective with the intention to persuade others to contribute to the realization of that future" (Van Knippenberg and Sitkin 2013 cited in Jacobsen & Andersen, 2015, p. 832).

Existing literature points out change communication as a key leadership dimension and stresses the value of establishing a sense of urgency and a vision for change (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006; Kotter, 1995). However, scholars predominantly theorize communication as part of the earliest stages of the digital transformation process and pay scant attention to how managers' communication about digital transformation develops over time. This is unfortunate because digital transformation is emergent, and challenging to plan upfront (Gasco-Hernandez et al., 2022; Hinings et al., 2018); it is therefore disposed to adaptive leadership with continuous communication adjustments triggered by various conditions and concerns.

Building on prior work on narratives as a central communication resource for managers (Boje, 2008; Borins, 2011), we set out to examine the types of narratives and their temporal development in leading digital transformation in the public sector. Narratives are typically considered to be composed of a coherent beginning, middle, and end (Currie & Brown, 2003), but in times of change, they are more provisional and presented as story fragments that have yet to settle into ordered narratives (Bartel & Garud, 2009; Vaara & Tienari, 2011). This latter type of narrative is ideal for analyzing communication in-action as it gives sensitivity to how narratives unfold over time in organizations undergoing change. Our focus here is on public organizations and how their top managers—the people carrying out the organization's mission—use narratives in leading digital transformation. We are guided by a two-part research question: *How do managers use narratives to ascribe meaning to digital transformation initiatives to shape employees' expectations, and how do these narratives develop over time?*

Empirically, we draw on a four-year qualitative study of how a local government health care department in Denmark embarked on a digital transformation initiative to implement a new digital health care platform. That platform was expected to transform the work practices of 7000 employees across multiple professional domains in elder and social care. Through our study, which builds on a rich data set of interviews, documents, and observations, we identified how managers leveraged different narrative resources as they continuously ascribed meaning to the initiative and sought to shape employees' expectations of the digital health care platform. Based on this, we theorize three narrative types in use—aspirational, setback, and persistence—and reveal how they developed over time.

Drawing on our findings, this article contributes to the emerging literature on leading digital transformation in the public sector (Gasco-Hernandez et al., 2022; Hansen & Nørup, 2017), and responds to recent calls for studying the role of stories and narratives in digital transformation (Anthony et al., 2023; Flyverbom & Garsten, 2021). By taking a narrative perspective, we elucidate an important leadership dimension that has received limited attention in current research: how public managers use narratives to ascribe meaning to digital transformation, and how those narratives develop over time as they are tailored to emerging and unforeseen concerns.

In the following section, we first review current literature related to communication and narratives in leading digital transformation. We then describe our case setting and research methods and present our findings. We conclude by discussing our study's implications and outlining *avenues for future research*.

LITERATURE BACKGROUND

In this article, digital transformation is understood broadly as organizational change "triggered and shaped by the widespread diffusion of digital technologies" (Hanelt et al., 2021, p. 1160). From this viewpoint, the focus is not on software upgrades or IT projects that create incremental change, but rather on change initiatives fostered by digital technologies in which organizational members "might experience discontinuous shifts in their understanding of particular phenomena" (Bartunek & Jones, 2017, p. 145). Thus, digital transformation entails radical rather than incremental organizational change (Mergel et al., 2019). In the context of the public sector— and its deeply entwined regulatory, administrative, and digital infrastructures—such a transformation is considered a long haul (Noesgaard et al., 2023; Øvrelid & Bygstad, 2019), which is seemingly at odds with the rhetoric of fast-paced transformation (Hinings et al., 2018).

Different bodies of literature are relevant for digital transformational leadership in public sector settings. The general change management literature is influential here and emphasizes communication as a core element in directing and motivating employees for change in large-scale initiatives such as digital transformation (Kotter, 1995; Kuipers et al., 2014). This literature takes a top-management perspective and draws attention to clear, intentional communication. For instance, scholars have stressed the key role of managers in generating initial support for change by establishing a sense of urgency and communicating a strong vision for that change (Barrett, 2002; Fernandez & Rainey, 2006). Managers must not only formulate and maintain a vision, but also use communication to encourage employees to work toward that vision. The literature argues that such communication requires simplicity, repetition, and multiple communication channels (Kotter, 1995).

Fernandez and Rainey (2006) emphasize that managers must "communicate the need for change" (p. 169),

which eventually depends on convincing employees of its urgency. Put differently, "without credible communication and a lot of it, the hearts and minds of the troops are never captured" (Kotter, 1995, p. 63). Similar, Gasco-Hernandez et al. (2022) stress that establishing and communicating a clear, explicit strategy is the first step toward successful digital transformation. And, in their study of how to overcome barriers to digital transformation, Wilson and Mergel (2022) highlighted storytelling as a tactic to emphasize the value that digital transformation can bring. These suggestions fuel the hopeful stories surrounding digital transformation, which act as a motor that drives organizations into action on digital transformation. While this body of literature stresses the importance of change communication and of narrating a vision for change in the early stages, it offers few insights into how communication becomes coupled with the digital transformation initiative over time.

So, while existing literature recognizes the role of narrative in digital transformation, it does not engage with specific types of narratives and how they develop over time as managers ascribe meaning to digital transformation. Filling this void is crucial. Reducing change communication to merely establishing a clear vision and insisting on that vision is inappropriate, as digital transformation is an emerging phenomenon that often goes wrong. Moreover, by failing to engage with how public managers navigate and produce stories over time, we risk missing pivotal insights into communication practices as managers strive to direct and shape employee expectations for digital transformation. Hence, there is a need to examine the temporal development of communication, particularly how manager narratives shift and adapt in the process of leading digital transformation in the public sector.

Against this backdrop—and in accordance with the view that managers give direction and motivate change at different points in the digital transformation process (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006)—our aim was to analyze communicative dynamics over time. In doing so, we drew inspiration from a narrative perspective that stipulates a processual view of public managers' communication efforts as they strive to give direction and shape employees' expectations through stories and narrative fragments (Orr & Bennett, 2017; Vaara et al., 2016).

A NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Narratives are "something that someone tells" (Pentland, 1999, p. 712) that represent a specific version of reality and offer guidance for actors' sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Narratives are delivered by connecting events or actions through a plot (Boje, 1991). Such plots are not given. A narrator (e.g., a manager) forms plots, which are communicated through language or other media, and which the audience (e.g., employees) further interprets (Boje, 1991; Vaara et al., 2016). Hence,

narratives represent a form of communication, or framing (Goffman, 1974), through which stories are "used more or less purposefully to create specific meanings" (Vaara & Tienari, 2011, p. 372). Attention is thus drawn toward how managers use communicative microelements, such as metaphoric expressions or rhetorical figures, that may play a crucial role in shaping employees' expectations of change (Boje, 1991; Vaara & Tienari, 2011).

Narratives can transfer organizational knowledge by sharing experiences from past initiatives and encouraging the creation of new ideas while being part of and influenced by broader conversations in the external environment (Bartel & Garud, 2009). Narratives are thus important communication resources for public managers (Borins, 2011) as they can shape the way employees understand change initiatives such as digital transformation (Flyverbom & Garsten, 2021). Narratives can also help managers communicate reasons for change to build support for specific agendas. For example, Orr and Bennett (2017) show how narratives produced by local government managers had the capacity to cut across professional boundaries and engage people with a shared sense of purpose for change.

Narratives also play out at different scales. They might, for example, be grand societal narratives or narratives that speak to a specific organization (Czarniawska, 1998). As literary analysis shows us, fully formed grand narratives typically contain an established plot with a clear beginning-middle-end structure; in contrast, organizational narratives rarely work as full-fledged stories (Vaara et al., 2016). These narratives are often provisional and can be understood as situated storytelling containing narrative fragments, or snippets (Bartel & Garud, 2009). Such narratives play a role in any organization, but they are particularly influential in environments that are changing and in which the future is uncertain; as a result, "narratives of organizational change are rarely coherent stories" (Vaara & Tienari, 2011, p. 372).

In large-scale strategic change (such as digital transformation), many narratives—and interpretations—can be in play simultaneously and serve multiple purposes. As Vaara et al. (2016) note, while narratives have performative power, they may be interpreted in different ways. For example, what management might see as creating synergy, might be viewed by employees as compromising quality. Consequently, over-optimistic narratives may be a source of frustration if the change initiative fails to meet expectations (Bartel & Garud, 2009), or they might be viewed as empty talk and problematic managerial decoupling (Bromley & Powell, 2012). Hence, as Christensen et al. (2021) argue, passing from "talk to action" is a "rocky and unpredictable" journey (p. 421).

Narratives are seen as critical communication resources in literature on public administration (Borins, 2011; Dodge et al., 2005; Orr & Bennett, 2017) and organization and management (Bartel & Garud, 2009; Boje, 1991; Vaara & Tienari, 2011). Still, while digital

transformation is rife with narratives of both great hope and great worry (Milne, 2020), we scarcely understand the role of such narratives for those tasked with leading the complex and problematic undertaking of public sector digital transformation. To address this gap, we examine how narratives work as a communication resource for managers as they ascribe meaning to digital transformation while it unfolds over time.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research is based on a four-year (2017–2020) qualitative case study (Miles et al., 2013) of a digital transformation initiative in the Elderly and Social Work (ESW) department of a large local government organization in Denmark. The organization introduced a new digital health care platform—CURA—that included tablets and smartphones for frontline workers such as caregivers, home nurses, and social workers. We had the opportunity to gather rich data over time and analyze the preparation, implementation, and use of the CURA platform. This was a tiresome process for the organization, and one that contained setbacks, unforeseen events, and many emerging conflicts.

Eldercare and social welfare services are primary functions of Denmark's welfare system. The central government provides funding in the form of politically decided budgets, which the 98 local governments (municipalities) then have the responsibility and authority to organize and distribute (Nielsen et al., 2014). The ESW department has an annual budget of US$430 million and serves elderly citizens in need of help (e.g., nursing homes, home nursing, homecare) and handicapped citizens of all ages. Denmark is recognized as one of the world's most progressive countries in improving its public service offerings through digital technology. It is thus an appealing setting for investigating digital transformation in practice.

As in most other public organizations, the use of digital technology has increased considerably in the ESW department over the past few decades. The CURA platform—delivered as a software package by a Danish IT provider—replaced an existing electronic patient record system that had been used by the organization for 25 years. Implementing CURA required integrating it with 28 other IT systems, and it required significant changes to both the work and documentation practices of more than 7000 employees throughout the entire organization. By June 2017, the ESW department announced that it had chosen CURA as the new digital platform, and in January 2018, the initiative was officially launched in a large kick-off event. CURA was designed in accordance with the third generation of a documentation standard—Shared Language—that was mandated by government agencies. This standard was expected to facilitate smarter and more accurate documentation and to generate comparable data on eldercare service delivery across all 98 Danish local governments; this, in turn, was seen as a foundation for developing a more data-driven

TABLE 1 Overview of data.

Round	Data sources
First (2018)	Interviews Management team: 12 Frontline managers: 10 Frontline workers 10
	Documents Project descriptions, minutes from meetings, and LinkedIn posts: +120 pages of text Communication on web pages: +40 min of video
	Observations Participation in meetings: six meetings (9 h)
Second (2019–2020)	Interviews Management team: 11 Frontline managers: 10 Frontline workers: 10
	Documents Project descriptions, minutes from meetings, and LinkedIn posts: +120 pages of text Communication on web pages: +20 min of video
	Observations Participation in meetings: four meetings (7 h)

health care sector. To fulfill this ambition, caregivers, nurses, and social workers would have to, among other things, change their old practices, which often included writing free text about their patients in a rather unstructured and flexible approach. With CURA, they would instead "click" boxes related to various criteria for classifying care services. Moreover, by implementing an app-based tablet solution (tablets and smartphones) frontline workers were expected to register the provided service at the point of care (i.e., in the homes of patients, and preferably together with them) instead of doing it later on an office computer. Overall, this initiative was described by our informants as a "paradigm shift" and "a cultural change," indicating its transformative potential in reconfiguring work practices. We therefore viewed this as a digital transformation initiative, as it was associated with radical rather than incremental change.[1]

Data sources

We collected data in two rounds: the first before the "go-live," and the second after. Between these two main rounds, we had several informal conversations with members of the management team and access to minutes from meetings, which made it possible to follow the digital transformation initiative over time. As Yin (2011) suggested and Table 1 shows, our case study data consisted of multiple data sources: interviews, documents, and observations.

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[1]We acknowledge, however, that whether this initiative will end up, in the long run, as a digital transformation that radically changes the organization is outside the scope of this article.

TABLE 2   Details of interviewees.

Function	Department unit	Numbers	Age range
Director	Management board	3	61–70
Head of eldercare	Management board	2	51–60
Head of rehabilitation	Management board	2	61–70
Vice director, social care	Management board	2	61–70
IT manager	IT department	2	51–60
IT project manager	IT department	2	51–60
Project manager	CURA project organization	2	41–50
Economist	CURA project organization	2	31–40
Quality consultant [1–3]	CURA project organization	5	41–50, 31–40, 31–40
Risk management consultant	CURA project organization	1	31–40
Homecare manager [1, 2]	Homecare	4	51–60, 41–50
Nursing home manager [1–3]	Nursing home	6	31–40, 31–40, 41–50
Rehabilitation manager [1, 2]	Rehabilitation	4	41–50, 41–40
Social work manager [1–3]	Social work	6	51–60, 41–50, 41–50
Caregiver [1, 2]	Homecare	4	31–40, 51–60
Nurse [1]	Homecare	2	31–40
Caregiver [3, 4]	Nursing home	4	31–40, 51–60
Nurse [2]	Nursing home	2	41–50
Physiotherapist [1, 2]	Rehabilitation	4	31–40, 41–50
Social worker [1, 2]	Social work	4	51–60, 51–60
		Total: 63	

To develop our understanding of the digital transformation initiative, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the management team, frontline managers, and frontline workers (see Table 2 for details). In selecting interviewees for our study, we relied on purposive sampling (Ritchiie et al., 2003) and included informants that (1) were in a leading position for the CURA initiative, (2) were in a frontline manager position, and (3) were the main users of the digital platform. In our case, the two latter groups were the audience of top managers' narratives. Since this project was part of a more extensive research program, we had access to relevant actors among managers and frontline workers, and the ESW department helped us mediate the contact with the informants. We had an open, explorative approach to interviewing, guided by our focus on leading the digital transformation initiative. We asked the management team questions about the reasons for the digital transformation initiative, as well as their objectives and visions, and whether they had changed over time. We asked them how they prepared, organized, and communicated the digital transformation initiative, including how they dealt with unexpected events and resistance from frontline workers. We also asked frontline managers and frontline workers to unfold how they saw their role in the digital transformation initiative and how they experienced the management teams' role in leading the initiative. In total, the study included 63 interviews, most of which were conducted face-to-face and the rest via Skype or Microsoft

Teams.[2] We recorded all interviews, which were transcribed verbatim by a group of student assistants supported by Konch's online Speech-to-Text platform.

We supplemented our numerous interviews with documents such as project descriptions, minutes from meetings, educational material, and communications about the digital transformation initiative on the organization's web pages. For example, we had access to the CURA website, which included a series of short videos of ESW department managers talking about their expectations and aspirations for the new digital platform, as well as benefits of its use. These sources gave us crucial insights into managers' formal communications about CURA. We also used meeting observations to gain deeper understanding of how managers communicated and sought to motivate people about the digital transformation initiative. We attended these meetings until February 2020, when we had to stop due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In total, we observed 10 managerial meetings, which helped us better grasp the ways in which top managers discussed the initiative, how they approached it, and what they were concerned about in relation to setbacks. During

these observations, we took detailed field notes. Overall, triangulation of different data sources—interviews, documents, and observations—helped safeguard data trustworthiness in our qualitative study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We also relied on member checks from three interviewees in the ESW department to ensure that our understanding of the CURA case was congruent with interviewees' experiences and to check the viability of our interpretations.

Data analysis

Our data analysis was both exploratory and abductive, as we moved from data to theoretical insights in an exploratory manner while creating plausible explanations—based on existing literature—for what we found in our case (Klag & Langley, 2013). We organized our data using NVivo. To analyze the data, we used a two-step approach. First, we focused on getting an overview and temporal understanding of our case (Langley, 1999) and created a timeline of the CURA case's key events (see Figure 1).

Our second step was guided by thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2013). When reading interview transcripts, documents, and our field notes from observations, we were fascinated by how managers communicated about their hopes, how they were affected by past events of digitalization failures, and how the rhetoric changed over time as the digital transformation initiative faced delays and emerging concerns. Based on these insights, we consulted the existing literature and decided on *narratives* (Boje, 2008) as our theoretical perspective. During our analysis, we iterated through the literature and our empirical material and discussed various theoretical perspectives, including literature on anticipatory governance (Flyverbom & Garsten, 2021) and framing (Goffman, 1974). However, we stayed with narratives because they allowed us to understand change communication in action and how such communication unfolds and develops over time in organizations undergoing digital transformation. While the terms "narrative" and "story" are frequently used synonymously (Haack et al., 2012), we follow Orr and Bennett (2017) who distinguish between the two by "positioning stories as subordinate to narratives" (p. 517). With this distinction, we identified three overarching narrative types, and their underlying stories, that dominated at different times in our case. In this process, we moved from generating initial categories to stabilizing the categories in a process that involved defining, dropping, relating, and renaming categories (Grodal et al., 2021). Table 3 provides an overview of this stage of coding.

Initially, we recognized how managers stressed the many opportunities of the new digital platform to prepare frontline workers for change. We call this an *aspirational narrative* that encapsulates how managers articulate their hopes for digital transformation. Managers did so through sub-stories that problematized existing technology, stressed the benefit of future technology, humanized the technology, and distanced it from previous failures. Next, we recognized how managers engaged in what we call a *setback narrative* when they had to deal with obstacles in preparing for change. Managers started to talk about setbacks—such as postponements—as an inherent part of digital transformation, and even characterized them as advantage, and we identified two sub-stories: setback as a strength and setback as normal. Finally, once the CURA platform was in daily use, we observed how managers had to do repair work when prior expectations were not met. This involved what we call a *persistence narrative*, which encapsulates how managers talk about digital transformation when it does not live up to prior expectations. This narrative contains sub-stories through which managers sought to recalibrate expectations and encourage patience, while downplaying and adjusting expectations of the digital platform.

To further understand how top managers' narratives about digital transformation developed over time, we analyzed interviews with frontline managers and frontline workers to gain insights from the digital health care
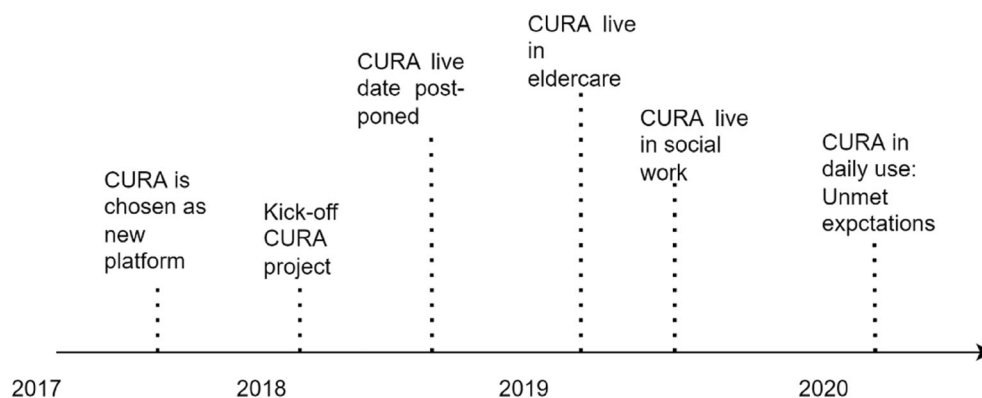

FIGURE 1 Timeline of the CURA case.

TABLE 3 Categories, codes, and quotes.

Category	Codes (stories)	Example quotes
Aspirational narrative	Problematization	"The existing system is outdated, and we hope to get a system that is more user-friendly than what we have now" (head of rehabilitation)
	Benefits	"We expect CURA to increase the quality of our work. We talk about improved efficiency and not productivity in the narrow economic sense" (director)
	Distancing from failure	"The Healthcare Platform was about saving money, and they initially fired several medical secretaries to achieve their goal. It created a lot of resistance, and they even had to hire many of them again. We do not want to make the same mistake" (director)
	Humanizing technology	"For more than a year, we have prepared to get CURA ready for all of you who will be using CURA in daily work. We call CURA 'a good colleague'" (IT manager)
Setback narrative	Setback as a strength	"The postponement of CURA go-live was a major disappointment, but we started to see it as a new opportunity to make the organization ready for the new platform" (project manager)
	Setback as normal	"It was a hard period with many obstacles, but both managers and employees must realize that it is an inevitable part of such a huge digital transformation initiative" (IT manager)
Persistence narrative	It takes time	"This takes time. CURA is in daily operation, and everyone has received training in using the platform. Now, new work practices must be learned. We are not there yet" (head of eldercare)
	On the right track	"It has been a long time coming. There are many things we have not been able to plan, but we move slowly one step closer to our goal" (project manager)

platform's main users. Our goal in this analysis was to improve our understanding of narrative development over time by examining how manager stories were perceived on the frontline.

ANALYSIS

In the following empirical account, we describe the three identified narratives and how they unfolded in our case.

Aspirational narrative

The aspirational narrative began with a *problematization* story, which construed the current technology as outdated. This story emphasized the need for a new digital platform by claiming that the existing system was user-unfriendly and incompatible with the new mandated documentation requirements (Shared Language). In videos on the CURA website, managers described the existing system as "an old-fashioned IT system that did not support the transition to a new documentation standard" (IT manager) and highlighted that the organization had "knowledge-sharing problems across professional domains" (vice director). We also found this description of failure in interviews with managers, who stressed that the existing system was inhibited by "double documentation" (head of eldercare) and that the organization was "standing on a burning platform because the existing system has to be phased out" (IT manager). This story thus builds expectations for the new platform by questioning the existing technology and emphasizing the inevitable need to invest in new technology.

The *benefit* story rationalized the new digital platform's capacity to create value for multiple actors. CURA was promoted as a platform that addressed the existing system's problems because it was superior to previous technologies and "the best solution on the market" (IT manager) that could help "improve quality of documentation and provide better services for patients" (project manager) and create a "data-driven organization" (director). The head of eldercare explained the following in a CURA website video:

> "We will get a platform with a simpler user interface than our previous system so that frontline workers can solve their tasks with as few clicks as possible. I have a dream that the platform will help us advance professionalism in our documentation and in our contact with patients."

Because failure risk is quite high in digital transformation, in his opening speech at the January 2018 kick-off event, the director stressed not only the many new opportunities that CURA offered, but also the immense work ahead. In doing so, he strived to encourage employees to take part in "the hard work required to successfully implement CURA" (director), which was portrayed as beneficial for frontline workers (smarter documentation), managers (better decision-making), and the department overall (improved cross-sector collaboration) and thus created a

win-win situation for everyone involved. Notable, CURA was "not seen as a cost-saving initiative" (director). The expected savings of US$0.8 million described in the new platform's business case was articulated as "a drop in the ocean"—as a member of the CURA project organization expressed it—in a department with an annual budget of US $430 million. Hence, managers sought to create a rationale for digital transformation through a story that appealed to non-economic factors, which made it less controversial without favoring certain actor groups.

Another story coiled around *distancing from failure*, which included claims that CURA would be different from the many examples of failure in public sector digitalization. In the years before launch, Danish media had reported critically about failures in sectors such as the tax agency, police, and health care. The management team became concerned about these circulating failure stories, which shaped how they talked about CURA. In particular, one initiative—the so-called *Healthcare Platform* (in Danish, *Sundhedsplatformen*) implemented in hospitals in Denmark's capital region and criticized in news media—played an important role as an "anti-story" in managers' communication about CURA.[3] Creating distance from the Healthcare Platform, managers explained why CURA would not become the next digitalization failure. "We cannot afford another IT scandal as with the Healthcare Platform in the capital region. We must do it differently" (IT manager) and "the Healthcare Platform is an example of lack of employee involvement. We're doing the opposite and relying on a participatory approach" (director). Thus, stories about public digitalization failures became part of the ESW department's narrative, as managers used oppositional stories to such failures as a resource for their own initiative. These stories were important in underscoring "who we are *not* going to be," and provided leeway for managers to signal another aspiration for the new digital platform. As a case in point, stressing a participatory approach—in contrast to the Healthcare Platform's lack of employee involvement—was considered essential for successful transformation. By distancing themselves from failures, managers sought to motivate the digital transformation initiative by explaining how CURA would be different.

The aspirational narrative was further substantiated with a *humanizing of technology* story. This story was told mainly around the CURA launch in spring 2019 when frontline workers had to start using the new platform. Like the other aspirational stories, this story emphasized the platform's huge potential as a tool for improving work practices and services. *Slogans such as* "CURA—a good colleague" were used in speeches by managers, on posters in the employee lunchroom, and in the IT provider's promotional material to signal CURA's value as a partner

rather than as cold technology. In a video shared with the entire department, the director stated:

> "When you show up on Monday, you'll have a new colleague: CURA. You can bring CURA with you when visiting citizens, which is why we call CURA a good colleague."

The manager offered a similar message on social media:

> "The ESW department will soon give birth to a new colleague. She appears fresh and healthy. We are certain she will be a healthy solution for the future."
> (LinkedIn post, March 2019)

Managers relied on these and other metaphoric expressions to humanize the technology and make it meaningful for frontline workers.

Overall, the aspirational narrative encapsulated stories of hopes and dreams for the digital platform. Some frontline workers seemed to echo these hopeful stories and voiced great expectations for the new platform saying, for instance, "I am sure documentation becomes easier and faster with the new system" (nurse 1). Others adopted a more wait-and-see attitude, yet they were still hopeful: "Management says CURA will be much better. So, I guess it will be. I think it will free more time to serve patients" (caregiver 2). However, ascribing meaning to digital transformation in this way did not automatically lead to buy-in from the entire group of frontline workers. For instance, not all of them shared the managers' experience of standing on a burning platform; one claimed that "the existing system runs pretty well" (nurse 2). Others had difficulties relating to the managers' abstract talk about the potential benefits of the new platform and argued: "We know very little of CURA to actually judge it" (physiotherapist 1) and "I am positive minded but also a bit wait-and-see because I do not know what I expect, since I do not know what it can actually do" (physiotherapist 2). One caregiver had a fundamental doubt about the new platform's many promises: "I've been in this field since 1985, and I always hold some kind of skepticisms when it comes to new IT systems" (caregiver 4). Hence, while managers' techno-optimistic talk about a promising future created a non-controversial rationale for the digital platform, these aspirational stories also came across as overly optimistic to many frontline workers, who recognized the abstract aspirations in this talk and were more hesitant and doubtful about which benefits the new digital platform would bring.

Setback narrative

In the wake of the optimistic stories surrounding the digital transformation initiative, managers had to cope with

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[3]One may have expected that the experiences and stories from other CURA users in similar organizations—and not an initiative from the hospital sector—would be important for managers in the ESW department. However, according to our data, this was not the case as managers frequently referred to the Healthcare Platform.

setbacks in summer 2018, as both technical and contractual challenges surfaced. The ESW department had planned to implement CURA according to a "big bang strategy," which was expected to take place by October 2018. However, the management team realized that the platform's configuration was not going as planned, and a conflict with the IT provider emerged as varied understandings of contractual obligations came to the fore. As the IT manager explained, plans had to be reconsidered:

> "There were too many problems, and we did not want to implement a solution that only lived up to half our expectations, so we decided to postpone it."

Hence, in August 2018, the management team postponed the CURA go-live date.

This decision to postpone was considered critical to managers, as it might jeopardize the story of a beneficial digital platform. Hence, following the postponement, the ESW department invested significant resources in handling the critical situation by providing additional education, online learning packages, and training of super-users. During this, we observed a shift in manager communication about CURA, from talking about hopes and dreams to addressing unexpected situations and handling potential frustrations in the organization. Thus, the *setbacks as a strength* story illuminates how managers began to reframe the digital transformation initiative by narrating the postponement as unfortunate but also as an opportunity to make the organization ready for the new platform. In an internal message from the management team to employees in August 2018, the postponement was communicated as follows:

> "When CURA goes live, it must reflect the work processes in our organization. Our vision is a platform for our employees that is easy to use. It must be a platform that assists frontline workers' everyday practices and a platform they trust. We will not be able to fulfill this vision if we stick to the original go-live date."

The director further argued that the postponement "provided more time for maturing the organization," while a project manager shared this perspective: "We have now more time to ensure that caregivers are ready for the new platform." As such, managers downplayed the postponement's problems and talked about setbacks as an advantage because—in the long run—they would increase the opportunity for successful implementation. So, while the postponement was regrettable, managers articulated it as a way to purposefully deal with the unforeseen challenges that would have created server issues later if ignored. The head of rehabilitation explained it as follows:

> "We tried to explain the reason for the postponement, and what would have happened if we had proceeded. I stepped up in front of all 250 of my employees to explain why we made the decision and why it was best to postpone."

So, while the postponement created uncertainty, managers tried to turn the unexpected into something intentional and planned, or, as one project manager described it: "another opportunity to make it, but this time it must not go wrong." Another part of this narrative was a *normalizing setbacks* story that urged frontline workers to accept that digital transformation is anything but unproblematic. Hence, managers strived to handle setbacks by articulating them as inherent to digital transformation. In a video shared with the entire organization before the new platform's launch, the director explained: "there will always be obstacles and problems in such a large-scale digital transformation initiative." In an interview, he elaborated:

> "Digital transformation initiatives like CURA differ from other kinds of change because everything can go wrong. No matter how good your implementation and communication plans are, there are always more critical challenges that can be devastating to a successful implementation. The goodwill of IT providers, the management team, and employees is never enough."

The head of rehabilitation reached a similar conclusion: "frustration and digital transformation go hand in hand," and the head of eldercare shared her perspective:

> "There will always be teething troubles, but I think we simply must accept that. It is part of the process when you are doing something as new as this."

Thus, setbacks were articulated as an inevitable part of digital transformation. By normalizing setbacks—and even articulating them as a strength—managers framed the delay caused by the setback as beneficial, because it allowed the organization to be better prepared for the new platform.

Overall, the managers' decision to postpone the go-live date and associated setback stories seemed to resonate in the frontline. Although the postponement was described as "an unfortunate way to start the project" and "a bad signal to send to the organization" (caregiver 4), there was support for how managers handled the unforeseen situation. As one frontline worker explained it: "They had to postpone CURA. The platform simply was not ready" (nurse 2), while another added: "I think it is positive that they decided to postpone. Now we can be

better prepared for the new platform" (caregiver 1). A frontline manager even argued that the postponement increased trust in the organization:

> "I experienced something interesting in relation to the postponement. I experienced that trust in us as managers increased because of the postponement. Many employees feel that we have much respect for them because we did not push this through in a short time."

Thus, although the postponement "came as a surprise" (homecare manager 1), the decision made sense to frontline workers, and the managers' communication about the setback seemed to help calm down this unforeseen situation. As one nurse explained: "I think they (members of the management team) have been good at communicating and informing us about the CURA project, also when things have gone wrong" (nurse 1).

Persistence narrative

In 2019, 7000 employees started using the CURA platform. Shifting to CURA was a huge task, as old habits had to be shed and new routines learned. Frontline workers were happy about the supportive management team throughout the process and found the tablets and smartphones valuable for their work. However, many were frustrated because their (high) expectations had not (yet) been met. Nurse 1 described how managers had painted a near-perfect picture of the "super system CURA," which, in practice, it had difficulty living up to. Caregiver 3 added: "My expectations of CURA were high. I expected work to be easier. But it is not." Another caregiver also expressed disappointment: "They told us we would get the best system, but I am sure they bought only the cheap version, there are so many things that still do not work."

Managers were aware that the high expectations of CURA could cause problems and that there was a need to reshape employee expectations. A project manager explained: "Our expectations were too high, and it created problems." Hence, in the wake of the CURA go-live, a period followed in which patience and the need to recalibrate expectations became important. The persistence narrative was substantiated by an *it takes time* story, which acknowledged that digital transformation is not a quick fix, but rather a long-term change process. Managers told frontline workers to hold their horses, to be patient, and to not judge the new platform too soon. At a management meeting in December 2019—8 months after CURA was put into operation—the director clarified: "before CURA is fully integrated into our everyday lives, it will take at least two years, and our employees must know that time frame." The head of eldercare endorsed this viewpoint: "We have started to

think of CURA as a learning journey, not as a quick fix." And the head of rehabilitation noted:

> "It really takes time. We go to all frontline managers to say how important their support is; managers at all levels must support the frontline workers. CURA is not fully implemented."

Consequently, managers stressed that the initial expectations simply could not be achieved as promised, and patience became an important dimension in communicating about unfulfilled expectations when CURA came into daily use. As the project manager concluded: "CURA has enormous opportunities we still have not fulfilled." Hence, the calls for patience were supplemented by claims that benefits will become clear in the long run.

The persistence narrative included an *on the right track* story, in which managers said that things were going in the right direction, despite frustration among frontline workers. The IT manager said: "we are not as far as we have hoped, but I am sure we will succeed." And he added the following:

> "When someone comes to me saying: 'CURA sucks,' I'll tell them: Fine, but we had only 48 calls today from frontline workers who had problems with the platform and none of these calls created a case. Or when I tell our employees that 1,000 users entered the system in the last hour, then the problems do not seem that bad, right?"

Hence, while acknowledging that expectations had not been met, managers emphasized the accomplishments already happening. As a case in point, CURA was hailed as paving the way for data to drive the organization in new ways, such as using digital data from the CURA platform in combination with machine learning. One such project was to map and optimize driving routes for frontline workers doing home care work, while another aimed to improve rehabilitation programs. These examples were promoted as dependent on CURA data. As the IT manager argued: "by having better data, we are now able to engage in new kinds of projects." Managers thereby illustrated that CURA was on the right track, as early ethereal aspirations were now grounded in specific, CURA-enabled projects.

Overall, the persistence narrative seemed to reverberate among frontline workers, who said, among other things, "right now we are at version 1.0, and we need to get to version 3.0 before we are really up and running, so there is some way to go" (nurse). Another frontline worker told us: "The new documentation practice in CURA requires a new mindset. It does not simply develop when we get a new digital platform. It takes a long time" (caregiver 2). Although workers in the frontline continued to have skepticism about the value of CURA, they also

held out hope that things would get better with time. One said: "It's not like I think 'wow' this is fantastic. There are some things that work well in CURA, but it takes a long time to learn them" (social worker 2), while another added: "It's probably a matter of getting used to it" (caregiver 4). Other hopeful views included: "We're not quite there yet" (social work manager 3) and "It is about keeping hope and keeping the faith that things will probably be good" (nursing home manager 2). As these examples show, the persistence narrative appeared to resonate in the frontline as the digital platform increasingly assimilated into work practices in the ESW department.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we examined how public managers in a local government health care department in Denmark used narratives to ascribe meaning to a digital transformation initiative. Our analysis reveals how managers leveraged narrative resources that entangled with aspirations, engaged setbacks, and encouraged persistence as they seized new opportunities (a digital platform), handled unexpected events (postponements), and coped with frustrated frontline workers (unfulfilled expectations), all of which stipulated a need to change the narrative over time. Hence, in our case, managers produced narratives to "move an agenda forward" (Ospina & Dodge, 2005, p. 145) and as a way of "motivating and influencing staff" (Orr & Bennett, 2017, p. 515). The narratives we identified never calcified but rather changed as the digital transformation process unfolded in unexpected ways. We therefore see them more as provisional snippets, rather than fully formed narratives with a clear beginning-middle-end structure (Bartel & Garud, 2009; Boje, 2008). In the following section, we discuss our findings and our study's theoretical implications given existing literature, focusing on the types and temporal development of narratives in the process of leading digital transformation in the public sector.

Narrative types

We identified three narrative types—aspirational, setback, and persistence—that managers in our case used to ascribe meaning to digital transformation as it unfolded over time.

The *aspirational narrative* reflects a set of stories that construe the hopes and dreams for digital transformation. In our case, public managers portrayed the former technology as deficient and, in turn, depicted the new technology as beneficial for multiple actors (win-win expectations), while also using metaphoric expressions of humanizing the technology ("the good colleague") to make it meaningful for frontline workers through an "emotional connection" to public service delivery (Orr &

Bennett, 2017, p. 525). These findings reflect how public managers communicate reasons for change (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006) and detail the stories through which they strive to give digital transformation both direction and momentum. While these narrative efforts are forward-looking, they connect to past events (Boje, 2008; Vaara & Tienari, 2011). In our study, managers were faced with stories about past digitalization failures and used these failure stories as anti-stories—that is, *we are doing something different here*—to create distance from failure and ascribe meaning to their own digital transformation process. In this way, the aspirational narrative illuminates how managers not only have an important role in producing stories about digital transformation but also in navigating existing stories (Anthony et al., 2023; Flyverbom & Garsten, 2021).

The *setback narrative* encompasses stories that deal with obstacles in digital transformation. In our case, this narrative emerged as managers faced severe concerns and postponed the go-live date—and needed to rebuild confidence in the initiative as a result. In this situation, we observed how managers switched from emphasizing the many hopes for the digital platform to encouraging frontline workers to deal with setbacks. They did this by claiming that setbacks are unfortunate but normal in digital transformation and that setbacks even can be a strength; in this case, they said the postponement provided more time to prepare the organization for change. While the setback narrative illuminates the incompleteness of aspirational stories, it continues to present an optimistic view on digital transformation. This aligns with Wilson and Mergel (2022), who argue that storytelling can be helpful in overcoming barriers to digital transformation. Because obstacles—as we witnessed in this Danish case—are common in digital transformation (Flyvbjerg et al., 2022; Kuhlmann & Heuberger, 2021), managers must not only articulate an aspirational narrative, but also engage in repair work through setback stories to rebuild trust when obstacles occur. These insights support literature stressing the importance of cultivating an error-friendly culture to improve organizational performance (Cannon & Edmondson, 2005).

The *persistence narrative* contains stories that deal with unfulfilled hopes in digital transformation. In our case, this narrative became dominant when the new digital platform went into daily use and did not appear to live up to initial expectations. To handle this situation, managers intensified communication appealing to patience and to preventing premature judgment among the employees, signaling that the benefits take time, but that they will emerge. This narrative embraces a view on digital transformation as a long-term change process (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Øvrelid & Bygstad, 2019) and deviates from the aspirational stories by focusing on patience and on adjusting initial expectations. As such, this narrative relates to a view on digital transformation that questions "the disruptive talk associated with digital

transformation" (Hinings et al., 2018, p. 52) and instead appeals to a more slow-paced development. In the persistence narrative, we observed how managers stated that things were on the right track as (some) results were already happening, thereby illustrating how they tried to talk those early inspirational stories "into existence" at a later stage (Haack et al., 2012, p. 817).

Narrative development

As Figure 2 shows, we posit that managers' narratives about digital transformation develop over time. Our analysis reveals that the aspirational narrative continued over the years, first focusing on strict benefits, and then as a humanizing of the technology. The setback narrative was more limited in time and addressed specific obstacles that emerged in the digital transformation process, while the persistence narrative appeared at a later stage when managers had to deal with unfulfilled expectations among frontline workers. By considering different narrative types and their temporal development, we point to the dynamics of narratives and how these reflect and respond to the techno-optimism—and the obstacles and failures—associated with digital transformation. Managers tailor (or remake; Chapple et al., 2022) these narratives to conform with emerging concerns as challenges with digital transformation gradually arise. While the three identified narratives dominated at different times in the transformation process, they are not mutually exclusive; various narratives can coexist (Haack et al., 2012).

In Figure 2, the horizontal axis shows the time dimension, and the vertical axis distinguishes between what we refer to as "abstract talk" and "concrete talk." This division captures our observation as we looked across the narratives—that is, the stories contained in each of the narratives tended to be either ethereal and abstract (manifested mainly in the aspirational narrative) or substantial and concrete (manifested mainly in the setback and persistence narrative). Our findings indicate that frontline workers had mixed perceptions of these narratives. The abstract talk associated with the aspirational narrative seemed to be met with some skepticism among frontline workers. In comparison, the concrete talk in the face of setback and unfulfilled expectations seemed to be more tightly coupled with frontline workers' understanding of the digital transformation initiative. Our speculation is that the frontline workers' response to the abstract talk reveals a downside to the hopeful rhetoric that often surrounds digital transformation efforts. Although hope, optimism, and aspirations may animate action (Wenzel et al., 2020), they may also simply obfuscate what people should reasonably expect (Milne, 2020). Scholars have called for studying the symbolic impact of organizational narratives about digital technologies (Anthony et al., 2023), and studies have argued that transformational efforts can be talked into being (Christensen et al., 2021; Haack et al., 2012), yet our study indicates that such talk may be too abstract to resonate among frontline workers and hence is met with greater skepticism compared to more concrete talk from managers.

By revealing different narrative types and how they develop over time, our study advances understanding of leading digital transformation in public sector organizations. While the current literature on change management (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006; Hansen & Nørup, 2017; Kotter, 1995) stresses the importance of change communication, it often focuses on visionary, urgency-oriented communication in the earliest stages of the digital transformation process and therefore downplays how managers adapt their communication over time. Against this backdrop, we have offered a narrative inquiry and illuminated various types of narratives and stories and their temporal development as managers continually ascribe meaning to digital transformation. Our analysis indicates that an aspirational narrative or appealing vision in the
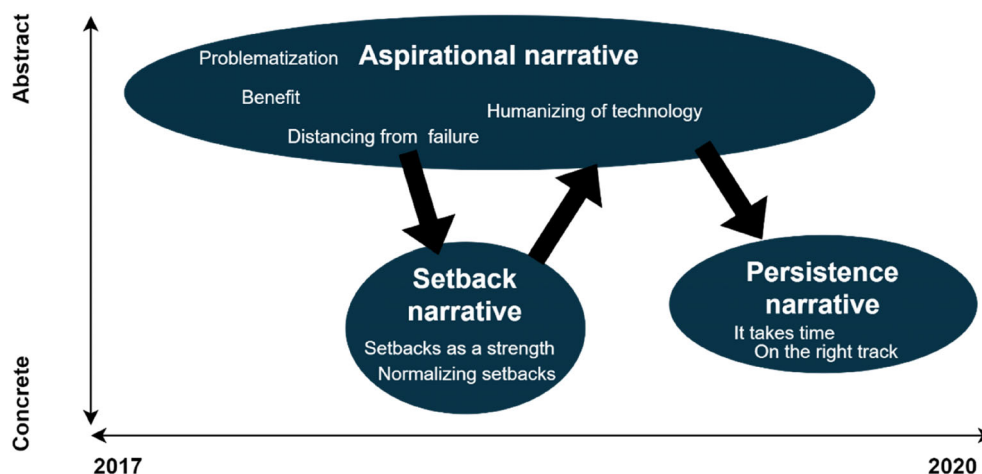

FIGURE 2 Empirical grounded model of narrative types and their temporal development in the process of leading digital transformation in the public sector.

early stages of a digital transformation process (Kotter, 1995) is not enough to create a unified direction and commitment among frontline workers over time. When fulfilling the expectations of workers is impossible, those expectations must be adjusted, and managers must continuously seek cues that can help them weave a sensible narrative plot. In our case, we observed this process unfold in the stories comprising the setback and persistence narratives. Hence, our narrative focus underscores the inevitable change of communication over time as managers tailor their communication to emerging concerns.

Our research reveals ways in which narratives—and their subordinate stories—represent a crucial part of public managers' communication practices as they lead a digital transformation initiative. This idea that narratives are integral to public leadership is not new (Orr & Bennett, 2017). Yet, despite the fact that narratives of hype, optimism, and skepticism are deeply entwined with digital transformation efforts (Anthony et al., 2023), narratives have been underexplored in the context of how public managers lead digital transformation. Our study therefore gives empirical credence to literature that stresses the key role of narratives in digital transformation and calls for deeper empirical and theoretical insights (Anthony et al., 2023; Flyverbom & Garsten, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Digital transformation is increasingly vital for public sector organizations, yet leading that transformation is fraught with challenges. By focusing on change communication as a critical dimension for leading digital transformation, we examined how public managers use narratives to ascribe meaning to digital transformation and how their narratives develop over time. Our effort was grounded in an in-depth qualitative study of a local government health care department's digital transformation initiative, and it contributes new insights into how public managers produce narratives, navigate existing ones, and tailor them to emerging concerns.

While case studies do not lend themselves to generalization, they can provide compelling examples (Flyvbjerg, 2006). We believe our findings are relevant to understanding change communication in other similar public sector contexts where strategic change initiatives are characterized by considerable management attention and disruptive talk. These contexts include broad areas, such as sustainability and climate change, and digital contexts such as machine learning and algorithms. Still, to assess narratives as a communication resource for public managers, we encourage additional empirical examination at different organizational sites and national contexts and with other digital technologies. While our study identified the three narrative types, other types may emerge in other settings to enrich, test, or refine our analysis.

Our research focused on top managers' narratives, and we invite future studies to address the role of middle managers. These managers are equally influential in how digital transformation ideas are turned into practice, and we expect their narratives to be important in ascribing meaning to and motivating others around digital transformation. We also encourage future research to further explore how management narratives are perceived and interact with sensemaking among frontline workers. It would be valuable to comprehensively examine this interaction in greater detail, providing a clearer understanding of when and how employees react. Particularly, while our study is limited to a qualitative research design, we invite scholars to use quantitative techniques to investigate further and test whether managers' abstract talk about digital transformation in general results in greater skepticism—with less social convergence—than concrete talk among frontline workers.

Finally, future research should investigate the potential downsides of digital transformation narratives. While we predominantly highlighted the performative actions of narratives here, narratives can also contain a manipulative side that risks seducing stakeholders into a failing course of action by overstating techno-optimism and hiding the negative impacts of digital transformation. Examples of such techno-optimism are vast, and policy organizations and management consultancies alike feed stories of fast-paced digital transformation in the public sector (Daub et al., 2020). In contrast, scholars stress that, while narratives and storytelling can mobilize support for emerging technologies, they also can obscure images of the future and lead actors astray (Bartel & Garud, 2009; Milne, 2020). As a result, when managers articulate overly optimistic narratives about the future, it can backfire and bring adverse effects. Scholars interested in narratives as a communication resource for managers may well find this a fruitful area of focus.

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