Exploring the leveraging potential of insider social change agents for the sustainability transformation of their organization

- Action research at the University of St Gallen -

In light of the growing sustainability pressures on society (e.g., social inequality) and the planet (e.g., climate and biodiversity crisis), this research project explores how insider social change agents within organizations can help their own organizations to understand, interpret, and respond to the systemic and complex nature of today's sustainability challenges and crises by transforming them. More specifically, this research aims at exploring pathways for leveraging the impact of the insider social change agents in the sustainability transformation of their own organization, to move beyond the small wins approach. A better understanding of this process and finding new ways to enhance the insider social change agents' impact would enrich both academic and practical knowledge. This exploratory research uses the action research methodology in the context of a higher education institution (HEI), the University of St Gallen, in Switzerland. Through an abductive process, the research project draws on both the sustainability transformation and the insider change agent literatures at large and in the context of HEIs, while running three core action projects in collaboration with insider social change agents at the university. This research project is rooted in real-world challenges with the goal to combine relevance, engagement, and rigor, in line with an impactful scholarship.

Keywords: insider social change agents; sustainability transformation; action research; higher education; engaged scholarship

Background & purpose of the research project

Our society and planet are currently facing, and will increasingly face in the future, a variety of socio-ecological challenges including climate change, pollution, resources shortage,

and social crises, among others (e.g., Raworth 2017; Rockström et al. 2023). In this context, both civil society and academia are urging organizations, including higher education institutions, to accelerate their sustainability transformation.

In academia, Girschik (2020) points out the rising pressures companies face in demonstrating their responsibility in addressing societal challenges, being either social or environmental. Indeed, organizations, as key entities in the human-made system, have an essential role to play in the collective effort to transition to a more sustainable future. As Gümüsay & Reinecke (2022) note, this transition involves questioning the present to find creative pathways to shape this more desirable future, a reflection for organizations to also engage in for their own transformation. A reflection for HEIs to undertake holistically through a whole institution and a third mission approach for their in-depth sustainability transformation (Leal Filho et al., 2019; Ramísio et al., 2019; Viera Trevisan et al., 2024). Contesting the status quo and creating new alternatives is what constitutes sustainability transformation according to O'Brien (2012). Usually better managed when done intentionally, it is a long-term and potentially gradual process made up of structural and cultural changes at multiple scales, which requires individual and/or collective capacities (Folke et al., 2010; O'Brien, 2012; O'Brien & Sygna, 2013).

Therefore, for Heucher et al. (2024), insider social change agents , as individuals who proactively create sustainability-related changes from within their organizations contributing to positive socio-ecological change, act as important actors in the sustainability transformation process of their own organization. The term insider social change agents encompass various terminologies used so far to describe those individuals in the literature such as insider activist (Carrington et al., 2019), social intrapreneur (Alt & Geradts, 2019), tempered radical (Meyerson & Scully, 1995) and institutional entrepreneur (Battilana et al., 2009). However, across this literature, the insider change agents are largely characterized by small

wins. The goal of this research project is to further explore and better understand the mechanisms through which these insider social change agents can move beyond small wins with the same existing resources and reach tipping points to create a broader impact, since it currently remains unclear (Heucher et al., 2024). Moving beyond small wins would potentially enable insider social change agents to accelerate the sustainability transformation of their own organization so they can contribute to regenerating ecological and social systems while navigating the complex interplay of climate, social inequality, and geopolitical instability. Thus, the following question: How can insider social change agents leverage their impact to further contribute to the sustainability transformation of their own organization?

To explore this question in depth, the research project focuses on the study of one specific organization, the University of St Gallen.

The methodological approach

This research project aims to explore this gap in the studies of the growing insider social change agents phenomenon using an action research methodology with a specific focus on one organization, the University of St Gallen.

This participatory research method is well-suited to investigating this topic. Indeed, action research is a good fit for research that is timely and relevant to practice, embedded in the present with a future orientation, and conducted in a co-creative knowledge process through different voices and action and reflection cycles (Coghlan, 2019). It is a suitable methodology for research that contributes to the transformation of our society in general as well as to the transformation of our organizations in order to ensure a sustainable future (Bradbury et al., 2019; Zandee & Coghlan, 2024).

This present research is composed of three core action projects, each following a different approach, but all consisting in contributing to fundamentally integrating sustainability

at the core of the University of St Gallen, in collaboration with insider social change agents at all levels, from the various schools and the administration. One is the co-development of an internal grassroot movement called Positive Impact Collaboration, which gathers all types of insider social change agents at the university. Another one is the creation of a cooperative inquiry group (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2006) composed of a few insider social change agents to go more in depth in the exploration through a couple of cycles over several months each. The goal is to collectively observe and identify how we create change and find ways we can each leverage the impact of our actions. The third takes an appreciative inquiry approach, through appreciative interviews, to go broader and engage in conversations with various internal stakeholders, especially in the leadership of the organization, less involved in the other two core projects. Across all the core action projects, participants are diverse in gender, age, department within the university, position, and role. As an insider action researcher, being a change agent at the university, I am one participant in the core action projects.

To conduct this research, the research project follows an abductive approach, which is consistent with the iterative action research project process in which the action cycle informs the research project and vice versa (Coghlan & Shani, 2021; Shani et al., 2019). Consequently, each core action project emerges from the insights of the previous one, as well as from literature. Each approach used in this project enables to instigate change in practice while generating data that informs the subsequent stages of the research project, both in practice and in the production of academic knowledge.

Future findings & expected contributions

The core action research projects are still in progress, with the appreciative interviews taking place in Spring 2026. The analysis of the other two projects is still undergoing.

Therefore, core findings are not yet available. Nevertheless, this research aims to contribute to both practice and academia.

In practice, the research process contributes to the development of the capabilities of the insider social change agents directly involved in the different core action projects, impacting their work, projects, network and, potentially the university's structures. As a result, the research process impacts the current and future sustainability transformation of the university.

Scholarly, this research project intends to make two academic contributions. First, it complements the ongoing conversation about insider social change agents moving the existing academic knowledge beyond small wins (Heucher et al., 2024; Schaltegger et al., 2024). Second, it contributes to the current discussion on the sustainability transformation of organizations, particularly of HEIs (Hoffman, 2020), and the role of insider change agents in the holistic transformation of these specific institutions (Lozano et al., 2013; Kapitulčinová et al., 2018) as well as to the sustainability transformation in general, HEIs being key organizations to prepare students to become agents of change socio-ecological challenged world (Viera Trevisan et al., 2024). It responds to the call to ask new questions and find bolder answers helping to develop strategies and act for sustainable transformation at the pace and scale required for humanity well-being (O'Brien, 2012).

In addition, following the growing impact-driven scholarship movement in academia, this research project intends to take part in bridging non-traditional approaches in management research, in this case action research, and more conventional standard research to produce rigorous, relevant, and transformative research. It aligns with the management research call for more impactful and rigorous research that provides answers to real-world problems and societal grand challenges (Gray, 2023; Gümüsay et al., 2022; Sharma & Bansal, 2020; Simsek et al., 2018).

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