

Change agency for circular economy as leadership practice motivations, practices and social networks

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Research question: Change agents are crucial for implementing and managing changes within organizations. They are individuals, or sometimes teams, who initiate, lead or take the responsibility of making change happen. While sustainability related changes are increasingly called for in business life, the change agency practices for such changes are still poorly understood. Circular economy is a systemic change aiming at prevention of depletion of natural resources. While it is often seen as a technical change, we claim that human agency is equally important facilitator for such a systematic change. Therefore, our study focuses on creating understanding on change agency practices for circular economy, and is especially interested in the art of motivating and inspiring others to act for circular economy.

Theoretical framework: Our study views change agency for circular economy as a leadership practice, and focuses on how, where and why change agency based leadership is practiced to promote circular economy. The research interests is characterized by focus on moral, emotional, and relational aspects, instead of rational, objective, and technical ones, according to leadership as practice school of thought.

Method: We interviewed 46 circular economy professionals in Finnish companies, operating in different industries. The companies were selected based on the list of leading circular economy companies in Finland, called Sitra100 list. In each firm, the person responsible for circular economy implementation was interviewed. The interviews are thematically analyzed.

Findings: This study advances the understanding of change agency for circular economy as leadership practice by introducing motivations, practices and social networks for such action. It shows that motivations are supported by moral and emotional aspects, by related positive experiences and sense of meaningfulness. Concerning practices it shows that most of the actions are experienced challenging, and require boldness, bravery and putting up with frustration when introducing novel solutions. It finally highlights different types of social networks as contexts for change agency practice.