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Bridging Moral Aspirations and the Mundane Reality: A Grounded Study of the Process of Radical Purpose Adaptation in a Business School

Luca Manelli[a], **Carlotta Benedetti**[b], **Josip Kotlar**[a] and **Federico Frattini**[a]

[a]*Politecnico di Milano;* [b]*Ca' Foscari University*

ABSTRACT In previous research, scholars have often highlighted the important role of leaders in defending and protecting a historical organizational purpose. However, adopting such a 'backward-looking' perspective, researchers have devoted much less attention to understanding how an organizational purpose can be deliberately changed and leveraged to justify novel moral commitments, thereby bridging the moral and the mundane. We theorize these activities as a process of radical purpose adaptation, whereby an established organization deliberately and radically changes its purpose to align with its commitment to society. We draw on a single, longitudinal case study of a business school as it engaged in the process of changing its organizational purpose. Adopting a social-symbolic work lens, we conceptualize purpose as a social-symbolic object and theorize purpose work, which captures leaders' efforts to establish new organizational aspirations. We find that proactive purpose work leads to the unintended emergence of self-reinforcing, competing demands that threaten the new purpose, which are tackled through reactive purpose work. Thus, a recursive process emerges in which proactive and reactive purpose work operate in tandem: proactive work generates novel aspirations and tensions, while reactive work contains and redirects them, enabling organizations to stabilize new commitments without abandoning their transformative intent.

Keywords: management education, organizational purpose, organizational repurposing, purpose work, social-symbolic work, unintended consequences

INTRODUCTION

Organizational purpose, defined as the reason for which an organization 'is created or exists, its meaning and direction' (Hollensbe et al., 2014, p. 1228),[1] is becoming an increasingly popular concept in management research, connecting traditional theories

Address for reprints: Luca Manelli, Department of Management, Economics and Industrial Engineering, Politecnico di Milano, Via Raffaele Lambruschini 4/b 20156, Milan, Italy (luca.manelli@polimi.it).

with the emerging conversation around organizations' societal commitments and driving changes toward more sustainable organizing (George et al., 2023). Although leaders' challenges in conveying and integrating an organization's purpose have been explored extensively in management and organization research (George et al., 2023; Selznick, 1957), scholars have assumed that organizational purpose develops in the early stages of the organizational lifecycle and is tied to the values and beliefs infused by founders (Chua et al., 2024; de Cuyper et al., 2020). Accordingly, most researchers have focused on how institutional leaders (Selznick, 1957) defend and embed an organization's existing purpose (Besharov and Khurana, 2015; Kraatz and Flores, 2015; Washington et al., 2008), thereby adopting a 'backward-looking', historically rooted perspective (Ocasio et al., 2023), or do so ineffectively, leading to drifts (Grimes et al., 2019; Ramus and Vaccaro, 2017; Selznick, 1949). To date, researchers have largely overlooked the possibility of a 'forward-looking' process whereby organizational purpose is deliberately and radically adapted to new societal challenges (Ocasio et al., 2023), as highlighted in a growing number of anecdotal accounts of firms such as Barry-Wehmiller (Town et al., 2024) or Mars Petcare (Gulati, 2022).

However, this process is problematic because it grafts new prosocial commitments justified by morals (George et al., 2023; Hollensbe et al., 2014). A new organizational purpose not only provides new conceptions of the 'collective desirable' for the organization (Rindova and Martins, 2023), but also prescribes new means–ends chains that are supposed to be aligned across the organization. A change in organizational purpose implies a change not only in goals but also in the meaning and content of organizational policies, thereby bridging 'the moral and the mundane' (Pratt and Hedden, 2023). Integrating moral commitments introduces several challenges. First, research on organizational values indicates that the 'mundane arrangements' (Kraatz et al., 2010) of existing processes and structures in organizations might prevent normative goals from being embedded and enacted due to the precariousness of values. Second, the credibility of an organizational purpose might differ between internal and external stakeholders. Whereas a backward-looking perspective on organizational purpose interprets it as the historical pattern of character-building commitments between an organization and its key stakeholders (Selznick, 1957), radically changing it could lead to severe cynicism and scepticism (Pratt and Hedden, 2023), even when intentions are good (MacKay and Chia, 2013). Third, organizational purpose is, by definition, an ambiguous and ideational claim, and connections between the collective desirable and mundane activities are not automatic but require active bridging (Carton, 2018) and efforts to infuse organizational activities with value. Overall, we do not know much about leaders' proactive efforts to radically change an existing organizational purpose in response to societal pressures – what we label 'radical purpose adaptation'.

We apply the social-symbolic work lens (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019) to theorize the work behind the process of radical purpose adaptation. Social-symbolic work refers to 'forms of work that involve individuals and organizations purposefully and strategically expending effort to affect their social-symbolic context' (Phillips and Lawrence, 2012, p. 233). While scholars have considered purpose as either a structural attribute of specific organizational forms (e.g., social enterprises) that integrate a social logic by design (Battilana et al., 2022;

Battilana and Dorado, 2010), or a cultural attribute present in organizations as a 'shared sense of meaningfulness' (Beer et al., 2022; Lepisto, 2022), the lens of social-symbolic work enables us to conceptualize organizational purpose as a social-symbolic object that is actively constructed by multiple actors. So, we uncover and theorize an overlooked form of social-symbolic work: 'purpose work'. The substantive introduction of a new organizational purpose implies changes in multiple domains beyond the social-symbolic object itself (i.e., 'second-order effects;' see Lawrence and Phillips, 2019) as evidence that the purpose has substantively changed. Finally, the social-symbolic work lens allows us to shed light on potential effects of radical purpose adaptation. Specifically, the problem of well-intentioned change might lead to unintended consequences – 'a critical part of studying social-symbolic work' (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019, p. 41). Thus, we ask: *How do organizations engage in purpose work to facilitate radical purpose adaptation?*

To investigate the process and implications of radical purpose adaptation, we develop a longitudinal, single case study of BetaSigma, a European business school. BetaSigma is a revelatory case (Yin, 2018) of an organization that engaged in a substantive purpose change process, introducing new policies and actions intended to be both more meaningful for employees and stakeholders, and more responsive to moral commitments to society. BetaSigma's leaders distanced the organization from its engineering legacy and increasingly integrated humanistic and prosocial practices that diverged from those of mainstream management education. Leveraging an insider-outsider approach and an in-depth analysis of multiple primary and secondary data sources, we unpack the mechanisms behind the purpose work performed by BetaSigma's leaders and stakeholders' responses.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

From Organizational Purpose to the Process of Radical Purpose Adaptation

In a world increasingly plagued by social, environmental and economic crises, the emerging societal discourse on organizational purpose – an organization's reason for being – seeks to transform organizations into responsible societal actors by pressuring them to embrace 'larger values that promote the well-being of society and individuals within and outside of business' (Hollensbe et al., 2014, p. 1228). Although purpose has been a central concept in management and organization studies (for a review, see George et al., 2023), management scholars have only recently begun to treat it as a standalone construct. Findings indicate that purpose emerges as part of an idiographic process that builds upon multiple factors, such as the mission and values of the founders and relationships that are built over time with stakeholders (George et al., 2023; Ocasio et al., 2023; Selznick, 1957).

In this stream of research, much attention has been given to the ability of leaders – particularly institutional leaders – to defend the value of historical organizational ends while ensuring organizational adaptation to the institutional environment (Washington et al., 2008). Research has suggested that leaders infuse purpose into organizational structures, processes and decisions, justifying decisions based on their normative value rather than technical demands. Furthermore, leaders' actions help connect employees' work to a meaningful aspiration (Carton, 2018), align organizational structures and processes (the 'means') to the purpose (George et al., 2023) and ensure stakeholder trust

and collaboration (Kaplan, 2023). Organizational purpose is seen as 'an end in itself' (Selznick, 1957), the 'collective desirable' (Rindova and Martins, 2023, p. 171) that an organization intentionally upholds (Morrison and Mota, 2023). It 'ingrains intrinsic values (such as honesty, integrity, fairness, and sustainability) into economic and managerial choices' (Durand, 2023, p. 154). Pratt and Hedden (2023) suggested that effectively conveying an organizational purpose is not about separating technical aspects from moral aspects, but 'about bridging the mundane (i.e., an organization's function) with the moral (i.e., an organization's value-laden intentions)' (p. 190). Yet, such moral aspects 'do not invariably enter into decisions and are often overridden by institutional forces of a different stripe' (Kraatz and Block, 2017, p. 551).

Most scholars have adopted a 'backward-looking' perspective, assuming that leaders have a duty to preserve the value of an organization's historical purpose, which is precarious. One assumption in extant literature is that founders influence the persistence of an organizational purpose, with an emphasis on imprinting effects (Selznick, 1957; Stinchcombe, 1965) of founders' values and practices (de Cuyper et al., 2020). Scholars have suggested that an organizational purpose is informed by the 'inspirational convictions and commitments of organizational leaders' (George et al., 2023, p. 1848) – although 'some imprinting events can create deviance from rather than reinforcement of values, which may dilute the intended purpose over time' (Muñoz et al., 2018, p. 152).

However, this stream of research is undergirded by different implicit assumptions. First, organizational purpose is generally considered either as a structural attribute of specific organizational forms (e.g., social enterprises) that integrate social logics by design (Battilana et al., 2022; Battilana and Dorado, 2010), or a cultural attribute, that is, a 'shared sense of meaningfulness' (Beer et al., 2022; Lepisto, 2022). This has led, respectively, to a focus on the multiplicity of institutional templates tied to different organizational forms (Battilana and Dorado, 2010) rather than investigating the inner dynamics of purpose, and to a lingering conflation of organizational purpose with work meaningfulness, which are separate constructs that operate at different levels of analysis. Second, there has been much attention to the oversized influence of founding imprints on the formulation and circulation of a historical organizational purpose, while much less attention has been given to 'more purely 'creative' forms of leadership that aim to forge new purposes in the here and now' (Ocasio et al., 2023, p. 126). Contemporary discourse is pressuring established organizations to change their purposes later in their lifecycles – a process that does not fit with the predominant assumption in previous research. As a result, much less attention has been given to how organizations incorporate societal commitments to stakeholders and the environment.

Within this line of theorizing, we argue that a process of deliberate purpose change, which seeks not only to change normative means and ends (i.e., the 'collective desirable'; Rindova and Martins, 2023) but also to adapt new ones to broader societal commitments, implies a process of moralization. This suggests that, at least within an organization, new prosocial ends are valuable and justified for their own intrinsic, normative value rather than their contributions to economic efficiency, and become internalized by organizational members (Kraatz et al., 2020). However, research suggests that this process of introducing new ends might not be easy, because values and morals might infringe upon existing goals, practices and structures, making them

precarious (Clark, 1956; Kraatz et al., 2010). The introduction of a new purpose might trigger changes in what Chua et al. (2024) called the 'embodied' perspective on purpose among stakeholders. Although researchers have spelled out leaders' actions to defend and uphold the integrity of an organization's existing moral commitments, which can be precarious due to drift (Grimes et al., 2019; Kraatz, 2009; Selznick, 1949, 1957), they have not yet theorized leaders' work to integrate new moral commitments by radically changing an organization's purpose.

Social-Symbolic Work and Organizational Purpose as a Social-Symbolic Object

In this paper, we leverage social-symbolic work (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019) to make sense of and theorize the process and effects of radical purpose adaptation. Social-symbolic work is defined as 'purposeful, reflexive efforts intended to shape or maintain social-symbolic objects in organizational life' (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019, p. 5). In turn, social-symbolic objects are 'combinations of discursive, relational, and material elements that constitute meaningful patterns in social systems' (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019, p. 5). This perspective integrates concepts such as emotion work (Hochschild, 1979), institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006) and values work (Gehman et al., 2013) under an overarching framework. In this paper, we conceptualize purpose as a social-symbolic object that is actively constructed by multiple actors, both internal and external to the organization, thereby introducing an overlooked form of social-symbolic work: 'purpose work'. Taking inspiration from Lawrence and Phillips (2019), we define purpose work as intentional, reflexive efforts to shape or maintain an organization's purpose.

This theoretical lens is particularly appropriate for investigating our research question for several reasons. First, it allows us to investigate how different forms of purpose interact with each other, and how they come to have intersubjective validity for multiple actors (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Martela, 2023; Morrison and Mota, 2023). This is important because scholars have conceived purpose as a static, core and enduring organizational feature that is tacitly embedded in the organizational structure and governance, and defended by institutional leaders (Kraatz, 2009; Selznick, 1957). Applying the lens of social-symbolic work allows us to shift attention to how purpose becomes a social-symbolic object in and of itself through actors' reflexive efforts. Radical purpose adaptation processes imply conscious efforts to create and shape an organizational purpose that is accepted and valid across stakeholders. Indeed, an organization's credibility as 'purpose-driven' derives from the credibility and authenticity of the accounts it disseminates (Scott and Lyman, 1965), and the extent to which actors connect such accounts to the organization's accountability (Pratt and Hedden, 2023; Suddaby et al., 2023). However, this is particularly complex and ambiguous in our context because a radically changed organizational purpose must be both meaningful to organizational members and aligned with societal discourse.

The process of radical purpose adaptation engages multiple internal and external actors with heterogeneous motives, generating diverse and often conflicting views about an organization's new purpose. This complexity extends beyond the traditional tension

between financial and social goals (Battilana et al., 2022) to include concerns about whether the adapted purpose is perceived as authentic (Suddaby et al., 2023) and meaningful (Jiang, 2021; Pratt and Hedden, 2023). The social-symbolic work lens offers critical insights by highlighting that purpose change processes involve multiple actors and produce varied outcomes. A common concern in the literature is the superficiality of purpose changes – mere symbolic gestures like statements without substantive integration – resulting in organizational decoupling (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Ocasio et al., 2023). Such superficiality is exacerbated by entrenched coalitions and structures resisting change, causing partial or fragmented adoption of a new purpose (Kimsey et al., 2023; Selznick, 1957). Distrust among stakeholders and disconnection between stated aims and daily work may lead to cynicism and disillusionment (Pratt and Hedden, 2023). However, scholars often treat these issues as failures of symbolic change. Social-symbolic work also directs attention to the multiple, sometimes unintended outcomes of radical purpose adaptation (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019; Pradies et al., 2021). Shifting the focus from antecedents to purpose dynamics beyond concerns of authenticity and 'purpose washing' (Kimsey et al., 2023) can deepen understanding of how radical purpose adaptation unfolds.

METHODOLOGY

Research Context

To develop theory on how organizations radically adapt their purposes, we draw on a longitudinal single case study of a European business school, BetaSigma. We chose this research context for several reasons. First, it is a rare organizational context where the constitutive elements of the process of purpose embedding are visible (Yin, 2018). In early 2020, BetaSigma undertook a process of strategic change was initiated by the newly designated dean and chairman. This process focused on the explicit objective of carrying out a radical 'purpose-full' or 'purpose-centric' organizational transformation of BetaSigma. The organizational change at BetaSigma was planned and deliberate (Stouten et al., 2018), as it was driven by upper echelon leaders with a clear vision for the organization's future state. Overall, we chose BetaSigma as our research context not only due to the potential to develop a rich account of a radical purpose adaptation process, but also because the process was intentionally substantive, as it entailed radical changes in different organizational domains and significant resource commitments to ensure the effectiveness of the change process.

Data Collection

Our data collection took place between 2020 and 2023, drawing on rich and diverse qualitative data collected from both real-time and retrospective sources, allowing us to capture the evolution and enactment of BetaSigma's purpose-driven transformation from multiple perspectives. We conducted 44 in-depth semi-structured interviews with BetaSigma staff, faculty and stakeholders to understand how the new purpose was perceived, interpreted and enacted both internally and externally. In parallel, we analysed archival materials (i.e.,

internal documents, public communications, media coverage and stakeholder engagement reports) to trace the historical development of the organization and examine how the purpose transformation was framed and communicated. We also compiled reflective diaries maintained by two insider co-authors and carried out participatory observation in purpose-centred training programmes, providing experiential insights into the change process.

We pursued a two-pronged data collection strategy. First, we 'zoomed out' to obtain a richer understanding of BetaSigma's historical evolution (Pettigrew, 1990). To do so, we traced the organization's history since its founding, highlighting salient events such as changes in governance and the evolution of its mission and vision statements. We triangulated evidence pertaining to the historical growth of the business school, analysing turnover, headcount and the number of courses offered. In this way, we could make sense of the extent to which BetaSigma gained traction while providing hard evidence about the 'growing pains' associated with scaling and professionalizing a business school. Then, we 'zoomed in', focusing on the beginning of the organizational change itself. We developed a timeline of key decisions that unfolded since the beginning of 2020, including strategies implemented by BetaSigma's new dean and activities and events organized by the school to demonstrate its commitment to the new purpose. The timeline of events is presented in Figure 1.

We adopted an insider-outsider approach (Bartunek and Louis, 1996; Gioia et al., 2010), which can be generative in qualitative research, as the richness of insiders' understanding can be complemented by the more objective perspective of outsiders who have not been socialized into a specific culture (Geertz, 1973). To minimize bias and concerns about trustworthiness, we clearly bounded the role of the two insiders. The first two authors, who were not affiliated with the organization, conducted the interviews with BetaSigma members and stakeholders and analysed the data, while the two insider authors provided feedback on the interpretation of the codes, playing the 'devil's advocate' role. The two insider authors also documented key decisions and discussions during meetings and events at BetaSigma from 2020 to 2022 and reflected on how they experienced the unfolding of the strategic change.

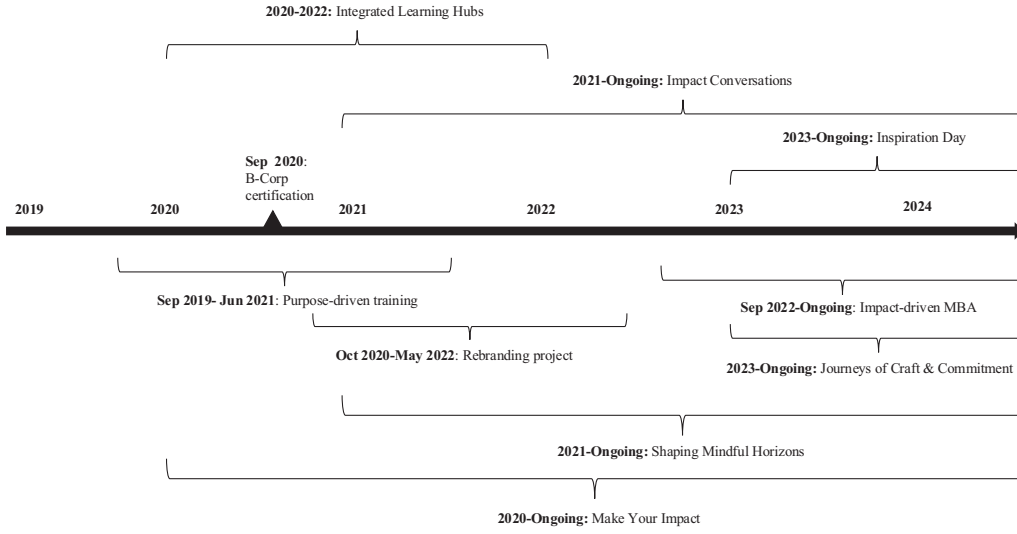

Figure 1. Timeline of events

Although the two outsider authors did not explicitly analyse these diaries, they discussed them with the insider authors as exercises of reflexivity on the change process.

To understand how organizational members construct the meaning of organizational purpose as a social-symbolic object, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews which served as the main source of data. We chose our initial informants from a list of stakeholders and expanded our pool via snowball sampling. We performed 18 interviews with BetaSigma staff members, 14 interviews with BetaSigma faculty members, and 12 interviews with other stakeholders. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2.5 hours, were conducted solely by the two outsider authors, and were transcribed verbatim. We collected data as the process was unfolding, allowing us to capture real-time insights into the evolving strategic change. The outsider authors created memos to capture emerging ideas and linkages between concepts that could inform a theoretical explanation of the different dimensions of the strategic change process. They discussed these memos within 24 hours of the interviews as a reflexive debrief. The template of the interview protocol is presented in Appendix A.

Another important source of data was the documents that summarized the techniques and the jargon used by the consultants hired to facilitate the cultural change at BetaSigma. These documents uncovered the institutional and self-policing nature of the discourse around organization, culture and self that was introduced in the strategic change process (Goodrick et al., 2020). As a complement to the interviews, both authors carried out participant observations, which were extremely useful for understanding how consultants carried out their activities. In the BetaSigma strategic change process, the consulting company AlphaGamma played a pivotal role in shaping members' beliefs about the organization. Consultants engaged in extensive training sessions with top managers, middle managers and staff, and used psychological techniques to reconnect individuals with their own purposes. AlphaGamma's interventions are listed in Appendix B in the supplemental material. Interviews and participant observations were the main sources of data around these techniques, whose importance within the organizational change process was confirmed multiple times by informants across all levels. Finally, we gathered archival materials, that is, external and internal communications about BetaSigma's transformation. Table I summarizes the type and the analytical function of the data we collected.

Data Analysis

Adhering to the principle of constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), we collected and analysed our data simultaneously (Suddaby, 2006). After developing the event timeline, we analysed the interview data by developing tentative codes reflecting informants' experiences or applying in-vivo codes. The first and second authors coded the data independently to overcome potential biases associated with relying on the interpretation of one person. Disagreements between the two authors about codes were resolved by discussion. The third and fourth authors periodically met with the other two authors to discuss the codes, questioning the emergent theoretical linkages and probing new explanations of the phenomena at hand. During these meetings and throughout the research process, the outsider authors did not disclose informants' identities to the insider authors.

Table I. Summary of collected evidence

Type of data	*Amount*	*Use in the analysis*
Semi-structured interviews	44 interviews (total)	
BetaSigma organizational members (staff members, line managers, top management team)	18 interviews	Provide in-depth, firsthand insights into the operationalization of the business school's initiatives, revealing how purpose-driven changes were perceived and enacted at the organization level
BetaSigma faculty	14 interviews	
BetaSigma stakeholders (reviewers from accreditation bodies, journalists, shareholders)	12 interviews	Capture diverse external perspectives, providing in-depth insights into the interpretations, experiences, and responses to the organization's purpose-driven transformation
Archival data	771 pages (total)	
Internal documents (faculty meeting minutes, strategic plans, sustainability plans, teaching materials, internal memos, project presentations, financial statements, and budgets)	413 pages	Understand the organization's long-term goals and commitments, explore how purpose is integrated into educational practices, assess communication and initiative implementation, analyse resource allocation and the prioritization of strategic objectives
Publicly available documents (press releases and public announcements, programme and course catalogues)	187 pages	Examine how the organization communicates its strategic direction, purpose-driven initiatives, and alignment with external expectations, providing a foundational understanding of its public identity and evolving narrative
Media documents (article and opinion pieces, public speeches and interviews, social media posts)	92 pages	Capture external perceptions, public narratives, and discourses about the organization's purpose and strategies, offering insights into how the organization is portrayed in the public sphere and how it engages with stakeholders
Stakeholder engagement documents (newsletter targeting alumni and stakeholders, external audit reports, accreditation reviews)	79 pages	Provide insights into the organization's external relationships, perceptions of its purpose and impact, and alignment with external expectations and standards
Diaries		
Two of the four co-authors systematically recorded personal reflections, observations, and experiences over time	68 pages	Provide a rich, firsthand account of individual experiences and reflections, allowing for an in-depth examination of personal perspectives and emotional responses to organizational changes, which complement other data sources by offering a more intimate view of the transformation process

(Continues)

Table I. (Continued)

Type of data	*Amount*	*Use in the analysis*
Participant observations		
Two of the four co-authors participated in a training programme on purpose in collaboration with AlphaGamma, a consulting firm	48 hours	Provide experiential insights into the organizational transformation, allowing for a deeper understanding of the practices and perceptions surrounding the implementation of the new purpose framework

The social-symbolic work perspective supported our data analysis because it can be broadly and flexibly applied to theoretically explain how actors make sense of their socially constructed organizational reality and engage in social-symbolic actions to maintain or shape it. The social-symbolic work perspective also provided an overarching framework to explain how organizational purpose might be proactively constructed by organizational members. This lens aligned well with our case, as actors' deliberate actions triggered BetaSigma's stronger commitment to activities aimed at societal change, such as offering courses based on a humanistic vision of the purpose of management education.

Therefore, we engaged in a new round of coding focused on leaders' actions aimed at developing a new organizational purpose. With help from the change management consultants, we mapped all their interventions to generate a shared understanding of the new organizational purpose. Examples of these interventions include co-creation workshops about BetaSigma's new core values, workshops on how to be mindful of one's motivational state, and training sessions for the top management team about how to integrate their commitment to the newly defined organizational purpose into strategic decisions. These heterogeneous interventions selectively targeted specific segments of BetaSigma's workforce across the organizational hierarchy. We coded leaders' and management consultants' intentional actions to shape organizational purpose as 'purpose work', a new social-symbolic object within and outside the organization. In coherence with our conceptualization of organizational purpose, which connects internal and external dimensions, we coded specifically for purpose work geared toward internal versus external stakeholders, unearthing qualitative differences between the two in terms of content and objectives of the work. Finally, we engaged in another round of coding focused on how employees experienced the strategic change process.

We found that the change in the purpose was neither smooth nor widely accepted by organizational members, as posited in previous studies (Lepisto, 2022), but was riddled with tensions indicating 'precariousness', that is, a lack of stability and consensus in how the new purpose was perceived by different categories of organizational stakeholders. Questioning whether the organizational purpose was settled (Pratt and Hedden, 2023), we coded the tensions experienced by employees as they sought to understand the meaning of the new organizational purpose. For instance, we distinguished between

'purpose-embedded precariousness' and 'purpose-embodied precariousness' which refer to different types of resistance to the process of purpose adaptation. Ultimately, we adopted a mechanism-based approach to theorize social-symbolic work and explain why and how the process unfolded, unearthing unintended consequences and actors' reactive purpose work to curb them.

FINDINGS

At the beginning of 2020, the newly appointed dean and chairman of BetaSigma, a business school with a traditional engineering focus, decided to engage in a radical, purpose-centred organizational transformation, a process that lasted until mid-2023. The school's initial purpose was, in many ways, only an implicit agreement rather than a clearly articulated vision. BetaSigma used to operate as a conventional business school, adopting widely accepted industry standards focused on academic rigour and market-oriented skill development. 'We were educating managers who could deliver efficiency and profitability. The focus was on improving relevant skills, while adhering to international content and quality standards', recalled the associate dean for master's degree programmes. 'But as societal challenges escalated, from climate change to social inequality, it became increasingly clear that we weren't equipped to address these broader issues'.

Reflecting on the school's history, leaders recognized that its initial purpose was framed by an engineering mindset focused on technical excellence and economic performance, and that transformative societal challenges were only marginally addressed. A student's feedback caught the attention of the leadership team:

> My experience at BetaSigma was excellent overall—I gained strong technical skills and solid business foundations. However, looking back, I am aware that topics such as sustainability and societal impact were treated as an afterthought, and most of the professors didn't seem equipped to guide us through these complex issues.

To address these concerns, leaders decided to engage in a process of radical purpose adaptation. We present our findings by detailing how BetaSigma navigated the process through distinct forms of purpose work that unfolded over time.

The Process of Radical Purpose Adaptation

BetaSigma's purpose-centric transformation was initiated with what we label *purpose theorization work*, whereby leaders explicitly articulated the organizational purpose as a social-symbolic object, making it central to conversations, official texts and decision-making processes. The theorization of a new organizational purpose was operationalized through a new type of work – namely, *purpose integration work* – translating leaders' reflections into purpose-driven initiatives that redefined BetaSigma's strategic direction. This process of purpose change created new ends and means for the organization. However, external stakeholders responded with cynicism, generating pressure to re-establish prior goals and comply with normative expectations in the field. Although leaders intended to

completely restructure BetaSigma to reflect its new purpose and moral commitment to positive change, stakeholders' cynical responses impeded organizational members' ability to bridge idealized moral aspirations with more pragmatic organizational activities (*purpose precariousness*).

To resolve such tensions, leaders engaged in two complementary forms of reactive purpose work. First, leaders engaged in *stabilizing purpose work* aimed at curbing *purpose-embodying precariousness* by *aligning systems and structures with the new purpose* and *framing the purpose as flexible*, rather than a top-down, mandated ideology. Second, leaders engaged in *enrolling purpose work* aimed at curbing *purpose-embedding precariousness* introduced by stakeholders' cynicism. Through this outward-directed form of purpose work, leaders sought to increase the credibility of BetaSigma's new value-laden commitment to sustainability and positive change by *aligning organizational commitments with societal commitments* and *spearheading field-reconfiguring initiatives* aimed at rethinking the purpose of management education. This form of work helped persuade cynical audiences that the integration of the new organizational purpose was legitimate, supporting the stabilization of the new purpose. Figure 2 presents our emerging framework. We provide additional selected quotations supporting our interpretations in Table II.

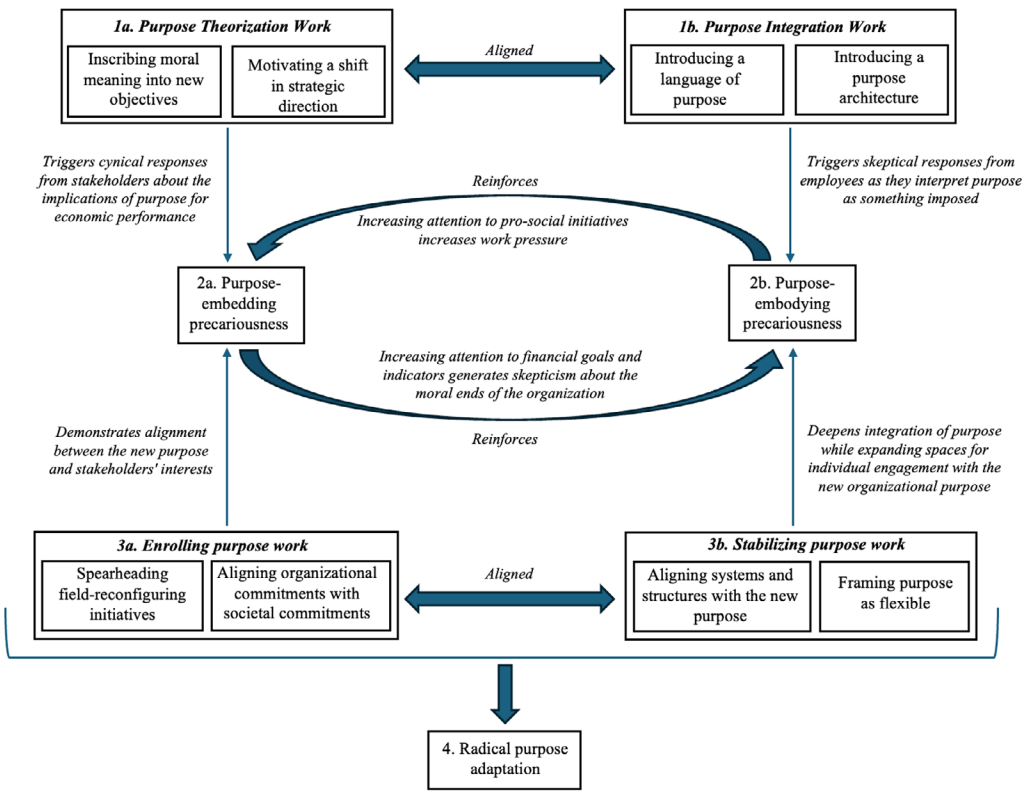

Figure 2. A process model of radical purpose adaptation

Table II. Selected evidence

Aggregate dimension	*Theoretical dimension*	*Selected evidence*
Purpose theorization work	Inscribing moral meanings into new objectives	'Our school has been doing a few stakeholder engagement activities in the past years, but they were side projects. Now such activities have a different reason for being'. (Head of human resources)
		'I feel like the school has now a moral duty to actively shape the future, the one we would like to see … Before the change in 2020 this was not clear or evident to anybody'. (Member of administrative staff)
		'We now feel we have a responsibility as a school: to use the power of management education to transform the world for better. Everyone in the school is now encouraged by our leadership team to identify any action and project, of any kind, that can contribute to this purpose. We judged what is good and what is not for our school from this perspective now'. (Head of marketing and communication)
	Motivating a shift in strategic direction	'We sat in early 2020 and we realized we needed to create and communicate a statement to represent our vision'. (Chairman)
		'The new purpose statement not only had to articulate a radically different vision about the school, but also introducing the concept of 'purpose' to the people of the school … Something higher that goes beyond maximizing the value we create for our shareholders'. (Associate dean)
		'We needed a purpose statement to convey in a synthetic way the countless conversations we have had around the responsibility and ambition of our School. It was created through a discursive process that engaged the many stakeholders of the school until we reached a statement that represented what we stand for at its best'. (Associate dean)
Purpose integration work	Introducing a language of purpose	'With this approach of openness, in my opinion, a greater glue has been created among colleagues but, above all, we have been provided with tools to be able to reflect and face our everyday life'. (Member of administrative staff)
		'The school has invested in giving everyone the tools to be able to fully experience what is the new organizational culture'. (Head of communication and marketing)
		'So I have used the mind talk and the falsification technique (concepts learned during the workshops) in several situations'. (Member of administrative staff)
	Introducing a purpose architecture	'We are also developing a new MBA for 2022. This represents a new generation of MBA with purpose as the core theme'. (Dean)
		'This is epitomized by the school's own recent re-branding initiative. Previously known as AlphaBeta, a business school embedded in one of Europe's most prestigious technical universities, has recently changed its image and name to BetaSigma. The rebranding stems from the desire to accelerate the school's new direction'. (Magazine article)

(Continues)

Table II. (Continued)

Aggregate dimension	*Theoretical dimension*	*Selected evidence*
Purpose precariousness	Purpose-embedding precariousness	'In people it remains "They changed a logo, they changed a name"; however, behind it they don't understand—or at any rate they don't care about the change of the brand personality, therefore, and its identity'. (Project manager)
		'Recently we are proposing the concept of human capabilities (or humans for business) that is perceived externally in a way that is controversial with respect to the vision or at least the perception of BetaSigma as a business school'. (Executive director of corporate education)
		'So, at first it was difficult just to have the impression that we were speaking the same language, that we were going in the same direction, perhaps because we were going at two different speeds, with two different levels of involvement'. (External marketing consultant)
	Purpose-embodying precariousness	'In my opinion, there is a mechanism in this transformation, which is the following: often pursuing a high goal, unrelated to technical performance, exposes you to the risk of non-authenticity' (Dean)
		'Let's say that there is sometimes a bit of a disconnect from what are the promoted values and how they are reflected in day-to-day operations' (Member of administrative staff)
		'So, if we are all humble professionals, if we all really believe in what the values of the school are, we should at least help each other, for instance by saying "This stuff here is my responsibility, so I'll help you, I'll relieve you." That doesn't happen'. (Member of administrative staff)
		'I have realized that sometimes it is easier to make a decision in the traditional way and then try to dress it up with the new purpose'. (Director of human resources)
Stabilizing purpose work	Aligning systems and structures with the new purpose	'The idea of accountability, on the other hand, was another very important innovation. Connected with this idea is the project to revise the performance management system, which is normally associated with financial recognition in terms of bonuses. On this topic, a new project has been launched to redefine the performance appraisal system, trying to bring it as close as possible to the newly introduced values'. (Staff Member)
		'So, it is a very serious realignment process'. (Faculty Member)
		'The intersection between innovation and business is clearly one that greatly shapes the MBA experience at BetaSigma. That's why we decided to realign the purpose, values and culture of BetaSigma itself. This included redesigning our full-time MBA—our flagship program' (Magazine Article, Interview with BetaSigma's Dean)

(Continues)

Table II. (Continued)

Aggregate dimension	*Theoretical dimension*	*Selected evidence*
	Framing the purpose as flexible	'Over time my perception of transformation has changed a lot, in the sense that I have been able to find my own interpretation of what I am experiencing. That is to say, "No it's not an imposition." It's not a "You must!" You will do it when you feel like it, when you want to, in the way, in the interpretation that most suits you'. (Associate Dean)
		'Purpose cannot become a cage, otherwise it creates groupthink, and implicitly erodes the humanity that we want to bring into this organization. We have given our staff members some tools to enact BetaSigma's purpose, but then it is up to them to choose when and how you enact it'. (Associate Dean)
		'A message of greater resourcefulness came through my two managers, and this is a message that I also took on board very willingly. We were given more room to propose new ideas, propose new solutions, and even in situations that might have been rather standard situations I perceived a strong appreciation from our managers when a solution was brought to the table'. (Staff Member)
Enrolling purpose work	Aligning organizational commitments with societal commitments	'Our goal is to become a sustainable and credible organization in promoting transformation and leading by example (for instance, through our B Corp Certification gained in 2020, the preparation and publication of our Sustainability Plan by mid-2022, and the transformation of our school into a benefit corporation in the next months)'. (Strategic Report)
		'BetaSigma intends to use its status as a Certified B Corporation to accelerate as a sustainable organization, enhancing educational methods and training programs on the topics of purpose, sustainability and inclusivity, while continuing to work with companies to achieve the same goals'. (Magazine Article, Interview with BetaSigma's dean)
		'It is a long path that has just begun, which has many ramifications, and that has led us from the 7 most important SDGs to making 28 concrete commitments because only through measurements—with an independent monitoring mechanism—can we assess our actions and progress, and verify our achievements'. (Sustainability Report)
	Spearheading field-reconfiguring initiatives	'Ranking-free, purpose-full'. (Chairman)
		'It is highly remarkable that BetaSigma, inspired by its own purpose, has promoted initiatives that have very little to do with its positioning on the market, but are truly inspired by the commitment to trigger a systemic change in the landscape of management education'. (Dean of another business school)

(Continues)

Table II. (Continued)

Aggregate dimension	*Theoretical dimension*	*Selected evidence*
		'Most business schools are concerned with their communication and brand building initiatives. When I speak and interact with the leadership of BetaSigma, I perceive a genuine effort to bring onboard of this process of change other schools with the only purpose of generating a bigger impact on management education and how leaders are educated'. (Journalist expert in management education)

Purpose Theorization Work

Motivating the shift in strategic direction. The realization that the existing purpose was inadequate set the stage for a radical transformation. During a pivotal leadership retreat, guided by external facilitators, the top management team articulated a new purpose statement: to empower leaders who could drive sustainable innovation and social impact. 'It wasn't just about writing a new purpose statement', emphasized the associate dean for students and alumni services. 'We had to confront the inertia characterizing the past years and convince the community that this shift wasn't just cosmetic – it was existential'. Following this credo, the business school introduced a new set of initiatives and ways of working to help organizational members and other stakeholders increase their attention and active engagement toward addressing social and environmental global challenges.

In February 2020, BetaSigma's leaders reflected on several issues. First, there was increasing dissatisfaction with the school's market positioning, which was seen as standard and uninspiring. The marketing director explained: 'It felt like we were just another business school in the crowd – solid, yes, but not unique. There was nothing that made us stand out or spoke to a deeper mission'. Second, weak signals from some stakeholders underscored that traditional business education frameworks were failing to prepare leaders for today's interconnected challenges. 'One alumnus said to me, 'Your curriculum taught me to optimize profits but left me ill-equipped to navigate ethical dilemmas or think systemically' (Associate dean for sustainability and impact). These challenges catalysed a deeper inquiry into the implicit assumptions underpinning the school's original purpose.

The turning point came with the appointment of a new dean, whose energy and conviction reshaped the strategic conversation. 'When I joined BetaSigma as the dean, it felt like the school was a well-oiled machine—but lacked a real soul' (Dean, leadership workshop). The leadership team shared the dean's urgency and engaged in a series of workshops designed to critically interrogate the school's foundational beliefs and identify the gaps in its mission. The executive director of marketing retrospectively reflected: 'Those sessions were intense. For the first time, we were asking ourselves why we existed beyond ranking tables and corporate partnerships. It was uncomfortable but necessary'.

Inscribing moral meaning into new objectives. BetaSigma's leadership team developed a strategic plan formulated around the new organizational purpose, articulating new organizational commitments to sustainability and positive social change. This plan was outlined in

Table III. Strategic plan elements

Strategic plan element	*Definition*
Our purpose	We are committed to inspiring and collaborating with changemakers to build a better future for everyone
Our ambition	We aim to become globally recognized as a leading institution in innovation and in fostering a more responsible and sustainable society
Our values	We are committed to innovative thinking We act with humility and professionalism We value respectful and collaborative relationships
Our strategic priorities	• Motivating • Building partnerships • Fostering innovation • Contributing to build a better future

a document summarizing the four main strategic pillars: *purpose, ambition, values and strategic priorities* (see Table III). Such commitments were intentionally incorporated into business school's strategic agenda to align these new strategic priorities with the moral commitments that the dean envisioned for the school. He explained:

> The path we have taken is not limited to a new logo and visual identity, but goes further, bringing with it a repositioning. BetaSigma wants to be recognized as one of the most innovative business schools, dedicated to its commitment to building a more equitable, inclusive and mindful society.

In sum, leaders engaged in purpose theorization work to integrate purpose as a social-symbolic object into organizational discourses. In doing so, they introduced purpose as an abstract category that justified the shift in the school's strategic direction, as well as the infusion of moral value into its new strategic priorities and objectives.

Purpose Integration Work

The theorization of a new organizational purpose was operationalized through initiatives aimed at changing discursive and behavioural patterns to align them with the new purpose. Two overarching mechanisms were critical to this purpose integration work. By *introducing a language of purpose*, leaders sought to replace the school's previous rhetoric with a new vocabulary that emphasized values, ethics and societal impact. In turn, organizational members could internalize and communicate the new purpose. By *establishing a purpose architecture*, leaders sought to create structural and strategic frameworks to embed the purpose within organizational practices. This purpose architecture served as a blueprint for aligning decisions, initiatives and interactions both internally and externally.

Introducing a language of purpose. To integrate the new purpose into BetaSigma's activities, leaders began by *introducing a language of purpose*, that is, expressing a coherent set of

organizational words and meanings aligned with the new purpose. This process not only helped organizational members detach from previous organizational language but also supported their ability to reframe their tasks within the frame of the new purpose-centric organization. This work ensured that both existing and new organizational members could articulate expressions and understand their roles and activities through the lens of purpose.

To facilitate this work, an independent consulting firm known for its cognitive-behavioural psychological approach was hired to help BetaSigma members internalize and operationalize purpose-driven behaviours in their daily work (Bartunek and Moch, 1987) while encouraging the adoption of new words. A BetaSigma staff member explained: 'A great deal of effort went into clarifying the new values. During the workshop, the values underlying the new vision were clearly articulated, values that I personally resonate with, such as "being committed to innovative thinking," "acting with humility and professionalism," and "valuing respectful and collaborative relationships."' The consulting firm also implemented a 2-year programme comprising workshops, ad-hoc conversations and one-on-one coaching with BetaSigma's organizational members. The temporal progression of such initiatives is shown in the supplemental material.

These workshops were extended to several staff members, functional managers in the business school and a few faculty members. AlphaGamma introduced specific frameworks and concepts to help generate a 'language of purpose' described by one of the consultants as the 'set of practices and tools to help organizational members rise up to the challenge of transforming BetaSigma in a purposeful, high-performance organization'. One of these practices, the falsification technique, was highlighted by several informants:

> I use this technique during the selection interviews, and I see that it works very well and helps us communicate a feeling of caring towards our students. I think this is a small tool that nevertheless communicates an important value. (Staff member)

The consistent communication style established within BetaSigma supported the development of widely shared intentions and beliefs which guided the behaviour of all organizational members, enabling the purpose to be realized:

> Through the workshops, we acquired the tools that enable us to frame specific dynamics, the instruments for our understanding, which helped us improve our approach at a collaborative level. These instruments were in my opinion the keys for reading the macro-objectives of purpose. (Faculty member)

Establishing a purpose architecture. The process of integrating a new purpose at BetaSigma extended beyond internal alignment to encompass strategic initiatives aimed at bridging the internal and external dimensions of the organization. This involved *establishing a new organizational architecture* that redefined how the business school would communicate its purpose and engage with stakeholders. Central to this work was the deliberate reframing

of BetaSigma's brand identity and educational offerings to reinforce the new purpose. Even more emblematically, the business school decided to open new campuses in different locations to create a series of hubs connected through digital platforms.

To initiate this process, BetaSigma implemented a rebranding strategy to align marketing efforts with the new purpose. Together with a marketing consultancy, BetaSigma developed a cohesive narrative that embedded the new purpose into tangible and experiential dimensions, thereby radically repositioning its brand identity. During this process, BetaSigma realized that even its historical name no longer reflected its current identity. As highlighted by the final report compiled by the marketing agency: 'The new brand expression and experience will bring BetaSigma's purpose and vision to life, shifting audience's perceptions and behaviors, being explanatory of BetaSigma's principles without them being stated'.

BetaSigma also reframed its core business, management education. Interestingly, the business school redesigned its primary offering, the full-time MBA, by introducing the idea of purpose as one of the main educational pillars, advertising that the programme would 'equip students with the ability to work consciously with purpose and with their inner domain and to make this the foundation of their approach to managing organizations, from strategy making to operational deployment' (MBA brochure). Distancing BetaSigma from the school's engineering heritage, leaders also enriched educational offerings by introducing new thematic areas inspired by humanistic disciplines. By drawing students closer to these disciplines, BetaSigma aimed to broaden the traditional focus on managerial skills and competencies to promote greater awareness of the values guiding their future actions:

> We have decided to bring the human aspect to the center of our MBA program. Under the belief that only by growing our students as conscious managers we can prepare a new generation of leaders who will lead the much-needed transformation on which the sustainability and survival of our planet, society and economic system will depend. (Dean)

Leaders also established new campuses, which they described as reflecting 'the conversion of our purpose, our values and our culture into a physical space'. This initiative aimed to align with spatial embedding, as it integrated the school into geographically diverse contexts. The campuses themselves were thoughtfully designed to reflect BetaSigma's purpose, as every floor was named after one of BetaSigma's founding values. The ground floor, 'ACT', reinforced the school's commitment to action and concrete projects, embodying the ethos of 'getting one's hands dirty'. The first floor, 'BRIDGE', offered spaces that encouraged interaction and collaboration, reinforcing the importance of relationships. The second floor, 'INSPIRE', reinforced innovation and change for a better future. These campuses, designed as interconnected hubs, also were intended to foster relational alignment, facilitating stronger partnerships with companies and students. Through them, BetaSigma operationalized its purpose in the executive and corporate educational market, creating spaces for education that also embodied its values.

Purpose Precariousness

In making sense of our case study, we encountered several unexpected tensions arising from the responses of multiple stakeholder groups. Such tensions fundamentally emerged from divergent understandings of the implications of BetaSigma's new purpose. Internal and external stakeholders' cynical and sceptical responses led to the purpose becoming more precarious as a social-symbolic object. However, we also identified that such precariousness unfolded in two different ways. *Purpose-embedding precariousness* emerged from stakeholders' concerns about the potential negative impact of purpose-driven objectives and initiatives on BetaSigma's competitiveness, ranking and financial performance. *Purpose-embodying precariousness* related to employees' struggles to perceive a meaningful connection between the new purpose and their day-to-day work, as well as the ambiguity surrounding whether the purpose was truly integrated into the organization.

Purpose-embedding precariousness. BetaSigma's new educational offerings and market positioning, which focused on a humanistic approach to management education, generated several clashes. Some students failed to see the relevance of BetaSigma's new approach: 'We make a big investment to study in this business school to acquire skills to further our careers, also from a salary perspective. Purpose is nice but not relevant to this goal'. Such considerations aligned with pressure for BetaSigma to maintain its competitive ranking as a business school. A member of BetaSigma's rankings committee claimed:

> Post-MBA student salary is one of the most important criteria for our ranking position, we cannot give it up for making philanthropy. If our MBA courses are not aligned with this, then this is a problem that will hurt our short-term and long-term performance.

Some shareholders also expressed scepticism about the school's new strategic direction, highlighting potential adverse consequences. When the school's new strategic plan was presented at a board meeting, a director highlighted potential risks:

> By focusing on its new purpose, BetaSigma would risk damaging its positioning as a school focused on technology and innovation, which has been for decades the reason why students have chosen it. This could eventually turn into a loss of enrollments and revenues. We need to be very cautious about this.

Similarly, during a meeting of the International Advisory Board, the CEO of a large multinational company remarked:

> Changing the purpose of the school could result in a loss of attractiveness of BetaSigma for international students who are mostly interested in career progression and salary growth, as parameters on which they base their choice of a business school.

He emphasized:

> the risk that this loss of attractiveness would damage, in the short-term, the economic performance of the school, which would make it even more difficult—in a sort of vicious cycle—to establish, communicate and embody the new purpose, with the complex and costly investments that this would require.

Purpose-embodying precariousness. A nuanced examination of the data also revealed tensions that surfaced as organizational members struggled to bridge mundane structures and tasks with the moral, aspirational implications of BetaSigma's new purpose. Stakeholders' cynical responses to the new purpose, coupled with normative pressures associated with business school rankings, created increased pressure to perform well against classic indicators, such as salaries of graduates, and student career progression. This led organizational leaders to attempt to balance performance on classic indicators with performance on stakeholder-oriented, non-profit initiatives. As the dean of BetaSigma stated during an executive committee meeting in the second half of 2020:

> We need to be brutally realistic and understand that, to make room for costly initiatives that are needed to establish our new purpose, we have to deliver sound performance along the classical economic-financial indicators. If we do not find a way to increase our top and bottom lines in the short term, we will have no resources to invest in pro-social projects that are in service of our purpose, and we will lose legitimacy, especially in the eyes of our parent university. As a result, our strategic change process will be stopped or delayed. If we find a way to navigate this complicated balance, I am sure that in the medium- to long-term, the benefits for our school will be plenty.

This created additional complexity for the leadership. Managers began to systematically monitor and reduce unnecessary costs to improve productivity and grow enrolment rates, and had to justify how these activities were consistent with the new purpose. Pursuing classic objectives while attempting to change the organization's culture led organizational members to unintentionally weaken connections between their work activities and BetaSigma's new collective desirable. We recognized two types of tensions associated with *purpose-embodying precariousness*: (a) *inadequate lived experience* of the organizational purpose in day-to-day work and (b) a *lack of contextual embeddedness* of the new organizational purpose, implied by members' disillusionment with the persistence of legacy practices.

Inadequate lived experience. Multiple staff members emphasized the unintended consequences of additional complexity on their ability to authentically connect their day-to-day tasks with the new organizational purpose. Multiple external and internal demands led to a general sense that they needed to mindfully connect the meaning of their work with the intended organizational purpose. When explaining initiatives to implement the new purpose,

informants emphasized the ceremonial value of formal claims. However, they were sceptical about how such slogans and statements would translate into facts and numbers.

> The big difference concerning past transformations is that they were more direct and easily computable by numbers. In this case, the symbolic nature of this purpose-centric transformation goes against its substantiality. Therefore, as it is difficult for one to attack the symbol, there is the risk that this cultural change will remain only ceremonial. (Faculty member)

Organizational members also expressed concerns about leaders' increased focus on performance metrics (growth, profitability, etc.) at the expense of the new purpose.

> In some ways, the purpose is so common sense that you cannot directly counter it. That is, if I say, "Better future for all," no one will reasonably activate a pushback mechanism. The real point is that, in my opinion, there is an important segment of our faculty and staff who still react to this by saying, "Whatever, call it however you want, we are just doing EBITDA." (Faculty member)

BetaSigma's executive director of corporate education also highlighted these tensions:

> For instance, in our specific area, the products we offer are exponentially growing. This should at least result in a reorganization of roles. However, in some cases, the effort we have put into work was such that it shifted attention away from values.

Time constraints were also perceived as limiting organizational members' personal initiative and having a negative influence on the quality of performed activities:

> The transformation has created so many operational activities that I didn't even have the time to wonder how it applies to me. I ask myself, "Well, what's the value of being a passionate innovator? Great value!" But when will I have the time to be one if I have tons of other urgent things to do? (Staff member)

Organizational members said they felt 'overwhelmed' or 'imprisoned:' 'At the moment, the focus on day-to-day activities is based on time compression so there is no long-term vision that certain values deserve. Sometimes I feel chained, imprisoned by my daily activities'.

Lack of contextual embeddedness. Describing the process of embodying (Chua et al., 2024) the new purpose in the organization, organizational members emphasized their disillusionment with the persistence of legacy behaviours and routines in BetaSigma that were supposed to change after the new purpose had been integrated. Informants described a lack of alignment between the organizational values underlying the purpose-centric transformation of the business school and their enactment into daily practices.

> In my opinion, there is still a disconnect between values and the way they are enacted, perhaps in specific situations. As a concrete example, I hear talking about "respectful

> partnership" [one of the three formalized organizational values], but I happened to receive email at 11 pm saying, "I want slides by tomorrow morning." I do not find it respectful, as I believe that my personal time is valuable. (Member of administrative staff)

We observed several tensions across organizational levels between professions and teams. For instance, the purpose-centric transformation was lived very differently by two groups working in the business school – namely, administrative staff and faculty.

> I find myself collaborating with six different directors on a single master's program. In some cases, we build a very fruitful relationship of continuous exchange and this relationship directly affects the product we deliver. In other cases, the existing hierarchy is immediately re-established. However, from my point of view, until these two worlds [faculty and staff] are more integrated, some of the aspects of the transformation will always be somehow mitigated. (Administrative staff)

Informants highlighted that some of these struggles derived from the lack of congruence between the new practices introduced during the organizational transformation and the resistance enacted by legacy power structures. For instance, a member of the administrative staff emphasized the incongruence between the empowerment she experienced and a lack of formal recognition from faculty:

> Expanding the boundaries of my professional role sometimes clashes a bit with how we are perceived by the faculty. We are often seen as the university secretaries, so we are asked to fix the template of material, carry the water bottle or do activities that in some ways are just a little bit at odds with the empowerment that we are experiencing. (Member of administrative staff)

Reactive Purpose Work

In response to the tensions identified during the purpose-centred transformation, we observed leaders engaging in two types of reactive purpose work: *stabilizing purpose work* is aimed at curbing purpose precariousness within the organization by *aligning systems and structures with the new purpose* and by *framing purpose as flexible*; *enrolling purpose work* is aimed at mitigating external conditions that lead to purpose precariousness and is performed by *aligning organizational commitments with societal commitments* and *spearheading field-reconfiguring initiatives*. Through these types of purpose work, organizational members aimed to resolve internal tensions while projecting this consistency externally. This dual process played a crucial role in fortifying BetaSigma's position and reputation while fostering relationships with key stakeholders.

Stabilizing purpose work: Aligning systems and structures with the new purpose. Our analysis revealed that embodying the organization's overarching purpose required more than rhetorical commitment; it demanded a tangible integration of purpose into daily operations across all levels of the organizational structure. This realization

spurred a focused effort to bridge the gap between aspirational rhetoric and practical implementation. Our observations showed that leaders engaged in *stabilizing purpose work* to defend and reinforce the organization's moral foundation. One aspect of this work involved *aligning systems and structures to the new purpose*. A faculty member explained:

> A great deal of work has been done on values. At an internal event we have had the opportunity to go even more in depth into these values, to make them explicit through what we have called "the purpose guide," a document in which we provided concrete examples of what it means to behave consistently with these values.

A staff member described similar activities: 'The work we have done this year has been directed toward embedding values in our behaviors, casting them in a somewhat more concrete way'.

Leaders further reinforced the integration of purpose into daily operations by implementing a Management by Objectives (MBO) system tied to distributed economic bonuses. This initiative linked the variable portion of employee compensation directly to evidence of their ability to translate purpose into concrete actions and behaviours. By connecting financial incentives to purpose-driven performance, the organization signalled its commitment to embedding values into practice, ensuring that alignment with the overarching purpose was not only encouraged, but rewarded. The dean of BetaSigma explained:

> The MBO system of our staff had been traditionally based—as in the majority of the organizations—on measuring the extent to which each person achieved the specific objectives that his or her boss assigned at the beginning of each year. We decided to change it into a system where the incentives are tied to the extent to which each colleague behaves according to the three values that we considered as the practical manifestation of our purpose in everyday job [activities].

Stabilizing purpose work: Framing purpose as flexible. Such alignment practices were integrated in conjunction with an additional form of purpose work: *framing purpose as flexible*. Both staff and faculty highlighted that the new purpose was initially perceived as a mandated, top-down ideology, limiting the potential to authentically enact organizational values. One informant suggested: 'I am not a religious person, hence I was extremely skeptical when the organization introduced the new purpose. Sometimes it felt like we were the targets of religious preaching by other people'. Several informants used the words 'cult' and 'religion', especially when describing practices aimed at integrating the purpose. Indeed, some organizational members actively sought to enact the organizational purpose:

> Once I get a bit too busy and am working with my colleagues, we stop and say, 'What are we doing this for?' We do not engage in particular techniques. We simply remind ourselves of the people who benefit from our work in BetaSigma.

By embedding purpose-driven values into everyday practices, the organization aimed to cultivate a collective sense of responsibility and empowerment. Over time, the purpose was no longer perceived as something imposed from above, but rather as a flexible and open-ended framework that each individual could interpret and connect with in their own way. This shift enabled members to feel that the purpose was more closely aligned with their daily work, fostering a deeper sense of ownership and meaning. The idea of meaningful work and empowerment emerged repeatedly during our interviews. A staff member explained:

> Over time, my perception of purpose has changed a lot, in the sense that I have been able to find my interpretation of purpose by living it. It's no longer an imposition. It's not a "You have to!" and more a "You will do it when you feel like it, when you want to, in the way, in the interpretation that is most correct for you."

Enrolling purpose work: Aligning organizational commitments with societal commitments. Leaders also recognized the need to translate BetaSigma's new organizational purpose into actionable practices outside the organization. By proactively *enrolling* external stakeholders in the new purpose, BetaSigma's leaders sought to mitigate the conditions that led to the unintended purpose precariousness (i.e., stakeholders' cynical responses). One way they did so was by *aligning organizational commitments with societal commitments* to strengthen the legitimacy and credibility of the organization's efforts:

> The goal is to become a sustainable and credible organization in promoting transformation and leading by example, for instance, through our B Corp certification gained in 2020, the preparation and publication of our sustainability plan by mid-2022, and the transformation of our school into a benefit corporation in the next months. (Dean)

The importance of building credibility in the eyes of external stakeholders translated into the need for tangible metrics and initiatives to bring the organization's purpose to life. Among other accreditations, in 2020 BetaSigma obtained the B Corp certification, a concrete and universally accepted measure for sustainable business practices and positive societal impact. For BetaSigma, this constituted more than a mere certification; it signified a commitment to rigorous standards of social and environmental performance, accountability and transparency. As highlighted in BetaSigma strategy report:

> Being a B Corp could have become a cliché after our school achieved this acclaimed certification in July 2020, but instead we decided to live by its precepts in our daily life, in coherence with our purpose. The first thing we did was to set up a new participative process to construct our sustainability plan.

To further engage external stakeholders such as alumni, corporate partners and institutional partners, BetaSigma co-created programmes and activities that aligned with its purpose, showcasing its dedication to fostering socially responsible leadership and

addressing global challenges. For instance, BetaSigma launched collaborative projects to integrate sustainability practices into corporate strategies and mobilized alumni networks to mentor students on purpose-driven leadership. These initiatives served as platforms to invite stakeholders to actively participate in and contribute to the purpose-centred transformation. Through this engagement, BetaSigma strengthened its external legitimacy by creating a shared narrative of purpose and demonstrating its relevance and impact beyond its organizational boundaries. A prominent expert on international accreditation systems for business schools affirmed this approach:

> Contemporary business schools need to authentically research and find a new purpose underlying their work and integrate it into their educational offering. A purpose that speaks to the impact they can create through research and education on their varied stakeholders and to society and the environment at large. BetaSigma is among the first schools that has done so at the international level.

Enrolling purpose work: Spearheading field-reconfiguring initiatives. Motivated by the new organizational purpose, BetaSigma leaders spearheaded a series of initiatives that not only legitimized its own position, but were directly aimed at changing ideas and practices in the field of management education to make it more humane and purpose-driven. For example, BetaSigma initiated a series of networking events for deans and associate deans from leading business schools to rethink the purpose of management education and envision new management models. A participant in one of these workshops explained:

> Changing the purpose of management research and education is something that goes beyond the efforts of a single business school. It requires a systemic shift and an ecosystem approach. This workshop is of utmost importance because it lays the ground for such a systemic shift.

Appendix C provides an overview of the initiatives[2] undertaken by BetaSigma during its purpose change process.

Whereas our analysis traces the unfolding of BetaSigma's radical purpose adaptation across distinct phases and forms of purpose work, it is important to note that the process is not yet concluded. Purpose remains a dynamic and evolving element of organizational life, and BetaSigma continues to invest significant effort in integrating its purpose both internally through practices that support individual enactment, and externally through engagement with stakeholders and broader field-level initiatives. Nevertheless, the organization appears to have reached a sustainable degree of stability in its purpose adaptation, as evidenced, for instance, by having won a competitive award for workplace well-being in 2024.

DISCUSSION

Adopting the social-symbolic work lens, in this study we asked: *How do organizations engage in purpose work to facilitate radical purpose adaptation?* We have shown that this process involves

two proactive forms of purpose work (*theorization* and *integration*) that trigger unintended, self-reinforcing outcomes which increase the precariousness of purpose. Our findings also reveal two types of reactive purpose work (*enrolling* and *stabilizing*) aimed at curbing the precariousness of purpose. Taken together, these insights contribute a broader theoretical message: radical purpose adaptation unfolds as a recursive cycle in which proactive and reactive forms of purpose work interact, showing that organizational purpose is not simply defended or redefined, but continuously constructed and stabilized through this dynamic interplay.

Theoretical Implications for Research on Organizational Purpose and Repurposing

We contribute to the conversation on organizational purpose by providing empirical evidence that reveals how the process of purpose change unfolds. In contrast to most empirical work on organizational purpose taking a 'variance' approach (Mohr, 1982), focusing on how organizational activities are perceived as purposeful from the perspective of either organizational members (Gartenberg et al., 2019) or external audiences (Durand and Gouvard, 2022), we have adopted an empirical, processual approach (Langley, 1999) focused on processes of organizational repurposing later in the lifecycle (de Cuyper et al., 2020; Rauch and Ansari, 2022). Drawing on the notion of social-symbolic work (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019), we have theorized organizational purpose as a social-symbolic object and introduced a new form of work: 'purpose work', defined as the purposeful, reflexive efforts intended to shape or maintain an organization's purpose.

We also have leveraged research on value-based institutionalism (Kraatz et al., 2010, 2020; Selznick, 1957) to explore how a new organizational purpose can be precarious. Research has been very sparse in this regard, acknowledging that purpose is vulnerable to drift (Grimes et al., 2019; Ramus and Vaccaro, 2017; Rauch and Ansari, 2022; Selznick, 1949) and that efforts of authentically committed and well-intentioned charismatic leaders to instil a new purpose can unintendedly go awry (Cha and Edmondson, 2006). Our findings show that purpose precariousness emerges in radical purpose adaptation processes due to differences in how stakeholders interpret the new purpose, as well as in breakdowns in how employees experience the new purpose. Organizational repurposing is not only shaped by leaders' sensegiving actions (Carton, 2018) and authenticity (Cha and Edmondson, 2006), but also requires dealing with multiple demands, external and internal coalitions and trade-offs (Besharov and Khurana, 2015). Our analysis highlights the value of an open-systems view for understanding the organizational repurposing process, which suggests that the internal life of an organization is 'shape[d], supporte[d], and infiltrate[d]' by the environment (Scott and Davis, 2007, p. 31). Moreover, we have identified antecedents of unintended consequences of organizational repurposing. In line with organizational scholarship (Harris and Ogbonna, 2002; Jay, 2013; Selznick, 1949), our findings suggest that processes of organizational repurposing, which are situated in knots of multiple, competing demands and require a departure from the status quo, can result in unintended outcomes and consequences, both for the (pragmatic) legitimacy

of the purpose for shareholders and external stakeholders, and for the individual experience of meaningfulness by employees.

Our paper thus contributes to research on organizational purpose by extending the understanding of purpose precariousness originally conceptualized by Selznick (1957). We uncover and theorize two previously overlooked forms of social-symbolic purpose work – enrolling and stabilizing – through which organizations actively confront and manage precariousness in the course of radical purpose adaptation. Enrolling work resonates with existing research on stakeholder cynicism (Huy et al., 2014), focusing on the importance of buy-in by recognizing the organizational benefits of a new purpose. Whereas enrolling work mitigates the negative organizational consequences of contradictory demands, stabilizing work addresses internal precariousness stemming from perceptions of purpose as an imposed ideology and as a tool for symbolic management. We theorize that stabilizing work enables organizational members to autonomously bridge the moral and the mundane by actively framing purpose as having flexible meanings.

Our empirical analysis suggests a lack of individual autonomy in bridging mundane activities with the new 'collective desirable', casting additional doubt on the 'leader-hero' figure in this process, particularly interventions involving organizational discourses and vocabularies (Carton, 2018). Our findings are consistent with Town et al.'s (2024) recent theorization suggesting the importance of diffusing 'purpose-full' language and employees 'creatively appropriat[ing] it' (p. 840) to remind themselves that the new organizational purpose is real and has important moral implications. We complement previous findings (Jiang, 2021) by suggesting that leaders' purpose work fosters these dynamics by actively granting autonomy to employees to bridge the organization's collective desirable with their individual experiences of it. Our analysis also suggests that such autonomy cannot be completely devoid of any moral theorization (Heclo, 2011). More broadly, our findings point to the challenges of repurposing organizations to prioritize societal responsibility, and how this can be achieved through humanistic organizing (Laasch et al., 2025).

Finally, our analysis of context-specific challenges and tensions that emerged during the process of radical purpose adaptation within a business school adds to the debate about repurposing management education for the public good (Ghoshal, 2005; Starkey et al., 2005). Research has yielded consistent findings, highlighting business schools as organizational forms that are embedded in an institutional field where incentives and deeply entrenched rules of the game make repurposing extremely challenging (Rasche and Gilbert, 2015). In business schools, substantive repurposing is resisted due to the professional values and incentives of faculty, inertia of staff, ambiguity of performance management systems, lack of resources and institutionalized rankings and practices (Kitchener, 2024; Murcia et al., 2018; Rasche and Gilbert, 2015). However, empirical accounts are scarce. We contribute to this stream of research by unpacking the specific problems and unintended consequences that well-intended business school leaders might face in the process of transforming such organizations into a force for good.

Theoretical Implications for Research on Social-Symbolic Work

We contribute to the conversation on social-symbolic work by providing an integrated, multi-level account of the 'work' that actors perform to construct a coherent

and shared view of organizational purpose. Leveraging the social-symbolic work lens (Geiger and Stendahl, 2023; Lawrence and Phillips, 2019; Phillips et al., 2025), we have conceptualized organizational purpose as a novel social-symbolic object created through what we call 'purpose work'. Our findings show that in radical purpose adaptation processes, purpose is introduced as a social-symbolic object that shapes sensemaking. While previous research on social-symbolic work at the organization level focused on how actors shape the *meaning* of existing social-symbolic organizational objects (e.g., organizational identity, values and boundaries; see Lawrence and Phillips, 2019), we have theorized the social-symbolic work of *introducing* a social-symbolic object within an organization (see also Creary, 2025). This involves creating a new pattern of meanings that shapes how individuals make sense of the object in organizational life. While these dynamics have been discussed in research on institutional work (e.g., Tracey et al., 2011), they remain underexplored in research on organizational work. We have shown how forms of theorization (Greenwood et al., 2002) and account-making (Lepisto and Pratt, 2017) embedded in texts, vocabularies and discourses are necessary to construct organizational purpose as an abstract category and to justify its existence as more than a generalized, shared experience of purpose in organization.

Our findings show that theorization, defined as 'development and specification of abstract categories' (Greenwood et al., 2002, p. 60), is not just a way to engage in institutional work (Tolbert and Zucker, 1996), as emphasized in previous research, but also a form of organizational work. Our findings suggest that it helps leaders initiate a process of purpose change. Indeed, the introduction of a new purpose implies the creation of new justifications about why we do what we do (and aspire to do). This finding is in line with extant research that emphasizes the relevance of accounts and vocabularies of motives for understanding the phenomenon of purpose in organizations (Suddaby et al., 2023) as an account-making activity (Lepisto and Pratt, 2017).

Finally, we have unpacked the role of unintended outcomes in social-symbolic work, specifically those associated with the introduction of new social-symbolic objects in organizations – an area of research that has been understudied (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). Most research in this area has investigated first- and second-order consequences for individuals, organizations and institutions. In contrast, we have shown how forms of work aimed at integrating a social-symbolic object into an organization led to almost the opposite of the intended outcome: precariousness of the new purpose. This finding raises an interesting theoretical implication for social-symbolic work research – namely, the success and failure of social-symbolic work. Lawrence et al. (2009, p. 11) suggested:

> Institutional work aimed at creating institutions may create institutions, but it might also fail to do so; it might affect unanticipated institutions in unintended ways, including disrupting those institutions or creating ones very different from those originally conceived of by the actors involved.

We have shown how the initial intentions behind purpose work led to unintended consequences, and how leaders and other organizational members engaged in 'reactive'

purpose work to address the unintended outcomes. Using the language of social-symbolic work, we have shown how, rather than fulfilling a single role associated with the social-symbolic object (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019, pp. 207–214), the same actor might play multiple roles and pursue multiple goals over time.

Theoretical Implications for Research on Organizational Change

Our findings also have distinct implications for research focused on organizational change. Research has shown that processes of organizational change increase their likelihood of success when recipients experience positive meanings and emotions toward change, thereby increasing their willingness to accept it (Bartunek et al., 2011; Sonenshein, 2010). Compared to other forms of organizational change, our findings suggest that the experience of positive meanings might be more salient, or even necessary, for processes of organizational purpose change to be successful, as the organizational purpose is also experienced as a sense of meaningfulness. Misalignments between the theorization of accounts about the new organizational purpose and lived experiences of meaningfulness in the workplace can undermine the overall legitimacy of the change process.

Our findings demonstrate that such difficulties can even increase due to change recipients' different assessments of the legitimacy of change agents and the new purpose. In contrast with previous research stressing the legitimacy assessments that emerge in different stages of the change process (Huy et al., 2014), our findings show that in processes of organizational purpose change, leaders face earlier and more pressing expectations to deliver results. This led to conflicting prescriptions, greater uncertainty and increasing work pressure for employees, constraining their ability to experience meaningfulness.

Practical Implications

Our findings have several implications for managerial practice. The first relates to the ability to manage organizational change processes that involve embracing meaningfulness and a higher purpose. These change processes are becoming increasingly common in established companies due to the diffusion of an institutionalized discourse around organizations' responsibility to create a better future for stakeholders, workplaces becoming more open and democratic, and the need for organizational leaders to express themselves authentically. Our findings provide some cautionary suggestions that might be useful for top managers and leaders who are willing to lead processes of organizational repurposing. We suggest that if the objective is to infuse purpose into an organization, substantive changes must occur at a deep (rather than surface) level across different domains, from organizational culture to strategy, to reporting, to market positioning. Our findings suggest that the positive effects of purpose on organizational outcomes frequently reported in practitioner-oriented articles and reports might conceal a series of hurdles that managers and leaders need to consider when engaging in such a process. Overcoming these hurdles may require leaders to manage multiple expectations, goals and values of different stakeholders.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Due to our qualitative, revelatory single case study design, our findings may be transferable to other research contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Similar dynamics are likely in pluralistic organizational contexts where groups embrace different and conflicting values and interests (Besharov, 2014; Kraatz and Block, 2017). The organizational form we studied – a business school – faces a legitimacy crisis tied to growing demands for social responsibility, which may trigger broader field-level changes. Importantly, prior to its purposeful change, BetaSigma's culture and identity were weakly reflected in action, with technical concerns outweighing institutional commitments (Selznick, 1957). Thus, our theorization may apply to established organizations under competitive pressure that have not yet mindfully reflected on purpose.

This study also opens several directions for future research. First, scholars could examine how hybrid organizations, facing multiple institutional logics (Besharov and Mitzinneck, 2023; Besharov and Smith, 2014), use social-symbolic work to negotiate the legitimacy of their purposes, or even to (de)hybridize. Second, adopting an open-systems perspective, researchers could study how organizational and institutional purposes interact across levels of analysis. Organizations develop idiographic purposes through stakeholder commitments, yet forms such as corporations carry distinct institutional purposes (e.g., 'shareholder value maximization'; Leixnering et al., 2022). Future work might investigate how organizations engage in discursive, material and relational work to adapt or craft their purpose in relation to institutional ones ('organizational purpose work'), or how organizational purposes themselves motivate the shaping of field-level discourses about institutional purposes ('institutional purpose work').

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NOTES

[1] We acknowledge the possible confusion between purpose and strategy. Strategy refers to 'patterns in streams of decisions' (Mintzberg, 1978, p. 934) which can be aligned or misaligned (Grimes et al., 2019) with purpose. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

[2] Names of initiatives have been anonymized.

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