

One-pager

Embracing discomfort in the boardroom: towards self-initiating change in the economic paradigm shift

Ellemiek Etman, March 2023



Introduction

Companies need to make more radical choices for sustainability, and the transition to sustainable economic growth will only occur with deep changes in top management. The economic paradigm shift requires leaders who are capable of overcoming resistance and guiding the economic transition towards sustainability. External pressures for change are intensifying in various ways, causing discomfort for both intrinsic and extrinsic motivated business leaders and non-executive directors.

The aim to start my research is to gain a deeper understanding of this discomfort and explore how discomfort can drive proactivity in the boardroom from an existential perspective, seeking for alternative guidelines to support the integration of sustainability.

This research takes as its premise a dual problem causing discomfort: increasing societal pressure on the boardroom and its members (external problem) and a personal sense of ethical responsibility that is difficult to transfer into professional roles (internal problem). New external and internal expectations lead to discomfort in the boardroom. Corporate governance seems inadequate to deal with the challenges of economic transitions.

Grounded theory research

This study focuses on embracing discomfort in the boardroom and examines the elements and relationships involved in transforming discomfort into self-initiated change from an existential perspective. A grounded theory study is employed to address this. Preliminary research among 40 transition-oriented business leaders and non-executive directors of SMEs, large companies, and listed companies contributed to the formulation of three sensitising concepts: alienation & resonance, hope and self-initiated change, and existential leadership (including humanistic and spiritual-existential leadership). Central question of the research is:

To the backdrop of the economic paradigm shift:

How can an existential perspective help transform discomfort into self-initiated change in boardroom dynamics?

Research methods

Subsequent research will be conducted through a case study (Project Ongemak in de boardroom), a survey, focus groups and interviews. The possibility of expanding the research with other transition-oriented business leaders and non-executive directors is under consideration. Data will be analysed using inductive analysis with Atlas-ti.