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From crisis to transformation: The role of creative practices in organisational transitions

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Abstract: Organizational transitions can evoke a range of reactions and emotions among employees, departments, stakeholders, and leaders. To effectively manage the transition, it is crucial to comprehend how organizations experience and design change to navigate the various challenges of the transition process. This study investigates how changes in the working environment of the catering staff of a convention centre in the Netherlands led to the formation of a close-knit community that not only embraced the change but also developed innovative approaches for addressing local and social challenges. We draw on interviews with 16 individuals from the organization, and use social practice theory to show the interconnected elements of practices that collectively constitute a creative approach to change. The study reveals that leadership and support are crucial competencies for promoting the participation and engagement needed to turn a crisis into an opportunity for both the organization and its stakeholders.

Keywords: Social practice theory; Creative practice; Organizational change; Co-creation

1. Introduction

Organizational change has been the subject of numerous studies. There is a growing body of literature that recognizes the effect of transformation on a company's performance (Wischnevsky & Damanpour, 2006), organizational change and its relation to environmental change (Suarez & Oliva, 2005), and the critical role of organizational creativity in organizational change (Jeong & Shin, 2017; Lutz Allen et al., 2013). Moreover, organizational scholars have started to view organizations as a set of established practices that persist even if employees, facilities, or tools change. The "practice turn" (Schatzki et al., 2001) is also adopted by organizational researchers like Nicolini (2012) and Gherardi (2019), emphasizing that organizations can be defined through their "nexus of doings and sayings" (Schatzki, 1996,



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p.98). This study addresses the gap in understanding the role of creative practices in organizational change. By utilizing a qualitative case study approach, it aims to explore how creative practices can effectively facilitate such change. Additionally, designers are identified as pivotal figures who bridge grassroots communities and institutional actors, thus fostering commoning and institutional practices (Teli et al. 2022). This suggests a potential avenue for leveraging creative practices to drive organizational change with the assistance of designers as intermediaries. One question that arises from the literature is: what role do organizational structures play in either facilitating or hindering the integration of creative practices into organizational change processes?

To provide insights on this research question, we conducted a case study with RAI, a Dutch organization leading the industry of business event organization. RAI Amsterdam, located on the Europaplein, is the Netherlands' largest convention center, with 115.000 square meters of exhibition space and 1.5 million visitors every year. Pressured by technological advancements, environmental concerns, and the post-COVID-19 pandemic, RAI intends to adopt a design-oriented methodology and embrace digital transformation to envision the future of the exhibition experience and devise a range of ideas that can help materialize these visions. The project aims to explore co-creation practices in strategic design contexts as a basis for improving strategic performance. The research is divided into three phases: understanding the organization, creative sessions, and problem-solving.

The case we present in the paper is explained and analyzed using social practice theory framework through two complementary narratives. The first narrative describes how changes in the work environment of RAI catering gave rise to the creation of a close-knit community of catering staff that learn to adapt to various situations through experiencing change. The narrative illustrates how changes affect the catering staff's resilience and willingness to embrace new approaches to achieving their goals, as well as their levels of adaptability when faced with challenges. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of leadership and proactive decision-making during times of change. Throughout the second narrative, it becomes evident how the community engages in changing practices promoting care for human and environmental well-being under the direction of the executive chef and the sous-chef of the catering department.

2. Social practice theory

The term "practice" can have various meanings, such as actions and deeds rather than theories or ideas, a way of doing things that is habitual or customary, consistent training to improve or develop a specific skill, or the occupation or business of a professional organization or an individual. From an epistemological perspective, practice has two general meanings. The first one is to develop skill through repetition, drill, or rote activities, as in the case of "practicing the piano." The second meaning is to apply a skill in a practical setting, as in the case of "practicing medicine." The first meaning involves training for the actual work, while the second meaning involves the actual work itself (Cook & Brown, 1999). In the social sciences, "practice" is a subject of study that refers to a set of relationships that are inherently

connected to time (Bourdieu, 1980/1990). Unlike other social theories, the theory of social practices “places the social in ‘practices’ and it treats practices as the ‘smallest unit’ of social analysis” (Reckwitz, 2002). In other words, practice theories alter the perspective of analysis from the micro level of individuals or the macro level of organizations and groups to an uncertain or unspecified level (Kimbell, 2012). Practices constitute the basic element of social existence (Shove et al., 2007); they give rise to both individuality and social order (Schatzki, 1996).

Practice theory is an evolving social theory, and there is no one-size-fits-all theoretical approach to practice. Anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1984) was one of the first authors who used the term “Practice theory” by referring to Bourdieu’s and Giddens’ studies on practice. Practice theorists have made significant contributions to our current understanding of various issues (Schatzki, 2001). Specifically, the impact of studies by Bourdieu and Giddens can be observed in diverse areas, including learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999; Wenger et al., 2002), consumption and consumer culture (Shove & Pantzar, 2005; Shove & Warde, 2001; Warde, 2005), and design studies and practice including design thinking, transition design and sustainable design (Kimbell, 2011, 2012; Tonkinwise, 2011, 2023; Irwin, 2015; Irwin et al. 2015, 2020; Kuijer et al., 2013).

Humans engage in multifaceted activities that involve not only physical actions but also verbal expressions. As they pursue their objectives, complete tasks, and experience emotions, they communicate their thoughts, feelings, and intentions through language. In this sense, a practice can be defined: “as a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings. ...To say that the doings and sayings forming a practice constitute a nexus is to say that they are linked in certain ways” (Schatzki, 1996, p. 89). In other words, practice refers to a specific set of actions or behaviors that are carried out in a certain order and are linked together to form a pattern or block of behavior; it is a collection of interconnected elements that make up a routinized type of behavior (Reckwitz, 2002). We use social practice approach to look at the constituent elements of practice of Basement Chefs as a case that emerged and turned into a community of practice, kept practicing change and later formed a creative practice to transform a crisis into advantage for their organization and its stakeholders.

3. Basement chefs case

3.1 Case study context

RAI Amsterdam stands as a premier international convention and exhibition center nestled in the heart of the dynamic city of Amsterdam, Netherlands. With a dedicated workforce comprising professionals across various domains such as event management, marketing, and logistics, RAI Amsterdam orchestrates a plethora of trade shows, conferences, and exhibitions throughout the year, spanning diverse sectors including automotive, healthcare, technology, and sustainability. Collaborating closely with an extensive network of stakeholders, including exhibitors, sponsors, government bodies, and local communities, RAI Amsterdam

serves as a vital nexus for fostering innovation, facilitating knowledge exchange, and driving economic growth within and beyond its bustling confines. As Amsterdam's city planning initiatives evolve toward circular economy, RAI Amsterdam stands poised to navigate forthcoming changes with agility and foresight (Municipality of Amsterdam, n.d.). In line with the city's commitment to sustainability, the venue is primed to embrace eco-conscious practices, from minimizing carbon footprints to championing waste reduction efforts. Concurrently, RAI Amsterdam recognizes the importance of nurturing community relationships, aiming to deepen engagement through proactive outreach programs and collaborative endeavors.

During the first phase of the project, we interviewed 16 employees from various departments in RAI to investigate organizational change and transition by identifying how innovation and creativity occur in RAI. The interviews took place in the Spring and Summer of 2023 in RAI Amsterdam and lasted about 45 minutes. The interviewer followed an interview guide and snowball sampling method (Goodman, 1961) to gather data. The audio files of the interviews were transformed into verbatim transcriptions. During our interviews with employees, some of the interviewees specifically mentioned the creative approaches of the company's executive chef and the "Basement Chefs" case. This study focuses on the culinary and other activities of Basement Chefs based on an interview with the organization's executive chef, field notes gathered by the first author during his visits to RAI, a review of the activities of Basement Chefs on their social media presence, and other source related to Basement Chefs that are publicly available.

3.2 The Basement chefs

The group responsible for the culinary operations at RAI Amsterdam is comprised of around 25 individuals who named themselves Basement Chefs in reference to their workplace located in the basement of RAI premises in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. In the realm of change and creative practice, the emergence and expansion of Basement Chefs and their approach to challenges present an insightful case study. In our exploration of the creative practices concept in RAI, we have examined two related narratives that demonstrate how a community inside an organization can be developed in response to changing situations.

The first narrative renders Basement Chefs as a community in which members are empowered to embrace change through engagement and participation under the leadership of RAI's executive chef and his colleagues. The second narrative explains how Basement Chefs contributed to the concept of "Heart-warming Amsterdam" by transforming a crisis of one of their suppliers into an opportunity and preventing food waste. Heart-warming Amsterdam represents RAI's sustainable approach and collaboration with local communities, food suppliers, and NGOs to reduce food waste (Nassar, 2019). In other words, two key principles underpin Heart-warming Amsterdam: local sourcing that focuses on human and environmental well-being and food waste prevention. (Figure 1). (RAI Amsterdam, 2016; Nassar, 2019).

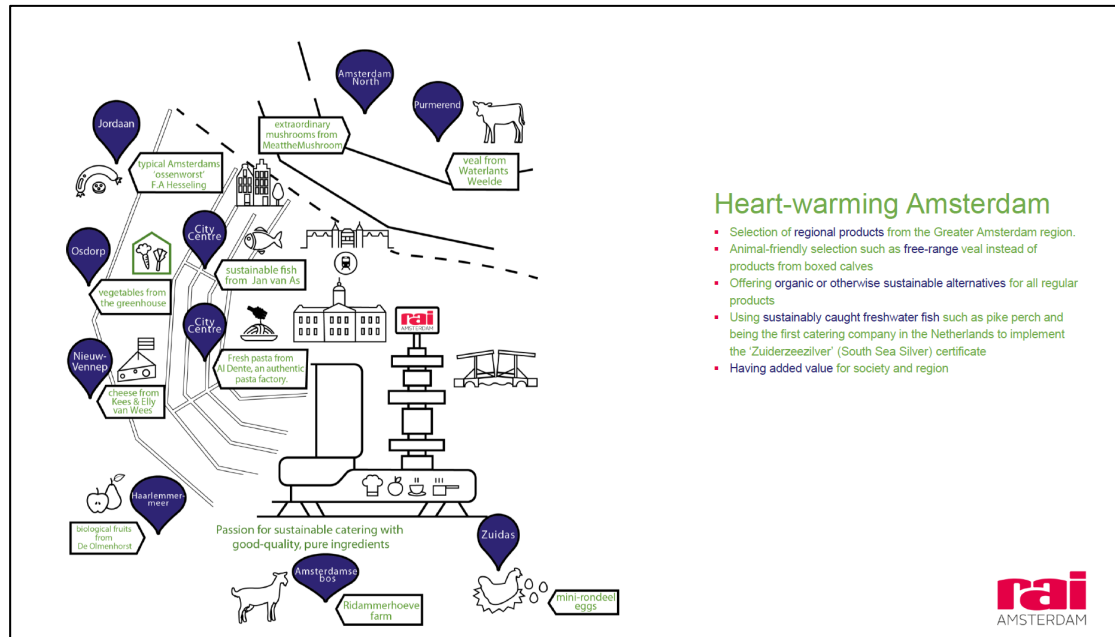


Figure 1 The objectives of RAI Heart-warming Amsterdam (RAI Amsterdam, 2016)

3.3 The emergence of Basement Chefs

In 2011, RAI closed its catering department for two months for renovation. During this period, catering staff created a Facebook page called “Keuken RAI” to keep each other updated on a daily basis by sharing information and images about the renovation in progress. (Figure 2 is a post by the catering staff on their Facebook page about the renovation of the floor of their work place). However, soon after the page was opened, RAI’s Corporate Communication Department called the executive chef, RAI’s executive chef, and asked him to shut down the page because it contained the name of RAI, and the staff was not authorized to do corporate communication. Instead of closing the page, the chef promptly took charge of and re-named the page as “Kelder Keuken” (Basement Kitchen).

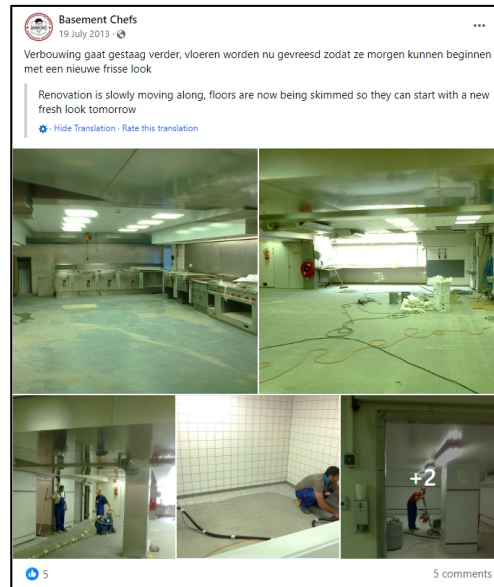


Figure 2 Photos of renovation of kitchen captured and shared by Basement Chefs about the renovation in progress (Basement Chefs, 2013)

Following the renovation, the idea of having a Facebook page was embraced by all the catering staff and they decided to keep it. They renamed it to “Kelder Chefs” (Basement Chefs) and it continued to serve as a platform for the catering staff to share information about their daily lives:

Just posts like you would post on your vacation. So we’re not going to post corporate stuff. We’re going to post personal stuff of somebody who is his birthday and is working, or working together 10 years here, but also stuff you’re proud of, what are you proud of, and what’s happening behind the scenes, so your kids can see what you’re doing. Your mother can see what you’re doing. That was the idea (The executive chef, 2023).

For instance, Basement Chefs posted pictures of the catering department in their work place and appreciated their efforts (Figure 3). In addition, they celebrated the 20th anniversary of one of their chefs’ devoted service in RAI. They presented him with an edible prize symbolizing his dedication for preparing more than 500,000 bitterball (a Dutch meat-based snack) (Figure 4).

As the Facebook group continued to expand the family members of the staff, previous employees, and other individuals expressed keen interest in joining. A few years later, the RAI organization realized the need for a change in its strategy and target market. The company’s leadership team decided to shift their focus from hosting and organizing national events to international business-to-business approaches. To achieve this goal, they sought input from their departments, including RAI’s catering. The catering staff suggested transforming the language used on RAI’s Facebook page into English and renaming the Kelder Chefs page to “Basement Chefs”. This change would make RAI’s offerings more accessible to English-speaking customers and align with the company’s new direction. The idea was well-received, and

RAI implemented the changes, paving the way for a successful transition to a new target market.

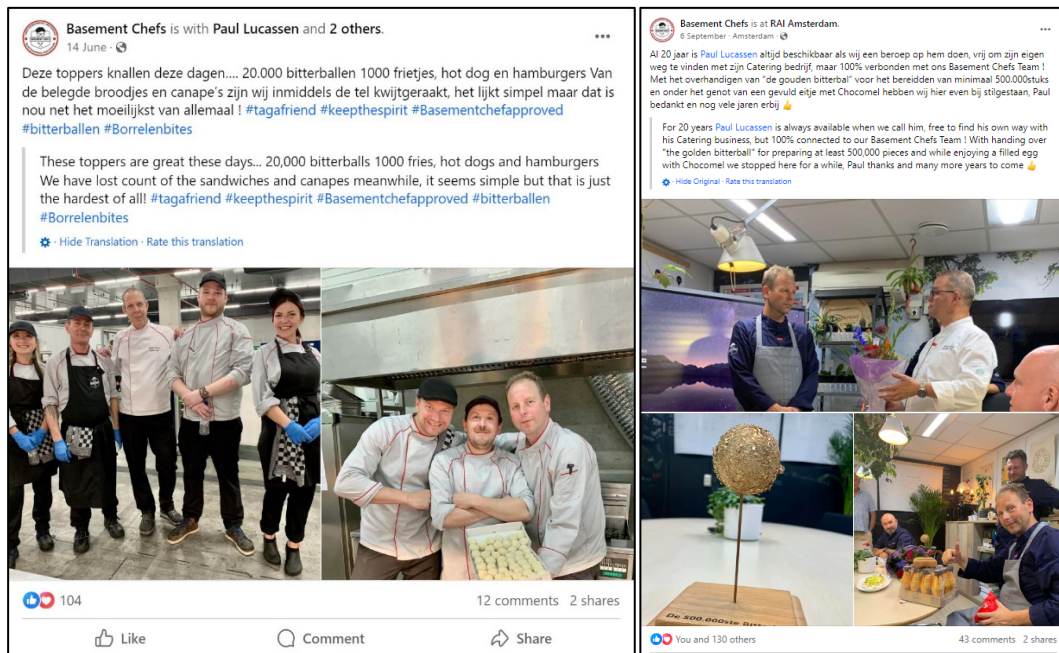


Figure 3 (Left) Basement Chefs acknowledged and appreciated the catering department's efforts (Basement Chefs, 2023b)

Figure 4 (Right) Basement Chefs celebrating the 20th anniversary of one of the chefs (Basement Chefs, 2023a)

The evolution of the Basement Chefs community is depicted in Figure 5, which highlights a series of transformative moments. It all began with the renovation of the kitchen, which sparked the idea to create a Facebook page (Change 1). The name of the page was changed from Keuken RAI to Kelder Keuken when the corporate communication department asked them to shut down the Facebook page (Change 2). When the renovation was completed, as the staff decided to share their narrative beyond their catering, the Kelder Keuken changed to Kelder Chefs (Change 3). Eventually, the catering staff changed the name of their Facebook page to Basement Chefs (Change 4) as RAI shifted its focus towards international business-to-business, marking a significant change in the organization (Change 5). These changes reflect the adaptive and innovative spirit of the Basement Chefs community as they navigated through various challenges and emerged stronger and more united than ever before.

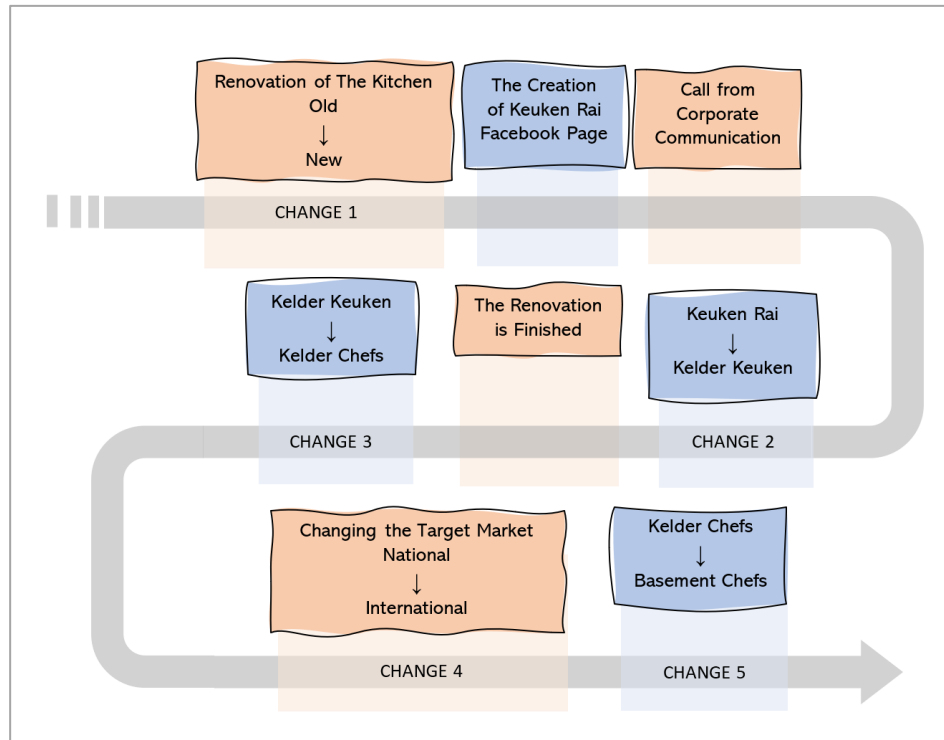


Figure 5 This figure illustrates pivotal changing points, starting with the renovation of RAI's kitchen, the impetus behind the formation of the Keuken RAI Facebook page, and extending to RAI's shift towards the international B2B market and the renaming of Kelder Chefs as Basement Chefs. (The red rectangles represent the organization's actions, and the blue ones show Kelder Chefs' reactions.)

3.2 Basement Chefs' local ketchup

Basement Chefs had been purchasing their tomatoes from Stadsboerderij Osdorp city farm, located 15 kilometers from Amsterdam. The farm provided daycare and employment for individuals in recovery from addiction or mental health challenges, supporting their integration into the workforce. The executive chef describes the RAI's intention to partner with local food suppliers in this way:

We started working with daycare farms and Rondeel eggs and stuff like that. Because it's giving daycare for a lot of people. It's giving back to the community. It's stuff like that. So, change is all about being open for the change to be (The executive chef, 2023).

However, in 2015, the greenhouse faced a big challenge when its major client and the owner of a large restaurant chain declared an abrupt bankruptcy. The executive chef mentioned how Stadsboerderij Osdorp city farm was facing a crisis following the sudden disappearance of their primary customer, which left them with an abundance of tomatoes that needed to be sold before they rot.

And, of course, you cannot stop tomatoes from growing. So all the tomatoes were already there. They called, and they said: Can you help us? Because we think we have 15 tones of tomatoes left and we have to start harvesting in three weeks (...). We said OK.

Of course, we’re gonna help, but we don’t know. We cannot use 15 tonnes of tomatoes each week because we are big, but we’re not that big (The executive chef, 2023).

In a discussion between the Basement Chefs and greenhouse staff, an interesting idea was raised. They thought about preserving the tomato harvest so that RAI could buy all the produce. “If we can preserve them, then we can use them longer. And if we can use them longer, then we have more time to get rid of those 15,000 kilos. And then we can buy the harvest” (The executive chef, 2023). Eventually, a solution that they ended up with was to make ketchup, an efficient way of preserving tomatoes. So, the chefs started looking for traditional ways to make ketchup using local ingredients, and they came up with their own unique recipe, which they later shared on their Facebook page (Figure 6).



Figure 7 (Right) The RAI's ketchup made by Basement Chefs (Basement Chefs, 2022)

Once the ketchup was ready, the chefs realized they would have to design a label and package for their ketchup, a task they were unfamiliar with. Hence, they approached RAI’s marketing department to help them with designing the label and packaging, and together, they created the logo of Basement Chefs. “We talked with marketing [department] and they said OK., we are going to do that and they really get excited (...) and then together we created this logo of Basement Chefs” (The executive chef, 2023). The designed logo of Basement Chefs is a graphical representation of the executive chef’s glasses and his sous chef’s flat caps, combined with the outline of the geometric shape of RAI’s logo (Figure 6 and Figure 7). Since then, they have been using this logo as their signature on different objects. Since then, they have used this logo on different items as their signature (Figure 8, Figure 9, and Figure 10).



Figure 8 (Left) The logo of Basement Chefs on their uniforms (Basement Chefs, 2023d)

Figure 9 (Right) The logo of Basement Chefs on the packaging of the food for delivery (Basement Chefs, 2023e)



Figure 10 The logo of Basement Chefs on RAI's Amtrium Restaurant where the employees eat their lunch (Photographed by the first author, 2023)

Eventually, Basement Chefs produced 10,000 bottles of ketchup, and within six to seven months, all the ketchup bottles were given as a present, sold, or used with the whole story of how they were made on the tables. “We told the story, sold the bottles” (The executive chef, 2023). The narrative of how basement chefs prevent food waste and turn a crisis into an opportunity was shared in various local media in the Netherlands, and it gained extraordinary momentum. The project generated excitement among those directly involved, and even RAI's competitors found it intriguing. In the executive chef's words:

The ketchup became one of our corporate signature presents. There were even organizers who were a little bit jealous because they didn't have their ketchup yet. (...) But then we noticed that organizers were starting to follow us because we told the story and we told the story about the basement chefs and how it devolved. (...) And they started to become friends. So big organizers became friends, and they follow us, and they see what we do. So now, when they come in, they know who we are, what we do, what the possibilities are, and it's all connected. And it was never one second the idea of changing something. It was the idea of evolving and changing. So everything changes (The executive chef, 2023).

4. Practicing change, changing practice

It might appear at first glance that the repeated renaming of the Facebook page is merely an impulsive reaction to the organization's actions and demands. However, the social practice theory framework allows a deeper understanding of Basement Chefs' practices of change and, later, their changing practices that transformed crises into opportunities. To do so, we analyze Figure 5, explaining how the Basement Chefs repeatedly experienced change by referring to the interrelation between the materials, skills, and meanings during the changes.

The initial idea of Basement Chefs arose from the desire to know about an extraordinary situation that was changing the equipment, working environment and overall materials of the practice that they were carrying out in RAI's kitchen. In other words, the catering staff, the carrier of the practice, sought to understand the transformation of materials which could potentially impact their competencies and the practices they were responsible for carrying out in their organization (Change 1). However, in a very short time, they confronted the obligation to explain and clarify this idea to the organization that they were part of it. This challenge required an immediate response; otherwise, the misinterpretation of the meaning of their social-learning approach could potentially lead to the premature discontinuation of their initiative before it has had a chance to fully develop and yield the intended benefits (Change 2).

After the renovation, the catering staff exercised another change; together with renaming the Facebook page from *Kelder Kueken* (Basement Kitchen) to *Kelder Chefs* (Basement Chefs), they shifted their focus from the material to the competency and meaning of their practice (Change 3). Figures 3 and 4 are examples of how they use Basement Chef's Facebook page as a platform to creatively acknowledge the skill and knowledge of novice and expert catering practitioners, creating a sense of belongingness.

In addition to culinary skills and knowledge, these skills include other forms of know-how; it includes building an active network with local stakeholders and proactively collaborating with them to co-create shared social and environmental values. Co-creating ideas to preserve tonnes of tomatoes, transferring the inspirational narration of the transformation of a crisis into an opportunity, and working routinely with Salvation Army (RAI Amsterdam, 2021) and Instock (Figure 11) are examples of Basement Chefs' exercise of finding creative ways to share their expertise in a collaborative way with others.

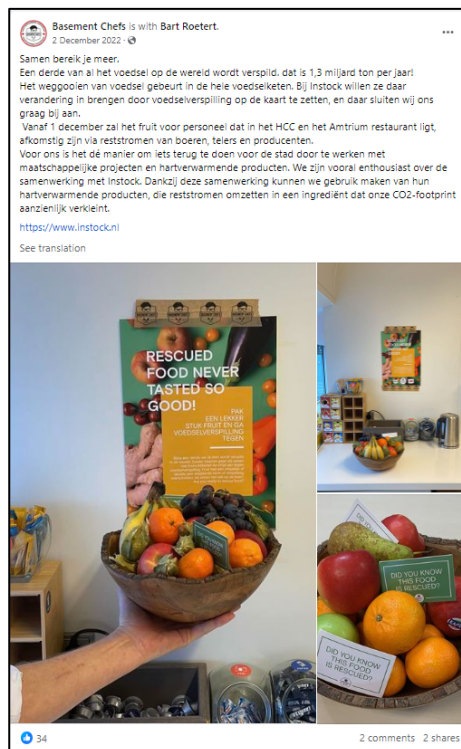


Figure 11 A screenshot from Basement Chefs' Facebook page, illustrating an example of collaboration between Basement Chef and Instock. Instock is a community that tries to rescue the foods that would otherwise be wasted. (Basement Chefs, 2023f)

The executive chef's explanation of what it means to be a Basement Chef indicates the relation between meanings and the skills that are required to perform with others.

Basement Chefs stands for doing things different[ly], doing it in our own way, and it comprehends our strategy of Heartwarming Amsterdam, working with local producers, giving back to the community, working with the Salvation Army or stuff. And doing things differently, like caring for plants, caring for people, caring for our colleagues, trying to be open, knowing somebody who needs a little care and paying attention to them and stuff. All, all of that (...). And people are making it bigger than we really think ourselves. But being aware of your place is one of the things of being a basement chef. Being aware that you're more than just a colleague, you're a person, you have your ideas, you have your energy. (...) And what can I give more than just doing my job? (The executive chef, 2023).

City farms that provide daycare for the weaker parts of society contribute greatly to urban areas' sustainability and resilience, promoting and resonating individual and communal values. The solution that addressed the farm crisis supported the city farm while preventing food waste disasters. It is not only the physical materials that are transformed into a new form through mental and bodily activities and mind. Through collaborative performances, the meanings of the practices of one organization migrate to another, and this collaboration turned into a meaningful way to make a positive impact on the local community that is associated with individual and communal values.

These values and meanings are in harmony with the organization's corporate social responsibility goals (Mathas, 2022) and those of its stakeholders, including the sustainable goals of the city of Amsterdam (City of Amsterdam, n.d.). Consequently, bigger changes in the organization's strategy and goals (Change 4) can be supported by the smaller practices of transitions carried out by Basement Chefs through sharing their material, competence and meaning (Change 5).

These findings contribute to design research in the following way. The emergence and evolution of Basement Chefs within RAI Amsterdam present an intriguing case study of how creative practices can unfold within organizational contexts. By examining the narratives of Basement Chefs, researchers gain a deeper understanding of how communities can form and thrive within organizations, particularly in response to changing circumstances and challenges. Furthermore, designers can strategically intervene to catalyse change processes by understanding how creative practices manifest within organizations and how they interact with existing organizational structures. This underscores the importance of considering not only the creative potential of individuals and communities within organizations but also the broader organizational context in which they operate.

5. Conclusion

Theoretical frameworks on practice offer broader perspectives for comprehending the locus of creativity and its role in organizational change. Using social practice theory, this paper outlines the establishment of a community of practice within an organization, which actively and creatively transforms its practices to promote environmental and social sustainability initiatives aligned with the organization's values. Our study examined the role of creative practices in facilitating organizational change, focusing on Basement Chefs at RAI Amsterdam, a leading business event center. The emergence of Basement Chefs as a community of practice demonstrates the value of employee-driven creativity and innovation during times of change. This case study emphasizes the interconnected links between the elements that make up creative practices, highlighting the relationship between the reinterpretation of materials, competencies, and meanings and organizational transformation. Furthermore, our study demonstrates the importance of proactive leadership and decision-making in fostering employee-driven creativity during times of change.

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