

Frontline Employees' Motivation to Align with Value Propositions

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Abstract

Purpose: Customer value creation is dependent on a firm's capacity to fulfil its brand promises and value propositions. The purpose of this paper is to explore frontline employees' motivation to align with value propositions.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper explores frontline employees' motivation to align with a firm's value propositions as operationalised brand promises. A longitudinal, three-phase case study was conducted on a B2B company in the building and technical trade sector.

Findings: This study reveals factors that foster and weaken employees' motivation to align with a firm's brand promises and value propositions. The findings show that co-activity and authentic, practice-driven promises and value propositions foster frontline employees' motivation to uphold brand promises and value propositions, whereas an objectifying stance and power struggle weaken the motivation.

Practical Implications: The study indicates that a bottom-up approach to strategising is needed and that frontline employees are to be engaged in traditional managerial domains, such as in developing value propositions. By creating space and agency for frontline employees in the strategising process, their motivation to align with value propositions is fostered. Four motivational modes are suggested to support bottom-up strategising.

Originality/value: The paper is unique in its focus on frontline employees' motivation. Developing value propositions traditionally falls within the domain of management strategising, while employees are ascribed the role of enactment. Contrary to the established norm, this paper highlights employees' active role in strategising and developing value propositions.

Keywords: Value propositions, frontline employee motivation, bottom-up strategising, co-activity, co-workership, autonomy, authenticity

Paper type: Research paper

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1. Introduction

Developing and delivering successful value propositions has been a key issue within marketing literature and business practice for decades (Anderson *et al.*, 2006), and is still managerially relevant (Eggert *et al.*, 2018; Mora Cortez and Johnston, 2018). The topic has been studied within the model of *promise theory* since the early 1990s (Bitner, 1995; Grönroos, 2000; Calonijs, 2006; Little *et al.*, 2006). The discussion on value propositions is still highly topical (Skålen *et al.*, 2015; Grönroos, 2017), and the focus has shifted towards a co-creating mode (Kowalkowski, 2011) where the role of employees has increased. Value propositions have traditionally been seen as 'suggestions and projections of what impact on their practices customers can expect. When such a projection is proposed actively to customers, it is a promise about potential future value creation' (Grönroos, 2011: 4). Promise theory identifies three different aspects of promise management, making, keeping and enabling promises (Bitner, 1995; Calonijs, 2006; Grönroos, 2000, 2009, 2017; Little *et al.*, 2006), and suggests activities related to these aspects. Developing value propositions has been defined as the second major aspect of making promises (Little *et al.*, 2006). A major research issue pertaining to promised value propositions is how well the firm and its employees are able to deliver what has been promised (Henkel *et al.*, 2007).

Since developing value propositions by tradition falls within the domains of top management in organisations (Little *et al.*, 2006), the leadership team is inherently aligned with the value propositions. Delivering value propositions, or keeping promises, is mainly the task of frontline employees (FLEs) working in customer service and the sales interface (Gummesson, 1998; Grönroos, 2009; Zeithaml *et al.*, 2012). However, being distanced from the development of value propositions, employees may lack ownership of and insight into the meaning of value propositions. FLEs traditionally enter the arena only when value propositions are to be actualised in customer interactions. Yet FLEs can actively co-create value with customers in their interactions (Grönroos and Voima, 2013) and should uphold the value that has been promised during these interactions (Grönroos, 2009) as representatives of the firm (Balmer *et al.*, 2009; Piehler *et al.*, 2016; Tosti and Stotz, 2001). Hence, FLEs are expected to act as brand ambassadors in customer interactions (de Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2001; Gelb and Rangarajan, 2014; Xiong *et al.*, 2013; Henkel *et al.*,

2007). They have to be able to communicate the value promised to customers (Salomonsen *et al.*, 2012). Further, employees' brand experiences are necessarily aligned with those of customers (Mosely, 2007), and this may lead to confusion among employees on how to be aligned with value propositions and fulfill given promises in customer interactions (Henkel *et al.*, 2007), as they may become ambivalent about the meaning of brand promises (Balmer, 2012). To be able to align with value propositions and act as brand ambassadors, FLEs need to emotionally buy in to the value that is proposed to customers (Thomson *et al.*, 1999), as well as have knowledge and be aware of and understand brand promises (Mitchell, 2002; Urde *et al.*, 2013; Xiong *et al.*, 2013). Specifically in a business-to-business (B2B) setting with comprehensive offerings, it is important that behavior among FLEs is aligned with brand promises (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010). FLE alignment impacts how the firm succeeds in fulfilling the explicit and implicit value propositions of the brand (Anker *et al.*, 2012).

Despite the frequent use of the value proposition concept in practice (Skålen *et al.*, 2015), and its manifold implications, there is a need for in-depth research on the topic (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2011; Frow and Payne, 2011). While the main focus of value propositions research has been customers' perspectives (Anderson *et al.*, 2006), B2B managers' motivation to adopt branding strategies has also been explored to some extent (Aspara and Tikkanen, 2008). However, the specific factors that impact FLEs' motivation to align with promises and value propositions represent a less explored area of research. Moreover, the current research provides evidence that motivated employees facilitate a better organisational performance (Lee and Raschke, 2016). Hence, research on FLEs' motivation to align with a firm's value propositions is of strategic significance.

The purpose of this study is to explore FLEs' *motivation to align* with a firm's value propositions. The study explores *employee motivation to align*, whereas the focal object of alignment – value propositions as operationalised brand promises – is beyond the scope of this study. A longitudinal single-case study of a Nordic B2B market leader company in the building and technical trade sector was conducted to empirically identify factors that foster and weaken FLEs' motivation to align with the firm's brand promises and value propositions.

The study contributes to existing B2B research by advancing the understanding of how FLEs experience motivation in a value propositions context. The paper contributes to theory by suggesting bottom-up strategising and four motivational modes that enhance FLEs' motivation. In practice, this study will enhance managers' understanding of how to enable FLEs to deliver the promised value in customer interactions. The findings indicate the importance of a 'bottom-up' perspective in strategising and thereby challenge the current top-down hierarchical managerial method of developing and implementing value propositions. The paper is organised as follows. First, employee motivation is discussed, followed by the research approach and method used for data gathering and analysis. After the findings are revealed, the analysis, discussion and further research suggestions are presented.

2. Value Propositions and Employee Motivation to Align

Value propositions are strategic tools for firms to effectively communicate value to customers (Payne *et al*, 2018), as they capture the essences of a firm's marketing strategy decisions and "can sharpen the firm's positional advantages" (Eggert *et al* 2018: 85). Researchers have formulated value propositions as promises that capture the essential nature of a company's offerings (Rintamäki *et al.*, 2007; Frown and Payne, 2011) and are conventionally interpreted to mean 'the marketing offer or value promise formulated and communicated by a seller', with the intent that it be accepted by a buyer (Kowalkowski, 2011: 277). Value propositions can also refer to promises of 'reciprocal value between providers and their customers' (Kowalkowski, 2011: 277). Central to value propositions is the promise of future value that firms communicate to their customers (Grönroos, 2009), often seen as the firm's brand promise, meaning the brand's covenant identity and the information communicated to a firm's stakeholders about the brand (Balmer, 2012). In practice, the brand promise is often expressed as a statement or slogan that expresses a firm's core values (Chong, 2007). In line with the value promised by the brand, a firm makes and communicates more specific value propositions about the benefits customers will acquire when buying the firm's offerings (Anderson *et al.*, 2006; Greyser and Urde, 2019). A brand promise has also been the 'specific experience at each touch point' that a customer has with a firm's products, services and messages (Sartain and Schaumann, 2006: 7). A major cause of the

value failures customers may experience is a discrepancy between their perceptions of the promised value, their expectations based on these promises and the actual value creation (Drake *et al.*, 2010; Zeithaml *et al.*, 2012). Drawing upon the literature (Grönroos, 2009; Anderson *et al.*, 2006) in this paper we treat brand promise as the overarching promise that directs all sub-promises and permeates all other promises and value propositions, such as abstract promises concerning service concepts, the more specific value propositions in brand offerings, and all operational activities. In other words, value propositions are operationalised brand promises. This overarching stance of brand promises would be the case even if promises of value are seen as unidirectional, meaning they are crafted by the management of a firm and communicated *to* customers, or reciprocal in considering value outcomes for all parties involved (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2011). Value propositions are optimally reciprocal and ‘emerge from the appreciation or the reciprocal positions and interactions of a focal firm and its counterpart(s)’ (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2011: 208).

For a firm, the challenge is to coordinate activities that relate to giving, keeping and enabling promises (Bitner, 1995, Little *et al.*, 2006, Grönroos, 2009, Pinar *et al.*, 2016). Making promises has traditionally been regarded as the primary function of marketing and relates to strategising and communicating the intended value to customers (Little *et al.*, 2006; Grönroos 2009). Researchers have established that employees are a vital resource in co-creating value with customers (Grönroos and Voima, 2013), and employee motivation is instrumental for a firm’s success in upholding its promises of potential value (Grönroos, 2000; Maxwell and Knox, 2009). Employees have to be ‘willing and prepared to perform as part-time marketers’ (Grönroos, 2011: 14), and FLEs’ motivation to align with value propositions is central for successful ‘promise delivery’ (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2012). From an FLE’s perspective, the challenge is the expectation that one should be motivated to align with a multitude of, at times, possibly contradictory promises of potential future value. A key expectation is that one should think, feel and act according to these promises in customer interactions.

Another practical challenge is that marketing research and practice commonly assume that managers are able to facilitate employee alignment with strategies by, for example, adopting and being aligned with a firm’s customer orientations strategies (Skålen, 2009). Indeed, a common

assumption is that management is able to ensure employee motivation is aligned with strategic intents, such as the promises of potential value that firms make to customers (Grönroos, 2000; Ahmed and Rafiq, 2003; Wiseke *et al.*, 2009). Based on tradition, motivating employees is accomplished with varying reward programs, such as monetary bonuses and career advancement possibilities, thus motivation is seen as a question of external stimuli (Basset-Jones and Lloyd, 2005). Further, the research assumes that employees respond in a similar manner to motivational programs. Yet motivation science research indicates that authentic motivation emerges mainly from the intrinsic motives that employees experience as meaningful, such as meaningful work (Deci and Ryan, 2006; Hung, 2011), and that intrinsic motivation is an important factor in work performance (Kuvaas *et al.*, 2017). Kuvaas *et al.* (2017) argue that the means of extrinsic motivation, such as close monitoring and comparing employees, should be applied with caution. Even if FLEs' motivation to align with value propositions has been established as a central concept in the research, different aspects of FLE motivation have not been explored. Hence, in practice, it is a challenge for firms to identify why and how FLEs become motivated to align with value propositions. Current marketing theory does not provide sufficient knowledge on FLEs' motivation in relation to value propositions.

As a concept, *motivation* is commonly used to depict the psychological forces that drive humans to action. According to Fiske (2008: 4), motivation science defines a motive as 'a predisposition to behave in a directed fashion', which 'acts as the motor for action and energizes purposive behavior that serves a function for the individual'. Motives are commonly assumed to operate via specific goals in specific situations (Fiske, 2008). A variety of motives have been suggested by different schools of thought, ranging from the Freudian view on hedonistic motives and the self-enhancement motives posited by Murray in 1938 to the instincts and purposive activity motives presented by McDougall in the 1950s (Fiske, 2008).

However, there is no single definition of work motivation due to its complexity (Lundberg *et al.*, 2009). The traditional view of promoting employee motivation relies on market-based incentive systems (Park and Ward, 2012). Based on this view, there are different kinds of motivation. For instance, positive organisational behavior draws upon positive psychology and applies it to a work context, and hence sees organisational behavior and work motivation in light of fulfilment and collective self-actualisation, drawing upon humanistic values and a drive towards societal changes.

Motivation science is a vast field that includes a number of different streams with specific, at times contradictory, definitions of motivation (Fiske, 2008). Recently, a more unified view of the research streams has emerged that includes both general views on motivation and contextual views on motivation, such as work motivation.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are considered the main determinants of human behavior in organisations (Baard, Deci and Ryan, 2004; Park and Word, 2012). The notion of different types of motivation broadens the perspective on work motivation, which consequently affects the managerial implications for how managers can motivate employees. For instance, Kuuvas *et al.* (2017) argue that managers need to consider that employees are not motivated only by traditional extrinsic motives, such as monetary rewards, advancement opportunities and job security, but by intrinsic motives, such as individual values, seeking fulfilment and a sense of accomplishment. Extrinsic motivation refers to ‘performance of an activity in order to attain a separable outcome’ (Deci and Ryan, 2000: 71), or to avoid guilt and anxiety, or to attain ego enhancements (Deci and Ryan, 2000: 72). Research shows that intrinsic motivation, also referred to as motivation without money (*ibid*), is a substantive driver of the employee attitudes associated with both employee satisfaction and turnover intention (Cho and Perry, 2012). Intrinsic motivation is discussed as a specific type of motivation, for instance ‘the intent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacities, to explore, and to learn’ (Deci and Ryan, 2000: 70). Essentially, intrinsic motivation refers to ‘doing an activity for the inherent satisfaction for the activity itself’ (Deci and Ryan, 2000: 71).

Another specific sub-type of work motivation is *prosocial motivation*, which refers to a sense of duty and a desire to help (Park and Word, 2012). This type of intrinsic motivation was initially identified within public service motivation (PSM) research, but has been applied to other work contexts as well (Park and Ward, 2012). Within PSM, *service motivation* has been used as another concept to describe the type of motivation that is oriented towards serving others (Homburg *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, motivation research shows that there is a relationship between creativity and prosocial motivation. Related to intrinsic motivation, Ryan and Deci (2006) discuss autonomy as a core concept of motivation, and Grant (2008) notes that autonomy is driven by *other-focused* psychological processes.

Self-determination theory (SDT) also involves intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. This theory refers to a process of intrinsic motivation through which non-intrinsically motivated behaviors can become self-determined (Ryan and Deci, 2000). SDT shows how humans internalise and integrate values and regulations, and acquire motivation for non-intrinsically motivated practices and ascribed behaviors (Ryan and Deci, 2000). SDT frames the core motive as self-regulation, meaning that individuals can regulate their motivation, depending on their identification with the external source or integration of external values. SDT highlights individuals' "evolved inner resources for personality development and behavioral self-regulation" (Ryan and Deci, 2000: 68). SDT holds that needs for competences, relatedness and autonomy are the basis of self-motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2006). These needs are essential for optimal social functioning. For instance, SDT proposes that autonomy is an important component of motivation, and claims that even extrinsic motivation can be autonomous if the values or ascribed behaviors are internalised, or achieved through identification with the conscious value of a behavioral goal (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Hence, extrinsic motivation can be a form of self-motivation, for example when an employee internalises the values ascribed by management. Given that the internalisation of extrinsic motives is a core aspect of SDT, the facilitation of the internalisation of extrinsic motivation has also been explored. Facilitating factors in the social environment include support for experiences of autonomy, support for competences and a feeling of connectedness and belonging with others (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

In this paper, the view of employee motivation is premised on motivation science, drawing upon service research. Within service research, the link between employee motivation and how firms succeed in keeping their promises is established. However, motivation is mainly discussed from the managerial perspective in terms of what managers can do to motivate employees (as objects). Managers are ascribed a hierarchical power position that grants them the agency to instill an organisational identity in their employees (Skålen, 2009; Wiseke *et al.*, 2009). Employees are commonly discussed as a unit and a resource to be managed and motivated by managers. In general, researchers commonly assume that managers have the power and that employees' motivation for enacting marketing ideas is facilitated by informing employees of the content of these ideas. The 'tools' used to motivate employees consist mainly of external, traditional motives. On the other hand, some researchers note that a motivating factor for employees to act upon strategies is a congruency between personal values and organisational values (Zampetakis and Moustakis, 2007) Further, King and Grace (2008) claim that a more humanitarian approach to

employees is required to motivate them to deliver on brand promises. Hence, in this paper, employee motivation is framed within the context of value propositions, depending on different factors in the work environment, and may consist of both extrinsic and intrinsic aspects of motivation, which affect how employees align with value propositions.

3. Methodology

A longitudinal, single-case study was conducted in three phases (2002, 2007-2010, and 2014-2015). A case study is meaningful as it investigates a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life setting (Yin, 1994, 2017), allows for the meaningful characteristics of real-life events to emerge (Gummesson, 1988; Yin, 1994), and provides case data to capture a sense of reality and build ‘*verstehen*’ (Strauss, 1989: 215). Ghauri (2004) argues that *single cases* ‘are appropriate when a particular case is a critical case and we want to use it to explain or question an established theory’ and when the case ‘meets all the conditions necessary to confirm, challenge or extend the theory’. This case was critical in that it offered an optimal study context because the research question of involving employees in development work was on the firm’s strategic agenda. Further, the firm was driven by an employee development-friendly approach, was highly concerned with employee well-being and job satisfaction, and appreciated the employees’ knowledge. The use of a single case with access to rich data was also considered relevant in this study since the approach was abductive and the aim was to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon explored.

The case firm, a business-to-business company within the building and technical trade sector, is a market leader and has operated in Finland since the early 1900s and since 1990 internationally. Currently, the company offers comprehensive material services for contractors, industry, public organisations and technical retailers in nine countries. It employs approximately 3000 employees in its Nordic and Baltic operations. The study was conducted with Finnish FLEs and managers. The practical objective of the research process was to engage FLEs in value proposition development. The brand promise is based on the company’s code of conduct (values, vision and mission), and verbalised to customers as a specific promise statement. FLEs’ motivation to align with value propositions was the research objective that was evaluated in the three different phases of the longitudinal study. The brand promises of the case firm were crafted by management and hence unidirectional in being communicated *to* customers and informed *to* employees, whereas

specific, operational value propositions were also reciprocal to a varying degree, based on negotiations between the firm and its customers.

3.1 Data collection

The research is explorative and applied a qualitative, abductive research strategy. In applying an abductive approach, empirical processes interact during phases wherein theory exploration and findings are combined in a systematic manner (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). Abduction can be understood as the combination of induction and deduction, and is often required when relatively unexplored phenomena are studied and the aim is to discover novel things (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). The study of an in-depth organisational phenomenon is rarely conducted from employees' first-order position within management and marketing research (Skålen, 2009), therefore justifying the abductive research approach. The study was theoretically positioned within service and management research, and a discourse analysis was conducted on the context in which service research discusses employee motivation. Humanistic management, which takes a holistic and systemic approach to employees and considers re-humanising management (Follet, in e.g. Godwyn and Gittell, 2012), functioned as another central theoretical informant. This approach deviates from the common approach practiced within management as well as service management, where employees are seen as operand or operant resources (see e.g. Vargo and Lusch, 2004), the connotation of which applies to things, such as assets and resources management, that the firm can draw upon for efficient functioning. Further, co-workership with foundation in the work by Tengblad (2007) emerged as an important concept particularly in the final phase. Motivation science functioned as another core theoretical informant throughout the different phases of the study.

A longitudinal study was conducted in three phases and complemented with the researchers' pre-understanding of the case company. The different phases of the longitudinal study are depicted in Table 1. The *pre-understanding* is based on one of the author's experience of working with strategy alignment training in the firm (during a period of three years in the early 2000s). This work encompassed four-month-long, in-firm training processes, in which employee well-being, job satisfaction and engagement in development work were the themes. An average of 25 employees participated in each process (comprising four contact days, written assignments and individual

coaching). The process took place on the firm’s premises (one day) as well as on the premises where outside seminars were held (three days). These training processes played an important role in building a preliminary understanding of employees’ experiences with the factors that foster and weaken their motivation to align with value propositions. This pre-understanding also provided insight into the firm’s internal constellations that foster or challenge FLEs to perform in a manner that is aligned with the firm’s value propositions in customer interactions. During this period, several discussions with management (marketing and human resources) took place.

Table 1: Phases of the longitudinal study

Phase	Preunderstanding	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Year	Early 2000	2002–2003	2007–2010	2014–2015
Approach	Observation	Pilot interviews and 1 st action research process (Customer Care process)	Service Concept Development; 2 nd action process	Questionnaire: assessing co-activity in development Co-activity workshops
Practical Aim	Firm internal training program on Employee wellbeing at work, job satisfaction and engagement in development work	Advance understanding on how to engage FLEs in development work. Contextualize the brand promise	Engage FLEs in concept development and value propositions accordingly	To assess FLEs motivation to live up to promises and value propositions
Research aim	Advance understanding of what motivates FLEs in a B2B context to align with value propositions			
Number of participants	Approx. 100 FLEs	Personal interviews: 10 FLEs 10 managers Action research 40 FLEs participating in group sessions	20 Personal interviews with FLEs 20 participants in 2 group work sessions Personal interviews with marketing manager	15 FLEs (in a specific product/service group) 3 managers Discussions with CEO and board member
Ethnographic-inspired research visits on the case firm’s premises (participation in internal firm trainings and events, and ad hoc lunch discussions with managers and FLEs throughout the three phases of the research)				

The first data collection phase involved pilot interviews with FLEs and managers in 2002 to deepen the pre-understanding of FLEs’ motivation to align with value propositions. Ten employees and ten managers were interviewed. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted on the firm’s premises, and lasted between 30 minutes and two hours. A conversation-inspired interview strategy was used in the pilot study in order to build rapport and

enable the conversation to flow in a direction that seemed relevant to the interviewee. The FLEs who participated in the study work in sales and customer service. Managers were also included as informants in order to broaden the understanding of the context of FLEs' motivation to align with promises and value propositions. The interviews with managers covered managers' perceptions of factors that, in their view, may foster and weaken FLEs' motivation to align with value propositions. An explicit strategic intent in the firm was to involve FLEs in the development of value propositions. Hence, this case setting was optimal for exploring FLE motivation for alignment since the topic was on the agenda, and space for alignment was deliberately created within the firm.

Drawing upon the data gathered during the pilot, the first action research process was conducted, with the practical aim to engage FLEs in development work by contextualising the 'First Choice' brand promise. In order to meet the research objective, for data-gathering purposes, the action research study applied Soft System Methodology (SSM), which is a qualitative action research methodology within management science (Checkland, 2000). SSM adopts a systems thinking and futures approach. This methodology draws upon constructivist assumptions in assuming that we can actively participate in creating our future, and is an organised way of tackling messy, real-life situations (Checkland, 2000). It sets out to solve real-life problems and departs from the future in clarifying current issues. The SSM guidelines that the study followed are learning about the problem, formulating relevant purposeful activity models, debating the situation, seeking changes that would both improve the situation and be regarded as desirable and culturally feasible from that debate, as well as accommodations between conflicting interests (in this case managers/employees) in search of actions that might improve the situation, and finally, taking action to bring about improvement (Checkland, 2000). This method is flexible in operating in cycles of experiences and purposeful action. The intention was to collect data in the form of FLEs' experience and use this data for the purpose of solving a real-life challenge, namely by engaging FLEs in development, contextualising the brand promise and developing value propositions accordingly. Altogether, 40 employees participated in four dialogic sessions (2 hours/session). During these sessions, the categorised material and the themes identified from the pilot study functioned as a point of departure for the dialogues. These sessions were opened by the Strategy Director to mark the importance of the process and to introduce the idea of employees participating in development work. These sessions followed the principles of dialogue in accordance with the

SSM outlines. The sessions were recorded and transcribed. Following the principles of actions research, a concluding session was carried out at the end of the process. The aim of the concluding session was to scrutinize the categorised and analysed material derived from the previous sessions. For the same purposes, the preliminary findings were presented for a management group consisting of ten managers from different sub-business units.

From 2007 to 2010, the second phase of the study was conducted. It consisted of personal interviews with FLEs and four value proposition workshops (approx. 1,5 hours/each) in which 20 FLEs participated as informants. The theme was a particular service concept that was being developed, and management wanted to include FLEs in the process. SMM-inspired workshops were conducted and the focus was mainly on considering what type of value propositions FLEs would suggest for this specific service concept, drawing upon the firm's main brand promise and based on FLEs' customer knowledge. More specifically, FLEs came up with suggestions on the content of value propositions and considerations of the alignment of the value propositions (being developed) to the brand promise, and discussed factors that FLEs experienced that would foster their motivation to align to these value propositions.

The third study phase conducted from 2014 to 2015 involved fifteen FLEs in a follow-up study with the aim to assess FLEs' motivation to align with the brand promise 'First Choice', and one of its sub-promises, 'Best service in the field'. The FLEs answered an open-end questionnaire on their experience of co-activity during two workshops. Based on prior analyses, initial categories had been established, that is co-activity and the content of the promises. These categories were further elaborated upon, both individually in writing prior to the workshops and as group work during the workshops.

Throughout the research process, one of the researchers had the opportunity to perform ethnographic-inspired research visits on the firm's premises, other than the actual interviews or workshops that were recorded and transcribed. These visits included participating in several internal firm meetings, such as on the purchase/implementation of new CRM systems, an annual sales training cruise, and other internal firm events, as well as ad hoc lunches with FLEs and managers, during which informal discussions occurred. This participation advanced the pre-understanding achieved throughout the process, as it offered an opportunity to scrutinize previously analysed data and the categories being developed at the case firm. Further, regular

meetings on the advancement of the research with a key informant (managerial), the process owner from the case firm, were carried out during and between the different phases throughout the process. These meetings were recorded and transcribed. This process provided systematic cooperation between the researcher and representatives of the case firm, which, according to Visconti (2010), is beneficial in case studies conducted in industrial settings. Cooperation fine-tunes reciprocal expectations on the research, the research experience is shared, and the knowledge that emerges may be disseminated throughout the process. The use of triangulation in data collection, which in this research consisted of interviews, action-based group sessions, observations and written documentation, ensured access to data gathered from various perspectives and reduced the likelihood of misinterpretation.

The informants for each phase of the study were chosen in cooperation with the process owner from the case firm. The key criteria were that the informants were FLEs (i.e. worked in customer service or sales) and were willing to participate as informants in the process. As for managers, directors and sales managers from three different SBUs were interviewed in the pilot phase and management representatives were interviewed for each phase of the study. To ensure the quality of the research, the abductively analysed findings were discussed with the informants in separate sessions at the end of each phase. At the end of the third phase, the owner and a member of the board took part in the findings.

3.2. Coding the Material and Data Analysis

The aim with case studies is ‘to present an “authentic” understanding of people’s experience’ (Ghauri, 2004: 119). All the interviews and dialogic sessions from the different phases of the study were transcribed (and the citations used were translated into English). The transcribed data were analysed as part of an iterative process to identify factors that affect FLEs’ motivation to align with value propositions. The units of analysis were 1) the identified factors of alignment motivation, that is all the issues FLEs indicated to relate to their motivation to align with value propositions and different aspects of the promises, namely the overarching brand promise, sub-promises and more specific value propositions; and 2) the aspects of motivation these identified factors related to, that is whether the identified factors referred to intrinsic or extrinsic aspects of motivation. Drawing upon motivation science, we anticipated the existence of multiple

motivational aspects, including aspects fostered by extrinsic means, such as monetary rewards, career advancement opportunities and security, intrinsic motivation aspects fostered by autonomy, the other-focused, prosocial or service aspects of motivation, and the combination of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation as described in SDT. Therefore, beside the first unit of analysis, or the factors that FLEs reported to foster and weaken their motivation, the study notes distinctions in different *aspects of motivation* as the other unit of analysis. This means that the identified factors are also discussed concerning the aspects of motivation they represent.

A constructivist grounded theory-inspired method was applied in the coding and categorisation of the data. This method represents an evolved version of grounded theory (GT) (Charmaz, 2000, 2008; Mills *et al.*, 2006), and strives to capture subjective experiences, which, through abstractions, are stated as theoretical statements. The ontological and epistemological stance of constructivist GT fits the purpose of action research; it draws upon traditional GT features and processes, but allows the researcher to adjust the process based on needs created by the advancement of the research, and the researcher's choices of ontological and epistemological stances. Constructivist GT does not assume one truth, but rather many realities to be discovered, and that these realities are embedded in action (Charmaz, 2000: 521). The purpose of the action research process in this study was to engage FLEs in value proposition and development and, following constructivist GT principles, FLEs' motivation to align was explored by capturing their subjective experiences.

The coding process that started in phase 1 scrutinised the material for conditions, interactions among actors, tactics and consequences. The initial codes were further scrutinised throughout the process, and issues that kept appearing formed the foundation of the working hypotheses. For example, one of the core categories fostering motivation to align (co-activity) was initially coded and categorised during phase 1. Drawing upon the empirical data, and following constructivist GT-inspired analysis (Fendt and Sach, 2008), this core category was first formulated as a working hypothesis, i.e. a reflection of the informants' experiences that the researcher grasped by being involved in the process, stating that, '*marketing ideas and promises that are not anchored in practices remain distant to FLEs*'. This working hypothesis was supported during the following phases of the study. In GT, making working hypothesis, i.e. 'tentative, provisional answers to questions are an essential part of the analysis process' (Strauss, 1989: 10-14). According to the

constructivist GT view, working hypotheses are contextual and represent people's construction of reality in a specific context (Charmaz, 2008). Hence, the findings represent the experiences of those involved in this specific context and are therefore not generalisable, which is not the aim of explorative case study research. Throughout the study, the data was analysed following the logic of the abductive action research process; the working hypothesis has also been scrutinised by the participants from the case firm, which strengthens the reliability of the proposed findings, and hence the contribution of the study.

Having access to the same case firm in multiple instances provided variability to the analysis and broadened the understanding achieved throughout the process. According to Ghauri (2004), this approach is favourable for studies that aim to create understanding. Further, being able to apply the approach longitudinally provides a processual understanding of the phenomenon, which, according to Ghauri (2004), advances the attempt to develop longitudinal explanations that track a phenomenon over time. The phases of the study were designed in such a manner that the phenomenon (motivation to align) explored in all phases had possibly advanced between the phases. The core category that emerged from the first phase of the study was *co-activity*, that is granting FLEs the agency to participate in promise development or, in other words, co-activity fostered FLEs' motivation to align to value propositions. The agency for co-activity was then granted to those FLEs who participated in the second phase of the study by inviting them to engage in the service concept development process. During the initial phase, FLEs' participation was considered favourable, but agency to participate was not inherent in the firm's *modus operandi*, so during the second phase, the FLE informants were specifically invited to participate in development. In other words, the motivation to align was explored from a slightly different point of departure in phases 1 and 2. The *modus operandi* with regard to employee participation in development work also advanced in the case firm over time since this was the articulated strategic intent.

The factors that weaken motivation were identified mainly during the first phase of the study, and verified during phase three. The focus in phase two was on co-developing and the informants were invited to do so. Hence, given this co-activity mode, the focus of the study was mainly on exploring additional factors that foster motivation. The participating FLEs enthusiastically discussed both the content of customers' value aspects, and how to communicate these value aspects to and with

customers. During phase three, in addition to the group discussions the informants' experiences with co-activity were assessed on a 7-point Likert scale. The scale assessed individual perceptions of whether the participants felt they could be co-actively involved in value proposition development (four items included in another questionnaire). The result shows an average of 4.4 for experienced co-activity. Although the sample is small and cannot be generalised to the organisation, the response rate of 100% gives a good indication of the perspective of this specific group.

Throughout the process, FLEs were more prone to discuss the factors that foster motivation and all in all, they seemed inspired by their work and motivated for customer work, as the motive to serve customers shows. FLEs' service motivation seemed to be strong. In general, they perceived their work environment as positive, and also emphasised that the firm attained good financial results. Further, they felt well-taken care of by their employer. Indeed, a lot of laughter was clearly noticeable when walking around the firm's premises, and a nice, easygoing and welcoming atmosphere, which the FLEs seemed to enjoy. Even if some issues that weaken motivation emerged in the discussions, the work mode was positive and constructive. The participants emphasised that recognising and improving these issues would foster motivation even more.

4. Findings

The findings revealed three core categories of factors that encourage FLEs to align with value propositions, and two categories of factors that weaken FLEs' motivation. The core categories contain explicating sub-categories.

4.2 Factors that Foster Motivation for Alignment

The factors that foster employee motivation to align with value propositions are 1) FLEs' co-activity in the process of developing promises and value propositions, 2) authentic promises, and 3) the mode and quality of communication.

Table 2 Factors that foster FLEs' motivation to align with promises and value propositions

Core category of factors that weaken motivation	Sub-category	Meaning	Aspect of motivation	Illustrative quote (phase of study Pn)
FLE Co-activity	<i>Agency to participate</i>	<i>Agency and ability to contribute with operational knowledge and experiences in developing value propositions</i>	Intrinsic, autonomy Extrinsic, structures (enabling process)	‘Everyone should be able to contribute with their experiences and perceptions... that bring energy. It is in practice that things get organised’. P1 ‘If people are allowed to be involved and participate in the development ... that it does not always come as already decided upon’ P1 ‘When we can participate it is transparent and we are responsible for what occurs in customer interaction’ P2
	<i>Awareness and understanding</i>	<i>Feeling of ownership of value propositions</i>	Intrinsic motivation, drive to engage in development	‘A forum for direct dialogue and discussions where you would be able to express directly what is wrong’ P1
	<i>Forum for exchanging ideas</i>	<i>Arena for dialogue and discussions</i>	Extrinsic motivation, structures, space for participation	‘It has been very good that we have been able to ventilate our experiences on these issues, this is good for us all. I have never previously been in meetings like these’. P2
Authentic promises	<i>The content of value propositions practice-driven value propositions</i>	<i>Congruency between what occurs in practice and what is promised to customers, i.e. focus on actual customer value creation and clearly defined value propositions that originate in customer interaction</i>	Intrinsic motivation, authenticity	‘How can we promise to be “the First Choice” when we do not really know customers’ processes, what when and how they need’. P1 ‘FLEs are the firm’s face towards customers, regardless of the situation ... In any situation you need to be able to act in a way that the customer leaves happy’. P3
	<i>Ownership of value propositions</i>	<i>An ‘others-focused’ drive to go the extra mile for customers</i>	Intrinsic, prosocial/service motivation	‘Perhaps we serve our customers too well, we even provide them with shoelaces if they wish, and we really pamper them?’ P1

	<i>Trustworthiness</i>	<i>Ability to walk the talk and uphold common norms of honesty and trustworthiness in customer interactions</i>	Intrinsic, service motivation driven by need for honesty Extrinsic, culture of honesty in the firm	'It's motivating to be able to live up to what we promise to customers because then things go smoothly and it makes customers satisfied. This also makes work nicer and thus motivating to keep promises'. P3
Mode and quality of communication	<i>Dialogic mode of internal communication</i>	<i>Communication that ensures creation of shared meaning of value propositions and managers who listen to FLEs' ideas</i>	Extrinsic motivation, structures and norms	'The manner in which the vision is communicated to us has a bit too much advertising language for the people who work (on operational level)'. P1 'We have a lot of information and a lot of papers all right, but no one is able to read all that stuff'. P1 'We need development sessions in focused meetings, not e-mail training'. P2
	<i>Appreciation and respect from managers for FLE ideas</i>	<i>Mode of communication that is free of hierarchical norms</i>	Extrinsic motivation, 'method'	'They should listen to the sales people. We know what is important to customers'. P1
	<i>Bottom-up infusion</i>	<i>Customer knowledge used for developing value propositions</i>	Extrinsic motivation, working modes, norms and structures Intrinsic autonomy	'In practice the customer gets promises delivered by us. Actually, we have a huge role in defining what is promised'. P3
	<i>External communication</i>	<i>Integration of FLEs' view on value proposition in advertising</i>	Extrinsic motivation, mode of external communication	'Let's not build in complicated elements that are not in line with what we actually do for our customers'. P2

4.2.1 FLE Co-activity in Development Work

Co-activity includes *agency to participate, awareness and understanding of promises and value propositions, having a forum for exchanging ideas, and appreciation from managers*. It denotes FLEs' interest and willingness to be involved in strategic issues, such as the development of value propositions, which are not directly related to their daily work. The informants stated that it would be both easier and more motivating to perform in line with what was being promised if those who kept the promises in practice could also influence what was being promised by having the *agency*

to participate in developing value propositions. They pointed out that discrepancies could occur between what was officially promised to customers (by management/marketing) and the value co-creation that occurred in customer interactions. The reason cited for such discrepancies was a lack of *awareness* among FLEs of what was actually promised, and a lack of individual and shared *understanding* about the actual meaning of the brand promise and its value propositions. In particular during phase 1 of the study, but even to some extent during phase 3, FLEs experienced the brand promise as somewhat fuzzy regarding its practical implications. In their view, the promise could basically mean anything, depending on individual interpretation. The promise was also experienced as ‘not present’ all the time in customer interactions because, to a varying extent, it lacked practical meaning for FLEs. Therefore, as FLEs pointed out, the agency to participate in the development of value propositions would not only make them aware of, and advance their understanding of, what was promised, but would also give them ownership of what was being promised.

Co-activity refers mainly to extrinsic motivation as it requires organizational structures and processes that enable employees the possibility to participate in developing value propositions. Such structures ensure agency for employees to be active co-developers of value propositions. Co-activity can also be described as an intrinsic motivation aspect as it has to do with employees’ wish to be able to contribute knowledge and expertise to the different aspects of promise work, which brings meaning to their work. The motive that in this context energizes purposive behavior is a feeling of meaningfulness as one has the possibility to contribute. Further, the motive also creates a willingness to strive to align one’s own work in customer interactions with the different types of value propositions that are made to customers.

Therefore, FLEs suggested the use of *promise forums* for not only traditional top-down information sharing, but the co-active development of value propositions and the meaning of promises. This would, in the view of FLEs, foster individual and shared understanding of promises and value propositions. In such forums, FLEs and managers would exchange ideas about the content of current and future promises. FLEs claimed that, in general, it would be highly motivating to discuss different aspects of promises, such as how promises and value propositions are stated, and whether ‘says equals does’. Further, FLEs thought that it would be optimal if they were allowed to elaborate explicitly upon the content of current brand promises and their practical

implications. The promise forums would also serve a purpose in contextualising current top-down promises. Such forums did not exist, and some FLEs claimed that prior to participating in phase 1 of this research, they had not participated in any meetings of a similar kind. In general, strategy kick-offs and launches of new concepts, products or campaigns that related to the current general brand promises, and/or included new aspects of the promises, were about informing FLEs of their content and the issues that could or would impact FLEs' customer work. During phase 1, FLEs felt that, based on tradition, they were only informed about management decisions, and thorough contextualisation was not usually on the agenda. Therefore, having face-to-face promise forums like those arranged during phase 1 of the study, where managers should also participate, could and probably would, in the view of FLEs, also *foster appreciation* among managers for FLEs' ideas. *A forum for exchanging ideas* is an essential extrinsic, structural aspect of motivation as it is required in order for co-activity to take place.

4.2.2 Authentic Promises

The second category, authentic promises, involves *the content of value propositions* -, *ownership of value propositions*, and *trustworthiness*. Authentic promises link closely to the idea of having the agency to participate in developing value propositions because co-activity does, in the view of FLEs, result in value propositions that suggest the kind of value to customers that is actually evident in practice during customer interactions.

FLEs reported that the *content of value propositions* based on existing practices is very important. They felt that with their involvement in developing value propositions, such as offers to customers, the content actually had an operational relevance that supported practice-driven customer value creation. In other words, such value propositions that originate from customer interaction practices are more authentic and easier to align with, and this in itself fosters motivation. Hence, authentic promises foster motivation because they are easier to live up to than diffuse, fuzzy abstract promises, such as brand promises that FLEs have only been informed of. Further, FLEs pointed out that the value propositions they are responsible for are inherently authentic and practice driven, and thereby easier to align with; therefore, such value propositions inherently foster motivation. Authentic promises also relate to an inherent need to serve customers well, which was common among the FLE informants. The willingness and interest to serve customers well was experienced by FLEs as a high priority issue, even if this meant deviating from value propositions crafted by

management. Consequently, FLEs did not want to break a promise, particularly a promise made to customers. This meant that FLEs found it easier to align with value propositions, which they had participated in developing, as this implied an inherent responsibility and perceived *ownership of the value propositions*. Such ownership in turn would, according to FLEs, be closely linked to *trustworthiness* of value propositions as another motivation factor. The consistency between customer expectations and the actual service performance was experienced as motivating. Hence, such trustworthiness would foster a positive motivation-performance spiral.

4.2.3. The Mode and Quality of Communication

The third core category, the mode and quality of internal communication, concerns the *internal information* about promises and customer strategies, *bottom-up infusion*, *respect for employee knowledge*, and how brand promises and value propositions are *communicated externally* to customers. FLEs stated that their work is facilitated with a sufficient amount of information, not too much and not too little. For example, a lot of information on the intranet is not always helpful if one does not know to look for it, or where and when to look. The brand promise statement as such was known to the informants, even if they experienced it as somewhat vague and fuzzy. However, the brand promise overarched many sub-promises that were communicated at different occasions in different ways, for instance, statements about new concepts and suggestions and projections of their value impact on customers' processes. When launching new products, the simplest form of promises, 'price promises', constituted important information for employees. Sometimes this information reached customers before employees were aware of the promises.

Employees reported that the fuzzier the promise was, the bigger a challenge it was to align with that promise. Hence, a fuzzier promise required more in terms of the quality of *internal communication*. Employees stated that the timing of the communication was a central factor in how they managed to align with the promises and perform accordingly. These, above discussed, closely interlinked factors all contributed to fostering motivation for aligning to value propositions. When these factors were 'activated' their interplay had a leveraging effect on employee motivation. When the content of the promises was expressed in a clear manner, and authentically reflected customer work practice, employees could easily align to the promises. This was

particularly the case if and when FLEs had the opportunity to co-actively participate in forming the value proposition statements, instead of just enacting imposed value propositions.

FLEs suggested that a *bottom-up infusion* of ideas be considered in the development of value propositions, ranging from general brand promises to more specifically articulated service promises, benefits, guarantees and so forth. FLEs felt that closer customer contact enhanced customer knowledge about the value customers obtained from offerings, suggesting that this kind of customer knowledge should be considered in all strategic work. Granting FLEs agency to participate in developing value propositions, and utilising their customer expertise, would result in propositions that are more authentic. In the view of FLEs, this process would facilitate a performance aligned with the proposed value, which FLEs experienced as motivating.

Appreciation and *respect* were deemed important in regard to motivation. Employees called for appreciation and respect of the work they do with customers in supporting customers' value creation. Respect in this context means that managers not only appreciate FLEs, but also pay attention to their ideas.

External communication links to bottom-up infusion in terms of what the firm actually communicates as official promises to current and potential customers, namely its current external marketing communication. Employees called for an infusion of actual value-enhancing aspects into the messaging instead of advertising jargon. FLEs suggested that focusing on the value-enhancing aspects of offerings that reflect what is actually provided to customers could result in more realistic promises. This focus could include the real value of the benefits that customers de facto receive from a specific service. Thus, the promises would be suggestions of the value impact that customers could expect. Instead of fancy advertising language, a more realistic approach in the wording of promises and value propositions would, in the view of employees, be easier to align to, and hence more motivating.

4.3 Factors that Weaken Employee Motivation for Alignment to Value Propositions

The two core categories that weaken FLE motivation are: 1) *An objectifying stance* towards employees, and 2) *Power struggle*.

Table 3 Factors that weaken FLEs' motivation to align with promises and value propositions

Core category of factors that weaken motivation	Sub-category	Meaning	Aspect of motivation	Illustrative quote (phase of study Pn)
Objectifying stance	<i>Paternalistic management mode</i>	<i>Imposing and order giving management style</i>	Intrinsic motivation (lack of) autonomy Extrinsic stance of management. Negative SDT	‘I do not really feel that I can participate in developing ... making the value propositions. It is a big organisation and they come from above’. P3
	<i>Confusing content</i>	<i>Confusion about practical implication of content of value propositions</i>	Extrinsic de-motivation, decisions made far from customer work. Challenges alignment to promises	‘Decisions are made on management level. They have good discussions and then they make decisions. Then they try to bring the decisions to the operational level and there is confusion on what the decision is about. And then there are confused activities and lack of understanding’. P1 ‘But what does it really mean when we tell such things to our customers?’ P1
Untapped knowledge	<i>Customer proximity is disregarded</i>	<i>Customer knowledge not utilized in development work</i>	Extrinsic motivation, no forums where employees could infuse their customer knowledge	‘We have enormous amounts of customer knowledge that is barely used at all in development work’
Power-struggle	<i>Internal Fuzz</i>	<i>Different agendas and contradicting goals within the organisation</i>	Intrinsic motivation to serve customers. FLEs have ‘practice power’, which they enact if considered necessary, due to proximity to customers. Negative SDT	‘Employees are in for this, but the management is a challenge, of course it is a question of power and such ...fuzz’.P1 ‘Let them keep doing their strategies and such, we take care of the customers, and eventually they (management) will calm down’. P1

4.3.1 Objectifying stance

Objectifying stance is the first core category of the factors that weaken FLEs’ motivation. It includes the sub-categories *Paternalistic management mode* and *Confusing content*. This stance

pertains to FLEs' lack of agency to participate in strategic issues, such as decision-making and development work. Because they were not being involved in development work, value propositions did sometimes feel abstract and confusing. Occasionally FLEs felt that managers had an objectifying stance towards them, and a paternalistic management mode in communicating about strategic issues, as FLEs were mainly just informed about the decisions managers made. In addition, they felt that their customers' knowledge and field experiences were not always sufficiently appreciated. The second sub-category was *Confusing content*. If the content of the value propositions felt unclear to FLEs, it was confusing to try to uphold their promised value. When promises were not articulated clearly with regard to their meaning and practical implications, the promises could easily be compromised. Confusion was experienced based on two aspects: 1) the content of promises, and 2) how promises were communicated internally at the firm.

4.3.2 Untapped knowledge

Untapped knowledge is a second core category. A significant weakening factor was that FLEs felt that their proximity to customers, and hence the customer knowledge they have because of this customer proximity, was not considered enough in the development of value propositions. FLEs felt that this was a waste of their knowledge since they have a thorough expertise on customers' needs, wants and expectations due to their often longstanding relationships with the customers. Their knowledge would in the view of the interviewed FLEs be valuable in developing proper, authentic value propositions, which consequently would be easier to align with. This was recognised and emphasised by many of the managers interviewed as well. Indeed, the managerial initiative to include FLEs in development is a sign of valuing FLEs' competences as an asset.

4.3.3 Power struggle

The third core category, *Power struggle*, consists of the sub-category *Internal fuzz*. This category relates to situations where employees would mobilize the power they possessed in regard to customer proximity and competences, and act in the manner they considered to be right, despite the official value propositions, particularly if the value propositions lacked practical anchoring, or if they were diffuse and confusing. This category relates mainly to the extrinsic aspect of

motivation when value propositions were experienced as confusing or imposed. FLEs felt they would still be motivated to serve customers, but not aligned to a specific, though confusing value proposition. However, power struggle relates also to intrinsic motivation, in particular an inherent motivation to serve others, which seems to be common among FLEs (Perry, 1996). This drives FLEs to serve customers despite organisational circumstances that may challenge this motivation, such as hierarchy and organisational power structures. This disconnect could result in *Internal fuzz*, the sub-category of power struggle which occurs in situations where customers' expectations of value creation, based on promises and value propositions, deviate from what actually occurs in customer interactions. As a result, FLEs would decide to ignore these propositions in favour of being able to better serve customers. This kind of power struggle could occur when FLEs relied upon their expertise in serving customers, even if it differed from managerial decisions. Accordingly, discourses may reveal informal power commodities. This means that if, for example, motives have internal hierarchies, the motive to obey managerial decisions ranks lower than the motive to serve customers well.

5. Discussion and Implications

Because of the evident need to explore in more depth FLEs' motivation to align with value propositions, we adopted an abductive approach to identify factors that foster and weaken FLEs' motivation to uphold value propositions in customer interactions. In the study, value propositions denote promises of potential future value creation for customers, as stated in a firm's brand promises and related value propositions. The field-based findings from the longitudinal research process of theoretical and empirical data are summarised in four motivation modes (Figure 1). The motivational modes indicate cognitive and emotional forces that drive FLEs to align with a firm's value propositions.

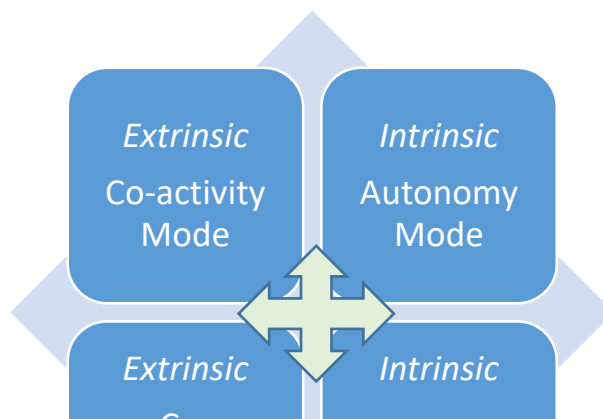


Figure 1. FLE motivational modes

The four motivational modes represent styles of working and function as the foundation for bottom-up strategizing and hence foster FLEs' motivation to align with value propositions. Two of the modes, *co-activity* and *co-workership*, are extrinsic in nature, but adopting these modes may foster both self-determined extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. The other two modes, *autonomy* and *authenticity*, are intrinsic in nature. These motivational modes may enable a firm to maintain a clear focus on bottom-up strategising. We define bottom-up strategising as *a perspective that grants FLEs agency to participate in the development of value propositions by emphasising the four motivational modes in practices.*

The four motivational modes require a paradigm shift towards including FLEs in strategising activities. Strategising or bringing ideas into practice (von Koskull *et al.*, 2014) traditionally falls within the domain of top management (Sundbo, 1997). Just as von Koskull *et al.* (2014) suggested including middle management in strategising, we extend the logic of strategising one step further towards operations and suggest the inclusion of FLEs in strategising practices. This recommendation is in line with the work of Santos-Vijande, Lopez-Sanches and Rudd (2015), who suggest FLE-driven innovation because FLEs can contribute valuable customer knowledge based on their experience with customer interactions. They posit that FLE-driven innovation transfers responsibility for change and value propositions to FLEs. Their view corresponds with the findings of this study, which identifies co-activity as one of the core categories that fosters FLE motivation to align with value propositions. The evaluation of the innovativeness of developing value propositions is beyond the scope of this study, but regardless of the level of innovativeness,

development work is involved in strategising. It was exactly this co-active participation in developing value propositions that the FLEs in our study expressed an interest in and found motivating.

The *co-activity mode* refers to a working mode that enables FLEs' knowledge integration. The co-activity mode is also supported by the motivation-weakening factors we identified. An objectifying stance, that is an experienced lack of agency to be co-actively involved in development that concerns FLEs' work in customer interactions, was one of the core weakening factors. The power struggle concerning decisions and value co-creation activities in customer interactions also weakened FLE motivation. On the contrary, co-activity seemed to induce a feeling of ownership of value propositions, and hence fostered motivation. Therefore, we suggest co-activity as a working mode that advances the integration of FLEs' knowledge into development work, and thereby allows customer interaction practices to shape decisions in developing value propositions. This in turn increases the probability of enacting authentic value propositions. Moreover, based on FLEs' experiences, a co-active working mode has a positive impact on both their awareness and understanding of value propositions, which, according to Mitchell (2002) and Xiong *et al.* (2013), are important parts of promise delivery. Further, the empirical findings show that co-activity enhanced the emotional buy-in of value propositions, which has also been established as an important part of promise delivery in previous research (Thomson *et al.*, 1999). Moreover, co-activity seemed to foster engagement in the development process, and thereby a commitment to value propositions, which, according to Thomson *et al.* (1999), are crucial aspects of emotional buy-in. Thus, FLE knowledge integration through deliberate co-activity enhances bottom-up strategising, which facilitates FLEs' agency to participate. Therefore, co-activity refers to the modal aspect of bottom-up strategising practices and a normative way of integrating FLEs' knowledge, which will advance FLEs' awareness and understanding of value propositions and their practical implications. We define co-activity in a value propositions context as: *A stance that emphasises creating space for FLE knowledge integration and proactive, practice-driven development decisions that advances firm internal awareness and understanding of value propositions.*

Co-worksip refers to firm-internal relations that foster motivation. It involves modes of communication and relating among FLEs and managers, as well as other firm internal relations.

The study indicated the significant role of the interrelationships between FLEs and management and how communication occurs. This is a crucial aspect of co-workership, an empirically anchored Scandinavian concept on organising, which emphasises an active and responsible co-worker role, and employees' relation to their work, colleagues, managers and employer at large (Tengblad, 2009). The concept has been developed in the Nordic countries (in particular in Sweden) during the past decades (Tengblad, 2007; Tengblad, 2009). Co-workership adopts a non-linear worldview, the treatment of employees as adults and modalities such as respect, appreciation, togetherness, prudence, trust, openness and honesty as its cornerstones (Tengblad, 2007; Wickelgren *et al.*, 2012). We posit co-workership as one of the extrinsic motivational modes, as the concept's core ideas emphasise a firm's internal manners of relating and communicating. This appreciation and respect for customer work, customer knowledge and respectful treatment fosters motivation. This finding is in line with previous research on strategising in a B2B context, which found that appreciation is indeed an important factor for managers to utilise to generate energy for strategic activities (Masalin, 2013). Based on our findings, we argue that appreciation is equally important for FLEs, as in their role as boundary spanners, they have to face disappointed customers during different kinds of service failures. Previous research notes that employees may be exposed to toxicity stemming from negative customer interactions (Stein, 2007), such as when customers experience value failure in the case of discrepancies between value promises, expectations that build on the firm's promises and actual value creation. Such toxicity can lead to a problematic experience and a downward spiral characterised by toxicity may ensue, affecting employees' relationships with both customers and employees (Stein, 2007). Furthermore, in line with Masalin (2013) who argues that appreciation is optimally expressed in face-to-face interactions, the findings of this study indicate the importance of expressing appreciation face-to-face. Especially the promise forums were perceived as motivating and inspiring by the FLEs, and a good vehicle for contributing ideas that make value propositions more authentic. They were also perceived as useful in providing an appreciative and respectful atmosphere to interact with colleagues and managers, and exchange ideas on the meaning of current promises and the development of new, authentic value propositions. Such forums would enhance co-activity and be a way of showing respect for FLEs' competences. The importance of appreciation is also supported by the SDT view on motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2006). Even if aligning with value propositions is experienced as an extrinsically motivated behavior, meaning employees feel they have to adopt behavior and

activities based on the value propositions developed by management, this practice could be autonomously motivating if employees receive appreciation for their competence in customer work. Applying the co-workership concept as a working mode means adopting dialogic communication modes in practice, where appreciation and respect are central. Furthermore, the structures in the related process need to be adjusted. This implies, among other things, reorienting from imposed top-down decisions to bottom-up, dialogic joint activities in strategising. We define co-workership in a value proposition context as *a mode that creates space for relating and communicating in a respectful, appreciative and dialogic manner, and thereby advancing FLEs participation in development of value propositions.*

In addition, the identified weakening factors also support the notion of co-activity and co-workership as working modes that foster FLEs' motivation. Occasionally, FLEs experienced they lacked agency to participate in the development of value propositions, and experienced an objectifying stance from management, represented by a paternalistic mode in everyday practices. This perception did seem to weaken FLEs' motivation to align with value propositions. However, even if they were exposed to these factors, FLEs would still do their best for customers, and go the extra mile because of their intrinsic service motivation. But they would do so in an extrinsically de-motivated mode based mainly on the 'inherent satisfaction of doing the activity' as described by Deci and Ryan (2000:70), meaning the motivation to serve their customers. This experience may eventually foster negative energies and harm customer value creation, both directly and indirectly. Therefore, applying co-activity provides FLEs with the agency to participate, and the core ideas of co-workership describe the kind of communication mode that will have a positive effect on FLEs' alignment motivation. These modes identify the means of extrinsic motivation that may also foster intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, the absence of information on what these modes stand for may weaken intrinsic motivation, which heightens the relevance of the concept in this context. Therefore, we suggest the use of co-activity and co-workership as a means to enhance the extrinsic motivation that may lead to self-determined extrinsic motivation, and will foster intrinsic service motivation.

In line with the works of Deci and Ryan (2000), the *autonomy mode* suggests support for FLEs' experiences of autonomy, here in particular in making customer-driven decisions both in customer interactions and in developing value propositions. Autonomy is supported by the extrinsic

motivational modes of co-activity and co-workship. The findings show that service motivation fills many promise-performance gaps in practice, such as broken promises or when FLEs felt uncertain or unaware of the practical implications of value propositions. In such cases, FLEs were motivated by serving customers, even if this service required deviating from management-driven value propositions. In the face of uncertainty, FLEs would also make autonomic decisions concerning whether to follow official value propositions or, rather, to follow their own judgment and deviate from the propositions in order to ensure value creation for customers. Eventually, such situations may lead to power struggles and ultimately, FLEs would often do what they deemed to be favourable for the customer's value creation. However, when FLEs are engaged in development work and their autonomy is encouraged, their motivation to align with value propositions is inherently fostered. Adapted to a value proposition context, autonomy denotes a *mode that encourages FLEs to contribute with self-directed and practice-informed contributions to the development of value propositions*.

Authenticity necessitates the ability of FLEs to evaluate the authenticity of value propositions, meaning that the value offered to customers is, in fact, possible to uphold during customer interactions. It draws upon the idea of an individual's elaboration of the value and truthfulness of the object in a context (Nilsonne, 2004, Rowan, 2001), in this case the individual FLE's elaboration of value propositions (in relation to serving customers in customer interactions), and whether value propositions are indeed experienced as relevant and meaningful on an individual level. Thus, individual elaboration of value propositions foster the authenticity of value propositions.

Authenticity emphasises both the authentic content of value propositions and FLEs' individual evaluations of value propositions in relation to their own value standards. In practice, FLEs would evaluate value propositions, and follow their intrinsic motivation to serve the customer in line with the approach they perceived to be best for them. Thereby the authenticity of value propositions is advanced, as well as FLEs individual intrinsic experience of authenticity. Again, a deviation from the official value proposition could occur because of FLEs' proximity to customers and the 'customer power' and knowledge they possess, even if this meant a deviation from the official value propositions and firm-internal plans made by management. However, in the long run, both FLEs' motivation and customer value creation suffer from such value proposition deviations because they create confusion, which is a negative state. Therefore, both autonomy and

authenticity modes are central to the intrinsic motivation to align with value propositions. Adapted to this specific value proposition context, we define authenticity as a *mode that supports individual evaluation in regard to the meaningfulness of value propositions through emotional and cognitive introspection*.

Several implications can be drawn from the longitudinal study. The theoretical implications of the study relate to the importance of intrinsic motivation. The intrinsic motivational modes, autonomy and authenticity, relate to what current motivation research describes as service- or other-driven motivation, which is inherently intrinsic in nature (Park and Ward 2012; Winter, 2009). Autonomy and authenticity are two related but distinct aspects of intrinsic service motivation. The extrinsic motivational modes, co-activity and co-workership provide sufficient structures in regard to working modes and stance, and thereby support the formation of individual, intrinsic motivation. These findings support studies on job stress that have emphasised intrinsic motivation, for example, recent research showing that the meaningfulness of work and social connectedness are related to job satisfaction (Kraft *et al.*, 2018). The results of this study suggest a need to deconstruct the managerial discourse on employee motivation, which is currently both general and undefined, and to move towards a contextual holistic view of motivation that considers employees' experiences. It is argued that motives are activated in relation to an 'object' or an issue. Therefore, we argue that to foster FLEs' motivation to align with value propositions, the main issue to consider is co-activity, or granting agency and creating a space for FLEs' active participation in *bottom-up strategising*. This in turn will stimulate intrinsic motivation. The inclusion of FLEs in the development of value propositions requires reframing management and leadership, adopting a stance that appreciates the fact that FLEs are intrinsically and autonomously motivated. The findings indicate that the modern employee rarely finds being managed or led based on a traditional top-down stance and mode to be motivating.

Moreover, the study indicates the importance of focusing on FLE perspectives with regard to strategic issues, such as value propositions. Contrary to established norms, the study highlights the need for FLE participation in strategising as active subjects by suggesting and emphasising a bottom-up strategising mode. This view deviates from the traditional managerial top-bottom approach with its established discourse on efficiency and economy, and suggests a deconstruction of traditional managerial discourse. The current views on management, including on how to

motivate employees, reinforce current managerial hegemony towards employees. This hegemony places employees in a subordinate position, which weakens not only intrinsic motivation, but may do so even in regard to possible autonomous extrinsic self-motivation. This is not supportive of FLEs' motivation to align with value propositions. In contrast, our findings suggest that extrinsic motivation based on autonomy and authenticity can generate ownership of and alignment to strategic issues. The findings thus support recent research that emphasises the crucial role of organisational input and managerial support in developing value propositions (Kienzler *et al.*, 2018). The verb 'strategising', which pertains to practices of strategic work (von Koskull *et al.*, 2014), is useful in this context. Therefore, we suggest including FLEs who have the knowledge, power and willingness to contribute in creating authentic value propositions in the strategising process. Employees who work in customer interaction enjoy an inherent strategic position in terms of their role as boundary spanners (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2012) and part-time marketers (Gummesson, 1997; Grönroos, 2011) in being close to customers and having insight into customers' value creation processes. FLEs can contribute their detailed knowledge about customers' views on value formation. Such employee input facilitates the development of value propositions that may be more coherent in customers' value formation and, from the FLEs' perspective, are more motivating and easier to align with..

The managerial implications of the study indicate a call to question the common hierarchical approach in practice to the development of value proposition as a task reserved mainly for top management. Our findings indicate the detrimental effects of the separation between the top management team that formulates the value propositions and the FLEs who operationalise these promises. The creation of value propositions solely by top management does not advance FLEs' motivation for alignment, and will ultimately affect customers' value creation in a negative manner. Such a hierarchical stance is inherently paternalistic and deprives employees of the agency to participate in the development of their own work in customer interactions. To improve employees' willingness and motivation to align their activities to adhere to value propositions, it is important that managers support employees' intrinsic motivation. This is best accomplished by improving FLEs' understanding of the overall vision of the company, removing hierarchical boundaries and power imbalances, and improving dialogic communication between top management and frontline personnel. The findings thus provide insight into factors to consider when constructing the actual alignment process in a manner that will advance a shared

understanding of value propositions and foster FLEs' motivation to align. An important managerial implication emerge from the motivational modes that result from and build on bottom-up strategizing. The closely interlinked motivational modes all contribute to fostering FLEs' motivation to align with value propositions. When these modes are 'activated', their interplay has a leveraging effect on FLEs' motivation to align. When the content of value propositions is clearly expressed, and authentically reflect customer work practice, FLEs can easily align with the promise, in particular when FLEs co-actively participate in developing the value propositions. A clear focus is needed in bottom-up strategising, and the suggested motivational modes are helpful in this quest. It seems evident that extrinsic and intrinsic motivational modes do interact. Following the logic of SDT cited by Ryan and Deci (2006), the line between the two modes may be blurred as extrinsic motives may indeed become intrinsically regulated. Regardless of the type of motivation that will be fostered on an individual level, the recommended motivational modes will induce FLEs' ownership of value propositions, and hence inherently convey motivation.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study is based on a single case conducted in a specific industry and therefore does not allow for generalisations. However, the aim in this kind of explorative, qualitative research is 'to develop critical work that enhances societal issues' (Alasuutari, 1999: 234) and further the understanding of a phenomenon (Yin, 1994), which functions as a component of theory construction. The findings from this study function as a point of departure for exploring FLEs' motivation to align with brand promises and value propositions in another B2B context. This study aimed to identify factors that foster motivation. In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the mechanisms that underpin motivation in this specific value proposition context, further exploration of FLEs' experiences in a wider variety of settings is required. Exploring the factors that affect FLEs' motivation to align with brand promises and value propositions in another context, such as the manufacturing industry or ICT sector, will facilitate the advancement of a higher-order understanding of FLE motivation in a B2B setting. Factors that affect motivation are not only contextual, but may be very subtle, fluctuating and individual. The motivation to align with brand promises and value propositions consists of intrinsic psychological processes combined with social, contextual and material factors to which employees respond individually. Therefore, more

in-depth individual interviews covering a wider sample are required, followed by an exploration of the bottom-up strategising concept to be verified by a quantitative approach.

The study focused on the FLE perspective on the motivation to align with value propositions. Additional insight on this perspective was achieved by exploring managers' views of the employees' motivation. Further research can take a dyadic approach, wherein managers and FLES on the same teams are asked to evaluate the process of delivering brand promises and value propositions, and the challenges they experience in the process. The findings made it clear that bottom up strategising, meaning FLE participation in the development of value propositions, creates a deeper understanding of and motivation to align with the proposed value. Further research is needed to explore the bottom-up approach of such strategising, especially in relation to the potential discrepancies between FLEs' understanding of operative issues at the customer contact level and top management's strategic visions for the overarching brand promise. This research will advance the creation of customer interaction-driven, reciprocal value propositions, as suggested by Ballantyne *et al.* (2011). Moreover, a deeper theoretical understanding of different levels of promises and value propositions, their systematic alignment and the operational implications is required. To conclude, the longitudinal study provided several interesting avenues for further research, and supported the notion that involving FLEs in strategising is important in creating and delivering successful value propositions.

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