Creating and Sustaining Stakeholder Emotional Resonance with Organizational Identity in Social Mission-Driven Organizations

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CREATING AND SUSTAINING STAKEHOLDER EMOTIONAL RESONANCE WITH ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY IN SOCIAL MISSION-DRIVEN ORGANIZATIONS

ABSTRACT

How do senior managers of social mission-driven organizations build and sustain stakeholders’ emotional resonance with organizational identity beliefs over time in the face of repeated existential threats? This is an important question, given the dependence of many such organizations on external stakeholders who provide the resources necessary for survival. In this paper, we investigate the case of Solidum, a philanthropic organization devoted to poverty causes. Drawing on ethnographic, interview and archival data over 20 years, we develop a process model showing how senior managers may create and sustain stakeholder emotional resonance through three practices of emotional resonance work: building emotional bridges, enrolling stakeholders in collective soul-searching and materializing an appealing identity symbol. We show that stakeholder emotional resonance needs to be continually renewed and reshaped in the face of ongoing challenges associated with macro-organizational trends and the routinization of existing practices that can result in the dissipation of emotional resonance over time. The paper contributes to the literature on organizational identity maintenance by drawing attention to the active managerial work required to sustain stakeholder emotional resonance over time to allow mission-driven organizations to survive and prosper.

It is well known that social mission-driven organizations such as non-profits, cooperatives, social enterprises, and philanthropic organizations often experience tensions between the pursuit of their social mission and economic imperatives (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014; Jacobs, Kreutzer, & Vaara, 2020; Smith & Besharov, 2019), potentially leading to what has been known as ‘mission drift,’ (Ebrahim, Battilana, & Mair, 2014; Jones, 2007), i.e., the dilution of their ‘raison-d’être’ in order to respond to economic pressures.

Perhaps ironically, critical to an organization’s ability to sustain its social mission and core identity over the longer term is the ongoing commitment and engagement to that identity by key stakeholders (e.g., clients, funders, donors), on whom the organization also depends for financial resources. For example, Jacobs et al. (2020) reveal how a dominant managerial mindset at UNICEF that neglected the organization’s children’s advocacy mission ultimately led to accusations of financial mismanagement from whistleblowers, undermining donor trust and resulting in a financial crisis. Cloutier and Ravasi (2020) suggest that alignment between elements
defining a non-profit’s identity (whether oriented around a category of activity, or a particular clientele) boosts funders’ confidence and ensures longer term survival.

In other words, the maintenance of the organization’s social mission depends critically on whether its expressed organizational identity ‘resonates’ with the stakeholders who support it, where the notion of ‘resonance’ is defined as “[matching or alignment] with the audience’s beliefs, values, aspirations, or ideas” (Giorgi, 2017: 712). Giorgi (2017) further argues that ‘resonance’ has both cognitive and emotional dimensions, with emotional resonance associated with stakeholder identification likely to be particularly important in the case of philanthropic organizations where people give to causes that touch them emotionally.

Scholars have noted the importance of relations with external stakeholders in sustaining organizational identity over time (Hampel, Tracey, & Weber, 2020; Scott & Lane, 2000), while Howard-Grenville, Metzger and Meyer (2013) pointed to the role of emotional elements in identity maintenance. However, to our knowledge, no studies have unpacked the processes by which social mission-driven organizations create and sustain stakeholder emotional resonance with their organizational identities over long periods, especially in contexts of repeated economic pressures and identity threats. Given the probable significance of emotional resonance for these organizations’ long-term survival as social mission-driven organizations, this is an important concern. We therefore ask: How do senior managers of social mission-driven organizations build and sustain stakeholders’ emotional resonance with organizational identity beliefs over time in the face of repeated existential threats?

To answer this question, we studied the case of Solidum, a philanthropic organization devoted to poverty causes in a metropolitan area. By examining three successive periods of turbulence associated with ongoing existential threats over a period of 20 years, we investigated
the emotion-laden practices through which senior managers responded to pressures exerted by
stakeholders, notably large corporate donors. Based on observation, interview and archival data,
we develop an inductive process model of the ongoing ‘emotional resonance work’ (our concept)
engaged in by senior managers in interaction with central stakeholders to sustain emotional
resonance around the notion of a ‘caring’ identity, despite repeated challenges.

The model highlights three inter-related practices that together promote stakeholder
emotional resonance: ‘building emotional bridges,’ (labeled ‘bridging’ for short) ‘enrolling in
collective soul-searching,’ (or ‘enrolling’) and ‘materializing an appealing identity symbol’
(‘materializing’). Specifically, the practice of ‘building emotional bridges’ involves seeding
emotional resonance among central stakeholders through direct immersion in mission activities,
contributing to their identification with the organization and its mission. Practices of ‘enrolling in
collective soul-searching’ involves deeply engaging these stakeholders in sharing worries about
perceived existential threats, implicating them in deliberations, and building a sense of a common
purpose. Finally, ‘materializing an appealing identity symbol’ involves articulating emotionally
appealing symbols of organizational identity that facilitate the propagation of emotional resonance
to a wider community.

Importantly, we also show that stakeholder emotional resonance needs to be continually
renewed and reshaped in the face of ongoing challenges associated with macro-organizational
trends and the routinization of existing practices of bridging, enrolling and materializing, resulting
potentially in the dissipation of emotional resonance over time. Thus, the renewal of stakeholder
emotional resonance requires repeated stakeholder enrolment in soul-searching activities, the
materialization of identity symbols that can regenerate emotional appeal, and novel approaches to
building emotional bridges that can draw in new stakeholders, while sustaining resonance with
others. Since the three practices of bridging, enrolling and materializing each have distinct rhythms, they may fall out of sync over time, potentially leading to moments of renewed existential threat, as we see empirically in our case history.

With this study, we contribute to the literature on organizational identity, and in particular to the body of work examining how organizational identities can be sustained over time. In addition, we contribute to the understanding of the role of stakeholder relations in organizational identity dynamics by focusing on the practices of stakeholder emotional resonance work that allow social mission-driven organizations to sustain their core identities, and therefore ongoing support from the stakeholders on whom they depend for survival.

ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY SUSTAINABILITY AND STAKEHOLDER RESONANCE

Social mission-driven organizations, by which we refer to organizations focused on pursuing a mission aimed at improving social outcomes, face both survival advantages and disadvantages when compared with for-profit counterparts. On the positive side, their missions serve to “rally, engage, and enroll workers, volunteers and donors” (Minkoff & Powell, 2006: 591), particularly when they are anchored in clearly expressed organizational identities (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2020). Less advantageously, many of these organizations must deal with increasingly competitive environments in which they are pushed to become more ‘business-like’ (Sanders & McClellan, 2014), while lacking experience and resources needed to succeed in commercial contexts (Young, 2001). Such external threats may render them vulnerable to identity tensions (Smith, Knapp, Barr, Stevens, & Cannatelli, 2010) or even closure should their missions no longer be considered relevant (Cannon & Kreutzer, 2018). Ceding to financial or other pressures from key stakeholders may lead social mission-driven organizations to experience mission drift (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Jacobs et al., 2020). As they navigate the array of structural and strategic
choices open to them, these organizations benefit from clarity surrounding their organizational identities in order to provide internal guidance (Young, 2001). The ability to develop and especially sustain a core identity that balances the needs of different principal stakeholders is thus a priority for such organizations (Ebrahim et al., 2014).

To situate our study, we first review research that has examined how organizational identity is sustained over time. We then hone in on work that has focused on relations with external stakeholders in identity dynamics, and in particular, on the role of emotions.

**Sustaining core organizational identity**

As the shared answer to the question ‘who are we, as an organization?’, organizational identity can provide an internalized ‘rudder’ around what an organization stands for in the heads and hearts of its members (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000), helping to frame organizational decisions and actions (Oliver, 2015). Organizational identity was originally conceptualized as an organization’s central, distinctive and enduring characteristics (Albert & Whetten, 1985), with the word ‘enduring’ implying sustainability over time, by definition. Indeed, studies have shown how organizational identity can persist and orient cognition even in contexts of strategic or competitive threat (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Tripsas, 2009).

However, a growing body of work in the social constructionist tradition interprets organizational identity as an ongoing accomplishment or process of becoming (Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012) rather than something fixed that an organization ‘has’. From this viewpoint, the ‘enduringness’ of organizational identity takes the form of ‘continuity’ and ‘adaptive instability’ rather than stasis (Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, & Corley, 2013; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). From this perspective, efforts taken by organizations to sustain their identities are an important element of ‘organizational identity work,’ defined as the “cognitive, discursive, and behavioral processes in which individuals engage to create, present, sustain, share and/or adapt organizational
identity” (Kreiner, Hollensbe, Sheep, Smith, & Kataria, 2015) [emphasis added]. Work to sustain organizational identity can involve connecting the past with the present (Golant, Sillince, Harvey, & Maclean, 2015), or intertwining long and short time horizons (Schultz & Hernes, 2020). Organizational members may reach into their cultures and pasts to find themes that will resonate with present needs (Ravasi & Phillips, 2011; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Schultz & Hernes, 2013), although at times historical projects can be ‘forgotten’ in order to sustain an appealing organizational identity (Anteby & Molnár, 2012).

Organizational identity work can also be highly politicized (Jacobs et al., 2020; Watson, 2016), and sustaining identity can thus involve bridging tensions between competing visions. For example, Kreiner et al. (2015) found that church leaders’ responses to the nomination of a gay bishop led to tensions concerning what was truly central and distinctive, testing the ‘elasticity’ of identity to accommodate differences. Ashforth and Reingen (2014) described how tensions related to an identity schism between idealists and pragmatists in a food cooperative contributed to the persistence of a hybrid identity, while political processes fed into how UNICEF reconstructed its identity following a breach (Jacobs et al., 2020).

Internal political debates concerning organizational identity sustainability are also influenced by external stakeholders. Organization members can seek to formulate and present attractive images of their organizations to stimulate the identification of stakeholders (Scott & Lane, 2000), including potential merger partners (Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, & Thomas, 2010). Media-based rankings have been found to tempt business schools to focus on image over ‘substance’ (Gioia & Corley, 2002), while media reports of homeless people sleeping in bus stations impacted the Port Authority’s image and ultimately its shared organizational identity (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). In times of crisis, organizational members’ broader affiliations or professions may also
influence how they see and potentially identify with their organization (Glynn, 2000). Yet, we have fewer studies tracing how such stakeholder influences may be managed over long time periods, to sustain organizational identity.

While many studies of organizational identity maintenance work have emphasized more cognitive tactics (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2020; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996), the importance of emotional content in identity and identification has led to calls for further study of the emotional aspects of organizational identity work (Kreiner & Murphy, 2016). Howard-Grenville, Metzger and Meyer’s (2013) study of how community leaders orchestrated emotional experiences to resurrect a faded collective identity is of great interest here. In organizations driven by strong social missions, the emotional side of organizational identity work may be expected to take on even greater significance, meriting further focused attention.

**Stakeholder emotional resonance**

In a classic conceptual article, Scott and Lane (2000) argued that organizational identity research requires a stronger focus on ‘manager-stakeholder interaction.’ Organizations depend heavily on their external stakeholders for resources and survival, and conversely stakeholders may depend on the focal organization to achieve their goals. This mutual influence shapes the organizational identity of both parties (Harquail & Brickson, 2012). For example, for-profit organizations may collaborate with non-profit or social mission-driven organizations to create and leverage their social capital (Brickson, 2007). In return, those organizations must offer identity content that is attractive enough for the for-profit organization to support (Harquail & Brickson, 2012). Yet, as noted above, conforming unreflexively to external stakeholder’s interests in the short term can also undermine the identity of the non-profit and divert its mission (Ebrahim et al., 2014). Thus, while interactions between stakeholders and the organization may influence how organizational identity is built and negotiated (Scott & Lane, 2000), the way this process plays out
remains unclear—especially with regard to sustaining core organizational identity beliefs over long periods of time for an established organization. In order to develop the theoretical grounding to investigate these processes, we build here on the notion of ‘stakeholder emotional resonance.’ Note that although we introduce the concept here, its importance emerged initially through inductive analysis of our case study.

Drawing on the social movements literature on framing, Giorgi (2017) defines the ‘emotional resonance’ of a ‘frame’ (i.e., the packaging and organization of information) as an alignment of the ‘felt’ with the desire, passion and aspirations of a target audience. This is different from ‘cognitive resonance,’ which focuses on a ‘thinking’ alignment with the central understandings and beliefs of the audience. Robnett (2004) suggests that emotional resonance does not imply a single emotion, but an ‘emotion package’ experienced by a target audience. Broadly, resonance is what promotes receptivity of a frame by a target audience (Snow & Benford, 1988), and emotional resonance is considered a key element in generating desired outcomes from that audience, such as employee commitment (Giorgi, 2017) or the adoption of new technologies (Raffaelli, Glynn, & Tushman, 2019). In our research, we draw on the notion of emotional resonance originally derived from the social movement and framing literature to apply it explicitly to organizational identity beliefs, while the notion of ‘stakeholder emotional resonance’ designates external organizational stakeholders as the target audience.

The promotion of emotional resonance with audiences is an example of an emotional influence strategy, where one seeks to arouse and regulate the emotional states of the audience in order to achieve goals (Hambrick & Lovelace, 2018; Huy & Zott, 2019; Lok, Creed, DeJordy, & Voronov, 2017; Maitlis, Vogus, & Lawrence, 2013). As such it involves cognitive processes, such as cognitive change or reappraisal, but the end result is the emotional state generated in the target
audience (Gross, 1998; Raffaelli et al., 2019). Emotional resonance ‘shakes’ and ‘unfreezes’ the existing feelings of the audience and pushes them to action (Giorgi, 2017). When resonance is absent, it can promote disengagement and disinterest from the target audience, which could result in an organizational identity challenge. As stakeholders are the key ‘audience for organizational identity’ (Scott & Lane, 2000), stakeholder emotional resonance can be an important lever in the management of organizational identity. However, given the lack of studies on this topic we know little about how it occurs.

That said, hints are provided by social movement and institutional scholars who have focused for example on how audience identity can be a lever to increase frame resonance (Jones & Massa, 2013; Massa, Helms, Voronov, & Wang, 2017). Thus, in a study of wineries in Ontario, Massa et al. (2017) found that regional identities among target audiences enabled emotional resonance that transformed these audiences into evangelists. In addition, Barberá-Tomás, Castelló, de Bakker and Zietsma (2019) showed how the use of shocking visual images could incite collective identification around social causes promoted by an activist movement in a process that they call emotional symbolic work.

While they do not explicitly address the issue of stakeholder emotional resonance, organizational identification scholars have also provided insights into the relationship between organizational identity and both internal stakeholder (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Petriglieri, 2015) and external stakeholder emotions (Hampel et al., 2020). Giorgi (2017), indeed, argues that identification is a key mechanism underpinning emotional resonance. Identification is seen as a ‘process of becoming’ (Petriglieri, 2015; Pratt, 1998), in which emotions play a role. Individuals are identified when their self-concept matches that of the organization. However, this relationship is not static and can wax and wane. Several studies have thus explored identification management
practices following breakdowns, for example following scandals that threaten stakeholder identification (Eury, Kreiner, Treviño, & Gioia, 2018; Petriglieri, 2015), or in the case of Hampel et al. (2020) a strategic pivot that disrupted stakeholders’ initial identification with a new venture. When such events occur, they create inconsistencies that generate strong negative or ambivalent emotional reactions from stakeholders, leading temporarily to deidentification or ambivalent identification. These studies have suggested that organizations can rebuild identification through emotional practices, such as providing information that elicits positive emotions (Petriglieri, 2015), evoking past-oriented and future-oriented positive emotions to neutralize current negative emotions (Eury et al., 2018) or by creating a ‘shared emotional narrative’ (Hampel et al., 2020) to show that the identity breakdown event was not intentional, and that repairs are underway.

Finally, Howard-Grenville et al.’s (2013) study of identity resurrection in the town of Eugene Oregon showed how community leaders’ creation of emotionally charged experiences that reconnected community members with a glorious past helped to revive a largely forgotten community identity. These studies confirm the importance of emotional resonance in mobilizing target audiences, and offer ideas about how this may be achieved in specific moments. However, none explore how mission-driven organizations might sustain stakeholder emotional resonance with organizational identity beliefs over long periods in the face of repeated threats. This is the focus of our study.

METHODS

Research setting

Solidum and its causes. We studied ‘Solidum’ (pseudonym), a philanthropic organization providing poverty alleviation assistance to people in a large North-American city (pseudonym: CapitalCity). Solidum was set up as a public foundation providing efficient mediation between large (mostly corporate) donors and community organizations. Each year, Solidum invested more
than $50 million in a broad portfolio of social problems related to poverty, including school drop-outs, isolated single mothers, family violence, food security, homelessness, social isolation of the elderly, etc. Solidum did not intervene directly in the field; rather, it supported a 350-strong network of small community organizations, funded on a long-term basis.

Solidum operates autonomously, with its own Board of Directors of about 20 members—mainly senior business and community leaders serving on a volunteer basis—and a leadership team consisting of five senior and eight middle managers, and roughly 100 employees. All strategic decisions are taken internally by the top management team and volunteer-staffed governance bodies.

While collecting donations and distributing them were Solidum’s principal activities, its need to assess the governance and effectiveness of its beneficiary community organizations pushed Solidum to become a major actor in dealing with social problems. Its causes were described as ‘low intensity’ but ‘enduring,’ requiring compassionate caring which became Solidum’s core value and a marker of its identity. However, the relative lack of visibility of its causes exposed Solidum to an enduring struggle for survival in the face of competition from more immediately appealing causes such as children’s illnesses or disaster relief.

**Corporate leaders as central stakeholders.** Solidum’s central stakeholders are its donors, and in particular corporate leaders. Corporations played a key role in Solidum’s creation. In the 1960s and 1970s, corporate leaders across CapitalCity grew frustrated in having to deal with multiple funding requests from various community organizations. They requested that community organizations consolidate their efforts, ultimately leading several of the largest entities to merge and form Solidum. Solidum was highly dependent on these corporations as they accounted for some 80% of the funds it collected each year. Most fundraising occurred during a
2-3 month annual campaign in workplaces across the city, managed by an annual fundraising campaign board co-chaired by two influential Chief Executives (CEOs) from CapitalCity’s business community. These CEOs in turn recruited another 200 corporate leaders, subdivided by industry (e.g. energy, transport, technology). The campaign board had a ‘major donors’ division including the CEOs of 30 top corporations responsible for over 50% of the funds raised. These donors served as an interface between Solidum and the business community, and they were crucial in mobilizing an additional more than 1000 CapitalCity corporations during Solidum’s annual fundraising campaign. These companies, in turn, mobilized employees who ran the Solidum campaign in their workplaces. In total, more than 10,000 volunteers (including corporate leaders and employees) participated in the fundraising campaign each year.

Sometimes, corporate leaders chose not to participate in Solidum’s campaign, preferring to support specific causes such as children’s health. To encourage their participation, Solidum offered corporate leaders roles in its governance committees, including its administrative, donations and social investment boards. As a result, many played an important role in shaping Solidum’s history, strategy, and organizational identity. Our research began in 1997 as Solidum faced a major new trend in its philanthropic environment: ‘designation’, which as we will show later challenged its relationship with corporate stakeholders and potentially threatened its organizational identity.

**Data collection**

This study drew on three main sources of data including 181 interviews, 117 meeting observations and numerous documents gathered over a 20-year period, with two waves of intensive data collection (1997-2003 and 2011-2016), and two follow-up data collection efforts for the periods 2004-2010 and 2018-2021. A summary of data sources is provided in Table 1.
Researcher roles: An insider-outsider approach. The study began as an action research project, then evolved into a classic ethnographic study. In October 1997, the second author was recruited by Solidum’s management team to provide tools to assist with their strategic planning. The team agreed that the initiative could be framed as ‘action research,’ because they were interested in having university scholars assist them in their reflections, and provide an academic outlook on their situation. The approach was thus one of ‘collaborative sensemaking’ (Luscher & Lewis, 2008), in which the researcher helped managers to make sense of their environment, while at the same time using the data collected for theory building purposes (Eden & Huxham, 1996). This initial action research project involved interviewing stakeholders, producing reports summarizing their views, holding meetings with internal employee groups, and running training sessions to fuel Solidum management team’s own reflections. The second author did not provide solutions or specific action-oriented advice, but rather conveyed the results of the information gathered along with preliminary interpretations, while also reacting to the management team’s sensemaking and conclusions in meetings.

At the end of the action research project in 2000 following Solidum’s adoption of a new mission statement, the second author requested and obtained agreement from the management team to continue the study but in the role of ethnographer and participant-observer. Thus, he attended key strategic meetings, and agreed to be involved as a volunteer member of some operational committees between 2000 and 2011. During this period, no specific theoretical concern guided the research, which was broadly focused on the dynamics and governance of a volunteer-based organization. In 2012, he was invited to become a board member and held this position until 2018. By 2012, he was a familiar figure in the organization, and was on friendly terms with managers and professionals. As such, the second author played the role of an insider researcher,
who had developed a deep understanding of the context and gained privileged access to the emotional atmosphere of the organization.

In 2011, the first author joined the study as a non-participant observer, attending strategic meetings and interviewing Solidum’s managers, employees and key stakeholders. The other two authors joined the project in 2016 as ‘outsider’ researchers who were given access to the data and participated in analysis. Their fresh perspective was useful to balance, and occasionally challenge, the views of the other two researchers who were closer to the organization (Louis & Bartunek, 1992).

**Observations.** As an action researcher and participant observer, the second author took extensive notes in management meetings. Later, as a board member he generally remained silent in meetings. As a long time friend of Solidum and a reference for historical events, his academic perspective was appreciated. However, to avoid undue influence, he shied away from initiative or idea leadership. From 2011 on, the first author began attending top management meetings as a non-participant observer, taking extensive hand-written notes. Over these periods, both researchers were systematically invited to all important strategic meetings, enabling us to observe the most significant ones. The long immersion of both researchers produced 117 extended meeting observations (see Table 1), a key source of data in our analysis.

**Semi-structured interviews.** We carried out two waves of intensive semi-structured interviews and a follow-up wave for a total of 181 interviews over 20 years. We interviewed all important internal and external actors. The latter were generally identified by Solidum managers as important stakeholders and opinion-makers. Researchers probed to ensure that no important actors were missing, and then requested interview time from the targeted persons. Most of them responded positively. The first set of 82 interviews was conducted from 1997-2000 by the second
author and five research assistants as part of the action research project. In this first wave, the second author sought to understand the organizational context through individual interviews with senior and middle managers, and three focus groups with employees (see Table 1). Interviews with external stakeholders (company CEOs, politicians, community organization leaders) were then carried out using an interview protocol co-constructed with Solidum’s management team to meet their sensemaking needs. Although identity was not part of the initial research agenda, its repeated mention by managers led it to be added to the interview protocol. The research team also explored actors’ feelings, actions and responses to strategic issues (we provide sample questions in Online Appendix A). In this paper, we drew mainly on the interviews with managers and key corporate leaders, along with other sources.

The second set of 81 interviews was conducted in the 2011-2016 period (70 interviews with internal stakeholders and 11 individual and group interviews with external stakeholders), mostly by the first author. Senior managers were interviewed multiple times (see Table 1). A third wave of 19 follow-up interviews was carried out between 2018 and 2020 within two corporations identified by Solidum managers as crucial partners. These interviews were intended to document experiences of a sample of people from the wider community, including corporate managers and employees. We interviewed five corporate leaders and nine employees from these two companies. We also interviewed Solidum’s managers and professionals (three individuals and two group interviews) working closely with these organizations. Formal interviews lasted between 30 and 120 minutes, with 80% recorded and transcribed, and extensive notes taken on the remaining 20%. In addition to formal interviews, the first two authors had numerous informal conversations with key actors.
**Archival data.** We obtained access to all significant documents, including committee meeting minutes, PowerPoint presentations, working documents, histories and reports, as well as many emails, in particular those capturing ongoing interactions (see Table 1). Meeting minutes were a particularly important source of data. We retrospectively collected the minutes of all top management team weekly meetings and the monthly board of director’s meetings, totalling 548 meetings from 1994-2015. These minutes enabled us to map key events month by month, while their detail enabled us to capture rich managerial interactions. In particular, the minutes of board meetings and meetings with corporate leaders helped us to capture interactions with central stakeholders and other business leaders. In addition, we collected publicly available videos in which external stakeholders, corporate leaders and employees members of the wider community, speak of their relationship to Solidum. In total, we collected 16 testimonial videos of 18 central stakeholders, and employees from 12 important partner corporations. These videos constitute useful complementary material to triangulate understandings of stakeholder emotional resonance.

**Data analysis**

As is typical in qualitative research, our model emerged through an abductive process involving several iterations of data analysis and coding, literature consultation, then returning to the data in a process combining inductive and deductive elements (Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2008). The analytical process unfolded in five main steps.

**Step 1: Developing an event chronology and pinpointing key episodes.** Our access to all minutes of board, top management team, and committee meetings where strategic issues were discussed allowed us to develop a temporally accurate chronological record of Solidum’s response to its identity challenges, beginning in 1996 and continuing over 20 years. Specifically, we identified 206 meetings where actors explicitly discussed the tensions surrounding Solidum’s core identity beliefs. This allowed us to capture the evolution of the challenges over time and document
related events and facts, especially for the periods where we were not present in the field. Using chronologically ordered tables, we combined these data with accounts from interviews and field notes to identify key episodes in Solidum’s identity threat responses, which we later grouped into three periods that can be considered as comparative ‘temporal brackets’ (Langley, 1999) (see Figure 1 for a timeline).

Insert Figure 1 here

In particular, we noticed that on three occasions over 20 years, senior managers confronted identity challenges stemming from similar pressures from corporations to allow ‘designated donations’ to specific causes. Each time, these issues were debated in the context of one or more exercises of collective reflection involving corporate leaders, and each of these exercises ultimately led to the articulation and promotion of a specific form of donation that Solidum would seek. These articulations were in turn deeply imbued with identity meanings by senior managers and corporate leaders. Examining these three occasions in detail led us to orient our subsequent analysis around the three periods as units of analysis as shown in Figure 1. Because the first and third iterations were more complex (the second period essentially involved reaffirmation of proposals emerging from the first period), our analysis and coding in this paper focuses more deeply on the other two periods where our data are also richer.

Step 2: Identifying the centrality of corporate leaders and emotion-focused practices in addressing identity threats. A second analytical step involved exploratory coding of the work undertaken by senior managers to address identity challenges over time. By analyzing the events of the case, we made three important observations. First, throughout the three periods, senior managers were concerned with finding ways to preserve the essence of Solidum’s core mission and identity, despite pressures for change. Second, in every stage, they directly engaged with influential members of the stakeholder community, specifically corporate leaders (whom we
labeled ‘central stakeholders’), including those who were pressuring for change. These central stakeholders in turn influenced a wider community of stakeholders (including other corporate leaders and employees involved in corporate fund-raising campaigns). Third, and most importantly, we observed that the strategic mobilization of stakeholder emotions appeared central to these processes. We noted, for example, the efforts made by senior managers to bring corporate leaders into direct contact with beneficiaries of Solidum’s activity, and the emotional impact this generated. We also noted how within the context of deliberately designed exercises of collective reflection, managers and corporate leaders shared their worries about existential threats to Solidum’s identity and through these processes became personally aligned with and emotionally committed to efforts to sustain it.

It was these observations that eventually led us to see stakeholder ‘emotional resonance’ with identity beliefs as central to sustaining the mission and identity of social mission driven organizations such as Solidum, and correspondingly to see how deficits in emotional resonance underpinned successive incidents of existential threat. This inductive insight led us to delve into prior literature on the notion of ‘emotional resonance’ and to engage in a more refined coding of our emerging concepts, as we now describe.

**Step 3: Identifying and coding evidence of emotional resonance.** In reviewing the literature on emotional resonance, we found Giorgi’s (2017: 716) distinction between *cognitive* resonance, defined “as a fit with audiences’ extant cognitive orientations, schemas, or understandings” and *emotional* resonance, referring to “an alignment with audiences’ feelings and desires” useful in interpreting our respondents’ narratives specifically related to Solidum’s organizational identity threat. For example, actors might indicate cognitive resonance with Solidum’s identity using expressions such as “a rational choice” or “an effective instrument of
fundraising.” Our analyses indicated that cognitive resonance was not generally perceived as problematic. Conversely, at moments of perceived existential threat, respondents often identified a lack of emotional resonance with Solidum’s organizational identity, particularly in how it aligned with the interests, desires and emotional needs of stakeholders. They used expressions such as “emotionally appealing,” “attractive cause,” “corporate interest in visibility,” or a cause that allows for “an emotional bond” to refer to this phenomenon. Thus, at the start of the case, we coded references to Solidum by key stakeholders as revealing ‘weak’ emotional resonance, as compared with how they referred to competing charities (e.g., health, disasters) which aroused more intense emotional responses. This led Solidum’s managers to engage in practices aimed at overcoming the deficit as we describe next.

**Step 4: Coding practices of emotional resonance work and their effects**. Building on our earlier exploratory coding and elements from the literature, we refined our coding of a set of three interconnected practices adopted by senior managers to build the emotional resonance of organizational identity with stakeholders, which we labeled collectively ‘Emotional Resonance Work.’ The first is ‘building emotional bridges’ (or ‘bridging’), a set of activities that aim to establish an emotional link between corporate donors and beneficiaries. We identified various types of bridging activities but all involved forms of emotional immersion in activities explicitly related to Solidum’s mission, e.g. visits to poor communities; dialogue between community organizers and corporate leaders. The second practice that we call ‘enrolling in collective soul-searching’ (or ‘enrolling’) comprises joint activities organized between managers and corporate leaders, involving the sharing of worries raised by identity threats during meetings and other interactive events, as tracked in documents and real-time observations. The third practice of

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1 We provide additional illustrative data for all codes and concepts in Online Appendix B (Tables B1-B3).
‘materializing an appealing identity symbol’ (‘materializing’) involves making organizational identity beliefs tangible in ways that resonate with target audiences. By comparing and contrasting practices over the three periods and in specific activities, we also saw how they were dynamically interrelated.

We next coded the dynamic effects of the practices of emotional resonance work as revealed in our data. The literature on resonance suggests that it is possible to capture emotional resonance effects through target audience behaviour such as ‘emotional response’, espousal of the desired emotional impact, ‘emotional commitment’ or ‘adoption’ (Giorgi, 2017; Massa et al., 2017; Raffaelli et al., 2019). Building on these ideas, we coded three types of indicators of effects ranging from more proximal effects to more distal effects in relation to the practices themselves. The most proximal effects involved displayed or expressed emotions such as compassion, shock, passion, and enthusiasm following specific events (e.g., “I was overwhelmed and touched”). A second type of effect involved stakeholders’ explicitly expressed alignment with and commitment to orientations that preserve the cause, values and identity of Solidum (e.g., “I value the “common fund,” which has a longer term impact on society. I hope that Solidum will not lose sight of its mission.”) Finally, to gain an appreciation of the more distal effects of these practices as a whole, we tracked metrics used by Solidum’s managers to assess the emotional resonance of larger audiences, such as the community of business leaders and corporate employees, as indicated by their growing or decreasing commitment to the organization’s core mission through their donations and participation in Solidum activities (as illustrated on the timeline in Figure 1).

We found that the most intense emotional resonance effects were associated with the ‘building emotional bridges’ practice in which stakeholders were brought into direct contact with the organization’s activities, stimulating identification with its mission. The ‘enrolling’ practice
consolidated this identification, while the ‘materializing’ practice provided stakeholders with the tools to act on this identification to evangelize others.

**Step 5: Developing a conceptual model.** Our generic conceptual model of stakeholder emotional resonance work is shown in Figure 2, and its empirically specific manifestation at Solidum spread out over three periods is shown in Figure 3. Both versions of the model show how the three practices of emotional resonance work are drawn on repeatedly following a perceived existential threat resulting from low or dissipating emotional resonance of the wider community of stakeholders with organizational identity beliefs. The conceptual version of the model in Figure 2 was developed by raising the level of abstraction of the specific events shown in the timeline and in the empirical model in Figure 3 to draw out the generic processes in play. Figure 3 shows the specific and detailed empirical playing out of these processes at Solidum over three periods and remains close to the data. For example, it illustrates how the second period (in which the materializing practice was truncated) contributed along with broader environmental trends to deepening dissipation of emotional resonance with the wider community. This in turn led to more intense emotional resonance work in the third period. The generic conceptual model (Figure 2) will be described in more detail below, and its empirical manifestation (Figure 3) will be elaborated systematically as we present the findings.

Overall, our analytical process was cyclical, involving repeated back and forth among the authors over several months before we arrived at an agreed set of concepts and model. All co-authors had access to the data, and shared interpretations over time. Two authors first separately coded a sample of data to ensure convergence on concepts. The coding was then collectively discussed by all authors to achieve stabilization on the concepts generated. When we did not agree, we sought additional information from the data and literature to strengthen our interpretation. At
three stages of analysis (2016, 2018, 2020), we met with informants including the former and current CEOs, other senior managers and key stakeholders, to validate our interpretations. For example, in the last round of theory generation we met separately with the former CEO, the current CEO and a senior manager to obtain their feedback on our model.

**FINDINGS**

To orient the findings, we present our overarching conceptual model in Figure 2. This model emerged from the analysis described above, but we summarize it briefly here to assist the reader in following the descriptive data that support it. Following the presentation of the data, we elaborate on this model further.

*Insert Figure 2 here*

The starting point for our model is shown on the bottom left-hand side of Figure 2: the perception of an existential threat (Box B) resulting from weakened emotional resonance of the organization’s core identity beliefs (Box A) among a wide community of stakeholders on whom the organization is dependent for its ability to pursue its mission. This perceived existential threat drives the organization’s senior managers to engage with central stakeholders—in our case, corporate leaders—who are key to ensuring the organization’s survival and development through their own financial contributions along with their influence on the wider stakeholder community, including other corporate donors and employees participating in fund-raising campaigns.

The central oval in Figure 2 shows the three practices of ‘emotional resonance work’ (Box C) through which senior managers generate or restore stakeholder emotional resonance with identity beliefs. As described, the practice of *building emotional bridges* (C1) brings corporate leaders into direct contact with beneficiaries of the organization’s activities to *seed emotional resonance* and *stimulate identification*. The practice of *enrolling in collective soul-searching* (C2) brings managers and corporate leaders together and leads them to jointly share and address their
respective worries about existential threats, *consolidating identification and emotional resonance*. The practice of *materializing* (C3) involves *making identity beliefs tangible* that provides corporate leaders with the tools to evangelize others, *propagating the emotional resonance* of identity beliefs with the wider community of donors (Box D).

Together, the three practices of emotional resonance work feed into one another. The model also suggests that they need to be continually reactivated over time to sustain emotional resonance with identity beliefs, given shifts in the macro-environment and the availability of competing causes with potentially superior emotional resonance. Without continued renewal, the emotional resonance of identity beliefs among the wider community (top of Figure 2) will tend to dissipate over time, leading to renewed identity challenges (feedback loop to Box A) and renewed perceptions of existential threat (Box B). We identified three iterations of the model at Solidum over twenty years, in which episodes of emotional resonance work played out in different ways. The empirical representation of these three periods is illustrated in Figure 3. Note that given the transitional and truncated nature of the second period, we provide greater detail on the first and third periods which involved significantly more intense and urgent emotional resonance work on the part of senior managers and corporate leaders.

To structure the findings, we now describe the key events composing the three iterations of the model, organized according to the boxes of Figure 2. For each period, we provide a broad descriptive overview of the most significant events drawing on evidence from the data to show how they played out over time (zooming out) (Nicolini, 2009). In addition, we embed within these broad accounts a number of detailed episodes that capture the interactive dynamics of specific incidences of emotional resonance work (zooming in) (Nicolini, 2009).

**Period 1: Building stakeholder emotional resonance (1996-2007)**
Identity challenge (Box A) leading to a perceived existential threat (Box B). The perceived identity challenge for Solidum’s senior managers emerged around 1996, about one year before we began our investigation, and intensified in subsequent years. Solidum had had until then a historical advantage in its relations with corporations and public agencies, because it had a quasi-monopoly on being able to run employee fund-raising campaigns through direct pay deductions. Around 1994-95, a health charity group, whose cause might be considered more emotionally appealing than Solidum’s, began asking to be included in Solidum’s philanthropic campaigns and pressuring the government to allow direct payroll deductions. The health charity targeted corporations that were increasingly sensitive to emotionally appealing causes, as well as to the potential advantages of orienting charitable donations to corporate social responsibility priorities. Solidum’s managers considered ways of countering this competitive move, such as by allowing ‘designation’, i.e., permitting donors to specify the organizations or causes from Solidum’s portfolio to which their donations would be directed. However, many senior managers viewed this strategy as contrary to Solidum’s caring mission and identity beliefs “caring for the most vulnerable” (mission statement, 1992), because it might ultimately result in the neglect of important but less appealing causes.

Faced with these concerns, Alison Stewart (Solidum’s CEO) commissioned a consulting firm to examine “the impact of designation on sister organizations that had adopted it.” The consultants’ report, entitled “Study of the benefits and risks associated with designation” confirmed that 80% of donors were pushing to designate their donations, and that 78% of Solidum’s sister organizations already offered a designation program. However, the report also stated, “At its extreme, Solidum could become a mere grant distribution ‘channel’, which would compromise its social mission” (Report, May 1996). The consultants’ report only intensified
concerns among managers and employees about how designation would affect Solidum’s mission and identity. Our first interviews in 1997-98 with Solidum’s managers and corporate leaders confirmed the nature of these tensions. For example a corporate leader acknowledged “Corporations increasingly need recognition and visibility for themselves, yet giving to Solidum does not provide enough visibility. The interests of corporate donors are not fully met” (Int#92, CEO112), while a Solidum manager commented, “My worry is that we lose sight of the essence of who we [Solidum] are.” (Int#48, MM2) In the face of these challenges, Alison and her team mobilized to protect Solidum and preserve its caring identity in the changing environment. As we shall see, this ultimately meant resisting the call for ‘designated donations’ and instead working to stimulate corporate leaders’ emotional resonance with Solidum’s mission and core identity as they saw it.

**Emotional resonance work (Box C).** Faced with this perceived threat to its caring mission and identity beliefs, along with the need to maintain the support of its most influential donors, Solidum’s senior managers focused their attention specifically on its most important donors: the Chief Executives (CEOs) of the largest companies in the city. These individuals (‘central stakeholders’ in Figure 2) could decide to maintain or withdraw corporate support from Solidum. Initially, a few influential leaders were targeted, with efforts gradually extended to a larger number of CEOs. Instead of responding to the corporate push for designation, the effort was mainly aimed at creating emotional resonance for the broader and more encompassing social mission and caring identity of Solidum (i.e. avoiding designation), as Alison retrospectively explained:

> Philanthropy is what enables us to support and advance what is most precious in a society...Something that adds beauty to our lives. You will notice that people who are going to join on a voluntary basis, without counting their time, do it for passion... Unfortunately,

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2 In references to interviews, note that SM refers to Senior Managers of Solidum, MM refers to middle managers of Solidum, CEO refers to Corporate leaders / Central stakeholders, EMP refers to employees of corporations in the wider community.
there is a big trend where philanthropy is becoming a tool for marketing and, in encouraging this, we destroy philanthropy...People don’t think before they donate to breast cancer, because it touches them emotionally...[But] when you think about the social problems we face and think about where the solutions are going to come from, you realize that there is something fundamentally wrong. (Int#4, SM1)

Building emotional bridges to seed emotional resonance of identity beliefs (Box C1):

Building on this type of concern, Solidum’s managers’ ‘emotional resonance work’ involved, first of all, efforts to connect corporate leaders directly to the emotional essence of Solidum’s mission, i.e., compassion for the most vulnerable in society. In what follows, we illustrates how this effort began for one of the earliest corporate leaders to be engaged in this way by Solidum’s leaders: Dan Baker. His visit to a low-income neighborhood became a model and precursor for many subsequent initiatives over the next twenty years.

Dan Baker was the CEO of one of the country’s largest companies, a financial conglomerate with over $100 billion in assets. In 1998, a local newspaper described Dan’s family as “the wealthiest and most influential family in the state.” Alison had approached Dan via his personal friend Peter Morris (CEO of large retail company), to see whether he would contribute, and at the same time help in soliciting large donations from other members of the business community. Dan wanted to know more about Solidum’s activities before agreeing to join its annual campaign board. Alison therefore set up this visit. One of the community organizations they visited was ‘Family Hub,’ an agency that cared for vulnerable families with critical needs. Alison recounts how Dan and Peter sat around a kitchen table with people on welfare, who explained the choices they had to make at the end of each month, such as deciding whether to buy bread or other essentials: “They were stunned.” Alison continues with the story of their lunch visit to a community soup kitchen that same day:

There was a poster with photos on the wall, and a caption that said, “It’s because of them that you lost your jobs.”...When I got closer, I saw that the poster gave the salaries of
certain individuals alongside the number of jobs they had eliminated in two columns next to each other. I thought, “Oh no!” Peter and Dan came up, and Peter looked at Dan and said, “Look that’s your photo there!” I nearly died.

Mr. Baker asked the agency manager who had put that poster up, and she said, “We did.” I could have sunk through the floor. I went to get my soup with a heavy heart. Mr. Baker followed me. It was just the two of us, and I thought it would be all over: “If you think I came here to be insulted…” But no - he said, “Ms. Stewart, I realize that we do not understand these people. But they do not understand us either. You are there to help us create a bridge between us.” At that moment, I thought, “He got it.” And I could have hugged him.

In a private interview, following this visit, Dan Baker himself commented on how important these visits were “…to see what [Solidum] is doing: to see that the poor don’t want to eat the rich and the rich don’t want to eat the poor. This leaves people with a good feeling even if they may be scared to death…It offers an experience that allows people to love and help another person: a human exchange.” (Int#89, CEO8)

This immersive activity appears to have shaped Dan Baker’s emotional relationship with Solidum’s identity. He was placed face to face with the precarious conditions in which some of his neighbours lived, and found himself pinpointed by the owners of the community organization as partly responsible for the miserable conditions experienced by many people. His reaction was one of compassion (“allowing people to love and help another person”), and he subsequently became deeply identified with Solidum’s mission: “[I am] attached to Solidum and I want this organization to progress” (Int#89, CEO8).

Dan’s support was crucial in subsequent efforts to emotionally connect other corporate leaders to Solidum’s initiatives and identity. First, Dan helped Alison replicate his own experience of visiting low-income neighborhoods with other influential corporate leaders. Later in 2000, Alison reported a telephone call with Dan Baker, “Ms. Stewart, listen, there are so many more things we can give you, we have networks of influence, we have access to knowledge. Can you tell me what we can do to try to eradicate poverty?” (Int#3, SM1) Alison drew on this commitment as
a stepping stone to emotionally inspire other corporate leaders, through a formal initiative called ‘Builders’ through which Solidum’s managers mobilized a few influential CEOs, including Dan who agreed to sponsor this initiative, to meet local communities. In line with this initiative, a variety of means were used to connect corporate leaders with the communities served by Solidum. Our data indicate that these ‘bridging’ practices created similar reactions among targeted corporate leaders, seeding emotional resonance with Solidum’s caring identity among other CEOs:

We went to a community organization for underprivileged kids and I was amazed by how natural Dan Baker was in that environment. We actually played football, Dan with one of the children against myself and another child and it was so impressive to see Dan so involved in that environment that I thought to myself when somebody (like Dan) could be natural and giving and selfless, it is a model to follow. (Video#16, CEO22)

Similarly, another central stakeholder--the CEO of a transportation firm--commented:

We need evangelists who will walk around and then talk about why this [supporting Solidum] is important, people with a reputation. I was influenced in my way by people like Dan Baker. When I looked at these people, presidents of big companies, people with a solid reputation in our community, who got involved, I said to myself; (...) “If these people talk about this, it is because it is important.” We have to find a way to expose more people to this kind of message...If you advertise on TV, in a newspaper it doesn’t work...You have to reach people in a more human way. (Int#98, CEO17)

These central stakeholders became, in turn, active in promoting these practices within their companies to reach the wider community:

When I was at the engineering company...we brought a community organization supported by Solidum to talk to the managers in the company and their 2000 engineers. These are not fainthearted people, some have no heart at all I think (laughs). We brought a group of ladies from community organizations... 17-year-old girls who just gave birth... when these girls started talking about how Solidum had changed their lives, when I looked at that bunch of tough engineers in the room, I saw some with tears in their eyes. I said to myself “great, we touched these people!” We have to touch these people with the human aspect. This is the only way to do it ... We have to touch people in a human way. (Int#98, CEO17)

Enrolling stakeholders in collective soul-searching to amplify emotional resonance of identity beliefs. Practices of ‘building emotional bridges’ as described above were important in seeding emotional resonance among corporate leaders for Solidum’s identity beliefs. A second
form of emotional resonance work we call ‘enrolling in collective soul-searching’ helped to
amplify this resonance and engage corporate leaders. This practice explicitly involves engaging
corporate leaders in sharing worries about Solidum’s core mission and caring identity, and
implicating them in deliberations concerning proposed actions aimed at sustaining it, resulting in
the generation of a sense of common purpose.

Specifically, corporate leaders who were important donors themselves but also critical
intermediaries in organizing fundraising campaigns among their employees, were tapped by
Solidum’s managers to participate in its governance bodies (board, campaign leadership, strategic
committees), and became directly involved in decision making around Solidum’s future strategic
direction. During the first period, two successive episodes of joint reflection are illustrative of this
practice. The first occurred around the time of the strategic planning exercise in 1998. Dan Baker
and other corporate leaders were invited to a meeting by Alison and other senior managers to
discuss the identity threat associated with designated donations. Dan had already agreed to become
President of Solidum’s Fundraising Campaign that year, and was deeply involved in ongoing
activities. The second author’s real time field notes⁴ reveal how Alison raised the issue of
designation as an identity threat at the beginning of the meeting:

Alison: *Donors tend to want to identify their donation with a person or a specific charity,*
*rather than an umbrella organization like Solidum. This worries us and we want your
advice... With Solidum, donors cannot designate their donations. If we allowed this, we’d
become a simple broker... This could have a significant impact on Solidum, which aims to
be a unifier, catalyst, and social actor.*

Participants in the meeting shared their comments, concerns and worries, with a bank CEO
and member of the campaign board commenting:

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⁴ The second author was present at this meeting largely to familiarize himself with the organization’s strategic issues
before the action research project got underway. He did not intervene significantly in the interactions described here,
but took detailed notes.
We [corporate leaders] are pressured to give to many causes. Solidum can’t be the only donation all companies make. In the companies that I approached to participate in Solidum’s fundraising campaign, this is a clear trend...If leaders better understood how resources were allocated and their effects, this could influence their decisions. If freedom of choice leads to a loss of effectiveness, that would worry me and penalize Solidum. We need to inform people.

Another corporate leader on Solidum’s Board of Directors and Strategic Planning Committee commented in response to a suggestion that Solidum needed to be more sensitive to donor’s wishes, “We [Solidum] are already doing that, but it’s a fine line we’re walking. Our expertise is our knowledge of the community and to know how to allocate money where it is needed. If we allow too many donors to make specific allocations we are moving away from what we do best.” Note here how this corporate executive uses the pronouns “we” and “our” in a way that suggests personal identification with Solidum. Dan Baker’s concluding comment in the meeting also tends to reveal an interpretation of Solidum’s identity that expresses resonance with senior managers’ worries and understandings of organizational identity: “When you are large you are the big guy, every one shoots at you. The word ‘solidarity’ is what Solidum should be about. It really depends on society’s needs—what it wants.”

Participants left the meeting in broad agreement on the need to preserve Solidum’s caring identity, as recorded in the meeting minutes: “Participants confirmed that Solidum's worries are justified...Much remains to be done to consolidate Solidum’s image and positioning as a symbol of generosity and solidarity. We must be patient in achieving this. It cannot be done in a year; it will probably take several years.”

This meeting illustrates how senior managers enrolled corporate leaders in collective soul-searching, sharing their worries about existential threats, and converging around a common purpose that consolidated their identification with Solidum. The strategic planning process eventually led to a new vision statement that was approved by the Board in 1999. Managers hoped
that this vision, developed by Justin, a senior manager at Solidum, might serve to enhance commitment to the organization’s identity. The statement reads as follows:

**Vision: Building a Caring Community. General Orientation: Accentuating the caring character of Solidum.** For the last few years, Solidum has been striving to create bonds of solidarity between citizens, especially between the most and least fortunate...Solidum is one of the few places in our society where we transcend difference to come together around a common value: caring as a common concern for the quality of life of the most vulnerable in our society. (Strategic Planning Report, November 1998)

Yet, although this vision of Solidum’s identity as a “Caring Community” was approved by the board, it nevertheless fueled more tension around the issue of designation. This led to a second episode of intense discussions in 2002, in the context of a Forum on Corporate Philanthropy organized by Alison to consider how to implement the vision. Key corporate leaders were again enrolled in collective soul-searching. The Co-Chairs of the Forum’s Advisory Committee, John Cummings (CEO of a large manufacturing firm) and Roger Patterson (an energy company executive) were initially inclined to favor designated donations. Yet, perceptions of the risks of this proposal intensified as data was collected from sister organizations that had engaged in this practice. Alison put it this way:

*Solidum’s goal is not to collect as much money as possible, but to have the most impact possible in building caring communities...By creating a culture of mutual help...A culture of (pure) philanthropy, educating people.* (Meeting with co-chairs, 2002)

Both John and Roger came to share the concerns of senior managers, as did other members of the committee. Roger commented: “*It has become clear that we need to return to Solidum’s values to find a meaningful answer for major donors, community organizations and social workers*” (Board meeting, June 2003).

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4 The second author and his action research team collected data that fed into this Strategic Planning Report. However, the vision statement described here was developed by Justin and other senior managers. The second author subsequently became a member of the Advisory Committee on Philanthropy (2002-2003). He was not in a leadership role on this committee, but contributed his reflections to the discussion.
As the two examples given above show, although the practice of ‘building emotional bridges’ seeded the emotional resonance of corporate leaders to Solidum’s caring identity, these leaders’ enrolment in collective soul-searching activities provided an opportunity to amplify resonance with organizational identity beliefs. Indeed, sharing existential worries and engaging in deliberations about identity threats helped change their perspective and caused them to focus on the interests of the broader community, creating a sense of common purpose with Solidum’s senior managers. The examples of Dan and Roger are notable in this regard. Dan’s influence and commitment to Solidum’s identity persisted 20 years later, while Roger became chairman of Solidum’s board of directors in 2004 and continued to be involved as member of different governance bodies. They both recalled the events described above as eye-opening regarding the downsides of designation, and the virtues of what would come to be known as the ‘Solidarity Donation’. This brings us to the third practice of emotional resonance work which we suggest was critical in overcoming, at least for a time, the ongoing existential threat that had seemed to persist even amidst the efforts described so far.

**Materializing an appealing identity symbol to propagate emotional resonance (Box C3).**

The third practice of emotional resonance work refers to senior managers’ efforts to embody identity beliefs within a tangible object that could be drawn on to further propagate emotional resonance beyond the narrow group of corporate leaders who had participated in prior activities, towards other leaders and employees participating in fund-raising campaigns. As described next, materializing a concrete organizational identity symbol that could be transported across space and time not only offered a tool that could be used to promote Solidum more widely, but was also a source of relief and clarity to senior managers and corporate leaders who had struggled in 2002 to clarify Solidum’s future identity claims.
Indeed, after lengthy debates, Alison and her team supported by Dan, Roger and a few other influential corporate leaders, had come to the conclusion that the “door should be closed definitively on the option of designation,” (Strategic Retreat, September 2002) even if this had been a strong demand at the time. Instead, they looked for a way to better communicate Solidum’s core identity beliefs and generate resonance with “what the Solidum caring identity means.”

Several brainstorming sessions observed by the second author were aimed at finding a concept that would communicate Solidum’s identity more effectively. Several ideas were discussed, such as ‘generosity’, ‘unifier’, ‘solidarity with the most vulnerable’, and ‘caring’, but these intangible expressions did not stick. It was again Justin, a management team member who came up with the idea of materializing Solidum’s identity in the notion of the ‘Solidarity Donation’, in opposition to the ‘designated donation.’ As another senior manager recalled:

*With the concept of the “Solidarity Donation,” we managed to express what we wanted to say by refusing designated donations. It was important to explain both internally and externally why this [designation] should not go ahead...This made it possible to bring everyone on board. When we came up with the expression “Solidarity Donation”, it crystallized our core value of solidarity...It protected Solidum from losing its identity. It expressed our identity in simple terms. (Int#22, SM3)*

Alison herself recalled: “It was a huge relief when we were able to place a name to it—Wow, that’s who we are! That’s it. It’s who we are” (Int#07, SM1). Alison first tested this concept with Jean, a marketing expert, and a member of the Advisory Committee on Philanthropy. The concept was then presented to Roger and John, the two corporate leaders who had co-chaired this committee, as well as to Solidum’s Board of Directors. They all showed great enthusiasm for the concept. It clearly ‘resonated’ with them as well as with senior managers. As a result, the ‘Solidarity Donation’ became a key symbol that materialized Solidum’s caring identity, as expressed very explicitly in the final report of the Advisory Committee on Philanthropy, titled “The Solidarity Donation to Build Caring Communities”: 
The Solidarity Donation is a symbol that materializes Solidum’s values, beliefs and vision. It is a donation with no strings attached, which bonds all donors. The Solidarity Donation is a statement of donors about their willingness to unite in order to have a larger impact together. Each donation to Solidum adds to thousands of others, and to investments by partners, to boost social development...To state the primacy of the Solidarity Donation is to be consistent with Solidum’s actions in the community, and reveal its unique positioning. Giving to Solidum, a Solidarity Donation, is therefore a choice offered to each donor. (Report, June 2003)

The concept was validated by the Board of Directors in June 2003, and became one of the main tools used by corporate leaders and other actors to promote Solidum’s caring mission.

The data suggest that the materialization of organizational identity beliefs in a concrete object (i.e. the Solidarity Donation), which could be referred to and articulated in interaction with others contributed to propagating emotional resonance. For Solidum’s managers, the notion of solidarity with the community expressed a ‘genuine’ compassion placing collective and community interests above corporate donors’ specific interests. The intention was clearly to leverage this identity concept as a tool to mobilize external stakeholders, and especially the broad community of corporate leaders and their employees:

If Solidum’s future is related to the primacy of Solidarity Donation...It is also related to its ability to secure support and engagement of [CapitalCity]’s business and social leaders. Solidum must nourish these people’s identification to Solidum’s values and vision, by sharing with them a passion for helping the most vulnerable people and communities. (Report, June 2003)

In particular, Dan Baker and other corporate leaders leveraged this concept as a tool to mobilize other corporate leaders and employees, feeding into the ‘building emotional bridges’ practices discussed earlier as well. From 2003 to 2007, Solidum’s managers intensified their efforts by promoting the Solidarity Donation and engaging corporate leaders in hundreds of community visits as described by Morgan, a manager in charge of these activities:

[Corporate leaders] are, above all, humans and have the same concerns as everyone. We undertook several activities with them: visiting beneficiaries, strategizing together. It was like giving them a gift; [they] showed a lot of emotion. (Int#39, MM6)
This support provided considerable momentum to Solidum to continue receiving donations from major corporations in line with its identity. During these years, the concept of the Solidarity Donation was seen to be successful, in particular among corporate leaders, and increased emotional resonance around Solidum’s caring mission: “[CapitalCity]’s business leaders support the Solidarity Donation: A survey of major corporate leaders confirms their support for the Solidarity Donation and Solidum's mission as an umbrella organization helping the most disadvantaged.” (Internal report, March 2008).

The set of three ‘emotional resonance work’ practices described above for Period 1 is illustrated to the left of Figure 3. Retrospective testimonials from employees of several corporations confirm the impact of these practices on the wider community, offering illustrations of emotional resonance and identification with Solidum’s caring values:

Solidum’s campaign is very important because we know how important it is to help the community in our city. For several years now, we have increased our contribution by 50% a year. Personally, as a campaign manager, it really touches me, which makes it easier for me to touch and convert other people. (Video#9, Employee from a large mining corporation)

In my company, it is a love affair with Solidum...every year, our committee is enthusiastic, it is essential, it is part of our company’s culture...The amount has almost tripled over the past 10 years. (Video#8, Employee from an engineering corporation)

**Insert Figure 3 here**

**Period 2: Continuity of practices, dissipating resonance and remerging identity challenges (2008-2012)**

In Figure 3, we show a second period of emotional resonance work from 2008-2012. Our description of this period will be much shorter than the previous one, given the continuity of certain practices of emotional resonance work and truncated attention to others by senior managers. For example, the ‘building emotional bridges’ practice begun in previous years was pursued using similar methods as before, associated explicitly at this point with the theme of ‘building bridges’
(an inspiration for our category label). A 2008 report lists activities such as workplace storytelling, visits to community organizations, group tours of neighborhoods, and volunteer initiatives aimed at major donors (for more evidence, see Online Appendix B).

However, significantly in this period, the financial crisis of 2008 contributed to a drop in donations and renewed concern about the most appropriate philanthropic strategy. In 2008-2009, a new committee was set up to reflect on this topic involving the participation of corporate leaders, and ‘enrolling’ them in a renewed exercise of ‘collective soul-searching,’ in which worries about the future of Solidum and its identity could be shared. The ‘Solidarity Donation’ took center stage during these discussions, as nagging pressure remained for designation from some corporate donors. However, these reflections were terminated when Alison and the senior management team ultimately insisted on the immutable nature of the Solidarity Donation as the main symbol to communicate Solidum’s caring identity to its stakeholders, closing down any possibility of developing alternative ways of materializing Solidum’s organizational identity beliefs. As explained by one participant in these activities:

_We had a Strategic Retreat (in 2009) where we called the ‘Solidarity Donation’ a sacred cow, that shouldn’t be touched. Some of us wanted to question the Solidarity Donation, but this created a crisis in the group. People rallied around the Solidarity Donation—recognizing and accepting that it deprived us of certain donations, considering this acceptable compared to the loss of meaning if we adopted designation. That was a very, very important moment...It struck me that one could never question the Solidarity Donation. (Int#79, AD8)_

While corporate leaders closest to the management team (e.g., active on the Board of Directors) were clearly implicated in this decision and remained committed to and resonant with Solidum’s caring identity as expressed in the Solidarity Donation, this retreat signaled the start of some emotional disconnection with the wider community of corporate donors, and especially with corporate employees. The difficulty in selling ‘solidarity’ compared with more immediately popular causes became even more salient during this period, partly due to generational change. Joe
Pinter, the CEO of a transportation company and chairman of Solidum’s Board of Directors during this period explained:

> My two daughters are under 30 with successful careers. They look at the world in a different way...Their generation treats philanthropy differently...It is more experiential...When I talk to my colleagues and others CEOs, it is the same everywhere...As board members, did we ignore this? No, but I think we underestimated that it could have an impact so quickly. (Int#98, CEO17)

Trends like these pressured corporate leaders to choose more emotionally appealing causes. In 2010, Solidum experienced an explosion of similar pressures including from some traditional allies, who threatened to withdraw their donations if Solidum’s management team persisted with the Solidarity Donation as the only way to give to charitable causes:

> The pressure grew stronger [around 2010]. It was getting so strong that corporate leaders told us: “If you don’t do something, we will not be able to support you any more because our employees want more, they want to have a choice.” They wonder why we support only Solidum. Employee culture has changed since the 90s. There were business leaders who told us bluntly: “if you don’t do something, we won’t be there!”... We have to preserve what Solidum is, but we also have to give corporate leaders the means to continue to help us.” (Int#22, SM3)

Around this time, fundraising teams began reporting that it was “more difficult to generate new major donors in a context of the Solidarity Donation. Several potential major donors declined to give to Solidum” (management meeting, November 2010). This pressure resulted in the loss of some large companies’ support and a decline in employee donations. In 2012, Solidum experienced its greatest decrease in donations in over 20 years. This decline continued in the following year. The ‘Solidarity Donation’ no longer generated emotional resonance with the wider community of donors, leading to a renewed identity challenge (Box A) and existential threat (Box B). This initiated the third period of emotional resonance work we observed, which began in 2012 when Olivia Sanchez, previously CEO of an international humanitarian NGO, was chosen by the board to replace Alison who had retired.
Period 3: Renewing stakeholder emotional resonance (2013-2018)

*Emotional resonance work (Box C).* As shown in Figure 3, the third period of emotional resonance work involved the same set of practices as the first, although in a different chronological order. This period began with work on ‘rematerializing an appealing identity symbol’ (Box C3) to replace the ‘Solidarity Donation,’ a practice that had been missing in Period 2. This activity overlapped in time with the practice of ‘enrolling stakeholders in collective soul-searching’ (Box C2) and culminated in the practice of ‘rebuilding emotional bridges’ (Box C1). As we describe next, the three practices helped re-establish stakeholder emotional resonance with Solidum’s core identity beliefs that had begun to dissipate in Period 2.

*Rematerializing an appealing identity symbol to reseed stakeholder emotional resonance (Box C3).* In preparation for her job interview with Solidum’s hiring committee, new CEO Olivia Sanchez had consulted a few people close to the organization to understand Solidum’s key issues. As she explained in a personal interview, she had quickly realized that the concept of the ‘Solidarity Donation’ was causing concern. In her first six months on the job, she met with several corporate leaders to explore the issue. Her conclusion was that the ‘Solidarity Donation’ was a major problem for Solidum’s growth and even survival:

> My first meetings with companies made me realize that there was a disconnect....The CEOs made it clear that they could no longer impose the Solidarity Donation on their employees...People I had spoken with before joining Solidum had already told me this. I kept hearing the same thing from different people (Int#28, SM8).

With her background in the humanitarian field, Olivia Sanchez shared the identity beliefs conveyed through the concept of Solidarity Donation, but she concluded that, given the threat to Solidum’s survival, there was a need to be pragmatic: “If it were solely up to me, I would keep the Solidarity Donation because it is fundamentally the solution, and it is the right thing to do. But it
does not work anymore. It will not allow Solidum to fulfil its mission. Therefore, I prefer to be pragmatic.” (Int#28, SM8)

Olivia began to work with her management team and consultants to design a new identity symbol that would retain the essence of Solidum’s caring identity (seen by many as expressed by ‘solidarity’), but rethought in a way that might restore its emotional appeal. Specifically, Olivia sought solutions that would involve, as she put it, “reframing the concept of the Solidarity Donation.” For her, this meant “finding a way to make a Solidarity Donation while, at the same time, meeting the emotional needs of donors.” With the board’s approval, she recruited several consultants and set up a Strategic Committee to work on the issue between April 2014 and January 2015. Even before the Strategic Committee started meeting, Olivia worked with her team and consultants to develop a more appealing concept. They came up with the notion of the ‘Directed Donation’ as an alternative to the ‘Solidarity Donation.’ The ‘Directed Donation’ moved towards accommodating corporate leaders’ wish to be able to select the specific causes they would give to (designated donations) to meet their own strategic goals, but was different from pure designation because it involved grouping causes into a small number (four or five) broad ‘buckets’. The original proposal was explained by Olivia and one of the consultants, Carolyn, in a meeting with Solidum’s Board of Directors in March 2014:

Employees in organizations are over-solicited by competing calls, and wish to give to the cause of their choice. An emotional connection with donors is needed to build relationships. As a generalist, Solidum responds to social needs, but is losing touch with firms and young corporate employees who are looking for active involvement …

The Directed Donation proposal would help maintain the position with those firms who have given to Solidum, by providing them a fit with their strategy. The Directed Donation allows employees to choose a group of causes they care most about, allowing Solidum to adopt a more strategic approach while maintaining the possibility of contributing to the common fund (Strategic Retreat with the board, March 2014).
As one of the consultants explained in an interview, focus groups with employees had revealed the urgency of finding a way to rekindle emotional resonance with Solidum’s identity, in a context where their choice to support Solidum seemed to be mainly related to convenience rather than emotional connection – placing considerable pressure on corporate leaders.

Focus groups made us realize that people, including donors, now have little emotional connection to Solidum. Their motives were mostly: “I trust my company’s choice of a good cause.” “It is easy to give as a direct deduction from my pay, with no need to think about it.” That’s mostly the head choosing...But the connection with Solidum’s cause was not there...I think that the emotional connection is essential, because we are competing with other causes, which touch people’s hearts more. (Int#77, AD5)

In materializing the concept of the ‘Directed Donation,’ Olivia was attempting, in one sense to square the circle: i.e., to blend a concern for maintaining Solidum’s caring identity privileging solidarity with the community over corporate interests, with a concern to satisfy the specific emotional needs of individual corporate and employee donors. One of the criticisms of the Solidarity Donation as an identity symbol was its implication as an ‘obligation’, as one respondent put it. It represented control over one’s compassionate expression toward societal causes. In contrast, the new identity concept ‘Directed Donation’ was designed to make Solidum’s caring mission more emotionally resonant for corporations and individuals. The core principle was to offer some choice to corporate donors.

At this point, however, the Directed Donation was not fully fleshed out. For example, the ‘buckets’ of causes that would become part of Solidum’s offering were not yet defined. Moreover, while the notion of the Directed Donation offered the promise of rekindling emotional resonance among donors, its potential was not fully proven. In addition, perhaps paradoxically, but also because of the history of previous periods, several of the corporate leaders who were most deeply identified with Solidum (including Roger Patterson who remained on the board) aligned themselves profoundly with Solidum’s social mission and identity, which for them was represented
by the Solidarity Donation. Similarly, several managers and board members were emotionally
attached to Solidum’s caring identity and were worried that this would be compromised to
accommodate corporate interests. In other words, in attempting to kindle emotional resonance for
specific causes among the wider community of donors, for others, these moves risked
compromising their own emotional resonance with Solidum’s conception of itself as a caring
community. This led to further efforts at ‘enrolling stakeholders in collective soul-searching.’

**Enrolling stakeholders in collective soul-searching to sustain stakeholder emotional resonance (Box C2).** The Strategic Committee constituted by Olivia brought together people with
different perspectives on Solidum’s future. One key participant was Kathleen, a consultant who
had formerly been a fund-raising executive at Solidum and had left in 2002 due to disagreements
with Alison about her refusal to consider designation. Her perspective was most strongly oriented
towards enabling donors to choose causes in line with the Directed Donation proposal. However,
several other participants including Roger Patterson (former Executive of an energy company
encountered earlier), Terry Holmes (technology company executive and committee co-chair) and
Mary Fairbairn (a Solidum senior manager) shared opposing worries about how the Directed
 Donation proposal might compromise Solidum’s identity, and more concretely whether allowing
choice would lead Solidum to find itself hamstrung in its desire to support less appealing but
important causes contributing to social cohesion. As Mary, a manager initially opposed to the
Directed Donation put it in an interview:

> I think Solidum’s raison d’être is knowing where to invest the money to have the most impact in the community. I believe in it, and I wouldn’t want Solidum to lose its raison d’être. I like that there is an openness to at least communicate with donors, to listen to them and not be afraid to hear their response. I think it’s a must to be able to have communications with our corporate donors. I see that as a very interesting path, but we need to do this without losing who we are. This must not happen! (In#35, SM9)
In the end, Olivia and her team identified four broad categories of causes that would be proposed to donors in the form of the Directed Donation, but added a fifth that would be called the ‘Common Fund’ which would be a category of ‘collective solidarity’ (i.e., no designation to a particular cause). For Solidum’s managers and committee members this category represented the ‘Solidarity Donation,’ which resonated strongly with the caring identity.

However, enrolling corporate leaders already committed to Solidum through their ongoing participation in governance activities was not considered sufficient. Enrolling stakeholders in soul-searching about Solidum’s identity and survival was thus expanded by Olivia and her team to include business leaders who had initially pushed for designation (including people not on governance committees). Olivia noted, “These consultations with our major partners [corporate leaders] were very, very interesting to make sure that we did not go too far [from Solidum’s mission], but far enough so that people felt that there was change” (Int#30, SM8). These additional meetings were organized to present the proposed categories of causes, while indicating Solidum’s own preference for donations to the common fund. They took place externally within the offices of several large companies and were an opportunity for Solidum managers to share their concerns about Solidum’s caring identity and gain support from the CEOs of the largest companies (major donors), as described here by another senior manager:

*We organized an activity for major donors at [name of large investment company]...I shared the situation with them without going into the solutions, starting with Mr. Thomson, the chairman of the host company’s board...He opened the session by saying: “Some donors want to direct their donations, that is not good! This is not good! Solidum must be able to carry out its mission...” Mr. Thomson saw the danger that if everyone wanted to direct their donation, it would jeopardize Solidum’s ability to do what it does. So those who sincerely believe in Solidum, because they understand what it does...share my worries, you know...There are many people, particularly among major donors who understand the importance of a strategic player like Solidum...They still want to protect that. (Int#57, SM11)*
Indeed, as the comments below suggest, business leaders consulted generally expressed enthusiasm about offering choice, but at the same time most still supported the ‘Common Fund’ category because they could relate to the importance of sustaining Solidum’s mission:

To reach the new generation, Solidum must generate “feel good about it” and “emotional appeal”, which are currently absent. Nevertheless, our donations will continue to be made to the Common Fund. (Int#102, CEO21)

I am very much in favor of offering a choice to satisfy the strategic philanthropy of companies...On the other hand, I believe that Solidum must protect collegiality, beyond the competition issue. The desire to work together—the universality that Solidum generates must not break down. (Int#103, CEO23)

Similar comments from other CEOs reassured the management team, and corporate leaders on the Strategic Committee and the Board that the Directed Donation option could offer more emotionally appealing choices to corporations and individuals, while at the same time supporting and sustaining Solidum’s identity.

Rebuilding emotional bridges to propagate emotional resonance with identity beliefs to the wider community (Box C1). While the Directed Donation contributed to sustaining and amplifying the emotional resonance of identity beliefs with corporate leaders, the key concern that had precipitated the above activities was the dissipation of emotional resonance with the employees of organizations involved in corporate fund-raising campaigns. As indicated, these employees were less and less open to having their philanthropic choices imposed on them by corporate leaders. In other words, the intermediary role of corporate leaders in choosing which causes to support could no longer be taken for granted. There was still value for Solidum in continuing its ongoing ‘bridging’ practices described earlier to sustain the compassionate response of corporate leaders as major donors in their own right. However, to achieve the potential of the Directed Donation, Olivia and Solidum’s Board recognized the need to broaden the practice of ‘building emotional bridges’ to bring employees themselves into closer contact with activities
central to Solidum’s mission. With this in mind, Kathleen and Olivia developed a pilot project called Solidum Plus designed to “allow employee donors to donate according to their philanthropic interests, and stimulate an experience.” Olivia explained that “the goal of this experimental phase is to ensure that the Common Fund will be prioritized by employees before expanding to other companies” (Strategic committee, September 2014).

Olivia and her team selected a few companies for this pilot project, co-opting Angela Gomez, the influential CEO of an energy company to chair the project. “We created a flyer to be the tool we used to talk to people. And everyone said, ‘Wow: that’s exactly what we need’,” explained Olivia (Int#31, SM8). Initially deployed in 11 organizations, the Solidum Plus effort soon expanded to 30 large corporations, involving Solidum’s managers’ working closely with campaign ‘ambassadors’ in these companies to develop customized experiences and choices for employees. The options presented in the Directed Donation proposal (e.g., Breaking Social Isolation to cover a series of poverty causes) were in fact designed to expose potential donors much more closely and directly to the rich array of appealing causes that Solidum supported. Solidum’s bet was that faced with a choice between these categories, donors would see all of them to be worthy and important, and decide to donate to the Common Fund.

The project also included two emotional immersion activities aimed at the younger generation. The first, called “Move for Solidum,” included a set of activities designed for their emotional appeal (e.g. music concerts, bicycle contests), and the second, called “Solidum Experience,” enabled employees to volunteer for one of the agencies supported by Solidum, another form of the practice of ‘building emotional bridges’ that brought employees into direct contact with Solidum’s mission-based activities. One employee of a large company involved in coordinating the campaign commented: [The program] allows gestures of caring, to see where
our money is used in terms of real impacts in the community… (Int#116, EM5). Over the first three
years of experimentation, Solidum Plus reached more than 100,000 employees. In a follow-up
interview, Olivia described how corporate employees responded to the initiative:

This pilot project was a great success, way beyond our wildest hopes. All the firms that did
the campaign with the new concept have exceeded their donation goals, some surpassing
by as much as 20%. The fear that people would choose specific causes, and abandon the
‘Common Fund’ was not borne out by the facts…90% of employees chose the Common
Fund during the electronic campaigns…People understand the value of the global actions,
but those who fall for a cause that attracts them emotionally can make that choice too.
(Int#32, SM8)

In sum, through the combination of practices we saw in Period 3, Solidum’s managers
worked towards renewing and deepening stakeholder emotional resonance with its caring identity,
something that had tended to dissipate over previous years. Enrolling corporate leaders in
collective soul-searching around the existential threat posed by recent trends led to a collective
drive to find solutions that would enhance the emotional appeal of Solidum’s causes while
retaining the spirit of solidarity underpinning its identity. This was achieved by rematerializing
a new object – the ‘Directed Donation’ - that bridged competing concerns in a way that could sustain
its identity beliefs. Finally, the practice of rebuilding emotional bridges brought the wider
community of employee donors into closer contact with Solidum’s social mission, enhancing its
emotional resonance for them. We end this findings section with a story from another employee
involved in the Solidum Plus program described above:

There was a beggar on the street who I used to give money to. At one point, I started talking
to her, and that helped motivate her to get off the street...I helped her get off the street, I
gave her only $15 dollars...I cried afterwards, you know, it really touched me...The next
day, I went to another station, where I saw four or five women begging. I said to myself “I
can’t help them all!”...I felt helpless... So when I got involved in the Solidum campaign, I
said “I’m going to do something that will bring people together to help as many people as
possible...I’m going to be very motivated to do it. That is the kind of experience that
Solidum offers. (Int#113, EMP2)
DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS: A MODEL OF CREATING AND
SUSTAINING STAKEHOLDER EMOTIONAL RESONANCE WITH
ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY BELIEFS

In this study, we asked: How do senior managers of social mission-driven organizations build and sustain stakeholders’ emotional resonance with organizational identity beliefs over time in the face of repeated existential threats? The conceptual model in Figure 2 sums up our answer to this question, showing how existential threats lead senior managers to engage repeatedly in three specific practices of ‘emotional resonance work’ in interaction with central stakeholders. In this section, we step back from the specificity of our findings at Solidum to draw out the key contributions of our analysis, situating these with respect to the literatures on organizational identity maintenance, stakeholder relations, and emotional resonance. We structure this discussion according to three key aspects of the model shown in Figure 2.

**Stakeholder emotional resonance work as critical to sustaining organizational identity**

Previous literature has revealed the importance of navigating external stakeholder relations in sustaining an organization’s identity (Scott & Lane, 2000) and some authors have begun to address the role of emotions in these processes (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Hampel et al., 2020; Howard-Grenville et al., 2013). Our study contributes to this literature by unpacking in depth how organizations can effectively emotionally engage external stakeholders to sustain emotional resonance with identity beliefs over long periods of time, showing the specific practices by which they do so, and revealing ways in which these practices may or may not succeed over time. Indeed, we show that ‘stakeholder emotional resonance work’ composed of the three practices we describe is critical in allowing social mission driven organizations to sustain their identities over the longer term.

While much previous research on organizational identity work oriented towards external stakeholders has tended to focus on specific moments such as crisis (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991;
Eury et al., 2018; Jacobs et al., 2020 or pivot (Hampel et al., 2020), we observed in our study how ‘stakeholder emotional resonance work’ involves continuous and ongoing purposeful effort, requiring incessant vigilance, and renewal. Moreover, while resonance has cognitive and emotional dimensions (Giorgi, 2017), and while cognitive resonance may enable continued stakeholder support to some degree through the mechanisms of familiarity and inertia, we argue that stakeholder ‘emotional resonance’ with an organization’s identity is particularly critical to social mission-driven organizations to avoid the gradual dissipation of support, especially in the face of alternative opportunities offering superior emotional resonance. Our concept of ‘emotional resonance work’ can be seen as a particular form of social-symbolic work, defined by Lawrence and Phillips (2019: 31) as “purposeful, reflexive efforts of individuals, collective actors and networks of actors to shape social-symbolic objects,” where in this case the social-symbolic object is ‘stakeholder emotional resonance’ that must be continually worked on.

Practices, mechanisms and effects of stakeholder emotional resonance work

The most important contribution of our study lies in the identification of the three specific practices of stakeholder emotional resonance work shown in the center of Figure 2, and illustrated in detail in our findings. The way in which these practices operate together to seed, amplify and propagate the emotional resonance of organizational identity beliefs with stakeholders over time offers an integrated perspective on emotional resonance work that is original and novel to this study. In summary, the three practices work together to achieve stakeholder emotional resonance by connecting central stakeholders to the emotional underpinnings of the organization’s social mission, stimulating and further enhancing their identification with it by implicating them in the organization’s identity-related deliberations, and providing them with tangible tools to spread identity beliefs to others.
Specifically, the practice of ‘building emotional bridges’ expresses how senior managers immerse stakeholders as directly as possible in the mission-based activities of the organization in such a way as to stimulate emotional resonance with its mission and identity, stimulating stakeholder identification. Giorgi (2017) suggests that identification is the fundamental mechanism that underpins emotional resonance. We argue based on our study that it is rather the seeding of emotional resonance through practices such as ‘building emotional bridges’ that stimulates identification, enabling subsequent enrolment in other practices. While the emotions targeted by Solidum through bridging activities included caring and compassion, organizations with different types of missions might seek to stimulate other forms of emotional reactions through similar means. For example, in their study of activists for the cause of preventing plastics pollution, Barberá-Tomás et al. (2019) found that shocking visual images could be used to generate anger among audiences, building emotional commitment to that cause. In our study, however, it is not just visual images, but rather embodied relational connections between stakeholders and recipients that seeded emotional resonance. The theoretical point here is that this practice works by creating conditions in which stakeholders are brought to experience and appreciate in a direct, embodied, and personally meaningful way the work of the organization and the particular emotional content underpinning its identity.

The second practice, ‘enrolling in collective soul-searching’ extends and reinforces the practice of bridging. It involves bringing central stakeholders to the very heart of managerial deliberations about the organization’s strategy and key decisions, and engaging them directly in sharing existential worries about the survival of the organizational identity and mission that they have come to appreciate emotionally. In turn, central stakeholders contribute to sharing worries of their own in interaction with managers. As we saw in the case of Solidum, this practice contributed
to aligning both senior managers and stakeholders toward a common sense of purpose, amplifying the emotional resonance of organizational identity beliefs and consolidating their identification (Scott & Lane, 2000). Note that the practice of ‘enrolling’ does not mean sudden resolution of shared existential worries, and as we saw in the case, may sometimes involve lengthy periods of collective soul-searching and ambivalence. However, it nevertheless contributes to a sense of joint ownership of the issues being debated as evidenced in our findings. The sharing of existential worries can be described as a form of emotional regulation qualified by Rimé (2009) as “emotion sharing” that “creates a coalition between the narrator and the audience” (p.73), something that we clearly saw in our case. Exercises of collective soul-searching can provide a setting for mutual ‘validation’ of worries (Leahy, 2005) where members’ concerns are legitimized, enhancing their capacity to move forward.

Bridging and enrolling alone may not, however, be enough, as we saw in particular in the second period. ‘Materializing an appealing identity symbol’ is needed to complete the triad. This practice solidifies the potential for emotional resonance with organizational identity beliefs by rendering that organizational identity tangible in a concrete symbol. The materialized symbol plays two key roles. First, it provides closure to processes of ongoing collective soul-searching, appeasing ongoing existential worries. Second, it offers a tool for central stakeholders to communicate organizational identity meanings to the wider community. For example, the ‘Solidarity Donation’ and the ‘Directed Donation’ at Solidum stimulated enthusiasm and commitment, notably among central stakeholders who then acted as evangelists with the wider community. Simultaneously, these materializations provided a tangible focal point around which action could be justified and mobilized. Without appealing materializations such as these,
emotional resonance work might not connect with the wider community (as we saw earlier on during period 1, as well as during period 2).

While some scholars have noted the importance of objects in stimulating thinking on organizational identity (e.g., Oliver & Roos, 2007; Schultz & Hernes, 2013), most studies of organizational identity focus on textual descriptions at a reasonably high level of abstraction (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2020). Our study suggests that organizational identity attributes become much more emotionally powerful when they are materialized in a specific object. Materialization is not only a defense mechanism for self-referential identity work (Brown & Starkey, 2000), but also and importantly, an emotionally engaging tool to influence others.

Relatedly, another insight from our study is that tangible materializations of organizational identity may have a more durable character than words. This can contribute to consolidating attachment to specific organizational identity beliefs over relatively long periods of time. In actor-network theory terms, materializations of identity may become ‘actants’ in themselves that pull together a network of supporters, and they may be used to ‘speak for’ the organization (Cooren, 2010; Latour, 2005). The downside is that as we saw in period 2, undoing these artifacts may require considerable effort in itself, even when this appears necessary to sustain emotional resonance with the core features of organizational identity.

**Rhythms and tensions of stakeholder emotional resonance work**

The final insight from our study builds on those described above. As we have noted, the emotional resonance work required to sustain organizational identity beliefs over the long term is a never-ending challenge. It is not something that is ever ‘achieved,’ but needs to be continually repeated. However, the case suggests that each of the practices we described may have different natural rhythms. For example, practices of ‘bridging’ in which key stakeholders become personally immersed in mission activities may need to be relatively continuous to sustain
connections over time. Re-evaluations of which stakeholders should be targeted for these activities may be more periodic, however, and the way they are carried out may need to be varied to sustain their freshness and impact, as we saw in period 3. In the context of our case, practices of enrolling were continuously pursued in the background, but became far more intense at particular moments where existential threats became most salient (see timeline in Figure 1). Such practices might be rendered less intense by ongoing and planned reflective practices allowing more continuous adjustments (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2020).

Finally, because of the durability we described above, materializing seems to be a practice requiring occasional renewal at a less frequent rhythm than the other practices so as not to undermine the continuity of the organizational identity claims they symbolize, while frequent enough to render those claims sufficiently fresh and appealing to ensure continued stakeholder emotional resonance. Indeed, it is important to note that while materializations may contribute to creating and sustaining emotional resonance for a time, their power seems likely to gradually diminish as the artefacts, practices and labels associated with them lose their freshness and novelty, and therefore their appeal. A tired organizational identity representation (like last year’s fashion) may not stimulate stakeholder resonance; indeed, the reverse may be true as we saw in our case in Period 3. This is another reason (along with evolving trends and needs in the organization’s environment) why emotional resonance work is a never-ending requirement for social mission-driven organizations, and why it may almost inevitably be punctuated by occasional moments of existential threat and crisis. While several studies have evoked the notion of emotional resonance (Giorgi, 2017; Raffaelli et al., 2019; Robnett, 2004), the need for it to be continually renewed, and the different rhythms associated with the practices involved in achieving it have not received concerted research attention in this literature.
Boundary conditions, transferability, and limitations

The study presented here was carried out in the specific setting of a philanthropic organization. Our findings have parallels with the experiences of other organizations with social missions, where the ability to continue to attract funding may involve competition with similar entities. Deprived of many means of attracting resources available to for-profits, it may be particularly important for these organizations to gain support by formulating organizational identity claims that resonate both cognitively and emotionally with external stakeholders. In these organizations, understanding the emotional resonance work practices described in this paper can be a critical part of retaining stakeholders’ interest and funding, by enabling them to continuously update their connection to organizational identity over time.

In the particular case we studied, the relevant stakeholders were close enough and small enough in number that they could be targeted successfully drawing on the processes we describe. The processes might be somewhat different in another type of organization where key stakeholders are more widely dispersed, and less intertwined with the organization (making bridging and enrolling more difficult). Solidum clearly benefited from a history of close relations with its corporate sponsors that it had nurtured over the years and with whom it could more easily exert emotional influence. In addition, the stratified nature of Solidum’s stakeholder network and of its managers’ efforts at emotional resonance work might seem idiosyncratic at first sight, since it is based on the way in which the wider community of donors is dependent on decisions by central stakeholders (corporate leaders). However, we note that this type of stratification is nevertheless echoed by other studies. For example, the ‘evangelists’ of Massa et al.’s (2017) study of the Ontario wine industry and ‘identity custodians’ of Howard-Grenville et al.’s (2013) study of identity resurrection clearly lie at the nexus of the emotional dynamics that enable other individuals
to be brought into the fold. The difference may lie in the degree to which central stakeholders are
deliberately targeted or self-selected. At Solidum, and no doubt in other formalized organizational
settings, senior managers were strategic in choosing with whom to engage more intensively
because of the influence they had on others.

Another possibly idiosyncratic aspect of the case is that Solidum’s ‘emotional resonance
work’ appeared fairly reactive over the three periods of the study. It was the emergence of
existential threats that initially led senior managers to invest in the practices described. Once the
intensity of the threat died down, managers tended to reproduce past practices until new threats
emerged. One might ask whether these tension points were inevitable, and how they might have
been avoided. Further research could also examine how emotional resonance work might be
enacted to promote entirely new ventures.

Overall, we believe the model described here could be instructive in a wide variety of
settings. The fact that we were able to examine emotional resonance work in three sequential
periods within the same organization is a strength of this study that enhances the potential
transferability of the ideas because it reveals different ways in which the practices may play out.
We hope that further research will build on these ideas to further develop studies of emotional
resonance work in social-mission based organizations.

The study also has some limitations. For example, although our database was rich and
extensive, access to data was not even across time. Periods 1 and 3 were not only more intense in
terms of events, but also better documented in our data. Nevertheless, although we did not have
access to the fine-grained observational data we could draw on for Periods 1 and 3, we believe that
our representation of Period 2 is largely faithful to what occurred due to our many retrospective
interviews, access to temporally embedded data from meeting minutes, and member checks with
key observers. In addition, the involvement of the second researcher as action researcher in Period 1 of the study required a certain reflexivity. However, we believe that this involvement was not substantively influential in ways that would undermine the findings, and was a great strength in enabling us to capture relevant data, and provide rich insight into practices and dynamics over time (Langley & Klag, 2019).

**CONCLUSIONS**

In summary, our in-depth longitudinal study of Solidum contributes by developing a model showing how the senior managers of mission-driven organizations can create and sustain stakeholder emotional resonance with core organizational identity beliefs over long periods of time. They achieve this through ‘emotional resonance work’ manifested in the three inter-related practices of bridging, enrolling and materializing that are enacted iteratively and that each contribute in different ways to enabling stakeholder emotional resonance. These practices need to be continually renewed as stakeholder emotional resonance tends to dissipate over time in the face of competition, potentially leading to periodic existential threats.

Important lessons for practice can be derived from this study. In particular we reveal how managers of social mission driven organizations may engage central stakeholders’ emotions to build support for core organizational identity beliefs. When such organizations are threatened by adverse environmental changes, it may be important for them to reflect on the tradeoff between acceding to immediate stakeholder demands and finding ways to preserve the organization’s valued mission and identity. While some might view the processes we observed as evidence of ‘resistance to change,’ (particularly in Period 2), another way to view the processes described is as a proactive and important defense of a core mission and identity with value for society, and that might have been at least partially lost if managers were not prepared to address external threats through subtle handling of stakeholders’ emotions.
The study of Solidum also points to specific practices that can stimulate stakeholder emotional resonance. Building emotional bridges brings stakeholders into direct contact with the organization’s mission and makes its values and beliefs tangible. But to build support, stakeholders have to be enrolled in collective soul-searching so that they become emotionally and mentally available to support organizational identity. Finally, and most critically, by making organizational identity more tangible through practices of materializing that draw on identity symbols, managers can give their identity greater emotional appeal. Managers also need to realize that identity-related emotional resonance work is a never-ending process. Emotional resonance can be powerful, but fleeting—dissipating as the environment changes. Like fashion, emotional resonance needs to be continually renewed to remain fresh and maintain excitement, even among those stakeholders who have been strong allies in the past.

In conclusion, our analysis of Solidum shows that while ‘mission drift’ is always a risk for social mission driven organizations, it is not inevitable—even under repeated pressures from powerful stakeholders. We show how these organizations can preserve the essence of their core identities, not without effort, compromise and possible setbacks along the way, but through the skillful and judicious mobilization of practices of stakeholder emotional resonance work that are continuously renewed and reimagined as these organizations and their environments evolve. By unpacking the emotional dynamics of stakeholder relations, we contribute to a better understanding of how a valued organizational identity can be sustained over time through ongoing and impactful emotional resonance work.

REFERENCES


Table 1: Timeline of Data Sources and Uses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Main data sources: (117 meeting observations; 182 semi-structured interviews; 5,525 pages of archival data and 16 videos)</th>
<th>Use in analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994-1996</td>
<td>Archival data: 643 pages; Minutes from 78 meetings including TMT (61) and Board (17): 624 pages; 1 consultant report: 19 pages</td>
<td>Deepen understanding of the context before entering field (history, identity threat emergence).</td>
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|              | **First intensive wave of data collection**  
|              | **Observations:** 61 meetings  
|              | Strategic committee (38); executive committee (16); Board and campaign committee (7)  
|              | **Semi-structured interviews:** 82  
|              | 35 interviews with Chairman (1); CEO (4); all five senior managers (7); five middle managers (5); individual interviews with professionals (15); group interviews with professionals (3)  
|              | 47 interviews with external stakeholders: Chairman and CEOs of large corporations (major donors) (13); President of large state union and association (2); CEOs of community organizations (7); politicians (7); CapitalCity representatives, mayor and directors of major services (10); CEOs and VPs of other philanthropic organizations (8)  
|              | **Archival data:** 2577 pages  
|              | Minutes from 241 meetings including TMT (141); Board (61); and strategic committee (39): 1838 pages; 61 consultant reports and other documents (e.g. working documents, internal emails) including: reports (35) and others (26): 739 pages | Reconstruct chronology of events (triangulation of observations and meeting minutes). Deepen understanding of the first period of identity work including motivations, actions and decision processes. Deepen understanding of how TMTs tried to influence stakeholders over this period. Trace evolution of the identity-related emotional resonance issue, emotion-focused practices, and their effects. |
| 2004-2010    | **Follow up data collection**  
|              | **Observations:** 8 workshops and meetings  
|              | **Archival data:** 997 pages  
|              | Minutes from 75 meetings including TMT (24); Board (48) and strategic committee (3): 695 pages; 16 consultant reports and other documents including: reports (11) and others (5): 252 pages | Reconstruct chronology of events and ensure no major identity work events during this period. Trace evolution of the identity-related emotional resonance issue, emotion-focused practices, and their effects. |
| 2011-2016    | **Second intensive wave of data collection**  
|              | **Observations:** 48  
|              | 31 observations of TMT and board meetings: strategic committee (23); executive committee (4); Board (4)  
|              | 17 observations of other strategic meetings: campaign committee (11); meeting with experts, competitors and donors (2); strategic workshop with employees (4); resource allocation committee (1)  
|              | **Semi-structured interviews:** 81  
|              | 70 interviews including: Chairman, Board and strategic committee members (6); former CEO (6); new CEO (6); all four senior managers (24); four middle managers (18); consultants & other professionals (10)  
|              | 11 interviews with key external stakeholders including CEOs and VP of large corporations (majors donors) (5); group interview with CapitalCity mayor, five CEOs and VPs of large corporations, and one foundation CEO (1); group interview with Chairman, CEOs and VPs of large corporation (1); CEOs of community organizations (4)  
|              | **Archival data:** 1183 pages  
|              | Minutes from 154 meetings including TMT (93); Board (35); strategic committee (26): 896 pages; 9 consultant reports and others (e.g. working documents, internal emails): 287 pages | Reconstruct event chronology through observations and meeting minutes; complement with interviews. Deepen understanding of organizational identity work: motivations, actions and decision process. Trace evolution of the identity-related emotional resonance issue, emotion-focused practices, and their effects. Compare and contrast with previous periods to identify similarities and differences in emerging patterns. |
| 2018-2021    | **Follow up data collection**  
|              | **Semi-structured interviews:** 19  
|              | 5 individual and group interviews with managers and professionals including former CEO (2); current CEO and one senior manager (1); middle manager and three professionals (1); another professional (1)  
|              | 14 interviews with key external stakeholders including: CEO (1), vice presidents (4), corporate employees from two large corporations (9).  
|              | **Archival data:** 144 pages + 16 videos  
|              | 17 reports and others working documents (e.g. balance sheet reports, documents with corporate donors, consultant report): 144 pages  
|              | 16 testimonial videos with key external stakeholders related to Solidum over the past 20 years (18 central stakeholders (CEOs of large companies); testimony of 32 employees from 12 corporations). | Confirm understanding of organizational identity work, motivations, actions and decision process. Confirm ongoing emotion-focused practices and their effects, especially with corporate leaders and employees. |
Figure 1: Chronology of key events and data collection related to Solidum’s identity challenges

KEY EVENTS

Growing pressure for “Designated Donation”
Visits to low-income neighborhoods (Dan Baker)
Vision statement “Building a caring community”
“Builders” initiative (involving CEOs in neighborhood visits)
Advisory Committee on Philanthropy
Promotion of Solidarity Donation
“Bridging” activities
2008 financial crisis
Increased pressure for designation by corporate leaders
Fundraising decline
New CEO at Solidum
Adoption of Directed Donation

DONATION GROWTH

Emerging identity challenge and existential threat
PERIOD 1: Building stakeholder emotional resonance with identity beliefs
PERIOD 2: Dissipating resonance and re-emerging identity challenge
PERIOD 3: Renewing stakeholder emotional resonance

DATA COLLECTION

Retrospective data
First wave of intensive data collection (second author)
Follow up data (regular field presence of second author)
Second wave of intensive data collection (first and second author)
Follow up data (first and second authors)

*NB: Certain events in the timeline are color-coded to indicate their relation to the three practices of emotional resonance work. Practices associated with “building emotional bridges” are color-coded in blue. Practices associated with “enrolling in collective soul-searching” are color-coded in red. Practices associated with “materializing an appealing identity symbol” are color-coded in green.
Figure 2: Conceptual Model of Emotional Resonance Work in Social Mission-Based Organizations

Dissipation leads to renewed identity challenges

A. IDENTITY CHALLENGE:
Weakened emotional resonance of identity beliefs

B. PERCEIVED EXISTENTIAL THREAT
- Survival
- Identity

C. EMOTIONAL RESONANCE WORK
Senior managers engaging with central stakeholders
- Enrolling in collective soul-searching
- Materializing an appealing identity symbol

C2: Enrolling in collective soul-searching
(Consolidating identification and emotional resonance)

C3: Materializing an appealing identity symbol
(Making identity beliefs tangible)

C1: Building emotional bridges
(Seeding emotional resonance and stimulating identification)

D. EMOTIONAL RESONANCE of identity beliefs

Wider community of stakeholders
Central stakeholders (organizational boundary spanners)
Internal senior managers (micro)

NB. To promote transferability, we have formulated the model using generic labels for the key actors in the Figure (e.g., an left-hand side). However, in the context of Salisham, the “Central Stakeholders” are corporate leaders who are both key donors to themselves, as well as facilitators of fund-raising campaigns among employees in their organizations. The wider community of stakeholders includes other donors, notably the employees of organizations involved in fund-raising campaigns.
Figure 3: Empirical Model: The Temporal Trajectory of Emotional Resonance Work at Solidum
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