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## The Process of Establishing a Green Climate: Face-To-Face Interaction between Leaders and Employees in the Microsystem

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### Cover Page Footnote

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## **The Process of Establishing a Green Climate: *Face-To-Face Interaction between Leaders and Employees in the Microsystem***

### **Abstract**

*This study explores the processes of establishing a green organizational climate in small-scale companies. Previous studies have primarily focused on factors associated with pro-environmental behaviour in large organizations. The role of a green organizational climate – specifically, the interactional processes involved in the construction of a green climate – has largely been unexplored. Entrepreneurial small companies constitute an ideal arena within which to study the initial phase of greening processes. The present study examined the process of establishing a green organizational climate in seven small-scale Norwegian companies. This article presents a systems model that was developed to analyse how processes at different levels interact in the shaping of the green climate. The design was a longitudinal mixed-methods approach, consisting of focus-group interviews conducted in the field, a questionnaire, and follow-up interviews with the leaders. Findings indicate that the construction of a green climate had a strong, practise-based approach. The company founders were driven by environmental values; they sparked the initial green measures, influenced the employees – directly and indirectly – and also invited dialogue around and co-construction of the green climate. Frequent face-to-face interactions within the microsystem of the leaders/employees were decisive to the development of the green climate. The present study contributes to the understanding of the process of greening an organization: specifically, how green practice relates to the construction of a shared green climate. Contrary to previous research and theorizing, this study indicates that it is possible to “go green” without a superordinate green strategy.*

### **Introduction**

In the context of climate change and environmental degradation, companies are increasingly striving toward environmental sustainability. Organizations play a key role in the transition toward sustainability (De Matos & Clegg, 2013), and the green agenda has been embraced as an attempt to adapt to environmental challenges (Shevchenko, Lévesque, & Pagell, 2016). Several small companies are at the forefront of creating green changes; they have the ability to adapt rapidly, create innovative solutions, and engage employees in a shared green vision (Shevchenko et al., 2016) – however, it is unclear how this kind of green focus develops. In this study, entrepreneurial, small-scale green manufacturing companies were used as an arena within which to study the processes

involved in the establishment of a green organizational climate; this climate is defined as the employees' shared perceptions of the environmental policies and practices of the organization (Norton et al., 2012; Norton et al., 2014). It has been hypothesized that the green organizational climate established in an early phase of a company significantly impacts the future of the company (Kelly et al., 2000; Robertson & Carleton, 2017; Schein, 1983) and thus has extensive consequences. While the literature has examined associations between different factors, it is less clear how a sustainable and green organization *evolves* (Glavas, 2016; Kim et al., 2017; Norton, Parker, et al., 2015). To our knowledge, no studies have directly addressed the underlying process of establishing a green organizational climate (Glavas, 2016; Harris & Crane, 2002; Norton, Parker, et al., 2015).

## **The Emergence of a Green Organizational Climate – Many Roads, Few Directions**

Although many companies establish environmental strategy statements as part of their greening efforts, the formulation of a strategy does not necessarily promote behavioural change (Baumgartner & Ebner, 2010; Howard-Grenville et al., 2014; Lo et al., 2012; Mishra, 2017; Whitmarsh, 2009). At least one study indicates that the environmental strategy needs to be directly linked to action in order to promote pro-environmental behaviour (Norton et al., 2017); moreover, the establishment of a self-sustaining green practice requires that it be embedded in the overall organizational culture and climate (Benn et al., 2015; Davis & Coan, 2015; Norton, Zacher, et al., 2015; Renwick et al., 2013; Schneider et al., 2013). Correspondingly, the absence of an environmental culture or climate seems to hinder pro-environmental behaviour (Yuriev et al., 2018; Zientara & Zamojska, 2018).

Schneider and Reichers (1983) have defined “organizational climate” as a set of shared perceptions regarding the policies, practices, and procedures that are developed through interaction and supported by the organization. It is a collective phenomenon resulting from social processes, and is analogous to the way newcomers are socialized into the organization (Schneider & Reichers, 1983). Climate strength refers to the degree of agreement among co-workers with regard to their climate perceptions (Chou, 2014; Kuenzi & Schminke, 2009; B. Schneider et al., 2017); correspondingly, strong climates are hypothesized to be associated with frequent interaction between employees in the organization, which promotes uniform perceptions (González-Romá et al., 2002; Rentsch, 1990; Schneider et al., 2013). Organizational climate is found to be strong in small units with dense communication patterns (Schneider et al., 2013) and is consistently linked to employee behaviours (Kuenzi & Schminke, 2009).

While a general organizational climate is a global construct, the green climate relates more narrowly to the shared perceptions of environmental policies and practices within the organization (Kuenzi & Schminke, 2009; Norton et al., 2012; Norton et al., 2014). Although there is a considerable body of literature on general organizational climate, few studies examine the emergence of environmental climate in a work setting (Norton, Parker, et al., 2015). Some recent studies indicate that green climates are associated with environmental behaviour (Khan et al., 2019; Norton et al., 2017; Tian et al., 2020; Zientara & Zamojska, 2018), but it remains less clear how a shared green focus develops. As such, this study examines how organizations embed a green focus into their climate, to broaden our understanding of how pro-environmental behaviour can be dispersed throughout an organization.

Studies of pro-environmental behaviour at work are still at a nascent stage (Ones & Dilchert, 2012). We lack knowledge on the processes whereby leaders establish and shape an organizational climate that promotes pro-environmental behaviour (Norton, Parker, et al., 2015). There are also gaps in the literature related to methodological issues – several meta-analytic articles call for longitudinal studies that examine change processes; multilevel-studies that allow for understandings of how processes at different level interact; and, finally, qualitative studies that explore underlying mechanisms (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Kuenzi & Schminke, 2009; Lo et al., 2012; Norton, Parker, et al., 2015; Schneider et al., 2013).

## **Drivers of Green Climates in Organizations**

A major challenge in promoting green change is the lack of theories and knowledge on how a green climate is established and woven into the fibre of an organization. In general, organizational climate is thought to be driven by management systems (Flamholtz & Randle, 2014). Conversely, we hypothesize that an environmental-specific climate is driven by environmental certifications; as of yet, however, this relationship remains unexamined.

***Internal and external drivers.*** The drive to “go green” may vary along a continuum ranging from external to internal motivation. Important external drivers of organizational greening are stakeholder pressure, competitive pressure, and governmental requirements (Pham et al., 2019). Values are considered significant internal drivers; pro-environmental behaviour coincides with self-transcendent and biospheric values (Steg & Vlek, 2009). This basis likely extends to work settings, but it is unclear how common perceptions of green values develop among co-workers (Norton, Parker, et al., 2015).

Furthermore, moral obligation and conscientiousness have been reported as important drivers of pro-environmental behaviour (Norton, Parker, et al., 2015; Paillé et al., 2015); meaning is another internal driver that promotes the feeling that the greening efforts serve a greater purpose (Aguinis & Glavas, 2013; Fineman, 1996). Although some organizations with a peripheral approach to greening are motivated by external factors, organizations with an embedded approach to greening integrate environmental sustainability into its strategy and practices (Aguinis & Glavas, 2013). The processes by which green embeddedness is established and maintained are not well understood.

***The role of leadership in promoting a green climate.*** Some recent studies have suggested that leadership plays a significant role in the establishment of a green organizational climate (Bratton, 2018; Robertson & Carleton, 2017; Saleem et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2018). In line with this, a non-hierarchical leadership style has been found to contribute to cultivating a green climate (Xing & Starik, 2017). Leader support is central to promote pro-environmental behaviour, more specifically – feedback from leaders and setting examples enhance environmental performance (Robertson & Barling, 2013; Young et al., 2015). Researchers suggest that leadership style, such as ethical leadership (Khan et al., 2019, Saleem et al., 2020), responsible leadership (Zhao & Zhou, 2019), green transformational leadership (Robertson & Barling, 2013; Robertson & Carleton, 2017; Wang et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2018), and environmentally specific charismatic leadership (Tuan, 2019), positively affect pro-environmental behaviour. Furthermore, a green climate has been hypothesized to mediate the relationship between leadership style and pro-environmental behaviour (Khan et al., 2019; Robertson & Carleton, 2017; Saleem et al., 2020). Since pro-environmental procedures and practices constitute central elements of the green climate construct, the studies that link pro-environmental behaviour to leadership are relevant to consider.

## Applying the Ecological Systems Model to Green Climate Development

Given the substantial gaps in our knowledge around greening, it may be necessary to build a firmer theoretical standpoint. Flagstad and Johnsen (2020) have argued that Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems perspective may be used as a framework to understand how leaders and employees in organizations are influenced by each other and how a green organizational climate develops. In Bronfenbrenner's original model, the developing person is placed in the innermost system level and surrounded by nested structures, such as family, community, and culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Typically, the systems closest to the person are more significant for development than the more peripheral systems levels; according to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the interconnections between different levels are as important as the levels themselves. The drivers of development are proximal processes – interactions with the environment that occur with some frequency and over some time (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000) – which is in line with Schneider and Reicher's (1983) theorizing on shared climate and interpersonal interaction.

In the context of organizational climate, Flagstad and Johnsen (2020) have developed the model below to illustrate how a person in a company is influenced by different entities (*Figures 1 and 2*). In *Figure 1*, a leader of a small company is placed at the centre of the model with his/her values, ideas, skills, and attitudes. The *microsystem* of the leader includes employees with whom the leader interacts on a daily basis. These kind of face-to-face interactions and personal relationships are at the core of constructing a green climate in the microsystem (Schneider & Reichers, 1983).



The next system is the *corposystem*, which represents bodies within the company with whom the leader (in this example) has less direct contact, such as its board of directors, green organizational climate, environmental strategy and environmental values. Similar to how Flagstad and Johnsen (2020) have placed the environmental strategy in the corposystem, Norton et al. (2017) conceptualize it as a distal variable, and argue that the strategy has limited influence on the practice within the company if it is not directly

translated into action. In a large company, the corposystem represents entities such as other departments, top-level management and support functions. In Flagstad and Johnsons' (2020) organizational model, this level is different from the interactional level in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original model, and they coined the term "corposystem" to highlight this difference.

The distal level is the *macrosystem*, which represents entities outside the boundary of the organization, such as investors, external partners, customers, the local community and environmental certifications. Outside the macrosystem is the larger context, comprised of other companies, economic and political conditions, culture, international conditions, and the zeitgeist. The systems model may be related to the peripheral – embedded dimensions of greening introduced by Aguinis and Glavas (2013). They argue that organizations characterized by a peripheral approach to greening rely on governmental requirements (in the macrosystem in the systems model, *Figure 1*), while organizations with an embedded approach depend on interactional processes (in the corpo- and microsystems in the systems model, *Figure 1*).

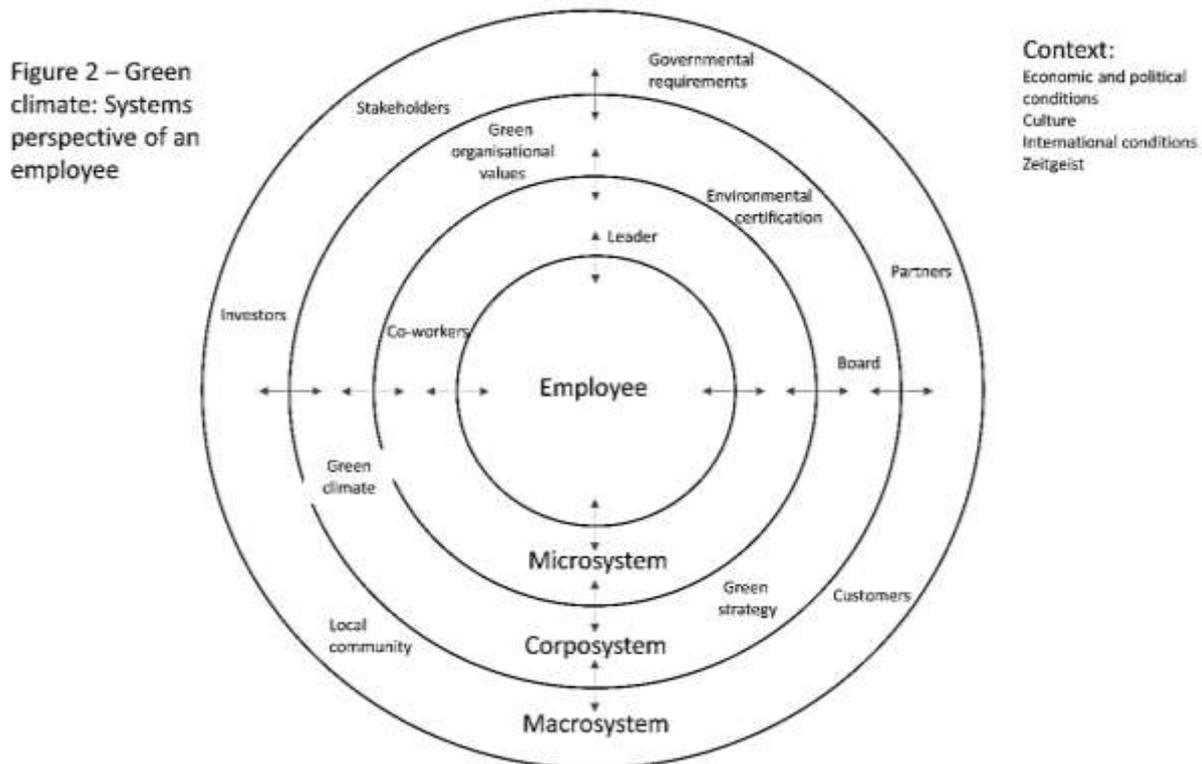
Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) identified two important developmental outcomes – competence and dysfunction; these emerge from the dimensions of exposure to proximal processes: *duration, frequency, interruption, timing, and intensity*. In the context of developing a green climate, competence was considered pertinent, and the three exposure dimensions of duration, frequency, and intensity were considered most relevant; in addition, *relevance*, a fourth dimension, was introduced, referring to instances when a process is perceived as being important (Flagstad & Johnsen, 2020).

Based on the dimensions of exposure to proximal processes, we hypothesize that the development of a green climate in an organization depends on interactional processes that originate in the microsystem. The development of shared perceptions of the environmental strategy and practice is at the core of the green climate – and these shared perceptions emerge from interpersonal interaction. We therefore propose that 1) the *duration* of encounters between people at work determines the construction of shared perceptions; 2) the *frequency* of encounters between people at work determines their influence on the construction of shared perceptions; 3) the level of *intensity* of encounters between people at work determines their potential to influence the construction of shared perceptions; and 4) the potential to influence depends on the perception of the *relevance* of the contributions. Finally, we also propose that the construction of a shared green climate depends on a combination of the above processes, and that a combination of the exposure dimensions precede the development of a strong environmental climate.

In addition to the propositions above, strong climates are hypothesized to be more common in small companies, because one might expect communication to be frequent and of longer durations (Schneider et al., 2013). Some relate the development of a green climate to meaning (Aguinis & Glavas, 2013), which is similar to the exposure dimension of relevance. Conceptually, the green climate is located in the corposystem, because it encapsulates the whole company; however, the employees may experience a continuous presence of the climate in the face-to-face interactions that characterize the microsystem. Similar to the propositions from the systems perspective, Norton et al. (2017) suggest that employees are surrounded by multiple contextual levels and hypothesize that the environmental climate constitutes a proximal variable, primarily constructed through social interaction.

The systems that shape the green climate may be constructed from the perspective of any member of the organization. *Figure 2* depicts the perspective of an employee: here, the leader and co-workers occupy the microsystem around the employee, and the boundaries

of the corposystem is an important delineation, as the employee's work is principally internally oriented.



Employees who hold personal pro-environmental values and attitudes will contribute to the construction of a strong green climate. However, employees who do not support the environmental focus of the organization will hinder the development of a green climate. Furthermore, differences of opinion may give rise to conflicts in the micro- and corposystems. Frictions in these two systems may also arise as a result of competing climates: for instance, the environmental climate may be threatened by a climate of efficiency (Kuenzi & Schminke, 2009).

**Leader driven processes.** We emphasize that the systems model is related to prior research and theorizing. Firstly, several theoretical perspectives place leadership as an element in the proximal context of the employee (Kim et al., 2017; Robertson & Carleton, 2017), which corresponds to the microsystem in the systems model. The importance of leader support as a central driver for a green organizational climate is well documented (Kim et al., 2017; Robertson & Barling, 2013; Robertson & Carleton, 2017; Saleem et al., 2020). Leader influence is related to several of the exposure dimensions: leaders' interactions with employees may occur frequently and over a long duration. Furthermore, some leaders have high intensity (e.g., charisma), and moreover may communicate their green engagement in a way that seems relevant to the employee.

**Employee driven processes.** Secondly, the co-workers are a central element in the microsystem of an employee; they may play a key role in promoting pro-environmental behaviour through "work group green advocacy" (Kim et al., 2017), normative social influence processes and social learning processes (Robertson & Carleton, 2017). The dimensions of exposure impact the strength of the influence: for example, frequent, long, intense, and relevant encounters lead to strong environmental influence.

**Leader–employee interaction.** Additionally, Kim et al. (2017) suggest that there may be interactional effects involved: the leader’s pro-environmental behaviour spurs green advocacy in the work group, which in turn may strengthen the green focus of the leader. The authors found that the dynamic processes in the work group have amplifying consequences, creating social pressure to perform pro-environmental behaviour (Kim et al., 2017). Moreover, employees’ desire for approval and recognition may be important drivers, stemming from both co-workers and leaders (Dejonghe et al., 2009; Paillé et al., 2015). Indeed, research suggests that strong relationships between co-workers and the experience of support encourage pro-environmental behaviour in organizations – more specifically, “eco-helping” (Paillé et al., 2015). In line with this, Robertson and Carleton (2017) found that transformational leadership, focused on building relationships, is associated with pro-environmental climate, and conversely that lack of co-worker/managerial support has been found to be a barrier to pro-environmental behaviour (Yuriev et al., 2018). In sum, the systems model explains how face-to-face interactions in the microsystem – both between employees and between the leader and employees – determine the development of a shared green climate.

### **Greening Mechanisms in Miniature: Norwegian Small-Scale Companies**

To examine the mechanisms through which greening occurs, we decided to focus on organizations in the entrepreneurial phase. According to several authors, research on environmental sustainability in small-scale companies is underexplored (Del Giudice et al., 2017; O’Donohue & Torugsa, 2015; Roxas & Coetzer, 2012), and to our knowledge there are no studies on environmental climate and culture in this context; the majority of research in this field has been conducted in large companies (Kuenzi & Schminke, 2009; Ozbilir & Kelloway, 2015; A. Schneider et al., 2017). This lack is noteworthy, since small companies in most countries contribute substantively to wealth creation – in Norway, they make up 25% of wealth creation – and their environmental impact thus deserves attention (NHO, 2018). Furthermore, small companies may form the core of larger organizations in the future and consequently they are hypothesized to generate great environmental effects. The focus of this study is therefore on small-scale companies, defined by the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise (NHO) as companies with 1 to 20 employees (NHO, 2018).

We hypothesize that the size of the company influences the greening process. On the one hand, small companies may face obstacles in their greening efforts due to a lack of slack resources (i.e., liquidity), environmental knowledge, and explicit policies with regard to environmental sustainability (Del Giudice et al., 2017; O’Donohue & Torugsa, 2015). On the other hand, small companies have advantages related to flexibility, close interaction, and the ability to adapt rapidly to changes (Masurel, 2007; O’Donohue & Torugsa, 2015). An additional characteristic of small-scale companies is that they tend to have a unitary organizational culture and climate, which are attributes that may facilitate the diffusion of green values (Harris & Crane, 2002). Shevchenko et al. (2016) have requested further research on small organizations characterized by entrepreneurship and an active striving for “true sustainability,” rather than on large companies that primarily engage in compensatory actions.

In the present study, we decided to focus on manufacturing companies, because they make choices that have an environmental impact – especially concerning production process, use of raw materials and choice of packaging/transport. Furthermore, we aimed to investigate environmental considerations in companies that face market competition.

Most research on the greening of organizations has been conducted in North America and the United Kingdom; to our knowledge, this is the first study of green organizational climate in a Norwegian setting (Yuriev et al., 2018). Norway makes for an interesting context, as Norwegian work life is characterized by low levels of hierarchy and a high degree of employee involvement, which may influence organizational greening. Norwegian society faces a dilemma in the era of climate change: the “Norwegian paradox.” On the one hand, Norway strives to be at the forefront of sustainable development; on the other, its economy is highly reliant upon oil (Boasson & Lahn, 2017; Eckersley, 2015; Norgaard, 2006). The Norwegian society is moving in a green direction; the green shift was awarded “the word of the year” in Norway in 2016, the Green Party (Miljøpartiet De Grønne) has recently seen a rise in support (Larsen & Madsen, 2018) and climate change was rated the largest challenge of our time in 2019 (Livgard, 2020). There is a rising controversy regarding Norway’s paradoxical position between climate leadership and fossil fuel extraction (Lahn, 2019) and the ethical dilemma this creates (Hunnes, 2019).

## **Purpose and Research Questions**

In this study, we investigated the greening process – from initial pro-environmental concerns to the development of a green organizational climate – in small-scale manufacturing companies. Our aims were two-fold: to advance our understanding of the interpersonal exchanges that take place during the construction of a shared green climate; and to examine the processes through which a shared climate take shape. Our focus was on the social interaction mechanisms at play between employees, and between employees and the founder. By considering how the environmental focus was reflected in practice, values, and philosophical underpinnings, we were able to explore the dispersion of green values and the evolving elements in the establishment of an environmentally-sound organization.

## **Method**

As this study was designed to examine the dynamic and interactional aspects of the establishment of a green organizational climate, a longitudinal qualitative approach was employed. A thematic analysis of the interviews was conducted which provided a means of identifying and organizing crucial themes in a straightforward way (Braun & Clarke, 2006); the focus group interviews themselves enabled an exploration of shared perceptions of the organizational climate. All focus group participants completed a survey aimed at examining environmental climate perceptions at the level of the individual. Finally, founders were invited to participate in a follow-up phone interview, which enabled studying the evolving elements of the organizational climate.

## **Participants**

Seven focus group interviews were conducted, consisting of three to six participants in each group, representing both leaders and employees. In all but one of the companies, the founder was still working at the company. The companies were either organized as corporations or foundations: several were family- and/or farm-based; the green profiles on their websites had different foundations; some had environmental certification; and each were in the food industry (FI), beverage industry (BI) or textile (TI) industry (*Table 1*). The findings indicated that although their motivation to go green had different origin, all founders had an environmental commitment.

**Table 1**

<b>Details of the Selected Companies (N = 7)</b>				
<b><u>NAME</u></b>	<b><u>CORPORATE FORM</u></b>	<b><u>GREEN PROFILE ON WEBSITE</u></b>	<b><u>ENVIRONMENTAL CERTIFICATION</u></b>	<b><u>INDUSTRY</u></b>
<b>Company A</b>	Family/farm-based corporation	Organic	Yes	BI
<b>Company B</b>	Family/farm-based corporation	Sustainable	No	FI
<b>Company C</b>	Corporation	Nature/sustainable	No	TI
<b>Company D</b>	Farm-based foundation	Organic/ biodynamic	Yes	FI
<b>Company E</b>	Family/farm-based corporation	Organic/ sustainable	Yes	BI
<b>Company F</b>	Family-based corporation	Organic	Yes	FI
<b>Company G</b>	Family-based foundation	Organic/ biodynamic	Yes	FI

Criteria for selecting the companies were carefully developed (*Table 2*), and they were primarily identified through web searches. We targeted companies with an environmental product and profile; specifically, companies describing themselves as green on their web page by using descriptive words like “organic,” “sustainable,” “ecological,” “biodynamic,” “natural,” “environmentally friendly,” “tradition,” “handicraft,” “local production,” “good use of resources,” “care for nature,” “recycling,” “diversity,” and “equilibrium” (central words are summarized in *Table 1*). Organizations with at least five employees were selected, since organizational climate is a group-level phenomenon. To avoid complex structures and the potential for existing subcultures, organizations with more than 20 employees were excluded. Organizations that were primarily business-oriented were targeted, using revenue as a criterion. Furthermore, companies that produce a physical product were hypothesized as facing similar environmental challenges concerning packaging and transport, and including this as a selection criterion enabled comparisons across different industries. We targeted companies that operate in the open market, because they were expected to experience tension between economic and environmental concerns. Finally, we targeted organizations with high levels of employee involvement in decision-making, indicated by a common language, inclusion in work meetings, and a shared physical location.

**Table 2**

<b>Selection Criteria</b>	
<b>Green profile</b>	Describes company as green on their website
<b>Size</b>	4–20 employees
<b>Revenue</b>	More than USD 100,000
<b>Outcome</b>	Physical product
<b>Competition</b>	Competes on the open market
<b>Involvement</b>	Employees involved in decision-making

### **Procedure**

Invitations were sent to 15 companies, of which 7 fulfilled the selection criteria and agreed to take part in the study. A full day was devoted to each company, allowing thorough preparation and time to digest the field experience. All interviews were conducted in the field, providing valuable contextual information. The interviews were conducted by one moderator, who directed the dialogue, and one observer. Questionnaires were administered at the end of the interview. Topics were allowed to emerge during the data collection phase, and new questions were added to subsequent interviews. A year-and-a-half after the focus group interviews, the company leaders were invited to participate in a

follow-up phone interview: six participated. The material was transcribed verbatim and uploaded into MAXQDA – a qualitative data analysis programme (VERBI Software, 2019).

### ***Questionnaire***

We used the green work climate perceptions scale developed by Norton et al. (2014) to measure different aspects of the green organizational climate. This questionnaire enabled us to both measure environmental climate at the level of the individual and analyse how the individual perceptions corresponded to findings from the group interviews. Moreover, the scale provided a measure of climate strength (degree of agreement among group members), as a high/low standard deviation corresponds to a strong/weak climate (Zientara & Zamojska, 2018). In addition, the companies were ranked along a green scale; this scale was established via independent evaluations by the interviewers along four dimensions comprising the environmental aspects of the 1) product, 2) work process, 3) physical infrastructure, and 4) organizational climate.

To provide a comparison group, the data from the climate scale were compared with data from a study ( $N = 234$ ) of small- to medium-sized companies in Norway. The comparison group differed from the participants in the present study in several ways: firstly, they were not selected based on a green focus; secondly, they differed in size, ranging from individual enterprises to medium-sized companies; and, finally, they represented a variety of industries, and most did not produce a physical product. Nevertheless, they provided a proxy for environmental climate perceptions in a general Norwegian company.

### ***Coding and Analysis***

The preliminary analysis was conducted during the transcription phase, by listening to audio recordings and by noting reflections. The transcripts were then analysed in MAXQDA and a set of initial codes were generated with reference to the themes in the interview guide; subsequent codes emerged from the data. The analysis followed the constant comparative method, in which hypotheses were tested in the data through a back-and-forth dialogue (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2006). “Substantial codes” were emphasized, which provided further direction toward the elaboration and development of analytical categories. Categories were explored within – as well as across – the interviews; this enabled examination of their overall relevance and of any changes between the first and second interviews. Overarching themes were developed out of the initial categories; these themes represented more abstract and encapsulated topics. In the final stage, findings from the interviews were analysed in conjunction with the data from the questionnaire.

### ***Findings and Discussion***

This section is organized in accordance with the major themes that emerged from the analysis: 1) developing a green organizational climate – the role of the founder in the early phase, development, and maintenance of the climate, and the role of newcomer socialization; 2) developing the environmental practice – constant improvement, the role of environmental philosophy, involvement, and the green wave; 3) resolution – going green as a way of resolving the emotional discomfort posed by climate threat. Finally, the data on environmental climate from the questionnaire will be analysed and discussed in relation to the interview data.

### **Developing a Green Organizational Climate**

***The role of founders in instigating the construction of a green climate.*** From the beginning, founders determined the establishment of a green climate; hence, they influenced practices in the company by their continuous presence.

3: *If [name of founder] hadn't been so into his own vision, then I think it had gone downhill very quickly. So that... he is so clear all the time, I think that's important.*

2: *Then it would have been more like a negative culture than a green culture (Company E).*

These statements highlight the importance of the environmental vision of the founder in maintaining a green focus. They also highlight the role of leadership in shaping the green vision of the company. Another participant emphasized how the environmental values of the founder supported his own environmental engagement, and therefore made it easy to bring up ideas, since he knew the leader would accept them: "If it comes from the boss then you know that... it's nice to be environmentally responsible, I completely agree with that" (3, Company C). The quote below from the founder in this company echoes the above statement, which stresses the importance of managerial support of employees' green initiatives:

*... Well, I think it's good and important that the boss... is environmentally committed, both in everyday life and in the boardroom. Then things become a lot easier: it's not a pressure from the bottom up, from some passionate employees, which is later overruled in the boardroom, but it's kind of the other way around. That makes it a lot easier (1, Company C).*

This series of quotes from Company C demonstrates the mutuality of the influence process and the importance of managerial support. It also illustrates that the leader moves between interacting with employees, in the microsystem, and the board of the directors, who are located in the corpusystem (*Figure 1*).

Moreover, several founders mentioned that they avoided giving direct instructions, because they were afraid of moralizing and wanted employees to make up their own minds. They highlighted the importance of giving each individual space to develop their own engagement.

*We try to build an organization that makes it possible for each one to take responsibility, to have some space in a way. It's not one chief telling 10 people what to do, and walking around controlling. We need engagement. Even if... someone is shorter time here, we like when they get engaged, and do also from the inner side, as they can (1, Company D).*

This quote illustrates how giving people space is related to stimulating their inner motivation ("from the inner side"). The founders seemed to be conscious of the balance between influencing and trying to teach ways of moving forward on the one hand, while cultivating engagement and bottom-up processes on the other. Since the founders are located in the microsystem of the employee, they are likely to exert strong influence through frequent interactions occurring over time that are likely to be intense and relevant.

***Developing and maintaining the green climate.*** The employees played a central role in developing the green climate through mutual influence processes in the microsystem, with regard to both the leader and other co-workers. In general, the accounts indicate that they experienced a shared environmental climate; they tended to agree on how environmental practices were conducted, and typically reported shared perceptions. "I believe that we think alike, that we're passionate about the same things" (2, Company E). Here, "think alike" and "passionate about the same" both point to shared perceptions about the environmental focus. In another company, an employee experienced the environmental profile as integral to the production process, and believed the other co-workers personally cared for the environment.

*Our environmental profile is very much woven into everything we do... the whole infrastructure. The materials come from someone who is... responsible, and are produced close by, and are transported a short distance, and it's like, a place we've built around [the idea] that it should be green... after all, we're all aware of recycling and about consumer culture and such (2, Company C).*

The above notion suggests that this participant experienced the green profile as corresponding to their own practice. The expression “we are all aware” indicates that the participant experienced a shared green focus. In general, participants assumed that they had common environmental procedures, and that their co-workers would follow these procedures when they were not present. Because of the close ties in the microsystem, they were able to make judgements based on experience, enabling them to know how others performed in the environmental domain.

A variety of influence strategies were employed in the development of a green climate, along a continuum in which internal to external motivation was being promoted. Several participants highlighted the importance of raising consciousness and “setting a good example” (1, Company A). One participant felt that leading by example was the only valuable way of influencing others.

*You can just attempt to raise awareness and tell that we do this because of this and that, and so on. And do it yourself – set a good example. That's the only thing that works. That's my impression. But not by being overly moralizing, then... it becomes the other way around. Generally, we have to work on it all the time (1, Company D).*

Another central element in the development of a shared climate involved discussions and dialogue, both informal and more formal (e.g., during work meetings). It seemed that many of the participants enjoyed and celebrated *the process* of developing the green focus. Rather than rushing toward a result, they prioritized spending time in work meetings, encouraged dialogue, and allowed time for developing ideas. In some companies, daily work meetings served as an important forum in which to discuss and develop the green focus.

*3: We have workshops... and question why people think this way or that way.*

*1: We have a meeting every morning, and plan the day... when it's busier, then... one tries to create different teams so that one experienced person teams up with one or two with less experience (Company G).*

The above example illustrates how diverse teams were used as a way of transferring experience and routines to newcomers. The frequency of the work meetings enabled strong influence through the four dimensions of exposure to proximal processes. Further, the participants highlighted the importance of the process of developing a green focus, and that they cherished being open to change.

*3: That it's actually always evolving and it's a process in which everyone can be involved and it's open for new ideas (...).*

*1: So that one attempts to constantly evolve... that there are processes one must always include.*

*3: I think it's important to be open to new ideas and things like that, and to changes, and go through that process, so that one doesn't say “now it's this way”, and you think it's perfect, but maybe... new ecological thoughts have arisen (Company G).*

The participants stressed the importance of including everyone in the process of developing an ecological way of thinking. Interestingly, it was among the two companies that had an explicit ideological foundation that the importance of being open to new ideas

was most frequently underlined. The participants stressed that working on finding sustainable solutions was a long-term process: “It is an ongoing conversation... yes, always some kind of dialogue. What’s good for nature, and what do we have to do in order to... and that we should always have it in mind” (1, Company D); and, similarly, “The road is made by walking, we didn’t quite know what we were about to face” (2, Company B). This process of forming a green climate seemed to be an ongoing theme that was given high priority, and further relates to these companies’ search for improvement. Interaction processes in the microsystem were decisive to the development of the climate. Moreover, the participants seemed to cherish the process in itself and all four dimensions of exposure were at play.

***Newcomer socialization.*** In analysing the process of establishing an environmental climate, it was pertinent to study how the companies integrated newcomers, because this constitutes a central aspect of forming a shared climate. None of the companies had recruitment strategies to attract “green” employees and the interviews indicated that newcomer’s environmental commitment varied from highly committed to less aware. One founder explained how newcomers contributed to their environmental focus: “We have common perceptions – I’d absolutely say that. I’d say that the newcomers who have started only contribute positively” (1, Company A). Accordingly, this founder found that the newcomers reinforced the company’s green focus, and emphasized the importance of recruiting people who precisely fit the organization. This followed a leadership philosophy that he referred to as “FIFO – fit in or fuck off” (1, Company A). Further, he highlighted the importance of training: “It is important to provide clear instructions and good training. However, at the same time, there are certain things that’re, as I call it, in your nature” (1, Company A). Hence, this underlines the importance of recruiting employees that will strengthen the green focus. Even though several founders highlighted the importance of training new employees, none of the companies had a formalized training programme, so transferring knowledge to newcomers depended on informal influence.

There were several accounts of how newcomers adopted environmental practices at work and transferred some of the new habits to their household. For instance, in one company, there was evolvment regarding new environmental practices at home: “To me, it’s at least something that grows, at home, to yeah, recycle and... it has grown in me during the past half year, the feeling of still making a difference with small actions” (2, Company C). In two of the companies, the employees lived on site, and the line between work and private life was blurred. “It doesn’t end with your work, with opening hours, but it’s also that we make as much organic food as possible and such... so it’s a whole lifestyle really, not just as a company” (3, Company G). These examples illustrate how the environmental focus of the company extended beyond the boundaries of the corposystem and into the private sphere.

In the follow-up interviews, several founders mentioned how recent hires contributed positively to the company’s environmental focus. They also underlined the advantages of being small: it enabled close attention and follow-up procedures, and facilitated the socialization process. A number of theoreticians have highlighted the integration of newcomers as central to embedding culture (Schein, 1983; Schneider & Reichers, 1983). The accounts in the present study illustrate how newcomers were socialized into the organizations: efficient onboarding of new employees seemed to be the outcome of this process.

In summary, the accounts in the current section indicate that shared perceptions of procedures were established among employees, and that they were confident that others would follow the protocol when they were not present. A distinct feature of these small companies was the active engagement of the founder in shaping a green climate. A strong

climate is associated with the ability to influence employee behaviour, and the close and frequent interaction in the microsystems that characterized these companies enabled the establishment of a strong pro-environmental organizational climate.

## **Developing the Environmental Practice**

***Constant improvement.*** The companies in the present study had a green focus from the beginning, reflected in their practicum – and, in one case, also in their strategy. Throughout the analysis, the emergent properties of the green climate attracted attention; it seemed that an urge to improve practice was a key factor in explaining the dynamic aspects of the environmental climate. Both founders and employees were concerned about improving their practice: “We do what we can, but like Participant 1 said, we could’ve done a lot more” (2, Company A). As such, they seemed to have a constant drive toward improvement – a search for new and better environmental practices and innovative green solutions: “Never, never ending, somehow, to develop and to look for better solutions, but also, improve this, I guess” (3, Company D). In one company, all employees were included in weekly work meetings, discussing new projects and ways to move forward: “Everyone that works here believes it’s important that we always focus on... yeah, ecology, and thinking further about what we can improve, or do differently” (2, Company G). Furthermore, they were continuously searching for better and more ecological alternatives: “So we kind of always try with the stuff we need... try to find the best overall ecological alternatives” (1, Company G). This drive to improve was an important explanation for the evolving character of the environmental climate in these companies: it contributed to advancing green practices and increased environmental awareness. Although these companies had established a green focus from the outset, the urge to improve explained dynamic aspects of the environmental climate.

***The practice–philosophy gap.*** The green practices in these companies appeared to have little support in an agreed-upon theoretical framework. In short, the participants seemed to be good practitioners, but poor philosophers. Although the green routines and practices seemed to be rooted in environmental idealism and a deep environmental conscientiousness, access to this foundation and the articulation of these ideas was difficult. Some related the questions on environmental philosophy to environmental certification: “It might not be that clearly expressed. So, it’s kind of a basic requirement. But we were an eco-lighthouse [environmental certification] after all” (1, Company B). When we asked about environmental values, they tended to direct the focus on practical aspects of their work, as in this case: “A lot of these things are there, but you might not speak much about it, because the work we do is hands on, and then the day is over, and then...” (1, Company B). The dialogue below exemplifies the typical shift we observed in several cases, to relating the answer to everyday events and practical matters:

I: Is environmental protection and climate a motivation for you?

*1: Absolutely, absolutely! And maybe now more than ever. You question what's going on, right. When it's severe, like weather changes here and there. It's clear that... but it's so many big questions, that you can't quite cope and... in the day-to-day you cannot grasp the constraints of it, but I have to say I think recycling of waste and stuff, that's actually quite interesting* (1, Company B).

Later in the same interview, this participant was asked a new question concerning their environmental motivation: “You know, actually we don’t think that much about it. Why we think like this, because it’s kind of just the way it is. But, it’s really just part of the culture, maybe. It’s kind of just like this” (1, Company B). For the participants, taking care of nature seemed natural, something they took for granted – similar to how basic assumptions

shape organizational culture (Schein, 1983). This practical orientation may explain why it was difficult to obtain answers to some of these questions: the participants were environmental practitioners who, at times, lacked awareness around what they were doing.

***Follow-up: The evolving green organization.*** In the follow-up phone interviews that we conducted with the founders, specific questions on environmental philosophy were included to examine the hypothesis that emerged from the focus group interviews: i.e. that the companies seemed to be strong practitioners, but lacked a theoretical foundation. The founders seemed to struggle to express their company's environmental philosophy: "I'm not sure what that philosophy should have been, so it becomes uh... like receive as little as possible, or tread lightly, do as little harm as possible and... make people do the same" (1, Company C). In one company, there were ideas – but they were not clearly stated: "I am pretty sure that we have the same focus, but we should express ourselves differently" (1, Company D). In another company, the focus was clearly practical: "At the moment we're more concerned about putting things into practice. There's not very much time to philosophize when you're walking around working" (1, Company F). Thus, there seemed to be a gap between environmental practices on the one hand, which seemed to be very strong, and environmental philosophy on the other, which seemed to be either unspoken or absent. In essence, it seemed that the shared environmental climate grew out of practice instead of a philosophical superstructure.

Some leaders reported that new developments were related to their environmental focus, which mostly concerned the further development of existing projects. For instance, one company was extending their biomass heating system to include all buildings, and was developing calculations of their environmental footprint. Another company was developing a new local production based on the use of excess materials. In some companies, participants highlighted evolving elements of the green profile. However, other companies reported that the environmental focus was the same as before: as one participant stated, "We recycle. We did that last time you were here, too" (1, Company F). Another participant felt that the focus was the same, yet more structured:

*So, the environmental focus hasn't changed a lot, I believe. No, it was there from the beginning. Indeed... We've got a little more order in life and work... more structure. And that has probably improved that [the environmental] part too (1, Company D).*

The time horizon might be different for founders and employees. Employees might come and go, whereas founders must live with the long-term consequences of their choices: "After all, we're probably here in three or five years, so we have to live with the consequences in a way, and you have the freedom to, you can travel home in a year or so... so it must be something we believe in" (1, Company G). In light of the time perspective, it was unsurprising that the founders put more effort into strategic decision-making, and how decisions might influence prospects in the future. The time perspective is located within the context of the systems perspective (*Figure 1*), and one might argue that leaders are required to interact with all the system layers—including the context – whereas employees primarily operate in the microsystem.

***The green wave.*** In general, the participants felt that the society's environmental focus had increased since the founding of their company: "When they started in 2005, the case about ecology and the green mind-set and the climate and all that stuff, it wasn't as important as it is today" (3, Company B). In the follow-up interviews, the founders noted that interest in organic products had strengthened: "The demand for this has increased, so we notice that some customers are very enthusiastic about 'Is it organic?'" (1, Company B). One company had launched a new ecological product line, and the founder related their recent success

to the new line: “It’s going well, and one of the reasons is certainly that we hit the sweet spot with the customers that are concerned about this, and it’s also a trend in the branch of trade — that it’s going in that direction. So, the shops also want to participate” (1, Company C). The participants described how the customers’ interest in and concern for the environment (i.e., the macrosystem) contributed to the development of the environmental focus in the companies.

In the follow-up interviews, climate change was frequently mentioned as a factor that contributed to strengthening the motivation to go green, and the participants found their greening efforts to be meaningful. In general, the participants experienced a “green wave” in society (i.e., the zeitgeist) — hence, their accounts indicate that elements in the macrosystem and context contributed both to the development and enforcement of their environmental focus (*Figure 1*). Thus, the greening measures in these companies must be interpreted within the Norwegian context, characterized by a strong commitment to responsible climate action (Boasson & Lahn, 2017).

### **Resolution: Going Green as a Way of Resolving Discomfort**

Several participants made remarks regarding environmental motivation. Some emphasized that their environmental focus fostered a feeling of doing something meaningful: “To do something that’s bigger than yourself... it isn’t just about sales and money” (2, Company C). They related the environmental focus to “doing something important”, and making things right: “That little drop in the ocean” (1, Company A). Moreover, they did not feel they had a choice: “If we don’t do something, the earth will perish. So, it’s quite easy” (1, Company C). Several participants felt that their environmental focus was reflected in “a lot of small things” (2, Company D). Conscientiousness was mentioned by several participants as their most important driving force: “To earn a living honourably, hahaha, and I believe that’s something you can stand for with a clear conscience” (1, Company D). Others referred to maintaining traditions, a sense of responsibility and frugality. Taking care of nature and being close to nature were also mentioned as motivations: “Finding a way of working with nature not against it” (2, Company D); and “You have to care for the nature and understand that it’s vulnerable and has to be protected and... indeed conserve it” (1, Company C). One participant related his ecological focus to idealism: “It’s kind of an idealism. To do something good for the world. Improve the world, a little bit like this. I’m a bit of a world improver. Haha, yes” (1, Company D). Even though none of the participants related their environmental commitment to Norway’s role as an oil nation, their references to conscientiousness and responsibility may be understood in relation to the “Norwegian paradox.”

Thus, the green organizational climate did not seem to develop gradually; the accounts illustrate that the green focus was established from the very beginning. Some theoreticians argue that embedded green organizations stem from a green core idea (Pandey et al., 2013), and the current findings seem to be in line with this understanding. Although the ideas were not clearly articulated in most cases, they were still present and defined the direction of the companies. The accounts provided few references to visions and strategies—rather, the companies seemed to follow their own path by developing strong green routines and practices without a superordinate green philosophy.

### **Measured Outcomes of the Greening Efforts**

In this section, the results from the survey on environmental climate will be reported, and observations of the environmental focus will be summarized in a green score. The results from the survey provided an indication of how well the companies had succeeded in establishing a shared environmental climate. Cronbach’s alpha ( $\alpha$ ) was calculated to test

for internal consistency within the scale, which was sufficient ( $\alpha = .83$ ). The results (*Table 3*) show that the participants in this study reported higher environmental climate levels when compared to the comparison group. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the two groups further (see *Table 3*). The results suggest that the companies in the present study had succeeded in creating a green organizational climate.

<i>Table 3</i>						
<i>Environmental Climate</i>						
<u>Climate</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>df</u>	<u>p</u>
<b>Participant group</b>	28	4.10	0.43	2.25	187	.025
<b>Comparison group</b>	161	3.82	0.65			

There were differences between the companies: Companies A and F had high scores on environmental climate, but were ranked relatively low on the green scale (*Table 4*). By contrast, Company G had a low score on environmental climate, but received the highest score on the green scale. The scores on the self-report scale and ratings on the green scale proved unrelated: this could be explained by a dissonance between how the companies perceived themselves, reflected in the self-reported green climate, and how others perceived them, reflected in the external ratings on the green scale. Accounts from the interviews indicate that Company G had a strong desire to improve performance, which might have led to an impression that they were not at the top of the scale and thus the weak perceptions of their environmental climate. However, seen from the outside, and compared to other companies, they seemed successful in embedding their greening efforts.

Additionally, the findings highlight that climate perceptions and evaluations of environmental performance were relative concepts, and emphasize that shared norms and standards were not established in this area. This raises the following question: what does performing well – with regard to environmental sustainability – actually imply? Furthermore, the companies were ranked according to the predefined criteria on the green scale, but all companies in the sample were generally considered to perform well with regard to the environment, which might indicate a lack of variation (*Table 4*). The questionnaire results demonstrated somewhat different perceptions of environmental standards: these were meaningful to analyse in conjunction with the interview data, which supported the notion of different standards.

<i>Table 4</i>					
<i>Environmental Climate and Green Scale</i>					
<u>Name</u>	<u>Climate</u>			<u>Green Scale<sup>1</sup></u>	
	<u>N</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>		
<b>Company A</b>	3	4.79	0.16	6/4	
<b>Company B</b>	5	3.75	0.29	3/3	
<b>Company C</b>	4	4.34	0.14	7/7	
<b>Company D</b>	6	4.13	0.31	2/2	
<b>Company E</b>	3	3.96	0.41	5/5	
<b>Company F</b>	4	4.06	0.41	4/6	
<b>Company G</b>	3	3.83	0.06	1/1	

<sup>1</sup> The green scale ranged from 1 = most green to 7 = least green.

To summarize, the results indicated that the companies had succeeded in establishing a green organization, as reflected in employees' perceptions of a shared environmental climate.

## **Concluding Discussion**

The take-home message of this study is that self-sustaining green organizations depend on social interaction processes for the establishment and maintenance of a green organizational climate. Several factors may be involved in such processes.

***Leadership and green change.*** First, the results indicate that the founder played a decisive role, both in the early phase of creating the green climate, but also continuously, to uphold the green focus. The founder had a strong impact on the employees and exerted different influence strategies, ranging from direct instructions to more indirect strategies (e.g. leading by example). This finding is in line with Robertson and Barling's (2013) study, demonstrating that leaders influenced their employees' pro-environmental behaviour through idealized influence, inspirational influence, and social modelling. The results point to the importance of leadership in setting the green agenda and creating a sustainable organization.

***Newcomer socialisation and shared green perceptions.*** Second, results demonstrate that newcomer socialization was key to the dispersion of shared green perceptions. This is interesting, because recent theorizing calls for a renewed focus on the socialization process as central to understanding the perpetuation of organizational climate to newcomers (Schneider et al., 2013). The social interaction in the work group seemed to strengthen the green focus initiated by the founder. This is in line with the findings of Kim et al. (2017), indicating that green behaviour in organizations is shaped by social processes in the work group — namely, work group green advocacy. The companies in the present study comprised small units with dense communication patterns, both found to correspond to strong climates (Schneider et al., 2013). This also corresponds to the hypotheses derived from the systems model, which propose that the dimensions of exposure are the mechanisms that best explain climate development. In the present study, all employees were included in the microsystem and the potential influence from the dimensions of exposure was strong.

***Internal drive to green practice.*** Third, the findings show that the participants had a strong tendency to focus on green practice. Several companies aimed at showcasing a green path through their work in an attempt to disperse their green values to the wider society. Even though they represent a minority, their greening efforts met the demands of a growing community movement (Swim et al., 2011). The companies in the present study did not respond to government requirements — rather, their green efforts were driven by a voluntary aspiration to contribute toward creating a sustainable future. Hence, the factors outlined in the macrosystem in the systems model seemed to play a minor role; the drivers were mainly localized in the microsystem.

***Lack of green philosophy.*** Fourth, study findings suggest that strategy, vision, and overarching philosophy did not play an important role in these companies, contradicting previous findings and theorizing (Aguinis & Glavas, 2013; Norton et al., 2012; Norton et al., 2014). While privately held values tended to be green, this was more at an individual level and seldom articulated and endorsed as company policy. As leaders are considered central in inspiring a shared vision (Afsar et al., 2019), there seems to be an unused potential in terms of including employees in the development of an overarching green

philosophy. Furthermore, the lack of green philosophy in the companies may be explained by the strong environmental commitment in the Norwegian society.

**Green motivation.** Fifth, and finally, findings indicate that the motivation and drive to go green had different origins – such as an environmental conscientiousness, care for nature, traditions, and frugality. For many of the participants, acting on their green conviction seemed to evoke feelings of meaning, functioning as a way of reducing cognitive dissonance, and further releasing feelings of guilt related to consumerism. Relating this to the systems model, this corresponds to the exposure dimension relevance, as meaning and relevance coincide. Moreover, this finding is in line with recent studies that have found conscientiousness and pride to be important predictors of pro-environmental behaviour (Bissing-Olson et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2017; Yuriev et al., 2018).

### **Systems Perspective on Greening**

The processes involved in shaping a green organizational climate operate at multiple levels, parallel to the multilevel and cross-level social dynamics that shape “employee green behaviour” (Kim et al., 2017; Norton, Parker, et al., 2015). The systems perspective is a framework that enables analysis of how elements at different system levels interact in shaping the climate. Starting from the periphery, all companies operate in a *context* shaped by culture, politics and the time in which they exist. Climate change and political movements were mentioned in the accounts as elements shaping their business practice. To face the current environmental uncertainty, companies are required to adjust to environmental challenges and green adaptability becomes a new asset (Chang, 2016; Song et al., 2019). At the level of the *macrosystem*, environmental certification was mentioned; in addition, some accounts indicated that customers contributed to the green focus.

At the level of the *corposystem*, one account pointed to the significance of the board of directors. Also, some companies had a green strategy or vision, but because of the central role of the founder, the company’s environmental values (located in the *corposystem*) were difficult to distinguish from the environmental values of the founder. Since these companies were all single unit, the *corpo-* and *microsystems* are best conceived as nearly overlapping. In the *microsystem*, the leaders played a decisive role in establishing the green climate in these companies: they instituted the green focus from the outset, and maintained and developed the green focus as the company grew to include a group of employees. Thus, the present study provides support for the importance of leadership with regard to the establishment and development of a green climate (Robertson & Carleton, 2017).

Furthermore, in some companies, employees also contributed significantly to developing and improving the green focus. The formal roles that define employment in larger companies were replaced by informal and more flexible practice in these small companies. At the level of the *microsystem*, social interaction processes and the inclusion of newcomers were central in the development of the green climate.

Finally, values, conscientiousness, and purpose were important drivers of behaviour at the level of the *individual*, and contributed to strengthen the green focus of the companies. In this study, the participants highlighted several important aspects with regard to the outcomes of a green focus. Some highlighted positive feelings, such as meaningfulness, satisfaction, and having a clear conscience. Several highlighted the experience of “making a difference” as an important motivation. Meta-studies have documented the potential economic upsides of going green (*see* Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Albertini, 2013), but there

are numerous potential positive outcomes extending beyond the economic sphere that are less documented (Norton, Parker, et al., 2015).

The systems model may be related to the perspective on greening proposed by Norton et al. (2017), suggesting a differentiation between proximal and distal factors: classifying environmental certification as a distal factor and the construction of a green climate as a proximal process. Considering contextual factors, it is noteworthy that the companies in this study upheld their green project, irrespective of the focus of the surrounding society. They largely stood for a minority position, while the majority remained negligent, indifferent or unwilling to take necessary measures. This minority position did not seem to hinder their efforts toward developing sustainable business practice – they even found support in connection to others. As the wider society is moving in a green direction, an increased interest from customers and partners (macrosystem) may contribute to further strengthening the green climate. This illustrates how factors at different system levels interact in shaping the green focus. Here, the company size is important to consider, because the interactional processes in small companies could be more intense, and therefore the potential to influence development of the green climate through the dimensions of exposure is heightened. Research by Shevchenko et al. (2016) indicates that small companies will be the first to reach “true sustainability” since their decision-making is driven by their readiness to change and their ability to address opportunities in uncertain situations.

### **Contributions to Theory**

Most of the companies in the present study did not have clearly stated environmental strategies or visions, which might be explained by the fact that they were small and/or in a nascent stage of development. Some highlighted that the multitude of tasks required in the founding phase did not leave time for strategy work. Still, it is interesting to note that these companies succeeded in their green endeavours, regardless of a lack of strategy. One possible explanation for this finding is that formal policies are less important in small companies, since leaders are able to influence employees directly through proximal interactional processes that are hypothesized to pose a strong influence on behaviour. Thus, Norton et al. (2017) might be right in theorizing that environmental management systems are a distal variable, which has less impact on green practice than more proximal variables.

On a methodological note, the models proposed by quantitative approaches to organizational greening imply a linear logic, often testing antecedents and outcomes of greening measures (*see*, for instance, Kim et al., 2017; Norton, Parker, et al., 2015; Norton et al., 2017; Obeidat et al., 2018; Paillé et al., 2013; Paillé et al., 2015; Robertson & Barling, 2013; Robertson & Carleton, 2017). Andersson et al. (2013) call for research that explores the complexity of the greening process by adopting a systems perspective. For instance, it is possible that greening processes are circular, and that feedback loops are created.

Most founders were unable to articulate environmental values, or an underlying philosophy. The distinction between embedded and peripheral suggested by Aguinis and Glavas (2013) might be a simplification, and may therefore miss a proportion of companies that are inventive and pro-environmental in their actions yet lack the strategic elements that are necessary to be classified as embedded. Contrary to Aguinis and Glavas (2013) proposal that successful green companies integrate their greening efforts into both strategies and practices, the present findings suggest that it is possible to go green without formal green strategy statements and philosophy. Furthermore, it is interesting to

understand this finding in relation to the green wave in society, which provides an overarching framework for interpreting organizational greening measures.

### **Directions for Future Research**

The scope of this study was limited to small-scale manufacturing companies, and may not generalize to other settings. Therefore, future research should conduct large-scale studies to investigate greening processes in large organizations and across different industries. Although recent studies link leadership to sustainability, more research is needed on the processes whereby leaders shape a green organizational climate, for instance using longitudinal designs. While leaders might have a bird's eye-view of organizational greening, employees tend to have a hands-on approach to practice and procedures, and thus more research is needed on different perspectives (Linnenluecke et al., 2009). Another avenue for future research is to consider how legislation and politics promote greening processes. Extending the results from this study on the central role of founders in small-scale companies, it would be interesting to explore the processes by which leaders upheld the green focus as the company grows. For instance, how new members of the organization are socialized into the green climate, and further explore factors that promote or challenge the green core. An application of the results from this study would be to examine how a green subculture in a large organization may influence the organization as a whole, for instance by exposure to green values and behaviour, setting a good example, inspiration and engagement (Harris & Crane, 2002; Howard-Grenville, 2006). Furthermore, it would be interesting to conduct multilevel-studies to explore how entities at different levels impact greening efforts, and analyse the magnitude of factors in the context (i.e., natural disasters, climate change), in the macrosystem (i.e., governmental requirements, customer demands), in the mesosystem (i.e., top-level management, green climate) and microsystem (i.e., leaders, co-workers). Regarding organizational climate, future studies could investigate in more detail the content of the green organizational climate construct, and uncover its antecedents, drivers and barriers. Finally, an important area of future research is to study the relationship between green climate and pro-environmental behaviour, as the ultimate goal of this stream of research is to contribute to a greener society.

### **Conclusion**

This study contributes to our understanding of how green organizational climates evolve. Social interaction processes in the microsystem are at the core, and there is a strong emphasis on improving environmental practice. There are a multitude of factors at work, and the systems perspective is an attempt to clarify how factors at different levels interact. This study explored the role of employees in promoting a green agenda, and the accounts demonstrate that they often contributed to strengthening and developing the green climate. Leaders were found to play a key role, and the green climate was formed through an active process, involving the employees as well as influence processes.

In conclusion, the establishment of the environmental climate was motivated by internal factors, and sustained through social interaction. Green *practices* seemed to be at the heart of organizational greening, while strategy seemed to be tacit or lacking. These practices were improved through a process of continuously questioning procedures and searching for greener alternatives. The motivation to go green appeared to arise out of environmental values, and evolved regardless of external requirements. Furthermore, for study participants, their green endeavours functioned as a way to resolve conflicting feelings, which gave rise to a strong drive to continue their efforts.

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