Sensemaking

Sensemaking or **sense-making** is the process by which people give meaning to their collective experiences. It has been defined as "the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing" (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409). The concept was introduced to organizational studies by Karl E. Weick in the 1970s and has affected both theory and practice. Weick intended to encourage a shift away from the traditional focus of organization theorists on decision-making and towards the processes that constitute the meaning of the decisions that are enacted in behavior.

Weick identified seven properties of sensemaking (Weick, 1995):

1. *Identity* and identification is central – who people think they are in their context shapes what they enact and how they interpret events (Pratt, 2000; Currie & Brown, 2003; Weick, et al., 2005; Thurlow & Mills, 2009; Watson, 2009).

2. *Retrospection* provides the opportunity for sensemaking: the point of retrospection in time affects what people notice (Dunford & Jones, 2000), thus attention and interruptions to that attention are highly relevant to the process (Gephart, 1993).

3. People *enact* the environments they face in dialogues and narratives (Bruner, 1991; Watson, 1998; Currie & Brown, 2003). As people speak, and build narrative accounts, it helps them understand what they think, organize their experiences and control and predict events (Isabella, 1990; Weick, 1995; Abolafia, 2010) and reduce complexity in the context of change management (Kumar & Singhal, 2012).

4. Sensemaking is a *social* activity in that plausible stories are preserved, retained or shared (Isabella, 1990; Maitlis, 2005). However, the audience for sensemaking includes the speakers themselves (Watson, 1995) and the narratives are "both individual and shared...an evolving product of conversations with ourselves and with others" (Currie & Brown, 2003: 565).

5. Sensemaking is *ongoing*, so Individuals simultaneously shape and react to the environments they face. As they project themselves onto this environment and observe the consequences they learn about their identities and the accuracy of their accounts of the world (Thurlow & Mills, 2009). This is a feedback process so even as individuals deduce their identity from the behaviour of others towards them, they also try to influence this behaviour. As Weick argued, "The basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs" (Weick, 1993: 635).

6. People *extract cues* from the context to help them decide on what information is relevant and what explanations are acceptable (Salancick & Pfeffer, 1978; Brown, Stacey, & Nandhakumar, 2007). Extracted cues provide points of reference for linking ideas to broader networks of meaning and are 'simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring." (Weick, 1995: 50).

Sensemaking

7. People favour *plausibility over accuracy* in accounts of events and contexts ([Currie & Brown, 2003](#); [Brown, 2005](#); [Abolafia, 2010](#)): "in an equivocal, postmodern world, infused with the politics of interpretation and conflicting interests and inhabited by people with multiple shifting identities, an obsession with accuracy seems fruitless, and not of much practical help, either" ([Weick, 1995](#): 61).

Each of these seven aspects interact and intertwine as individuals interpret events. Their interpretations become evident through [narratives](#) – written and spoken – which convey the sense they have made of events ([Currie & Brown, 2003](#)), as well as through [diagrammatic reasoning](#) and associated material practices ([Huff, 1990](#); [Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012](#)).

From decision-making to sensemaking

The rise of the sensemaking perspective marks a shift of focus in organization studies from how decisions shape organizations to how meaning drives organizing ([Weick, 1993](#)). The aim was to focus attention on the largely cognitive activity of framing experienced situations as meaningful.

It is a collaborative process of creating shared awareness and understanding out of different individuals' perspectives and varied interests.

From planning to action

Sensemaking scholars are less interested in the intricacies of planning than in the details of action ([Weick, 1995, p. 55](#)).

Uncertainty, ambiguity, and crisis

The sensemaking approach is often used to provide insight into factors that surface as organizations address either uncertain or ambiguous situations ([Weick 1988](#), [1993](#); [Weick et al., 2005](#)). Beginning in the 1980s with an influential re-analysis of the [Bhopal disaster](#), Weick's name has come to be associated with the study of the situated sensemaking that influences the outcomes of disasters ([Weick 1993](#)).

Categories and related concepts

A 2014 review of the literature on sensemaking in organizations identified a dozen different categories of sensemaking and a half-dozen sensemaking related concepts ([Maitlis & Christianson, 2014](#)).

The categories of sensemaking included: constituent-minded, cultural, ecological, environmental, future-oriented, intercultural, interpersonal, market, political, prosocial, prospective, and resourceful. The sensemaking-related concepts included: sensebreaking, sensedemanding, sense-exchanging, sensegiving, sensehiding, and sense specification.

Source: [Sensemaking - Wikipedia](#)   *Accessed Oct 7, 2021*