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“Sensemaking in organizations”

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Cap. 1. The nature of sensemaking

Pág. 2: “What make ‘Battered-Child Syndrome’ an instance of sensemaking? First, someone notices something, in an ongoing flow of events, something in the form of a *surprise*, a discrepant set of cues, something that does not fit” (Battered-Child: 1967=7 000; 1972=60 000; 1976=500 000).

Pág. 2: “Experts overestimate the likelihood that they would surely know the phenomenon if it actually were taking place. Westrum calls this ‘the fallacy of centrality’: because I don’t know about this event, it must not be going on”.

Pág. 3: “Battered-Child Syndrome (BCS) is an instance of sensemaking because it involves identity, retrospect, enactment, social contact, ongoing events, cues, and plausibility, seven properties…” *(But) what makes these events organizational sensemaking?* (…) The setting in which the BCS was discovered is organizational in several ways. Pediatricians and radiologists, working through interlocking routines that are tied together in relatively formal ‘nets of action’, perform specialized tasks intended to preserve the health of children. Medical personnel have shared understandings of their roles, expertise, and stature, but they also act as shifting coalitions of interest groups. The prevalence of routines, generic understandings, and roles enables personnel to be interchanged. (…) Although all of this organizing facilitates coordinated action, it also imposes an ‘invisible hand’ on sensemaking.”

Pág. 3: “More frequent reporting of what Westrum calls ‘uncorrected observations and experience’ should intensify *ambiguity* in the short run, until others begin to report similar experiences. As *anomalies* become shared, *sensibleness* should become stronger”.

Pág. 4: “(…) ‘Intentional ill treatment’ or ‘battered child’? Vivid words draw attention to new possibilities, suggesting that organizations with access to more varied images will engage in sensemaking that is more adaptive than will organizations with more limited vocabularies”.

Pág. 4: “The concept of sensemaking (…) literally means the making of sense. Active agents construct sensible, sensible events. They ‘structure the unknown’. *How they construct what they construct, why, and with what effects are the central questions for people interested in sensemaking (…) put stimuli into frameworks (e.g.: strategy)”.

Pág. 7: “I contrast sensemaking with interpretation because interpretation is often used as a synonym for sensemaking (…). Sensemaking, of which interpretation is a component, has widespread applicability. Most descriptions of interpretation focus on some kind of text. What sensemaking does is to address how the text is constructed as well as how it is read. Sensemaking is about authoring as well reading”.

Pág. 8: “What is the uniqueness of a sensemaking perspective? The process of sensemaking is intended to include the construction and bracketing of the textlike cues that are interpreted, as well
the revision of those interpretations based on actions and its consequences. Sensemaking is about authoring as well as interpretation, creation as well discovery”.

Pág. 121: “(Like in the work of Garfinkel on jurors’ choices), people start with an outcome in hand – a verdict, a choice – and then render that outcome sensible by constructing a plausible story that produced it (in the Garfinkel’s words, ‘the interpretation makes good sense’)”.

Pág. 12: “Think about the wonderfully compact account of sensemaking mentioned by Graham Wallas. ‘The little girl had the making of a poet in her who, being told to be sure of her meaning before she spoke, said: ‘How can I know what I think till I see what I say?’ This recipe is central in sensemaking (…). My act of speaking starts the sensemaking process”.

Pág. 13: “What makes current thinking about sensemaking robust is that both ethnomethodology and dissonance theory (…). What is unusual about the topic of sensemaking is that it is grounded as much in deductions from well-articulated theories as it is in inductions from specific cases of struggles to reduce ambiguity”.

Pág. 13: “The key distinction between sensemaking and interpretation is that sensemaking is about the ways people generate what they interpret (…). Jurors literally deliberate to discover what they are talking about and what constitutes evidence. They look for meaningful consistencies in what has been said, and then revise those consistencies”.

Pág. 13: “A focus on sensemaking induces a mindset to focus on process, whereas this is less true with interpretation (=product) (…). The act of interpreting implies that something is there, a text in the world, waiting to be discovered or approximated. Sensemaking, however, is less about discovery than is about invention. To engage in sensemaking is to construct, filter, frame, create facticity, and render the subjective into something more tangible”.

Pág. 14: “The concept of sensemaking is valuable because it highlights the invention that precedes interpretation. It is also valuable because it implies a higher level of engagement by the actor (…). Sensemaking matters. A failure in sensemaking is consequential as well as existential. It throws into question the nature the self and the world (…). Whenever the sense is lost (=failure of efforts to replace one sense of the world with another), the loss is deeply troubling, whereas the loss of an interpretation is more like a nuisance (=interpretations can be added or dropped with less effect on one’s self-perceptions)”.

Pág. 15: “The text metaphor represents the activity of social construction as a static result, implies that meaning already exists and is waiting to be found rather than that it awaits construction that might no happen (…). Finally, what sensemaking is not is a metaphor. I say this because Morgan and al. describe sensemaking as one of three metaphors (the others are language game and text).

Pág. 16: “Sensemaking is what it says it is, namely, making something sensible. Sensemaking is to be understood literally, not metaphorically (…). This error of logical typing can be avoided if sensemaking is separated from the class of interpretive activities it names and set above this class as a higher level of abstraction that include them. Although the word sensemaking may have an informal, poetic flavor, that should not mask the fact that it is literally just what it says it is”.

Cap. 2. Seven properties of sensemaking

Pág. 17/8: “Sensemaking is understood as a process that is:
   a) Grounded in identity construction
   b) Retrospective
c) Enactive of sensible environments

d) Social

e) Ongoing

f) Focused on and by extracted cues

g) Driven by plausibility”

Or: “People concerned with identity in the context of others engage ongoing events from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, all the while enacting more or less order into those ongoing events”.

Pág. 18: “These seven characteristics serve as a rough guideline for inquiry into sensemaking – what sensemaking is, how it works, and where it can fail”.

a) Grounded in identity construction

Pág. 18: “Sensemaking begins with a sensemaker: ‘How can I know what I think until I see what I say?’ (…). Any one sensemaker is, in Mead’s words, ‘a parliament of selves’.

Pág. 20: “The sensemaker is himself or herself an ongoing puzzle undergoing continual redefinition, coincident with presenting some self to others and trying to decide which self is appropriate. Depending who I am, my definition of what is ‘out there’ will also change”.

Pág. 23/24: “The idea that sensemaking is self-referential suggests that self, rather than environment, may be the text in need of interpretation. How can I know who I am until I see what they do? Something like that is implied in sensemaking grounded in identity. I make sense of whatever happens around me by asking what implications do these events have for who I will be? (…). What the situation means is defined by who I become while dealing with it or what and who I represent. I derive cues as to what the situation means from the self that feels most appropriate to deal with it, and much less from what is going on out there”.

b) Retrospective

Pág. 24: “The creation of meaning is an attentional process, but is attention to which has already occurred (…). Actions are known only when they have been completed (…).

Pág. 26: “Meaning is not “attached to” the experience that is singled out. Instead, the meaning is in the kind of attention that is directed to this experience (from a particular present)”

Pág. 27: “The important point is that retrospective sensemaking is an activity in which many possible meanings may need to be synthesized, because many different projects are under way at the time reflection takes place. The problem is that there are too many meanings, not too few. The problem faced by the sensemaker is one of equivocality, not one of uncertainty. The problem is confusion, not ignorance (…). What people need when they are overwhelmed by equivocality is not information, but values, priorities, and clarity about preferences to help them to be clear about which projects matter”.

Pág. 29: “The feeling of order, clarity and rationality is an important goal of sensemaking, which means that once this feeling is achieved, further retrospective processing stops”.

Pág. 30: “The dominance of retrospect in sensemaking is a major reason why students of sensemaking find forecasting, contingency planning, strategic planning, and other magical probes into the future wasteful and misleading if they are decoupled from reflective action and history”.
c) Enactive of sensible environments

Pág 30: “Now I want to say more about the activity of ‘making’ that which is sensed”.

Pág 30/1: “I use the word enactment to preserve the fact that, in organizational life, people often produce part of the environment they face. I like this word because it suggests that there are close parallels between what legislators do and what managers do. Both groups construct reality through authoritative acts. When people enact laws, they take undefined space, time, and action and draw lines, establish categories, and coin labels that create new features of the environment that did not exist before (Ex.: Michigan Bell and the 400th call, “The 400th call has now become something tangible, unique, visible, and symbolic as well something that is an obstacle for someone on a budget to work around. The legislators enact a constraint for their constituents (…)”).

Pág. 31/2/3: “There is not some kind of monolithic, singular, fixed environment that exists detached from and external to people (…). They act, and in doing so create the materials that become the constraints and opportunities they face. (…) Throughout this book I assume that action is crucial for sensemaking”. (…) Follett argues that rather than talk about “results”, we should talk about “relatings” (…) and rather than ‘resistance of environment’, we should talk about ‘confronting the activity of environment’.

Pág. 34: “People create their environments as those environments create them (…). People create and find what they expect to find”.

Pág. 36: “It is this institutionalising of social constructions into the way things are done, and the transmission of these products, that links ideas about sensemaking with those of institutional theory. Sensemaking is the feedstock for institutionalisation”.

Pág. 36/7: “The implication that enactment is first and foremost about action in the world, and not about conceptual pictures of that world (enthinkment, as Lou Pondy called it) is clearest in Porac et al’s discussion about (…) manufacturers of Hawick (…). People in Hawick enact the environment that enacts their Hawick identity, and this process represents enactment in sensemaking. There are subjective interpretations, of externally situated information, but that information has become external and objectified by means of behavior. People discover their own intentions. If this is ontological oscillation (Gareth Morgan), so be it. It seems to work”.

Pág. 37: “The caution, than, is to be careful not to equate action with a simple response to a stimulus, or with observable behavior, or with goal attainment. To do so may be to miss subtle ways in which it creates meaning. The act that never gets done, gets done too late, gets dropped too soon, or for which the time never seems right is seldom a senseless act. More often, its meaning seems all clear”.

Pág. 38: “(…) Faith put self-fulfilling action in motion. Faith is instrumental to sensemaking. James knew this, even if deconstructionists have forgotten it”.

d) Social

Pág. 39: “Those who forget that sensemaking is a social process miss a constant substrate that shapes interpretations and interpreting. Conduct is contingent on the conduct of others, whether those others are imagined or physically present” (…). Sensemaking is never solitary because what person does internally is contingent on others. Even monologues and one-way communications presume an audience. And the monologue changes as the audience changes”.

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People who study sensemaking pay a lot of attention to talk, discourse, and conversation because that is how a great deal of social contact is mediated (…). Weick (1985) argues that a significant portion of the organizational environment consists of nothing more than talk, symbols, promises, lies, interest, attention, threats, agreements, expectations, memories, rumors, indicators, supporters, detractors, faith, suspicion, trust, appearances, loyalties, and commitments… Words induce stable connections, establish stable entities to which people can orient”.

c) Ongoing

Sensemaking never starts. The reason it never starts is that pure duration never stops. People are always in the middle of things, which become things, only when those same people focus on the past from some point beyond it (…). To understand sensemaking is to be sensitive to the ways in which people chop moments out of continuous flows and extract cues from those moments (…). Cohen, March and Olsen have remained sensitive to the reality of continuity, thrownness, and flows in their insistence that streams of problems, solutions, people, and choices flow through organizations and converge and diverge independent of human intention”.

If people are in the middle, what are they in the middle of? One answer, as we saw earlier, is “projects (…) But, even though people are immersed in flows, they are seldom indifferent to what passes them by. This is especially true for interruptions of projects. The reality of flows becomes most apparent when that flow is interrupted. An interruption to a flow typically induces an emotional response, which then paves the way for emotion to influence sensemaking. It is precisely because ongoing flows are subject to interruption that sensemaking is infused with feeling.”

Interruption is a signal that important changes have occurred in the environment. Thus a key event for emotion is the ‘interruption of an expectation’ (…). Arousal should build more quickly the more tightly organized an interrupted action sequence is”.

If we apply these propositions to organizations, we start by asking, what is the distribution of interruption in organizations? Where are interruptions most likely to occur, and how organized are the actions and the plans that are likely to be interrupted? If we can describe this, then we can predict where sensemaking will be specially influenced by emotional experiences”.

When people perform an organized action sequence and are interrupted, they try to make sense of it. The longer they search, the higher the arousal, and the stronger the emotion. If the interruption slows the accomplishment of an organized sequence, people are likely to experience anger. If the interruption has accelerated accomplishment, then they are likely to experience pleasure. If people find that the interruption can be circumvented, they experience relief. If they find that the interruption has thwarted a higher level plan, then the anger is likely to turn into rage (…).

These emotions affect sensemaking because recall and retrospect tend to be mood congruent. People remember events that have the same emotional tone as what they currently feel. Anger at being interrupted should encourage recall of earlier events where feelings of anger were dominant. These earlier moments of anger should stand out when people look back over their past experience to discover ‘similar’ events and what those previous events might suggest about the meaning of present events. Past events are reconstructed in the present as explanations, not because they look the same but because they feel the same (= to use a feeling-based memory to solve a current cognitive puzzle = difficult sensemaking because it tries to mate two very different forms of evidence = sensemaking is ongoing and neither starts fresh nor stops cleanly”).
f) Focused on and by extracted cues

Pág 49: “Investigators are more likely to see sense that has already been made that to see the actual making of it (…). We are more likely to see products than process. To counteract this, we need to watch how people deal with prolonged puzzles that defy sensemaking, puzzles such as paradoxes, dilemmas, and inconceivable events. We also need to pay close attention to ways people notice, extract cues, and embellish that which they extract”.

Pág. 50: “Extracted cues are simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring (…). A seed is a form-producing process that captures much of the vagueness and indeterminacy of sensemaking”.

Pág. 52: “Context affects the extraction of cues, and small, **subtle features can have surprisingly large effects on sensemaking** (…). Thus, not only do students of sensemaking need to be closely attuned to the social, they also need to think context (…). Social context binds people to actions that they then must justify”.

Pág. 53: “(…) What happens to cues after they are extracted? (…) Regardless of the cues that become salient as a consequence of context, and regardless of the way those extracted cues are embellished, the point to be retained is that faith in these cues and their sustained use as a reference point are important for sensemaking. (…) These cues tie elements together cognitively. These presumed ties are then given more substance when people act as if they are real”.

Pág. 54/5: “An extracted cue is used to prophesy the nature of the referent from which it was extracted (…). (Exemplo: a história dos soldados perdidos nos Alpes e que se salvaram com um mapa dos Pirinéus). This incident raises the intriguing possibility that when you are lost, any old map will do. (Old maps as old strategies) animate and orient people. Once people begin to act (enactment), they generate tangible outcomes (cues) in some context (social), and this helps them discover (retrospect) what is occurring (ongoing), what needs to be explained (plausibility), and what should be done next (identity enhancement) … What the leader has to do, when faced with these situations (the map or the plan they have in front of them are not sufficient to get them out) is instil some confidence in people, get them moving in some general direction, and be sure they look closely at cues created by theirs actions so that they learn where they were and get some better idea of where they are and where they want to be (…). Soldiers were able to produce a good outcome from a bad map because they were active, they had a purpose (get back to camp), and they had an image of where they were and where they were going. They kept moving, they kept noticing cues, and they kept updating their sense of where they were. As a result, an imperfect map proved to be good enough. The cues they extracted and kept acting on were acts of faith amid indeterminacy that set sensemaking in motion. Once set in motion, sensemaking tends to confirm the faith through its effects on actions that make material that previously had been merely envisioned”.

g) Driven by plausibility

Pág.55: “The prefix sense in the word sensemaking (…) simultaneously invokes a realist ontology, as in the suggestion that something is out there to be registered and sensed accurately, and an idealist ontology, as in the suggestion that something out there needs to be agreed on and constructed plausibly. The sensible needs to be sensible, and therein lies the trouble”.

Pág. 56-60: “Accuracy is nice, but not necessary. (…) Sensemaking is about plausibility, pragmatics, coherence, reasonableness, creation, invention, and instrumentality (…). The criterion of accuracy is secondary in any analysis of sensemaking for a variety of reasons:
a) people need to distort and filter (with the errors, misperceptions and irrationalities of humans);

b) sensemaking is about the embellishment and elaboration of a single point of reference or extracted cue. Embellishment occurs when a cue is linked with a more general idea;

c) speed often reduces the necessity for accuracy in the sense that quick responses shape events before they have become crystallized into a single meaning. A fast response can be an influential response that enacts an environment;

d) circumscribed accuracy, not global accuracy: circumscribed accuracy is focused on prediction of specific encounters in a limited number of contexts for a brief period;

e) the interpersonal, interactive, interdependent quality of organizational life (=interpersonal perception, not object perception). Questions in organizations that look like they involve global accuracy and object perception tend to be translated into questions of intentions and personalities.

f) Accuracy is defined by instrumentality. Beliefs that counteract interruptions and facilitate ongoing projects are treated as accurate. Judgements of accuracy are project specific and pragmatic. Weick cita Hall: ‘The unknowable is what I cannot react upon. The active part of our nature is not only an essential part of cognition itself, but it always has a voice in determining what shall be believed and what rejected’ (…). What is believed as a consequence of action is what makes sense. Accuracy is not the question’;

g) Accurate perceptions have the power to immobilize. People who want to get into action tend to simplify rather than elaborate (…). Perceptions can never be accurate because by the time people notice and name something, it has become something else and no longer exists (…). The actor who knows what he or she can do, and who shapes the environment so that it needs precisely these capabilities, come close to perfect accuracy. People construct that which construct them;

h) At the time of perception, it is almost impossible to tell whether the perception will prove accurate or not.

Pág. 60/1: “If accuracy is nice but not necessary in sensemaking, then what is necessary? (…). In short, what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story (…). Something that preserves plausibility and coherence, something that is reasonable and memorable, something that embodies past experience and expectations, something that resonates with other people, something that can be constructed retrospectively but also can be used prospectively, something that captures both feeling and thought, something that allows for embellishment to fit current oddities, something that is fun to construct”.

Pág. 61: “Sensemaking is about accounts that are socially acceptable and credible (…). An obsession with accuracy seems fruitless, and not of much practical help”.

Pág 61: “A good story, like a workable cause map, shows patterns that may already exist in the puzzles an actor now faces, or patterns that could be created anew in the interest of more order and sense in the future. The stories are templates. They are products of previous efforts at sensemaking. They explain. And they energize (=two important properties of sensemaking)”.