

An Introduction to the Art and Practice of Deliberate Sensemaking¹

Part I (of 3 Parts)

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¹ This series owes a lot to many others. I don't officially cite specific contributions in the body of this paper, I do provide a "Selected Readings" section at the end of Part III, pointing the reader to the many sources that have informed the thinking and practices reflected here.

What This Paper is About

Much of day-to-day life is defined by our encounters with situations and circumstances we find challenging and problematic. We assert, however, that many of the situations we encounter are not *in themselves* problematic or challenging. Rather, it is the way in which we *make sense* of those situations that render them so.

We define “**sensemaking**” as the interpersonal and collaborative activities by which we mobilize ourselves toward collective action, and the beliefs, stories, and emotional triggers—usually *hidden*—which underlie and inform those activities.

Deliberate sensemaking is a set of practices and distinctions by which we reveal those activities and the beliefs, stories, and emotional triggers which underlie those activities. The resulting ***sensemaking intelligence*** allows us to see reality more clearly as it is, thus raising our capacity for high quality decision-making, problem-solving and, ultimately, actions which effect the quality of impact we intend.

In this 3-part series, we first explain more fully what we mean by “sensemaking” and “deliberate sensemaking.” We then describe two shared sensemaking conversational practices: the ***deliberately developmental conversation*** and the ***shared sensemaking conversation***, both of which, when used in groups and teams, raises their level of *sensemaking intelligence*, empowering and enabling them in the face of challenging and problematic situations and circumstances.

PART I: An Introduction to ‘Deliberate’ Sensemaking

What is ‘Sensemaking’

Much of the work we do in organizations depends on our ability to solve problems, make decisions, and take action in collective partnership with others.

Underlying the activities by which people so engage with each other is the fact that, at all times, what they are engaged in is sensemaking.

For example, when a product development team works together to plan how they will go about developing a particular product feature, they are effectively engaged in an activity of sensemaking.

Sensemaking is the ongoing activity by which people, together, construct plausible meaning, according to which they understand what they are doing and what is going on around them.

We make sense together through the conversations, vocabularies, interaction patterns, and upon the shared assumptions and beliefs (which are, for the most part, hidden from our awareness), by which we naturally go about the business of getting work done.

Take a look at the following image.



Here is depicted a rather mundane moment in any organization: people engaged in some kind of conversation—a moment of sensemaking.

In looking at the photo, what might we observe?

What you might see is body postures and hand gestures. You might also see that one person seems to be talking while others are listening. You might also note the manner of facial expressions, and the way people position their hands.

And of course, that which we can't observe, which is the conversation itself. What is being said? What is it that people are hearing? What might be the assumptions, beliefs and stories that frame what he is saying and how people understand him?

If we were there in the room, and especially if we were regular members of this team, we might find ourselves fully inducted into the inferences, shared assumptions and shared commitments that frame the conversation—many of which it wouldn't even occur to us to stop and question.

As unquestioned, those inferences, shared assumptions and shared commitments simply become what we know.

It would all just “make sense” to us.

“Sensemaking” is the activity by which we invoke those inferences, shared assumptions, and shared commitments toward the accomplishment of specific goals, and through the conversations, actions, and interactions by which we accomplish those goals.

There are two key points we need to get if we are to understand what we mean by sensemaking and why it is so important for organizational performance in a VUCA world.

First Sensemaking is *ubiquitous*.

Second ... Sense is *Made, Not Given*.

Sensemaking is Ubiquitous

The first point we need to understand is that sensemaking, as we’re defining it here, is *ubiquitous*: it is the invisible cognitive and relational glue that binds us together, socially and culturally.

Our sensemaking is so much a part of our moment-to-moment living, that we scarcely even notice it. It is like the proverbial water fish swim in. Every aspect of that fish’s life—its very movements, its very breathing—everything—is determined by that water.

Similarly, every aspect of our social life is determined by the shared background, and the conversations and activities, that constitute our sensemaking. Our capacity for effective action is shaped by it.

To the degree we are unaware of the constitutive nature of our sensemaking—and the hidden background by which it is shaped—we can’t possibly begin to discern the source of the ineffectiveness of our actions. We are quite literally blind to it.

Sense is *Made Not Given*

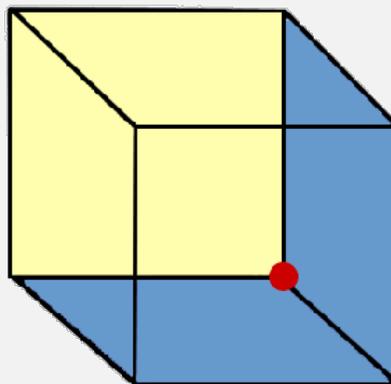
The second point is this: Sensemaking is not about discovering what's "true or real"—it is not about finding a world that is distinct from activities of sensemaking.

It's about constructing the cognitive and psychological frames that determine how we understand a given situational reality, and the actions and decisions by which we invoke that understanding as we endeavor to impact the unfolding of that reality.

This suggests that the very activity of sensemaking already, and almost always, introduces interpretive artifacts that distort and otherwise reconfigure what's actually happening.

How we see things, and how we understand things, is not necessarily how they actually are.

For an example of how this sort of distortion can arise, take a moment and look at the following image:



Notice that at first you see a particular cube with a particular orientation (the little red dot helps with the illusion).

Now keep looking at the image. See if, at some point, you see the *other* cube.

The illusion is referred to as the Necker Cube. It demonstrates the quality of distortion I'm wanting to

get at here. It's not that we look at the image and see a horse. The world depicted here is the world of 'cubeness'. It's just that the particular cube we perceive is not on the page.

Nor is it in our mind. It's somewhere in between.

The relationship of our sensemaking to the world of which we make sense is of a similar quality.

Through the activities of, and the underlying meaning-making structures which govern, our sensemaking, we come to see the world as a particular 'cube'.

Then, we mistake that particular 'cube' for the world itself.

And, we don't realize we're doing that. We think we're in a dance with the world as it is—whether in our individual pursuits, or in collective partnership with others.

However, it is far more accurate to say that what we are in a dance with is the manner in which the world is occurring for us—that particular 'cube' we have seen.

Our actions are always—always—correlated to the conversations, vocabularies, interactions and shared assumptions that govern our sensemaking, not to how things actually are.

When those conversations, vocabularies, interactions and shared assumptions lack the complexity and nuance needed to meet the complexity and nuance of the situational reality which we are currently facing, our actions are likely to be a product of a distorted view of reality, and hence not likely to be consistently effective.

Returning to the example depicted in the image above....



Imagine that the person talking is rigidly trying to convince the others of his point of view—a not uncommon occurrence.

In doing so, perhaps he uses a “vocabulary” that is intended to persuade or even covertly intimidate others, while relying on collectively held assumptions, which are never voiced, and of which people may be wholly unaware.

In doing all of this, he exercises a kind of argumentative power that is, at least in this moment, all-consuming, and in relation to which people find themselves acquiescing.

Culture emerges from the reiteration of conversational patterns such as this one, wherein a particular style of conversational practice (in this case, dominating through logical argumentation) is silently sanctioned.

What might we conclude about the quality of decisions and actions which such a conversation—such a moment of sensemaking—give rise to?

Stay Tuned for Part II in this series.