

# Sensemaking in the Social Construction of Organization. A Powerful Resource in a Pandemic Context

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**Abstract:** The paper presents the potential of sensemaking in social construction of organization, especially in times of uncertainty, generated by Covid-19 pandemic. The perspective is based on the social constructionism and explores the implications of sensemaking in organizational context. The paradigm of social constructionism is interested in dialogue and relations between members of organizations in the process of producing meaning in social interactions. In this context, sensemaking provides a significant influence in the process of organizing and leads the members to develop new ideas and discover effective practices, helping them to face the challenges encountered. Finally, the paper suggests the sensemaking as being a useful resource in creating a common map, providing hope, confidence, that may conduct to more effective action for rethinking the activities in situations of safety and trust.

**Keywords:** *organization; sensemaking; social constructionism; uncertainty.*

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## 1. Introduction

The paper introduces the sensemaking as a powerful resource for helping organizations to cope within uncertain situations, based on social constructionism paradigm. In the first part, the paper presents the concept, its implications followed by the challenges met in organization, and how sensemaking can help the members of organization to become more resilient in times of uncertainty, as is the case generated by Covid-19. The paper details the concept of sensemaking in order to emphasize its importance, thus developing an effective response, and repeating when threatening actions occur. The paper ends with some conclusions and opens further researches on sensemaking helpful for advancing knowledge in organizational development.

Concerning the social constructionist approach we can affirm that the constructed realities are the results of the social and interpersonal influences (Gergen, 1985). This paradigm emphasizes the ability to create realities through language, stimulating a process of continuous creation (McNamee, 2004; Gergen & Gergen, 2012). The members of organization are capable of making multiple and diverse maps of realities (Maas, Manschot & Roodink, 2001). The multiple realities are therefore constructed through language. Language becomes a lens for understanding certain aspects of the organizational life (Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985), being a tool of relating, and gains its use in context (Burr, 2003). In this sense “knowledge is seen not as something that a person has or doesn’t have, but as something that people do together” (Burr, 2003, p. 9). The social constructionist epistemology places discourse at the center of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Thus, the meaning is a product of the social and discursive practices (Mumby & Clair, 1997). People interact together and they have the power to influence other individuals. Language can lead to innovation, creativity, but also can create panic, fear and uncertainty. In this context, the reactions to situations are so important for the well-being of organizations, and most of the time the discourse needs to be changed (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Sandu, 2016). For example, Haas (2006) argues that in uncertain contexts sensemaking becomes critical in problem solving. Sensemaking, a process of the social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) focuses on how individuals try to understand events, new, ambiguous and confusing situations in organizational context (Colville, Brown & Pye, 2012; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Scott (1987) describes the sensemaking as a continuous construction of reality during in which people give sense to the present situations by assigning meaning to events. Creating meaning is an ongoing

event lacking a beginning, middle or an end. The members of organization get involved in this process and try to give meaning to their work towards themselves and also towards others. Creating meaning goes beyond interpretation and individuals play an important role in constructing each situation they are part in to understand it (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfel, 2005). The meaning created involves indications and fits a story, individuals constructing together meanings given to actions (Cunliffe, 2008). It is also a retrospective process. As a result, retrospective meaning usually appears as an activity summarizing the previous experience (Weick, 1995).

## **2. Sensemaking implications**

In organizational context, the conditions often change very rapidly, and opportunities may pass. “The major challenge of decision making is to mobilize collaborative processes in the service of effective action” (Gergen, 2009, p. 146). The act of decision-making is more than an information exchange. From constructionist epistemology making choices is a context for the discursive negotiation of social reality. People are bound together by choices (Weick, 1993). The organization emerges from choices made. Including the members of organization in decision making, and affirming their contribution, help to improve the organization activities. Sensemaking is also seen as a resourceful one that enables us to expand our worlds (Wright et al. 2000). Therefore, the environment of organization is created through the sensegiving and sensemaking. As Littlejohn & Domenici (2000, p. 53) sustain “people support what they create”. There is a need of “equilibrium, but not a static one, but a dynamic one” (Dulcan, 2009, p. 66). In a collaborative decision-making, focusing on the patterns that connect people can facilitate collective meanings, values, and purposes (Gergen, 1985; Gergen, 2009). Engaging in activity of change does not begin of a single one, but in relating to others. Creating space where everyone in the organization can be heard, a process emerges that makes the organization more vital (Cuyvers, 2010; Bushe, 2010). Relating enables participants to frame new shared meanings (Marshak & Grant, 2008), generating force for creativity that is essential in the process of change (Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjian, 1999).

Sensemaking is used as a way of making sense of change together, sustains it and the enactments through which change is experienced and made real (Colville, Hennesstad, & Thoner, 2014). Sensemaking is the process by which new meaning is created to rationalize the actions of individuals in relation to change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Maitlis &

Sonenshein, 2010). Sensemaking suggests the capabilities and skills that require attention and development (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Sensemaking creates and maintains coherent understanding that sustains relationships (Weick, 1993; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). A central issue in sensemaking is the ways in which “people redeploy concepts in order to ward off blind perceptions, and redirect perceptions to ward off empty conceptions” (Weick, 2012, p. 151). Sensemaking involves exploring changing through multiple resources, selecting new frameworks, interpretations, achieving more desirable results (Ancona, 2011). Sensemaking is especially needed in the organization when members are surprised by events, and perceive challenges as fear and threat (Ancona, 2011).

### **3. Organizational challenges in a pandemic context**

The organizational development is a complex process full of changes, opportunities, challenges, and involves decision making. The changes in organizational structure generate new responsibilities, new roles, and may create contradictories (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Due to emergence of a new coronavirus (COVID-19), characterized as a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), many organizations are forced to rethink their activity or to close their activity. Whether we refer to medical services, to schools, universities, nongovernmental organizations, corporations, or to others important services, each of the organizations continues to face challenges at different level. We can say that the daily routine is replaced with turmoil. A resilient organization reconfigures its activity, the resources, and creates order from chaos. This attitude requires actions, which sometimes seem to have no meaning (Barton, et al. 2020).

In this line, the question addressed is how sensemaking can help the organizations to become more resilient in responding to these dynamic times. It is widely known that the members of organizations may confront issues, actions, that sometimes are confusing, and unpredictable (Taleb, 2007; Andrus, 2010), and also may face anxiety because of the uncertainty about their jobs (Rothstein & Talbott, 2007). When the situations are volatile and uncertain, the indicators that notice the problems are not observed (Barton, et al. 2020). As a strategy to develop more the resilience capacity, the members of organization can describe what works well, and then to communicate to others in order to influence their realities. This action brings into discussion the sensegiving processes (Hill & Levenhagen, 1995). As Gioia & Chittipeddi (1991) describe “the sensegiving is concerned with

the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred definition of the organizational reality” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). In these situations, but not limited, co-constructing meaning can clarify the violated expectations, and can be an answer to how members of organization should act. The expectations can hold people hostage to their relationships, generating a discrepancy, and a valenced interpretation (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). Co-constructing meaning can also be an important process to practice actions that are not conducted on assumptions (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Co-constructing meanings can be achieved sharing different world views using dialogue, discourse or language (Burr, 2003; McNamee, 2004).

In this frame, the role of a relational leader and other organizational stakeholders is important. According to Barge & Fairhurst (2008) leadership is a co-created, contextual, and attributional process and the ideas expressed are recognized by followers as progressing tasks. The relational view underlines the importance of relationships between leaders and followers (Covey, 1993; Russell, 2003; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). For example Maitlis (2005) notes that the relative influence of leader and other groups determine the process of meaning-making that can be classified in “different forms of organizational sensemaking, guided, fragmented, restricted and minimal” (Maitlis, 2005, p.32). These forms represent “the level of engagement of the leader and stakeholders, attempting to influence others’ understanding of an issue” (Maitlis, 2005, p. 21). Thus, the organizational realities are the results of the shared conversations, calling to co-action (Weick & Roberts, 1993). Co-acting participants are getting involved in commitment, binding people to action (Weick, 1993). Acting to change is important for understanding the meaning to the stream of the organizational moments and which are the events that give direction (Weick, 1993). “This content is the sense that people feel and share” (Weick, 1993, p. 22).

#### **4. Conclusions and further directions**

The Covid-19 pandemic presents multiple challenges that conduct to unpredictable events. The adaptability and flexibility are more than essential in these times. We observed that many organizations are filled with barriers, have rigid structures that obstruct participants from developing skills, ideas, and actions (Marshak & Grant, 2008; Cojocaru, 2012; 2013). In this line, we suggest that the organizations need to learn how to do things from another perspective, how to create knowledge that contributes to the well-being of its members. Practicing resilience involves of course, fast learning. This

practice is about making sense of what is happening, operationally and rationally, thus developing an effective response, and repeating when threatening actions occur (Barton, et al. 2020). A resilient organization takes the problems as opportunity in order to update their understanding, reconfiguring the roles, the resources. Especially in these times of Covid-19 pandemic, the process of learning is enormously important. Organizations that are involved in adapting their activities, reflecting on their experiences, struggling with new things can spread their lessons in order to help creating a more resilient community (Barton, et al. 2020).

As this paper suggests, sharing meanings, fears, emotions (Rafaeli, Ravid & Cheshin, 2009) and feelings (Schwarz & Clore, 2007) the members of organizations can create knowledge, then can decide to apply it or not in a particular context. Developing meaning together members of organization can change their organizational worlds. In this ongoing process, constructing a common sense improves understanding “micro processes that underlie macro processes” (Zilber, 2007, p. 1049). Sensemaking becomes useful creating a common map, providing hope, confidence, and lead to more effective action. Also, sensemaking helps to discover purpose, motivation, and desire to get involved. Co-constructing meanings of events, and actions, participants become responsible, sharing visions, values, and insights. Sensemaking is also an extraordinary influential perspective in the processes of innovation (Weick, 1993; Cerulo, 2006), allowing individuals to find new interpretation of the context through conversations (Bingham & Kahl, 2013; Corley & Gioia, 2004). Exploring conversations, dialogue, and discourse can provide insight how meaning is socially constructed and how action is generated within organizations (Brown, 1990). In this line, the value of multiple perspectives, although these conduct to contradictory discussions, can lead to new ideas and practices (Pralhad, 2004; Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2008). Beside this, the appreciation of different perspectives opens space for more theory and research (Lusch, 2007) and new directions of action are encouraged to be explored. The organizations have the possibilities to thrive through a relational process. Therefore, meaning lies not within self-mind, but in relating process (Gergen, 2009; Gergen, 2015). Based on the social constructionism perspective, we can say that meaning is a construction, the product of the cultural, linguistic and social practices used in a specific context (Cojocaru, Bragaru & Ciuchi, 2012). ‘Action’ and ‘context’ are mutually in sensemaking, in a simultaneous equation, in which the members of organization are continually solving and re-solving to determine the nature of the events in which they are involved (Bolander & Sandberg, 2013). Sensemaking calls for courage, to understand the change,

and it's most needed when the organization world becomes incomprehensible in some way (Ancona, 2011). Creating meaning in relating and embracing self as relational provide additional input to bracket and assign meaning (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), opening further researches on sensemaking helpful in advancing knowledge for the organizational development.

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