

A UNIQUE ANGLE ON SENSEMAKING ABOUT ORGANISATIONAL COMMUNICATION DURING TIMES OF CHANGE

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Abstract

Independent workplace support workers, such as industrial chaplains, have a unique role in workplaces, which allows them to observe intra-organisational communication with a degree of operational independence denied to either workers or management. This working paper reports on an ongoing New Zealand study that is examining the conceptual frameworks and interpretative discourses employed by support workers to make sense of the communication in workplaces undergoing changes such as down-sizing, closure, and restructuring.

A modified snowballing sampling technique identified 14 participants with experience supporting workplaces during both planned and unplanned change. Semi-structured interviews provided data on participants' observations and interpretations of organisational communication in these organisations. The analysis of these data is revealing that support workers use frames of reference grounded outside the workplaces being discussed to make sense of organisational communication. This paper discusses two of these frames of reference and how these shape the support workers' sensemaking. It reveals how notions about the nature of industrial relations and change provide core frameworks for interpreting communication during the initial phases of organisational change. A search of the extant literature suggests that the findings offer insights into both sensemaking and organisational communication, during change, that have not previously been explored or elucidated.

DESCRIPTORS: sensemaking, frames of reference, intra-organisational communication, organisational change, independent staff support workers

A unique angle on sensemaking about organisational communication during times of change.

Much has been written about the pervasiveness of organisational change and the challenges that change presents to organisational stakeholders (e.g., Ciancio, 1998; Lally, 1997; Lewis, 2000, McKinley & Scherer, 2000). Some writers go so far as to call change the "buzzword in business today" (Lundquist, 2002). There is wide acceptance that change is the most challenging issue managers face (e.g., Nilakant & Ramnarayan 1998, p.9), although some scholars are now questioning whether organisational change should be as endemic and constant as it is today. Zorn, Christensen, and Cheney (1999) ask whether we are enamoured by the process of change, while Hearn, Graham, and Rooney (2002, p.60) go so far as to question how much of organisational change is actually real as opposed to merely communication about change.

Organisational change provides the backdrop for the study described, in this paper, which examines how sense is made of intra-organisational communication during organisational changes involving down-sizing restructuring, and closure. Specifically, the paper examines the sensemaking behaviour of a unique and largely unstudied group of workers; a group that support organisations and their staff during such instances of organisational change. This group has been known variously as industrial (Horrill, 1995), business (Grensing-Pophal, 2000) or corporate chaplains (Dale, 2001), or more recently as workplace support workers (WSWs). Historically, their mission was to bridge the gap between workplace and the church by engaging in a specialist form of ministry that involved relating to people in their workplaces (Horrill, 1995, p.23). Today, the role of WSWs is increasingly concerned with the provision of confidential counselling services, designed to promote the emotional well-being of workers and their managers during times of crisis and change. As one support agency states in its promotional material, it “offers an expanded range of services to educate and equip employees to deal with personal and work issues arising from a rapidly changing world and workplace.” (Source available on request)

The current study examines how WSWs make sense of the workplace communication at sites visited during periods of organisational change. It represents the first study of its sort. Preliminary findings suggest the study will enrich our understanding of sensemaking and communication during organisational change as well as offer those providing workplace support with a framework for critically reflecting upon their professional practice.

The independent workplace support person

The role of chaplain or WSW is well established in Australia, New Zealand, and Britain but not so elsewhere (Elkin, 1992, p.17), although the numbers in the USA have recently risen sharply (Cress quoted in Grensing-Pophal, 2000, p. 54). These workers bring an independent ear, encouragement, emotional support, and practical advice to workers, particularly in times of personal distress or change. Their low-profile role (Elkin, 1992) has often been described as “loitering with intent” (Reindorp, 1993), p.20). For many WSWs, their role is a mission or ministry, a calling to help people through times of trouble and uncertainty. It also provides an avenue for WSWs to enact personal spiritual beliefs while providing client organisations with a valuable means for addressing the emotional well-being of their staff.

In New Zealand, two models of independent staff support have contributed to the nature of this support role today (Horrill, 1995). The first model presents the primary role of the WSW as the provider of pastoral care. In contrast, the second model, with origins in the UK, characterises the WSW’s role as a facilitator of sound workplace relationships, positive relationships between industry and the community, and the establishment of links between theology and work (Randerson, 1995). This later model does not give prominence to the pastoral care aspect of chaplaincy role. In New Zealand, the combination of these models created a WSW tradition that emphasises the pastoral role, undertaken within a context of concern for the enhancement of the human experience of work and the promotion of Christian values.

WSWs are neither staff nor management at the workplaces they visit. They are employed by an independent agency (e.g., a religious group or non-aligned workplace support provider) that charges organisations for their employees' services. This means the WSWs have unique positions (Prentice, 1976) that afford them the opportunity to develop an independent third-party view of industrial relations and organisational communication at the workplaces they visit. It also means that they make sense of the organisational communication from frames of reference that do not necessarily mirror those of either the workers or managers they visit. Given their stated concern for the quality of human relationships in the workplace and the wellbeing of all parties interacting there, it seems reasonable to argue that the WSWs insights into organisational communication could be valuable to those seeking to understand and effectively manage workplace communication. Because WSWs become most engaged in the life of workplaces during times of crisis, change, and uncertainty, it is also reasonable to conclude that their insights during such times would be particularly well developed.

Organisational communication during change

Much continues to be written about organisational growth, decline, and transformation under the rubrics of organisational innovation, organisational restructuring, organisation development, and the overarching rubric of organisational change. Given this interest in organisational change and the long tradition of acknowledging the importance of communication to organisational change processes (See Lewis, 1999; Rogers, 1995), the paucity of studies that specifically examine the communication processes that emerge during change, as opposed to those designed to manage change, is surprising. Much of the research that does address emergent communication seeks to explain organisational members' reactions to change (Lewis & Seibold, 1996, p. 133). Lewis and Seibold's (1993, 1996) studies of coping responses to innovations are two of just a handful of studies that examine interactive responses to change. This could be because studies on change in both the organisational communication and organisational behaviour literatures tend to approach organisational communication from a managerial perspective. Both literatures are concerned with the role of communication (and associated problems) in implementing planned change (e.g., Lewis, 1999, 2000), introducing innovative communication strategies (e.g., a work-group meeting programme - Greenbaum, Holden, & Spataro, 1983), prescriptions for communication management during change (e.g., Barrett, 2002; D'Aplix, 1996), and describing resistance to change (Ford, Ford, & McNamara, 2002; Schraeder, 2001). The grapevine literature within the network literature acknowledges the link between communication activity and uncertainty and change but no studies were located that tracked this activity in relation to planned change.

In other fields, communication, particularly the need for better communication, is usually a recommendation that emerges from studies of organisational change rather than the primary research concern (See, for example, More & McGrath, 2002).

Thus, with the exception of Lewis and Seibold's (1993, 1996) two studies, which are directed to elucidating users' coping responses during innovation implementation, there seems to be little interest in discovering the unplanned organisational communication that

emerges during organisational change, especially that involving restructuring, redundancy, and closure. Overall, there appears to be a preoccupation with organisational communication as an instrument of change rather than an unplanned consequence of the organisation's changing internal and external environment.

Sensemaking about intra-organisational communication

Sensemaking is the process whereby individuals engage "in ongoing processes through which they attempt to make their situations rationally accountable to themselves and others" (Morgan, Frost and Pondy, 1983, p. 24). Sense is an accomplishment rather than a discovery (Weick, 2001, p. 460), prompted by ambiguity or equivocality (Weick, 1979, p. 130).

A review of the sensemaking literature suggests there has been little interest in examining the sense people make of intra-organisational communication, either planned or emergent. Two studies were found. The first by Lewis (2000) examined four organisations implementing planned changes. It found workers' sensemaking behaviour was potentially problematic because it produced competing notions of the planned change (Lewis, 2000). When workers' notions differed from those of the change agents, Lewis found workers judged the communication about the change to be lacking credibility.

In the second study, Mills (2000a, 2000b) found that sensemaking about organisational communication was tied to workers' emotional engagement and the prevailing issue climate. These shaped the sensemaking discourses workers selected to make sense of organisational communication. When workers were emotionally engaged they used different interpretative discourses to when they were indifferent. Thus, the study provided a mechanism for explaining the way sense about communication practices and episodes of organisational communication could change over time.

Given that workers' sensemaking about communication during organisational change has attracted so little research activity, it is not surprising that the literature is silent about the sensemaking about communication of such a low profile group as WSWs.

Research Questions

The current study addresses this gap in the literature by asking:

1. What can we learn from WSWs about the nature of organisational communication and its management during times of change?
2. How do these support workers make sense of their observations and experiences in organisations experiencing change?

Participants

The six male and eight female participants (N=14) worked as WSWs in New Zealand. Twelve were New Zealand born. One (N=14) was between 40-50 years of age, eight were between 50 and 60 and five were between 60 and 70. Four worked in small towns and the balance in a large metropolitan centre. The years of experience in the WSW role ranged from four to 17 years (Mean = 10 years). Three were ordained ministers. Nine had

changed religious affiliations at least once. The remainder was composed of two Presbyterians, one Anglican, one Baptist, and one Catholic.

Method

The approach employed is qualitative, guided by research questions rather than a pre-emptive conceptual framework derived from extant literature. This reflects the author's belief that the quality of sensemaking studies is easily compromised by predetermined conceptual frameworks or hypotheses. The data should suggest the conceptual framework used to subsequently analyse it. This is consistent with the basis tenet of the Grounded Theory Approach originally conceived by Glaser and Strauss (Glaser, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 1971).

A modified snowballing sampling technique identified 14 participants experienced in supporting workplaces undergoing change. Selection was by referral. Each worker, except the first who volunteered, was contacted by the previous interviewee and asked to participate. The value of this approach lies in the way it involves participants, reveals the professional networks within the participating group (i.e., WSWs), and allows workers to be reassured about the process by someone they know, trust, and has already participated.

Semi-structured interviews provided data on participants' belief systems, backgrounds, observations, and interpretations of organisational communication. These interviews took one to two and a half hours and were taped and transcribed so that the language used could be examined in detail. The analysis involved carefully examining transcripts for themes, concepts, and arguments WSWs used to describe or explain workplace communication. These were compared with data on the WSWs' backgrounds and expressed or implied belief systems. Attention was paid to both coincidences and contradictions between the two. The findings were then examined as a whole to identify patterns and variance within the total data set.

The data suggested the concept of "frame of reference" was an appropriate basis for this analysis. Frame of reference refers to a clusters of ideas that coalesce around a central theme, and by virtue of the coherency this provides, can be used to make an otherwise meaningless experience meaningful (Littlejohn, 1992, p. 182). In other words, a frame of reference highlights certain dimensions of a situation so that the situation can be defined in terms of past experience and so "make sense".

Findings

The analysis revealed WSWs apply themes from frames of reference originating outside the workplaces being discussed to make sense of organisational communication during change. This paper describes the two primary types of frames used.

What is perhaps surprising is that spiritual frames did not feature prominently in WSWs sensemaking. WSWs used spiritual frames to explained why they chose to engage in chaplaincy activities and to account for how they maintained their energy and inspiration for their work. Their spiritual frames were not specifically accessed to make sense of

organisational communication during change. The following comments suggest reasons why this was the case:

I think it's just part of, yeah I suppose you could say, yes, my whole life is just living it I guess without hounding myself to live it as a Christian, it's an intuitive thing. I guess that's what it is. I'm not one of those, yeah, I'm not a heavy, ...

and

..., that lined up also with my belief that people do spend a lot of time at work and that sometime or another in our life we all need someone to walk alongside us for a while. And I saw that [being a WSW] as a way really of living out my beliefs.

Only one participant indicated that his spiritual beliefs played a role in how he made sense of his/her experiences but then failed to include any examples of doing this when discussing organisational communication.

Industrial relations frames

Each WSW expressed views on what constituted appropriate workplace behaviour and how the parties should relate to each other. These views, which will be referred to as industrial relations frames, varied across the WSWs but, at their heart, all the frames incorporated some degree of acceptance of workplace pluralism. Pluralism is used here to refer to the notion that an organisation is a coalition of groups that inevitably depend upon each other but which have conflicting interests (Deeks & Rasmussen, 2002, p. 28). This is in contrast to the unitary perspective that portrays the groups within an organisation as operating as a team because they possess common interests.

Those WSWs who expressed the strongest pluralistic industrial relations frames reported exposure to socialist or social justice ideologies in their formative years. They reported identifying with the views of significant others who had actively engaged in social work, political processes, and union activities. They portrayed management and workers as two groups with needs and goals that were inevitably at odds, particularly during times of change. They revealed this view in various ways, but most consistently in the way they described their own employment activities in the workplaces visited.

These WSWs characterised their work variously as a human relationships watchdog, picking up the pieces, and walking a tight rope between management and workers (see Table one). Such characterisations assume industrial relations provide the potential for conflict, win-lose situations or at least conflicting interests between management and workers.

Table one. Strongly pluralistic characterisations of WSW work.

Characterisation	Illustration
Human relationships watchdog	"..., if you were my client and you're the manager and you're treating people in a way which was out of step with fundamental managerial decency or managerial procedure, then it would be my place to

	actually say, “X, we have some difficulties here ...””
Picking up the pieces	Yeah, one other organisation I was in, the change agent, or the person that was making the announcements came from another region to do it. He wasn't part of the structure so to speak, that he was addressing. And he came in virtually like a hit man, and then went out again. [The WSW then had to help deal with the aftermath]
Walking a tightrope	<p>“So we have to walk this tight rope of seeing to the needs of management and to see to the needs of the employee, equally without bias or favouritism.”</p> <p>“... , we're dealing with two fronts here too which is a conflict. We're supporting someone who is perhaps resisting change and we're also supporting employers, at the same time, pushing the change, the complete opposite. And somehow [sic] have to stand in the middle, identify with the pain of one and at the same time, encourage the growth or the rebirth of the company</p>

At the other extreme were WSWs who did not describe industrial relations from a strongly group conflict perspective. They expressed a more individual-oriented analysis of industrial relations that was closely aligned to the empowerment model they reported encountering in their in-service training. They interpreted workplace communication in terms of a people's personal characteristics and needs, not their affiliations to particular groups, preferring to describe their support activities in terms of meeting individual rather than group needs. These WSWs did not report being influenced by either socialist ideologies or the labour movement. Some had been managers or had managers in their immediate families, others had held both managerial and non-managerial roles and reported being able to relate to the various employment groups because they had once held similar positions. As a group these WSWs presented themselves as champions of effective individual agency (i.e., empowerment). This contrasts with those holding strongly pluralist notions who presented themselves more as champions of social justice.

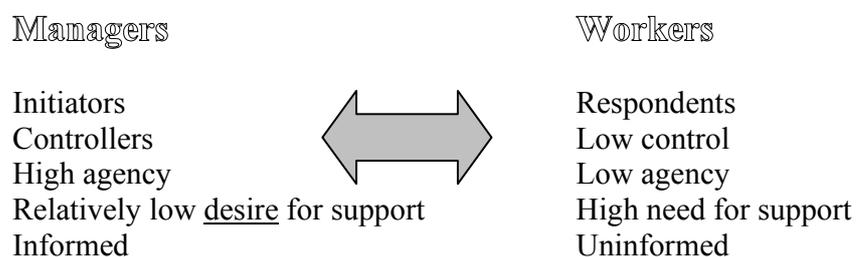
Table two. Strongly individualistic characterisations of WSW work.

Characterisation	Illustration
Facilitator	“Trying to assist them to come to their own solutions

	to problems in their lives, at work or at home, with relationships.”
Reflective listener	You’re trying to be the mirror. I often describe it as the mirror in front of yourself when you’re talking to the person across from you, to talk back to the mirror, you’re just being reflective. And then saying back to them, this is what I’ve heard you say, is that right, checking.
Interested companion	Not necessarily agreeing with them but the starting point is not to judge but to accept and I call that showing the love of God. Not verbally very often but just by being there for somebody else without judgement and taking an interest.

Each WSW’s industrial relations frame was also expressed in the way they characterised superior-subordinate and worker-worker communication. Those presenting a strongly pluralistic view of industrial relations made sense of these sorts of communication differently from those who did not express such strong pluralistic views. The data suggest a number of oppositions lie at the heart of the sensemaking of those WSWs holding strongly pluralist views that are not necessarily accepted by those with less pluralistic frames. These oppositions are presented in Figure 1 below as poles of continua. An employee’s position in their organisation determined where they were perceived to be positioned on each continua. If, for example, the organisation had a head office in Wellington, then the local manager’s communication with staff may not be explained in terms of high agency or control so they would be located towards the worker end of these two continua.

Figure one. Pluralistic oppositions used to make sense of communication



WSWs who viewed workplace relations from more individualistic frames of reference gave explanatory power to quite different characteristics to those with strongly pluralistic views. These characteristics related to personality and mental health, (e.g., stress) and

could not be grouped into managerial versus work oppositions. An individualistic perspective allowed WSWs to account for worker's communication behaviour in exactly the same way as a managers and vice versa, depending upon the circumstances. The following excerpt illustrates this. The WSW is making sense of why some managers withdraw after announcing a change that is going to cause job losses. Personality, not position, is used to explain this lack of communication:

I mean some have personalities that will face up to that but I think for many people, they don't and this is where we [WSWs] have a role in managing change and talking to staff about that or even having workshops if it's warranted.

Frames of change

WSWs listed a variety of change situations when asked to select illustrative instances of workplace change but showed a very strong preference for illustrating their comments with instances of restructuring, redundancy, and closure. These situations all involve loss for those directly affected. This loss dimension seems very significant in WSWs' sensemaking, perhaps because it provides the link between organisational change and grieving. The data suggest the grieving process (i.e., shock, denial, anger, despair, recovery) is a central theme in the change frame WSWs use for making sense of organisational communication at times of change. The following excerpts illustrate how the grieving process was integrated into WSWs' sensemaking:

Yeah, it was exactly like a grief situation, that they had to go down and then level and come back up again, in some way.

and

It's really observable that it [organisational change] follows a set pattern. And the pattern will depend on the affinity that the individual has with the work they do and the workplace. And it directly affects communication in that way, and for want of a better explanation, it does follow a grief pattern.

and

The communication is grief communication all the way through. And the communication directly to management can be summarised as grief responses. The shock, "The bastards, you're nothing but a bastard" But, what I have actually seen over the years is that grief response if you like, which is sort of shock, horror, negative, through to I've accepted it up here and I've moved on.

The WSWs understood communication during change followed a discernible set of phases that accommodated the stages of grieving. They indexed the change process to the sequence of formal communication events that occurred in a particular instance of organisational change. The resulting change frame proposes communication during organisational change moves from expressions of shock, denial and clarifying (announcement phase) through to expressions of anger and uncertainty and guardedness (post-announcement phase) to expressions of resignation, relief, support, and recovery

(final announcement onwards) with the possibility that stages could merge into each other.

In cases of organisational change where change was anticipated by employees, WSWs added a pre-announcement period. This was characterised by high levels of uncertainty that supported rumouring and grapevine activity. Where the change was announced and the details given some time later, then the post-announcement period was also characterised by further rumouring and grapevine activity. Table three presents this change frame with descriptions of the communication WSWs reported observing during each phase.

Table three: The stages of communication during change

Stage	Illustrations of WSWs' observations
<p>Pre-announcement (Information seeking, speculation, testing and proclamations)</p>	<p>“Prior to going into the room there was a lot of buzzing around the team, just trying to project what the announcements were going to be.”</p> <p>“They suspect what’s going to happen so the buzz groups are sort of firing these questions up but just sort of getting a sense of whether they’d actually do it in the meeting or not. It’s also a sense of supporting each other, within those groups. And if any people, I’ve seen this in some groups too, if some people sort of stand up as a natural leader, that’s another thing, they may organise it, saying hey, let’s go to a bar down the road or go for a coffee after this.”</p>
<p>Announcement (Expressions of shock and denial and clarifying)</p>	<p>“But it seemed to be that the disquiet and the quietness were there like a grief situation, there was something happening and they had to work through it.”</p> <p>“There may be nothing spoken initially, you know, because of the severity of it, people are just are flabbergasted.”</p> <p>“I mean, I might be angry at you because you might have even been responsible for that, but I’d hardly kick you in the teeth because I’m too overwhelmed with, you know, <u>I mean, I’m grieving, I’ve just sustained a loss.</u> So I’m pretty subdued at that point.”</p> <p>“When an announcement is made, they don’t really take in totally what’s being said. And so they get back into the group and what they’re talking out is their interpretation of what they’ve heard.”</p>

<p>Pre-final announcement (Expressions of anger and uncertainty and guardedness)</p>	<p>“And then if [until] they got the next news, they used to always call it cliff hanging, it was like the hanging over a cliff waiting. Because they didn’t know whether it was going to go this way or that way or whatever.”</p> <p>“I guess it’s a feeling of impending gloom. Although by the final announcement there could have already been one or two people have moved on. And I guess there’s that pending feeling that we’re going to know and that’s going to be better than what we’re doing now. But in the end it’s the, “for goodness sake, lets hear what it is so we can get on and stay or go or whatever it’s to be”.</p> <p>“Well there’s a lot amongst the colleagues, of gossiping and standing around speculating what they’re going to do.”</p> <p>“...then they start to watch their own backs because if they’re making plans, they don’t, they’re better not to tell everybody too much because then someone else might go and apply for that job too. So, yes, from all being sad and griping together, people, depending on the kind of work they’re doing, do begin to watch their own backs.”</p>
<p>Final announcement (Expressions of relief, resignation, support and recovery)</p>	<p>“Well there is tears, there have been tears in my experience. And wonderful support, there’s the grief that comes from losing workmates, there’s the guilt that you’ve still got your job and they haven’t. And wonderful, I do on the whole sense wonderful support amongst, ... sometimes management leave much to be desired this time. But I think mainly more from their own inadequacies, they don’t know how to deal with the grief, the tears, the things that can’t be calculated or written in a book. But co-workers can become very, very supportive and loving and yeah, keeping in contact.”</p>

Grieving was not the only imported concept WSWs used to make sense of communication during change. In the following example, a WSW also uses the notion of rehearsing, which she acknowledges learning about during in-service WSW training, to talk about the effect of a long wait between the initial announcement of change and the final announcement of details:

WSW: Well because of the long lead in for a lot of these. A lot of these people knew. Whether communication’s too good I’m not sure, but they’ve done

most of their grieving, , and maybe they, it's like rehearsing, maybe when it happens.

Interviewer: So they're actually rehearsing, that's an interesting concept.

WSW: Well I've heard through our training for this work, the word rehearsing is used for a couple that separate, that's where I heard the word rehearse. Because maybe one partner has been rehearsing the scenario for a couple of years before it happens, and they cope much better.

Discussion

The concept of "frame of reference" emerged as a useful framework in this study. It allowed the finding that collections of ideas, grounded outside the workplaces being discussed, were central to WSWs' sensemaking about organisational communication during change to be explored further. This exploration revealed that WSWs employ two powerful types of frames to make sense of communication. The industrial relations frames spanned conceptions of workplace relations that varied in terms of the assumed amount of manager-worker conflict. Like all continua, however, this continuum between pluralistic and individualistic frames spans an expanse of grey where both types of frame co-exist to some degree. For this reason, it would be wrong to conclude that the participants in this study fall into two clear camps. The value of the continuum of industrial relations frames is that it maps the extremes and highlights the variability that exists among the participants. While one pole, the strongly pluralistic frames, corresponds to one of the three industrial relations perspectives in conflict theory (see Rasmussen & Lamm, 1999, p.17), the other pole does not closely correspond to either of the two remaining perspectives (i.e., unitary or radical). The individualist frames emphasise the uniqueness of individuals and provide a basis for interpreting instances of supervisor-subordinate communication as a product of individual traits and needs rather than a product of differential power and the assumed conflict associated with this. Thus, this study contains the seeds of a challenge to conflict theory as a basis for explaining how people can make sense of workplace communication.

It is also interesting to note that the poles of the industrial relations continuum correspond to the priorities of the two models of chaplaincy that contributed to the style of independent workplace support now offered in New Zealand. Thus, there are those WSWs who employ frames at the pluralist end who focus on the inequities in the workplace and the social justice issues these generate and who concern themselves with the need to improve workplace relations. At the other extreme, there are those who focus on the needs of individuals and concerned themselves with the pastoral care issues these raise. The fact that one or other perspective predominates for some WSWs suggests that the integration between the two chaplaincy models is not yet complete.

It is curious that WSWs illustrated their observations about communication during organisational change to instances of restructuring, redundancy, and closure despite reporting that their experience of organisational change includes instances of organisational development such as the introduction of new technology and expansion. This suggests that the sense made of change, and therefore communication during change, is strongly influenced by the notion that organisational change involves loss. This

is not surprising. The history of chaplaincy has been shaped by the view that the chaplain's services are most needed in times of loss, and the most common form of workplace loss is loss of employment.

The finding that the most significant change frame was one that integrated the process of grieving provides further confirmation that WSWs make sense of communication during organisational change in terms of loss. The additional finding that WSWs indexed the grieving process to the formal communication process initiated by management to inform people about organisational changes suggests WSWs' prevailing sense of communication during change is of a process of grieving initiated and maintained by formal communication. This raises many questions about how organisational change and the sense made of this change and its associated communication might be transformed by encouraging different sensemaking frames. What if sensemaking about organisational communication depended upon frames of reference that centred upon opportunity instead of loss? What would happen if radical changes were made to the sort of formal communication that accompanies change?

It is particularly interesting that communication during change was framed by managerial actions, not workers' actions. This suggests that, even among those WSWs who had an individualistic frame of reference with regard to industrial relations, there was a taken-for-granted expectation that managers were active and workers reactive, and that change ran on a managerial timeline. Many would argue that this isn't open to interpretation, it is a fact.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed one corner of the data from this ongoing study of WSWs' sensemaking about communication during organisational change to reveal the nature of WSWs' industrial relations and change frames of reference. There are many more angles to be explored. For this reason, it should be seen as a beginning rather than an end in a study of a fascinating but low profile group of workers.

However, what it is already confirming is that WSWs are ideally positioned to make non-partisan sense of workplace communication as long as they appreciate that, like all people, their sensemaking is subject to influence from frames of reference drawn from outside the situations being interpreted. In this case, their frames centre on themes of social justice versus individuality and grieving and loss.

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