Making organisational communication meaningful: 
Reviewing the key features of a model of sensemaking about change communication

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Abstract

An organisation brings together people from diverse backgrounds and abilities and endeavours to harness them into an operational system to achieve its purposes. To successfully do this requires creating a web of interrelated processes and common understandings that support sensible collective action. Communication is at the heart of doing this (van Vuuren & Elving, 2008). It provides the means for enacting these processes and also the means for making sense of the experiences that are created. At the same time communication is itself the product of this organising behaviour. For these reasons it is reasonable to assume that if we understand how people make sense of organisation communication, we tap into the very essence of organisational reality and the nature of work.

This paper reviews the elements of a model of sensemaking (Mills, 2000, 2005, 2006) about organisational communication during change in light of findings from two subsequent studies. It shows how the latest studies confirm and extend the original model. Its contribution to the field of organisational communication lies in the way the model integrates physical, social, and psychological elements to create an integrated and comprehensive model of sensemaking about change communication that captures the way employees transform nonsense into sensible coordinated action and thus make workplace experience meaningful. As such it provides evidence of the value of taking a sensemaking turn in the study of organisational communication.
Keywords

Sensemaking, organisational communication, change communication, meaningful work

Introduction

An organisation brings together people from diverse backgrounds and abilities and endeavours to harness them into an operational system to achieve its purposes. To successfully do this requires creating a web of interrelated processes and common understandings that support sensible collective action (Weick, 1995). Communication is at the heart of doing this. It provides the means for enacting these processes and also the means for making sense of the experiences that are created. At the same time communication is itself the product of this organising behaviour. For these reasons it is reasonable to assume that if we understand how people make sense of organisation communication, we tap into the very essence of organisational reality.

This paper addresses findings that have emerged from a series of studies that have sought to do just that – to understand how insiders make sense of organisational communication. Specifically, it reviews the key elements of a model of sensemaking about organisational communication during change that emerged from a study of sensemaking about communication during a factory restructuring in light of findings from two subsequent studies. It shows how the latest studies confirm and extend the original model. Its contribution to the field of organisational communication lies in the way the model integrates physical, social and psychological elements to create an integrated and comprehensive model of sensemaking about communication that captures the way employees transform nonsense into sensible coordinated action and thus make workplace experience meaningful. It also challenges the prevailing notions about the relationship of formal to informal communication, particularly during periods of organisational change. As such it illustrates the power of examining organisational communication from the perspective of organisational members’ sensemaking and provides evidence of how “communication, sensemaking and change make a chord of three strands that hold organisations together in the complexity and pace of the twenty-first century” (van Vuuren & Elving, 2008, p.351).

Sensemaking and change

The change literature is extensive, possibly a reflection of the ubiquitous nature of organisational change (Zorn, Christensen, & Cheney, 1999). Within this literature are studies that address sensemaking during periods of organisational change. For instance, Gioia and
Thomas (1996) examined sensemaking during change in a large university and found managers used key ‘lenses’ to make sense of organisation-level issues while in an earlier study Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) discovered that a CEO’s primary change roles were sensemaker and sensegiver. The change process was found to engage the CEO in cycles of sensemaking (i.e., cognition) followed by sensegiving (i.e., action). Ogawa (1991) also examined sensemaking during change in a study that examined how teachers made sense of principal succession. It found teachers engaged in three phases of sensemaking: enchantment, disenchantment, and accommodation. These were set against an expectation that a new school principal inevitably heralds organisational change. This study also found that the teachers’ assessments of the appropriateness of change were linked to self interest.

In a related study Fauske and Ogawa (1987) found evidence suggesting that pre-succession attitudes, beliefs and desires provide the framework for post-succession assessments. A desire for change in the pre-succession stages of the principal change was found to be linked to teachers’ expectation that the new principal would undertake a programme of organisational change. Other more recent studies linking sensemaking and change include Bean’s study (Bean, 2003; Bean and Eisenberg, 2006; Bean & Hamilton, 2006) of how workers made sense of a change from conventional officing to nomadic work and Laine and Vaara’s (2007) study that investigated how workers in a European engineering and consultancy group made sense of change using contrasting strategy discourses.

What each study shows is that when organisational change is examined from a sensemaking perspective our understanding of the process of organising is enhanced. Collectively, they encouraged us to appreciate to see organisations as processes rather than structures. They also help us tap into the dynamic and at times complex ways in which people make organisational experience sensible to themselves.

Adding communication to the mix

Few management or communication scholars have examined how change communication and sensemaking are linked. Organisational change has been typically portrayed as ‘something separate from communication’ (Ford & Ford, 1995), as a tool for achieving change or as an explanation for the outcomes of change (Albrecht & Ropp, 1984; Fulk, Schmitz, & Steinfield, 1990; Lewis, 2000; Lewis & Seibold, 1993; Rogers, 1995; Van de Ven, Angle, & Poole, 1989). A notable exception can be found in the work of Ford and Ford (1995). They propose that communication is best conceptualised as the substrate in which organisational change is embedded. This conceptualisation accentuates the interdependence of communication and
change and encourages us to explore change communication and the sense made of it in order to explicate the nature of this interdependency. The three studies referred to in this paper sought to do just that. As such their findings take us beyond the instrumental and consequential models of change communication to a model which lies much more comfortably within systems theory and the notion that an organisation is not a fixed entity that must be changed to become something new but an ongoing series of interlocked and mutually constituting processes. In other words, the organisation does not really exist but is something in the making (James, 1909). The studies also represent a response to the repeated calls for attention to be paid to understanding change communication (e.g., Jones et al, 2004; Lewis and Seibold, 1998; van Vuuren & Elving, 2008). Not only are the studies contributing to the “communicative turn in change research” (van Vuuren & Elving, 2008, p. 350), they are providing evidence of the value of a turn to sensemaking in the study of change communication.

**The three studies**

Three organisational studies of how people make sense of communication during change inform this paper. The first was a study of a large food processing plant that was undertaking a restructuring that saw its hierarchical departmental structure replaced by a team-based structure that operated on principles akin to those intrinsic to Total Quality Management. The second was a large multi-site regional organisation whose CEO unexpectedly announced his retirement. The third organisation was a national multi-site organisation undergoing a long-anticipated CEO succession process. All three were experiencing what is typically referred to as a period of change. Each change generated varying degrees of uncertainty and ambiguity. According to Weick (1995), these are the key factors that stimulate sensemaking activity. This means that periods of change are ideal times to study sensemaking as they provide an abundance of sensemaking opportunities.

**The research methodology**

In all three studies participants (N1=48; N2=35; N3=34) were interviewed and asked to account for the change communication they observed or engaged in during the organisational changes being studied. In the restructuring study participants were interviewed twice while in the CEO succession studies each participant was interviewed at least twice and in most cases three times. In the first study data was also gathered using observations and participant observations.
The demographics in each study varied. Blue collar workers predominated in the first study while in the second study participants spanned a wide range of occupational categories from blue collar, through technical and secretarial to highly educated scientific and professional occupational categories. In the third study participants ranged from semi-skilled through technical and secretarial to highly educated scientific and professional occupational categories with scientific occupational categories predominating. Taken together the three studies provided a very comprehensive span of occupational categories from unskilled to very highly skilled and from no tertiary qualifications to the highest level of tertiary qualification.

The unit of analysis was the account, which typically contained both descriptive and explanatory material. Each account of a change-related communication event was analysed in terms of both its form and ideational content (e.g., concepts, arguments, metaphors, and recurring themes). In the first study codes were suggested by this analysis. New accounts were then considered against these emergent codes and the coding system was modified in order to accommodate these new accounts. This process continued until a coding framework developed which embraced all the accounts. The approach mirrored ‘constant comparison’ (Glaser, 1992, 1998; Glaser and Strauss, 1967, 1971); a technique that is a defining characteristic of the Grounded Theory Approach. A second level of analysis was then conducted to conceptualise the relationship between the codes in order to identify integrating themes that linked the data categories together into a sensemaking process. In the second and third study codes were compared with those that comprised the model that emerged from the first study. When these did not adequately apply to the nature of the sensemaking accounts revisions were made to the model to accommodate them. The two subsequent studies have allowed this model to be tested and refined.

**Reviewing the model**

The model of sensemaking about change communication that emerged from the first study has been reported elsewhere (See Mills, 2000, 2005, 2006). The following section briefly describes this original model. The 10 elements of the model that have been found to apply across the three studies are then discussed. Five were the core elements of the original model. The second five elements were discussed in the formulation of the model but not included in the original model as core elements.
The Original Model

The model (see Figure 1) represents an ongoing process and so has no beginning or end. It situates the communication behaviour or event that is the subject of sensemaking (i.e., the communication object) at the opposite side to the sense made of this behaviour or event. This sense is created by the processes that lie between these two points. Contributing contextual influences such as the prevailing issue climate, the social setting of a sensemaking episode and the communication environment complete the model.

According to this model, the sensemaker extracts the communication object from the stream of organisational experiences they are exposed to. This bracketing off of the communication object results from the sensemaker judging that the object is of personal interest. The degree to which this interest provokes affective engagement will determine whether sensemaking moves beyond merely noticing the object to labelling it or on to more active sensemaking where the sensemaker seeks to interpret it.

Affective engagement is defined as “the depth or intensity of affect a worker expresses towards the workplace communication:” (Mills, 2000, p. 412). The model proposes that the affective engagement is the driving force for workers when making sense of workplace communication, particularly during times of change and uncertainty. It determines the amount of energy expended in processing a communication event and is shown in figure 1 by large black arrows.

If the sensemaker becomes affectively engaged by a communication behaviour or event then the model proposes that they will make an assessment of the consequences of expressing their level of affective engagement in their sensemaking discourse. This assessment determines which framing discourse gets employed to interpret the communication object. The original study identified five framing or interpretive discourses that were used by workers to make sense of their communication objects. These discourses were designated detached, operational, aligned, oppositional and alienated discourses according to the ideational elements they contained. (See Mills, 2005 for a detailed description of each discourse).

Each discourse positions the sensemaker in relation to the participants in a communication object. For instance, if a worker chooses to use an oppositional discourse to interpret a workplace meeting, this would position them in opposition to another group or member of a group at that meeting or in the wider workplace (e.g., managers or line manager). By employing such oppositional constructs as “them and us” and conflict or war metaphors (e.g.,...
being under attack, defending our position, being on guard, putting up a fight, being under siege) the worker is constructing a social identity of his or herself as warrior or defender and framing the behaviour of others as aggressors or attackers. By doing so, the sensemaker reveals their sense of who they are in relation to the social setting which generated the communication event that they are making sense of and in which they now make sense of this communication. This then contributes to the communication environment they experience. If the sensemaker’s sense of who they are (i.e., self-identity) identity is at odds with others’ expectations or ideals then their sensemaking could also contribute to the prevailing issue climate too. The model shows how sensemaking behaviour contributes to and is itself shaped by the social environment in which sense is made, the communication climate and the issue climate in the workplace. This in turn is influenced and itself influences the physical environment provided by the workplace. Collectively these are termed the geosocial environment.

Overall, the model is consistent with Weick’s (1995, pp.17-62) properties of sensemaking. It depicts sensemaking about change communication as intimately linked to identity construction, retrospective, creating the environment the sensemaker then faces, ongoing, social, focused on extracted cues, and about creating plausible rather than accurate understandings. What distinguishes the model is that it extends our understanding of sensemaking by capturing the different levels of sensemaking activity that can occur, the contextual embeddedness of sensemaking, particularly about communication, and the role of affect and discourse. It represents sensemaking as an open system of mutually dependent elements that support an ongoing process of making workplace communication sensible.

Figure 1. A Model of Sensemaking about Workplace Communication.
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Five confirmed elements of the original sensemaking model

The first element in the model that was found to apply across all three studies was what was termed the **geosocial environment** (Note this is termed ‘social setting’ in Figure 1). This referred to the product of the dynamic interplay between the physical and social dimensions of the work environment. All three studies revealed that employees’ sense making was situated in and shaped by this **geosocial environment**. The geographic location (e.g., head office, a remote depot, or a particular department’s location in a factory complex), the physical constraints of the immediate environment (e.g., space, noise, machinery), and the social structure of the work group (e.g., tight knit, collection of subgroups, longstanding friendship group) were intricately woven into how sense was made of change communication. Employees who worked in a five-person depot miles from company headquarters made sense of organisational communication in ways that distinguished them from those at larger centres and centres within easy reach of headquarters. Similarly, employees working in isolation (e.g., forklift drivers) gave different accounts of their sense of change communication compared to those who worked alongside others (e.g., on the inspection belts in a factory) or who those who actively collaborated in a team situation (e.g., constructing containers or reconstructing irrigation channels). Similarly, employees who were part of a socially cohesive workgroup made different sense of communication to those who were more loosely socially coupled or those who were not integrated into the social nexus of the work group at all.

The second element in the model was the **communication environment** that prevailed in a work group. This was the product of the way people communicated with each other and, while an integral part of the geosocial environment, was identified as a distinct element in the model because it had a major bearing on what change communication was attended to and how it was subsequently interpreted. Where there was limited or unproductive engagement between managers and workers the meanings ascribed to particular communication events involving these managers were different to those generated in when workers and managers communicated regularly and effectively. Distinctive interpretive discourses (called framing discourse in the model) were identified in the first study which could be linked to the specific communication environments (Mills, 2000, 2005) workers encountered.

The third element in sensemaking model that was confirmed across all studies was **consequence assessments**. When participants made sense of change communication they made consequence assessments of the communication object to determine whether they needed to go beyond just noticing this communication, to labelling it or investing time...
determining what the communication meant and to what it could be attributed. In other words, they asked “What impact will this communication have on me?” In the first study impact considerations were largely to do with personal impacts. Workers asked, “How will this affect me? Is it of personal interest?” In the second two studies they also asked “How will this affect the organisation and the work of the organisation?” Given the very different demographics in the first organisation (i.e., predominantly poorly educated semi-and unskilled workers) compared to the organisations in the two subsequent studies (i.e., high proportions of profession highly educated employees with a strong commitment to the work of their organisation), this finding suggests that education and identification with an organisation’s mission predispose sensemakers to take a broader view of the consequences (i.e., impact) when deciding whether to invest any further effort in making sense of a particular change communication event.

The fourth element in the model is affect engagement. As noted earlier, this refers to the depth or intensity of affect a worker expresses towards the workplace communication they are accounting for (Mills, 2000, 2005). In all studies the level of affective engagement experienced by sensemakers as a result of attending to a particular communication event had a significant effect on the sensemaking enterprise. Those who were highly affectively engaged by a communication event invested much more effort in making sense of that event and trying to influence the sensemaking of others than those with relatively lower levels of engagement. It seems that when people’s feelings are engaged they are less able to distance themselves from change communication. This was clearly apparent in one department in the first study. Little attention was paid to the communication relating to the restructuring until the department’s foreman was made redundant. This angered the remaining employees and heralded a shift in the effort they invested in making sense of subsequent restructuring-related communication.

Data relating to the fifth element of the model, the framing discourses in which the sensemaking accounts are embedded, is still being examined to determine if the five framing discourses that emerged as central to the model in the first study are the same discourses used by participants in the subsequent two studies. Preliminary findings suggest they are in essence but with variations which reflect the different vocabularies present in the other two organisations.
Five ‘new’ elements

Several elements that were mentioned in the discussion of the first model (Mills, 2000) but not integrated into the diagrammatic representation of this original model have been found to be important aspects of employees’ sensemaking in the two subsequent studies. The first of these elements is employment history, which includes the relational history of an employee. This influenced the sense employees made of communication by influencing the conceptual models, biases, and expectations they brought to their sensemaking. For example, an employee in one of the succession studies who reported having a negative interaction with the departing CEO interpreted the CEO’s farewell quite differently from others who did not have a negative critical incident in their relational history that negatively disposed them towards the departing CEO (Mills, 2009). Likewise those who could trace their employment back to organisations that had been amalgamated to form the current organisation used different sensemaking resources at times when making sense of change communication. Such participants often reported engaging in collaborative sensemaking with colleagues who shared the same employment history. This they accounted for in terms of familiarity and trust. They felt comfortable with those they had worked with for a long time and had accumulated evidence of their trustworthiness when it came to dealing with sensitive and confidential information.

The second element that has been identified as significant enough to warrant specific mention as a procedural element in the emerging model is the relationship between formal and informal communication. In the organisational communication literature informal communication, such as gossiping and rumour mongering, is typically presented as a response to insufficient or inadequate formal communication. The primacy of this role is challenged by the findings of these studies. Spikes of informal communication were reported following formal change communication events. Rather than primarily serving to provide additional information in the form of hearsay, rumour, and speculation to supplement inadequacies in the formal communication, participants reported that these spikes contributed to the process of making the formal communication meaningful. They served to clarify the meaning of the formal communication (e.g., provided context in terms of organisational communication protocols). The spikes of informal communication were also the locales of influence, where opinion leaders exerted influence on the sensemaking of others. Those employees who understood the complementarity of formal and informal change communication were in a strong position to shape the change climate and ultimately how the change was received by the organisation.
The third element that the later studies suggest warrants greater significance in the model is the notion of communication profile. This refers to the communication style and typical behaviours of a communicator as ascribed to them by others. Participants reported constructing communication profiles for fellow organisational members and then employing these profiles to make sense of the communication these members engaged in. These profiles were composed of an amalgam of rumoured behaviour, personal observations, and first-hand interactional experiences such as critical incidents. Participants often constructed sophisticated profiles of other employees who they hardly knew; suggesting second-hand information was an important sensemaking resource. In the interviews this observation was explored and participants’ answers highlighted the significant role of others in their sensemaking. Social networks, prominent opinion leaders, and immediate colleagues all contributed to their sensemaking.

Significantly, the managers who were judged to have the best communication profiles were visible at many levels in the organisation. They attended social functions and regularly participated in informal communication with staff (e.g., went to morning tea). This finding links to the next finding (i.e., the high value placed on face-to-face communication) and suggests that managers gain enormous value in terms of their communication profile by ‘being present’ as this ensures that employees have the opportunity to gather first-hand information about them. It also means they are in a position to take active sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) roles in relation to their own behaviour. In other words, the manager can interpret their own behaviour to staff rather than leaving this to others to do in their absence.

The significance of communication profiles was clearly illustrated in one of the two CEO succession studies. If an employee’s profile for the departing CEO included dimensions such as ‘open’ and ‘personable’ then the feelings that the CEO displayed at his staff farewell function were interpreted quite differently compared to someone whose communication profile for this CEO did not include such dimensions. In this study the departing CEO’s communication profile was also used by employees as a template for gathering and interpreting data on the communication style of the incoming CEO’s behaviour. If, for example, the departing CEO was seen as a good listener then data on the new CEO’s listening behaviour was actively sought.

The fourth ‘new’ element of the model confirmed by the subsequent studies is face-to-face (f-t-f) communication orientation. In all three studies f-t-f communication was given considerable significance when employees endeavoured to make sense of change communication and also their personal value to the organisation. Participants reported feeling
valued when the CEO or senior staff communicated with them in person. Those who held positions of responsibility or influence reported expecting f-t-f encounters with senior colleagues. When this didn’t occur they felt aggrieved and gave explanations for feeling this way that suggested their psychological contracts had been violated.

One very notable incident illustrated this very clearly. In one organisation an email was sent inviting all staff to contribute to the succession process by suggesting to the management consultant overseeing the selection process three characteristics he or she would like to have in their new CEO. The sense made of this invitation varied across the organisation. At the most senior level of the organisation it was viewed negatively. These negative responses were explained in terms of entitlement. The senior staff felt their positions of responsibility entitled them to a f-t-f encounter with the Board or a representative of the Board to discuss what they considered were desirable attributes of the new CEO. Being consulted by way of an all-of-staff email was not considered appropriate to their position. The absence of a f-t-f encounter with the Board was taken as symbolic of how the Board perceived the senior employee’s value to the organisation. Senior staff, particularly those in the Executive team, concluded that they were not respected and in some cases the absence of f-t-f engagement with the Board was taken as evidence that the Executive Team could expect to encounter changes (e.g., redundancy or redeployment) upon the arrival of a new CEO.

Elsewhere the reactions were quite different. Middle managers saw the email as evidence that their opinions mattered and as a sign that the Board was trying to be inclusive. Technical and secretarial staff came to similar conclusions. At the lowest levels in the organisation some workers made quite different sense of the invitation. Some dismissed it as irrelevant while others dismissed it as a joke. When participants were asked to account for these responses they explained that they had never met the departing CEO. Some had never met any of his predecessors either. They felt their past experience entitled them to interpret the email request as irrelevant, unrealistic, a joke or an example of the Board being politically correct. For many lower level workers the only substantive meaning they gave to the email was that it confirmed their marginal organisational status.

The fifth and final ‘new’ element in the model, **personal organisational identity**, was woven into the sensemaking behaviour across all three studies but was most pronounced in the later two studies. The email example (given in previous sections) illustrates how sensemaking about change communication provided a vehicle for individual employees to assert and confirm their organisational identities. In providing accounts of the meaning given to the email, employees discursively rehearsed their sense of their personal organisational identity.
Many other examples of this occurring were also identified, both in the interviews and in observations made by the researcher (e.g., at morning tea in the cafeteria).

**Discussion and conclusion**

The purpose of this paper has been to review the elements of an empirically-based model of sensemaking about change communication (see Mills, 2000, 2005, 2006) in light of findings from two subsequent studies. It has shown how the five core elements of the original model have been confirmed while five elements that were mentioned in the original discussion of the model but not specifically included in the model schematic warrant specific mention. Such findings and the refinements they foster serve to highlight how repeated studies in different contexts can enrich findings from earlier studies and contribute to the development of generic models. The line of research reported here is ongoing with this specific purpose in mind – to create an empirically-based generic model of sensemaking about communication during organisational change. Such a model will allow change agents to systematically strategize change communication and in so doing hopefully ensure that change processes are approached in ways that are sensitive to employees’ lived-in organisational realities. Along the way some taken-for-granted understandings about organisational communication may also be exposed as being in need of revision, as was the case in this series of studies with regard to the relationship between formal and informal change communication. The studies have shown that formal and informal change communication are coupled in a complementary way rather than informal communication primarily being a means of compensating for inadequate formal communication. Overall the study programme discussed here and the model that is being developed are addressing the repeated calls for attention to be paid to understanding change communication (e.g., Jones et al, 2004; Lewis and Seibold, 1998; van Vuuren & Elving, 2008). The research is showing how taking a sensemaking approach to the study of organisational communication, particularly during change periods, generates valuable insights into the essence of organisational life and the role that the sense made of communication plays in this life.

**References**


