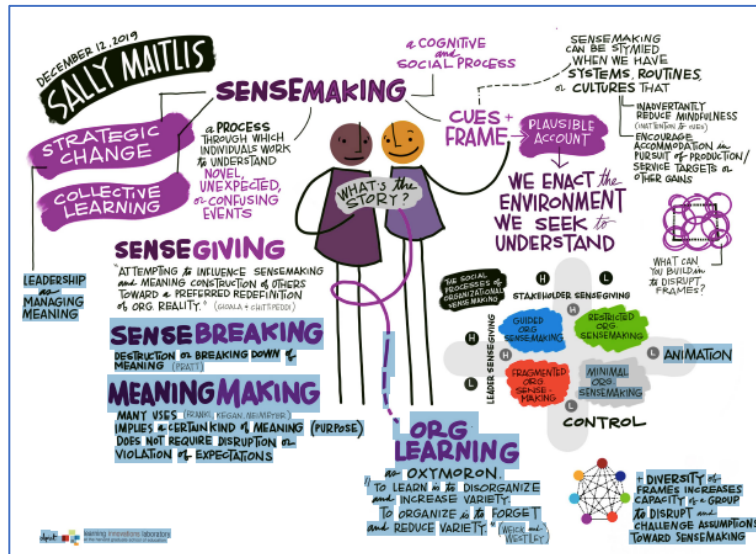


## December 2019 LILA Member Call – Sally Maitlis

### Sensemaking: A Primer



During the October gathering, the LILA community explored the current business context in a world where what we know is less important than how we are connected to ongoing knowing. Most importantly, it is a context where sensemaking, meaning making, and wayfinding become the primary knowledge activities. We must learn how to engage in ambiguous and unknown environments, which means that we engage in very different organizational learning practices. There were two conversational café’s that explored this reality – what should the role of the learning function be? and how do we convert “learning lakes” into “learning rivers?” To gain a better understanding of sensemaking, we were joined on the call by Sally Maitlis, Professor of Organizational Behavior and Leadership at the Saïd Business School, University of Oxford.



### What is Sensemaking?

**Sensemaking** is the process where we try to understand novel, unexpected, or ambiguous events. It is conscious and intentional, creative and active; sensemaking is more about invention than discovery. Carl Weick, a foremost scholar in this field, says that sensemaking begins when you find yourself asking, “What’s the story?”

We engage in sensemaking by extracting and interpreting cues from the environment, connecting them to our pre-existing lens, or **frame**, and then constructing a plausible account that provides a sense of order. This account, or story, guides our future actions.

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Sensemaking **is NOT** the same as passive interpretation. It demands active authorship for understanding. Sensemaking is a fundamentally creative act which inevitably produces other actions.

### Enactment

We create the environmental conditions that we're trying to understand, a process known as **enactment**. Enactment can also be defined as a process where organizational members create a stream of events that then commands their attention.

### The 'Fully Monty' of Sensemaking

A holistic, or 'Full Monty', definition of sensemaking is: "A process prompted by violated expectations that involves attending to and bracketing cues in the environment." Disrupted expectations force participants to create intersubjective meaning through cycles of interpretation and action; as a consequence, they enact a more ordered environment.

Notably, sensemaking is an inherently social activity. We think together about what an ambiguous event means for us as individuals and as a collective.

### Related Constructs

**Sensegiving** is the attempt to influence others' sensemaking and meaning construction. This happens when individuals try to persuade others of a 'preferred redefinition' of organizational reality. This is frequently performed by leaders and managers.

**Sensebreaking** is the destruction or breaking down of meaning. This may disrupt an individual's beliefs or opinions about the world.

**Meaning-Making** implies a certain kind of meaning. It does not require a disruption or violation of expectations. Sally used Viktor Frankl's *Man Search for Meaning* as an example of meaning-making; it is a broader process that is directed towards a particular point or purpose.

### When does sensemaking occur?

Sensemaking occurs in ambiguous contexts, particularly when events interrupt our ongoing flow and norms. Organizational crises, identity threats, and environmental jolts, such as the BP Gulf Oil Spill, disrupt organization's understandings of the world and create uncertainty about how to act next. Disruptions don't necessarily need to be large, but they do need to be consequential.

### Where does emotion enter into sensemaking?

Emotion triggers the beginning of the sensemaking process. We have an emotional response to a triggering event in our environment, and then try to create a plausible account of the event. Scholars now recognize that emotion is a vital part of the sensemaking process. Sensemaking is also increasingly regarded as an embodied process.

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## What gets in the way of sensemaking?

We often try to accommodate, explain away or normalize sensemaking triggers. This happens when groups, organizations or institutions have systems that reduce mindfulness and attention to potentially meaningful cues. This may also happen when norms, routines or cultures encourage accommodation in pursuit of production and service targets.

The Challenger disaster stemmed, in part, from disregarding sensemaking cues in order to accommodate external pressure to launch.

High reliability organizations and teams, such as in healthcare and airplane cockpits, have practices built into their daily routines that encourage sensemaking and collective mindfulness. This infrastructure is formalized: for example, the Army War College includes training for military personnel that encompasses groupthink and specific practices for sensemaking.

## How does sensemaking happen?

The core Sensemaking process involves three components:

1. A **Frame** (Past Moments of socialization)
2. **Cues** in the Environment (Present Moments of Experience)
3. A **connection** between the two moments

To illustrate how sensemaking happens, scholar Carl Weick describes how battered child syndrome became a plausible account. Initially, it seemed absolutely inconceivable that parents could be doing this to their children. Over time, though, Doctors connected the cues in the environment with an awareness of their 'frame'. They allowed their frame to be modified. Wildland firefighters form another example. A team of firefighters went out to tackle a moderate fire (also called a 10 o'clock fire). This frame made it difficult for the team to take in external cues that the fire was actually much worse. Some were able to modify their frames in response to this reality; others were not.

## The Importance of Frames

Our frames are often rooted in past organizational learning and can create myopia and shortsightedness. **Everyone's frame is different, yet not all frames are valued equally.** We often assume that we all see the world the same way, when in reality, we each have unique 'dominant frames' shaped by our previous experiences.

## Who's Doing Sensemaking?

Everyone is engaged in sensemaking in organizations. However, some sensemakers are more influential than others.

Sensemaking can appear in many different forms: talking, questioning, writing, arguing, joking, gossiping, reflecting. It can occur through the expression of emotion, as previously discussed, and attuning to our embodied senses. Action is important: it generates cues for sensemaking and is used to test our provisional understandings.

## Four Forms of Organizational Sensemaking

There is a spectrum of leader sensegiving (low to high) and spectrum of stakeholder sensegiving (low to high). See the four by four below.

	High stakeholder (organizational members and others) sensegiving	Low stakeholder (organizational members and others) sensegiving
High leader sensegiving	Guided organizational sensemaking	Restricted organizational sensemaking
Low leader sensegiving	Fragmented organizational sensemaking	Minimal organizational sensemaking

Maitlis (2005) The Social Processes of Organizational Sensemaking.  
*Academy of Management Journal* 10

When leaders and stakeholders are giving sense, there is **guided organizational sensemaking**. Everyone is involved in trying to persuade others of their ‘frame’ of reality. Leaders may have managed stakeholder meetings, yet stakeholders are also engaged, to create an intense sensemaking environment.

Marked by: more controlled, more animated processes, intense information flow.

When leaders engage in sensegiving, but stakeholder sensegiving is low, the result is **restricted organizational sensemaking**. Leaders are controlling the process, but stakeholders are not clamoring for information.

Marked by: more controlled, but less animated processes. There is light information flow, as stakeholders know little about issues. There is intermittent sensemaking occurring.

When leaders are low in sensegiving, but stakeholder sensegiving is high, organizations are engaged in **fragmented sensemaking**. Increases in organizational transparency and information availability has shifted organizations towards this fragmented form.

Marked by: intense information flow between leaders and others, fewer formal mechanisms for leader sensegiving. Less controlled, more animated sensemaking processes.

**Minimal organizational sensegiving** occurs when there is little sensegiving by leaders or stakeholders.

Marked by: Light information flow and little sensemaking all around.

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## What does Sensemaking accomplish?

**Strategic Change:** When leaders' sensegiving is successful, others come to understand the future in ways that are consistent with a redefined reality. Change can progress through alternative cycles of leader/member sensemaking. The change process can stall when there are 'sticky' prior frames/narratives, or top team attention is focused elsewhere.

**Collective Learning:** Sensemaking is especially important, but also especially challenging in conditions of high ambiguity. Sensemaking is vital to learning through mistakes or failure. It is not about finger pointing or blaming, but rather oriented towards continuous learning. This is particularly true in non-crisis contexts and knowledge-intensive teams.

## Linking Sensemaking and Learning: A Paradox!

Organizational learning as an oxymoron: to learn is to disorganize and increase variety. To organize is to forget and reduce variety. Sensemaking involves creating order out of flux, but ordering can also inhibit learning. We must be willing, therefore, to disrupt the order we have created in order to be adaptable and flexible. Colville et al. sum this up by stating that organizational learning occurs through intermittently generated interruptions, and then subsequent recoveries, in the continuous process of modifying frames. This raises the question for leaders of learning – what organizational practices can we introduce in order to be continuously modifying frames to allow us to be open to new cues and new ways of understanding?

## Learning, sensemaking, and diversity: 'Multiple Frames'

A diversity of frames is key in your ecology. In the words of Weick, 'Believing is seeing' – if you see a greater number of frames, then you may believe that there are greater numbers of ways to make sense of events and the environment.

## Puzzles raised by LILA members

- How do we engage with the paradox between learning and (dis)organization?
  - To learn is to shake things up. With sensemaking, we are trying to find the story to explain the chaotic happening. But this order inhibits us from learning more. The paradox then, is how can we make sense of what is happening *and* be willing to disrupt that order. Sensemaking inserts intermittently generated interruptions and recoveries and all as we do this, we are trying to modify our frames. Organizations might want to set up practices where individuals are continuously modifying their frames to be open to new ways of understanding.
- How can we teach sensemaking in a way that embraces its inherent disruptions – while also inviting participation?
  - Organizations have many practices for reflecting but this is not the same as sensemaking. Normally after we reflect we don't engage in action. We sometimes reflect in action. To reflect is to look at what happened. Sensemaking is more active, more experimental. For example, you may ask yourself, what is going on here, then try something experimental and based on

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what happens next, you have a better sense of what the story is. That is sensemaking

- What does constructive destruction/disruption look like in workplace settings? In teams?
  - You can't have sensemaking without disruption. Within your organization you have disruption every day (eg: market changes). What can you build into the ecology that challenges the taken for granted assumptions? Recognize that unless you do that, you are mired into the current form of thinking and capabilities and will not grow.
  - At Lego there are team seminars where the whole organization gets together to make sense of recent events within the organization. The aim of these sessions is to create collaborations and make sense across the team of what the changes they are making.
  - At the US Army War College: They have well-grounded infrastructure in place to watch for environmental cues. Individuals are trained in military decision planning or operational design to scan the environment, make deliberate plans on how to change the environment. There are deliberate routines to make sure that group think doesn't set in.
- How can we elicit greater numbers of different frames in our learning ecologies?
  - You need to have greater diversity of frames as you have diversity in your environment. As soon as you try to simplify, you are blinding yourself to other possibilities. As Carl Weick said, "believing is seeing" – the frame you have is the only frame you have. The more people you tap, the more frames you will have represented in the sensemaking process and therefore, a richer understanding of what is happening will emerge.
  - While having highly engaged leaders in sensemaking is better for most strategic issues. But you will get a richer story if you have sensemaking from other perspectives as well.
- Is 'nonsensemaking' a form of sensemaking? What does this look like?
  - "Nonsensemaking" is really just another kind of sensemaking by promoting another kind of understanding.
- What are the ways in which we're shifting the learning function itself (does it need to expand or change its role?)
  - Introduce the idea of constructive disruption as a way to grow and move forward.
  - One on one conversations as well as broader meetings.
  - Watch out with initiatives that try to create coherence in order to get everyone 'on the same page' as it may inhibit sensemaking.
  - Increase diversity of thought in meetings as a way to open up space for multiple frames to be brought into the sensemaking process.

To listen to a recording of the call, click this link [LILA on Sensemaking](#).