Sensemaking Thinking

Idea In Short

When something unexpected happens, such as a sudden market shift, a failed launch, or a strange customer signal, people do not start with a blank page. They scramble to work out what is going on, and the story they settle on shapes everything that follows. Organizational theorist Karl Weick named this activity sensemaking and showed how it can hold a group together or fall apart under pressure. This article explains what sensemaking is, the properties that Weick identified, what the Mann Gulch fire analysis teaches about its collapse, how teams can build shared understanding in uncertain moments, and the traps that come with settling too soon on a plausible story.

A retailer's online sales drop by a fifth in one week. Marketing says the ad campaign is failing. Operations says the website is slow. Finance says a competitor cut prices. Each team holds a plausible story, and each starts acting on its own. Come Friday, the company has launched three uncoordinated fixes, and nobody can say which one, if any, worked.

What sensemaking means

Sensemaking is the process of working out what is happening when events do not fit expectations. Wikipedia notes that the concept was introduced to organizational studies by Karl Weick in the late 1960s, and that his 1969 book The Social Psychology of Organizing shifted attention from organizations as entities to organizing as an activity.1

Weick and colleagues have described it as "the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing."2 Three words in that description carry weight. Ongoing means the work never finishes. Retrospective means people interpret events after they happen. Plausible means the story only needs to be believable enough to act on.

A reference entry from SAGE adds that Weick's interest grew from dissatisfaction with

traditional approaches that see organizations as rational entities, and from a concern for process over outcomes.3

The seven properties

An overview of Weick's work lists seven properties of organizational sensemaking: identity, retrospect, enactment, social contact, ongoing events, cues, and plausibility.4

Each property points to a practical lever. Identity reminds you that people interpret events in light of who they think they are. Retrospect says that meaning comes after the event. Enactment says that people shape the situation by acting in it. Social contact says that sense is built together. Ongoing events and cues say that people notice some signals and miss others. Plausibility says that a good-enough story beats a perfect one for action.

The properties explain why two teams can look at the same data and see different problems. They bring different identities, notice different cues, and talk to different people.

Plausibility over accuracy

Wikipedia's entry observes that people tend to favor plausibility over accuracy in accounts of events and contexts. That tendency is useful, because action cannot wait for certainty. It is also dangerous, because a plausible story can be wrong.

The retailer's three stories each sound plausible. The test is not which story sounds best, but which story survives checking. A leader's job is to turn competing stories into testable claims and then test them.

Treat any story as provisional. Say it aloud, name what would show it wrong, and look for that evidence on purpose.

What Mann Gulch teaches

Weick's best-known case study analyzes the 1949 Mann Gulch fire in Montana. A reprint in the United States Forest Service's human factors materials describes the death of 13 men as the interactive disintegration of role structure and sensemaking in a minimal organization. Weick asks two questions: why do organizations unravel, and how can they be made more

resilient?5

The lesson for business is not about fires. It is that sensemaking and organization depend on each other. When roles blur and people lose a shared picture of what is happening, the group can stop functioning as a group.

Later scholars have returned to the case. A paper by Robin Holt and colleagues revisits Weick's reading of the Mann Gulch events to argue that sense is also shaped by mood and by exposure to unknown possibility, and not only by retrospective assessment.6 The debate shows that the field keeps developing.

Building shared understanding

Sensemaking is a social activity, so build it socially. Start by gathering cues from many people. Ask each person what they have noticed, and invite those closest to the front line, because they often see signals that managers miss.

Next, put the current story into words. Say, for instance: our working view is that the drop comes from the slow checkout page. Naming the story lets others test it and propose alternatives.

Then act in small steps that also generate information. Weick's idea of enactment suggests that acting changes the situation and reveals more about it. A small experiment can tell you more than another hour of debate.

Finally, update openly. When new evidence arrives, revise the story and tell everyone. Teams stay aligned when the story changes in the open.

Sensemaking and decision making

Sensemaking comes before decision making. A decision assumes that you know what the choice is about. Sensemaking establishes that.

If the retailer decides which fix to fund before it understands the drop, it will pick the loudest story. If it makes sense first, the decision becomes narrower and better informed.

The two also feed each other. A decision generates new events and cues, and those start another round of sensemaking. Treat the cycle as continuous, and expect your understanding to shift as you act.

This view changes how you run meetings in uncertain times. Spend the first part on what we see and what story fits. Move to what we should do only when the story is clear enough to act on.

Fast crises and slow shifts

Sensemaking works differently depending on the pace. In a fast crisis, such as an outage or a safety event, people have minutes. Clear roles, short messages, and a single place for the current story matter most, as the Mann Gulch case suggests.

In a slow shift, such as a gradual change in customer behavior, the danger is the opposite. Nothing forces a pause, and old stories persist because daily results still look acceptable.

For slow shifts, schedule sensemaking. Hold a regular session in which the team asks what has changed, which assumptions look weaker than they did a year ago, and which weak signals it has been ignoring.

Roles and routines that help

Assign someone to track the evolving story. A short running note with the date, the current view, the evidence, and the open questions keeps the group oriented.

Rotate a challenger. Ask one person per session to argue that the current story is wrong. The role makes doubt acceptable and protects against early lock-in.

Use regular check-ins in uncertain periods. A fifteen-minute call that asks what changed since yesterday and what we now believe keeps sensemaking alive without long meetings.

Questions that prompt sensemaking

A handful of questions can start the process in any meeting. What exactly have we observed, as opposed to inferred? Who has seen something different? What story do we tell

ourselves, and what would we expect to see if it were true?

Ask also what we might be ignoring. Cues that do not fit the favored story are often the most informative, so invite the person who noticed an oddity to describe it in full before the group moves on.

A hypothetical example

Imagine the hypothetical retailer again. A new head of digital stops the three uncoordinated fixes and gathers the teams. Each describes what it sees, and a shared note lists the cues: traffic is steady, cart abandonment rose, and a competitor cut prices on two product lines. The group states a working story, that price pressure on those lines drove shoppers away, and agrees on a test.

Within two days, a limited price match on the two lines restores most of the lost sales, while the slow page turns out to be a minor factor. The story updates, and the team stops its other fixes. The retailer is invented, but the case shows how shared sensemaking turns scattered reactions into coordinated learning.

Cautions

Do not mistake a confident story for a correct one. Confidence often rises when a group repeats a story, even if the evidence is thin.

Beware of identity. People protect stories that fit their role or past decisions. Ask whether a story persists because it is true or because it is comfortable.

Finally, keep sensemaking proportionate. Not every blip needs a team-wide inquiry. Reserve the effort for surprises that could change your plans.

- 1Sensemaking
- 2Sensemaking, organizing, and surpassing: a handoff, Weick
- 3Sensemaking, SAGE Knowledge
- 4Karl E. Weick
- 5The collapse of sensemaking in organizations: the Mann Gulch disaster, U.S. Forest Service

- 6Sensemaking revisited, Copenhagen Business School

Summary

Sensemaking thinking means interpreting uncertain events by building a shared, testable understanding of what is going on. Karl Weick introduced the concept to organizational studies and framed it as a continuing effort to build believable explanations for what people are already doing. His analysis of the Mann Gulch fire shows how sensemaking and role structure can fall apart together. Leaders can strengthen it by gathering cues from many people, stating the current story aloud, testing it, and revising it as new evidence arrives. Plausibility is not accuracy, so keep stories open to challenge. At your next surprise, ask the team what they see, what story fits, and what would prove it wrong.