

Making Sense of Change: A Systematic Literature Review of Sensemaking During Organizational Change

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Abstract - *This paper presents a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) on sensemaking as a core process in supporting adaptation during organizational change. It explores two main dimensions. First, it examines how individuals adapt by making sense of change through identity work, emotional processing, social negotiation, and learning from ambiguity and resistance. Second, the paper investigates the pivotal role of leadership in guiding collective sensemaking. It details how leaders act as 'sense-givers' by communicating strategic purpose while supporting individual interpretation, using powerful tools like narrative and dialogue to shape shared understanding, and aligning their words with tangible actions to build credibility. Crucially, effective sensegiving also requires listening to employee feedback and emotional responses, thereby acknowledging the limits of top-down influence. Together, these insights offer a more nuanced understanding of how sensemaking enables adaptive responses in organizational change.*

Keywords - *Sensemaking; Organizational change; Individual adaptation; Leadership communication; Collective sensemaking*

I. INTRODUCTION

"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change." – Charles Darwin

This powerful message has never been more relevant than it is today. In a world filled with rapid changes, uncertainty, and complexity, the ability to adapt is not just a helpful skill, it is a basic requirement for survival and long-term success. This is especially true for organizations in developing markets, where economic, social, and technological shifts happen quickly and often. As these organizations face ongoing changes in both structure and culture [1], the ability to adjust and grow becomes key to staying competitive and promoting innovation.

However, change in organizations is rarely easy. It often disrupts daily routines, creates confusion, and brings emotional stress. It breaks familiar patterns of work [2] and challenges what people thought was normal or expected [3]. While many companies focus on strategies, tools, or new systems to manage change, they often forget about the human side of it. This creates a gap: people cannot fully support or carry out change unless they can understand what it means and how to respond to it. In other words, true adaptation requires more than a plan, it requires the ability to make sense of what is happening.

This paper explores that ability, known as sensemaking. Sensemaking is the process by which people try to understand new or unclear situations. It is both a personal and social activity that helps individuals and groups find meaning, reduce confusion, and take action [4] [5]. It involves building and rebuilding meaning as things change, helping people move forward even when the future is uncertain. Through sensemaking, people can better understand what is expected, what matters, and how to respond. This can support change and make it feel more manageable and acceptable [6].

The purpose of this paper is to review and summarize studies that explain how does sensemaking enables adaptation during organizational change. First, the paper explores how sensemaking helps individuals adjust their thinking, emotions, and actions when facing change. Second, it looks at the important role of leaders in guiding collective sensemaking.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Sensemaking in Organizational Change

Sensemaking is the fundamental social and cognitive process through which individuals and groups create plausible interpretations of ambiguous or novel events, particularly during organizational change [5]. It is an ongoing, interactive effort to understand "what is going on here?" [7]. Driven by plausibility

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rather than objective accuracy, sensemaking is deeply linked to identity, as individuals interpret events through the lens of who they are [2], [8].

Leaders attempt to guide this process through sensegiving, the deliberate use of communication to influence others' understanding toward a preferred reality [3]. This is not a linear transmission of meaning but an iterative cycle. Leaders provide sensegiving cues, but employees actively interpret, filter, and sometimes contest these messages, creating their own understanding. This employee sensemaking, in turn, provides feedback that shapes subsequent leadership actions, making change a "reflexive" and "multivocal process" of co-creating meaning [9].

B. Sensemaking and Individual Adaptation During Change

During organizational transitions, individuals use sensemaking to adapt cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally. This process is profoundly filtered through an individual's identity and emotional state. Change can threaten employees' work identities, prompting them to engage in "identity work" by crafting narratives that reconcile the new reality with their sense of self. Hay et al. [2] identified four distinct narrative trajectories—Identity Loss, Revision, Affirmation, and Resilience—each defined by how the change impacted employees' core work identities. Similarly, an individual's career identity, whether proactive or passive, shapes their response, determining if they become "champions" or "doubters" of the change [10].

Emotions are integral to this adaptive process. While feelings of fear and anger can lead to resistance and paralysis, other emotions can facilitate progress. Dwyer et al. [7] found that different forms of anxiety (cosmological, representational, and practical) actually prompted further sensemaking by creating a powerful need to restore meaning. This emotional processing allows individuals to navigate uncertainty and move toward a state of readiness [11]. Through this cognitive and emotional work, individuals dynamically shift their roles in the change process, moving between stances such as a Loyal Rebel and a Redeemed Recipient as they make sense of their evolving circumstances [12].

C. Leadership Communication and Collective Sensemaking

While individual adaptation is crucial, sustainable change requires a degree of shared understanding. Leaders, as primary sense-givers, are instrumental in fostering this collective meaning through skillful communication. They use framing and narratives to shape a common interpretation of the change. Metaphors, such as framing a change as a "must-win battle," create urgency, while storytelling builds a shared cultural narrative that employees can adapt to their local contexts [13].

The effectiveness of this communication depends on creating a supportive environment for dialogue. Structured discourse opportunities, such as the regular, orchestrated meetings described by Day et al. [14], provide a "stable and routine-based platform for sensemaking" that encourages parity and mutual direction [5]. This is reinforced by substantive and symbolic actions. Substantive actions, like modifying organizational structures, make the change tangible, while symbolic actions, like a leader's continued engagement, signal that sensemaking is a valued practice [3][5]. Without this sustained, multimodal engagement, ambiguity prevails, and employees are left to construct their own, potentially conflicting, meanings [6].

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to explore how sensemaking supports adaptation during organizational change, with particular attention to individual and leadership-level processes. This method identifies consistent patterns across contexts, offering a robust, evidence-based view of sensemaking as a core mechanism in organizational change. To ensure a focused and rigorous review, a structured literature search was conducted on June 21, 2025, using the Scopus database. The following search string was applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords: "sensemaking" OR "sense making" OR "sense making" OR "making sense" OR "make sense" AND "strategic change" OR "planned change" OR "organizational change"

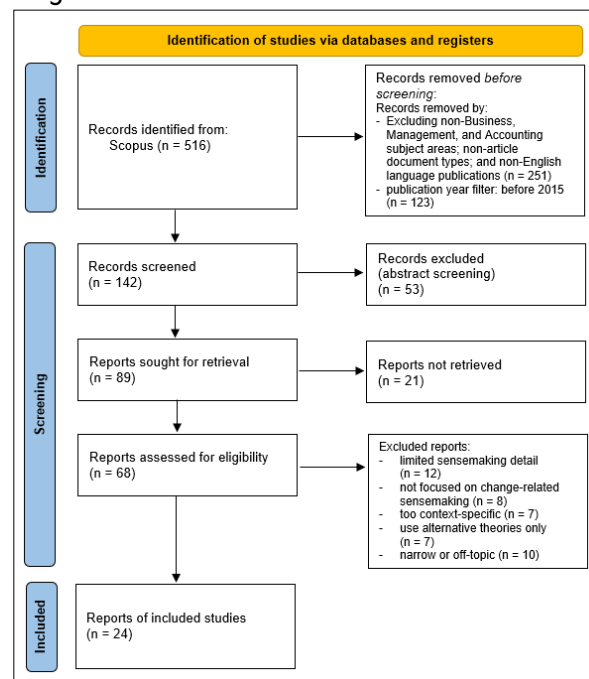


Fig 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of the Article Selection Process

This search strategy was designed to capture studies that examine the process of sensemaking in the context of strategic or planned organizational change. To enhance transparency and replicability, the study follows the PRISMA 2020 guidelines for article selection. The full screening and inclusion process is illustrated in Figure 1, which shows the flow of identified, screened, and selected articles.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This review finds that individual adaptation to organizational change is shaped by sensemaking as an ongoing cognitive, emotional, and social process. Employees interpret change through the lens of their work identity, emotional responses, and interactions with others. Identity acts as a core filter, when threatened, individuals engage in identity work to maintain a sense of coherence. Emotions like fear or hope trigger different paths of action, while conversations with peers help negotiate roles and shared meaning. Through these processes, individuals navigate uncertainty and gradually reconstruct their place within a changing organization.

At the group level, leadership communication plays a key role in shaping collective sensemaking. Leaders influence how employees interpret change by using framing, stories, dialogue, and visible actions. Communication serves both practical and symbolic purposes: it helps convey strategic intent and gives employees tools to make sense on their own terms. However, its effectiveness depends on how well it resonates with employees' identities, values, and emotional states. Sensemaking is not top-down, employees actively interpret and sometimes reshape leadership messages. Change succeeds when leaders create space for dialogue and co-construction of meaning, rather than merely delivering messages.

A. The Influence of Sensemaking on Individual Adaptation During Organizational Change

Organizational change, by its nature, introduces ambiguity and disrupts established routines, compelling individuals to actively interpret and navigate their new reality. Central to this process of individual adaptation is sensemaking, the social and cognitive mechanism through which people give meaning to novel or confusing events [4], [15].

Recent studies show that sensemaking is a flexible, multifaceted process that shapes adaptation in several interrelated ways. It helps individuals reinterpret their identities, manage emotions like anxiety or hope, and negotiate meaning and roles through social interaction. It also enables people to reframe resistance and ambiguity as opportunities for learning and growth.

Through these functions, sensemaking becomes a key mechanism for navigating organizational change.

A.1. Identity Work in Sensemaking and Adaptation

People often understand organizational change through the lens of their work identity. Adapting to change is not just about learning new tasks but about preserving or reshaping one's role and self-image within the organization. An individual's identity, based on role, profession, or career goals, shapes how they interpret change. For example, employees described a failed change as a loss, a challenge, or an opportunity, depending on which part of their identity felt most affected [2].

Employees with strong internal values tend to support change, while those reliant on external validation may resist [10]. When a new sustainability program was introduced, those identified with profit-driven roles ignored the message, showing that alignment with personal values affects openness to change [16].

Change can also threaten identity. During the 2020 health crisis, some employees labeled as non-essential experienced stress and uncertainty about their worth [17]. Similarly, in a shift to self-managed structures, employees questioned not just responsibilities but also their place in the new system [1].

In response, individuals engage in identity work—adapting, redefining, or reinforcing who they are. Some lost a sense of self, others redefined it, and some adapted while staying authentic [2]. Role changes also led to role expansion, adjustment, or complete transformation [16].

Together, these studies show that identity is not a side issue in change. It is at the center of how people understand what is happening and decide how to respond. When individuals can make sense of their role and value in the middle of change, they are more likely to adapt in ways that are healthy, productive, and lasting.

A.2. Emotional Processing in the Face of Change

Adaptation is not purely rational, it is deeply emotional. Emotions like fear, sadness, and anxiety can either hinder or drive sensemaking. For instance, emergency managers faced emotional paralysis after a major fire, while others used anxiety to reflect and find solutions [7].

Emotions are also used in communication to help others understand change. Middle managers often use emotionally rich stories when they talk to employees about change. These stories can reduce fear, build hope, and create a shared sense of purpose. In this way, sensemaking becomes a tool not just for understanding change, but for helping others feel more ready to accept it [11]. Similarly, leaders need to respond to employees' changing emotional needs at different

points in the change journey. For example, early on they may need to provide comfort, later they may offer direction, and eventually they may help people find balance as the change becomes real [18].

Other studies show that emotions can shape whether people support or resist change. In research on organizations that were both partners and competitors, middle managers often felt frustration and doubt. These emotions led them to question whether the change was worth it, which slowed down progress. However, these same emotions also pushed some managers to seek clarity, discuss their concerns, and ultimately help shape a better outcome. This shows that emotional responses are not only challenges to be managed. They can also be powerful sources of motivation for deeper engagement and thoughtful action [19].

A.3. The Social Negotiation of Roles and Meaning

Sensemaking is not something people do entirely on their own. It is also a social activity [15]. People make sense of change together, especially when formal roles or responsibilities become unclear. In these situations, people look to each other to understand what is expected and how to move forward.

In a healthcare setting, employees collectively redefined their roles in response to limited guidance, which enabled them to take action but occasionally conflicted with top-down expectations [6]. Similarly, in another study, individuals actively shaped their role identity through stories, framing themselves as loyal resisters or adaptive learners, to navigate the broader change process. These narratives helped them balance alignment with organizational change and the need to maintain personal agency [20].

At a group level, sensemaking also helps teams build a shared understanding of what change means. Collective dialogue helped faculty adapt to change in a university setting [21]. At the senior level, leadership teams acted as small groups that created their own shared stories about change. These shared stories helped them connect the big picture from headquarters with the daily reality of their teams. As both change agents and recipients, they played a key role in helping others adapt to change [22]. These examples show that sensemaking is both social and adaptive, building shared meaning to guide action.

A.4. Learning Through Ambiguity and Resistance

Organizational change often brings uncertainty and confusion. In these moments, sensemaking helps people turn that confusion into learning. Rather than simply reacting to what is unclear, individuals and groups use sensemaking to ask questions, reflect, and explore new ways of thinking and working.

Some researchers argue that resistance to change should not always be seen as a bad thing. Employees

who push back against change can actually help leaders notice problems or misunderstandings. When leaders use these moments as opportunities for deeper reflection, they can design better ways to communicate and involve others. In this view, resistance is a helpful signal that more sensemaking is needed. When handled constructively, it becomes a pathway to learning and better decisions [23]. Supporting this idea, research on digital transformation showed that employees responded differently depending on whether they focused on broad strategic goals or on the specific impact on their day-to-day experiences. People moved between these levels of understanding, and this dynamic process played a key role in helping them interpret and learn from change [12].

In many cases, change requires people to learn not just new tasks but new ways of thinking. This kind of learning depends on having space to ask questions, test ideas, and revise old beliefs. Sensemaking provides that space. It helps people organize their thoughts, connect them with others, and gradually build a clearer picture of what the change means. Over time, this supports more flexible thinking, stronger engagement, and a greater ability to deal with future changes.

B. Leadership Communication and Collective Meaning-Making

Leadership in organizational change is fundamentally about managing meaning. Rather than relying solely on technical plans, successful change depends on leaders' ability to shape shared understanding and commitment. This occurs through sensemaking and sensegiving, where communication constructs new organizational realities.

Recent studies emphasize key roles of leadership communication. It conveys strategic intent while enabling local interpretation, uses framing and storytelling to shape emotional engagement, and fosters structured dialogue to co-create meaning and maintain alignment. Leaders must also support narratives with visible actions to make change tangible. Ultimately, the impact of communication depends on how employees interpret and respond to it, highlighting the interactive nature of sensemaking. These dynamics show how leadership communication drives collective adaptation during change.

B.1. Communicating Purpose and Supporting Personal Interpretation

Leadership communication plays two important roles during change. First, it shares the bigger picture or strategic purpose behind the change. Second, it provides a structure that helps others make sense of the change in ways that are meaningful for their own work. For example, in a global company, leaders used phrases like "must win battle" to build urgency, which

middle managers then adapted to fit their local contexts [13].

Similarly, in the Swedish police, managers facilitated open dialogue, encouraging staff to contribute their own perspectives and stories, resulting in a richer, more grounded understanding of change [9]. Rather than delivering one fixed message, leaders acted as facilitators who made it easier for others to explore and define meaning together

B.2. Using Stories, Frames, and Dialogue to Shape Understanding

Leaders guide collective sensemaking through framing, storytelling, and continuous dialogue. Framing helps shift perspectives, for example, viewing deadlines not as pressure but as opportunities for growth [5]. Stories are especially powerful in shaping how people understand progress and outcomes. Leaders often build “narratives of success” to maintain energy and focus, especially when change feels uncertain [24]. These stories are built and adjusted throughout the change journey, not just told at the end. To be effective, they must connect to what people already care about. This means drawing on the organization's past, its values, and the lived experiences of its members [8].

However, communication tools like stories or frames are only effective if there is room for ongoing conversation. Research shows that formal and regular discussions between leaders and middle managers are vital for building shared meaning. These conversations help people align their understanding, raise concerns, and re-plan together as the change unfolds [25]. Without these conversations, people may create their own understanding that does not match the intended goals [6].

B.3. Aligning Words with Action to Make Change Visible

Communication gains credibility when supported by visible actions. Change became more believable when leaders promoted new team leaders and redefined roles, helping staff understand what the change meant in practice [3].

Even simple tools like templates or progress reports can support sensemaking. Although some staff may resist these tools at first, they often become useful for organizing thoughts and building shared understanding [21]. Symbols also matter. Naming a group as a “pilot team” or creating a new title like “transition lead” signals commitment and builds a story around the change [26]. These visible signs reinforce the message that the change is real and supported from the top.

B.4. Listening to the Response and Knowing the Limits

Sensemaking is shaped by how individuals filter messages through their roles, values, and emotions. Leaders must connect change to what matters to their

audience. For example, helping financially driven employees see the relevance of sustainability goals [16]. In such cases, leaders need to go beyond sending messages and instead support staff in redefining their roles.

Emotions also shape how people make sense of change. Leaders can support adaptation by helping others move from fear or confusion toward confidence and readiness. In early stages, people may need reassurance. Later, they may need more involvement or clear guidance [18]. Stories can help here too, especially when they include positive emotions and a hopeful outlook [11].

Importantly, employee resistance should not be seen as a problem to eliminate. It is often a sign that people are struggling to make sense of the change. If leaders pay attention to resistance, they can learn from it and improve how they guide the change process [23].

V. CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review set out to answer the question: How does sensemaking enable adaptation during organizational change? The synthesis of 24 peer-reviewed studies provides a two-level answer.

At the individual level, employees adapt by engaging in identity work, managing emotional responses, negotiating roles and meaning with others, and reframing ambiguity and resistance as opportunities for learning. These processes allow individuals to reconstruct a coherent self-concept and maintain work continuity even when change disrupts established norms.

At the leadership level, change succeeds when leaders act as sense-givers who go beyond broadcasting a vision. Effective leaders use framing, storytelling, dialogue, and visible actions to co-create meaning, while listening to and learning from employee responses, including resistance. This reciprocal sensemaking builds alignment between organizational direction and employee values, ensuring that change is sustained both strategically and culturally.

By explicitly connecting sensemaking processes to the dynamics of change, this review highlights that successful organizational change is not a one-way, top-down process. Instead, it is an iterative, participatory journey in which meaning is negotiated, adapted, and enacted over time.

Implications for Practice:

- Embed sensemaking early: Begin change initiatives with structured opportunities for employees to interpret changes, voice concerns, and align personal meaning with organizational goals.
- Train leaders in sensegiving: Equip managers

with skills in framing, storytelling, and emotional intelligence to guide collective interpretation.

- Use resistance as a diagnostic tool: Treat resistance not as a barrier, but as feedback that reveals misalignments in understanding or values.
- Align symbolic and substantive actions: Reinforce change messages with visible structural or role changes that make the new reality tangible.

Implications for Research

- Investigate how sensemaking unfolds over the full life cycle of change, from initiation to post-implementation.
- Explore the role of digital communication tools in enabling distributed sensemaking during change.
- Compare sensemaking dynamics across different cultural and market contexts to identify universal vs. context-specific patterns.

Future studies could also examine the interplay between sensemaking and other change enablers such as dynamic capabilities, organizational learning, and co-innovation, especially in fast-changing environments.

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