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Trust and continuous sensemaking: Case study on internal dynamics in an industrial company

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Disclaimer: *This case has been written solely as the basis for class discussion, for educational and development purposes and is not intended to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation or to represent successful or unsuccessful managerial decision-making or endorse the views of management. Some of the names, events, financial and other information have been disguised or camouflaged to protect identity and to maintain confidentiality.*

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how sense is made in an organization with regard to the future of a company. The study presents a case study of sensemaking in dialogue between the top management, middle management and shop stewards in a company preparing for international growth after global financial crisis. By using a sensemaking framework, the study examines the discourse of trust and shows how different organizational groups participate in creating, shaping, and sustaining the organization and its future. The study contributes to sensemaking literature in organization studies, first, by viewing organization as a socially constructed verbal system and showing how sensemaking is created through language. The study shows how sensemaking is a continuous process in the organizational dialogue. As a second contribution, this study shows how sensemaking analysis can be used to unravel the narratives that legitimize different organizational identities and surface the politics of sensemaking.

Keywords: Sensemaking, trust, qualitative analysis, case study

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine how sense is made in an organization with regard to the future of a company after turbulent times in the market. The sensemaking literature is interested in how individuals and organizations give meaning to events (Mills et al., 2010; Weick, 1995). Organizations are viewed as socially constructed realities where ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ are continuously negotiated through meaning making (Weick, 1995). The underlying assumption is that change and organizational transformation arise from the sense that people make of the situation and the way by which people account for their experiences related to the situation.

In the sensemaking approach, organizations are seen as dialogical systems where individual, group, and organizational action is created and sustained by narratives and conversations through which people make meaning to their experiences (Bushe and Marshak, 2014). This study presents a case study of sensemaking in dialogue between the top management, middle management and shop stewards in a company producing durable consumer goods. At the time of the study, the organization was recovering from the global financial crisis and preparing for a new era of international growth. The future growth was expected to come from the international markets. One production facility has already been established in another country and the company was doing an investment research for finding a suitable location for another production facility abroad. The interest in this study lies in how three different groups make sense of the unfolding situation and seek to create a plausible narrative for what is going on.

Data was collected with interviews. In the analysis, trust emerged as a key topic of discussion and qualitative content analysis was focused on depicting how each group talked about trust.

Examining the discourse on trust and using the sensemaking framework, the case shows how different groups of organizational actors participate in creating, shaping, and sustaining the organization. The results of the empirical study highlight the importance of understanding the continuous construction and preservation of identity. The study shows how sensemaking supports each parties' legitimacy and identity claims. Furthermore, the study shows how sub-cultures in an organization shape the sensemaking of the different groups and how the relational context, that is the power relations between the different groups, is integral in sensemaking.

The study departs the mainstream use of sensemaking and examines sensemaking as an on-going activity instead of studying it after a particular disruptive incident (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2014). The study joins research which discusses organizations as socially constructed systems which are characterized by simultaneous and overlapping narratives that are negotiated and contested through sensemaking (Currie and Brown, 2003; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Parkkinen et al., 2015; Lehtimäki et al., 2013, 2014). Thus, the focus is more on the social construction of meaning instead of the cognitive processes of the individuals engaged in sensemaking.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, the concept of trust will be briefly discussed and then the sensemaking framework will be presented. After introducing the qualitative research methodology used in this study, the results of the content analysis on talk about trust will be presented. At the end of the results section, the findings from the sensemaking analysis will be presented. At the end of the paper, key contribution to the sensemaking literature will be discussed.

Theoretical background

Trust and distrust in relationships

Trust is a multifaceted phenomenon. It can be described as a positive expectation that people will act fairly and justly towards others and will not take the benefit of one's weakness and reliance (Das and Teng, 1998; Lewis and Weigert, 1985). Typically, trust grows when people obey the same norms, ideas and values (Fukuyama, 1995). Trust helps in creating positive and fruitful relationships (Lewicki & Brinsfield, 2012). Moreover, trust reduces tension in relationships and helps to achieve shared targets (Svendsen, 1998). However, trust is not only a positive or productive phenomenon. Certain amount of distrust can be practical, because trust always includes a chance that somebody will not act in benevolence towards others, but rather misuse the trust in a relationship. Distrust may be a rational choice as it helps in reducing a risk for the feared negative consequence. Therefore, in particular contexts, a degree of distrust may cause the benefits of saving time and resources. Recently, researchers have also paid attention to distrust as an aspect of trust (Lewicki and Brinsfield, 2009). Distrust can be defined as an expectation that people will not respond with a kind and benevolent manner, but react with mean and unkind ways and/or neglect shared norms and values (Connelly et al., 2012). Lewicki et al. (1998) argue that in organizations operating in the global market both trust and distrust need to be managed.

Positive and negative trust

Instead of seeing trust and distrust as the opposites of each other, it is understood that trust and distrust coexist in organizations and in relationships (Govier, 1994; Kujala et al., 2015;

Lewicki et al., 1998). Human beings have diverse and controversial feelings and emotions related to events, other people, or future aspirations. Lewicki et al. (1998) argued that positive and negative attitudes are independent but intertwined, and they can be experienced at the same time, 'given different experiences within the various facets of complex interpersonal relationships.'

As trust and distrust are connected with emotions and expectations towards others, their intensity and strength can vary from low to high (Kujala et al., 2015). High trust comprises confidence, hope, faith, initiative, and assurance, whereas, low trust includes no confidence, no hope, no faith, hesitance, and passivity (Lewicki and Brinsfield, 2009). High distrust contains scepticism, cynicism, fear, wariness, watchfulness, and vigilance, while low distrust includes absence of scepticism, absence of cynicism, no fear, low monitoring, and non-vigilance. Distrust is shown in pessimistic and fearful intentions and expectations, negative expectations, and lack of confidence, while trust is grounded in optimism, confidence, hope, and positive intentions and expectations (Lewicki and Brinsfield, 2012). Lewicki and Brinsfield (2012) claim that low trust and low distrust relations are neutral and unbiased, while low trust and high distrust relations are watchful and doubtful. Furthermore, high trust and low distrust relations are confident and productive, and high trust and high distrust relations are contradictory and uncertain.

Sensemaking in organizations

Sensemaking is a social and retrospective practice through which members of an organization give meaning to what is going on in the organization (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2014). The central theme in sensemaking is that 'people organize to make sense of equivocal inputs and

enact this sense back into the world to make that world more orderly' (Weick et al., 2005).

The framework is particularly powerful in viewing organizations as an evolutionary process of organizing, where members of an organization join through interpretation, meaning making, and conversation (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2014).

Weick (1995) identified seven socio-psychological properties that provide a way of understanding how individuals make sense of the complicated organizational settings they do their daily work. According to these properties, sensemaking is, first, grounded in identity construction. This means that individuals make sense by constantly redefining their identity in relation to the interpretations of the environment and to the ways they act in the environment. Experiences and contacts with each other continuously redefine our identities as through sensemaking we seek clues to define who we are as individuals. Second, sensemaking is retrospective, as we rely on past experiences to interpret the meaning of current events. Past experiences guide interpretation of what information to consider as important and what to omit. Third, sensemaking is enactive of the environment, which means that individuals extract cues from the environment rather selectively and easily ignore cues that challenge the credibility of the individual's sensemaking. Fourth, sensemaking is social in that it is contingent with interaction with others and also closely influenced by rules, norms, routines and symbols. Fifth, sensemaking is continuous and sequential which means that even though sensemaking can most easily be studied in situations that challenge the routine or the normal, sensemaking is constant. Sixth, in sensemaking, cues, signs, and signals help people to decide what information is important and expand this information into acceptable explanations. Not all cues are given equal importance, instead, some cues are considered as important while others are completely ignored. Finally, sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than

accuracy, as we tend to rely on cues that make our sensemaking seem acceptable rather than accurate perceptions of the environment and events.

Mills et al. (2010) refined the sensemaking framework by adding two properties to it, namely those of power and context. This is what they call a critical sensemaking framework. They highlight the importance of paying attention to the discursive power effects, particularly in interpreting the cues and in identity construction. Also, they highlight the importance of understanding the formative context of sensemaking. Maitlis et al. (2013), in turn, emphasise the importance of taking into account the role of emotion in sensemaking. Emotion may trigger sensemaking and it may have a significant impact on the sensemaking process.

Methodology

This study joins the linguistic turn in management studies. Organizational activity is seen as a phenomenon in and of language (Boje et al., 2004) and organizations are treated as socially constructed systems where simultaneous and overlapping narratives are negotiated and contested through sensemaking (Currie and Brown, 2003; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Thus, the focus is on the social construction of meaning instead of the cognitive processes of the individuals engaged in sensemaking.

To get information about the phenomenon under scrutiny, a single case study was conducted (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008; Yin 2003). The aim in the study was to choose a case that is likely to replicate or extend the idea of how organizational actors join in shaping the organization. Qualitative methods were chosen for data collection and analysis to understand the research phenomenon more holistically and to gain in-depth information from the real-life

events and practices (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) recommend qualitative methods when researchers aim at capturing an individual's own experiences and point of view, and wish to secure rich descriptions of the social world explored.

Data were collected with focus groups, thematic interviews of individual informants, and ethnographic field research (Ragin and Becker, 1992; Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008).

The primary data consist of 15 interviews with 26 persons. The middle management at the factory of the case company was interviewed in five focus groups. A total of 16 persons participated in the focus groups. Two groups met twice and one group only once. In the first meeting, the past and current situation at the factory was discussed, and in the second meeting the future prospects and goals were discussed. In addition, six shop stewards and four top managers were interviewed individually. All interviews were transcribed and they resulted in close to 280 pages of text.

The Case

The case company supplies innovative durable goods. The focus is on customer needs in special markets and in the areas with particular challenges on product performance. The product development is consistently working on sustainable solutions for safety and the environment while embracing the whole life cycle of the product. At the time of conducting the case study in 2010, the company had around 3,500 employees and net sales of approximately Euro 1,000 million.

The case company was established already in the early 1900s. The organizational culture has varied considerably during the long history of the company subsequent to the common management trends, the overall economic situation, and the company's financial success. Until 1985, a paternalistic culture existed with authoritarian leadership and a tayloristic management view; superiors were respected based on their position. Restructuring, adjustment, and cost control were the management focus during 1986–1988. After that, the attention shifted to management development and change in leadership culture for a couple of years. Years 1991–1992 represented an era of stagnation when the organization was developed with a lot of small group activity. In 1993–1995, the business was flourishing, openness and flow of information characterised the culture and teamwork practices were established. From 1996–2008, the attention was in developing intellectual capital and competence improvement. The global financial crisis in 2008 made the company concentrate on restructuring and adjustment, which brought back the authoritarian and tayloristic culture. (Kujala et al., 2011.) In terms of competence and well-being development, 2009 was a challenging and exceptional year in the company history. After the streamlining in the first half of the Year 2009, support was offered to personnel by providing information packages, in briefings, discussions, crisis counselling, and other training sessions. In the spring of 2010, the atmosphere was dense due to the significant savings and layoffs that had taken place over the two previous years. After a long history of growth, the adjustment was rapid and drastic and influenced the whole organization.

Findings

Trust and distrust

Trust was regarded as a very important issue by all interviewees although they also expressed that distrust within the organization existed, especially between the middle management and shop stewards at the factory. This led the authors to focus their analysis on examining how the different organizational sub-groups talked about trust (see also Kujala et al., 2015). They followed the suggestion by Lewicki et al. (2006) and paid attention to the positive and negative aspects of trust expressed by the top management, middle management, and shop stewards.

All interviewed people expressed pride in the long history of the company and saw the products as high quality, innovative, and the best in the market. In addition, everyone agreed that a strong emphasis on setting the targets high and achieving them, productivity, and making good results prevailed in the organization. The technological know-how and ability to improve the products year after year were seen as a source of pride. While there was a consensus on a top-down management driven decision-making culture, the managerial culture was described by all as ‘a culture of surprises’. Middle managers and shop stewards thought that they were not getting enough information and they talked about tensions, wariness, distrust, uneasy feelings, and concealed hostility in relationships. More personal interaction and sharing practices within and across different units, and well documented processes in management were called for.

Overall, the top management showed both positive and negative expectations towards trust and they also expressed both trust and distrust in their interviews. The top management strongly emphasised the importance of trust in general and especially in organizational change. In general, the top management was very optimistic towards the future, and depicted the forthcoming recovery and growth of business with confidence. While being positive and optimistic overall, the top management acknowledged that some distrust between management and employees exists and they understood the need for consistency in the leadership work voiced by the middle management. The top management saw that the middle management was worried about being dismissed and overridden by the top management in communication and decision-making.

Moreover, the top management expressed that relationships between the middle management and shop stewards were characterised by distrust. They perceived that the shop stewards had no trust towards the top management and were aware of the shop stewards' beliefs that the top management was lying or giving wrong information on purpose. The top management described these issues as follows:

'I have told them these pains openly and, well, explained what their role is, what their responsibility in taking care of things is [...] and, well, I have then promised to stand by them, if there is any problem, so that there is no need to be afraid that they will be overridden by somebody from upstairs over there.'

'So they felt that they have been taken away what it takes to lead and, well, it was like a big problem, and then it led to the situation that the shop stewards walked over them in everything so that even in everyday management work, when a small issue of conflict arose, which was supposed to be dealt by the line

organization there, and it tried to make the decision, they [shop stewards] announced that, well, they will go upstairs.'

Finally, the top management depicted the future as uncertain when looking at it from the employees' point of view as illustrated by the following extract:

'Well, this gang at the floor level, they have grown impatient with this situation. They are under temporary lay-offs for the second year and they are like loosely in gallows all the time, that's what is happening. Supervisors don't dare to do anything, if they do they will be shot down, or they are afraid that they will be shot, like illustratively.'

The expectations of the middle management were somewhat ambiguous. On the positive side, they too emphasised the importance of trust and had positive expectations towards the future. However, at the same time, the atmosphere among the middle management was characterised by lack of openness, a desire for more communication, and by personalised trust. This referred to the idea that the trustworthy people were mentioned by name to identify those to be trusted, while the general atmosphere was characterised by distrust. However, while the middle management acknowledged the preceding difficulties, they had positive expectations toward the future, and thought that the difficult times would soon be over. Moreover, the middle management strongly emphasised the importance of the relationship with their own supervisor as demonstrated in the following quotations:

'I, at least, give the full credit to our supervisor, that he is so tough [...] that he wants to give us the power and responsibility, that the supervisor would do what a supervisor is supposed to do, so that really to decide people's affairs and help them'

‘So to be a supervisor of the people, it is to be, like, [...] trustworthy and able to give solutions to people and take things forward.’

The middle management voiced a shortage of openness and a longing for more communication in the organization. Furthermore, the middle management expressed that the employees did not have trust on the middle management, rather, the employees saw them as representatives of the ‘bad’ employer, as illustrated in the following excerpt from the middle management interviews:

‘Surely there are those individuals who feel that we act as intermediaries of evil [...] it does not necessarily become personalised to anybody, but it is like this, company is wicked.’

‘And the basic worldview is that the employer is mean [...] and wants to humiliate the employees this way.’

The middle managers also expressed that they had difficulties in co-operation with colleagues and described that colleagues in the middle management were ‘digging foxholes’ and ‘watching one’s own back’. These elements can be seen as examples of distrust towards the referents at the same subculture level. Thus, while the middle management expressed distrust in the issues related to atmosphere and relations with others, they showed trust in leadership work and positive expectations towards the future.

While the shop stewards showed mostly negative expectations, they had some positive views, too. They pointed out the role of trust in reaching the organizational goals. Shop stewards also voiced personalised trust by expressing trust towards certain managers that were mentioned by name. Other shop stewards were trusted, too.

As negative expectations, the shop stewards presented a lot of criticism towards the top management for lack of courage to talk about difficult issues. Distrust was expressed mainly towards the top management who were believed to hide and cover the truth, and even lying and giving intentionally incorrect information. Moreover, the shop stewards expressed that there was a lot of tension between employees and middle management, between employees and top management, and between employees and the Human Resource (HR) department as shown in the following quotations from shop stewards:

'But you can also see from the upper clerical workers that they are frustrated with this management style and this culture that prevails here nowadays. They, workers, are as frightened as us, if not even more frightened than us. So that reflects the whole palette.'

'So in a way, the supervisor, or the manager and HR have not been discussing with each other.'

The shop stewards saw the future as miserable and they were afraid of the closedown of the operations, and the atmosphere was characterised mostly by distrust as the following extract from interviews shows:

'Distressed. I can't say that it is even frightening anymore. Maybe it was some time ago. Now it is frustrated, and people are puzzled.'

To sum, the power games and tensions between the different sub-groups and units, as well as feelings of uncertainty and insecurity characterised the organizational culture at the factory. However, the atmosphere varied among different parts of the organization. While some focused on internal micro-politics, others were already looking for growth prospects. The

shop stewards, in particular, voiced a view of the future as gloomy with no signs of recovery. Fear for the future directed the attention to internal matters rather than the business and external relationships. Both the top and middle management had a positive and optimistic view and they had trust for the future of the company. Middle management also expressed a desire to build positive working atmosphere and gain broader support for it.

Sensemaking

Seven sensemaking properties (Weick, 1995) were identified in the data. In addition, emotions and power were brought into the analysis as the aspects of sensemaking (Table 1). First, identity construction in sensemaking took various forms. The way by which top management concentrates on discussing the big picture and the future of the company allows for distancing oneself from the day-to-day events and relationships, and adopting a bird's eye view to the organization and its future. The middle management, in turn, interprets their position in relation to both the top management and the employees. When talking about the events in the organization and the future visions, the middle managers reflect on the views of not only the top management but also the peers in middle management and the shop floor supervisors and workers, on the other hand. Middle managers see themselves as interpreting different views and they express empathy and understanding towards both views. The shop stewards, in turn, construct their position as voices for the shop floor workers, who become constructed as powerless and those who suffer the consequences of top management decision making. This legitimises the identity of shop stewards as fighters for the justice and advocates of rights for the blue-collar and white-collar workers.

Table 1. Sensemaking properties on talk about trust.

Sensemaking property	Top managers	Middle Managers	Shop Stewards
Identity construction	Strategic visionaries, not engaged in day-to-day struggles	Interpreters of different views in the organization	Fighters for justice for workers
Retrospective	Make notice of the past events, but focus on future	Makes effort to point out instances of trust while acknowledging tension and distrust	Emphasize events of trust breaking
Enactive of the environment	Acknowledge fear among middle management	Expectations of openness and expression of trust from their supervisors	Elaborate on distrust and fear
Social	Managerial and strategic outlook	Express low trust among peers and difficulties in cooperation with colleagues, digging foxholes, watching own back	Identify with workers, voicing the belief that top management lies, gives wrong information, hides or covers the truth on purpose
Continuous	Focus on the present and the future	Emphasis on the on-going day-to-day events	Examples supporting the story spanning the company history over decades
Cues, signs, symbols	Financial figures, market information	Experiences, meetings with supervisors	Incidents and experiences of distrust in the past, strategic decisions that will lead to closing down the factory
Plausibility	Strategic business focus on the operations	Day-to-day management perspective on the operations	Emphasis on the negative incidents
Emotions	Calm, proficiency	Empathy, fear, stress	Frustration, anger
Power	Recognise micro-politics	Talk about the continuous negative rumours being spread in the organization	Blame and detest the top management

Source: Compiled by the Authors.

Second, both the middle management and the shop stewards, in particular, draw heavily on the past experiences when making an argument about what is happening in the organization and where the organization is headed. They give examples of what has happened in the past, and what they and the employees of the organization have felt at the face of these events. The shop stewards emphasise the negative events in the past and highlight experiences of trust breaking. The middle management seeks to find instances of trust while acknowledging the tensions in the relationships in the organization. The top management makes a notice of past experiences in the organization, but makes a point of not getting caught in these events and shifts the focus on the future with new possibilities.

Third, the way each group makes sense enactive of the environment is visible in the ways by which they talk about the atmosphere and the organizational work. All groups focus on the relationships in organization. The top management recognises that there is fear among middle management and distrust in the relationships between employees and management. The middle management talks about the importance of building trust in the relationships and they also expect the expressions of openness and trust from their own supervisors. The shop stewards elaborate on the distrust towards the top management, the misbehaviour of middle management, and the lack of trust in relationships, in general, in the organization.

The way sensemaking is social, the fourth aspect of sensemaking, is observable particularly in the talk of the shop stewards and middle management. Both groups make a strong reference to their peers. The shop stewards identify with the employees and construct a critical voice for the employees. The middle management talks about their peers and recognises the tension and distrust between each other. The sixth aspect, continuity in sensemaking is not observable as such in one time interview data but the temporal aspect of sensemaking is visible in the way

each group refers to the events in the past and in the future. Top management talks mostly about the future prospect and the current market situation of the company. Middle managers talk and ponder about the day-to-day operations and the shop stewards draw on experiences spanning over several decades to make a case for the misbehaviour of top and middle management. The use of cues, the seventh aspect of sensemaking, differs between the groups. Top management draws on financial data and market information in arguing for the potential of the growth of the business in the future. Middle management and shop stewards talk about experiences and incidents to explain their view points.

The emotional aspect in sensemaking is visible in the verbal and physical expressions of each group during the interviews. Top managers acted calmly and expressed proficiency in discussing the topics in the interviews. The middle management talked about empathy both towards the workers and the top management. They also talked about stress and expressed fear with regard to discussing issues they felt as delicate. The shop stewards talked about frustration and anger and they also behaved unreceptive and unfriendly towards the interviewers.

Finally, all groups identify rumours and micro-politics in the organization. The top management talk about these by merely recognising their existence. The middle management talks about how rumours and micro-politics are part of the sensemaking among the employees and peers that they need to address. The shop stewards highlight the tensions the rumours create and blame the top management for lack of openness in sharing information for the existence of rumours and micro-politics.

Conclusions

The study shows how three groups of actors, top management, middle management and shop stewards join in narrating the organization through sensemaking. Using the sensemaking framework, the case shows how different groups of organizational actors participate in creating, shaping, and sustaining the organizational culture. The sensemaking framework allows for showing how different organizational groups contribute to creating, shaping, and sustaining the current and the forthcoming.

The study contributes to sensemaking literature in organization studies, first, by viewing organization as a socially constructed verbal system where sensemaking is used to create multiple, simultaneous and sequential narratives that interweave (Currie and Brown, 2003). The study examines how sensemaking is created through language, in this case organization, through discourse on trust, in particular. In this study, the seven properties of sensemaking introduced by Weick (1995) were added with the properties of emotion (Maitlis et al., 2013) and power (Mills et al., 2010).

Second, this study contributes to sensemaking literature in organizational studies by presenting an empirical case of continuous sensemaking (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2014). The study shows how sensemaking analysis can be used to unravel narratives, which legitimizes the identities of the different organizational groups and to surface the politics of sensemaking. Each group creates a coherent narrative which enables enacting the desired identity for the particular group and allows for establishing the particular power position. The results of the study show that top management does this by distancing themselves from the day to day operations and keeping the focus on cues related to business targets. Shop stewards highlight

the negative incidents in the past and draw on stories of bad management. The dual identity of the middle management is visible in the both-and sensemaking.

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