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But I Would Like to Try This!
Persuading and Resisting with Emotion

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But I would like to try this! Persuading and resisting with emotion

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Abstract

The research case focuses on sensemaking and emotionality in the context of service innovation. More specifically, we examine how the leader and the employees make sense of a new online service through their emotional performances. The theoretical background integrates the sensemaking literature with the performative approach to emotional labour. The participant observation, field notes and videotaped data from organisational meetings was analysed with qualitative content analysis. The analysis elaborates on how the social meanings of the new service were negotiated in a process in which the leader made an effort to persuade the employees to adopt the new service. The findings show that, in order to maintain her own and the company’s identity as an innovator, the leader developed “emotional Teflon” (Sigford, 2005) to allow employees’ resistance to slide off her positive emotional performances.

Keywords: business development, service innovation, sensemaking, emotional labour, performing emotionality, “emotional Teflon”

Introduction

This research case concerns the adoption of a new online service, LiveChat, which enables clients to chat with customer service providers in real time. The story starts with a franchising chain meeting in which the chain manager introduced the LiveChat service to the eight small rental and real estate agencies in Finland. The leader of one of these agencies, OVV Kuopio,
considers her company a forerunner of innovativeness in the whole chain. She also prides herself as an inventive entrepreneur who is eager to develop her business through novel ideas. Hence, she wanted her company to be among the first in the chain to adopt the LiveChat service. As it happened, this was more easily said than done, and required both sensemaking and skilful emotion work, especially from the leader.

The objective of the case study is to explore sensemaking and emotion work in a process in which the leader and the employees negotiate the adoption of a new service. During this process, the leader attempts to persuade the employees through positively oriented emotional performances that emphasise the benefits of the service. When repeatedly facing the negatively oriented emotional performances of the employees, who outline the practical difficulties of running the service in their everyday work, the leader develops an “emotional Teflon” (Sigford, 2005) that helps to sustain her own sense of identity as well as that of her company as forerunners in business development, compared to the other agencies in the franchising chain.

Theoretically, the case study focuses on sensemaking and emotionality in the context of service innovation. Several researchers suggest that emotions may play a key role in how individuals make sense of their environments, which creates a need for further research on the issue (Holt & Cornelissen, 2013; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Maitlis & Sonenschein, 2010; Sandberg & Tsoukas 2014). While the small number of previous studies on emotions in sensemaking tends to pursue psychologically-oriented approaches to emotions, this study introduces a more sociologically-oriented approach, which conceptualises emotionality as a performative accomplishment of interacting actors (Goffman, 1959).

The paper proceeds to introduce the theoretical background of the study. Thereafter, the methodology of the intensive case study will be explained. In the empirical section, the LiveChat case will be described and analysed. The paper then proceeds to provide a discussion of
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the findings in relation to the literature on sensemaking and emotional labour. The paper ends with theoretical contributions, managerial implications and conclusions.

**Theoretical Background**

In order to understand emotionality in face-to-face interactions between the leader and the employees, the case study draws from the theoretical discussions concerning leaders’ emotional labour (Humphrey, 2008; Humphrey et al., 2008; Iszatt-White, 2013), emotive performance (Ng & Kidder, 2010), and sensemaking (Weick 1995, 2001). Leading with emotional labour (Humphrey, 2006) refers to leaders’ emotional performance, which aims to influence the emotions, motivation and performance of the followers (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011; Humphrey et al., 2008).

Previous studies have demonstrated how leaders need to express: (a) friendly and positive emotions in their daily interactions to build trust with their employees, (b) sympathy and compassion towards employees’ personal problems and (c) irritation and anger when employees perform poorly and fail to meet organisational goals (see also Iszatt-White, 2009).

Further, Ng and Kidder (2010) have emphasised the view that people deploy emotion reflexively to advance their situational agenda, which is far from “losing it”. This view of emotion as a performance is based on a constructivist view of the formation of emotion, where emotion is done in an interactive performance between organisational actors (Ng & Kidder, 2010), who aim at impressing each other through the use of narrative and expressive devices such as a well-turned phrase, a specific tone of voice, a look in the eyes, or a posture (Goffman, 1959, p. 2). Hence, emotion is something that has to be “enacted, portrayed and realized” in performance (Goffman, 1959, p. 75). Based on a reflexive view of emotional performance, actors are aware of their circumstances, and able to define the cultural horizon of background knowledge rather than to engage in deliberate calculation, or even manipulation, of their emotional expressions. Emotional performance derives from the command of some background cultural knowledge, or what Goffman
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calls “a command of an idiom, a command that is exercised from moment to moment with little
calculation or forethought” (1959, p. 74).

Ng & Kidder (2010) emphasise the meaning-making aspect of emotional expression. Analysing face-to-face interaction between the leader and the employees through the sensemaking lens emphasises how actors interpret what happens around them in a particular situation. Sensemaking as a social psychological process focuses on how meanings are attached to events and circumstances, including interactions between people. Furthermore, sensemaking concerns how different meanings are assigned to similar events and situations. These different meanings can be assigned by different individuals or by the same individuals at different points in time (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005) in an ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing. This process can be characterised as accomplishing reality rather than discovering it (Weick, 2001, p. 460).

Research Methodology

The empirical data for the study come from an action research-based project (INWORK), the purpose of which was to investigate how innovation was managed and measured at work. OVV Kuopio was one of the organisations studied in the project. In order to enhance wider understanding about this specific company, the first author of this paper performed a one-week participant observation in the company and a one-day observation in the franchising chain meeting, during which LiveChat was introduced by the chain manager. She conducted four face-to-face personal interviews with the leader and one such interview with each of the employees. In addition, two company development workshops were organised, facilitated and videotaped by the wider research team. The wider team also performed non-participant observation at 11 monthly office meetings, which were first videotaped and then transcribed verbatim.

The conversation analysed in this paper took place in one of the videotaped office
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meetings. The case outlines a sensemaking story with six subsequent episodes from the 20-minute conversation between the leader and the four employees, in which they engage in emotional performances, through which sense is made of the benefits and problems concerning the adoption of the LiveChat service. This particular conversation was chosen as a case in point because of the persistence of the leader in persuading the employees and the persistence of the employees in not giving in. The conversation was analysed through qualitative content analysis and narrative analysis (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016).

The LiveChat Case

LiveChat is an online customer service software package which helps companies to provide real-time support for their clients. The franchising chain manager introduced the novel service as a modern solution for improving customer service in the whole chain. The leaders of the eight franchising companies generally agreed that LiveChat sounded very promising and could help the chain to enter the new era of digitalisation of their business, which is particularly appealing to young customers. In the franchising chain meeting, the chain manager suggested that every company in the chain should adopt the software and take turns in providing the chat service for the whole chain.

One month later, LiveChat was on the agenda of the office meeting at the case company, OVV Kuopio. The leader, Paula, re-introduced the matter to her employees, Rosa, Irene, Anna and Emma, who had been present in the franchising chain meeting. In the following transcript, six subsequent episodes from the conversation between Paula and her employees will be presented. In these episodes, the leader’s mostly optimistic emotional performances enact a sense of LiveChat as being a useful tool for improved service to the clients, which should be easy for the chat-savvy employees to perform. The employees’ emotional performances of negativity and
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hesitance outline LiveChat an additional task in their busy service work, the benefits of which can be contested.

1. **Motivational selling and the sound of silence.** Paula introduces LiveChat by asking what the employees know about it. One of the employees, Rosa, replies with a bored voice, “Nothing!” Paula takes a long gulp of water, raises her hands in the air and starts to describe how the chat works: “There is this small icon bar on the webpages…” The employees show no interest. Bringing up the chain manager’s suggestion of inter-company collaboration in providing the chat service, Paula looks at the employees one after another and says in an indignant voice that she absolutely does not want the other companies in the chain to take care of OVV Kuopio’s clients: “That would be a death sentence.” No reaction from the employees. Using her fingers as scintillating stars, Paula declares optimistically that some other company in the chain will start using the service. The employees sit quietly. Waving her head lightly and swinging her right wrist, Paula smiles and says that ready-made answers can be saved to the system and re-used with new clients. The employees keep their eyes down. Paula continues with a confident voice, telling the employees that they could keep the chat open when they wanted, and turn it off when they were busy. Complete silence. Paula searches for words: “But... er... but...”.

2. **Some criticism and a little empathy.** Irene fires questions at Paula: “Do you think that we will have time to chat with our clients? How much does LiveChat cost? Will we get some real benefit from the service?” Starting with a cautious voice, Anna says with a laugh: “I do not understand how we would have time to hang around in the chat?” Emma laughs for support. Paula nods, tells them the price of the LiveChat service and gives Irene and Emma an appealing look. Lowering her voice, Paula indicates that she is willing to pay for the service “just for the trial”. She then fixes her eyes on Anna and Rosa. With an apprehensive expression on her face, Paula acknowledges the downside of needing extra time to take care of the LiveChat service. The employees are pleased to
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agree with this empathetic gesture and Rosa continues with an amused tone in her voice: “Today we would not have time for LiveChat!” Paula replies with an understanding tone in her voice: “Then we wouldn’t have opened the chat”.

3. **Strongly arguing and gently ignoring.** Paula leans against the window-sill and sighs a little. She then asks Anna to open the commission form on the computer. With some desperation in her voice, Paula explains that she got so excited about LiveChat because their commission form is “shocking, horrible”. Pointing to the computer screen, she claims that that they are losing countless customers because of that awful form. Paula pauses and the employees’ eyes are fixed on the screen. When Paula urges them to find a way to get hold of the clients who disappear from their website, Irene starts to talk over her. Gesturing with her hands, Irene argues loudly that they should definitely check when people are using their website, but she also remarks that if their customers visit the website in the evenings, it is useless for them to be available on LiveChat during the day. All the employees murmur in agreement but then resort to silence. When Paula continues to talk, her voice gets more and more quiet towards the end of the sentence. She reminds them that if they want to look for the statistics concerning the website, there are none available. Rosa optimistically suggests that Paula asks the chain manager for some statistics. Paula does not respond to this suggestion.

4. **Patiently suggesting and persistently opposing.** Nodding and looking at the employees one after another, Paula suggests: “How about… if we implement LiveChat… and if it is not fit for our purposes, then we will quit using it. We will lose the money, but we will not die because of that amount of money.” With serious faces, Irene and Emma ask which companies in the franchising chain will implement LiveChat. Paula explains patiently, how one office will implement LiveChat. Paula smiles and then argues that if they hold their heads high and start with the service, other companies will join them. With an amused tone in her voice, Emma remarks that Paula has
probably been pondering this idea quite a lot. Emma then asks if Paula has figured out how they could handle the chat service in shifts. Paula looks at Emma eagerly and replies that she would like to hear the employees’ thoughts about the shift arrangements. Paula suggests: “How about the A-shift, who is dealing with e-mails?” Annoyed, Anna replies that the A-shift doesn’t have even have time to read all the e-mails. The employees laugh and Rosa exclaims with an amused tone in her voice: “66 e-mails this morning!” Calmly, Paula makes another suggestion: “How about the D-shift? And then I have ASPA-shifts every Tuesday and Wednesday…” None of the employees like Paula’s suggestions.

5. **Enthusiastically outlining and critically detailing.** Paula gestures with her hands and says in an amused tone that if she was dealing with LiveChat, she could do it anytime. She raises her palm with outspread fingers and shakes her head: “I see chatting like... this should be easy for you... you are young and used to chatting. I see it is so easy!” Paula laughs and continues: “While I have been chatting, I have done millions of things at the same time!” Paula raises her palm and moves it very quickly: “I can see chatting is like... swoosh!” Anna sits still and reminds Paula in a serious tone that they would need to agree on certain shifts because otherwise nobody would deal with LiveChat. Looking closely at Paula, Anna raises another worry: that they would fail to provide answers for the clients in the chat “because of all those phone calls and emails”, which would ruin the good image of the company. Rosa agrees with Anna and Irene asks in an irritated voice: “How do we know there is a client waiting for us in the chat?” Looking at Paula, Anna repeats Irene’s question. When Irene asks the same question for the third time, Paula replies with a friendly voice that the message will be in the icon bar, but Anna disagrees. Paula then continues with a slightly irritated tone in her voice while pointing at the screen: “I mean that... okay... when I scruffy old woman have been chatting in the Facebook, the icon bar has been located there.” Anna disagrees again and Rosa
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shows the location of the icon on the screen. Paula quickly withdraws from this practical discussion.

6. **Skilfully selling and hesitantly giving in.** Opening her hands in front of her, Paula outs a positive spin on the argument concerning the company image: “I can see that this is about our online image. We are trying out new things!” She then reaches out her hands towards her employees: “We praise ourselves for being progressive!” Hesitating a bit, Rosa is the first to agree that they could try out the new service: “In principle... yes”. She then suggests with a moaning tone in her voice that, as chatting with the clients takes time, somebody in a VAS shift might have time to take care of the chats. With some enthusiasm in her voice, Anna agrees that this could work, based on her experience with that particular shift. Calmly, Paula then proposes that they would try out the chats in the way that the employees have suggested. Standing up straight, Paula raises her chin: “And when I’m working in customer service, I will keep the chat open in order to get experience of how it is going to work.” Then Paula opens her arms and promises that she will not take the LiveChat costs from the employees’ salaries. The employees laugh and Rosa starts to playfully tease Paula about how she hopes that “it will not happen that it is Mrs. Paula who is chatting there all night long”. The employees laugh again and all of them, except Irene, agree to try out the service. Paula takes her seat and winds up the discussion: “Alright, let’s see what happens.”

**Analysis**

In the first episode, the leader assigns a variety of positive meanings to LiveChat through her emotional performance, with which she tries to motivate the employees to adopt the new service. She introduces the useful technical details of the service, portrays it as worth adopting and emphasises its usability. She flatters the employees as being the best ones in the chain to take care of clients, and promises that they can turn the chat off when they are busy. Through repeated silence, the employees show their reluctance to agree with the leader. When the leader fails for the
sixth time to receive any positive response from the employees to her understanding of the benefits of LiveChat, it becomes clear that her sense of self and the company as innovative is under threat in this conversation.

In the second episode, the employees add more verbal elements to their sensemaking: they fire questions at the leader, use a negatively loaded expression of “hanging around and chatting” and give short laughs as signs of disbelief about the usefulness of adopting the service. They also imply that a “chat” is something that occurs in leisure time and not worth adopting in the professional rental business. To combat this negativity towards the new service, the leader emphasises the centrality of experimentation for the company, while appealing to the employees with prolonged eye contact. She is sympathetic to the employees’ worries concerning the lack of time and grants them increased power to self-organise their work in order to persuade them to accept her understanding of the benefits of LiveChat.

In the third episode, the leader continues to attempt to convert the employees’ sensemaking by dramatically expressing her despair about the lack of client perspective in the company and enacting a sense of urgency that something must be done immediately. While the leader is confident that LiveChat would improve the situation, the employees argue that they would need some background information before making a decision on whether to adopt LiveChat or not. The leader argues back that they do not have any statistics available, but the employees suggest that she asks the chain manager for these. To stop the arguing and the discussion on statistics, which might not support the adoption of the new service, the leader ignores the employees’ suggestion and thereby preserves the option of adopting LiveChat without any analysis of the website statistics.

In the fourth episode, the leader introduces the compromise that they will stop using LiveChat if it does not work for them. Through a patient emotional performance, she explains again that they would be the prime movers in providing the service for the clients, and that other companies would follow. One of the employees asks about the work arrangements, and the leader
makes some suggestions, but the employees disagree with all of them.

In the fifth episode, the leader outlines chatting as a simple and play-like task, which does not require much organising. The employees in turn depict chatting as real work, which requires pre-planning and has consequences for the company image. When the employees resist LiveChat by paying attention to its technical details, the leader temporarily shows her irritation by noting the generation and technology gap between the young employees and herself as a middle-aged technology user.

In the sixth episode, the leader offers the company’s image as a cue for the employees’ sensemaking and suggests that LiveChat helps to maintain the modern and innovative image of the company and should therefore be tried out. When one of employees hesitantly agrees and one more follows, the leader encourages the employees to figure out how to organise the work shifts around the chats. She also promises to be a sport herself and keep the chat open every time she works a shift in customer service. The conversation ends with friendly joking about chatting habits.

**Discussion**

The case study illustrates how emotionality is central to sensemaking. It shows the details of emotional work done by the leader and the employees in a situation in which the leader persuades the resistant employees to accept her sensemaking of the benefits of a new service. Helping the employees to accept the leader’s sense of LiveChat was important because it enabled the leader to sustain her understanding of self and the company as innovative (when compared with the other companies in the chain). In order to succeed in sharing her sense of LiveChat with the employees, the leader developed an “emotional Teflon” (Sigford, 2005) against her employees’ negative emotions. In other words, the leader repeatedly managed to shake off the criticism, negativity and resistance of the employees from her own sensemaking and emotional performance.
BUT I WOULD LIKE TO TRY THIS!

Also, when temporarily showing some negative emotions (e.g., irritation), the leader reflexively changed her performance.

The findings of the study suggest that emotional performances are a critical part of sensemaking processes in face-to-face interaction (Liu & Maitlis, 2014; Ng & Kidder 2010). The LiveChat case shows how the leader, with her friendly and positive emotional performances, managed to persuade the employees to change their sense of the LiveChat service as “just another time consuming task in their busy work schedules” into her sense of the new service as “a sign of improved customer service and a symbol of innovative business”. To do so, the leader reflexively changed her emotional performance from episode to episode to find new ways of convincing the employees to accept and adopt her sense of the LiveChat service. Throughout the conversation, the leader skilfully provided the employees with new sensemaking cues that favoured the adoption of the LiveChat service. She further enhanced shared sensemaking through varying emotional expressions of amusement, hesitation, despair and concern.

The findings also indicate that minimal emotional performances do not signal an absence of emotion (Brown, 2004), but can be equally relevant as other forms of emotionality in sensemaking processes. For instance, the case shows how the employees’ minimal non-verbal performance at the beginning of the LiveChat conversation caused the leader to offer new meanings for LiveChat that would provide new cues for sensemaking.

**Theoretical Contributions and Managerial Implications**

This research case provides new knowledge on one key aspect of sensemaking, namely emotionality, which has been little studied previously. In addition, the paper has introduced a novel perspective for conceptualising emotionality as performed in the course of face-to-face interaction between the leader and the employees.

Two recommendations can be made from the findings. First, both leaders’ and
employees’ sensemaking benefits from the reflexive deployment of emotions at the right moment, which helps to advance the situational agenda. Also, in the context of innovation, both positive and negative emotional performances can keep discussions concerning the implementation of new ideas rich and constructive and help in evaluating their consequences. Second, leaders benefit from learning to develop “emotional Teflon” (Sigford 2005), which is useful for dealing with employees’ negativity and criticism. Furthermore, it can be suggested that the employees would benefit in the same way when engaged in discussion with a leader who exhibits negativity and excessive criticism.

Conclusions

The LiveChat case suggests that emotions can play a critical role, at least in sensemaking processes which take place in face-to-face interactions. Focusing on these types of sensemaking processes between the leader and the employees, the case has also illustrated that – in addition to the leader’s emotional performance, which aims to influence the emotions, motivation and performance of the followers (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011; Humphrey et al., 2008) – it is equally important to study how employees’ emotional performances are connected to sensemaking processes and to the production of organisational reality. Finally, the case analysis has indicated the relevance of videotaped research data in the study of emotionality in sensemaking.

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References
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