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Sense-making and Sense-giving in the new normal for Change Managers

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The covid-19 pandemic set its foot in the world and pushing us into an environment, which is dynamically uncertain and stressful; disrupting industries, routines, and life in general. Beyond doubt, the pandemic has kept governments, and business executives on their toes in a constant state of reassessment of risk, repositioning, and re-prioritizing on an ongoing basis. While few organizations with a Business Continuity Plan (BCP) in place swiftly started coping with the new normal, the larger group is still struggling to deal with the gamut of problems brought up by the pandemic. Mercer's¹ study in 2020, found that about 51% of organizations around the world have no plans or protocols in place to combat a global emergency like Covid-19. During a crisis, a considerable amount of time is needed for leaders to make sense of the situation, evaluate options and arrive at a consensus on how to deal with it so that a shared vision emerges.

The pandemic has made us realize the importance of sense-making and sense-giving than ever before. In this article, we explore the nuances of sense-making, sense-giving, and how it has presented change managers with a unique opportunity to un-learn, re-learn and evolve to pioneer human-centered change management interventions.

¹51% of companies have no business continuity plan to combat coronavirus outbreak: Mercer study finds. Retrieved from <https://www.me.mercer.com/newsroom/covid-19-companies-have-no-business-continuity-plan-to-combat-coronavirus-outbreak.html>

Sense-making and Sense-giving

Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld² (2005) defined sense-making as the process by which people give meaning to their collective experiences. It is the “ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing”. Karl Weick, in his book; asks us to think of it as “a frame of mind about frames of mind”. The manifestation of this phenomenon in a crisis gets magnified. One classic example of sense-giving from our day to day lives would be browsing through an e-commerce website to buy a product, or a family planning for a vacation. We start with reading about the product features, customer reviews, youtube demonstration videos or vlogs to gain understanding for making the decision. We subtly place our earlier experiences, knowledge and hidden biases, couple with rationalising the information available while making the buying decision. On the other-hand, sense-giving “consists of attempts to alter and influence the way others think and act” (Huemer³, 2012:241).

Let’s look at the earlier buying the product example with a salesperson involved. Here our perception is influenced by the words, meanings shared by the salesperson which alters our understanding and later the buying decision. While the product might have various facets of benefits, we would have seen that few key benefits getting highlighted over the others during sales pitches.

The pandemic has impacted all aspects of peoples' lives. It has pushed people to process large amounts of information in a short time, called for updating their understanding of the evolving situation (Lockdowns, protocols, and medications). Most importantly, it brought up a set of competing demands which require their attention (work vs home; career vs survival, etc). While it is difficult to assess the cues, prioritize, and, focus on; the current crisis has highlighted the importance of attention, sense-making, and sense-giving which we often take for granted during business as usual.

²Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science*, 16(4), 409-421.

³Steigenberger, N. (2015). Emotions in sensemaking: A change management perspective. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*.

⁴Will, M. G., & Pies, I. (2018). Sensemaking and sense giving: A concept for successful change management that brings together moral foundations theory and the ergonomic approach. *Journal of Accounting & Organizational Change*.

With blended working going to be a norm, managers must learn and practice sense-making in the workplace. The pandemic has provided us an opportunity to examine the assumptions of sense-making and sense-giving theories. Empirical research by Steinberger⁴ states that emotions (anger, fear, anxiety, and hope) act as an input and outcome of sense-making. An individual's perception of change events and emotions shape the content and influence the likelihood of that person engaging in sense-giving activities or be willing to accept sense-making outcomes.

Will and Pies⁵ (2018) through their study proposed that emotionally driven processes of sensemaking can easily become dysfunctional, especially in situations that require extensive change. Consequently, it should be the top priority for managers to engage in sense giving, which comprises of narratives, that explain what is going on against the background of relevant alternatives and appropriate discourses that guide how employees form their expectations. In a nutshell, sense-giving attempts to reframe sensemaking processes.

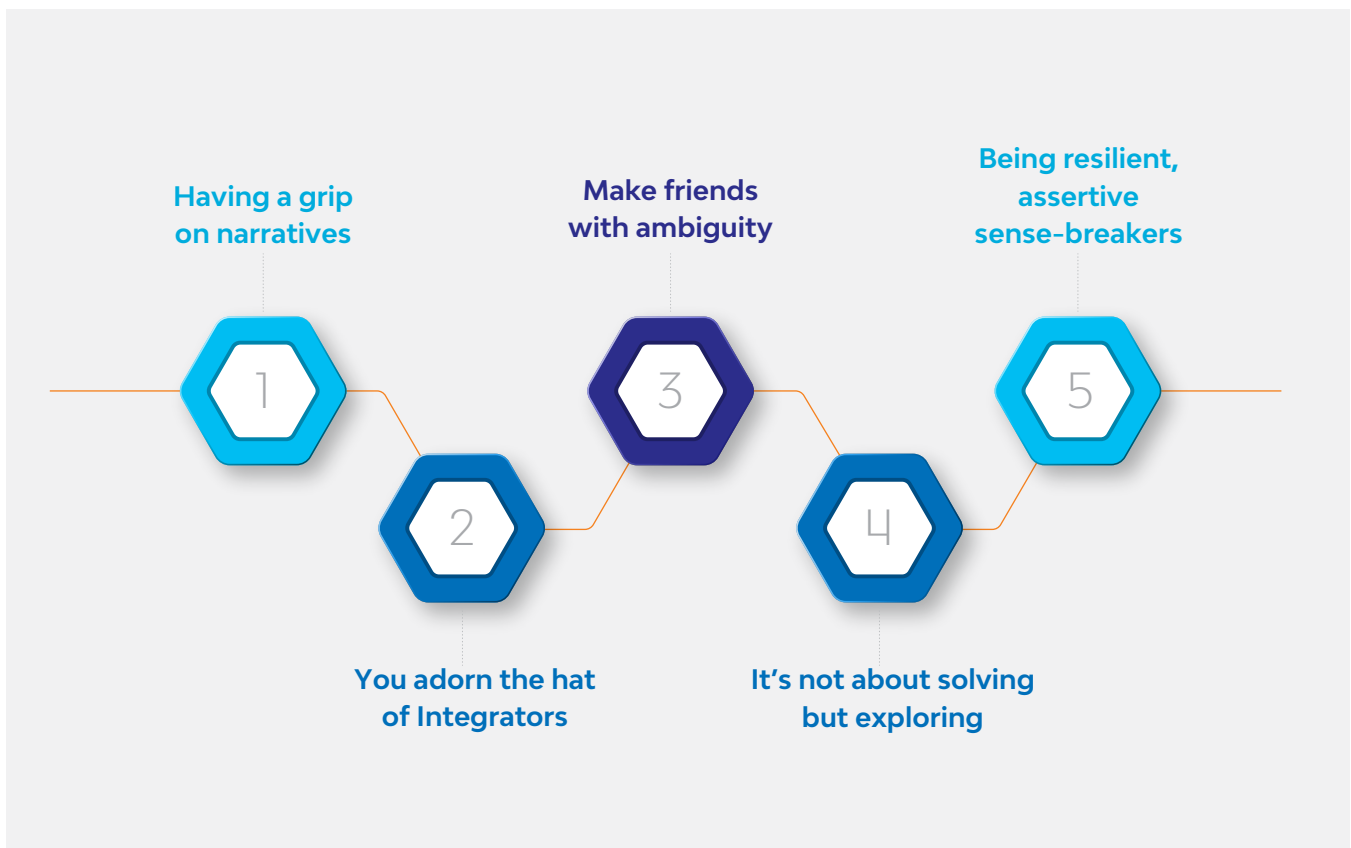
⁴Steigenberger, N. (2015). Emotions in sensemaking: A change management perspective. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*.

⁵Will, M. G., & Pies, I. (2018). Sensemaking and sense giving: A concept for successful change management that brings together moral foundations theory and the ergonomic approach. *Journal of Accounting & Organizational Change*.

How do these topics become relevant for Change Managers?

More than a year into battling the effects of the pandemic, while the world is embracing digital ways of working; change managers have been dealing with their fair share of challenges. Ranging from catering to client needs, selection of change tools to deal with projects, working remotely, and blurred lines between work-home; change managers

have been pushed to evolve. With project deadlines and workflows encountering surprise events and having a team looking up to them for direction, it has become imperative for change managers to possess the skill of sense-giving, as much as they have command in sense-making.





Having a grip on narratives

Quite often change managers are staffed on multiple projects, across geographies involving multi-cultural stakeholders and peers. The ability to operate remotely, cross-referencing individual narratives, and assigning meanings before letting it percolate down the communication channel providing meaning to the stakeholders has been a real challenge. It's imminent to have a thorough understanding of localized events, people's moods to make and give sense to teams.



You adorn the hat of Integrators

Change managers have become integrators over the pandemic; as the ones who deal with sensemaking, sense-giving, and sense-breaking at individual, team-level, and for client project teams, operating in a conducive fashion to deliver results.



Make friends with ambiguity

Gone are those days, where we could follow a waterfall approach with sturdy Gant charts to visualize project progress. The dynamic nature of business teams, the markets, and constant re-prioritization call for change teams to rejig their approach to adapt to current realities. It also calls for thinking beyond Plan B and stands firm with the impacted stakeholder engaging in dialogue to customize solutions.



It's not about solving but exploring

Any consultant's dream would be to have a clear problem statement, a motivated stakeholder group, and excellent leadership support to drive change initiatives. But with pandemic around, consistent time and efforts need to go in exploring the problem, capturing the nuances of localized changes in real-time. While this might not bring in a drastic change in the mandate, there might be considerable re-positioning in the approach or customization.



Being resilient, assertive sense-breakers

Sense-giving might not be the most efficient way to operate always. Consultants might have to stretch the organizational communication to challenge and even disintegrate the existing meaning-making process; introducing meaning that contrasts with currently accepted beliefs, making adequate room for new meanings to emerge. While it can be a strenuous and time-taking exercise that calls for unconditional levels of patience, empathy couple with resilience can pave the way forward.

Amidst new waves and variants of the Covid-19 pandemic, organizations continue to rethink their approaches, to run the business as usual, change managers have been pushed to embrace a new set of skills. Making friends with ambiguity, listening deeply to impacted personas, operationalizing continuous communication, while iteratively re-visiting and optimizing change interventions. The current scheme of things has also provided us with an opportunity to become integrators for diverse teams; making, breaking and, giving "sense" to embrace the new ways of working. We tend to give a negative shade to "status-quo"; in the short-term sticking to status-quo might not be a bad option, while creating a mindset to embrace the new scheme of things as they come! It's time for change managers to step up to become effective integrators with ears on the ground and engage in constant consultative dialogues.

About the Author



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Sreejith has around 5 years of experience in project management, strategic operations, client services and currently is part of the Transformation Management Practice, managing to end to end change management projects for clients. He holds a masters in OD, Change and Leadership from TISS Mumbai; and undergraduate degree in Mechanical Engineering from CUSAT.

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