

As a leading Irish business school in a public university system, KBS is committed to excellence in teaching and to fostering knowledge and understanding of business and society within a diverse, research active and socially engaged environment.

Research at KBS serves this mission. Our goal is to cultivate excellence in research, underpinned by our core values including commitments to promote learning and discovery as well as social responsibility and ethical behaviour; to protect academic freedom and enhance knowledge; to maintain a future orientation and an international perspective; to promote inclusive and sustainable societies and facilitate the involvement of industry.

Our research finds a focus in the four academic departments of the School as well as in active research clusters and broad thematic descriptors. The current research clusters are:

- Accountability (ARC)
- Efficiency & Productivity Analysis
- Emerging Risk Assessment & Underwriting
- Human Rights & Development Practice
- Consumers in Society
- Psychological Science in Business
- Privatisation & PPP
- Quality of Work
- Economics of Innovation and Policy

Research seminars are also regularly organised by the themes of Work, Knowledge & Employment and Public Policy, Enterprise, Governance & Sustainability.

See <http://www.ul.ie/business/research> for more information.

Simple rules for sensemaking praxis: How HR can contribute to strategic change by developing sensemaking capability in organisations.

Kieran, S., MacMahon, J. and MacCurtain, S.

Synopsis

This paper explores how sensemaking theory offers a new perspective on HR's role during strategic change. As change in organisations today is less of a programme and more of a continuous cycle of business transformation, there has been a shift in focus to its underpinning, cognitive process of sensemaking. However, HR's role in developing sensemaking praxis in organisations is not widely researched. This paper addresses that gap.

We draw on Eisenhardt and Sull's 'simple rules' whereby complex strategy praxis is reduced to a highly translatable, small number of key rules (2001). Through a diary study of middle managers engaging in strategic change, we investigate their real-time, lived sensemaking praxis. We conclude that HR have a significant contribution to play in developing an organisation's sensemaking praxis through four Simple Rules of Sensemaking; 1) Plan creative discourse opportunities, 2) Ensure leader-middle manager parity, 3) Mutually direct sensemaking through on-going re-planning and re-prioritisation, and 4) Ensure leadership effort continues beyond the initiation of strategic change.

Issues and Questions Considered

As the pace of change in organisations increases, exploration of its underpinning, interpretive processes have never been more important (Sanders, Shipton et al. 2014). Known as sensemaking, organisational members notice cues and triggers which prompt change, they reflect individually, and then share information, compare different interpretations, and review possible responses all in an iterative, social and discursive manner (Bartunek, Rousseau et al. 2006, Cornelissen 2012). We situate

sensemaking praxis as inexorably linked to strategic change praxis: an on-going, living process in organisations (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2015, Balogun and Rouleau 2017). This perspective of the organisation as a discursive space or interpretive system (Daft and Weick 1984) is becoming increasingly relevant in today's uncertain environment. This study is concerned with advancing HR's contribution to strategic change through the development of sensemaking praxis in the organisation. This potential contribution is impeded by our limited knowledge of the processes and practices through which organisational members navigate and make sense of change (Maitlis and Christianson 2014, Brown, Colville et al. 2016). It is in this theoretical gap that the HR solution lies, posing the research question: What role can HR play in enabling sensemaking praxis in organisations? To achieve this we draw on the work of Sull and Eisenhardt (2015) who found that, from a strategy perspective, it is possible for organisations to engage in a small number of simple rules that can guide members through the complex world of global strategy. We propose that the development of 'simple rules' for sensemaking can also offer a practical contribution by providing a pathway for HR.

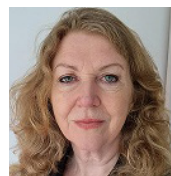
Methodology

Through an innovative, real-time, diary methodology, we seek to unravel and isolate sensemaking praxis through the lived experience of middle managers, a key stakeholder known to reside at the critical nexus of the leadership's vision for change (Floyd and Wooldridge 1994, Balogun 2003). In order to isolate sensemaking praxis, the research employed a case-based approach (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007) with two US multinationals in the medical devices sector. The research used a multi-source/multi-level data collection method; semi-structured interviews with 8 senior leaders, focus groups

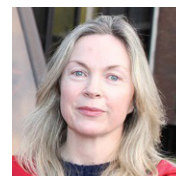
Authors



Dr Sarah Kieran
Department Work &
Employment Studies
Kemmy Business School
University of Limerick



Dr Juliet McMahon
Department Work &
Employment Studies
Kemmy Business School
University of Limerick



Dr Sarah MacCurtain
Department Work &
Employment Studies
Kemmy Business School
University of Limerick

with 32 middle managers, and weekly, online, mixed-method diaries with 19 middle managers for 12 weeks. The latter sought to isolate and identify the real-time, lived experience of middle managers' sensemaking: day-to-day interactions, experiences, feelings and activities.

Outcomes and Findings

This study expands our knowledge of sensemaking praxis through the lens of strategy as simple rules (Eisenhardt & Sull, 2001, Pg 109). As we can see in Figure 1, the two cases of Servu and Manu engaged in very different strategic change approaches resulting in Servu's Bounded Sensemaking and Manu's more successful Building of Sensemaking Praxis. These findings highlight that sensemaking will always occur naturally but its potential will not be reached without organisational engagement in its praxis. The contribution therefore is two-fold; 1) We isolate and identify the micro-processes of sensemaking, which underpin strategic change and 2) Conceptualise these as 'Simple Rules for Sensemaking', which provides HR with a clear framework for advancing their role in strategic change.

Simple Rule for Sensemaking I: Plan creative discourse opportunities

Formalised leader/manager discourse of varying duration and intervals provides a stable and routine platform for sensemaking praxis. In their multi-level role (Brown, Kulik et al. 2017), HR must influence the leadership team to engage in sensemaking praxis through formal, scheduled discourse with middle managers. The nature of this discourse is also paramount.

Simple Rule for Sensemaking II: Ensure leader-middle manager parity

HR has a key role in building a culture of parity between leadership and middle managers. Where middle managers feel they can question and influence appropriately, they will work with leaders to make sense of change while simultaneously evolving the sensemaking praxis itself.

Simple Rule for Sensemaking III: Mutually direct sensemaking through on-going re-planning and re-prioritisation

HR's role in the ongoing re-planning and re-prioritisation of strategic work is critical to creating an environment where middle managers can direct their sensemaking appropriately, as individual strategic change events evolve over time. Too frequently, the vision and high-level plan for change is socialised with middle managers but then, after a period of discussion and input, they are expected to implement without question. This does not align with the complex realities of business today. Conflicting and competing priorities not only disable their sensemaking but is further associated with the lack of time for sensemaking, a factor previously noted (Dutton, Ashford et al. 1997, Balogun and Jenkins 2003). Thus, on-going re-planning and re-prioritisation directs sensemaking where it is needed most.

Simple Rule for Sensemaking IV: Ensure leadership effort continues beyond the initiation of strategic change

HR need to influence leadership to ensure they lean into strategic change in the long term. Leader/middle manager sensemaking time is critical, yet many leaders think it a luxury. We know resistance to change can be viewed as organisational members expressing the need for the time and space to make sense (DuBrin, Ireland et al. 1989, Brown and Starkey 2000). Furthermore, metrics (targets and deadlines associated with strategic change) have been identified as potentially reducing organisational mindfulness and strategic alternatives can be dismissed or discrepancies normalised by an organisation's strong focus on production targets (Weick, Sutcliffe et al. 2005, Maitlis and Christianson 2014). This study indicates the metrics that are designed to guide sustainable strategic change outcomes enable sensemaking but targets and deadlines to be achieved, beyond all other outcomes, act as a constraint.

The underlying paper was published in the Human Resource Management Journal, 2021
A full copy can be obtained at <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12404>

Authors:

Sarah Kieran, Juliet MacMahon, Sarah MacCurtain

For further information and comments, please contact:

Dr Deirdre O'Loughlin
Assistant Dean, Research
Kemmy Business School
University of Limerick, Ireland
T: +353 61 213375
E: Deirdre.OLoughlin@ul.ie

Forthcoming Research Bulletin

Title: The use of Net Promoter Score (NPS) to predict sales growth: insights from an empirical investigation

Authors: Sven Baehre, Michele O'Dwyer, Lisa O'Malley & Nick Lee

About the KBS Research Bulletin

The purpose of the KBS Research Bulletin series is to make our research more readily accessible to a wide range of interested stakeholders, and so to allow our work to have a useful impact on the society in which we operate. We regard this as an important part of our stakeholder engagement. The dissemination of these bulletins aligns with both the UL focus on excellence and impact in research, and on the KBS strategic goals of cultivating excellence in research while contributing to our community of stakeholders in a responsible and sustainable manner.

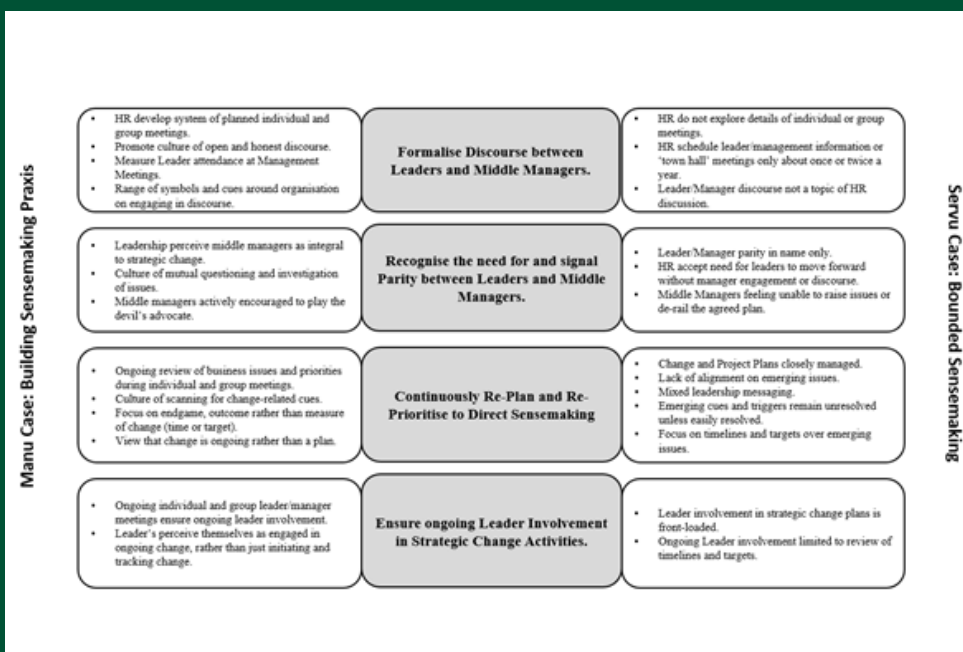


Figure 1: Simple Rules for Sensemaking