

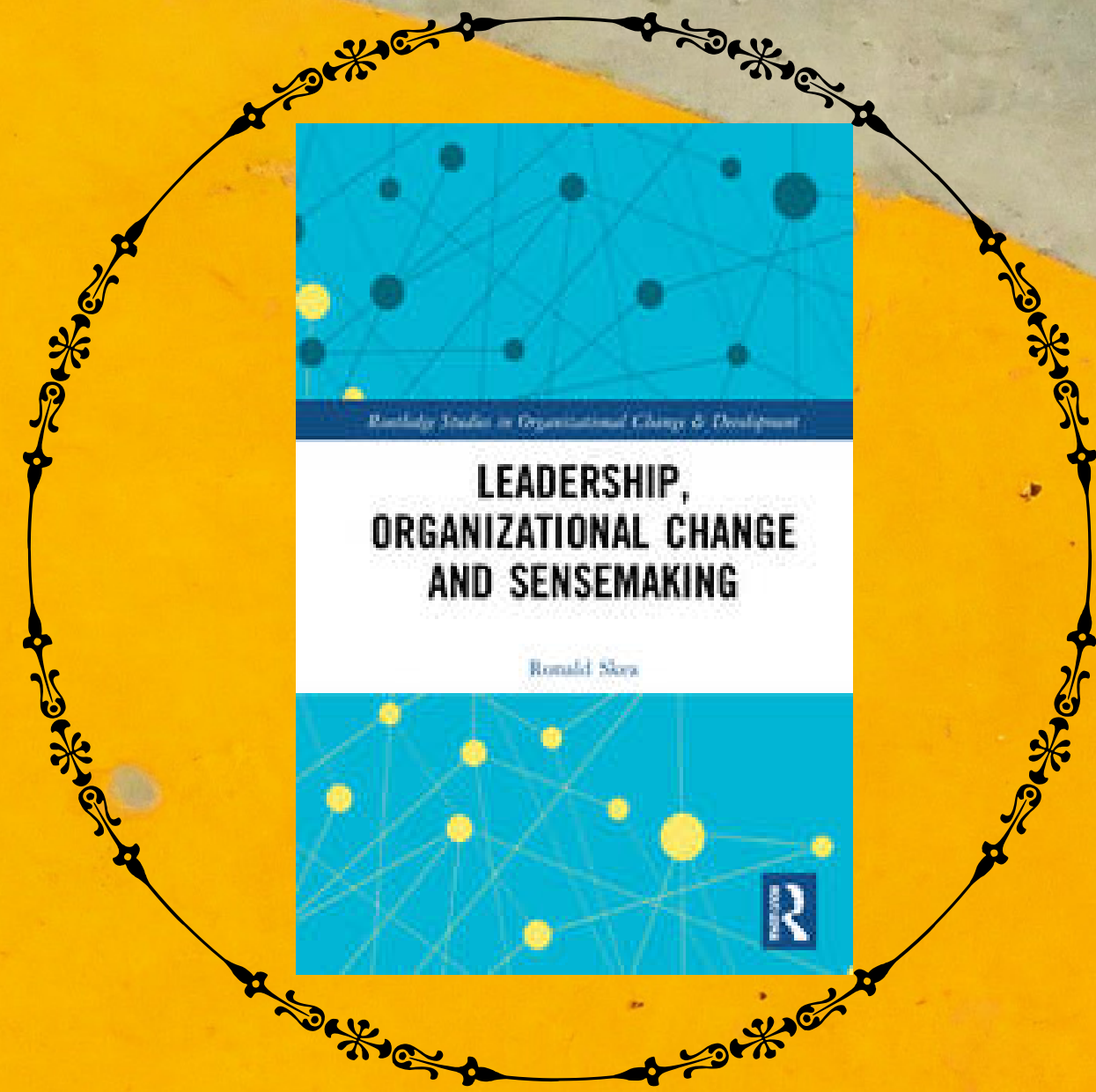
LEADERSHIP, ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AND SENSEMAKING

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Description

Organizational change literature often focuses on the leaders role in giving sense to others of the need for change and there is a plethora of models and recipes on how to influence employees thinking about change, organizational design and performance.

This book surfaces the elements behind leader sensemaking that add to or detract from their ability to critically question their current thinking. Leaders and interventionists have lacked practical and pragmatic advice on how to influence the process. This book is the culmination of 10 years of research spent working with leaders in organizations as they interpreted the need for change and made choices about engaging, or not, with transformational change methodologies. It reveals nine elements of sensemaking displayed by organizational leaders as they grapple with challenges to their current orthodoxies about how to lead and organize in times of change.

PART ONE

LEADERSHIP, ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AND SENSEMAKING INTRODUCED

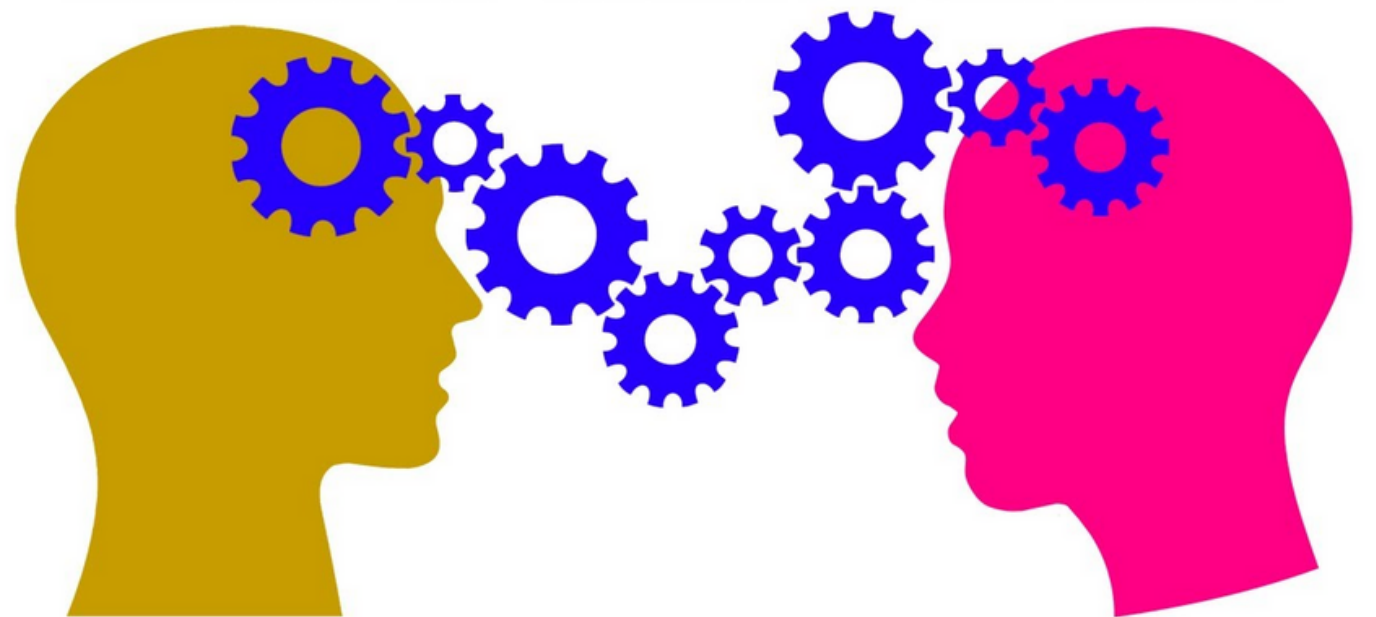
Leadership and Organizational Change



A enduring leadership theory is that of transformational leadership. Burns (1978) is credited with developing the process led concept of leadership in which he promotes the idea of transforming leadership, with its emphasis on the leaders' ability to motivate and empower his/ her followers and also the moral dimension of leadership. The goal of transformational leadership is: ... to 'transform' people and organisations in a literal sense – to change them in mind and heart; enlarge vision, insight, and understanding; clarify purposes; make behaviour congruent with beliefs, principles, or values; and bring about changes that are permanent, self-perpetuating, and momentum building”.

SENSEMAKING

WHAT IS SENSEMAKING



The author's research was underpinned by Weick's studies of organizational sensemaking. Weick is a social constructivist and argues that sensemaking requires us to look for explanations and answers in terms of how people see things rather than structures or systems. Issues such as strategies, change and problems are not things that exist independently in organizations—their source is in peoples' ways of thinking. Sensemaking occurs after organizational members experience unexpected outcomes from, or some sort of break in the routine of, organizational life. It is therefore a retrospective activity which happens 'after' something has caught our attention or interest. And it is a process of making sense of that which we have just noticed. At an individual level it is 'a process in which individuals develop cognitive maps of their environment' (Ring and Rands, 1989, p.342).

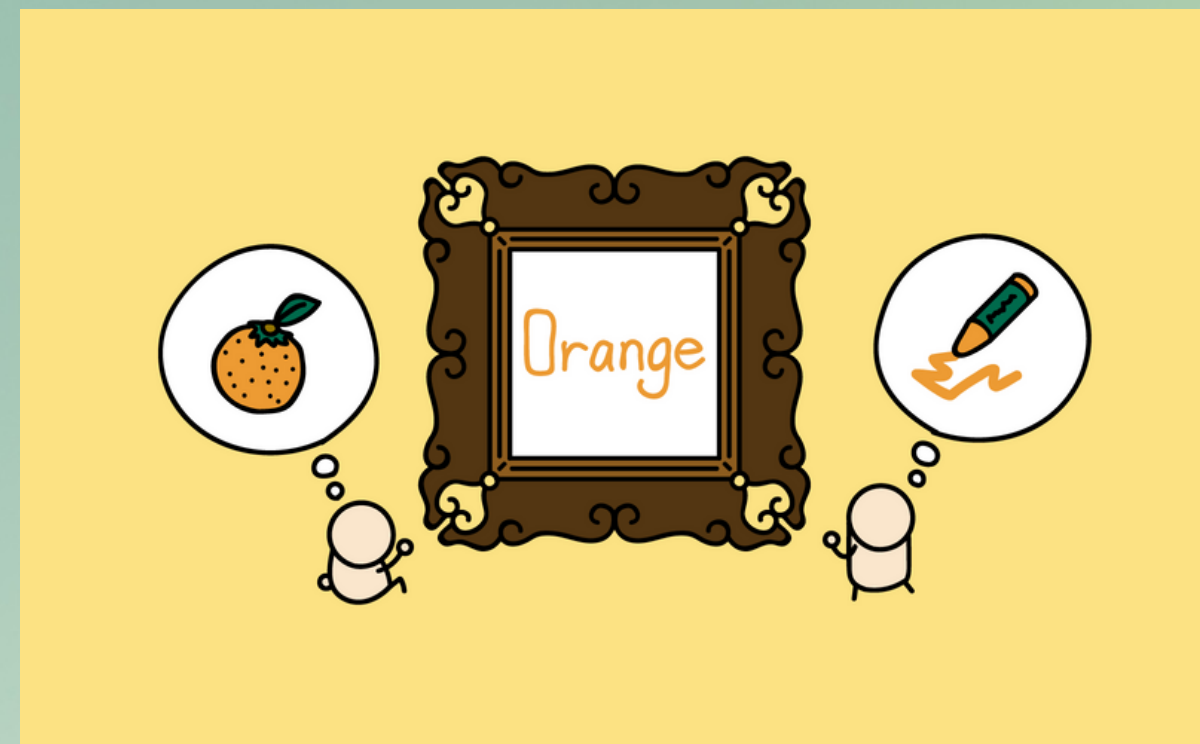
PART TWO

ELEMENTS OF LEADER SENSEMAKING



Ontology

CREATING REALITIES



Ontology is not a word I heard any leader use in any of the research organizations. But it is a key aspect of leader sensemaking of change that been witnessed during the research.

1. Change is seen as the norm, not an epiphenomenon. This aspect aligns with Heraclitan flux or the constant stream of experience in sensemaking.
2. Leaders cannot manage change – rather they need to recognize the inevitability and unpredictability of it and be agile enough to react and adapt to it. However, the act of reacting influences and creates new problems (environment) which they must in turn react and adapt to. This cycle never ceases.
3. Leadership is not a thing, it is a result of complex relationships and leaders must give up their current paradigms and mindsets about leadership in organizations. The business methodologies were aligned with Burns' (1978) concept of transforming leadership rather than the subsequently developed concept of the transformational leader.
4. Organizations are not things, they are methods of coping with complexity and chaos and seeing them as such allows us to move to more agile and adaptable organizational designs and structures.

Storytelling

IF YOU'RE GOOD TO TELL A
STORY, MAKE IT A GOOD ONE



Stories and fables have long been used as a vehicle for communication in many popular business publications aimed at managers and leaders. Business parables and fables such as *Who Moved My Cheese?* (Johnson, 1998), *The Goal* (Goldratt and Cox, 1984) and *Fish!* (Lundin et al., 2000) have sold millions of copies and have remained in the business

book bestseller lists since being published.

The importance of organizational storytelling: **In organisations, storytelling is the preferred sensemaking currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders ... it is the institutional memory system of the organisation.** (Boje, 1991, p.106)

Gabriel (2000, p.36) identifies **eight** poetic tropes which he argues are 'the storyteller's central interpretive devices':

- Attribution of motive (to a seemingly motiveless event)
- Attribution of causal connections (linking coincidental events as causal or related)
- Attribution of responsibility, namely, blame and credit (casting others as heroes or villains)
- Attribution of unity (stereotyping classes of people as an undifferentiated entity of others e.g. 'them' or 'they')
- Attribution of fixed qualities, especially in opposition (often linked to 'they' or 'them' e.g. they lied once so they always lie)
- Attribution of emotion (presenting people as extremes in order to bring into relief the behavior of others e.g. the panicking of others versus the calm hero)
- Attribution of agency (turning something passive or inanimate into something active e.g. 'the organization' becomes an active (usually negative) actor in many stories)
- Attribution of providential significance (imbuing random events with fateful significance or divine providence)



In conclusion, storytelling is an integral aspect of sensemaking but is only one element of it and does not have to be empirically accurate for it to be real for leaders. And thus interventionists need to understand, and be able to identify, when leaders are being driven by the need to create a plausible good story rather than a factually accurate timeline of events. Attributions will be made that can be flawed and hinder genuine paradigm or mindset shift and so the use of reflexive practice is one way to challenge stories that are diverging in an unhelpful way. Another is to recognize that events will be embellished and rearranged in time in order to create better drama as happened with the ah-ha! moments and once again reflexive practice can create a more accurate story of how and when ah-ha! moments will be used as part of our sensemaking.

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Displacement of Concepts

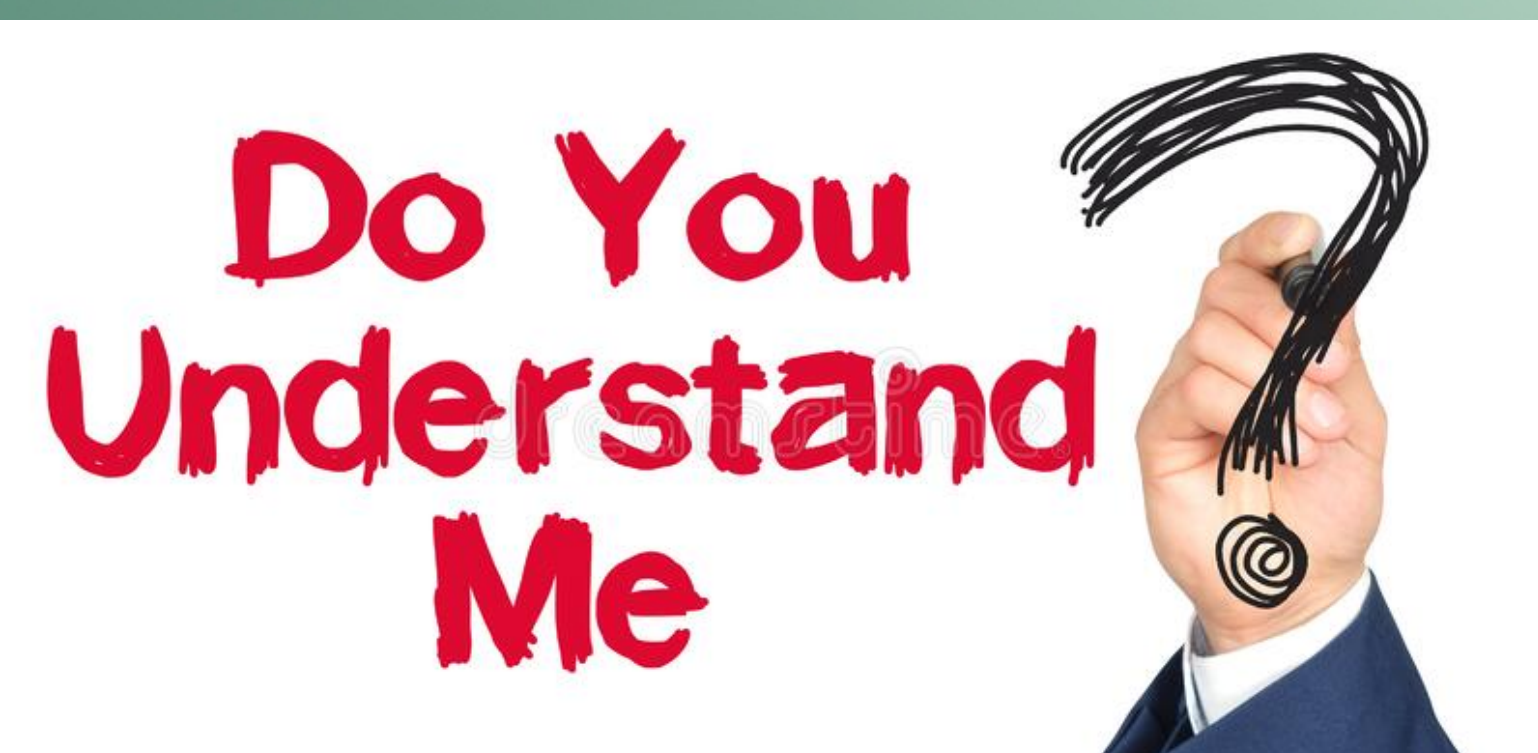
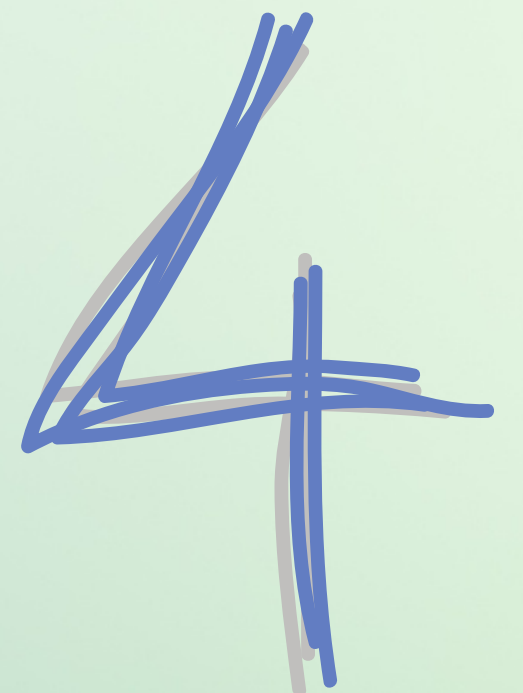
Paradigm Shift or Paradigm Expansion?

One example of displacement of concepts:

In a traditional sense when we look at reorganization, what senior people like me do is get a flip chart out and draw lots of boxes and allocate people to functions without really knowing what's going on in the organization. One of the things we do around this [transformation] approach is to let the structure form itself and continue to re-form as circumstances change. It's a challenge for us because we're used to stability and continuity but the reality is our environment is constantly changing so we need to be nimble and agile enough to adapt our structures and roles as fast as the environment changes. (p.69)

Preunderstanding

A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE CAN BE A DANGEROUS THING



Three categories of preunderstanding :

- A small number of leaders who had no preunderstanding of the methodology
- The majority of leaders who had second-hand preunderstanding, most often from hearing about the methodologies from colleagues
- A small number of leaders who had first-hand personal experience of engaging with the methodologies



COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

BURNING PLATFORM OR HAS SOMEONE
BURNT THE TOAST

Cognitive dissonance is the next element of sensemaking and influences how people generate that which they then make sense. Weick (1995) summarizes the legacy of cognitive dissonance theory and its

shared ideas with sensemaking by asserting that both:

- involve increasing the number of cognitive elements that are consistent with the decision being made sense of
- entail justification being triggered by the choice made (and so are post-decisional behaviors)
- are retrospective and use post-decision outcomes to reconstruct pre-decisional histories
- are triggered by some form of discrepancy or unexpected outcome
- use social construction of justification
- are founded on the concept that action shapes cognition

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Interpretation

DECIDE FIRST, JUSTIFY LATER

In other words, sensemaking involves selecting one out of a myriad of possible interpretations of what is being experienced and using one of a myriad of possible explanations to make sense of our chosen interpretation. One important outcome of this continuous circular process of sensemaking and interpretation is that:

... it leads to justifications for past and future actions. Once a commitment to action is made, the process of providing an explanation for a particular interpretation simultaneously creates justifications for past events and future courses of action. Creating these justifications is not a one-time event in sensemaking, but an ongoing process whereby the justifications shapes actions and then those actions shape further justifications. (Kramer, 2017)



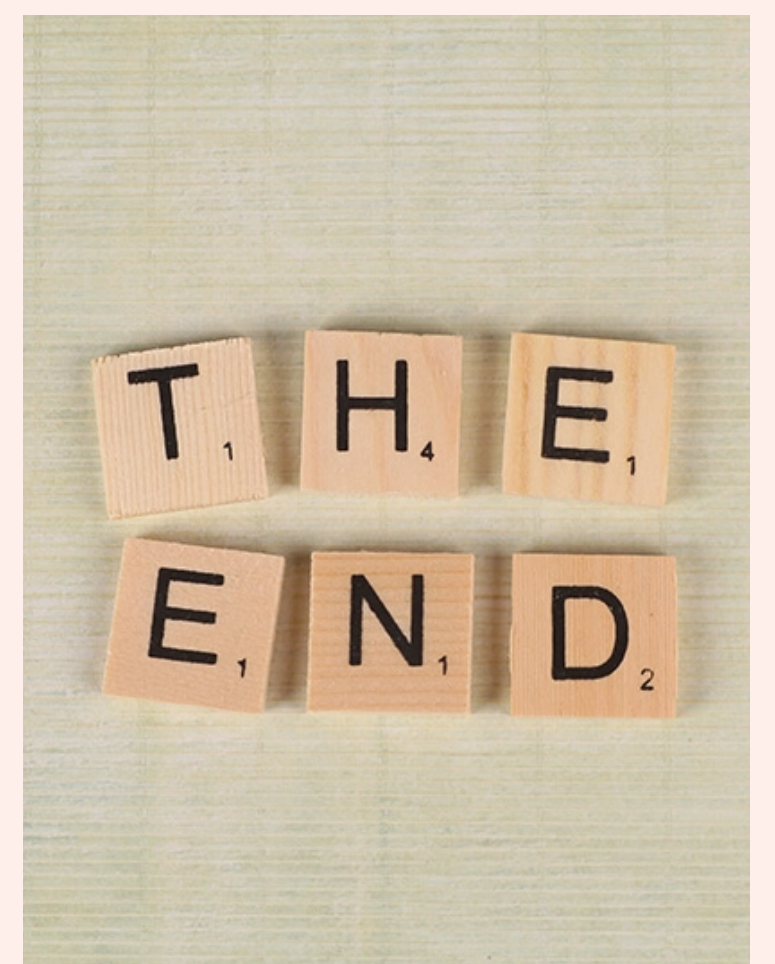
INTERPRETATION

PART THREE

CONCLUSION

These key elements of sensemaking are identified and used to understand the sensemaking process of leaders. The relationship between the elements and the impact they can have in both promoting and inhibiting mindset change. The sensemaking elements are interrelated and each influences and is influenced by, the others. It provides insights for leaders seeking self-development and for interventionists wishing to help others make sense of change. The book illustrates how the elements can be influenced to help create conditions for leaders to engage in reflexive practice in which they challenge their current mindsets. This research has synthesized a holistic understanding of these existing and new concepts and placed them into the context of leader sensemaking of organizational change. This book shows several important elements of sensemaking. Through interviews with different leaders around the world, it finally shows the importance and particularity of these elements. Although I believe that some concepts and methodologies in the book are not easy for people who are not familiar with leadership, through overall reading, we can broaden our knowledge and better understand the characteristics and functions of sensemaking.

Reference



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Beauvois, J.-L. & Joule, R.-V. 1996. *A Radical Dissonance Theory*, London, Taylor and Francis.