

ABSTRACT

Sensemaking and sensegiving is a widely researched topic in the domains of organizational leadership and organizational crisis and continue to make substantial contributions to these fields. In crisis situations, failure has been accredited to the inability to create shared understanding. Thus, shared understanding is crucial for an organization when they face an uncertain and ambiguous situation which makes changes to existing practices inevitable. These changes emerge because shared understanding happens through leaders' and followers' engagement in sensemaking and sensegiving. Thus, sensemaking and sensegiving play a major role in a crisis to create shared understanding among leaders and followers in decision making. As a result, creating shared understanding takes organisations to its pinnacle as it leads to higher organisational performance through collective strategic decision making by building trust and rapport between leaders and followers. Collective decision making happens as a result of shared understanding. In a crisis, leaders have their own sensemaking about the crisis and followers too. They engage in their own sensemaking which results in equivocality, and to enact the environment and to reduce equivocality a shared understanding is a must.

Most research work carried out in the existing literature focuses on sensemaking and sensegiving (retrospective sensemaking and prospective sensemaking respectively). Prospective sensemaking entails imaginations about the future and it is forward looking and sensemaking itself is an activity which is retrospective. However, studies reveal that there is a dire need for more theoretical and empirical investigations on prospective sensemaking which is also known as sensegiving. Furthermore, most extant studies on sensemaking and sensegiving is leader centric and those that used a follower centric approach is rare in the existing literature.

This study aims to explore whether and how sensemaking and sensegiving contribute to create shared understanding in a crisis. Hence, this study establishes how leaders engaged in sensemaking and sensegiving and how the followers engaged in sensemaking in a crisis and how they make the ground to create a shared understanding.

The study uses the theoretical lens of theory of enactment. Theory of enactment has been used to explain sensemaking and sensegiving in the existing literature., Weick (1979)

considers enactment as bracketing, deviation amplification, self-fulfilling prophecy, and social construction of reality. Frames are activated in the individual minds that are used for sensemaking. Schemas are dynamic knowledge structures in a person's mind regarding crisis and other concepts, events and entities that activate sensemaking in leaders' and followers' minds. In this research, how sensemaking is activated in leaders' and followers' minds are explored using enactment, framing and schemata/cognitive maps.

This study adopted a qualitative approach rooted in an interpretative paradigm since it is not aimed at generalising the findings. Case study research strategy was adopted in this study to investigate the phenomenon of focus. A single hotel group was selected as the case for this study and was selected because of its success in handling the global crisis of Covid-19 which first impacted international markets before impacting Sri Lanka as a country. The selected hotel group had faced many other crises even before the Covid-19 pandemic, and successfully recovered within a shorter period. Hotel Z group has identified as the most suitable for the purpose of this study, and their success story of handling the Covid-19 pandemic is still ongoing. Twenty-three in-depth interviews and one focus group interview was carried out for data collection, and out of the interviews carried, 10 interviews were with leaders and 13 interviews were with followers. Data analysis was done through thematic analysis and the theory of enactment was used as the theoretical lens.

The results of the study reveal that both leaders and followers engaged in sensemaking through framing, enactment and schemata/cognitive maps. The findings also revealed that leaders engaged in sensegiving through metaphors, storytelling/narratives, and emotional arousal as well. Further, followers also engaged in both sensemaking and sensegiving during the crisis to create shared understanding. Emotional arousal was used as a way of engaging in sensemaking by leaders which makes a contribution to the theory of enactment.

Key words: Shared Understanding, Sensemaking, Sensegiving, Theory of Enactment, Crisis, Framing, Schemata, Metaphor, Storytelling