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The Role of Substantive Actions in Sensemaking During Strategic Change

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ABSTRACT While prior research has provided rich insights into how strategic change unfolds through sensemaking and sensegiving, the existing literature conceptualizes these activities largely as cognitive and discursive accomplishments. Although leaders commonly also modify organizational structures, processes, and practices, prior research has paid little attention to how these substantive actions shape the interpretive change process. Based on a qualitative case study of a top-management-led change initiative, I identify four ways in which substantive actions can support strategic change beyond the influence of discursive sensegiving: actualizing, concretizing, formalizing, and materializing. I incorporate my findings into an integrative model that relates my observations of the distinct influence of different types of sensemaking cues to differences in the sensemaking content and describes sensemaking during strategic change not just as an intellectual but as a multimodal process.

Keywords: discursive, implementation, sensegiving, sensemaking, strategic change, substantive

INTRODUCTION

Strategic change refers to change that is consciously initiated by top managers and that leads to a significant shift in an organization's key activities (Gioia et al., 1994). Successful strategic change implementation requires a shift in the meanings that employees attribute to the organization and the environment (Balogun and Johnson, 2004, 2005; Bartunek, 1984). Recognition of the importance of this dynamic has led scholars to examine strategic change as unfolding through 'processes of sensemaking and sensegiving' (Canato et al., 2013, p. 1744). Strategic change disrupts organizational members' taken-for-granted reality and causes them to adopt a more conscious mode of engaging with their surroundings (Balogun and Johnson, 2005; Weick, 1995). Organizational leaders can try to influence employee sensemaking in the unfolding change process through sensegiving

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[Corrections added on 21 October, after first online publication: Figure 2 has been moved to model section.]

'toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality' (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442).

Prior literature has conceptualized sensemaking mostly as a cognitive and discursive process (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Correspondingly, sensegiving is 'usually conceived as a discursive activity designed to "interpret and sell" change' (Arnaud et al., 2016, p. 41). Extensive research has shown how leaders can skilfully use narratives, metaphors, and other discursive resources to guide employees' sensemaking (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). In recent years, however, scholars have criticized the existing literature for its 'predominantly intellectualist approach to sensemaking' that privileges 'cognition and language' (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, p. 7). Scholars have therefore called for research to attend more closely to the influence of the material context on the sensemaking process (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Weick, 2012). Studies in this vein have elucidated how people make sense of cues from the natural environment or their physical setting (Cornelissen et al., 2014; Whiteman and Cooper, 2011), from their bodies or emotions (Cunha et al., 2015; Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; de Rond et al., 2019), and from physical artifacts (Arnaud et al., 2016; Höllerer et al., 2018; Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012).

Despite these recent advances, how leaders' substantive actions, which materially modify organizational structures, processes, or practices (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990; Bansal and Kistruck, 2006), influence sensemaking has not yet been systematically investigated. While senior leaders commonly shape the organizational environment to gain support for strategic change, the sensemaking literature has tended to assume that these substantive actions are not part of the interpretive change process (Mantere et al., 2012). Prior research has tended to view substantive actions only as a 'prelude' to discursive sensegiving (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p. 69) or as a 'secondary reinforcement mechanism' (Canato et al., 2013, p. 1746). Consequently, our knowledge of the distinct ways in which substantive actions contribute to sensemaking and sensegiving during strategic change is underdeveloped. Enhancing the existing research in this regard is important to deepen understanding of sensemaking during strategic change not just as an intellectual but as a multimodal process.

I address this research gap by asking: *How do leaders' substantive actions influence employee sensemaking during strategic change implementation?* To investigate this question, I build on in-depth data from a revelatory case of a centre-led change process that allowed me to analyse the distinct ways in which leaders' substantive actions contribute to sensemaking during strategic change. The top management team (TMT) wanted the business units to take on more responsibility for cultivating their markets. This strategic change posed an especially difficult challenge for one department, which had developed an internal service focus of sorts and served the other business units rather than the market. While the TMT's discursive sensegiving actions were not sufficient to trigger a shift in meanings among department members, its substantive actions helped facilitate employee sensemaking.

This study makes two contributions to the literature on sensemaking and strategic change. First, my observations extend the prevailing understanding of how substantive actions influence sensemaking and sensegiving during strategic change. I identify four ways – *actualizing*, *concretizing*, *formalizing*, and *materializing* – in which substantive actions

can support strategic change beyond the influence of discursive sensegiving. By unveiling distinct effects through which substantive actions can reinforce and complement discursive sensegiving, my findings point to the benefits of an integrated deployment of these two types of sensemaking cues. Second, I incorporate my findings on the influence of substantive actions into an integrative model that describes sensemaking during strategic change as a multimodal process. Previous research has tended to conceptualize sensemaking as a purely intellectual accomplishment based on discursive interactions about abstract beliefs regarding the reasons for and the benefits of change. My model complements this perspective by also demonstrating the significance of substantive and experiential modes of engaging with change in terms of the nature of the cues and the content of the sense made.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Since the early 2000s, the processes underlying employee sensemaking during strategic change have spurred significant research interest (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). The sensemaking perspective is premised on the idea that organizational actors socially construct their realities (Weick, 1995). Accordingly, reality is 'an on-going accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs' (Weick, 1993, p. 635). Strategic change disrupts the taken-for-granted reality, and organizational members begin to more consciously engage with their environment to make sense of changing circumstances (Balogun and Johnson, 2004, 2005). They interpret the cues that they extract from their environment and make sense of them by negotiating, contesting, and coconstructing meaning (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014) to establish a level of certainty that enables further activity (Lüscher and Lewis, 2008; Weick, 1995).

Closely related to the idea of sensemaking is the notion of sensegiving, that is, change agents' attempts to influence 'the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality' (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). In centre-led strategic change, sensegiving is viewed primarily as the task of organizational leaders (Balogun et al., 2015). Leaders' sensegiving is successful when recipients construct an interpretation of change that is compatible with leaders' goals and that supports implementation behaviour (Mantere et al., 2012; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2017). The effects of any sensegiving action, however, depend on organizational members' sensemaking (Monin et al., 2013). Members can either accept or subvert the influence of leaders (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Monin et al., 2013) as they develop their own interpretations of strategic change.

The existing literature has treated sensemaking as a largely cognitive and discursive process (de Rond et al., 2019; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). Consequently, it has tended to focus on the role of leaders' discursive actions in shaping meanings and influencing others (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Although senior leaders commonly also modify organizational structures, processes, and practices to gain support for strategic change, the prior literature on sensemaking has largely assumed that these substantive actions are not part of the interpretive change process (Mantere et al., 2012).

Instead, the role of substantive actions in sensegiving has been seen primarily as 'sensebreaking' (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Sensebreaking refers to the destruction of established organizational meanings (e.g., Mantere et al., 2012; Monin et al., 2013). Several studies have shown how restructuring initiatives (such as mergers or spin-offs) can destroy existing meaning (e.g., Balogun and Johnson, 2004, 2005; Balogun et al., 2015; Lüscher and Lewis, 2008), thereby creating a 'meaning void' and a 'sensegiving imperative' that enable leaders' subsequent discursive sensegiving actions (Corley and Gioia, 2004; Mantere et al., 2012). Hence, the sensemaking literature has tended to view managers' substantive actions primarily as 'a prelude' to discursive sensegiving (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p. 69) or sometimes also as 'secondary reinforcement mechanisms' (Canato et al., 2013, p. 1746).

The cognitivist and discursive orientation of the sensemaking literature has been attributed to the influence of Weick's (1979, 1995) early work (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). However, already in his classic *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Weick (1995) noted that, although arguments and reasoned discourse are 'an obvious anchor in organizational sensemaking', actions manipulating the organizational environment may be 'just as plentiful as potential reference points for sensemaking' (p. 155). He argued that 'manipulation [of the environment] generates clearer outcomes in a puzzling world, and these outcomes make it easier to grasp what might be going on' (Weick, 1995, p. 168). The fact that substantive actions are often not directly targeted to affect organizational meanings – but convey meanings while serving instrumental purposes (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992) – might seem to suggest that sensegiving based on substantive action can play only a crude or unspecific role in effecting major change. However, as Weick (1995) further specified: 'Manipulation need not to be heavy-handed, nor massive, to create something sensible that others can see and interpret. Manipulation can create order and sensibleness incrementally' (p. 168).

In recent years, scholars have begun to increasingly criticize the intellectualist approach to sensemaking (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; de Rond et al., 2019; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015; Weick, 2012). A growing number of scholars have argued that sensemaking is not only an 'embrained phenomenon' (Cunha et al., 2015, p. 41). Rather, the 'sensing' of the material surroundings is also an integral part of sensemaking (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012). Consequently, scholars have called for more research on 'how sensemaking unfolds when the material world is present and consequential' (de Rond et al., 2019, p. 1963).

Recent studies in the wider sensemaking literature have responded to these calls and have begun to examine how people make sense of cues from their physical setting, their bodies, and their emotions. For example, Whiteman and Cooper (2011) introduced the concept of ecological sensemaking to describe how actors make sense of material landscapes and ecological processes. Cornelissen et al. (2014) studied how 'material anchoring' through the physical setting, physical gestures and acts, and material objects strengthened police officers' commitment to an erroneous cognitive frame during an anti-terrorist operation. Finally, Cunha et al. (2015) explored the role of different 'meaning-making routes' – cognitive, emotional, and bodily – in the sensemaking process of a Khmer Rouge prisoner.

A related stream of research has investigated how material artifacts influence sensemaking. Stigliani and Ravasi (2012) studied how PowerPoint slides, sketches, and Post-its enabled product designers to develop, articulate, and elaborate new conceptualizations of products. Höllerer et al. (2018) analysed multimodal compositions of verbal and visual text elements in news articles and examined how visual materials contributed to shaping sensemaking about the global financial crisis. Finally, Arnaud et al. (2016) observed how reading and writing texts that contextualized a global strategic change initiative fostered employees' sense of local control and support for company strategy.

Building on these recent advances, which have challenged the intellectualist approach to sensemaking (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015; Weick, 2012), I seek to better understand how leaders' substantive actions influence sensemaking and sensegiving during strategic change. Enhancing knowledge in this regard is important to improve our understanding of the sociomaterial underpinnings of what has been primarily conceptualized as an intellectual process. Following the prior literature, I define substantive actions as actions that create 'real, material' change in organizational structures, processes, or practices (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990, p. 178) or, put differently, as actions that produce 'observable, physical referents' in organizational structures, processes, or practices (Pfeffer, 1981, p. 182).

METHODS

Research Context

Software Inc. was founded in 1984 to develop tailor-made software solutions for diverse industries. In 2016, the company employed 270 employees and produced sales revenues of approximately 46 million Euros. Software development was organized into three departments. While the Department of Finance Solutions focused on the financial services industry and the Department of Telecommunications Solutions served the telecommunication industry, the Department of Enterprise Solutions had no clearly defined market focus.

Since the founding of Software Inc., its TMT had championed initiative-taking at lower levels of the organization as a critical determinant of performance and long-term sustainability. However, as growing competition from near and offshore providers in Eastern Europe and Asia required strengthening the company's profile as a technical consultancy and harnessing the industry knowledge of its business units, the organization began focusing increasingly on exploiting the extant business rather than on developing new business opportunities. In 2015, the TMT decided to launch a strategic initiative aimed at enhancing entrepreneurial responsibility in the different business units to ensure that each department would focus on seizing new business opportunities in its respective market. For both the Department of Finance Solutions and the Department of Telecommunication Solutions, which had clear market foci, the change initiative meant that they had to extend their personnel capacity and revitalize their business development efforts. However, greater strategic change was required in the Department of Enterprise Solutions, whose external reach was rather limited.

Data Collection

My data collection took place from January to July 2016. When I entered the field, initial conversations revealed that members of the Department of Enterprise Solutions were seriously concerned about the TMT's strategic change initiative. Department members indicated that they were not convinced that change was necessary and felt that it might disadvantage them. During the six months of data collection, I observed how members of the Department of Enterprise Solutions made sense of the strategic change initiative and how employee engagement with strategic change implementation evolved. My main contact was the head of the Department of Enterprise Solutions. His upward and downward access in the organization enabled me to observe management meetings, conduct interviews, and collect documents across the organizational hierarchy. He was also willing to answer any additional clarification questions, which enhanced my understanding of the company's processes. During the data collection period, I visited the company on a weekly basis, usually on two to three separate occasions. I collected data through observations in management meetings, interviews, and documents, allowing me to triangulate different data sources (Jick, 1979; Yin, 2014).

Observations. I conducted nonparticipant observations in all management meetings involving members of the Department of Enterprise Solutions. These observations allowed me to track how their sensemaking of strategic change evolved over time. In total, I observed 48 management meetings. I attended all meetings in which department members interacted with the TMT. Observing the interactions between the TMT and department leaders enabled me to understand the TMT's sensegiving actions that took place during my data collection period. For example, I attended the meeting at which the CEO introduced the balanced score card (BSC) to department leadership teams. In total, I joined 10 biweekly meetings between the TMT and the department heads. I also observed two quarterly meetings between the TMT and departments' leadership teams and one organization-wide meeting between the TMT and all employees.

In addition to meetings involving the TMT, I observed four types of departmental meetings: (1) 12 department leadership meetings attended by the department head, team leaders, and sales personnel; (2) 14 operations meetings of the department leadership team that focused on operational issues around project development; (3) six meetings between the department head and individual team leaders; and (4) two department-wide meetings. Finally, in July 2016, I also had the opportunity to attend a meeting in which the department head and team leaders retrospectively assessed the successes and failures of the previous half-year.

Many of my visits to the site entailed a combination of informal conversations and follow-up discussions that supported my understanding of the various interactions that I had observed in the meetings. During all meetings and several subsequent informal conversations, I took detailed notes, including many verbatim quotes, on a laptop and wrote them up within 24 hours (Yin, 2014). These detailed accounts allowed for 'a sound reconstruction of significant interaction episodes' during data analysis (Patriotta and Spedale, 2009, p. 1234).

By observing the departmental interactions, I was able to capture how department members' sensemaking of strategic change evolved in real time in response to the TMT's modifications of organizational structures, processes, and practices. These substantive actions provided important cues for department members' sensemaking. They led department members to question their existing understandings and acted as an 'agenda for discussion' (Arnaud et al., 2016, p. 53). In addition to revealing department members' sensemaking efforts, the observational data also enabled me to study departmental activities more broadly and observe how department members' change implementation behaviours evolved in relation to their ongoing sensemaking efforts.

Interviews. To complement my observational data, I conducted 20 open-ended, audio-taped interviews that I transcribed verbatim. These interviews deepened my understanding of the change process and participants' experiences. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2.5 hours, with an average length of approximately 1.5 hours. I interviewed the five members of the TMT, which allowed me to learn more about their intentions behind the change initiative and their sensegiving efforts to convey the importance and benefits of the envisaged change to organizational members. In addition, I interviewed twice the leadership team of the Department of Enterprise Solutions. I conducted the first set of interviews in the first few months after entering the field and the second set in the last few months before exiting the field. In line with the inductive nature of my study, I modified the interview protocol after each interview to take advantage of themes that had emerged in prior interviews or observations (Spradley, 1979). The first set of interviews focused on gathering broader information on the organization and management. After quickly discovering that the change process was a serious concern among department members, I focused more specifically on how department members made sense of the intended change, both prior to and during the first few months of my data collection. The second set of interviews focused on how department members experienced the change process after the initial interviews, the developments during subsequent months of my data collection, and their progress. In the different interviews, department members' sensemaking of strategic change primarily related to the TMT's substantive action. I adjusted my interview protocol accordingly to better understand this emerging theme.

Documents. To triangulate the data from observations and interviews, I also collected internal documents on the change initiative. These documents provided further insights into how the TMT and department members made sense of change. Furthermore, I reviewed the company's annual reports and public announcements, which explained some of the TMT's substantive actions to external stakeholders.

Data Analysis

Consistent with a grounded theory approach, my analyses iterated among the analysis of the data, developing theoretical categories, and integrating emerging insights with the existing literature (Gioia et al., 2012). To code the data, I organized them chronologically in an Atlas.ti 7 database (Yin, 2014). In line with the premise that 'sensemaking

is a team-based process' (Balogun et al., 2015, p. 962), my analysis centred around understanding department members' sensemaking process that eventually led to coordinated change implementation behaviour. I found significant consistency in the interpretations of the department leadership team, but one team leader did not share the others' perspectives. This team leader had joined the department only in the year prior to data collection. He had previously worked for another department and, already at the beginning of data collection, supported a shift toward more proactive market cultivation. My analysis focused on the sensemaking process of the rest of the department leadership team, whose interpretations developed along the lines described in the empirical section.

Stage 1: Understanding the strategic change context. I began my data analysis knowing that, although the TMT had used discursive sensegiving to disseminate a persuasive account of its intended change, it had concluded its efforts before I entered the field. During data collection, the TMT no longer discussed the necessity and benefits of the change initiative with department members. In interviews, the TMT members elaborated on their intention behind the change initiative, the perceived lack of change implementation progress in the Department of Enterprise Solutions, and their substantive actions. When discussions in the cross-hierarchical management meetings related to the change initiative, they mainly concerned details of the implementation of the TMT's substantive actions, such as promoting team leaders and department heads or introducing the BSC.

Stage 2: Understanding departmental sensemaking processes. To analyse how the change process evolved from the department members' point of view, I systematically coded and aggregated raw data to develop theoretical constructs (Gioia et al., 2012). I first analysed text passages describing department members' interpretations of the change and their change behaviour. Reading through the field notes, interviews, and documents, I coded relevant passages with the informants' 'in vivo' terms and phrases. Next, I combined the codes that were 'similar in essence' into first-order categories (Locke, 2001; Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012). Noting similarities and differences, I subsequently grouped the first-order codes into second-order categories. When comparing the resulting themes with the extant literature, I realized that several emerging concepts resembled constructs cited by Sonenshein and Dholakia (2012) and Herscovitch and Meyer (2002). When applicable, I adopted labels for these constructs from the literature.

These constructs included 'strategy worldview', that is, a set of beliefs that helps lend coherence to change and improves the understanding of why adjustments are necessary (Sonenshein and Dholakia, 2012, p. 3). The construct of 'benefits finding' describes the extent to which organizational members construct change as having more benefits than downsides (p. 4). The construct of 'affective commitment' captures 'a desire to provide support for the change based on a belief in its inherent benefits' (Herscovitch and Meyer, 2002, p. 475). The construct of 'continuance commitment' refers to a commitment to change based on 'a recognition that there are costs associated with failure to provide support for the change'. The construct of 'unit identification' describes the degree to which organizational members self-define in terms of a referent (Sonenshein and Dholakia, 2012, p. 6). The construct of 'perceived change efficacy' captures organizational

members' perceptions of their ability to 'handle organizational change and, despite the difficulties involved, function effectively' (p. 7).

Subsequently, I clustered the codes into five aggregate dimensions describing department members' sensemaking in response to the TMT's discursive sensegiving, the TMT's substantive actions, and their practical experiences during change implementation. The data structure in Figure 1 shows the outcome of this analytical process. To further illustrate the validity of my interpretations, I also include Table I with supporting data for each first-order concept and second-order theme.

Given the important role of the TMT's substantive actions, I next focused on better understanding how these actions contributed to department members' sensemaking. This focus led me to identify four ways in which substantive actions may support strategic change beyond the influence of discursive sensegiving: *actualizing* (turning the presumed consequences of change implementation into a tangible reality); *concretizing* (creating an intentional power vacuum to clarify change responsibilities); *formalizing* (giving official status to employees' expanded responsibilities); and *materializing* (providing a material reference structure of the central ideas of the change).

Stage 3: Building a model of sensemaking as a multimodal process. After identifying the core categories, I drew on statements by department members to infer linkages between

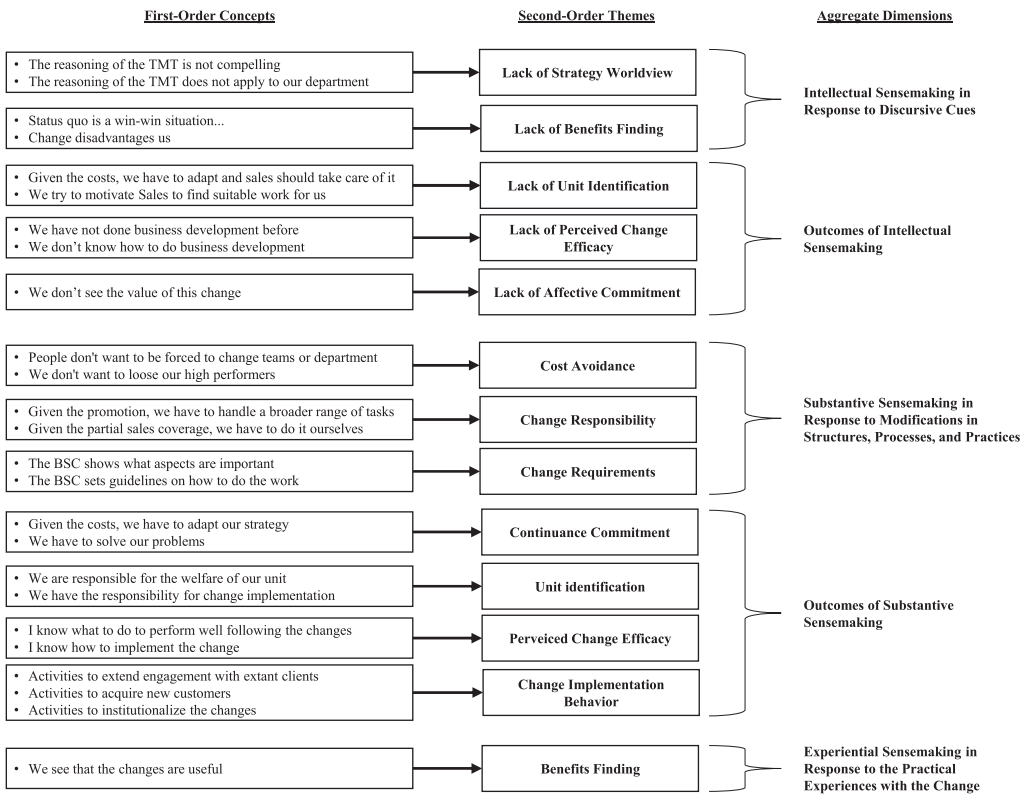

Figure 1. Data structure

Table I. Supporting data for each first-order concept and second-order theme in Figure 1

Second-order themes	*First-order codes*	*Illustrative quotes*
Lack of strategy worldview	Reasoning of the TMT is not compelling	'The TMT is convinced that the departments must adopt a market focus, and that is also being said in all the communications, for example, in the annual report and other publications, also internally… What exactly is the reason that one had to now do exactly that and not do something else, I can't really determine without doubt'. (DH, Interview, January 2016)
		'I think how we have approached things – very opportunistically… something came in, we took care of it, and then something else came along… That's how we have worked, and in my opinion, that has worked well'. (TL 2, Interview, February 2016)
	Reasoning of the TMT does not apply to our unit	'Right now, [Software Inc.] is moving in the direction that the departments are supposed to have a market focus. For the telecommunications department, this is clear. For the finance department, this is also clear, and we have actually always been a little bit of a special case. Enterprise Solutions today – we don't have a market, but several markets. Market focus is a challenge for the department because it is a lot less clear'. (DH, Interview, January 2016)
Lack of benefits finding	Status quo is a win-win situation	'We used to be able to say, "We help the other departments, and we earn the money that our employees earn over there, and everybody is happy. A win-win situation!..." We now need to terminate this wonderful collaboration that we had, that we supported very much, and that we liked doing …' . (DH, Interview, January 2016)
	Change disadvantages us	'Outside the finance and telecommunications market, the order situation is of course much more difficult and challenging because, first of all, there are no orders to such a great extent and especially not in this breadth'. (DH, Interview, January 2016)
Lack of unit identification	Given the costs, we have to adapt and sales should take care of matters	'I'm pleased that the gentlemen of Sales are here to negotiate how you can support us. So far, ES has been a billowing entity between Telco and Finance, but now the TMT wants to set stronger boundaries. We're in a difficult situation in terms of market focus and need new orders, new customers'. (DH, Department Leadership Meeting, February 2016)
	We'll try to motivate sales to find suitable work for us	TL 3: 'If we get employees back from the other department, we have to be able to employ them. We now kick the ball back to sales…'. DH: 'Exactly. We've now caught the ball and will kick it back in the field and say, "This is why you [sales] have to figure out which new projects can be acquired"'. (Department Leadership Meeting, February 2016)

(Continues)

Table I. (*Continued*)

Second-order themes	*First-order codes*	*Illustrative quotes*
Lack of perceived change efficacy	We haven't done business development before	'The way we're set up is that it is my task to take care of department members. In other words, my job is a mixture of Administration, HR, Coach, etc. I've never been responsible for sales'. (DH, Interview, January 2016)
		'I've never before actively acquired a new project…'. (TL 2, Bi-Lateral Meeting with the Department Head, January 2016)
	We don't know how to do business development	DH: 'Cultivating the market does not per se have to mean that you have to find four other clients in the medicinal engineering market. It could also mean that you start developing the market by extending your engagement with [your existing client in the medicinal engineering market] …'.
		TL1: 'Yes, I understand that. I just don't know how to do that…'. (Bi-Lateral Meeting, March 2016)
Lack of affective commitment	We don't see the value of this change	'Everybody here will tell you that we [at Enterprise Solutions] don't have a market! And they don't want a market, which is maybe the more important statement…'. (TL 1, Interview, March 2016)
Cost Avoidance	People don't want to be forced to change departments	'[The other departments] take over our people, and that now happens constantly. That has meant a reduction from 65 to 50 department members. And, actually, yes, that creates a certain stress. Not because I'm a headcount fetishist. I don't really care about that, but time after time, I see that the employees themselves have a certain idea of what their work life should look like'. (DH, Interview, January 2016)
	We don't want to lose our high performers	'And it often hits our high performers, and then we have a problem'. (DH, Interview, January 2016)
Change responsibility	Given the partial sales coverage, we have to do it ourselves	'Yes, and with regard to sales, I have realized that things work a bit according to the slogan: "Help yourself, then God will help you" – because they don't do it by themselves'. (DH, Interview, March 2016)
	Given the promotion, we have to handle a broader range of tasks	'It's not so much about equalization or that the department heads are part of the TMT, even though you could say, cool, that's an increase in power! I think it's rather the other way around. If you give power, you give responsibility. And now this responsibility weighs heavily on us, and it means now you have to do it! That's exactly the issue that we're now facing: We're now there and have the responsibility to take care of everything'. (DH, Interview, February 2016)
		'Yes, I feel that that's now a challenge. And that's why we have to bring the department, the department head to a new level of fitness… The team leaders must take the next step, and I must also take the next step…' (DH, Interview, February 2016)

(Continues)

Table I. (*Continued*)

Second-order themes	*First-order codes*	*Illustrative quotes*
Change requirements	The BSC shows which aspects are important	'The BSC provides a list of action fields: Where do I need to do something? What kind of goals do I want to set for myself?'. (TL 3, Interview, February 2016)
		'What has surely changed because of the Balanced Scorecard is that the awareness of certain action fields has increase…'. (TL 1, Interview, March 2016)
	The BSC guides us in doing the work	'I think that the BSC is something that also helps me personally. When an employee now asks me, "How do we do that?", I can say, "Look, there we have a document, which tells you how we do things. I think it's pretty good for this purpose"'. (TL 1, Interview, March 2016)
Continuance commitment	Given the costs, we have to adapt our strategy	'I feel uncomfortable if people are forced to change departments. A way out would be if we would have more markets that we are cultivating, more projects, more acquisitions, because then I know that I can employ everyone and no one can come and say, "Give me something…"'. (DH, Interview, January 2016)
	Given what is at stake, we have to adapt	'The point has been, either you find work or the team will be taken apart and distributed, one over here, one over there… And we actually voted against that and wanted to keep the team together, and then had to start looking at how to get new work ourselves…'. (TL 4, Interview, March 2016)
Unit identification	We are responsible for the unit's welfare	'[The project leader] and I have to help more of our people to do the things we are doing – distribution of responsibility in the team… distributing responsibility among more people. Until now, we've always had to be there. For example, on Monday, when [the Sales] says that he wants to have [the project leader] and not [team member X] at the sales meeting because [team member X] is not yet able to sell to the customer. We have to enable our people to do that so that in the future someone else can also take this role'. (TL 1, Bi-Lateral Meeting with the DH, March 2016)
	We are responsible for change implementation	'For me – who's quasi at the top of the pyramid – I'm now even more aware that my responsibility is also to guide the sales process or at least to try to influence it – where previously, I didn't have to do that. Previously, my task was simply to organize the production perfectly, and I could do that, and now to put the at-times-still-tangled sales process on the rails – that is something different, right?'. (DH, Interview, March 2016)
Perceived change efficacy	I know how to perform well after change	'Performance requirements have been communicated very sparsely. Now, I have this card that I can look at and think: Ok! If I take care of that, then I'm doing pretty well. I like that'. (TL 2, Interview, February 2016)

(Continues)

Table I. (*Continued*)

Second-order themes	*First-order codes*	*Illustrative quotes*
	I know how to implement change	TL5: 'I could still say what I have in mind for field "M3 – market expansion". To be more strongly represented and present at [customer X] and thereby be able to acquire new projects…'. DH: 'Ok, I'll write that down, "Position Software Inc. as technology partner at [customer X]". Ok, now there's still the question about how to do that'. TL5: 'I think one would need to spend much more time at [customer X] to be more visible. And you need to be able to achieve the goals of M1 and M2, "customer satisfaction and excelling customer expectations", so that our popularity grows beyond our current ecosystem at [customer X] …'. (Bi-lateral Meeting, March 2016)
Change implementation behavior	Activities to extend engagement with extant clients	'What would still be important…We've already talked about it… That we use the time to spread out. They apparently still have many issues. By focusing on what the client needs and by being optimally informed… We should really make sure that we can extend our footprint over there and in fact before the 2.2 million earmarked in the current budget are exhausted. That would be really important. To do that in parallel…'. (DH, Department Leadership Meeting, March 2016)
		'In terms of business development, we will have a workshop with [customer Y]. Last mile management is the new key word regarding their production line, and we want to provide them with tools for how they can plan their supply on the production line and advise them with regard to architecture and not just blow up [the existing system] to enable more flexibility, agility, and, in the end, from our perspective, open up another budget. That we will do next week, and we're excited to see what will come of it'. (TL 2, Department Leadership Meeting, March 2016)
	Activities to acquire new customers	'[Company X] put out a request for proposal and invited me and sales to show what they've got. I believe they have money. They've invited four software companies, and we need to decide whether we want to make an offer. Then, there is [company Y]. There's the question of whether we want to register on their platform to get more information about their next software engineering project. My suggestions: We register and see what it actually is and decide whether to make an offer at the next meeting'. (DH, Department Leadership Meeting, May 2016)
		DH: 'We got a query from [Mr. X] from [potential customer Z] …'. TL6: 'That would be IoT…'. DH: 'Exactly, we three will go there and you could then follow it up sales-wise'. (Department Leadership Meeting, June 2016)

(Continues)

Table I. (*Continued*)

Second-order themes	*First-order codes*	*Illustrative quotes*
	Activities to institutionalize changes	Suggested changes: The focus of the department leadership meeting on Tuesdays should switch between daily and non-daily business. (Internal Document from the Departmental Retrospective, July 2016)
		DH: 'I know that it's the most difficult thing for us to manage the balancing act between working at capacity and doing something new at the same time'. TL6: 'I think it makes sense to have a team that can develop bids, help out the other teams in the department, etc. I think such an emergency relief team makes sense. It is of course a stressful job, but perhaps people could rotate…'. TL2: 'Yes, that's a valid consideration…'. DH: 'Let's have a meeting on this topic…'. (Operations Meeting, July 2016)
Benefits finding	The changes are useful	'I think we've developed regarding the level of customer cultivation. Previously, we had such fundamental problems to even find work for people. Back then, the focus was only on, "How do we find work for people, or where do we distribute them?". It has since switched more to, "How do we find projects?". I think we now have a higher standard in all teams. With regard to what I mentioned today about "What do we want to talk about with the customers?". In other words, this awareness that we do prototypes for them, look at their questions with them, find out what moves them and then, based on that, be able to do projects with them. I think that it's simply a little bit different than it used to be. Previously, we actually waited until sales gave us something or until maybe the existing project extended itself. That's my impression. But I don't think we've reached our goal yet. It's not yet perfect. But I think that we've taken a rather big step in a short amount of time'. (DH, Interview, June 2016)

the categories. I combined my observations of the TMT's influence on department members' sensemaking and of the evolution of departmental responses with existing theory to develop an integrative model of sensemaking during strategic change. When I compared the model to the existing sensemaking literature, I realized that the model captured three distinct ways of engaging with change in terms of the nature of the cues and the content of the sense made (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Whereas the notion of 'intellectual sensemaking' has been referenced in prior research, I also identified two other sensemaking modes that I call 'substantive sensemaking' and 'experiential sensemaking'. Although these distinctions constitute somewhat 'artificial boundaries' between complex, intertwined processes (Cunha et al., 2015, p. 47), they allow us to more fully understand the influence of different types of sensemaking cues and sensemaking processes during strategic change.

FINDINGS

The Strategic Change Context

In 2015, the TMT of Software Inc. decided to launch a strategic initiative aimed at enhancing entrepreneurial responsibility in the company's different departments. The TMT noted in an internal document communicating the change initiative that '*We want to delegate more entrepreneurial responsibility to the departments with a market focus*'. Since the founding of the company, the TMT of Software Inc. had championed initiative-taking at lower levels as a critical determinant of performance and long-term sustainability. However, two developments necessitated this centre-led change initiative. First, growing competition from near and offshore providers in Eastern Europe and Asia had heightened the importance in the TMT of shifting the company from being an excellent technical service provider to accentuating its profile as a technical consultancy. Thus, the TMT felt that emphasizing the company's industry knowledge with its eminent technical capabilities was critical to maintaining the company's position as a premium software developer. The CEO explained the reasoning as follows:

> We can't just stand out from our competition based on our technical competence because, often, industry know-how is also important. The customer doesn't simply want someone who will build software for him; he also wants someone who understands his business. (Interview, April 2016)

Second, while customer proximity enabled the business units to develop the industry knowledge needed to create relevant offerings, the TMT recognized that overemphasizing 'the hourly rate per total hours worked' had in recent years made the organization focus increasingly on exploiting the extant business instead of developing new business opportunities. Although the departments that were active in the fast-growing finance and telecommunication markets had grown steadily, the Department of Enterprise Solutions had largely become an internal service unit. Instead of adopting an outward focus and developing distinct market foci, this department had aligned itself around the other, growing departments. It often lent them its employees to help manage high market demand and took on projects in the finance and telecommunications markets that exceeded the other departments' capacity. Because the business units closely heeded optimizing their capacity utilization, this arrangement was advantageous for all departments. The Finance and Telecommunications Solutions departments did not need to recruit additional employees, and the Department of Enterprise Solutions faced less pressure over finding its own external customers. The Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO) summarized the situation as follows:

> Given that he wants to be highly profitable, [the head of Enterprise Solutions] is prepared to give away employees. He meets [the head of Finance Solutions], whom we told that he needs to recruit new people due to the high demand in his market, but he didn't do this as this department also focuses on the hourly rate. So, they meet and what happens? [The head of Enterprise Solutions] hands over people. (Interview, April 2016)

Beyond supporting the other two departments, the Department of Enterprise Solutions undertook any incoming project that fell outside the other departments' market focus. For example, the department's software developers were working for the manufacturing, retail, logistics, and medical engineering industries.

These developments made the TMT launch a change initiative to ensure that each department would take on entrepreneurial responsibility for its own business and actively seize new opportunities in its market by providing customers with both technical excellence and industry know-how. For the other departments, which had clear market foci, the change initiative meant extending their personnel capacity and revitalizing their business development efforts. However, the Department of Enterprise Solutions required greater strategic change. The CHRO explained the situation as follows:

> For the Department of Enterprise Solutions, this change is a little bit iffy. For the Department of Finance Solutions, the market focus is clear – the same for the Department of Telecommunications Solutions. Now, if you look at the Department of Enterprise Solutions… Some do software in the realm of medical engineering, and the others take care of personnel planning, logistics… It's quite a particle zoo, right? (Interview, April 2016)

Hence, the department would need to more clearly define and actively cultivate its own markets. It would need to move beyond its focus on operational excellence and efficiency to develop its business outside the finance and telecommunications industries. The COO summarized the situation as follows:

> The challenge lies with [the head of Enterprise Solutions]. He'll have to take care of more than one market but should still continue to develop in a market-oriented way and cultivate his own markets. If he doesn't, his department will just be a human resources pool of software engineers, as brutal as that sounds. (Interview, April 2016)

Departmental Responses to Strategic Change

The TMT launched the strategic change initiative by disseminating a plausible account of the targeted change in personal meetings with department members and via internal documents. Despite the TMT's discursive sensegiving, department members were not convinced of the reasons for or the benefits of the change. However, the TMT's subsequent substantive modifications of organizational structures, processes, and practices facilitated department members' sensemaking of the change.

In the following, I present my findings on the responses of the Department of Enterprise Solutions to the TMT's strategic change initiative in three parts. Part 1 considers department members' sensemaking in response to the TMT's discursive sensegiving. Part 2 describes how department members' sensemaking of the strategic change evolved in response to the TMT's substantive modifications of organizational structures, processes, and practices. Part 3 describes how, in subsequent months, employees'

interpretations supported increasing change implementation behaviours. The constructs underlined in the following narrative are used to build the grounded model of strategic change.

Part 1: Departmental Responses to the TMT's Discursive Actions

Discursive actions do not convince employees of the reasons and benefits. The TMT launched the change initiative by communicating its rationale to employees. Recognizing the increasing competitive pressure from low-cost competitors abroad, TMT members explained in various internal communication arenas why it had become increasingly important that the departments cultivate their own markets and create '*breathing space*' for business development. However, members of the Department of Enterprise Solutions did not find the TMT's arguments for the need to change compelling. They failed to develop a strategy worldview based on the TMT's verbal communications. The head of Enterprise Solutions explained:

> Sure! The communication fits the intended change. Of course, you can find fitting reasons in the communications. The question is simply: Is there another set of reasons for another strategic direction that would make just as much sense? That's what I'm questioning… (Interview, January 2016)

Team leader 2 summarized his view of the change initiative:

> We now have to do business development… Otherwise, we are 'bad'.
>
> (Meeting observation, January 2016)

The TMT also communicated its expectations about the benefits associated with strategic change, including the increasing value of the business units focusing on certain markets and the increasing importance of customer proximity in developing industry knowledge and creating new business opportunities. However, this reasoning did not enable department members' benefits finding about change. In contrast, they observed that change might even be a '*step backward*' from well-functioning departmental collaboration, described as a '*win-win situation*' for the organization. The head of Enterprise Solutions explained:

> I think that we're mentally already a little bit further along in our department because we've always collaborated with the other departments and helped out … Yes, from a certain perspective, I'd say we have now taken a certain step backward because good things that have functioned well in departmental collaboration no longer work. (Interview, January 2016)

Department members felt that the TMT's reasoning for the change did not apply to their unit and that the strategic change would disadvantage them relative to the other two departments. Team leader 3 explained his view as follows:

> In the finance area, there has been a big pull, which has drawn a lot of resources. And the telecommunications projects have become bigger and bigger. In our context, demand has somewhat decreased. This means, of course, that we have to make sure that our people are placed somewhere. (Interview, February 2016)

The head of Enterprise Solutions commented similarly:

> Many of our projects were not sustainable in the sense that they would have substantiated an entire market or even just a significant market segment… If you calculate how many projects were one-offs compared to how many customers had follow-up projects, then the ratio in our department is much worse than with the finance and telecommunications departments. (Interview, January 2016)

Although the department maintained that its projects were by nature less sustainable than those of the other departments, the TMT felt that the department had not paid enough attention to its customers and had not invested sufficient effort in creating new business opportunities. The COO of the company explained this concern as follows:

> I was so upset with [the head of Enterprise Solutions]. I said, 'You need to finally understand what it means to take care of a customer. You have to take care of him proactively and not just passively do the bare minimum. Here, you have an existing client. You have to take care of him and be innovative instead of hoping for some new projects to just appear… That will not work'. That was, of course, my perception of the situation, but not just mine; other TMT members also said, 'We have to change this mindset! Then, we'll be fine…'. (Interview, April 2016)

Part 2: Departmental Responses to the TMT's Substantive Actions

To further reinforce strategic change throughout the organization, the TMT implemented a series of modifications in the organization's structures, processes, and practices. Subsequently, I discuss how the change process continued to unfold by describing department members' responses to these substantive actions.

Substantive actions clarify change costs. To reinforce its message, the TMT asked department members who were working on projects in the finance and telecommunications markets to change departments and join the Department of Finance Solutions or the Department of Telecommunications Solutions. This action caused a major uproar in the Department of Enterprise Solutions because several employees did not want to leave their teams. Additionally, the department did not want to lose any employees, many of whom were considered '*high performers*.' The TMT's actions reduced the department staff by 15, bringing the total number down to 50. Following this loss, and threatened with losing five additional employees, interpretations of the change began to evolve in the department. The change started to look like a less costly alternative to the new status quo. Team leader 3 summarized this cost avoidance as follows:

> I think if you do everything completely opportunistically, then you don't think about the long term. You don't think about where you want to go and what the problems are. I think we're now facing a consequence of that. Meaning that when other departments had a need, we helped out everywhere. Now, we have a situation in which we no longer know where our home is, what we are doing, what our focus is. Our people are bogged down somewhere, tied up somewhere, and you don't really get them back. (Interview, February 2016)

This clearer understanding of the costs of resisting change implementation inspired a commitment to change in the department that was based on the desire to avoid these costs. Given the costs, department members felt the need to adapt to the proposed change. The department head commented on this continuance commitment to change as follows:

> That we have to move our teams to another department is like a permanent sword of Damocles over our heads as of late, and therefore, we somehow have to outgrow this situation … We'll have to adapt our strategy so that when we see issues that could potentially relate to other departments, we'll have to close our eyes quickly and then just try to push our own things. (Interview, February 2016)

At the department leadership meeting, he added:

> As soon as a customer is not within our portfolio, we get torn up. Ideally, we could grow with the people we have in the areas that belong to our department. (Meeting observation, February 2016)

Substantive actions clarify change responsibilities. Although department members gradually realized that the previous status quo could no longer be maintained and that their strategy would need to be adapted, they did not view themselves as leading change implementation. Rather, they looked to the company's sales personnel to help drive the department's strategic adaptation. The department head reasoned:

> We need more clients in the markets outside finance and telecommunications. And we're trying to motivate sales to hunt in these fields… (Interview, February 2016)

At the department leadership meeting, the department head turned to the company's sales personnel and requested:

> That would really be my plea, my wish to you [sales]: Which measures could you take to help improve our situation, to relieve the pressure on us? I think sales is a saviour in this regard … (Meeting observation, February 2016)

While the TMT had initially hired a sales manager to exclusively support the Department of Enterprise Solutions in cultivating its markets, it allowed him to expand his marketing efforts and pursue sales leads in other markets as well. This decision effectively reduced company-level sales support for the Department of Enterprise Solutions. Consequently, department members realized that they would have to lead strategic change themselves, as the following exchange at an operations meeting indicated:

> *DH: If we knew better what we would want to do in terms of business development, then we could better involve sales*
>
> *TL2: So, this is about figuring out how we can better engage sales?*
>
> *DH: Maybe, we sometimes don't even need any sales … We do have the responsibility…*
>
> (Meeting observation, February 2016).

Understanding the importance of taking responsibility for change was further strengthened by another substantive action. The promotion of team leaders to the newly established department leadership team and the promotion of department heads to the extended TMT were interpreted in the department as a change that logically entailed increasing responsibility because '*if you give power, you actually give responsibility*'. Whereas in the past, it might have been enough to wait until someone else took the initiative, this was now clearly the responsibility of those who were '*at the top of the pyramid*'. The department head explained matters as follows:

> Now the department heads will soon be on par with the top management team. I think that means that we'll have to be able to improve performance. All of a sudden, things are becoming much clearer. It is like a new dawn: We are responsible for much more. Previously, we were concerned with the hourly rate and didn't have to take care of sales. It will come, and if it doesn't come, it's not your problem, to put it simply! And now… there is customer satisfaction, market development, you are supposed to put yourself out there… (Interview, February 2016)

A clearer understanding of their entrepreneurial responsibility among department members resulted in a stronger identification with the challenges facing the unit. Team leader 4 summarized matters as follows:

> Previously, you said, 'Sales, bring me a project!' And if sales didn't deliver, then we'd tell them, 'Do something!' And now it is actually the other way around. That means we actually have to look for new projects ourselves and are still figuring out how exactly to do that… (Interview, March 2016)

Substantive actions clarify change requirements. Although department members felt responsible for adapting their strategy, they were still uncertain about their ability to implement the

required changes. They worried about their lack of experience in business development and were unsure of how to approach their new tasks. Reflecting on this challenge, the department head remarked at a department leadership meeting:

> The only weak point of ES is finding our market … We don't have a problem with people, we don't have a problem with quality. (Meeting observation, March 2016)

Team leader 2 further elaborated on this challenge:

> I have to say that, until now, I have been extremely focused on execution as a developer and project leader, and now as a team leader, you're confronted on almost a weekly basis with having to do something strategic, right? That's something I first have to get used to a little bit … to even think that way… (Interview, February 2016)

The lack of perceived change efficacy was alleviated by the introduction of a BSC. The BSC was implemented to help orient departmental activities toward a broader scope of tasks by extending beyond financial measures, such as the hourly rate, and recognizing the value of investing in '*innovation, market and customer development*'. The TMT asked the departments to define department-specific goals as well as a set of coherent actions for achieving these goals using BSC categories and subcategories. For example, in the category of market and customers, the department members were asked how they would ensure '*the satisfaction of their customers*', '*exceed customer expectations through innovation*', '*develop their markets*', and '*become a leader in a certain field*'. Next, the department leaders were asked to present those goals to the TMT during a session in which TMT members provided feedback such as, '*Is this course of action feasible?*' or '*Can you define that goal more concretely?*'. Instead of institutionalizing a centralized process to measure goal achievement, the TMT asked the department leaders to self-assess their accomplishments after six months by evaluating them on a colour scale of '*green, yellow, or red*'. Department leaders then presented their assessment at a joint meeting with the TMT. Rather than judging departmental performance, TMT members gave department members space '*to reflect on their activities and draw conclusions for the future*'.

The department members saw the BSC as an important tool for specifying change requirements. The BSC outlined all of the fields of action that required attention and set standards for successful performance following change implementation. Team leader 4 explained this as follows:

> [The BSC] provides goals. To begin with, that is actually new because there used to be only one goal, the hourly rate… The most relevant part is business development, which is becoming more important for us… (Interview, March 2016)

The BSC strengthened perceived change efficacy in the department. Prior to the introduction of the BSC, the department head had expressed his discomfort with calling a

'*strategy meeting*' to discuss change implementation and had postponed the meeting several times. However, once the BSC was launched, he felt comfortable with organizing the meeting under the heading, '*Enterprise Solutions Balanced Scorecard Meeting*'. The department head's preamble framed the category of market cultivation as the central focus of the meeting. The BSC provided structure for the department's discussion on how best to move forward in this regard. The BSC also enabled individual discussions between the department head and team leaders on how they could cultivate the specific markets in which the different teams had established a foothold. For example, the department head and team leader 1 developed an understanding of how to extend their engagement in the medical technology market.

> *DH: I understand that if one hasn't thought about it before, it can be pretty difficult in the beginning. I was also puzzled by the BSC at first and was wondering what to do with it. But somehow, we get it more concrete like this. 'Building up the market'… What is your header in this box?*
>
> *TL1: 'Extension medical technology market'…*
>
> *DH: Now, you still have to say what you're going to do to achieve that, because otherwise you may not do anything, and no one in your team knows what to do…*
>
> *TL1: We could go with our customer to his customers. I think that's a rather important point…* (Meeting observation, March 2016).

Part 3: Departmental Change Implementation Behavior

As a result of the TMT's substantive actions, department members initiated change by increasing their efforts to maintain the extant business as well as to up- and cross-sell to existing customers. They paid more attention to customer satisfaction and initiated regular customer contacts outside of daily project work to inquire about customer welfare. Moreover, they sought to extend their network of contacts at customer companies. Overall, they hoped to gain status as a '*trusted advisor*' by client companies and, thereby, collect valuable information about potential new software applications that could provide advantages to their customers. Team leader 1 described the change in his own team as follows:

> What I thought was astonishing is how accepting my team was of the fact that they now spend a lot of time at the customer – to do requirement engineering and even to work there. That's something we didn't used to do. Thereby, we hope to learn proactively about new needs that might arise at our customers. On the other hand, we also hope to get to know potential new customers… (Interview, June 2016)

As this quote suggests, department members also began more actively to acquire new customers. They started building relationships with their customers' customers, whom they met when providing services. They also began assuming more leadership toward sales personnel. The department head tracked inquiries from potential customers and initiated discussions in the department leadership team about the '*strategic value*' of such

business development opportunities with regard to '*longer-term benefits*' and '*synergies with extant businesses*'. For example, when commenting on a request for proposal received from a company in the medical technology market, the department head remarked to team leader 1:

> I think that would be great because it would fit in with your new e-health focus
>
> (Meeting observation, May 2016)

After jointly deciding whether to pursue a lead, the department leadership team sought to collaborate with sales personnel and asked them to support their business development activities through specific actions, such as obtaining more information on a specific sales lead, providing their opinion on an opportunity's strategic value, or accompanying them to a client meeting. This increase in customer activity led to an increase in the number of bids sent out for new projects. Only five months after the department members had indicated their commitment to change, the department was working at full capacity and had already increased back to 55 employees. Moreover, all of the KPIs for this period exceeded expectations.

Practical engagement with change, combined with the positive outcomes of change implementation, led to reinterpreting the inherent value of the strategic change: department members began to see the benefits and were proud of their accomplishments with regard to change implementation. In July 2016, the team leaders decided to organize a '*retrospective*' to assess their efforts over the past six months and to identify opportunities for further progress. At this review meeting, team leaders collected their thoughts on a white board and identified the following '*achievements we are proud of*': '*learning aptitude with regard to business development*', '*business development initiatives are being executed well*', '*collaboration with the sales personnel*', '*shared understanding in the department and the department leadership team*', and '*autonomy of the department*'. Team leader 2 reflected on the department's development as follows:

> We've developed with regard to cultivating customers… We're now doing things more consciously and more coordinately, and we know what we want. Previously, we were set up very opportunistically and took what came our way. Now we try to develop the client. The fact that we're doing this more consciously certainly has positive effects, for example, that we can grow the project portfolio with a customer. (Interview, June 2016)

The department head reflected on the outcomes of the change process similarly:

> I think that people have seen, and I think that they've also understood, that it's of great benefit if one can determine one's own path. I think this has been the biggest step that we've taken, and I think this step is actually very remarkable. (Interview, June 2016)

To institutionalize change, department members began discussing modifying the department's operational model. They considered establishing a departmental '*fire*

brigade' that would support teams pursuing a time-consuming business development project while working at full capacity. Furthermore, the department members considered institutionalizing a biweekly focus at their weekly department leadership team meeting to concentrate on existing business one week and new business the next week.

A Model of Multimodal Sensemaking during Strategic Change

This section combines my findings on how leaders' sensegiving actions impacted employees' sensemaking during strategic change with existing theory. I put forward an integrative model that elucidates how substantive actions reinforce and complement discursive sensegiving. The model, shown in Figure 2, relates my observations on the influence of different types of sensemaking cues to differences in the sensemaking content and depicts sensemaking during strategic change as a multimodal process that includes intellectual, substantive, and experiential modes of engaging with change.

Intellectual sensemaking. The first element of the model describes sensemaking and sensegiving around strategic change as an intellectual process. It captures how organizational members use discourse to negotiate abstract beliefs about the reasons for and the benefits of change. At Software Inc., the TMT concluded, based on its interpretation of the developments in the external environment and its understanding of internal dynamics in the organization, that it would need to instigate certain changes in organizational meanings and behaviours. To gain employees' support, the TMT first engaged in discursive sensegiving actions. It launched its strategic change initiative by

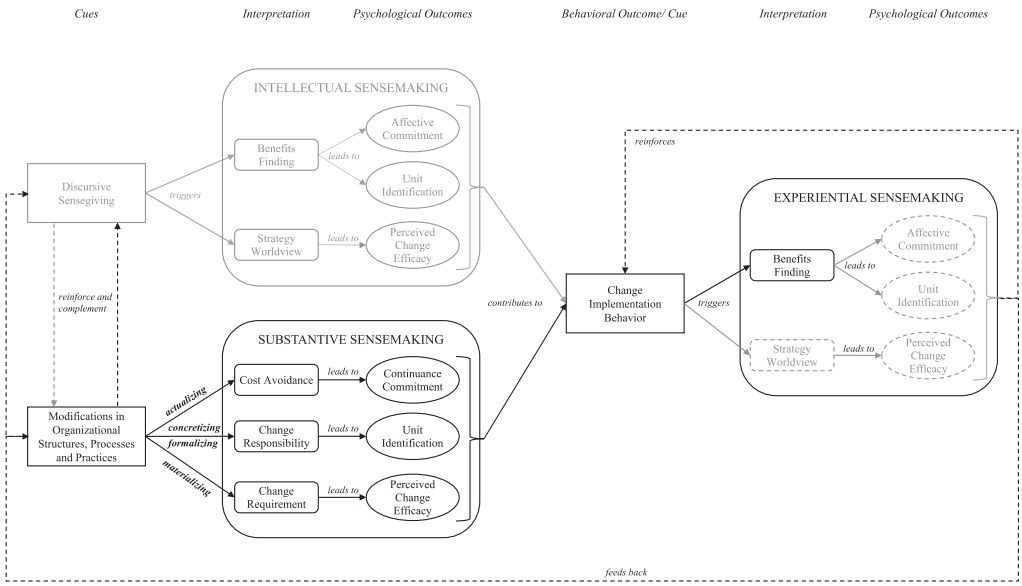

Figure 2. An integrative model of sensemaking during strategic change as a multimodal process

disseminating a plausible account of the targeted change, hoping that 'constituents could be influenced to comprehend, accept, and act upon to initiate desired changes' (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 444).

Extant research has described how managers' discursive actions can support the development of a 'strategy worldview' and enable 'benefits finding' (Sonenshein and Dholakia, 2012). These meaning-making processes are aimed at creating the requisite psychological resources – affective commitment, unit identification, and perceived change efficacy – that facilitate employees' change implementation behaviours. However, the staff at the Department of Enterprise Solutions neither developed a strategy worldview nor identified significant benefits of the envisaged change based on the TMT's discursive sensegiving actions. Department members resisted the TMT's interpretations and offered an alternative view, emphasizing the value of their current practices. This resistance may be explained by the department's particular situation and, relatedly, by the extent to which its members needed to revise their interpretations and behaviours (Labianca et al., 2000; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2003). Department members assessed the change as disadvantaging their department because it had no distinct market focus and less external reach than the other two departments. Department members regarded their project work as less suited to creating a stream of follow-up projects and felt that the TMT's reasoning did not apply to their department.

Substantive sensemaking. The second element of the model describes sensemaking and sensegiving around strategic change as a substantive process. Modifications of organizational structures, processes, and practices trigger employees to make sense of change based on matters of practical importance rather than on theoretical or ideal considerations. My observations demonstrate how the TMT's substantive actions enabled department members to make sense of change despite their initial resistance based on their intellectual sensemaking of the change initiative.

Table II. Distinct effects of substantive actions on sensemaking during strategic change

Substantive actions	*Distinct effects of substantive actions on sensemaking during strategic change*	*Members' sensemaking*	*Psychological resources*
Transferring personnel to other departments	*Actualizing* (turning the presumed consequences of change implementation into a tangible reality)	Cost avoidance	Continuance commitment
Withdrawing sales support	*Concretizing* (creating an intentional power vacuum to clarify change responsibilities)	Change responsibility	Unit identification
Promoting department members	*Formalizing* (giving official status to employees' expanded responsibilities)		
Introducing the balanced scorecard	*Materializing* (providing a material reference structure of the central ideas of the change)	Change requirements	Perceived change efficacy

I identified four ways in which the TMT's modifications of organizational structures, processes, and practices complemented and reinforced its discursive sensegiving efforts (Table II). First, my findings show how the transfer of personnel to other departments enhanced department members' commitment to change. The intervention served to turn the TMT's presumption that a continued lack of business development efforts would lead the department to become a 'human resources pool' into a tangible reality. The intervention contributed to department members' sensemaking by *actualizing* the presumed consequences of change implementation.

Second, my analysis shows how the withdrawal of sales support led department members to identify with the challenges facing their unit. This structural modification made department members realize that they needed to take charge of their department's business development activities by removing other actors who might reasonably be held accountable for performing this function. The intervention contributed to department members' sensemaking by *concretizing* their responsibilities for change implementation.

Third, my observations show how promotions to higher management positions further enhanced department members' identification with the challenges facing their unit. Promotions gave official status to department members' expanded responsibilities and provided them with greater power to shape outcomes. The intervention contributed to department members' sensemaking by *formalizing* their responsibilities for change implementation.

Fourth, my findings show how the implementation of the BSC enhanced department members' perceived change efficacy. Implementing the BSC provided department members with a material reference structure for organizing their work practices and aligning these with central change requirements. This intervention contributed to department members' sensemaking by *materializing* the central ideas of change.

Experiential sensemaking. The third element of the model describes sensemaking around strategic change as an experiential process. This element captures how organizational members' understandings continue to evolve as change unfolds based on practical experience. Department members' substantive sensemaking and the resulting psychological resources facilitated their engagement in change implementation behaviours. As department members gradually began to experience the actual impact of change, they began recognizing intrinsic value. Previously, the department had depended on the welfare of other units. Now, the department was able to take care of its own needs. This benefits finding facilitated department members' affective commitment to change implementation, which, in a self-reinforcing dynamic, spurred additional efforts to institutionalize the ongoing implementation process (Herscovitch and Meyer, 2002; Meyer et al., 2007; Sonenshein and Dholakia, 2012).

Overall, the integrative model demonstrates how different sensemaking modes can complement one another during strategic change. Both intellectual and substantive sensemaking can facilitate employee engagement in change in complementary ways. Experiential sensemaking, based on practical experiences with change, can further reinforce ongoing implementation behaviour and inspire additional sensegiving efforts to institutionalize this behaviour and to more broadly promote the value of change.

DISCUSSION

In recent years, scholars have advocated conceptualizing sensemaking and sensegiving beyond 'the domains of reason, cognition, and language' (Cunha et al., 2015, pp. 53–54; Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; de Rond et al., 2019; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015; Weick, 2012). Yet, the literature on strategic change has continued to view sensemaking during strategic change primarily as an 'intellectual process' located 'purely in the mind or in language' (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p. 100). My study contributes to addressing this gap by examining how leaders' substantive actions influence employee sensemaking during strategic change implementation. I identify four ways in which substantive actions can support strategic change beyond the influence of discursive sensegiving: *actualizing*, *concretizing*, *formalizing*, and *materializing*. My study extends the existing understanding by highlighting the importance of seeing sensemaking during strategic change not just as an intellectual but as a multimodal process.

The Influence of Substantive Actions During Strategic Change

Prior research has paid little attention to the role of substantive actions in sensemaking and sensegiving during strategic change. The existing literature has associated substantive actions primarily with sensebreaking (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Mantere et al., 2012) or with the generic reinforcement of already established meanings (Canato et al., 2013). It has not, however, regarded substantive actions as an integral part of the interpretive change process unfolding in organizations (Mantere et al., 2012).

My analysis contributes to theory development on the ways in which modifications in organizational structures, processes, or practices can support strategic change beyond the influence of discursive sensegiving. First, I show how modifications in processes and practices can support discursive sensegiving efforts by *actualizing* the anticipated costs (or benefits) of a failure (or a success) to implement change. Transferring personnel to other departments led department members to understand the consequences of resisting change implementation, thereby fostering their commitment to change. Prior research has shown how leaders' discursive sensegiving can enhance the perceived valence of change (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia et al., 1994) and foster employees' affective commitment (Sonenshein and Dholakia, 2012). However, although discursive sensegiving may produce animated narratives (Maitlis, 2005; Weick et al., 2005) that make plausible the benefits of the desired course of action, the presumed consequences of change still remain hypothetical. In contrast, sanctioning change implementation in a substantive manner allowed leaders to bring these consequences into the present and to turn them into a tangible reality.

Second, my findings show how structural modifications can support discursive sensegiving efforts by *concretizing* employees' responsibilities for change implementation. Withdrawing sales support clarified responsibilities for change implementation and facilitated identification with the challenges facing the unit concerned. The existing literature has shown how discursive practices can be used to assign responsibility for strategy implementation. However, actors may deflect responsibility away from themselves by assigning it to other stakeholders, which may lead to protracted tensions and conflict (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2003). Substantive modifications of organizational structures

can facilitate efforts to assign responsibility through the redeployment of individuals or groups. The absence of other stakeholders who might be reasonably held accountable for change implementation can facilitate employees' understanding of the need to take on new roles and adjust to new behavioural requirements.

Third, I observed how structural modifications can support discursive sensegiving efforts by *formalizing* employees' responsibilities for change implementation. My findings show how empowering department leaders through promotions to higher management positions further enhanced their identification with the challenges facing their unit. Prior research has shown how assigning 'responsibility without power' can lead employees to reject their role in strategy implementation (Sillince and Mueller, 2007). The existing sensemaking literature tends to emphasize that those with less formal power can still exercise a significant influence through their discursive abilities (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). My findings show how giving official status to organizational members' expanded responsibilities and, thereby, providing them with greater 'formal' power to shape outcomes can further enhance actors' understanding of their responsibility for change implementation.

Fourth, I observed how modifications in processes and practices can support discursive sensegiving efforts by *materializing* the central ideas of the envisaged change. My findings show how introducing the BSC clarified change requirements and enhanced department members' perceived change efficacy. While discursive sensegiving allows actors to define specific features of an issue, highlight certain categories, and define relations among these elements (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014; Cornelissen et al., 2011; Maitlis, 2005; Weick et al., 2005), material tools may serve to amplify actors' sensemaking capacity (Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012). The BSC served as a common reference structure for department members' discussions. It also enabled them to materialize the content of their conversations and visually revise these interpretations. The BSC thus enabled department members to engage more deeply with the central categories that the TMT saw as encompassing performance after change implementation. It facilitated the collective elaboration of the meaning of different categories and supported department members' efforts to relate overarching performance requirements to their everyday work practices.

My observations of the complementary effects of substantive actions resonate with a recent call for more research on 'the optimal mix, pacing, and sequencing of executives' substantive *and* symbolic actions during change campaigns' (Hambrick and Lovelace, 2018, p. 125). Prior literature has considered substantive actions primarily as 'a prelude' to discursive sensemaking and sensegiving (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p. 69) or as 'secondary reinforcement mechanisms' (Canato et al., 2013, p. 1746). In contrast, my analysis suggests that these actions can be important sensemaking resources throughout the interpretive change process. My analysis points to the importance of deploying discursive and substantive actions in an integrated manner. Discursive and substantive sensegiving actions can contribute to similar sensemaking outcomes in complementary ways. Skillfully combining these different sensegiving cues allows leaders to disseminate equifinal meanings in a mutually reinforcing manner and enables employees to 'flexibly draw from the available pool of resources' (Höllerer et al., 2018, p. 621) in their sensemaking of strategic change.

Sensemaking during Strategic Change as a Multimodal Process

In criticizing the predominant conceptualization of sensemaking as a cognitive and discursive process, scholars have advocated 'taking a broader, richer approach to the study of sensemaking' (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p. 100). In this context, recent studies have begun to investigate how other modes of meaning making – beyond cognitive and discursive processes – contribute to sensemaking and sensegiving efforts (e.g., Cornelissen et al., 2014; Cunha et al., 2015; Höllerer et al., 2018). While this research has shed light on the role of different types of sensemaking processes in various organizational contexts, the literature on sensemaking during strategic change has made little progress in this regard.

Based on my analysis, I propose an integrative model that portrays sensemaking during strategic change as a multimodal process involving intellectual, substantive, and experiential sensemaking. This broader conceptualization of the sensemaking process takes into account different ways of engaging with change and, relatedly, the range of relevant sensemaking cues that affect employees' responses. Intellectual sensemaking arises in response to leaders' discursive sensegiving actions and is based on abstract ideas about the reasons for and the benefits of change. Substantive sensemaking is triggered by leaders' modifications of organizational structures, processes, and practices. It concerns matters of practical importance, such as sanctions, obligations, and the ability to implement the change, rather than theoretical or ideal considerations. Finally, experiential sensemaking arises during change implementation and is based on the experiences of the actual impact of change.

Recent research has also found that, depending on the circumstances, 'sensemakers may give differential attention to the information coming from different sources' (Cunha et al., 2015, p. 53). For example, Cunha et al. (2015) found that, under conditions of extreme physical danger, sensemaking 'may become less an exercise in cognition and more a bodily experience' (p. 52). My findings extend these insights into the literature on strategic change. My analysis shows that when attempts to intellectually make sense of change fail, substantive and experiential sensemaking processes become more important. While an integrative deployment of distinct sensemaking resources may be beneficial across issues, contexts, and audiences, it is likely to be particularly useful in challenging change situations. In this way, organizational members may begin to make sense starting from either type of cue depending on which cues are clearer to them in a given situation.

Sequential Patterns in Sensemaking and Sensegiving During Strategic Change

Finally, my findings also contribute to an improved understanding of sequential patterns in sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change. In my case company, the focus of department members' sensemaking shifted over time, from commitment through identification to efficacy. In other words, only after department members committed to strategic change did they begin questioning who was responsible and in a position to lead change implementation in their department. Similarly, only after department members had accepted that they would need to take charge of implementing change themselves did they begin questioning whether and how they would be able to do so. These observations

extend the prior research that, based on cross-sectional data, has established the importance of commitment, identification, and efficacy as antecedents of change-supportive behaviour (Sonenshein and Dholakia, 2012).

Another way of looking at this sequence is to compare my findings on the influence of different substantive actions with the typology of different discursive sensegiving forms by Schildt et al. (2020). This typology distinguishes authoritative, inspirational, and expansive sensegiving. According to the authors, authoritative sensegiving works to 'close down and constrain' sensemaking, whereas inspirational and expansive sensegiving work to 'open up and empower recipient sensemaking' (p. 16). While prior research portrays the influence of substantive actions on sensemaking primarily as destructive, constraining, or indiscriminate, my findings show how substantive actions can be used similarly to what Schildt et al. (2020) describe for discursive sensegiving. I observed how leaders first mobilized substantive actions for authoritative interventions aimed at discrediting established understandings to stimulate employees' willingness to commit to change and take responsibility for its implementation. Subsequently, the TMT mobilized substantive actions for inspirational sensegiving by promoting department members to higher management positions. These promotions provided them 'with the "power to" overcome established routines' (Schildt et al., 2020, p. 17). Finally, the TMT used substantive actions for expansive sensegiving to induce 'a richer understanding of a situation' and to open up 'new avenues for articulated reasoning and deliberate action' (pp. 16–17). Specifically, the manner in which the BSC was implemented allowed it to function as a template that guided members in making sense of change by accommodating their understandings of how to achieve change objectives.

My findings also extend Schildt et al.'s (2020) portrayal that organizational adaptation benefits from initial expansive sensegiving efforts that accommodate employees' understandings (e.g., Christianson et al., 2009; Thomas et al., 2011) but may subsequently require authoritative sensegiving to align organizational actions (e.g., Gioia et al., 1994; Huy, 2002). My findings suggest that this pattern may be more suited to situations in which employees embrace change, the scope of the intended change is less extensive, or the company has more time and resources to implement change. In situations in which employees resist change, a change initiative requires significant deviation from the status quo, or time and resource pressures exist with regard to change implementation, the reverse sequential pattern – from authoritative sensegiving to expansive sensegiving – may be more beneficial for organizational change. Prior literature has cautioned that coercive interventions are likely to trigger 'resigned compliance, rather than an authentic willingness to change' (Ogbonna and Harris, 1998, p. 285; Herscovitch and Meyer, 2002; Jarzabkowski, 2008). My findings show how subsequent opportunities for more expansive sensemaking can alleviate this concern.

Limitations and Future Research

Future research could extend my analysis in several ways. My findings provide insights into how substantive actions facilitate sensemaking and sensegiving efforts during strategic change. Studies could extend our understanding of the role of substantive actions by studying how other types of substantive actions affect sensemaking processes, as well as

how substantive actions affect sensemaking in other change contexts. Furthermore, my research focuses mainly on employees' sensemaking processes. By more closely studying the dynamic interplay between managers' and employees' sensemaking and sensegiving processes, future research could provide further insights into the 'intended and unintended symbolic consequences' of substantive actions (Pratt and Rafaeli, 2006, p. 14). In addition, to further extend our understanding of the influence of these sensemaking cues, future research could pay closer attention to how substantive actions are discursively mobilized in sensemaking and sensegiving during strategic change.

My findings highlight the importance of finding ways to combine and balance constraining and empowering sensegiving actions during strategic change processes. Future research could further our understanding in this regard by studying different sequences of sensegiving actions. Future research could also advance the understanding of the constraining and empowering nature of substantive actions. Contrary to the prevailing account, the influence of substantive actions on sensemaking during strategic change extends beyond the destruction of organizational meanings. Future studies could extend our knowledge of the types of substantive actions associated with more inspirational and more expansive sensemaking processes.

Finally, my study distinguishes the influence of intellectual, substantive, and experiential sensemaking processes, thereby highlighting the multimodal nature of sensemaking during strategic change. Future research could build on my findings to examine how multimodal sensemaking plays out in different strategic change contexts in order to provide a more complete account of how new meanings are constructed. By distinguishing the influence of different sensemaking modes, future studies could also shed more light on how the composition of sensemaking modes may vary across issues, settings, and audiences.

Implications for Practice

Conventional wisdom proclaims that 'talk is cheap' and 'actions speak louder than words'. My analysis sheds light on how managers can use modifications of organizational structures, processes, and practices to go beyond their discursive sensegiving efforts and bolster their change narratives. Managers can strengthen employees' commitment to change by using sanctions to turn the perceived costs of a failure to implement change into a practically understandable reality. They can modify organizational structures to clarify change responsibilities and further enhance employees' identification with the challenges facing their unit by giving official status to members' expanded responsibilities. Finally, managers can support employees' perceived change efficacy by providing them with a material reference structure of the central ideas of the intended change. Overall, my observations highlight the value of an integrated deployment of discursive and substantive sensegiving during strategic change, especially in challenging change situations.

CONCLUSION

My analysis provides an improved understanding of the role of substantive actions in sensemaking and sensegiving during strategic change – a topic that has received limited

attention because of the predominant cognitive and discursive orientation of prior research (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). I identify ways in which substantive actions can support strategic change beyond the influence of discursive sensegiving. My findings extend the prevailing understanding, which portrays the influence of substantive actions on sensemaking primarily as destructive, constraining, or indiscriminate. I find that substantive actions can be important sensemaking resources throughout the interpretive change process, serving a wide range of purposes. Overall, my findings emphasize the multimodal nature of sensemaking processes during strategic change that involve not only intellectual but also substantive and experiential modes of engaging with change.

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