



## Sensemaking Processes in Organizational Change: Evidencing Sensegiving and Visual Sensemaking in a Multiple Case Study

*Processos de Sensemaking na Mudança Organizacional: Evidências de Sensegiving e Visual Sensemaking em um Estudo de Casos Múltiplos*

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** To explore the way sensemaking processes occur in planned organizational change. **Design/methodology/approach:** Qualitative multiple case study conducted in four Brazilian companies. Data collection included semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and document analysis. Data analysis employed grounded theory methodology with inductive coding. **Originality/value:** Expands the understanding of sensemaking by analyzing these processes in real-world organizational contexts, particularly highlighting the leader as sensemaker and the relatively unexplored use of visual elements in these processes. **Findings:** Identified five key categories related to sensemaking: Sensemaker, Sensebreaking, Narratives in Context, Information Design, and Visual Tools, grouped into two macro-categories: Sensegiving and Visual Sensemaking. The study illustrated how these categories interact to either facilitate or hinder organizational change. **Theoretical/methodological contributions:** Highlights the dynamic interplay among sensemaking, sensebreaking, and sensegiving, offering an innovative perspective by integrating visual elements into sensemaking processes, a little-explored area in current literature. **Social/management contributions:** Provides practical insights for managers implementing effective organizational change, emphasizing communication strategies, the role of leaders and the use of visual sensemaking to enhance organizational members' understanding and commitment to proposed changes.

**Keywords:** sensemaking, sensegiving, sensebreaking, sensemaking visual, mudança organizacional

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Explorar como os processos de sensemaking ocorrem na mudança organizacional. **Metodologia/abordagem:** Estudo qualitativo com abordagem de estudo de casos múltiplos, realizado em quatro empresas brasileiras. Dados coletados através de entrevistas semiestruturadas, observações diretas e análise documental. A análise seguiu a abordagem da teoria fundamentada nos dados, utilizando codificação indutiva. **Originalidade/relevância:** O estudo amplia a compreensão sobre sensemaking e sensegiving, analisando sua operação em contextos organizacionais reais e destacando especialmente o líder enquanto sensemaker e o uso ainda pouco explorado de elementos visuais no processo. **Resultados:** Identificadas cinco categorias principais relacionadas ao sensemaking: Sensemaker, Sensebreaking, Narrativas no Contexto, Design de Informação e Ferramentas Visuais, agrupadas nas macro-categorias Sensegiving e Visual Sensemaking. O estudo demonstrou como essas categorias interagem, facilitando ou dificultando a mudança organizacional. **Contribuições teóricas/metodológicas:** Evidencia a interação dinâmica entre sensemaking, sensebreaking e sensegiving, oferecendo uma perspectiva inovadora ao integrar elementos visuais no processo de sensemaking, aspecto ainda pouco abordado na literatura existente. **Contribuições sociais/para a gestão:** Fornece insights práticos para gestores na implementação eficaz da mudança organizacional, enfatizando estratégias de comunicação, o papel dos líderes e o uso do sensemaking visual para melhor compreensão e adesão dos membros organizacionais às mudanças propostas.

**Palavras-chave:** sensemaking, sensegiving, sensebreaking, sensemaking visual, mudança organizacional

## RESUMEM

**Objetivo:** Explorar cómo los procesos de sensemaking ocurren en el cambio organizacional. **Diseño/metodología/enfoque:** Estudio cualitativo con enfoque de estudio de casos múltiples, realizado en cuatro empresas brasileñas. Datos recopilados mediante entrevistas semiestruturadas, observaciones directas y análisis documental. El análisis siguió el enfoque de la teoría fundamentada en datos, con codificación inductiva. **Originalidad/relevancia:** El estudio amplía la comprensión sobre sensemaking y sensegiving, analizando cómo operan en contextos organizacionales reales y destacando especialmente al líder como sensemaker y el uso aún poco explorado de elementos visuales en el proceso. **Resultados:** Se identificaron cinco categorías clave relacionadas con el sensemaking: Sensemaker, Sensebreaking, Narrativas en Contexto, Diseño de Información y Herramientas Visuales, agrupadas en dos macro-categorías: Sensegiving y Visual Sensemaking. El estudio mostró cómo estas categorías interactúan, facilitando o dificultando el cambio organizacional. **Contribuciones teóricas/metodológicas:** Destaca la interacción dinámica entre sensemaking, sensebreaking y sensegiving, ofreciendo una perspectiva innovadora al integrar elementos visuales en el proceso de sensemaking, aspecto aún poco abordado en la literatura existente. **Contribuciones sociales/para la gestión:** Proporciona insights prácticos para gestores en la implementación efectiva del cambio organizacional, enfatizando estrategias de comunicación, el papel de los líderes y el papel del sensemaking visual para una mejor comprensión y adhesión de los colaboradores a los cambios propuestos.

**Palabras clave:** sensemaking, sensegiving, sensebreaking, sensemaking visual, mudança organizacional

## ■ INTRODUCTION

The manner in which individuals operate in the contemporary world has led historian and anthropologist Jamais Cascio to argue that the world is no longer defined by VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous), but rather by BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible). Brittle refers to systems that are prone to sudden and catastrophic failure. Anxious denotes a pervasive fear that any action taken may be the wrong one. Non-linear captures situations in which cause and effect appear disconnected or disproportionate. Incomprehensible, in turn, is associated to events and decisions that seem illogical or senseless (Cascio, 2020; Godoy & Filho, 2021).

This new paradigm calls for innovative approaches to comprehend the world amidst political chaos, climate disasters, and global pandemics. Brittleness can be countered with resilience and slack, anxiety can be soothed through by empathy and mindfulness, nonlinearity calls for contextual understanding and flexibility, incomprehensibility requires transparency and intuition. (Cascio, 2020; Godoy & Filho, 2021).

Taking into account BANI's scenario and the associated challenges, adapting to social, technological, and global changes, market demands, and legislation has become critical for organizations in times of persistent disruption (Ala-Laurinaho et al., 2017). Organizations are constantly compelled to modify their operations to cope with rapid social and economic transformations. These adjustments are more successfully implemented when organizations are capable of planning their internal changes, as planned organizational change enables a more effective response to environmental demands (Martin et al., 2019; Onyeneke & Abe, 2021). However, change can unintentionally harm performance and trigger unforeseen outcomes due to the dynamic nature of change (Castillo et al., 2018; Hay et al., 2021; Maes & Van Hootegem, 2019).

In scenarios characterized by ongoing change and adaptation, the signification and re-signification of events become essential for generating new principles that guide action (Daft & Weick, 1984; Weick, 1995; Zollo & Winter, 2002). This process called sensemaking forms the basis for creating plausible explanations that impose order and coherence on unfolding events (Maitlis, 2005; Moon et al., 2017; Sheng, 2017; Weick, 1995).

Acceptance or resistance to organizational change is strongly influenced by individual perceptions, and the mobilization of professionals is positively related to how they process and interpret information (Will & Pies, 2018). In this context, the sensemaking process becomes fundamental, enabling individuals to interpret and navigate new, unexpected, and confusing events that arise during organizational change (Hay et al., 2021; Maitlis, 2005; Will & Pies, 2018). It also entails challenging the status quo and the meanings that are continually constructed and reconstructed. (Bouckenooghe et al., 2021; Kolb, 2014; Teece et al., 1997; Zollo & Winter, 2002; Wang et al., 2015; Weick, 1995).

Each organizational member, based on their individual characteristics and how they interpret received information, will have a unique way of perceiving organizational change. As Hay et al. (2021) highlight, the success or failure of organizational change is closely tied to how individuals interpret these changes. Consequently, sensemaking becomes a crucial component for coherently understanding organizational reality and enabling collective action, as it centers on how organizational members attempt to clarify what is happening around them (Ala-Laurinaho et al., 2017; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Recent studies on sensemaking in organizational change underscore the necessity for leaders to master effective communication strategies, taking into account all organizational members. Integrating relevant information and reconstructing change mindsets is crucial for navigating the discourse of change management (Aprianto et al., 2023). Additionally, Tessema (2024) investigated the sensemaking strategies employed by early-career employees in organizationally constrained environments, revealing that these individuals use sensemaking strategies to perform ambiguous tasks and mitigate organizational constraints. Furthermore, Hernes & Obstfeld (2022) emphasize that sensemaking research is necessary to understand how actors adapt to unfamiliar environmental events. Langley and Rieple (2024) call for the relevance of sensemaking for leaders navigating unstable institutional contexts. However, despite the importance of sensemaking in organizations, there is still a lack of empirical studies about it (Cristofaro, 2022).

This study seeks to deepen the understanding of how sensemaking occurs during planned change processes, offering insights into the management of such transformations. It specifically identifies the sensemaking dimensions of managers and employees involved in organizational change processes. The study contributes theoretically by highlighting the role of organizational actors and the intrinsic nature of sensemaking in organizational change. Drawing on a multiple case study of four companies and using observation along with interviews and documents, the analysis reveals sensegiving and visual sensemaking as fundamental sensemaking processes, interactions with the content, context and process of planned organizational change.

Although previous research has explored the role of sensemaking in organizational change (Weick, 1995; Maitlis, 2005), this study advances the literature by examining how leaders act as sensemakers in organizational change, as well as the importance of narratives in their contexts (Aprianto et al., 2023). By exploring visual sensemaking as formed by information design and visual tools, it also offers a novel perspective on the use of visual elements in facilitating sensemaking processes, an area still underexplored (Manuti & Giancaspro, 2021; Wurth & Mawson, 2024).

Furthermore, this study incorporates the perspective of both leaders and their subordinates. While much of the existing research focuses on how leaders influence sensemaking, recent studies have begun to highlight the role of non-managerial employees in this process. For instance, Metz et al. (2024) provide a non-managerial perspective on shared sensemaking during strategic change, emphasizing the importance of including diverse organizational actors in understanding how sensemaking unfolds. Grasping these dynamics can significantly strengthen change management practices and enhance organizational adaptability in evolving environments.

This article is structured as follows. The next section presents the theoretical elements associated with organizational change and sense-

making. Then, the methodological procedures are described. The results focus on intra-case and cross-case aspects, along with the development of the emerging categories. Finally, the discussion and concluding remarks are presented.

## ■ ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Organizational change is characterized by a dynamic, holistic, interconnected, and non-linear nature (Pettigrew, 1987; Ala-Laurinaho et al., 2017; Bouckennooghe et al., 2021). It is typically driven by internal demands or external environmental pressures that require organizations to adapt and respond (Gungadeen et al., 2018). In this regard, change emerges from the interplay among context (the circumstances surrounding the change), process (how change unfolds), and content (the decisions that shape the change) (Pettigrew, 1987; Whipp et al., 1989).

When such adaptation is intentionally designed or deliberate, it is referred to as planned organizational change, the focus of this article. We adopt Nadler and Tushman's (1997) concept, which conceives planned change as the organization's response to environmental disturbances in order to maintain congruence among its components. This perspective assumes that discontinuous shifts are sometimes required to cope with destabilizing events in the environment (Rosenbaum et al., 2018).

Within this discussion, we also consider revolutionary change processes, which involve significant reorientations affecting strategies, structures, processes, and cultures. These differ from evolutionary change, which consists of incremental, gradual adjustments aimed at specific goals (Tushman & Romanelli, 1985).

Despite its intended purpose of improving alignment with environmental demands, planned change initiatives often fall short. Studies document situations in which such efforts have unintentionally reduced productivity, diminished shareholder value, or increased organizational costs (Castillo et al., 2018; Hay et al., 2021). This underscores that, regardless of how a change system is designed, its components interact in ways that may generate unanticipated outcomes due to the inherently dynamic nature of organizational change (Maes & Van Hootegem, 2019).

Recent research further emphasizes that readiness for change involves cognitive-affective processes. Middle managers, for example, rely on emotionally rich narratives to foster shared sensemaking among employees, thereby enhancing their openness to change (Wasieleski et al., 2024). Consequently, sensemaking remains a critical mechanism for sustaining a coherent understanding of organizational reality and enabling coordinated action, particularly in turbulent and evolving contexts (Ala-Laurinaho et al., 2017; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020). Its processes are developed in the next section.

## ■ SENSEMAKING PROCESSES

Sensemaking involves not only the interpretation and production of meanings but also the construction of “realities” that mobilize people. This dynamic interaction occurs within the context of experiential learning, combining experiences that help companies develop and renew resources profitably, reconfiguring themselves as necessary to innovate and respond to

When organizational members encounter moments of uncertainty, they attempt to make sense of the situation by noticing and interpreting cues from their surroundings, using them to form a plausible explanation that restores order and meaning (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). In this regard, unexpected events do not automatically trigger sensemaking; it arises when the gap between what was anticipated and what is experienced becomes significant enough for individuals or groups to question what is happening and how they should respond (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Although sensemaking is often highlighted for its retrospective nature, some theoretical and empirical research suggests it can also be future-oriented and prospective (Nag et al., 2007; Ybema, 2010). Additionally, sensemaking can be framed as both a cognitive process focused on evaluation and interpretation, and a social process where meaning is negotiated, contested, and mutually constructed (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Despite these ontological differences, sensemaking is inherently social because even individual meaning-making occurs within a socio-material context influenced by the presence of others (Weick, 1995).

In recent years, two related dimensions —sensegiving and sensebreaking—have gained prominence in understanding how sensemaking is performed.

Sensegiving involves efforts to shape others' sensemaking toward a desired reframing of organizational reality through the use of images, symbols, and other persuasive techniques (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Yet, sensegiving is not purely top-down, as it can generate resistance or support depending on the perspectives and interpretations of those involved (Prior et al., 2018). Also, Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) emphasize that the failure to maintain the property of “ongoing updating” of cues in both sensemaking and sensegiving processes often creates contradictions, which can potentially undermine strategic initiatives and lead directly to organizational crises. In this regard, Acciarini et al. (2024) have identified as processes of strategic change three phases: initiation/formulation, implementation/execution and sensemaking/sensegiving. For the authors, the sensemaking/sensegiving phase is crucial because it is the interpretive and communicative mechanism that follows initial formulation and implementation, ensuring that managers understand critical issues and that stakeholders accept the change.

Sensebreaking concerns the dismantling of established meanings to make room for new interpretations (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Pratt, 2000;). In other words, it disrupts the scanning, interpretation, and learning mechanisms of sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). Sensebreaking actions emerge through questioning, reframing, and redirecting, which can either facilitate or hinder learning (Giuliani, 2016). Moreover, organizational members may engage in sensemaking in response to both sensebreaking and sensegiving efforts (Nordin et al., 2018). For example,

when facing change interventions, Balogun and Johnson (2005) found that employees draw on old schemata, leading to social interaction—including verbal and non-verbal negotiation—to develop new schemata, with resulting positive or negative consequences.

Together, sensegiving and sensebreaking emphasize the dynamic interplay between constructing and deconstructing meanings in organizations, highlighting the central role of leadership and communication in navigating change effectively (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Giuliani, 2016). In this context, recent studies reinforce that sensemaking is a complex and multifaceted process during organizational change, involving critical roles for knowledge, interpretation, emotions, employees, narratives, and artifacts.

Weiser (2021) characterizes sensemaking during strategic change as a multimodal process consisting of three interconnected modes: intellectual (discursive actions of leaders), substantive (material changes in structures, such as rules, methodologies, and sanctions), and experiential (impact-based transformation). This framework asserts that discursive actions alone are insufficient for effective change, which depends on the other two modes to reinforce efforts and inspire sensegiving. Expanding this process view, Turner et al. (2023) define sensemaking as a multifaceted, non-linear process involving nine stages: (1) sensing (making sense and giving meaning by relevant associations); (2) meaning-making (evaluating and interpreting environments and artifacts); (3) sensegiving (ordering knowledge for congruence—legitimizing reality); (4) becoming (revealing the unknown via attentive investigation); (5) agency (examining the local environment by representing the agency to collect, process, and apply information); (6) counterfactuals (challenging new threats to achieve controllability); (7) future scoping (communicating information coherently regarding surrounding events); (8) movement (discovering, taking action, and accepting a course of action to normalize the environment); and (9) impact (measuring the magnitude of outcomes).

At the ecosystem level, Sun et al. (2025) explain that effective business model alignment requires the focal firm to engage in sensemaking across content, structural, and governance alignments through the functions of interpreting (facilitating understanding), monitoring (evaluating implementation), and repositioning (facilitating ongoing alignment).

Considering the intersection of sensemaking, knowledge, interpretation, and change, the successful implementation of change is linked to improving knowledge management practices and connecting employee sensemaking with organizational outcomes, as indicated by Saeed et al. (2024). Conversely, the failure to maintain the “ongoing updating” property of sensemaking and sensegiving processes can undermine strategic initiatives and lead to crises, according to Cristofaro (2022). Moreover, dealing with “messy” and “wicked” strategy contexts, which challenge traditional planning, requires an enterprise-wide focus on “seeing through ambiguity,” particularly when managers realize the current organizational culture is inadequate, an emphasis made by Fahey and Saint-Onge (2024). Finally, Munck and Seolin (2024) argue that organizational sustainability necessitates meaning changes associated with a new Sustainable Organizational Identity (SOI), whose long-lasting values ensure expectations of consistency and coherence over time.

It is also important to take into account organizational interpretation and decision-making when facing high-stakes disruptions, including the role of

emotions. Langley and Rieple (2024) establish that sensemaking processes are fundamentally catalyzed by shock and surprise. Strategic decision-making during crises necessitates a focus on the critical interplay between cognitions and emotions, with the central challenge being the effective management of dynamic complexity and feedback systems. Previously, Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) focus on the necessity of achieving shared meanings and acknowledge the pervasive role of emotion within crisis sensemaking.

The role of employees in sensemaking processes is also identified. Van Der Schaft et al. (2022) explore mitigating employee resistance during digital transformation, emphasizing that successful change implementation requires providing social support in the anticipatory phase and understanding employee frames regarding digitalization, while also considering their perceptions and hierarchical level. Furthermore, Rheinhardt and Gioia (2021) highlight that dramatically changing workplace dynamics mean organizational change is increasingly influenced and initiated by employees at the bottom, suggesting an “upside-down” model, rather than relying solely on executives’ plans.

Narratives are fundamental to organizational stability and change, as the perception of change failure often relates to the construction and communication of value discourse, and individuals interpret outcomes based on subjective experiences rather than formal metrics, a key finding of Hagebakken et al. (2024). Extending this, Giolito and Golsorkhi (2023) show that executives actively use narratives to manage errors—employing practices like Collectivizing (sharing responsibility, e.g., framing failure as a “team responsibility”) and Temporalizing (error as belonging to the past or a specific transitional phase)—to reorient the strategic context, mitigate reputational damage, and even dramatize the necessity of change. Further, Hernes and Obstfeld (2022) conceptualize that actors use narratives to translate the distant past and future into the present through situated activity, emphasizing that change implementation is realized through daily micro-practices of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving, requiring managers to reconcile retrospective views with the “future perfect” tense (what will have been).

Lastly, artifacts and how they affect sensemaking are considered, such as strategy tools and visual imagery. Jarzabkowski and Kaplan (2015) argue that organizational actors apply strategy tools improvisationally to interpret context and cope with uncertainty, noting that these tools fulfill crucial social functions, such as providing legitimacy for viewpoints and establishing a common language for strategic conversations across managerial boundaries. Complementarily, reinforcing Eppler and Platts (2009), Wurth and Mawson (2024) demonstrate that visual imagery is an essential mechanism for fostering collaborative sensemaking within complex social systems, like Entrepreneurial Ecosystems (EEs), by acting as boundary objects that facilitate interpretation, coordination of action, and the alignment of interests among diverse actors, underscoring the critical role of non-verbal communication

## METHOD

- Research Design:** This study adopts a qualitative multiple case study approach to explore the dimensions of sensemaking among managers and employees involved in organizational change processes. This methodology allows for an in-depth examination of the complex dynamics within different organizational settings and facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2017).
- Sample Selection:** The research was conducted in four Brazilian companies that were undergoing significant organizational changes. The selection of these companies was purposive, based on their relevance to the study's objectives and their willingness to participate. The companies vary in industry, size, and geographical location, providing a diverse sample that enhances the generalizability of the findings. The units of analysis are detailed in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

Characterization of the analysis units.

Company	N° of Subjects	Characterization of the Company	Characterization of the Interviewees	Average Time of Performance (Years)
ALFA	6	It works with steel and is present in 10 countries, with approximately 30,000 employees. Headquarters in southern Brazil	CEO, organizational Development Manager, Regional Human Resources Manager, Change Manager, Production Manager, Executive Manager	15
BETA	12	A credit cooperative, it is present in 23 municipalities, through 30 branches, with more than 450 employees. Head office in south-eastern Brazil	Chairman of the Board, Vice-Chairman of the Board, Executive Director, Chief Operating Officer, Secretary to the Board, HR Manager, Business Manager, Learning Coordinator, 4 Branch Managers	19
GAMMA	10	It operates in furniture manufacturing, metallurgy, and transport services and has 1050 employees. Headquarters in southern Brazil.	Business Director, HR Director, External Consultant, Independent Consultant, HR Manager, Purchasing Manager, HR Supervisor, Automation Project Coordinator, Designer, Process Specialist	14
DELTA	5	Industry of products for education and health, which has 600 employees. Headquarters in southern Brazil	Advisor, Sustainability Projects Coordinator, Learning Coordinator, Lab Learning Projects Coordinator, Learning Facilitator	21
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>33</b>			<b>17</b>

The selection of the four cases was intentional, aimed at exploring different contexts of organizational change in diverse sectors, as suggested by Eisenhardt (1989). These sectors were chosen due to the relevance of their change processes and their distinct organizational characteristics (Ma et al., 2021), allowing for a broader analysis of sensemaking processes.

The four organizations have been undergoing a process of planned and revolutionary change (Nadler & Tushman, 1997; Tushman & Romanelli, 1985), with regards to market and technological changes and the respective internal restructuring and reorientation. Alfa's change context encompassed market demands and the need for a less bureaucratic structure and culture, towards a flatter company. Beta's change context involved a movement to-

wards a purposeful company, with a more humanized management. Delta's change context comprehended an intense movement towards a purposeful company, in which the relationship with some customers was terminated and the main executives were replaced by the figure of facilitators. Gamma's change context consisted of strategy restructuring due to market changes, and the need to improve processes and integrate teams.

## Data Collection

Data were collected through multiple methods to ensure triangulation and increase the credibility of the findings (Creswell, 2012). The primary data sources included in-depth interviews, direct observations, and document analysis.

- **Interviews:** Thirty-three semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in a variety of roles, in the upper echelon, intermediate management and positions at some lower levels, in order to consider those ones that present a direct relation with decisions and executions associated to the planned organizational change in the companies and the way sensemaking occurred. The interview guide is in the Appendix. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour and 12 minutes on average, generating a total of 532 pages of transcribed data. Moreover, the number of interviews followed the saturation criterion, at each case level (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
- **Observations:** Observations were made during internal company events, training sessions, and meetings, resulting in 103 hours. A field diary was maintained to record the context, interactions, and behaviors observed. It was possible to analyze the work environment, how information is shared, the centralization of possible decisions, more formal or informal dress codes and celebrations.
- **Documents:** Internal reports, sustainability reports, training materials, and communication records were analysed to complement the interview and observational data. The main observation contexts and the documents collected in each company are described in Table 2.

**Table 2.**

Source of data collection: observation and documents.

Company	Context of Observation	Documents
ALFA	In-person participation in internal lectures and online events (webinars and live broadcasts) with talks by the main executives, focused on aspects related to the changes.	integrated annual and sustainability reports focused on narrative
BETA	Training and meetings; 5 different courses, plus an immersion focused on experiential learning.	integrated annual and sustainability reports focused on narrative
GAMMA	Training, meetings, and group dynamics with managers.	learning plans with evaluation of the level of access of employees to training
DELTA	In-person participation in internal lectures and online events (webinars and live broadcasts) with talks by the main executives, focused on aspects related to the changes.	learning plans with evaluation of the level of access of employees to training

## Data Analysis

The data analysis followed a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), with open coding used to identify recurring patterns. We considered the recommendations of Suddaby (2006) to assure grounded theory analysis, who recognizes the role of pre-existing theory as basis, the process as interpretive by nature, the creative component of doing research, and the ongoing interaction between researcher and data (constant comparative method). Our theoretical background served as basis for data collection instruments and data analysis, taking into account the following theoretical axes of our study: organizational change, experiential learning and sensemaking. We reinforce the interpretive nature of our data analysis process, detailed as follows. The creative component of doing research and the constant comparative method were also taken into account, mainly during the coding process and the definition of categories and macro-categories

After within-case analysis, a cross-case comparison was conducted to identify common themes, such as sensegiving and sensebreaking. This process was supported by NVivo 12® software and involved coding and categorizing the data to identify recurring themes and patterns.

The analysis was conducted in two stages:

- **1° Within-case analysis:** Each company was analysed individually to understand its unique context, sensemaking processes, and perceived challenges. This detailed examination allowed us to identify specific sensemaking processes and contextual factors influencing these processes within each organization.
- **2° Cross-case analysis:** In the cross-case analysis, the aim was to identify common themes and differences across the four companies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Initially, an inductive approach was employed where data from interviews, observations, and documents were coded to identify recurring patterns and concepts. Two researchers were involved in the four phases of the coding process (initial, focused, axial and theoretical). From this coding process, 97 codes were identified, allowing the emergence of five categories. These categories were then grouped into two overarching macro-categories based on shared characteristics and interrelationships observed during the analysis. The Sensegiving macro-category includes the categories Sensemaker, Sensebreaking, and Narratives in Context. The Visual Sensemaking macro-category encompasses Information Design and Visual Tools (Table 3). This aggregation reflects the underlying themes and processes that influence sensemaking and organizational change. The coding matrix is presented in the Appendix.

**Table 3.**

Macro-categories and Categories of sensemaking identified a posteriori.

Macrocategoria	Categoria	N° de Códigos
Sensegiving	Sensemaker	23
	Sensebreaking	20
	Narratives in context	23
Visual Sensemaking	Information design	16
	Visual tools	15

The coding process, supported by NVivo 12® software, involved multiple iterations of revisiting the data to ensure that emerging patterns were fully captured. By employing a grounded theory approach, the data were systematically broken down into categories that reflect both individual and collective sensemaking processes.

### Reliability, Validity and Ethical Procedures

Several strategies were employed to enhance the reliability and validity of the study:

- **Triangulation:** Using multiple data sources and methods to cross-verify findings.
- **Member Checking and Coding Agreement:** Participants reviewed the interview transcripts and preliminary findings to ensure accuracy. We also identified a 0.83 inter-coder agreement coefficient, according to the thresholds indicated by Halpin (2024).
- **Transferability and plausibility:** are guaranteed by the coherence of data collection and analysis procedures, by choice of interviewees and by the possibility of intergroup comparison.
- **Rich and Thick Description:** Detailed descriptions of the cases and contexts were provided to allow for transferability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
- **Ethical procedures:** were guaranteed by companies' authorizations, participants' anonymization and by providing informed consent forms during the research.

By adopting a rigorous methodological approach, this study aims to provide robust and insightful contributions to the understanding of sensemaking processes in organizational change.

## ■ RESULTS

This section presents the findings from the study, derived from the analysis of data collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. The results are organized into two primary sections: within-case analysis and cross-case analysis. Each section provides insights into the sensemaking processes during organizational change within the four studied companies.

### Within-Case Analysis

Each company was analysed individually to understand its unique context, sensemaking, and challenges perceived, according to Table 4. Change content and process are also indicated.

All four companies—Alfa, Beta, Gamma, and Delta—undertook cultural or structural changes that required significant sensemaking and sensegiving efforts from their leaders, though the nature of their transformations varied. Alfa focused on reducing bureaucracy and fostering agility, relying on the redefinition of rituals to overcome resistance from long-tenured employees. Beta emphasized democratizing governance through a collegiate decision-making process, with training helping employees adjust to shared. Gamma shifted from a paternalistic to a results-driven leadership model, requiring clear communication and the re-signification of leadership roles to address tensions between old and new management. Delta centered its changes on sustainability and human-centric strategies, demanding sense-breaking actions such as rebranding and abandoning unsustainable but profitable market segments. Despite their different contexts, all companies faced resistance rooted in established practices and responded by aligning employees through strong sensegiving strategies tailored to their specific challenges.

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Table 4.

## Within-Case Analysis Summary

Company	Change
ALFA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>Context:</b> Alfa, a long-established company in the steel industry, initiated changes to reduce bureaucracy, enhance agility, and promote diversity and simplicity in relationships.</li> <li>■ <b>Sensemaking:</b> The management team utilized sensegiving strategies to align employees with new cultural values. Key rituals and myths were redefined to facilitate acceptance.</li> <li>■ <b>Challenges:</b> Resistance from long-tenured employees was a significant barrier. Sensebreaking efforts, such as modifying dress codes and communication styles, were crucial in overcoming these challenges.</li> </ul>
BETA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>Context:</b> Beta, a credit cooperative, implemented a collegiate decision-making process to enhance democratic governance.</li> <li>■ <b>Sensemaking:</b> Leaders used sensegiving to promote the benefits of shared decision-making. Training and experiential learning sessions were pivotal in helping employees adapt to the new governance structure.</li> <li>■ <b>Challenges:</b> Initial scepticism and reluctance to relinquish traditional hierarchical decision-making power were noted. Sensebreaking efforts included re-evaluating long-standing beliefs and practices.</li> </ul>
GAMMA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>Context:</b> Gamma, a manufacturer of furniture and provider of transport services, shifted from a paternalistic leadership style to a more results-oriented approach.</li> <li>■ <b>Sensemaking:</b> Sensegiving strategies included clear communication of the new leadership expectations and consistent reinforcement through training programs.</li> <li>■ <b>Challenges:</b> Tension between established leaders and new management was notable. The re-signification of leadership roles and responsibilities was essential in mitigating these tensions.</li> </ul>
DELTA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>Context:</b> Delta, a company in the education and health products industry, a manufacturer of furniture and provider of transport services, focused on sustainability and human-centric business practices. Gamma, a company in the education and health products industry, shifted from a paternalistic leadership style to a more purpose-oriented approach.</li> <li>■ <b>Sensemaking:</b> The company engaged in sensegiving by highlighting the long-term benefits of sustainable practices for both the environment and the company's future.</li> <li>■ <b>Challenges:</b> Implementing these changes required breaking away from profitable but unsustainable practices. Sensebreaking involved rebranding efforts and discontinuing relationships with certain market segments.</li> </ul>

On the other hand, taking into consideration the context, content and process of changes (Pettigrew, 1987; Whipp et al., 1989), the planned organizational changes in the companies studied stem from both external pressures and internal needs for adaptation. All four companies demonstrated shifts in strategy, power dynamics, and organizational structure, including changes in CEOs and senior executives, as well as renewed evaluations of culture, technology, and business models. These strategic realignments were driven and implemented by top leadership.

Regarding the content of change, the companies began reshaping their organizational cultures by integrating workflows related to structure, leadership development, communication, project management, and performance monitoring. Delta, in particular, underwent a more intensive transformation toward a flatter organizational design. In terms of the change process, the companies first engaged their upper-echelon executives to ensure they understood the transformation and could promote the involvement—especially—of middle managers.

Therefore, these organizational changes required companies to redefine their strategies, rethinking their operational and execution structures to achieve clarity and focus. Clear communication was essential for all members to understand and follow the changes. The studied organizations emphasized aligning change steps and outcomes with how information is

communicated and interpreted by employees. Company Gamma highlighted vulnerabilities and potential frustrations that could hinder the change process. The alignment and interpretation of the strategy by each employee are crucial for successful change, as noted by Hay et al. (2021) and evidenced in some excerpts:

*[...] the company is not the buildings or the brand, it is people relating, it is this relationship that exists between people that creates the connection to make it happen. The connection between people who want to do the same thing, walk in the same direction (HR Manager - ALFA).*

*[...] the engaged person has passion, curiosity for what he/she does. They identify with the company's values, with the projects they are working on, they are committed to the best results, they are dedicated and meet the deadlines. It is to make a difference (HR Manager - BETA).*

*[...] we thought of a value proposition where we would pass on everything we promised, and that it would really be a reality of delivery. Then we listened to our associates at the time, starting with the coordinators to see if that proposal was adherent or not. And what we noticed when we talked to our coordinators who represent the associates... what the coordinator perceived and what we said we delivered showed a big gap... They compared us a lot to banks... They didn't see us with much of a difference, and that bothered us... Then we started the change to rescue this bond between Beta and the associates in the essence of the values (EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR - BETA).*

*[...] the engagement is after the participation, if there is no participation there is no engagement (LEARNING SPACE COORDINATOR - DELTA).*

*We didn't want to make any changes without the collaborators, we didn't want to change people. Because it is easy to make a change and just change people...our idea was to make the change with the people who were on board the ship and make this ship make the turn that needed to be made, it was very hard work, but very enjoyable to do...everything we do is based on the advancement of our human-economic-environmental responsibility (DELTA ADVISOR AND FACILITATOR).*

*[...] we are listening to our leaders and employees, regardless of the hierarchy, in order to understand how the communication between the different levels is, but we can't always work as we would like. The change is taking longer than expected and the internal fights between the older directors and also the cut in investments in training make it very difficult to continue, but we will (HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER - GAMMA).*

This underscores the significance of understanding the dynamics and processes of sensemaking during organizational change. Sensemaking occurs through the unity of multiple accounts and events observed in the research, involving the combination of moments and contexts. It involves

changing cognitive structures of those involved, shaped by new ways of perceiving and interpreting the world, understanding changes, and acting in various scenarios.

## Cross-Case Analysis

Considering the aspects of change previously analyzed, the results of the Cross-Case Analysis identified common themes and differences across the four companies as shown at Table 5. The cases demonstrate that effective sensemaking, which involves sensegiving and sensebreaking, are consistently reliant on strong leadership and active employee engagement to overcome sensebreaking challenges. However, the specific strategies and difficulties encountered were modulated by industry-specific factors and varied change management approaches across the organizations.

**Table 5.**

*Cross-Case Analysis Summary*

Common Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>Role of Leadership:</b> In all cases, leadership played a crucial role in sensemaking and sensegiving processes. Leaders who effectively communicated the vision and rationale for change facilitated smoother transitions.</li> <li>■ <b>Employee Engagement:</b> Active involvement of employees in the change process, through training and open communication, was essential in fostering a positive perception of the changes.</li> <li>■ <b>Challenges of Sensebreaking:</b> Each company faced resistance to change, necessitating deliberate sensebreaking strategies to deconstruct old beliefs and practices.</li> </ul>
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>Industry-Specific Factors:</b> The nature of the industry influenced the specific challenges and strategies employed. For instance, the steel industry (Alfa) faced different cultural barriers compared to the cooperative sector (Beta).</li> <li>■ <b>Change Management Approaches:</b> The approaches to managing change varied, with some companies focusing more on participatory methods (Beta) while others relied on top-down directives (Gamma).</li> </ul>

The cross-analysis also allowed the identification, based on the five emergent categories, of two primary macrocategories in the organizational change process: Sensegiving and Visual Sensemaking. Such macrocategories are considered as sensemaking processes. Each macrocategory is further presented and detailed into its specific categories, that provide a detailed understanding of the sensemaking processes involved.

### Sensegiving:

- a) **Sensemaker:** Leaders linked environmental signals with empathy to inspire collective sensemaking.
- b) **Sensebreaking:** Leaders deconstructed existing practices to allow new behaviors and meanings.
- c) **Narratives in Context:** Coherent narratives shaped and were shaped by the organizational context.

### Visual Sensemaking:

- a) **Information Design:** Visual methods clarified information and facilitated understanding among stakeholders.
- b) **Visual Tools:** Tools like brainstorming and infographics supported collaborative problem-solving and idea generation.

### Sensegiving

Sensegiving in the studied companies is the intention to influence various stakeholders in their constructions of meaning and to provide meaning to their experiences. This role was evident in the top management leaders involved in the change processes, as they primarily influenced middle management in the analysed organizations. Sensegiving is comprised by the emergent categories of sensemaker, sensebreaking, and narratives in context.

### Sensemaker

A sensemaker is someone who produces meaning while creating context through connections between environmental signals and empathy towards others. In this context, the sensemaker, often in the role of leader or influencer, seeks to link each individual's actions to a larger vision, inspiring collaborators and producing collective meaning. Essentially, as the leader engages in sensemaking, they simultaneously promote sensegiving for the team.

Based on the findings, sensemakers in leadership roles use the company's purpose to construct their own meaning as individuals and for the team. This was particularly evident in Alfa, Beta, and Delta, where the purpose statement is seen as a means to transform and build something greater than merely delivering products that satisfy customers and generate profit. In these companies, executives often used the term "legacy" to describe both personal and collective efforts to deliver value to society in economic, social, and environmental forms. Gamma, conversely, focused on managing ambiguous messages, handling hierarchical challenges and enhancing relationships with significant customers.

*[...] in the old days when we questioned the role of the company the answer was to generate profit for the shareholder; today the company has to generate profit because if it is not profitable it goes out of business. But it needs a legacy for society, for the environment. For consumers, I strongly believe that this is a new economy, which will generate increasingly conscious consumers who will start to demand a more conscious economy from companies (PEOPLE AND SUSTAINABILITY DIRECTOR - ALFA).*

*[...] I would like to do much more than I already do and I really admire those who can leave a legacy, for example...the cooperativism should be in the whole society...working with cooperation, not only thinking about you doing well, but the whole system...that is why it is important to teach and promote the cooperativism for a vision of cooperation and not competition...I feel that I help to build it by being here (VICE COUNCIL PRESIDENT - BETA).*

*[...] 10 years ago when we did the work with an external consultancy, a question was asked - what was our purpose...if our organization ended what would be the legacy? It was there that we started to rethink our practices...to create a model of life that values collaboration more, to put our competencies to the service of society and not just serve ourselves (ADVISOR AND FACILITATOR - DELTA).*

*[...] "If he doesn't have the answer to the company's problem, he believes there won't be an answer. He already told the new director: 'It's not going to work.' Because he couldn't do it. If he couldn't do it, then it's because it won't work... But can't it be done with a different person!? We acknowledge that they deserve all the credit for bringing us this far, but we need different answers today. If we keep doing the same thing, we'll get the same results, and that's what they don't understand." (HR MANAGER - GAMMA)*

However, the sensemaking process is not without challenges. Disagreements and differing views among sensemakers can arise, particularly when the information is insufficient or interpreted variably. For example, the Coordinator of Sustainability Projects at Delta noted that exposure to different perspectives broadened horizons but did not necessarily lead to uniform decisions. Similarly, the HR Manager at Gamma highlighted the resistance faced when trying to implement new approaches.

*[...] we were used to common business situations, professors, consultants, references, right, and the change brought us a very broadening of horizons, we started to see many other things, being open to different worlds and visions...that does not mean that we have to decide for that, but that enters the radar to help in the decision (COORDINATOR OF SUSTAINABILITY PROJECTS - DELTA).*

*[...] they are feeling like that, as if we had tried to deconstruct everything they did, but we aren't at all, quite the contrary. We say that they have all the merit for bringing us here, but we need different answers today, if we keep doing the same thing, we will have the same results, and this is what they don't understand (HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER - GAMMA).*

The findings highlight that at the strategic level, increasing the knowledge repertoire of sensemakers can support leadership by alleviating anxiety about the new and improving the interpretation of uncertainties, ambiguities, and complexities. At the tactical-operational level, using visual tools and direct communication in sensemaking can optimize information flows, reduce data interpretation time, and enhance decision-making agility. Training courses have been provided to accelerate the understanding of diverse data sources, expanding knowledge in technical and cultural areas, which helps address both old and new problems, although it may also lead to questioning and criticism of existing systems. Organizational learning structures play a crucial role in this process.

Another significant observation is the focus on understanding consumers and co-creating products and services to enhance their experiences. Despite the overwhelming data and communication noise in a digital soci-

ety, sensemakers, as humans generating value for others, continuously feed this relationship. Critical thinking and abstraction are necessary to perceive connections between different phenomena, changes, and behavior patterns, which support decision-making. However, even if a sensemaker knows how to select data, read the context, and communicate effectively, they might still not take action.

## Sensebreaking

Sensebreaking is the deliberate deconstruction and re-signification of artifacts, functions, events, or business models by presenting new justifications, perceptions, and behaviors as examples of change. The findings indicate that company leaders reconfigured processes, hierarchies, and relationships through conversations, daily attitudes, and the promotion of new interpretations to justify and legitimize the need for change. In the studied companies, outsourced consultants were employed to sensitize employees to these changes and mitigate resistance, thereby encouraging adherence to the new organizational scenarios.

*[...] so practically we changed everything inside the company to give signs of the desired culture of sharing and openness. From the most basic, and the most basic is that we could work wearing jeans, because before we could not work wearing jeans. What is the fastest symbol with zero cost that you can evidence? Culture. But this has to be sustained by behavior at all times. If you put on the jeans and the colourful pouf, but don't change the behavior, it backfires. It will not promote any change (CHANGE MANAGER - ALFA).*

*We wanted to bring people together, we wanted their creativity and their speech into the process. So, we needed to break this hierarchy. We built this collectively. It was a learning process... because you don't stop being a director or a subordinate from one day to the next. Several institutions helped us in this process (ADVISOR AND FACILITATOR - DELTA).*

The support of third-party consultants was crucial for generating re-signification of the past and insights about the future from various sources. These consultancies began by aiding leaders in interpreting social behaviors and questioning existing organizational standards. They employed experiential programs to sensitize leaders and change their mental models, focusing on developing observation, sensitivity, self-knowledge, and personal evolution. Subsequently, other consulting services adjusted processes to align with new purposes. Sensebreaking emerged as a vital part of constructing meaning amid organizational changes, involving the intentional deconstruction of existing meanings to create space for new, recognized meanings within the organization.

## Narratives in context

In this research, narratives and context are viewed as intertwined phenomena, with narratives often shaping context and vice versa. The data selected and their interpretation are influenced by the prevailing context. In most cases, the narratives are coherent with what is said, written, and experienced, particularly in companies Alfa, Beta, and Delta. However, in company Gamma, there is a disconnect between words and actions, which may stem from the ongoing organizational generational transition, as the company founders move into roles on the management board. These narratives help stakeholders create specific meanings from situations, set against a backdrop of excessive data that needs to be interpreted and communicated to both internal and external stakeholders, including the press.

Companies Alfa and Beta, in dealing with this reality, adopted a more cohesive and visual language across all forms of communication, different from Gamma and Delta. The annual reports stood out the most in this new communication approach, utilizing infographics and prioritizing essential information to facilitate stakeholder understanding. This new format aimed to create a conversational structure, contrasting with the old, more textual reports, thereby making the information more accessible and engaging.

*[...] knowing the history, having these debates, these discussions are important for us to be able to communicate well and align. Because this is the big challenge... Having the strategy in the minds of 2 or 3 is no use. The strategy has to be in everyone's mind, it has to be in everyone's heart (COO - BETA).*

*[...] so we talk a lot about externality, relationship, dialogue, conversation, learning, these are terms that exist that are not often used, but we have adopted them here; harvesting, facilitation, there are about thirty terms that we use on a daily basis that other companies do not use, but we have got used to it, so it is our world as if this were our village and everyone understands this way of dialogue... it has been 12 years since the turning point (COORDINATOR OF SUSTAINABILITY PROJECTS - DELTA).*

In addition to reports, digital channels like the website and intranet were used to share current and future perspectives. Managers and employees also played a key role in disseminating narratives, particularly those related to historical facts of the organization and the founders' history, especially in Alfa, Gamma, and Delta companies.

## Visual sensemaking

Visual sensemaking involves the graphic representation developed to facilitate the understanding of the process and the generation of possible insights. Within the organizational context researched, visual sensemaking is the activity of making sense of situations through visual methods and tools including words, drawings, diagrams, tables, and charts used to represent organizational situations, systems, processes, challenges, and opportunities.

Information design and visual tools are the two emergent categories that comprises this macro-category, and they are described as follow.

## Information design

Information design happens through visual methods and lean but clear and concise ways of communicating that use visualization as a facilitator and accelerator of understanding. Due to a diversity of sources and perspectives and a context characterized by a lack of time for reflection and information overload, information design helps to connect the dots, therefore allowing people to act.

*[...] There came a time when we had a mission, vision, values, strategic drivers, purpose, principles, and we didn't know what to follow anymore. It was then that we decided to stick only with the purpose and the principles. And we realized this when we were discussing one of the company's principles, which is simplicity, which in reality we weren't following, so we decided to start simplifying there (HR MANAGER – ALFA).*

*[...] If I look at the map, it will be a big one, because... - which is "Make the world prosper." That's our purpose, and it has several 'whats.' What do you want to do?...there's no 'how', the 'how' is the creation part of everyone, how am I going to do it?...you'll have to invent how to do it. Then there's autonomy, then it's free. If I have clarity on the 'why', I know the 'what'. The 'how' is mine, that's an engagement factor (HR MANAGER – BETA).*

The major problem observed in organizations is that there is an imbalance between information and communication. Middle-management leaders are usually intermediaries between top management and the rest of the organization. They receive information, training, inspiration. However, they cannot convey these experiences and knowledge to their teams as intensely as they received them.

Information design is also indicated by the use of organizational charts which represent the companies' changes. However, companies Alpha, Beta and Gamma follow the tree organizational chart model. On the other hand, Delta's managerial complexity is shown in its organizational chart, which is not rigid or hierarchical.

*[...] this is the new architecture: it has the facilitation, the learning, it has the impacts and, these differ from the traditional. The tradition is also there: accounting, production, purchasing, sales, PCP, laboratories... it's all in there. And, this figure represents the yin yang in the middle, to remember to deal with our shadows. And the 'Educommunication', which is an educational communication, not oppressive, from Paula Freire, of help. (LEARNING COORDINATOR - DELTA).*

*Finally, one can infer from the results that visualizing the idea helps to understand what is going on, map it out, structure what is unknown and make it more familiar, which can help in understanding the "big picture" and possibly in introducing new ideas.*

## Visual tools

In this study, visual tools are techniques used to achieve visual convergence by illustrating ideas and creating contexts in the collaborative development of complex constructs, processes, or systems. The findings suggest a need to create new possibilities and engage stakeholders in problem-solving and future planning. Identified tools include brainstorming meetings, design thinking, post-it for idea generation, LEGO Serious Play methodology, PDCA technique for problem-solving, and the use of checkpoints and e-books as pre-training materials. These tools can be adapted into folders, digital guides, and infographics to enhance understanding and involvement.

*[...] the innovation people use Lego to teach, not always, but they have done it. We use A3, Scrum, PDCA and design as project development methods. There is a software that organizes PDCA. But this is more of a problem-solving culture. Everything, absolutely everything is PDCA, including the famous agile methods, however with a different dressing (PRODUCTION MANAGER - ALFA).*

*[...] we have the culture of post-it, of graphic facilitation, of co-creation, of creating together with the teams. We also have external support from excellent consulting firms that contribute to the more structuring projects. However, we don't let them lead, but integrate them to our creative process (COORDINATOR OF LEARNING - BETA).*

*[...] we use...that could be called design thinking..., but here we use another name. It is for the process of innovation, co-creation of products and services. We have the LAB, which is a space to involve employees, to give new meaning to their relationship with the company, the environment, and to get closer to the community, so that together with each one's experience, life experience, needs, we can co-create better products and services that meet people's needs in a more complete way (SUSTAINABILITY PROJECTS COORDINATOR - DELTA).*

The results suggest that organizational members' sensemaking occurs in response to leaders' sensebreaking, which challenges the status quo. Sensemaking depends on narratives and context. Empathy and consideration for the recipients, appropriate information, and suitable graphics reduce noise and enhance clarity in communication. Leaders' behaviors, discourses, and narratives reinforce effective information design. However, the potential negative aspect of discourse should be considered, as it can mobilize actors towards conformity with societal expectations, leading them to dedicate themselves to work and delivery.

These findings not only underscore the complexity of managing organizational change but also emphasize how essential sensemaking processes are for aligning both managerial actions and employee perceptions. By integrating sensegiving and sensebreaking strategies, leaders can more effectively steer organizations through turbulent transformations, as the study demonstrates. Effective change management requires a nuanced understanding of how employees interpret and respond to change, as well as strategic efforts by leaders to guide and shape these interpretations.

The integration of sensegiving and sensebreaking strategies is essential to facilitate successful organizational transformation.

## ■ DISCUSSION

Before delving into the micro-categories, it is essential to highlight that in the studied companies, connections are being made not only between interpreting the environment and acquiring the necessary learning to meet change demands but also in understanding the environment and the role of each individual. This dual focus enhances acceptance and fosters the creation of change aligned with the organization's purpose, taking into account the context, the content and the process of planned organizational change (Acciarini et al., 2024; Castillo et al., 2018; Hay et al., 2021; Pettigrew, 1987; Whipp et al., 1989). The identified purpose of engaging employees and leaving a legacy appears to strengthen the significance of ongoing change and each person's involvement in this journey, supporting a co-creation process that develops new capabilities suited to the current context (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Weick et al. (2005) argue that organizations emerge from collective meaning-making rather than the reverse, a dynamic evident in the cultural transitions observed in these companies. This extends beyond mere mindset changes to developing new capabilities essential for sustaining and creating change.

The analysis reveals that sensemaking occurs within the unity of diverse accounts and events observed, facilitated by new ways to perceive and interpret the world and act in various scenarios (Brown et al., 2015; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sun et al., 2025; Turner et al., 2023; Weick, 1995; Weiser, 2021). In this theoretical framework, sensegiving emerged as a macro-category encompassing sensemaker, sensebreaking, and narratives in context, as well as visual sensemaking, which includes information design and visual tools. In order to help with the discussion, Table 5 presents the main concepts and results.

## Sensemaking Processes in Organizational Change: Evidencing Sensegiving and Visual Sensemaking in a Multiple Case Study

Table 5.

Synthesis of Results by Category

Category	Description	Features	Selected Statement
Sensemaker	Produces sense and meaning, while simultaneously understanding and creating the context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Sensemakers strive to link individual actions to the larger organizational vision, fostering collective meaning and inspiring collaboration.</li> <li>■ Leaders acting as sensemakers leverage the company's purpose to construct both their personal meaning and the team's shared direction.</li> <li>■ The process is not seamless, as disagreements and differing views can emerge among sensemakers, especially when information is ambiguous or insufficient.</li> <li>■ Despite the challenge of overwhelming data and communication noise inherent in a digital society, sensemakers are crucial for continuously generating and feeding valuable human relationships within the organization.</li> </ul>	[...] it is necessary to have expert people who know how to read and understand the dynamics of the industry, of the market; together we can work to recognize what is happening, make sense of it, and then focus on what is really important (CEO – Alfa).
Sensebreaking	Intentionally deconstruct and change a meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Company leaders drove change by reconfiguring processes, hierarchies, and relationships. This was achieved through continuous conversations and daily attitudes, which were used to promote new interpretations, thereby justifying and legitimizing the need for the change initiative.</li> <li>■ Outsourced consultants were utilized to facilitate the change process, in order to sensitize people to the changes and mitigate resistance.</li> <li>■ Sensebreaking was identified as a critical component of meaning construction during transitions. It involves the intentional deconstruction of existing, outdated meanings to clear the cognitive space necessary for the acceptance and establishment of new, relevant organizational meanings.</li> </ul>	[...] in those three days of launching the event, everybody was expecting us to talk about numbers and goals, but we broke a pattern. We talked about meaning. We wanted to touch people's hearts, and say "this makes sense, I believe it is possible!" and for them to leave with the same energy that the collegiate had when they started the journey. This is the vision we wanted to convey: us united by the cause (Executive Director - Delta).
Narratives in Context	Narratives and context are viewed as phenomena that go together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Organizational narratives are not static; they are deeply influenced by the prevailing context, and they, in turn, shape that context.</li> <li>■ Narratives are crucial for sensemaking, helping stakeholders extract specific meanings from complex situations. This is essential given the excessive data that organizations must filter, interpret, and communicate.</li> <li>■ Successful dissemination and adoption of these narratives rely on a combination of factors: the appropriate choice of textual and visual language, the utilization of effective communication channels, and the active participation of both managers and employees in sharing the message.</li> </ul>	[...] knowing and telling the story, linking it to the strategy is important so we can communicate well and align. This is the great challenge... the strategy has to be in everyone's head and heart (Director of Operations – Beta).
Information Design	Organizing the abundance of data and extracting information from it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Information design connects diverse information and perspectives amidst time constraints and data overload, enabling people to take action.</li> <li>■ Communication Imbalance: Middle management, acting as intermediaries, receives information intensely but struggles to convey that same intensity and knowledge to their teams.</li> <li>■ Information design is also demonstrated by using organizational charts to clearly represent company changes.</li> </ul>	[...] I ask for one-page reports, only with what is most important... an overview... where the problems are and what the possible paths are... I respect the time of my colleagues and peers (Executive Manager – Alfa).
Visual Tools	Techniques to seek visual convergence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Engagement Need: There is a necessity to create new possibilities and engage stakeholders in both problem-solving and future planning.</li> <li>■ Identified Tools: Various tools are used for this engagement, including brainstorming, Design Thinking, Post-its, LEGO Serious Play, the PDCA technique, and the use of checkpoints and e-books for pre-training.</li> </ul>	[...] interacting with studios helped to understand the importance of building flows/designs to get everyone on the same page (Learning Coordinator – Delta).

Organizational members' sensemaking responds to leaders' sensebreaking—challenging the status quo—and sensegiving—shaping members' understandings of a positive future (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Sensebreaking actions in the studied companies, often facilitated by external consultants, involved questioning, reformulating, and redirecting to deconstruct and re-signify artifacts, functions, events, or business models (Moon et al., 2017; Weick, 1995). This process introduces in narratives new justifications, perceptions,

and behaviors better suited to the new change scenario from top leaders to operational employees, with mistakes providing learning opportunities (Hernes & Obstfeld, 2022; Giolito & Golsorkhi, 2023; Giuliani, 2016; Hagebakken et al., 2024; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Rheinhardt & Gioia, 2021; Sun et al., 2025; Turner et al., 2023; Van Der Schaft et al., 2022; Weiser, 2021).

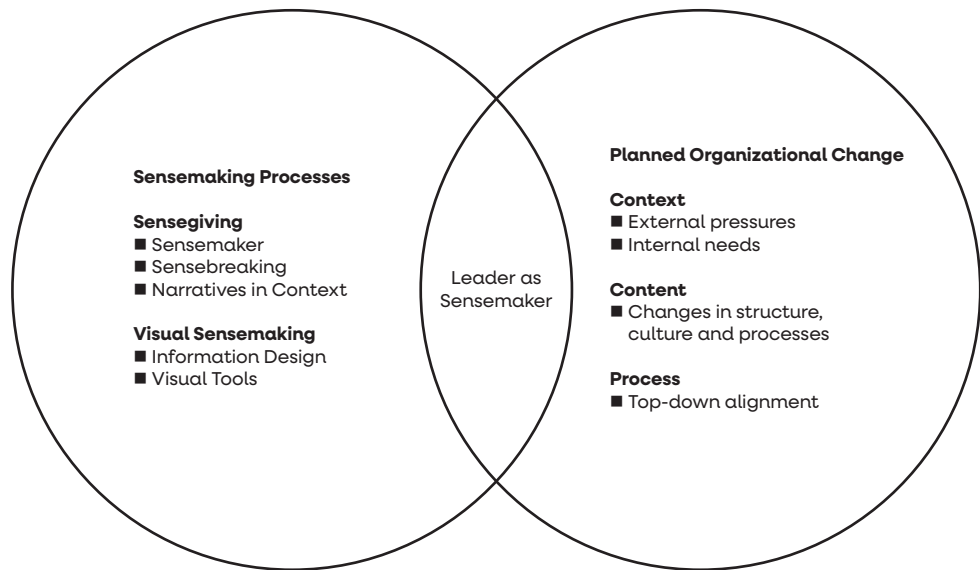
Concurrently, visual sensemaking serves as a cognitive and emotional accelerator, balancing words and visuals to enhance information comprehension and reduce environmental equivocality (Langley & Rieple, 2024; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; VanPartter & Pastor, 2016; Weick, 1995;). It is more than the interpretation of information; instead, it is the continuous interaction with information that allows meaning to emerge. This continuous connection and reconnection of cues with existing structures is what allows the manager to reduce environmental equivocality (Fahey & Saint-Onge, 2024; Weick, 1995). Effective visual sensemaking reduces noise and improves clarity through empathetic and contextually appropriate information design, although the potential for manipulative use of sensemaking should be considered (Eppler & Platts, 2009; Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015; Weick & Westley, 2004; Wurth and Mawson, 2024).

Moreover, leaders, acting as Sensemakers, are crucial for cultivating an organizational culture focused on business outcomes and for involving staff in change initiatives by imbuing the organization with meaning. These leaders function not only as connectors but also as catalysts linking experiential learning with sensemaking, given their capacity to set the tempo of changes. They are expected to continuously evaluate how organizational purpose guides strategic direction and must be prepared to modify or redefine this connection as circumstances evolve (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick et al., 2005). Furthermore, through both formal and informal communication, transparency, and authenticity, they possess the ability to foster a sense of belonging and reinforce the connection between narratives, commitments, and actual execution (Mukerjee et al., 2021).

The flow of this dynamic between sensemaking and organizational change is summarized in Figure 1. In the intersection between sensemaking processes and planned organizational change, we emphasize the role of leaders as sensemakers.

**Figure 1.**

Sensemaking Processes and Planned Organizational Change in the Cases Studied



We underscore that the source and method of message delivery are equally significant as the message content itself. This highlights the paramount function of the leader as a sensemaker, who must be proficient both in making sense of events and in communicating persuasively, mainly in contexts of ambiguity (Fahey & Saint-Onge, 2024; Langley & Rieple, 2024; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Rindova & Petkova, 2023; Weick et al., 2005). In this context, leadership is viewed as a collective endeavor and momentum driving the redefinition of strategy and the development of new capabilities. Moreover, sensemaking is, above all, relational in nature, depending on interaction, language, interpretation, and action for the construction of meaning. Thus, sensemaking contributes to understanding the current situation and acting upon it, generating insights and contributing to organizational outcomes (Acciarini et al., 2024; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Munck & Seolin, 2024; Nadler & Tushman, 1997; Rosenbaum et al., 2018; Saeed et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2025; Turner et al., 2023; Weick et al., 2005; Weiser, 2021)

### Limitations and future studies

One limitation identified was the inability to conduct more observation sessions, due to companies' constraints. Other aspect in the study is a possible effect of the elite bias, since the majority of interviews were associated to directors and managers. Future research could explore how new business analysis information systems contribute to sensemaking and dynamic capabilities development in organizations, and the impact of technological transformations on generating sensemaking and sensegiving. Additionally, examining the role of experiential learning in reshaping organizational purposes and the effects of learning curation in both formal and informal processes could provide insights into the development of dynamic capabilities. Finally, investigating the potential distortions and manipulation of information in the pursuit of favourable meanings would be valuable for future studies.

## Academic and Practical Contributions

The academic contributions of this study are multifaceted. We specifically address gaps in the existing literature concerning two key areas: the interconnection between sensegiving and sensemaking - leading to the identification of a singular conceptual category involving sensemaker, sensebreaking and narratives in context - and the integration of visual sensemaking within sensemaking processes, particularly information design and visual tools. In the current context emphasizing the importance of integrating advanced technologies and collaborative problem-solving approaches in organizational change processes, the design of clear and informative visual resources can significantly enhance employee understanding and engagement during such transitions (Mohlin, 2023).

The findings reinforce the critical role of leaders as sensemakers, at the juncture of sensemaking processes and planned organizational change, taking into consideration that leadership is a collective phenomenon and sensemaking is relational in nature. Additionally, the study advances understanding of the effect of narratives when interacting with organizational context, thereby highlighting the significance of engaging stakeholders through both written and spoken narratives. Finally, it underscores the reliance of sensemaking on reflection and the quality of experience, spanning all hierarchical levels. Sustainable solutions and the deconstruction of obsolete practices, as highlighted by Mohlin (2023), align with the need for sensebreaking to implement effective new approaches.

As practical contributions, the study indicates several actionable strategies for managing change, particularly in complex organizational environments where effective sensemaking is critical. Our findings highlight the necessity for leaders to function as effective sensemakers, emphasizing that continuous training is required to help them develop dynamic capabilities and connect their narratives to the company's future. Not all leaders are naturally adept storytellers.

Furthermore, the research stresses the importance of guided reflections through workplace learning and the promotion of an adaptive, innovative organizational environment through collaborative learning and reflective practices. This adaptive capacity is significantly supported by leveraging the sensegiving process and its dimensions, along with the strategic use of visual tools, which, as demonstrated in this study, can substantially improve the comprehension and acceptance of organizational change among stakeholders.

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## ▲ APENDIX

### Interview Guide

Consider a change project in which you played an important role in its development and/or execution.

1. When, how, and why did the XXXX project come about? Was it initiated by directors? Employees? Consultants? Tell me about these roles.
2. Who were the first layers to work on this change? (senior management, board...)? How?
3. How did you create a sense of change/urgency among executives and employees?
4. How long did it take to create an alliance strong enough to change the mindset? How did it happen? Was there resistance from senior management? How?
5. Were consultants hired to initiate and continue the transformation process? How were their role?
6. Was there a structured methodology to follow? Comment about it.
7. What is your main communication with the various audiences? Why? How did it occur during the change process?
8. What were the main challenges for you throughout this transformation process? Comment about it.
9. Where do you spend most of your time? Do you have time alone to think, reflect, and prepare? (for results meetings, with clients...). How does it happen?
10. What have you learned in your role as XXX? What has been your biggest learning experience along the way? Please comment.

## Coding Tree

Category	Codes
Sensemaker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ acting – can be understood as selecting data, reading the context, knowing how to communicate it, and still not acting</li> <li>■ focus on data – business processes and interconnected information systems</li> <li>■ co-creating products with health, education, design professionals, people with disabilities and their families – assistive technologies</li> <li>■ collecting data in various ways, both digital and behavioral</li> <li>■ communicating – sensemaking at the tactical–operational level – supported by visual tools and more direct forms of communication</li> <li>■ creating sensitivity to context, experiences, stories, and the humanities</li> <li>■ developing sensitivity to context, experiences, stories, and the humanities</li> <li>■ delivering value to society in the form of economic, social, and/or environmental development</li> <li>■ strengthening relationships between middle management and clients</li> <li>■ strengthening relationships between middle management and the community</li> <li>■ strengthening relationships with major clients</li> <li>■ structure – excess data from a digital society and communication noise</li> <li>■ asking insight-generating questions – identity construction – social context</li> <li>■ influencing and connecting – in the role of leader and/or influencer, seeks to connect each individual's actions to something bigger</li> <li>■ scheduling the meeting about the meeting</li> <li>■ thinking while acting – create change while searching for signals of change</li> <li>■ generating sense and meaning while simultaneously understanding and creating the context</li> <li>■ promotv critical thinking and abstraction skills to perceive connections and support perspective-taking</li> <li>■ receiving ambiguous messages</li> <li>■ recognizing – who speaks is as important as the content spoken</li> <li>■ reflecting – sensemaking at the strategic level – repertoire of knowledge for reading ambiguities and complexities – the time dilemma</li> <li>■ having a greater purpose – they used the word legacy – individual and group</li> <li>■ using (in the role of leader) the company's purpose in the search for one's own sensemaking as an individual and in building meaning for the team's actions</li> </ul>
Sensebreaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ breaking paradigms</li> <li>■ conversations to justify the change, daily attitudes, interpretation, and selling the idea that the changes were necessary</li> <li>■ designing processes – situation still unclear to define FROM–TO</li> <li>■ FROM centralized decision-making TO decentralized decision-making</li> <li>■ FROM centralized decisions TO collegiate, decentralized decisions</li> <li>■ FROM competing TO collaborating</li> <li>■ FROM directors TO facilitators</li> <li>■ FROM doing “for” TO doing “with” – co-creation</li> <li>■ FROM excessive processes and bureaucracy TO less bureaucracy, more agility, simplicity, and innovation</li> <li>■ FROM goals and product-focused metrics TO member-focused work – without targets</li> <li>■ FROM hierarchical/departmental management TO executive management in a collegiate structure</li> <li>■ FROM mission TO purpose</li> <li>■ FROM oppressor TO emancipator</li> <li>■ FROM success as something financial TO something greater – restricting markets not aligned with its purpose</li> <li>■ FROM training TO learning</li> <li>■ FROM unilateral actions TO co-creation</li> <li>■ hiring new executives</li> <li>■ in the process of defining the strategy</li> <li>■ reconfiguring processes, hierarchies, and relationships</li> <li>■ support from external consulting firms for sensebreaking to raise employee awareness of the new context – reframing</li> </ul>

## Sensemaking Processes in Organizational Change: Evidencing Sensegiving and Visual Sensemaking in a Multiple Case Study

Category	Codes
Narratives in Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ collaborating – collective</li> <li>■ comparing the former executive with the current one – the current executive now personifies the cooperative's values and purpose together with the collegiate leadership</li> <li>■ sharing discourse about behaviors – Above the line (response, responsibility, ability) – Below the line (blame, justification, denial, avoidance)</li> <li>■ being careful with nonverbal language – through unspoken messages people perceive what is valued</li> <li>■ recognizing the disconnect between what is spoken, written, and lived</li> <li>■ developing the Alfa Culture book</li> <li>■ highlighting the strength of cooperativism</li> <li>■ engaging in dialogue, maintaining respect and balance, and being careful with words, as they affect and shape the context</li> <li>■ providing internal communication channels (TVs, Yammer, Intranet, Email Marketing, leader–employee conversations) and external channels (website and official social media)</li> <li>■ understanding that technology is ephemeral – focusing on people and their transformation – they complement rather than exclude each other</li> <li>■ doing together for a shared purpose</li> <li>■ focusing on principles of information connectivity – annual reports</li> <li>■ presenting technology as an extension that supports human beings</li> <li>■ telling personal stories that intertwine with the cooperative's stories – members</li> <li>■ emphasizing in discourse – co-creation, sustainability, and economic, social, and human dimensions</li> <li>■ preferring images, diagrams, and infographics to explain purpose and future vision</li> <li>■ reinforcing the founders' stories – entrepreneurial spirit, resilience, innovation, preparedness, and courage to accomplish what they set out to do</li> <li>■ reinforcing in speeches – co-construction, genuine interest, trust, purpose, and collegiate decision-making</li> <li>■ repeating the history of purpose-driven management and the social programs, and how grateful employees feel</li> <li>■ repeating in speeches – protagonism, shaping the desired future, autonomy, openness</li> <li>■ keeping coherence between discourse and action – feedback, time for people, results</li> <li>■ using a more cohesive and visual language in a context of information overload</li> <li>■ using official digital channels</li> </ul>
Information Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ imbalance between information and communication</li> <li>■ in the form of a tree metaphor</li> <li>■ lack of visual thinking – communication is more textual</li> <li>■ lack of time – these excesses of information</li> <li>■ lack of time to reflect and deal with these excesses of information</li> <li>■ empathy map</li> <li>■ middle management – intermediary that connects top leadership with the rest of the organization</li> <li>■ fewer long reports and more management-at-a-glance</li> <li>■ organizational chart – complexity of management in a context without a rigid and hierarchical structure – the collective design went through several changes, moments of deconstruction and reconstruction</li> <li>■ starting and ending points to generate insights from various sources – collective constructions</li> <li>■ how many questions the report/research generated</li> <li>■ A3 reports – how many questions they generated</li> <li>■ meaning built through visual methods – to clarify and support – co-constructed purpose</li> <li>■ simplification of processes, systems, and communication methods</li> <li>■ everyone participates in information analysis, connecting ideas</li> <li>■ use of images, summaries, and videos to extend the experience</li> </ul>
Visual Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Canvas</li> <li>■ Canvas learning</li> <li>■ Design thinking</li> <li>■ Design thinking in the multiple-line approach</li> <li>■ e-book – pre-work – folder, digital guide, and infographic</li> <li>■ graphic facilitation – panels – disseminating workshop and meeting learnings</li> <li>■ information design with co-constructed concept maps – purpose</li> <li>■ Lego Serious Play</li> <li>■ murals</li> <li>■ PDCA</li> <li>■ post-its</li> <li>■ Scrum</li> <li>■ templates</li> <li>■ through specialized consulting firms</li> <li>■ visual management</li> </ul>



## NOTES

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