

EMOTIONAL SENSEGIVING

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ABSTRACT

Based on an analysis of video data, we identify a form of influence that we call ‘emotional sensegiving.’ Making sense receivers experience emotional arousal increases the effectiveness of sensegiving. Identity threats can be used to generate emotional arousal but with a high risk of causing painful emotions that make sensegiving fail.

INTRODUCTION

Sensegiving—intentional attempts to influence the sensemaking of others toward a preferred definition of organizational reality—is an essential part of organizational change processes (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991). Although a handful of studies have started investigating the role of emotions in change processes (Bartunek et al. 2006; Hodgkinson and Healey 2011; Huy 2011), the majority of sensegiving studies have focused on more cognitive processes. Yet, there are strong reasons to believe that emotions play an important role in sensegiving because they influence how people think and what they choose to do (e.g., Bechara and Damasio 2005; Izard 2009), both privately as well as in complex social situations (e.g., Hareli and Rafaeli 2008). There is thus a need to examine more closely the mechanisms that operate within the sensegiving process itself, and explore how emotions influence people’s receptivity to change. We therefore ask: How do the emotions experienced and displayed by a sensegiver and the targets of sensegiving influence the sensegiving process and its outcomes?

To study how emotions shape sensegiving processes in natural organizational settings we needed a method that allowed us to track how different actors’ emotions, rhetorical statements, interpretations and behaviors interact over time to generate potentially very different responses. Given that qualitative methods are especially useful for answering the “how” questions and tracking social interactions that may evolve in unexpected ways (Strauss and Corbin 1998) and that the current state of knowledge does not allow us to formulate precise hypotheses for testing, we carried out an inductive qualitative field study of a three-day change seminar organized for a Property Service Company in Finland. This provided an ideal extreme case (Eisenhardt 1989; Siggelkow 2007) for studying emotions during sensegiving because the sensegiver (coach) who ran the seminar displayed his own emotions vividly and triggered strong emotions in the participants. To capture the full range of emotions during the seminar, we video-recorded it.

DATA AND METHOD

The change seminar was a part of a strategic change planned by Property Service Company. The company had about 10,000 employees and annual revenues of 700 million euros

(about 1 billion USD). The change revolved around three main goals: (1) reorganization from a hierarchical to team-based structure, (2) new values, attitudes, and culture, and (3) a change in focus from revenue to profitability. All the employees in two functional areas (about 2,000 employees) were trained during three-day seminars, all led by the same coach.

The primary data source used in our analyses was a video-recording of one of the seminars. Previous sensegiving studies (e.g., Maitlis and Lawrence 2007; Rouleau and Balogun 2011; Vuori & Virtaharju, 2012) have tended to rely on interviews and meeting notes/transcripts, which may limit the accurate detection of spontaneous emotions that emerge during sensegiving for the purpose of studying their effects. The sensegiver and the participants were visible and audible in this 15-hour long video. In addition to the video, one of us participated in three three-day seminars and interviewed a group of 10 of the 31 participants before the video-taped seminar, immediately after it and two months after it. He also discussed with the coach repeatedly, and interviewed five participants of an earlier seminar.

Our data analysis proceeded from forming a general understanding of the seminar to a more detailed focus on the dynamics of emotional sensegiving. The first three phases were based on the analysis of the interviews and observation notes, and the last phase used the video to code for emotional dynamics.

The last phase of the analyses was the most central one. We coded for the emotional expressions and reactions to understand how emotions displayed simultaneously with words spoken influenced the way people responded to sensegiving. The first author coded instances that he *saw and heard* on the video to ensure that the focus was on emotions rather than the words. Body movements and volume of voice were the primary cues for determining the degree of emotional arousal: increased body activity and volume of voice implied higher arousal (Ekman 2003; Lazarus 1991; Russell 2003). Facial expressions (Ekman, 2003), tone of voice (Sobin and Alpert 1999), laughter and crying, body movements (de Meijer 1989), and potential cognitive appraisals (Lazarus, 1991) provided the most accurate evidence in terms of the quality of emotions (positive vs. negative; specific emotions).

The first author watched the video, pausing it every few seconds. Whenever something relevant happened, he marked the beginning and the end of that episode and wrote a first-order code to describe it, using software that enabled us to link the codes directly on the video. For example, when the coach told an anecdote about his mother which caused several audience members to readjust their positions in an emotional way, a code “*coach tells about his mother → aroused audience reactions*” was used to describe this episode. He coded 1,252 sensegiving instances in this way. We then clustered the first-order codes into more abstract categories (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

We also coded and categorized the interview, survey, and observation data in a similar way to our coding of the video. This allowed us to identify different kinds of reactions to emotional sensegiving. We also used this data to identify connections between what was captured on the video and the things the participants’ reported in interviews and surveys about their thoughts and intentions relating to the proposed organizational change.

FINDINGS

Our findings suggest that the emotional sensegiving process is composed of a repeated sequence of three main steps. The coach typically started discussing a new topic by using a variety of tactics (including non-work related subjects) to increase the participants’ emotional

arousal. After so doing, the coach then cognitively framed the situation to associate the arousal with content relating to the organizational change. He concluded the sequence by suggesting concrete actions and reinforced the participants' commitment to the new ideas. The sequence typically lasted between five and 45 minutes.

Elements of Emotional Sensegiving in the Change Seminar

Increasing emotional arousal. The coach used five tactics to elicit emotional arousal among the participants. One of the more arousing tactics involved the coach telling vivid personal stories of his relationships with his spouse and mother in explicit emotionally-laden terms. He also showed his own emotions when he told the stories. For example, in the early afternoon of the first day, he told how his mother had abused him as a child and then he asked the audience in a high-volume, high-pitched voice: "Why? [pause] Why would a mother want to destroy her son?" (Tape 4, 35:34). Participants' reactions were emotional. One female participant responded with a high-volume, low-pitched voice [as in anger; the content of words is indistinguishable on the video]. Seven of the 25 people visible on the clip moved their bodies from side to side and readjusted their positions multiple times, indicating arousal, while the content of the story implies anxiety-producing appraisal. (Tape 4, 35:59) The coach also told a number of jokes that triggered loud laughter in the audience (e.g., Tape 2, 20:45). Thus the participants experienced both positive and negative work-unrelated emotional arousal during the seminar, culminating in ever-higher levels of valence-free arousal.

Cognitive framing. Emotion-arousing actions were often followed by cognitive framing: the coach sought to associate the emotional arousal created in the first phase to subsequent content relating to the proposed organizational change, and thus made the change-related (cognitive) sensegiving content more engaging.

Reinforcing commitment. The cognitive framing allowed the participants to form new, tentative ideas in their minds and associate them with the arousal generated during the first micro-phase. In addition, the coach used four tactics to reinforce the participants' commitment to the newly learned ideas. For example, the coach first explained that there were various ways of using power. After he had explained his theory and its action implications, he asked "Do you agree?" and the participants nodded to show their agreement. (Tape 4, 43:53). Such public displays of affirmation can reinforce people's beliefs and intentions because explicating one's thinking and reasons behind one's current emotions can make things seem clearer, and saying things to others can increase commitment to the things said.

Overall Effects of Emotional Sensegiving in the Change Seminar

About sixty percent of the participants reacted positively to emotional sensegiving. They provided positive comments such as "good coach and good seminar" and "outstanding, inspirational," in open-ended survey questions immediately after the seminar. Four sources of evidence indicated that the sensegiving led to substantial changes in their understanding of themselves and their work. For example, the statements of seven of the ten participants whom we interviewed before and after the seminar changed in substantial ways. For example, one of the cleaning managers stated before the seminar: "My strength is that [...] I always put others' needs

in front of mine. I help my colleagues a lot. This week I have carried out the work of others all the time.” Conversely, after the seminar she had a different approach and understanding: “I have disagreed with people. Before, I used to be too nice and did as others told me to do. Now I have expressed my opinion more assertively.”

Failure in Emotional Sensegiving: Rejection and Indifference

Although more than half of the participants reacted positively to the coach’s emotional sensegiving, some rejected the change content and others remained indifferent towards it. Sixteen percent of the participants provided negative comments in the open-ended surveys after the seminar, and 23% provided neutral comments. Negative reactions were associated with the rejection of the change content, while neutral reactions were associated with indifference. An example of a negative comment was: “If I did not have to come to this seminar, I would not be here. The coach is crazy!” Neutral responses included, “The coach is ok.” Negative reactions and the rejection of change content surfaced when the participants felt emotional pain as a reaction to the increasing arousal tactics that they perceived as an identity threat. Indifference resulted when the participants found the “increasing arousal” content personally irrelevant.

Identity threat leading to rejection. An incident in the second hour of the second day illustrates how an identity threat can produce painful emotions that cause immediate withdrawal and the rejection of the subsequent change-related content. The coach sought to arouse participants emotionally by arguing that cleaning managers’ work was demeaning:

“When a young person goes to work in a place like this, then she must kiss her boss’s ass repeatedly, otherwise it will not work [...] you must tolerate and submit yourself to others. If there are problems, you are not supposed to speak about them. It is how cleaning managers work. We have these kinds of work communities.”

[There are four participants visible on this clip. The three women move their bodies and heads from side to side and back and forth, indicating an anxious reaction. One of them also visibly moves her hands as if to protect herself from harm. The male participant shows head movements from side to side but with lower intensity than the female participants. The coach’ voice went up and down in pitch and volume several times and he showed anger in his facial expression briefly during the description] (Tape 8, 08:00)

The coach then discussed how the firm could and should improve the situation through the proposed organizational change (Tape 8, 08:05). In essence, having aroused the participants with a provocative work-related example and threatening claims, he moved on to cognitive framing. The coach continued his lecture on how the proposed change should improve work interaction systems for several minutes. The first signs that the participants had experienced intense emotional pain and were protecting themselves by withdrawing from the situation became visible at this point. The three female cleaning managers began talking among themselves while the coach was lecturing (Tape 8, 14:10). A few minutes later, one of them leaned her forehead on the table, showing that she was not paying attention (Tape 8, 25:41). Another ten minutes later, when the coach was showing a slide about interaction culture, the same person sunk down in her chair so that only her head and shoulders were above the table, again communicating disengagement (Tape 8, 34:03). The three cleaning managers displayed similar behavior for

another 13 minutes until the coach gave an emotional speech about how he was committed to the seminar and it hurt him when people behaved inappropriately.

The coach concluded his commitment speech by asking if the participants had any further comments (Tape 8, 48:57), which made several cleaning managers open up. That they had experienced an identity threat can be recognized from their comments. One of them said, “You said cleaning managers are doing a worthless job. You said that we are all worthless,” in a shaky, crying-like voice. This triggered several other participants to simultaneously comment in loud, high-pitched voices (Tape 8, 49:15), and the discussion continued for a few more minutes until the coach moved on to a new topic. Even though the participants subsequently appeared to pay more attention to the coach, they had missed the change-related content relating to interaction dynamics and culture that he had talked about for 40 minutes because they were not listening. Hence, the painful emotions caused by an identity threat at the beginning of this episode undermined their acceptance of the change-related sensegiving. In other words, the “sensebreaking” (Pratt, 2000) carried out by the coach had an ineffective outcome.

Low arousal leading to indifferent reaction. Beyond rejection caused by painful emotions, indifference towards the change content caused by low emotional arousal is another undesired response. Some participants found the work-unrelated content the coach used to increase emotional arousal to be personally irrelevant, and consequently did not react emotionally. Neither did they find the content relating to the proposed change as engaging because they had no emotional arousal to associate with it. Some of them also considered that the work-unrelated content undermined the coach’s credibility. For example, a property maintenance worker who showed very few emotional cues during the seminar (video evidence) said, “The examples were too much about him. [...] He was just telling how he was married with someone. It didn’t really relate to this reorganization which requires that we work in teams.” Our data also suggests that there was a lack of cognitive change among individuals who did not get emotionally aroused during the first phase.

A GROUNDED MODEL OF EMOTIONAL SENSEGIVING

The findings described above enable us to propose a grounded model of emotional sensegiving (Figure 1). In successful instances, sensereceivers become emotionally aroused in the first phase. The arousal is valence-free in the sense that it can be either positive, negative, or a combination of both, as long as it is not too painful. The arousal is likely to be high enough yet not too painful if the sensereceivers perceive the content as personally relevant, yet not overly threatening to their identity. Arousal takes several minutes to subside, and thus the sensereceivers remain emotionally aroused when the sensegiver describes the cognitive content relating to the proposed change. The sensereceivers associate their emotional arousal with the cognitive content since they co-exist. The cognitive content can also trigger additional arousal that builds on the arousal from the previous phase, creating the (misleading) perception that it was the cognitive content that actually triggered strong emotions. As the new ideas prompt strong emotional reactions, the sensereceivers more likely remember them and develop the intention to act on them.

Figure 1 about here

Emotional sensegiving can fail in at least two ways. First, if the sensereceivers do not get emotionally aroused during the first phase because they find the content personally irrelevant they are unlikely to find the subsequent cognitive content engaging and be influenced by it. Second, if the sensereceivers experience painful emotions during the arousal phase, they are likely to respond immediately by escaping from source of the pain, embodied by the sensegiver. Consequently, the sensegiver will have little opportunity to deliver the cognitive content in a way that associates the preceding emotional arousal with the new content. The sensereceivers are thus unlikely to engage with the cognitive change content or develop related action intentions. Such painful emotional reactions are likely to result when sensereceivers perceive the content in the first phase to be both personally relevant and a strong threat to their identities.

CONCLUSION

Sensegiving research seems to have suffered from “the excessive intellectualism associated with the concept of sensemaking” (Weick 2012: 146). Consequently, sensegiving scholars have mainly focused on the “the interplay of cognitive, verbal/discursive, and action-oriented processes” (Gioia et al. 2010: 41-42) and have largely ignored emotions, even though emotions enable action tendencies (Elfenbein, 2007: 346) and “largely determine the contents and focus of consciousness” (Izard 2009: 3). Our study is important in that it reveals how emotional arousal can, under certain conditions, make sensegiving more effective and how identity threats can represent an effective, if risky tool with which to generate emotional arousal.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS

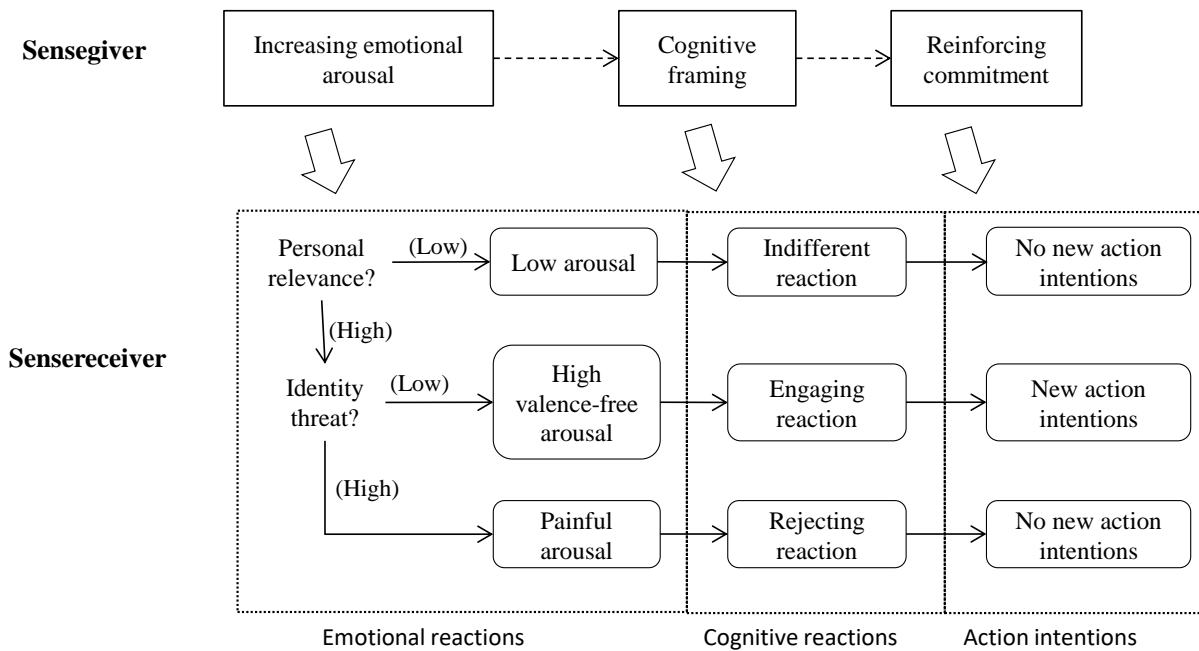


Figure 1: A grounded model of emotional sensegiving