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The sense of it all

The Sense of It All:

Framing and Narratives in Sensegiving about a Strategic Change

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Abstract

Managers leading strategic change processes have to be skilled language users in order to convince others of the necessity of change and to shape the interpretations of their followers in a preferred direction. This paper asks how and why managers employ certain forms of language in their sensegiving during strategic change, and when these managers are effective in their language use to change the sensemaking of others in the organization. On the basis of a longitudinal case study of a European multinational corporation, we find that effective sensegiving is about providing organizational members with a pragmatic form – a way of making sense rather than, as previous research suggests, about providing them with pre-packaged meanings. We extend prior research by distinguishing the effects that the different linguistic forms of managerial sensegiving have on organizational sensemaking. Furthermore, the managers we studied were effective in their sensegiving when they combined framing and narratives. These two forms of language supported each other by amplifying the overall effect on organizational sensemaking. This notion of a combined use of framing and narratives complements previous research, which has largely studied them separately.

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Introduction

Large-scale strategic changes involve a transformation of a company's strategy, structure, or culture and tend to have a destabilizing and disruptive effect on organizational life (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Bartunek et al., 2006). The initiation of such strategic changes often results from the arrival of a new chief executive officer who announces a new vision for the organization and through sensegiving aims to convince employees of their support (Denis et al., 1996; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia et al., 1994).

Past research has suggested that CEOs as well as other senior managers can, by virtue of their hierarchical position, in most instances shape and direct the interpretations of organizational members towards these new realities (e.g., Fiss and Zajac, 2006; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). Such acts of managerial communication are called sensegiving, which refers to attempts to influence the "sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality" (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). To be effective in such sensegiving leaders must be able to communicate and use language to convince organizational members of the necessity of change. Thus, managerial sensegiving can be viewed as a managerial effort towards changing employee meanings through acts of persuasion and communication.

The initial work on managerial sensegiving highlighted the importance of the use of certain key words, slogans, catchphrases, and metaphors in conceptualizing a change and in guiding employees in their own sensemaking regarding theimplications of the change (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia et al., 1994). This early research on sensegiving and sensemaking in strategic change, however, tends to assume a linear model of communication in that sense is literally "given" to employees, which then leads them to change and update their prior beliefs. In contrast, subsequent studies have suggested that the communication process may be more complex than what the linear model lends itself to believe (Kaplan, 2008; Sonenshein, 2010). In addition, the process of strategy-making itself has become more participatory in contemporary organizations, involving multiple actors across

organization levels (Berry, 2007; Birkinshaw, 2017; Mantere and Vaara, 2008; van der Steen, 2017). Consequently, recent research on strategic change has explored participatory processes of strategizing (e.g., Mantere and Vaara, 2008; van der Steen, 2017), communication between various layers of an organization (e.g., Balogun and Johnson, 2004) as well as differences apparent in the communicative ability of various managers as they frame a strategic change and engage in emphatic communication to gain support for their views (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). These studies have provided general evidence that leaders gain "followers" for their strategy depending on how they communicate with them (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007; Mantere et al., 2012; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011), suggesting that organizational members are not just passive recipients of a senior manager's sensegiving but author alternative accounts of the change process (Balogun et al., 2015; Bartunek et al., 2006; Mantere et al., 2012; Sonenshein, 2010). Furthermore, following the linguistic turn in strategy research (Vaara, 2010) some of these studies have started to take an interest in the linguistic form that acts of sensegiving and sensemaking take (Mantere et al., 2012; Sonenshein, 2010).

Current research is therefore pointing to the question of what specific forms of language are employed by managers during strategic change and when indeed they are more likely to be effective in their communication regarding strategic change. We aim to address this question and in doing so join the body of research that attributes considerable agency to managers in guiding how strategic change unfolds (see Maitlis, 2005; Müller and Kunish, 2018; van der Steen, 2017). On the basis of a longitudinal case study of a strategic change program within a multinational corporation, we make two contributions to the literature on sensemaking and strategic change. First, we extend prior research by distinguishing the effects that managerial sensegiving has on sensemaking by employees across the organization. Besides semantically conveying new sets of meanings to employees, we found that sensegiving also pragmatically prompts and primes employee sensemaking by giving them a way to think about the change. We accordingly suggest that effective managerial sensegiving is not

only about bringing across pre-defined meanings about strategic change to organizational members but also about providing them with a form – a way of making sense. The interplay between these semantic and pragmatic effects of managerial sensegiving offers novel insight into sensegiving and sensemaking processes around strategic change. Previous research has largely focused on how managers convey new meanings to others in the organization in a direct, linear way with the emphasis being strictly on a form of semantic meaning change.

Our second contribution involves unpacking a manager's communicative ability as part of sensegiving (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). We explore two linguistic forms of sensegiving – framing and narratives – and their use and effect on organizational sensemaking. Our case study highlights how frames especially affected organizational sensemaking in understanding the urgency and necessity of the strategic change. Narratives in turn were widely employed in making sense of change execution and also had a much broader effect across the organization – and primarily a pragmatic effect as mentioned above. We also identified a combined use of framing and narratives by leaders in an effort to enhance and amplify their effect on organizational sensemaking. This notion of a combined use of both forms of language complements previous research (e.g., Fiss and Zajac, 2006; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Sonenshein, 2010), which has largely studied framing and narratives separately as distinct linguistic forms, or in some instances has even confounded them (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014).

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. We first provide an overview of past research on strategic change-related sensegiving and sensemaking. We start with managerial sensegiving rather than organizational sensemaking due to the top-down nature of our study. We then introduce the various forms of sensegiving. We also provide a detailed discussion of our research methods. On the basis of our findings, we discuss our contributions to prior research on sensegiving and sensemaking and conclude the paper with a discussion of the contributions and limitations of our study as well as its implications for further research.

Sensegiving and sensemaking around a strategic change

Strategic change has often been used to refer to different types of change processes, depending on the scope and nature of the change involved – whether it is radical or incremental, revolutionary or evolutionary, core or peripheral (e.g., D'Aunno et al., 2000; Fox-Wolfgramm et al., 1998; Greenwood and Hinings, 1996). In this paper, we define strategic change to mean a radical alteration or substantial overhaul of previous organizational strategies, structures, and activities. This also implies a fundamental change in how employees are meant to view their organization. In other words, strategic change involves "a redefinition of the organization's mission and purpose or a substantial shift in overall priorities and goals" (Gioia et al., 1994, p. 364). The magnitude of the change and its implications for employees necessitate effective leader sensegiving to minimize resistance, build support for the change, help employees to internalize the change, and revise their interpretive frames (Balogun, 2006; Bartunek, 1984; Fiss and Zajac, 2006).

Studies on sensegiving and sensemaking around strategic change have for the most part focused on two linguistic constructs; framing and narratives. Both frames and narratives involve the construction of socially situated meaning in organizations (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014). Whilst studies of framing and narratives as part of sensegiving have to an extent developed along similar but separate lines, a key emphasis in both lines of research is that as more or less skilled rhetoricians, individual managers are – through their strategic sensegiving tactics – able to shape and direct the interpretations of organizational members towards a new set of interpretations (e.g., Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Mantere et al., 2012). Indeed, there is sufficient evidence within both the academic and practitioner literature (Garvin and Roberto, 2005; Kotter, 1996) to suggest that managers use framing tools (Carton et al., 2014; Cornelissen et al., 2012; Fairhurst, 2010; Sonenshein, 2006) as well as various narrative forms (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010; Sonenshein, 2010) to influence the sensemaking of organizational members and other stakeholders.

However, these studies have focused on one form or the other at a time, and not compared their relative impact on processes of strategic change nor considered how and when these linguistic forms may be used together.

As we define these constructs in this paper, framing involves the systematic use of a set of keywords, catchphrases, metaphors, and idioms to provide an interpretive frame of reference for a change (Fiss and Zajac, 2006; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). Through such word usage, framing often invokes meaning in line with existing cultural registers of understanding and is meant to make things familiar and to mobilize support and gain legitimacy for a change (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014). Narratives, for their part, are "grammatically structured (discursive) constructions that actors use to shape their own and to impact others' understandings" (Sonenshein, 2010, p. 480; see also Barry and Elmes, 1997; Patriotta, 2003). Narratives lay out a storyline, which involves actors and actions moving from a past and present to a future and desired state, with this future state typically acting as the plot that motivates and rationalizes a course of change (Fisher, 1984, 1987). Whereas framing is viewed to gain its force from cultural resonance – a perceived correspondence with established cultural beliefs, values and norms (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014), narratives draw on the power of sequencing, when managers structure, compress, and plot a change into a storyline with specific courses of action and outcomes laid out over time (Brown and Humphreys, 2003; Rhodes and Brown, 2005; Robichaud et al., 2004). As part of such narratives, managers then also tend to invoke a limited number of actors whose actions happen within a delimited time and space (Bruner, 1991). In other words, managers "create a discourse of direction to understand and influence one another's activities" (Barry and Elmes, 1997, p. 423).

In an initial set of studies on sensegiving and strategic change, Gioia and his colleagues highlighted how the president of a state university in the U.S. used clever metaphorical phrases and idioms (such as "world class") in his communication to initiate change and guide senior members of

the university and other stakeholders in their own interpretations and ways of implementing the change (e.g., Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia et al., 1994). Senior members, and particularly those in the change taskforce, were guided in their interpretations by the president's framing. They also adapted and tuned their own framing to accommodate the legitimate concerns of employees at various levels in the organization.

Subsequent research has examined such framing processes across a range of organizational settings (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014). We single out two longitudinal studies on the use of framing in strategic change by Kaplan (2008) and Kellogg (2009), as they involve clear instances of sensemaking processes around frames. Kaplan (2008) studied framing battles in strategy making at a communication-technology company, with managers employing framing strategically in an attempt to win over others in the organization to support a strategic change. Framing, Kaplan suggests, is both symbolic and cognitive (cf. Gioia et al., 1994; Goffman, 1974). She noted that skilled actors used frames that deftly mediated between their own political interests and the beliefs and expectations of others. In turn, this alignment between frames and interests (Cornelissen, 2012) led to the prevalence of certain frames, because a majority of the individuals in the organization judged them to be culturally resonant and legitimate (Kaplan, 2008). Kellogg (2009) in turn focused on the effect of framing on the introduction of new practices in surgery teams at two US hospitals. Comparing two hospitals, she found that the changes were successfully implemented in one hospital but not in the other. According to Kellogg (2009), the difference stemmed from the way in which proponents in the first hospital, including senior managers, constructed "relational frames" that accommodated the legitimate concerns of opponents while demonstrating and justifying the efficacy of the new task allocations and role behaviors.

Focusing on narratives, Maitlis (2005) highlighted the significance of narrative accounts in both sensegiving by senior managers and sensemaking by employees of events surrounding strategic change in three British symphony orchestras. Distinguishing different narrative forms of managerial

sensegiving, she found that a more focused and animated narrative account guided the sensemaking of employees. In cases where managers provided less unitary and energetic accounts, Maitlis found more fragmented and inconsistent forms of sensemaking across the orchestras. In a further paper on the same empirical setting, Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) argue that the ability of managers to construct such animated and purposeful narratives depends to a large extent on their discursive skills in constructing such an account and their perceived expertise and credibility in talking about issues and domains associated with the proposed changes. In another study, Sonenshein (2010) explored whether and how narratives in managerial sensegiving impact sensemaking at different levels of an organization. Studying a retailing company going through a strategic change, he found that managers alternated between strategically ambiguous but connected narratives, which, depending on their prior beliefs, shifted employees in the preferred direction or led them to resist the change. Sonenshein (2010) also found that the form of the narratives impacted those processes. Employees embraced or strongly resisted either a progressive or stable narrative when they believed that the change was either positive or negative for the organization and themselves.

Generally speaking, the existing literature on the use of frames and narratives as forms of sensegiving and sensemaking around a strategic change is marked by two limitations. Firstly, the exact nature of the communication process underlying a strategic change is far from clear. We address this challenge in the paper by exploring how the sensegiving by the leader in our case impacted the sensemaking of employees about a strategic change. Secondly, the concepts of framing and narratives have not always been clearly defined, and in ways that clearly distinguishes the two constructs from one another. The consequence has been a general confounding of work on framing and narratives in work on sensemaking (Cornelissen, 2012), as if these are conceptually and empirically more or less the same. In turn, we believe there is value in conceptualizing these constructs from an applied linguistic angle that clearly differentiates the two in empirical settings. By addressing this limitation in prior research, we aim to square conceptual definitions of framing and narratives with more focused

and systematic empirical analyses, and enhance our ways of identifying and explaining the different effects that these forms of language use have on employee sensemaking during processes of change. Thus, drawing on prior research, we pose the following research questions: 1) How and why do leaders and senior managers employ certain forms of language in their sensegiving during strategic change?, and 2) When are they more likely to be effective in impacting employee sensemaking about strategic change in the organization through such language use?

Methods

Case selection

To explore managerial sensegiving and organizational sensemaking in context, we undertook a single case study of a strategic change program which we label MulCo for reasons of anonymity. As will be described later, the strategic change at MulCo involved a redefinition of the overall identity, capabilities, and markets. MulCo operated in 40 countries across four continents with 30,000 employees and had net sales of nearly four billion euros at the time of the strategic change. A major transformation process in a large, global corporation is best approached and understood from the perspective of the managers and employees experiencing it and therefore a single case design was favored (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991). In addition, we also managed to secure deep access to the case company, as will be explained below.

Data collection

Our dataset consists of company internal documents, narrative interviews, focus group discussions, and observational data (see Table 1 for an overview). While we primarily draw on the company documents, personal interviews, and focus group discussions, the insights gained from the first author's participant observation served as important contextual knowledge to describe the

research setting and strengthen our interpretations and analyses. In terms of our philosophical positioning, we do not consider our findings to be truth claims simply mirroring what the research participants told us in the field in an inductive sense, but they are an outcome of our collective interpretation of the data collected in a social setting (Van Maanen, 2011).

Insert Table 1 about here

The data were collected to cover MulCo's strategic change process from 2005 to 2009. We gained access to the case company soon after the new president announced the strategic change and were able to track the sensegiving by the president as well as the sensemaking of organizational members from the announcement of the strategic change until its actual implementation. The president's letters, participant observation, and company documents captured rich contextual data on how events unfolded in real time. These sources were supplemented with retrospective interviews and focus group discussions to add the perspective of organizational members to the strategic change. For clarity, managerial sensegiving refers to the data drawn from the president's letters, and organizational sensemaking to the data drawn from the accounts of the organization members collected through interviews and focus group discussions. In the following, we will briefly discuss each source of data.

Real-time data. Company documents played an important role because they provided insight into the managerial sensegiving of the strategic change from 2005 through 2009. As Table 1 shows, these documents consisted of 41 original letters from the president. Of them, 16 were written in conjunction with the publication of financial results; 4 embraced a special topic – quality, values, and safety – and the remaining 22 focused entirely on the progress of the change process. The direct quotes from the president's letters are authentic; i.e., presented in the Findings section as they appeared in the original

data. They have not been edited by us and we quote them verbatim. In addition, we collected videos of top executives being interviewed about the new strategy, articles in employee magazines, slide shows of the new strategy, and various other supporting materials that had been used for sharing the strategy internally within MulCo. They assisted us in further contextualizing the case.

The second real-time data source was participant observation. The first author of this paper was employed as a senior manager by MulCo and was closely involved in the communication of the strategic change during 2005-2009. She acted as a general advisor to MulCo's president, but was not directly involved in the design or writing of the president's letters, or in the way he conceptualized his own sensegiving. The president wanted to guard his personal tone of voice in the writing of the letters to the point that he did not even allow these letters to be proofread by a native English speaker. The president granted the first author full access to company documents and accepted her dual role as a manager and researcher engaging in participant observation (something that was also known to her colleagues at MulCo).

As a participant observer, the first author wrote extensive field notes about how MulCo's new strategy was communicated internally. Her notebooks, which we treat as ethnographic real-time data, contain systematic records of her observations, discussions with actors involved in the change process, meeting notes and action points during 2005-2009 which we used as contextual information. When interacting with research participants, she was literate in MulCo's contextual "company speak" and highly familiar with the events associated with the strategic change process discussed by the interviewees, which created a trustful and open setting for the participants. Her position in the field granted us unique intimacy with the phenomenon of interest as experienced by the insiders themselves (Bansal and Corley, 2011). At the same time, we were well aware of the potential challenges inherent in conducting an "at-home ethnography" (Alvesson, 2009) and in our case, of the closeness with MulCo's top management. It is worth noticing that the interviews were carried out after the first author had left the company to pursue an academic career, reducing the risk of the research

participants perceiving her as the messenger of top management. We also had two outside members in the research team who had the critical distance necessary to carefully assess and challenge the data collected by the first author. They became deeply involved in the project but only at the data analysis and interpretation stage.

Retrospective data. The interviewees were chosen based on their ability to bring in multiple voices from both functional and geographical perspectives at various organization levels in order to gain a comprehensive overview of the strategic change as experienced in the organization of MulCo (see Table 1). This combination of real-time and retrospective data allowed us to draw inferences about the cause-and-effect relationships between the president's sensegiving and the subsequent organizational sensemaking. However, we were not concerned with matching each point of the president's sensegiving with the corresponding sequence in organizational sensemaking as the strategic change process unfolded. Rather, our aim was to determine how the president's sensegiving had apparently affected organizational sensemaking at the end of the period of analysis. Therefore, by looking back through the organizational accounts collected at particular points in time, we were able to determine the president's overall effectiveness as well as his communicative capability as a leader.

The focus group discussions were held in two locations: two in Scandinavia and one in Continental Europe. Two of these discussions were held in the language used at MulCo's headquarters and country of origin, and one in English, the common corporate language. The first author acted as a facilitator in these discussions, which lasted approximately one hour each. Focus groups have distinct strengths compared with personal interviews in that the solidarity and support of the group makes it more likely for lower-level managers and employees to open up and disclose their views about strategy (see Moisander and Valtonen, 2006; Wilkinson, 2004).

The personal interviews with top and middle managers were held in four different locations – the Americas, Asia, Continental Europe, and Scandinavia, which reflected MulCo's key markets. As in

the focus group discussions, English or the language of MulCo's headquarters was used for these interviews. The first author followed a narrative interview technique, which involves only a few guiding and clarifying questions by the interviewer (Søderberg, 2006). This allowed the interviewees to provide their own interpretations in their own words of MulCo's strategic change during 2005-2009. The interviews lasted on average between 50 and 60 minutes, within an overall range of 40 minutes to 75 minutes.

The personal interviews and focus group discussions were recorded with the permission of the research participants and then transcribed. The initial analysis of the data was conducted in the original language in order to stay as close as possible to the intended meanings of the interviewees (Welch and Piekkari, 2006). We had numerous discussions amongst the co-author team about how to translate words and meanings between the source and the target languages to convey the nuances and subtleties of the interview accounts. We consider this process important for enhancing the consistency of our inferences from the data. To honor the confidentiality agreements with research participants, numbers are used throughout the findings section to denote which top manager (e.g., TM1), middle manager (e.g., MM2) or focus group participant (FG1-1 for the first participant from the first group) is being quoted (see Table 1). Taken together, these sources produced extensive data about the research participants' sensegiving and sensemaking regarding MulCo's strategic change.

Analysis

The data analysis involved three main steps. We first analyzed the linguistic forms and communicative functions of the president's sensegiving. We then explored the sensemaking of organizational members and whether and how they used and reproduced the president's sensegiving. The analysis of the sensemaking accounts across the organization revealed that the spread and impact (Dailey and Browning, 2014) of the linguistic forms used by the president were more complex than

we had initially expected because meanings are not easily transferred and reproduced in large global organizations such as MulCo. In the following, we will discuss the process of our analysis.

Step 1: Analyzing the president's sensegiving of the strategic change. By virtue of his organizational position, the president had the power and authority to produce an authoritative text that gave sense to the organization and legitimated the company's course of action (Kuhn, 2008). Thus, we started the analysis by scrutinizing the 41 letters written by the president. In our initial analysis we identified several communicative functions in the president's sensegiving which were joined by common themes such as competition as the change rationale; setting the agenda for action; encouraging and committing employees; sharing progress and giving recognition; and 'well-done-but-I-need-more-change' (see Figure 1). We merged them into two thematic episodes based on their functions in leading a change: i) initiating and rationalizing the change; and ii) executing the change. These episodes, which do not refer to a temporal sequence in the strategic change process but to a communicative episode (see e.g., Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015), are commonly used in extant research on strategic change (e.g. Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). We then examined how the president used two linguistic forms – framing and narratives – in his sensegiving across these episodes and looked for patterns. Starting with a simple word frequency count we noticed that the president employed the metaphor "must-win battle" (Killing et al., 2006) altogether 38 times in 41 letters, particularly in episodes concerned with initiating and rationalizing the change. Furthermore, he regularly drew on linguistic resources to build contrasting utterances (e.g., contrasting sentences with words such as "but" 52 times and "however" 22 times), with these contrasting narratives being most salient in episodes concerning the implementation of the change.

Insert Figure 1 here

On the basis of these initial observations, we then categorized the material into codes which were derived both from the literature (e.g., framing and narratives in theory) and the empirical data (e.g., framing and narratives in use by the president) in line with our applied linguistic focus. We noticed that it was characteristic for the president to use the metaphor "must-win battle" to trigger associations of the unavoidability of the change. He favored stock phrases aimed at energizing action around the change such as "positive" and "strive." He also frequently repeated the contraction "let's" aimed at engaging and motivating employees in support of the change (e.g., "Let's continue this exciting fight"). Table 2 shows how we coded framing and narratives in the president's letters.

Insert Table 2 about here

The narrative form of sensegiving involved the coding of narratives. We identified certain repetitive structures that were salient in these narratives. These repetitive structures involved modal verbs as well as the use of pronouns to highlight the involvement of individual and collective actors in such events. Narratives also involved contrastive expressions, which in essence stipulate alternative scenarios, akin to alternative story lines being laid out (see Table 2).

However, at times it was challenging to separate one form of sensegiving from another since they were nested in each other and at times used in a combined way, which turned out to be a major finding of our study. In practice, we coded the president's sensegiving episodes in terms of the dominant form of language (e.g., framing, narrative, or a combination thereof). For example, his use of "let's" as a stock phrase seemed analogous to his use of modal verbs (must, should) as part of what we coded as "action narratives" with the narrative objective of plotting a course of action to the execution of changes. However, we found that in its contextual uses "let's" was oftentimes combined with the must-win battle metaphor as a call to action. As with this example, this phase involved going back and forth between data and the literature on the constructs of framing and narratives, and their

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linguistic underpinnings. While we were guided by the theoretical codes, we stayed as close as possible to the specific contextual use of language at MulCo. Overall, we discussed any differences between the authors and agreed on common codes and interpretations.

Step 2: Analyzing organizational sensemaking of the strategic change. Next we posed the question of how the president's sensegiving might have affected organizational sensemaking and sought to answer the second research question of when managers are effective in using various forms of language in their sensegiving.

We used the same codes to analyze organizational sensemaking as in the president's sensegiving. First, based on the temporal and thematic references to change events that organizational members made in narrative interviews and focus group discussions, we deconstructed the organizational accounts into the same communicative episodes of initiating and rationalizing the change, and executing the change. We then looked for resonance of the frames and fidelity in the use of narratives consistent with the president's linguistic forms of sensegiving and as a basis for assessing their impact. In other words, we contrasted and compared the use and reproduction of framing and narratives in these episodes and across different organizational levels.

We continued to rely on data tables and visual aids to trace how organizational members made sense of the president's sensegiving and whether they reproduced it in their own accounts. This assisted us in "seeing" how the constructs of framing and narratives in the president's sensegiving were picked up by the organizational members. These visualizations also revealed when a form of framing or narratives simply did not penetrate lower levels of the organization. For example, we noticed that the use of strategic management language in framing was rare below the ranks of MulCo's top management. Yet, the president for his part relied heavily on it when rationalizing the change.

Step 3: Conceptual leap to determine the effects of managerial sensegiving. In the third and final step of our analysis we continued to probe the dataset. Guided by prior research on framing and

narratives in strategic change, we assumed that organizational members would make use of framing and accept the resulting frames based on cultural resonance. We also expected that narratives would be repeated faithfully and similarly to the president's original use. Instead, and to our surprise, we found that the reproduction of these forms, particularly narratives, in organizational sensemaking was fluid and much more varied. The organizational adoption rested more on their pragmatic potency and elasticity in crossing episodes of sensemaking rather than on direct cultural resonance or narrative fidelity. Furthermore, whereas the metaphor of must-win battles resonated in the very down-to-earth culture of MulCo, the metaphor also had a pragmatic effect in serving as a concrete, easily understood "vessel" for middle management to transport and carry forward the new strategy to their own teams. In other words, cultural resonance and narrative fidelity, which prior literature considers as a basis for the transferring meanings, could not account for the pragmatic effects of managerial sensegiving on organizational sensemaking that we identified at MulCo. This insight led us to follow a process of abductive reasoning and turn to research on semantics and pragmatics in linguistics, which was the basis for making our conceptual leap towards identifying these differential effects in our case study (Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Klag and Langley, 2013; Van Maanen et al., 2007).

Research setting

Successful strategic change in the case of MulCo

In 2005, a new president was recruited to MulCo. He came from a global telecommunications company where he had been the executive director of strategy development. For MulCo, it was highly unusual to recruit the president externally since the previous presidents had largely been "groomed" from within the company for decades. This exceptional approach to recruitment denoted the keen interest of the family owners to get a fresh perspective and to undertake a major strategic redirection in MulCo.

In the mid-2000 MulCo employed about 27,000 people and ran up around 4 billion euros in net sales. It was a nearly 100-year old enterprise, which had grown from a European base to a global company through an aggressive acquisition strategy. Although MulCo's business was cyclical, reflecting global trends in the construction industry, the company successfully balanced this cyclicality by growing its servicing business. The servicing business accounted for more than 50% of its net sales in early 2005 and was very local in nature. Manufacturing in turn was global. MulCo was a renowned technology developer in the industry and its employees took a lot of pride from its leadership in innovation. When the new president was recruited, the company was doing well. MulCo ranked fourth in its industry globally, although it struggled to rise from this position (field notes). As the new president recalled in a discussion about the change process held to kick-off the interview phase of the research:

> "At the turn of 2004 and 2005, MulCo was a good company and it had a healthy culture in many ways. However, its profitability was lagging behind its competitors and its global market share was not strengthening anymore. Therefore, it was easy to arrive at the conclusion that [MulCo] needed to get onto a new path of growth – profitable growth in particular. The first task was, hence, to create a shared understanding of the existing situation, the need for change, and to define the new strategy; this new strategy that would aim at globally aligning the geographically dispersed country operations." (transl.)

The president wanted to shift the employee perceptions from technology as a strategic imperative to both technology and customers, from profit to profitable growth, from a European mindset to a global mindset, from differentiation to differentiation and cost-competitiveness, and from a high fixed-cost level to the use of a fixed cost level to achieve competitive advantage and streamlining. He was also determined to change MulCo's way of operating from functional silos to cross-functional collaboration. Moreover, the president wished to direct the company away from a relatively slow pace of action towards agility and faster responses (internal strategy presentation; field notes). The president added about the background of "must-win battles" (Killing et al., 2006):

> "However, our main concern was…the implementation of change. Therefore, and more importantly, it was essential to define the first five areas of change on which we focused the actions and which led the development towards the targets defined in the new strategy. I had

recently read an inspiring new book on change execution. That's how our change programs got their name, must-win battles." (transl.)

Nevertheless, since MulCo did not find itself in a crisis, the change process followed a different path. The first task of the new president was to create – through communication – a sense of urgency for change. This sensitized us researchers to explore how the president internally induced a crisis through his sensegiving efforts as he explained below:

> "Creating this burning platform was central in the early communication because the company had a history of success…It was also important to ensure that the people could still feel proud of the work and company." (transl.)

For the first time in MulCo's 100-year history the new strategy was communicated to the entire global workforce (field notes). The president's dedication to involve and engage everyone in the strategic change placed his communication efforts in a central role at MulCo, as the following quotation from the same discussion shows:

> "The way we put strategy into practice was… through the entire organization. It was essential… to mobilize the entire company… In this respect, the must-win battles…connected every [MulCo] employee to the change at least in some way. Nobody was left outside the change… We "planted" the must-win battles deeply into the organization." (transl.)

MulCo's historical growth through acquisitions and its decentralized management structure did not go well with the goal of global alignment, which was at the heart of the new strategy. The acquired companies had been allowed to keep their own local processes, cultures, and languages until the beginning of the strategic change process. On the contrary, the president's former employer, the global telecommunications company, had grown organically and developed a consistent and unified corporate culture. This posed challenges for the president:

> "At the time, there was a big gap between global and local functions at MulCo, and the business processes were fragmented and differed from each other. Thus, a new process architecture to better support global alignment was put in place during the first year. In addition…we had corporate values that drew from the family-firm background and its entrepreneurial culture. We expanded these traditional family-firm values with new corporate values that were closely linked with the new strategic direction and our must-win battles… Maintaining the value base of a family firm…ensured that we did not sacrifice the strengths the company had developed during its history." (transl.)

The strategic change process called for an extensive global communication program involving both direct top-down communication as well as local communication efforts between supervisors and employees in the form of a dialogue. These communication efforts were aimed at reaching everyone in MulCo in a spirit of inclusiveness. The main element of the communication program consisted of the president's letters, which were sent directly to all organizational members in English. These letters were meant to support two-way strategy dialogues between all managers and supervisors and their teams at the local levels (field notes). As the president recalled:

> "The president's letters were my way of reaching out to everyone personally in the global company. But more importantly, the strategy dialogues were not imposed by the top management but were personal conversations between managers and their teams. They provided opportunities to discuss new change related topics and to ask: what's in it for me? To support this kind of communication around the new strategy on every level of the organization, we chose strategy facilitators, experts from the middle of the organization – often energized early adaptors – to support local management in making strategy dialogues happen in practice." (transl.)

However, the engineering industry in which MulCo operated was a challenging environment for reaching all organizational levels through communication. While the strategic change embarked upon by the new president was quite abstract and visionary in nature when it was presented, MulCo was characterized by a rather concrete and technology-driven work culture. This was reflected in, for example, the rather specific and concrete language that was used across the company to express the core products and processes at MulCo (see also Brannen and Doz, 2012). Given this tension, and the unprecedented nature of this vision-driven strategic change, the president had to first find his own "voice".

To sum up, MulCo provided a challenging environment to communicate the new strategic direction towards global alignment. The history of the company as a multi-domestic federation of autonomous subsidiaries had led to fragmented processes and little communication across these units. Additionally, the very contextual engineering language meant that conveying meanings from the top of the organization was cumbersome, especially early on in the change process. Finally, the lack of urgency for change shaped the way the president's sensegiving efforts unfolded. Hence, we set out to

study the effects of managerial sensegiving on the organizational members' sensemaking around the strategic change of MulCo. Whilst we focus here primarily on the process of change-related sensemaking, we do note that in hindsight the case turned out to be an example of successful strategic change in terms of core financial indicators such as net sales, orders intake and profitability growth as well as an increase in MulCo's stock price after the conclusion of the change program.

Findings

Managerial sensegiving by MulCo's president

We will discuss the findings of the use of framing and narratives in the sensegiving of MulCo's president based on the two identified communicative aims in his change leadership: sensegiving to initiate and rationalize the strategic change process, and sensegiving to prompt the execution of changes. We discuss communicative episodes in managerial sensegiving separately around these two types of aims. Table 3 illustrates the use of the linguistic forms of framing and narratives as part of managerial sensegiving in the episodes of initiating and rationalizing change on the one hand, and executing change on the other.

Insert Table 3 about here

While we focused on the use of framing and narratives separately, we also discuss how they were used in combination, which was salient in this dataset but has been elaborated far less in prior research.

Sensegiving in the change initiation and rationalization episodes. The president relied heavily on framing in his sensegiving to the change initiative and rationale. We noted three systematic uses of framing: *symbolic* framing (Gioia et al., 1994) with the lavish use of the metaphor *must-win battle*;

relational framing (Kellogg, 2009) with idiomatic words and stock phrases like "Let's", "All of us", and the inclusive pronoun "we"; and, *cognitive* framing with stock phrases and coded strategy language to trigger associations with the business rationale for the change (see Table 3).

At the start, the president of MulCo explained the change process as follows: "Every three years, we define five key areas which are critical to create profitable growth, for strengthening our market position, and that way, for increasing the value of the company. In our strategic change communication, these five key areas were called must-win battles" (field notes). The metaphor must-win battle was so powerful that it worked on its own in his sensegiving, with no need for supporting words or terminology to render interpretations. It simply functioned as a conduit for a shared association for the five change programs as battles that needed to be won. In addition, the president metaphorically assigned tasks to the must-win battles; they were to "do" things for MulCo's change process such as "help us to focus…." (see Table 3). Furthermore, the president used a form of relational framing when initiating the change as well, such as "I am counting on your contribution and commitment", and the imperative of "let's" as a stock phrase combined with a systematic use of inclusive pronouns "we", referring to "our" common faith in building shared ownership around the new strategy. Finally, he frequently resorted to keywords from strategic management language, such as "fixed cost", "profitability", "competition" to trigger associations with compelling and familiar business-related causes for the change (see Table 3).

In light of our findings, the president's use of framing was mostly, except for the independent use of the metaphor must-win battle, of a nested nature; he frequently used framing words to nest other framing expressions. This demonstrates the layered functions of language in his sensegiving. He systematically used inclusive "we," "everyone," "all of us," and "each of us" in his relational framing, aimed at bonding with the employees, and at building a shared culture and ownership of the new strategy of global alignment. Furthermore, he routinely used "let's" for framing and nesting a set of motivational stock phrases: "Let's continue this exciting fight!" (see Table 3). The same applies to

strategic management language such as increased "customer satisfaction", being combined with

pronouns such as "our" and metaphors, such as in the following example "the company way":

> "It has all the time become clearer for me that we have significant potential to improve our
> *customer satisfaction* and *productivity* by harmonizing *our* processes through the *Company
> Way.*" (Letter 19)

While the president's communication about the change initiative and rationale mostly built on

framing as a linguistic form of sensegiving, we also paid attention to his occasional use of a particular

form of narrative to initiate change: contrasting narratives to underscore the difference between

existing and future ways of working (see Table 3). At times, he directly asked people to abandon

some of their established approaches. For this purpose, the president used a contrasting form of

narrating a path for the company "from internal issues to customers" as illustrated in the following

quote:

> "One of the most difficult things in life is to give up old ways of thinking and working. Still, this
> is   exactly what we need to do. As a company we must shift our focus *from internal issues to
> customers* and we must add speed in everything we do – just to name a few of the required
> changes." (Letter 4)

Previous research on strategic change has identified this kind of communication and has

described it as a form of sensebreaking (e.g., Mantere et al., 2012). Our study complements this line

of research by displaying more specifically the use of a particular linguistic form; that of contrasting

narratives, in marking differences between situations or between the past and the future – thus

breaking as well as building up a renewed sense.

Sensegiving to change execution episodes. The president predominantly employed narratives

rather than framing as the primary linguistic form to give sense to the change execution.

We found two clearly distinguishable, repetitive narrative forms. The first one, which we name

an *action narrative* as portrayed below was particularly common throughout the data (see Table 3).

The president used these narratives to plot specific courses of action in his sensegiving to the

execution of changes, nesting them with inclusive pronouns to communicate about the actions that "we all need to take":

> "*We need to focus* on growth. *We need to be best* in industry. Growth requires us to maximize our reachable market…*We need to start this* [major change] process." (Letter 2)

The second systematically used narrative form entailed *contrasting narratives*, as noted also in the communicative episodes of initiating and rationalizing change. However, the contrasting narratives were much more salient in the episodes of change execution. The contrasting narratives in the president's sensegiving for the change execution served the purpose of sustaining the momentum for change in MulCo throughout the process (see Table 3). As the following quotation illustrates, this structure embraced giving credit for past accomplishments. It was followed by an insertion of linguistic markers "however" or at times also "but", "in order to", or "if" to qualify the credit:

> "We are moving in a good direction and we have all the reasons to be proud of working at this company. *However*, let's keep in mind that we still have a great opportunity to make it a significantly better company." (Letter 17)

The contrasting narratives were an abundantly and systematically used linguistic form to give sense to the obligation to continue the change as Table 3 shows.

On the whole, our analysis of the president's sensegiving exposes a seemingly skillful rhetorician who comfortably employs both framing and narratives throughout his communication. We found distinct patterns of using each form for specific communicative functions during the strategic change process. In addition, he also often combined framing language with the narrative form, indicating systematic use of framing and narratives in combination (see Table 3). In particular, the president seemed to consciously and systematically amplify his use of narratives with relational framing by adding the inclusive "we", thereby aiming to provoke collective identification and action. Such a systematic combined use of framing and narratives complements previous research, which has largely considered these two distinct forms of sensegiving with their own rhetorical aims rather than looking

at their force in combination. Next we turn our attention to the effects of the president's sensegiving on the rest of MulCo's organization.

Effects of managerial sensegiving on organizational sensemaking.

In this section, we turn our attention to the way organizational members actively and creatively used the president's language in their own sensemaking of the strategic change.

Insert Table 4 about here

Table 4 provides an overview on the varied uses and adoption of the linguistic forms in sensegiving and sensemaking at MulCo. Organizational members engaged in combined and fluid uses of framing and narratives which they picked up from the president's sensegiving to construct the strategic change. We noted that the president's relational frames aimed at building a shared culture and ownership of the major change had an effect; organizational members in general, and the middle managers in particular, framed their stories about the major changes with an inclusive "we". However, the cognitive framing with strategic management language, that the president used abundantly, did not find any resonance below the ranks of top management. The more symbolic framing of change programs as "must-win battles" found a direct response within the organizational culture of MulCo and was widely adopted by organizational members. Interestingly, such resonance did not alone explain middle managers' particular affection towards the metaphor; this metaphor also seemed to have a more pragmatic effect on their sensemaking. Must-win-battles were also used to lend force to lead the change from the middle of the organization. Finally, the narrative forms bridged boundaries between diverse professional communities in MulCo's large and geographically scattered organization. In the light of our findings, MulCo's organizational members resorted to narratives for the most part to make sense of it all: initiating and rationalizing the strategic change as well as actions

to execute it across organizational levels. On the whole, narratives had a much broader and contagious effect on organizational sensemaking than framing.

In the following we support these findings with our data. Table 5 illustrates our findings concerning organizational sensemaking and offers additional evidence from the organizational accounts.

Making sense of change initiation and rationalization. Our findings reveal that there was initially internal confusion about the direction of the strategic change process at MulCo. At the start, the new president was not able to translate the conceptual elegance of the new strategy and its framing with strategic management language into the contextual language (Brannen and Doz, 2012) that his organization was familiar with. Having been recruited from outside the organization, the president had limited experience of the very pragmatic culture of MulCo, as described above. As his first task, he had to create some urgency for change. Another plausible explanation is that the confusion was deliberately created: he may have used confusion to produce disruption and trigger sensemaking. A comment by a middle manager indicates this: "He [the president] divided all his strategy in lots of separate items, and it forced us to create useful disorientation and to understand why we are here, why we are using other tools, why we are changing; useful disorientation… made us learn faster" (MM5). Research on strategic change has pointed to vision-related strategic ambiguity and to the need to simulate a disruptive external shock to induce change and trigger sensemaking (e.g., Gioia et al., 2012; Suddaby and Foster, 2017).

Insert Table 5 about here

The metaphor of a must-win battle helped MulCo's organizational members to overcome the initial confusion arising from overly abstract strategy talk. It conveyed a number of pertinent meanings and also helped middle and lower level managers to discuss the new strategy in pragmatic

terms (Table 5). Moreover, the metaphor functioned in a performative role: middle managers welcomed this popular framing language because it provided them with an easily understandable symbolic frame for both their own sensemaking and for their sensegiving efforts to others. Thus, there was a good cultural fit between the must-win battle metaphor and the engineering context of MulCo.

In the lower ranks of the organization, middle managers and employees also embraced the concreteness of the must-win battles. This metaphor focused their attention on real actions that had local meaning for them as illustrated in the following quote by a lower-level manager:

"All these must-win battles, they are really great in our work." (FG2-2, transl.)

It was notable that beyond the idea of must-win battles, other framing language used by the president did not resonate in the accounts of the rest of MulCo's organization. The managerial stock phrases and expressions from strategic management did not render cognitive associations with business causes like the metaphor of must-win battle did; only the top managers used occasional framing with strategic management language in rationalizing the changes. The effect of framing, as we observed, was thus socially contingent and dependent on membership in the same social and professional community rather than being organization-wide.

As Table 5 shows, organizational members of MulCo legitimated change necessity with reference to internal circumstances than external business pressure. This was different from the sensegiving of the president, who used cognitive framing with strategic management language to trigger associations with compelling business causes for change. These were mostly external circumstances such as tightening competition. However, we found that while not semantically adopting the meaning of the president's sensegiving regarding the reasons for change (the business cause), organizational members picked up the same linguistic form – that of the contrasting narrative – the president had used. Within organizational sensemaking, the contrasting narrative was used to attribute reasons for change to internal circumstances, such as being a static, production-oriented

company that needed to change, but also to reasons for contesting and resisting the change (see Table 5). Thus, organizational members used this linguistic form as a container for their own sensemaking, and amplified it with inclusive framing words such as "we" or "our" to make and give sense of various aspects of the change process. This fluidity of the linguistic forms and how they were used in organizational accounts revealed a novel, pragmatic effect of the president's sensegiving on organizational sensemaking. This finding complements the default assumption in prior research that managers, based on their hierarchical position, are able to directly transfer semantic meanings in their efforts to "give sense" (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991).

Making sense of the change execution. Our findings on making sense of the change itself further demonstrate that narratives spread in a contagious manner and across levels of the organization. We explain this with the characteristics of narratives themselves; tshey capture the sequence of change processes in a truncated rather than elaborated manner. They offer a versatile and "elastic" medium that employees and managers can adjust in order to develop their own understanding of the change process, as the data presented in this section show. MulCo's organizational members predominantly used narratives in their accounts about change execution (see Table 5). In their sensemaking of change actions, they systematically adopted similar action narratives with verbs in high modalities and combined them with the symbolic framing of a must-win battle. Thus, they extensively adopted the form of the president's sensegiving and included themselves as actors in the change process and at all ranks of the organization, as the following quote from a focus group discussion illustrates:

> "*We need to work* like involving other functions like sourcing, work as [a] team, not showing I am the best…*We need to work* here on structure and sophisticated solutions since that is the value added *we can give*…" (FG3-2, transl.)

Furthermore, organizational members adopted the president's contrasting narrative form and used it to explain progress in the change process. The following account from another focus group discussion demonstrates how one of the participants makes sense of the changes relevant for his work.

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He positions his own unit ("we") as opposed to corporate headquarters ("corporate side"), and also makes a contrast between the past ("In 2005") and the present ("now"):

> "Before 2005, the relationship to corporate…was quite conflicting…*we* were not able to understand each other. The main effort…was on *the corporate side* to change their attitude from the production to all the businesses in the company. *In 2005*, we were still a manufacturing company, focus[ing] much on the factories, on how to produce, how to reduce the cost. *Now* we are much more involved inside the projects, e.g. in my department, people speak frequently with R&D, and they are involved from the beginning at least to see what's coming." (FG1-2)

As previously mentioned, employees occasionally used the contrasting narrative to contest some of the suggested changes or even resist them. In their accounts, they followed the president's example of using structures such as "not only…but also" or "however" and "on the other hand", nesting action narratives. This allowed them to first make a statement and then challenge and qualify it with a contrasting expression to contest the benefits of developments (see Table 5, example of prioritization of product development projects based on business needs rather than creative innovation). Overall, the lower ranks made less use of framing compared to the upper-level and middle managers but adopted the symbolic framing with must-win battles in their action narratives.

In sum, narratives prompted MulCo's organizational members to think and talk about the change in particular ways without being limited to particular meanings; the narrative form provided the vehicle but allowed them to fill it with new interpretations and with local work-related meanings. This was evident in the way narrative forms, but not their contents, were picked up by various groups of organizational members. The pragmatic adoption of this linguistic form was both effective and essential in building up common ground and rapport as well as in providing individuals with a discursive flexibility to communicate the new strategy in their own environments. The final important finding in this case study relates to the frequency with which framing and narratives were combined, as well as the nested use of narratives to frame other narratives. This notion prompts researchers to give more attention to the checkered and fluid nature of framing and narratives as basis for sensegiving and sensemaking processes.

In the following discussion section we take stock of our findings and detail their implications for theory and research on sensegiving and sensemaking dynamics during strategic change.

Discussion

In the present paper, we unpacked managerial sensegiving and organizational sensemaking at the level of linguistic forms used for specific communicative functions. We studied the roles and effects of framing and narratives as part of sensegiving and sensemaking processes around a strategic change. We traced the differential uses of the two linguistic forms across organizational levels and different phases of a major change in MulCo. Prior studies view framing both as symbolic and cognitive (Bartunek, 1984; Fiss and Zajac, 2006; Gioia et al., 1994), considering its force in terms of cultural resonance for recipients (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014; Kaplan, 2008). Our case study revealed the pragmatic force of symbolic framing of changes as "must-win battles", which empowered middle managers to lead the change by lending force to must-win battles "to do" things. Furthermore, our study complements prior research on narratives in strategic change (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Mantere et al., 2012; Sonenshein, 2010) by exposing their broad effect as vehicles for organizational sensemaking across geographical and professional communities. We also found that the use of narratives in combination with framing amplified the effect of managerial sensemaking on organizational sensemaking (see Table 4).

Our notion of the pragmatic potency of linguistic forms calls, we believe, for additional insights from linguistics. In investigating the relationship between language and meaning, linguists define semantic as the cognitive meanings of words whilst pragmatic refers to what language users do with words and what actions they take accordingly (Recanati, 2004, p. 3). In the following we will borrow this terminology and characterize the qualities of "semantic" and "pragmatic" language to

theoretically qualify and explain the effects of managerial sensegiving on organizational sensemaking at MulCo.

At MulCo the president's sensegiving prompted, conditioned, and animated organizational sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005). The managers and employees responded to the president's sensegiving efforts by borrowing the form but not the function or meaning of managerial language. They headed in the broad direction laid out by the president, yet also reproduced the contents of the managerial sensegiving in novel ways, to better serve their own sensemaking needs. In other words, some of the linguistic forms of managerial sensegiving continued directly but the majority of them deviated from the original in form and/or meaning. This transformation of the form and/or meaning represents the pragmatic effect of sensegiving on sensemaking we noted in our data. The significant implication of this finding is that the effect of managerial sensegiving may in fact be about providing employees with a form to make sense of a change (i.e., a pragmatic effect) independent of directly conveying meanings as provided in managerial communication (i.e., a semantic effect). This pragmatic effect based on the form of language in managerial sensegiving has, however, received little attention in previous research.

What our findings signify is that sensegiving may thus be both direct and semantic – through conveying and transferring certain meanings – as well as indirect and pragmatic. The latter prompts and guides individuals and groups by providing them with just a form – a way to communicate and make sense – rather than what to communicate and think as part of their own sensemaking. Recognizing this combination, and specifically the pragmatic role of sensegiving, significantly advances prior empirical work, which has indeed suggested that the design of sensegiving can produce different outcomes of sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005; see also van der Steen, 2017) but has thus far overlooked the effects of linguistic forms of sensegiving on the outcome. Earlier contributions have also oftentimes cast sensegiving and sensemaking as a linear and cascading but largely as a semantic model of translation (Dailey and Browning, 2014; Gioia et al., 2012; Sonenshein, 2010), or

as a more symmetrical semantic model of managerial and employee co-orientation in which they build up common ground gradually and successively (Carton et al., 2014; Cornelissen et al., 2014). This semantic emphasis is epitomized in the very notion of "sensegiving" in some of the foundational writings on the subject (Gioia, 1986; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991).

Our broader approach to sensegiving and sensemaking processes has a number of important theoretical and methodological implications. We suggest that the theoretical understanding of sensegiving be expanded to include pragmatics so as to account for other and broader effects of sensegiving on organizational sensemaking. First of all, this contribution highlights the importance of theoretically grounding work on sensegiving in pragmatics, on the use of language, as opposed to or alongside the predominant focus on cognitive linguistics and semantics (of frame- and schema-based changes) (Putnam and Fairhurst, 2001). Second, it implies that further research should try to disentangle the pragmatic from the semantic effects, as a way of better understanding various routes towards persuasion and willingness to change. In our study, we find that the pragmatic effects of narratives were overwhelming and strong, and existed alongside the more specific semantic effects of frames that either strongly resonated with organizational members or offered them a useful vehicle for their own sensemaking. Future research may fruitfully extend these findings, and tease out the various conditions associated with the pragmatic and semantic effects of frames and narratives in greater detail.

Recent strategy research has called for more attention to the role of discourse in managerial sensegiving and to the performative power of language in organizational sensemaking around strategy and strategic change (e.g., Balogun et al., 2014; Mantere, 2013). Sensegiving and sensemaking are for the most part an issue of language, talk, and communication: "situations, organizations and environments are talked into existence" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). Up till now, however, the empirical exploration of how sensegiving is constructed using various forms of language, and how

and when managers are effective in their sensegiving, has remained limited. Prior work has highlighted the general importance of the rhetorical skill or communicative ability of senior managers (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011), but has to date not yet qualified what communicative tactics – as a basis of sensegiving – this may entail. We suggest that combining framing and narratives may enhance the effect of managers' sensegiving because this combined use amplifies the individual effect of linguistic forms on organizational sensemaking.

Conclusions

In this paper, we adopted a language-centered perspective on sensegiving and sensemaking and undertook a linguistically informed analysis of framing and narratives as forms of sensegiving. Our case study sheds additional light on processes of organizational sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Prior studies on change have focused on restricted forms of sensemaking where the leader drives and controls the process, and periodically demands input from organizational members (e.g., Corley and Gioia, 2004; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia et al., 1994; Mantere et al., 2012) or, on fragmented processes of sensemaking exemplified in studies on the meaning-making processes of middle managers versus employees (Balogun and Johnson, 2004, 2005; Sonenshein, 2010). The present paper takes a comprehensive perspective and elaborates the sensegiving-sensemaking process over time and across organizational levels. It reports an empirical case in which the president engaged in extensive sensegiving concerning the new strategy and encouraged managers and employees across the organization to embrace and shape the strategic change. In such guided sensemaking, the various parties of the organization have the legitimacy, expertise, and opportunity to drive sensemaking and engage in shaping the understandings of the issue or change at stake (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). We operationalized the process of guided sensemaking by exploring the effect of managerial communication as a basis for sensegiving. Our

results of organizational sensemaking illustrated how and when different forms of sensegiving were semantically replicated or pragmatically refracted from the initial managerial sensegiving. Thus, our study contributes to prior studies of sensemaking by providing evidence on how managerial sensegiving as communicative practice may guide organizational sensemaking in different phases of a strategic change (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007).

Finally, our paper provides novel insights into managerial practice and communication in the context of strategic change. The pragmatic force of sensegiving – meaning that middle managers and employees draw on the form rather than the contents of the sense that has been "given" to them by leaders – underlines the importance of providing organizational members with a "toolset", a vocabulary and communication grammar, to help them to conceptualize and interpret the change in social interactions in a way that is locally relevant to them. This is a particularly attractive opportunity for multinational corporations because the narrative structures seemed more contagious across cultural and language boundaries than framing expressions, narratives being "culture-neutral vessels" for carrying local meanings expressed in local language. This is a significant finding for management practice in contemporary corporations, where leaders need to engage organization members to actively participate in guided forms of sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005) and to empower them to collectively shape meanings. Many employees are highly knowledgeable and also nowadays expect to participate fully in strategy work (Mantere and Vaara, 2008) rather than passively follow top management's direction. Nevertheless, they often lack the pragmatic form for so doing. In this changing organizational setting, we believe that our revelation of the dynamic relationship between language and sensemaking offers many valuable future avenues for management research.

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[#] = Number of the letter   (I&R) = episodes to initiate and rationalize change   (E) = episodes to prompt execution
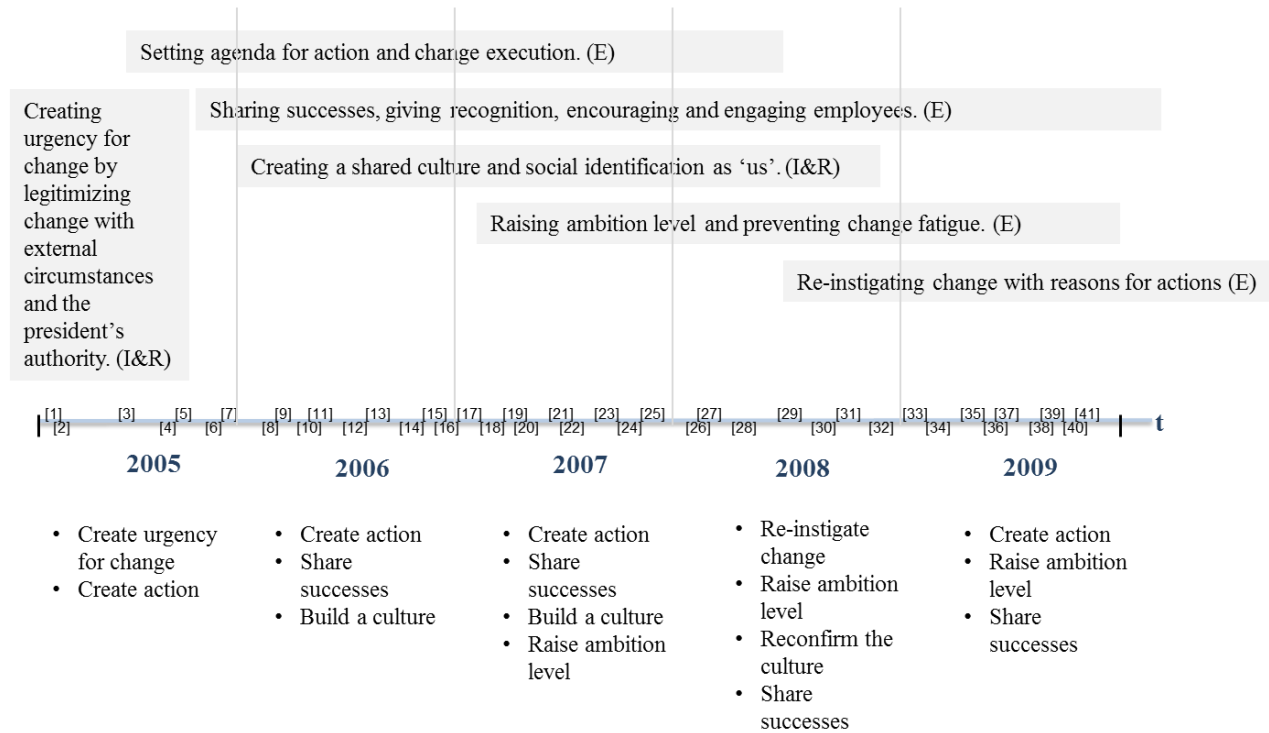
Setting agenda for action and change execution. (E)

Creating urgency for change by legitimizing change with external circumstances and the president's authority. (I&R)

Sharing successes, giving recognition, encouraging and engaging employees. (E)

Creating a shared culture and social identification as 'us'. (I&R)

Raising ambition level and preventing change fatigue. (E)

Re-instigating change with reasons for actions (E)

[1] [3] [5] [7] [9] [11] [13] [15] [17] [19] [21] [23] [25] [27] [29] [31] [33] [35] [37] [39] [41]
[2] [4] [6] [8] [10] [12] [14] [16] [18] [20] [22] [24] [26] [28] [30] [32] [34] [36] [38] [40]   t

2005   **2006**   **2007**   **2008**   **2009**

- Create urgency for change
- Create action

- Create action
- Share successes
- Build a culture

- Create action
- Share successes
- Build a culture
- Raise ambition level

- Re-instigate change
- Raise ambition level
- Reconfirm the culture
- Share successes

- Create action
- Raise ambition level
- Share successes

Fig. 1. Illustration of the main themes in 41 president's letters during five years

Table 1. Complete data set

Data source	Data quantity and temporality		Data collection time
	Real time	**Retrospective**	
Company internal documents			
President's letters	41		
Employee magazines	14		2005-2009
Strategy presentation	1		2005
Strategy dialogue support materials	1		2006
Videos	5		2005-2009
Narrative interviews			
Top managers, code TM1-4 (region, global function HQ, R&D, business line)		4	2009 August-November
Middle managers, code MM1-3 (change program, global function, country manager)		2	2009 August & October
Middle managers, code MM4-5 (global function, local management team member)		1	2010 March & April
Middle managers, code MM6-7 (factory manager, local HR manager)			2009 September
Focus group discussions			
Lower managers and employees, code FG1-1-4 (regional lower managers)		1	2009 September
Lower managers and employees, code FG2-1-4 (R&D experts)		4	2009 October
Lower managers and employees, code FG3-1-4 (HQ experts and lower managers)		4	2009 October
Observational data			
Field notes: 5 notebooks	1,000 pages		2005-2009

Table 2. Linguistic forms of sensegiving as codes in the analysis of the president's letters

Linguistic form as a code	Subcategory and explanation	Illustrative examples
Framing	*Metaphors and idiomatic words and expressions* Refer to familiar, popular expressions that trigger associations and render interpretation easier	Core metaphor 'must-win battle' Our must-win battles will further contribute to this positive development. We cannot afford to miss a beat; we need to raise our performance level even while working to clarify the strategy and direction for the future.
	Strategic management discourse Lexical reference to strategy and change	Our goal is to achieve faster growth than our competitors and positive result development from next year forward.
	Stock phrases and words Characteristic expressions used by the president	Fight, positive, energy, strive; let's…; we; us; all Let's continue with this exciting fight!
Narratives	*Action narrative* Verbs in high-commitment modalities	We must learn and get organized. We must shift our focus… We have to be extremely cost conscious…
	Contrasting narrative Semantic relations marked with "however–still," "only–when," "but," or contrasting positive/negative, or conditioning success	I see many good developments but we have not reached our goals yet. We are moving in a good direction. However, let's keep in mind that we still have a great opportunity to make this into a significantly better company.

Table 3. Illustrative examples of the president's sensegiving of MulCo's strategic change

Episode	Linguistic form and its use	Quotes from the data
Rationalizing and initiating change	*Symbolic framing* with the metaphor must-win battle, used as an independent conduit metaphor for the change programs, and in nesting expressions from strategic management expressions.	In the spring, we defined *five must-win battles,* which are crucial for growth and improving profitability in line with our long-term business goals. (Letter 6) Our five new *must-win battles* will again *help us focus on the key areas* that we need to work on in order to put *our strategy* into action and continue *to achieve good growth both in sales and profit*. (Letter 27)
	Relational framing with stock phrases and idiomatic expressions to engage and motivate, and with inclusive pronouns to build culture and render interpretation of a major change which belongs to all in the company.	I am *counting on your contribution and commitment* (Letter 1) *Let's* continue with this exciting fight! (Letter 15) It is vital that *we* continue the same *Can Do attitude* that already took *us* to a totally new performance level during 2005 and 2006. (Letter 19)
	Cognitive framing with strategic management expressions to trigger associations with business cause for change, nested with relational framing words such as inclusive pronouns to render shared ownership for this cause.	*Our* major competitors have been more successful in their business activity in recent years than we have. (Letter 2) *Our fixed costs* are at a high level compared to those of our competitors. (Letter 4) *Our* goal is to achieve faster growth than *our competitors* and *positive result development*– (Letter 3) The future opportunities look good– and *our* future depends on the active efforts of *each and every one of us!* (Letter 22) I am confident that *our good results* will energize us all to perform even better. (Letter 23) *We have made* a good start on our way to *higher than market growth and improved profitability* (Letter 4).
	Contrasting narratives juxtaposing present status with what needs to happen.	We must learn and get organized to work together for common goals *instead* of focusing on functional optimization. (Letter 4)
Executing change	*Action narratives* with high-commitment verbs like "must," "should," "will," and "can" to create action, framed with inclusive pronouns to provoke collective action and identification.	In 2005 *we need to focus* on three important initiatives. (Letter 1) *We must learn* and get organized to work together for common goals. (Letter 4). *We absolutely must* put an end to this and demand total discipline in following our safety practices. (Letter 9) *We need to continue* on this good path and get an even better understanding. (Letter 30). In this situation, *we must continue* high sales activity (Letter 39) *We still need to increase* these levels to further improve supply chain efficiency and reduce work-in-progress. (Letter 41).
	Contrasting narratives to prevent change fatigue and to sustain momentum of the change program by contrasting accomplishments with with what still needs to be done, in particular by using qualifying linguistic markers.	We are moving in a good direction and we have all reasons to be proud of working at this company. *However,* let's keep in mind that we *still* have a great opportunity to make it a significantly better company. (Letter 17) It is a great opportunity for us to directly improve our operating result *but* in order to fully benefit from that opportunity, we need a mindset change (Letter 35). We have the biggest order book ever---*However,* the economic slowdown continues to have an increasing impact on our markets, too. (Letter 32)
	Framing and narratives in combination relational framing with stock phrases, symbolic framing with the metaphor must-win battle to prompt action.	*Fighting spirit* (Letters 7, 33, 35, 39, 40, and 41). We are moving rapidly *from talk---to actions*. (Letter 5). We need to *turn every stone*. (Letter 14). *We need to put* our must-win battles *into action*. (Letter 27)

Table 4. Overview of the key findings

		Episodes of rationalizing and initiating change	Episodes of executing change
Managerial sensegiving	**President**	*Framing (H)* Symbolic framing with must-win battles to help employees embrace change. Relational framing with stock phrases Let's, all of us, winning together, to engage shared ownership. Cognitive framing with business cause and strategic management language. *Narratives (L)* Contrasting narratives juxtaposing mindsets, ways of working of the past and future	*Narratives (H)* Action narratives with verbs in high modalities, framed with inclusive pronoun we. Contrasting narratives juxtaposing accomplishments with further changes to sustain change and encourage further improvements. *Framing and Narratives in combination (H)* Relational framing with stock-phrases and figures of speech - Fighting spirit, from talk-to actions - and symbolic framing with must-win battles to inspire change action.
Organizational sensemaking	**Top managers**	*Framing (L)* Cognitive framing with strategic management language – strategy, growth – and stock phrases positive, challenge, people, personnel. *Narratives (H)* Contrasting narratives to rationalize change needs: we were not (fast; ambitious; good at executing) – as (competition; we need to be) in accounts about internal circumstances, framed with inclusive we/us.	*Narratives (H)* Action narratives with verbs in high modalities, framed with inclusive pronoun we. *Framing and Narratives in combination (L)* Some symbolic framing of action narratives (clock speed, mechanism, my orchestra).
	Middle managers	*Framing (H)* Symbolic framing of the strategy and change with must-win battles *Narratives (M)* Contrasting narratives to rationalize change needs: we were not (fast; ambitious; good at executing) – as (competition; we need to be) in accounts about internal circumstances, framed with inclusive we/us. Contrasting narrative used also to show resistance to legitimize change with the president's authority.	*Framing (H)* Symbolic framing of the strategy and change with must-win battles *Framing and Narratives in combination (H)* Action narratives: verbs in high modalities, framed with must-win battles and inclusive pronoun we. Contrasting narratives from-to, and comparatives about accomplishments, framed with inclusive we.
	Lower managers and employees	*Narratives (M)* Contrasting narratives to rationalize change needs: we were not (fast; ambitious; good at executing) – as (competition; we need to be) in accounts about internal circumstances, framed with inclusive we/us.	*Narratives (H)* Contrasting narratives with from-to, and comparatives about accomplishments nesting action narratives, framed with inclusive we. Contrasting narratives; past and now to express disengagement, critique, or resistance. *Framing and Narratives in combination (L)* Symbolic framing with must-win battles of action narratives. Relational framing with personalizing expressions: I felt it on my skin, in my opinion, I think – to express personal and emotional nature of the changes.

Salience in the data: H=high; M=medium; L=low

Table 5. Illustrative examples of organizational sensemaking of MulCo's strategic change

Episode	Linguistic form and its use	
Rationalizing and initiating change	*Symbolic framing* with metaphor must-win battle as a semantic conduit for the strategy, to simplify and crystallize it, as well as a pragmatic force to empower managers to initiate change in the middle of the organization.	The first *must-win battles defined the things where we need to change* immediately in order to turn the company in the right direction…the *new strategy was crystallized in these must-win battles*. (MM2, transl.) Thus what these *must-win battles* did for us, they gave us [a] *kind of a focus* but also *the way to communicate it to the rest of the organization*. (MM4) Maybe *this new set [of must-win battles] was good*, so good… that we [now] have good tools… *to get down to pragmatics fast*, to think about *what does this mean for me and my team*. (FG2-3, transl.)
	Contrasting narratives framed with inclusive 'we' to rationalize change: what we were, what not/ what we should be doing; attributing reasons to change to internal circumstances, contrasting current state with ideal state.	*We had no* ambition to grow; *we were good at* planning but not in execution. (TM2, transl.). It means we also need to calibrate this part, so that it is *not only about the salary* for obtaining the consensus of satisfaction *but what do you do with your people* if you do not have this. (MM7) It was kind of a – conflicting environment – *we had the reality of the head-quarters*, and then *the reality of the front-line companies*, and there the life was living like in silos; common language was missing (FG3-2, transl.). The idea was: this was the time to move *from a federation* status *to a corporate status* (MM7). We moved *in my opinion from a static company to a corporate more focused on the market, more focused on strategy*. (MM7) I felt the strong change on my skin *from a production-oriented to a customer-oriented* company. (FG2-4, transl.)
	Contrasting narrative in contesting or resisting change.	The first three years...*we spoke about a dialogue and involvement* but *it was very much Johan's change*,"here is what needs to happen" and if someone was against ...he did not much listen. (TM2, transl.). One thing that *I remember* was that there wasn't a lot of discussion, at least amongst our leadership team about the must-win battles. *We were more told*, this is what they are. Thus *we were more kind of the targets in terms of being told* what they were rather than kind of participating in the development. (MM5)
Executing change	*Combined use of framing and contrasting narrative:* metaphor must-win battle to trigger association with the change program, narrative to contrast past and present in talking about actions and accomplishments.	*If you need to drive issues*, it's really easy to lean on *the must-win battle on the environmental side* – for example in a meeting, *everyone knows* it and then you can lean on it. If there were more of them (must-win battles), the true focus would get lost. (MM3, transl.) *We don't really think about what our must-win battles are* on a daily basis; *we do them*. (MM2, transl.)
	Nested use of contrasting and action narratives combined with inclusive 'we' to indicate resistance to changes.	Well, *it is clearer and more systematic* now through prioritizing development projects – we do exactly what business [=sales] wants *On the other hand*, that embraces a risk… *we should also have some idea creation. If we only produce to [meet] the customer demand, we will lose on the long term. We should also be innovative and create needs*. Perhaps developing only what [the] customer wants is not the best direction. (FG2-3, transl.)