

Sensegiving as mise-en-sens—The case of wind power development

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Abstract

In seeking to advance the understanding of the production, diffusion and negotiation of meaning in and between organisations, we introduce below the notion of mise-en-sens. Mise-en-sens refers to the performing art term of mise-en-scène and builds on the French term *sens* denoting meaning as well as direction. Starting from a qualitative analysis of how Swedish wind farm developers manage the permit-application process for their projects, we suggest in a first-order analysis that the activities of the developers consist in contextualising the project, ontologising it and neutralising criticism addressed to it. In a second-order analysis, we conceptualise these activities as a mise-en-sens. Mise-en-sens spells out the way in which developers, as meaning managers, stage the project and provide it with direction. Having positioned mise-en-sens in relation to the notions of sensemaking and sensegiving, we suggest in conclusion that mise-en-sens could serve to describe not only the activity of wind farm developers but also, for example, that of project managers or entrepreneurs in general since they too are engaged in the management of meaning.

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1. Introduction

The piecemeal demise of objectivist epistemological assumptions in management studies has been accompanied by a growing interest in the production, diffusion and negotiation

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of meaning in organisational contexts. Although notions such as sensemaking or sensegiving have received a considerable amount of attention, there is relatively little understanding so far of the way organisational actors actually produce, diffuse and negotiate meaning in, between and around organisations.

In this article, we therefore focus on the specific process of organisational sensegiving and introduce the notion of *mise-en-sens* as a means for explicating the activity of meaning managers. *Mise-en-sens* is a neologism that alludes to the performing art term of *mise-en-scène* or stage-setting while also playing on the fact that the French term *sens* can denote both meaning and direction. We seek to show that the notion of *mise-en-sens* can help us to grasp what sensegiving activities actually involve. To illustrate this claim we take the case of wind farm development, and particularly the task of obtaining the mandatory permits to build such farms.

2. Sensemaking and sensegiving in organisations

The notion of sensegiving originates in the notion of sensemaking launched by Weick (1969/1979, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) as being critical to the study of organisational activity. In the wake of Weick's pioneering work, many others have approached various aspects of management and organisational behaviour in terms of sensemaking, e.g. organisational change (Bean & Hamilton, 2006), restructuring (Balogun & Johnson, 2004), strategic learning (Thomas, Sussman, & Henderson, 2001), the gendering of professions (Helms Mills, 2002) and the exercise of knowledge-based power in organisations (Marshall & Rollinson, 2004).

Maitlis (2005, p. 22) distinguishes two main approaches to sensemaking in this literature. One approach is to investigate “the social process associated with sensemaking”, particularly in situations of crisis or under extreme circumstances, and to focus on the way sensemaking depends on both organisational structure and individual patterns of interaction. A representative example is Weick's (1993) analysis of the Mann Gulch disaster. The other approach is to examine “how certain groups influence others' understanding of issues”, focussing in particular on when and how leaders at all levels influence the sensemaking of others toward some preferred definition of organisational reality. A prominent representative of this approach is Gioia and Chittipeddi's (1991) study of strategic change, in which the authors introduced the notion of sensegiving.

Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991, p. 442) have defined the process of sensegiving in contradistinction to the process of sensemaking. Sensemaking is concerned with “meaning construction and reconstruction” on the part of parties involved as they attempt to develop a meaningful framework for understanding the nature of an intended strategic change. Correspondingly, sensegiving is concerned with “the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred definition of organizational reality” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). The two processes occur in a sequential and reciprocal fashion, whereby cognitive stages of understanding (sensemaking) alternate with active stages of influencing (sensegiving).

Most articles on sensegiving adhere to the symmetrical approach to sensegiving and sensemaking offered by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991). Hill and Levenhagen (1995), for example, claim that the activity of entrepreneurs involves making extensive use of metaphors, both in developing a vision or mental model of their environment (sensemaking), *and* articulating that vision to others (sensegiving). The same symmetrical

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