

TITLE: Making Sense of Common Sense for Change Management Buy-In

Michael Y. Moon, Ph.D., M.B.A.

Department of Public Affairs and Administration
California State University, East Bay
MI 4127
25800 Carlos Bee Blvd.
Hayward, California 94552
USA

michael.moon@csueastbay.edu

Biography:

Michael Y. Moon, Ph.D. is an assistant professor in the department of Public Affairs and Administration at California State University, East Bay. He received a Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology from Columbia University and an M.B.A. from the Yale School of Management. He also holds a Certificate from the Program in Organizational Development and Consultation at the William Alanson White Institute in New York City. Dr. Moon has over 15 years of experience working in management and marketing roles in organizations including Onsale.com, American Express, and Aetna. Dr. Moon's research interests include bottom-up organizational change and professional training in organizational praxis.

Structured Abstract

Purpose: A model is presented linking the organization change agent's self-awareness and reflexivity, sensemaking of common sense perspectives, and buy-in for change initiatives. The case is made for change agents to pay close attention to common sense perspectives because they can become the basis for particular problematic ambivalence and diminished change buy-in among stakeholders in the organization.

Approach: Conceptual and theoretical rationales for the model are offered. Examples from the psychological and organizational theory literatures provide support for the various elements of the model.

Findings: Common sense perspectives should be factored into the diagnosis of the organization. Self-awareness, reflexivity, and sensemaking are all forms of social awareness that are necessary to engage stakeholders on matters of common sense.

Research implications: Four research areas are identified. First, social and cultural contextual influences on common sense require clarification. Second, if resistance is multidimensional, how are dimensions influenced by common sense? Third, what group level of the organization (e.g., individual, group, organization) do common sense perspectives represent? Fourth, how may change agents work out incommensurate common sense perspectives?

Practical implications: Common sense cannot be mandated. Change agents must maintain self-awareness and reflexivity as they work with stakeholders in a sensemaking process. Increased buy-in emerges through minimizing ambivalence towards change.

Originality/value: Little, if anything, has been written on the use of common sense in

organizational change management. Scattered published articles on common sense in organization studies exist.

Keywords: Common sense, sensemaking, change management, buy-in, resistance

Paper type: Conceptual

TITLE: Making Sense of Common Sense for Change Management Buy-In

Michael Y. Moon, Ph.D., M.B.A.

The literature on managing organizational development and change is vast. However, the importance of common sense in organizational change management has not been seriously considered. The concept of common sense itself has not received much attention in the organization literature. In this paper, I propose a model that links a change agent's self-awareness and reflexivity, his or her sensemaking of common sense perspectives related to planned change, and buy-in among organization stakeholders.

It is not clear why common sense is not formally discussed in the change management literature. Common sense is important for the study of organizations because it is an aspect of individuals' and groups' belief systems that is tied to sound judgment in practical matters (Brown, 1993). When an individual violates common sense in an organization setting, that individual's capacity for sound judgment may be questioned and, consequently, their reputation may no longer remain in good standing. Such a verdict on a change agent or internal change partners could preclude any chance of obtaining and sustaining buy-in for change initiatives. Therefore, it is crucial that change agents understand common sense perspectives in the organization and do what they can to either exhibit common sense or overcome possible ambivalence (Piderit, 2000) and outright resistance based on common sense judgments in the organization.

As with any belief system with the potential to influence work tasks, common sense perspectives must be considered in organizational diagnosis. Whether a change agent decides to act in accordance or not with stakeholder common sense perspectives (including one's own), the potential for stakeholders to adopt common sense notions as social defenses (Hirschhorn, 1990) or as the basis for some other form of ambivalent resistance (Piderit, 2000) should concern the change agent.

In this paper, I focus on the ability of the change agent to practice self-awareness and reflexivity in the context of an organizational change initiative. While I am aware that change is often managed by a group or groups of 'change agents', I am interested in how the intra-person processes of individual change agents may help them make sense of common sense perspectives in the organization. The approach in this paper does not contradict the rationale of working in teams of change agents. The model proposed in this paper then links this sensemaking of common sense with increased buy-in among stakeholders in the organization.

After presenting the model, I will discuss components of the model in greater detail. Sections on common sense in organizations, self-awareness and reflexivity, sensemaking, the link between common sense and organizational stakeholder buy-in, and a brief example follow the overview of the model.

The Model

The model presented in this paper links the change agent's self-awareness and reflexivity, the change agent's sensemaking of common sense perspectives related to the planned change, and organizational buy-in. A diagram of the model is provided in Figure 1. Increasing the degree

Copyright © Michael Y. Moon, Ph.D., M.B.A. 2008
Do not distribute without author permission

of buy-in among organization stakeholders for a change agent's efforts is the aim of this model.

For the change agent, an awareness of common sense perspectives in the organization can be a powerful analytical tool for assessing stakeholder interests and opportunities for buy-in. Day-to-day engagement with various stakeholders of the organization places the change agent in situations that can create confusion and conflict. Change can be unpopular and organization stakeholders are often ambivalent about change (Piderit, 2000). The change agent locates common sense perspectives among organization stakeholders through dialogue, engagement, and intersubjective understanding facilitated by the change agent's self-awareness and reflexivity.

Making sense of common sense perspectives is important because the credibility of the managed change will require actions that pass stakeholders' common sense 'sniff tests'. If actions related to the planned change do not align with common sense principles in the organization, it will be difficult for any change to be successful and long lasting. The emerging awareness of common sense perspectives can provide the change agent with a tool to strategically design interventions and communications that either overcome common sense perspectives that are potential obstacles to planned change or align the organization behind a shared common sense judgment about the planned change. An awareness and understanding of common sense may also provide the change agent the basis for avoiding tactical faux pas and errors in judgment. Stakeholders of the organization are less likely to adopt change when their common sense perspectives are violated through tactical errors in the change agent's judgment.

Moreover, common sense may also be a vehicle for resistance and use of social defenses (Hirschhorn, 1990) against planned change. Social defenses are group-level psychodynamic positions that allow individuals to act 'as if' the life of organizations conforms to certain

fantasies, such as family configurations (parents and siblings), fight/flight postures (disproportional aggression or passivity), and organizational rituals (anxious dependency on rules). Individuals who act out social defensive behaviors typically are not aware of doing so, at least on a level of understanding the ‘as if’ interpretation of the behaviors. Common sense can be invoked to justify social dynamics in groups (e.g., Pickering, 2001). Bringing to stakeholders’ awareness the social defenses and their implications for the organization can have a developmental effect on individuals in the organization and facilitate greater task focus for work (Hirschhorn, 1990). Therefore, it is in the change agent’s interest to become aware of the potential for such dynamics and address them as quickly as possible to support planned change and increase stakeholder buy-in.

The model begins with the change agent’s self-awareness about one’s perspectives on common sense related to the desired change. This includes awareness of personal and organizational issues, such as emotions, frames of reference, and intra- and interpersonal relations. Self-awareness and reflexivity about the change agent’s common sense perspectives will help the change agent avoid creating self-fulfilling prophecy scenarios or other situations in which the change agent projects one’s common sense perspective on the organization. I use “reflexivity” in Holland’s ‘reflexivity one’ sense of the term (1999). The change agent actively engages in internal dialogue and attends continuously to his or her responses to experiences. Because of the various interests and dynamics involved in effective change management, a change agent’s ability to maintain self-awareness and reflexivity through turbulence will help keep him or her centered and focused on common sense perspectives. More about self-awareness and reflexivity will be discussed in following sections.

As the change agent engages with stakeholders regarding a planned change initiative, he or she is acting on an emergent understanding that constantly depends on past, current, and anticipated conditions. This emergent understanding is confounded when the flow of engagement loses coherence regarding perceptions of what constitutes common sense and “the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world, or when there is no obvious way to engage the world” (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). When disruptions in the planned change process regarding what constitutes common sense and sound judgment occur, the change agent instigates a process of sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005). The disruption is examined for “reasons” for the interruption at the commencement of the sensemaking process. Such disruption may take the form of the change agent’s momentary uncertainty about stakeholders’ common sense perspectives, the change agent’s perception of stakeholder ambivalence towards planned change, or a lapse in the change agent’s common sense judgments. With sensemaking, the change agent may “organize to make sense of equivocal inputs and enact this sense back into the world to make that world more orderly” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 410).

The sensemaking process allows the change agent to resume action after the disruption. In the model, sensemaking is mutually coupled with both action scenarios: a) action in accordance with common sense perspectives (including one’s own), and b) minimizing ambivalence that is based on common sense perspectives. Engaging collaboratively with organization stakeholders through sensemaking, the change agent observes and listens closely (Jacobs & Coghlan, 2005) to possible perspectives on common sense. The dialogue regarding common sense in the organization is focused on the desired change and whether it violates common sense perspectives and why. This process of sensemaking is couched in the constant informal data gathering in which change agents engage during their interactions with the organization’s stakeholders (e.g.,

McCormick & White, 2000).

Equipped with a greater understanding of common sense perspectives related to the change initiative, the change agent may act in ways that are either consistent with these perspectives or that help to develop greater self-awareness in the organization. Sensemaking is focused on action (Weick et al., 2005), and awareness of common sense perspectives may provide the change agent frames for making a plausible case for change. Piderit (2000) raises questions about the concept of resistance to change, and proposes the need to consider multidimensional ambivalence to change instead. That is, resistance is usually not a monolithic experience within the organization, but a multifaceted collection of stakeholder thoughts, emotions, and intentions to act (Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008; Piderit, 2000). Stakeholders may resist the idea of change, based on common sense, but they may also understand that change on some level is needed, thus creating an attitude of stakeholder ambivalence towards the planned change. Where it is decided that change activities must deviate from some notions of common sense, the change agent may design a communication strategy that accounts for perceived violations of stakeholders' perspectives to reduce their ambivalence. Such a reframing of the terms by which stakeholders judge planned change based on common sense may help the change agent overcome objections and increase chances of stakeholder buy-in. Gaining buy-in can be an enormous boon for successful organization change management.

The following sections provide greater detail on the components of the model. The next section defines common sense and describes its significance for organizations and change agents. The following two sections address change agent self-awareness and reflexivity and their significance to sensemaking of common sense perspectives among organization stakeholders.

The following section of the paper addresses common sense, ambivalence, and stakeholder buy-in. A brief example is provided. The final section proposes areas of further research and practice implications of common sense awareness for change management.

Common Sense in Organizations

Common sense is defined as “good sound practical sense in everyday matters” and “the collective sense or judgment of humankind or of a community” (Brown, 1993, p. 454). Common sense is a distillation of held beliefs, and common sense judgment is based on a consideration of a broad cross-section of one’s beliefs that relate to the judgment. Because common sense is so straightforward for its users, it holds the potential to provide considerable persuasive power and plausible rationale for initiatives that align with common sense perspectives. Alternatively, those initiatives that violate common sense perspectives will face greater ambivalence and skepticism among organization stakeholders.

People generally wish to act with common sense and to be perceived as having common sense. Implicit in the concept of common sense is that those lacking it lack good judgment and sound decision making capacities. Sometimes the notion of common sense is invoked to raise questions about others’ lack of common sense since common sense is assumed, by definition, to be present among most people. For example, a definition of common sense includes the following: “Ordinary or normal understanding, as possessed by all except the insane and the mentally handicapped” (Brown, 1993, p. 454).

Leaders, particularly innovators, establish new perspectives on common sense. Theirs becomes an issue of selling ideas as it does with the change agent. In these special cases of

innovation, common sense is challenged. Nevertheless, innovators cannot suspend use of common sense too long without frustrating others in their organization. In the case of innovators, they must somehow find a way to make their innovations become as much a part of common sense as possible for others. This will greatly facilitate broad adoption of the innovation.

Common sense is typically held with conviction and with a sense of shared authority along the lines that a social contract is shared but without moral or religious overtones. As such, some degree of personal investment is implicit in what one considers to be common sense. It touches on one's sense of identity and what is proper. And, by definition, it connects one's sense of what is proper with what others in their community believe is proper. Common sense generally does not address issues of 'good' versus 'evil' as much as practical, everyday, presumably self-evident, logical extensions of good judgment.

Similarities and differences exist between common sense and intuition. Intuition has been defined as the process of "making high quality decisions relatively quickly" that are affectively charged and holistic in nature (Dane & Pratt, 2007, p. 33). Intuition and the process of intuiting are evoked when shortage of time, information, and other resources create difficulties for making decisions and conducting work. The quality of intuition is considered dependent on one's level of expertise (Patton, 2003). Similar to common sense, the focus is on use of sound judgment. However, the notion of intuition differs somewhat from common sense in that the emphasis in the case of common sense is not on expediency and is assumed to involve "good sound practical sense in everyday matters" and "the collective sense or judgment of humankind or of a community" (Brown, 1993, p. 454). Common sense is less affectively charged and instrumentally problem-focused regarding decision making than the process of intuiting, and it

draws more on a shared sense of practicality to produce sound judgment.

Wisdom is also associated with good judgment (Bierly, Kessler, & Christensen, 2000). The difference is the extended experience in personal and professional matters in wisdom. For example, the New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (Brown, 1993) includes in the following definition of wisdom: “the combination of experience and knowledge with the ability to apply them judiciously” (p. 3700). Wisdom is based on experience, knowledge, and perceptiveness. Wisdom is not considered as common among people in society as common sense is. Organizationally, wisdom is generally an aspirational goal (e.g., Bierly et al., 2000). Common sense is the state of beliefs at any given time. Common sense is what change agents must engage with on a day-to-day basis.

Common sense can serve as the basis for particular perspectives on issues in a manner similar to world views (Tsoukas, 1994), metaphors (Morgan, 2006), and frames of analysis (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Stakeholders can judge planned changes through their perspectives on common sense which can influence the degree to which they buy in to the changes. When there is alignment between those perspectives and the planned change, buy-in can be a more straightforward affair, all other things being equal. However, when common sense perspectives are not aligned with changes, a clash of world views can cause problematic conflict between the stakeholder’s beliefs and the planned change. Doubt and skepticism can emerge regarding other areas of the change that are not directly related to the common sense notion. The stakeholder may even commit the fundamental attribution error by deciding that the change agent is incompetent.

For organization stakeholders, common sense serves to provide basic principles or

guidelines for action. Common sense is an aspect of the background to the foreground of daily organizational matters in that its use is typically invoked when making a point about the obviousness or self-evident nature of an idea. Still, because common sense is the basis of everyday good judgment, its principles are invoked regularly.

Nevertheless, violations of common sense do occur. When social or other pressures distort stakeholders' perceptions and thought processes, common sense can be violated. Examples of this fill history and management literatures, such as group think, corporate leadership debacles (Enron and WorldCom), and politicians who have blundered their ways into personal and professional self-sabotage (President William J. Clinton, New York State Elliot Spitzer). Violations also occur regularly on a more prosaic daily level in which errors in judgment and poor choices are made. The violation of common sense undercuts the violator's credibility because common sense is considered so basic, and raises questions among others about the violator's capacity for good judgment. One palpable implication when common sense is invoked in the wake of someone's violation of a common sense principle is 'they should have known better'. Therefore, common sense is part of the complex meaning making in which employees must constantly engage to manage their roles and tasks. It holds an important place among one's beliefs by linking personal accountability and organizational role actions. So, even though the negative consequences for violating common sense are dire, documented and anecdotal examples of its violation are relatively (and perhaps even surprisingly) easy to find.

Even beyond the straightforward violations of common sense, common sense itself may be problematic. For example, during 1997-1999 popular media in Australia conveyed and perpetuated an image of asylum seekers and refugees from Kosovo and East Timor as 'deviants',

an attribute that took on common sense reality among the public (Pickering, 2001). Some common sense beliefs reflect organizational dynamics such as conversational rituals (Tannen, 1995) and organization rituals (Hirschhorn, 1990). In these cases, common sense is dictated by normative beliefs about proper behavior in one's role at work. Unfortunately, these normative beliefs are based on cultural and historical developments that obscure why changes to the rituals may benefit employees. For example, in the case of conversational rituals, changing linguistic styles in performance review feedback from directing to coaching (Palmer & Dunford, 2008) may not meet with approval of an executive whose common sense perspective assumes that the directing style of communication is the most efficient one. And, organization rituals, such as filling out paper forms and submitting monthly reports to the CEO, constructed around superficial customer service frequency counts may reify the common sense rationale that a greater number of callers that customer service representatives speak to will lead to enhancing the company's image of responsiveness.

Therefore, potential hazards exist in basing decisions on common sense (Fletcher, 1984). Just as with any other belief or judgment in organizations, common sense can be influenced by cohort effects, group dynamics, and unconscious processes. The change agent's self-awareness and reflexivity along with the process of sensemaking can surface many of the assumptions behind the common sense perspectives regarding the planned change.

Self-Awareness and Reflexivity

Self-awareness, reflexivity, and sensemaking are all contextually embedded forms of awareness that weave through an individual's intrapersonal and interpersonal frames of

reference. These various forms of awareness depend on the mutual construction of reality among self and others. Self-awareness is the intrapersonal conscious processing of one's emotions, thoughts, behaviors, motives, and desires. It can be retrospective or in-the-moment awareness, and is usually promoted in the literature to facilitate one's personal and professional growth (e.g., Epstein, 1999; Goleman, 1995). Self-awareness is considered an important aspect of taking up the role of change agent (Taylor-Bianco & Schermerhorn, 2006).

Reflexivity has been defined and used in many different ways (Holland, 1999). Holland (1999) reviews the social sciences literatures for denotations of the term, reflexivity, and proposes various levels of reflexivity. The first level remains within the boundaries of a discipline and considers "the person producing the theory [as being] included within the subject matter he attempts to understand." (p. 465) Holland calls this level of reflexivity "reflexivity one" (1999, p. 465). Higher levels of reflexivity involve broader transdisciplinary critiques of one's discipline including postmodern extra-disciplinary analysis. For the purposes of this paper, I use Holland's 'reflexivity one' sense of the term.

Reflexivity differs from self-awareness. Reflexivity places the individual's frame of analysis on his or her effect on others who are the subject of that individual's observations. In contrast, self-awareness places the frame of analysis primarily on the individual's intrapersonal processes and conditions. Presumably, a dialectical relationship exists between self-awareness and reflexivity. Self-awareness allows the grounds for reflexivity and understanding of one's effect on others. In turn, the reflexive frame of analysis brings additional understanding in one's self-awareness of how one influences and is influenced by others through such processes as projective identification (Sullivan, 2002) and other interpersonal dynamics (e.g., Argyris, 1991).

When change agents maintain their self-awareness around emotions, frames of reference, and other aspects of intra- and interpersonal relations, they make themselves available to reflexivity and intersubjective dialogue with others. The idea that in order for one to help others, one must know oneself is presented in the works of Buber ("Ich-Du" vs. "Ich-Es" 1971), Bennis (1994), and Hirschhorn (1990). To expand one's capacity to be with others and understand their perspectives requires one's own capacity to think critically about one's existence and motivations (self-awareness) and about one's own effects on interpersonal dynamics (reflexivity). This is a common notion in the organizational consulting literature on psychological transference and countertransference (e.g., Sullivan, 2002).

Because of the complexities and pressures from multiple interests in organizations, it can be easy to act in ways that veer from one's notions of common sense. Losing sight of common sense is a form of losing sight of one's core values and beliefs. This 'self-blindness' can afflict individuals at all levels of an organization and can lead to hazardous behaviors such as self-sabotage. Self-awareness allows one to continue reflecting on one's in-the-moment and past experiences. Self-awareness minimizes one's blind spots that can emerge regarding one's integrity, interpersonal dynamics (e.g., transference), and common sense.

Self-awareness may also provide perspective on how one's common sense differs from others' perspectives on common sense. Sustaining an inner dialogue about the change agent's own feelings and motivations regarding a planned change initiative may create the basis for the change agent's emerging in-the-moment realization that what he or she believes constitutes common sense no longer aligns with organization stakeholders' perspectives on what constitutes common sense and sound judgment. As the change agent engages in reflexive awareness of his

or her interactions with the stakeholders, the change agent may locate the difference in the realm of interests rather than as personal differences (e.g., Fisher, Patton, & Ury, 1992). This negotiation of interests and frames of reference provides some of the material for sensemaking of common sense perspectives.

Making Sense of Disruption Related to Common Sense

Because of the uncertainties of change outcomes and the fluid nature of organizations (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), planned change projects are disrupted regularly. That is, change never resembles the plan. Also, common sense can be difficult to discern because it is a socially constructed and subjective aspect of organizational life. Therefore, the change agent instigates a process of sensemaking (diagnosis) to understand disruptions in the planned change process through dialogue, facilitation, and active listening (e.g., Jacobs & Coghlan, 2005). The change agent may face ambivalence (Piderit, 2000) or other forms of resistance (Ford et al., 2008) based on uncertain or conflictual common sense perspectives.

Disruption in the planned change process regarding what constitutes common sense and sound judgment arises when the change agent encounters inconsistencies between the planned change and stakeholders' common sense perspectives or other momentary uncertainty on common sense perspectives in the organization. Alternatively, the change agent's own decisions may waver from common sense. Engaging in self-reflection and reflexivity may provide some personal perspective on these disruptions; sensemaking broadens this perspective by establishing the perspective in an interpersonal realm. Sensemaking is a social process that establishes intersubjective dialogue during an in-the-moment disruption in understanding of a work flow.

Sensemaking allows a process by which the self-aware and reflexive change agent may negotiate the meanings and ascendant notions of common sense related to planned change.

According to Karl Weick and colleagues (Weick et al., 2005), sensemaking involves:

the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing. Viewed as a significant process of organizing, sensemaking unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances. (p. 409)

Plausibility in making sense of disruptive conditions that no longer allow for expected practice is a key objective of sensemaking. This contrasts with models of rational decision making because problem solving for the purpose of moving toward general long-term goals is not solely dependent on accurately perceiving situations and problems (Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking can allow individuals to continue their work by socially constructing plausible solutions that transition the workflow back into better understood and less uncertain conditions. Any errant or incorrect actions from the sensemaking process can be addressed when conditions have stabilized.

Sensemaking involves a number of in-the-moment attempts at organizing information through communication. Sensemaking is an exercise in socially constructing meanings through language, storytelling, sharing evidence, and improvisation. As a change agent attempts to make sense of disruptions in the planned change process regarding what constitutes common sense and sound judgment, he or she engages in communications with organization stakeholders about

possible “reasons” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409) for the interruption in the planned change activities. According to Weick and his colleagues, “the image of sensemaking as activity that talks events and organizations into existence suggests that patterns of organizing are located in the actions and conversations that occur on behalf of the presumed organization and in the texts of those activities that are preserved in social structures” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 413). The process of sensemaking and conversational engagement it involves may also be seen as a method for shifting conversations (Ford, 1999) and, therefore, changing the organization and its constructed existence. Put more concisely, “sensemaking and organization constitute each other” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 410).

The process of shifting socially constructed meanings also affects the identities of the change agent and organization stakeholders. As stated already about common sense, some degree of personal investment in one’s notions of common sense is based on its link to what one believes is proper. The sensemaking process involves the change agent’s evolving identity in his or her role as change agent. Identity and sensemaking rely on sensegiving and the image one conveys. As Weick and his colleagues put it:

From the perspective of sensemaking, who we think we are (identity) as organizational actors shapes what we enact and how we interpret, which affects what outsiders think we are (image) and how they treat us, which stabilizes or destabilizes our identity. Who we are lies importantly in the hands of others, which means our categories for sensemaking lies in their hands. If their images of us change, our identities may be destabilized and our receptiveness to new meanings increase. Sensemaking, filtered through issues of identity, is shaped by

the recipe ‘how can I know who we are becoming until I see what they say and do with our actions?’ (Weick et al., 2005, p. 416)

Effective sensemaking involves the change agent’s openness to others’ receptivity and responses to their actions. This is a primary reason that self-awareness and reflexivity on the part of the change agent are important bases for sensemaking of common sense perspectives (e.g., see Argyris, 1991 on double-loop learning).

A typical question raised during the sensemaking process is: “what is going on here?” For the change agent, this question arises when stakeholder common sense perspectives can no longer be considered aligned with the change agent’s common sense perspective and the planned change. The follow up question, “what do I do next?,” is represented in the model (Figure 1) in the two actions: ‘act in accordance with common sense perspectives (self and others) as appropriate’ and ‘minimize ambivalence based on common sense perspectives if possible’. The subject of this next question is addressed in the following section.

Common Sense, Ambivalence and Organizational Stakeholder Buy-In

Through the sensemaking process, the change agent and stakeholders focus their relationship around problem solving. The process of sensemaking of common sense perspectives, described above, involves perspective sharing and dialogue about different world views. Often, it will involve negotiation. Even if the sensemaking process initially takes a collaborative coaching and interpreting approach (Palmer & Dunford, 2008) the outcome of the process could resort to the use of directives from authority in the form of top-down intervention. The sensemaking process will often place the change agent in the role of facilitator. The

approach and objective of sensemaking will require effective group collaboration, sometimes requiring facilitation. This facilitation may take a straightforward problem-solving, “basic” form or an educational, “developmental” form that teaches stakeholders also how to improve their group process (Schwarz, 2002). Whatever the substance of the sensemaking process and the mutual engagement and dialogue this involves, the relationship between the change agent and stakeholder is a critical component for generating buy-in (Ford et al., 2008).

Buy-in is a commitment to agreements about work, and it involves some degree of trust between the change agent and stakeholders. As such, buy-in depends on psychological contracts (Rousseau, 1989) as well as the intent to act accordingly. For buy-in to occur, ambivalence and resistance towards the planned change must be relatively minimal. Or, at least, stakeholders must see reason to tolerate their ambivalence and temper their resistance towards change. Because an ambivalent attitude may be based on any number of wide-ranging reasons, such as cognition, emotion, and possibly even intent to act (Piderit, 2000), some degree of ambivalence about planned change is inevitable. Incentives to ‘go along’ with the change may reduce outright stakeholder resistance. Presumably some degree of ‘buy-in’ will exist in order for the change project to maintain viability. Reduced ambivalence about the planned change is not a precursor or determinant of buy-in, but it may increase the degree of buy-in among stakeholders. The greater the extent to which genuine buy-in and even intrinsic motivation can be generated for a planned change initiative, the better the chances for successful and sustainable change.

In a sense, a crucial task for the change agent is to make the rationales for change initiatives seem like common sense to as many stakeholders of the organization as possible. It is imperative that the change agent be as ‘in touch’ with key stakeholders of the organization to

constantly assess their perceptions – and remain within acceptable boundaries of their common sense perspectives. Many would consider this to be common sense. Yet, many top-down organizational change initiatives are managed without much attention to stakeholders' perceptions – particularly on such a subjective level as common sense.

The change agent involved in the sensemaking process develops continuous hypotheses about common sense perspectives in the organization. These hypotheses are constantly being tested through self-awareness, reflexivity, and engagement with organization stakeholders. This constant testing “unfolds as a series of approximations and attempts to discover an appropriate response” to stakeholder perspectives on common sense and creates a growing base of knowledge of an unfolding sense about the organization. And this “knowledge of this unfolding sense is not located just inside the head” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 412) of the change agent, but its “locus is systemwide and is realized in stronger or weaker coordination and information distribution among interdependent...workers” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 412).

As the change agent makes sense of disruptions in the change process regarding common sense perspectives in the organization, he or she faces two general options for action. The first option is to act in accordance to common sense perspectives of oneself and others in the organization. This is available when sensemaking allows the change agent and stakeholders to find a path for planned change that conforms to their various common sense perspectives. There is little resistance and ambivalence with this option. The original disruption that led the change agent to instigate sensemaking could have been temporary confusion or a minor disagreement that could be resolved simply through the sensemaking process.

The alternative option is to seek ways to minimize ambivalence (or even outright

resistance) that is based on common sense perspectives. Again, because ambivalence may arise based on many dimensions, such as cognition, emotion, and possibly intent to act (Piderit, 2000), stakeholders hold simultaneous positive and negative attitudes based on common sense. Complexity in organizational life creates paradox and internal contradictions (Smith & Berg, 1987). Diagnosing resistance to change as multidimensional allows the change agent a more precise framework with which to understand and minimize resistance.

Brief Example

At a large state university, an internal consultant was exploring ways to continue and to grow the university's Masters of Health Care Administration (HCA) program, which had been part of the Department of Public Administration. From the perspective of the public administration (PA) faculty, the university had not honored its past promises to reward with additional resources programs that had demonstrated significant student enrollment growth. The PA faculty certainly wanted to be able to expand and enrich the HCA program, however they were already overworked and enrollment growth without additional resources was not possible. Therefore, common sense dictated that it was not in the PA faculty's interests to invest greater amounts of resources into the growth of a program without some reassurance that administration would provide additional support resources (e.g., staff, faculty). Moreover, a budgetary crisis was troubling the state government and it seemed unlikely that such resources would be available; cuts in programs had already been raised as a means to deal with the budget crisis. In a meeting between the PA faculty and university administrators, the PA faculty agreed to increase student enrollments contingent on obtaining resources that were clearly listed in a document

distributed at the meeting. The rationale was that if the university administration truly desired an HCA program they would 'put their money where their mouth is'.

The university administration understood that the HCA program posed a unique opportunity to enhance the university's presence in the region since no comparable program existed in the area. Their common sense perspective was that since an HCA program already existed in the PA department, they should be responsible for maintaining it and finding opportunities to expand it. The university administration had a general sense of goodwill sentiment towards the PA faculty and program because many of its members were graduates of the program. And the PA program was recognized for its innovation and thought-leadership in its field. The university administration considered the HCA program a positive opportunity for the PA faculty to build on its past successes. But when university administration received what they perceived as an unreasonable list of demands at the meeting with PA faculty, they were dismayed. The internal consultant was asked to look into alternative options within the university to resolve the situation without having to agree to the PA faculty's demands. A possible option would be to take the HCA program away from PA and house it in another department, such as health care sciences.

The internal consultant's perspective did not initially include an understanding of either party's common sense perspectives. In fact, these parties did not understand that their respective common sense positions did not occur to anybody else. Because their positions seemed to conform to their notions of common sense, it was inconceivable that their views would not be shared by others. And because each party seemed to violate the other's common sense perspective, serious questions were raised about the others' capacity for sound judgment on the

HCA matter. As the consultant discerned the growing antagonism and disappointment between the two parties, she immersed herself into several lines of sensemaking questioning with each of the parties to make sense of the conflict. The dispute constituted a disruption in the HCA project.

The internal consultant was self-aware enough to know that she would feel pressured to support the university administration because they were her ‘boss’. At the same time, she had risen through the ranks as a faculty member in another university, so she felt an affinity to the PA faculty. She understood their situation because she had faced similar challenges herself in the past. She was committed to gauge her in-the-moment responses to each party and to remain aware of how her facilitative presence (Schwarz, 2002) in this process of negotiation and (hopefully) resolution would affect the two parties and the outcome. She would remain reflexive about her influence on others and focus on bringing the two parties together for a collaborative dialogue regarding their common sense perspectives and their interests instead of their positions (Fisher, Patton & Ury, 1992).

Through engaged and separate dialogues with the PA faculty and university administration, the consultant realized that the conflict was emerging from two different common sense perspectives that created a paradox for the project. The PA faculty believed that limited resources made additional investment into the HCA program impossible. Devoting themselves to growing the HCA program without much needed material support would represent an unsound judgment and a violation of common sense. But the university administration’s belief that the existing HCA program should remain with the PA faculty and that they should feel compelled to support the program created an internal contradiction about who should grow the HCA program and how. This contradiction in common sense perspectives appeared clearer when the

administration balked at the PA faculty's list of required resources.

The internal consultant scheduled another meeting for the two parties. She presented her findings and mapped out the areas of their conflict. She pointed out how their common sense perspectives were not entirely contradictory but were actually plausible to each other, particularly if they could resolve the resources issue on a mutually agreeable basis. Clearly, both parties had interests that overlapped. Both wanted the HCA program to grow and thrive. Both felt squeezed by limited, and even shrinking, resources. Both wanted the Department of Public Administration to run the program. And both parties understood that they were committed to a long-term relationship in the larger context of their roles at the university, whatever the outcome of this particular conflict. Therefore, the university administrators and PA faculty resumed their discussions, now better equipped — through a collaborative sensemaking process, facilitated by the consultant — to understand each other's interests and common sense perspectives. And, whatever the outcome since much remained to be resolved, the credibility of the internal consultant and of both parties was maintained in the face of potential questions each party had about the others' common sense judgments.

Therefore, engaging in sensemaking processes about common sense perspectives, particularly as they cause disruptions to the change process should be a focus for the change agent. As already made clear, organizational change that fails to account for the relatively basic precepts of prudent common sense behavior and decision making risks losing credibility and buy-in among stakeholders of an organization. Because individuals hold common sense as self-evident precepts that allow them to judge their own and, typically, others' actions, it can influence how credible organizational initiatives are perceived.

Implications for Research and Practice

The process of sensemaking of common sense perspectives as a change management tool is not based on a structural-functionalist approach to management. Common sense cannot be mandated by managers and change agents. Because common sense perspectives generally receive their power from social and community based meanings, obtaining buy-in on common sense issues must deal with dialogue on the same social levels. The change agent must engage in an intersubjective journey that explores stakeholders' common sense perspectives. This requires that the change agent be self-aware and reflexive in his or her practice, as discussed above. Through this process, the change agent and stakeholders are intertwined in a relationship that is deeply implied by the process of sensemaking (Ford et al., 2008).

Because so little has been written in the organizational change and development literature about common sense, there is much to be explored in future research. Four areas of research are mentioned here. First, during the sensemaking process, how do stakeholders balance common sense perspectives with the organization's specific constraints and requirements? Another aspect to this question is: In what ways are "organizational members ... socialized (indoctrinated) into expected sensemaking activities [as] shaped by broad cognitive, normative, and regulatory forces that derive from and are enforced by powerful actors such as mass media, governmental agencies, professions, and interest groups" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 417)? All aspects of organizational life are embedded in social and cultural contexts, and understanding the process of sensemaking related to common sense perspectives in organizations must be considered accordingly.

Second, if resistance can be considered multidimensional, such as proposed by Piderit (2000) and Ford and colleagues (Ford et al., 2008), how are the dimensions influenced by common sense perspectives? The change agent's activities may face resistance, or objections may percolate to the surface of interactions with stakeholders, as incompatibility between stakeholder common sense and change activities arise. Responses to organizational change may occur across multidimensional ambivalence, from the perspective of the change agent. If the dimensions of cognition, emotion, and intent to act do comprise the dimensions of resistance (Piderit, 2000; Smollan, 2006), then does ambivalence based on common sense perspectives tend to affect all three of these dimensions? If so, one might hypothesize that change agents who face ambivalence or even outright resistance based on common sense perspectives must design a response that addresses all three dimensions.

Third, if organizational change can be considered to comprise of multilevel processes across individual, group, and organization-wide levels (Whelan-Berry, Gordon, & Hinings, 2003), what levels of meaning is sensemaking tapping regarding common sense perspectives? When the change agent engages with stakeholders about their common sense perspectives, on behalf of which communities or social networks are the stakeholders acting? By definition, common sense involves shared understanding with others that is "possessed by all except the insane and the mentally handicapped" (Brown, 1993, p. 454). Do stakeholders generally feel that they are speaking on behalf of a group beyond their individual level when they convey their common sense perspectives?

Finally, in cases where different stakeholders hold incommensurate common sense perspectives (Tsoukas, 1994), how may the change agent facilitate a working solution that does

not require shared, identical terms but at least organizationally equivalent terms? This would mean that, for work to continue, it may suffice for stakeholders to require not necessarily an identical shared vision but multiple theories that can join interdependently around loosely, but plausible, coupled equivalence (Weick et al., 2005, p. 418). Because the cost to reconcile (share) the disparate views in the organization can be prohibitively high, some degree of coordinated (equivalent) action centered around completing work is necessary. Working out and reworking arrangements (Corbin & Strauss, 1993) among the disparate stakeholders could support this coordination.

References

- Argyris, C. (1991). Teaching smart people how to learn. *Harvard Business Review*, *May/June*, 99-109.
- Bennis, W. G. (1994). *On becoming a leader*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.
- Bierly, P. E., Kessler, E. H., & Christensen, E. W. (2000). Organizational learning, knowledge and wisdom. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *13(6)*, 595-618.
- Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2003). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Brown, L. (Ed.) (1993). Oxford, England: Clarendon Press.
- Buber, M. (1971). *I and thou*. New York City, NY: Free Press.
- Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. L. (1993). The articulation of work through interaction. *The Sociological Quarterly*, *34(1)*, 71-83.
- Dane, E., & Pratt, M. G. (2007). Exploring intuition and its role in managerial decision making. *Academy of Management Review*, *32(1)*, 33-54.
- Epstein, R. M. (1999). Mindful practice. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, *282(9)*, 833-839.
- Fisher, R., Patton, B. M., & Ury, W. L. (1992). *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.
- Fletcher, G. J. O. (1984). Psychology and common sense. *American Psychologist*, *39(3)*, 203-213.
- Ford, J. D. (1999). Organizational change as shifting conversations. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *12(6)*, 480-490.

- Ford, J. D., Ford, L. W., & D'Amelio, A. (2008). Resistance to change: The rest of the story. *Academy of Management Review*, 33(2), 362-377.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. New York, NY: Bantam.
- Hirschhorn, L. (1990). *The workplace within: Psychodynamics of organizational life*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Holland, R. (1999). Reflexivity. *Human Relations*, 52(4), 463-484.
- Jacobs, C., & Coghlan, D. (2005). Sound from silence: On listening in organizational learning. *Human Relations*, 58(1), 115-138.
- McCormick, D. W., & White, J. (2000). Using one's self as an instrument for organizational diagnosis. *Organizational Development Journal*, 18(3), 49-62.
- Morgan, G. (2006). *Images of organization* (Updated ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Palmer, I., & Dunford, R. (2008). Organizational change and the importance of embedded assumptions. *British Journal of Management*, 19(1), 20-32.
- Patton, J. R. (2003). Intuition in decisions. *Management Decision*, 41(10), 989-996.
- Pickering, S. (2001). Common sense and original deviancy: News discourses and asylum seekers in Australia. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 14(2), 169-186.
- Piderit, S. K. (2000). Rethinking resistance and recognizing ambivalence: A multidimensional view of attitudes toward an organizational change. *The Academy of Management Review*, 25(4), 783-794.
- Rousseau, D. M. (1989). Psychological and implied contracts in organizations. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 2(2), 121-139.

- Schwarz, R. (2002). *The skilled facilitator* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Smith, K. K., & Berg, D. N. (1987). Sources of paradox in group dynamics. In K. K. Smith & D. N. Berg (Eds.), *Paradoxes of group life: Understanding conflict, paralysis, and movement in group dynamics* (pp. 62-83). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Smollan, R. K. (2006). Minds, hearts and deeds: Cognitive, affective and behavioural responses to change. *Journal of Change Management*, 6(2), 143-158.
- Sullivan, C. C. (2002). Finding the Thou in I: Countertransference and parallel process analysis in organizational research and consultation. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 38(3), 375-392.
- Tannen, D. (1995). Power of talk: Who gets heard and why. *Harvard Business Review*, September/October, 138-148.
- Taylor-Bianco, A., & Schermerhorn, J. (2006). Self-regulation, strategic leadership and paradox in organizational change. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 19(4), 457-470.
- Tsoukas, H. (1994). Refining common sense: Types of knowledge in management studies. *Journal of Management Studies*, 31(6), 761-780.
- Tsoukas, H., & Chia, R. (2002). On organizational becoming: Rethinking organizational change. *Organization Science*, 13(5), 567-582.
- Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science*, 16(4), 409-421.
- Whelan-Berry, K. S., Gordon, J. R., & Hinings, C. R. (2003). Strengthening organizational change processes: Recommendations and implications from a multilevel analysis. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 39(2), 186-207.

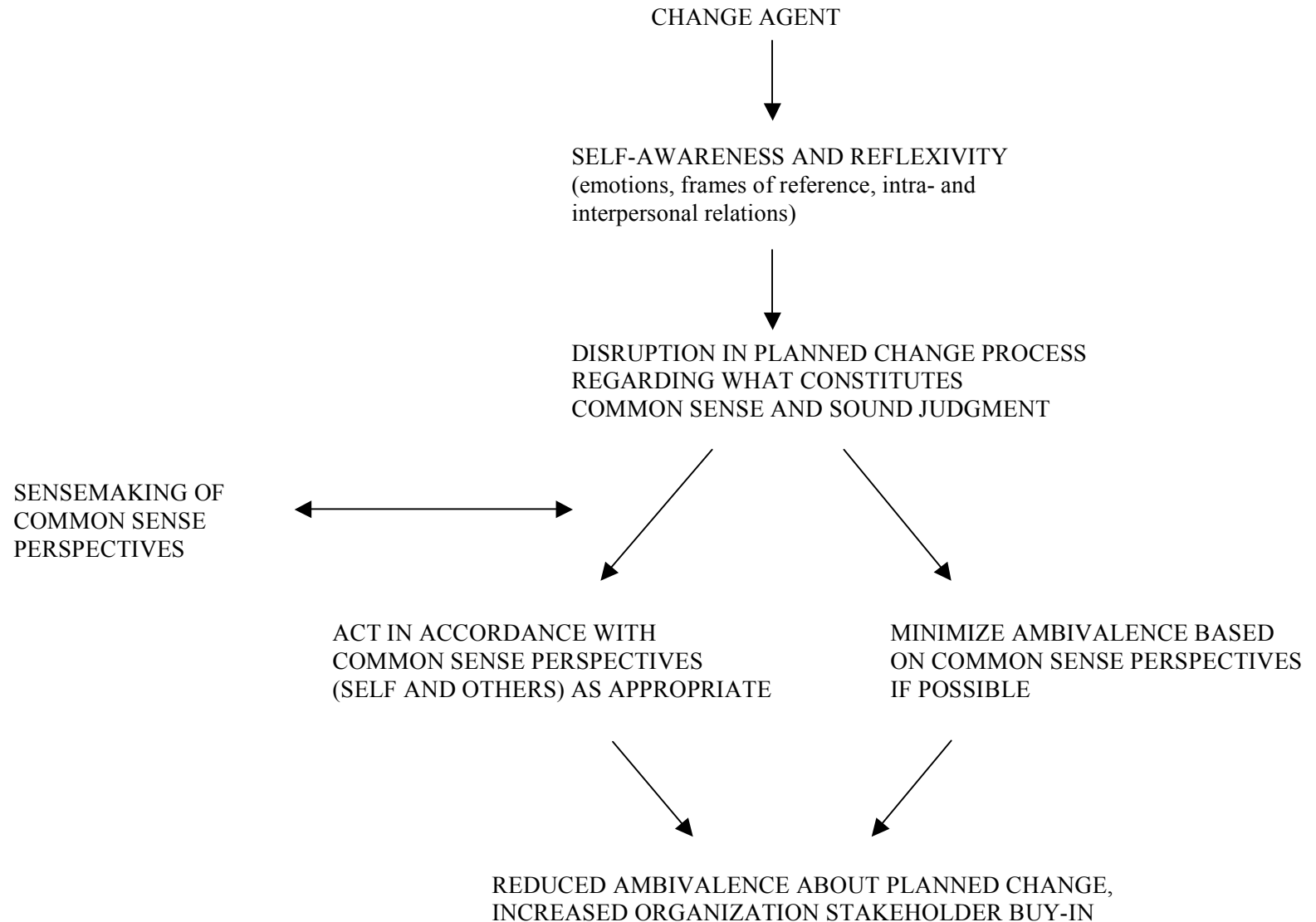


FIGURE 1: SENSEMAKING AND COMMON SENSE FOR ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE BUY-IN