Sensemaking and Sensegiving: An Exploratory Study of the Simultaneous "Being and Learning" of New College and University Presidents
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Sensemaking and Sensegiving: An Exploratory Study of the Simultaneous “Being and Learning” of New College and University Presidents

Ryan Smerek

Abstract
This study examines the first year in office of newcomer executives to understand how they make sense of the ongoing stream of experience (sensemaking) while they simultaneously articulate a desired future image (sensegiving). College and university presidents, who were hired as outsiders, were interviewed to examine how they make sense of the organization while they simultaneously set forth strategic initiatives. This research advances the executive transition literature by examining the simultaneity of “being and learning” an executive role. This contrasts with stage models that have examined sequential processes. Four empirically grounded processes emerged: (a) speaking in broad, ambiguous goals and “safe harbors”; (b) holding knowledge cautiously—knowing you do not know; (c) relying on social interactions to help make sense of the organization and to give more certainty in judgments; and (d) reducing equivocality through priority setting.

Keywords
executive transitions, leadership, sensegiving, sensemaking

Sensemaking
As a research stream, sensemaking has been articulated in many ways, from the microcognitive functions of individuals (Klein, Phillips, Rall, & Peluso, 2007; Louis, 1980; Starbuck & Milliken, 1988) to social, organizational approaches (Weick, 1995). The central focus of sensemaking is the construction of meaning and its consequences, particularly when practitioners experience breakdowns or surprises in their ongoing knowing-in-action (Schön, 1983). This perspective derives from the schools of pragmatism...
(Dewey, 1910; James, 1890, 1907), symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934), phenomenology (Schutz, 1967), and social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). One of the central propositions of sensemaking is that we come to know what we think by seeing what we say (Weick, 1995). This proposition suggests that most thought and behavior are intuitively constructed, derived from complex reasoning—most of which is tacit, unknown, and then verbalized into being (socially constructed with others). The perspective brings to life the nonrational aspects of organizational life and posits that most of our actions are only understood retrospectively.

There are three assumptions of importance in the sensemaking literature for understanding newcomer entry: (a) the social nature of thought, (b) the ongoing “stream of experience” in which practitioners find themselves, and (c) enactment (Weick, 1995). First, sensemaking is interested in the social context in which meaning is constructed. Therefore, thinking of sensemaking as only an individual process will induce blind spots (Weick, 1995). The social context can be face-to-face interactions (Weick, 1993) or thinking through other’s perspectives while deliberating individually (Blumer, 1969). Sensemaking is considered less likely to break down and can lead to more effective action when there is regular face-to face interaction (Weick, 1993). In the context of this study, new executives are particularly vulnerable in this regard because of, as past research has described, a sense of isolation and lack of peers to validate their impressions (Kerr & Gade, 1986). The emphasis on the social context is meant to highlight the relational manner in which thinking and behavior occur.

A sensemaking perspective also emphasizes immersion in the ongoing “stream of experience,” meaning that we are always in the middle of things (Mintzberg, 1973; Weick, 1995). To make sense of this experience, individuals “bracket” or “bound” this flow and retrospectively attribute meaning (Schutz, 1967). The important point about the ongoing stream of experience is to stress the human condition of constant immersion in the flow of events, prioritizing the assumption of fluidity rather than stability—that everything is always in the process of becoming what it is (Hernes, 2008; Thayer, 1988; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). This process perspective offers a different entry point in the search for a systematic understanding of human behavior (Hernes, 2008).

Third, a sensemaking perspective emphasizes how individuals enact sensible environments (Weick, 1995). In other words, “Order is present, not because extended prior analysis revealed it, but because the manager anticipated sufficient order that she waded into the situation, imposed order among events, and then ‘discovered’ what she had imposed” (Weick, 1983, p. 228). In other words, we primarily take actions and then justify why those actions were taken. In this manner, enactment is an antirationalist concept (Westwood & Clegg, 2003), which posits that actions precede rational planning. Instead, “attitudes are draped supportively around actions that are tough to undo” (Weick, 2003, p. 186). This is particularly important in understanding the role of chief executives, where, in many respects, it is less about the objective reality they find the organization in than about the reality they help enact through their everyday interactions. In sum, a sensemaking perspective brings to this research the notion that (a) thinking is a social process, (b) social life is an ongoing process, and (c) we often act before we think and then reflect on our action.

Sensegiving

If sensemaking is about how people come to construct meaning, then sensegiving is intentionally trying to influence how other people attribute meaning. This behavior is more conspicuous among those in positional leadership roles, making it relevant for this study. Sensegiving, as a term, is mostly used by those approaching inquiry from a sensemaking perspective and focuses our attention on the outward communicative agency of individuals. Sensegiving, as originally conceptualized by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), describes a framing process (Gioia, 2008), and some authors have developed the concept of sensegiving as framing (Fiss & Zajac, 2006). The intent of sensegiving is seen as providing a viable interpretation of a new reality and influencing targets to adopt it as their own (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) suggest that sensemaking and sensegiving are sequential processes that move through four phases. The envisioning phase (sensemaking) begins 3 months before the formal term of an executive and includes assessing potentials and possibilities through meetings with administrators to evolve an embryonic strategic vision. The signaling phase (sensegiving) begins after a month in office and is defined by the public declaration of the strategic change effort. This announcement “injects ambiguity” in a stable, even complacent university community. The third phase, revisioning (sensemaking), lasts about 6 months and involves the constituents trying to make sense of what the new changes will mean. Finally, the energizing phase (sensegiving) involves rolling out activities that have been agreed on by strategic planning committees.

Since this original conceptualization, Weick et al. (2005) have defined sensegiving as “a sensemaking variant undertaken to create meanings for a target audience.” The term is primarily used in the strategic management literature and usually describes the persuasion of strategic change initiatives (Bartunek, Krim, Necoechea, & Humphries, 1999; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Dunford & Jones, 2000; Rouleau, 2005), with the content of sensegiving being a present
versus future image. In their study of an organizational change in a government agency, Bartunek et al. (1999) describe how a recipient’s sensemaking will not be the same as the leader’s sensegiving. They suggest that “achieving acceptance of a vision is likely to be a complex process that involves multiple, perhaps conflicting, and evolving understandings” (p. 67).

The multiple interpretations that occur highlight a difficulty with the term sensegiving. In their case study, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) mention that sensegiving “instigated ambiguity.” However, sensegiving is mostly considered an intentional effort to persuade others, suggesting that the sender has an intended meaning for a target audience. Corvellec and Risberg (2007) argue that having an intended meaning risks the danger of reifying “sense.” In other words, there is the implication that someone “gives” something to someone else and that senior management owns an interpretation that is given to the employees. Corvellec and Risberg (2007) object to a “sender-centric view of sense” and argue that “it is non-sensical to speak of sense without referring to interpretation and, thus, to a living audience” (p. 322). Instead, they consider that sensegiving is the activity of influencing audiences in the direction of a preferred definition of reality. By focusing on the activity itself, one bypasses the complications of assessing whether the target audience adopts that particular meaning. It is unlikely, in a strict sense, that this would ever occur.

Recently, Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) have examined the triggers and enablers of sensegiving. They found that for leaders, sensegiving was triggered by “complex sensemaking environments—that were ambiguous and unpredictable and that involved numerous stakeholders with divergent interests” (p. 80). They also found that sensegiving was enabled by “a discursive ability that allowed actors to construct and articulate persuasive accounts of the world” (p. 80).

To conclude, sensegiving is an attempt to intentionally alter how people attribute meaning, with no assurance that the intended meaning is adopted. The conceptual and empirical literature in this area is sparse, and much of the work equates sensegiving with persuasion, influence, and action (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994). It is a term mostly used by those approaching inquiry from a sensemaking perspective and focuses our attention on the outward communicative agency of individuals. It is largely viewed symmetrically with sensemaking, and this is the manner in which the term is used in this study.

**Simultaneity and Studies of Executive Succession**

Gabarro’s (1987) study of 17 new managers is one of the most extensive studies in the executive succession literature that examines the qualitative experience of “taking charge.” He found that managers take charge in many different ways, depending on their style, skills, and prior experience and the context they have entered. Nevertheless, he found five predictable stages of taking charge: taking hold, immersion, reshaping, consolidation, and refinement. His model, as well as similar others, describes a sequential process that alternates between immersion in the flow of events and detached periods of thought and reflection (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Hambrick & Fukutomi, 1991; Isabella, 1990; Stubbart & Smalley, 1999). Similarly, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) describe the change process initiated by a new university president as one that alternates between several months of “understanding” contrasted with several months of “influencing.” Sequential models offer a partial view of the reality that a newcomer experiences; to fill this gap in knowledge, this research explores the simultaneity of the experience.

As Weick et al. (2005) say, “To focus on sensemaking is to portray organizing as the experience of being thrown into an ongoing, unknowable, unpredictable streaming of experience in search of answers to the question, ‘what’s the story?’” (p. 410). Likewise, this study examines the processes of how newcomer executives, with little contextual knowledge, come to make sense of the organization while simultaneously being in charge and persuading. Figure 1 displays the competing perspectives of simultaneity and sequential models.

**Method**

To capture the sensemaking and sensegiving processes of newcomer executives, a total of 18 presidents at colleges and universities in the United States were interviewed—a number at which sufficient “category saturation” was reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Colleges and universities were chosen as a context given that they are “complex sensemaking environments” (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007) that have been conceptualized as organized anarchies (Cohen & March, 1974), multiversities (Kerr, 2001), and loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976). In addition, colleges and universities in the United States were chosen given their propensity to hire organizational outsiders as executives—around 80% compared with 40% in business and industry (Blumenstyk, 2005).

The theoretical sampling included only presidents who were in their position for less than 5 years, those who were appointed as external candidates (to control for prior insider knowledge of the organization), and those who did not have a prior presidency (to control for prior role knowledge). Letters were mailed to 50 presidents who met these criteria, and the researcher traveled to 14 of the 18 organizations to conduct the interviews in person. The respondents were
from colleges and universities of various sizes, with roughly an equal third located at small liberal arts colleges, mid-sized master’s colleges and universities, and large research universities.

The participants were interviewed using an open-ended, semistructured format (Hammer & Wildavsky, 1993). Although the structure of the interview protocol was followed, sometimes it was necessary to further explore the sensemaking and sensegiving processes, therefore the protocol allowed for follow-up questions for more in-depth descriptions of experiences and events (Snow, Zurcher, & Sjoberg, 1982). (See the appendix for the interview protocol.) In addition to conducting in-person interviews, inaugural speeches, memoranda to the campus, and other remarks that were published on the organization’s website were collected. This complementary data collection allowed for a more productive in-person interview and the formation of a more complete picture of a president’s leadership.

The limitation of retrospective interviews, however, is that most people see past events as more rationally ordered than current or future events (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). Thus, interviewing presidents too far away in time from their entry process may uncover their rational narratives about the flow of experience rather than the flux and uncertainty of everyday life. Counterbalancing these validity concerns is the notion that retrospective verbal accounts of specific events can be more accurate than a recall of common, everyday events. Common events tend to blend together in people’s memories, resulting in more problematic recall. The relative ease with which people recall unusual events is often ascribed to the availability heuristic (Schwartz et al., 1991; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Through the interviews about the entry process, I was asking about specific events of high saliency, rather than common, everyday events, as a means to counterbalance this validity concern.

**Results and Analysis**

This research addresses the question of how newcomer executives handle being in charge while simultaneously being an organizational novice. The findings suggest several ways in which the presidents handle the uncertainty, equivocality, and overload of starting a new leadership position. First, they mention speaking about ambiguous, broad goals and safe harbors. Second, variation was found in the presidents’ certainty about their judgments, indicated by an awareness of “knowing what I don’t know.” Third, Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach does not mean that no prior theory was used. In accordance with the view of Strauss and Corbin (1998), who allow for prior theory, nontechnical literature, and personal experience to help gain insight into the data, grounded theory was used to elaborate on the existing conceptual vocabulary (sensemaking and sensegiving). In this pursuit, there was an effort “to achieve a practical middle ground between a theory-laden view of the world and an unfettered empiricism” (Suddaby, 2006, p. 635).

The coding process involved line-by-line coding of interview transcripts and documents (Charmaz, 2006). These concepts were then categorized into higher level codes to begin the process of reassembling data that were fractured during open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The process of choosing, discarding, and naming axial codes was largely one of “disciplined imagination,” where interest, plausibility, and category saturation were the criteria for selection (Weick, 1989). In this manner, the process of choosing axial categories unfolds much like artificial selection through trial-and-error thinking, with a constant process of logical and affective judgment (Alvesson & Kårreman, 2007; Davis, 1971; Fendt & Sachs, 2008; Locke, 2007). Logically, the categories were judged based on (a) their plausibility in answering the research question of how executives manage the simultaneity of being and learning a new leadership role, (b) whether the codes held up to increasing scrutiny, and (c) their correspondence with theory and previous findings.

**Data Analysis**

The methods of analysis were informed by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
the presidents mention the adaptive value of social interactions with organizational insiders, presidential peers at other institutions, and retired presidents. Finally, the presidents were found to initiate a process of prioritization to reduce equivocality and to be seen as giving sense to organizational constituents.

**Safe Harbors**

In response to how they manage the normative pressures to set forth plans, the presidents mention “buying time” or speaking in safe harbors that will not commit themselves to an initiative but may help give the constituents a sense of what the future holds (sensegiving). For example, one president said,

> “So what is your vision for the University?” And that is a very interesting question, because if you don’t have something relatively interesting to say, people say, “Well, why did we hire you?” . . . You have to have a way that you learn about the university, so that you can develop an informed opinion, and you can’t just say well you got to wait until I learn more to say stuff, you have got to be saying stuff all along the way. So, you think, where are the safe harbors that I can go that I can say something that 6, 8, 9, 10 months down the road I haven’t started something that I have to undo?

To this end, the president at this institution used the safe harbor of improving student learning. This goal is uncontroversial and is one of the core functions of any university. According to him, the goal avoided premature commitment because in choosing initiatives, “if you are wrong, what are you going to do?” Speaking in safe harbors that are uncontroversial and avoid commitment is similar to what Eisenberg (1984) describes as the “strategic ambiguity” used by politicians, who desire to appeal to many constituent groups with competing interests.

The president of another university used the ambiguous goal of “growth” when delivering the State of the University address 3 months after he began: “My vision for the University is evolving, and I refine it daily, but it revolves around our people and can be characterized in a single word—growth.” Using an ambiguous word for his vision, he could offer a term that could sustain the different attributed meanings of different constituents. He could simultaneously counter the normative expectations of having a vision while buying time to further understand the organization. Campus constituents could impose their own meaning of growth, given the ambiguity of the term. In describing his meaning for “growth” in his State of the University address, he further described the word’s malleability: Growth in the number of students we serve. Growth in our commitment to speak with pride about our University. Growth in our reputation as an institution that serves as a model of shared governance, civil discourse and inclusive behavior. Growth in our output and support for research and scholarship.

Thus, presidents respond to the normative pressure to have a plan by using ambiguity to simultaneously be perceived as competent leaders while they try to understand the organizations they are leading. Talking about “student learning” or “growth” fosters agreement on abstractions that do not require specific interpretations. As Eisenberg (1984) and others have argued, effective communication should not always be associated with clarity. With the existence of multiple viewpoints in colleges and universities, presidents use safe harbors to promote unified diversity and to facilitate collective action. Goals such as student learning and growth sustain multiple interpretations and adjust to different contingencies. They allow presidents to simultaneously give sense while they are making sense of the organization.

Safe harbors also offer convergence on means rather than ends. Means, such as “We will be student centered,” are a way of conducting operations rather than end goals in themselves. At universities, there is only a commitment to pursue diverse ends through a common means of collectively structured behavior (Weick, 1976). Thus, a safe harbor offers a means of conducting business that is plausibly ambiguous to sustain the various interpretations of those in the social community with competing interests. It offers a means to give the community a sense of how a desired future image will be reached, and yet it does not unnecessarily commit a leader to a definitive course of action while he or she is simultaneously learning about the organization.

**Maintaining an Attitude of Wisdom: Knowing You Don’t Know**

When asked how they simultaneously learn about the organization and set forth future directions, some presidents mentioned an attitude of holding knowledge cautiously—not immediately coming to a judgment that is firmly held. For example, one president said,

> When I was hired I knew I needed to do strategic planning. The board told me that. There’s just no question. They wanted to know when I was going to start, when the plan would be done, and I knew I didn’t know enough about the institution to finish the plan, so I bought time.

By knowing she didn’t know, the president exhibited a self-awareness of the certainty with which she held knowledge.
The president of another university mentioned a similar sentiment:

I was afraid that we might in our zest for cutting quickly, cut the very parts of us that were going to be our strengths going forward, and I didn’t want to make that mistake, but I also knew that I didn’t know enough to avoid that mistake if we did it too quickly, so that is why I asked for time so that we could know what we wanted to do.

Another president advised that an attitude of certainty can be a dangerous thing:

Quite frankly [telling people where to go] is [a dangerous thing] for someone coming in from the outside, truly coming in from the outside, if they don’t know a lot about the institution, if they were not recently affiliated with it. They don’t know the culture. They don’t know the history. None of which I knew.

At the other extreme, some presidents said that figuring things out was not “rocket science” and it took about “5 minutes” to figure something out—demonstrating certitude in holding knowledge. Those who spoke of coming to a quick assessment of the campus also mentioned during the interview of meeting a lot of resistance to their initiatives. For example, the president of a small college said,

I’d like to tell you that [the college’s] problems were rocket science because it would make me come out as a rocket scientist, but they are not. Their biggest problem was enrollment. It took me about 5 minutes to figure that one out.

Later, in the interview he mentioned problems with the constituents of the campus: “You go to bed at night, all these people are pissed off at you. You know, and you wake up and they are still pissed. It’s not fun.”

Likewise, the president of a midsized state university mentioned a great deal of resistance against his leadership among the faculty. He said that when he began he embraced the prospectus that was written for him about the institution. The prospectus was a 15-page document written by the search committee about the current state of the university and what it desired in a new president. He said that when he began he embraced the prospectus, “it was pretty darn clear where we wanted to go.” Therefore, he spent little time doubting that he knew where to take the campus. He said,

Before I had accepted the job I had talked to a lot of people. I had already . . . it turns out that I had pretty accurately diagnosed most things before I had come; because I had . . . I just read everything. I talked to folks, and I think one of my skills has been that I intuit things pretty well. I am able to connect the dots pretty quickly.

He also said that because of his background as a dean of a large, public university, he “was hugely prepared for this job,” and because of this experience, he “walked right in and knew what to do.” Later in the interview, he mentioned resistance among the campus constituents to his goal of making the undergraduate experience “the best in the country,” and he said that the university has a “huge number of people who have been here for a very long time and are resistant, very resistant to change, very resistant to change.”

Comparatively, across the interviews, the presidents who were more certain, and did not doubt their knowledge, faced more resistance. Alternatively, those who “knew they didn’t know” mentioned less resistance. Meacham (1990) describes holding knowledge cautiously as an attitude of wisdom. He argues “the essence of wisdom is to hold the attitude that knowledge is fallible and to strive for a balance of knowing and doubting” (p. 181). Lack of wisdom is “illustrated by the error of believing that one can see all that can be seen, that one knows all that can be known” (p. 183). The essence of wisdom, as Meacham describes it, is to know without excessive confidence or excessive cautiousness. It is to balance knowing and doubting and to avoid both extremes. This attitude is held by maintaining a balance between what you know and what you know you don’t know.

Figure 2 visually depicts this attitude of wisdom. The top half of the figure shows the extremes of knowing too cautiously compared with knowing with too much certainty. An attitude of wisdom is having a balanced ratio of known—unknown. The second half of the figure shows that as knowledge expands, the balanced ratio should remain—the more you know, the more you realize you don’t know.

Some presidents suggested that “knowing you don’t know” improved their effectiveness. One president said that he had “seen [presidents] get into trouble when they come in, [and] they think they know the day they step on campus, what needs to be done.” Seeing knowledge as provisional and incomplete in the immediate term is seen as a wise stance to knowledge that people respond favorably to, especially in organizations that are rich in traditions and believe in the value of shared governance.

Mary Sue Coleman, who began her presidency at the University of Michigan in the summer of 2002, describes her approach as a newcomer in a published interview (Gruber, 2005). She says,

Whenever you come into a new institution, you have to learn about it and understand it. I think it is a huge mistake to come in with preconceived ideas about
where you are going to take an institution to which you are new, because you simply cannot know. You can’t know enough about a new environment to recognize where the strengths are and where you might need to push the institution to grow. It takes you a couple of years to figure it all out. It is like a big puzzle. (p. 341)

She displays an attitude of wisdom in her metaphor of the organization as a “puzzle.” The metaphor of a puzzle helps one recognize the incompleteness of knowledge yet gives one confidence in its eventual completeness. In this sense, it is a wise metaphor because it allows one to proceed cautiously, knowing that knowledge is fallible and incomplete, yet helps one move forward with certainty to collect knowledge one piece at a time.

In sum, when seeking to lead while being an organizational novice, there was variation among the respondents in the certainty with which they held their judgments; some saw their knowledge as incomplete and provisional, whereas others saw it as more complete and definitive. A preliminary hypothesis from this finding is that an attitude of wisdom has adaptive value as it leads one to continually update one’s narrative understanding of the organization, including more particulars of the context. This eventually leads to actions that are more nuanced and less abrasive to the social community. Alternatively, a balance should be sought in not being so overwhelmed by the unknown that action becomes indefinitely forestalled.

Reducing Uncertainty Through Social Interactions

The next means that the presidents described to handle simultaneously “being and learning” in the presidency is to find trusted individuals who they can “go to the bank with.” In other words, as uncertainty increases, the need for thinking as a social process increases. Several presidents mentioned that you cannot buy time forever and that you need to take action. To improve their certainty in a course of action, they would find trusted individuals to discuss ideas in order to make sure they are not missing something. In some cases, search consultants would tell the president who they thought were trustworthy and would give them good advice. In other cases, the president would discover these people themselves. In either case, the intent was to manage being in charge and trying to make sense of the organization by discussing ideas with trusted people. As the president of a midsized university put it,

You can’t postpone actions that need to be taken just because you are still learning about the place . . . within a month or two, you have been able to build

Figure 2. Attitude of wisdom as a balanced ratio of known–unknown

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The figure shows a diagram representing the concept of attitude of wisdom as a balanced ratio of known–unknown, illustrating the dynamic process of recognizing what is known and what is unknown as the presidency progresses.
some trust with some folks, you have found out from folks at other universities who is in your new university who are the folks that you can go to the bank with. So you think you know what you want to do in a situation, you sit down and talk about “well, what would be the consequences of this and that . . . and well, this, that, the other thing.” This would have this ripple effect, you can then gauge all that, and also test with people your analysis. You know, “here’s how I am thinking about, here’s how I came to the conclusion. Here is the data I had, and everything.” Sometimes maybe they will point out you missed something . . . You can’t buy time forever.

As this president articulates, uncertainty is reduced by modeling scenarios with organizational insiders who have contextual expertise. Insiders can gauge the future consequences of present actions and see ripple effects and missing data. The president seeks out this expertise with an insider he or she can trust, who is not driven by a personal agenda.

In many cases, the insider is a member of the search committee. For example, one respondent says, “What was really, really helpful was to talk to the people who were on my search committee. They helped me put some major decisions in context, and I trusted their judgment.” Similarly, another college used a search firm to find its current president, and the principal of the search firm said that it was wise to have the transition team “help me through these first months, identify those pressing issues on campus, and also would help you not stumble, unknowingly.” Therefore, the search committee morphed into the transition team, and she had weekly telephone calls with the committee before she officially started. This group helped her identify pressing issues. She added, “The transition team was really the one who helped me make sense of, you know, what those issues were.” These trusted insiders also helped her interpret the motives of people. “A lot of people have an agenda. A lot of people want to come in and use the honeymoon period; the infancy period of a new president is often an opportunity for moving ahead on some personal agenda.”

Having trusted individuals in a transition team helped her make sense of the personal agendas and “issue selling” of midlevel administrators (see also Dutton & Ashford, 1993).

Presidents also seek to reduce uncertainty by looking to peers at another institution to see what they should be doing. This further highlights the social nature of sensemaking and the need to overcome the isolation and singularity of the position. For example, the president of a small college said, I actually went and talked to a few other presidents in the area on the guise of introducing myself, but really trying to pick their brain about what the hell is going on. What am I supposed to be doing here?

In addition to personal visits, presidents are also on e-mail lists formed while attending new president seminars. These lists serve as a means to “compare notes” with others. For example, one president mentioned that she was reviewing an e-mail conversation about strategic planning: “What we do on our distribution list from our new presidents’ seminar—everybody’s doing the same thing, we’re all doing strategic planning—so we compare notes about the process.”

The role of peers is important for newcomers when tasks are unclear and complex (Louis, 1990; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). This is especially true for college president’s where the issues faced are not ones in which standardized, professional knowledge can be applied (Schön, 1983). One respondent said that when she became president, she really took advantage of opportunities to talk to more experienced presidents, to bounce things off of them from time to time, and just . . . try to get as much wisdom as I can from them, knowing that I am new, and wanting to learn as much as possible from the experience of other people.

In addition to speaking with peers, the use of mentors was frequently discussed. For example, one president said that having a mentor was “extremely helpful, very, very helpful.” Having a mentor is a functional response to uncertainty because the problems or questions new presidents face are novel and complex. They are looking for the pattern recognition and perspective that comes from experience (Klein, 1989). For example, the board was trying to decide how the president would be evaluated. The board chair offered Intel Corporation’s evaluation process as a model. The president described this process thus: “Basically you have every person who has ever met you evaluate you once a year.” He knew that this was not the process he wanted, but he did not know how to proceed.

So I called Steve [his mentor] and talked to him about it, he not only agreed that that wasn’t what I wanted but he also had a very good suggestion about how to do it instead and this really related to what he had done at [his College], and now I basically have a kind of confidential verbal evaluation after ever trustee meeting.

He said that this evaluation process has worked very well and that this is one among several examples of his mentor giving him great advice and options.

Mentors help new presidents understand how an “experienced president” would interpret and respond to a situation. As one respondent put it,

I think it is very important for presidents, especially young presidents, to have mentors. I think that having
They are particularly helpful because presidents are not likely to display their ignorance, confusion, and need for help to people who report directly to them. They also do not want to display uncertainty to their “bosses,” the board of trustees. All this suggests that presidents readily turn to peers and mentors as a social means of thinking.

Finding trusted individuals highlights the social property of sensemaking. The point is that sensemaking is not a process of individual analysis; it is a social construction with others. In situations where individuals have little contextual information and high uncertainty, yet are called on to take action, the social nature of thinking is more prominent and adaptive. This finding contributes to the overly individualistic accounts of newcomer entry that have downplayed the relational process of sensemaking.

Reducing Equivocality Through Priority-Setting

Finally, presidents manage the “being and learning” phase by initiating structures and processes to “buy time” and to be considered as taking action. This happens through strategic planning sessions and priority articulation. When presidents begin, they often mention leading a group process of collectively discovering the organization’s strategy or priorities. In some cases this was mandated by the board of trustees who wanted a strategic plan. In others, the president mentioned the need to hold these sessions to “get everyone on the same page.” In the later case, the question becomes: Why did they want to get everyone on the same page? What problem were they trying to overcome? When seen as equivocality-reduction (Weick, 1979), there were too many meanings of what the organization could be doing. The president was trying to reduce this equivocality by focusing the efforts of the organization. Equivocality is especially present in colleges and universities that have complex and diffuse goals to educate students and create knowledge. Higher education organizations have complex environments they interact with, including the disciplinary inquiry of society and the natural world. This creates a multitude of purposes that counteract attempts at equivocality-reduction.

With our desire to have a clear purpose, managing a university is not for those seeking clarity. Nevertheless, people try.

This process of reducing equivocality was demonstrated in strategic planning meetings. Presidents are especially prone to want these meetings because equivocality collects at the top of the organization. They face many directions the organization could be going and are in need of reducing this in some way. Two presidents specifically described the same process for discovering the collective priorities of the college. For example, the president of a small college led a process to develop the school’s strategic plan with a committee of 40 people. Each person wrote action steps on Post-it notes. The committee members wrote these individually but they also passed forth ideas from the campus community. During the primary strategic planning meeting, committee members arranged the Post-it notes into categories on a wall. He says,

We put them all up on this huge wall and then we began to assemble them into similar categories. Once you have done that. Once you have got them, and it’s a time consuming process where everybody . . . I mean you can say, “No, this goes over here.” And someone else says, “No, it doesn’t.” And you finally reach a consensus, and then once you have done that everybody—you get little dots and we gave every . . . all 40 people each got 10 dots. So you got 10 votes and you could put all of your votes on one item, if you said this is the most important thing that I think we have to deal with you could put all 10 votes there.

From a sensemaking perspective this is a prototypical case of “How do we know what we think until we see what we say?” (Weick, 1995). How can the committee know what they think until they see the categories on the wall? Committee members come to know what they value by seeing their votes. They act in order to think (enactment). Their knowledge of priorities is largely tacit and becomes explicit by placing dots next to action steps; the process reveals the tacit priorities of the collective.

This process is also natural selection in microcosm. Participants bracket some portion of the stream of experience by writing action steps on Post-it notes. Then there is an intuitive selection of action steps by placing dots next to the ideas. The strongest, most plausible ideas survive. Finally, ideas are retained in a formalized, written strategic plan.

The president of a small college describes a similar process. He says:

The university-wide planning meeting was like a . . . process . . . the process was like determining together, the priorities of the institution, and so there was lots
of talk about how to group those various priorities, so we did some early brainstorming and then the facilitators and I tried to group these. We created nine . . . nine areas, and then we took under those nine topical areas, now what would be the operational priorities here and let people use dots to locate their support, and so, of those nine, we probably developed 60 or 70 operational pieces.

These strategic planning sessions demonstrate how the activities of organizing are directed toward the establishment of a workable level of certainty (Weick, 1979). The president is a facilitator of this process, ostensibly because their role in the eyes of the board of trustees is to set the strategic direction of the college. They face too many meanings and need clarity about preferences. Strategic planning sessions offer a means to reduce equivocality and direct action. Through these session presidents can simultaneously learn about the organization (see other’s priorities) and be in charge (articulate their own priorities).

Presidents also described priority-setting as a more distinct form of sensegiving. Similar to Schön’s (1983) description of problem-setting, priority-setting is the process of setting a boundary of attention, naming the things to which people will attend, and setting the context in which people will focus their efforts. As the president of a large research university describes, “People look to the president for a bit of removed vision of saying, ‘OK, this is important. This is less important.’” And the president of a small college says, “I would say that I am a strategic leader because I force myself and therefore everyone else to prioritize, to focus on the big picture, and leave the rest of it.” These statements of priority-setting were repeated in most interviews and are a core function of a chief executive.

As with reducing equivocality through strategic planning sessions, most presidents do not set priorities alone and they are quick to mention they are collectively-determined. However, they are often the person who writes a “priority memo” that is sent out to the campus, which is their filtered interpretation of campus meetings. Thus, although the priorities do not spring from their minds alone, they do play a critical role in their selection and articulation.

The president of one university was very explicit about priority-setting. She described it as the key lesson she learned in her previous position as provost in another university. Each year, her administrative team would identify three or four priorities—a practice she carried over as a new president. In directing the attention of the organization around these priorities, she said:

I . . . we put them on the web. I talked about them constantly. These are the three things or if it was four, most years it was just three. These are the things we are doing this year. This is what we are working on. I asked everyone who worked for me to adjust their time based on those, that doesn’t mean you don’t do other things, but I wanted their time to be focused on what we said were our priorities, and each year we then reported on what we got done.

Her priority-setting approach developed as provost while working on an initiative to reduce the number of credit hours needed for undergraduates. The advice she received from other provosts at the time was, “If you want to do that, you need to restructure people’s time around getting that done, otherwise it just won’t happen because everybody is so busy.” With future initiatives, priority-setting became an integral part of how she influenced the thinking of people in the organization. She said she made sure that time was structured around these initiatives and that she was frequently “accused of saying, ‘OK, where are we on this initiative?’” Her description of priority-setting was primarily about how she drove the execution of initiatives.

It is interesting that the term priority was used in most of the interviews rather than goals or vision. A priority is ordering the current activities of the organization in order of importance. A goal is articulating an aspiration, which entails reordering the current attention of people and prioritizing their time, but the word “priority” has a stronger hint of realism. Using the word “priority” recognizes the demands on individuals and attention as a scarce resource. It also hints at the world in which most presidents live, where there are hundreds of directions and initiatives and a need to focus attention. Rather than articulating inspiring new goals, the university already has too many. Instead, priority-setting is all that is needed to focus attention.

Discussion

This study sought to better understand the experience of being a new executive while being in charge. Several salient processes about being a newcomer emerged. The first was a communication process where presidents spoke using ambiguous, broad goals and “safe harbors.” The second was a personal attitude of cautiously holding knowledge and “knowing you don’t know.” Next, presidents mentioned the need for social interactions to garner contextual information and help interpret what things mean, and finally the desire to reduce equivocality was seen through priority-setting. The major contribution of this study is a theoretical accounting of a broad cross-section of individuals who were new to an organization and also in charge. The data were as close to the phenomenon as possible to yield empirically-grounded concepts about executives negotiating the “being
and learning” of their position. This adds an in-depth qualitative study of the entry process of new chief executives—an analysis that reviews have called for (Giambatista et al., 2005) and sets forth a simultaneous perspective of learning and action as opposed to a linear stage model.

One of the puzzles of this inquiry was why outsiders are so often chosen for leadership positions. Is it an irrational quest for a charismatic CEO as Khurana (2002) suggests? Or would organizations be better off promoting a stable insider, as Collins (2001) prescribes in his description of companies that transform from good to great? As was found in this study, presidents play a major role in the endless negotiation of the localized meanings and “ways of seeing” in the organization. When they first begin, they are not passively accepting “the way things are done” but are part of a reciprocal process. They are trying to make sense of the organization, but they were often hired because they would reject common understandings. This was especially true at organizations facing an immediate budget crisis. In these circumstances, the executive was more likely to understand the culture but immediately recognize the shift in thinking that needed to take place. They viewed the organization as poorly functioning and this caused them to challenge the assumptions and worldview of members more directly.

In Thayer’s (1988) description of leadership, he says:

The special wisdom that leaders seem to possess lies not in their achievement of a superior verbal knowledge of things, but in their willingness to remain forever in pursuit of understandings that lie beyond language as such . . . . The leader is not so much a problem-solver as a creative problem re-namer . . . . The art of leadership lies in redefining the problem, of creating other possibilities for seeing, of creating possible “alternities,” of creating different meanings of things. In a very critical way, which seems in retrospect always to have been inevitable, the leader is a sense-giver. (p. 254) [italics in original]

In this quote, Thayer (1988) describes both sensemaking and sensegiving. He also gives an additional clue as to why outsiders are often chosen as chief executives. First, leaders are described as people willing to pursue understandings that lie beyond the current reach of knowledge. They are in a position—as well as their senior management team—to be the “thinkers” for the organization, in which they are continually pursuing knowledge and understanding that lies just beyond current language. Second, the “art of leadership,” as Thayer (1988) describes, is to alter how others think by redefining problems, creating new ways of seeing, and new alternatives. This is the essence of sensegiving and Thayer directly links this to sensemaking. In other words, as we are continually pursuing new understandings (sensemaking), we are continually conveying those new understandings to influence others (sensegiving). It is easy to see how organizational outsiders would be better at creating new possibilities for seeing and this is exactly what was found.

Examples abound in this study of presidents seeing the way things are done but saying they needed to be changed. The point is that organizational outsiders have an inherent ability to see the organization differently than insiders, who often take things for granted. Thus, presidents are struggling to make sense of what is going on, but with the role discretion to reciprocally change the meanings and structures of the institution. If people are searching for this in leaders, as Thayer (1988) suggests, then the prevalence of hiring outsiders is understandable. Thus, this study contributes both empirically grounded concepts of the “being and learning” phase of newcomer chief executives, but also expands our knowledge of leadership more broadly and how outsiders are able to bring in new ways of seeing and give new meaning to organizations.

**Implications for Theory and Sensemaking**

In addition to the findings mentioned in previous sections, there are several ways this study contributes to developing our understanding of sensemaking and sensegiving. First, sensemaking emphasizes enactment and retrospect. In other words, “Action is always just a tiny bit ahead of cognition” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 419). However, this study found a great desire of participants to think about and plan for the future—to think strategically and be deliberate—to place cognition before action. This is likely because planning and imagining a future in which an organization is prestigious and nationally-recognized is enjoyable (Gilbert, 2006). The practice gives meaning to present conditions, and prods campus constituents toward the future; however incremental the improvements may be. The practice of planning for the future also creates positive expectations that can be motivating (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002).

Thus, one implication for sensemaking is to give more credence to cognition occurring before action. In many ways, the findings suggest there should be a de-emphasis of enactment, at least among the study population. In this manner, more emphasis should be given to future-oriented thought and how it influences present constructions of reality—how people think before acting. The role of future-oriented thought in sensemaking has been commented on, but never developed (Gioia, 2006; Gioia & Mehra, 1996), and this study gives more weight to cognition occurring before action.

The proposition that people act first and interpret later may be true under certain boundary conditions, particularly in emergency situations, where there is little time to think.
This is the context in which most sensemaking research has been completed (e.g., Snook, 2000; Weick, 1993). In most cases, presidents are not thrown into situations that have a clear time constraint and a specific outcome they need to reach. They are in a high-discretion role and can take time to plan. Thus, the future orientation that was encountered among participants is likely a result of the study population. Executives are supposed to be the future-oriented thinkers of the organization. Although it is acceptable for line workers to say they have not given much thought about the future of the organization, it would be unacceptable (and unthinkable) for a president or CEO to say likewise. Thus, although some of organizational behavior can be explained by people acting and then interpreting those actions, the thoughts of executive are different. If organizations are metaphorically viewed as a collective mind (Morgan, 2006; Weick & Roberts, 1993), then the executive office can be viewed as responsible for the collective foresight of the organization.

In conceptualizing future-oriented thought, a sensemaking perspective normatively asserts that future events should be placed as if they have already happened, for example, phrasing your inquiry as “what will have happened” as opposed to “what will happen” (Pitsis, Clegg, Marosszeky, & Rura-Polley, 2003; Rollier & Turner, 1994; Weick, 1979). This leads to richer detailed description of the future event (see Weick, 1979). In addition, recent evidence suggests that an image of success that is visualized from the third-person rather than first-person elicits higher levels of motivation (Vasquez & Buehler, 2007). Thus, a future image of an organization should be visualized as, “They will have achieved,” as opposed to, “We will have achieved.”

The cognitive mechanism underlying the effects of visual perspective from a third-person seems to come in construing an event in a manner that “accentuates its broader meaning and significance” (Vasquez & Buehler, 2007, p. 1401). In the current study of newcomer executives, presidents may initially be more adept at viewing the organization in the third-person and thus initially visualize the future of the organization that accentuates the broader meaning of its mission and the organization’s significance. In fact, in their initial description of the college, many of the presidents did use the third-person, for example by speaking about the campus as “they did not understand, etc.”

Overall, respondents seemed very interested about the future for several reasons: It is a way to motivate people. It can help the organization make adaptive changes in the present. And it gives clarity for actions in the present (i.e., there are too many directions that could be taken). In all these cases, people are trying to make sense out of what the future might bring. How the future is framed and constructed played a prominent role in the organizational life of new presidents. It seems this future orientation was largely a means to increase the behavioral flexibility in the present to improve the status of the organization for the future.

The second implication for sensemaking is that the construction of meaning seemed to be heavily influenced by normative concerns. How presidents described their entry process—the surprises, puzzles, and actions—was heavily influenced by how they thought they should behave. In this manner, there is a larger role for institutional theory in a sensemaking perspective. In many ways, the institutional logic of the college presidency is being constructed by new presidents’ seminars, management bestsellers, and dictates of corporate executives who sit on the board of trustees of colleges and universities. All of this content—from seminars, books, and bosses—informs what a college president should be like. This suggests that there is a stronger linkage between the micrologic of sensemaking and the macrologic of institutional theory (Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Scott, 2001; Weber & Glynn, 2006).

The dominant view is that institutions serve as cognitive constraints on sensemaking (Weber & Glynn, 2006), even though a sensemaking perspective largely espouses that we create the environment to which we must respond (Weick, 1979, 1995). If the latter perspective is more descriptive, there might have been more variance in how presidents responded to the questions. However, after 18 interviews a common mentality of the college presidency seemed to emerge, suggesting a macrologic, with less freedom to create the role at will. Thus, one implication of this study is the larger role of the macrologic of institutional theory on the meaning construction of sensemaking.

**Conclusion**

In sum, this study sought to better understand the experience of being a newcomer executive using the theoretical anchors of sensemaking and sensegiving. Four empirically-grounded processes emerged: (a) speaking in broad, ambiguous goals and safe harbors; (b) holding knowledge cautiously—knowing you don’t know; (c) relying on social interactions to help make sense of the organization and give more certainty to judgments; and (d) reducing equivocality through priority setting. This study helps advance our understanding of sensemaking and sensegiving by adding an empirical study to a largely theoretical literature. It also advances our understanding of the role of future-oriented thought in the field of sensemaking and potential future research on the interconnections between institutional theory and sensemaking.
Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. Looking back over your first several months, how would you describe the context in which you were hired?
   a. Given all the higher education organizations you know about, how turbulent or crises laden would you describe the college when you arrived?
2. How did you go about learning the ropes of your position?
3. As you look back on your first years, are there events that stand out in your mind as surprising, puzzling, or very challenging? Could you describe each one? How did you respond?
4. Have you set forth a vision for the organization? Why or why not? (sensegiving)
   a. If so, how did you come to articulate this vision?
   b. How did you communicate it to the campus community?
5. Did you feel that you had to balance learning about the college and setting forth a direction? Some people describe this as being and learning in the presidency.
   a. How did you manage this balance? What mindset did you take?
6. Some people say that when they became president, people “stopped telling them the truth” or that “they are the last person to hear about something.” Does that resonate with you?
7. What do you think of this quote from a college president?

Whenever you come into a new institution, you have to learn about it and understand it. I think it is a huge mistake to come in with preconceived ideas about where you are going to take an institution to which you are new, because you simply cannot know. You can’t know enough about a new environment to recognize where the strengths are and where you might need to push the institution to grow. It takes you a couple of years to figure it all out. It is like a big puzzle. (Gruber, 2005, p. 341)

8. Do you feel that you have to manage a lot of unexpected things? How do you do that?
9. Have your views of leadership changed since you began?
10. Is there anything else that you see as important that we have not covered?

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References


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