Making Sense of the Organization

The Impermanent Organization

Karl E. Weick

Volume Two
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Jill Hawk, former Chief Ranger at Mt Rainier National Park, described to me how Search and Rescue units on Mt Rainier live by this credo: ‘It is what it is, it is in front of me, and I have to deal with it.’ That credo is stirring and action oriented. It also has a lot of play in it. ‘It’ is mentioned four times, yet one wonders what ‘it’ refers to and imagines that members of the rescue team have different interpretations. ‘Is’ is mentioned three times, suggesting a solidity that may be hard to find. ‘Me’ and ‘I’ are the people dealing with all this, but those actors could be individual people or ‘us’ and ‘we’ as a group. That credo, in practice, is much less vexing to team members than it is to me. That is comforting to those hiking on Mt Rainier, but it is discomforting to me because it raises the question of how people in general make sense of an indeterminate situation and how the ways they are organized affect this sensemaking. It is tough to craft intelligent conjectures about how ‘it’ and ‘us’ get defined because situations are changing, experience is streaming, and teams are transient. John Dewey describes the flux this way: ‘In every waking moment, the complete balance of the organism and its environment is constantly interfered with and as constantly restored. . . . Life is interruptions and recoveries. . . . At these moments of a shifting of activity, conscious feeling and thought arise and are accentuated’ (1922, pp. 178–179).

The focus of the following essays is on the fugitive quality of organizing and sense-making. The organizing is fugitive because people try to fold order into streaming, changing experience. My efforts to understand these ongoing efforts are guided by John Dewey’s imperative for action: ‘So act as to increase the meaning of present experience’ (1922, p. 283). I want to suggest that people in general try to follow this imperative. And I want to provide specific ideas and images that can become part of the reader’s attempt to increase the meaning of his or her experience or to craft a more compelling imperative.

The streaming, the organizing, the sensemaking all are situated in what Taylor and Van Every (2000) call ‘the crucible of the quotidian’ (p. x). That is hardly the language of a search and rescue unit. However, it is what they face. The quotidian is the commonplace, the everyday, the recurring, which is the crucible where efforts to make sense and hold events together are tested. This crucible is ‘the ultimately determining factor in what the organization will be like’ (p. x). The commonplace is a steady stream of interruptions.
and recoveries. Talk, texts, and activity may produce the interruptions but they can also stitch together the recoveries.

With all this talk about transience and impermanence it seems only appropriate to acknowledge that my efforts to understand all of this are also transient. Search and Rescue team members as well as scholars trying to understand Search and Rescue teams all construct what Richard Rorty (1989) calls temporary theories, ‘a passing theory about noises and inscriptions being produced by a fellow human being that must be constantly corrected’ (p. 116). What this means is that the rescue team and I are all in this together. It is what it is.
The word ‘acknowledgment’ always seems a little cold as a heading to set apart statements of one’s gratitude for help given. Writing is a seemingly solitary act, and yet many people turn what seems solitary into something that is infused with energy, conversations (imagined and actual), and encouragement. Several people help me by assuming this role and I want to honor their help. Kathleen Sutcliffe is co-author with me on three of these chapters, one on overload of which she is the senior author, one on sensemaking where David Obstfeld joins us, and one on medical tragedies. Kathie has an uncanny ability to separate central arguments from potential distractions. For example, she summarized the 394 pages we wrote in our two editions of Managing the Unexpected (2001) in one sentence: ‘Managing the unexpected is curbing the temptation to normalize and dealing with the consequences when you do.’ Far be it from me to craft something that compact.

My appreciation for the help provided by the scholarship of others borders on awe. William James and John Dewey obviously inform much of what I write, but so do Michael Cohen, James Taylor, Elizabeth J. Van Every, Robert Chia, Hari Tsoukas, Gary Klein, William Starbuck, Karlene Roberts, Reuben McDaniel, Dave Schwandt, Barbara Czarniawska, Paul Schulman and the late Peter Frost. While the physical act of writing is solitary, it matters a great deal that I am part of an incredibly supportive, warm, and bright set of scholars in the Management and Organization group at the University of Michigan’s Ross School. Also at Michigan you’ll find a hearty band of inquirers including Dan Gruber, Danielle Molina, Jude Yew, Lisa Guzman, Pete Bacevice, and Ryan Smerek, who form the core of the Sensemaking Interdisciplinary Forum and stir up new insights with great frequency.

I count on durable help from the Wildland Firefighting community and it always seems to be there. My gratitude runs deep for conversations with Ted Putnam, Dave Thomas, Paula Nasiatka, Paul Chamberlin, Paul Keller, Mike DeGrosky, Riva Duncan, Dave Christenson and Anne Black.

And then there’s family. What surprises me is how those ties grow deeper and broader with age, so much so that enumerating those ties and fearing to omit some leaves one with gratitude for particulars but words of love for the assemblage. The love starts with my wife, Karen, and fans out from there.
I

Introduction

1. Organized Impermanence: An Overview
2. Mundane Poetics: Searching for Wisdom in Organizational Theory
3. Faith, Evidence, and Action: Better Guesses in an Unknowable World
Suppose we took seriously the idea that ‘Organization is a temporarily stabilized event cluster’ (Chia, 2003, p. 130). What would we notice if we believed that? William James provides an answer:

Whenever a desired result is achieved by the cooperation of many independent persons, its existence as a fact is a pure consequence of the precursive faith in one another of those immediately concerned. A government, an army, a commercial system, a ship, a college, an athletic team, all exist on this condition, without which not only is nothing achieved, but nothing is even attempted. A whole train of passengers (individually brave enough) will be looted by a few highwaymen, simply because the latter can count on one another, while each passenger fears that if he makes a movement of resistance, he will be shot before anyone else backs him up. If we believed that the whole car-full would rise at once with us, we should each severally rise, and train-robbing would never even be attempted. There are, then, cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming (James, 1992, p. 474).

(See Quinn and Worline, 2008, for a stunning elaboration of this mechanism in their analysis of the intentional crash of UA flight 93 on 9/11.)

The organized defiance of the coach passengers is a relatively stabilized relational order that is enacted into streaming experience. When social order is acted into ‘a sea of ceaseless change’ (Chia, 2003, p. 131) that order continues to change but at a slower rate. The shorthand for this transient social order with a slower rate of change is the ‘impermanent organization.’ Event clusters with slower rates of change tend to consist of a recurrent sequence (e.g. Czarniawska, 2006) held together by a closed, deviation-counteracting feedback loop.

The phrase ‘impermanent organization’ may seem like a questionable choice of words because it can be read as both trivial and ambiguous. It sounds trivial because it suggests that organizations come and go. It sounds ambiguous because it fails to make clear just what it is that comes and goes. The essays in this book begin to tackle that ambiguity and to do so in a way that makes impermanence less trivial and more significant. If impermanence is inherent in organizations it matters greatly how people try to organize portions of this impermanence and redo these organized portions when they begin to unravel. The argument is that people build recurrence into