Migrating from disruption to consensus: Middle manager experiences with organisational change

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: The study explored middle managers' experiences during organisational change and mapped their migration from disruption to consensus. When change is introduced, middle managers experience dissonance, which creates uncertainty, unpredictable consequences, and opposing priorities that may impede the restructuring objectives. Middle managers must make sense of the change for themselves and others before change implementation can be embraced.

Design/methodology/approach: A qualitative case study within a financial services provider in South Africa was used to gather rich data from 13 middle managers through semi-structured individual interviews.

Findings: Findings confirm sensemaking and sensegiving as social processes toward shared understanding. Dissonance affected middle managers' interpretation of organisational change, resulting in ineffective communication of strategy to others. When consensus is reached between emotions experienced, understanding the organisational change, and the practices of organisational members, middle managers are ready to fully implement the change. Sensemaking and sensegiving enable middle managers to create springboards for putting organisational change into practice.

Recommendations/value: Middle managers are vital in explaining critical organisational change and driving its implementation. Recommendations are for middle managers to participate in planning or designing organisational change to provide them with greater clarity regarding the change and its rationale. Ongoing emotional support to assist middle managers cope with negative emotions is recommended. Change

management upskilling and reskilling techniques are recommended to clear dissonance and obstacles that delay strategy implementation.

Managerial implications: The study presents middle manager experiences in a single case organisation in the South African financial services industry, but the findings may be transferable to other organisational change contexts. The findings benefit organisations by providing insight into how middle managers align themselves and others through sensegiving during organisational change. Creating a shared understanding of organisational change will align all stakeholders to focus on the change objectives and achieve the desired strategic outcomes.

1.   INTRODUCTION

It is generally acknowledged that today's successful strategies do not guarantee tomorrow's success; thus, it is imperative for organisations to periodically review their strategy. Reviewing strategies, identifying organisational changes, and amending strategic direction are requisites for responding to changes in the contemporary business environment (Tao *et al*., 2022). Notwithstanding, for managers in practice, strategic change gives rise to increased complexity. Organisational change is a dynamic, disruptive, and alarming occurrence that impacts and interrupts the well-rehearsed processes and practices of different parties within an organisation (Bövers & Hoon, 2021; Awati & Nikolova, 2022; Jabri & Jabri, 2022).

The financial services industry is constantly undergoing extensive organisational change, requiring significant strategic changes and adaption by organisations operating within the industry (PwC Financial Services, 2022). One such change in the financial services industry has been the upsurge of intermediaries, such as brokers, financial advisors, and financial providers. These intermediaries have emerged as threats to the competitive advantage of large established financial organisations (EY, 2016) and have positioned themselves as trusted advisors and relationship owners to the end customer (PwC Financial Services, 2015; 2017). The increase in the number and types of intermediaries have placed more prominent financial organisations in a position where they find themselves competing with the new entrants converging on their territory and gaining a competitive advantage. Accordingly, financial organisations have been compelled to find new ways of doing business with new customers (PwC Financial Services, 2018). To remain relevant and competitive, organisations must deal directly with their customers and reduce their dependency on brokers (PwC

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Financial Services, 2018). This requires adapting their strategy, which is necessary for their survival.

To achieve this much-needed organisational change, organisations turn to middle managers, who are tasked with initiating and driving organisational changes. Middle managers have been recognised as strategists, change agents, influencers and implementers of change (Kouamé & Langley, 2018; Netz *et al*., 2020). However, the literature confirms that middle managers experience a period of uncertainty and doubt arising from a gap between expectations and understanding as they attempt to make sense of the change process (Weick, 2015). This dissonance creates tension, unpredictable consequences, and opposing priorities that could affect the change objectives as middle managers try to make sense of organisational change (Weick, 2015). Christianson (2019) asserts that middle managers' existing knowledge is disturbed by continuous change, and their reasoning capability may be reduced as they grapple to make sense of new information in the changing environment. The disruption and middle manager dissonance caused by the restructuring event is a concern, given the role they play in fulfilling the organisation's strategic outcomes. This study contributes to the body of knowledge by mapping middle managers' migration from disruption to consensus during organisational change.

In this article, we argue that middle managers are both receivers and givers of change. Research on middle manager emotions, especially during organisational change, is recognised in the work of Lundgren-Henriksson and Kock (2016); Castillo *et al*. (2018); Vuori *et al*. (2018); Bruskin and Mikkelsen (2020); Kroon and Reif (2021). However, more research is needed on middle managers' significant role in sensemaking and sensegiving practices in enabling change management (van Dam *et al*., 2021). These studies have called for further research on how middle managers align and create shared understanding during organisational change. Additionally, there is a need to understand the lived experiences and practices of middle managers during these changes, thus highlighting the fundamental gap that this research aims to address.

As strategy-as-practice scholars, we recognise the messy realities of doing strategy in practice. We set out to answer our central research question on how middle managers align and construct shared meaning when organisational changes disrupt their lived realities. We were curious about how middle managers make sense and give sense during an organisational change to create a shared understanding. From the onset, we adopted the view that sensemaking is a way station on the road to a consensually constructed, coordinated system of action (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). In addition, we viewed sensemaking as an

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ongoing process that occurs when a flow of organisational circumstances is translated into words and practices (Weick *et al*. 2005).

We set out to explore the road to action by examining the role of middle managers tasked with facilitating restructuring and implementing organisational changes. When change is introduced, middle managers may experience challenges in making sense of the change initiative and in how to implement the change (Christianson, 2019). Our study explored the middle managers' sensemaking practices on the road to a shared understanding of organisational change as a prerequisite to making the change management objectives work in practice. This 'road' is characterised by distinct stations, which middle managers move through to reach implementation and action. A group of 13 middle managers were selected from a financial organisation in South Africa to gain insight into their experiences during organisational change. We zoomed into the micro-level practices of middle managers during data analysis by engaging in a constructionist exploration of the lived experiences of middle managers during the organisational change. The selected case organisation, in order to survive amidst the threats and disruption posed by the upsurge in intermediaries and related competing service providers, introduced organisational change by restructuring its business. This provided an information-rich and suitable site for data gathering.

1.1   Theoretical positioning

Constant change within organisations means that middle managers carry out tasks such as clarifying, conveying, and executing strategy while simultaneously coping with an array of emotions (Huy & Guo, 2017). The sensemaking process and struggle for meaning during change require energy (Christianson, 2019). Sensemaking theory enables middle managers to make sense of and construct meaning within occurrences around them (Christianson & Barton, 2021). Hence, sensemaking involves explanations and the active construction of daily practices (Brown *et al*., 2015). Drawing on Weick *et al*. (2005), sensemaking provides a micro-mechanism that produces macro-change over time and incorporates meaning into organisational change efforts. Sensegiving theory helps middle managers to align, create a shared understanding, and influence others to accept changes in achieving organisational change (Kroon & Reif, 2021).

Building on the theme of sensemaking within this journal, we joined the conversations of recent authors on the topic. Reimer and Callaghan (2018) argued that leadership values create the foundation for organisational meaning through which sensemaking and sensegiving guide the organisation's social persona. Letsholo and Pretorius (2016) explored information overload and how managers make sense of it to inform decision-making when technological progress

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gives rise to change. Sensemaking is gaining interest in other journals, as evidenced by a broader interest in the topic. Hübel (2021) adopted a sensemaking lens to explore the process of entrepreneurship-driven organisational transformation. Bruskin and Mikkelsen (2020) explored the link between retrospective and prospective sensemaking during organisational change. Helpap and Bekmeier-Feuerhahn (2016) recognised that organisational changes are emotionally charged processes and combined the model of enacted sensemaking with the Affect Infusion Model. Steigenberger (2015) adopted theories of emotion and action to understand the affective dimension of sensemaking processes in organisational change endeavours. These studies highlight the importance and value of a sensemaking lens when exploring organisational change. We aimed to contribute further by illuminating the practices employed by middle managers when aligning and constructing shared meaning during the introduction of organisational change. We wanted to know how middle managers make and give sense to others and how the mutual understanding of organisational change is achieved.

We also posit that strategic outcomes are achieved through the proximity and role of middle managers as practitioners and not only by the organisation's senior leadership (Hortovanyi *et al*., 2021). Thus, insight into middle management practices during organisational change is vital to implementing strategic change and achieving the change objectives (van Dam *et al*., 2021). With changes constantly taking place in organisations, middle managers are tasked to clarify, convey, and execute strategy, yet they often struggle for meaning (Christianson, 2019). Likewise, "providing meaning through sensemaking and sensegiving during uncertainty and change is critical" (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2021:234). Incongruent perceptions and a lack of shared understanding during organisational change hinder practices in strategy implementation (Friesl *et al*., 2021), resulting in wasteful resources and failure to implement the organisation's change objectives (Øygarden & Mikkelsen, 2020). Moreover, the world of work has become more complex, with new technology supplanting traditional ways of working (Jabri & Jabri, 2022) and creating challenges for middle managers. If newly acquired information by middle managers is misunderstood, it can create unintended consequences to the detriment of organisational change (Weick, 2015). Furthermore, ambiguity may result in unexpected, unplanned outcomes, creating confusion in the organisation and middle managers falling back on what they know (Weick, 2015). Dissonance among middle managers makes it difficult for businesses to recover from external factors and survive the competition. This is concerning, given that they are responsible for driving the organisational change (Netz *et al*., 2020). Conversely, middle managers have an advantage regarding sensemaking and sensegiving owing to their position in bringing general agreement, clarification, and

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interpretation while influencing other organisational members towards a chosen strategic reality (Kraft *et al*., 2015; Robert & Ola, 2021).

Sensemaking involves interpreting and creating an order of occurrences (Weick, 1995) and a social structure that members of an organisation can use to understand and clarify environmental signs (Christianson & Barton, 2021). Sensemaking pushes individuals to acquire new skills while still performing their jobs (Sarkar & Clegg, 2021). However, the absence of shared understanding by middle managers can be disastrous for the organisation, especially given the complexities of these changing times and their effect on individuals (Crevani *et al*., 2021).

2. METHOD OF RESEARCH AND FRAMEWORK

We structured our research project within a single case study to address our curiosity and gather rich data. In agreement with Yin (2016) and Creswell and Creswell (2018), single case studies allow researchers to collect valuable data through interviews. The single case study allowed us to directly engage individual middle managers face-to-face at their place of work in one of the leading financial services providers within the employee benefits environment in South Africa. Through our interview questions, we aimed to identify and describe the messy realities and lived experiences affecting middle managers' sensemaking and sensegiving when introducing organisational change.

2.1 Case selection

The case organisation selected was a Johannesburg Stock Exchange-listed, leading South African financial services provider in the employee benefits industry. It is also registered with the Financial Services Conduct Authority (FSCA), which is the market conduct regulator of financial institutions in South Africa. The selected organisation reviewed its strategy and embarked on organisational change by restructuring and transforming one of its business units. The case organisation attempted to reposition itself by establishing a consulting department to retain existing markets, expand markets, and generate new income streams.

2.2 Data gathering

Data were gathered over three months in mid-2018 at branches in Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban to understand and gather comprehensive information (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) through interviews with middle managers. From the onset, we specified inclusion and exclusion criteria that guided our selection of participating middle managers and added to the scientific rigour of the research. We recruited middle managers that contributed to the feasibility of the study, increasing the dependability and credibility of the findings while allowing

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the study to be replicated by other researchers (Hornberger & Rangu, 2020). The selected participating middle managers had all been in middle management positions for at least seven years and were directly affected by the restructuring event.

The purposefully selected 13 middle managers, who participated voluntarily with informed consent, assisted us in gathering the required data for the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These middle managers were permanent employees in the General and Benefits Consulting Department and were directly impacted by the strategy review and organisational change. This group of homogenous middle managers was ideal for discovering shared views and experiences (Ponelis, 2015; Yin, 2016; Guest *et al*., 2020) during the organisational change. Additionally, one of the researchers on the team offered an insider perspective as an active middle manager within the case organisation with 17 years of experience. Pseudonyms were used to ensure the confidentiality of the participating middle managers. To ensure thoroughness in our data gathering, we opted to use a voice-recording device to capture the realities and experiences of middle managers and to maintain the originality of the interviews. Semi-structured questions guided the individual interviews to collect personal accounts of middle manager experiences.

2.3   Analysis of data

Data were analysed by loading transcripts into a qualitative data analysis system (ATLAS.ti) to ease the process of coding, theming, and managing the data. We carefully examined the codes that emerged from the data gathered during interviews with participating middle managers. These codes were grouped into categories, and where codes could not be included in the existing categories, more categories were created. Similarly, the categories were organised into ideas that developed into themes until no new themes emerged. Through a rigorous process of engaging in the data, we further classified the generated themes into three clusters, presented as stations on the road to consensus.

3.   CASE STUDY FINDINGS

In this article, we discuss the lived experiences of middle managers during organisational change by asking questions on how they found their way onto the road to a consensually constructed, coordinated system of action. We adopted a processual perspective in exploring how middle managers migrate from where they receive the change, make sense of it, give sense to others, and eventually make the organisational change work in practice. In addition, we wanted to know more about the middle managers' sensemaking and sensegiving practices and whether these practices foster consensus among other team members, enabling them to

focus their efforts on the change objectives towards achieving the desired strategic outcomes in the context of organisational change.
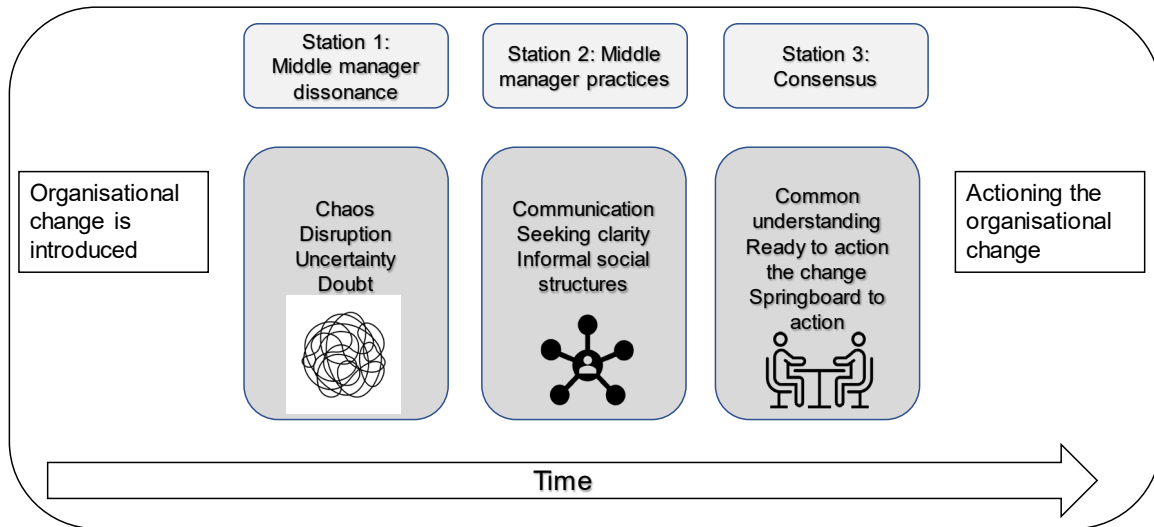
Our reflexive conversations about the data and interpretations added rigour and trustworthiness to our analysis. They yielded detailed descriptions, which later morphed the three main stations on the road to consensus. As expected, when the organisational change was introduced, the middle managers received the news, and the sensemaking process started with chaos and uncertainty and was emotionally charged (Weick *et al.,* 2005; Bruskin & Mikkelsen, 2019).

We identified three distinct stations where middle managers found themselves during the organisational change process towards reaching a point of common understanding and driving the implementation of the changes in the organisation. The first station is situated in this chaos where there is uncertainty among middle managers, which disrupts their well-rehearsed processes of action. This gap between their expectations and experiences led to their anxiety and ambiguity and emerged as our first station called: middle manager dissonance.

The identification of our second station along the road took shape through our lenses of sensemaking and sensegiving. The middle managers' accounts of their micro-level practices were deeply situated in the messy realities of organisational change. Participating middle managers were confronted with change that disturbed their existing knowledge and practices as they tried to make sense of and cope with new information emerging from the change. From the position of dissonance experienced at the first station, middle managers struggled to make sense of the occurrences and give meaning to others (Christianson, 2019). This position forced them to adopt specific sensemaking and sensegiving practices during organisational change. We named the second station: middle manager sensemaking and sensegiving practices.

Finally, our third station was closely linked to the desired end-state – not yet implementation of the organisational change, but actual consensus and mutual understanding of the restructuring event. This position then served as a springboard to actioning the organisational change. We called our third station: consensus. The middle manager migration through these stations is discussed in the following section. The migration was initiated when the organisational change event was announced, and the middle managers became change recipients (Ozawa, 2019:143). Figure 1 offers a diagrammatical depiction of the middle manager migration from disruption to consensus and shows the three stations as presented in our findings.

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Figure 1:   **Middle manager migration from consensus to disruption**

Source: Authors' own compilation

3.1   The first station: Middle manager dissonance

Dissonance is "an experience of incongruity between an entrenched understanding of a concept and a new piece of cognition" (Jain, 2019:127). When the organisational change was introduced, middle managers' existing knowledge was disturbed as they tried to make sense of new information. The organisational change could either threaten the managers' well-being and status or provide the opportunity for development and promote creativity and material benefits (Wynen *et al*., 2020). By its nature, organisational change triggers emotions of fear and apprehension (Huy & Guo, 2017). Two of our participating middle managers, Herman and Togo, recalled how they interpreted the organisational change, which led to feelings of dissonance, uncertainty, and self-doubt. In addition, they both questioned their capabilities and competencies; therefore, they internalised the change and its impact. The following remarks illustrate how they experienced the organisational change.

Herman felt uneasy about the changes.

> *Well, I first thought that given my understanding of the business –I felt anxiety…Am I equipped enough? Would there be further learning or training? Would I get support, and where would I get help?* (Herman)

Togo questioned his competencies.

> *My initial thought was, are we capable? Are we competent to do this work? How will our clients view us if we position ourselves as consultants? Would they take us*

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seriously? Are we going to earn their respect? Would they be willing to pay us for the consulting work? (Togo)

Herman and Togo's experiences align with those of Bruskin and Mikkelsen (2020) and van Dam *et al.* (2021) regarding feelings of uncertainty that organisational members experience during organisational change. These emotions were visible amongst middle managers, confirming the work of Steigenberger (2015), who noted how emotions shape sensemaking. For example, Thandi and Buhle recalled how they experienced uncertainty and a lack of clarity while trying to make sense of changes that were taking place.

There was a huge shift in consultants' requirements at that point, and there was a lot of uncertainty about what roles consultants would play. (Thandi)

Buhle needed clarity.

I needed to get clarity, which is what was important for me because my responsibility is to take those strategic objectives and make them my own so that I can put them into action. (Buhle)

A condition of dissonance was a reality for these individuals. For instance, we found detailed descriptions of where middle managers were overwhelmed by feelings of inadequacy, anxiousness, uncertainty, confusion, lack of clarity, and doubts about their roles and future. Middle managers' desire to acquire more information affirms the early steps towards making sense of restructuring and organisational change.

We noticed from the participating middle managers' descriptions that as the condition of dissonance continued, so too did confusion and frustration among middle managers as they struggled to make sense of the new information. Furthermore, Charlotte remembered how information overload created chaos at the beginning of the changes, which exacerbated the dissonance experienced. Earlier, we alluded to Weick (2015), who warns that uncertainty may result in unexpected, unplanned outcomes, creating confusion in the organisation, and individuals may fall back on what they know.

Charlotte shared her encounter as follows:

There were a lot of changes happening, so initially, it was quite confusing. We were given a lot of information, showing us how it would work in the future, but it was also quite confusing trying to make sense of how it would work. There were a lot of uncertainties that seemed to come through, so I think initially, just confusion. (Charlotte)

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While the information was being shared, we realised that *how* it was packaged and presented impacted middle managers' experiences. Ultimately, the restructuring event triggered a range of internal processes among the middle managers, as described by Warren, who recalled how confusion affected him at the beginning stages of the organisational change.

> *So, there was massive confusion in the beginning. So, it had to be unpacked. We had to do a lot of soul-searching, examining how we see it. So, that transition period was not well received in the beginning.* (Warren)

The experience of Charlotte and Warren confirms a need for more information sharing to aid in middle manager sensemaking. Their experiences further point to sensemaking as a timely and emotional process for them. The changes in the organisation require middle managers to learn new information, combat initial confusion, and develop new coping strategies and practices. We confirmed the views of Heyden *et al*. (2018) that new knowledge disturbs known management capabilities, giving rise to feelings of confusion and frustration caused by the lack of understanding and senior management's failure to transfer new knowledge, as highlighted by Jabu and Floyd.

Jabu commented on the frustration experienced by the team as follows:

> *… there was frustration. It was not just me. It was most of my team members.* (Jabu)

Floyd felt the frustration caused by dissonance in implementing the changes as follows:

> *For me, it has changed some things and left others the same. So that's frustrating that we are not focused enough on the pure consulting aspects of our jobs because we get side-tracked with administrative issues.* (Floyd)

Cindy explained how she kept guiding colleagues to refocus. The following quote demonstrates the uncertainty that participating middle managers experienced when the news of the restructuring event was shared.

> *Some team members kept playing in the wrong playground because it was their comfort zone; with those team members, you must keep guiding them back.* (Cindy)

The dissonance manifested in frustration and anxiety, which led to several unintended consequences, as described in the following section.

According to Peyrefitte *et al*. (2021), senior management's announcement of the critical organisational change should be communicated in clear language that encourages organisational members to support the implementation of changes and clear any dissonance. Like Helpap and Bekmeier-Feuerhahn (2016), we noticed that participating middle managers'

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emotions at the location of dissonance translated into resistance intentions. We considered the unintended consequences of the organisational change that originated from these middle manager emotions.

Martin and Warren indicated that they could not move beyond dissonance and implement organisational changes due to a lack of clear vision. This led to unintended consequences, expressed as resistance, delayed implementation, and sustained dissonance. Martin recalled that he did not immediately inform his clients about the changes. He commented as follows:

> *I didn't go and tell my clients immediately because I knew the implementation of that strategic vision would commence over a couple of months, even years, maybe, and I wasn't sure what the vision was myself; I had to experience it myself.* (Martin)

Martin further expressed his dissatisfaction with the expectation that middle managers should share a vision they were uncertain about. Moreover, if the organisational change does not align with the attitudes of middle managers, they are less likely to support it (Långstedt & Manninen, 2020) and will continue to experience dissonance. This was confirmed in the following quote by Martin:

> *… middle managers often find themselves in difficult situations and the expectations that have been created to share a vision that you're not sure of yourself.* (Martin)

Warren remarked on the lack of clarity and its impact on strategy implementation. As a middle manager, he needed to clear the dissonance before moving forward with implementation. In addition, middle managers must be knowledgeable about strategy implementation and required organisational changes accepted by members of the organisation (Hortovanyi et al., 2021).

> *I had to understand and be clear on the strategy before I could sell the very same strategy to my colleagues and my clients out there.* (Warren)

To achieve strategic outcomes, middle managers' sensemaking of the organisational change is critical to effectively communicate the change (Kieran *et al*., 2020) throughout the organisation. Moreover, middle managers need to clear the dissonance, make sense, and give sense to others. Instead, Martin and Warren remarked that not understanding the changes and the lack of clarity and guidance in the early stages of the organisational change led to the non-implementation of strategy. Martin lamented as follows:

> *I still find it exceedingly difficult. It's an ongoing battle; it's a change that I must admit I have not made yet. So, I still need guidance on that component of the strategic vision.*

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As to how to implement it successfully, I haven't received that guidance yet, and I haven't implemented it yet. (Martin)

Warren recalled how participating middle managers interpreted the strategy differently among themselves, which resulted in the delay in middle managers' alignment with the organisational change.

In the beginning, colleagues had different perceptions and interpretations of the strategy. It took a while for them to be aligned. (Warren)

Going through various emotions is vital in shaping sensemaking during organisational change (Aromaa *et al*., 2020). Middle managers experienced various challenges while coping with sensemaking and sensegiving during organisational change. They progressed from a state of dissonance to a sensemaking process and constructed meaning for themselves. At this point, we started to see the early signs of collective sensemaking (Robert & Ola, 2021) that triggered dialogue and discourse. We observed that our participating middle managers gradually accepted the changes and became involved in the sensemaking process by engaging in different strategising practices among themselves. From a position of dissonance, participating middle managers moved into action, as described in the next section.

3.2 The second station: Middle manager sensemaking and sensegiving practices

Keeping with the migration analogy, the second station found expression in the practices of the participating middle managers to clear the dissonance amongst themselves. Even though the participating middle managers were struggling with the dissonance, they recognised that they were responsible for making sense and giving sense to others in the organisation. Therefore, they began to make sense of the organisational change by deliberately engaging with one another in sensemaking and sensegiving practices, including informal interactions, continuous communication with others, sharing their interpretations of the changes, seeking clarity through one-on-one sessions, distributing information, reflecting on their experiences, and debating issues with other members of the organisation.

These change management practices are aligned with Odden and Russ's (2019:187) assertion that during sensemaking meaning is constructed, and the dissonance in understanding is clarified. This is evident in the sensemaking and sensegiving practices in which Musa was involved.

We had group discussions where we shared information regarding the strategy as managers seeking clarity and then shared it with the team—conducting one-on-one

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sessions and talking outside of employment because people were worried and unsure what needed to be done or what was expected of them. So, sharing information with people assisted me in giving information about our competitors and what the organisation is proposing. (Musa)

Buhle remarked on his direct sensemaking interaction with his colleagues. Through these interactions, middle managers jointly learn from one another while making sense of the environment and creating shared understanding (Christianson & Barton, 2021). Buhle describes how middle managers simultaneously interpreted the organisational change for themselves and gave sense to their colleagues.

So, there were direct face-to-face interactions and discussions, especially with my direct reports. I remember, at times, instead of sitting in the office, I would move to a subsidiary office for a day or two to assist my colleagues with processes and explain the reason for the change to an umbrella fund. (Buhle)

Sibu focused on continuous communication as a sensegiving activity and made the following assertion:

I ensured that team members were on board and realised that ongoing communication made sense in explaining the pros and cons of the change. (Sibu)

These daily practices of sensemaking and sensegiving by middle managers aligned team members to the organisational change (Hortovanyi *et al.*, 2021). While Martin, like other middle managers, experienced challenges at the inception of the organisational change, he used informal engagements to make sense and give sense to others.

So, the way I did it, I recently had a coffee conversation with a colleague as well. I would do so during lunch or go and sit with somebody when I see them drink coffee, and when we speak about it, they raise their concerns, or I will initiate the conversation, and we will chat about it in an informal session, and that is more valuable than receiving an added document or an official speech. (Martin)

To elaborate further, working in teams was important for Warren and Floyd to interpret the changes in the organisation. They recognised the meaningful contributions of every team member in sensemaking and in supporting the change in the organisation (Todnem By *et al.*, 2018). The following remarks demonstrate how Warren, Togo, and Floyd collaborated with their teams to make sense of and create shared meaning of the organisational changes:

Warren explained his regular interactions as follows:

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> *We convened various meetings as a team. We were given a platform to make contributions on how to implement the strategy best; there was a lot of teamwork and a lot of joint discussions, and because of that, we were able, as a team, to come to the party and implement the strategy.* (Warren)

In addition, the messages of the organisational change were constantly reinforced by Togo to make sense and create meaning for other team members in the organisation. Togo reflected on the sensemaking process as follows:

> *We needed to help team members define what core consulting is, what we view as consulting, and what we define as consulting. Lots of things that staff members were comfortable with were nowhere on the list of consulting, and it made a lot of people uncomfortable because what they're used to is no longer required in this new initiative.* (Togo)

Engagements amongst middle managers were a combination of formal and informal and included concrete practices toward team cohesion and joint undertaking during organisational change. From the detailed descriptions of our participating middle managers, we could affirm Rouleau & Balogun's (2011) stance on how middle managers used their combined knowledge to create shared meaning at the early stages of the change. The organisational change was reinforced over time and through several engagements and interactions. The continuous interactive processes of middle managers and other team members helped them understand the changes, supported the organisation in implementing them, and created a social structure.

Our findings confirm those of Christianson and Barton (2021), who describe sensemaking as a process that creates a social structure through which members develop connections by interacting continuously to make sense of the organisational change. The continuous interaction amongst our middle managers created an additional social structure outside the formal organisational structure. This allowed middle managers to network with one another and other members of the organisation to clear the dissonance and make sense of the changes in the organisation. Cindy, Martin, and Herman expressed how they benefited from the informal social structure.

Cindy described how she used the social structure to seek advice from others as follows:

> *When I did need to have a high level of expertise and knowledge, I had other resources, and those resources were readily available, but whether it was risk benefits, investment, or actuarial, there were other knowledgeable colleagues that I could tap into. There were colleagues with consulting experience in the team who were invited*

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to client meetings, getting their input on more technical aspects of consulting and solutions. (Cindy)

Martin shared his experience:

Luckily there were many sessions where we engaged with one another, but there was also inevitably informal engagement in the passages, at functions, or wherever. (Martin)

More importantly, through a social process, organisational members interpret and make sense of their environment (Christianson & Barton, 2021). Herman reflected on his engagements with other team members and tapped into their knowledge to seek clarity and develop his skills to navigate the organisational change event. He suggested as follows:

> *The people within the team have specific skills. If you don't know how to create an agenda pack or do not know how to do a presentation, you need to go to those recognised as good presenters. So, in other words, people within your team are recognised as resources, not competitors, and you realise that everyone is important in achieving the' organisation's objectives.* (Herman)

As a result of the interactions, middle managers created additional social structures that became a source of information and knowledge they could tap into as they made sense and created meaning while developing their competencies. This social structure provided a safe space where the organisation's members felt comfortable seeking clarity on issues as they made sense of the organisational changes around them. This continuous interaction led to an "*aha moment*" of sensemaking and clarity as middle managers engaged in daily practices.

The participating middle managers dealt with the dissonance by engaging in practices that assisted them in making sense and giving sense to others by clarifying the dissonance and creating meaning for the organisational change (Odden & Russ, 2019). We also observed unifying patterns created through the collective sensemaking processes within the social structures. For example, Musa and Thandi engaged in strategic practices, creating a shared understanding while aligning and influencing others through sensegiving. These practices became daily routinised behaviour as follows:

> *So, we set the goals at the beginning of the year, and then we'll follow up regularly. A monthly team meeting to ensure that we're still on the same page and that we're still ticking all boxes, and then during our key performance reviews, we'll double-check and make sure how far we are. What still needs to happen? And then, by the end of the year, we will tick them all off and then say yes, we have achieved our goals.* (Thandi)

Thandi further elaborated on her formal weekly sensegiving practices as follows:

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[I] do training … making sure there's a formal session with the team every week to ensure we walk on the same page. We will discuss those changes, engage and decide what we are going to do within that year for that fund. So that was our way of trying to make sense of and carry out or action the strategy within our area. (Thandi)

Musa explained her sensegiving practices as follows:

Okay, apart from training, one-on-one, and talking outside of employment, people were worried and unsure of what needed to be done or what was expected of them. So, I'll give them pieces of information to research, and they will present it to the team. Where they are not sure, I break it down into sections, and once everyone knows what we're talking about, I'll let them lead. (Musa)

Musa further explained her daily sensegiving practices as follows:

Have a daily catch-up, even if it's five minutes coffee session in the morning; let's talk, "How's your day? How was your day yesterday? Were there any challenges? If there were, let's talk about them." So not wait until there are big challenges where we need to involve the executives but attend to small issues before they become bigger. (Musa)

So, every morning when we come in, we have quick chats. We also have weekly sessions and monthly sessions. For me, that is what has worked, and there may be things that other team members are doing, but this has worked for us within the team. (Musa)

During these deliberate sensegiving practices, the participating middle managers swayed employees (sensegiving) toward a shared understanding (Kraft *et al.*, 2015). In the same way as other participating middle managers, Togo and Cindy were involved in practices regarding the actual implementation of the organisational change.

Togo remarked on his practices as follows:

So, every week there will be a session on practical things we need to do as consultants, and obviously, we will draft our delivery schedule as a team on quarterly deliveries to the clients. (Togo)

Cindy reflected on how she aligned the practices of others to the organisational change as follows:

My role was to get everyone aligned and understand what we wanted to achieve. It was just frequent communication and giving the team the necessary support and

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assurances that we were doing this for a solid reason and that it would be in our clients' and members' interests over the longer term. (Cindy)

3.3   The third station: Consensus

In this third station, aligned to the processual nature of sensemaking, it had become evident that middle managers were now fully involved in the practices that created a shared understanding and influenced others toward implementing the organisation's change in strategy. This consensually constructed station resembles the mutual process of sensemaking (Robert & Ola, 2021), where the process becomes reciprocal and continuous. The following discussions demonstrate how Musa and Thandi's sensemaking and sensegiving were shaped by others in the organisation as they continuously interacted with them.

Musa said:

> *As they present, I question and drive them towards understanding the strategy or the objective. Also, being the first person showing the team that you're at peace with the changes, that you've accepted the changes, and that you must all implement them and lead the way and find ways of breaking the strategy down.* (Musa)

> *Let them add value, not just being told, do this, do that … give them space to practice internally before they go out to the client.* (Musa)

Thandi remarked as follows:

> *I think just talking about the strategy as much as possible to say, 'What was your understanding of this? This was my understanding.' Engaging with the material and having robust discussions about where we saw things going, and I think it was particularly important. We used to have team meetings which included all four different teams, and we would have these conversations, and I think that helped to get that common understanding.* (Thandi)

Floyd indicated that he explained essential principles to the team members while creating a shared understanding and aligning them to the organisational change.

> *So, it was explaining those essential principles to the team members but also realising that only some were necessarily on the same page.* (Floyd)

Togo scheduled weekly meetings where the organisation's members asked questions and sought clarity while creating a common understanding. The strategic role of middle managers is brought to the fore as they fulfilled important sensegiving duties in the organisation. Togo explains:

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> *We had conversations around the strategy that created a common understanding and a platform for people to ask questions and take consultants to the clients to see how it applies and check in on weekly meetings, which created some common understanding.* (Togo)

In addition to helping others identify their gaps in understanding, Cindy conceded she did not have all the answers, but used other resources available to create alignment and shared understanding.

> *Identifying gaps, helping them to identify – my function was more a support role, and if they needed the resource, whether it was me or someone else, to bring it all together; one person can't try and do everything, and then also facilitate the engagement, with whomever as and when required, whether it was an external service provider or internal service provider to facilitate those conversations and pull it all together.* (Cindy)

Notwithstanding that turning senior management vision into daily practices is challenging (Øygarden & Mikkelsen, 2020), middle managers rose to the challenge. Middle managers implemented various practices that created a shared understanding while aligning and influencing others through sensegiving. These practices were anchored in the managers' tacit knowledge and the overall sensemaking efforts interwoven with the social context. In the end, the dissonance experienced by middle managers led them to find solutions by actively initiating meetings and practices that created meaning and resulted in sensemaking and sensegiving for themselves.

4.   DISCUSSION

Clearly, organisational change and restructuring events are not for the fainthearted. The findings revealed the messy realities of organisational change and illuminated the dissonance experienced by middle managers as recipients and implementers of these initiatives. The findings confirm that sensemaking and sensegiving take shape in formal and informal social structures and through formal and informal conversations. It was also observed that some of these social structures emerged as routines and interactions which took shape during the early stages of change. The study contributed three stations which offer a better understanding of how managers make and give sense during organisational change. The first station was characterised by middle managers' dissonance and found expression in their feelings of uncertainty and perceived gaps in their understandings. The dissonance manifested as unintended consequences that resembled forms of micro-resistance that could hamper the success of the organisational change (Fan & Dawson, 2022). From a position of dissonance, middle managers took action to get more information and used social structures to make

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sense of the change. Later, through sensemaking and sensegiving practices, middle managers developed practices, such as collective reinforcement through daily discussions, regular engagements on a formal or informal basis, and translating targets into practices and schedules. These practices became routines that created a shared understanding amongst the organisation's middle managers while creating alignment of the changes in strategy throughout the organisation. The managers also obtained a shared understanding by seeking clarity. From the third station, where consensus was achieved, the participating middle managers created a springboard for action to make the organisational change work in practice.

We presented and used an analogy of migration from one station to the next to illustrate the three main themes and to build on existing theory and understanding. The study confirms that the participating middle managers were in a state of dissonance when the organisational change was initially introduced. Their knowledge was disturbed as they attempted to make sense of the changes in the organisation. The participating middle managers also experienced confusion and various emotions, including fear and ambiguity. Insufficient clarity during the change gave rise to uncertainty and an absence of understanding. This initially affected how participating middle managers interpreted the organisational changes resulting in ineffective communication of strategy to the rest of the organisation. As a result, middle manager dissonance contributed to a delay in implementing the organisational change.

Although there were challenges, the participating middle managers moved into the task of 'selling' the new initiative by interacting continually with other members of the organisation. They formed connections through various practices, such as debating, interpreting, sharing information, and discussing the new initiative with one another. As they continued engaging in these practices, they made and gave the sense, and created shared meaning that cleared the dissonance. Through these interactions with other middle managers, informal social structures were created. These structures became a source of information and the development of competencies which they drew upon during the organisational change.

Having cleared the dissonance through sensemaking and sensegiving, middle managers moved on to daily practices, which gave sense to others in the organisation. Some of their practices involved explaining certain principles, frequently communicating strategy to the team, allowing team members to engage in strategy discussions, weekly and monthly strategy sessions, drafting delivery schedules with the team, enabling team members to voice their opinions, daily morning coffee sessions, and providing the necessary support when required. These practices aligned and influenced the organisation's team members towards a chosen organisational change.

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As evidenced above, sensemaking and sensegiving daily practices contributed to creating a shared understanding of the change objectives and implementation of the organisational change. Supporting the above, Kramer (2018) and Will and Pies (2018) indicate that sensemaking and sensegiving occur when individuals, such as members of the organisation, together understand the meaning of the initiative. This leads to mutual benefits and a greater likelihood of achieving the desired outcomes.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Initially, middle managers were in a state of dissonance when the organisational change was introduced. Through this study, it was established that organisational change triggers sensemaking as middle managers make sense of and construct the meaning of the initiative. Findings confirm that sensemaking is a social process toward shared understanding and is strengthened when consensus is reached between the emotions that are felt, the understanding of the new initiative, and the transformative practices of the organisational members (Will & Pies, 2018; Bruskin & Mikkelsen, 2020). At the same time, sensemaking and sensegiving processes occur over time within organisational change processes. These processes manifest in experiences of dissonance and uncertainty, leading to social structures and strategies to construct meaning, and ultimately translate into specific practices that contribute to a shared understanding during organisational change. We concur with Steigenberger (2015) that anxiety and dissonance are helpful emotions as they trigger sensemaking practices.

This research recognises that sensemaking and sensegiving are collaborative processes, and middle managers' sensemaking and sensegiving create a springboard for action (Weick *et al.*, 2005). We found that sensegiving is a reciprocal process through which the results of sensemaking are communicated, and sense is given by middle managers. From our findings, consensus on the organisational change had to be reached before actual implementation. We conclude that middle manager consensus, or shared understanding, is a prerequisite to making organisational change work in practice.

Middle managers are vital in driving the change initiative (Netz *et al.* 2020). Accordingly, it is recommended that they are involved in the planned change session of the restructuring event. This will allow them to seek clarity and avoid delays in the implementation stage, as some middle managers were still unsure about some elements of the new changes, which could be disastrous for the organisation (Weick, 2015).

We agree with Konlechner *et al.* (2019) that change is difficult and poses challenges for middle managers. It is recommended that ongoing support from top management to middle

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management be initiated and provided. It is further recommended that human resources (HR) provide middle managers and their teams with support in the sensemaking process of the organisational change, including coping with emotions (Kieran *et al*., 2022).

Although the findings emerged from a financial services industry in South Africa, the three stations proposed in this study are likely transferable to another organisational change context, which could benefit managers during restructuring events. It is recommended that management create a learning environment by implementing change management techniques, such as upskilling and reskilling middle managers, to help them cope with disruption and the complexities of change. This will help to alleviate the dissonance experienced by middle managers and remove obstacles that could delay the implementation of the strategy.

The upskilling and reskilling techniques will also position the organisation ahead of the change management and heighten performance in the organisation (Jabri & Jabri, 2022). Furthermore, a repository of information would be valuable where middle managers and members of the organisation can access information to avoid different interpretations of the strategic objective.

While offering these contributions, the study was limited to the research questions. Therefore, further research could explore the effectiveness of tools used to construct meaning by middle managers operating in a financial services provider within the employee benefits environment. Additionally, our study did not interrogate the success or failure of the organisational change post-implementation, which is recommended for further research. Suggested future research could explore tools to create meaning during organisational change while managing the dissonance experienced by middle managers. A longitudinal study is also recommended on the effectiveness of middle managers' practices in creating shared understanding and alignment when an organisational change is introduced. As middle managers deal with various emotions during organisational change, a study on the coping strategies of middle managers is recommended. Finally, an investigation into the capabilities and skills of sensemaking may also offer valuable insight into micro-level practices that could have significant consequences. Migrating from dissonance to consensus during an organisational change proved to be an interesting topic for study.

6.   MAD STATEMENT

Implementing organisational changes forms part of the middle manager's tasks. Such initiatives are grounded in change and often involve disruptions for those tasked with supporting the change and implementing the strategic objectives. Middle managers

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experience challenges in making sense of the change and giving meaning to others. Knowledge of the lived experiences of middle managers during a change process offers a better understanding of the dissonance and disruption experienced by them. Such understanding may prove useful in planned change initiatives across multiple contexts. We confirm the emergence of social structures and strategies to construct meaning that translates into specific practices towards a shared understanding of organisational change.

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ANNEXURE A

Column 1 offers the research question, and Column 2 offers the questions posed to the participants to gather rich data.

Research questions	Interview Questions
Question 1 How do middle managers make sense and construct meaning during organisational change?	**When a new consulting division was introduced,** When you first heard that a new consulting department was to be established, what were your reactions? What was your understanding of the purpose of this new consulting department? Can you tell me more about your initial thoughts after having heard that the consulting department was to be established? What was your view of the consulting department? Having worked here for more than 3 years, what insight can you share into how the strategic initiative unfolded? **In line with the response above,** Looking back over how this strategic initiative was introduced, how would you describe it? In hindsight, what has the change meant for you in your job? Can you tell me more about your experience in trying to understand the strategic initiative? As you were trying to understand the role of the new consulting division, what was in your mind?
Question 2 What strategising do middle managers engage in as they make sense and give sense to the initiative?	**Others in your department may have a different view on the objective of the strategic initiative,** In your experience, did people in your department have similar views on the objectives of the consulting department? What was your role in ensuring that everyone in your team understood the objective of the strategic initiative? How did you help your colleagues understand the objective of the consulting department? What else did you do to ensure that everyone in your team was on the same page? **Different methods will be used to convey information on the new strategic initiative,** Tell me more about the methods you used to transfer knowledge to others in the organisation. What activities were you involved in, in getting the message across about the strategic objective of the consulting department? Tell me more about the responses you received from others when you communicated strategic initiatives.

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Question 3	**Sometimes others in your department will have a different understanding of the strategic initiative,**
How do middle managers align and create common understanding as they influence others through sensegiving?	How did others feel about the introduction of the strategic initiative?
	How did you achieve alignment with other team members?
	What did you do to ensure that there was common understanding of the initiative with other team members?
	Tell me more about your experience with others when you engaged them about the initiative?
	What are the things you did to convince others in establishing buy in of the strategic initiative?

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