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## The politics of sensemaking and sensegiving at work

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## **The Politics of Sensemaking and Sensegiving at Work**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The aim of this paper is to investigate how political activities and processes influence sensemaking and sensegiving among top management, middle management and employees and to examine its consequences for implementing new knowledge.

**Methodology** – Data were collected in a Norwegian bank using in-depth interviews with middle managers and financial advisers. Observations of meetings, informal conversations and verbatim notes were also used in data collection among top managers. A practice-based approach was used as an analytical lens.

**Findings** – Top managers' political activities of excluding others from the decision process affects their sensemaking and resulted in sensegiving contradictions between spoken intent and how to change practice. Middle managers' political activities were to accept top managers' sensegiving instead of managing themselves in their own sensemaking to help financial advisers with how to change their role and practice. As a result, middle managers' sensemaking affects their engagement in sensegiving. For financial advisers, the political processes of top and middle managers resulted in resistance and not making sense of how to change and implement new knowledge.

**Originality** – No studies to our knowledge identify the three-way conceptual relationship between political activities, sensemaking and sensegiving. In addition, we believe that the originality lies in investigating these relationships using a three-level hierarchy of top management, middle management and employees.

**Research limitations** – A total of 30 in-depth interviews, observations of five meetings and informal conversations might call for further studies. In addition, a Norwegian study does not account for other countries' cultural differences concerning leadership style, openness in decisions and employee autonomy.

**Keywords** – political activities, sensemaking, sensegiving, middle managers, a practice-based approach, new knowledge

**Paper type** – Research paper

## Introduction

Investigating the political struggle for control and the active, resistive or reactive forces among colleagues and leaders might be crucial for our understanding of organisational practices and change (Fox, 2000; Schneider, 2007). However, in spite of encouragement to extend our knowledge of power and politics and of how they influence learning, change and innovation, this has not been sufficiently addressed in the literature (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Contu *et al.*, 2003; Contu and Willmott, 2003; Lawrence *et al.*, 2005; Antonacopoulou *et al.*, 2006; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008; Gherardi, 2009). Notable exceptions are Thomas and Davies (2005) and Sonenshein (2010), which address the dynamics of power and politics related to change, Maitlis and Lawrence (2007), Voronov (2008), Peirano-Vejo and Stablein (2009); Hope (2010), which explore politics related to sensemaking and sensegiving, and Vince (2001, 2004), Labatut *et al.* (2010); Mørk *et al.* (2010), which investigate power in resistance and negotiations as an inter-group phenomenon and how power and politics link to emotions.

What is substantially covered in the literature is that change and innovation require learning, knowledge sharing, knowledge requests and the transfer of new knowledge across and within social practices at work (Swan *et al.*, 2002; Newell *et al.*, 2009). Consequently, it is argued that for change and innovation to succeed requires new knowledge to be negotiated within existing knowledge domains at work (Weick and Westley, 1996; Clegg *et al.*, 2005). Accordingly, March (1991) argues that innovation requires a combination of the exploitation of existing knowledge and exploration of new knowledge within each knowledge domain. A knowledge domain typically has its own set of competence regimes that define what competent participation is through rules, resources, norms, perspectives, values and interests as a result of the shared negotiation of the competence (Newell *et al.*, 2009). Hence, new knowledge might fail to be translated into a knowledge domain if it threatens existing boundaries, control over knowledge and power structures (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000; Maurice and Sorge, 2000; Swan *et al.* 2002; Robertson, 2007; Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008; Newell *et al.*, 2009).

Dougherty (2003) links new knowledge to sensemaking, arguing that new knowledge needs to make sense for those responsible for implementing the novelty to enable them to change

their practice accordingly. Sensemaking refers to employees' construction and development of a framework that enables an understanding of experiences and of the organisation's reality (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995; Voronov, 2008). Sensemaking is therefore fuelled by the flux of practice actions and interactions within it, in employees' processes of creating meaning from new events and new knowledge (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick *et al.*, 2005; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). In the sensemaking literature, the emphasis is on power as a dynamic, active force, manifested through its use in local practices, where power is acknowledged through its use as political acts (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982; Foucault, 1997; Fox, 2000; Clegg *et al.*, 2006). In addition, when investigating strategies or tactics leaders use when they engage in sensegiving to shape the sensemaking of their employees, sensegiving is acknowledged as political processes (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). We need, however, more studies that explore and identify these political activities and how they affect sensegiving and sensemaking at different hierarchical levels, as research on sensegiving for the most part focuses on leaders at one level and their employees at another. Hence, our research question is *'How does political activities and processes influence sensegiving and sensemaking in a three-level hierarchy at work'?*

We investigate the political activities of sensemaking and sensegiving among top managers, middle managers and financial advisers in a large Norwegian bank. In our study, the implementation of new knowledge is related to how financial advisers have to change both the nature of the products they work with and their established work practices. We therefore believe that the case might serve as an example of how changing (or not changing) existing knowledge domains for implementing (or not implementing) the new knowledge vision is influenced by political processes that influence sensemaking and sensegiving activities. We also explore whether a practice-based approach can be a fruitful avenue to address these concerns. Using a practice-based approach means highlighting the situated nature of learning, knowledge and innovation as integrated processes embedded in social practices, which unfold within a broader field of interconnected practices (Schatzki *et al.*, 2001; Blackler, 2004; Gherardi, 2009). Hence, a practice-based approach highlights the importance of practitioners knowing how to perform within a particular knowledge domain, where sensemaking and sensegiving are integrated and embedded in processes of 'knowing in practice' (Nicolini *et al.*, 2003; Weick *et al.*, 2005).

First, we outline a theoretical framework on politics, sensemaking and sensegiving and a practice-based approach. Second, we investigate the politics of sensemaking and sensegiving activities in our study of top management, middle management and financial advisers in the bank. Third, our results are presented and discussed in relation to previous theories and research, where we outline propositions and contributions. We conclude with some practical implications and limitations.

### **A practice-based approach to politics**

Practices are often contested by professionals to maintain control and authority over knowledge domains (Swan *et al.*, 2002). Implementing new knowledge is therefore recognised as political processes (Fidler and Johnson, 1984; Klein and Sorra, 1996; Brown and Duguid, 1991,2001; Newell *et al.*, 2009; Thomas and Hardy, 2011) because new knowledge requires a new balance between the exploitation of knowledge in the organisation and the exploration of new knowledge in order to change (March, 1991). New knowledge might fail to be implemented because it does not align well or it threatens existing boundaries, power positions and politics that empower some employees over others (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000; Swan *et al.*, 2002; Robertson, 2007; Newell *et al.*, 2009). It is in practices that new knowledge is enacted or betrayed with the consequence of changing established practices or not (Nicolini *et al.*, 2003). In line with a practice-based approach, power and politics will typically be embedded in established practices (Maurice and Sorge, 2000; Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008; Gherardi, 2011). Practitioners may accept or resist the novelty while actively co-creating themselves through episodes of enacted political agency and negotiations (Marshall and Rollinson, 2004; Antonacopoulou, 2008; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008; Gherardi, 2011). Thus, situated, ongoing knowing within practices unfolds through actions of agreement and resistance, persuasions and negotiations within daily activities in order to create meaning (Suchman, 2003; Blackler, 2004). We take a practice-based approach, which implies that new knowledge may depend on the alignments of the presented novelty with the already existing practice-based knowing (Dougherty, 2003). Consequently, we approach politics as power in action as argued by Hardy (1996), where episodic power is discrete political activities initiated by self-interested actors and systemic power is diffused through routines and practices that constitute organisations (Foucault, 1997; Lawrence *et al.*, 2005).

Politics refers to both the social force that influences organisations as well as the strategic processes that employ or challenge power relations (Vince, 2004:66). Voronov (2008) distinguishes between surface politics as the exercise of power over various sources of influence (control over resources, authority, manipulation, gatekeeping) and deep structure politics, which is embedded in culture, symbols and communicative acts. Deep structure politics refers to the system, the structure, the sensemaking and the taken-for-granted rules (Frost and Egri, 1991; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). For key managers, politics is about both their political will and their power to influence change processes (Macpherson and Jones, 2008). Politics is therefore the activities of both creating a perception of legitimacy and shaping a perception of organisational reality as well as imposing this perception of reality on others (Hardy, 1996), which demonstrates its close link to sensemaking and sensegiving (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007; Voronov, 2008).

### **Sensemaking and sensegiving**

Sensemaking is the processes of the social construction of plausible meanings when discrepant cues interrupt daily practice, for instance new knowledge, where practitioners need to create new meaning on how to change their practices (Weick, 1988; Marshall and Rollinson, 2004; Weick *et al.*, 2005; Corradi *et al.*, 2010). Sensemaking is therefore acknowledged in ongoing activities at work as one of the main aspects of the notion of practice and practicing, where all activities among practitioners are '*constituted and are subordinated to a joint system as joint sensemaking*' (Weick, 2009:57). Sensemaking is therefore about the processes of meaning construction and reconstruction as an attempt to develop a framework of own experiences related to own practices and the organisational reality (Weick *et al.*, 2005; Voronov, 2008). Sensegiving refers to the processes of attempting to influence the sensemaking of others. It is an important activity for leaders as it shapes employees towards some intended definitions of organisational reality through the processes facilitated for acceptance, enthusiasm and energy for changing practice (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007).

Sensemaking and sensegiving must be acknowledged as processes, where these processes and activities related to the implementation of, for instance, new knowledge are fuelled with enacted power and occur as a result of political activities (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982; Foucault, 1997; Fox, 2000; Clegg *et al.*, 2006; Mørk *et al.*, 2010). Sensegiving is bound up

with power as it either normalises or shuts down alternative interpretations as a result of leaders' decisions and their facilitation of activities related to how to implement new knowledge and also how leaders might limit who participates in sensemaking processes (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Voronov, 2008). This is confirmed in the studies by Maitlis (2005) and Maitlis and Lawrence (2007), where leaders' sensegiving processes are argued to be political activities as they influence the interpretations and sensemaking of others. Weick *et al.* (2005) recognise that powerful actors give unequal access to roles and positions, which again influences meaning constructions as people endeavour to make sense of equivocal inputs and enact this sense back to make the world more orderly (Mills, 2003; Weick *et al.*, 2005). In these sensegiving activities, politics refers to both the social force when enacting power and the politics of strategic processes and sensemaking activities (Hardy *et al.*, 2003; Vince, 2004).

Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) also find that leaders' engagement in sensegiving is triggered by their own sensemaking, not just formal authority. Further, their engagement is motivated by issues that are perceived to be ambiguous and unpredictable in their own sensemaking, while their sensegiving is enabled by their issue-related experiences and by whether the organisation has already performed well in the relevant issue domain.

We investigate the politics of sensegiving and sensemaking related to Maitlis and Lawrence's (2007) triggers and enablers for sensegiving processes and to how sensegiving activities influence sensemaking processes. Our study includes top management, middle management and financial advisers, and we explore Balogun's (2003) argument that middle managers can be characterised as change intermediaries and strategic assets if given sufficient support for their own interpretation and sensemaking potential as a strategic asset. We take a practice-based approach, investigating the embeddedness of politics when new knowledge is negotiated, enacted or reproduced in practices at work.

### **Research context and methodology**

The study was conducted in one of the largest financial institutions, a bank alliance (BA), in Norway. The BA is a network organisation with operations in five major regions in Norway, namely BA North, BA West, BA Central, BA South-East and BA East. The BA consists of

approximately 350 local banks and 5,500 employees, providing geographical coverage for most of Norway within these regions. The BA's five regions are organised through the joint ownership and cooperation of the holding company, the BA Group, which consists of the BA's top management.

The BA group introduced the following new knowledge vision in 2007 (BA Strategy Document 2007-2010). 'BA's knowledge vision is to develop a learning organisation with employees that are knowledgeable and apply their knowledge professionally and in the best interests of BA's customers'. The knowledge vision has two main goals: a) financial advisers are to serve all four business domains of i) loans, ii) savings and financial placements, iii) money transmissions and iv) insurance and b) financial advisers are supposed to change their roles towards proactive selling within these four business domains. Our study addressed the implementation of new knowledge, which includes substantial new knowledge on financial products and substantially changing their role behaviour as finance advisers. Through methods of random sampling from the target population including every bank in the alliance, we selected a representative sample of local bank leaders and financial advisers employed at banks covering all regions in Norway. Additionally, the BA's top management were part of our study.

### *Data collection*

Case study methods allow researchers to understand complex phenomena in their natural environments and focus on the actual dynamics and meaningful characteristics of organisational events (Eisenhardt, 1991; Yin, 1994). With research questions such as why and how, case study approaches based on explorative qualitative design are most suitable (Yin, 1994). In addition, the case study methodology is frequently deployed for organisational learning and knowledge research (Voronov, 2008). Hence, we believe that a case study approach enabled us to use multiple sources of data in order to grasp the context of politics, sensemaking and sensegiving. Our study consisted of semi-structured interviews with middle managers and financial advisers as well as observations, participation in meetings, notes and informal conversations with top managers in 2008 and 2009. There were 30 interviews (six middle managers and 24 financial advisers) and we attended five meetings. The interviews lasted, on average, one hour and were tape-recorded and transcribed. Feedback was obtained from respondents on the transcriptions, and follow-up telephone

conversations were held with 10 of the 30 respondents for clarification. Observations and verbatim notes for the top manager meetings, and informal conversations with them, resulted in substantial data. They had initiated our research and they were aware of how we would use the data. Moreover, all our respondents were anonymous. We focused on how they communicated, what was said and by whom, their social interactions, how they solved possible conflicts of interest, how different interpretations were possible, possible power structures and powerful actors, their perceptions, communication forms, engagement and sensemaking, and we witnessed how they engaged in sensegiving activities. With regard to interviewing middle managers, we focused on their roles as leaders, their perceptions and sensemaking of the change initiative, their sensegiving activities towards top management and those financial advisers they were responsible for, what their experiences were, how they interpreted financial advisers' perceptions, sensemaking of the novelty, empowerment, political activities that they might identify and their interpretation of how to change practices in accordance to the new knowledge vision. The interviews with financial advisers were somewhat similar to those with middle managers. However, the focus was more related to their practices, to how they had changed (or not) their practices and to their interpretations of the new knowledge vision, their experiences with sensegiving activities, their sensemaking activities, their relationships with colleagues and their viewpoints on top management, middle management and their own leader. We also asked about their sensemaking in relation to challenges and opportunities and about how they rose to these. We asked what form their involvement had taken, why they had participated in the way they had, who else was involved, the point of conflict and cooperation, when and with whom they talked and what action was taken to understand, manage and resolve new knowledge.

### *Data analysis*

The data analysis was carried out in multiple stages. First, we provided detailed and descriptive write-ups of verbatim notes from the observations, informal meetings and documents. Second, all interviews were fully transcribed and organised for each local bank, consisting of their leader and financial adviser. Then, all data were coded in NVivo. Open and axial forms of coding were used to identify categories (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). We conducted a thorough analysis of all data in order to identify categories that occurred regularly in the majority of sensemaking and sensegiving accounts. Each category detected in the data may be viewed as a discursive, temporarily 'condensed theme' or a 'question of

concern' (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007:61) for respondents' sensemaking and sensegiving related to possible political activities and processes. An explorative, qualitative, in-depth approach enabled us to investigate politics in connection with sensemaking and sensegiving activities among top management, middle managers and financial advisers. The data were analysed iteratively, with us as researchers going back and forth between the transcripts, coded data and theoretical literature in order to further develop and refine insights (Brown and Lewis, 2011).

## **Findings**

Our findings on politics, sensemaking and sensegiving are organised into the three hierarchical levels of top management, middle management and financial advisers in the BA respectively.

### **Top managers**

The decision of a new knowledge vision was exclusively taken by top management, meaning that top management excluded the influence and participation from other, including middle management. Their decision processes consisted of activities such as workshops, regular meetings and discussions, where different perceptions, anticipations and interpretations of how to change the BA were openly discussed, before deciding upon a new knowledge vision.

Two of them explain:

We have had our differences before deciding upon a new knowledge vision and learning activities. I think that we now have a common interpretation of goals and of how to work, but it is quite complex, and those from insurance and banks have to learn to work together.

Insurance people are used to being sellers, while bank people are resistant to being sellers. We need middle management to focus more on the changes and help their financial advisers (bank director 3).

We had several meetings and workshops before we made the decision on a new knowledge vision and what activities to facilitate for, for instance learning activities. I think we had fruitful meetings and even though we did not always agree upon everything, I think we made a good decision... One thing we could have done differently was that we should have involved middle management in these processes; that was a mistake, I think we all see that now (bank director 2).

Top management is well aware that middle management should have been involved in the decision process, but still they did not involve them at a later stage. Hence, middle management's perception of the change initiative and of what novelty means remains somewhat unclear. One of them explains:

We are not involved in decision processes, not even the budget process for each local bank that we are responsible for. We are just given 'the order' from the BA... We believe this is beyond reason... We have tried to do something about it for many years, without success... We only meet representatives from top management once a year for an information meeting (middle manager 2).

This lack of opportunities for middle management to get involved and influence the new knowledge vision affected the financial advisers they are responsible for. Financial advisers feel the pressure to change but perceive that new knowledge only culminates in sales figures and budgets. Consequently, how to change their way of working and make sense of the novelty is overshadowed by their feelings of having less control over their own performances. Hence, a lack of a common understanding of how to implement the new knowledge vision results in some frustration. They do not really know what is expected of them and what the new knowledge goals are. They explain:

We do not have any other goals than the ones the bank says that we have. These goals are just budget numbers. No one, not even our leader, can tell us how to work and be concrete on how we should prioritise our workload... We are supposed to do everything now, and be sellers. But we struggle with how. Several financial advisers have resigned in frustration over this (financial adviser 1).

We are not involved in any decisions... we know little of the change initiative. We are just given 'the orders' from the BA... our leader tells us what the BA wants us to do. So our leaders are not involved either. We are the ones that have to find new ways of practice to meet the new goals... and we have to obtain new knowledge and perform differently as sellers, but how? (financial adviser 5).

We find that top management's exclusion of middle management in the decision process results in middle managers not being able to make sense of the new knowledge vision. Further, since top management have not facilitated sensemaking processes and activities among middle managers, but have focused on facilitating learning activities that first and foremost involved financial advisers, middle managers are left out in the dark. We find that top managers' limited involvement in sensegiving that encourages middle managers'

sensemaking processes can be identified as political activities. Middle management has the formal authority, and theoretically they are in a position to decide, or at least affect, how to implement the novelty in each local office. As it is now, top management has shot down alternative interpretations and limited middle management's sensemaking processes through their (top managers') sensegiving activities (or lack thereof). Hence, top managers' exclusiveness in decision processes and in their own sensemaking processes are political activities.

Among the top management group, we find different interpretations of how to implement the change due to differences in the experience and perceptions of how to be a sales organisation. As they have to make sense of the new knowledge vision, we find differences in top management's sensemaking as well as contradictions about what the new knowledge vision means regarding changing established practices. Their ambiguous interpretation of the new knowledge and therefore a lack of sensemaking might serve as a trigger for their sensegiving activities, but this can also result in poor sensegiving. We find that they are quite enthusiastic about the new knowledge vision and rely on their different expertise as a possible enabler for their sensegiving. For instance, the fact that top managers with expertise in insurance are more familiar and have experience of typical sales organisations is positive for how top management make sense of the new knowledge vision, which again might serve as both a trigger and an enabler for their sensegiving activities. However, it is then problematic that sensemaking activities tend to stay within the top management group, as they tend to simplify what the new knowledge vision involves and how their employees must practice in order to implement the new knowledge vision. Their good intentions and motivations are explained as follows:

My interpretation of our decision to be a sales organisation and that financial advisers should serve all four business domains is that it is a good and necessary decision. We have to change to match the competition and financial advisers just have to realise that. We have to secure their jobs (bank director 1).

If you have knowledge about how the finance market is developing, you will also know that we have to earn more money and be more effective. It is important that financial advisers realise that. It is tough and we need our middle management and financial advisers to realise that. This is challenging, as they are often quite resistant to change (bank director 2).

Top managers' sensemaking not being in accordance with the new knowledge of a knowledgeable and learning organisation has serious consequences for their sensegiving activities. These sensegiving activities, which force relying on one's interpretations of new knowledge as only being a question of measuring sales figures, are political processes.

### **Middle managers**

The lack of middle manager involvement in the decision processes of new knowledge and in how new knowledge is measured through individual sales budgets result in resistance to change among both middle managers and financial advisers. This exclusiveness also negatively affects middle managers and financial advisers' sensegiving and sensemaking processes instead of creating legitimation and support for the change initiative. Those that meet sales budgets are quite satisfied, among both financial advisers and their middle managers, but still they do not recognise sales numbers as knowledge goals, or as a question of implementing new knowledge. Sensegiving as to how top management try to affect both middle managers and financial advisers' sensemaking of the new knowledge vision is therefore somewhat failing, as employees feel forced, controlled and dictated to by top management. The result is that middle managers are not engaged in sensegiving activities towards their financial advisers.

Middle managers' sensemaking processes are affected by top leaders having a different interpretation and understanding of the new knowledge vision and its consequences for practical work. In addition, since middle managers are not the focus of top managers' sensegiving activities, middle managers' sensemaking processes are limited. Top managers not using middle managers as a strategic resource to implement new knowledge can be recognised as a political process. Middle managers responding by not engaging in sensegiving activities towards their financial advisers is also a political process. Middle managers have the formal position of sensegiving, but our findings show that they do not use these opportunities and therefore turn down alternative interpretations as well as financial advisers' sensemaking processes. Two financial advisers explain:

I do not think our leader facilitates and has his own interpretation of how we should change and become sellers. I do not think he has that overview of our work. It is more like instructions from the bank: now we should focus on this, now we should focus on that. I

believe our leader should take more responsibility for how we should change. We need to find our own way of practicing here too, so that can be frustrating even though we are used to working independently (financial adviser 4).

I want my leader to be active and help me in how I must change and be a good seller. We have meetings, but it is very limited what we get out of them. I would prefer our leader to focus on how to motivate us and focus on solutions (financial adviser 10).

These quotations are to some extent confirmed by middle managers, as we find that they tend to just refer to the BA and their decisions without making their own interpretations or contributions to how to implement the new knowledge vision in their local banks. Two of them explain:

I just tell them, even though I know that their first reaction will be negative, that I do not have any other goals than those that the bank tells us to have. I am no clearer than that. I think it is up to them how to solve it. (middle manager)

It is important to focus on the results. We have to change and not everything can be democratic all the time... But I could have been better at involving financial advisers... perhaps then they would feel more secure about the change and more involved in what is going on. (middle manager)

### **Financial advisers' sensemaking**

Advisers are concerned about the time pressure and about not being able to provide the necessary customer advice since they need to obtain a substantial amount of new knowledge to fulfil the new role. Moreover, they explain that they sell financial security and are afraid of making mistakes. For instance, within insurance and placements in stocks and funds, they report that mistakes can be crucial. Consequently, they find that they are moving in the wrong direction, as they have first been given responsibility for all four business domains, and then they need to obtain the necessary knowledge on all four. Several of them experience a lack of control. One explains:

It has been too much since they decided that we should have all four main financial areas. Rather, we should specialise. Then, you could get it done properly. Now you feel more or less uncertain on everything. I feel that. I am afraid of not giving my customers all the information that is required. (financial adviser 1)

We should specialise. I think that we will be forced to do so because it is so demanding to have the necessary knowledge in all areas. I don't think that any of us master it. The quality is too poor. (financial adviser 9)

Middle managers' political processes are recognised as the force of 'ordering' financial advisers to be proactive sellers. We find that financial advisers do not make sense of that role and that their attitudes towards salespeople are very negative. Consequently, many financial advisers continue to work as before, not changing how they practice, but still reaching their sales budgets, at least so far. This is a lack of sensemaking of the novelty and their previous experience and established practice and knowledge that hinders them in creating their own understanding of how a role as proactive sellers can be integrated into how they perform as financial advisers. Two of them explain:

We are used to the word 'seller' being related to car sellers or vacuum cleaner sellers. We have to work on changing our attitudes towards our interpretation of the term. When you sell bank products, it is not so much a concrete product, it is more abstract. We sell security. (financial adviser 12)

I don't look at myself as a seller. Raw selling, that is just not me. I can sell a product, but is it the right one for the customer? I always think about the customer when I sell. I never sell a product that customers do not need. (financial adviser 3)

We find that financial advisers are quite knowledgeable, experienced and trustworthy, which is confirmed by their leaders, but also their leaders find that they are quite resistant to change. They tend to perform in accordance with what is expected of them, but when it comes to being sellers and therefore more proactive towards potential customers, for instance calling customers at home, they find it difficult and quite a contradiction to how they are used to working. Therefore, they avoid these selling activities, and moreover rely on how they have worked with customers previously and continue with "work as usual". Their resistance towards new knowledge is due to an inability to construct their own meanings of how to change established practice. We find that middle management are inconsistent about how to mobilise different tactics and learning, and for the most part they are not engaged in sensegiving activities. Hence, the political processes from middle managers are convergent and divergent actions (if any) without facilitating financial advisers' sensemaking processes.

Financial advisers respond to these divergent but also forcing actions of “orders” by not implementing new knowledge.

## **Discussion**

We have identified several political processes and activities related to top managers, middle managers and financial advisers’ sensemaking and sensegiving. In accordance with a practice-based approach, our focus has been on how political processes relate to how to change established practices through situated actions of resistance, agreement, persuasion and negotiation, where practitioners try to construct new meaning on how to change practice. Our results lead to six propositions, which are discussed next.

### **Politics and top management’s sensegiving and sensemaking**

Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) contribute with a broad range of triggers and enablers for sensegiving and show patterns of how leaders (and stakeholders) affect the actions that produce organisational sensemaking processes. They find that leaders engage in sensegiving when they perceive an issue to be uncertain, ambiguous and unpredictable. That means that complex sensemaking results in leaders being motivated to engage in sensegiving. Complex sensemaking serves as a trigger for facilitation acceptance, enthusiasm and energy for change (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). Our study shows the enthusiasm, motivation and energy mobilised among top management for the change initiative. We also find their sensemaking process to be ambiguous and unpredictable, where top management report on different interpretations and discussions internally in the group and the negotiations they have in order to come up with the new knowledge vision. Hence, our study confirms that complex sensemaking serves as a trigger and creates enthusiasm and motivation for engaging in sensegiving activities among top management. Top management’s sensemaking is the result of a flux of practicing, actions and interactions to create a new meaning and make sense of how to implement the new knowledge and therefore change established practices (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick *et al.*, 2005; Voronov, 2008). We find this sensegiving to be political, as sensegiving activities are initiated by top managers with a formal power position, using their power as a force to not only influence middle managers and employees’ sensemaking but also force one meaning of the truth and reality in the organisation, thereby turning down alternative interpretations. Moreover, we find that engaging in sensegiving

helps top management formulate their own sensemaking processes, especially when their sensemaking is characterised by perceptions of reality being unpredictable and ambiguous (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). The problem is however, that their sensegiving activities for the most part are directed towards financial advisers. This leads us to the first proposition.

*Top managers' exclusiveness in decision processes is a political process that has turned down alternative interpretations for practice and therefore affected their own sensemaking.*

Top managers are motivated by their own sensemaking as drivers for engagement in sensegiving activities. What we find to be crucial, however, is their lack of necessary knowledge and expertise on what new knowledge represents and on its consequences for established practice as well as how to implement it. Further, they have not involved middle managers or representatives from practice (financial advisers), they do not have enough knowledge within the top manager group and they do not have enough knowledge of relevant performances on what it means to be sellers and to serve the four knowledge domains for each financial adviser. We believe that our findings show the close link between sensemaking and engagement in sensegiving that Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) argue for in their studies. However, in our case, the lack of top leaders' relevant expertise and the fact that the organisation has limited experience in how to work in accordance with new knowledge result in inconsistent sensegiving. This results from now having access to enough relevant knowledge, but also since they have not involved middle management. Top managers do not appreciate how inconsistency in their own words and actions, due to different interpretations from top managers, can undermine the facilitation of change when they do not address middle managers' need for their own sensemaking, which enables them to function as change intermediaries (Balogun, 2003). This leads us to our second proposition.

*Top managers' sensegiving activities are political as they do not facilitate for either the middle managers' sensemaking or the financial advisers sensemaking.*

### **Politics and middle management's sensegiving and sensemaking**

Middle managers are supposed to be change intermediaries that undertake their own personal change, help their staff through change, implement changes and keep the business running

(Balogun, 2003). This is clearly evident in our study, where top management focus on middle managers as change recipients with responsibilities limited to implementing new knowledge. There is no focus on how middle managers are to change themselves and make sense of the novelty, where their own sensemaking would help facilitate sensegiving activities towards their financial advisers. Instead, they focus on implementation and on keeping the business running. However, the first two roles are argued to be crucial, where the enactment of middle managers' own interpretations and sensemaking is a key function (Balogun, 2003).

Previous research implies contradictions between top managers' goals and how they are implemented due to middle managers engaging in divergent actions for their own sensemaking and where top management are often negative to middle managers as they want to be identified with the official knowledge vision (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997). Middle managers' potential lies in gathering and synthesising information from top management to help facilitate adaptability and use resources to champion innovative ideas from top managers (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994). All these enactments must be rooted in middle managers' sensemaking and interpretations, where new experiences lead to more interpretations and so forth (Balogun, 2003). Only through middle managers' sensemaking, which is clearly social and relies on informal communication as well as formal communication, might the frustration of the different interpretations of top managers' spoken intent versus their behaviour be hindered (Balogun, 2003). Instead, in our study, middle managers experience sensemaking gaps from top managers' intent and from their sensegiving compared to what happens in practice.

Two main explanations are vital. First, the fact that middle managers are not involved in decision processes shows that top managers do not appreciate middle managers' role as change intermediaries and the extent to which they are able to perform this role adequately. If the legitimacy of middle managers' own sensemaking is not recognised among top managers, and top managers do not appreciate the inconsistency in their own words and actions (their own sensemaking and sensegiving), middle managers fail to be responsible and might become paralyzed (Balogun, 2003). Second, top managers' inconsistent sensegiving results in more divergent actions and sensemaking among middle managers rather than convergent sensemaking, as their perception of the new knowledge does not make sense and they are also

struggling with resistance to change among their subordinates. The middle managers in our study function as ‘change recipients’, being told to change but having no influence on the decision (Balogun and Johnson, 2004). These two points are supported by the findings in the literature, which argue that middle managers try to make sense of change initiatives but that their sensemaking and sensegiving affect whether their actions are convergent or divergent (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Hope, 2010). We find that our study supports divergent action as well as passivity among middle managers, instead of their sensemaking processes leading to convergence and motivation to engage in sensegiving. Balogun (2003) argues that middle managers need to communicate with colleagues and peers, gather information, ask questions, swap experiences and exchange gossip and stories for their own interpretations and sensemaking. In other words, middle managers need to manage themselves through change while helping their departments or teams (Balogun, 2003), which provides evidence for the sensemaking aspects of middle managers’ role. Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) argue that leaders engage in sensegiving if they have the necessary knowledge and experience and/or if the organisation already performs well within these knowledge domains. We argue that middle managers do not have the formal authority or the related power position to meet the expectations of financial advisers to undertake personal change and help them through change, because the focus from top management is just on middle managers implementing the changes and keeping the business running. These political activities from top management strongly limit middle managers’ engagement in sensemaking and sensegiving. This finding is opposed to that of Hope (2010), who finds that middle managers that mobilise resource power (such as expertise in the business) strongly influence the sensemaking of others through sensegiving activities, including superiors’ sensemaking. This leads to the third and fourth propositions.

*Middle managers do not engage in top managers sensegiving activities on how to implement new practices. This is recognized as a political process among middle managers which affects their sensemaking.*

*Middle managers not engaging in sensegiving is a political process that affects financial advisers’ sensemaking processes.*

### **Politics and financial advisers’ sensemaking**

Sensegiving is enabled by the combination of a discursive ability to allow employees to construct and articulate persuasive accounts for the world and process facilitators in the form

of organisational routines, practices and performances (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). What is clearly stated through our study is that sensegiving is a result of sensemaking processes, both at a top management level and among middle managers. At both these levels, leaders have the formal authority and power, while financial advisers might feel empowered by the redefinitions of how to change practice. At the same time, financial advisers need to engage in sensemaking on how to change practice. Instead, they experience inconsistent sensegiving and sensemaking activities among top and middle management. These challenges are supported by a number of authors who argue that resistance to change is due to threats to established practice and because existing power positions need renegotiation (Carlie, 2002; Hardy *et al.*, 2003; Lawrence *et al.*, 2005; Newell *et al.*, 2009; Mørk *et al.*, 2010). When we approach resistance to change, we find that political activities hinder the legitimacy and support for change. This is in line with change and innovation relying on a combination of the exploitation and exploration of knowledge as stated by March (1991), where employees, or in our case financial advisers, must create meaning on how to both combine and change their role accordingly. Instead, sensemaking in our study, among middle managers and financial advisers, is largely reduced to employees reacting or adapting to what is handed to them, instead of sensemaking as constructing and finding actual meaning that makes sense in relation to established practice (Weick *et al.*, 2005). This leads to our fifth proposition:

*Top and middle managers' sensemaking as a contradiction between the new knowledge vision and how they want established practice to change is a political process that affects financial advisers' sensemaking.*

We have argued that middle managers' own sensemaking is crucial and strongly affects their social interaction and formal and informal communication with financial advisers to help them change (Balogun, 2003). Owing to different interpretations perceived in top management's sensegiving, including spoken intent and their behaviours, middle managers fail to be responsible for both their own and financial advisers' sensemaking; as a result, financial advisers experience middle managers as just following orders from top managers that do not make sense of how to change established practice. If middle managers were given responsibility and acknowledgement for their role of planning, budgeting resources and having to oversee change-related activities, their sensemaking would help them interpret financial advisers' experiences, what this means for practice and the implications for how they should change. Instead, both middle managers and financial advisers perceive a

contradiction between what top management have decided upon as a new knowledge vision and top management's limited focus on measurements and sales budgets. This hinders their meaning construction and reconstruction as they attempt to develop a meaningful framework for understanding the new knowledge, which are the basics of sensemaking (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). For middle managers, the result is less communication with financial advisers. This is problematic, as most sense is made through the social processes of sensemaking at the recipient level (Hope, 2010). In these social processes, middle managers should interact by exchanging stories, rumours, jokes, conversations and discussions to form an interpretation of what to do to put the change into action (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Maitlis, 2005). Instead, we find that financial advisers are afraid of the consequences of changing their ways of working when it comes to customer care and having enough knowledge of financial products to give satisfactory advice. We also find that middle managers experience more or less the same and therefore they do not engage in sensegiving activities towards financial advisers, and when they do their actions are perceived as convergent and divergent. Hence, for the most part, they are unable to help financial advisers' sensemaking of the change initiative. This leads to the sixth proposition:

*Top managers' sensegiving and middle managers not engaging in sensegiving are both political processes that affect financial advisers' sensemaking with the consequences of financial advisers not implementing new knowledge.*

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we identified six propositions of how political processes and activities influence the sensemaking and sensegiving of new knowledge among top managers, middle managers and financial advisers in a Norwegian bank. Top managers' political activities of excluding others from the decision process and relying on their own expertise prevented them from grasping the complexity of a new knowledge vision in their own sensemaking processes and resulted in sensegiving that was characterised by contradictions between their interpretations and spoken intent versus their facilitation of how to change practice. Middle managers' sensemaking of their new role were affected by the politics of top managers. They were not given the authority as change intermediaries, which would enable their personal change and help their staff through the change. Instead, they were just told to focus on implementing change and keeping the business running. Middle managers' political activities were to accept top managers' sensegiving instead of managing themselves in their own sensemaking

to help financial advisers with how to change their role and practice. As a result, middle managers' sensemaking affects their engagement in sensegiving. They moreover force down an acceptance of financial advisers having to work as sellers serving all four business domains, which limits the goal of a new knowledge vision. Hence, the political activities of top management affect middle managers' sensemaking and sensegiving. For financial advisers, the political processes of top and middle managers result in resistance, as they struggle with sensemaking in terms of their perception on how to change and implement the new knowledge vision.

Our study showed how sensemaking processes affect leaders' facilitation of sensegiving, where top managers settle for plausibility when dealing with ambiguity in their own sensemaking and where middle managers follow orders and turn down alternative interpretations in their own sensemaking. Hence, top leaders and middle managers' sensegiving results in financial advisers' sensemaking being closer to the exploitation of established practice than it is to an exploration of how to change practice. These findings outline the close link between sensemaking and facilitation through sensegiving activities and highlight the importance of acknowledging middle managers as strategic assets and change intermediaries. Instead, financial advisers engage in their own interpretations of the novelty among other financial advisers with the results of not implementing the new knowledge vision in accordance with top managers' intent.

### **Implications for practice**

Our findings highlight the importance of top management's role and demonstrate that they need to involve all levels in their own sensemaking of strategic decisions and in how to facilitate through sensegiving activities. By acknowledging middle managers as strategic assets and change intermediaries, middle managers' own sensemaking is in focus as is how they are to change their role in accordance with the new knowledge and their role as facilitators and sensegivers. Leaders and managers need to engage in formal and informal communication with colleagues and peers, gather information, ask questions, swap experiences, exchange stories and engage in interpretations, perceptions and expectations of how to change practice in order to develop their own sensemaking and help employees at all levels in their sensemaking processes (*how* to change and implement new knowledge).

Further, changing established practice as a result of the exploration and exploitation of knowledge takes time and needs to be made sense of before it is implemented at all levels of the organisation. The focus on sensemaking is most important, as this creates the starting point for relevant sensegiving activities. Sensemaking processes will therefore enable leaders in sensegiving activities that need to be consistent to determine expectations and a common interpretation of spoken intent on new knowledge in accordance with behaviour at all levels.

### **Limitations of the study**

Our study has several limitations. The first limitation, studying one specific change process does not necessarily capture other aspects of social dynamics such as individual and organizational aspects that would influence implementation of new knowledge. Second, only branches of one bank alliance in one country call for our findings to be investigated in other professions and geographical contexts. The third limitation is to be found in the data collection method. We relied on semi-structured interviews, observations of meetings and informal conversations. Our findings might also been strengthened by adding more data sources (e.g. emails, diaries or more observations of daily practices).

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