Sensemaking is key to interpersonal engagement

The cylinder model supports good sensemaking

Good sensemakers use several simple strategies
something has always bugged me about the way interaction skills are taught. Be it interviews, negotiations, or sales pitches, the emphasis is invariably the same. It’s tactics. Use open-ended questions. Avoid being judgmental. Get them coffee (but have a tea with you too in case they prefer it, then drink the one they don’t take). Plan. Plan some more. Etc. Etc.

This focus isn’t wrong. Each one of those tactics is good advice. But I can’t help thinking that we’re neglecting to learn a second skill. That skill is interpersonal sensemaking. Making sense of the other person’s behaviour and its underpinning motivation is critical. How else does one determine the best thing to say? The best tactic to use?

Is it really an issue? After all, people are sensible. They’re going to try and say the right thing. Some are even practiced in active listening, a technique where the listener re-states what the speaker has said in his or her own words to confirm a common understanding. There’s no doubt that active listening is a step along the path of good sensemaking.

The case for giving more prominence to sensemaking is two-fold. The first is a simple observation. Can we assume that people intuitively know how to make sense of another any more than they intuitively know what tactic to use? The second is a more subtle point. The teaching of tactics often gives students the impression that good tactics work in all situations, regardless of timing or context.

The example—sine qua non—of this second implication is the ‘open question.’ Open questions seeks a respondent’s knowledge, opinions, or feelings in an undirected way, usually by asking ‘what,’ ‘why,’ or ‘how’ questions. I can see why it is taught so widely. When frames are aligned, sense is made, and cooperation. That’s going to be quite a skill to master.

When it comes to sensemaking, the emerging view is that all of these perspectives is correct. Each of these different foci—the relational, the identity, and the instrumental—reflects a different ‘frame’ that will dominate conversation at any one time. The key for interviewers is to align their framing with that of their respondent. When frames are aligned, sense is made, and cooperation is more likely to ensue.

This insight will not come as a surprise. It’s less effective to offer a person money when their primary concern is to avoid the shame an action will bring to their family. The money is instrumental; the concern is identity. Equally, it is not useful to continue to emphasise trust and the need for mutual understanding when the interviewee’s concern has switched to sorting out how the meeting is going to end. Focusing on the inappropriate frame here runs the danger of making the other person feel misunderstood or unvalued. That’s a recipe for conflict and heightened emotions.

Where do we start if we want to be systematic about sensemaking? One account that brings the available re-

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What would you do?

At 2:30am on a Thursday morning you accompany the police to a small housing estate in North London where a man is standing on his third-floor balcony. He has a nylon rope around his neck, which is attached securely to a washing line hook. He is leaning on the metal fence that separates the balcony from the drop below such that, if he falls or jumps, it is likely that he will decapitate. The man sees you approaching and acknowledges this by asking, “what the fuck do you want?” So, what would you say or do? Working out your options or calling your favourite expert is not an option here; you probably have about 30 seconds before it’s too late. Making fast assessments of such situations takes practice, but it’s essential in the field and in the interview room.
search together in a useful way is known as the cylinder model. The cylinder model captures the different ways in which people communicate, and the motivations that underpin these, in three dimensions. These dimensions map out the ‘universe’ of the different ways people speak.

The spine of the cylinder differentiates a person’s overall orientation to interaction as either avoidant, competitive, or cooperative. An avoidant orientation is characterized by retractions from substantive discussion and a refusal to accept responsibility for events. This orientation may occur either because of the overwhelming nature of the situation, or because of a strategic wish to stonewall progress. A competitive orientation is expressed by behaviours that attack the other party’s position or credibility, while simultaneously restoring a personal position through positional arguing, boasting, and the rejection of compromises. These behaviours often form the bulk of interaction in uncooperative suspects whose natural response is to push back—a phenomenon characterized as the ‘one-down effect.’ Finally, a cooperative orientation is associated with behaviours such as concessions, compliments, and messages aimed at building relationships. These behaviours create a calmer, more normative discussion that leaves behind some of the unpredictability of crisis.

When adopting one of these three orientations, people do so to pursue a variety of goals. The second
distinction in the cylinder model characterizes these goals as instrumental, identity, or relational concerns. At any one point in time, a speaker may focus on gaining information by using bargaining techniques such as appealing to the interlocutor’s better nature or making offers of mutual exchange. This would be reflective of an instrumental focus because the speaker is using cooperative offers, concessions and information exchange to achieve an instrumental goal. By contrast, a speaker may use behaviours such as justifications, repeated interruptions, profanity, and insults to increase their power and personal self-worth. These behaviours are less focused on an instrumental goal and more focused on attacking the interlocutor’s identity while supporting self-identity. Finally, a person may respond to these insults though dialogue that empathises with the other’s position and identifies points of commonality. These messages are principally motivated by relational goals.

Critically, an individual can pursue each of these motivational goals while adopting an avoidant, competitive or cooperative orientation to dialogue. This creates nine communicative frames for understanding crisis interaction that form the cylinder model. At any one time, individuals tend to adopt an avoidant, competitive or cooperative orientation to interaction and pursue either an identity, instrumental or relational goal, with varying degrees of intensity. So, for example, a couple in a child custody dispute may yell abuse and insults as they compete over identity issues that stem from their beliefs about how the other acted within the relationship. But they may revert to more cooperative, instrumental behaviour such as compromises and promises when discussing what’s best for their child.

The final distinction is the intensity to which individuals communicate about a particular issue. The intensity of a speaker’s messages may seem like an obvious clue to make sense of, but it is easily overlooked. High intensity dialogue includes anger and threats, profanity, obscure metaphors, and dramatic changes in paralinguistic cues that reflect a deviation from neutrality. It’s associated with threat conviction and emotional stress. Relentlessly threatening action if a demand is not met signifies a high degree of concern for the issue, which is unlikely to dissipate until some form of agreement is made. Such intensity needs to be reduced before one can move from one frame to another.

What’s quite remarkable about the cylinder structure is how universal it is as a description of the communication that occurs in many contexts. It is possible to take a recording of an interaction and quite literally plot each speaker moving in and out of these different frames over time. This is not to suggest that any one utterance or message is exclusively attached to one frame. Language is more dynamic than that. But what it does suggest is that the process of cooperating with others is structured around these different emphases.

So how do good sensemakers go about identifying a speaker’s frame? One driver of their success is the use of active listening. They also appear to show sensitivity to the ‘status’ of the interaction at any one time. In hostage negotiations, for example, police negotiators and perpetrators match one another’s frames for sustained periods, with this matching increasing over time for crises that end in the perpetrator surrendering, but decreasing over time for those that end violently. Part of this divergence in matching appears to be due to the fact that, in successful incidents, police negotiators are more likely to switch their language style to that of the perpetrator.

They also vary the extent to which they talked or listened to the perpetrator at any one time. In successful resolutions, police negotiators reduced the amount they spoke by over 40% during transitional periods where the frame of the perpetrators’ speech and their own speech was not aligned. The negotiators appeared to recognise that they were no longer in sync with the perpetrator, and so held back from taking a dominant role in interaction. In doing so they gave themselves the opportunity to retune their sense of the perpetrator’s communication and re-engage him or her with the appropriate frame. Now, if we can find a way to develop that skill...

More on the Science

Simon Wells et al. (2013). Crisis negotiations. In Olekalns & Adair (Eds.), Handbook of research in negotiation. Edward Elgar.