Abstract
Humans make sense of situations they are in. They attach meanings to events and act according to these meanings. They do the same in the case of projects. To begin with, in order to make sense, projects have to be ‘talked into being’ (Clegg, 2005). However, processes of sensemaking are ongoing and new insights or unforeseen situations can alter the initial sensemaking of a project by the participants. Although these ongoing processes can undermine projects, they can also strengthen them, if done properly. In this paper we demonstrate the importance of these ongoing processes of sensemaking in the case of the renovation of the Vondelpark pavilion in Amsterdam.

After the introduction and research question, sensemaking is presented as a theoretical framework for examining the case. This is followed by a description of a crucial incident in the case. After a short description of the methodology used during the research, this incident is analysed on the basis of the theoretical framework, after which we discuss the development of sensemaking in the project. The article is concluded with an affirmative answer to the research question.

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Keywords: Project management, sensemaking, public projects, transformative dialogue, meta narratives

1. Introduction and research question

Project management is still supposed to be technical, functional and instrumental (Cicmil et al 2009, Blomquist et al 2010, Turner et al 2012). The realisation that project managers have to talk construction into being in the first place is relatively new (Clegg, 2005). The idea of the role of sensemaking in organisations and organising has a long tradition. Karl Weick is best known for his work on this topic. Attention for the role of sensemaking in project management is also relatively new (comp. Ivory et al 2006).

In the summer of 2012 we had a meeting with the project manager in charge of the refurbishment of the former Film Museum in the 'Vondelpark' public urban park in Amsterdam. During the conversation it transpired that the preparations for the refurbishment had not gone that smoothly and the idea came about of researching whether sensemaking could make a difference to the project's success. This article is the report of the ensuing research.

2. Theoretical framework

Sensemaking is what it says it is: 'it means the making of sense' (Weick, 1995: 4). In Dutch the concept would mean something like 'beterkenisgeving' (put a meaning on) or 'zingeving' (giving meaning to). However, these translations do not fully reflect the character of sensemaking. It is more than that. We base

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our approach primarily on the book entitled 'Sensemaking in organizations', written by one of the most important authors in the field of sensemaking, Carl Weick (1995).

With a view to creating a more specific definition of the term 'sensemaking', Weick describes, for example, the difference with interpretation. 'Interpretation is a component of sensemaking. One example of a clear description of sensemaking is the work of Schön, in particular when he deals with presenting a problem as a key component of professional work. 'Presenting a problem is a process in which we can interactively identify things we are going to focus on and determine the underlying context.' The task of the manager is not that of choosing, but of generating, of generating a clear and adequate formulation of what the problem situation 'is', of creating a coherent 'structure' from unrelated and disorderly occurrences, in which both current and possible future events acquire an understandable 'place' and all this not only through action, but through a continuous discussion with all other parties involved' (ibid. 9). The difference between interpreting things that have happened or are going to happen and the related sensemaking is expressed by the phrase, 'If the interpretation makes good sense, then that's what happened' (ibid. 10).

A crucial characteristic of sensemaking is that human situations are continually clarified (ibid. 11). Nevertheless, sensemaking is entirely different from a term such as strategic rationality: 'It (strategic rationality, ed.) is made up of clear questions and answers in an attempt not to miss anything. The world of sensemaking is different. Sensemaking has to do with contextual rationality. It is made up of vague questions, murky answers and negotiated agreements which attempt to reduce the confusion' (Weick, 1993: 636).

In addition, sensemaking has to do with making something 'sensitive' (ibid. 16). This means making something perceptible, as well as understandable and tangible. Weick also describes a number of characteristics of sensemaking (ibid. 17-62). These characteristics form the basis for the definition of sensemaking which we use in this article (cf. Volker, 2010: 56), namely that sensemaking is the social process, based on perception, of making something perceptible, understandable and tangible and concerns the continuous development of plausible presentations of reality which legitimise our actions.

Sensemaking is sensible (takes place) in uncertain or ambiguous situations (Weick, 1995: 91). Indeed, the more uncertain or ambiguous the situation, the more important sensemaking becomes for dealing with the situation(ibid. 70). In uncertain situations, assumptions, defined as facts and values, play a key role and are very similar to emotionally charged belief (ibid. 114). In an ambiguous situation it appears that, in the absence of objective criteria, players with a different value orientation depend more on personal or professional values when giving meaning to that situation. The clash between different values often adds a political and emotional dimension to the situation (ibid. 93).

When studying sensemaking in projects, incidents 'whereby people suddenly and deeply feel that the world -meaning that of the project (ed.) - is no longer an ordered system' (Weick, 1993: 633) can be worth their weight in gold. What makes such incidents so shocking is that both the sense of what happens and the resources to restore that sense both collapse at one and the same time (ibid.).

Although it is often taken for granted, projects often need to be ‘talked into being’ (Clegg, 2005). That can be done at two levels, at the level of the project itself and at the level of the position of the project in the world.

To begin with the latter, a project must add something new. There has to be a certain degree of necessity. This means that a certain added value has to be expressed to clarify the necessity of the result. What does it add? A legitimisation such as this tends to be expressed in terms of a narrative. In order to ensure that the project has a reason to exist, a world has to be sketched in which the project is significant and makes 'sense'. In this context, Alderman et al. talk about the importance of a meta-narrative. ‘We see the need for a ‘meta-narrative’ to be constructed that reflects the overall vision of the project and can meet the aspirations of all principal stakeholders’ (2005: 384). A project that has no added value ‘makes no sense’. This level of sensemaking can often be found within project teams or steering committees.
The first level implies that a project ‘has to be constructed socially and materially’ (Clegg, 2005). This means that not only people and resources are required in order to implement a project, but also harmonisation. Using the example of the construction of a new sewer system in Sydney on the eve of the Olympic Games, Clegg demonstrates the innovative manner in which this project was implemented. Sensemaking at this level has to do primarily with the question of whether something ‘works’ or not. Something that does not ‘work’, or is not functional, ‘makes no sense’. This level of sensemaking is often present in design or construction teams.

The consequence of ‘no sensemaking’ means that the parties involved lose their motivation and possibly terminate their contribution in both a material and mental sense. The former means that the parties involved do not carry out the tasks they have been assigned and literally withdraw. The latter means that the parties involved make a contribution, but do so without any conviction. The latter may well be more damaging than the former because the former is visible and can therefore be discussed. The latter is hidden from view and may undermine the quality of the result. The latter underlines the importance of sensemaking in projects.

Circumstances may mean it is necessary to change the meta-narrative. Using the case study as a basis, we want to show what happens when circumstances change.

3. The case

Incident

Since the relocation of the Film Museum at the end of 2011, to a location on the northern banks of the River IJ in Amsterdam, the old building that used to be its home has been empty. The building in question is at a magnificent location in the Vondelpark, in a niche in the richly verdant periphery of the park, with a patio that was always packed in summertime.

A pitch was organised for prospective new tenants in 2010 and it was won by the AVRO television and radio organisation. They wanted to turn the building into a 'cultural media house', a platform where the makers of art and culture programmes could meet a, first and foremost, varied audience. All this in a dynamic environment which offers all manner of facilities for the use of new media and which is strongly interwoven with a new pub and restaurant facility. When it won the pitch at the end of 2010, the AVRO assumed that this 'new-style clubhouse' would be reopening its doors at the end of 2012, just in time to provide a year-long boost to the organisation's push to recruit new members. The idea was to ensure that the AVRO would continue to be an important player when the new broadcasting concessions were awarded after 1 April 2014. 2013 could then be used for a large campaign to acquire new members "The more members you have the more say and more money you get".

That was then. Since winning the pitch, there has been a changing of the political guard locally and the AVRO is now embroiled in a merger with the TROS television and radio organisation. The appointment of a new project manager in January 2012 made it clear that a target date at the end of 2012 was no longer realistic and that, instead, the 'AVRO house' could only be operational at the end of 2013. As far as the AVRO was concerned, the momentum had been lost.

Project organisation

The project organisation consisted of a Design Team, a Project Team and a Steering Committee. The design team was involved in the technical and material part of the renovation. The main task of this team was to plan how to make the pavilion suitable for radio and television broadcasting. The sensemaking in this team revolved mainly around the question of what was needed technically and materially in order to make it work.
The project team was responsible for the integral management of the project. The project team consisted of participants from three parties, namely two representatives from a broadcasting company (the future user of the pavilion), a representative from West Amsterdam city council (the owner of the pavilion) and a project manager from the project management bureau of the city of Amsterdam (PMB). The steering committee consisted both of project principals and the project manager. The issue of the project’s importance, as portrayed in a meta-narrative, ought to be addressed in both the project team and the steering committee.

4. Methodology

The research involved interviews with members of the steering committee and the project group in the period between July and December 2012. This involved open questions being asked, following an introduction to the research and a presentation of what we believe sensemaking in projects means. Transcriptions were made of the interviews. In addition, reports were available of informal network meetings on the subject of sensemaking which the project manager and his assistant organised in the Vondelpark during the summer and autumn of 2012. Lastly, a New Year mailing was available which the project manager and his assistant had sent out to all those involved in the project. These details together formed the rough data for systematic qualitative analysis.

5. Analysis

The result of the analysis is shown below. It portrays a selection of subjects from the data to which sensemaking can be linked, such as definition, presentation of the problem or (un)certainty (see diagram). The subjects were selected on the basis of the degree to which a link was supported by the data.

Figure 1 Result of the analysis

The subjects were grouped according to themes, as briefly analysed below moving in a clockwise direction. The text includes examples of the data, which are the sentences between quotation marks.

Sensemaking is defined by the parties involved as "making sense", as "the act of giving the project a logical place in the ambitions and targets goals of an organisation", or as "the value which the project has for the city, for the AVRO, the district and all project employees". On a number of occasions, the term
sensemaking was linked to "feeling" and this is an indication that sensemaking goes beyond making something perceptible or understandable, as indicated in our definition.

Nevertheless, sensemaking can be linked more often with the formulation of a problem presentation than directly with feeling. "The question is whether we can breathe new life into the project. How can we provide a new impetus for the project and the collaboration?"

Sensemaking in the project can be linked to being in a situation of uncertainty. "Huge uncertainty regarding the schedule and interventions. Regarding the amount of say. All kinds of things. And they can't actually touch it. They can't actually get a grip on it. Every time they come here, they see the building and nothing happens. That is something they find very hard to deal with." Alternatively the situation is unclear or ambiguous. "Because then, for example, I hear from a member of staff, and that surprises me a bit, a project officer saying something like, 'Yeah, it is not entirely clear to me what they are going to do next'. And then I think, 'He is the only one who has been involved from day one'. And so I don't understand it. He was also there at the pitch." It supports the theory that sensemaking is sensible (or takes place) in uncertain or ambiguous situations (Weick, 1995: 91).

In the case sensemaking can often be linked to the ambition of the district or the AVRO for the project. "Look, my ambition, on behalf of the managing committee is to give the building a function which makes everybody say, 'That belongs in that building.' Something that everyone agrees, 'Fulfils an important role for Amsterdam and the district of West.' Something with regard to which everybody can claim, 'It adds something'. Another comment was, "So I started trying my best to create more diversity within the company as well. It was no easy task. I'm still trying to achieve it to this very day. So that was one thing. The other is… Our profile is based very much on art and culture. And that is traditionally what the majority of the parties we are cooperating with in Amsterdam are involved in. So I was thinking along the lines of diversity, a new type of organisation, art and culture, and of creating a clubhouse in the centre of Amsterdam."

Sometimes, sensemaking can also be linked to the personal motivation of the parties involved. "I personally made a serious commitment and stuck my neck out for this project".

Sensemaking can also be associated with (the lack of) ambitions at various levels of the (project) organisation because roles differ and are interpreted differently. The same applies to interests and their backgrounds. 'In itself, or in its final form as a platform, the project falls under the responsibility of the media director. However, at the moment he is the least involved of the day-to-day managers. That is actually quite logical because he simply has a very different short-term interest given that his role is to focus on ratings'.

Another comment made was, "We (the city district, ed.) took on far too much of a real estate role.(_) So the people who work under my responsibility also did the same." Trust also appears to be a condition for sensemaking. "If there is no mutual trust, it will fail."

As far as the broadcasting company was concerned the project made sense because it created a new public venue and a threshold to the city of Amsterdam. It was part of a scenario to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the company’s existence and played a part in the related promotional campaign. That sensemaking was seriously disturbed by the delay.

For the district council of West Amsterdam, the broadcasting company was just (another) lessee of the pavilion. They saw their role in the project as facilitating the new user by renovating the pavilion as best as they could. They saw the delay mainly as a problem for the new user.

As for the project management bureau, renovating the Vondelpark pavilion was a prestigious project. In their view the pavilion is an eye catcher in Amsterdam’s ‘Central Park’. The impossibility of the initial planning and deadline were identified thanks to the professional expertise of the project manager. To him it made sense to make a realistic schedule. He was surprised by the strong negative reaction of the broadcasting company.

To summarise, the picture presented above shows first and foremost that, although the elements from the definition of sensemaking provided can be identified in the case, they are more nuanced. Further, the case
reveals that sensemaking is indeed important in an uncertain situation. Lastly, it is also apparent that, in the case, on the one hand sensemaking can be linked with problem formulation and on the other hand with the ambition of the organisations involved, as well as with the (lack of) personal motivation of the parties involved, their interests and the related backgrounds. These problem formulations and ambitions/motivations/interests differed per key project figure during the incident.

That incident occurred a year after the start and was initiated by a message from the newly-appointed project manager that the initial schedule and deadline could not be met. According to his analysis, it was impossible to realise the renovation within the allotted time. That led to a crisis within the project team and the steering committee.

The delay exposed the different sensemakings of the project participants. As far as the broadcasting company was concerned, the project made sense because it created a new public venue and a threshold to the city of Amsterdam. It was part of a scenario to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the company’s existence and played a part in the related promotional campaign. That dream was shattered and that led to a strong negative reaction.

For the West Amsterdam district council, the broadcasting company was just (another) pavilion tenant. They saw their role in the project as facilitating the new user by renovating the pavilion as best as they could. At district level the delay did not have any particular consequences. It was first and foremost a problem for the new tenant.

As for the project management bureau, renovating the Vondelpark pavilion was a prestigious project. In their view, the pavilion is an eye catcher in the ‘Central Park’ of Amsterdam. Identifying the impossibility of the initial planning and deadline was part of the professional expertise of the project manager. To him, it made sense to make a realistic schedule. He was surprised by the strong negative reaction of the broadcasting company. The delay did not change the idea of the pavilion as an eye catcher in the Vondelpark.

The effect was that the Avro felt isolated and not supported in the problematic and dramatic aspects of the delay. It also reinforced the feeling of suspicion towards the West Amsterdam City council and towards the project manager as bureaucratic, uncommitted and incompetent. From the point of view of West Amsterdam district council, the reaction of the broadcasting company revealed its ignorance when it comes to renovating historical buildings. The project manager realised he was the messenger and he felt misinterpreted by the Avro as regards his commitment to the project.

So, there was no overall or shared view that united the participants. As long as their views did not collide they could co-exist peacefully. However, when it transpired that the broadcasting company’s narrative could not be realised, it also became clear that the other participants did not support it.

The project manager identified that lack of joint sensemaking when he was appointed. He made it clear that he wanted to be able to put his heart and soul into it, and otherwise there was no point. The problem was, however, that the Avro interpreted this statement as a lack of commitment and application. From that moment onwards, the various players started to acquire (negative) views of each other, or existing views were reinforced.

In this respect, the sensemaking by the participants undermined the project. Differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ emerged and the participants’ negative views of each other were confirmed. This led to a feeling of distrust, as became apparent during long discussions on details and excessive attention for procedures. Everything that was discussed was committed to paper.

6. Lessons

What can be learned from this case? We can identify three lessons: 1) sensemaking is fundamental in project management, 2) processes of sensemaking are ongoing and 3) a meta-narrative is needed.

Sensemaking is fundamental in project management
Projects are not a given, but have to be given a place in the world. They have to be ‘born’ and ‘life’ has to be breathed into them. In other words, they have to be ‘talked into being’. In a word, no (good) narrative means no project. The narrative with which the Avro won the pitch is a good example. That narrative ‘made the most sense’ at that moment. Sensemaking is fundamental on a personal level for all principal stakeholders. They need to feel committed to the project. In the words of the project manager:

‘I want to feel the importance of this work, for myself and for you, and I want to be able to put my heart and soul into it so that I am fully motivated each and every day.’

Processes of sensemaking are ongoing

Project sensemaking is not set in stone. Stakeholders make sense of actions and developments and act upon them. In this way, stakeholders continuously develop local-historical stories of what is going on (Hosking, 2004: 264). These stories can alter during the process of realisation. There may be an incident, intrusive external developments or changed views regarding the need for the project in the world. This means that the sense made out of a project may also change. The delay in the planning of the renovation of the Vondelpark Pavilion meant that the initial sensemaking of the Avro did not fit any more and had to be adjusted.

Meta-narratives are needed

As we saw, working on the same project does not necessarily mean that all participants share the same view or make the same sense out of the project. The case of the Vondelpark pavilion shows that the same project can have different meanings for the various parties involved. This is all well and good but, if things go wrong, the parties involved will revert to their own narrative. What is needed then is an overall vision of the project that can meet the aspirations of all principal stakeholders.

In the case of the Vondelpark pavilion, there did not appear to be an a unifying narrative in which all the parties felt involved. The newly appointed project manager of the Pavilion was looking for such a meta-narrative, but it did not exist at that time. Although such a narrative could not have prevented the incident, it may well have softened its impact.

In the case of the Vondelpark pavilion, therefore, there was no meta-narrative. Nevertheless, two small initiatives did breathe new life into the project as far as the Avro was concerned. One of these was the 'Record Store Day' [De dag van het vinyl] radio broadcast from the Vondelpark Pavilion in the Spring of 2013. The other initiative was a number of meetings of the ‘Plug the Day’ [Plug de dag] network in and about the pavilion in the summer of 2013. Another factor that helped is that the Avro merger partner decided to support the project. By doing so, it has also become their narrative.

One way of achieving such a narrative is via ‘transformative dialogue’. Such a dialogue ‘may be viewed as any form of interchange that succeeds in transforming a relationship between those committed to otherwise separate and antagonistic realities (and their related practices) to one in which common and solidifying realities are under construction’ (Gergen et al., 2001: 682). One of the characteristics of a dialogue like this is the co-creation of new realities through the localisation of superordinate goals (p. 697). These are goals and objectives which transcend the differences between the stakeholders and therefore unite them. Without these goals, participants may ‘lose’ each other. As we have seen, negative stereotypes are then developed and reinforced.

7. Implications

Broadening the scope of project management

Much of the impact of the external environment on projects is covered by the attention paid to stakeholders and, more generally, politics (Pinto, 19XX) and the attention paid to the need for a proper ‘business case’ (reference). This can be reduced to a simple cost and revenue calculation. What we argue and show is that a meaningful story is also necessary. Such a story connects participants who may, on other
levels, have different and even opposing stakes in the projects. This aspect needs to be further developed in theory and practice.

‘This project’s élan is down to the Avro director and partially the councillor. In order to understand the director and the councillor better you have to have your eye on a lot more than the costing, planning and schedule of requirements.’

**The project manager as storyteller**

To develop a meaningful story which gives ‘life’ to a project is a creative act. It means that common ground has to be found between all principal stakeholders (Alderman et al., 2005). Keeping this story alive is an ongoing process that has to be monitored. This requires special skills on the part of project managers who are responsible for projects as a whole, and thus for both levels of sensemaking. This is not a new idea.

‘Sensemaking has probably always been implicitly recognised as what project managers actually do, by examining the need to make sense at an appropriate high level, as well as at a detailed engineering and manufacturing level’ (Alderman et al., 2005: 384). In order to do this, project managers need to be able to facilitate transformative dialogues among stakeholders. It is through these kinds of dialogues that stories are developed which connect and move stakeholders.

8. In conclusion

The question at the beginning of this article was whether sensemaking could make a difference to the project’s success.

Working on the same project does not necessarily mean that all participants share the same view or make the same sense out of the project. Project managers need to be aware of the different sensemaking of the participants and need to develop an overarching story that makes sense of the project independently of the participants directly involved.

In the case of the Vondelpark pavilion that could, for example, mean breathing new life into the building, which would require the involvement of all the participants and, in that sense, a delay or another disturbance would affect everyone. In order to keep a project team united there has to be at least one viewpoint that is (more or less) shared by all, and therefore ‘hurts’ all if the project cannot be realised. As such, sensemaking has made a difference to the project’s success.

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