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**Making sense of experiences: sensemaking processes  
following critical communication events**

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## Abstract

Sensemaking may give us insight into the way organization members construct frameworks for abstract concepts like communication culture and organizational culture. By means of the critical incidents technique and follow-up questions, 125 critical communication events were collected from organization members, which were categorized into 9 categories. Respondents were able to derive 113 organizational culture values from these incidents, which were categorized in 8 organizational culture categories. Results suggest that organization members who are more satisfied with their team, more often ascribe positive meaning to events in their organization. Organizational growth is a value that appears autonomously in several categories. Past versus present incidents but also projection events were mentioned, which are actually about sense-keeping (respondents seek events that fit existing values). Respondents seem unable or unwilling to perform organizational sensemaking on incidents that are too personal. Critical incident technique with follow-up questions seems well fitted to expose sensemaking processes and development of organizational culture. From this method, different types of sensemaking processes appear to emerge.

## Samenvatting

Sensemaking kan ons inzicht verschaffen in de manier waarop organisatieleden omgaan met abstracte begrippen zoals communicatiecultuur en organisatiecultuur. Door gebruik van de critical incidents techniek en aanvullende vragen, zijn 125 kritieke communicatiegebeurtenissen verzameld uit een steekproef van 25 organisatieleden. Deze gebeurtenissen zijn gecodeerd in 9 communicatiecategorieën. De respondenten waren in staat 133 maal een betekenis over de organisatie toe te kennen aan een incident. Deze betekenissen zijn gecategoriseerd in 8 categorieën van waarden uit de organisatiecultuur. Resultaten wijzen erop dat employees die meer tevreden zijn met hun team, vaker positieve betekenis verlenen aan gebeurtenissen in de hele organisatie. Groei van de organisatie is een waarde die op zichzelf staand terugkomt bij verschillende categorieën. Regelmatig (21) kwamen incidenten met een duidelijke tegenstelling tussen verleden en heden naar voren. Ook projectie-gebeurtenissen werden vaak (47) genoemd. Projectie-gebeurtenissen gaan meer om sense-keeping (bij bestaande waarde wordt passende gebeurtenis gezocht), vooral bij incidenten die te persoonlijk zijn lijken respondenten geen sense te kunnen of willen maken. Geconcludeerd wordt dat de critical incidents techniek met de aanvullende vragen passend lijkt voor het blootleggen van sensemakingprocessen en het ontstaan van organisatiecultuur, waarbij verschillende typen sensemakingprocessen zichtbaar worden.

## **Making sense of experiences: sensemaking processes following critical communication events**

During the past twenty years, organizational communication scholars have become more and more enthusiastic about the interpretive research approach (e.g. Boje, 1995; Bougon, Weick & Binkhorst, 1977; Daft & Weick, 1984; Ford & Baucus, 1987; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Isabella, 1988). From an interpretive research point of view, reality is not 'out there', but is found in the way people experience it. Within this approach, the quality of organizational features, varying from its communication activities to the organizational culture within an organization, may be described as the perception of these features by members of the organization. But which aspects of organizational life cause this perception? In an organization, actual events in daily organizational life influence how employees feel about their work, but also how they perceive the organizational culture and communication. Within organizations, people make sense of their experiences and shape their view, or frame of reference, of the organizational culture and the communication system from these.

In very unusual or threatening situations, frames of reference cease to work, and sensemaking has to take place explicitly to adjust the frame of reference and cope with this crisis situation. Since it is likely that this explicit way of sensemaking can be observed relatively easily, several studies focus on sensemaking processes in extraordinary or crisis situations (e.g. Brown, 2000; Gephart, 1997; Weick, 1988; Weick, 1993). Within organizations, sensemaking has been investigated in major change situations, which also force involved people to explicitly make sense of the changing environment (e.g. Gephart, 1991; Thomas, Clark & Gioia, 1993; Gioia, Thomas, Clark & Chittipeddi, 1994). Boje (1991) and Patriotta (2003) study sensemaking in more common organizational settings, by investigating narratives or stories that live in organizations. Furthermore, many sensemaking studies concentrate on sensemaking and sensegiving (influencing sensemaking processes of other people) of managers (e.g. Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia, Thomas, 1996; Isabella, 1990; Louis, 1980). Yet, little is known about how these sensemaking processes actually work within an organization. For example, what events cause members of the organization to make sense of their experiences and to what extent do employees derive meaning about the organization from these events?

Maitlis (2005) addresses actual sensemaking processes, but analyzes them at the level of the organization and its environment as a whole and focuses on sensegiving rather than sensemaking. She distinguishes leaders and stakeholders as sensegivers who influence sensemaking processes by means of control and animation. Although she deals with sensemaking processes in organizations, she focuses on major events within the organisation and on the way in which leaders and stakeholders try to influence meaning ascription about such an event, not on the actual sensemaking processes that occur within the minds of organization members.

This paper describes an exploratory study focussing on whether critical events within the organization influence perceptions of employees about the communication system and the organizational culture. Following the interpretive view, a critical event is anything that is indicated as

such by the employee. In this way, not only the sensemaking processes related to major organizational changes is explored, but likely also the more implicit sensemaking processes that happen to employees in daily organizational life. It is expected that critical communication events which organization members experience lead to meaning ascription, and that this meaning ascription either changes or reinforces the view of the respondent on the communication system, organizational culture and the organization.

## Theoretical framework

Goldhaber (1993) introduces the 'functionalist perspective' and the 'interpretive paradigm'. The functionalist perspective views an organisation as mechanistic. The organisation, by management, controls people and sources by communication, based on system theory. Opposed to this, there is a perspective that is based on 'an anecdotalist's mode of thinking'. This is the interpretive paradigm which assumes that social reality is created by and between all participants, that 'social reality is intersubjectively created and that organizing and communicating are interdependent processes of organizational life (Goldhaber, 1993, p. 14).' Isabella (1990) points out that, in the interpretive perspective, organization members actively create the reality they inhabit, frames of reference of individuals exist within a collectivity, views of managers as a collective are especially salient, and interpretations are made a posteriori. In organizational studies, the interpretive perspective has gained popularity in addition to the functionalist view, since the former has shown it can greatly improve our understanding of organizational culture and communication effects (e.g. Blackburn & Cummings, 1982; Daft & Weick 1984; Ford & Baucus, 1987; Gephart, 1991; Gephart, 1997).

Within the interpretive approach, sensemaking assumes that people construct frameworks of reality. These frameworks, which are actually ideas about the way things are, are formed on the basis of events people experience in their daily life (Weick, 1995). Within an organizational context, employees form perceptions about the organizational culture and its norms and values. Employees, who are new to an organization, for example learn about this organizational culture and the norms and values of the organization through their daily contact with colleagues and events within the organization (Louis, 1980). After initial construction of the framework, there comes a time in which the framework is consistently reinforced by stimuli from the organization and explicit sensemaking activity diminishes. In the period following the initial framework construction, sensemaking becomes visible when expectations are not met; when unexpected things happen. When a situation does not meet expectations or routine based on past sensemaking, people again need to make sense of what is happening. In dealing with organizational issues, sensemaking requires people to look for explanations and answers in terms of how they see things, rather than to search for explanations in the organizational structure or communication system.

Sackman (1991, p. 33) describes sensemaking mechanisms as mechanisms that "include the standards and rules for perceiving, interpreting, believing, and acting that are typically used in a given

cultural setting.” According to this description, by studying sensemaking processes, organizational culture aspects may be exposed. The main idea of organizational sensemaking is that organisation members make sense of their work environment to intersubjectively form and discover the organisation culture. Employees interact about events with their environment, they reflect on their experiences afterwards and try to fit them into their picture of the organizational culture. This frame of reference about organizational culture of the employee (unconsciously) influences the observation of the event on its turn. Especially when unexpected experiences take place, the existing image of the organizational culture is disrupted and conscious sensemaking has to take place to adjust the frame of reference to the world outside. If this process is exposed, the development of cultural values among organization members could be studied.

Thomas, Clark and Gioia (1993) describe sensemaking as “the reciprocal interaction of information seeking, meaning ascription, and action” (p. 240), which points to the existence of three alternating phases in a sensemaking process. While information seeking and taking action may be found in many communication processes, the activity of meaning ascription is most typical for the sensemaking process. In this phase the actual process from experience to adjustment of the frame of reference takes place. Therefore, when actual meaning ascriptions from incident to organizational value of employees within an organization are studied, the focus is on the core of the sensemaking process.

According to Isabella (1990) there are four stages (anticipation, confirmation, culmination and aftermath) in organizational change in which different ways of interpretation are used by organization members. In her description of these stages, frames of reality as organization members construe them play an important role. When organizational changes cause these frames to shift, it is likely that sensemaking processes take place. The culmination stage, starting when the organizational change actually begins, is where the differences between past and present become clear. As actual changes take place and old standards stop working properly, new interpretations have to be made. This culmination phase in particular seems to involve visible sensemaking, but other stages could as well. The identification of sensemaking processes within the stages of organizational change can contribute to the understanding of how employees deal with organizational changes.

Balogun and Johnson (2004) stress that the emphasis on vertical interaction between management and other employees so far, caused a lack of attention for the important aspect of horizontal communication within organizations in sensemaking research. In their study they focus on horizontal communication of middle managers, but as of yet, little is known about experiences and sensemaking processes of work floor employees and supporting staff members, and what their effect is on the culture of the organization.

A frequently used technique to study events is the critical incidents technique (CIT) (e.g. Andersson & Nilsson, Flanagan, 1954; 1964; Redfern et al, 1993; Zwijze-Koning & De Jong, 2006) This technique provides procedures to collect incidents as a base for further research. The respondents determine the criteria in interpretive research, because it is their attitude and interpretation that are being investigated. Redfern, Norman, Tomalin and Oliver (1993) applied the critical incidents technique to the quality of care. They found that the method is able to combine the

different views from the involved people to one view on the quality of care. It can be assumed that a similar approach is possible for the different viewpoints to communication quality within other organizations.

By using the critical incident technique, events are collected that likely have caused sensemaking, since the events are critical. According to sensemaking, ideas and values are shaped based on these incidents. Glaser, Zamanou and Hacker (1987) used the critical incidents technique to extract statements that indicate the satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the six dimensions (teamwork - conflict, morale, involvement, information flow, supervision, meetings) of the organizational culture survey (OCS). While their research concerned events and their relation to organizational culture, their focus was not on identifying sensemaking processes. Zwijze-Koning & De Jong (2006) used the CIT to study the quality of organizational communication and found that it provided rich information about critical communication events, recurring events and situations. It seems that this type of incidents leads to cultural values about the organisation through sensemaking processes. Since little is known about the content of these processes, this study explores the sensemaking processes themselves.

## Method

### Research setting and respondents

Data were gathered at a secondary school in the Netherlands. This school provided educational programmes for children with severe behavioural difficulties. The school consisted of multiple departments where different types of education are taught. All departments were simulations of real work-environments such as a bicycle mender's shop, a garage, a catering unit and a hotel. Most education was on-the-job training in these work-environments. The departments were set up at different locations across the same town. The organization exists of many small departments with their own locations, and the large number of employees with more than one function. For example, someone can be a teacher at one department and an internship-coach at another department. These were aspects of the organisation that were likely to affect the communication system, since they offered many opportunities for informal and diagonal communication across all departments and the main office.

From the employees of the organization, a stratified sample was selected in such a way that all existing functions within the school were represented. In this way, managers, teachers of all levels and members of the supporting staff (e.g. secretaries, remedial educationalists and psychological assistants) were included in the sample. Furthermore gender (12 female, 13 male), age and the number of years that a respondent worked for this organization were taken in account for the sample.

### Data collection

Data collection took place in December of 2004, by means of half structured interviews with 25 members of the organization. All respondents received a personal invitation for the interview. At the beginning of the interview, the purpose of the study was explained to them. They were told that the interview was meant to evaluate the communication system of their organization and its corporate

culture. Also some explanation was given about the respondent selection procedure, the duration of the interview, respondent anonymity, and permission to record the interview was asked. All respondents gave permission to record the interview on audiotape. All interviews took place in a quiet environment at the department of the respondent.

The interview started with several questions based on the Critical Incident Technique (CIT; Flanagan, 1954). Flanagan describes the technique as (p. 327): “a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behaviour in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles.” Zwijze-Koning and De Jong (2006) used it within an organizational communication context and concluded that it not only was an adequate method to study organizational events, but that it can also give insight into sensemaking processes. By means of the CIT, critical communication experiences can be collected, which appear striking or typical to the respondent, and which are either positive or negative. The first question asked respondents to describe such an incident: *“Can you remember an event or situation, which you experienced as very positive or negative and in which communication played an important part? Please describe this situation for me”*. Several succeeding questions were asked to explore the incident in more detail. After this, the most important issue of the interview was touched upon, dealing with what meaning respondents derived from the incident, concerning the school. The exact wording of the question was: *“What does this incident tell you about what the school stands for?”*. In this way I hoped to learn more about whether these incidents influenced interpretations from respondents of the norms and values, and thus the culture of the school. Although this data collection approach is somewhat similar to the method Glaser, Zamanou and Hacker (1987) used to study organizational culture, I asked questions specifically aiming at meaning ascriptions about the organization as a whole, following a description of each incident. This was done to expose the sensemaking process that respondents go through between the event they describe and the organizational value they connect to the event. The full interview scheme can be found in appendix A.

All interviews were recorded on audiotape and additionally, the interviewer took notes during the interview session. At the end of each interview, respondents were asked to fill in a Dutch translation of the Organizational Culture Survey (Glaser, Zamanou & Hacker, 1987). The organizational culture survey measured six dimensions of organizational culture. These were teamwork - conflict, morale, information flow, involvement, supervision and meetings. Each category contained a number of propositions from which respondents indicated to which extent the proposition fitted their organisation on a five point Likert-type scale.

## **Data analysis**

The interview data were extracted from the audiotapes and notes of the researcher. These verbatim transcripts were put into a spreadsheet programme (Microsoft® Office Excel). In this way it was possible to stay close to the exact wording of the respondents.

All critical communication events were classified into the nine communication categories, which were developed by Zwijze-Koning & De Jong (2006) from 745 critical communication events in

similar organizations. A category, for example, was the communication climate, which included incidents about the social behaviour of the organization, the atmosphere at the work floor and positive and negative behaviour of colleagues. The category of communication channels concerned incidents about cooperation, accessibility, gossip, short communication lines and bottom-up communication. The responsibilities section contained events about indistinctness about who is responsible, too many or too few people being responsible, work pressure and colleagues who do not take their responsibility. All events were classified according to these communication categories. The nine critical communication event categories are presented in Table 1 of the results section.

In addition to the classification of the incidents themselves, the meanings about the organization which respondents derived from the incidents were coded. This meaning ascription about the organization exposed the sensemaking process, or part of it, that respondents went through from incident to organizational value. Because cultural values were expected in these data, the dimensions of the OCS were used as a guide for the development of organizational culture categories, but only as far as they fitted the meaning ascription data well. Part of the data fitted the OCS dimensions: teamwork – conflict, morale, supervision and involvement. Examples from the 'teamwork – conflict' category are *"people I work with are direct and honest with each other"* and *"people I work with constructively confront problems"*. An item in 'morale' is: *"this organization respects its workers"* and 'involvement' includes *"My opinions count in this organization"*. The dimension of information flow transformed to 'informedness', to fit the data better. Informedness contains items about accessibility of information or people, clarity of instructions and tasks and accuracy of communication. The OCS dimension of 'meetings' disappeared, since no data fitted this category. Furthermore, the additional categories of organizational development, professionalism and unity emerged from the data, which covered supplemental organizational culture values. The cultural values categories are presented in Table 2 of the results section. The cultural values were also analyzed for their level (organization, group, individual) and for self-sufficient values. These are values that emerge from the data, regardless of classification.

Lastly the scores of the dimensions of the OCS were calculated and compared to the total number of meaning ascriptions in the corresponding category as well as the number of positive and negative meaning ascriptions.

## Results

In total 125 incidents (N=25) were gathered. Respondents were thus able to describe, on average, five incidents concerning the internal communication in the organization. This is similar to the findings of Zwijze-Koning & De Jong (2006). In all, respondents mentioned 54 positive incidents (43%) and 71 negative ones (57%).



Table 1: The number of incidents per critical communication event category.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Number of incidents</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>
Communication climate	21	13	8
Communication channels	19	12	7
Responsibilities	18	6	12
Information exchange	15	4	11
Communication means	15	8	7
Recognition of qualities	12	5	7
Keeping rules and agreements	9	0	9
Decision making	8	3	5
Leadership	8	3	5

Most incidents (see Table 1) concern the communication climate within the organization, for example *“The organisation grows at cost of social interaction. Lately a colleague from another department had had surgery and I didn’t even know. In the past I would have known such a thing”*. The communication channels which were used within the organization were second most mentioned, as in the statement *“Following a special team meeting that was rather turbulent, I wanted to discuss some things with my supervisor. I asked for a meeting and this was realised on a very short term, the meeting itself was very satisfying as well”*. The extent to which employees perceive that e.g. supervisors take responsibilities for their tasks is also often mentioned. A small number of incidents concerns the extent to which rules and agreements are kept within the organization, the way in which decisions are made and leadership issues. Within the category ‘keeping rules and agreements’ only negative events are mentioned.

Based on the critical incidents, respondents described what meanings they derive from the incidents, concerning their organization. These meanings are categorised in organizational culture categories, which are loosely based on categories of the OCS, supplemented with three additional categories that emerged clearly from the data.

Table 2: The number of meaning ascriptions per organizational culture category.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Number of ascriptions</b>	<b>Positive ascriptions</b>	<b>Negative ascriptions</b>
Teamwork - conflict	24	11	13
Organizational development	21	4	17
Morale	16	13	3
Professionalism	13	3	10
Informedness	11	3	8
Supervision	9	5	4
Involvement	9	3	6
Unity	8	1	7

Some topics that fit the OCS-based category of teamwork – conflict, but are not included in the OCS item list, emerge from the meaning ascription analysis. The ability to rely on each other as colleagues is such a topic, e.g. in the description *“People do things in their own manner, you can’t trust that it is done right.”* In the category of informedness, the communication structure is considered, e.g. in *“I tried to call the secretary at the main office, I let the phone ring until it stopped and I still had no contact. Accessibility at the organisation is bad, even customers can’t reach us.”* Besides these shifts or supplements of meaning within the existing categories, three new dimensions concerning organizational culture are found. Organizational development, professionalism and unity are categories that clearly emerge from the meaning ascription data, besides the OCS-based categories. Respectively 21 ascriptions are assigned to organizational development, 13 to professionalism and 8 to unity within the organization.

The organizational development category includes the movement of the organization towards more expertise, establishment of rules and procedures and how these things make organisation members feel, in a positive or a negative way. Positive issues that often occur are the increase of professionalism and the rise of ICT in the organisation. On the positive effects of ICT: *“By e-mail things are communicated faster, better and you know it is delivered. The organisation is now modernizing although it took a while before ICT was introduced”*. On the aspect of the growing organization: *“I talked to the director about an idea to start a new project. He tells me immediately I can start the project. We always look for new possibilities but we must not go faster than we can handle.”* Capacitance against rules, growth of the organisation which slows down peoples daily work and impulsiveness of the organisation are issues, often at the negative side, that contribute to the organizational development category as well.

From the professionalism category, two aspects were mentioned. First, organisation members value the access to experts within the organisation. Second, organisation members signal when colleagues do not do their work as they should (in the eyes of the beholder). These deficiencies are ascribed to the educational level of the employees being too low. This category is rather univocal, the statements are about the big differences in performance level of employees, about lack of professionalism or about the presence of experts in the organisation. On the presence of experts: *“I think things are well organised, there are always experts to back me up, we have everything we need for the students we work with.”* On the difference in competencies: *“With one colleague I can reflect on students. Communication with some persons is at another level than with others. The difference is in my role. In one case we are equals and in another case I have to be more directing.”*

Unity is often described as an issue that is connected to organisation growth. It is often felt that the growth of the organisation threatens the unity. Especially different departments, which have their own location in town, appear to become little organisations of their own, and are defended as such by the employees. As well it is signalled that organisation members often differ in view about how to deal with students. It is therefore often the lack of unity that is actually mentioned. The category concerns the growth of unity through organisation-wide agreements and the decline of unity through organisation growth, departments drifting apart, people who defend the autonomy of their own department and different views on students thorough the organisation. On the growth of unity:

*“Especially with my function at different locations I see the differences between departments. If I now address colleagues about that, this is accepted. This happens because of organisation-wide agreements.”* On the lack of unity: *“A colleague from a former department of me treated me badly. Departments of the organisation are all their own little businesses, but we have to be a whole for all students as well. That feeling has to stay and that is the hardest thing. The organisation should not become too big.”* On the decline of unity: *“This organisation is getting bigger and more detached. The departments become more like islands. In the past they were peninsulas, now they are islands. I have struggled with that.”*

Respondents filled in the OCS, for which the internal consistency for each OCS-dimension (using Cronbach's alpha) was calculated, these scores all exceeded the minimum level of 0.60. The correlation between the category scores of the employees on the OCS (morale, involvement, etc.) versus the number of positive and negative incidents and the number of positive and negative cultural values of the corresponding category were analyzed. The cultural value category of teamwork - conflict correlated significantly with the total number of positive incidents which lead to meaning ascription about teamwork - conflict ( $r=.494$ ,  $p=.01$ ; Pearson correlation), indicating that employees who were more satisfied with their direct co-workers, in all mentioned more positive incidents. The category of teamwork correlated even more significantly with the number of positive meaning ascriptions in the allied cultural value category ( $r=.638$ ,  $p=.001$ ; Pearson correlation), indicating that organization members who are more satisfied with their team, more often ascribe positive meaning to events in their organization. The other categories did not correlate significantly with the number of incidents and cultural values.

Table 3: which critical communication events lead to which cultural values.

	<i>Teamwork - conflict</i>	<i>Organizational development</i>	<i>Morale</i>	<i>Professionalism</i>	<i>Informedness</i>	<i>Supervision</i>	<i>Involvement</i>	<i>Unity</i>	<i>No meaning ascription</i>	<i>Sum of incidents</i>
Communication climate	6		6	2		2		4	1	21
Communication channels	5	2	4	2	1		3		2	19
Responsibilities	4	1		1	2	4	1	1	4	18
Information exchange	2	1	1	2	6	1	2			15
Communication means		6	1	1	1		1		5	15
Recognition of qualities	4		1	4			1		2	12
Keeping rules and agreements	3	5						1		9
Decision making		5	2					1		8
Leadership		1	1	1	1	2	1	1		8
sum of meaning ascriptions	24	21	16	13	11	9	9	8	14	125

Incidents in the category of communication climate (6) and communication channels (5) most often lead to cultural values in the category of teamwork – conflict. An example of how sensemaking from an incident about communication climate to meaning ascription concerning teamwork works: *“I did not yet have a contract when I got a medical problem, so I thought end of story. They could have gotten rid of me then, which I expected them to do, but nevertheless I got a fixed contract.”* which leads to: *“The organization is social, they care about their employees.”* Incidents about communication channels also lead to teamwork values five times. An example of such a case: *“When I forget something, a colleague calls me by phone to remind me about it.”* which leads to: *“We make sure things stay pleasant here.”*

Sensemaking from communication climate to morale appeared six times and how this happens is shown in the following example: *“If the manager hears about something and has the idea that something is wrong, he asks about it directly.”* which leads to meaning ascription about the organisation morale: *“The organisation is big by staying small-scale, it is nice to work like that.”*

Incidents that concern information exchange lead to sensemaking about informedness in six cases. Examples of how this happens are: *“I had no place in the existing communication structure, so I did not always hear what was going on with pupils. It depended completely on the colleague and the coincidental contact we had, there was no structure. I always had to try and find out whether a student was excused or not.”* which leads to the cultural value: *“Communication is difficult because there are several groups of students, differing schedules and different locations.”* Another incident that leads to a similar cultural value is: *“I forgot to pass on a message to a colleague about a student going home early because I was busy”* which leads to *“Although it is good for the pupils that they are spread, it makes communication difficult that there are many different locations”*. However, events in which information exchange is inadequate, can also cause sensemaking about for example lack of professionalism among organization members: *“During a meeting about a student, a punishment for this student was agreed upon by the coaching team. The mentor of this student didn’t communicate this agreement correctly to the student, so the student didn’t agree and went directly to one of the staff members to tell her what happened. Communication between mentor and student went completely wrong because the mentor gave a wrong reason for the punishment.”* which leads to: *“Some colleagues don’t possess enough professionalism.”*

Communication means’ incidents lead to meaning ascriptions about organizational development five times and as well five times there was no sensemaking about the organizational culture at all. Meaning ascriptions to organizational development are derived mostly from incidents involving ICT. One of the statements illustrates the positive attitude towards ICT of an employee and the sensemaking which leads to values about organizational development: *“In the past you had to wait and see whether your messages were received in time by the right person. By e-mail I now get information faster than before. It works more effective”* which leads to: *“The organisations now keeps up with the times, but it has taken long before ICT was introduced”*. The incidents about communication means that lead to no meaning ascription were mostly about how the relational aspect of the communication was perceived. For example: *“When we had private meetings in the past, we*

*could discuss confidential matters.” and “Communication through e-mail is often harsh, things are always perceived differently than they are meant. Therefore I rather use the phone.”*

Keeping rules and agreements leads to meaning ascriptions in the organizational development category more often (five times) than to any other cultural value category and the same goes for incidents in the decision making category. *“A colleague from the internship department was called by an organization which had an internship available. This colleague arranged the internship quickly, without following the official procedure. The department manager reprimanded this colleague for not following the procedures which had been discussed in a meeting.”* as an incident of keeping rules and agreements leads to sensemaking about organizational development: *“The organisation struggles with its growth, they want to make rules and agreements to not lose their hold on the growing organisation. People who work here from the beginning often have problems with rules because of former freedom.”* An example of meaning ascription from decision making to organizational development is: *“Last holiday I got an e-mail about a new project. This project was suddenly started, while many other projects don’t even function well yet. It takes a lot of time and energy to start a new project and we should first finish existing cases.”* which leads to *“This impulsive way of doing things is totally embedded in the organisation, but it has to change. Working this way has consequences for the whole organisation”.*

From fourteen incidents there is no organizational sensemaking visible. This category ‘no meaning ascription’ contains nine incidents which mainly concern the respondents themselves, three incidents about the organization, two about the image of the organization and one about the sector as a whole. Examples are *“I had to do a meeting with a new pupil, replacing my supervisor. I had never done this before, so I prepared very well. Just before the meeting started, it appeared that another participant of the meeting had already told the pupil most of the things I had prepared, and during the meeting he also took over, he told things that I had prepared. At that time I really didn’t know what to do anymore.”* or *“I have to coach the pupils, but the teachers need my coaching as well, and everything is new to me. They expect a lot of me and I want to do a lot, but not this much, that is not good.”* These examples and the fact that there are nine incidents about the respondents themselves in this category, suggest that respondents either do not want to or can not perform sensemaking processes in an organizational context if events get too personal.

The sensemaking processes lead to values at the organizational level, the group level and to the level of a particular person who is involved in the incident. By far the most values (64) are about the organization as a whole. In 36 cases, sensemaking leads to values about certain groups within the organization, like a department, management, department leaders, but also inefficient employees, stubborn employees, harsh employees or gossips. By these ascriptions about groups, not only the values respondents hold emerge, but also the identification of the groups which play a role in the organization. Ten times, values were ascribed to one particular person. When a respondent points out characteristics of a single person as particular, it is likely that those characteristics are not commonly found in the organization and are indeed exceptions within the organization.

The issue of growth of the organisation was mentioned in seventeen cases across different categories of cultural values. In addition, in 21 cases the respondent compared the present situation to

the past. The organizational growth appears to be a living issue within the organization. Although several different issues cause respondents to mention growth, the establishment of rules was the trigger to mention organizational growth seventeen times. The cases which involve organizational growth or the comparison of past and present are inherently about organizational changes, and they fit the stages of organizational change of Isabella (1990). In 4 cases, the change is in the anticipation stage, 1 case relates to the confirmation stage, 24 to the culmination stage and 9 to the aftermath stage. The culmination stage seems most prominent, because it is the most turbulent stage in which sensemaking processes are most explicit.

Sensemaking processes towards the issue of organizational growth do not always seem rational. Instead, this issue seems to live a life of its own for organization members. Diminished freedom of action and growing bureaucracy for example, leads to sensemaking which concerns growth of the organization: *"Sometimes I neglect procedures to arrange a traineeship for a student faster, in the student's interest, mind you, but this is not tolerated by my supervisor. Because there is a special department for this and because we need to follow procedures, it now takes longer to arrange things than in the past."* leads to: *"The organisation is growing, which is good, but we should not grow further. In the past everything we did was practical and intuitive, now experts sometimes swarm around the pupils without something happening."* A conflict about job descriptions leads to sensemaking about growth as well: *"There is a conflict with management about the function level of us supervisors. My colleague supervisor has called me because he wanted to act on it and he wanted to know if I wanted to join in the action. I don't want that, but at least he asked me."* leads to: *"Things become tougher, more businesslike. We grow, so we have to be more businesslike, but things become less amicable, I think that is a pity."*

In 47 cases, the events that are mentioned do not cause change but actually reinforce the existing views of the respondent on the organization. It appears that the stimuli which reinforce the view of the respondent about the organization (Louis, 1980) are visible here. These 'projection events' are events that are important to respondents because they prove that their organizational cultural views are right. They seem to be used in opposite direction from the usual sensemaking processes, so the cultural value is protected and reinforced because the respondent finds a fitting incident which can be used as 'evidence' for the cultural value. All cases that involved organizational growth are projection events, as well as eleven of the cases that involve the past – present comparison.

## Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the critical incident technique, supplemented with the organizational questions can provide new insights in organizational sensemaking processes and the development of organizational culture. Critical communication events do often appear to lead to meaning ascription about the culture of the organization. For the cultural values, eight categories were developed, loosely based on the organizational culture survey. Additional categories that emerged directly from the data are organizational development, professionalism and unity. Sensemaking

appears to take place, however, the process of it does not always seem logical or rational. Several possible issues seem related to this process. It would be very interesting to pay more attention to the process of meaning ascription itself, to discover the underlying processes, because they do not seem to be only rational, e.g. the fact that the organization uses e-mail now, leading to *“Our organization is finally getting up to date.”* or an employee who delivers the wrong message to a student leading to *“The employee is not competent”*. Furthermore, people are not always able to ascribe meaning about incidents. Especially when it concerns more personal events, people seem to have a blind spot. It is unclear whether people can not or do not want to go beyond the experience itself.

Sensemaking takes place thorough the organization, all organization members appeared to ascribe meanings about the organization, derived from critical events. No differences in number of incidents and number of positive or negative incidents were found between managers and work floor employees, in contrast to the findings of Zwijze-Koning & De Jong (2006). This could implicate that the work floor employees are as involved as the managers are, or that there is very little distance between management and work floor employees in the organization. Typically, when respondents are asked to pick their own critical communication events, they don't think big, like the major changes that often are the subject of sensemaking studies, they think personal. Small, more personal events are able to have major impact on sensemaking processes of a person, department or the organization as a whole.

There appear to be norms, values and ideas in the collective frame of reference of the organization members, which are very strong. *“This organization is growing fast, which is good, but we must not become even bigger”* and similar remarks followed after many meaning ascriptions. It seems to be the 'answer to all your questions', the organization aspect to which many situations are ascribed. This growth of the organization can easily be marked as a collective frame of reference (Isabella, 1990). Typical is that 'rules and agreements', which were the most prominent category in accordance to the growth issue, are only mentioned in negative incidents. Apparently this is a turbulent, not-agreed-upon and frustrating category for the organization members.

It appears that the stimuli which reinforce the view of the respondent about the organization (Louis, 1980) also become visible in this study. These 'projection events' seem to be used in opposite direction from the usual sensemaking processes, so the cultural value is protected and reinforced because the respondent finds a fitting incident which can be used as 'evidence' for the cultural value. Therefore, in these cases 'sense-keeping' could be a more fitting description for the process than sensemaking.

The teamwork - conflict category appears more determining than other categories for the perception of the quality of communication and culture of the organization. It looks like the direct work environment and the daily contact with direct colleagues are very important for the way the organizational life as a whole is experienced by an individual.

Critical incident technique with follow-up questions seems well fitted to expose sensemaking processes and development of organizational culture. From this method, different types of sensemaking processes appear to emerge, , which are inviting for further research.



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## Appendix A: interview scheme

## Appendix A

### Interview scheme

#### *Introduction:*

- *goal of the interview;*
- *respondent selection procedure;*
- *duration, anonymity, permission to record;*
- *questions from respondent? If not >> start tape and interview.*

I study the communication by means of concrete positive and negative examples of communication. To find out what was important about this communication event, we will discuss the examples some more.

1. Can you remember an event or situation, which you experienced as very positive or negative and in which communication played an important part? Please describe this situation for me. [this could be communication with a colleague, supervisor, department, main office, expert, the director, a working group, the organization as a whole, etc.]
2. What happened exactly?
3. Who were involved in this event?
4. When did this happen?
5. Did it influence the way in which you view the school?
6. What does this incident tell you about what the school stands for?
7. What did you learn from this event? Did it change you?
8. Did you learn something more?
9. What is important about this event to you?
10. What is important about >>answer question 12<<?
11. What is important about >>answer question 13<<?
12. What is important about >>answer question 14<<?
13. >>Repeat as long as there is response<<

>>repeat question 1 as long as there is response<<

>>let respondent fill out OCS questionnaire<<