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Sensemaking and sensegiving in times of merger

How do line managers from different hierarchical levels make and give sense during a merger process?

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Abstract

The number of mergers has increased sharply in recent years. While mergers offer numerous advantages, they also introduce uncertainty. Previous research has primarily focused on the role of leaders at higher organizational levels, such as senior managers and CEOs, during periods of uncertainty and change. However, the investigation into the role of different line managers' hierarchies during mergers remains unexplored, despite their crucial role. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring and analyzing the processes of sensemaking and sensegiving across different line managerial hierarchies and employees, shedding light on the roles played by diverse hierarchical levels in shaping organizational understanding and communication dynamics throughout the merger process until the message reaches employees. By employing a real-time data approach, this study draws insights from a single case study of an ongoing merger in the accountancy sector. A qualitative study of 20 semi-structured interviews with senior managers, middle managers, frontline managers, and employees is conducted.

The findings revealed intriguing dynamics during a merger. Particularly among middle managers who consistently expressed concerns and negativity during the merger. However, active involvement and positive emphasis in messages from senior managers led to a positive shift in opinions. In contrast, frontline managers initially responded negatively but evolved positively over time through engagement with key stakeholders and active participation. Surprisingly, all employees responded positively, highlighting the effectiveness of transparent communication and emphasis on positive aspects. This study emphasized the significance of timing, the content of the message, and discussions with important stakeholders in shaping a positive sensemaking process, with individuals lower in the organization tending to hold more positive opinions. Furthermore, sensegiving processes among the line managers reflected a multifaceted approach, characterized by an open and informal communication approach. Senior managers tried to foster enthusiasm using active sensegiving techniques, while middle managers and frontline managers prioritized effective communication through various active and passive sensegiving techniques. Notably, a few middle and frontline managers opted for feedback loops, expressing concerns to supervisors rather than subordinates.

In conclusion, this research underscored the intricate dynamics of sensemaking and sensegiving processes during a merger, emphasizing the importance of transparent communication, adaptability, and a nuanced understanding of the emotional landscape at different managerial levels. Additionally, this study provided theoretical and practical implications, accompanied by recommendations for future research in this field.

Keywords: mergers, sensemaking, sensegiving, line managers, hierarchical layer

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1 Introduction

The number of mergers has increased sharply in recent years, with more and more business owners considering acquiring or merging with other companies. For example, in 2019, 48.000 deals totaling $3.7 trillion were sold worldwide (Umashankar et al., 2021). A merger can be defined as a consolidation of two separate organizations, which together form a new entity (Marks & Mirvis, 2011; Gaughan, 2005). It is a process of merging different organizational values, and cultures, forcing them into one new entity.

Mergers bring many benefits. For instance, a merger can lead to faster entry into a new market, following a new strategy, improved competitiveness, protection of market share, accelerated cash flow generation, increased equity and shareholder value, and reduced overall associated costs for the company (Marks & Mirvis, 2011; Ray, 2022; Malik et al., 2014). And even in uncertain and difficult times, a merger can help save a company's survival (Marks & Mirvis, 2011).

Despite all the benefits, mergers also bring a lot of uncertainty because of major changes and the possibility of potential. This can cause so-called merger stress (Appelbaum et al., 2000). If two companies decide to merge, they face many challenges, including cultural management, HR restructuring, job insecurity, and resistance to change (Kansal & Chandani, 2014). In fact, KPMG found that 80% of mergers fail. Reasons for this are often incorrect change management approaches to the challenges mentioned above. If organizations do not manage change properly, this can create uncertainty. Both companies must understand each other's culture and value change (Kansal & Chandani, 2014).

Line managers play an important role during mergers, since they serve as vital links between top management and the executive core (Balongun, 2003; Townsend et al., 2022). They cover various hierarchical levels within organizations, ranging from frontline managers to senior managers (Townsend et al., 2022). At the top are the CEOs and top managers, commonly referred to as senior managers, who are responsible for the overall management of the organization (Ciptono, 2007). Middle managers, on the other hand, are defined as line managers overseeing at least two hierarchical layers beneath them (Townsend et al., 2022). Lastly, frontline managers are responsible for supervising non-managerial employees, at the operational level (Wilkinson et al., 2015; Townsend et al., 2022; Ciptono, 2007).

Given their pivotal role as connectors between top management and the executive core (Balogun, 2003; Townsend et al., 2022), line managers play a crucial role in strategic changes such as mergers. In times of merger, line managers need to accommodate conflicting goals. Besides, they should take care of communication to remove uncertainty among employees and increase commitment (Bansal et al., 2022). When line managers succeed in winning over their employees, this can lead to employees taking action, voicing their opinions, and supporting the change (Muller, 2012). In addition, line managers can help their employees during a merger by giving them an understanding of

the merger, the tasks they need to perform, and the associated goals (Bansal et al., 2022). Despite their importance, research indicates variations in the understanding of change across different hierarchical levels in organizations. Middle managers, for instance, possess a different awareness of business strategy compared to senior managers, often relying on practical awareness (Rouleau, 2005).

While line managers play a crucial role in navigating the complexities of mergers, it is essential to recognize that employees at the operational level also experience significant challenges and uncertainties (Sonenshein & Dhalokia, 2012; Muller, 2012). Employees facing the prospect of a merger may perceive insecurity, triggered by feelings of losing control over important things. They may feel uncertain about their future, leading to uncertainty concerning personal and organizational changes (Kramer et al., 2004; Schweiger & Weber; 1992). A common reaction to this feeling is withdrawal, with the hope of regaining control. To address this uncertainty, line managers at different hierarchical layers play a vital role in fostering empathy and providing comprehensive information to reduce uncertainty and stress among employees. This underscores the responsibility of line managers to offer support, mitigate uncertainty, and demonstrate commitment in times of merger (Appelbaum et al., 2000; Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012).

Thus, in the context of strategic changes such as mergers, clear, consistent, and honest communication is crucial. It not only improves the merging process but also ensures the effective management of strategic change (Kansal & Chandani, 2014). In such circumstances, senior managers have a pivotal role in the initial phases of strategic change because they serve as architects, assimilators, and facilitators of the strategic transformation (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). In addition, the successful implementation of strategic change requires a shift in employees' perception of the company and its environment (Weiser, 2021). Therefore, crucial processes like meaning-making and the senior managers' interpretation of a new vision for the organization come into play, which actively contributes to the initiation and effective management of change (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

The implementation process of a merger, including meaning-making across different organizational layers down to the employees, is complex and involves many stakeholders, encompassing various line managerial hierarchies and employees. To understand how diverse line managerial hierarchies and employees interpret a new organizational vision, the concepts of sensemaking and sensegiving can be employed (Gioia & Gittipeddi, 1991; Bansal et al., 2022). Sensemaking is the process by which individuals in an organization grasp uncertain and ambiguous situations, due to change (Robert & Ola, 2021). All individuals within the organization use sensemaking to reconstruct meaning to understand the merger process and to create new behaviors or practices that have beneficial effects (Gioia & Gittipeddi, 1991; Turner et al., 2023). For instance, employees strive to comprehend ambiguous inputs to facilitate change and influence their behavior (Kroon & Reif, 2021). Beyond the sensemaking process, line managers actively seek to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of layers beneath them toward the desired outcome, which is a process known as sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

This study aims to understand the sensemaking and sensegiving process of various organizational stakeholders in times of mergers by addressing the following research question: "*How do line managers from different hierarchical levels make and give sense during a merger process?*". The study aims to explore and analyze the processes of sensemaking and sensegiving among different line managerial hierarchies and employees, shedding light on the roles played by diverse hierarchical levels in shaping organizational understanding and communication dynamics throughout the merger process until the message is received by the employees. In doing so, this research contributes to a deeper comprehension of the involvement of different line manager hierarchies in the sensemaking and sensegiving processes during mergers. The research employs a real-time data approach, drawing insights from a single case study of an ongoing merger between two organizations in the accountancy sector.

This research provides the following five contributions to the literature. Initially, despite an extensive exploration of sensemaking and sensegiving in periods of uncertainty and change, the primary focus has been on the practices of leaders at higher organizational levels, specifically senior managers and CEOs (Bansal et al., 2022; Lundgren-Henriksson & Kock, 2016). Surprisingly, the investigation into the role of different line manager hierarchies during mergers remains unexplored, despite their crucial role. Examining the influence of line managers' sensemaking and sensegiving is crucial, given their pivotal role as a link connecting top management and the executive core. Additionally, it is crucial to consider their significance in managing conflicting goals, operationalizing the leadership vision, and mitigating employee anxiety during times of uncertainty (Robert & Ola, 2021; Balogun, 2003; Bansal et al., 2022; Kieran et al., 2020).

Secondly, studies exploring sensemaking and sensegiving often concentrate on acquisitions, creating a gap in understanding how individuals make sense and give sense during mergers. Additionally, the limited use of real-time data in current studies hinders a comprehensive understanding of line managers' and employees' sensemaking and sensegiving during ongoing mergers. For example, previous research only examined middle managers' emotions post-merger through interviews conducted five years after the announcement (Kroon & Reif, 2021).

Furthermore, there is a notable absence of research exploring the impact of line managers' sensemaking and sensegiving practices on other organizational layers during mergers, including senior managers, middle managers, frontline managers, and employees. For instance, previous studies on sensemaking and sensegiving predominantly focused on managers, overlooking the examination of various hierarchical layers and stakeholders within an organization (Kroon & Reif; Bansal et al., 2022). Investigating this aspect is crucial, as research has demonstrated that organizations increasingly need to show openness to their environment, fostering interactions with stakeholders (Rouleau, 2005).

Finally, the so-called trickle-down effect of not only sensemaking but also sensegiving through different hierarchical levels in the organization in a top-down communication process is still underexplored. Nevertheless, prior findings, as highlighted by Kroon and Reif (2021), have revealed

variations in the engagement of sensemaking and sensegiving across hierarchical levels in organizations. These findings imply that processes initiated at higher levels may indeed "trickle down" and manifest differently as they move through the organizational hierarchy, underscoring the importance of focusing on this process.

This study is structured as follows. First, the theoretical framework with literature streams and the derived research model is presented. Chapter three provides an overview of the methodology and explains the methods used to arrive at the results of the study. After that, the findings are presented. The thesis ends with a conclusion, discussion, theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

2 Theoretical framework

In this chapter, the definition of a merger and the role of line managers during mergers are first provided. Subsequently, an explanation is given regarding what sensemaking and sensegiving entail during times of strategic changes. Finally, it is clarified how various hierarchical layers within an organization engage in the processes of sensemaking and sensegiving during mergers.

2.1 Mergers and the role of line managers in times of merger

Marks and Mirvis (2011) define a merger as an amalgamation of two separate organizations, which together form a new entity. Roberts et al., (2003) provide further elaboration, explaining that these organizations undergo noticeable changes until the merger is completed. Previous research has identified various phases of change within a merger, including the run-up, transitional change, integration, and closure (Muller, 2012).

While mergers offer various advantages such as facilitating entry into new markets, supporting the implementation of new strategies, enhancing competitiveness, and safeguarding market share, they also introduce uncertainty due to significant changes and the possibility of potential loss (Marks & Mirvis, 2011; Appelbaum et al., 2000). Strategic changes, such as mergers, are therefore known to be uncertain, complex, ambiguous, and emotional, resulting in transformative impacts on an organization's strategy, structure, and culture (Kieran et al., 2020; Logemann et al., 2019). These large-scale changes often lead to disruption and negative consequences for its overall functioning (Logemann et al., 2019). Consequently, the merger process may induce "merger stress", and if not managed properly, this can create uncertainty (Kansal & Chandani, 2014).

Uncertainty can be defined as the inability to accurately predict outcomes, often stemming from incomplete or ambiguous information (Bordia, 2003). For many individuals within an organization, change can be distressing as it involves the loss of routine, safety, comfort, and identity. Employees may experience uncertainty regarding their future, accompanied by changes in their positions and relationships at work (Appelbaum et al., 2000). Additionally, whenever there is any sense of uncertainty, members frequently take action to defend themselves (Muller, 2012). While individuals respond naturally and pre-programmed to events in stable times, these reliable actions can break down during periods of change, requiring adaptation to new positions and working styles, among other things (Balogun, 2006).

Many researchers highlight the crucial role that line managers play during times of uncertainty, as they serve as crucial connectors between top management (strategic apex) and the executive core (operating core) (Balogun, 2003; Townsend et al., 2022). According to Townsend et al. (2022, p.4), the term line managers "is a container term for managers at different hierarchical positions ranging from senior managers to frontline managers". Šiugždinienė (2008, p.34), defines a line manager as someone who "is authorized to direct the work of subordinates and is responsible for

accomplishing organizational goals. He/she is directly accountable for obtaining results through people in his/her organization, in comparison to other employees, who do not have the same level of accountability and responsibility to senior management for the work of others". Expanding on this role, Townsend et al. (2022, p.4) describe line managers as "mediators, negotiators, and interpreters of connections between the organization's strategic and operational levels".

Particularly in the context of mergers, line managers across different hierarchical levels play a crucial role in accommodating conflicting goals (Bansal et al., 2022). In addition, their significance extends to operationalizing the leadership vision and mitigating employee anxiety during times of uncertainty (Kieran et al., 2020; Robert & Ola, 2021).

Line managers must understand the different phases of change during a merger so that they can prepare for what is expected of them at each stage and what the reactions of employees may be (Muller, 2012). Additionally, they encounter the challenge of addressing the wide range of uncertainties experienced by employees. To minimize uncertainty, managers must develop effective communication and change implementation strategies, as research indicates that providing more information to employees decreases uncertainty (Bordia, 2003; Kramer et al., 2004). Specifically, managers should focus on sharing clear and complete information regarding the reasons behind the merger, changes in the organizational structure, and specific adjustments to employee benefits (Schweiger & Weber, 1992). Managers need to create awareness of their employees' emotions to manage and guide them (Kroon & Reif, 2021). Furthermore, managers who are responsible for implementing a merger must establish so-called assessments and reporting procedures throughout each phase to ensure the merger stays on track (Roberts et al., 2003).

2.2 Sensemaking and sensegiving in times of mergers

Sensemaking and sensegiving are two key concepts that play a significant role in organizational events such as mergers. During these events, members of the organization often experience chaos, ambivalence, and uncertainty as they consider the impact of the change on themselves and the organization as a whole (Routila, 2022). The successful implementation of a strategic change requires a shift in line managers' and employees' perceptions of the company and its environment (Weiser, 2021). This transformative process can be facilitated through the practices of sensemaking and sensegiving. During a strategic change such as a merger, the senior managers, middle managers, and other stakeholders of an organization are involved in a cycle in which sensemaking and sensegiving practices proceed from top to bottom and from bottom to top (Kieran et al., 2020). According to Gioia and Gittipeddi (1991), sensemaking and sensegiving are mutual processes that take place between the CEO and senior management as well as between internal and external stakeholders. Sensemaking and sensegiving practices can be linked to the organization and management of meaning, and any

shortcomings in these processes can potentially undermine the success of the change initiative (Robert & Ola, 2021).

Sensemaking can be defined as "the process of meaning construction and reconstruction by stakeholders in their attempts to develop a meaningful framework for understanding the nature of the intended strategic change" (Gioia & Ghittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). In other words, it is the process by which individuals in an organization grasp uncertain and ambiguous situations, such as mergers (Robert & Ola, 2021). Finding new ways of organizing to create new behaviors or practices that have beneficial effects is the goal of sensemaking (Turner et al., 2023). When making sense, past experiences are used to interpenetrate the current event and are triggered by cues. Therefore, sensemaking is related to the environment and depends on interaction with others (Routila, 2022). Emotions such as fear and frustration, in times of merger, also play an important role in the sensemaking process, as they can lead to a barrier to understanding strategic change and cause inflexible reactions (Kroon & Reif, 2021).

Sensegiving can be described as "the process of trying to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others towards the desired redefinition of organizational reality" (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). The process is mainly about influencing outcomes, communicating thoughts about the change to others, and gaining support (Routila, 2022; Clark et al., 2010). Sensegiving becomes particularly important when so-called gaps and organizational ambiguity arise between people in an organization (Robert & Ola, 2021). Sensegiving processes can also be influenced by emotions. For instance, leaders' expressed emotions can be intentionally included in sensegiving processes (Kroon & Reif, 2021).

Strategic changes, such as mergers, require knowledge sharing, knowledge questions, and the transfer of new knowledge to increase the chance of success (Filstad, 2014). Consequently, sensemaking, meaning-making, and interpretation of a new organizational vision play an important role in initiating and managing change in times of merger (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Successful strategic change requires leaders to engage in effective sensegiving, which helps diminish resistance, foster support for change, facilitate employees' assimilation of the change, and enable them to revise their interpretive frameworks (Lodgemann et al., 2019). Although sensemaking and sensegiving practices capture how individuals within an organization interpret a strategic change, it is important to further explore the various hierarchical layers in an organization to clarify how these different layers make sense and give sense in times of merger. This exploration is vital given the recognized variations in these practices across different hierarchical levels within an organization (Kroon & Reif, 2021).

2.3 A hierarchical perspective: managing change in times of merger

This section explores how various levels of line manager hierarchies and employees engage in sensemaking and sensegiving during mergers. It is crucial to understand these dynamics as research

indicates differences in how change is perceived across different levels within organizations. Specifically, existing studies primarily focus on how senior and middle managers influence others during strategic change (Robert & Ola, 2021). These studies reveal variations in the utilization of sensemaking and sensegiving practices across different hierarchical levels within organizations (Kroon & Reif, 2021). For example, research has demonstrated that awareness levels differ between senior managers and middle managers (Rouleau, 2005). According to Rouleau (2005), middle managers, in contrast to senior managers, often prioritize practical awareness in their actions.

As previously highlighted, Townsend et al. (2022, p.4) emphasize that the scope of line managers' roles encompasses line managers at various hierarchical positions, spanning from senior managers to frontline managers. This perspective implies that top managers, also referred to as senior managers, can be classified as line managers. In the literature, diverse terms are employed to describe the various layers of line managers, each overseeing a specific level in the organization hierarchy. Consequently, this segment of the theoretical framework delves into the various terms used for line managers and examines how distinct line managerial hierarchies engage in sensemaking and sensegiving during mergers. The focus extends to understanding the outcomes when the message finally reaches employees and how they interpret and make sense of it.

First of all, at the top of the organization are the CEOs and top management, also known as senior executives or senior managers (Ciptono, 2007; Wilkinson et al., 2015; Townsend et al., 2022). CEOs and senior managers play a crucial role in the early stages of strategic change, as they initiate processes like mergers (Kansal & Chandani, 2014; Routila, 2022) They need to comprehend the strategic shift logically before defining the change the organization is about to undergo (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Due to their hierarchical positions, CEOs and senior managers can influence and guide other members within the organization toward the emerging reality and their vision, a process known as sensegiving (Logemann et al., 2019; Gioia & Gittipeddi, 1991). To influence others, CEOs and senior managers employ specific techniques to ensure that members accept the strategic change (Robert & Ola, 2022). They must communicate the story in the appropriate manner, at the appropriate time, and in the appropriate setting (Kieran et al., 2020). The announcement of strategic change is often conveyed through stories, giving middle management substance to think about in which the change takes place, a process also referred to as sensemaking (Routila, 2022). And while employees go through the process of making sense, the senior managers must lead, make sense, and give sense to the middle managers, ultimately achieving acceptance from the people working in the organization (Routila, 2022).

Secondly, situated between top-level management and frontline managers are the middle managers (Ciptono, 2007). Middle managers can be characterized as line managers overseeing at least two hierarchical layers beneath them (Townsend et al., 2022). While they are not the only individuals in the organization making sense of strategic change, middle managers are key figures (spiders in the web) in facilitating broader organizational sensegiving (Kieran et al., 2020). Middle managers

participate in a variety of social interaction behaviors during sensemaking, such as conversations, negotiating, storytelling, rumors, and signaling. For instance, research by Adamson et al., (2006) revealed that managers can increase the impact of their message of strategic change by turning their message into a story that is compelling and memorable. Middle managers primarily have the responsibility of executing directives from senior managers and effectively utilizing available resources (Balogun, 2003). Therefore, it is important that they first interpret and understand the strategic changes communicated by the senior managers themselves and subsequently share their knowledge and interpretation with their frontline managers and employees (Kroon & Reif, 2021).

Thirdly, positioned between the middle managers and the employees, are the frontline managers, also known as first-line managers or first-tier managers (Wilkinson et al., 2015; Townsend et al., 2022). Frontline managers are characterized as line managers holding positions at the "lowest levels of management", particularly at the operational level (Townsend et al., 2022, p.4). They are responsible for supervising a team of operational, also referred to as non-managerial, employees and executing specific plans devised by middle managers (Townsend et al., 2022; Ciptono, 2007). The role of the frontline manager is crucial as they are located between management and non-management personnel (Ciptono, 2007). Traditionally directed and monitored from above to ensure the successful execution of operational activities supporting the company's strategy, their role has evolved in leading companies. While the operational execution aspect remains essential, frontline managers in leading companies are increasingly expected to be innovative and entrepreneurial, managing growth, driving new business developments, and taking responsibility for introducing and implementing organizational changes like mergers to employees (Ciptono, 2007; McElroy, 1996).

Finally, at the bottom of the organization, are the employees, who receive the message about the merger last. Employees only experience a sensemaking process, distinct from that of other hierarchical layers. In addition to their sensemaking, employees can also contribute to sensegiving and influence their colleagues (Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012). During mergers, employees express concerns, driven by their desire, need, and belief in achieving success, allowing them to overcome obstacles and persevere under challenging conditions (Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012). The sensemaking process of employees in a merging organization involves hearing, verifying, understanding, making sense, deciding what they think of the information they have received, and acting (Routila, 2022). Researchers have examined the main characteristics and reactions of employees during the four phases of change mentioned in section 2.1. In the run-up phase, employees feel intense pressure and anxiety, are uncertain, and lose direction and focus. In the immediate transition phase, there is high work pressure and fear of losing the job. In the integration phase, there is cultural sensitivity, employees feel pressure and are attentive to working with differences. In the closure phase, employees feel relieved and try to let go of the past (Muller, 2012).

2.4 Navigating organizational change: sensemaking and sensegiving across different hierarchical levels

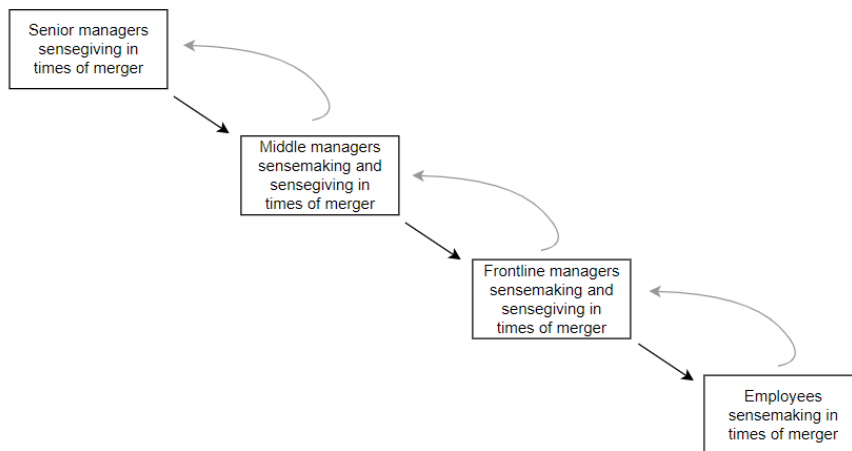Based on the theories described above, the research model of this study is presented below:

Figure 2.1 Research framework

This study focuses on sensemaking and sensegiving practices across various hierarchical levels within an organization. The research model illustrates the study's objective, which is to enhance understanding of how line managers at different hierarchical levels interpret and communicate organizational changes within their teams during mergers. This exploration also involves understanding how the message eventually reaches the employees and how they interpret and make sense of it.

In the research model, the grey curved lines symbolize feedback loops, indicating that each organizational layer provides feedback to their respective supervisor regarding the ongoing sensemaking and sensegiving processes. These feedback loops are taken into account, as previous research has emphasized the significance of providing feedback to track progress and ensure the success of the change process (Bijlsma-Frankema, 2001; Galpin, 1999).

3 Methodology

In Chapter 3, the research design of this study is initially discussed. It also offers insights into the context in which this research was conducted. Subsequently, the methodology employed for data collection is explained. Finally, the process used for data analysis is described.

3.1 Research design

To gain a better understanding of how line managers of different hierarchical levels make sense and give sense of organizational changes during mergers, this study employed qualitative research methods. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate in this context as it focuses on specific events and the perspectives of those who are involved in these events (Tehrani et al., 2015). In other words, "Qualitative research collects participants' experiences, perceptions and behaviors" (Tenny et al., 2022, p.1). Thus, by using qualitative research, this research provided insight into how line managers at different hierarchical levels and employees make sense and give sense in times of strategic change.

In this study, a single case study was conducted to answer the research question "*How do line managers from hierarchical levels make and give sense during a merger process?*" Single case studies are suitable to investigate complex, organizational processes such as change and sensemaking (Mir & Jain, 2017). In addition, single case studies have several advantages, including the ability to conduct research within the context where the process is occurring, the use of multiple research methods, and the potential to provide detailed explanations of complex situations (Zainal, 2007). Using a single case study, this study identified the sensemaking and sensegiving processes of line managers at different hierarchical levels during a merger.

The following sections will provide more details on the research context, and how the data was collected and analyzed.

3.2 Research context

As mentioned in the introduction, this study employed a single case study. Selecting a suitable organization was crucial for conducting this case study. To investigate how line managers across different hierarchical layers make sense and give sense in times of merger, it was important to choose two organizations that were merging. Additionally, the organization should have had multiple line managers at various hierarchical layers to understand the impact of their sensemaking and sensegiving practices on other layers within the organization. Finally, the timing of the study was crucial as it aimed to capture the heightened uncertainty inherent in the pre-merger period.

For this single case study, an appropriate organization was identified that fulfilled all the requirements. The organization under analysis had a workforce of over 400 employees and operates within the accounting sector. The organization provided advisory and support services to clients in

areas such as accounting, taxation, acquisitions, financing, human resources, payroll, subsidies, and other entrepreneurial matters.

The chosen organization was highly suitable for the single case study due to its decision to merge with another organization of similar size by the beginning of 2024. The organization's objective behind the merger was to enhance the continuity and quality of its services, as well as to facilitate further sustainable growth. The announcement of the merger was made by the executive board at the end of 2022 and had implications for the entire organization. While the senior managers had already been actively involved in shaping and making preparations for the merger over an extended period of time, the employees were unaware of it until the official announcement in November of 2022. This merger introduced a lot of change and uncertainty, resulting in diverse reactions among members of the organization. The case study offered valuable insights into these reactions.

The subsequent sections elaborate on the methods employed for data collection and analysis within the company.

3.3 Data collection

To investigate how different stakeholders within an organization make sense and give sense in times of merger, semi-structured interviews were conducted. These interviews involved one-on-one conversations with a combination of open and closed questions, including inquiries like 'why' and 'how' (Adams, 2015). The choice of semi-structured interviews was deliberate due to their various advantages. They not only enhance response rates but are also well-suited for delving into values, beliefs, attitudes, and motives. Additionally, they allow for the observation of non-verbal cues, contributing to the assessment of response validity. Furthermore, the structured nature of these interviews ensures that all questions are addressed during the interview, and respondents cannot seek assistance from others while responding (Barriball & While, 1994). Given these inherent advantages, the use of semi-structured interviews proves highly effective in gaining valuable insights into how line managers and employees make sense and give sense in times of merger. To gain a better understanding of the sensemaking and sensegiving practices in times of merger, members from various hierarchical layers within the organization were interviewed. This approach aimed to clarify the impact of line managers' sensemaking and sensegiving practices on other layers within the organization during the merger, as illustrated in Figure 2.1. This study focused on examining the sensemaking and sensegiving practices of line managers and employees within an organization, specifically targeting two distinct departments: the audit department and the personnel and salary advice department. The aim was to explore potential differences in these practices between the selected departments. Interviews were conducted with individuals from different hierarchical levels within each department, including three senior managers, seven middle managers, six frontline managers, and four employees. These interviewees were appointed by two senior managers within the organization and were contacted via

email to participate in the study. In total, 20 interviews were conducted, utilizing a combination of face-to-face and virtual interviews. Ten interviews were conducted virtually to accommodate distance constraints.

Throughout the interviews, participants were asked about their beliefs and emotions when hearing about the merger, their reaction to this event, and how they translated information about the merger to the other members of the team. All interview questions and the process of obtaining these questions can be found in Appendix A. These questions revealed how sensemaking and sensegiving practices differed across hierarchical levels and what their effect is on other layers within the organization. Recordings were made during the interviews for accuracy and were later transcribed for detailed analysis. The duration of each interview varied based on the depth of responses, ranging from 30 minutes to 1 hour. This method facilitated a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the complexities of sensemaking and sensegiving practices within the context of a merger.

3.4 Data analysis

In order to easily interpret the sensemaking and sensegiving process of line managers across different hierarchical levels in the next chapter, the first step was to transcribe the interviews. Transcription offers the advantage that the interviewees' words will remain intact (Alsaawi, 2014). These transcripts were coded thematically using the method of Gioia et al. (2012). To ensure a streamlined and effective coding process, this research utilized the software program Atlas.ti. This choice of software was instrumental in achieving efficient thematic coding, contributing to the interpretative exploration of the sensemaking and sensegiving dynamics among line managers across various hierarchical levels.

Throughout the analysis, a blended approach combining inductive and deductive coding methods was applied. Deductive coding provided a structured framework, incorporating predefined categories and concepts derived from existing theories. This facilitated a focused examination of specific themes, such as sensemaking, sensegiving, and the distinction in these processes across different hierarchical layers within the organization. By leveraging deductive coding, the data could be systematically organized and classified based on predefined criteria (Seale, 2017).

Additionally, as previously mentioned, the Gioia method, a systematic inductive concept development approach known as inductive coding, was employed. Inductive coding can be defined as "a data analysis process whereby the researchers read and interpret raw textual data to develop concepts, themes or a process model through interpretations based on data" (Chandra & Shang, 2019, p.91). In this study, the coding process began with a first-order analysis (Gioia et al., 2012), also known as open coding, where categories were developed from all transcripts. These initial categories, featuring labels that effectively represented the raw data, were then compared in an axial coding phase to identify differences and similarities (Chandra & Shang, 2019; Kaiser & Presmeg, 2019). Similar categories were merged into new ones, constituting a second-order analysis. A subsequent examination

determined if these labeled categories could be further refined into aggregated dimensions (Gioia et al., 2012). Ultimately, these aggregated dimensions were utilized to answer the research question "*How do line managers from different hierarchical levels make and give sense during a merger process*?"

The next chapter will present the results based on the aforementioned coding process. As all interviews were conducted in Dutch, the transcripts were initially translated into English. To ensure the anonymity of the interviewees, function names are used for each interviewee in the subsequent chapter.

4 Findings

To better understand the role of line managers at various hierarchical levels and employees in making sense and giving sense to organizational changes during a merger, the findings are categorized as follows. Initially, the analysis focused on the PowerPoint presentation that was presented during the live update where the merger was first announced. The reasons provided by the executive board for initiating the merger were examined to understand the motivations behind it. Secondly, differences between the sensemaking and sensegiving processes in the four hierarchical layers are identified. Additionally, distinctions in the sensemaking and sensegiving processes between the audit department and the personnel and salary advice department have been examined.

4.1 Executive board's stated motivations for the merger

The merger was announced in the organization through a webinar in late 2022. In this webinar, the executive board presented the reasons for the merger. This webinar was announced through email and provided to all employees in both organizations, aiming to inform the entire workforce simultaneously.

Looking at the information presented during the webinar by the executive board, the following reasons were identified as the primary motivations for the merger:

- Pursuing independent growth in regions closely aligned with the current operational areas of both organizations.
- Ensuring quality and continuity.
- Striving to be an attractive employer by improving outreach to the job market and offering more to potential employees.
- Securing the continuity of multidisciplinary services for clients.
- Enhancing international positioning.

4.2 Sensemaking and sensegiving processes in the four hierarchical layers

4.2.1 Senior manager sensegiving process

Since strategic change processes, including mergers, are typically initiated by the organization's top management, senior managers only undergo a sensegiving process. Therefore, the initial focus is on examining their sensegiving process. The overview of their sensegiving process can be seen in Figure 4.1 on the next page.

Figure 4.1 Sensegiving senior managers codes

First of all, in the interviews, the senior managers emphasized their personal emotions' role in the sensegiving process. All three senior managers were very enthusiastic about the merger and supported the decision to merge. They actively **tried to convey this enthusiasm and positive perspective** to their middle managers. In turn, all three senior managers indicated that they had informed their middle managers about the merger at an earlier stage, utilizing **one-on-one discussions**. The following quote illustrates this:

> *"I discussed the developments we were in and the potential impact on the team and the individual's position personally with them." (SM3)*

When addressing the purpose and benefits of the merger during these one-on-one discussions, one senior manager expressed commitment to **conveying the same information presented during the live update** by the executive board. The senior managers **emphasized strategic objectives** and **highlighted positive aspects** such as the merger's significance for quality improvement, scaling, organizational sustainability, and talent attraction. They also communicated that a merger is essential in the accounting industry and that it presents numerous individual opportunities, as evident from the quote below:

> *"I told them that the merger is actually about quality and scaling up. I also told them, if we don't grow, then over time, we have to question whether we can continue to handle all this*

work. And of course, the labour market, the people working here also notice that we are actively seeking for more personnel. We can only achieve that by getting bigger." (SM1)

Simultaneously, while the executive board provided updates to the senior managers about the merger and developments, the senior managers strived to disseminate this information comprehensively to their middle managers. This occurred through **central discussions** after the announcement through the live update, **regular team meetings**, and **individual conversations**.

During these discussions the senior managers adopted an **open and informal communication approach**, aiming to secure early-stage support for the merger. They embraced this communicative approach to cultivate an organizational environment that encourages middle managers to share their ideas about the merger. This inclusivity ensures their active involvement in the merger process, with their ideas being considered in both the development and implementation phases of the merger. Additionally, the senior managers make efforts to reassure particularly uncertain middle managers, create a supportive atmosphere, and convey a sense of calmness.

Interestingly, when questioned about their used **communication methods and tools**, the senior managers listed diverse communication methods and tools. Upon reviewing their responses, it can be inferred that the two senior managers in the audit department employ a more varied set of tools and methods compared to the senior manager in the personnel and salary advice department. The senior manager of the personnel and salary advice department only mentioned using personal communication. In contrast, in the audit department, the senior managers mentioned using various methods and tools, including one-on-one conversations, central communication, regular team meetings, and individual discussions. Additionally, they utilize the so-called Young Audit Board with 5 representatives to discuss developments, OfficeVibe as a tool for asking questions about the merger, newsletters, and updates by service line, and they refer employees to the Q&A. The following quote illustrates this:

> *"We have tried to communicate through central information provision and newsletters. In the Audit practice, we use OfficeVibe. Every two weeks, people are invited to anonymously indicate how they are feeling about various topics (…) We also have a Young Audit Board with 5 representatives. We meet with them once every six weeks to discuss the merger (…) And the Q&A had all the information well-explained; that's where we directed people to as well."*
> *(SM2)*

Given this, one could argue that the senior managers within the audit department use more communication methods and tools because of the complex and dynamic nature of audit work, which

often involves critical decision-making and real-time responses to emerging issues. Therefore, having a more extensive communication toolkit becomes crucial in effectively navigating these challenges. This perspective was further confirmed by one of the senior managers who indicated that his team mainly experienced uncertainty regarding the choice of tools and packages they should work with. By utilizing a diverse range of communication methods and tools, these uncertainties surrounding tool and package selection can be addressed. In contrast, the preference for personal communication in the personnel and salary advice department suggests a more straightforward and less complex communication environment within that particular department.

Finally, the senior managers conveyed that, during discussions, both managers and employees exhibited largely positive sentiments toward the merger. This positivity stemmed from a shared belief that the merger was in the best interest of the organization and that the two entities were well-matched. The senior managers tried to **emphasize their appreciation for positive feedback** and **encouraged middle managers to share these positive responses with their teams**.

In addition to the positive reactions, minimal negative responses were reported by the senior managers. This could be attributed to middle managers possibly hesitating to express negative feelings about the merger to their senior managers, either due to concerns about potential consequences or a desire to maintain a positive working relationship. Nevertheless, inquiries regarding uncertainties, such as the merger's impact on tasks and office size, were received. To address these concerns, the senior managers **engaged in discussions**, **sought to mitigate concerns**, **presented perspectives,** and **offered assistance**, as evidenced by the following quote:

> *"We always try to have a conversation, like, where does that uncertainty come from and what exactly is causing that (…) in the hope that people really express themselves. That is how we try to engage in individual conversations, and we try to provide an understanding of how the merger is going and the envisioned path forward." (SM2)*

4.2.2 Middle manager sensemaking process

To map the sensemaking process of the middle managers, an overview was created in Figure 4.2 on the following page.

4.2 Sensemaking middle managers codes

When it came to the middle managers' initial reactions to the news of the organization's merger, they provided insightful responses. It can be concluded that all seven middle managers were **initially informed by different individuals** within the organization, including the director from the executive board, a work council meeting, and a colleague who also holds a middle managerial position. Interestingly, one middle manager was not informed earlier but learned about the news during the live update. In a particularly distinctive response, another middle manager encountered the news of the merger through social media channels and shared the following perspective:

> *"That's quite funny because at the moment it was announced, I was on vacation in southern Chile. I received an important update email in my inbox, but I thought, "Oh well, I find my vacation important too". So, I didn't open it right away, and I couldn't attend the live update. I actually heard about it through social media channels." (MM3)*

Upon analyzing the middle managers' **initial reactions** to the merger news, it becomes apparent that they hold divided attitudes, ranging from positive to negative. A closer examination reveals that their initial responses primarily stem from the anticipated impact of the merger on the organization, contrary to the expectation that middle managers would predominantly focus on personal and team

impacts. Remarkably, five middle managers **initially expressed negative feelings** regarding the organization's size, the postponement of internal developments, the additional workload, and the extended communication lines. What stands out is that within the personnel and salary advice department, all four managers expressed negative reactions, whereas in the audit department, only one manager initially responded negatively. A potential explanation for this is that it was communicated that there would be major changes within their department, specifically mentioning alterations in the regions where they work. This information led to reactions concerning additional workload and the postponement of internal developments. The following quote highlights one of the initial negative reactions:

> "Well, several people from ICT and Finance were involved, and they were immediately enthusiastic. However, I did express my reservations to them, saying that I believe the organization still needs to take certain steps. For instance, you can see that nothing has been done yet in terms of leadership development. I had some doubts beforehand, wondering if the merger is really necessary." (MM4)

When examining the individuals responsible for informing middle managers and their subsequent negative reactions, an observable pattern becomes apparent. An analysis of their responses suggests that middle managers informed by their director exhibited an initial negative reaction primarily due to the timing of the message. The director provided information too early in the process, when only the intention to merge was known, and no concrete steps had been taken. Additionally, those informed by their colleague displayed a negative reaction, likely influenced by their colleague's negative message, potentially shaping their own opinion. In other words, the colleague's negative opinion might have played a significant role in shaping their perception. Lastly, the manager who received information during the live update appeared to require additional clarification about the merger. One could argue that the content of the message was not clear enough, especially considering his role as a middle manager in a region where significant changes were anticipated. In summary, it can be concluded that the person delivering information about the merger, the timing of the message, and the content of the message play a pivotal role in shaping the sensemaking process for middle managers.

In contrast to the negative initial reactions, two middle managers also exhibited an **initial positive response** to the news of the merger. They expressed optimism due to assurances of quality, alignment with industry trends, the information that not much would change within the organization, and various personal opportunities, as the following quote displays:

> "I'm glad I now have an office closer to home. I do know the other organization to some extent. I come across them occasionally because I have clients in their areas (...) And through

these interactions, I've found out that their culture is practically oriented, and that could suit me well." (MM3)

Analyzing the patterns of those who delivered the information, and the positive responses suggests that the individual informed during the work council meeting displays a positive reaction, potentially influenced by the conveyed message. Consequently, the manager recognized the necessity of the merger. Furthermore, it seems that the other individual informed during his vacation also had an initial positive reaction, potentially influenced by observing positive responses from colleagues and individuals on social media. This suggests that the people around him may have played a significant role in shaping a positive opinion.

Moreover, four middle managers experienced positive experiences during the merger process and mentioned having a **positive current opinion** about the merger. Assessing their current opinion is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the entire sensemaking process, as the merger process has unfolded over several months. The middle managers articulated that their current positive opinion stems from the excitement about new colleagues and the belief that the merger is essential for their department's talent attraction. Additionally, they appreciate that the merger does not directly impact their work, observe increased specialization resulting from the merger, and note a positive perception of the limited changes in the last few months. Considering this, one could argue that the senior managers' message was primarily focused on emphasizing the many opportunities and benefits that the merger presents. Consequently, the middle managers acknowledged the positive developments arising from the merger.

Notably, another middle manager stated that he developed a more positive opinion through **active involvement**. Hence, it appears that increased engagement within the merger process transforms initially negative opinions into positive current opinions, as highlighted in the following quote:

> *"Now I am much more involved with the merger. In the beginning, you hear about it, and then it is a waiting game. You wait to see how it will unfold. In that sense, you're not directly engaged with it; you can't exert any influence. Now, I have a lot of influence on things. So, my opinion has become more positive." (MM7)*

However, after six months, three middle managers mentioned a shift towards **increased negativity and criticism regarding the merger**, citing various negative experiences during this period and potential shortcomings in communication. It is noteworthy that one middle manager conveyed that, initially, the merger process was presented too positively. However, over time, she experienced disappointment as the realization set in that the merger was more complex than initially conveyed by

her informant. An examination of other negative current opinions and experiences leads to the conclusion that the other two middle managers shared similar sentiments. The middle managers expressed disappointment about the prolonged duration of the merger, the numerous challenges they faced during the process, and the many organizational differences that occurred. Additionally, the two managers in the personnel and salary advice department indicated that their current opinion remained negative, as the past six months revealed the considerable time and energy required to work in regions undergoing significant changes. Considering these factors, it can be argued that middle managers tend to become more negative and critical when the details of the merger become more visible, as demonstrated in the following quote:

> "I think in the beginning, it was presented too positively, with a strong emphasis on how similar we are and that our cultures align (…) I believe this created the perception that the merger was just a formality and would be easily sorted out, but as the process unfolded, it became clear that it's not that straightforward (…) I think the overly positive communication initially has led to some disappointment now (…) So, I feel that's somewhat the impression I have is: presented very positively, and as it progresses, it's a bit of a let-down." (MM1)

> "I noticed that we are very different, because we are now actually talking about the details. And that requires a lot from people, to create a sense that they belong to one organization." (MM2)

In conclusion, despite the senior managers' confidence in having communicated all relevant information about the merger effectively, a discrepancy in perception among middle managers becomes apparent. Three middle managers developed a more negative opinion during the process, suggesting a potential misalignment between the senior managers' sensegiving efforts and the actual sensemaking process among the middle management team. In essence, while the initial positivity surrounding the merger painted a picture of cohesion, the reality and details became apparent over time, revealing the complexities and challenges faced by middle managers.

4.2.3 Middle manager sensegiving process

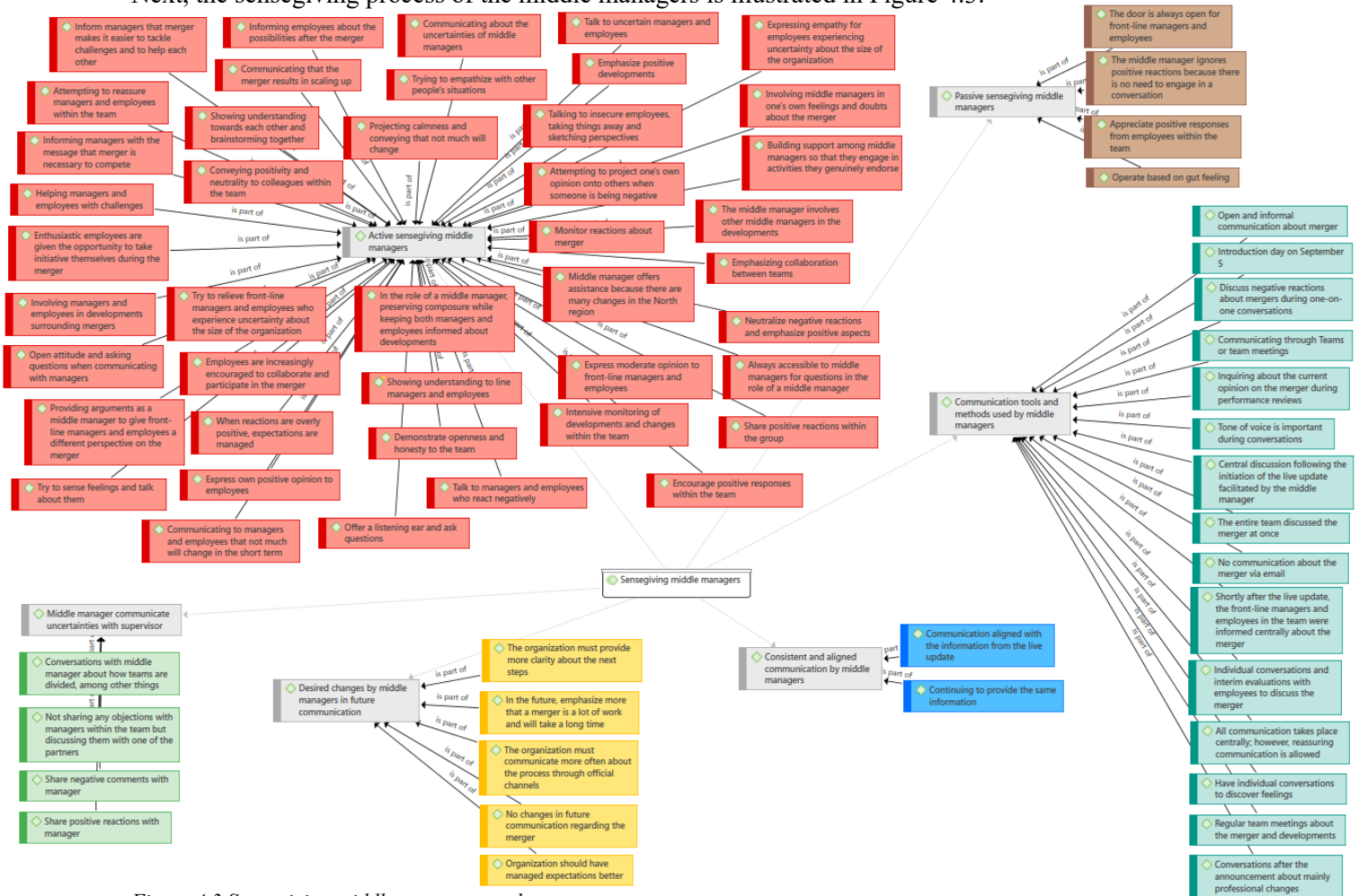Next, the sensegiving process of the middle managers is illustrated in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3 Sensegiving middle managers codes

Initially, what emerged during the interviews with the middle managers, and is quite surprising, is that **they did not inform their frontline managers about the merger**. Instead, they directed them to watch the live update from the executive board. However, one middle manager from the personnel and salary advice department, who informed fellow middle managers, also informed his frontline managers during a **management team meeting**. The following quote illustrates this:

> *"We had a regular management team meeting. I brought up what was about to happen and the potential consequences (...) so, I already informed them before the live update." (MM4)*

Despite not personally informing their frontline managers, some middle managers actively participated in **central discussions** with those present at the offices after the live update, as the following quote indicates:

> *"We basically just waited for the webinar. At that time, my colleague and I were both in the office. We went out into the department's hallway when the announcement was made and talked to everyone." (MM1)*

One potential reason for their participation in central discussions after the live update could be that many middle managers missed additional explanations when informed by their informants. This lack of information was a result of inadequate timing and messaging. Considering their negative experiences, it can be suggested that middle managers proactively choose to participate in central discussions during their sensegiving process. Their goal may be to protect their frontline managers from facing similar negative experiences and to provide them with additional explanations about the merger.

In addition to these central discussions, middle managers participated in various other **central, team, and individual discussions**, similar to their senior managers. Additionally, the Microsoft Teams meetings and the introduction day on September 5 for all employees in the audit department were emphasized as significant communication tools. In alignment with senior managers, middle managers strive to **convey the same information shared by the executive board** to their frontline managers. During these discussions, they underscored the merger's necessity for scalability, competitiveness, and maintaining quality.

The middle managers actively embraced an **open and informal communication approach**, similar to the method utilized by senior managers. They recognized the significance of calmly delivering information and consistently reinforcing key points to ensure frontline managers remained well-informed about ongoing developments. Moreover, unlike the senior managers, the middle managers employ various active sensegiving techniques. These techniques encompass offering a receptive ear, fostering an open attitude, demonstrating understanding, assisting with challenges, posing questions, and striving to maintain a sense of calm to prevent frontline managers from feeling uncertain, as highlighted in the following quotes:

> *"A lot of repetition, often saying the same things again. We've consistently asked if anyone needs information (...) it's just been a standard question: "How is the merger for you, and where do you stand?" We tried to make it very personal because you can see that everyone experiences it in their own way (...) you really have to listen to what each person needs." (MM1)*

> *"People are curious about what it will mean in the long term, and in our communication, we've made it clear to say, "Well, for now, it doesn't really change anything for you" (...)*

Because many people are quite busy and experiencing significant work pressure, and if you say there's a merger coming, it can be perceived as more work coming in. And that's not the signal you want to send. So, we've mainly communicated that nothing is changing for now, to maintain a sense of calm, so to speak." (MM3)

Although the majority of middle managers expressed sharing their emotions and feelings honestly and openly with their frontline managers, two middle managers from the personnel and salary advice department and one manager from the audit department revealed sharing their own emotions and feelings with their supervisor rather than their frontline managers, a practice known as **feedback loops**. The following quote illustrates this:

"Well, when I have any concerns, I don't express them to the people in the team. When I come across things in the merger process, I discuss them with my supervisor. Expressing my feelings to my colleagues doesn't help." (MM3)

In contrast to senior managers, middle managers not only applied active sensegiving techniques but also integrated several **passive sensegiving techniques**, such as acknowledging positive reactions and relying on gut feelings. One middle manager conveyed that his team can always approach him with questions, as illustrated in the following quote:

"There are no barriers; the door is always open. They can come to me for anything. And I believe that if you continue to radiate that feeling, people will sense that they can share their stories with you." (MM5)

Moreover, it is noteworthy that one middle manager actively employs the **passive sensegiving technique of ignoring positive reactions** from frontline managers because he believes there is no need to engage in a conversation with them. One could argue that this choice might stem from the manager's belief that positive reactions signal a comprehensive understanding and acceptance of the conveyed information. The manager might perceive positive reactions as confirmation that the message has been well-received, considering further discussion or clarification unnecessary.

The middle managers noted that the frontline managers responded very rationally towards the merger. The frontline managers saw the opportunities, were enthusiastic, and understood the decision to merge. During discussions, middle managers adopted the same active sensegiving approach as their senior managers, namely **encouraging and appreciating positive reactions**. What is noteworthy is that the senior managers indicated that they encouraged middle managers to share positive reactions

with their teams, and the middle managers indeed expressed sharing positive reactions with the team, as reflected in the following statement:

> *"Well, I try to share that within the group. Because then you create a sense of unity within the team (…) so that others also hear positive feedback." (MM7)*

In contrast to the positive reactions, the middle managers also received many more negative and uncertain reactions from their frontline managers. For instance, the frontline managers were afraid of losing team spirit and uncertain about the impact of the merger. Potential reasons for receiving more negative and uncertain reactions could be that frontline managers feel more at ease expressing concerns or uncertainties with their immediate middle managers, whom they may perceive as closer and more directly involved in their day-to-day work. The middle managers **employed various strategies during their conversations**. For instance, they mentioned attempting to understand the root of these reactions through personal discussions by asking questions. They also tried to shift negative reactions towards a more positive outlook and aimed to involve managers in the merger process to generate support, as evident from the following quote:

> *"I try to communicate with them about it, saying, "It's not a big deal; just continue doing what you've always done (…) Initially, it's perceived negatively, and I try to let it sink in with people, asking them to come up with proposals. Then you see that the managers face less resistance (…) that's my goal – to create support and get them on board to do things they also believe in (…) I'm happy if I can convince them that it's the best way. And if they are genuinely negative, then we need to have a conversation. But that hasn't been necessary so far." (MM4)*

Finally, the middle managers expressed their desires for **potential changes in future communication**. Upon reviewing their responses, it can be concluded that the mentioned aspects align with the areas where middle managers currently have negative opinions or experiences about. The middle managers suggested that, in the future, the organization should communicate that the merger is a long-term process and use official channels more extensively. Additionally, they emphasized the need for more effective management of expectations and increased communication about upcoming steps, as highlighted by the following quote:

> *"There could be a bit more communication. I understand that certain decisions haven't been made yet, but you can also talk about the process itself. I think it's good that the board communicates more frequently through the official channels." (MM2)*

4.2.4 Frontline manager sensemaking process

After examining the sensegiving process of the middle managers, the focus shifts to the sensemaking process to comprehend how frontline managers interpret the message regarding the merger. Figure 4.4 provides an overview of this process.
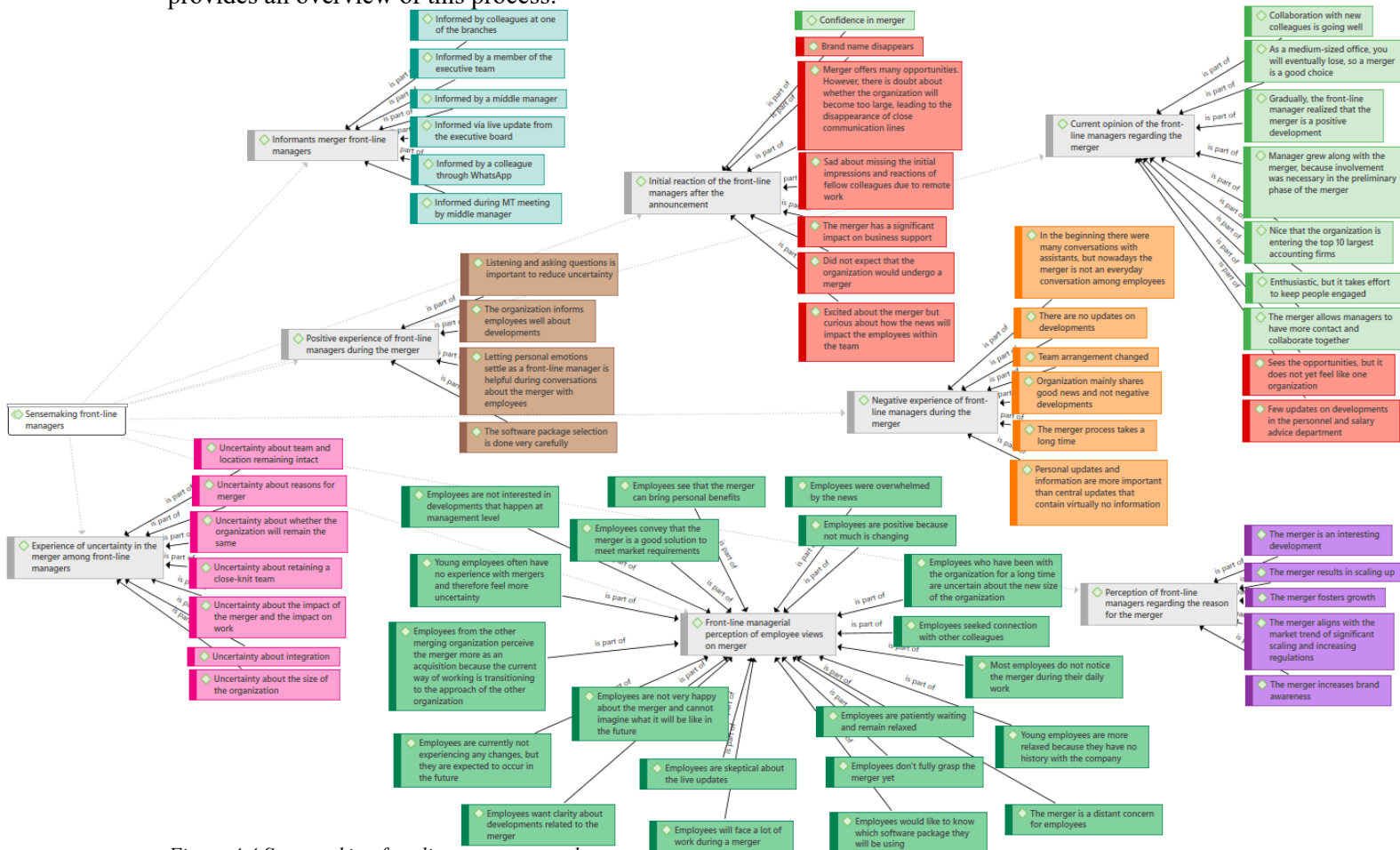

Figure 4.4 Sensemaking frontline managers codes

Firstly, it can be concluded that all six frontline managers, similar to the middle managers, **were informed by various individuals**. One manager learned about the news during the live update, while the others were briefed earlier by various sources, including colleagues at a branch, a member of the executive team, a colleague via WhatsApp during vacation, and a fellow middle manager during a management team meeting. Consistent with the claims made by middle managers in their interviews, it can be inferred that they were indeed not the messengers of the merger news. However, an exception exists for the two frontline managers who were informed by their fellow middle manager, as the middle manager mentioned that he informed his middle and frontline managers earlier.

Upon analyzing the frontline managers' initial reaction to the merger news, it becomes clear that almost all frontline managers **initially responded negatively** to the merger. What is surprising is that only one frontline manager, from the audit department, had a positive initial reaction because he had confidence in the merger. The remaining five managers had a negative reaction. The negative reactions

primarily revolved around concerns about the team and business support's impact, the unexpected nature of the announcement, and disappointment over missing the initial reactions of colleagues due to remote work. Additionally, one frontline manager mentioned that the negative initial reaction was related to the organization's expansion and the disappearance of short communication lines, as indicated in the following quote:

> *"Something that concerns me is that you initially chose for a small office. One of the core values of the organization is also flexibility and short lines of communication (...) my gut feeling also had a sense of how big are we going to become and how does such a large organization fit with me (...) Before, we knew the entire management team, and you would frequently work at other locations, and that is something that will change soon (...) I am curious about what it will do to the organization, especially in terms of decision-making. The reason I liked our audit department so much was the short lines of communication." (FLM1)*

A closer examination of their negative initial reactions and feelings of uncertainty reveals that the frontline managers are primarily concerned about the **impact of the merger on the organization** itself rather than being preoccupied with the potential impact on their personal circumstances. Interestingly, this pattern was also observed among the middle managers.

Furthermore, it is crucial to highlight that one frontline manager who reacted only positively was informed through the live update. One potential reason for this positive reaction could be attributed to the mode and context of receiving information. Watching the live update might have provided a sense of immediacy, transparency, and direct communication from the executive board, fostering a positive connection with the information. On the other hand, those who were informed by various individuals might have received the news in a fragmented or less coherent manner, leading to confusion, uncertainty, and potentially a more negative perception of the merger. For instance, the frontline manager who was informed by the director received information too early, when nothing was clear yet, similar to what was observed with the middle managers. This suggests that the timing was also inappropriate in this case. Additionally, one could argue that the frontline manager informed during the management team meeting responded negatively to the merger due to a perceived lack of communication or insufficient clarity regarding how the merger would impact his team. Furthermore, it can be suggested that the frontline manager informed by colleagues reacted negatively because her colleagues at the branch were also negative about the merger, influencing her opinion. Finally, it can be proposed that the one who was informed by his middle manager initially showed a negative reaction because the middle manager was also quite negative, potentially influencing his opinion. These last two cases emphasize the importance of who delivers the information. In summary, it can be

argued that the person delivering the information, the timing, and the clarity of the content play pivotal roles in shaping the sensemaking process of the frontline managers as well.

After six months, a noteworthy shift in frontline managerial sentiment emerged, challenging the initial wave of negativity surrounding the merger. In contrast to their initial reaction, the **current opinion among frontline managers has notably evolved in a positive direction**. Notably, four frontline managers display a more optimistic outlook on the merger, surpassing their middle managers in positivity. This is evident in their experiences, which reflect an increase in overall positivity. During interviews, managers attribute this newfound optimism to the effective communication practices implemented by the executive board. Moreover, they pointed out that positive collaboration with new colleagues contributed to their positive shift in opinion over the last six months. They now acknowledge the merger as a positive development, recognizing its necessity for maintaining competitiveness in the market. In light of this, it can be argued that engaging in conversations with individuals deeply involved in the merger process and middle managers expressing positive opportunities plays a crucial role in creating a positive opinion. This underscores the importance of the person delivering the information and the completeness of the message.

A specific instance underscores a frontline manager from the audit department, emphasizing the precision applied in the software package selection, leading to a recent positive opinion. Despite initial indications from senior managers that their audit team experienced uncertainty regarding the choice of tools and packages, frontline managers no longer encounter such uncertainty over time. It becomes evident that frontline managers believe the tool and package selection have been executed excellently. A potential reason for this discrepancy could be the organization's progress, having already made choices and entered the implementation phase. For instance, as the software package was implemented, line managers gained a deeper understanding of its functionalities, benefits, and sustainability for their specific needs. This suggests that frontline managers tend to adopt a more positive opinion when they observe the ongoing development within an organization, particularly in the context of software package selection.

In alignment with middle managers, one frontline manager emphasized that **early involvement ensured personal growth** alongside the merger, expressing:

> "I was already involved in the preliminary phase when it was not yet certain, so you also grow into it a little bit." (FLM6)

Despite the overall lower frequency of negative experiences and opinions among frontline managers compared to their middle managers, it is noteworthy that some frontline managers did **encounter**

negative aspects during the merger process. Reviewing the negative experiences during the merger process and the two current negative opinions, it can be stated that the two managers who currently hold a negative opinion also experienced negativity during the merger process. For example, one frontline manager mentioned that she now has a negative current opinion because she believes the organization provides too few updates about the merger. What she experienced as negative during the merger process is that the organization primarily shares positive news and not negative developments. Another frontline manager, who also holds a current negative opinion, stated that she is negative because it does not feel like one organization yet. She mentioned experiencing negativity about the merger process taking a long time, the lack of conversation about the merger with employees, and the preference for personal updates over centralized ones, as evidenced by the following quote:

> *"I place much more value on being personally informed. I am not really into updates where nothing is said (..) If we say that we are working on things but haven't made any choices yet, well, that doesn't help me. However, there are many colleagues who don't have the internal connections within the organization, so I'm not saying that the updates are pointless. But personally, I don't get much out of them." (FLM1)*

In conclusion, the positive evolution in the opinion of frontline managers can be attributed to multifaceted factors, with effective communication standing out as a key contributor. One could argue that the emphasis on an open and informal communication approach, coupled with personal involvement from the middle managers, has reshaped their perceptions. Additionally, it could be suggested that active involvement leads to a more positive opinion. Furthermore, one could argue that the central discussions following the live update have contributed to the current positive outlook. In contrast, the limited updates and perceived lack of integration experienced by two frontline managers who currently hold negative opinions highlight the importance of ongoing, informative communication to address concerns and maintain a positive trajectory.

4.2.5 Frontline manager sensegiving process

In addition to the sensemaking process, the frontline managers also engage in a sensegiving process to communicate the message of the merger to their employees. An overview of the sensegiving process of the frontline managers can be seen in Figure 4.5.
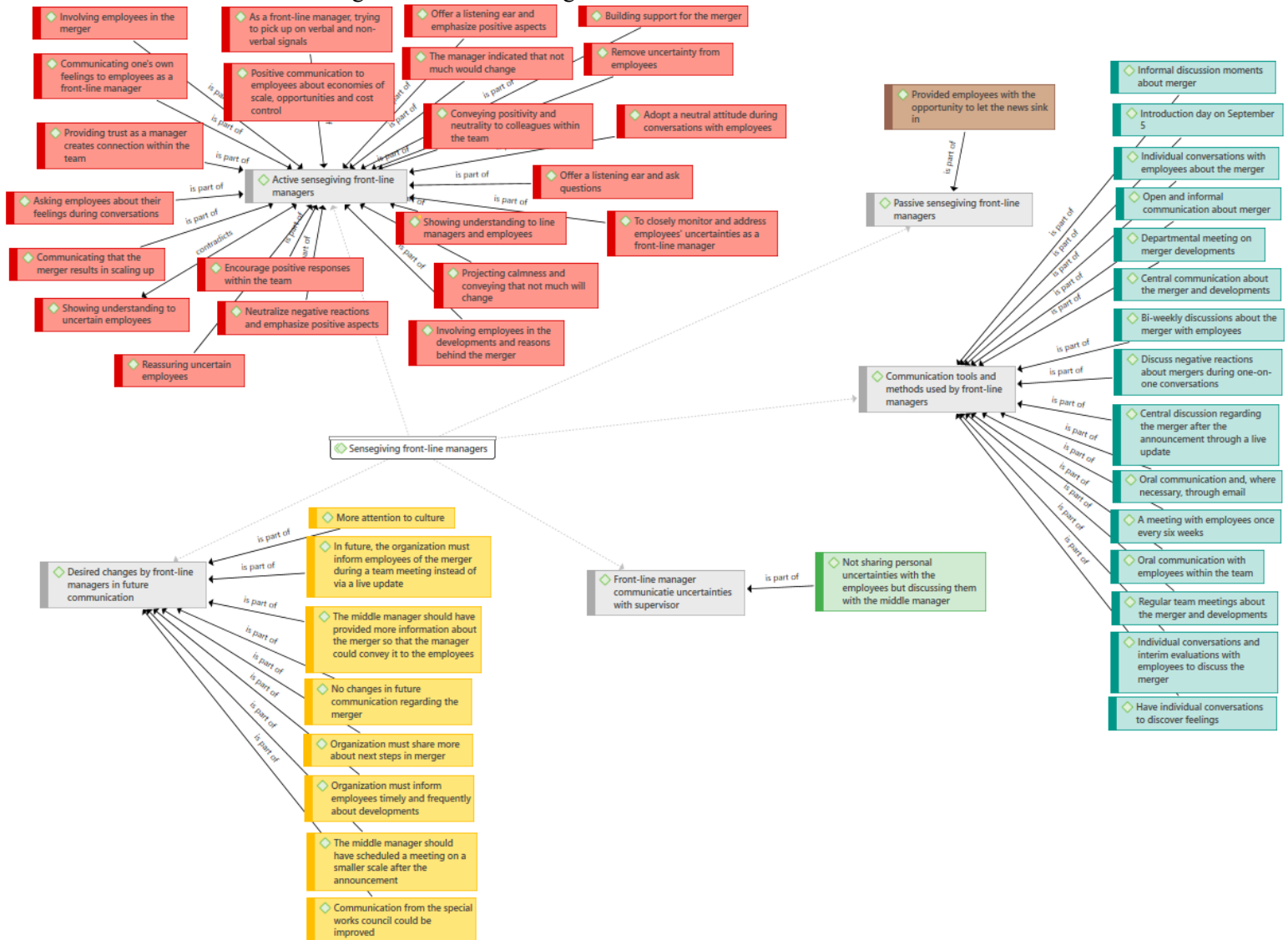

Figure 4.5 Sensegiving frontline managers codes

First and rather surprisingly, **none of the frontline managers took the initiative to personally communicate the news** of the merger to the employees. Instead, they pointed out that the information was conveyed through the live update facilitated by the executive board. However, after the live update, a significant number of frontline managers, similar to middle managers, took part in both **individual and centralized discussions** with their employees to provide additional clarity and gather their opinions about the merger. One possible reason for offering additional clarity could be that frontline managers lacked further clarification at the time they received information about the merger, similar to what was explained in the sensegiving process of the middle managers. This is illustrated by the following statement:

> *"After the announcement by the executive boards of both parties, I immediately sat down with the audit service line. And thus informed the people." (FLM3)*

In addition to these post-live update discussions, frontline managers employed various **communication methods and tools**. Analysis of their responses reveals that frontline managers from the personnel and salary advice department attempted to engage through department meetings, bi-weekly discussions, one-on-one conversations, and regular team meetings. On the other hand, frontline managers from the audit department utilized the introduction day on September 5, meetings held every six weeks, regular team meetings, and interim evaluations as key tools. This is articulated in the following quote:

> *"During individual discussions and interim evaluations, I talk to the assistants about what the merger looks like. I discuss the steps that were taken by the executive board (…) and discuss what opportunities the assistants see and if I can contribute to that, and whether they want to do something to participate in the merger." (FLM2)*

Throughout these discussions, the frontline managers actively conveyed that the merger enhances the company's attractiveness, improves its reputation, and enables better adaptation to market developments. Additionally, they highlighted that the merger leads to scalability and improved cost control. One frontline manager shared a noteworthy perspective for choosing to provide background information during these discussions:

> *"I observed that the assistants had slightly less in-depth knowledge about all the developments occurring in our field. They receive the regulations last and implement them. I have to make them aware, explain the background, why it's happening, and what impact all those regulations has on our work. Presenting it in that way helps them understand the necessity of the merger." (FLM2)*

Further analysis of their responses reveals that frontline managers **employ fewer active sensegiving techniques** compared to their middle managers. While the managers aimed to assure employees of minimal short-term changes and emphasized personal advantages resulting from the merger, only one frontline manager admitted to using a **passive sense-giving technique**. This particular frontline manager aimed to allow the news to settle before emphasizing the positive aspects, to allow employees to naturally come around once they recognize the benefits:

"It's all about listening to how they perceive the impact. Certainly, I also try to emphasize that it can be an advantage. But people need time to absorb it, and in the initial stages, it doesn't make much sense to immediately highlight all the positive aspects right after the news is announced. Let it sink in first, and then people will naturally come around when they see the benefits." (FLM6)

During discussions with the employees, frontline managers from both departments actively embraced an **open and informal communication style**. This is a significant observation, indicating that every line manager within the organization adopts this specific communication approach. The motivation for embracing this style lies in the fact that, as indicated by the frontline managers from the audit department, the nature of the audit department is defined by oral communication. The open and informal communication style of the frontline managers is characterized by providing a listening ear and demonstrating understanding. One frontline manager expressed the following:

"What I have done is offer a listening ear (..) and then ask, "How are things, what challenges are you facing?" People differ in this regard. Some chose a small office, and now it becomes such a large organization, which affects them (...) so, my strategy and approach is about informing people verbally" (FLM3)

When it comes to expressing their emotions and sentiments, only a few frontline managers admit to sharing positive opinions with their employees. Interestingly, the majority of frontline managers affirm **maintaining a neutral stance and conveyed confidence** during discussions, refraining from revealing their own emotions and feelings. This approach is justified by their aim to preserve team cohesion and accomplish specific goals, as expressed in the following quote:

"I approach it very neutrally (...) I have tried to paint an honest picture, but I can see that the merger is still a bit abstract for them. They haven't felt much impact yet. I do realize that it is important to demonstrate confidence in navigating the merger process, to maintain cohesion within the team. If we, as managers, lack confidence, we won't achieve anything." (FLM1)

Similar to middle managers, one of the frontline managers also mentioned utilizing **feedback loops**. He expressed discussing his concerns with his supervisor, highlighting his intention not to infect his team with negativity, as illustrated by the following quote:

"I also have a manager, and to be honest, I share it with him. If I truly feel something, I wouldn't share that with my team. Because I don't want to infect them with my negativity." (FLM3)

According to the frontline managers, many employees expressed positivity about the merger, citing various personal benefits and maintaining a relaxing attitude. In discussions, the frontline managers tried to **promote positive responses and express joy** when receiving such positive feedback, as reflected in the following statement:

> *"Well, good. I support that completely. It's just nice when people are happy and content. So, applauding." (FLM4)*

However, alongside these positive reactions, frontline managers also faced negative and uncertain responses, particularly from long-tenured employees expressing concerns about the organization's increased size. This is a noteworthy observation, suggesting that individuals with longer tenures at the organization may experience increased uncertainty due to the shift from a small office environment. In response to these concerns, **frontline managers implemented various strategies** during discussions. They demonstrated understanding, emphasized the merger's benefits, and provided a listening ear, as evidenced by the following quotes:

> *"You start by showing understanding. So, my role involves genuine interest, a listening ear, and making adjustments where necessary. I ask about inaccuracies (...) Some people accept a merger right away, while others need guidance through the next steps and the process (FLM3)*

> *"Well, yeah, I tried to listen, and I also emphasized that there are positive aspects. Fortunately, it was mentioned that we would remain in the same office (...) So, I could reassure them about that." (FLM6)*

Furthermore, a manager from the audit department delved deeper into understanding the roots of negative reactions, aiming to transform them into positive ones:

> *"Then I ask why they think (...) I'm curious about the underlying thought process. I always find that interesting (...) There's always something behind it (...) I attempt to show understanding and turn the negative responses into positive ones." (FLM2)*

In conclusion, similar to middle managers, frontline managers also discussed **potential changes in future communication**. They advocated for emphasizing organizational culture and expressed a desire for timely and frequent updates with additional details about follow-up steps. Two frontline managers specifically expressed a preference for delivering the merger message on a smaller scale, highlighting their dissatisfaction with the potential disappearance of short communication lines, as illustrated in the following quote:

"I would not opt for a live update with 1000 people all at once. I would have preferred, for the team's cohesion, to share this information during our team meeting (...) Presenting it through a live update felt quite impersonal. I acknowledge the practical aspect. But I believe this is a clear example of our organization expanding. Personal communication diminishes, leading to reduced commitment and involvement." (FLM1)

4.2.6 Employee sensemaking process

Finally, the sensemaking process of the employees is illustrated. Unlike the other layers in the organization, they only experience a sensemaking process. The overview can be seen in Figure 4.6.
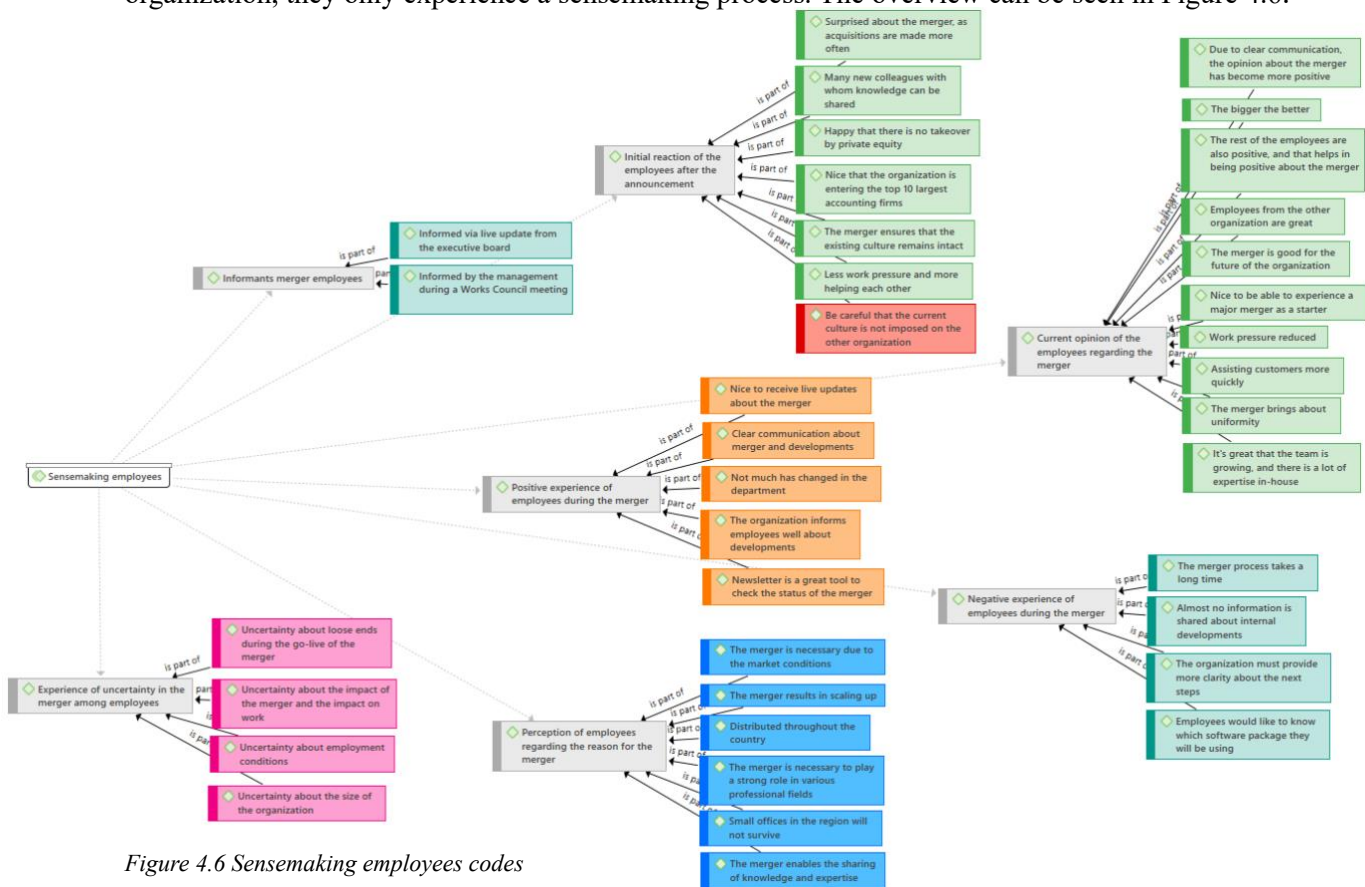

Figure 4.6 Sensemaking employees codes

To start, examining the responses from employees regarding who informed them reveals that nearly all four employees **received information directly from the executive board** during the live update. This aligns with the narratives provided by the frontline managers, indicating their choice to refrain from informing employees earlier and instead encourage them to watch the live update. It is noteworthy that only one employee was informed during a works council meeting, as exemplified in the following statement:

"I am a member of the works council, so we received an approval request with an explanation from the executive board along and a lot of accompanying documents. They outlined what we

were going to do and how we were going to do it. So, I knew it a few months earlier than the
rest." (Empl.1)

Examining **employees' initial reactions** to the company merger revealed a predominantly positive sentiment, characterized by surprise and enthusiasm. Only one individual expressed concern about potential cultural imposition on the other organization. The positive reactions comprised joy at welcoming new colleagues, relief at not being absorbed by another organization, satisfaction in achieving a position among the top 10 largest accounting firms, satisfaction with maintaining the current culture, and anticipation of reduced work pressure.

Surprisingly, one employee, despite the initial surprise, expressed a positive outlook on the merger, particularly from an audit perspective:

> *"I was a bit surprised. I always had the impression that we wanted to grow through*
> *acquisitions (…) Such a big merger did surprise me, but I am positive about it. I think*
> *especially from an audit perspective, it is probably a good thing." (Empl.1)*

Further analysis of this quote reveals that the employee's positivity in the audit department is based on the anticipation of increased support through the merger. Audit department employees highlighted that this strategic move allows them to establish a technical expertise department, expand in the field of data analysis, and enhance compliance, ultimately boosting the overall efficiency of their services.

After six months, it is evident that, contrary to the current opinions of both frontline managers and middle managers, all four employees hold a **positive perspective on the merger**. Transparent communication, the introduction of new colleagues, team growth, and positive feedback from colleagues were highlighted as pivotal factors contributing to the current positive opinion. This transformation in employee sentiment underscores the significance of effective communication strategies by frontline managers, the integration of new team members, and the fostering of a collaborative and growth-oriented work environment in shaping a positive perspective during organizational change.

Moreover, and what is noteworthy, is that one of the employees was exceptionally positive about the merger. He did not mention any negative points and expressed optimism about the size of the organization and the promising future resulting from the merger, as illustrated in the following quote:

> *"What I personally think is only positive, and the bigger, the better. The more people, the more*
> *businesses, the higher the revenue, the more firmly we establish ourselves in the market. We*

are now entering the top ten. Look at the other big players: they are still standing. We have to move forward. We have to look to the future." (Empl. 4)

Subsequently, employees shared predominantly **positive experiences**, further contributing to their positive current opinion. Upon reviewing their responses, it becomes apparent that employees had the most positive experiences throughout the merger journey. They expressed positivity towards the live update, the minor changes within their departments, and the clear communication on various platforms, as evidenced by the following quotes:

"As I mentioned earlier, communication is just done well (...) So, in terms of communication, I find it very clear, in terms of platforms. I haven't thought about how I would have wanted it differently, because I find everything very clear." (Empl.2)

Despite the prevailing positive current opinion and favorable experiences, it is essential to highlight that some employees also **encountered a degree of uncertainty** and noted **negative experiences** during the merger process. In contrast to their middle and frontline managers, employees' uncertainties and negative experiences primarily revolved around personal impacts. Notably, they expressed uncertainties about the merger's effect on their work, changes in employment conditions, and curiosity regarding the selection of the software package they will be using, as can be seen in the following quote:

"Some things, like package selection, are very relevant for me. So, it is a bit frustrating when that no decision had been made yet, as I am very eager to know which package, we are going to use" (Empl. 2)

In conclusion, upon examining the initial and current opinions from the employees, it can be asserted that the live update might have played a pivotal role in fostering a positive sensemaking process. The timing of the live update, aligning with a period of clarity and the ability to articulate anticipated developments effectively, may have contributed to the positive shift. Furthermore, one could argue that the emphasis on positive aspects by frontline managers during one-on-one and post-update discussions may have advanced acceptance of the merger. However, it is worth noting that the limited number of negative reactions might indicate that the complexities of the merger are not yet clear and visible to employees, as was the case at the middle and frontline manager levels of sensemaking. This suggests that the details of the merger may not have fully permeated the employees' understanding and will only become apparent when observable changes are implemented.

Additionally, the differing concerns between middle managers, frontline managers, and employees during a merger may be attributed to their distinct roles and responsibilities within the organization. Middle and frontline managers, being responsible for overseeing and leading teams, may naturally be more focused on the impact of the merger on the overall team dynamics, organizational structure, and workflow, while employees may be more concerned about the personal consequences of the merger.

5 Conclusion

In addressing the research question "*How do line managers from different hierarchical levels make and give sense during a merger process?*", this study provided valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of sensemaking and sensegiving across organizational layers.

The examination of the sensemaking process within various layers of the organization revealed intriguing dynamics during a merger. Among seven middle managers, five consistently expressed concerns and negativity about the merger, reflecting their awareness of the complex challenges associated with navigating change at a pivotal managerial level. A more in-depth analysis led to the conclusion that negative initial reactions among middle managers stemmed from factors such as poor timing, unclear messages, and negative informants projecting their views onto lower layers. Focusing on potential impacts on their teams, rather than personal impacts, three middle managers became increasingly negative during the process as the details of the merger unfolded. However, active involvement and the emphasis on opportunities by senior managers contributed to a shift in opinions among the remaining middle managers towards a more positive outlook, as evidenced by the findings.

In contrast, five out of six frontline managers initially responded negatively to the merger, focusing on potential impacts on their teams. Here, poor timing, unclear messages, and negative informants also played pivotal roles in shaping negative opinions. However, after six months, three of them notably evolved in a positive direction. This positive shift was attributed to engaging in conversations with people actively involved in the merger process and middle managers emphasizing positive developments during one-on-one and post-update discussions. Additionally, frontline managers tended to adopt more positive opinions when actively observing ongoing developments within the organization and actively participating in the merger.

Surprisingly, all employees responded positively towards the merger, despite one employee expressing initial negativity. This unexpected positivity might be attributed to clear and comprehensive information provision about the merger, emphasizing the critical role of frontline managers and transparent communication. Their positive opinion could also be linked to the timing of the live update and the emphasis on positive aspects during one-on-one and post-update discussions. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the complexities of the merger might not yet be fully clear and visible to the employees, and therefore, their positivity might be based on incomplete understanding.

In summary, the examination of positive opinions within the three layers suggests that individuals lower in the organization tended to hold more positive opinions. Additionally, it can be concluded that while middle managers and frontline managers focused on the potential impacts of the merger on their teams, employees are primarily concerned with its personal impact. Moreover, the overall success of positive sensemaking centered around factors such as timing, the content of the

messages, informants, visible details and opportunities, and one-on-one and post-update discussions. This emphasizes the importance of recognizing these specific aspects in shaping a positive sensemaking process during mergers.

Examining the sensegiving processes within different line managerial hierarchies reflected a multifaceted and dynamic approach to communicating the merger. Senior managers actively informed their middle managers about the merger, fostering a sense of enthusiasm and positivity. Surprisingly, middle managers and frontline managers often refrained from personally conveying the news of the merger, choosing instead to direct their teams to the live update provided by the executive board. However, after the update, they engaged in discussions with front-line managers and employees to offer clarity and gather opinions. Their participation in post-update discussions appeared to stem from the fact that they missed additional clarification about the merger when receiving information from their informants. As a result, it can be concluded that their sensegiving process, in this aspect, differs from that of their senior managers as they have learned from experience that providing no additional clarity is not effective.

Moreover, line managers in the audit department distinguished themselves by employing a wide range of communication methods and tools, a contrast to their counterparts in the personnel and salary advice department. This broader selection of methods and tools may be attributed to the intricate and dynamic nature of audit work, which involves critical decision-making and real-time responses to emerging issues. In discussions, all line managers adopted an open and informal communication approach, employing active sensegiving techniques such as maintaining a sense of calm, repeating key messages, providing a listening ear, and fostering positive reactions. Additionally, some middle managers and frontline managers utilized passive sensegiving techniques, such as allowing time for the news to settle before emphasizing the positive aspects. Notably, a few middle and frontline managers opted for feedback loops, expressing their concerns to supervisors rather than subordinates. This practice highlighted the nuanced ways in which managers navigated their own emotions while prioritizing effective communication.

In conclusion, this research underscored the intricate dynamics of sensemaking and sensegiving processes during a merger, emphasizing the importance of transparent communication, adaptability, and a nuanced understanding of the emotional landscape at different managerial levels.

6 Discussion

This study was initiated to address significant gaps identified in the literature on sensemaking and sensegiving literature, especially in the context of mergers. Previous research on these topics often overlooked crucial stakeholders who exert influence during the merger process. Consequently, this research delved into the sensemaking and sensegiving practices across four distinct hierarchical layers within an organization, namely senior managers, middle managers, frontline managers, and employees, to answer the research question "*How do line managers from different hierarchical levels make and give sense during a merger process*?". The theoretical and practical implications, as well as the limitations of this study, are explained below.

6.1 Theoretical implications

This study makes a valuable contribution to the existing literature about sensemaking and sensegiving in times of merger, specifically by examining how various key stakeholders participate in sensemaking and sensegiving practices.

The primary theoretical implication underscores the crucial role played by line managers in the context of mergers, challenging the predominant focus of existing research. While prior studies have predominantly focused on the sensemaking and sensegiving practices of leaders at higher organizational levels (Bansal et al., 2022; Lundgren-Henriksson & Kock, 2016), the results of this study suggest that relying solely on the narratives of leaders may present a skewed view. The findings reveal that line managers at different hierarchical layers play a crucial role during mergers, which is in line with previous research (Balogun, 2003; Townsend et al., 2022; Bordia, 2003; Kramer et al., 2004). Consequently, these findings emphasize the necessity for a more inclusive approach in future research that considers the perspectives and contributions of various hierarchical levels to provide a comprehensive understanding of sensemaking and sensegiving dynamics in the context of organizational change. By concentrating on diverse line managerial hierarchies and employees, this study uncovered insightful differences in their sensemaking and sensegiving processes, highlighting their significant role during times of merger. These promising insights are discussed in detail below.

First of all, the outcomes of this research propose that middle managers, frontline managers, and employees tend to develop a more positive or negative opinion about a merger based on three specific factors. These three specific factors are the timing of the message, the content of the message, and the person delivering the message. The findings revealed that inappropriate timing, such as announcing the intention to merge without concrete steps, led to negative reactions among middle and frontline managers. Additionally, some middle and frontline managers reacted negatively because their informants also held a negative opinion. Moreover, the content of the message was crucial, as some managers desired additional clarification, particularly in regions undergoing significant changes.

Lastly, providing the live update at the right moment resulted in an overall positive opinion among employees. These findings align with Angwin et al.'s (2014) study, emphasizing that the combination of communication richness and its timing during mergers contributes to building employee commitment. Therefore, this research confirms that the timing, the content of the message, and the attitude of the informant play pivotal roles in the sensegiving process of line managers among their subordinates.

Secondly, the findings highlight significant variations in opinions regarding the merger across hierarchical layers, and these perspectives tend to transform over time. This shift from initial negativity to positive opinions underscores the transformative role played by senior, middle, and frontline managers in guiding perceptions during strategic change. For instance, the results indicate that middle managers, frontline managers, and employees tend to adopt a more positive outlook when senior managers, middle managers, and frontline managers emphasize opportunities and positive developments in discussions. Additionally, the positive sentiment can be attributed to clear, comprehensive, and transparent communication. These findings align with existing literature on sensemaking and sensegiving, recognizing the influential role that line managers play during mergers (Kroon & Reif, 2021; Ciptono, 2007; McElroy, 1996). For example, research by Adamson et al. (2006) demonstrated that managers can enhance the impact of their message by presenting it as a compelling and memorable story. This reasoning is consistent with Sonenshein and Dhalokia's (2012) argument that focusing on opportunities improves employees' acceptance of strategic changes, such as mergers. Building on this, the study contributes by providing empirical evidence of managers shaping the organizational narrative positively during a merger (Bordia, 2003; Kramer et al., 2004).

Thirdly, this research finds that while the message is "trickling down", people in the lower levels of the organization tend to develop a positive sense of the merger. Even though middle managers and frontline managers still hold some criticism and negativity, there is an absence of negativity at the employee level. This emphasizes the need to recognize the adaptability of how information is interpreted as it moves through different hierarchical levels. These findings align with Kroon and Reif's (2021) research, which highlighted variations in how sensemaking and sensegiving practices are approached at different organizational levels. The outcomes of this study suggest that processes initiated at higher levels have a trickle-down effect, showing diverse manifestations as they trickle down through the organizational hierarchy. In addition, it seems that the positive perception at lower levels may be influenced by middle and frontline managers emphasizing opportunities and positive developments, as highlighted before. In conclusion, this research emphasizes the pivotal role of middle and frontline managers in shaping the overall organizational narrative positively during significant change, as opinions tend to shift towards a more positive outlook as they trickle down.

Moreover, the identification of different concerns among middle managers, frontline managers, and employees during the merger highlights the importance of acknowledging their distinct roles and responsibilities within organizations. While middle managers and frontline managers focus

on aspects like team dynamics, organizational structure, and workflow, employees primarily express concerns about personal consequences. These findings contradict previous research that suggested that employees particularly experience uncertainty regarding the future and changes in their work and work relationships (Appelbaum et al., 2000; Routila, 2022). This contradiction arises because this study observes that line managers within an organization experience more uncertainty surrounding their teams instead of their personal work and future. In summary, these findings emphasize the multifaceted nature of perspectives within the organization.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that middle and frontline managers utilize feedback loops during mergers to navigate their own emotions while prioritizing effective communication. In the context of this study, feedback loops refer to the practice of middle and frontline managers redirecting their concerns and emotions to their supervisors rather than sharing them directly with their subordinates. The managers expressed during the interviews that they discuss their concerns with their supervisors because they are convinced that expressing negative feelings to subordinates does not help, as it might infect them with negativity. Consequently, it can be inferred that middle and frontline managers make use of feedback loops. This discovery aligns with the studies of Bijlsma-Frankema (2001) and Galpin (1999), emphasizing the importance of giving feedback to understand the progress made and ensure the success of the change process. Therefore, this study confirms that providing feedback to supervisors is crucial for the success of the change process, as it aids in navigating personal emotions and prioritizing effective communication.

In addition, this study not only underscores the theoretical significance of line managers' pivotal role in mergers but also emphasizes the importance of examining both sensemaking and sensegiving processes across different hierarchical levels. The findings reveal that employees at various organizational levels were involved in both sensemaking and sensegiving processes, aiming to comprehend the personal implications of the change and shape interpretation to gain support (Gioia & Gittipeddi, 1991; Routila, 2022; Clark et al., 2020; Kroon and Reif, 2021).

First of all, the results revealed that while senior managers were confident in effective communication about the merger, a perceptual discrepancy emerged among middle managers during the sensemaking process, indicating that middle managers may not always perceive senior managers' sensegiving practices as positive, despite the senior managers' beliefs. This discovery emphasizes the importance of examining both sensemaking and sensegiving processes, as it is not always accurate that middle managers perceive the sensegiving practices of senior managers as positive, even though the seniors may often believe so. Furthermore, some middle managers and frontline managers chose to adopt a different sensegiving approach than their senior managers, influenced by their negative sensemaking process. This negativity was partly due to the lack of additional clarification received from their informants during the merger announcement. As a result, middle and frontline managers engaged in post-update discussions with their subordinates to ensure they received additional

clarification, a step their senior managers did not take. This distinction highlights that the nature of sensegiving varies across organizational levels when line managers have a negative sensemaking process, underscoring the importance of distinguishing between sensemaking and sensegiving processes.

Consequently, this research validates the significance of investigating both sensemaking and sensegiving. It recognizes the interplay between individual cognitive processes and line managers' communication strategies, emphasizing that organizational change is not purely cognitive but also socially constructed (Gioia & Gittipeddi, 1991). An exclusive focus on sensemaking might overlook line managers' deliberate efforts to guide perceptions during a merger when ambiguity arises (Robert & Ola, 2021). Therefore, investigating both processes is essential for a comprehensive examination of interconnected processes in organizational change.

Finally, while this study emphasizes the importance of exploring how line managers engage in sensemaking and sensegiving during mergers, it is crucial to acknowledge the challenges of categorizing individuals in smaller organizations where traditional hierarchical definitions may not be fully applicable. For example, the definition of having precisely two layers of employees beneath middle managers (Townsend et al., 2022) may not universally apply, adding complexity to accurately classifying individuals in this managerial role.

This challenge was also evident in the personnel and salary advice department, where the flat hierarchy made it difficult to differentiate between senior and middle managers. Despite their significant authority, individuals in this department were classified as middle managers based on the two-layer criterion of Townsend et al. (2022), highlighting the limitations of relying solely on hierarchical layers in organizations with flatter structures.

Based on the challenge, this study suggests that focusing on hierarchical layers, as described in the literature, may not always be helpful for smaller organizations and those with flatter hierarchies. Instead, this study advocates for exploring broader concepts such as the timing, the content of the message, and the person delivering the message, which significantly influence the understanding of organizational change during mergers, as highlighted before. In addition, future research is encouraged to shift towards considering job classification based on skill sets rather than hierarchical positions in smaller organizations, categorizing employees based on specific tasks (Evan, 1963; Schneeweiß, 1995; De Mauro et al., 2018).

In essence, the theoretical implication underscores the need for adaptability in research based on organizational size. While larger organizations may adhere to conventional hierarchical definitions, smaller organizations with less pronounced hierarchies should prioritize respondent selection based on active involvement in sensemaking and sensegiving processes, irrespective of formal hierarchical positions. This approach allows researchers to focus on the timing, the content of the message, and the

person delivering the message, acknowledging that these factors have a more significant impact on the sensemaking process than rigid hierarchical classifications.

6.2 Practical implications

Besides the theoretical implications, this study provides practical implications for both organizations and the stakeholders involved, including senior managers, middle managers, frontline managers, and employees navigating organizational mergers. The practical implications are elaborated below.

First of all, this study underscores the pivotal role of actively involving middle managers and frontline managers in the merger process, demonstrating its potential to shift initially negative opinions towards a more positive outlook. Building on Marmenout's (2011) insights, active engagement during times of merger correlates with positive psychological outcomes, reducing feelings of helplessness and increasing perceived control. Consequently, senior managers and middle managers should implement strategies that encourage active participation and meaningful involvement of middle and frontline managers throughout different merger stages. This approach ensures a stronger connection with the ongoing merger, enabling these line managers to exert influence and cultivate a more positive perception.

Secondly, it became evident that recognizing the role of timing, message content, and informants in the merger process is essential. The findings suggest that informing middle managers and frontline managers too early, a lack of additional clarification, and negative informants contribute to shaping negative opinions. Therefore, practical steps for senior managers and middle managers involve careful consideration of when and how they communicate merger information to subordinates. Special attention should be given to the timing and ensuring comprehensive information is provided. Importantly, middle managers with negative opinions should avoid projecting these sentiments onto their subordinates. By employing effective timing, projecting positivity, and delivering comprehensive messages, senior and middle managers can anticipate a more positive opinion toward the merger from their subordinates.

Thirdly, this study reveals that all levels of managerial hierarchy adopt an open and informal communication approach when discussing the merger to transform negative initial reactions into positive current opinions in times of merger. Therefore, this finding has significant implications for effective management by senior managers, middle managers, and frontline managers. It aligns with Kramer et al.'s (2004) study, which highlights the role of interpersonal communication in reducing employee uncertainty during organizational change. The adoption of this communication style fosters an environment where stakeholders, including employees, feel valued and engaged in the merger process. In addition, maintaining an open and informal communication approach allows for idea-sharing and decision-making, leveraging stakeholders' insights and experiences to ensure a comprehensive and successful merger. Moreover, efforts by line managers to reassure and support

uncertain employees contribute to building trust and mitigating resistance, fostering a positive atmosphere during the transitional phases of the merger (Adamson et al., 2006).

Fourthly, it has become evident that some middle managers and frontline managers have expressed a desire for potential changes in future communication. Essentially, they have highlighted potential changes that align with the areas where they currently have negative opinions or experiences about. It is therefore advisable for both senior managers and middle managers to incorporate these desired changes into their sense-giving process during a merger. These changes encompass emphasizing the ongoing nature of the merger, giving priority to regular updates through official channels, and investing in strategies to establish realistic expectations and promptly address concerns. Furthermore, implementing a structured communication plan, complemented by personalized methods, can enhance the dissemination of information, foster an informed and engaged managerial team, and contribute to a positive perception of the merger. The implementation of these strategies is crucial to ensure a smoother merger process, mitigate concerns among middle managers and frontline managers, and cultivate a positive organizational environment during periods of change.

Finally, considering the crucial role identified for live updates in fostering a positive sensemaking process among employees, organizations undergoing mergers should prioritize and enhance the effectiveness of live communication channels. The implementation of regular updates, facilitated by executive boards, serves as a powerful tool for keeping employees well-informed, addressing uncertainties, and maintaining a positive atmosphere. Organizations should strategically plan and schedule these live updates to align with periods of clarity and effective communication of anticipated developments, to ensure that the timing and the content of the message are right and clear. Recognizing the impact of live updates on employee perceptions enables organizations to leverage this communication strategy proactively, shaping a positive narrative and ensuring a positive sensemaking process during times of organizational change. In addition to these live updates, it became evident that post-update discussions contribute to creating a positive opinion among frontline managers and employees. Therefore, middle managers and frontline managers should actively participate in post-update discussions, aiming to foster a positive sensemaking process among their frontline managers and employees.

6.3 Limitations

Although the study yielded promising results for both theory and practitioners, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations that may have influenced the outcomes. These limitations should be thoughtfully taken into account in future research initiatives.

The first limitation arises from interviewing only one senior manager in the personnel and salary advice department, despite another individual serving as a department head and making significant decisions. However, this individual was categorized as a middle manager in this study,

following the definition of middle managers with two hierarchical layers beneath them, as highlighted in the theoretical implications (Townsend et al., 2022). Consequently, this research interviewed one senior manager and four middle managers from the personnel and salary advice department, deviating from the initial goal of interviewing two senior managers and three middle managers. The limitation lies in the uncertainty about how other senior managers in the same department engage in sensegiving practices during mergers. While this study successfully mapped out this process in the department, the perspective of a single senior manager may not fully capture the diversity of senior managerial experiences. For future research aiming for a more comprehensive understanding, selecting organizations with multiple senior managers could enhance the validity of exploring the sensegiving processes among senior managers.

The second limitation is that this research exclusively relied on semi-structured interviews. Future research could enhance its methodological approach by incorporating qualitative document analysis alongside interviews. Qualitative document analysis, also known as Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA), is a research method for systematically examining the contents of written documents (Wach & Ward, 2013, p.1). This method is particularly beneficial for triangulating various research methods, thereby providing additional evidence and enhancing the reliability and validity of the research findings. In addition to its effectiveness in triangulation, qualitative document analysis offers advantages such as efficiency, widespread availability, and cost-effectiveness (Bowen, 2009). Future research could examine documents on the employee portal, emails, PowerPoints, and similar sources that contain information about the merger. Integrating this method into future research could improve the data collection process and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the sensegiving practices among line managers.

The third limitation arises from conducting interviews within a relatively short six-month timeframe as the merger process unfolded. Nevertheless, a more extended timeframe is desirable as it allows for more extensive observation and analysis of the evolving dynamics post-merger. Moreover, an extended timeframe would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the sustained impact on the sensemaking and sensegiving processes, capturing potential shifts, adaptations, or challenges that may arise in the later stages of the merger. Ultimately, this prolonged temporal perspective could contribute to a more nuanced and in-depth exploration of the organizational changes and the responses of various stakeholders involved in the merger.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions (in Dutch)

Type of question	Derived from the following source
Introduction questions	Not applicable
Sensemaking and sensegiving questions	Master theses by students Janna Nolting and Gijs ter Doest

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Interview Questions Senior managers

Doel: Sensegiving praktijken van senior managers in tijden van fusie in kaart brengen.

Introductie vragen:
- Zou u uzelf willen voorstellen?
  - o Wat is uw naam?
  - o Wat is uw functie?
  - o Hoe lang bent u al binnen dit bedrijf werkzaam?
- Heeft u al eens eerder een fusie meegemaakt in uw werk?
- Zou u kort iets kunnen vertellen over de fusie die gaat plaatsvinden?
- Wat is uw kijk op deze fusie?

Sensegiving vragen:
- Kunt u vertellen waarom het bedrijf volgens u besloten heeft te fuseren?
  - o Wat zijn in uw mening de belangrijkste redenen of doelstellingen achter deze fusie?
  - o Welke impact heeft volgens u de fusie op de organisatie en de medewerkers?
- Wat is uw rol in het fusieproces?
  - o Op welke wijze vervult u deze rol?
- Wat vindt u van de fusie? Bent u het eens met het feit dat het bedrijf gaat fuseren?
- Op welke wijze heeft u de managers in uw team op de hoogte gesteld van de fusie?
  - o Wat heeft u uw managers verteld over het doel/het nut van deze fusie?
  - o Welke strategieën of technieken heeft u gebruikt om betekenis en begrip te creëren over de fusie?
  - o Welke rol speelde uw eigen emoties en gevoelens tijdens het overbrengen van de boodschap?
  - o Welke rol speelde communicatie bij het betrekken van uw managers en het verminderen van onzekerheid?
  - o Hoe bent u tijdens de communicatie omgegaan met uw eigen emoties en gevoelens?
- Hoe reageerden uw managers in eerste instantie op de fusie?
  - o Waarom denkt u dat zij zo reageerden?
  - o Wat was uw reactie op deze reacties?
- Hoe denkt u dat uw managers nu tegen de fusie aankijken?
  - o Waarom denkt u dat dit wel/niet veranderd is?
- Hoe gaat u om met positieve reacties rondom de fusie?
- Hoe gaat u om met negatieve reacties of kritiek rondom de fusie?
- Als u uw managers opnieuw zou moeten informeren over de fusie, hoe zou u dit doen (met de kennis die u nu heeft)?

Interview Questions Middle managers

Doel: Sensemaking and sensegiving praktijken van midden managers in tijden van fusie in kaart brengen.

<u>Introductie vragen:</u>
- Zou u uzelf willen voorstellen?
    - Wat is uw naam?
    - Wat is uw functie?
    - Hoe lang bent u al binnen dit bedrijf werkzaam?
- Heeft u al eens eerder een fusie meegemaakt in uw werk?
- Zou u kort iets kunnen vertellen over de fusie die gaat plaatsvinden?
- Wat is uw kijk op deze fusie?

<u>Sensemaking vragen:</u>
- Wanneer werd u op de hoogte gebracht van de fusie?
- Door wie werd u op de hoogte gebracht van de fusie?
- Op welke manier werd u op de hoogte gebracht van de fusie? (Bijvoorbeeld: persoonlijk gesprek, e-mail of webinar)
- Wat ging er door u heen toen u hoorde dat het bedrijf ging fuseren?
- Waarom denkt u dat het bedrijf besloten heeft te fuseren?
    - Hoe denkt u dat de fusie bijdraagt aan het bedrijf?
- Wat is uw rol tijdens het fusieproces?
- Hoe heeft u het gehele fusieproces van begin tot aan nu beleefd?
- Wat is uw huidige mening over de fusie?
    - Is deze mening verandert, terugkijkend naar uw eerste reactie?
    - Zo ja, wat is de reden dat uw mening veranderd is?

<u>Sensegiving vragen:</u>
- Wat is uw rol in het fusieproces?
    - Op welke wijze vervult u deze rol?
- Wat vindt u van de fusie? Bent u het eens met het feit dat het bedrijf gaat fuseren?
- Op welke wijze heeft u de lijn managers in uw team op de hoogte gesteld van de fusie?
    - Wat heeft u uw lijn managers vertelt over het doel/het nut van deze fusie?
    - Welke strategieën of technieken heeft u gebruikt om betekenis en begrip te creëren over de fusie?
    - Welke rol speelde uw eigen emoties en gevoelens tijdens het overbrengen van de boodschap?
    - Welke rol speelde communicatie bij het betrekken van uw lijn managers en het verminderen van onzekerheid?
    - Hoe bent u tijdens de communicatie omgegaan met uw eigen emoties en gevoelens?
- Hoe reageerden uw lijn managers in eerste instantie op de fusie?
    - Waarom denkt u dat zij zo reageerden?
    - Wat was uw reactie op deze reacties?
- Hoe denkt u dat uw lijn managers nu tegen de fusie aankijken?
    - Waarom denkt u dat dit wel/niet veranderd is?
- Hoe gaat u om met positieve reacties rondom de fusie?
- Hoe gaat u om met negatieve reacties rondom de fusie?
- Als u uw lijn managers opnieuw zou moeten informeren over de fusie, hoe zou u dit doen (met de kennis die u nu heeft)?

Interview Questions Frontline managers

Doel: Sensemaking and sensegiving praktijken van eerstelijns managers in tijden van fusie in kaart brengen.

Introductie vragen:
- Zou u uzelf willen voorstellen?
  - Wat is uw naam?
  - Wat is uw functie?
  - Hoe lang bent u al binnen dit bedrijf werkzaam?
- Heeft u al eens eerder een fusie meegemaakt in uw werk?
- Zou u kort iets kunnen vertellen over de fusie die gaat plaatsvinden?
- Wat is uw kijk op deze fusie?

Sensemaking vragen:
- Wanneer werd u op de hoogte gebracht van de fusie?
- Door wie werd u op de hoogte gebracht van de fusie?
- Op welke manier werd u op de hoogte gebracht van de fusie? (Bijvoorbeeld: persoonlijk gesprek, e-mail of webinar)
- Wat ging er door u heen toen u hoorde dat het bedrijf ging fuseren?
- Waarom denkt u dat het bedrijf besloten heeft te fuseren?
  - Hoe denkt u dat de fusie bijdraagt aan het bedrijf?
- Wat is uw rol tijdens het fusieproces?
- Hoe heeft u het gehele fusieproces van begin tot aan nu beleefd?
- Wat is uw huidige mening over de fusie?
  - Is deze mening verandert, terugkijkend naar uw eerste reactie?
  - Zo ja, wat is de reden dat uw mening veranderd is?

Sensegiving vragen:
- Wat is uw rol in het fusieproces?
  - Op welke wijze vervult u deze rol?
- Wat vindt u van de fusie? Bent u het eens met het feit dat het bedrijf gaat fuseren?
- Op welke wijze heeft u de medewerkers in uw team op de hoogte gesteld van de fusie?
  - Wat heeft u uw medewerkers verteld over het doel/het nut van deze fusie?
  - Welke strategieën of technieken heeft u gebruikt om betekenis en begrip te creëren over de fusie?
  - Welke rol speelde uw eigen emoties en gevoelens tijdens het overbrengen van de boodschap?
  - Welke rol speelde communicatie bij het betrekken van uw medewerkers en het verminderen van onzekerheid?
  - Hoe bent u tijdens de communicatie omgegaan met uw eigen emoties en gevoelens?
- Hoe reageerden uw medewerkers in eerste instantie op de fusie?
  - Waarom denkt u dat zij zo reageerden?
  - Wat was uw reactie op deze reacties?
- Hoe denkt u dat uw medewerkers nu tegen de fusie aankijken?
  - Waarom denkt u dat dit wel/niet veranderd is?
- Hoe gaat u om met positieve reacties rondom de fusie?
- Hoe gaat u om met negatieve reacties rondom de fusie?
- Als u uw medewerkers opnieuw zou moeten informeren over de fusie, hoe zou u dit doen (met de kennis die u nu heeft)?

Interview Questions Employees

Doel: Sensemaking praktijken van medewerkers in tijden van fusie in kaart brengen.

Introductie vragen:
- Zou u uzelf willen voorstellen?
    o Wat is uw naam?
    o Wat is uw functie?
    o Hoe lang bent u al binnen dit bedrijf werkzaam?
- Heeft u al eens eerder een fusie meegemaakt in uw werk?
- Zou u kort iets kunnen vertellen over de fusie die gaat plaatsvinden?
- Wat is uw kijk op deze fusie?

Sensemaking vragen:
- Wanneer werd u op de hoogte gebracht van de fusie?
- Door wie werd u op de hoogte gebracht van de fusie?
- Op welke manier werd u op de hoogte gebracht van de fusie? (Bijvoorbeeld: persoonlijk gesprek, e-mail of webinar)
- Wat ging er door u heen toen u hoorde dat het bedrijf ging fuseren?
- Waarom denkt u dat het bedrijf besloten heeft te fuseren?
    o Hoe denkt u dat de fusie bijdraagt aan het bedrijf?
- Wat is uw rol tijdens het fusieproces?
- Hoe heeft u het gehele fusieproces van begin tot aan nu beleefd?
- Wat is uw huidige mening over de fusie?
    o Is deze mening verandert, terugkijkend naar uw eerste reactie?
    o Zo ja, wat is de reden dat uw mening veranderd is?