

PRACTITIONER NOTE

SUPERVISORS' KEY TO UNLOCKING SENSE-MAKING AT WORKPLACE

 Xiaofang BI
Vanessa CAI

Centre for Work and Learning

This practitioner note aims to provide workplace supervisors with some practical tips to overcome challenges in guiding and facilitating workers to make sense of their work-related tasks in order to improve the quality of their performance.

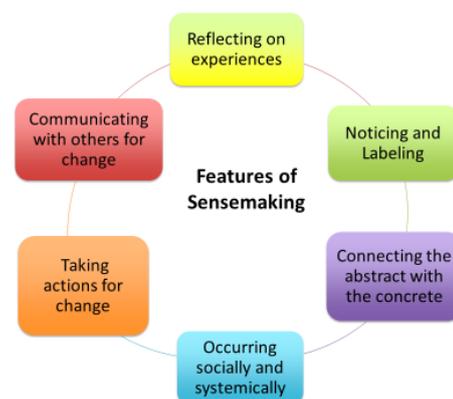
Encouraging workers to develop their expertise through sense-making involves:

- ❖ Facilitating workers to understand the expected outcome of the tasks;
- ❖ Helping workers link what they have learnt in classroom training to their work-related tasks;
- ❖ Improving workers' awareness of the consequences of their errors in work-related tasks;
- ❖ Developing workers' capability to predict how changes in work-related tasks can affect the way they do their work;
- ❖ Building a positive and encouraging learning environment where the workers' voice could be heard.

What is sense-making?

Sense-making is a process through which people attempt to give meaning to their experience (Weick, 1995). Sense-making usually occurs when workers encounter something that is abstract, confusing, uncertain or new (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfield, 2005). An example would be the sense-making of sales strategies learned in training programs in order to apply to customers with different needs and personalities.

The interconnected features of sense-making enables continual development of new capabilities as workers continue to encounter new circumstances, whether they are small differences to what has taken place previously or larger changes (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfield, 2005) (See Figure below).



The process of sense-making involves workers noticing differences and finding the language to name the differences, connecting what they see and name to what they already know through talking with peers, supervisors and/or their own self-directed learning. This process is often about decision making, taking action, interacting with others, seeing what difference or impact their actions have. So the process is rather social, spiral and continuous.

Feedback and Sense-making

Engaging in the process of sense-making is particularly helpful for workers working in environments that require them to respond quickly to changes, for example, workers working in medical teams in hospitals who make critical decisions on the care to be given to patients during emergencies (Engestrom, 2001); and military command officers on mission (Jensen, 2009; Lim, 2012). This ongoing, dynamic and social process requires:

- trust between workers and supervisors;
- both workers and supervisors to feel supported by the organisation; and
- workers and supervisors to be committed to improving performance.

Supervisors' Key

In the social and continuous process of sense-making, support from one group of workplace experts – supervisors – plays an important role in helping workers make sense of their work-related tasks. As compared to experienced peers, supervisors who provide consistent moral and practical support during their workers' learning journey are likely to better encourage workers to apply what they have learnt to work, as these supervisors give workers the impression that they have the latitude and are valued (Lancaster, Milia & Cameron, 2013; Ng, 2013; Velada, Caetano, Michel, Lyons & Kavanagh, 2007). Additionally, workers who perceive their supervisors as positive role models are more likely to engage in better sense-making (Lancaster et al., 2013).

Constructing feedback and facilitating reflections are considered two of the most useful and important processes to facilitate the sense-making of work-related tasks for workers (Embo et al, 2014; Peters et al, 2017; Ramani & Leinster, 2008), as compared to other processes, e.g., assigning tasks, decision-making strategies, effective time management.

Types of Feedback:

1. **General feedback:** a general or vague idea of whether the worker did well or not, e.g., "good job", "bad customer communications", without the necessary details to guide performance;
2. **Specific feedback:** details as to how the worker has performed and why; followed by specific areas for improvement or questions posed to workers regarding how they can improve in specific areas;
3. **Corrective feedback:** where the worker has performed inadequately; sometimes, it sounds like scolding;
4. **Constructive feedback:** where the worker has performed well as well as where the worker can perform better, worker can also actively seek clarification from supervisors.

Feedback is a two-way communication process occurring between supervisors and workers regarding workers' sense-making of work-related tasks. Feedback can be used to improve workers' expertise over time and inform workers of desirable performance. It is a co-learning process in which both supervisors and workers have key roles to play (Boud & Soler, 2016). Lack of feedback in workplaces can result in adverse consequences. Without feedback from supervisors, workers may not have a clear understanding of the requirements of the task so that they may not be able to achieve the expected outcome of the task.

This two-way communication may have different impact on workers' sense-making. Providing only corrective feedback triggered by workers' mistakes can be deemed as negative, judgmental and evaluative in nature. From such feedback, "workers may know what to do but do not necessarily understand why they are doing so or realise the impact and consequence of their actions" (Bound *et al*, 2016, p. 44). Besides, workers may view corrective feedback as a personal attack (Ramani & Leinster, 2008), which may inhibit their deep sense-making of work-related tasks.

In contrast, supervisors could construct specific, positive, explanatory, continuous and constructive feedback on workers' performance to inform them where they have done well, why and how, how to take actions and what actions to take to improve in specific areas of their performance, for example, to make sense of the changes in work-related tasks. Feedback should also be prompt and based on the supervisors' own observations rather than on others', unless there is a need to supplement their own observations with that of others.

At the same time, workers can take initiative to solicit specific, continuous and constructive feedback from the supervisor through asking questions and seeking clarifications based on their own experiences and practices. Constructing such feedback by both supervisor and workers can help supervisors and workers reach a common understanding of workers' sense-making in their work-related tasks. Such a common understanding will facilitate the supervisor to provide a more comprehensive and objective evaluation on workers' performance, and develop workers' clarity about expected standard of performance and of roles.

This communicative feedback approach could also enable the building of a positive learning environment in which errors are acknowledged and mutual communication is expected and accepted to facilitate workers' deep sense-making of work-related tasks.

Example

In an F&B menu-change training, when helping cooks practice their techniques, the Chef (supervisor) can construct prompt and continuous feedback based on his own observation by commenting on the good techniques the cooks are showing and sharing details on how some specific techniques could be improved, rather than just correcting, reminding, or re-demonstrating. At the same time, the cooks can actively solicit Chef's feedback on their techniques by posing questions and seeking clarifications.

Reflection Facilitated by Supervisors and Sense-making

Reflection refers to the review, interpretation and understanding of experiences to guide present and future sense-making of work-related tasks. Reflection can be categorised in terms of timing and the degree of meta-thinking.

Types of reflection:

1. Reflection in action takes place during the activity by just simply describing and interpreting the activity;
2. Reflection on action takes place after the activity by describing and interpreting the activity, thinking about the different interconnections within and across the activities or relating own actions to other settings;
3. Reflection on entire performance by mainly thinking about different interconnections of the activities or relating own actions to other settings.

(Embo, et al., 2014; Moussa-Inaty, 2015)

Guiding questions are useful prompts to encourage reflection, for example:

- For the moment, can you provide a description or summary of what you have learned so far?
- What do you think you did well for the past month? How do you think you can apply it to your further work?
- What do you think you did not do well for the past month? How do you think this can be improved? How would you address the same problem in a future similar task?
- For your entire performance in the task, what would you like to change? Why is that?
- What do you plan to investigate further/find out about? How will you do this?
- What else would (you/customer/boss, etc.) like to see /achieve?

Notice that the language in these suggested questions is not meant to encourage the workers to judge their own work. Asking about what you and others would like to 'see', what you and they want to change in future, encourages the workers to make better alignment with the expected performance.

Also, supervisors need to be mindful about the frequency and purpose of using different types of reflections for different workers in facilitating their sense-making of work-related tasks. For example, requiring reflection with you, the supervisor, too often can become tedious. Monthly or quarterly reflection facilitated by supervisors would be recommended, depending on the duration of tasks. However, you can set up the expectation that workers undertake reflection themselves by helping them develop their ability to reflect and ask themselves questions about their performance.

TIPS FOR SUPERVISORS: THE 7 'P'S

1. **Provide** timely feedback to help workers understand their work better, and to tackle work challenges better.
2. **Present** your feedback positively, constructively and clearly to help workers feel encouraged and valued and grasp what to do specifically.
3. **Prevent** yourself from using negative or corrective feedback to avoid making workers feel judged.
4. **Participate** in the feedback process by giving workers a safe space for them to elicit feedback from you to build trust between you and your workers.
5. **Prompt** your workers to engage in self-reflection so that they are aware of their own performance and would be encouraged to think about how to improve on it.
6. **Prepare** workers for reflection and be purposeful in using guiding questions in each type of reflection that you want the workers to engage in.
7. **Pre-arrange** your reflection sessions so that workers would not be overwhelmed.

Conclusion

Sense-making of work-related tasks is:

- A continuous, on-going and dynamic learning process; and
- An advantage not only to the workers and their supervisors, but also to the organisation as a whole.

Supervisors are likely to help workers' sense-making of their work-related tasks more successfully if they incorporate the following strategies in their feedback and reflection efforts:

- Constructive and specific feedback are more powerful than general and corrective feedback; and
- Using guiding questions that encourage understanding of the principles, the reasons why AND how to apply these principles in different situations is important.

In helping to create a supportive and rewarding learning climate for their workers, supervisors will enable workers to better develop their expertise through successful sense-making of work-related tasks and enhance their sense of belonging to the workplace.

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Address

11 Eunos Road 8,
#07-04, Lifelong
Learning institute,
Singapore 408601

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