Tensense

Closing the proximity gap.

Why Sensemaking is the engine of Organisational Intelligence.

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Hero photo from the Tensense shoot: leaders and teams at work, in natural light.

Purpose

The guiding principle is to give leaders at every level Organisational Intelligence: **a signal from the people closest to the work, before organisational hierarchy filters it**. It is a step-change from the consultant's discovery process, or from running multiple traditional surveys — accurate but narrowly focused — in search of compelling proof-points, at the cost of time, resources and disruption. Such interventions have clear benefits. But our contention is that organisations are better advised to test for issues before they invest in solutions that don't fit the problem, and better off being sighted on plausible issues before they escalate.

Dr Mike Carter, Chief Scientific Officer at Tensense, explains the history and rationale behind Tensense: a distinctive way of measuring and reporting how things are landing across an organisation, from the perspective of the people who do the work every day. He sets out the science and origins of Sensemaking, and why it matters to identify emerging issues across wide swathes of an organisation before they become a crisis.

Three drivers behind this thinking.

01 Given the added safety of anonymity, many people will take the opportunity to flag impediments to high performance. However, this is hampered by survey fatigue, or by having to confide in an interviewer who must be taken on trust. A light-touch pulse reduces survey fatigue compared with traditional engagement or satisfaction surveys.

02 Leaders often can't show their people that positive action follows from the collective results of consultant engagements or surveys — **if everything is a problem, then nothing is a problem.** And as organisations add layers, senior leaders sit further from day-to-day reality, so weak signals of hidden stress or misalignment are ignored until they become crises.

03 Forty years of experience as a senior detective and qualitative researcher, interviewing many hundreds of people, shows that tacit knowledge and unspoken emotion are as informative as direct answers. Think of the early stages of a major investigation or a consultant engagement: both start with broad enquiry, and take serious notice of what is implied as well as what is stated, before forming theories and investigating in detail.

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Photo from the Tensense shoot: someone giving an instinctive response to the pulse on their phone.

We sense before we can explain.

Human instinct

In everyday Sensemaking terms, we all form opinions about the world around us, often from narrow channels of information, and from our experience and knowledge of the context we find ourselves in. Over millions of years, humans have developed to recognise threat or opportunity instinctively, from plausible conclusions and possible outcomes, whether articulated, acted on or not. Tensense harnesses this instinct to detect 'trip hazards': the small frictions that grow into performance failures if left unchecked.

Tentative theories

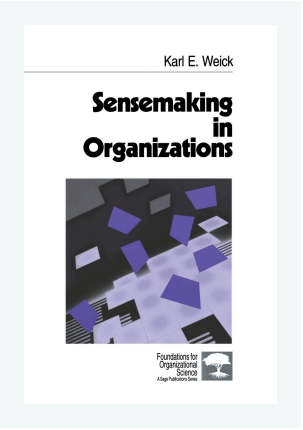
The way we first form tentative theories about our surroundings is fragile and prone to error: individually and collectively, we under- and over-credit the clues and cues around us. But to deny the relevance of this often latent thought processing is also to deny what enabled our species, for better or worse, to dominate all others on our planet.

Organisational functioning

We live in a world of increasingly evidence-driven data, which is why much of our understanding of how organisations function comes from deep data, detailed and narrowly focused surveys, or large-scale consultant-led projects. Tensense challenges the 'information lag' of traditional consultant-led projects. With rapid feedback loops, and rapid reporting at the end of each cycle, attention moves quickly to what is really happening on the ground.

> "Whether you're managing a global portfolio or a high-stakes turnaround, the better your Sensemaking, the faster you close the gap between strategy and reality."
>
> **Dr Mike Carter, Chief Scientific Officer, Tensense**

Organisations run on Sensemaking.



Karl E. Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations* (1995)[4]

Karl Weick is a much-celebrated scholar: an organisational theorist known for his concept of Sensemaking, which goes back to the late 1960s[3] and describes the process of making sense of the world around us. It rests on the idea that individuals and groups are constantly trying to make sense of their experiences and surroundings, and that this process is essential for successful adaptation and survival.

Human decision-making

Sensemaking is a life-critical building block of human decision-making, developed over millions of years. Fight-or-flight decisions take less than a second[1], because our hunter-gatherer ancestors did not have the luxury of time: confronted with a threat, they had to act immediately, or die.

Emotion v logic



Dr Mike Carter, Chief Scientific Officer, Tensense

Logical, rational decision-making has been refined through socialisation and civilisation over tens of thousands of years. The race between the two is not even close: emotion-laden pathways in the brain are faster than logical analysis.[1,2] That is why Tensense asks for an instinctive response, not a considered one. It is aligned with System 1 (fast, intuitive) thinking, takes 90 seconds on average, and captures 'rapid data': the unfiltered sentiment of the workforce, before it is polished for a formal report.

When Sensemaking is overwhelmed.

Individual and collective process

For many years, Sensemaking has been used to deconstruct and reconstruct major disasters in which people made a bad situation worse because their Sensemaking was overloaded. The research has been especially useful for organisational learning in High Reliability Organisations: technically complex organisations where failure can cost lives, such as nuclear power plants and aircraft carriers.[5] In these organisations, disasters have occurred not because the data didn't exist, but because of a visibility crisis: hierarchy filtered out the weak signals known by people on the ground.

When individual and collective Sensemaking in such organisations was overwhelmed — variously by novelty, dynamic complexity, hierarchy and time pressure — it contributed to these disasters, and many more:[6]

Boeing 737 MAX crashes[7,8]

NASA's Challenger and Columbia disasters[9–11]

Losses of emergency service personnel after the 9/11 impacts[12]

Bhopal chemical leak[13,14]

The shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes on the London Underground[15–17]

Excess deaths in children's heart surgery at the Bristol Royal Infirmary[18,19]

Sources: see References, page 8.

The practical business problems Tensense addresses.

Leaders are gradually accepting that a business landscape shaped to some degree by uncertainty and disruption is now more the norm than the exception. The speed, quantity and scale of major change have all accelerated over recent decades. We are living through events seen as exceptional in recent experience — Brexit, a global pandemic, roaring inflation, a major war in Europe and widespread climate challenges. It is natural, even comforting, to assume each is a one-off, and that we will return to the more stable situation we had grown used to. Yet on every one of those issues, that assumption is risky. In such dynamic complexity, which touches every organisation in one way or another, how do leaders keep pace with evolving challenges, let alone get ahead of them?

Complex, evolving environments cannot be fully engaged with and understood by holding faith with established routines and meanings: they need continuous updating ('what's the story here?'). Even very capable people often make at least one big, basic error — rushing to change in the mistaken belief that they already know what they have, where they are going and how to get there — with little time to appreciate the cost or recurring impact of change on their people.

Organisations that want robust analysis and interventions need to decide their own trade-offs. The professional researcher provides general but narrow assessments through research, and tries to fit them into simple, accurate findings that produce actionable interventions — forcing complex theory into simple actions.

Sensemaking, put to work.

Consultants typically use a discovery phase to gather data, perform analysis and identify areas for improvement. It assumes the consultant has a clear understanding of the problem and can provide objective, data-driven solutions. Yet the real-world problems clients face are often complex, multi-faceted and subject to change.

In contrast, Tensense, the Organisational Intelligence Platform, gives leaders at every level rapid reporting at the end of each cycle.

Unlike a typical consultant-led discovery phase, Tensense enables a 'Measure → Intervene → Re-measure' cycle for fast strategic alignment.

This approach is particularly relevant in today's constantly changing business environment, where organisations must respond quickly to shifting market conditions, new technologies and changing customer preferences. A typical consultant-led discovery phase, with its emphasis on data analysis and objective solutions, is often ill-suited to this kind of environment: it can take too long to implement and may no longer be relevant by the time it is complete.

As a process and a science, Sensemaking is well understood, but it lacks utility: it does not tell you how to use Sensemaking to make better decisions in organisations. Tensense mimics the process of Sensemaking so that leaders can understand 'what's the story here?' and make more informed, faster and, ultimately, better decisions. Tensense identifies where to engage; leaders then explore the context with their people, act, and run further cycles to see whether it is working.

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