The senior management sensemaking paradox

Abstract

Purpose – From a complexity leadership theory perspective, leadership stops being seen as residing in an individual, and comes to be conceived as emergent from the myriad interactions among organizational members. However, in spite of this reconceptualization, organizations still have senior managers (e.g. the CEO) who are supposed to be leading, and thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore, then, who are these senior managers and what challenges emerge for them under a complexity leadership perspective.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper reviews first the literature on complexity theory and leadership, and then, conceptually develops an understanding of the challenges that senior managers might face under complexity.

Findings – The main finding and focus of the paper is that, from a complexity perspective, a paradox emerges regarding senior managers. On the one hand, senior managers might need to make sense of their limitations and the unowned essence of the processes that surround them. On the other hand, their subordinates might still insist on portraying senior managers as final causes of all success or failure.

Originality/value – This paper presents a novel way to re-conceptualize senior managers, under a complexity perspective, where they come to be perceived as trapped in a paradox of contradictory sensemaking processes: as they come to find out all that is outside of their control their subordinates insist on making them responsible for everything as if they had control.

Keywords

Complexity, leadership, senior management, complexity leadership, complex adaptive system, paradox

Complexity theory has come to change the way we envision and understand organizations and their environments. Complexity theory is an interdisciplinary theory, which has found broad and interesting applications in many different disciplines (Allen and Boulton, 2011; McMillan, 2004). From physics, to chemistry, biology, economics and organization science, complexity theory has come to change the ways we think about the world (Anderson, 1999). From a complexity perspective, organizations and their environments are conceived as possible complex adaptive systems, where myriad agents interact with each other in non-simple ways generating a whole that, if complex, cannot be adequately reduced to the sum of its parts (McMillan, 2004; Simon, 1962; Stacey, 1995). Complexity has made its way into leadership studies, and a complexity leadership theory appears to be developing and emerging (Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2001; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). In a recent paper in the *Journal of Strategy and Management*, Kriger and Zhovtobryukh (2013) have argued that leadership is not the doing of one single individual. And it is precisely that which complexity leadership states. In complexity, leadership comes to be conceived as a systemic process of self-organization. A distributed phenomenon that is no longer represented by one individual (Lichtenstein and Plowman, 2009), but that is best defined as "…a recognizable pattern of social and relational organizing among autonomous heterogeneous individuals as they form into a system of action" (Hazy and Uhl-Bien, 2013: 80). Such a view on leadership has created, therefore, a dilemma for senior managers, because if organizations can lead and organize themselves (i.e. self-organization), then what is the role for those at the top of the organization? At the end of the day, even if organizations self-organize, it is clear that organizations still have senior managers at the top, who are supposed to be leading. More importantly, these senior managers tend to be those who are paid more than anyone else in the

organization and have access to more resources than anyone else too (Hambrick, 2007; Hambrick and Mason, 1984; Hodgkinson and Sparrow, 2002; Quigley and Hambrick, 2015).

To solve this dilemma, some have claimed that senior managers are enablers of the complex dynamics through which an organization could organize and lead itself (Lichtenstein and Plowman, 2009; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Thus, it has been said that senior managers could become enablers of the interactions that are needed for self-organization to emerge (Hazy and Uhl-Bien, 2013; Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2001). Among those roles that senior managers as enablers play, an important one is that of sensemakers or facilitators of sensemaking in the organization (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Lichtenstein and Plowman, 2009; Pye, 2005). Such an important activity of sensemaking, demands from senior managers to be co-creators or co-authors of meaning and share it (i.e. sensegiving) to other individuals in the organization. Of course, the challenge emerges as senior managers are not the only ones sensemaking and sensegiving. Actually, "in complex environments… when timely action is needed as events unfold, greater emphasis is placed on determining who will have how much influence rather than focusing on building a centralised process" (Hazy, 2012: 53). So that the strategic response of organizations, as strategy as practice has extensively argued (Johnson et al., 2003), is the product of the sensemaking and sensegiving of many different actors throughout the organization (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Vaara and Whittington, 2012). Some of them might be working at lower levels in the organization, yet their work -including their sensemaking and sensegiving- remains essential, as "leadership   at   the organization   level   is   highly contingent and dependent upon learning and adaptation at lower levels in the system" (Hazy, 2008: 301). Thus, while senior managers' sensemaking and sensegiving is highly influential in organizations, other groups might be going through their own sensemaking processes, and arriving perhaps simultaneously to differing meanings and

interpretations. For example, based on the romance of leadership literature (Bligh et al., 2011; Meindl et al., 1985), or the work of Gabriel on followers' fantasies (1997, 2011), it is possible that sometimes followers' sensemaking derives in their apotheosis of their leaders, such as their senior managers. While, on the other hand, because of complexity, senior managers might be finding out that actually they are far more subjected, restricted, and impotent than their followers might acknowledge, as leading an organization is the result of complex systemic processes, some of them beyond senior managers' ken. The convergence of these differing sensemaking processes, thus, will be presented in this paper as the root of a fundamental paradox for senior managers: they might realize their limitations and impotence while others in the organization might be expecting them to be in control.

In this essay, therefore, I will argue for a senior management sensemaking paradox, which emerges from complexity leadership theory. In order to present and discuss the senior management sensemaking paradox, I will first provide a basic introduction to complexity theory and its propositions, followed by a summary on what complexity theory has contributed to leadership studies. After this, I will discuss how in a complexity perspective, senior managers are put in a tense position, where as they realize that organizations and their external environments can lead themselves, they come to face how much is outside their control. In other words, senior managers come to perceive the world as outside of their control. By contrast, at the same time, their subordinates might demand from senior managers to present themselves as full causes of all good or bad in the organization. For most people in organizations, pretending that senior managers are responsible for all the good and bad that happens in the organization is a way to avoid how complex the world can be and how sometimes nobody is in charge, and therefore, it represents a simplistic

understanding that puts most people at ease and away from the anxiety and uncomfortableness that complex environments might generate.

In summary, in organizations there are differing sensemaking processes that converge in the same space. On the one hand, senior managers might be making sense of how in complex organizations it is the system which leads itself, and thus, a lot lies beyond senior managers' control. On the other hand, the subordinates of senior managers might try to avoid the complexity of the world by pretending that senior managers have full control of all that happens. This, therefore, creates a paradox: the senior management paradox.

Complexity

Complex adaptive systems are characterized by the non-simple interactions among a plethora of elements. Through such non-simple interactions, elements of a system impart to each other some of their own individual behaviors, while at the same time no two elements of the system behaving completely the same (Hazy and Uhl-Bien, 2013; Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2001). Particularly, in a complex adaptive system some of the core elements of the system are agents, who "…are partially connected to one another, so that the behavior of a particular agent depends on the behavior (or state) of some subset of all the agents in the system" (Anderson, 1999: 219). This means that complex adaptive systems are characterized by feedback loops through which the outputs that an individual agent contributes to the system could come back in a distorted way as an input to influence again the same agent. What particularly characterizes a complex adaptive system is that what emerges from the interaction of all its constituent elements cannot be adequately described as the sum of its parts (Anderson, 1999; McMillan, 2004; Stacey, 1995). This means that in a complex adaptive system "…group behavior is more than simply the sum of individual behaviors"

(Stacey, 1995: 481). Therefore, it is said that complex adaptive systems are nonlinear systems, where the interaction among constituent elements is compositional, which, thus, involves "…an interaction of units that changes their combined character in fundamental ways" (Lord et al., 2011: 108).

In a complex adaptive system, causal relationships become much more opaque. This means that "…links between specific causes and specific effects, between specific actions and specific outcomes, are lost in the complexity of what happens" (Stacey, 1995: 483). Moreover, in complex adaptive systems, their dependency to initial and past conditions is highly important too (Arthur, 1999; Boisot and McKelvey, 2010). Small variations in initial or past conditions in the system could sometimes have large effects on the system (Anderson, 1999). This includes what has been popularly described as the butterfly effect (Boisot and McKelvey, 2010). More importantly, complex adaptive systems are paradoxical, because even though they might be unpredictable and constantly taking unexpected states, they tend to be constrained to "…a strange attractor, a limited region of the state space within which the system stays permanently" (Anderson, 1999: 219).

Complex adaptive systems "…are unique and desirable in their ability to adapt rapidly and creatively to environmental changes" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007: 303). A peculiar characteristic of complex adaptive systems is that the system and/or its constituent elements have a schema or schemata of their world and how it might work. Thus, in a complex adaptive system "…the system has within itself a model of its environment that it uses to influence *present* behavior in anticipation of future events" (Mikulecky, 2001: 347). From a complexity perspective, organizations, particularly modern large organizations, come to be conceived as possible complex adaptive systems. More importantly, they come to be seen as possible complex adaptive systems nested within others. In other words, an organization does not usually exist in isolation. Organizations are

embedded in broader, technological (Bower and Christensen, 1995), social (Meyer, 1982), economic, regulatory (Cook et al., 1983; Cook et al., 1985; Mahon and Murray, 1981; Smith and Mick, 1985), political (Bradshaw-Camball and Murray, 1991; Levy and Egan, 2003; Mueller et al., 2013), and natural external environments, which themselves could be complex systems. For example, the national or global economy that surrounds an organization is likely complex itself (Arthur, 1999).

There is no question that complex adaptive systems can be quite difficult to understand, particularly because they can be paradoxical in their evolution and behavior. For example, in complex adaptive systems, "At some point, a critical mass occurs,... and something becomes inevitable" (Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2001: 402). That inevitableness might, sometimes, be the system's collapse (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; McMillan, 2004). Nonetheless, that inevitableness might, sometimes, be emergent self-organization. In other words, at the higher aggregate level of the system, some sort of self-organization could emerge, which tends to be the result of "...interdependent relationships... (auto-coordination) and... constraints imposed by actions external to the informal dynamic, including environmental restrictions... and administrative controls" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007: 304). This process of self-organization in social systems, such as organizations, is largely the result of overall systemic negotiations of meanings and interpretations within the organization (Weick and Roberts, 1993; Brown et al., 2015). So that as groups of people manage to reach a level of shared meanings, their efforts could become aligned, and therefore, the people become led by these understandings and meanings they have negotiated (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014; Mabey, 2013). Hence, "democracy and power equalization" become vehicles that "create the conditions for self-organization" (Burnes, 2005: 85). Thus, through self-organization an organization could potentially lead itself. In other words, in complex

adaptive systems it might be the system that leads and not one single heroic leader. Therefore, this has produced an alternative perspective of leadership, where "…rather than being "in" someone, leadership – understood as the capacity to influence others – can be enacted within every interaction between members. In this sense, complexity's focus for leadership is literally the "space between" individuals" (Lichtenstein and Plowman, 2009: 618). However, the essential point to mention is that negotiating meaning and direction -sensemaking- is usually contested and controversial, as different groups within the same organization might be arriving at different meanings and directions. It is from the convergence of these differing understandings that the senior managers' sensemaking paradox emerges, as I will show in the next section.

Complexity leadership: the dilemma

Conceiving leadership as emerging from the interactions within the system, obviously generates a dilemma in terms of senior managers. Classically, the senior managers of an organization were portrayed as sitting at the top of the organization and being responsible for leading the organization through the strategies they formulate (Hambrick, 2007; Hambrick and Mason, 1984; Katzenbach, 1997; Mintzberg et al., 2002). However, as I have already argued, from a complexity perspective organizations might lead themselves through emergent self-organization. Yet, we still have senior managers in most organizations, and they are usually the best paid employees, and at least partially they do play some role in explaining organizational performance (Helfat and Peteraf, 2014; Quigley and Hambrick, 2015). Thus, the question that emerges is, from a complexity perspective, what are these senior managers doing or what could/should they do? The standard argument is that senior managers might become enablers of the complex process of emergent self-organization. Therefore, senior managers could enable interactions among people in the organization, they could

energize the organization with new hires, they could set boundaries for the emergent process by defining the businesses in which the organization would operate, and they could become symbols of change initiatives , among many other roles that have been argued (Anderson, 1999; Lichtenstein and Plowman, 2009; Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2001; Stacey, 1995; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Another important role for senior managers, from a complexity perspective, is that of sensemakers and sensegivers (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007; Pye, 2005; Whittle et al., 2015). By developing interpretations of what is going on (i.e. sensemaking) and sharing these interpretations with their subordinates (i.e. sensegiving), senior managers could potentially enable interaction, as they could foster shared interpretations that could generate a basis for interaction and self-organization. Hence, senior managers could "…see new possibilities for the… [organization] by making sense of what was happening, and artfully giving meaning and purpose to what was emerging" (Lichtenstein and Plowman, 2009: 624).

The senior management sensemaking paradox

A paradox involves "Contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time. Such elements seem logical when considered in isolation, but irrational, inconsistent, even absurd, when juxtaposed" (Lewis et al., 2014: 58). In order to present the senior management sensemaking paradox, I will describe first, separately, the two different faces of it, followed by juxtaposing them, in order to show how the paradox arises.

Central to any complexity discussion is Asbhy's principle of requisite variety. Simply put, the principle of requisite variety states that "The adaptive capacity of complex systems is thought to depend on the match between internal complexity in an organization and the complexity of its environment" (Lord et al., 2011: 105). This means that for a system to survive it might need to

mirror the complexity of its environment. In terms of senior management, what Asbhy's principle might demand is for senior managers and their sensemaking to mirror the complexity of their environments. Therefore, senior managers' sensemaking needs arguably to be as complex as the environments in which senior managers are embedded. Furthermore, as I explained at the beginning of this essay, in current times and especially in currently large organizations, both the internal and external environments (Shepherd and Rudd, 2014) that surround senior managers could be quite complex (Allen et al., 2007; Stacey, 1995; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). In addition, external environments are constantly changing and their change can rarely be accurately predicted (Ambrosini and Bowman, 2009; Barreto, 2010; Easterby-Smith et al., 2009; Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000; Teece, 2007; Teece et al., 1997). Thus, organizations are themselves continuously morphing to try to link and fit with the external environment (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; Gavetti and Rivkin, 2007; Rindova and Kotha, 2001). In other words, senior managers could be surrounded by staggering complex external and internal environments that could easily overwhelm them. Environments as these were clearly described, for instance, by Mackay and Chia (2013) in their case study of a Canadian automotive company. They described how the company faced constant change in its external environment, such as changes in the needs of their buyers, changes in the market including shifts in truck demand, the global financial crisis, and then, the impact of the global financial crisis on the company's buyers. Under such complex conditions, Mackay and Chia argue that senior managers' decisions are necessarily incomplete as they cannot ever really predict the full consequences of their decisions, which leads to a series of unavoidable unintended consequences (2013; Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). Thus, one of senior managers' main sensemaking challenges, under these conditions, is to realize the incompleteness

of their decisions, all that lies beyond their control, and that in spite of all they can actually do, in the end, overall strategic change processes remain mainly beyond their full control.

The global financial crisis of 2008/09 would be an example of such a complex environment. The crisis certainly changed and deeply affected the environment under which many organizations work. However, there is no one single person or group of people that could be held solely accountable for what happened. Even though the causes of the crisis are far more complex than I could actually explain in this essay, the crisis was, at least partially, the result of the actions of literally myriad actors: from those blatantly promoting and selling mortgages to people who might not really afford them, to those that took on the mortgages, those that securitized the mortgages, those that sold mortgage backed securities around the world, those that bought them, the governments and their regulations on the matter, and of course, in the end the governments and their plans to rescue failed financial institutions, among many, many other types of actors and interactions that resulted in the worst financial downturn in 80 years (Davis, 2010; Henisz, 2011; The Economist, 2013). Thus, even as many people did do things that contributed to the crisis and for which they should be held accountable, the overall change in the economic environment, is far more complex than any one single individual. In other words, there is probably not one single individual who could own the crisis (Rescher, 1996).

In sum, in complex environments, part of senior managers' sensemaking is to recognize their role as limited, where what happens in the organization, including the ways in which the organization could self-organize and lead itself, and what happens in the external environment, lies beyond the full control of senior managers. Under such conditions, as elegantly argued many years ago by Charles Lindblom, senior managers instead of owning the change process, sometimes, just merely muddle through (1959). It is this making sense of the environment as

something larger than them, which might allow for senior managers to then play the enabling role that it was previously argued for. Having said this, it is important to say that not all senior managers will arrive to such sensemaking, many would simply live in denial, pretending they control or can control everything. However, it is possible, that under such complex environments, some might arrive to the inevitable sense or interpretation that they are not under full control and neither could fully own their internal and external environments. This type of sensemaking I refer to as sensemaking as acceptance, and it represents the first face of the paradox.

The second face of the paradox has to do with the rest of the people in the organization. If senior managers, as a result of facing complexity make sense of it in the acceptance mode here described, it would certainly be very difficult to share that level of understanding or acceptance with the rest of the people in the organization. Most people are actually not looking to understand their worlds as complex places where neither them nor their senior managers have full control over, and in which instead, it is "…choice, chance events, and industry and global changes [that] interact to produce unintended consequences that can play a decisive role in the success or failure of organizations" (MacKay and Chia, 2013: 221). By contrast, most people make sense of their environments through simplistic plausible accounts that put order on the world (Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Furthermore, like Maitlis and Sonenshein state, "In the absence of [such] a plausible understanding of the situation… anxiety, fear, and frustration may increase" (2010: 557). More importantly, as argued by the romance of leadership literature, many times such plausible simplistic accounts that put order on the world might involve blaming senior managers, like the CEO, for all success or failure (Bligh et al., 2011; Meindl et al., 1985). Therefore, as Bligh et al. (2011: 1059) argue, people in organizations when,

> faced with continually larger and ever more complex systems, there are many causal forces to consider that
> coexist in highly intricate and overlapping networks — each with multiple inputs and outputs and feedback

loops — that are continually evolving in a dynamic state of flux. Faced with this ever-increasing complexity, total comprehension of the system appears impossible. As a result, the… [romance of leadership] highlights that sooner or later discussions of successes and failures, rights and wrongs, and past, present, and future outcomes will inevitably focus on leaders [such as senior managers]: their strengths and their shortcomings, what they did or did not do, should or should not have done, who they are, and perhaps most importantly, who we need them to be.

These two faces of sensemaking under complexity, when looked at separately, might not generate any major controversy. However, the paradox, as expected, emerges when juxtaposing both of them. On the one hand, there are senior managers surrounded by possibly staggering complexity of which they need to make sense of. To make sense, they might come to realize that their internal and external environments are not under their full control (MacKay and Chia, 2013), and that in spite of all that they can actually do, rarely could they fully own anything in these environments. Thus, some might come to accept the limitations that surround them, and look for a way to just muddle through (Lindblom, 1959). On the other hand, as senior managers might come to accept complexity, people in their organizations, such as their subordinates, may start demanding from their senior managers to be presented as full causes of everything that is happening in the organization (Bligh et al., 2011; Meindl et al., 1985). Therefore, since people might struggle making sense of complexity, their easy way out of it might be to simply blame all success and all failure on senior managers, the senior managers that in order to survive might be precisely arriving at the opposite conclusion, resulting therefore, in the senior management sensemaking paradox.

Discussion and conclusion

The first point that I should clarify is that this is in no way a paper to exonerate senior managers for their deeds or misdeeds. The complexity perspective of leadership that I have here presented and the senior management sensemaking paradox, still acknowledge that senior managers do a lot and should be held accountable for what they do (MacKay and Chia, 2013; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Nevertheless, to be fairly held accountable, one needs to acknowledge how much of a process can/should actually be owned by a senior manager. This can be illustrated by going back to the financial crisis of 2008/09. During and after the global crisis, a lot of people started to argue whether senior leaders, such as President George W. Bush or key Wall Street CEOs, were responsible for the crisis, some even went all the way back to claim that it was President Clinton's repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act (i.e. the act separating commercial and investment banking in the US) that caused the crisis. The truth is that it is likely that all these people and their decisions had something to do with the crisis, and responsibility should be assigned accordingly and fairly. However, the overall event of the financial crisis was the result of many, many, many, more decisions, actors, and their interactions.

A second important point is how the paradox might be resolved. First of all it should be said that it might be the case that the paradox has no solution. At the end, that is the destiny of many paradoxes. So obsessing with a solution would not always be the best path to follow. Sometimes the paradox itself, even unanswered, might be valuable because it provides a useful educational tool in order to understand what it feels to be in a senior management position. In other words, when senior management comes to be conceived through this paradox, we immediately start wondering how absurd, lonely, powerless, contradictory, and irrational it might feel to be in a senior position, where you realize you do not control everything around you, but people want you to pretend you do. Therefore, for senior managers not finding a solution to the paradox could

derive in some potential and serious consequences. One, for instance, could be the classic case of how lonely it might (sometimes) become to be in a senior management position (Lee and Tiedens, 2001; Stybel and Peabody, 2013). Entrepreneur Kamakshi Sivaramakrishnan illustrated this point, when in an interview to The New York Times, described the difficult conundrum of senior managers' loneliness: "Over time you learn to create a layer of insulation between your employees and the reality you feel as the leader and the pressure to deliver for investors. It is truly lonely, and I don't mean lonely in a despondent way" (in Bryant, 2016: 2). Moreover, for a senior manager dwelling in this paradox while not resolving it, simply hanging in there, could derive in other possible emotional challenges, such as anxiety. This relates, therefore, to the psychoanalytic idea of leaders' negative capability. Based on an early conception by Keats, negative capability refers "precisely [to] the ability to tolerate anxiety and fear to stay in the place of uncertainty" (Eisold, 2000: 65). So senior managers that stay and dwell in the state of this sensemaking paradox, might need to learn how to "…literally be in a position where… [they] do not know what is actually going on" (Simpson and French, 2006: 245).

Having started with this warning, I will now explore some possible solutions or attempts to solve the paradox. Several possibilities emerge on how senior managers try to cope or not with the paradox. The first and perhaps simpler case is that of a senior manager in denial. Many senior managers do not ever come to acceptance. By contrast, they live in denial, believing that they have full control, until something happens, like for example a financial crisis, which shows them they do not. Then, the frustration might overtake them, because it can be devastating to live pretending you control an organization, and then come to find out you do not. However, sometimes, even when facing information that disproves the belief of senior managers that they have full control, senior managers could continue believing in their hegemony and their almighty influence. This

might derive in a sort of self-deceptive leadership (Brown and Jones, 2000; von Hippel and Trivers, 2011), where unwelcome information is suppressed.

Another alternative is that of the senior manager that tries to reason with people. We saw this, for example, in Alan Greenspan's congressional testimony after the crisis, where he certainly tried to persuade people by explaining how the global economy is a complex and largely unpredictable system. Yet, these attempts might not always end up satisfactorily, as people might still just prefer simplistic and already held causal models that blame everything on one key senior manager or person (Lewandowsky et al., 2012).

A final way to solve the paradox that I will discuss is what could be referred as double face senior management. In this case, senior managers come to accept the complexity of the world that surrounds them. However, they do not publicly admit their actual thinking. By contrast, since people want simple explanations, they give that to them by taking and accepting always all the blame for everything. This is certainly easy to do when senior managers are blamed for all success and have to take all the glory. However, it is not so easy when senior managers are blamed for all failure and have to take all the blame (Bligh and Schyns, 2007), even in ways that might not be fair. Thus, in a world of complexity, senior management is no longer about heroic managers having full control of their organizations, but probably about senior managers pretending they have control and taking the blame of all success and failure, giving people, then, at least some cognitive peace of mind.

In conclusion, I started this paper by arguing that complexity theory has come to perceive organizations, their environments, and leadership in a very different and novel manner. Complexity theory focuses on the interactions among the plethora of elements that constitute a system and the peculiar behaviors that result from this (Allen and Boulton, 2011; Allen et al., 2007;

McMillan, 2004). From a complexity perspective, leadership is no longer in an individual, but emerges from the interactions among many actors (Lichtenstein and Plowman, 2009; Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2001; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Under such a perspective, the question then emerges on what senior managers' role is. I said that from a complexity leadership perspective, senior managers become enablers of emergent complex adaptive processes of self-organization. Furthermore, I said that sensemaking possibly remained a key role for senior managers (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia et al., 1994). While analyzing senior managers' sensemaking, it was shown that a possibility is for them to make sense of the world by accepting their limitations and the unowned and uncontrollable essence of many processes that surround them (MacKay and Chia, 2013; Pye, 2005). However, while senior managers' might realize their limitations, people in their organizations might be demanding from them to take full responsibility of what senior managers know is not fully their doing (Bligh et al., 2011; Meindl et al., 1985). I called this the senior management sensemaking paradox. To solve the paradox, several alternatives were discussed. However, one that I mainly discussed was that of double face senior management: senior managers privately come to terms with the complexity that surrounds them and all that is beyond their control, while at the same time publicly accepting blame for all success and failure in order to give some peace of mind to their people. It is in this way, therefore, that senior managers come to be perceived in a different way, no longer as heroes, but simply as trapped between contrasting and contradictory complexity sensemaking processes.

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