

Sensemaking, sensegiving and strategic management in Danish higher education

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Abstract Strategic management and leadership has been a vital catchphrase in most European higher education reforms over the past decade, and has in many countries resulted in a strengthening of the top level management tiers. Rectors and Deans are increasingly tasked with the responsibility of turning HEIs into more active, entrepreneurial actors in society, and are in this way required to take on and inhabit the role as strategic managers to a much higher degree than ever seen before in higher education systems. This role, apart from being new to many of the managers, is at the same time complicated by the upending of the traditional governance structures, and the rigorous defence of the very same structures stemming from the academic staff. The article examines how these strategic managers simultaneously attempt to make sense of these changing circumstances, and how new and old ideas, values and norms play into these sensemaking processes. The findings suggest that while traditional academic norms may still be very influential, new ideas about HEIs have found their way into both sensemaking and sensegiving efforts, and that both old and new ideas significantly affect the goal construction and strategic management practice.

Keywords Sensemaking · Strategic management · Leadership · Academic values · Sensegiving

Introduction

Strategic management and leadership has been a vital catchphrase in most European higher education reforms over the past decade; most often presented as a means to ensure that

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higher education institutions play a more active, entrepreneurial role in society—for the good of students, staff and not least the national economy (see e.g. Folketinget 2003; Bayenet et al. 2000; de Boer and File 2009). The demand for interaction with society is linked to the increasing coupling of higher education institutions and the performance of national systems in the globalized economy—the knowledge economy (e.g. EC 2005). This increasing focus on *strategy*, coupled with rising demands for responsiveness, has in many European countries resulted in a significant strengthening of the power of the top tiers of the internal governance structures, cf. Rectors and Deans, to enable them to make ‘the tough decisions’ and be held accountable for them. These tough decisions often include constructing and implementing visions, reform programs and organizational transformations, to make higher education institutions more customer oriented, responsive and competitive (de Boer and File 2009; Meek et al. 2010). The top level managers¹ are in this way required to take on and inhabit the role as strategic managers to a much higher degree than ever seen before in higher education systems. This role, apart from being new to many of the managers, is at the same time complicated by the upending of the traditional governance structures, and the rigorous defense of the very same structures stemming from the academic staff.

In Denmark, as well as in other European countries, the straight line between the top level managers and the strategic decisions made is curved by the simultaneous implementation of external majority boards as the supreme authority in higher education institutions, and the demand for academic reputation as a means for obtaining legitimacy amongst the academic staff (Degn and Sørensen 2012). The present article sets out to explore how the top level managers (Rectors and Deans) in two Danish universities attempt to navigate between sometimes conflicting demands, and simultaneously make sense of their new role, while acting in it. It investigates how the top level managers make sense of their changing role, what factors influence this sensemaking, and how this affects the strategic goals they set up. The aim is to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on how leaders think and act in higher education (Pietilä 2013; Kezar 2012; Henkel 2000, 2005; Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Gioia and Thomas 1996), and on how new ideas transform and interact with existing norms and values (Czarniawska-Joerges and Sevón 2005; Béland and Cox 2011; Menahem 2008).

In higher education, top level managers have in many countries gone from being *primi inter pares* leaders, chosen amongst their peers, to appointed, and in most cases more *professional* managers, indicating that the role as top level manager is perceived to be more important by policy makers than ever before. Strategies are assumed to “reflect the values of top managers” (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991, p. 434) which means that the recruitment at this level is of vital importance to the strategic direction of the institution. The values and norms of top level managers are therefore now a political concern, as the trend towards institutional autonomy and professionalized strategic managers is discursively linked with the knowledge economy concept; a coupling which connects higher education institutions closely to the value-producing apparatus (Bayenet et al. 2000; Stensaker et al. 2007).

These extensive changes at the top tiers of the university management system have created an air of uncertainty within the higher education institutions, as they represent a

¹ In this paper Rectors and Deans are referred to as strategic managers as opposed to strategic leaders. The Danish language holds only one word which covers both English terms and the term strategic manager has been chosen in the present paper—not as an indication that leadership elements are not prevalent in the roles of Rector and Dean, but because it to highlight the links with such concepts as New Managerialism and New Public Management, which have been highly influential on the higher education sector in Denmark.

part of a massive upending of the traditional academic governance system and have introduced new positions, new legislation and new values into the higher education system and particularly into the management structure. Several studies have however suggested that the academic values and norms are still very influential and constricting even for external top level managers (e.g. Meek et al. 2010; Deem et al. 2007), and that the new ideas about strategic capacity, accountability, responsiveness etc. may not be as pervasive as they were expected to be. The managers of the new structures are also, in many countries, mainly recruited from within the organizations—or at least from within academia—and are thus to a high degree ‘brought up’ with the academic values of academic governance, collegiality and self-management. They are thereby navigating between demands from without and within; attempting to implement strategic changes in highly institutionalized organizations (Scott 1995) to achieve goals defined (partially) by external stakeholders, e.g. by the political system, while at the same time maintaining the respect and legitimacy needed to actually carry out the changes within the organization.

Sensemaking and sensegiving in higher education: a framework for analysis

This complex situation calls for both sensemaking, i.e. the creation of meaning from the flux of impulses that the managers are confronted with, and sensegiving, i.e. the communication of a vision or plan, in a way that maximizes the possibility of success (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Weick 1995; Weick et al. 2005; Rouleau 2005; Hope 2010; Bartunek et al. 1999). Sensemaking and sensegiving as theoretical concepts provide concepts for looking at how disruptions of existing practice, uncertainty and ambiguity leads people to rethink and reorganize how they perceive themselves and their role within the organization [see e.g. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), Humphreys and Brown (2002) or Smerek (2011) for examples of sensemaking/sensegiving studies in higher education settings]. The argument in the present article is that examining the sensemaking and sensegiving of top level managers provide valuable insight into the processes that lead to strategies instead of examining the strategies themselves.

Sensemaking, following Karl E. Weick, “unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances” (Weick et al. 2005, p. 409). This definition of sensemaking entails many discrete dimensions, but for the purpose of the present study I shall focus on just three of them, namely the identity concern, the social context and the enactment dimension.

When faced with an ambiguous or confusing situation, people tend to respond with questions of identity, like “who are we” and “how do we do things” (Mills et al. 2010, p. 1889). The process of constructing answers to these questions can be seen as sensemaking, where individuals (or organizations) connect cues (events, ideas, etc.) with frames (cognitive frames, mental models etc.) in order to construct a working story of identity; a self which corresponds with the perception of the world. This process allows the sensemaker to continue acting by affording a “general orientation to situations that maintain esteem and consistency of one’s self-conceptions” (Ring and Van de Ven 1989, p. 180, quoted in Weick 1995). The claim in the present paper is that sensemaking processes seek to serve three basic needs for every individual, namely the needs for self-enhancement, self-efficacy, and self-consistency (Erez and Earley 1993; Weick 1995; Brown et al. 2008). These three identity-needs frame how cues are picked out, as they bias the attention

towards cues that strengthen feelings of positive self-image, competence and continuity. These cues are then connected to salient frames and the question of identity construction is thereby also seen as a question of shifting “among definitions of self” (Weick 1995, p. 20). These different definitions of self and the process wherein they are selected for representation are thereby seen as highly influential on the behaviour of managers, as they promote certain problem definitions, plausible solutions and response strategies. As Porac et al. (1989) have argued, the mental models of decision-makers are key to understanding strategic behaviour. The expectation in other words is the top level managers will tend towards picking out and dealing with problems that have a perceived high likelihood of success and avoid those that they believe exceed their capabilities, seek out and highlight cues that boost a positive self-image and create stories that “naturalize” their present position in order to maintain a feeling of consistency (Erez and Earley 1993). The interesting question thus becomes which cues are seen to be relevant in this endeavour.

Another interesting question is how the constructions differ across organizational and disciplinary borders, as the process of identity construction is seen to be guided by other, more structural factors, such as “an organization’s rules, routines, symbols, and language [which] will all have an impact on an individual’s sensemaking activities and provide routines or scripts for appropriate conduct” (Mills et al. 2010, p. 185). This also means that a sensemaker is never alone in his/her attempt to create and project meaning—others are present either by direct interaction or by proxy via the institutions of language, routines etc., or via the imagined expectations of others. Sensemaking is seen to be a social process, which always takes place in the imagined or actual presence of others, taking into account the imagined scripts, mental modes etc. of these others, as they are e.g. represented by the symbols and language of the organization. This has also been conceptualized by other theorists, e.g. social identity scholars who contribute with knowledge on how salient group classifications are part of what is termed the “social identity” (Ashforth and Mael 1989), and how the perceived image of the organization with which one identifies, i.e. how I think other people perceive my organization, can be very influential on the perceptions and interpretations of issues within the organization (Dutton and Dukerich 1991). This argument is pursued in this paper, where the assumption is that the top level managers’ perceived image (how they think others perceive them as managers—as well as their organization) will influence how they perceive themselves. Social identity theory claims that if the perceived image is under threat, organization members will tend towards attempting to change this image accordingly in order to maintain a positive self-image (Elsbach and Kramer 1996). This argument is explored by looking at how top level university managers navigate between audiences and respond to possible identity/image threats.

A final characteristic of the sensemaking/sensegiving process is that by way of enactment, the sensemaker constructs his own environment and the premises for future sensemaking and sensegiving processes—both for himself and for others. By creating order and categories from which future sensemaking processes can extract meaning, sensemaking processes are thereby also seen as enacting a social order. This thus also becomes part of a sensegiving process, which describes the other side of the coin (Rouleau 2005); the way managers (or others) attempt to ‘sell’ a message and gain influence on how others make sense. Sensegiving is often conceptualized as the strategic or intentional side of sensemaking, where an individual (or group) try to sway or influence the sensemaking of others to obtain certain goals. Gioia and Chittipeddi describe sensegiving as the management’s attempt to provide the employees with a “viable interpretation of a new reality” and influencing them “to adopt it as their own” (1991, p. 433). It is in this respect important to

note that this interpretation is itself a result of a sensemaking process and therefore a contingent construction. Sensegiving is in the present paper investigated in order to gain insight into the decision premises that are enacted and thus come to serve as foundations of future decisions.

Together these three dimensions suggest a partial answer to the question of how top level managers in higher education institutions respond to the external pressure of new demands for strategic management, accountability and responsiveness, as well as the internal pressure for legitimacy, academic freedom etc., by turning the spotlight to the self-perceptions of top level managers, and how these self-perceptions interrelate with the strategic practice. The framework suggests that the need to maintain a positive self-image, feelings of competence and self-continuity would influence the strategic practice, e.g. by ‘blinding’ the sensemaker to problem-definitions that lay outside one’s competences. Similarly, an assumption is that the perceived (personal and organizational) image and threats on this tend to cause shifts in self-definitions. These shifts are then assumed to affect how the top level managers ‘give sense’, and thus enact a certain interpretation of ‘reality’.

Analytical strategy

The aim of the study is to explore the sensemaking and sensegiving processes of top level managers from two Danish universities. The two universities were chosen for their quite distinct individual characteristics—one traditionally perceived as a Mode 1-university² and the other a newer, more Mode 2 oriented-university, and ten (former and current) Deans and Rectors, with differing disciplinary backgrounds, were interviewed about their perceptions of higher education management in general, their own role as strategic managers (sensemaking) and about how they go about the task of producing strategies for the university (sensegiving).

The case selection strategy was theoretically founded and in the analysis differences related to disciplinary, organizational and other variations will be discussed when relevant, but it is important to note that the study is not designed as a comparative study, nor does it claim to be representative of the population of university managers. The framework is not an explanatory one, but is seen as a constructive way of exploring how sensemaking plays out in various contexts. The aim is in other words not to explain variation, but ensure variation in the selection of informants in order to ensure as many qualitatively different experiences of the circumstances as possible.

The interviews were designed as semi-structured with much room to digress from the interview-guide and pursue subjects and themes that the respondents deemed meaningful in order to keep the sensemaking as open as possible. However, there is little doubt that an interview session in itself is a driver of sensemaking, or at the very least a ‘forced’ verbalization of an ongoing and perhaps unconscious process. By asking specific questions, the interview session frames the sensemaking process and affords specific cues. I argue however that by allowing the respondent to digress and construct a personal narrative, the interviews are seen as a good window into the continuing sensemaking processes of the managers.

² The traditional university has however over the past years gone through a massive academic and administrative reform process, which has altered its traditional organizational structure, aimed at constructing a more “entrepreneurial university” (Clark 1998).

In the analysis the *identity* dimension of sensemaking is explored by looking at how the top level managers describe and construct a positive sense of self (self-enhancement) and sense of belonging (self-consistency), e.g. when responding to questions of how they obtained their management position, characterizations of a ‘good university manager’, descriptions of career paths etc., and how they define and select problems (self-efficacy), etc. by looking at goal constructions. The *social* dimension is explored by looking for definitions and categorizations of ‘others’, e.g. when the informants describe and reflect on the pressures from without and within, or the expectations that they are met with. Perceptions of ‘academics’ and ‘the political system’ are highlighted. Finally the *enactment* dimension is explored by investigating how the informants describe a certain ‘state of things’, e.g. how specific versions of events are enacted and how particular categories are naturalized.

The sensemaking and sensegiving of the top level managers

The role as strategic manager: sensemaking as identity construction

A common trait in the sensemaking narratives of the top level managers is the emphasis that is put on “being a strong academic person”. Across the board the general construction of self is as a manager, but with a clear emphasis on the academic background. With few exceptions the managers also all mention having been at university “always”, and all, across organizational and disciplinary borders, highlight their background in academia, e.g. either as a strong researcher or as a dedicated teacher, and very often link their role as a manager with this background. The similarity in identity constructions across disciplines may be explained by use of generalized academic qualities and traits; the important cue is having been a researcher/teacher, not a specific kind of researcher/teacher. In this way, the use of academic norms in identity constructions does not seem to be more prevalent among e.g. managers from a particular disciplinary background, or from the more traditional university as might be expected. These generalized academic cues, e.g. exemplified by notions of having “paid ones dues” and “knowing what it takes”, or more generally as expressions of having knowledge of the academic practice, norms and standards, are generally used to construct a story of ‘entitlement’ and to boost feelings of self-efficacy.

... I found that it was very important that you (...) were able to demonstrate that you had some knowledge about what was going on [in the research field of the employee]. Otherwise I don’t think that there will respect surrounding the managers. So your authority is tied, of course mainly to you as a person, but also to the fact that you have an academic background and know the conditions in terms of being an employee at a university. (Dean, Traditional University)

In this way, the academic system emerges as a powerful audience, and whose ‘language’ is used to create consistency, even though some of these ‘classic academic’ values and principles are seen as symbolic and counterproductive in modern HEIs. This can be seen as an example of how routines and scripts are still vitally influencing how managers perceive their space for action and resources as a manager. The academic link is perceived to be necessary in order to “get things done” or even be taken seriously as a manager and being able to speak the relevant language. Several respondents reflected on the symbolic nature of this type of legitimacy, e.g. by stating that the further up the hierarchy you get the more

basic and superficial your knowledge of all the research fields and disciplines you are expected to be familiar with becomes, but it nevertheless emerged as a vital frame in all the narratives across the board.

The academic background and personal experiences as a researcher is seen to cater to all three identity-needs. Being a strong academic person serves the need for the self-consistency; a need which is seen to direct individuals towards information that is congruent and consistent with their perception of self, and to contribute incongruent information to situational factors. This motivation is evident when one manager speak of having paid ones dues; creating a story of belonging, of being entitled to the position as a top level manager. Most managers emphasize that they were encouraged to apply for the position, and they all construct it as a natural progression, allowing them to have a stable self-image over time and not perceive the top level management position as a radical break with their constructed sense of identity (Erez and Earley 1993). Particularly the Rectors and less explicitly the Deans, however tend to strengthen this feeling of self-consistency by differentiating them from their previous peers, creating a reason for leaving academia and becoming a manager. The cues used for this differentiation vary from e.g. specific personality traits (the superior ability to organize and inspire others or the innate sense of strategy) or communal (having visions and ambitions for the specific organization, being better for the organization than the previous managers).

Self-efficacy is generally strengthened by constructing a story in which their perception of personal strengths is meaningful, i.e. where their experience is a capacity. As mentioned the concept of self-efficacy describes the tendency of individuals to seek out tasks and situations in which they believe they will be successful, by selecting manageable problems and obtainable strategic goals. As mentioned their formal power and authority was reinforced significantly in the reforms of the new millennium, but this strengthened formal position of the top level managers is mentioned very little in the narratives—and is never mentioned as a help or a tool in the managerial toolbox. The notion of authority is on the other hand almost consistently linked with legitimacy and culture as seen above.

I have tried sometimes to make some ‘top-down’ initiatives, which has always been met with friendliness and understanding from the people I have approached, and then they told me: I honestly think that you should do that yourself, because I am busy with something else (Dean, Traditional University)

The quote illustrates a common construction of authority stemming not from structures, but from the support and help of the staff; a support and help that was contingent on the academic link. This illustrates how the top level managers tend to make sense of their new, more powerful role, by constructing a situation or a set of circumstances wherein their background as an academic and the ensuing knowledge of the academic system, the norms and values are strengths and capacities, thus increasing their chances of being successful.

The academic frame is also used to boost and maintain a positive self-image, i.e. as self-enhancement. By highlighting the necessity of having ‘the academic credentials’ to be an effective university manager, the managers evoke scales by which they can comfortably be measured, and which supports a positive self-concept. The informants however tend to bring forth past experiences, when they describe being met with mistrust or a sense of alienation from the academic staff; threats against a positive state about the self. This supports the suggestion made in the theoretical framework that identity threats might lead to attempts to change the perceived image in a way that may produce a more positive external image. This tendency is most pronounced in the traditional university, which has recently undergone a massive re-organization. Here it seems that the academic

background, e.g. descriptions of “paying their dues”, references to their vast publication record or extensive teaching experience and reputation etc., serves as a very powerful frame which helps them ‘dismiss’ such cues (mistrust and alienation) as unjustified—both as means of sensemaking and sensegiving.

This analysis of the identity construction dimension of the top level managers’ sense-making processes illustrates the resilience of the academic ideas about higher education governance and management, and how they are still valued highly and employed actively. The academic norms and principles may be explicitly or implicitly criticized by the managers, but they nonetheless seem to influence the way manager identity and image is constructed.

However as demonstrated above, the present study shows that being a *strong academic person*—in the sensemaking narratives of Danish top level higher education managers—is not the same as being a *strong academic*. The top level managers have remolded and redefined their sense of self, from their past identity as an academic (researcher/teacher) to a manager with an academic background. The question remains why exactly this frame is brought forth and deemed appropriate, at the expense of other potential frames. Following the sensemaking framework I argue that this selection process is highly influenced by the sensemaker’s perception of audience. Sense is in other words made, knowing that it will need to be given on—that decisions will need to be implemented and thereby appropriated and sanctioned by others, which makes these ‘others’ and their perceived values and norms important. To elaborate further on this social aspect of the sensemaking processes of top level managers, we now turn to the enactment side of sensemaking, i.e. how the managers produce the environment they face by way of setting goals and determining means towards these goals.

The practice of strategic management: sensemaking as a social process

Goal setting is a vital part of strategic management and also of sensemaking and sensegiving, as it enacts a sense of direction, which in turn excludes other possible directions. By setting or constructing a goal the top level managers create the environment in which they act, and thereby also the premises of the sensemaking of others. The following section will thereby provide a picture of how the top level managers produce the “viable interpretation of new reality” (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991, p. 433) that they give on to their employees.

The goal constructions of the top level managers in the present study can be divided into three distinct categories of goals. The first category comprises a set of normative goals, where the external impulses and ideas about higher education play a vital role. These goals are often described as goals that are “naturally necessary for the society at large”, that are “obviously reasonable” etc. They are in other words described in a somewhat de-personalized manner and not as personal goals. These goals can be named the *externalized strategic goals* and are typically connected to normative frames, as goals that the universities are obliged to work towards, but not as goals that the managers see as personally fulfilling.

it’s obvious, that if we are to handle some of the problems we have, [...] climate issues and so on, then we need to have cooperation crosswise – they cannot be handled technically these things (Dean, Old University)

This goal is not a personalized goal—it is a more generalized goal construction used as part of a sensegiving exercise directed at a specific audience. This type of goal construction appears relatively rarely in the narratives and are seem to take the form of a story that the top level managers wish to tell about themselves and their organization. Even though they vary in specificity and direction (e.g. to be “excellent in research”, “contribute to the knowledge society”), the externalized goal constructions are mainly concerned with legitimizing the practice of the universities to an external audience, which is done by linking them with the impulses that are experienced as being relevant to this external audience, mainly society and the political system.

The second category of goals is often described as the things that “make a difference”. One example of such a construction is the following:

Well, my goal was basically to strengthen research in the university, so we could get a boost in prestige and also introduce a culture where people prioritized research (Dean, New University)

Even though this might seem as a somewhat vague goal formulation, it is nevertheless closely linked to the perception of personal strength, and also to the academic background described above; a tendency well in line with the assumption described above, that managers will tend to seek out problems and goals that suit their perceived strengths to boost feelings of self-efficacy. This is what distinguishes them from the first set of goals—the *externalized strategic goals*, which were de-personalized—namely that they are constructed and linked to a personal frame. The goal in the quote above was expressed by a manager whose identity construction was closely linked to a previous career as a distinguished researcher. Research and research excellence were critical frames in this manager’s sensemaking process and the goal is clearly influenced by this sense of self. Another manager highlighted putting the humanities on the agenda nationally and internationally—a goal which was closely linked to the self-image as a strong and proactive academic person. These goals are also experienced as more conflictual and in many cases where the ‘actual’ management takes place. In the example above the respondent set the goal of introducing and building a culture of “thinking research” in a culture where teaching had been the primary focus and the primary source of income. This resulted in some quite radical changes in the organization, where both the economic and study structures were transformed in order to achieve the personalized strategic goal.

This illustrates a common tendency in the narratives: namely that the external impulses and ideas about higher education (e.g. their role in the solution of grand challenges, the need for accountability, value-for-money etc.) are less influential than the sense of personal strength in the construction of what could be named *personalized strategic goals*, i.e. they are goals that the managers want to achieve, not because they feel obliged to, but because it is connected to sense of personal fulfillment. These goals thereby also differ more than the externalized strategic goals—ranging from wanting to bring the university into “the international major league” to aspiring to create closer links to the private sector and businesses to fostering cultural changes. The construction of the personalized strategic goals can be seen as much more connected to sensemaking than to sensegiving—and the audience that emerges is therefore naturally to a much higher degree the internal, academic one.

The final group of goals that we see in the narratives is what one might call *operational goals*. These goals are aimed at the organization as such and towards strengthening the structures and operations of the organization. Often they are described as “cleaning up the mess” or “sorting things out”—frequently in the economy, but also improving the

structures and frames, which are perceived as vital in order to achieve the strategic and the necessary goals:

... first of all to get the economy in control, so we knew what we had to deal with and subsequently implement the economic model that works. (Dean, Traditional University)

These goals are also closely connected to the perception of personal strengths and can thereby also be seen as an effort to enhance the feeling of self-efficacy, i.e. the need to feel competent in the performance of tasks. Interestingly, many of the operational goals also seem to be influenced by new notions of accountability and responsibility—and also in many cases ideas about good governance or creating a good psychosocial working environment. This might be an indication that at this level of goal formulation, new ideas have had some impact. It is clear that in the formulation of operational goals, the top level managers attempt to address some of the structures and cultural aspects that they perceive to be counter to the implementation of the strategic goals, but also that these obstacles/challenges are connected to the perception of the existing structures and culture as rigid. The audience is thereby both internal and external, as the goals both serve the need for legitimacy in the relation with the external audience, but also the need for self-efficacy and self-enhancement.

Discussion and conclusions

The primary questions of the present paper were how the top level strategic managers make sense and give sense of their role as strategic managers; particularly how new ideas about higher education governance and management are balanced with more established ideas and frames and how this sensemaking and sensegiving affects the practice as strategic managers. The study overall has shown that even though traditional norms and values are still very influential, newer ideas about accountability, strategy and transparency have certainly found their way into the goal-setting and identity constructions of higher education managers in Denmark.

One interesting finding of the study has been the degree to which the academic background is consistently used as a frame in the sensemaking processes and how this affects the cues that are extracted from the changing circumstances. *Being an academic person* as distinct from being an academic is shown to be a highly salient frame, which lends meaning to the construction of identity, cf. the three identity needs, and thereby also to the construction and selection of goals and salient problems. This illustrates how powerful frames academic norms and values are—both in personal sensemaking and in organizational sensegiving. The analysis has shown that by looking through the sensemaking/sensegiving framework, academic frames emerge as both crucial to the top level managers' construction of self; working as anchors in the identity construction process, and also as vital statements and legitimizers; acting as symbols and 'justifications' in the stories that are told. This however should not be seen as contradicting or as attempts of 'window dressing', but as a sign that scripts, routines and institutions might be more significant in the ongoing sensemaking processes, than is consciously recognized by the top level managers.

Interestingly, these identity constructions seem to be relatively independent of disciplinary differences. An often heard argument is that management is more alien and thereby more difficult to practice in the humanities and more familiar in the natural science

disciplines, but the present study has not provided support for this argument. This does not mean that disciplinary background does not matter to managerial sensemaking and behavior, but simply that the present study has not revealed any patterns in sensemaking processes and constructions that might be ascribed to these characteristics.

Where the clearest difference is, however, is across organizational borders. It is clear that managers from the traditional university, which has recently gone through a massive restructuring, seem to be more concerned with image maintenance than their counterparts from the newer university. One explanation to this could be that the re-organization has enlarged the perceived degree of threat on the identity and image. The managers from this university seem to feel a more pressing need to legitimize their managerial practice, than their counterparts. Further studies of this tendency are however needed to explore how identity work plays out in transforming organizations.

Another key finding of the present study has been how the managers' sensemaking processes impacted the goal setting—and thereby the strategic management of the higher education institutions. Goal setting is seen as an integrate part of sensemaking and sensegiving by representing the enactment of specific constructions of meaning and as the premises of the sensemaking of others. They are thus also a representation of the *practice* of strategic management. As demonstrated above, even though the substantive content of the goals differs, there seems to be three similar patterns of goal constructions, namely externalized strategic goals, personalized strategic goals and operational goals, each constructed in the presence of different (constellations of) audiences. The externalized goals e.g. mainly target an external audience and may be seen as mainly a sensegiving attempt, whereas the personalized goals both serve as sensemaking and sensegiving. The personalized strategic goals can often be seen as the managers' *translations* of the externalized strategic goals; a personalization of depersonalized visions. They are a representation of how the top level managers choose certain cues out of a variety of possible problem definitions, connect them to a personal frame, and enact this back into their environment by way of specific initiatives and decisions. The externalized strategic goals are often part of a powerful social discourse that any strategic manager would be hard pressed to circumvent—and thereby the recognition and articulation of these goals act as sensegiving to the external (political, societal) audience. Another characteristic of these goals is that they are rarely accompanied by particular means, or descriptions of actions/enactments. They remain on the more abstract level. The personalized strategic goals can on the other hand be seen to represent the managers' attempt at creating a meaning that both allow them to maintain a positive self-relation, and also one that they believe to be 'digestible' to their internal audience, i.e. the academic staff that should help achieve the goals, thereby supporting the findings of e.g. Czarniawska, who point to the importance of translation processes in organizations (Czarniawska-Joerges and Sevón 1996; Czarniawska 2009).

As demonstrated, the externalized and personalized goals are accompanied by more concrete goals like “sorting out the economy”, “making the organization run smooth” etc. Interestingly, new (externally constructed) ideas seem to have the highest impact on the externalized strategic goals—but also on these operational goals. This indicates that the new ideas primarily impact *sensegiving* rather than *sensemaking*, as these two categories of goals are more linked to these outward-oriented processes. As shown in the analysis above the personalized strategic goals are more closely connected to the sensemaking processes of the individual manager, and thus to their perception of personal strengths and the need for self-enhancement and self-efficacy, indicating that traditional norms, values, routines

and scripts are more influential on the identity construction of the top level managers, than the newer ideas of strategy, professionalism etc.

In general the study has shown that the sensemaking processes of the top level managers seem to serve a vital purpose in that it helps constructing themselves as agents by setting their own goals—translating the ideas and impulses in relation to their own sense of self. In this way sensemaking can be seen as a means for empowerment.

The study thereby supports the findings of Henkel (2000, 2005), Meek et al. (2010), Deem et al. (2007) which have all pointed to the importance of traditional academic norms in changing higher education systems, and has added to this knowledge by investigating both the process in which these norms and values affect identity construction, and also how they affect the enactment, i.e. the practice of setting up goals for the top level managers.

The study reported here however is a small scale, national case study and it would naturally be very interesting to follow up on the findings in larger, cross-country studies of the sensemaking and sensegiving processes in HEIs. Such studies would allow for more in depth analyses of the (lack of) differences across disciplines and explore how academic cues are used by managers with other structural conditions, e.g. no formal requirements for an academic background or a less “professionalized” task portfolio.

Another question that arises is how the goals that are set up by these managers are received and made sense of on other levels of the organization. Further research into how sensemaking and sensegiving plays out amongst academic staff and how the goals of the top level managers play into these processes would be of great value in terms of understanding the complex relationship between highly institutionalized norms and values and powerful new ideas.

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