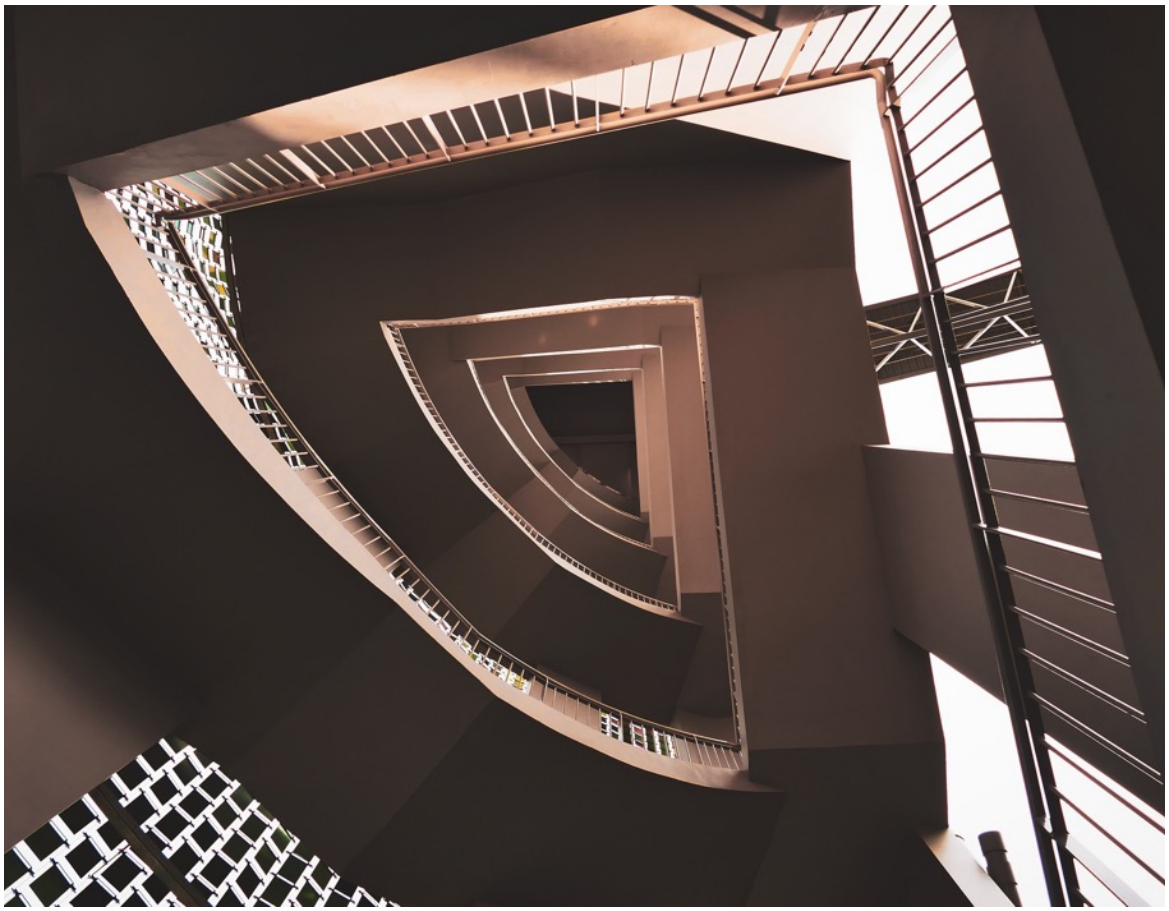
CASE STUDY

Effectiveness in Uncertainty: An action learning project in a South African manufacturing company.

Sonja Blignaut, March 2016.



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In 2015, More Beyond partnered with a company in the manufacturing industry to enable leaders and decision-makers from various parts of the business to become more effective in uncertainty. Six teams were identified from across the organisation who would participate in a 9 month long action learning process, where they would apply complexity based thinking and methods to actual problems in the business. These problem areas included: decision-making, safety culture, change and brand perception.

The process

Over a 9 month period we had various interactions with the teams where we taught them complex its based techniques and tools that they then had to go away and apply to their selected problems. The learning they received during these interactive workshops included among others:

- Mapping the current narrative landscape/disposition of the system as it relates to the problem using Sensemaker®. This included using narrative to understand the dynamics of complex systems and intractable problems; how to design signification frameworks in Sensemaker®; how to gather narrative from a target population; and analysing Sensemaker® data.
- Sense-making and moving from data to action: using the Cynefin framework to make sense of patterns discovered in the narrative; designing safe-to-fail experiments and small actions in the present to create "more stories like these" and "fewer like those".
- Using Sensemaker® to monitor for shifts and measure the impact of interventions.

Outcomes

"The stories made the biggest impact. If people had reported something, they would get punished. This gave them freedom to share stories and be upfront. It gave people a voice and gave them permission to tell the truth."

~ Safety team reflection

As the entire process was designed to be "safe to fail" with multiple small projects being implemented concurrently, some projects were more successful than others which offered unique learning opportunities to the group. Some of these learnings included the importance of choosing topics closely related to your work as groups that chose themes too far removed from their everyday jobs struggled to find time to dedicate to this project. Another key learning was that without a well thought-out and adaptive narrative collection strategy it is very hard to gather a sufficient number of

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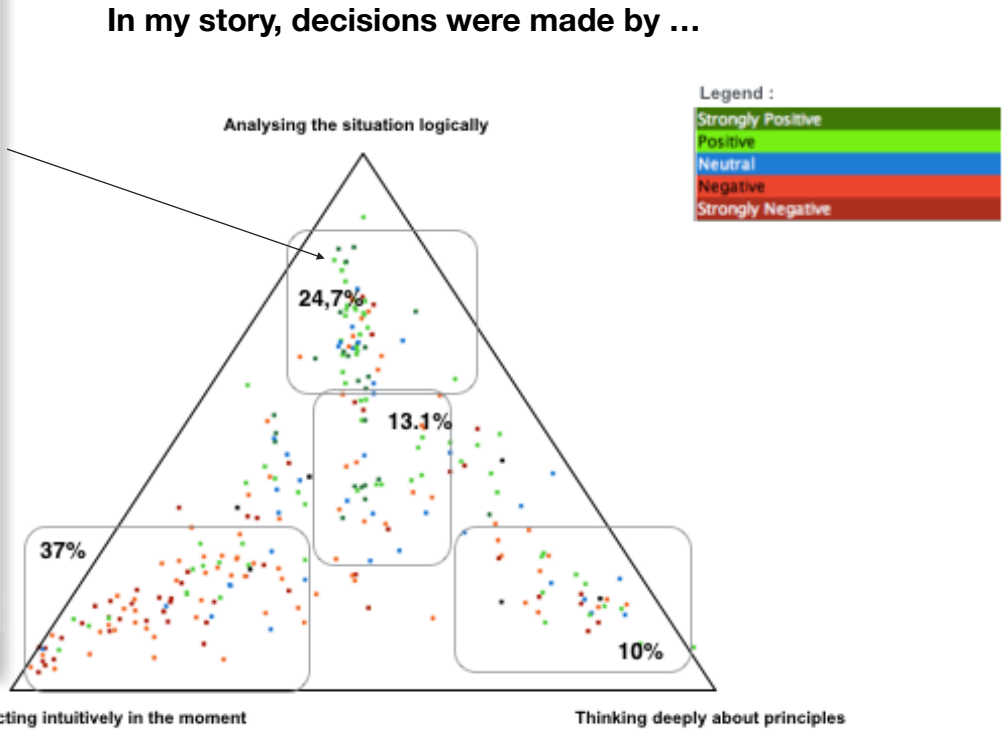
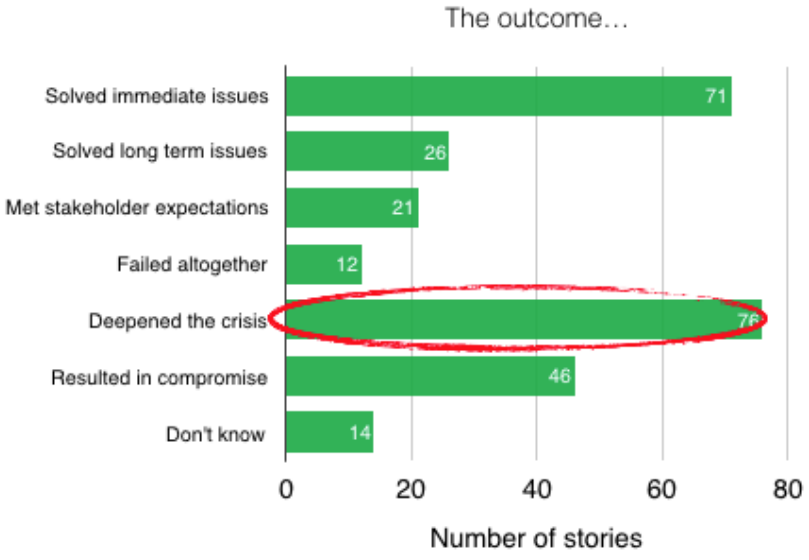
stories. The projects that proved most successful were the ones looking at Decision-making in times of uncertainty and Safety culture respectively.

The triad below shows the results from one of the Decision project's questions around decision-making style. An interesting pattern emerged where the dominant style seemed to be intuitive decision-making, however the stories signified towards this option was predominantly negative. Overall people felt that the decisions made solved only the immediate problems, or tended to make things worse rather better. As with all Sensemaker® projects, these patterns carried the supporting narratives with them. A sample story can be seen in the image below.

"A remarkable shift in focus from what we use to have to thinking out of the box while adhering to the process.
I went into the risk review workshop with an existing set of risks and then the manager asked instead: What keeps us awake at night and decided to start with a brainstorming of emergent risks instead.
The good outcome of it was that there is clear action which require further investigation of the risk elements with multiple stakeholders to provide a more accurate analysis
These plans are normally very left brain activity, what worked today was the strong right hand brain mode for identification and context. We need more of that"





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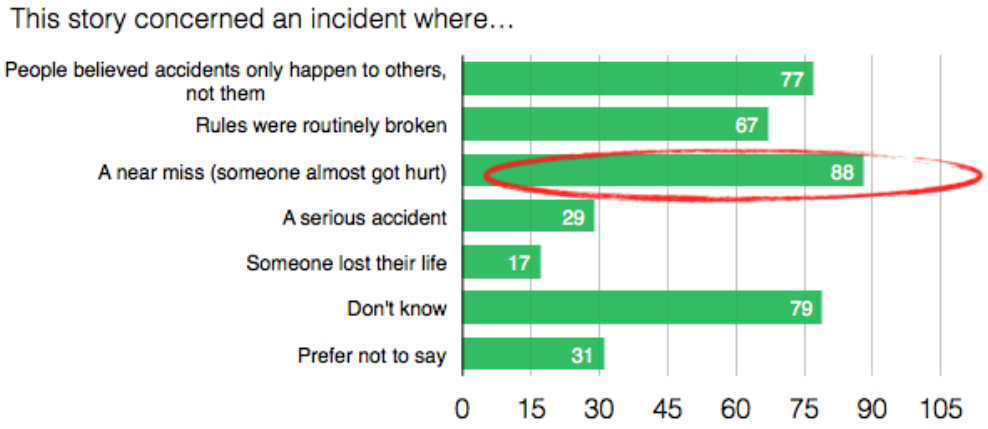
A key hypothesis flowing from the project is that the organisation seemed to be more effective at making decisions in crisis than routine, every day decisions or those that involved planning for the longer term.

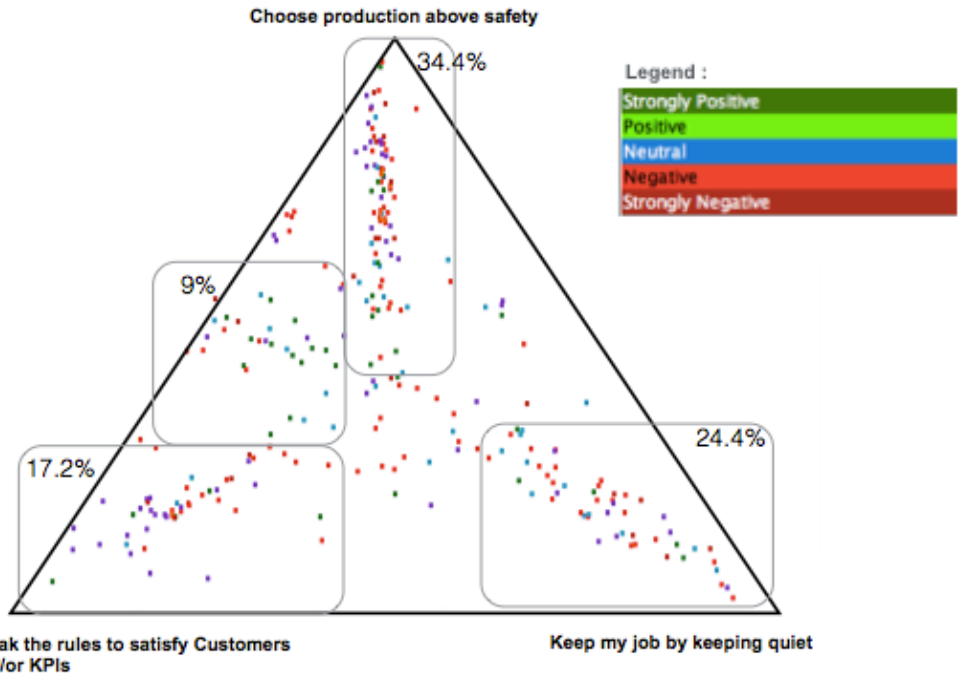
The safety team was the most successful out of all the teams, gathering around 400 stories over the 9 months. What was really encouraging with this project, is that employees responded to the invitation to anonymously share stories that they felt were important by sharing stories of near-misses (where accidents nearly happened). No other instrument have managed to gather these stories in the past, and these observations proved invaluable by challenging many firmly held assumptions.



Whereas other surveys that ask direct questions about how important safety is in this company yielded the expected result (everyone knows what the right answer is!), the patterns emerging from our project tells a very different story.

My story shows that around here it is normal to …

"I often feel unsafe. I don't feel that this organisation and it's leadership allows for anyone honest opinion. I don't feel like it's safe to be authentic. People are often watching their backs.Senior managers give instruction that are outside process but are never there to take accountability when auditors are around. There is a culture of always looking for someone else to blame."



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My story shows that what happens in this organisation is …

Managers think Safety is a Joke

"In our last staff meeting when the safety clip was shown this manager made a big show of playing on her phone. Looking up only to condescendingly laugh at a bit of the clip where the pronunciation of something was different from how she would have pronounced it in her first language. She then rolled her eyes and continued playing on her phone and writing notes to the person next to her. Although the clips are boring the rest of the team were trying to watch but this behaviour was distracting."

Employees' departments get fines if they report injuries at work.

I have slipped just outside the building. My heels are not too high and the soles of my shoes are not slippery. I have hurt my ankle. I could not report it to the health and safety representative for my department, because it would add to our department's statistics regarding injuries at work and apparently those statistics will have an effect on the department's bonuses. I can't understand why my department would be penalised for an injury which I obtained outside my department. So, our Health and Safety policy actually prevent people from reporting injuries. I went to the doctor myself and still have problems with my ankle. But I better not report it.

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Intervention design activities revolved around collective sense-making using the Cynefin framework, and designing safe-to-fail experiments informed by the gathered narratives. A simple question guided design efforts: What do we need to do differently to get “more observations/stories like these” that move us in a beneficial direction, and “fewer like those”?

The safety team has integrated the learnings from this project into their everyday activities and has become convinced of the power of narrative to understand and shift complex problems. Even though the project is over, sense-making continues and participants report a shift in how they see and make sense of their environment and the challenges they face.

What the client had to say:

"With Sensemaker® we are not looking at the surface stuff. When there are fatalities we can send people in and we come up with real stuff. We know the value of asking the right questions. We now get the real stories. It is very real. “

~ Safety team reflection

“Sensemaker® has validated our (behaviour based safety) way of working. Because we deal with a lot of linear processes, we can now say to consider behaviours as well. We have now evidence about what we do. We can now ask them when we do audits, if they really think it will change because of behaviours. I can now help them because we can show them behaviours. People are interested in what we do now. For the team it is empowering.” - OHS Specialist, Safety team

"If you look at the current sentiment in our organisation, what this sense-making experience has done for us to make us aware that: “how resilient you are depends on how you can make sense of it”. It’s about more than the cognitive and emotional, it’s also about a sense of purpose. This changed our conversations to “why am I here, what is my purpose?”. We can look at negative things that happened and have deeper and more meaningful conversations. If people can’t make sense, they tend to leave or avoid the issue.” ~ Decisions team

“The Cynefin framework has provided my team with a powerful vocabulary and means of approaching complexity at an organizational level. The use of micro-narratives and probes (through implementing the Sensemaker tool)” provided us with a highly informative dataset that demonstrated consistency for similar questions when applied across various problem areas. For us the theory and the practice came together really well. ~Senior Manager, Decisions team

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