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# Everyday Sensegiving: A Closer Look at Successful Plant Managers

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## Abstract

The authors conducted in-depth interviews and on-site visits with successful plant managers to understand similarities in their management approaches. Across 11 different plants, representing nine different industries, the authors found each plant manager actively engaged in shaping how employees viewed the organization and its values through what the authors call “everyday sensegiving.” From themes inductively identified from the interviews and on-site visits, four central values—“Here, we value people, we value openness, we value being positive, and we value being part of a larger community”—were identified. In this article, the authors link everyday sensegiving of these middle managers and extend the findings of the study to consider linkages to organizational performance and change efforts.

**Keywords:** sensegiving, values, qualitative case studies

I try to spend a lot of time on the floor, somewhere between 45 minutes to an hour on each shift. We run a first and a second [shift], so typically I would say I spend an hour and half on the floor each day ... I think that is a great way to get people feedback, build that connection with them, you know, let them give *you* information that they need to give you.

—Plant manager of a 300-person manufacturing plant

When asked about how he spends his time as a manager, the award-winning<sup>1</sup> plant manager quoted above did not talk about planning or driving labor costs down, or adopting new technologies. Rather, like each of the plant managers in this study, he described numerous ongoing activities—such as walking the plant floor—intended to underscore and reinforce key values. Across eleven different plants, representing nine different industries, we found each plant manager actively engaged in shaping how employees viewed the organization and its values through what we call “everyday sensegiving.” The central message was the same across the 11 plants—“Here, we value people, we value openness, we value being positive, and we value being part of a larger community.”

Although a manufacturing environment that is automated and routinized does not seem to require “managing meaning,” these managers all emphasized their roles as “sensegivers.” We theorize how everyday sensegiving can contribute to outstanding organizational performance and discuss the implications of everyday sensegiving for organizational change efforts. Far from what we expected to find in this study, it may be that successful plant management has more to do with managing the intangibles of meaning than managing the tangibles of machines, schedules, and costs.

In their seminal article, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) distinguished *sensegiving* from *sensemaking*. Sensegiving refers to the process one uses to influence how others construct meaning, that is, sensegivers attempt to shape the thinking and attitudes of others. Sensegivers shape how others “make sense” of their world. Most of the literature on sensegiving and sensemaking has focused on top management, although some scholars have recently addressed how middle managers construct meaning or shape the meaning construction of others (Balogun, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2003; Rouleau, 2005). Also, the sensegiving literature has focused on how managers influence the way others give meaning to *specific* events or changes. There has been no attention given to the everyday character of sensegiving—no attention to the ongoing, nonstop attempt to shape how employees view and understand their organizations. This article makes a unique contribution because we focus on middle managers, rather than top managers, as sensegivers, and because we focus on everyday sensegiving rather than sensegiving around discrete events. We use the findings from our study to extend theory about how both organizational performance and change efforts may be enhanced through the everyday sensegiving activities of managers.

We begin this article with a theoretical background and a brief review of literature on sensegiving<sup>2</sup> and middle managers. We then present the design of our inductive case study and our methods. We organize our findings around four key values espoused by the managers in our study—people, openness, being positive, and being part of a community. We build on work by Pfeffer (1981) and Hardy (1985) and theorize that intentional sensegiving, such as that engaged in by these successful plant managers, may create “sentiment” outcomes, that is, people feel good about where they work, which, in turn, can lead to “substantive” outcomes such as goal attainment, improved work processes, or enhanced profits. We discuss the implications of our research for firm performance and the practice of organizational change.

## **Sensegiving and the Role of the Middle Manager**

### ***Sensegiving***

All managers manage “meaning” in an effort to achieve a sense of shared purpose (Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Weick, 1979). Morgan, Frost, and Pondy (1983), in fact, argue that a manager’s effectiveness lies precisely in his or her ability to make activity meaningful for those in the manager’s role set. Sensemaking, the process through which information, insight, and ideas coalesce into something meaningful, has long been recognized as a key organizational activity (Weick, 1995), particularly for top managers (cf. Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Since the initial formulation, however, the notion of sensemaking has been refined (e.g., Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph, & DePalma, 2006; Weber & Manning, 2001). For example, sensemaking is no longer seen as restricted to top managers (Maitlis, 2005; Patriotta, 2003; Rouleau, 2005; Stensaker, Falkenberg, & Gronhaug, 2008). More importantly to our purposes, however, sensemaking is not an isolated activity or event. Rather, once “sense is made” it is communicated and used to influence both the sensemaking and behavior of others. This effort to influence and shape the sensemaking and meaning constructions of others has been termed “sensegiving” by Gioia and Chitipeddi (1991), who see sensegiving as a fundamental leadership activity. Sensegiving is essentially an act of persuasion (Bartunek, Krim, Necochea, & Humphries, 1999), and the interplay of sensegiving efforts on the part of many actors over time shapes organizational accounts (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2003). That is, sensegiving contributes to the construction of mental models that constitute the frameworks of organizational rationalities and belief systems (Hill & Levenhagen, 1995, p. 1059). Moreover, middle managers have been identified as active participants in mental model construction, shaping the organization’s “sense” upward through the hierarchy (cf. Dutton, Ashford, O’Neill, Hayes, & Wierba, 1997; Westley, 1990), and downward through the hierarchy or even across organizational boundaries (Beck & Plowman, 2009; Rouleau, 2005).

Sensegiving is usually conceived to be an exercise in verbal language, but if one construes “language” more broadly, then sensegiving is amenable to different media, including the use of symbols. Maitlis (2005) describes sensegiving as including both “... statements or *activities* [italics added] ... ” (p. 29). An activity, although not verbal language, can represent an idea and so “give sense.” For example, Fiss and Zajac (2006) explicitly connect sensegiving and symbols by examining the symbolic struggles over the purpose and direction of an organization. Similarly, Corvellec and Risberg (2007) report that successful wind power developers in Sweden essentially stage manage the permit application process to symbolically convey their point of view. Thus, sensegiving pertains to what managers say as well as what they do.

### ***Middle Managers and Sensegiving***

Middle managers operate at the intermediate level of the corporate hierarchy, two or three levels below the CEO (Dutton et al., 1997; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990); they super-

vise supervisors but are supervised by others (Dutton et al., 1997). Plant managers reside at precisely the location attributed to middle managers, and thus, they are the focus of this study. Our study extends the middle management literature and fills some of the empirical gap regarding what middle managers actually do. Our findings also suggest that the instrumental nature of middle managers' jobs may not demand as much attention as the symbolic aspect of their roles. The literature on middle managers offers little perspective on the middle manager's role as sensegiver, with the exception of Rouleau (2005) who looked at the middle managers' role in selling a specific change initiative. Three conceptual themes dominate the middle management literature: (a) normative and instrumental prescriptions for middle managers, (b) the need for middle manager involvement in the formulation of strategy, and (c) the role of middle managers in bringing about large-scale change.

Early middle management research focused on middle managers as implementers of corporate strategy who largely play a support role, receiving plans from top managers, and translating these initiatives to the lower level units (Bourgeois & Brodwin, 1984; Guth & McMillan, 1986; Hrebiniak & Joyce, 1984). Studies in this area highlighted the tools that middle managers *should* use to implement strategy; the prescribed use of operational objectives, structure, and control designs for achieving implementation. A second area of middle management research focused on the need for middle managers to be involved in the formulation of organizational strategy (Burgelman, 1983; Mintzberg & McHugh, 1985; Westley, 1990). Dutton et al. (1997) suggest that middle managers engage in "issue selling" to get top management's attention. Floyd and Wooldridge (1992, 1997) and Floyd and Lane (2000) focused on the upward influence of middle manager ideas, information, experiments, and innovations within an organization's ongoing strategic renewal. More recently, several researchers observed middle managers playing important roles during overall organizational transformation (Huy, 2002), organizational restructuring (Balogun, 2003; Balogun & Johnson, 2004), strategy shifts (Rouleau, 2005), or structural role redefinitions (Currie & Procter, 2005). In these studies, middle managers were not the initiators, but rather the recipients of change initiatives articulated from elsewhere in the organization.

Our review of the middle management literature produced few articles focused on the middle managers as sensegiver, and none about attention to the everyday nature of middle management sensegiving. Yet the middle managers we interviewed did not talk about trying to influence the formulation of strategy or implementing radical strategic or structural changes in the firm. Rather, located at the operational core of the firm, they were intensely involved in the day-to-day activities required to implement goals and strategy provided from their corporate headquarters. However, far from the instrumental nature of most prescriptions of what middle managers should do to effectively implement strategy, we instead heard much more about the interpersonal, relational, and symbolic aspects of their roles. On reflection, as we heard middle managers talk about what they did and what they thought was important, we heard stories about their values, how they tried to reinforce those values in the plant, and how they went about shaping employees' perceptions of the organization. While we undertook this study to

observe the general attributes and mindsets of successful plant managers, the findings that emerged from our study pointed us in the direction of the everyday sensegiving activities and values of middle managers.

## **Method**

This study began as a descriptive study of the characteristics and traits of successful plant managers. What emerged from interviews and visits to 11 manufacturing plants was a consistent story about how these successful plant managers make continuous and deliberate attempts to share their values and shape how employees understand and internalize the plant's values. Using an inductive approach, we interviewed successful managers associated with high-performing organizational subunits within large corporate enterprises. The managers who participated in our study oversaw manufacturing plants that had won prestigious external awards from recognized institutions, or were identified by managers of award-winning plants as being exceptionally talented plant managers with strong operational outcomes. All managers in our study had at least one set of operating managers, and in most cases at least two levels of managers (i.e., functional and production shift managers), between the manager who was interviewed and shop floor workers.

## **Research Sites**

We identified an initial group of managers and their award-winning plants based on visible awards such as the Baldrige, *Industry Week* Best/Top Plants annual lists, and Shingo Prize winners. We reduced this list to include only those award-winning plants located close to our university. We sent each plant manager an introductory letter inviting him or her to participate in our study and indicating our interest in learning more about how they manage their plant. For any plant participating in the study we offered a reduced rate on executive education at our university for one manager per plant. In follow-up phone calls, we received agreements to participate from several plant managers. We used a sampling approach to create a purposeful sample of information-rich cases that "manifest the phenomenon of interest" (Patton, 2002, p. 243). Additionally, we used a "snowball/chain sampling" approach (Patton, 2002) to solicit informed peer judgments of plant managers with outstanding reputations for plant excellence, but who may not yet have won an award.

As shown in Table 1, our final set of 11 cases included 7 managers from award-winning plants, and 4 managers nominated by the award winners. The plants in our study ranged in size from 50 to 2,500 employees with an average of 742. Table 1 also presents the products made in these plants, age ranges of the plant managers, and length of tenure of plant managers. Two of the four plants recommended for study (not award winners) were the smallest two plants in the study, but we found no differences between these two plants and the award-winning plant managers in their efforts to reinforce key values through everyday sensegiving. Thus, we felt comfortable drawing conclusions based on the interviews of nominated as well as award-winning plant managers.



**Table 1.** Case Descriptions

Case	Award Won or Who Recommended Plant	Number of Plant Employees	Products Made	Plant Age: Older than 1995?	Union	Plant Manager: Age Range (Years)	Plant Manager: Years as Plant Manager
1	<i>Industry Week</i> best plant; <i>Industry Week</i> top 50 plant	1,200	Computers	No	No	40-49	3
2	Suggested by award-winning manager and Lean Institute Director	50	Auto parts supplier	No	No	50-59	15+
3	Suggested by and worked for award-winning manager (#4)	700	Doors and windows	Yes	No	40-49	7
4	<i>Industry Week</i> finalist for best plant award 2003, 2005, 2006	2500	Cooking products: ranges, ovens, cooktops	Yes	No	40-49	13
5	<i>Industry Week</i> best plant	524	Contract manufacturer	No	No	40-49	2.5
6	Recommended by Lean Institute	600	Air-conditioning units	No	No	30-39	8
7	Director (research university) Shingo Prize in 2004	700	Mufflers, converters, exhaust systems	Yes	Yes	40-49	5
8	Suggest by award-winning manager	68	Thermo glue sticks/hot-melt adhesive	Yes	No	50-59	9
9	<i>Industry Week</i> best plant winner	976	Coated paper, pulp	Yes	Yes	50-59	25
10	Shingo Prize in 1996, 2007 State of Kentucky Environmental Leader	440	Auto parts supplier	Yes	No	40-49	4
11	<i>Industry Week</i> Top 10 in 2005	405	Electrical outlet and conduit boxes	Yes	Yes	50-59	21

## **Data Collection**

We began our research by reviewing pertinent literature to determine if there were comprehensive studies of the behavioral styles of plant managers. Finding none, we did not enter the research with any expectations of features of successful plant managers. We created a list of general interview questions to elicit insights and descriptions about how these managers operate and think about their work. Our questions were broad and included inquiries such as the following: How do you spend your day? What do you think are characteristics of excellent plant managers? What is your greatest current challenge?

We used on-site, in-depth interviews with each manager to collect most of the data for our study. Each interview began with questions about what distinguishes an average from an exceptional plant manager, and we used many probes (some scripted, most probes were in relation to managers' comments) to elicit responses. We promised all managers anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. We also conducted in-depth interviews with at least one direct support subordinate. These subordinate interviews were transcribed and reviewed for this project and were used to corroborate our findings from the plant managers. We reviewed these subordinate interview transcripts again during the final model creation to make sure our findings involving the plant managers were consistent with the views expressed by the direct reports.

In addition to data collection from multisource interviews, we also used data from direct observations of the manufacturing site and manager meetings. In the majority of visits, the plant manager provided a tour of the facility to the researchers. Interviews were recorded and lasted from 45 to 115 minutes. Within 48 hours of returning from the site visit, the interviewers created a verbatim transcription of the interviews. Immediately following each interview, each interviewer wrote a brief description of impressions of the manager, how the manager acted during the plant tour and meeting, and other meaningful or surprising aspects of the visit. These field notes provided another set of data for the study. This process resulted in more than 150 pages of single-spaced transcribed text.

## **Data Analysis**

In analyzing our data, we adhered closely to the guidelines for naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and constant comparison techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These approaches enable rigorous collection and analysis of qualitative data (Corley & Gioia, 2004) and provide the basis for clearly identifying themes and aggregate dimensions by examining ideas discussed by informants (Nag, Corley, & Gioia, 2007).

In the first phase of our analysis, we read the transcripts from each interview, looking for initial organizing ideas. As we read and reread the transcripts, we also reviewed our field notes from the plant visits, trying to disregard the interview questions so that we could 'hear' what the informants said. Each researcher reflected on the larger thoughts presented in the data and identified initial themes. After much discussion and comparisons of our initial themes, we agreed on five major themes: perceived features of



an effective plant manager, actual management style, mentoring issues, character/values, and personal challenges. Once we agreed on the five broad themes, two team members independently coded each transcript using the five themes. That is, the coders read each sentence of each transcript and assigned it to one of the five themes. To assure confidence in the assignment of sentences to categories, we assessed the degree of agreement between the two coders. Overall agreement was strong (76% agreement). In those instances where there were disagreements we reviewed the coding to see why some sentences were not coded the same way. Usually we discovered that it had to do with coding style (e.g., identifying different focal themes in sentences containing multiple themes) rather than comprehension of the codes. In each case we discussed and modified the coding scheme until agreement was achieved.

To systematize the data coding, we used QDA software that enabled us to not only record each sentence by theme but also cross-reference each sentence later. We then constructed a file for each of the five major themes, consisting of the quotes assigned to that theme by the coders. These became our theme files, which were the focus of our subsequent analysis.

Three of the five theme files contained both the greatest number of quotes and seemed to us to be the most interesting. For that reason we narrowed our analysis to a more detailed analysis of those files: *perceived features of an effective plant manager*, *actual managerial style*, and *character/values*. The remaining analysis focused on these three theme files. We undertook a second round of coding, looking for subthemes within these large theme files. For example, within the theme file labeled "actual managerial style" we identified 11 subthemes such as team interaction, strong manager beliefs, interactions with shop floor workers, and goal setting. Within the theme file labeled "perceived features of an effective plant manager" we identified five subthemes of vision, character, process, team, and execution. Finally, within the "character/values" file, we identified four subthemes of values, symbolic actions, community, and survival. Two coders then went back through each of the three large theme files, and independently coded the sentences within that file using the subtheme lists.

In the final phase of our analysis we looked for similarities across the 20 subthemes. As we looked across the theme files, and also went back to the transcripts, we saw a similar pattern in the values and beliefs of all 11 plant managers; we observed similarities, not only in their actions, but in the language used to describe and explain their actions. We identified similar coded segments in the three theme files that addressed their core values. They all talked about valuing people, openness, being positive, and the majority of plant managers expressed the value of being part of a community. We also observed similarities in how much plant manager attention was devoted to regular interactions with plant workers in an attempt to shape workers' perceptions about the plant. As is a natural step in qualitative research, we at this point stepped back from the data and attempted to form a larger meaning of what was going on in these plants (Creswell, 2007). We began to look for explanatory theoretical frameworks, using what Langley (1999) describes as an "alternate templates" approach. As we searched for theoretical connections (Eisenhardt, 1989), it became clear that our findings resonated with insights from the

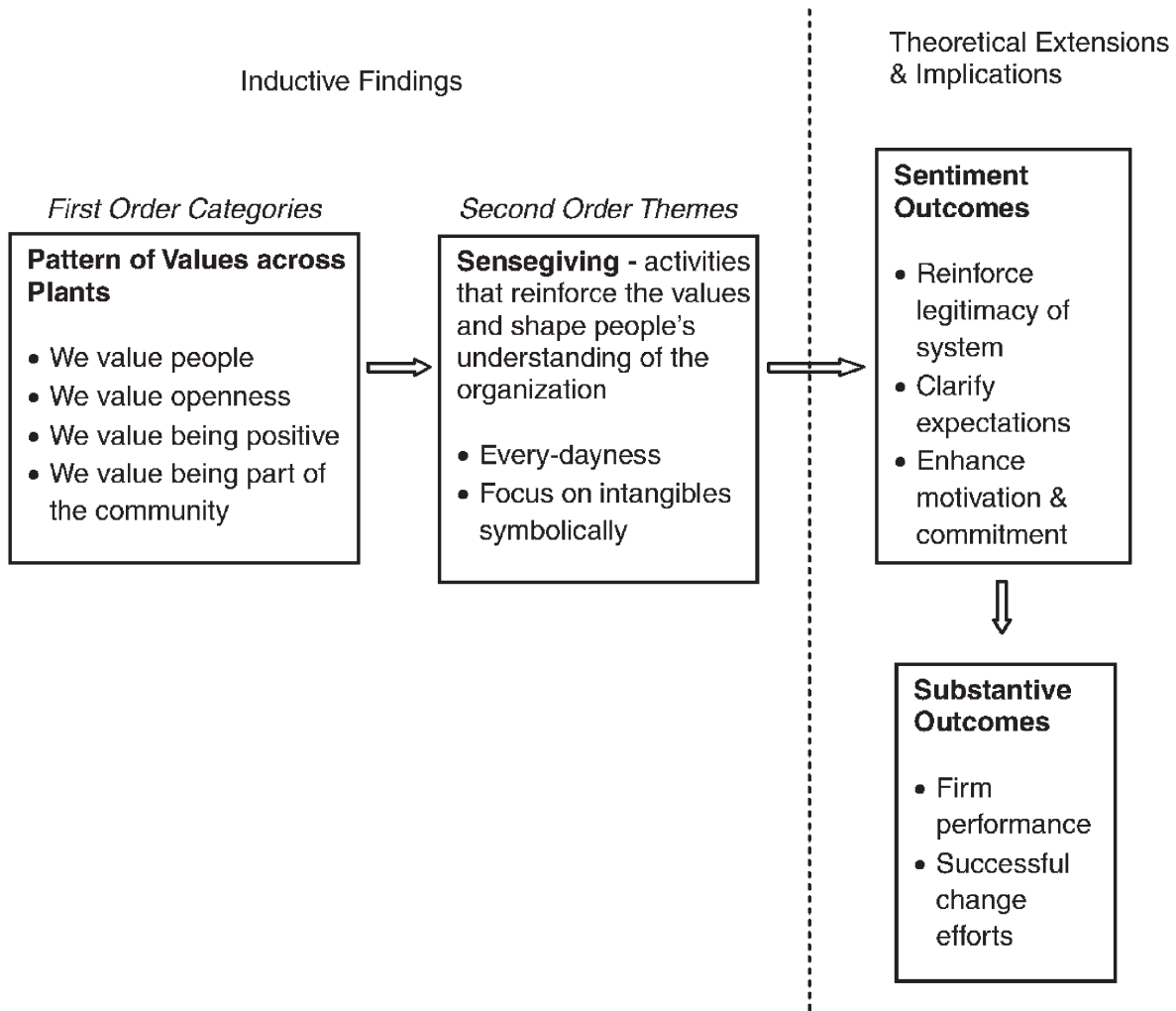


Figure 1. Data structure and theoretical extensions

sensegiving literature. We then linked these observations of high-reputation leaders to theories of sensegiving (by the plant manager).

Finally, because all the plant managers in our study were high-reputation plant managers, we looked for theoretical explanations for why sensegiving, through reinforcement of values, might affect not only firm performance but change efforts as well. In returning to the literature we found the theoretical frameworks that Hardy (1985) and Pfeffer (1981) use to explain how managers influence others to achieve organizational outcomes to be particularly useful for extending the theory from our study and explaining possible implications. We included those summary ideas in our model in Figure 1.

### A Pattern of Values

Throughout all 11 manufacturing plants, we heard plant managers repeatedly describe 4 core values that they try every day to communicate in order to shape how em-

ployees think and feel about their work and about the organization. The plant managers spoke repeatedly about their focus on values for *people, openness, being positive, and being part of a community*. Moreover, the managers employed both direct action and symbols to reinforce these values (Bolman & Deal, 2003), thus managing impressions (Elsbach, 1994) and shaping attitudes (Pfeffer, 1981). Thus, we organized our findings around these four values.

### **We Value People**

Each plant manager in our study spoke extensively of his or her efforts to communicate the message that “people matter here.” For example, the plant manager of Case 2 described the need to know the people he worked with—not just their skills but “their personal lives, their wives and children.” Plant managers also described how they wanted plant workers to get to “know who I am” (Case 7) and “what I’m all about” (Case 11). Tellingly, the term *family* was used by 6 of the 11 managers (Cases 1,2,3, 5, 7, and 9) in reference to the workers in their plant, reflecting the personal nature of their relationship with plant workers. One manager described that this was “our home away from home.”

Valuing and respecting workers included a sincere caring for a worker’s growth. Plant managers in Cases 3, 4, 6, 8, and 11 described mentoring workers and caring for their workers’ development, as seen in their comments on Table 2. The plant manager of Case 6 stated, “The people on the shop floor realize they didn’t come to work with their hands. They came with their minds.”

Repeatedly, we heard stories of attention to the shift workers’ needs, reminding workers that they are valued and that they are worth the company’s investment. Several managers described attention to plant conditions such as bathroom cleanliness and fountain water quality. The plant manager in Case 11 described the importance of clean eating areas and restocking the vending machines more than once a day.

When I’m walking around, I’m also looking at the cafeterias. Are they clean? Are they stocked? Because that’s always a problem. Generally most companies will stock their machines once a day, and it’s got to cover 24 hours. If the midnight shift is always out of donuts or always out of Mountain Dew, you’re going to have a lot of unhappy people.

The plant manager of Case 3 told us he sends birthday cards with personal notes to all 750 people in his plant and said, “I try to never just sign my name. I always try to put some little comment, something I know about them or something funny.” Some plant managers described using small rewards for jobs well done such as free movie tickets (Case 5), ballgame tickets (Case 7), and t-shirts (Case 8). Repeatedly, we heard stories of attention to the shift workers’ needs, reminding workers that they are valued and that they are worth the company’s investment. Comments about valuing their people dominated the interviews. More illustrative quotes can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Illustrative Quotes by Core Value

Core Value	Illustrative Quotes
We value people	<p>[Employee] concerns ranged from very minor situations in the plant, little nit-picking complaints. We wrote them all down, and responded to all of them. For example, [they said] the water fountains don't have good water ... So we asked, "Why is that?" We investigated, trying to figure out why. So now they can take tap water and make it purified. It's the same as bottled water. People are happy, and it cost nothing. (Case 11)</p> <p>Once a month I have a lunch with employees, usually a group of 15-20 off each shift, and I don't have an agenda. I pretty much start the thing. But the purpose of the meeting is first of all to know who I am, and just answer whatever questions those people have. (Case 7)</p> <p>Walk up and look them in the eye, pat them on the back ... We have one guy out here that holds the ... state record in bowling. It's interesting, the people you run into ... I like that kind of interaction-straight and informal. (Case 3)</p> <p>It's hard to satisfy people when it's 90-something degrees and the plant is 110. But yet, we try to do what we can. For example, we have free water in the canteen areas and free Squencher, which is a Gatorade kind of thing. All that kind of stuff. First thing we do is try to make it as comfortable as possible. (Case 7)</p> <p>People who really have a sincere interest in my career whether it was with that company or with another company and you can tell the difference pretty quick. You know, whether someone is trying to develop you just to help their team or whether they are really interested in developing you where you can be successful in any organization. Now, I've had several people that were very much that way with me ... and subsequently, I mean, I try to be that way with those that I mentor here and previous jobs. (Case 4)</p> <p>As I said, the, having a small plant allows you to, uh, know everyone that is in the plant alright, ... it is also gives me an opportunity to teach, ok, um, I enjoy that aspect as well, ok. My responsibility, I view my responsibility as uh to work myself out of the job, ok. I should develop the people around me to the point where I am looking for something to do as opposed to being the one who is doing it. (Case 8)</p>
We value openness	<p>One of things I always try to do is to carry a little notebook. So, if I'm on the floor and somebody comes up and asks a question, I write it down. I come back in a week [and follow up]. (Case 10)</p> <p>Sometimes people if they think long enough, they may not like your ideas. Let them know that they have a responsibility to tell their ... point of, you know, I'm not talking about fist fighting. I'm talking about getting at some emotion at what you believe in. Otherwise you're gonna have quite a bit of problems. (Case 9)</p> <p>Every employee regardless of level in the organization can push back, can make suggestions, can question why we are doing something we are doing whether it is an initiative or any type of change at all. Everyone has a say so in it ... I would be foolish and arrogant to think that I have all the answers it takes to run a plant this size. (Case 5)</p> <p>When I say touching the people, I'm talking about the hourly person that's out on the shop floor, but when I'm talking about my direct reports, I'm talking about the staff and leadership of the plant. If either just want a nod that they're heading in the right direction, my approval or buy in, and that right there is the biggest part of my time. That right there is the biggest part. (Case 6)</p> <p>You go out there and talk to them on the same level, don't go out there with this mindset, oh I am the GM and they are going to listen to me, they are going to get out of the way, what I say goes ... they will smell that a mile away. (Case 5)</p>

*(continued)*

**Table 2. (continued)**

Core Value	Illustrative Quotes
We value being positive	<p>But, so, the first thing that I try to do everyday is get out on the floor. I had a boss. He said he has his MBA. He called it "management by walking around." (laughs) So I'll go down and walk the entire floor for a number of reasons ... So, I do as my old boss said "management by walking around" and see how the plant looks and things. See how it is. So, and then talk to people out on the floor. Say good morning to them. How's it going! What's happening! Those type of things. So that's, other than checking phone and voicemail, the first thing I try to do everyday. (Case 10)</p> <p>It's fun. You've got to have fun doing it. I can't sit and enjoy my life everyday, but at the same time if the plant manager's out there walking around, putting his head down, and moping, everybody's going to be moping and complaining. (Case 7)</p>
We value being part of a community	<p>Keep things good for people and keep things fun, and [then workers] feel good to come to work. (Case 6)</p> <p>The biggest hindrance is in an organization of this large ensuring that the communication is clear enough that there is a trust element there and that you don't have rumors flying around ... I have had to constantly be communicating with the team trying to fight the rumor that we are not shutting the plant down, you know, you would just be amazed at the rumors that go around in an organization this large and you know, there is a lot of fear when you are cutting an organization's size back like that, there is fear ... everybody wants to be part of a winning team so communicating to people how the team is going to win and how the individual will win is pretty critical. (Case 1)</p> <p>You got to be willing to be somewhere 6:30 in the morning. You got to be able to get on airplanes, you gotta be able to get up in the morning when you don't feel too good. (Case 2)</p> <p>You know, a halfway decent leader given a team that cares can do a lot of good things. (Case 5)</p> <p>If you don't ... if I don't walk through the plant and pick up trash how can I talk to somebody in the plant about not picking up! (Case 11)</p> <p>The people at this plant before I came had been through some tough times, they went through, I think I was the fourth general manager in like 2, 2 and half years, so there was this feeling, we can't get a plant leader here so they are going to shut us down, so there was a survival thing that they really cared about performance at this plant, they cared that the customers were happy, everyone says they do, but they really do down deep. (Case 5)</p> <p>[In discussing how a plant is measured], "For the community [goal], we measure that as the number of volunteer hours that people work here donate to the community and also in dollars that we raise to United Way, Habitat for Humanity, Junior Achievement. (Case 4)</p> <p>Do you understand what I'm saying? It really is about community and providing jobs and livelihood, and that's evidenced by so many [things] ... The community giving. Philanthropic activities and donations that they do. (Case 3)</p> <p>To me, Meals on Wheels an hour a month, give up a half hour of my lunch and half hour on company time, I don't know why everyone wouldn't do it. You know, 600 of us can go down here and drive. I let them use the company car so they don't have to worry about gas and things like that. (Case 7)</p>

## **We Value Openness**

All the managers in our study worked hard at being accessible to plant workers and at seeking input from their employees. We learned this from their comments, from the comments of their direct reports who we interviewed, as well as from observations while visiting the plant. All 11 plant managers described the importance of walking the plant not only to be visible but also to reach out to workers. The plant managers in Case 2 and 3 described the need for direct eye contact with workers during their daily walk through the plant. The plant manager of Case 2 described using his regular walk through the plant as a time for conversations.

I try to walk on the shop floor often and I try to do it without anyone from my direct staff or anyone from their direct staff with me. I want to go out there and have conversations with people on the shop floor. That is how I find out what is going on and what I should be worried about that I may not be hearing ... I seek push back. I seek input from other people and only then when you hear a plethora of wise voices can you make the best decision.

We heard many stories of plant managers spending time in the plants observing, making notes, and asking questions. For example, the plant manager of Case 11 told us,

Basically, you go out and pick a spot and stand there for an hour and observe. It's amazing what you see ... you see a lot. You see ways to improve, ways to get better. Observing and making notes and writing down ideas, involving the workers. They come up and ask questions and I talk to them. They're like "holy cow!"

Several plant managers used meals as an opportunity to solicit input, such as breakfasts (Cases 9 and 10), lunches (Case 7), dinners (Cases 3, 8, and 11), and ice cream snacks (Case 4). The plant managers in our study not only worked at communicating their value for the people who worked there, but they also worked hard at communicating an attitude of openness. See Table 2 for more illustrative quotes.

## **We Value Being Positive**

The plant managers in our study were keenly aware that they lived in a fishbowl, that workers observed them closely, and that what workers saw affected the mood of the plant. That is, the managers took advantage of the fact that they symbolize the organization to the workers. The plant manager of Case 1 said, "People watch every move you make and so if they see body language or anything that does not come across as positive that will definitely feed the wrong way through the organization." In 7 of the 11 plants (Cases 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, and 11), plant managers used the word "fun" at least once to describe their approach to their work, and 8 of 11 plant managers (Cases 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 10, and 11) used the word "positive" to describe the desired atmosphere in their plants. The



manager of Case 6 described the need to “keep things good for people and keep things fun, and [then workers] feel good to come to work.” Further evidence of the upbeat attitude is the robust laughter noted during the seven plant manager interviews (Cases 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, and 11).

Like the plant manager from Case 1 in the first opening quote of the article, all the plant managers described the importance of being visible in the plant to build morale and maintaining a positive mood. The Case 1 plant manager told us, “If, as a plant manager, you don’t come in every day full of energy and perceived to be in an awesome mood, that [mood] will definitely filter through the organization.”

The importance of creating a positive mood was reflected also in the comments of employees, such as the direct report from Case 3 who described his plant manager, “He gives a lot of people a lot of energy to really go and do and perform.” Plant managers from Cases 2, 6, and 9 discussed the pride in their workers. The plant manager of Case 6 described that when she is out on the floor, she talks to people about what they are doing, and “they take pride in their job and feel appreciated.” Another manager described the importance of being positive while walking the plant floor, but also of using the walk-through to acknowledge problems that have occurred, but in a way that stays focused on solutions rather than punishment.

So you got to be positive and yet with reality. If you lose business, that’s reality. And there’s no sense in saying “Oh, we didn’t know. Let’s just stay positive.” You lost them. Here’s why and let’s understand what we did wrong to lose this business so we don’t do it again.

In all 11 plants, the managers gave voice to the need for being positive, particularly in light of the stresses associated with some of the work and with maintaining plant viability. The plant managers valued being positive—not just because it made the work setting more pleasant—but because it influenced how employees understood the organizations and themselves in relation to it. The upbeat, positive nature of the plant managers was intended to be contagious. See Table 2 for more illustrative quotes.

### ***We Value Being Part of the Community***

We observed a consistent pattern in how plant managers talked about the plant’s relationship to the larger external community. That is, the plant managers worked at shaping people’s views and beliefs about the plant both inside their organization and across the organization’s boundaries. The word “community” was explicitly mentioned in 5 of the 11 manager interviews (Cases 1, 3, 4, 7, and 9) and in 4 plant manager interviews (Cases 3, 4, 5, and 9), the word “survival” surfaced as plant managers acknowledged the link between the plant’s survival and the community’s survival. Most of the plant managers viewed the plant’s success and the community’s success as tightly interconnected.<sup>3</sup> The plant manager at Case 9 told us, “In our business you can’t fail. There are no options—too many towns and people at stake.” One plant employee at Case 11 de-

scribed workers' perceptions that the plant manager worked hard to keep jobs from being shipped overseas.

People here realize [the plant manager] has done a really good job at making everybody understand that in manufacturing ... you have to fight to keep [these] jobs. You have to do everything you can to take as much cost as you can out of the products and make them as high quality as possible because there are people in China or Mexico that are willing to do these jobs at 15 cents an hour while we are paying them 12 dollars an hour. The [employees] understand that what we are doing is trying to keep this place open, to keep the doors open.

We heard stories of plant managers directly involved in community activities such as the plant manager from Case 7 who coaches Little League softball teams and paints community shelters alongside plant workers. The plant manager of Case 4 told us of plant donations to local United Way programs and Habitat for Humanity projects as well as other local community events. In addition to the plant and plant manager contributing to the community, managers described ways in which they encouraged and recognized worker involvement in community projects. The plant manager from Case 9 discussed how employee involvement in their community and charities are taken into account during performance reviews. The Case 7 plant manager told us about an employee advisory council that organized volunteer activities for workers:

There is an advisory council. They do all sorts of things. For one, they try to raise money for charity. They had a hot dog cook and bake sale right outside. It doesn't seem like much, but everybody who wanted a hotdog or not, gave something. They raised \$1000 for Hospice group here in [the community]. They got their picture made and all that stuff.

See Table 2 for more illustrative quotes.

## **Plant Manager as Sensegiver**

We began this study in an attempt to learn more about what successful plant managers think about, what they do and say. Our first-order findings show that all of these managers consistently talked about the *same* values and provided rich description of these values. Moreover, each plant manager also provided rich descriptions of how they used direct action and symbols to communicate these values to workers in the plant. We did not begin this study with a theoretical framework about values or sensegiving. However, as we listened to these plant managers, it became clear that each of them invests tremendous effort into articulating and communicating their values as a means of shaping how workers understand and experience the organization. This is precisely what sensegiving is—the leader attempting to shape the meaning of a common or shared perception (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). As we reviewed the transcripts from the perspective of everyday sensegiving two themes emerged. First, the everyday character

of these managers' sensegiving efforts was striking. Second, these manufacturing plant managers used both actions and symbols to focus their sensegiving on the intangibles (i.e., values and relationships) much more so than the tangibles of schedules, machines, and costs.

### ***Everydayness of Sensegiving***

As we reviewed the transcripts from the perspective of sensegiving, we heard the voices of plant managers who engage in sensegiving as part of their everyday work. Their sensegiving efforts could not be tied solely to singular events or large-scale changes that created uncertainty for workers. Rather, their role as sensegivers comprised a major part of what these managers talked about as critical managerial activities. Day in and day out these managers looked for opportunities to connect the organization's espoused values with enacted values. Several of them commented, as did this manager from Case 3, on the importance of relatively routine and mundane behavior such as eye contact:

Now, going through the plant, eye contact with someone I may only see once a month, but if I make eye contact with them and acknowledge them, that motivates that person. I may not get to speak a word to them, but it's the acknowledgement that I see you, especially if you know their name, that motivates from my level to the people in the plant.

The stories we have reported are about things such as daily walks in the plant, regular meals with workers, attention to vending machines for the third shift, providing a new water fountain or better coolers. All these actions are ways to reinforce the core values we heard these managers describe.

The day-to-day nature of these efforts by plant managers resonate with some of the themes in the emerging literature on an activity-based view of strategy and strategizing (Johnson & Huff, 1998; Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003; Rouleau, 2005; Whittington, 2006). Scholars from this activity-based perspective have called for bringing the human being back into strategy research. Middle managers, such as the plant managers in our study, are the ones typically responsible for carrying out the tactics of the firm's strategy: They are the strategy practitioner. As Jarzabkowski, Balogun, and Seidl (2007) note, "in order to understand human agency in the construction and enactment of strategy it is necessary to re-focus research on the actions and interactions of the strategy practitioner" (p. 6). Viewing the plant managers in our study as middle managers charged with implementing the firm's strategy, we have put the human being back into strategy implementation.

### ***Focusing on Intangibles Symbolically***

As we reviewed the transcripts, we were struck not just by the everydayness of these manager's sensegiving efforts but also by how they focused on the intangibles (values

and relationships) using both actions and what we came to see as symbolic behavior. Sometimes the plant managers described their own behaviors as symbolic and at other times we inferred the use of symbols from their actions. By symbolic, we mean an action that stands for something else; it conveys a meaning beyond the obvious function alone (Morgan et al., 1983; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Actions and behaviors contain both functional and symbolic meaning (Zott & Huy, 2007) and the managers all recognized the utility and power of symbols. For example, a plant manager who sits down in the cafeteria with workers and asks questions about what's going on, acquires information that may be useful for problem solving. However, the manager's behavior also conveys symbolic messages: the workers are worth talking to, they are valued, and cultivating a relationship with them is worthwhile.

The plant manager from Case 7 described establishing a rumor box because of the negative impact rumors could have on the organization. The rumor box is a tangible sign that rumors are often false and can be a detriment to morale if not addressed. Employing a rumor box also symbolically reinforces the values of openness (we are open to feedback) and being positive (we want to solve problems).

The plant manager from Case 11 described the symbolic value of going home with a dirty button-down shirt because it reinforces the value of being positive (i.e., we solve problems on the spot).

You see the problem, you fix it. Don't pass it off on somebody else, and so we do that. I try not to ruin my clothes. My wife gets really mad because I get grease on them. She said, "I thought you were the plant manager?" I say, "That's true but I get my hands dirty every now and then." But basically it's what we try to do is you see a problem, don't push it off.

In addition to the managers directly speaking to the value of symbols in helping to "make sense" of the organization, we were able to infer the prominence of symbols in many of their words and deeds. For example, as the plant manager from Case 8 explained, if the plant prioritized safety (which most of our plant managers stated was the top goal), the managers always wore a hard hat or safety goggles when walking the plant floor. The plant manager from Case 11 provided two examples of symbolic behavior. If the plant wanted workers to share responsibility for keeping the plant clean, this plant manager picked up trash as they walked the plant. As well, he described his habit of taking pictures of things in the plant that needed to be addressed and then using the pictures in a humorous way to make a point to workers.

I'm called the camera-Nazi. I take my digital camera and I go out into the plant and take some pictures. I put them on PowerPoint and put notes on there or sarcastic comments about areas of the plant that need to be cleaned up, and send the file out and let people look at it. And of course, they will print them off and take them out to the plant and say, "Look what Herb saw. (laughs) Get this cleaned up." (laughs)

In summary these successful plant managers shared four core values: for-people, openness, being positive, and being part of a community. As they described their roles as managers, a dominant theme was the importance they all gave to activities and symbols that reinforced these values and shaped workers' understanding of the organization. Pratt and Rafaeli (2001) argue that symbols are a nonverbal language for enacting and maintaining relationships between individuals and organizations and that symbols can be used to reveal similarity between the actor and the target audience. This argument underscores some of our findings in this study as we repeatedly observed managers' values and symbolic expressions of those values to shape how workers saw themselves and their relationship to the organization. Pratt and Rafaeli (2001: 103) noted that actors often "use symbols to construct a cognitive frame that will guide how others interpret and guide the actor, the situation and the relationship involved." The managers in our study did this in a multitude of ways, everyday, in an attempt to help connect espoused values with enacted values.

## Discussion

We found the plant managers in this study actively engaged in shaping how their employees viewed the organization through what we call "everyday sensegiving." Moreover, the managers did not focus their attention on the tangibles such as plans, costs, and processes. Rather, they focused on values, an intangible, and every one of them focused on the same four values: valuing people, valuing openness, valuing being positive, and valuing being part of a larger community. Each of the eleven managers also relied on multiple media by employing words, actions, and symbols. Although the plants in our study all experienced outstanding performance, our data do not allow us to directly connect ongoing sensegiving activities to plant performance. However, we offer some theoretical extensions for how such sensegiving efforts might positively impact both *firm performance* and subsequent *change efforts*.

### **Sensegiving and Firm Performance**

The intentional efforts by these plant managers to reinforce core values through sensegiving seemed to contribute greatly to work climates in the plants where the workers had positive feelings about the organization. This positive sentiment can then be used to open pathways to legitimize the manager and the organization, to enhance motivation and commitment of workers and to clarify expectations. Pfeffer (1981) describes two types of outcomes that managers seek: substantive, which have to do with decisions and resource allocations; and symbolic, which have to do with attitudes, sentiments, perceptions. Similarly, Hardy (1985) describes these two types of outcomes as *substantive* and *sentiment*, and argues that achieving sentiment outcomes matters because positive sentiments improve the chances of achieving desired substantive outcomes. That is, positive sentiment makes it more likely that substantive outcomes will occur. For example, when the manager engages in activities that reinforce the value "people matter



here," workers are more likely to experience positive sentiments and feelings of trust, respect for authority, and commitment to the organization.

Pfeffer (1981) argues, "it is the symbolic identification with organization or decisions, as much as real choice and participation, that produces commitment and action" (p. 207). Hardy (1985) describes this as a kind of unobtrusive power where the manager attempts to "achieve substantive outcomes by influencing sentiments such that outcomes are deemed legitimate, inevitable or acceptable" (p. 390). Thus, workers achieve the desired substantive outcomes because they want to, because they agree, because they share the same sentiments with others about the organization. In the end, firm performance is measured by the achievement of substantive outcomes. Yet because goal achievement is a widely used metric for assessing firm performance, simply getting people to understand and accept organizational goals in the first place enhances goal achievement. The more people understand the organization's goals and agree about them, the more they view proposed actions and policies as legitimate, the more committed they are to the organization; the less likely they are to oppose the organization's goals (Pfeffer, 1981). When workers have positive feelings about the organization, that is, when sentiment is positive, workers are more likely to see the system as legitimate, to understand what is expected of them, and be motivated and committed to do what is expected of them. In this way, sentiment outcomes can enhance substantive outcomes, that is, firm performance can be enhanced.

### ***Sensegiving and Change Efforts***

The same logic can inform how we think about change efforts: ensuring sentiment outcomes improves the chances of achieving substantive outcomes. A number of scholars have argued that successful strategic change requires attention to the intangible such as symbolic acts through which "change processes are galvanized" (Johnson, 1990, p. 189). Higgins and McAllaster (2004) and Higgins, McAllaster, Certo, and Gilbert (2006) argue that cultural artifacts, such as values and symbols, play a major role in executing strategic change. Similarly, Brooks (1996) observed that successful change agents employ the cultural tools of symbolism to help bring about change. From our study, we see plant managers who pay a great deal of attention to reinforcing organizational values and creating positive sentiment, which in turn will make it easier for the manager to introduce change when needed, something Bartunek et al. (2006) showed in their hospital study. Thus, the more change agents and change recipients share consistent meanings regarding a change initiative, the more likely the initiative will be successful. This notion is consistent with the work of scholars such as Brown (1994), Brooks (1996), and others, who argue that leaders who bring about transformation have to focus on both attitudes and behaviors. When managers engage in everyday sensegiving to reinforce values and shape employees' perception of the organization, they are focusing on the alignment between worker and organization, a condition likely to enhance the success of change efforts.

The findings from our study offer insights into how to bring about organizational change and are consistent with the components identified in the Burke and Litwin (1992) model of organizational performance and change, which distinguished between transfor-



mational and transactional dynamics in organizational change. According to their model when organizations need major or episodic change (Weick & Quinn, 1999), change agents use the transformational subsystems of leadership, mission, and organizational culture. On the other hand, when organizations need only continuous (Weick & Quinn, 1999) or more minor change, the change agents should rely on the transactional subsystems of management practices, structure, work unit climate, and individual needs and values. The everyday sensegiving practices of the plant managers in our study could be viewed as attending to the transactional subsystems of these plants. However, we also suggest that the constant attention to reinforcing values and shaping climate will ultimately enable these plant managers to prepare the ground and thus more easily overcome resistance to major (transformational) changes. They are every day shaping a positive culture of trust and openness. Rouleau (2005), for example, showed how daily routines and conversations can be useful for creating meaning and purpose at the beginning of a strategic change.

The core values that emerged from our study of valuing people, openness, and being positive, influence all of the well-known phases of major change processes (Lewin, 1951). If workers feel valued, feel that management is approachable, and that there is a positive sentiment in the plant, unfreezing may be less threatening to workers because they are led by managers who engage in daily sensegiving. Also, achieving positive sentiment in the plant may well make experimentation with change more rational, more acceptable, and thereby enable workers to be open to the outcomes of the experiment as well as necessary refreezing actions.

### **Limitations**

This study is not without limitations. Although we believe that a qualitative approach (e.g., we relied on in-depth interviews from plant managers of 11 different manufacturing plants) is important for extending and developing theory on middle management sensegiving, we recognize the limitations of this approach. We relied heavily on what plant managers told us they believe in and value as well as what they said they did. We do not have extensive data from plant workers about how the managers' actions are understood throughout the plant. Rather, our data show how the plant manager thinks about his or her role; we provide a glimpse into how the managers make sense of the sensegiving that is required in manufacturing organizations. To attenuate some of the limitations of relying heavily on the plant managers' interviews, we also use data from interviews with the plant managers' direct reports and supplemented with observations from our tours of the plants and from watching these plant managers conduct meetings.

A second limitation minimizes the degree to which we can discuss the symbolism inherent in much of the activity we heard about or observed. We feel confident that many of the plant managers' actions in reinforcing core values were intended to be symbolic, but because we did not interview plant workers we cannot conclude what meaning workers derived from the actions. Further research should examine both the sensegivers' intentions and the sensemakers' understandings. A further limitation of our research is the possible bias introduced by reliance on North American plants in a partic-

ular area of the Southeast, and the fact that 10 of the 11 managers were white males. It could well be that wider geographic representation and more diversity of gender and ethnicity could have produced different results in how managers manage meaning.

## **Conclusion**

Managing meaning through values, symbols, and other cultural artifacts has long been described as a role that managers play, with only minimal empirical evidence to indicate how exactly this happens. Managing meaning, in part, means shaping organizational members' values, and it means shaping how members view the organization. The managers in our study articulated the same set of core values and seemed to look continuously for opportunities to connect their espoused values to enacted values. Although they did not use the term sensegiving, *everyday* sensegiving was a dominant theme in how they understood their role. Their voices communicated their values as well as the numerous daily activities they engaged in to continuously shape people's experience at work. Our findings echo Tom Peters' description of the manager's job:

Executives, after all, do not synthesize chemicals or operate lift trucks; they deal in symbols. And their overt verbal communications are only part of the story. Consciously or unconsciously, the senior executive is constantly acting out the vision and goals he is trying to realize in an organization that is typically far too vast and complex for him to control directly. (Peters, 1978, p. 10)

We believe this study offers new insights into how this happens.

## **Notes**

1. Seven of the 11 manufacturing plants in this study had received or been nominated for performance awards such as the Baldrige Award, Shingo Prize, or *Industry Week* annual best plant award.
2. We follow the approach used by Nag et al. (2007) in organizing our introduction and conceptual background around the theoretical concepts that emerged from our study. Although the traditional grounded theory approach to research calls for the discussion of the theory to follow a rather lengthy description of the findings, we agree with Nag et al. that clarity can be enhanced by reversing that order. It is important to remember, however, that the concept of everyday sensegiving is a theme that emerged from the study and was not a theory used to shape the study.
3. It may well be that the emphasis on community and the perceived interdependence between the manufacturing plant and the community is a finding that would be unique to a manufacturing setting where the plant is often established in and central to local communities.

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