

POST-INQUIRY SENSEMAKING: THE CASE OF THE BLACK SATURDAY BUSHFIRES

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

I respectfully acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation, and their Elders past and present, who are the Traditional Owners of the land on which Swinburne's Australian campuses are located.

"I was concerned that the bushfire relief and those affected may have been forgotten as we go from one headline to another"

Mike Ashley (Artist)

The Canberra Times

8 April 2020

[Image by Mike Ashley https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6716150/a-stunning-tribute-to-our-frontline-workers/](https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6716150/a-stunning-tribute-to-our-frontline-workers/)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjGS4rYK03c>

<i>Senior Managers</i>	<i>Middle Managers</i>	<i>Functional Experts</i>
Assistant Chief Officer 1	Communications Manager 1	Brigade Captain 1
Assistant Director 1	Community Education Manager 1	Community Engagement Officer 1
Deputy Chief Officer 1	Community Engagement Manager 1	Community Information Officer 1
Deputy Chief Officer 2	Community Engagement Manager 2	Fire Operations Officer 1
Director 1	Community Safety Manager 1	Fire Planning Officer 1
Director 2	Emergency Coordination Manager 1	Fire Planning Officer 2
Director 3	Operations Manager 1	Firefighter 1
Executive Director 1	Policy Manager 1	Firefighter 2
Executive Director 2	Policy Manager 2	Incident Controller 1
Regional Director 1	Project Manager 1	Incident Controller 2
Regional Director 2	Project Manager 2	Incident Controller 3
Senior Executive 1	Project Manager 3	Incident Controller 4
Senior Fire Officer 1	Project Manager 4	Logistics Officer 1
Senior Fire Officer 2	Regional Manager 1	Organizational Psychologist 1
Senior Operations Officer 1	Regional Manager 2	Project Officer 1
Senior Operations Officer 2	Regional Manager 3	Public Information Officer 1
Senior Operations Officer 3	Regional Operations Manager 1	Public Information Officer 2
State Coordinator 1	Regional Operations Manager 2	Public Information Officer 3
State Operations Officer 1	Regional Operations Manager 3	Regional Fire Operations Officer 1
Weather Services Manager 1	Regional Operations Manager 4	Regional Operations Officer 1
	Senior Policy Officer 1	Regional Operations Officer 2

Article

Post-Inquiry Sensemaking: The Case of the ‘Black Saturday’ Bushfires

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Abstract

We examine post-inquiry sensemaking by emergency management practitioners following an inquiry into the most damaging bushfire disaster in Australia’s history. We theorize a model of post-inquiry sensemaking with four distinct but overlapping phases during which sensemaking becomes more prospective over time. In addition to providing important insights into what has, hitherto, been a neglected arena for sensemaking studies, i.e. post-inquiry sensemaking, we contribute to the understanding of sensemaking more generally. Specifically, we show the complex nature of the relationship between sensemaking and equivocality, explain how multiple frames enhance sensemaking, and explore temporality in sensemaking over time.



Organization Studies

1–25

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‘I can still picture the faces’: Black Saturday firefighters want you to listen to them, not call them ‘heroes’

January 2, 2020 8:03am AEDT



Special Issue Article

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Partners



We have not lived long enough: Sensemaking and learning from bushfire in Australia

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Abstract

Organizations increasingly find themselves responding to unprecedented natural disasters that are experienced as complex, unpredictable, and harmful. We examine how organizations make sense and learn from these novel experiences by examining three Australian bushfires. We show how sensemaking and learning occurred during the public inquiries that followed these events, as well as how learning continued afterward with the help of “learning cues.” We propose a model that links public inquiry activities to changes in organizational practices. Given the interesting times in which we live, this model has important implications for future research on how new organizational practices can be enacted after public inquiries have concluded their work.

Keywords

Novelty, organizational learning, public inquiries, sensemaking

What is sensemaking?

1. Grounded in identity construction
2. Retrospective
3. Enactive of sensible environments
4. Social
5. Ongoing
6. Focussed on & by extracted cues
7. Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy

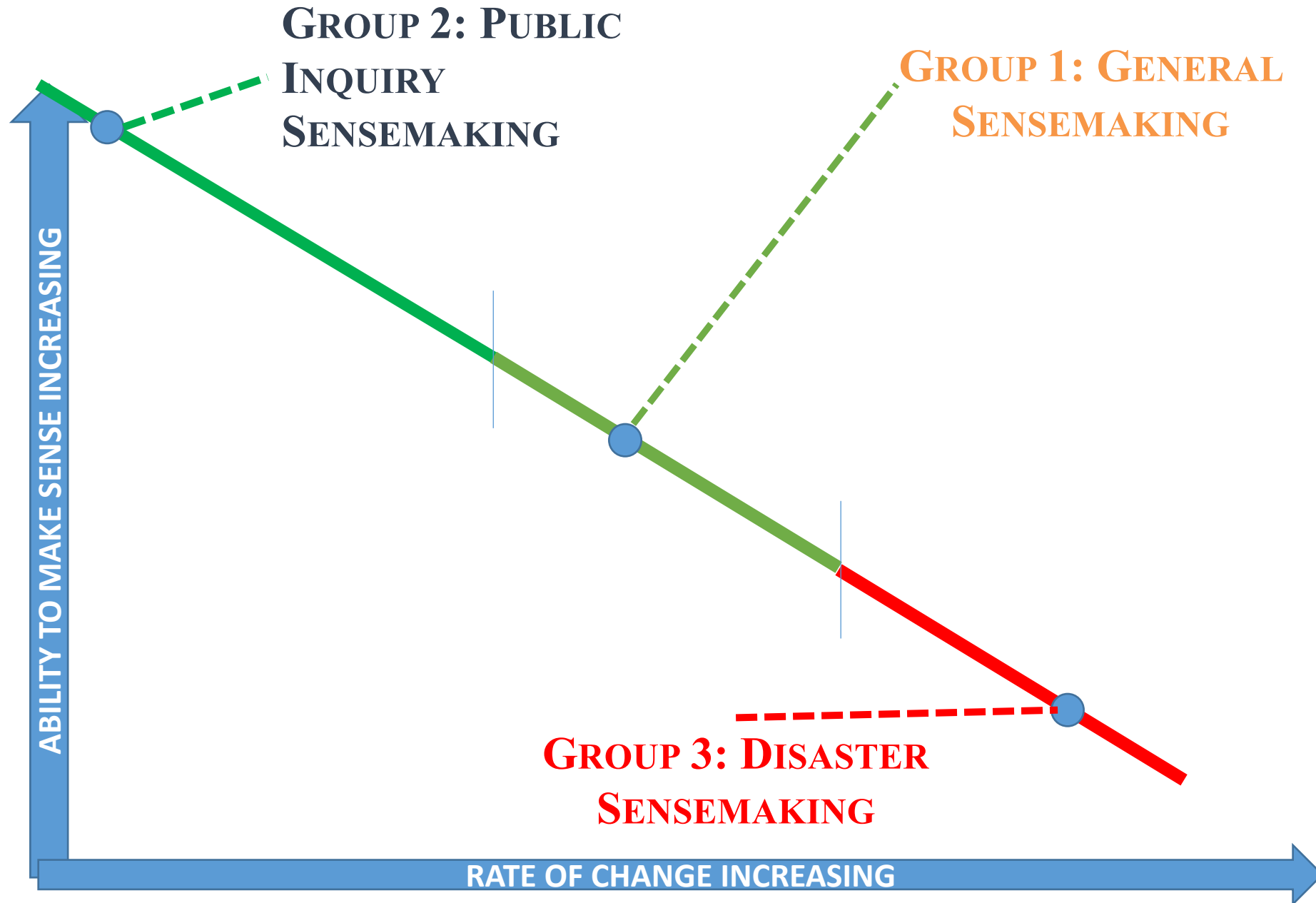


SENSING



MAKING

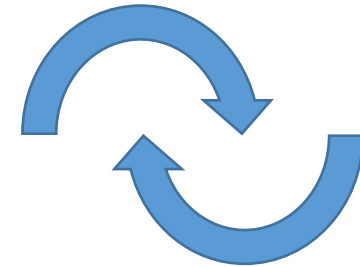
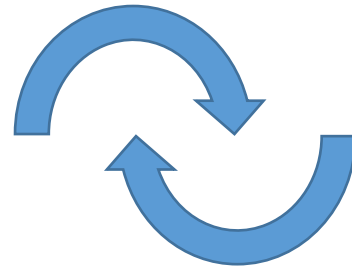
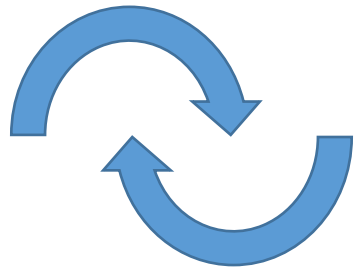
Sensemaking in research studies



SENSEMAKING
BEFORE THE EVENT

SENSEMAKING
DURING THE EVENT

SENSEMAKING
AFTER THE EVENT



Learning from rare events (post inquiries): a sensemaking perspective

1. Empirical insight into “the ongoing sensemaking that accompanies organizational action” (Boudes & Larouch, 2009: 393)
2. Clarify the nature of the relationship between sensemaking & equivocality (Deverall, 2009; Elliot & Macpherson, 2010)
3. Connect sensemaking to practice literatures (Tsoukas, 2010; Giurette & Vandenbempt, 2016)

Post Inquiry Sensemaking: Recommendation 1

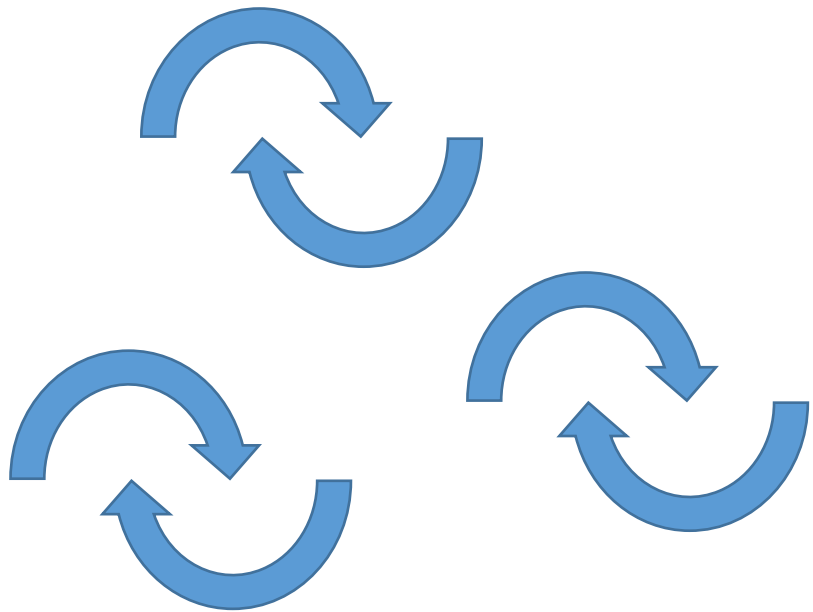
Stay or Go to ...

Leave & Live

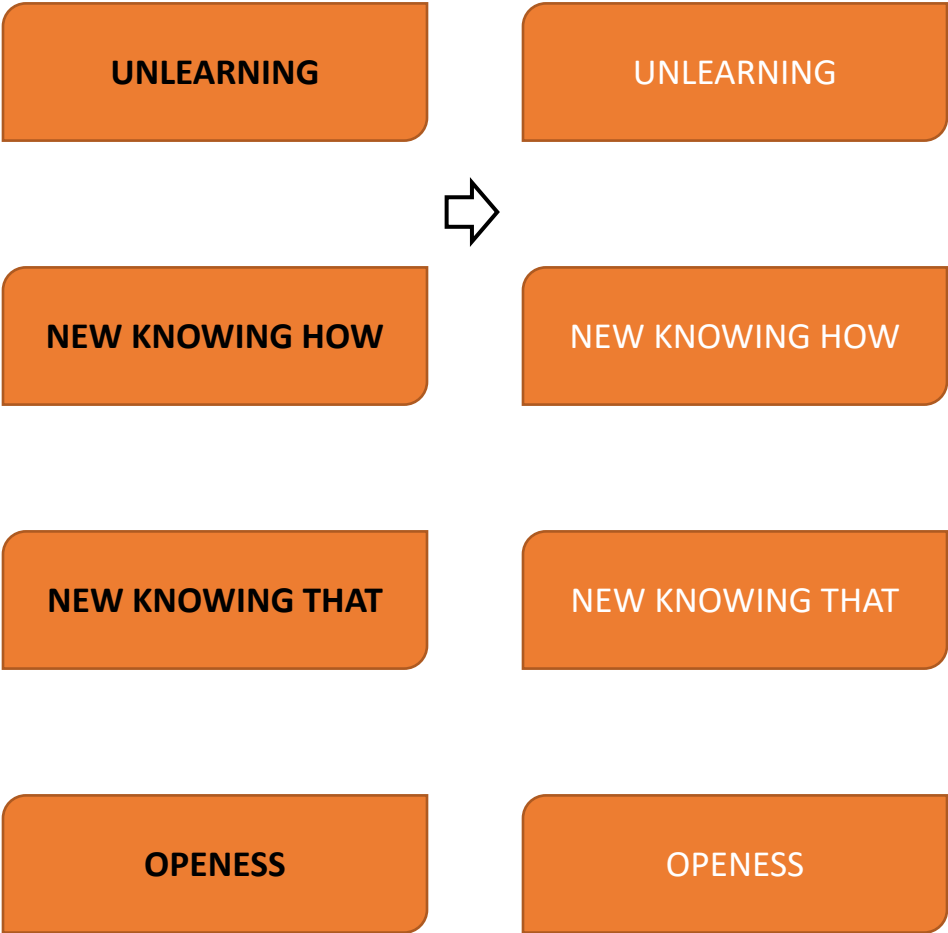
- *enhance the role of warnings – including providing for timely and informative advice about the predicted passage of a fire and the actions to be taken by people in areas potentially in its path*
- *emphasize that all fires are different in ways that require an awareness of fire conditions, local circumstances and personal capacity*
- *recognize that the heightened risk on the worst days demands a different response [...]*
- *improve advice on the nature of fire and house defendability, taking account of broader landscape risks (VBRC, Final Report: 23).*

FINDINGS

EQUIVOCALITY



POST INQUIRY SENSEMAKING



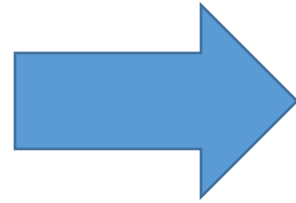
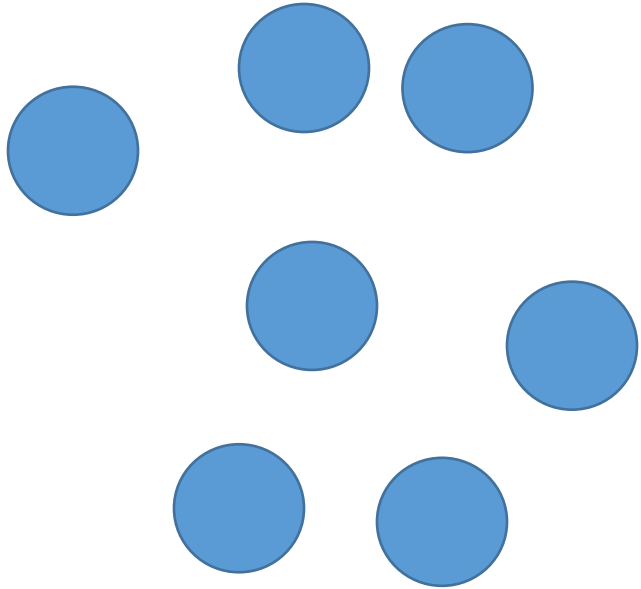
EQUIVOCALITY

For incident controllers ... there was a fear of the unknown. They didn't know what they should be communicating and what their liability was for getting messages wrong (Community Information Officer 1).

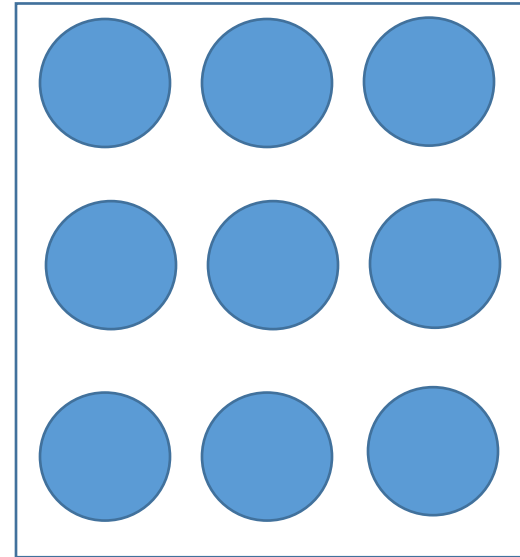
A lot of the recommendations needed sector culture change, right. A lot of things had to be were sector-wide ... [and you] had to challenge the way we did business and challenged our traditions (Deputy Chief Officer 2).

Cues & Frames

CUES



FRAMES



<p>Cues: anomalies of some kind located in talk, texts, interactions, events, experiences, and material objects that cause individuals to take note of phenomena; their initial sense (or nonsense) is subjected to further interpretation to make more organized sense of them.</p>	
<p>Cues derived from practitioners' experience of the fires (embedded in the incident)</p>	<p>I remember saying to the Minister on Black Saturday when he came into the control centre wanting to know what was happening ... He said: 'How can you not know what's happening?' I said: 'Have a look out there: you've got three phone systems, four computer systems in that room, [but] there are people who can't talk to each other in the [same] building or even in that room! Do you know that?' (Senior Fire Officer 1).</p>
<p>Cues derived from practitioners' experience of participating in the hearings (embedded in the inquiry)</p>	<p>On days like Black Saturday the emergency management arrangements get pretty complex. There was vagueness about who was in charge and it's like it didn't matter until it was put under extreme pressure Then under the extreme spotlight of the Royal Commission and suddenly it all rather looks shaky (Emergency Coordination Manager 1).</p>
<p>Cues derived from practitioners' experience of reading the final report (embedded in the inquiry)</p>	<p>What happens when you get a Royal Commission [is] there's a heap of recommendations, which we had to figure out We saw the same thing after '39 (Black Friday Fires), we saw it after 1983 (Ash Wednesday fires) and we've seen it now after Black Saturday (State Coordinator 1).</p>
<p>Cues derived from practitioners' experience of their work (embedded in implementation)</p>	<p>To some extent, the technology that they're using is still the same. I think it's very clunky and there's probably better ways of doing it.. (Community Education Manager 1).</p>
<p>Cues derived from anticipating future problems (embedded in imagination)</p>	<p>A number of people would say we were actually lucky on Black Saturday. [However], it could have been a lot worse and one day it will be, and it will happen again. It's not to say we're not stronger now than we were, but each [fire] event generates and identifies new weaknesses in our systems (State Operations Officer 1).</p>

<p>Frames: interpretive schemes, based on experience, training, socialization culture, identity that shape what people notice and what they decide requires further attention.</p>	
<p>Professional frame: drawing from expertise, training and identity as fire-fighters</p>	<p>February 7th [Black Saturday] was [an example of] some of the best fire-fighting done anywhere in the world. A massive amount of work [was done by firefighters] to prevent more damage to amenities, to protect water catchments (Deputy Chief Officer 1).</p>
<p>Forensic frame: drawing from the expertise, training and identity of lawyers, as well as the investigative process during the hearings</p>	<p>The initial sitting in the Royal Commission was about my role on that day. So, what information did we have, what warnings did we give out, what timeframe, etc. So, there was a bit of analysis of the role (Deputy Chief Officer 1).</p>
<p>Authority frame: drawing from the official identity and legal status of the Royal Commission</p>	<p>There's no doubt that the recommendations have given very clear directions and policy for Government, and they've been agreed to by Government, so that's that (Executive Director 1).</p>
<p>Organizational frame: drawing from the goals, structure, culture and identity of the organization</p>	<p>The recommendations have resulted in degrees of changing the culture, changing the thinking, changing the approach for a whole range of things that weren't ostensibly part of the recommendations per se. [Instead, this] has come out of – how can we do this better [organizationally] thinking? (Project Manager 4).</p>

Phase 1 Sensemaking: questioning (prompted unlearning)

Although it was a pretty harrowing experience, being in the Royal Commission ... Questions they were asking actually helped shape what the actual outcome would be (Senior Operations Officer 1).

I reckon the Commission was correct in that we were very operationally focused on putting the fire out at all costs and the bit that the Commission picked up on [was] about not adequately keeping the community informed, pre- and during and post the event (Regional Fire Operations Officer 1).

Phase 2 Sensemaking: new tools and technologies

E-mapping is really assisting us to ... assess what the likely threats and risks are so we're much better at the predictive side of things. We're getting on the front foot and that's really helpful (Incident Controller 4).

Since Black Saturday and the Royal Commission, we've developed some fantastic means of communicating that are forward looking. (Regional Operations Manager 4).

Phase 3 Sensemaking: new meanings of work

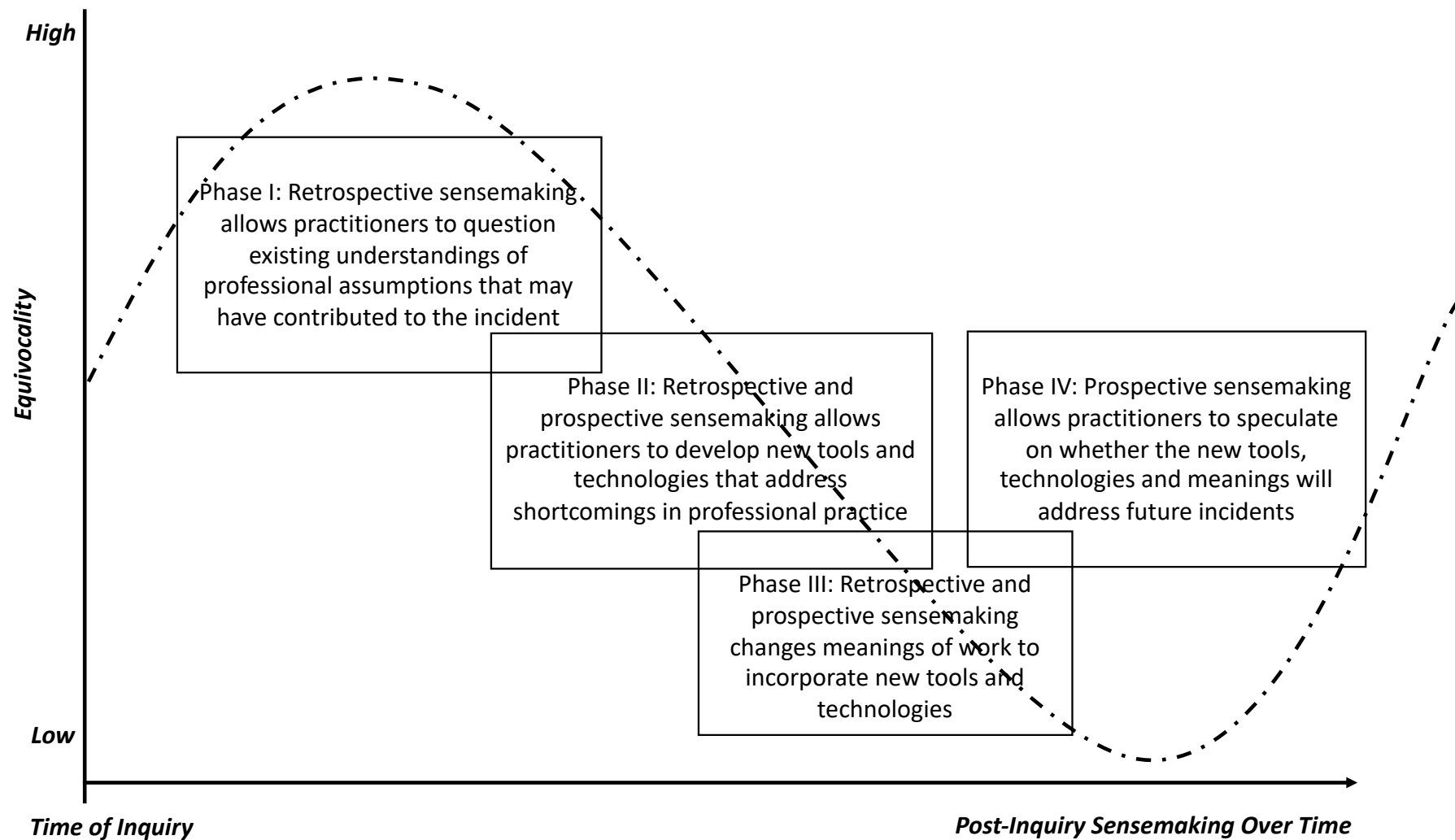
There was a time I would have said that an Incident Controller's right-hand man is his Operations Officer, now I'd say it's his Information person. In days gone by we would have put the fire out and then told the community but, now, we keep them informed (Regional Manager 3).

We had to ... literally redefine the role of community engagement within [the organization]. For the incident controllers and the operations people, the previous focus had been on suppression tactics – they were happy simply to tell the community they were putting the fire out (Community Information Officer 1).

Phase 4 Sensemaking: speculating

We've learned and there are better systems in place now for warning the public [but] I reckon if we had another Black Saturday we'd still be in a lot of trouble. (Regional Operations Manager 1).

You do wonder, will ... the change actually make a difference if we get another day like Black Saturday? I suppose the Royal Commission has left a legacy now where people are expecting more in terms of warning and that's bound to be difficult (Communications Manager 1).



----- Indicates degree of equivocality

Contributions

Shows distinctive nature of post inquiry sensemaking: Frames are available to all and are performative and move beyond individual specialisms

Resilient sensemaking can happen amongst those who are not considered 'institutional entrepreneurs' (Werner & Cornelissen, 2014)

Insight into prospective sensemaking which is embedded in cues anticipated in the future

Challenges notions of the 'future perfect' (practitioners make sense of what happened and what may happen)

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PRACTICE INSIGHTS

WILEY

Learning to learn from bushfire: Perspectives from Victorian emergency management practitioners

Graham Dwyer 



DISCUSSION