

Original Article

Coordination Without Consensus: A Process Theory of Variance Reduction in Managerial Sensegiving

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Abstract

Organizations routinely coordinate despite persistent disagreement. Sensemaking theory explains how individuals construct meaning under ambiguity but leaves underdeveloped the temporal mechanism through which individual interpretations become sufficiently aligned to enable coordinated collective action. This paper develops a mechanism-based process theory of variance reduction in managerial sensegiving, specifying how recursive cycles of sensegiving progressively reduce interpretive dispersion—the variance in interpretive frames among team members—until interpretive convergence emerges as the collective state enabling coordinated action. The framework specifies four complementary mechanisms (informational, cognitive, affective, and social-identification) through which sensegiving reduces dispersion, identifies psychological safety as a boundary condition distinguishing genuine from illusory convergence, and develops seven process propositions: three specifying the core sensegiving mechanism and four extending the model to AI-augmented contexts, where AI-generated interpretations can compete with or substitute for managerial sensegiving. This is a conceptual paper: the seven propositions are developed for future empirical testing and are not tested within this manuscript. The framework extends sensemaking theory from a theory of individual interpretation to a theory of collective adaptation, offering a testable account of why teams stop pursuing further agreement—not because

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disagreement disappears, but because sensegiving reduces interpretive variance below the level required for coordinated action. For practice, the framework redirects managerial attention from pursuing unanimous agreement to directly monitoring and reducing interpretive dispersion, prioritizing psychological safety as the condition that distinguishes genuine convergence from surface compliance.

Keywords: interpretive convergence; interpretive dispersion; psychological safety; sensegiving; sensemaking; variance reduction

1. Introduction

How do organizations coordinate effectively when their members hold fundamentally different interpretations of their situation? This question has animated organizational theory since Weick's (1979) foundational claim that organizing is the process of reducing equivocality, yet its answer remains surprisingly elusive: sensemaking theory has primarily focused on how individuals interpret ambiguity (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005), leaving underdeveloped the temporal mechanism through which individual interpretations become sufficiently aligned to enable coordinated collective action. Recent comprehensive reviews (Eckstein et al., 2025) confirm that, despite 35 years of sensemaking research, the transition from individual cognition to collective action remains undertheorized.

This gap is increasingly consequential: many organizations face significant uncertainty, in which coordinated response depends critically on shared understanding, and the cost of getting this wrong can be organizational paralysis or misdirected collective action. The rise of AI-augmented decision-making (Agarwal et al., 2026; Balasooriya & Sedera, 2026) has further complicated this landscape, introducing hybrid human-AI sensemaking processes that existing theory does not adequately address. This complication is cognitive before it is technological: people systematically discount their own judgment in favor of algorithmic output even when it is wrong, a pattern documented in automation-bias research (Parasuraman & Riley, 1997), and, even when no error is present, tend to rate algorithmic outputs as more credible than a human's, a preference Logg et al. (2019) term algorithm appreciation.

Because AI-generated interpretations carry this same perceived objectivity, they can shape how team members process and accept interpretive cues independently of, and sometimes before, any sensegiving a manager provides. AI matters for this framework specifically because it can occupy the same functional role as managerial sensegiving: generating the "common reference points" that reduce informational uncertainty (Section 3.2). Where AI-generated interpretations align with managerial

sensegiving, they may accelerate convergence; where they diverge, or where their apparent objectivity substitutes for mechanisms sensegiving alone would otherwise engage, they introduce new pathways to both faster and more fragile convergence. Sections 3.4 and 4.1.3 develop this logic through four propositions extending the core model to AI-augmented contexts.

The theory's dominant unit of analysis remains the individual cognizer. It explains how one person makes sense of a situation but stops short of specifying the temporal process through which that person's interpretation becomes a shared basis for team action. This limitation echoes a broader concern in adjacent process research (Weiser et al., 2020), which similarly finds that fragmentation across levels of analysis has limited the field's ability to explain how organizational action unfolds in practice. Although Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) introduced sensegiving as managers' attempts to influence others' sensemaking—hinting at how individual interpretation might extend beyond the self—subsequent work has acknowledged the interdependence of sensemaking and influence (Gioia et al., 1994; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020) while stopping short of specifying managerial sensegiving's theoretical role within the sensemaking framework: what it does, how it operates, and why it matters for explaining organizational outcomes. Case evidence confirms that sensemaking and sensegiving unfold as interlocking cycles in practice, with sensegiving activity concentrating among boundary-spanning middle managers rather than being evenly distributed across hierarchical levels (Alfoldi et al., 2017). Yet despite its long presence within the sensemaking literature, sensegiving has remained a secondary influence process rather than the behavioral engine through which individual interpretations become collective action.

What remains absent, after these several advances, is a temporally specified, content-based account of how interpretive convergence is achieved: the field lacks theoretical propositions that specify the recursive informational, cognitive, affective, and social-identification mechanisms through which managerial sensegiving reduces interpretive dispersion, and it lacks a boundary condition that distinguishes genuine convergence from illusory alignment.

This study advances the thesis that coordinated collective action under uncertainty emerges not by eliminating interpretive differences but by reducing them to a functional threshold, enabling teams to coordinate effectively despite persistent disagreement (Healey et al., 2015). We extend sensemaking theory from a theory of individual interpretation to a theory of collective adaptation: whereas prior research has focused on how individuals construct meaning under ambiguity (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005), we specify the temporal mechanism through which individual interpretations become sufficiently aligned to enable coordinated action. To test this, we introduce interpretive dispersion and interpretive convergence as dynamic, content-based, team-level constructs that reconceptualize coordination as variance reduction to a functional threshold rather than as the attainment of agreement. This extends the strategic consensus literature's static, agreement-based view (Kellermanns et al., 2005) and the rating-based team dispersion literature (DeRue et al., 2010; de

Jong & Dirks, 2012; Loignon et al., 2019) by specifying the temporal mechanism through which content-level dispersion is reduced, not merely documenting that teams tolerate it. We develop seven process propositions that specify the recursive informational, cognitive, affective, and social-identification mechanisms through which managerial sensegiving reduces interpretive dispersion, and we identify psychological safety as the boundary condition that determines whether this convergence is genuine or illusory. This direction is significant for the rational design of coordination processes in uncertain environments, offering a predictive basis for identifying when and how managerial influence translates individual sensemaking into collective action.

2. Methodology

2.1 Theory-Building Approach

This paper integrates sensemaking theory and process theorizing to propose that interpretive convergence emerges through recursive cycles of managerial sensegiving. Following Weick (1995), we treat interpretation as an active, ongoing process of meaning construction; we extend this perspective by drawing on process theorizing (Van de Ven, 2007; Langley, 1999; Langley et al., 2013; Pentland, 1999) to specify the temporal mechanism through which individual interpretations become collective, a mechanism that sensemaking theory alone does not provide. This integration yields a novel framework: sensemaking theory supplies the content of interpretation, process theory supplies the temporal structure of how interpretations evolve, and their integration explains how individual cognition becomes coordinated action. Rather than explaining organizational coordination through cross-sectional causal relationships, the theory specifies how coordinated action emerges over time through recursive sequences of events, mechanisms, and feedback.

The abductive logic proceeds as follows. The empirical observation that motivates this theory is that organizations coordinate despite persistent interpretive disagreement—a phenomenon existing accounts cannot fully explain. The abductive inference is that coordination under uncertainty is best explained by variance reduction to a functional threshold rather than by agreement. This inference is warranted because: (a) complete agreement is rarely observed in high-ambiguity settings; (b) managers appear to focus on creating common reference points rather than forcing unanimous agreement; and (c) teams often act decisively while acknowledging remaining disagreement. The variance-reduction account is warranted because, unlike agreement-based accounts, it explains why residual disagreement is tolerated, provides a stopping rule, and reconciles these observations with existing sensemaking theory while extending it to explain collective action.

Following Hedström and Swedberg (1998) and Hedström and Ylikoski (2010), the theory specifies the mechanisms through which interpretive dispersion is reduced, explaining not just what happens but why it happens.

2.2 Process Theorizing Framework

Process theories differ from variance (construct) theories in several important respects (Langley, 1999; Van de Ven, 2007; Kozlowski et al., 2026). Variance theories explain outcomes as functions of independent variables; they focus on which factors predict outcomes. Process theories explain how outcomes emerge through sequences of events and mechanisms; they focus on how change unfolds over time. This paper adopts the latter approach because the transition from individual sensemaking to coordinated action is inherently temporal: it unfolds through recursive cycles of communication, dialogue, and refinement that static, cross-sectional relationships cannot adequately capture.

Following Pentland (1999), the theory explains the how and why of organizational coordination under uncertainty, not merely describing stages but explaining the mechanisms through which interpretive variance is progressively reduced. Pentland (1999) emphasizes that process theories should provide narrative explanations that account for the sequence of events and the mechanisms that generate change. This paper provides such an explanation by specifying how managerial sensegiving reduces interpretive dispersion through informational, cognitive, affective, and social-identification mechanisms.

2.3 Theory Development Procedure and Search Strategy

This study follows a theory synthesis approach (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010), rather than a PRISMA-style systematic review. To enhance transparency and replicability, the literature retrieval process consisted of two complementary tracks: systematic database searching and purposive citation-based retrieval.

2.3.1 Track 1—Systematic Database Search

Because Scopus and the Web of Science Core Collection offer complementary coverage of the management and psychology literatures and support field-restricted Boolean searching, both were treated as the primary sources and searched on June 26, 2026 (search fields: Scopus TITLE-ABS-KEY; Web of Science TS). Google Scholar played only a supplementary role, checking coverage rather than anchoring the retrieval process, since it lacks equivalent field restriction and systematic deduplication; its full-text/title search was used to cross-check results rather than as an independent search field.

String 1—Core Phenomenon

Scopus: (sensemaking OR "sense-making" OR sensegiving OR "sense-giving") AND ("interpretive dispersion" OR "cognitive dispersion" OR "interpretive diversity" OR "strategic consensus" OR "shared mental model" OR "interpretive convergence") AND (organization* OR team* OR collective OR group*)

Web of Science: TS=((sensemaking OR "sense-making" OR sensegiving OR "sense-giving") AND ("interpretive dispersion" OR "cognitive dispersion" OR "interpretive diversity" OR "strategic consensus" OR "shared mental model" OR "interpretive convergence") AND (organization* OR team* OR collective OR group*))

String 2—Mechanisms

Scopus: (sensemaking OR sensegiving) AND ("social information processing" OR "categorization theory" OR "affective regulation" OR "social identity" OR "psychological safety")

Web of Science: TS=((sensemaking OR sensegiving) AND ("social information processing" OR "categorization theory" OR "affective regulation" OR "social identity" OR "psychological safety"))

Searches were restricted to English-language articles and review articles within the Business/Management/Psychology subject areas.

2.3.3 Track 2—Purposive Citation Retrieval

Keyword searching alone cannot be expected to retrieve all foundational theoretical sources because some discipline-anchoring works predate the terminology used in contemporary sensemaking research. Foundational mechanism sources, including Salancik and Pfeffer (1978), Rosch (1978), Tajfel and Turner (1979), and Stryker and Burke (2000), were therefore identified through backward and forward citation tracking of the core sensemaking and sensegiving literature. Research on affective regulation (Franck et al., 2026) was identified through the same citation-tracking process used for the affective mechanism. The principal anchor works were Weick (1979, 1995), Weick et al. (2005), Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), Gioia et al. (1994), Maitlis and Christianson (2014), Sandberg and Tsoukas (2020), and Healey et al. (2015). Citation tracking was conducted using Scopus "Cited by," Web of Science "Cited References," and Google Scholar "Cited by" functions.

2.3.4 Selection Criteria

Sources were retained when they satisfied three criteria. First, the theoretical mechanism had to represent an independent channel of social influence that could not be reduced to the other mechanisms. Second, foundational sources had to constitute highly cited, discipline-anchoring contributions within psychology, sociology, or organizational behavior. Third, contemporary supporting sources had to be peer-reviewed, credible, and independently verifiable. These criteria led to the consideration and exclusion of a fifth behavioral/structural mechanism because it did

not constitute an analytically independent channel of social influence; its effects could theoretically be accounted for by the four identified psychological mechanisms (Section 3.2).

Consistent with Cronjé's (2006) synthesis of objectivist and constructivist perspectives, apparently competing theoretical accounts—particularly cognitive and relational explanations of interpretation—were treated as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. The synthesis therefore, sought theoretical integration rather than selection of a single dominant perspective.

2.3.5 Final Corpus

The resulting theory-synthesis corpus comprised 55 sources: 7 core sensemaking/sensegiving works and 48 mechanism sources distributed across four independent channels of social influence—Informational/Social Information Processing (12), Cognitive/Categorization (12), Affective/Regulation (11), and Social Identity (13). The corpus served as the theoretical evidence base for developing the mechanisms, process sequence, boundary conditions, and propositions.

2.4 Illustrative Vignette

To illustrate the theoretical framework, we provide a stylized illustration of organizational sensemaking (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005). The illustration is a composite constructed for exposition, grounded in empirical patterns documented in two studies of managerial sensegiving under uncertainty: Ejsing's (2025) study of how middle managers communicate and coordinate during decentralized crisis response, and Benbenisty and Luria's (2021) case study of how unit leadership used everyday sensegiving to align interpretations of an ambiguous use-of-force restraint policy. Consistent with these accounts, in which convergence emerged through repeated, informal reframing by boundary-spanning managers rather than a single directive, consider a global pharmaceutical company facing an unexpected regulatory change that threatens a major product line. The CEO convenes her leadership team to interpret the implications. Initial interpretations diverge sharply: regulatory affairs sees compliance opportunities; R&D sees reformulation pathways; commercial sees market repositioning; finance sees cost containment. This represents a state of high interpretive dispersion.

Over three weeks, the CEO engages in iterative sensegiving, framing the situation as a strategic pivot rather than a crisis, repeatedly connecting the challenge to the company's mission, and facilitating cross-functional dialogues. She also manages the emotional responses of her team, acknowledging anxiety while maintaining confidence. By the end of the third week, the team has not achieved consensus, R&D and commercial still disagree on the timeline, but their interpretations have converged sufficiently to launch a coordinated response. Interpretive dispersion fell below the functional threshold, enabling action despite persistent disagreement.

This vignette illustrates the recursive process theorized in this paper and demonstrates the phenomenon the theory explains.

3. Results

Building on the abductive logic and illustrative vignette developed above, we next present the process model itself, beginning with its initial conditions and central mechanism before turning to the recursive process and the propositions it generates.

3.1 Initial Conditions: Environmental Ambiguity and Interpretive Dispersion

Environmental ambiguity is the starting condition for the process. When situations are ambiguous, characterized by multiple possible interpretations, incomplete information, or novel circumstances, individual team members naturally develop divergent interpretive frames. This is not a failure of sensemaking but a natural consequence of ambiguity: different people notice different cues, apply different frames, and construct different accounts.

Interpretive Dispersion is defined as: the variance in interpretive frames among team members regarding the meaning, priorities, or implications of an ambiguous organizational situation.

Interpretive dispersion is an observed distributional property, the variance among team members' interpretations, rather than a latent construct. Unless otherwise specified, this variance is calculated within teams, across individual members' interpretations, rather than between functional subgroups; researchers studying multi-unit or matrixed teams should explicitly state which unit of analysis they are using, as the two can diverge sharply. Organizations rarely require unanimous agreement (consensus). They require sufficiently low dispersion (variance) to enable coordinated action. Consensus implies content agreement; variance captures the distribution of interpretations without assuming agreement or disagreement on any specific dimension.

Interpretive dispersion has multiple dimensions:

- Cognitive dispersion: Variance in how members understand the situation itself (Weick, 1995; Hodgkinson & Healey, 2008).
- Priority dispersion: Variance in what members believe matters most (Ocasio, 1997; Kaplan, 2008).
- Causal dispersion: Variance in how members understand cause-effect relationships (Barr et al., 1992; Weick, 1979).
- Temporal dispersion: Variance in how members understand urgency and sequencing (Bluedorn, 2002; Stalk, 1988).
- Affective dispersion: Variance in members' emotional responses to the situation (Franck et al., 2026).

Interpretive dispersion is theoretically grounded in the literature on strategic issue interpretation (Dutton & Jackson, 1987), cognitive diversity (Kilduff et al., 2000), frame plurality (Cornelissen, 2005), equivocality (Weick, 1979), and interpretive ambiguity, all of which point to the same theoretical challenge: not why dispersion exists under uncertainty, but how it is reduced to enable coordination. This construct is distinct from, but complementary to, the organizational-behavior literature on within-team dispersion in emergent-state ratings, such as efficacy (DeRue et al., 2010), trust (de Jong & Dirks, 2012), and rating disagreement more broadly (Loignon et al., 2019); Section 4.3 develops the distinction in full. Both traditions converge on the insight, developed by Healey et al. (2015), that teams can coordinate effectively despite persistent within-team disagreement, reinforcing this paper's departure from agreement-based accounts of coordination.

These five dimensions capture the primary sources of interpretive divergence under uncertainty. The threshold applies to dysfunctional dispersion that impedes coordination, not to functional role-based differences. This conceptualization builds on earlier work on interpretive diversity in collective interpretation processes (Krepapa, 2003).

3.2 The Central Process Mechanism: Managerial Sensegiving as Variance Reduction

Managerial sensegiving reduces interpretive dispersion through four complementary psychological mechanisms. These mechanisms are sufficient because they span the primary pathways through which social influence operates: informational (what people learn), cognitive (how people think), affective (how people feel), and social-identification (who people are). We considered a fifth, behavioral/structural mechanism (e.g., formal role redesign or incentive realignment). Still, we excluded it because such changes operate through these same four psychological pathways rather than constituting an independent channel of influence. Recent research (Franck et al., 2026) has demonstrated that emotional regulation is critical to the success of sensegiving, supporting the inclusion of an affective mechanism.

3.2.1 Informational Mechanism: Creating Common Reference Points

Individuals construct interpretations based on social cues from authority figures (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Sensegiving provides these cues, giving team members a common reference point and reducing informational uncertainty. The informational mechanism operates through two subprocesses: reducing informational uncertainty by providing a focal interpretation and establishing common ground (Clark, 1996) by creating shared assumptions about the situation and what matters about it. This informational logic parallels findings at other levels of analysis: at the firm level, Kim et al. (2025) show that sensegiving activities reduce interpretive uncertainty among external stakeholders with divergent cognitive frames, while at the process level,

Kihlberg and Lindberg (2021) document a reflexive form of sensegiving that, by design, keeps interpretive cues open-ended rather than prescriptive. The present framework differs from both in specifying a team-level, recursive mechanism through which such reductions in dispersion accumulate over sensegiving cycles rather than occurring within a single sensegiving episode.

3.2.2 Cognitive Mechanism: Aligning Interpretive Frames

Sensegiving provides a common prototype that shapes how team members interpret ambiguous cues, thereby reducing classification variance (Rosch, 1978). When managers frame a situation in a particular way, they provide a schema that team members use to interpret subsequent information. The cognitive mechanism operates through schema activation and frame alignment, reshaping how team members categorize and respond to ambiguous cues.

3.2.3 Affective Mechanism: Regulating Emotional Responses

Sensegiving shapes not only what team members think but also how they feel (Franck et al., 2026). Managers regulate others' emotions through their framing, tone, and demeanor. The affective mechanism operates through two subprocesses: providing emotional cues that team members use to regulate their own emotional responses, and legitimizing certain emotional responses while delegitimizing others, shaping what emotions are acceptable to express.

3.2.4 Social-Identification Mechanism: Creating Identity Alignment

Sensegiving connects interpretations to team identity, making convergence more likely (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When managers frame interpretations in identity-consistent terms, team members are more likely to adopt them because doing so affirms their social identity. The social-identification mechanism operates through identity verification and in-group alignment.

A reasonable objection is that these four mechanisms are not truly independent: categorization is itself a form of information processing, and identity-based influence plausibly operates through affect, since identity threat generates emotion. Independence is defended here analytically rather than by claiming that the mechanisms never co-occur; the paper's own account of their parallel operation assumes they routinely do. What distinguishes them is the question each answers about what changes in a team member's psychology, not whether they are ever observed together. The informational mechanism concerns what content is available as a reference point (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978); the cognitive mechanism concerns how that content, once available, is structured and categorized (Rosch, 1978)—a manager can supply a common reference point without supplying a categorization schema, for instance by stating a fact without reframing how it should be interpreted, which is why

informational and cognitive convergence can be manipulated independently in principle even though sensegiving typically engages both together. Similarly, the social-identification mechanism is motivational rather than affective in the sense specified by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979): it operates by making an interpretation self-relevant through group membership, not by regulating the emotional valence of the interpretation itself, so identity-consistent framing can shift acceptance of an interpretation without altering how team members feel about it, and affective regulation can shift how team members feel without invoking identity at all. The mechanisms are therefore correlated in practice, as recursive sensegiving typically activates several at once, but analytically separable in the sense required by Selection Criterion (a) in Section 2.3: each can be varied independently of the others, even if managers rarely do so in isolation. These four mechanisms operate in parallel, jointly facilitating recursive frame updating (Weick, 1995): through dialogue and iterative refinement, team members update their interpretive frames in response to feedback and discussion. Each cycle further reduces variance. All four mechanisms are necessary for genuine convergence—convergence in which dispersion is actually reduced across all five dimensions (Section 3.1). A subset of mechanisms can nonetheless produce apparent convergence, crossing the functional threshold without resolving every dispersion dimension; Propositions 6 and 7 develop this distinction for AI-augmented contexts, and Section 4.1.3 develops its human analogue (power-shortcut convergence).

3.3 Interpretive Convergence as an Emergent Collective State

Dispersion is the continuous measure of variance; convergence is the discrete state reached when variance crosses the functional threshold. Interpretive convergence emerges through the progressive reduction of interpretive dispersion.

Following Chan (1998) and Kozlowski and Klein (2000), interpretive convergence is conceptualized as an emergent team-level state, a property of the team that arises from the interactions of its members. It is not reducible to individual interpretations but describes the relationship among them. Three features require emphasis. First, interpretive convergence is dynamic, not static; it can be disrupted by new ambiguity. Second, it is a state of the team, not a property of individuals. Third, it is functional rather than epistemic: it enables coordination regardless of whether the converged interpretation is accurate.

Functional Convergence Threshold is defined as: the level of interpretive dispersion below which the marginal gains in coordination from further convergence are exceeded by the marginal costs of continued sensegiving efforts, drawing on optimal stopping theory (Chow et al., 1971) and the logic of search costs (Stigler, 1961). The threshold varies with task interdependence (lowers it), time pressure (raises it), and team size (raises it). These directions follow from the same optimal-stopping logic that defines the threshold itself: whichever variable moves depends on which side of the marginal cost-benefit comparison it acts on. Task interdependence lowers

the threshold because it raises the cost of stopping early rather than the cost of continuing: when one member's misinterpretation propagates directly into others' actions, residual dispersion translates more directly into coordination failure, so the marginal benefit of further convergence remains positive at lower levels of dispersion than it would under loosely coupled tasks. Time pressure and team size instead raise the threshold by acting on the cost side of the comparison: time pressure increases the opportunity cost of each additional sensegiving cycle, and team size increases the communication cost of each cycle, since a given round of dialogue must now reach and be reconciled across more interpretive positions. Both push the marginal cost of continued sensegiving above its marginal benefit sooner, so organizations rationally stop at a higher level of residual dispersion. This yields a testable pattern: task interdependence and (time pressure, team size) should have opposite-signed relationships with the observed threshold precisely because they operate on opposite sides of the same stopping rule, not because they capture unrelated phenomena.

The threshold is dynamic, varying across contexts. It predicts that organizations will tolerate residual disagreement, that convergence is deliberately incomplete, and that managers can misjudge the threshold, either overshooting or undershooting. In practice, managers rarely observe the threshold directly; they infer it from behavioral proxies such as team dialogue shifting from diagnostic questions ("what is happening?") to executional ones ("how do we proceed?"), declining repetition of previously voiced objections, and members beginning to coordinate logistics without further sensegiving prompts.

Coordinated action is defined as behavioral synchronization among interdependent actors pursuing shared objectives under uncertainty. It emphasizes behavioral rather than cognitive alignment, convergent meaning structures rather than identical interpretations. Coordinated action is distinct from organizational performance or effectiveness: a team can act in a well-synchronized fashion on a flawed shared interpretation and still fail, just as a team can achieve strong outcomes despite imperfect coordination through other means (e.g., redundancy, slack resources).

3.4 The Recursive Process of Convergence

Following Langley (1999), Van de Ven (2007), and Pentland (1999), the framework specifies a recursive process organized around five phases. Each phase explicitly distinguishes events, mechanisms, and outcomes. The process is inherently recursive: phases overlap and recur, with outcomes at later phases feeding back into earlier phases. We define one sensegiving cycle as a bounded interpretive episode — a single sensegiving exchange (e.g., a meeting, memo, or dialogue session) followed by team response and dispersion reassessment—rather than a fixed unit of clock time, since cycle length varies with communication channel and team norms.

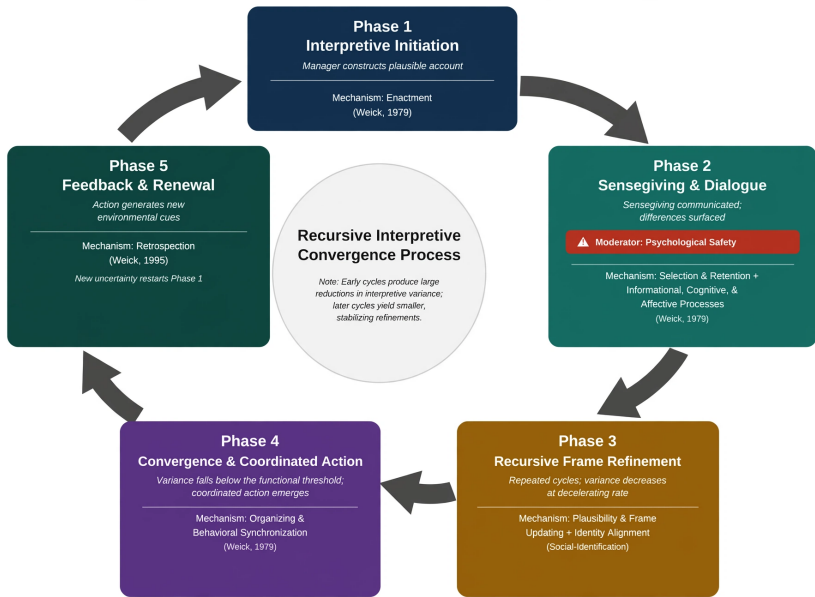


Figure 1. The recursive process of interpretive convergence — five phases connected by recursive feedback loops, each driven by a distinct sensemaking mechanism.

Phase 1: Interpretive Initiation

Event: Environmental uncertainty creates a need for interpretation. Managers engage in individual sensemaking, noticing cues, building frames, and constructing plausible accounts of the ambiguous situation.

Mechanism: Enactment processes (Weick, 1979). Managers actively construct rather than passively receive environmental cues. They bracket experience, label situations, and develop preliminary interpretations that will guide subsequent sensegiving.

Outcome: A managerial interpretation requiring dissemination, provisional and subject to revision, that provides the initial content for sensegiving.

Phase 2: Sensegiving and Dialogue

Event: Managers engage in sensegiving behaviors, communicating interpretations through meetings, memos, conversations, and other channels. Team

members receive, interpret, and discuss the manager's framing. This phase increasingly involves AI augmentation, as AI tools can provide real-time monitoring of variance and suggest framing alternatives (Agarwal et al., 2026). In practice, this includes AI-generated meeting summaries, predictive dashboards that flag emerging disagreement, and GenAI chatbots embedded in team communication channels that offer their own situational framing.

Mechanisms: Selection and retention processes (Weick, 1979). Social information processing (informational mechanism), categorization (cognitive mechanism), and emotional regulation (affective mechanism) begin operating. Viktorelius and Larsson (2025) emphasize the discursive nature of this phase: through talk and dialogue, interpretations are shared, challenged, and refined (see also Cristofaro, 2021). Psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023) determines whether dialogue becomes genuine meaning negotiation or superficial compliance. In high-psychological-safety environments, team members voice alternative interpretations, challenge the manager's framing, and engage in genuine dialogue. In low-psychological-safety environments, team members suppress dissent, conform to perceived expectations, and engage in surface compliance.

Outcome: Initial reduction in interpretive dispersion; surfacing of interpretive differences. The manager's sensegiving provides a common reference point that reduces variance, but dialogue may also reveal previously hidden differences.

Phase 3: Recursive Frame Refinement

Event: Through repeated sensegiving and dialogue, interpretive dispersion progressively reduces. Managers refine communication based on feedback. Team members adjust their understanding based on dialogue and new information. AI tools may support this process by tracking dispersion and identifying remaining differences.

Mechanism: Plausibility processes (Weick, 1995). Identity alignment (social-identification mechanism), emotional regulation (affective mechanism), and recursive frame updating occur through dialogue. Each cycle further reduces variance as team members update their interpretations in response to discussion, feedback, and new cues. The marginal reduction in dispersion decreases with each cycle: early cycles produce large reductions as major differences are resolved; later cycles produce smaller reductions as residual differences become more resistant to alignment.

Outcome: Progressive reduction in interpretive dispersion at a decelerating rate. Convergent meaning structures begin to emerge.

Phase 4: Convergence and Coordinated Action

Event: Interpretive convergence emerges as variance narrows below the functional threshold. Team members act on convergent meaning structures, producing coordinated action.

Mechanism: Organizing processes (Weick, 1979). Behavioral synchronization occurs as team members' interpretations become sufficiently aligned to permit predictable, complementary behavior. Convergence is necessary but not sufficient for coordination; resources, authority, capabilities, and timing may prevent coordination even when it occurs. Malik et al. (2025) provide broadly consistent evidence at the organizational level, showing that sensemaking processes support firms' agile responses to environmental change. However, their study does not test the specific convergence-to-coordination link proposed here and should be read as suggestive rather than confirmatory.

Outcome: Coordinated action. The team executes strategies, makes decisions, or adapts to change based on sufficiently converged interpretations.

Phase 5: Feedback and Renewal

Event: Organizational adaptation generates new cues, restarting the process. Coordinated action produces environmental feedback that may disrupt existing convergence.

Mechanism: Retrospection processes (Weick, 1995). Feedback processing and environmental sensing occur. Action generates new interpretive cues that may increase dispersion. Success may breed complacency; failure may trigger re-evaluation. AI-generated feedback, such as automated performance dashboards, can accelerate detection of new ambiguity but may also distort it by flagging statistically anomalous patterns that are not substantively meaningful, prompting premature re-engagement of the cycle.

Outcome: New uncertainty initiates return to Phase 1. The loop closes: coordination produces feedback that restarts the sensemaking process.

Recursive Dynamics

The process is inherently recursive. Phases overlap and recur. When dialogue reveals remaining dispersion, the process returns to Phase 2. When coordination reveals a misunderstanding, it returns to Phase 3. When adaptation generates new uncertainty, it returns to Phase 1. Early cycles produce large reductions in interpretive dispersion; later cycles produce smaller reductions; eventual stabilization reaches a plateau where residual dispersion is functional rather than harmful.

This recursive structure has three important theoretical implications. First, interpretive convergence is never permanent; it must be actively maintained. Second, the functional threshold is not a fixed point but a dynamic equilibrium that shifts with environmental conditions. Third, organizations cycle through periods of high and low dispersion, with sensegiving efforts intensifying during periods of high ambiguity.

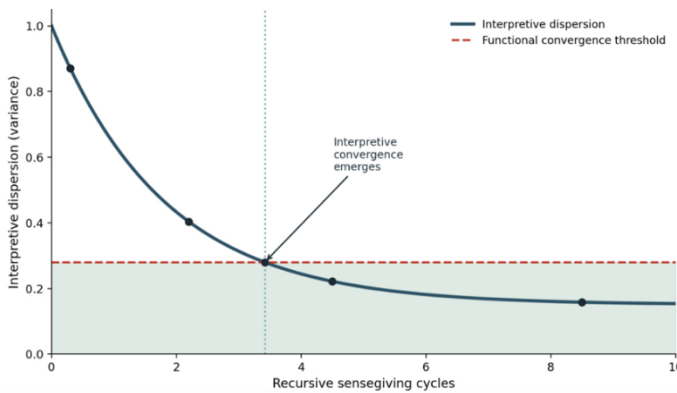


Figure 2. Progressive, decelerating reduction of interpretive dispersion across recursive sensegiving cycles, with convergence emerging once dispersion falls below the functional threshold.

3.5 Process Propositions

The recursive process described above yields seven testable propositions, three specifying the core sensegiving mechanism and four extending it to AI-augmented contexts.

Proposition 1: Recursive Sensegiving and Progressive Reduction of Interpretive Dispersion. As recursive cycles of managerial sensegiving accumulate, interpretive dispersion progressively declines at a decelerating rate until interpretive convergence emerges when dispersion falls below a functional convergence threshold.

Proposition 2: Interpretive Convergence as the Generative Mechanism of Coordinated Action. Interpretive convergence explains the generative pathway through which managerial sensegiving produces coordinated action under conditions of uncertainty. This generative effect strengthens as uncertainty intensifies, because alternative coordination mechanisms become less effective when interpretation is most consequential.

Proposition 3: Psychological Safety and Boundary Conditions of the Convergence Process. Psychological safety facilitates the recursive dialogue through which interpretive dispersion is progressively reduced. This facilitation is attenuated by hierarchical distance and intensified workload, which inhibit the voice behaviors necessary for genuine convergence. This temporal framing is consistent with longitudinal evidence that team psychological safety itself develops through a consensus-emergence process initiated by early information sharing (Marlow et al., 2025), suggesting that psychological safety and interpretive dispersion may co-evolve across the same recursive cycles rather than psychological safety operating as a fixed antecedent condition. The likely direction is bidirectional, but the sequence within each cycle is: early psychological safety enables the voice behavior that surfaces genuine dispersion rather than suppressing it. The resulting experience of safe disagreement being heard and resolved through dialogue then further builds

psychological safety for the next cycle, compounding across recursive cycles rather than operating as a one-time precondition. Extending the model to AI-augmented contexts, we propose:

Proposition 4: AI Reference Points and Cycle Reduction. AI-generated informational reference points reduce the number of sensegiving cycles required to reach the functional convergence threshold but do not alter the threshold itself, because it is set by task interdependence, time pressure, and team size—properties of the coordination problem, not of the information source.

Proposition 5: Competing Reference Points and Referent Ambiguity. When AI-generated interpretations diverge from managerial sensegiving, team members face two competing reference points rather than one. This increases interpretive dispersion, not through informational scarcity but through referent ambiguity—the same failure mode as sensegiving by two disagreeing managers—and it worsens as authority is more evenly split between AI and manager.

Proposition 6: AI Substitution and Misconvergence Risk. Because AI-generated interpretations carry perceived objectivity, they substitute for the informational and cognitive mechanisms (common reference points, schema alignment) rather than working alongside them, consistent with automation bias research showing that people discount their own judgment in favor of algorithmic output even when it is wrong (Parasuraman & Riley, 1997), and consistent with evidence that people rate algorithmic outputs as more credible than a human's across estimation and forecasting tasks even absent any error, a preference Logg et al. (2019) term algorithm appreciation. Genuine convergence requires the joint condition across all dispersion dimensions to hold (Section 4.4); because AI substitution satisfies only the informational and cognitive dimensions, it produces apparent, not genuine, convergence—teams behave as though coordinated because the dimensions most visible to observers (shared facts, shared framing) are resolved, while the affective and identity-based dimensions remain elevated and unaddressed, raising misconvergence risk at lower total mechanism engagement than human sensegiving requires.

Proposition 7: Asymmetric Dispersion-Reduction Curve Under AI Augmentation. Because AI substitutes for the informational and cognitive mechanisms but cannot substitute for the affective or social-identification mechanisms—AI-generated content cannot affirm team identity or regulate emotional response in the way managerial sensegiving can — the dispersion-reduction curve under AI-augmented sensegiving should show a steeper initial slope (faster informational/cognitive convergence) but a higher asymptote of residual affective/identity dispersion than purely managerial sensegiving—meaning AI-augmented teams reach apparent convergence faster but are less likely to reach genuine convergence at all, since the two mechanisms AI cannot substitute for are the ones whose dimensions remain unresolved at the asymptote. Together, Propositions 6 and 7 imply that AI augmentation does not lower the functional threshold itself (Proposition 4) but changes which dispersion dimensions are reduced en route to it—

a distinction only visible once dispersion is measured as a vector across dimensions (Section 4.4) rather than as a single scalar.

4. Discussion

Having presented the process model and its seven propositions, we now discuss their theoretical implications, boundary conditions, distinctiveness from related constructs, and practical significance, before turning to measurement, limitations, and future research.

4.1 Theoretical Implications and Contributions

The framework developed in this paper advances understanding of the theoretical interface between sensemaking and coordinated action by specifying the temporal mechanism through which individual interpretations become sufficiently aligned to enable collective behavior. By identifying interpretive convergence as the emergent team-level state that enables coordination, and managerial sensegiving as the behavioral engine that progressively reduces interpretive dispersion, the framework addresses the central unresolved problem in sensemaking theory: the transition from individual cognition to collective action (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Eckstein et al., 2025).

This reframing joins recent work showing that consensus is not necessary for coordinated action (Healey et al., 2015), diverging from the assumption implicit in strategic consensus research that agreement is the relevant target state (Kellermanns et al., 2005), and reconceptualizes coordination as fundamentally a problem of managing interpretive variance, not eliminating disagreement. This paper's deepest contribution is not the premise itself but the temporal, mechanism-based account of how variance narrows: the recursive sensegiving cycles and four psychological pathways developed in Sections 3.2–3.4.

This carries three implications for theory. First, it extends sensemaking theory by explaining not just how individuals make sense, but how their interpretations become coordinated action (Section 4.1.1). Second, it reconceives coordination without consensus (Section 4.1.2). Third, it identifies the boundary conditions, including psychological safety, under which genuine rather than pseudo-convergence occurs (Section 4.1.3).

4.1.1 Extending Sensemaking Theory

The framework extends sensemaking theory by specifying the temporal transition between individual interpretation and coordinated collective action. It addresses the gap identified by Maitlis and Christianson (2014) and Sandberg and Tsoukas (2020) by providing a mechanism-based explanation of how individual

cognition becomes collective action. Recent systematic reviews further highlight the need for process models that explain interpretive alignment at the team level (Cristofaro, 2021). Recent empirical work reinforces this need from two directions: studies of collective sensemaking in extreme, high-uncertainty settings show how multiple actors' interpretations must be actively reconciled for coordinated response to occur (Lübcke et al., 2025), while studies of less-hierarchical organizing show that removing formal authority does not remove the need for some mechanism to align interpretations, consistent with this paper's claim that sensegiving, not hierarchy per se, is the operative mechanism (Bremer et al., 2025).

4.1.2 Explaining Coordination Without Consensus

The framework explains how organizations coordinate without achieving consensus. By focusing on variance reduction rather than agreement, it provides a more nuanced account of coordination under ambiguity.

This claim is not novel in isolation: Healey et al. (2015) already show that teams can coordinate effectively while disagreeing, via dissociation between reflective and reflexive cognition, and the team dispersion literature (DeRue et al., 2010; de Jong & Dirks, 2012; Loignon et al., 2019) documents that within-team variance, not just mean agreement, shapes outcomes. What this framework contributes is a temporal, mechanism-based account of why and how that variance narrows over time: managers require not agreement but manageable interpretive variance, and sensegiving is the process that gets a team from high to functional variance. This reframing has implications for how we understand coordination in ambiguous environments, where complete consensus is often unattainable. The framework suggests that managers should focus less on achieving agreement and more on reducing variance to functional levels, a fundamentally different managerial mindset.

The variance-reduction logic developed here is easily mistaken for a restatement of strategic consensus research (Kellermanns et al., 2005), so the distinction warrants direct treatment rather than an implicit contrast left to Table 1. The two literatures differ in their target states, temporal structures, and governing mechanisms, and each difference carries distinct implications.

First, target state. Consensus research treats disagreement as a deficit to be minimized, with agreement as the theoretical endpoint. This paper treats residual disagreement as functional: convergence is defined by a threshold, not a maximum, and organizations are predicted to stop well short of agreement because further convergence yields less than it costs. A team that reaches consensus has, by this framework, likely over-invested in sensegiving relative to the coordination it purchased.

Second, temporal structure. Strategic consensus is typically a static, cross-sectional measure of agreement captured at one point in time (Kellermanns et al., 2005). Interpretive dispersion is instead a trajectory: a variance expected to decline at a decelerating rate across sensegiving cycles and rise again once feedback introduces

new ambiguity, paralleling recent work modeling organizational identification as dynamic rather than stable (Bednar et al., 2019), though tracking a different object: a team's variance in interpretation, not an individual's sense of belonging. Consensus asks whether agreement exists; dispersion asks how a distribution is moving over time.

Third, governing mechanism. Consensus research does not specify why organizations would stop short of full agreement; the implicit assumption is that more consensus is simply harder to achieve, not that less is optimal. This paper grounds the stopping point in optimal stopping logic (Chow et al., 1971) and search-cost reasoning (Stigler, 1961): sensegiving continues only while its marginal coordination benefit exceeds its marginal communication cost. This yields a testable difference: consensus theory predicts managers should keep pushing for agreement; this framework predicts that managers who push past the functional threshold are making a decision error.

These distinctions matter beyond terminology. They imply different managerial diagnostics (whether dispersion is falling toward a threshold versus whether agreement is present), different failure modes (misjudging a stopping point versus simply failing to persuade), and different empirical signatures (a decelerating variance trajectory with a detectable inflection point versus a static agreement score). Section 4.3 develops this comparison further against a broader set of related constructs.

A related but distinct construct is shared mental models (Cannon-Bowers et al., 1993), which focuses on the content of cognition—what team members know and believe. Interpretive dispersion focuses on the variance in those cognitions, not their content. Teams may share mental models (high content overlap) while still exhibiting interpretive dispersion (variance in how they interpret novel ambiguities). Conversely, teams may lack shared mental models yet converge rapidly on ambiguous situations through sensegiving. The distinction is between static content overlap and dynamic variance reduction.

4.1.3 Boundary Conditions and the Dark Side of Sensegiving

While this paper focuses on benevolent managerial sensegiving, sensegiving can also be used manipulatively. Managers may deliberately frame situations to obscure uncertainty, suppress dissent, or advance personal agendas. This 'sensegiving as control' produces pseudo-convergence—apparent alignment that masks continued dispersion. Future research should examine the boundary conditions under which sensegiving facilitates genuine versus coerced convergence.

This framework implicitly assumes symmetrical dialogue. In hierarchical contexts, lower-power members may experience 'voice suppression'—they converge publicly but diverge privately. This suggests that psychological safety is not merely a facilitator but a necessary condition for genuine convergence. Without it, convergence is illusory. Power asymmetry also alters how the four mechanisms operate: high-power sensegivers can secure surface-level informational and cognitive alignment through positional authority alone, without engaging the affective or social-identification pathways that produce durable convergence, effectively substituting coercion for

persuasion. This power-shortcut convergence, in which compliance masks unresolved dispersion, is distinct from the mechanism-complete convergence the core model describes.

This power-shortcut pathway is not merely a passive byproduct of hierarchy; it is exploitable. Toxic or abusive leaders can deliberately engineer power-shortcut convergence as an instrument of control: by supplying authoritative-sounding informational cues and demanding visible cognitive alignment (“everyone understands the plan”) while actively punishing or ignoring dissent, such leaders can produce the surface appearance of convergence—teams appear to cross the functional threshold—without ever engaging the affective or social-identification mechanisms that would surface genuine disagreement. The result is silent compliance rather than alignment: team members withhold the private dispersion that psychological safety would otherwise have surfaced, and the organization proceeds on an interpretive base that is more fragile than it appears. This is theoretically distinct from ordinary pseudo-convergence in degree and intent: it is not merely convergence that happens to mask residual dispersion, but a leadership strategy that uses the mechanism-substitution logic of Section 4.1.3 instrumentally, converting the four-mechanism model’s own structure into a tool for suppressing rather than resolving disagreement.

The four mechanisms (informational, cognitive, affective, and social-identification) operate through neural and psychological processes. Future research should examine how sensegiving activates specific neural circuits (e.g., the prefrontal cortex for cognitive processing, the amygdala for affective regulation) and how individual differences (e.g., need for closure, tolerance for ambiguity) moderate the speed of convergence.

4.1.4 Practical and Policy Implications

Beyond its theoretical contribution, the framework has direct implications for managerial practice and for how organizations design the structures that support coordination under uncertainty, conceptualizing this coordination competence as a dynamic capability that integrates leadership and management functions (Briones, 2026).

For practicing managers, the framework reframes the goal of sensegiving during periods of uncertainty. Managers should not treat unanimous agreement as the marker of successful sensegiving; doing so leads to overinvestment in communication and dialogue well past the point at which it improves coordination. Instead, managers should monitor interpretive dispersion directly, for example, through structured check-ins, pulse surveys, or facilitated debriefs that surface where team members’ understanding of priorities, causes, and urgency still diverge, and treat the persistence of some disagreement as expected rather than as a failure of leadership. Because the four mechanisms operate in parallel, relying on informational communication alone (memos, briefings) risks convergence stalling even when information is clearly communicated. Practically, this suggests pairing factual updates with explicit

emotional framing and identity-consistent language, and prioritizing psychological safety so that dialogue surfaces genuine dispersion rather than surface compliance that masks it. Finally, because early cycles of sensegiving yield the largest reductions in dispersion, managers facing time pressure should front-load structured dialogue early in a change process rather than distributing it evenly, since later cycles produce diminishing returns.

For organizational design and policy, the framework has implications for how organizations structure the conditions for sensegiving. Because psychological safety determines whether dialogue produces genuine convergence or surface compliance, organizations seeking to improve coordination during periods of ambiguity should prioritize investments that build it, such as leadership development, norms around voicing dissent, and flatter communication channels, over investments in additional formal reporting or communication infrastructure alone. Consistent with Proposition 3, organizations operating under chronic overload or steep hierarchy should anticipate slower or shallower convergence and may need to compensate with dedicated sensegiving roles or protected time for cross-functional dialogue during periods of strategic change, particularly given evidence that sensegiving activity naturally concentrates among boundary-spanning middle managers rather than occurring uniformly across the hierarchy (Alfoldi et al., 2017).

Finally, as organizations increasingly introduce AI tools into sensemaking and decision support, the framework suggests a governance implication: AI-generated interpretations should be treated as an additional input to the dispersion-reduction process rather than an independent authority, since unmanaged AI framing can increase rather than reduce interpretive dispersion; policies governing AI-augmented decision-making should therefore specify how AI-generated interpretations are reconciled with managerial sensegiving rather than assuming the two automatically align. This boundary condition should not be assumed culturally uniform. In high-power-distance contexts, where deference to hierarchical authority is a normative expectation rather than a situational constraint, voice suppression may function as the default state rather than as a deviation requiring explanation. In such settings, Proposition 3's psychological-safety mechanism may operate more slowly, require more deliberate managerial intervention to activate, or, in the most hierarchical contexts, fail to activate at all, regardless of sensegiving quality—meaning the model's predicted convergence trajectory should be read as conditional on this cultural boundary rather than universal.

4.2 Process Failure Modes

The model applies when psychological safety is sufficient, sensegiving is authentic, and AI framing is reconcilable; otherwise, defensive sensemaking or pseudo-convergence occurs.

4.2.1 Cognitive Failures: Defensive Sensemaking + Interpretive Polarization

Team members may entrench existing interpretations rather than engage in genuine dialogue. When faced with threatening ambiguity, individuals may defend their existing frames rather than updating them (Staw et al., 1981). This produces interpretive rigidity rather than convergence.

Sensegiving may reinforce rather than reduce dispersion when team members interpret managerial communication through divergent existing frames. The same message may be interpreted differently by different subgroups, increasing rather than decreasing variance (Lord et al., 1979).

4.2.2 Social Failures: Surface Compliance + Misconvergence

Low psychological safety produces apparent convergence that masks continued dispersion, without the behavioral synchronization that genuine convergence enables.

Teams may converge on incorrect interpretations, producing coordinated action based on shared misunderstanding. Interpretive convergence concerns the degree of alignment, not accuracy. The theory predicts coordination, not decision quality. Misconvergence is particularly dangerous because the behavioral synchronization it enables may prevent the detection of errors.

4.2.3 AI-Mediated Disruption

The rise of AI in organizational decision-making (Agarwal et al., 2026; Balasooriya & Sedera, 2026) introduces both opportunities and challenges for interpretive convergence. AI may accelerate convergence by providing rapid informational reference points, enabling real-time monitoring of interpretive dispersion, and suggesting framing alternatives. However, when AI-generated interpretations differ from managerial sensegiving, teams may experience increased rather than reduced dispersion, producing competing reference points or the misconvergence described above, now compounded by AI authority. This tension is already visible in adjacent contexts: recent work on self-service analytics finds that sensegiving practices and individual sensemaking resources jointly, but not always harmoniously, shape how users interpret data cues (Patabandige et al., 2026), suggesting the reconciliation problem this paper raises for team-level convergence has an individual-level analog already emerging in practice. These dynamics raise important questions for future research: Does AI lower or raise the functional threshold? Does it produce genuine convergence or pseudo-convergence? How do teams reconcile managerial and AI framing when they conflict?

4.3 Construct Distinctiveness

A central challenge for any new construct is demonstrating its distinctiveness from related concepts. Section 4.1.2 developed this argument in detail for strategic consensus, the closest and most likely conflation. Table 1 extends the comparison to the wider set of related constructs, situating interpretive dispersion and interpretive convergence against static, agreement-based measures on one side and dynamic, content-based sensemaking constructs on the other.

Table 1. Distinguishing interpretive dispersion and interpretive convergence from related constructs.

Construct	Primary Focus	Static/Dynamic	Level	Core Question	Difference from Interpretive Dispersion	Difference from Interpretive Convergence
Cognitive Diversity (Kilduff et al., 2000)	Stable differences in knowledge/style	Static	Team	What differences exist?	Differs from Interpretive Dispersion	Differs from Interpretive Convergence
Strategic Consensus (Kellermanns et al., 2005)	Agreement on priorities	Static	Team	Do we agree?	Differs from Interpretive Dispersion	Convergence is a threshold, not a trait
Shared Mental Models (Cannon-Bowers et al., 1993)	Shared cognitive content	Static	Team	What is shared?	Dispersion is situational, not stable	Convergence is threshold-based, not maximum agreement
Climate Strength (Schneider et al., 2002)	Agreement on climate	Static	Team	Do we agree?	Dispersion is variance, not agreement	Convergence is dynamic, not static content
Collective Sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005)	Joint meaning construction	Dynamic	Group	How is meaning made?	Dispersion is variance, not content overlap	Convergence is threshold-based; strength is monotonic
Frame Diversity (Cornelissen, 2005)	Variation in frameworks	Static/Dynamic	Team	What frameworks exist?	Dispersion is dynamic; strength is static	Convergence is the outcome of sensemaking
Interpretive Dispersion (This paper)	Variance in interpretive frames	Dynamic	Team	How much do interpretations differ?	Dispersion is the distribution of meanings	Convergence is variance reduction to a threshold
Interpretive Convergence (This paper)	Emergent state of low variance	Dynamic	Team	Has variance fallen below threshold?	Dispersion is variance, not diversity content	Distinct from Interpretive Dispersion: convergence is the discrete threshold-crossing event, not the continuous variance measure itself

This threshold-based, variance-reduction conception also resonates with foundational work on how interpretive schemes change during organizational restructuring (Bartunek, 1984). A further conflation risk not covered in Table 1 comes from the team emergent-state dispersion literature, which studies within-team variance in ratings of constructs such as efficacy (DeRue et al., 2010) and trust (de Jong &

Dirks, 2012), and which Loignon et al. (2019) show follows reliably different patterns across teams. That literature treats dispersion as a statistical property of ratings on an already-defined construct; interpretive dispersion, by contrast, is dispersion in the content of the interpretations themselves, and the mechanisms proposed here (Section 3.2) explain how that content-level dispersion is reduced, not merely how it is measured or patterned.

Interpretive convergence is also easily mistaken for groupthink (Janis, 1972), but the two are conceptually opposite. Groupthink describes a pathological suppression of dissent in service of an illusion of unanimity, achieved by silencing minority views before they can be voiced. Interpretive convergence, by contrast, explicitly tolerates residual disagreement below a functional threshold and depends on psychological safety enabling, not suppressing, dissenting voice (Section 3.2); the pseudo-convergence produced by voice suppression under power asymmetry (Section 4.1.3) is the pathological case this framework is designed to distinguish from genuine convergence, not a version of it.

4.4 Measurement Implications

Before turning to specific instruments, it is worth being explicit about what is being measured. Interpretive dispersion is treated throughout as a variance, but variance is only well defined once a scale and a unit of analysis are fixed. This paper proposes, provisionally, that dispersion be represented as a vector of five dimension-specific variances (cognitive, priority, causal, temporal, affective, as defined in Section 3.1) rather than collapsed into a single scalar, since a team can be low-variance on some dimensions and high-variance on others. The five measurement approaches below are not interchangeable: cognitive mapping and causal-belief coding speak most directly to causal dispersion; semantic similarity analysis and frame coding to cognitive and priority dispersion; and none directly capture affective dispersion, which requires a separate measure such as experience-sampled affect. Researchers should therefore match measures to the specific dimension(s) under study rather than assume convergence on one measure implies convergence on the construct as a whole; a minimum viable approach is to prioritize the one or two dimensions most consequential for the setting (e.g., cognitive and priority dispersion for strategic planning teams, affective and temporal for crisis response teams) and expand coverage later.

Interpretive dispersion can be captured through multiple measurement approaches. Cognitive mapping (Barr et al., 1992) captures team members' causal beliefs about the situation, with variance calculated across members. Q-sort methods (Stephenson, 1953) have team members sort interpretive statements, enabling calculation of inter-rater variance. Semantic similarity analysis (Mohammed & Dumville, 2001) examines language use in team communication to quantify variance in semantic content. Frame coding (Cornelissen, 2005) codes team members' interpretive frames and calculates variance in frame categories. Network analysis of

interpretations (Maitlis, 2005) models the structure of interpretive relationships to identify patterns of convergence. These approaches enable repeated measurement over time, allowing researchers to track the progressive reduction of interpretive dispersion predicted by the process model.

Table 2. Sample operationalization of interpretive dispersion dimensions.

Dimension	Recommended Instrument	Example Item / Metric
Cognitive	Cognitive mapping (Barr et al., 1992)	Variance in cause-effect links coded from team members' free-text situation descriptions
Priority	Q-sort (Stephenson, 1953)	Inter-rater variance in the rank-ordering of the top 5 priorities for the situation
Causal	Causal-belief coding (Barr et al., 1992)	Proportion of team members citing the same primary cause of the ambiguous event
Temporal	Frame coding (Cornelissen, 2005)	Variance in members' estimated timeline (days/weeks/months) for required action
Affective	Experience-sampled affect (Franck et al., 2026)	Variance in momentary valence/arousal ratings collected via brief team pulse surveys

4.5 Functional Convergence Threshold

The functional convergence threshold raises several questions for future theoretical development. First, threshold identification: is the threshold an objective property of task interdependence, or is it socially constructed through team negotiation? Who determines when sufficient convergence has been achieved, and by what criteria? Second, threshold variation: does the threshold differ across task types, crisis versus routine situations, or organizational cultures? Third, threshold dynamics: does the threshold shift during crises, when the cost of failed coordination rises and managers may rationally tolerate less residual dispersion? Fourth, threshold measurement: how can researchers empirically identify the threshold for a given team? Inflection point analysis in longitudinal dispersion curves may be one promising approach. At present, the threshold is specified directionally—task interdependence, time pressure, and team size indicate whether it rises or falls—rather than as an independently measurable value; a fully predictive account awaits the empirical work called for above.

4.6 Limitations

These open questions about the threshold, together with the framework's conceptual status more broadly, point to several limitations that should qualify how the theory is read at this stage. This paper has four main limitations. First, it is conceptual, not empirical; all propositions are hypotheses pending testing. Second, the claimed distinctiveness of interpretive convergence from related constructs has not been empirically demonstrated. Third, the proposed process model assumes a particular temporal ordering that requires longitudinal testing. Fourth, the role of AI in sensegiving is rapidly evolving and may require revisiting as technology develops.

Finally, the theory reflects a functionalist epistemological orientation that emphasizes mechanism-based explanation. Alternative perspectives—critical or discursive approaches—might foreground power asymmetries or linguistic construction differently. A critical or discursive alternative would treat sensegiving less as a mechanism that productively reduces variance and more as a site of power struggle, asking whose interpretation comes to dominate and through what discursive resources, rather than how quickly dispersion falls. The functionalist framing was chosen deliberately because it yields falsifiable, mechanism-level propositions amenable to the longitudinal and experimental designs proposed in Section 4.7; a discursive account would raise different, valuable questions but not the same testable process model. The theory's limitations should be understood in light of this commitment.

4.7 Research Design Recommendations

Study 1: Discriminant Validity and Construct Validation

Using independent behavioral coding of manager communications (for sensegiving), interview-based think-aloud protocols (for individual sensemaking), validated team psychological safety scales, interpretive dispersion measures (cognitive mapping, semantic similarity), and interpretive convergence measures, test whether the constructs load as empirically distinct factors. Confirmatory factor analysis should demonstrate AVE greater than .50 and HTMT less than .85 (Henseler et al., 2015). Measure dispersion at T1 (pre-sensegiving), T2 (after two cycles), and T3 (post-decision).

Study 2: Field Test of the Process Model

A longitudinal, multi-team field study using experience sampling methodology, longitudinal cognitive mapping, multilevel latent growth models, and dynamic network analysis. Multilevel latent growth modeling of curvilinear (decelerating) trajectories of this kind typically requires at least 30-50 teams with 3-4 repeated measurement occasions per team to achieve adequate statistical power. Latent growth curve analysis should test the predicted deceleration in the reduction of interpretive dispersion over time. Threshold analysis should identify the functional convergence threshold for each team. In hybrid contexts (Agarwal et al., 2026), measure the role of AI in sensegiving and test whether AI augmentation lowers the functional threshold. Vary AI framing consistency (consistent vs. conflicting) and measure dispersion change.

Study 3: Agent-Based Simulation

Agent-based simulation could complement empirical testing by modeling recursive cycles and threshold dynamics under varying conditions, enabling exploration of thousands of simulated team interactions that would be impractical in field settings. Code functional vs. dysfunctional dispersion separately using the five dimensions in Section 3.1.

Empirical testing of the seven propositions through longitudinal field studies and agent-based simulation is a priority for future research. The most urgent tests are P1–P3, which establish the core process model; P4–P7 extend the model to AI-augmented contexts and should follow once the baseline process is validated.

4.8 Future Research Questions

Future research should also examine several open questions raised by the framework.

Several of these directions warrant particular attention, beyond the threshold-identification and threshold-dynamics questions already raised in Section 4.5. A first priority is the relationship between interpretive convergence and decision quality: because the framework predicts coordination without guaranteeing accuracy, establishing when convergence coincides with good decisions, and when it does not, is essential for translating the theory into practical guidance. A second priority is how AI augmentation affects the functional threshold, which deserves early empirical attention given how quickly organizations are adopting these tools, and because the framework's governance implications in Section 4.1.4 rest on assumptions about AI's effect on dispersion that have not yet been tested.

Further questions include whether convergence thresholds vary across organizational forms, whether the four mechanisms operate differently across cultural contexts, the role of leader emotional intelligence in the affective mechanism, and the interplay between institutional logics and interpretive convergence (Li & Liu, 2026). Cross-domain evidence that sensegiving, sensebreaking, and sensemaking interact recursively as organizations navigate competing institutional logics (Grande, Ricciardi et al., 2026) suggests that the recursive structure proposed here may generalize beyond team-level coordination to field-level tension management, an extension worth testing directly.

5. Conclusion

Sensemaking theory has long explained how organizations interpret uncertainty. What has not been fully explained is how those interpretations become coordinated organizational action. By theorizing managerial sensegiving as the behavioral engine that progressively reduces interpretive dispersion until interpretive convergence

emerges, this paper shifts the explanatory logic of sensemaking from cognitive interpretation to collective adaptation.

The central insight is that managers are not aligning interpretations to a single view; they are reducing variance until disagreement falls below a coordination threshold. Coordination is ultimately not an informational achievement but an interpretive one, a matter of achieving sufficient interpretive alignment rather than eliminating disagreement.

This joins a broader reframing of organizational coordination as a problem of managing interpretive variance rather than achieving agreement, a premise supported by prior work on teams that coordinate while disagreeing (Healey et al., 2015) and on patterned within-team dispersion (DeRue et al., 2010; Loignon et al., 2019), to which this paper contributes the temporal mechanism developed above. The future of sensemaking research may therefore lie less in explaining how people create meaning than in explaining how organizations manage the distribution of meaning over time. Whether this process explanation survives empirical scrutiny remains the framework's central theoretical test.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that he has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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