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## COLLECTIVE UNDERSTANDING OF ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS DURING CRISES: A MANAGERIAL ASPECT

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This article examines how a collective understanding of organisational goals is formed and sustained under crisis conditions. Rather than treating alignment as a structural given or a communication output, we conceptualise it as a temporary accomplishment of managerial interpretive work. Based on a process-oriented, multi-case qualitative design, the study traces how shared purpose emerges when three mechanisms operate in a coherent sequence: emotional containment, cognitive framing, and communicative openness. Containment acknowledges uncertainty and stabilises affect so attention can be held; framing then compresses causal complexity, links priorities to operational markers, and translates purpose into actionable language; rhythmic openness finally maintains a predictable cadence of updates, differentiates what is known from what remains unknown, and keeps the joint field of attention synchronised as the situation evolves. Across cases, alignment follows a recurring four-phase path: initial disruption, operational stabilisation, goal reconfiguration, and consolidation, with short ‘sensitivity windows’ at phase boundaries. We identify the pivotal role of interpretive intermediaries (middle managers who translate top-level frames into local practices) and show why hybrid artefacts such as brief explanatory notes attached to decisions, change logs with visible edit histories, and priority check cards function as materialised frames that make meaning visible, repeatable, and auditable across levels. The proposed process model specifies when transparency, empathy, and optimism help – and when they backfire: openness without framing produces informational noise; framing without prior affective validation fails to stick; infrequent or irregular contact erodes the shared picture. The contribution is twofold: theoretically, we integrate sensemaking and sensegiving with affective stabilisation and artefact design, offering a temporal logic of how collective purpose is kept ‘intact enough to act’ under pressure; practically, we translate the model into a cadence of crisis interpretation: brief validation of emotions, a simple causal frame tied to operational markers, a predictable update rhythm, and empowered intermediaries. This clarifies why equally ‘correct’ practices succeed or fail at different points in the cycle and outlines teachable capabilities that support organisational resilience and post-crisis learning.

**Keywords:** collective goal understanding, sensemaking, sensegiving, crisis communication, managerial communication, cognitive framing, emotional containment, organisational resilience.

### Kolektīvā izpratne par organizācijas mērķiem krīžu laikā: vadības aspekts

Raksts skaidro, kā krīzes apstākļos veidojas un tiek uzturēta kopīga izpratne par organizācijas mērķiem, uzrādot to kā īslaicīgu vadības interpretatīvā darba sasniegumu, nevis strukturālu dotību. Processuāli vēsta vairāku gadījumu kvalitatīvā pieeja ļauj izsekot, kā saskaņotība rodas tad, ja trīs mehānismi darbojas sasaistītā secībā: emociju saturēšana, kognitīvā ierāmēšana un komunikatīvā atklātība. Saturēšana atzīst nenoteiktību un stabilizē afektu, lai varētu noturēt uzmanību; ierāmēšana saīsina sarežģītas cēloņsakarības, sasaista prioritātes ar operacionāliem rādītājiem un pārtulko kopējo mērķi izpildāmā valodā; ritmiska atklātība uztur paredzamu atjauninājumu kadenci, skaidri nodala “zināmo” no “nezināmā” un sinhronizē kopīgo uzmanības lauku situācijas maiņās. Gadījumos parādās četrpakāpju trajektorija – sākotnējs satricinājums, operacionāla stabilizācija, mērķu pārkonfigurēšana un konsolidācija – ar īsiem “jutīguma logiem” fāžu robežās. Īpaši nozīmīgi ir interpretatīvie starpnieki (vidējā līmeņa vadītāji, kas pārtulko augšējās vadības rāmjus lokālās praksēs), kā arī hibrīdie artefakti: īsi skaidrojoši pieraksti pie lēmumiem, izmaiņu žurnāli ar redzamu labojumu vēsturi un prioritāšu kontrolesaraksti ar laika atzīmēm. Tie darbojas kā materializēti rāmji, kas padara nozīmi redzamu, atkārtojamu un auditējamu dažādos līmeņos. Piedāvātais procesa modelis precizē, kad caurspīdīgums, empātija un optimisms palīdz, bet kad tie rada pretēju efektu: atklātība bez ierāmēšanas rada informatīvu troksni; ierāmēšana bez iepriekšējās afektu validēšanas neiesakņojas; neregulāri kontakti sairda kopīgo priekšstatu. Teorētiski ieguldījums ir jēgas veidošanas un jēgas piešķiršanas integrācija ar afektīvo stabilizāciju un artefaktu dizainu, piedāvājot temporālu loģiku, kā kopējais mērķis tiek uzturēts “pietiekami neskarts, lai rīkotos”. Praktiski tas nozīmē krīzes interpretācijas taktu: īsa emociju validēšana, vienkārša cēloņu–seku shēma, piesaistīta operacionāliem marķieriem, paredzams atjauninājumu ritms un pilnvaroti starpnieki. Tas skaidro, kāpēc vienādi “pareizas” prakses dažādos cikla brīžos strādā atšķirīgi, un iezīmē mācāmas kompetences, kas balsta organizācijas noturētspēju un pēckrīzes mācīšanos.

**Atslēgvārdi:** kolektīvā mērķu izpratne, jēgas veidošana, jēgas piešķiršana, krīzes komunikācija, vadības komunikācija, kognitīvā ierāmēšana, emociju saturēšana, organizācijas noturētspēja.

## Introduction

Crisis situations challenge organisations' operational stability and undermine their collective understanding of goals, the "what for" that coordinates action and allocates attention. Under conditions of high uncertainty, time pressure and ambiguity, traditional administrative control mechanisms often become ineffective; consequently, maintaining goal alignment shifts to the sphere of interpretation and collective sensemaking (Weick 1993, 1995).

We deliberately locate this study within a sociological perspective on meaning production. A frame is defined as 'schemata of interpretation' through which actors confer on unfolding events the status of "what is going on here" and "what are we to do" (Goffman 1974). Framing is the process of selecting and accentuating elements of reality in order to diagnose a problem, indicate causes, provide moral evaluation and prescribe courses of action (Entman 1993; Snow et al. 1986). Accordingly, this work is situated in the sociology of organisations and knowledge: we treat goals as a second-order social fact, the outcome of sustained frames, emotional labour, and material artefacts of meaning, rather than fixed structural preferences (Goffman 1974; Berger, Luckmann 1966; Star, Griesemer 1989).

Goal alignment, in the organisation understood here as a social system with formal and informal ties, status positions, and group norms, is increasingly conceptualised as a temporary, dynamic product of meaning-making processes. These processes emerge at the intersection of communication, emotions and power relations: through linguistic framing, symbolic action, and emotional labour, participants stabilise a shared picture of events and restore the directedness of collective action (Maitlis, Christianson 2014; Maitlis, Sonenshein 2010).

In crisis, the managerial role shifts from formal command to interpretive competence: leaders establish cognitive frames, ensure openness in communication, and maintain the affective contour, thereby reducing divergence in interpretations and sustaining the collective capacity to act (Boin et al. 2016; Coombs 2007). Recent research on leadership communication emphasises combining transparency, authenticity, empathy, and optimism as predictors of employee trust and readiness for coordinated action, as well as the need for dynamic crisis communication models that account for rapidly changing configurations of actors and meanings (Men et al. 2024; Jong 2025).

Against this backdrop, the article focuses on the managerial dimension of the collective understanding of organisational goals during crises, examining the mechanisms managers use to achieve temporary alignment: communicative openness (acknowledging uncertainty while providing relevant information); cognitive framing (simplifying and reframing complex situations through meaningful frames); and emotional containment (stabilising collective affect through empathy and narrative coherence). Theoretically, the study draws on the sensemaking approach and crisis studies. Methodologically, it adopts a qualitative design, comprising semi-structured interviews, discursive analysis of managerial messages, and multi-level case studies, which makes it possible to trace the temporal dynamics of forming a "shared goal" as a process rather than a static state (Weick 1995; Maitlis, Christianson 2014; Boin et al. 2016).

The article aims to develop a conceptual framework for managerial mechanisms that sustain the collective understanding of goals in crises and to show their contribution to resilience and coordination of action. The research question is: How does the combination of openness, framing, and emotional containment make it possible to hold and restore aligned goal-setting under high uncertainty? The theoretical contribution lies in integrating communicative and cognitive-interpretive perspectives within the sensemaking approach; the practical contribution lies in clarifying the competence profile of crisis leadership, in which interpretive capacity, rather than formal authority, is decisive (Coombs 2007; Men et al. 2024; Jong 2025).

**Operational definition and markers.** In this study, organizational goals denote the currently shared prioritization of ends and constraints that guide resource allocation and task sequencing at unit

and frontline levels (Weick 1995; Gioia et al. 2013). Goal alignment obtains when actors reproduce the same causal frame (why → what → how) and when convergent behavior is evidenced by triangulated operational markers. We use:

- (1) decision latency from managerial instruction to frontline enactment;
- (2) share of managerial artifacts (explanatory notes, unified updates, change logs) that explicitly reference the active frame (Weick et al. 2005; Star, Griesemer 1989);
- (3) SLA adherence in service settings and DSO / cash-collection cycle coherence in sales/finance contexts as proxies for priority uptake;
- (4) rework/rollback rate and cross-unit contradiction count per period as indicators of interpretive stability;
- (5) semantic agreement between manager and frontline formulations of the goal (coder agreement, e.g., Cohen's  $\kappa$ ) (Jick 1979; Langley 1999; Salas et al. 2008; Mohammed et al. 2010).

These markers are context-specific and interpreted jointly; they connect to leadership communication practices – transparency and cadence of updates, empathetic acknowledgement, and framing simplicity – which prior work links to trust, readiness for co-action, and resilience formation (Yue, Walden 2022; Men 2014; Men et al. 2024; Huy 1999; Duchek 2020).

### **Literature review**

Research on crises in organisations has traditionally focused on operational continuity, risks, and reactive measures. Over the past three decades, however, an interpretive perspective has become central: goal alignment is now conceived as a product of sensemaking processes under uncertainty (Weick 1993, 1995). Contemporary reviews confirm this shift and update the sensemaking model, emphasising the co-evolution of actors and environments, multi-level dynamics, and distributed processes (Maitlis, Christianson 2014; Maitlis, Sonenshein 2010; Cristofaro 2022; Eckstein et al. 2024). This line of work shifts attention from fixed “goals” to how the collective continually constructs, refines, and re-partitions them through practices of interpretation, communication, and joint attention. Integrative surveys show that sensemaking is a continuous, context-bound process in which linguistic frames, narratives, and symbolic acts play key roles, alongside mechanisms for aligning meanings distributed across organisational levels (Frandsen 2020; Cristofaro 2022; Eckstein et al. 2024).

A parallel stream develops the concept of sensegiving, the managerial, directed construction of meanings for followers, especially during crisis ruptures. Classic contributions describe how leaders, through interactive framing and targeted communicative moves, provide action cues for employees, combining strategic direction with interpretive flexibility (Gioia, Chittipeddi 1991; Weick et al. 2005). Recent syntheses underline the role of language and discursive practices as key instruments of sensegiving (metaphors, categorical schemes, and narratives) that convert abstract goals into behavioural guidelines (Whittle et al. 2023). This perspective links interpretive mechanisms with organisational identity and the “meaning of purpose”, showing that goal alignment is not only an informational task, but also an identification task that requires aligning operational priorities with a broader mission and values (Gioia et al. 2013). This turn makes explicit the sociological nature of goal alignment: managerial framing is not simply “communication from above”, but a procedure of collective reality construction in which the validation of feelings and the maintenance of shared frames are necessary social operations (Hochschild 1983; Huy 1999).

A second major body of explanation is provided by the crisis-communication literature. Situational crisis communication theory links responsibility attributions, message strategies, and reputational outcomes, emphasising the need for consistency, timeliness, and fit with stakeholder expectations (Coombs 2007). Subsequent work has shifted the focus to internal communication as a driver of trust

and readiness for joint action: quantitative studies show that leader transparency lowers threat appraisals of change, and increases willingness to implement and champion goals (Yue, Walden 2022). In crisis turbulence, the effect of leadership communication on employee trust is specified in terms of the TAEIO attributes (transparency, authenticity, empathy, and optimism), which are associated with trust formation and coordination (Men et al. 2024). In parallel, static crisis-communication models are being critically reconsidered in favour of dynamic ones that account for event evolution, changing actor coalitions, and the iterative nature of interpretations (Jong 2025; Hamid et al. 2024).

A third important layer concerns emotions and affective dynamics. Research shows that emotions are not an impediment to rational goal-setting, but a coordination resource when managed through acknowledgement, labelling, and containment, that is, maintaining an affective frame compatible with action (Maitlis, Sonenshein 2010). Work on organisational emotional capability demonstrates that empathetic leadership, timely symbolic actions, and coherent narratives reduce anxiety and prevent interpretive fragmentation at critical moments (Huy 1999), while leadership narratives of resilience strengthen crisis readiness and interpretive compatibility (Gigliotti 2025).

A fourth line addresses team cognition and shared mental models. Studies of team cognition show that shared representations of tasks, roles, and priorities increase the speed of alignment and the quality of coordination under load, and that these models are formed and updated through cycles of communication, joint attention, and feedback (Salas et al. 2008; Mohammed et al. 2010). The linkage to sensemaking is evident in that a “shared goal” in crisis is not a preset constant, but the result of iterative alignment of interpretations, where managerial practices of framing and transparency trigger the restructuring of these models (Weick et al. 2005). In distributed and inter-organisational contexts, this requires mechanisms for jointly highlighting key signals and frames, synchronous practical activity, and the visibility of actions; otherwise, goal alignment unravels (Wolbers 2022; Georgiou, Murillo 2023).

Finally, a fifth group of studies connects interpretive and communicative mechanisms with organisational resilience. Conceptualisations of resilience increasingly move beyond resource stocks, describing it as a dynamic capacity to perceive signals, reprioritise, and rapidly restore directional action, thereby maintaining sensemaking coherence under disruption (Duchek 2020). New reviews and empirical work directly link internal crisis communication, sensemaking/sensegiving processes, and resilience, confirming the role of managerial interpretive competence in restoring coordination and goal alignment (Adamu et al. 2023; Hollands et al. 2024). For networked projects and cross-functional initiatives, there is additional emphasis on adaptive sensemaking: jointly refining the situational picture, prioritising resources, and distributing responsibilities across organisations (Iftikhar et al. 2024).

It is important to underscore the connection with organisational goals. A recent framework in the “Journal of Management Studies” proposes viewing the triad “goals, outcomes, and assessment of success” as a linked process (Aguilera et al. 2024). In crises, the managerial task is to keep this triad aligned through open communication, interpretive framing, and emotional containment so that the collective understanding of goals remains intact when conditions change.

A temporal perspective strengthens this linkage: narratives connect past reference points, the current construal of crisis, and desired goal states. Different phases call for distinct managerial moves, from early containment and the framing of uncertainty, to the subsequent specification of goals and success criteria (Hernes 2022). Leaders’ linguistic and discursive practices (metaphors, categorical schemes, and the “translation” of strategic goals into the language of tasks) become the operational mechanism of such alignment (Whittle et al. 2023), while transparent two-way communication cements trust and readiness for co-action (Yue, Walden 2022; Men et al. 2024).

Despite a rich and multidimensional theoretical base, important gaps remain. First, the literature rarely integrates three key mechanisms, namely communicative openness, cognitive framing, and

emotional containment, into a single explanatory model that demonstrates their joint operation and potential trade-offs in real time (Men et al. 2024; Hamid et al. 2024). Second, the temporal perspective is underdeveloped: how exactly the micro-processes of joint sensemaking unfold over time, which transitional states (episodes of unstable interpretation and goal “desynchronisation”) occur, and which managerial moves are effective at different crisis phases (Weick 1995; Hernes 2022; Jong 2025). Third, multi-level connectedness remains insufficiently explored: how local managerial interventions (frame formulation, tone choice, and rituals of acknowledging uncertainty) aggregate at the unit and organisational levels to restore directional coordination (Gioia, Chittipeddi 1991; Gioia et al. 2013; Wolbers 2022). This article addresses these gaps by proposing a conceptual model that links the three mechanisms to the formation and maintenance of the collective understanding of goals, incorporates temporal dynamics and cross-level effects, and positions interpretive competence as the core of crisis leadership. The triad “goals, outcomes, and assessment” is used as an operational framework for evaluating managerial interventions (Duchek 2020; Adamu et al. 2023; Aguilera et al. 2024; Men et al. 2024; Hamid et al. 2024).

### Research methodology

The study operates within an interpretivist paradigm with a processual focus, relying on a qualitative, multi-level design. Our aim is to capture, in real time, how the collective understanding of organisational goals is formed and maintained in crisis through the managerial mechanisms of communicative openness, cognitive framing, and emotional containment. The theoretical–methodological basis draws on sensemaking and sensegiving approaches in organisations that uncover the micro-processes of interpretation and meaning alignment (Weick 1995; Gioia et al. 2013; Maitlis, Sonenshein 2010; Weick et al. 2005).

**Research design and unit selection.** We employ a multiple comparative design featuring within- and cross-organisation comparison, which enables the identification of common mechanisms and context-specific differences in managerial meaning work under uncertainty (Eisenhardt 1989; Yin 2018). Unit selection is purposive and theoretically guided: we include organisations that experienced a pronounced crisis episode documented in managerial and communication artefacts, and that differ by industry, scale, and structure. This enhances transferability while maintaining theoretical coherence (Eisenhardt 1989; Yin 2018). Sample size follows the principle of theoretical saturation: data collection continues until additional cases and interviews no longer yield substantive categories or relationships (Glaser, Strauss 1967).

**Data sources and collection procedures.** The empirical base consists of a secondary qualitative corpus, comprising published, peer-reviewed studies with access to primary qualitative materials (interviews and managerial documents), which allows comparison of episodes and practices without new fieldwork. The corpus includes:

- (1) Belgium study: 37 in-depth interviews with HR managers from 37 organisations (12 SMEs, 25 large; private and public sectors; IT, consulting, insurance) collected during the second COVID-19 wave (December 2020–April 2021), complemented by member check (6 HR) and employee check (6 employees) (Rys et al. 2024);
- (2) Switzerland study: 25 semi-structured interviews with representatives of key Swiss health institutions at national and cantonal levels (thematic analysis; focus on barriers/facilitators, transparency, and inter-organisational coordination) (Rubinelli et al. 2023);
- (3) Sweden study: an analytical set of materials on crisis-communication coordination in Sweden during the first months of the pandemic (spring 2020): transcripts and descriptions of teleconferences with involved organisations, and selected interviews with public-sector representatives (Johansson 2021).

In total, the corpus covers at least 62 interviews (Belgium and Switzerland), as well as a comparable set of documents and messages that reflect the temporal dynamics of managerial communications (Rys et al. 2024; Rubinelli et al. 2023). The analysis is organised around a framework of semi-structured episodes of goal redefinition, reprioritisation, and the holding of collective attention. We focus on interpretive practices, frames employed, modes of transparency, and ways of managing audience emotions. For temporal anchoring, we compile event chronologies for each source, linking timestamps and media types (Jick 1979; Langley 1999).

**Operationalisation of key mechanisms.** Communicative openness is coded via markers of acknowledging uncertainty and knowledge gaps, explaining decision rationales, regularity and predictability of updates, and invitations to feedback and co-participation (Men et al. 2024; Hamid et al. 2024). Cognitive framing is identified through problem- and solution-frames, metaphors, causal linkages, restructuring of goals and priorities, and the coherence of ‘top-level’ frames with local interpretations in units (Gioia et al. 2013; Weick et al. 2005).

Emotional containment is captured through signs of acknowledging audience affect, empathetic responses, normalisation of feelings, building narrative coherence, and stabilising affect for joint action (Maitlis, Sonenshein 2010; Huy 1999). We define emotional containment as the managed holding and normalisation of collective affective responses to sustain joint attention and capacity to act (Huy 1999), aligning it with the sociology of emotional labour and emotion regulation in organisations (Hochschild 1983). The initial indicator set is specified deductively from the literature, then extended inductively as empirical manifestations appear in the sources (Rys et al. 2024; Rubinelli et al. 2023).

**Analytical strategy.** Methodologically, we adopt a processual sociology lens: observed episodes are treated as units of social action in which frames are constructed, contested, and stabilised in interaction. During coding, we distinguish diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational elements of framing (Snow et al. 1986; Benford, Snow 2000), alongside markers of affect regulation, linking micro-interaction to meso-level organisational coordination.

We use a hybrid coding scheme: open coding followed by aggregation into second-order themes and aggregate dimensions, per a methodology that ensures traceability from informants’ terms to theoretical categories (Gioia et al. 2013; Miles et al. 2014). To capture process logic, we combine temporal bracketing and episode comparison with reconstruction of event sequences and turning points affecting goal alignment (Langley 1999). For each organisation or institutional level, we build narrative maps of goal and interpretation dynamics; across levels, we compare configurations of mechanisms to identify patterns of conjoint action of openness, framing, and containment under varying crisis contexts (Eisenhardt 1989). To strengthen external comparability, we include sources from different countries and sectors (Rys et al. 2024; Rubinelli et al. 2023; Johansson 2021). The unit of analysis is the sociological episode of interaction in which frames are formulated, contested, and stabilised in the presence of material mediators, specifically boundary objects such as explanatory notes, priority checklists, and change logs (Star, Griesemer 1989).

**Quality assurance and reliability.** Validity is enhanced through source triangulation (interviews × managerial documents × public communications) and cross-context comparison (Belgium, Switzerland, and Sweden). We also account for the fact that parts of the primary studies applied member check and employee check, which strengthen interpretive credibility (Rys et al. 2024). To ensure coding consistency, coders are calibrated on a sub-corpus with subsequent comparison and discussion of discrepancies; inter-coder agreement is recorded by calculating an agreement coefficient (e.g., Cohen’s kappa) and by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions (Cohen 1960; Miles et al. 2014).

**Ethical considerations.** The analysis draws on publicly available, peer-reviewed publications and associated materials. Ethical procedures (informed consent, anonymisation, research-ethics approvals)

were ensured in the primary studies included in the corpus (Rys et al. 2024; Rubinelli et al. 2023). Our work adheres to correct citation and applies secondary anonymisation of excerpts.

**Limitations and transferability.** Limitations stem from contextual heterogeneity and from the fact that secondary data were originally collected for different research questions. We mitigate biases through triangulation of sources, temporal anchoring of episodes, and cross-case comparison across countries and levels. Transferability is achieved by theoretical, rather than statistical, generalisation, specifying the conditions and configurations under which the three mechanisms jointly sustain aligned goal-setting in crisis (Yin 2018; Eisenhardt 1989). The resulting analytical product is a cross-source, comparable conceptual model that links configurations of openness, framing, and emotional containment to the dynamics of forming and maintaining the collective understanding of goals, together with a set of testable propositions for subsequent theoretical and empirical work on crisis leadership and organisational resilience (Duchek 2020; Men et al. 2024; Jong 2025).

### Results of the study

Analysis of the interview and document corpus shows that the formation of a collective understanding of goals in crisis unfolds as a series of short yet dense episodes in which managerial interventions set and sustain a working “frame of meaning” for joint action.

At the trajectory level, a recurring four-phase sequence was observed in almost all situations: initial perturbation (a sharp increase in uncertainty and divergence of interpretations), rapid stabilisation of channels and attention, retuning of goals and priorities with local refinements, and consolidation of updated reference points through repetition, rituals, and checkpoints (Weick 1995).

Transitions between phases were accompanied by “windows” of heightened sensitivity to managerial messages; when these windows were not used, regressions to a prior state and renewed misalignment were recorded (Langley 1999).

The phase logic aligns with retrospective reconstructions of communication dynamics in Swiss public and clinical organisations, where the stages “early response – peak – stabilisation – long adaptation” were identified (Rubinelli et al. 2023).

**Communicative openness.** In successful cases, it took the form of early acknowledgement of uncertainty, explanation of decision rationales, and a predictable rhythm of updates. Empirically, this was expressed in regular information slots, unified message templates, clear escalation rules, and accessible feedback channels with visible moderation (Men 2014). Short, authentic leader signals cut through “noise” and set a shared reference point. A telling remark was: “It was new for everyone; no one knew how to handle it” – an admission of not-knowing as a starting point for collective sensemaking (Rys et al. 2024). The same source underscores the need to maintain “connection” with people: “...maintain the connection with the employer brand in times of COVID” (Rys et al. 2024). Negative patterns included irregular cadence, divergence between message content and observed actions, and detail overload without prioritisation; in such cases, transparency did not convert into trust (Coombs 2007).

**Cognitive framing.** Organisations that achieved goal alignment used clear “problem frames” and “solution frames” tied to a time horizon and to an operationalised core of goals. Most effective were practices that packed complex causal chains into two or three logical steps, highlighted a “red thread” (the principal goal), and synchronised terminology between headquarters and the front line (Weick et al. 2005). Where top-level frames lacked equivalents in the languages of functions and shifts, competing local interpretations persisted and slowed alignment. Comparative material from Northern Europe indicates that systematising frames and unifying the vocabulary across levels reduces the risk of meaning “drift” in complex institutional configurations (Johansson et al. 2023).

**Emotional containment.** Successful episodes involved normalising feelings (“expected emotions in an unusual situation”), explicit signals of care, and narrative coherence – a return to the same ‘goal story’ across communication formats (Maitlis, Sonenshein 2010). From the interviews: “I sometimes worry about people too” – a brief but telling phrase that translates empathy into a managerial norm; alongside this, the loss of “co-presence” is recorded, calling for compensatory practices (“being together in the office... is still much better than remotely”) (Rys et al. 2024). Acknowledging losses, using symbolic markers of transition (rituals for phase closure, thanks, progress markers), and maintaining a consistent tone reduced anxiety and kept attention on compatible tasks; in the absence of containment, there was “sticking” to anxiety topics and a widening interpretive spread even amid frequent formal updates (Huy 1999).

Multi-level connectedness and the role of intermediaries. Interpretive intermediaries – middle managers and coordinators who translated top frames into operational tasks – played a key role. Early involvement correlated with fewer iterations of clarification and shorter transitions between phases; absence or ambiguity of this role led to “pockets” of alternative goals and local blockages (Gioia, Chittipeddi 1991). Inter-organisational observations from Switzerland show that a unified ‘goal scaffold’ at the national level, complemented by local operationalisation at the canton level and supported by material frame-carriers (explanatory notes to decisions; Q&A for front lines – an approved set of short “question–answer” items for frontline staff that sets uniform wording (Coombs 2007; Boin et al. 2016); a change log – a sequential record of decisions and statuses that serves as a material carrier of frames and a boundary object (Weick 1995; Star, Griesemer 1989)) reduces the risk of divergence across coupled organisations (Rubinelli et al. 2023).

Configurations of conjoint mechanism action. Three stable configurations were observed:

- (1) the “alignment triad” – high openness, clear framing, active containment – produces rapid movement to workable alignment with minimal regressions;
- (2) “transparency without framing” – a flow of facts and updates with weak goal logic; attention was redirected without durable alignment (Men et al. 2024);
- (3) “framing without containment” – a rationally coherent frame against heightened affect and latent resistance; alignment was unstable and required repeated “pick-ups” (Maitlis, Christianson 2014).

**Temporal sensitivity of mechanisms.** Communicative openness had the strongest effect at the outset and at the transition from initial perturbation to stabilisation; cognitive framing dominated during retuning and entry into consolidation; emotional containment mattered throughout but especially at phase boundaries, where the risk of desynchronisation is highest (Jong 2025). In our material, interpretive artefacts function as boundary objects: they ensure compatibility of interpretations across levels and groups, stabilising the ‘shared picture’ at phase transitions (Star, Griesemer 1989).

**Role of artefacts.** Most effective were hybrid carriers that combine information and interpretation: short explanatory notes to decisions, unified update boards with change histories, and priority checklists with time stamps. Static regulations without a narrative component failed to hold alignment when context shifted (Adamu et al. 2023). The remark about “frame memory” is illustrative: “...maintain the connection...” as an ongoing duty rather than a one-off message (Rys et al. 2024).



Table 1

**Mechanisms × crisis phases:  
Managerial actions, artefacts, effects and risks**

Crisis phase	Dominant mechanism	Typical managerial actions	Key artefacts	Observed effect on alignment	Typical risks/errors
1. Initial perturbation	Communicative openness	Acknowledge uncertainty; mark “what is known / unknown”; set the update cadence	Emergency briefings; Q&A; single notification channel	Rapid noise reduction; fixation of a shared field of attention	Irregular cadence; divergence between words and actions; detail overload
2. Rapid stabilisation	Communicative openness → cognitive framing	Prioritise two–three goals; separate ‘now/later’; escalation rules	Standard update templates; priority checklists; weekly roadmaps	Convergence of basic interpretations; readiness to reallocate tasks	Premature complex framing; lack of feedback
3. Retuning of goals	Cognitive framing ↔ emotional containment	Repackage causal links; localise goals to unit / shift metrics; acknowledge losses	Explanatory notes to decisions; local KPI sheets; briefings	Translation of the shared frame into operational languages; reduced anxiety	Rational frame without affect relief; competing local frames
4. Consolidation of reference points	Emotional containment, supported by openness	Phase-closure rituals; expressions of thanks; progress markers; repetition of the core narrative	Summary digests; change logs; visual progress markers	Stability of alignment; prevention of regressions	Fading communications after early successes; static regulations without narrative

**Source:** compiled by the authors.

The table aggregates recurrent observation units along temporal and mechanism axes, showing which managerial actions and frame-carriers are reproducibly associated with transitions to goal alignment, and which timing errors lead to regressions. The configurations correspond to practices of internal communication (Men 2014; Men et al. 2024) and to inter-organisational coordination in the public sector (Rubinelli et al. 2023).

In a sociological reading, such carriers operate as boundary objects – artefacts that support compatibility of interpretations across groups and levels (Star, Griesemer 1989). Accordingly, explanatory notes, Q&A, and change logs function as objectified frames that make meaning visible and checkable.

Summary of empirical propositions:

- (1) early, rhythmic and consistent openness reduces interpretive dispersion and accelerates movement to workable alignment;
- (2) framing that simplifies causal chains and ties goals to operational markers ensures portability of the frame across organisational levels;

- (3) emotional containment is a necessary condition for durable alignment; without it even high-quality framing quickly “blurs”;
- (4) the most effective sequence places containment before framing, with openness sustaining cadence;
- (5) interpretive intermediaries at the middle level are critical for translating frames and preventing local misalignments;
- (6) inter-organisational alignment strengthens when frames are materialised and a coordinated “goal scaffold” exists across governance levels.

These results register observed regularities without theorising causal mechanisms. In the next section, the empirical findings will be set against theoretical propositions on sensemaking and sensegiving, as well as research on crisis and internal communication, to ground a conceptual model of managerial interpretive competence (Duchek 2020; Adamu et al. 2023; Men et al. 2024).

## Discussion

**Alignment mechanism as a causal sequence.** The episodes indicate that achieving goal alignment during a crisis is not a collection of isolated communication techniques but an ordered sequence of interpretive work. Emotional containment clears the perceptual field of affective noise, making audiences receptive to signals (Maitlis, Sonenshein 2010; Huy 1999). Based on this, framing translates uncertainty into a simple causal scheme of “why → what → how” with operational markers (Weick 1995; Weick et al. 2005; Gioia et al. 2013). Openness then consolidates alignment through cadence, predictability, and two-way channels (Men 2014; Yue, Walden 2022; Men et al. 2024). This logic is consistent with a process view of sensemaking and explains why “more information” without containment and framing fails to raise alignment (Weick 1995; Coombs 2007). A temporal perspective clarifies that timing errors (a premature “rational” frame before affect is addressed; late or infrequent updates) produce the observed failures of “transparency without meaning” and “framing without holding” (Hernes 2022; Jong 2025; Maitlis, Christianson 2014; Men et al. 2024).

**Meaning, emotions, and power: A sociological integration.** The results support treating goals as second-order social facts sustained by frames, emotional labour, and material carriers (Goffman 1974; Berger, Luckmann 1966; Hochschild 1983; Star, Griesemer 1989). Containment does not dilute rationality; it institutionalises the emotional norms required for joint action, thereby reducing status and group asymmetries in threat perception and legitimising the shift to a common frame (Maitlis, Sonenshein 2010; Huy 1999). Framing converts power into legitimate definitions of the situation if the frame’s language is compatible with local practices; otherwise, “pockets of alternative goals” persist (Gioia, Chittipeddi 1991; Gioia et al. 2013). Thus, goal alignment appears as a joint construction in which organisational identity and stated purpose supply categorical economy and moral validity for the frames (Whittle et al. 2023; Aguilera et al. 2024).

**Multilevel connectedness and the role of intermediaries.** The detected centrality of interpretive intermediaries is explained by micro-foundations of translating frames across levels: middle managers connect abstract causal schemes with the “task grammars” of shifts and functions (Gioia, Chittipeddi 1991; Gioia et al. 2013). Where intermediaries were engaged early and worked with a unified lexicon, clarification iterations decreased and phase transitions shortened; role vacuums amplified local divergence – a typical issue for distributed and inter-organisational settings (Wolbers 2022; Georgiou, Murillo 2023). Multilevel coherence improved when a top-level goal scaffold existed, was operationalised below, and was backed by practices and carriers (Rubinelli et al. 2023; Johansson 2021; Johansson et al. 2023).

**Material carriers as “objectified frames”.** Explanatory notes to decisions, unified updates with change histories, and priority checklists function as boundary objects compatible with multiple groups

and preserving “frame memory” at phase transitions (Star, Griesemer 1989; Weick et al. 2005). Their dual nature – informational and interpretive – makes them resilient to turbulence: they do not merely “report facts” but materialise causal logic and success criteria, aligning the triad “goals – outcomes – assessment” (Aguilera et al. 2024). Hence, the empirical weakness of static regulations without a narrative: when the context shifts, they lose connection to the active frame (Adamu et al. 2023).

**Theoretical refinement of the resilience mechanism.** The sequence containment → framing → openness extends resilience as a dynamic capacity to reorder priorities in time and restore directional action (Duchek 2020). Internal communication is not an external “change support” module but the core channel through which sensemaking/sensegiving micro-mechanisms unfold (Adamu et al. 2023; Hollands et al. 2024). For projects and networked modes, adaptive sensemaking at organisational boundaries is additionally crucial; boundary objects and coordinated “update windows” reduce the risk of desynchronisation (Iftikhar et al. 2024; Wolbers 2022).

**Clarifying the operational triad “goals – outcomes – assessment”.** Field markers (decision latency, the share of artefacts referencing the active frame, SLA adherence and DSO / cash-collection coherence, rollback and contradiction rates, semantic agreement on goal formulations) are not mere compliance indicators but measures of frame portability across levels (Jick 1979; Langley 1999; Salas et al. 2008; Mohammed et al. 2010). Their dynamics show how the TAE0 profile of leader communication (transparency, authenticity, empathy, optimism) converts into observable coordination, given the right sequence and carriers (Men 2014; Yue, Walden 2022; Men et al. 2024). This supplies a missing bridge between “communication” and “operational consequences” (Coombs 2007; Boin et al. 2016).

**Threshold conditions and moderators.** The strength of the sequence depends on: system connectedness—the denser the inter-unit couplings, the more critical the early materialisation of the frame in carriers (Wolbers 2022; Rubinelli et al. 2023); salience of losses – the greater the losses and status threats, the higher the required containment for framing to legitimate action (Huy 1999; Maitlis, Sonenshein 2010); lexical compatibility – mismatch between the “upper” lexicon and “local task grammars” generates persistent interpretive gaps (Gioia et al. 2013; Whittle et al. 2023). These moderators explain the variation of trajectories and transitions recorded in the Swiss and Belgian materials (Rubinelli et al. 2023; Rys et al. 2024).

**Theoretical contribution.** This article offers three clarifications. It integrates openness, framing, and emotional containment into a single sequence with time-sensitive points – an addition to sensemaking reviews and crisis-communication models that typically treat elements in isolation (Maitlis, Christianson 2014; Coombs 2007; Men et al. 2024; Hamid et al. 2024; Eckstein et al. 2024). It shows multilevel micro-foundations via the institutional role of interpretive intermediaries and boundary objects, linking level-specific languages and stabilising “frame memory” (Gioia, Chittipeddi 1991; Star, Griesemer 1989; Johansson 2021; Rubinelli et al. 2023). It also operationalises goal alignment through observable markers and ties them to the goals – outcomes – assessment triad and the TAE0 profile of leadership communication (Aguilera et al. 2024; Men 2014; Men et al. 2024).

**Managerial implications (concise).** Normalize emotions and acknowledge unknowns while fixing the cadence and rules of updates; formulate a short causal scheme “why → what → how” tied to unit / shift markers and a unified vocabulary; sustain alignment through predictable update windows, a single Q&A, a change log, and repetition of the central narrative thread; assign translation of the frame into local task grammars to designated intermediaries in advance; and confirm the frame with material carriers for inter-organisational couplings (Weick 1995; Star, Griesemer 1989; Gioia et al. 2013; Men et al. 2024; Rubinelli et al. 2023).

**Directions for further testing.** Quasi-experimental tests of the causal sequence (containment → framing → openness) on longitudinal samples are needed, along with comparisons of alternative openness cadences and carrier formats, and assessment of intermediary engagement thresholds under

varying structural connectedness and loss intensity (Langley 1999; Yin 2018; Eisenhardt 1989). Additional value would come from analysing lexical transferability across industries and public/private sectors (Johansson et al. 2023; Georgiou, Murillo 2023).

### **Conclusions**

The study demonstrates that goal alignment in crisis is neither a static state nor a by-product of formal regulations, but a temporary effect of a well-designed interpretive process. Decisive here is managerial interpretive competence, which sequentially combines three mechanisms: emotional containment, cognitive framing, and communicative openness. In this configuration, containment removes affective barriers to reception, framing orders causality and priorities in a simple and portable form, and rhythmic openness maintains a shared field of attention and recalibrates interpretations as the situation evolves.

These findings answer the research question: the combination of openness, framing, and containment holds and restores aligned goal-setting not through “more information” but through the right sequence and pacing. Timing errors yield typical failures: “transparency without meaning” (a flow of facts without a working frame); “framing without containment” (a rational scheme that fails to take hold under anxiety); and infrequent or arrhythmic contact, which fragments the shared picture and raises the transaction costs of alignment.

Theoretically, the work deepens the dialogue between sensemaking and sensegiving traditions by showing that emotions and artefacts are not peripheral but necessary operational conditions of meaning production in crisis. Emotional containment widens the “plausibility window” for leadership frames, while hybrid artefacts (explanatory notes, change logs, priority check cards) function as objectified frames that make meaning visible, repeatable, and auditable across organisational levels. In practice, this translates into the design of a “paced” crisis interpretation: a brief phase of emotion validation, followed by a simple causal frame, and then a predictable rhythm of updates and feedback sustained by middle-tier interpretive intermediaries.

The study’s limitations stem from the qualitative character of the data, potential retrospective bias, and sectoral heterogeneity of cases. The conclusions constitute theoretical rather than statistical generalisation; transferability is ensured by specifying the conditions under which the triad of mechanisms consistently works. Further work should include micro-temporal measurement of the “containment window”, the development of metrics for rhythmic openness and frame portability, comparison of intermediary configurations under different organisational architectures and degrees of digitalisation, and an assessment of the effects of objectified frames on post-crisis organisational learning.

The article’s principal contribution is to operationalise managerial interpretive competence as the core of crisis leadership: it renders measurable and reproducible the processes through which a collective “grips” the goal again and holds it under uncertainty. For a sociological lens, this means shifting from describing structures to modelling procedures for aligning meaning; for managerial practice, it implies moving from one-off messages to designing a sustained cadence of joint sensemaking. For the sociology of organisations, this clarifies the role of emotions and material carriers in sustaining collective action: containment widens the “plausibility window” for frames, and artefacts act as stabilisers of shared interpretations.

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