Adaptive Sensemaking

Growing with Challenges and Sustaining Impact and Wellbeing

Training Concept

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1 INTRODUCTION

Setbacks and challenges in areas of our life that deeply matter to us take a toll on psychological wellbeing if we do not find empowering ways of dealing with them. Those who are passionate about their work, for instance, should foster learning-oriented interpretations of challenges to sustain their engagement (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017).

In the following, a training plan will be presented for developing the ability to identify dysfunctional interpretations and replace them with learning-oriented ones. To this end, the training will build on three pillars: (1) a simple summary of the insights of sensemaking research; (2) mindfulness exercises; (3) exercises to practice reframing challenges through the application of the ABC-Model of *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.*

2 CONCEPT

2.1 Sensemaking

Sensemaking is a crucial concept in organization studies (e.g., Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). It denotes the "process, prompted by violated expectations, that involves attending to and bracketing cues in the environment, creating intersubjective meaning through cycles of interpretation and action, and thereby enacting a more ordered environment from which further cues can be drawn" (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 67). Our sensemaking is adaptable if are ready to detach from interpretations and enactments, should they fail to orient us in changing circumstances, and to explore alternative perspectives.(Cornelissen et al., 2014)

Schabram and Maitlis (2017) studied sensemaking triggered by setbacks and challenges at work characterized by employee passion, enjoyment, and/or a sense of duty and moral responsibility (p. 591). Because this kind of work, which they understand as callings, comes with greater involvement and engagement, it also implies intense emotional reactions to successes and setbacks.

Schabram and Maitlis identify three different styles of how people make sense of their calling and its challenges. Each style is associated with particular reactions that shape the environment which then elicits further reactions. This feedback cycle shapes typical developments, or calling paths, of work engagement and wellbeing. The first calling path is (1) *identity-oriented*, where people consider themselves as uniquely suited for the work and challenges mean threats to one's identity. The second path is (2) *contribution-oriented*, comprising people who focus on their impact, which is threatened by challenges. On the third, most adaptive and sustainable path people are (3) *practice-oriented*, with a focus on growth, so that challenges become learning opportunities.

Each approach has advantages but the identity-, and contribution-oriented paths increase the risk of intense frustration, destructive actions, and burnout symptoms (see Appendix 6.1 for more detail). Hence, Schabram and Maitlis suggest supporting people with these styles to deal constructively with challenges (p. 606). Practice-orientation, on the other hand, corresponds to greater adaptability in the face of setbacks and challenges because we then do not depend on maintaining the belief in our worth or contribution.

2.2 ABC-Model

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) developed means to help people seize agency over their interpretations of events. It is a "key element" of CBT to help people "see the connection between an event that may serve as a trigger, and how irrational [i.e., dysfunctional] evaluations may cause emotional and/or behavioral consequences that often in turn lead to increased distress or conflict" (Malkinson & Brask-Rustad, 2013, p. 122). One of the most commonly used tools in CBT is the ABC-model (for a summary see Selva, 2021) which helps with anxiety, depression, anger, and issues with self-confidence (Fuller et al., 2010). The model asserts that „our emotions and behaviors (C: Consequences) are not directly determined by life events (A: Activating Events), but rather by the way these events are cognitively processed and evaluated (B: Beliefs) " (Oltean et al., 2017, p. 602). For details on the application of the model see sections *5.1* and *8.2*.

2.3 Mindfulness

Knowing how to apply the model must be complemented by practicing recognizing when to apply it. Therefore, the training will comprise mindfulness exercises. Mindfulness increases wellbeing at work (Good et al., 2016) and allows taking a step back so that difficult emotions do not immediately translate into destructive action (Friese et al., 2012; Klein & Robinson, 2019). Moreover, mindfulness expands agency over modes of information-processing, thereby increasing flexibility in the handling of situations (Kudesia, 2019, p. 406).

Mindfulness practice allows people to appreciate that attention, if non-judgmental, is not a limited resource and that monitoring one's thinking and acting is empowering (Kudesia, 2019, pp. 414–415). Most importantly, practitioners experience for themselves that thoughts and beliefs are no definite representations of reality but interpretations of its many layers („map-terrain differentiation," ibid).

2.4 Learning objectives

Three dimensions of effective habits (compare Covey, 2004, p. 47) summarize the training's goals:

1) **Knowledge:** Participants know that different interpretations of setbacks fuel different kinds of emotions and actions, that they can be summarized into three styles of interpretation of which a practice-orientation is most functional, and that mindfulness and the ABC-model help to reframe setbacks.

2) **Desire:** Participants understand the importance of the sensemaking processes and their consequences for productivity and mental health. They want to adopt the most functional interpretation-style, for the sake of the work and their wellbeing.

3) **Skill:** Participants can identify dysfunctional interpretations of setbacks and reframe them with the ABC-model. They can practice mindfulness independently to improve their awareness of interpretation processes.

3 TRAINING PLAN

Knowledge = (K) *Desire = (D)* *Skill = (S)*

Time	Transfer and Learning goals	Method	Media
Warm-Up: Topic and greeting			
09.30 – 09.45 am **15 min.**	**Topic:** welcoming participants **Goals:** (K) knowing trainer, rules, regulations; (D) wanting to follow rules for better learning **Content:** greeting**;** rules (e.g., phone use); fire regulations; special circumstances	**Trainer-input**	**PowerPoint** welcome procedure
5 min.	*Room for questions*		
09.50 – 09.55 am **5 min.**	**Topic:** *Mindfulness Exercise A* **Goals:** (K) knowing mindfulness exercises; (S) improving practice **Content:** simple focus on breath, letting sensations and thoughts arise	**Guided exercise**	
09.55 – 10.00 am **5 min.**	**Topic:** Getting to know each other (a) **Goals:** (K) knowing relationship to work and difficulties; (D) becoming curious about how to adjust **Content:** answer three questions: *Why am I doing this work? Last time I found something challenging? Last time I learned something?*	**Self-reflection**	**PowerPoint** three questions
10.00 – 10.20 am	**Topic:** Getting to know each other (b) **Goals:** (K) knowing the others; (D) wanting to engage with them; (S) being able to address them personally	**Trainer-moderation**	**PowerPoint** three questions

20 min.	**Content:** introducing yourself by name, sharing years with company, and answers to three questions		
Part I: Calling Paths and Sensemaking			
10.20 – 10.30 am **10 min.**	**Topic:** *Sensemaking Theory A: Calling Paths* **Goals:** (K) knowing about different understandings/interpretations of calling and of challenges **Topic:** introduce Schabram and Maitlis's (2017) research on understandings/paths of one's calling; explain how understandings are associated with different styles of interpretations of setbacks	**Trainer-input**	**Flipchart** character-drawings for different paths (thinker for identity, hands-on for contribution, magnifier for learner)
10.30 – 10.50 am **20 min.**	**Topic:** What is my style? **Goals:** (K) becoming more self-aware; (S) learning to distinguish styles; (D) appreciating differences **Content:** getting feedback from colleagues on one's understanding of the work and of challenges; focus on strengths and on which style these might be most associated with; rotating group roles	**Work in groups** size of three random allocation 5 min. for each participant to receive feedback + buffer	**Flipchart** same as before
10.50 – 11.00 am **10 min.**	**Topic:** the greatest challenges at work **Goals:** (K) becoming more aware of one's struggles; (D) wanting to do something about it **Content:** What are the most difficult/frustrating situations at work? (write down at least 3); What do I want to be different?	**Self-reflection**	
10 min.	*Small break*		
11.10 – 11.20 am **10 min.**	**Topic:** *Sensemaking Theory B: Emotional and behavioral consequences* **Goals:** (K) knowing the effects of styles of interpretation; (D) realizing the importance of consequences and wanting the best	**Trainer-input**	**PowerPoint** showing and summarizing models of Scha-

	Content: how different interpretations lead to different emotional and behavioral reactions that act as self-fulfilling prophecies and amplify effects		bram and Maitlis (2017) (see appendix 8.1)
11.20 – 11.30 am **10 min.**	**Topic:** learning by example to identify styles **Goals:** (S) understand different paths and judge how they will unfold; (D) appreciating the importance of the processes **Content:** euthanasia of animals as an exemplary challenge of the calling the Schabram and Maitlis (2017, pp. 596-599); let participants guess how people reacted	**Trainer-moderation** Case study	**PowerPoint** *slide 1*: challenge: euthanasia picture *slide 2*: different reactions of three paths
5 min.	*Buffer for questions*		
11.35 – 11.45 am **10 min.**	**Topic:** Classifying your own reactions **Goals:** (K) becoming self-aware, understanding one's patterns; (S) being able to classify interpretation-styles; (D) wanting more agency **Content:** return to three difficult moments noted in self-reflection at 10.50 am and categorize them	**Working alone** Practice	**PowerPoint** *slide 2* from above: different reactions of three paths
11.45 – 12.15 am **30 min.**	**Topic:** sharing one's challenges **Goals:** (K) becoming more self-aware, knowing that others function differently; (S) being able to classify interpretation-styles **Content:** every participant shares one of their difficult moments and their initial classification of it, and gets feedback; 10 min. each	**Working in groups** same groups of three as above	
5 min.	*Small break*		
12.20 – 12.40 am **20 min.**	**Topic:** the perks and perils of identity-, and contribution-oriented paths	**Trainer-moderation** Discussion	**Flipchart** guiding questions

	Goals: (K) knowing the (dis-)advantages of each style; (D) wanting to align one's style with what is most functional **Content:** guiding questions: What are the different problems of each path? What does the variety imply about the relativity of our interpretations?		write down key-words for partic-ipants' comments
12.40 – 12.45 am **5 min.**	**Topic:** mindfulness and seizing agency over our in-terpretations **Goals:** (K) knowing that mindfulness allows to seize agency over interpretations; (D) wanting to practice **Content:** the need to monitor one's interpretations; Kudesia's (2019) three enabling believes of mindful-ness: attention sufficiency, virtue of monitoring, map-terrain-differentiation	**Trainer-input**	**PowerPoint** three enabling believes
12.45 am – 01.00 pm **15 min.**	**Topic:** *Mindfulness exercise B* **Goals:** (K) knowing mindfulness exercises; (S) being able to practice; (D) wanting to stay aware **Topic:** 12-minute meditation; letting everything (in-cluding interpretations) arise and pass without judg-ment and effort	**Guided exercise**	
60 min.	*Lunch break*		
Part II: Reframing and the ABC-Model			
10 min.	Yogic stretching and breathing	**Energizer**	
02.10 – 02.20 pm **10 min.**	**Topic:** ABC-model **Goals:** (B) knowing the model; (D) understanding that it can help to reframe and wanting to apply it **Content:** introducing the model and how it relates to sensemaking; explaining reframing	**Trainer-input**	**PowerPoint** graphic of ABC-model
02.20 – 02.40 pm	**Topic:** learning to apply the ABC-model to reframe	**Trainer-moder-ation**	**PowerPoint**

20 min.	**Goals:** (S) being able to go through the steps of the model **Content:** taking again the euthanasia example from Schabram and Maitlis (2017) and example from the group, and ask participants to apply the model	Case Study	returning to *slide 2* of 11.20 am
02.40 – 02.45 pm **5 min.**	**Topic:** Guiding questions for the application of the ABC-model **Goals:** (K) knowing that the application can be supported with targeted questions **Content:** handing out the worksheet with the guiding questions and introducing them	**Trainer-Input**	**Worksheet** with guiding questions (see appendix 8.2)
10 min.	*Buffer for questions*		
02.55 – 03.20 pm **25 min.**	**Topic:** Using the guiding questions for own cases **Goals:** (S) being able to use the worksheet to support reframing **Content:** returning to cases used in group before (11.45 am) and reframe with help of questions together, one after another	**Working in groups** same groups of three as above	**Worksheet**
10 min.	*Small break*		
03.30 – 03.50 pm **20 min.**	**Topic:** Reframing my challenges at work **Goals:** (S) being able to reframe challenges; (D) wanting to do so more **Content:** returning to two remaining cases of difficult moments (10.50 am); using the guiding questions to reframe one's interpretation	**Working alone** Practice	**Worksheet**
03.50 – 04.30 pm **40 min.**	**Topic:** Practicing reframing together **Goals:** (S) being able to reframe challenges; (D) wanting to do so more; (K) knowing that everyone reframes differently	**Working in groups**	**Worksheet**

	Content: going into new groups and sharing two cases; other two make suggestions and probe the reframing "What would you do if this happened?"	random allocation of groups of three	
5 min.	*Small break*		
Conclusion, securing transfer, and goodbye			
04.35 – 04.40 pm **5 min.**	**Topic:** The message of the day **Goals:** (K) knowing the relevance and connection between topics; (D) wanting to use reframing **Content:** key points summary	**Trainer-input**	**PowerPoint** summary of points
04.40 – 04.45 pm **5 min.**	**Topic:** My goals **Goals:** (K) knowing what one wants to change in the future; (D) wanting to change it **Content:** SMART goals about how to change reactions to setbacks; building on reflection of 10.50 am	**Self-reflection**	
Securing transfer: allocating learning partners to check progress (teams from last group work)			
10 min.	*Buffer and room for questions*		
04.55 – 05.05 pm **10 min.**	**Topic:** *Mindfulness exercise C* **Goals:** (S) being able to practice; (D) wanting to stay aware **Content:** letting the thoughts and frames of the day arise and pass without judgment	**Guided exercise**	
05.05 – 05.10 pm **5 min.**	**Topic:** How to continue mindfulness practice **Goals:** (K) knowing how to practice independently; (S) being able to construct a routine **Content:** suggestion of daily practice (ca. 12 min.)	**Trainer-input**	
10 min.	*Asking for personal feedback, handing out feedback-survey that goes to employer*		

05.20 – 05.30 pm **10 min.**	**Topic:** Goodbye with a laugh **Goals:** (K) work is not only challenging; (D) leaving in good spirits and motivated **Content:** everyone saying goodbye with a story of sometime they laughed heavily at work	**Trainer-moderation**	

4 METHOD, POSSIBLE CHALLENGES, AND TRAINER ROLE

The application of the ABC-model to enable reframing is the core skill developed by the training. The practice exercises build on the guiding questions (see appendix 8.2) listed on the provided worksheet. Applying the model, trainees will start with identifying difficult moments at work with negative emotions and behaviors (C). Next, they will describe the experienced setback or challenge (A) as accurately as possible, to then identify the style of interpretations (B) that cause negative reactions.

To empower the participants to change their reactions, the model is extended by the steps D (Dispute) and E (Effect) (Kos, 2017; Selva, 2021). ”Dispute” means to challenge employed frames and generate alternatives to them. To monitor the benefits of the method, the last step is to write down the final effect (E).

At approx. 3 pm, participants reenter their groups to reframe their challenges. Each will get feedback and suggestions from the others, after which participants will switch roles. In the process, the trainer will come to check progress, and make suggestions or ask questions where needed. In the subsequent working-alone activity, the trainer will be available for private questions.

All group exercises presuppose participants’ readiness to share difficult experiences. If participants are reluctant to do so, the trainer must build trust and lead the way, sharing relevant personal stories, thereby showing vulnerability and demonstrating the value of the promoted tools. Motivated participants will also be encouraged to lead by example.

Participants particularly frustrated with their work might enter the training with doubts about its effectiveness and possibly lament that none of the calling paths fits them. Considering the audience’s ethical motivations, the trainer will in this case respond by calling to mind the importance of

peace processes and that the three styles are only a model that may help the participants to sustain their important work. The trainer will raise participants' self-efficacy and ask what they can do about their situation at work, to then explain how the model can help.

Generally, the trainer will address participants' responsibility and mobilize their initiative in the learning process, which he will only guide with initial inputs, suggestions, and targeted questions.

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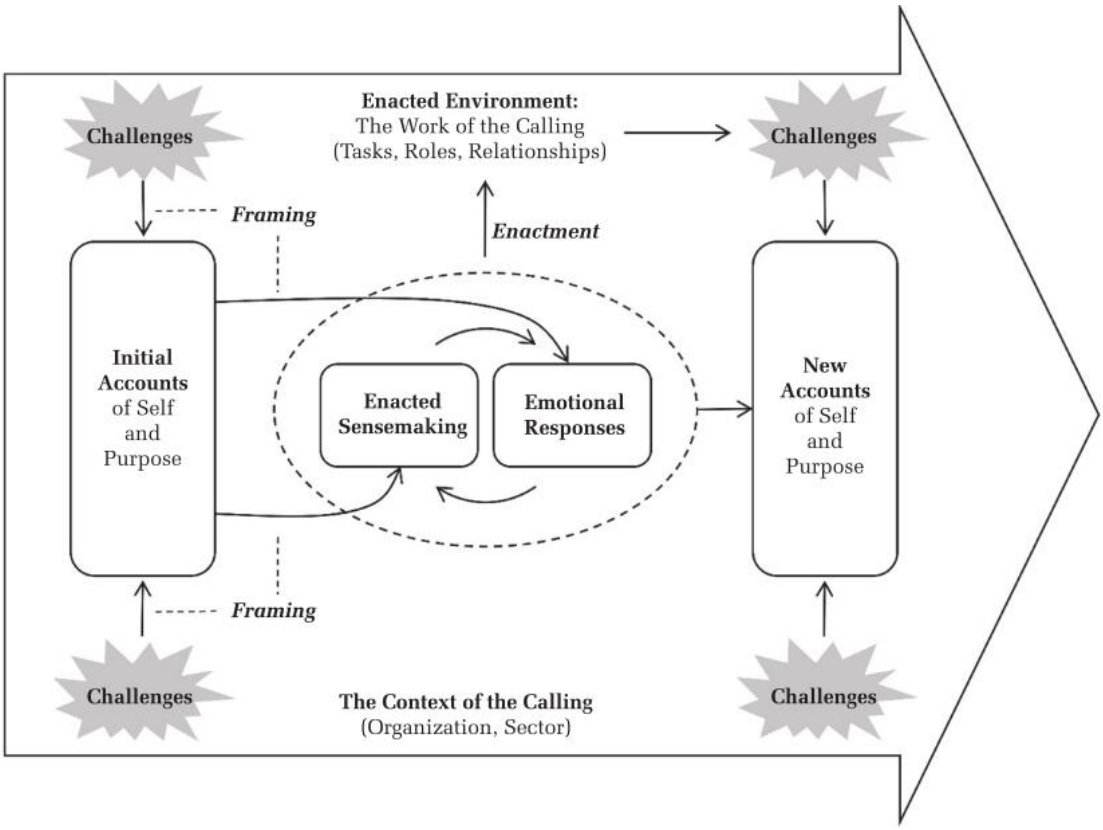
6 APPENDIX

6.1 Sensemaking theory and calling paths

Different accounts of one's relationship to one's calling, are associated with different styles of sensemaking or, more simply, of interpreting in the face of challenges. These styles over time amplify differences and result in different "calling paths." Schabram and Maitlis (2017) explain "the two core mechanisms that drive the process: framing, that affects how individuals interpret and respond to the challenges they encounter, and enactment, that constructs the work context in which further challenges arise" (p. 601)—in simplified terms, the two key steps are interpretation and the acting out of interpretation (see model 1 below).



- *Model 1: The key mechanisms of sensemaking (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017, p. 594)*

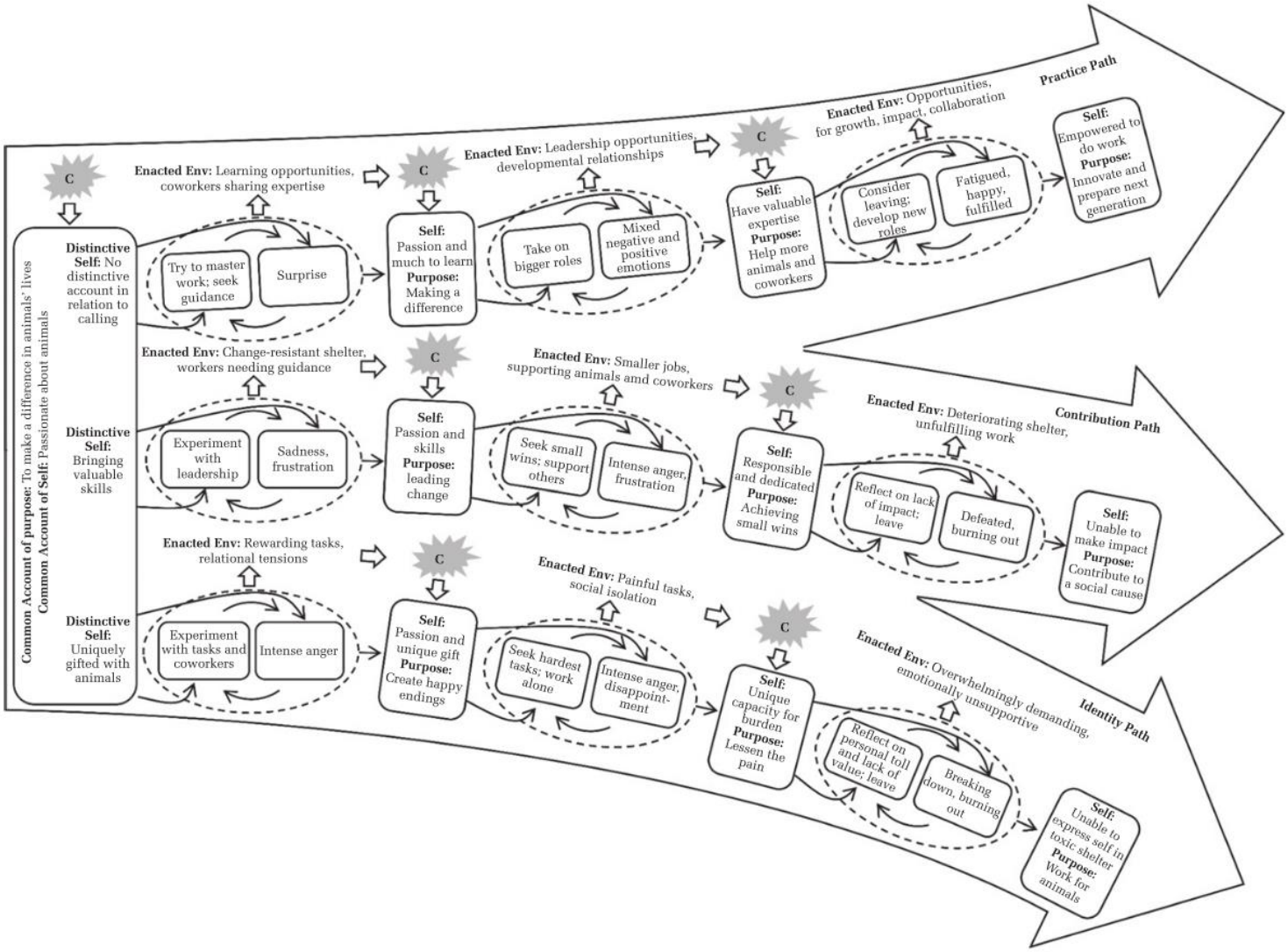
Schabram and Maitlis further observe "that sensemaking in response to the challenges of a calling is a very active, social process in which individuals engage in a variety of behaviors that include talking with others, reflecting alone, and experimenting with different ways of working and relating" (p. 602). It is a core finding of sensemaking research that the above mechanism amplifies initially small differences between individual paths because interpretations shape the environment in a distinct fashion that then invites further interpretations of the same style. If, for instance, I consider a setback in my work as implying that there does not exist a good fit between my skills and this work, subsequently engage less and withdraw from relationships with my colleagues, then the work will appear even less suited to my personality. Thus,

> those on the identity and contribution paths responded to challenges with sensemaking that involved dramatic shifts in their tasks and relationships, experimenting with the most rewarding and then most painful jobs, seeking promotions, bringing work home, and guiding coworkers they saw as less skilled. These actions repeatedly enacted an

> environment characterized by uncertainty, failure and, especially in the case of the identity path, isolation. (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017, p. 603)

In summary, people on both these paths, people display dysfunctional reactions to challenges. They put their stress onto colleagues, grow cynical, reactive, withdraw into rumination, show burnout symptoms, and generally employ inconsistent and extreme strategies in the attempt to resolve the dissonances of their situation—one of these strategies being quitting their job to seek work that allowed to maintain a positive self-image (p. 604).

People on the practice path, on the other hand, begin their work with more modest expectations and focus on continuous learning, slowly taking up more responsibility and more difficult tasks. In this framework, setbacks and challenges become learning opportunities. Thus, people gradually build up more confidence and usually maintain better relationships with colleagues as well, whom they actively seek out for help.



- *Model 2: The three calling paths (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017, p. 595)*

6.2 Questions guiding the application of the ABC-model

The questions are inspired by, and partly adopted from, Kos (2017) and Selva (2021) but mostly adjusted to the given context. The questions are designed to direct attention to those aspects of setbacks that are within one's control, i.e., they generate internal attributions (Vough & Caza, 2017, p. 120). They also meet participants' desire to preserve a positive self-understanding despite acknowledging shortcomings, by expanding their identity towards the future, so that participants ask

who they may become (compare Maitlis, 2009, p. 71). Lastly, rather than declaring previous "dys-functional" frames as simply irrational, it is important to enter into dialogue with them, legitimizing their respective functions, but nudging them towards a new framing that is more empowering in the given situation (compare Malkinson & Brask-Rustad, 2013, p. 119; also see NLP's methods, as in Bandler & Grinder, 1979).

(C) Consequences:

- Am I feeling anger, depression, anxiety, frustration, self-pity, etc.?
- How intense are my emotions? (Rate on a scale of 1 to 10)
- What's my automatic action? (Describe the actual response to the situation)
- Am I behaving in a way that doesn't work for me?
- Am I behaving in a way that is sabotaging my wellbeing?
- Am I behaving in a way that is undermining my relationships with my colleagues?
- Am I behaving in a way that is detrimental to the company's mission, to my mission?

(A) Activating event (here, the challenge or setback at work)**:**

- What is the activating event?
- What has happened?
- What did I do?
- What did others do?
- What does the event say about me?
- What does this really mean for my contribution?
- What does this really mean for my future at the company?

Accurate, objective answers to the questions are crucial, refraining from speculative interpretation as much as possible.

(B) Beliefs (i.e., interpretations)**:**

- What do I believe about the activating event, how do I interpret it?
- What do I think does the event imply about my own abilities?
- What do I believe it implies for my own contribution?
- Does this interpretation focus on my own role and identity, on my contribution, or on learning opportunities?
- Are my interpretations demotivating, frustrating, or discouraging?
- What kinds of automated negative thoughts go through my mind?

(D) Dispute (reframing)**:**

- How else could I interpret the event? Is thinking this way helping the situation and my overall contribution?
- What does the event say about me and what was a matter of chance? What could I have done better, what was really out of control?
- If I made a mistake, what does this say about me right now and what about the potential I have?
- Does this event suggest to me how I want to act and perform in the future? Are there any learning opportunities hidden here?
- Do my interpretation and reaction preserve my self-understanding? Is this the self-understanding I really want to have? Can I maintain it in another way?
- What matters to me here? My own abilities, the difference I can make right now, or my long-term contribution?
- What difference will this one-time event make in a month, a year, or a decade?

(E) Effect:

- Does my current interpretation support my wellbeing and contribution at work?
- Does it help me to focus on learning opportunities? Does it help me to grow?
- What are my new feelings?
- What are the potential blind spots of my new interpretation? What should I be aware of?