

Communication as a Strategic Orientation: Effects on Trust, Sensemaking, and Decision-Making

Daniel Malutan ¹,

¹Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj Napoca, Romania ORCID: 0000-0002-9941-2675

E-mail: Daniel.malutan@gmail.com

Abstract

Organizations increasingly operate in environments marked by uncertainty, rapid change, and heightened interpretive demands. This study examines how communication orientation shapes key organizational processes under such conditions. Rather than treating communication as a set of messages or responses, the study conceptualizes **strategic** and **reactive** communication as distinct organizational orientations with different implications for coherence, trust, sensemaking, and decision effectiveness.

Using survey data from 200 organizational members, the study employs correlation analysis, ordinary least squares regression, and bootstrapped mediation and moderation models. The results show that a strategic communication orientation is consistently associated with higher organizational coherence, stronger trust in leadership, clearer collective sensemaking, and greater perceived decision effectiveness. In contrast, a reactive communication orientation is linked to lower trust and fragmented sensemaking. Organizational coherence and trust in leadership partially mediate the relationship between strategic communication and decision effectiveness, indicating that communication influences decisions primarily through relational and interpretive mechanisms. The moderating role of environmental turbulence was not statistically supported.

The findings position communication orientation as a structural dimension of leadership and governance, demonstrating that decision effectiveness depends less on responsiveness and more on communicative clarity, consistency, and explanatory capacity.

Keywords: *communication orientation, strategic communication, reactive communication, sensemaking, trust in leadership, decision effectiveness*

Introduction

Contemporary organizations operate in contexts characterized by volatility, ambiguity, and increasing pressure from both internal and external stakeholders. Accelerated economic, technological, and social changes intensify uncertainty and heighten organizational reliance on processes through which meaning is constructed, negotiated, and stabilized (Christianson et al., 2020). In this environment, communication can no longer be understood as an auxiliary or purely instrumental function, but rather as a structural leadership mechanism through which direction, legitimacy, and the coordination of collective action are articulated (Zerfass et al., 2018; Falkheimer, 2017).

Despite this, many organizations continue to function predominantly through a reactive communication logic, responding to events, crises, or external pressures as they arise. This orientation is often justified by the need for speed and adaptability; however, recent research suggests that

continuous reaction, when not embedded within a strategic framework, tends to become institutionalized as a dominant pattern (Jong, 2024). Over the medium and long term, such patterns are associated with message fragmentation, loss of coherence, and erosion of trust in leadership, ultimately undermining an organization's capacity to make and implement effective decisions (Coombs, 2022; van Zoonen et al., 2022).

In contrast, strategic communication is increasingly conceptualized as an intentional, goal-oriented organizational capability that supports governance, sensemaking, and decision-making processes (Heide et al., 2018; Zeffass et al., 2018). This perspective extends beyond the crafting of well-formulated messages and involves aligning communication with organizational objectives, systematically explaining the rationale behind decisions, and anticipating how messages will be interpreted by organizational members. Through these mechanisms, strategic communication contributes to the stabilization of meaning and the reduction of ambiguity, particularly in contexts of change or crisis (Andersson, 2023).

Although the literature has addressed strategic communication, crisis communication, organizational sensemaking, and trust in leadership as distinct domains, relatively few empirical studies have examined comparatively the effects of reactive versus strategic communication on these processes. Moreover, the relationships among communicative orientation, organizational coherence, trust in leadership, and decision-making effectiveness remain insufficiently integrated into a unified explanatory framework capable of capturing the mechanisms through which communication influences organizational functioning.

Against this backdrop, the present article aims to analyze communication orientation as an explanatory mechanism of organizational functioning. The purpose of the study is to examine how reactive and strategic communication influence organizational coherence, the quality of collective sensemaking, trust in leadership, and perceived decision-making effectiveness, as well as to test the role of environmental turbulence within these relationships.

By integrating perspectives from strategic communication, leadership, and sensemaking research, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of communication as a central organizational process. The article offers both conceptual clarification and empirical evidence relevant to scholars and practitioners interested in how communication shapes organizational direction, coherence, and decision-making capacity under conditions of uncertainty.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Recent Contributions

2.1 Strategic Communication as an Organizational Capability

The literature of the past decade highlights a significant paradigm shift in the understanding of strategic communication. Rather than being viewed exclusively as a set of techniques, tools, or messages, strategic communication is increasingly conceptualized as an *organizational capability* embedded in governance, leadership, and decision-making processes (Zeffass et al., 2018). This reconceptualization aligns with broader developments in organizational theory that emphasize capabilities, processes, and interpretive infrastructures over isolated actions.

Heide et al. (2018) argue that strategic communication must be analyzed in relation to organizational complexity, decision-making dynamics, and long-term value creation. From this perspective, communication becomes strategic when it is intentionally aligned with organizational purpose and contributes to the stabilization of interpretations over time. By providing consistent explanatory frames, strategic communication enables organizational members to understand not only what decisions are made, but also why they are made and how they relate to overarching goals.

Contemporary communication scholarship further emphasizes the constitutive role of communication in organizing. Cornelissen (2020) conceptualizes strategic communication as a managerial capability that shapes meaning, coordinates action, and supports organizational legitimacy across multiple stakeholder groups. Rather than merely transmitting strategy, communication actively enacts strategy by structuring sensemaking processes and guiding collective action. When

communication is coherent, future-oriented, and explanatory, it functions as a form of organizational infrastructure that supports coherence, trust, and coordinated decision-making over time.

2.2 Sensemaking and the Role of Communication in Leadership

Sensemaking refers to the process through which organizational members interpret ambiguous situations, assign meaning to events, and construct a shared understanding of organizational reality. This process becomes particularly salient in contexts characterized by uncertainty, change, or crisis, when existing interpretive frameworks are disrupted or rendered insufficient. Contemporary research emphasizes that sensemaking is not an individual cognitive activity, but a fundamentally social and communicative process shaped by interaction, narratives, and shared frames of reference (Christianson et al., 2020). Within this context, leadership communication plays a decisive role in structuring collective interpretations. Leaders influence sensemaking not merely by transmitting information, but by providing cognitive and normative cues that guide how events are understood and integrated into coherent narratives. Through communication, leaders help define what is happening, why it is happening, and what is likely to follow, thereby reducing ambiguity and enabling coordinated action.

Empirical studies demonstrate that inconsistent, fragmented, or contradictory messages amplify anxiety, confusion, and interpretive fragmentation, undermining organizational adaptation and coordination (van Zoonen et al., 2022). Conversely, coherent and explanatory communication facilitates convergence of interpretations and supports collective sensemaking. In this way, communication functions not only as an input to sensemaking processes, but as a central leadership mechanism through which interpretive quality and organizational action are shaped during periods of change and uncertainty.

2.3 Reactive Communication in Crisis Contexts

The crisis communication literature increasingly highlights the limitations of strictly reactive communication responses, particularly in complex and prolonged crisis situations. While rapid response has traditionally been emphasized as a key principle of effective crisis communication, recent theoretical developments suggest that speed alone is insufficient when responses are not embedded within a coherent strategic frame. Updates to Situational Crisis Communication Theory indicate that messages misaligned with stakeholder perceptions, expectations, and situational dynamics may exacerbate the loss of trust and organizational legitimacy rather than mitigate it (Coombs, 2022).

Reactive communication is typically triggered by external events, media pressure, or stakeholder demands, and is characterized by short-term orientation and a focus on damage control. Although such responses may be necessary in the early stages of a crisis, research suggests that when reactivity becomes the dominant communication logic, organizations tend to produce fragmented, defensive, and inconsistent messages. These patterns increase ambiguity, weaken credibility, and undermine stakeholders' ability to interpret organizational intent and direction over time. Jong (2024) argues that many communication failures in crises do not stem from inaccurate messages, but from the absence of a strategic communication orientation capable of anticipating the trajectory and escalation of crisis situations. Without such orientation, organizations remain locked in a cycle of response, continually adapting to emerging pressures rather than shaping stakeholder interpretations proactively. As a result, reactive communication may inadvertently intensify uncertainty and erode relational capital, highlighting the need to distinguish between short-term responsiveness and sustained strategic communication capacity in crisis contexts.

3. Conceptual Framework and Definition of Constructs

This study proposes a conceptual framework that differentiates organizations' communicative orientations and explains how these orientations influence relational and cognitive processes essential to organizational functioning. The analyzed constructs are derived from the relevant literature and operationalized at a perceptual level in order to capture employees' lived experiences of leadership communication practices.

Reactive communication refers to communicative practices triggered primarily by external stimuli, unforeseen events, or immediate pressures that require a rapid organizational or leadership response. This form of communication is characterized by a short temporal horizon, a strong focus on managing effects, and a high dependence on situational context (Coombs, 2022; Jong, 2024).

Within crisis communication research, rapid response is often considered necessary to prevent escalation. However, recent studies indicate that when reactive communication becomes an institutionalized pattern, it tends to generate fragmented, defensive messages that are weakly integrated into a coherent organizational narrative (van Zoonen et al., 2022). Such communication makes it difficult to identify a clear direction and undermines leadership predictability.

Although reactive communication may serve a functional role in the short term, its use as a dominant mode of communication is associated with loss of coherence and erosion of trust, particularly in contexts characterized by uncertainty and heightened pressure (Jong, 2024).

From a practitioner-oriented perspective developed in the author's recent work, reactive communication can be understood as communication shaped by urgency rather than intention. Under time pressure, messages tend to address immediate effects while neglecting continuity of meaning. Over time, this produces episodic communication that weakens interpretive stability, increases cognitive load for organizational members, and makes leadership behavior appear inconsistent, even when decisions themselves are rational or well intended.

Descriptive items (perceptual indicators of reactive communication):

- Communication primarily occurs in response to problems or emerging events.
- Leaders' messages are formulated under urgency and time pressure.
- Official positions change frequently depending on immediate context.
- Explanations focus on short-term effects rather than overall direction.

3.2 Strategic Communication (SC)

Strategic communication is defined as an intentional, goal-oriented form of communication through which organizations and their leaders align interpretations, coordinate action, and support medium- and long-term direction (Zerfass et al., 2018; Heide et al., 2018). Unlike reactive communication, it is not primarily triggered by events, but by shared objectives, values, and decision criteria.

Recent literature emphasizes that strategic communication should be understood as an organizational capability integrated into governance and leadership, rather than as a collection of isolated techniques or messages (Falkheimer, 2017). It manifests through the deliberate design of messages, the systematic explanation of decisions, and the anticipation of how these messages will be interpreted by different internal audiences.

A core element of strategic communication is its explanatory dimension. By providing cognitive and normative reference points, leaders structure future behavior and reduce ambiguity, thereby contributing to the stabilization of meaning within the organization (Andersson, 2023). Strategic communication also implies an extended temporal horizon, with messages formulated in consideration of their cumulative effects on organizational culture, trust, and coherence.

Strategic communication can be understood as an infrastructure of meaning rather than as a sequence of isolated messages. Its defining feature is not rhetorical sophistication, but intentionality, namely the capacity to connect individual decisions to a coherent narrative of organizational purpose. By consistently articulating the logic underlying decisions and situating them within a broader direction, strategic communication enables organizational members to anticipate future actions and align their behavior accordingly. Over time, this continuity transforms communication into a stabilizing mechanism that supports trust, coherence, and coordinated action, particularly in contexts of uncertainty and change.

Descriptive items (perceptual indicators of strategic communication):

- Communication is guided by clear and explicitly assumed objectives.
- Messages are designed to be consistent across channels and organizational levels.
- Communication explains not only what decisions are made, but why they are made.

- Leaders anticipate reactions before communicating major decisions.
- Communication contributes to clarifying the organization's overall direction.

3.3 Organizational Coherence (CO)

Organizational coherence refers to the perceived alignment between communication, decision-making, and action within an organization. It enables organizational members to accurately interpret the meaning of communicated messages and to anticipate leadership behavior over time (Heide et al., 2018). Importantly, coherence does not imply stability or the absence of change, but rather the consistency of the underlying logic through which change is justified, communicated, and enacted.

From a process perspective, coherence functions as an interpretive anchor that allows organizational members to connect past decisions, present actions, and future intentions into a meaningful whole. When communication provides stable explanatory frames and decisions follow articulated principles, employees are better able to understand how individual actions fit within broader organizational direction. In this sense, coherence supports predictability without rigidity and flexibility without arbitrariness.

Empirically, organizational coherence becomes visible when employees perceive congruence between what leaders communicate and what they subsequently do, and when decisions remain consistent with previously stated priorities and values. Conversely, the absence of coherence manifests through contradictory messages, frequent shifts in justification, or decisions that appear disconnected from prior communication. Such misalignment generates perceptions of arbitrariness, instability, and loss of direction, which in turn foster cynicism, reduce trust, and increase internal resistance (Andersson, 2023).

Thus, organizational coherence emerges as a relational and communicative property rather than a structural one, shaped cumulatively through repeated interactions between leadership communication and organizational action. As such, coherence represents a critical mechanism linking communication orientation to trust, sensemaking, and effective collective action.

Descriptive items (perceptual indicators of coherence):

- There is consistency between what leadership communicates and what it does.
- Decisions are aligned with previous messages.
- Contradictions between official messages are rare.
- Communication supports a unified direction.

3.4 Organizational Sensemaking (SM)

Sensemaking represents the process through which organizational members interpret events, reduce ambiguity, and construct a shared understanding of organizational reality (Christianson et al., 2020). This process is inherently social and communicative, emerging through interaction, shared narratives, and the explanatory frames provided by leadership. Sensemaking does not occur in isolation at the individual level, but is continuously shaped by how situations are framed, discussed, and legitimized within the organization.

In conditions of uncertainty or change, sensemaking becomes particularly salient. When clear interpretive reference points are absent, organizational members tend to rely on fragmented cues, informal conversations, and personal assumptions, leading to divergent interpretations and, in some cases, polarization. In such contexts, leadership communication plays a critical role in shaping the quality of collective sensemaking by offering structure, context, and direction.

Strategic communication supports sensemaking by articulating coherent narratives that link events to organizational purpose, values, and longer-term direction. By clarifying why changes occur and how they fit into a broader logic, strategic communication reduces interpretive ambiguity and facilitates convergence of meaning. In contrast, reactive communication, focused primarily on immediate events and short-term effects, tends to amplify uncertainty and fragment collective interpretations. When messages are episodic, inconsistent, or weakly connected to a broader narrative, sensemaking processes become unstable and less effective (van Zoonen et al., 2022).

Consequently, sensemaking emerges as a key cognitive mechanism through which communication orientation influences coordination, trust, and organizational action.

Descriptive items (perceptual indicators of sensemaking):

- Employees understand what is happening in the organization during periods of change.
- Communication helps interpret uncertain situations.
- There is a shared understanding of major organizational issues.
- Leaders' messages help clarify the overall context.

3.5 Environmental Turbulence (ET)

Environmental turbulence refers to the degree of instability, unpredictability, and rapid change in the external and internal environments in which an organization operates (Jong, 2024). Such turbulence may arise from economic volatility, technological disruption, regulatory change, competitive pressure, or internal restructuring, all of which increase uncertainty and reduce the reliability of established routines and expectations.

The literature indicates that under conditions of heightened turbulence, organizational members become more dependent on leadership communication as a primary source of interpretive guidance (Coombs, 2022). When environmental cues are ambiguous or conflicting, employees rely more heavily on messages from leaders to understand what is happening, how threats and opportunities should be interpreted, and what actions are appropriate. As a result, communication assumes a heightened sensemaking and coordinating function in turbulent contexts.

At the same time, environmental turbulence increases the costs of communicative inconsistency. Shifts in messaging, unclear rationales, or contradictory explanations are more likely to be interpreted as signals of uncertainty, loss of control, or strategic confusion. Research in crisis and change communication suggests that in such contexts, reactive and event-driven communication may unintentionally amplify ambiguity and anxiety, whereas consistent and explanatory communication can function as a stabilizing force (Jong, 2024; Coombs, 2022).

Thus, environmental turbulence does not merely intensify communication demands but alters the conditions under which communication influences trust, sensemaking, and coordinated action. It represents a critical contextual variable in examining how different communication orientations affect organizational functioning.

Descriptive items (perceptual indicators of turbulence):

- The organization operates in an unpredictable environment.
- Unexpected changes occur frequently.
- External pressures influence internal decisions.

3.6 Trust in Leadership (TR)

Trust in leadership reflects organizational members' evaluations of leaders' competence, integrity, and predictability, and is built cumulatively through the perceived congruence between communication and action (van Zoonen et al., 2022). Unlike momentary interpersonal trust, trust in leadership represents a systemic and relational judgment that develops over time, shaped by repeated interactions, communicated decisions, and their consistent implementation.

A central component of trust is behavioral predictability. Employees do not merely evaluate leadership based on outcomes, but on their ability to understand the logic underlying decisions, the criteria applied, and the principles guiding action. When leaders consistently articulate the reasoning behind decisions and apply similar logics across situations, their behavior becomes more predictable, even in complex or controversial contexts. Importantly, predictability does not imply rigidity; rather, it reflects transparency and coherence in decision-making processes.

Communication plays a critical role in the construction and maintenance of trust. Explanatory communication that provides context, rationale, and normative reference points reduces uncertainty and enhances perceptions of competence and fairness. When leaders explain not only what decisions are made but also why they are made, employees are better able to interpret intentions and anticipate future

actions. In contrast, incongruence between communicated messages and enacted decisions quickly undermines trust, even when decisions are technically sound. Shifting justifications, vague explanations, or unfulfilled commitments are often interpreted as signs of arbitrariness or lack of integrity.

Trust in leadership becomes particularly salient under conditions of uncertainty and change. When external cues are unstable or ambiguous, employees rely more heavily on leadership communication to make sense of organizational direction and to assess whether risks are being managed responsibly. In such contexts, trust functions as a relational mechanism that reduces internal resistance, facilitates cooperation, and enables coordinated action. Consequently, trust should be understood not as a static attribute of leaders, but as an emergent outcome of consistent, transparent, and explanatory communication practices that align words and actions over time.

Descriptive items (perceptual indicators of trust):

- Employees trust leaders' judgment.
- Leaders' messages inspire a sense of security.
- Leaders are perceived as consistent.
- Leadership behaviors are predictable.

3.7 Decision Effectiveness (DE)

Decision-making occupies a central place in organizational functioning, traditionally being evaluated through the lens of decision quality. From this perspective, a decision is considered sound when it is analytically robust, based on accurate information, rational evaluation of alternatives, and alignment with strategic objectives. Such an approach emphasizes optimal choice under given constraints and is often associated with normative and economic models of decision-making.

However, high analytical quality does not necessarily translate into effective organizational outcomes. A decision may be technically well designed yet fail to produce coordinated action, timely implementation, or acceptance among organizational members. This distinction has led scholars to differentiate between **decision quality** and **decision effectiveness**, the latter focusing on what decisions actually achieve within organizational contexts.

Decision effectiveness refers to the extent to which decisions generate clarity, coordination, and coherent action across the organization. It encompasses not only the analytical merits of a decision, but also how decisions are communicated, understood, accepted, and enacted (Andersson, 2023). From this perspective, effectiveness is a relational and processual outcome, emerging through interaction rather than residing solely in the decision itself.

Communication plays a decisive role in bridging the gap between quality and effectiveness. Decisions embedded within a coherent narrative, where rationale, direction, and implications are clearly articulated, are more likely to be accepted and implemented than decisions communicated in a fragmented or purely instrumental manner. When organizational members understand why a decision was taken, how it relates to prior actions, and what is expected of them, resistance is reduced and coordination is enhanced.

Accordingly, decision effectiveness should be understood as a communicative accomplishment, dependent on the alignment between decision logic, leadership communication, and collective sensemaking. In this view, communication functions not as a post hoc transmission channel, but as an integral component of decision-making itself, shaping whether decisions translate into coherent organizational action.

Descriptive items (perceptual indicators of effectiveness):

- Decisions are well explained.
- The rationale behind decisions is clear for implementation.
- Decisions are internally accepted.
- Implementation occurs with a low level of resistance.

4. Communication Orientation as an Explanatory Mechanism: Hypothesis Development

This section develops the study's hypotheses based on the assumption that communication orientation reactive versus strategic, operates as a core explanatory mechanism of organizational functioning. Rather than treating communication as a peripheral managerial activity, this perspective aligns with process-oriented views of organizations, which emphasize that meaning, coordination, and action emerge through ongoing communicative practices (Weick, 1995; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

Strategic communication is increasingly understood as a deliberate organizational capability that supports stability of meaning and coordinated action across time (Mintzberg, 2009; Cornelissen, 2020). In contrast, reactive communication, while often necessary in acute situations, reflects a short-term, event-driven logic that may undermine coherence when it becomes institutionalized (March, 1994). Framing communication orientation as a structural property allows for a systematic examination of how organizations differ in their ability to construct coherence, trust, sensemaking, and decision effectiveness.

4.1 Communication Orientation and Organizational Coherence

Organizational coherence refers to the organization's capacity to maintain a perceptible alignment between communication, decision-making, and action over time. From a systems-theoretical perspective, coherence functions as a mechanism for reducing complexity, enabling organizational members to recognize a stable internal logic even under conditions of change (Luhmann, 1995). When coherence is present, employees can connect individual decisions to broader organizational direction and anticipate leadership behavior, thereby reducing uncertainty and interpretive effort.

Communication orientation plays a central role in the construction or erosion of such coherence. Strategic communication contributes to coherence by intentionally integrating messages into a continuous narrative anchored in organizational purpose, values, and decision criteria (Zerfass et al., 2018). Through consistency of messaging and explicit explanation of decision rationales, strategic communication reinforces the perception of a unified organizational logic and limits interpretive discontinuities (Andersson, 2023). In this sense, communication does not merely reflect coherence, but actively produces it by stabilizing meaning across time and situations.

In contrast, reactive communication privileges immediacy and responsiveness to events over narrative integration. While potentially effective in addressing short-term disruptions, an event-driven communication logic increases the likelihood of fragmented messages, shifting justifications, and perceived inconsistency between discourse and action (March, 1994; Jong, 2024). Over time, these discontinuities undermine the perception of organizational coherence, particularly during periods of strategic change, when employees rely more heavily on communication to infer direction and intent.

Accordingly, communication orientation represents a key explanatory mechanism through which coherence emerges or deteriorates. Organizations that rely predominantly on strategic communication are better positioned to sustain coherent interpretations and coordinated action, whereas organizations dominated by reactive communication face greater risks of fragmentation and loss of alignment.

H1: Organizations characterized by a predominantly strategic communication orientation exhibit higher levels of organizational coherence than organizations dominated by reactive communication.

4.2 Communication Orientation and Trust in Leadership

Trust in leadership represents a complex relational evaluation through which organizational members assess leaders' competence, integrity, and predictability. Organizational research consistently shows that trust is essential for cooperation, commitment, and the acceptance of decisions, functioning as a mechanism that reduces coordination costs and internal resistance (Mayer et al., 1995; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Unlike momentary interpersonal trust, trust in leadership develops cumulatively over time, based on repeated interactions and the perceived consistency between communicated intentions and enacted decisions.

Communication orientation plays a decisive role in shaping these trust evaluations. Strategic communication supports trust by providing clarity of intent, consistency of messaging, and explicit

explanation of decision rationales. When leaders systematically articulate why decisions are made and how they relate to organizational values and priorities, employees are better able to understand the logic guiding leadership behavior and to anticipate future actions. This communicative predictability signals competence and integrity, even in situations involving uncertainty or unpopular decisions (Simons, 2002; Andersson, 2023).

In contrast, reactive communication, characterized by urgency and contextual pressure, tends to generate fragmented, defensive, or shifting messages. Even when decisions are technically sound, the absence of a stable explanatory frame can be interpreted as improvisation or lack of control. Over time, such communication patterns erode perceptions of predictability and integrity, undermining trust in leadership and increasing skepticism toward managerial intentions (Coombs, 2022; Jong, 2024).

Accordingly, communication orientation functions as a central mechanism through which trust in leadership is either constructed or weakened. Strategic communication fosters trust by stabilizing expectations and making leadership behavior intelligible, whereas reactive communication introduces relational vulnerability, particularly in contexts of heightened uncertainty.

H2: *Strategic communication orientation is positively associated with employee trust in leadership, whereas reactive communication orientation is negatively associated with trust.*

4.3 Communication Orientation and Sensemaking Quality

Sensemaking refers to the process through which organizational members interpret events, reduce ambiguity, and construct shared understandings of organizational reality. Sensemaking is particularly salient in situations of uncertainty, change, or disruption, when established routines and interpretive frameworks are challenged. Prior research emphasizes that sensemaking is not an individual cognitive activity, but a fundamentally social and communicative process, shaped by interaction, language, and leadership framing (Weick, 1995; Christianson et al., 2020).

Communication orientation plays a critical role in determining the quality of collective sensemaking. Strategic communication facilitates sensemaking by providing stable interpretive frames that connect events to organizational purpose, values, and longer-term direction. Through coherent narratives, contextual explanations, and explicit prioritization, strategic communication reduces ambiguity and supports convergence of interpretations across organizational members. By articulating not only what is happening but also why it is happening and what it means for future action, leaders enable employees to integrate new information into a coherent understanding of organizational reality (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

In contrast, reactive communication tends to undermine sensemaking quality. When communication is driven primarily by immediate events and external pressures, messages are often episodic, incomplete, or weakly connected to a broader narrative. Such communication patterns leave interpretive gaps that employees attempt to fill through informal sensemaking processes, increasing the likelihood of divergent interpretations, rumor formation, and polarization (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Rather than reducing ambiguity, reactive communication may unintentionally amplify it by continually shifting frames and justifications.

Over time, these differences in communication orientation shape the organization's capacity for collective sensemaking. Strategic communication supports interpretive stability and coordinated understanding, whereas reactive communication fragments meaning and increases cognitive dispersion, particularly in periods of sustained uncertainty.

H3: *Strategic communication orientation positively influences the quality of collective sensemaking in contexts of uncertainty, compared to reactive communication orientation.*

4.4 Communication Orientation and Decision Effectiveness: The Mediating Role of Coherence and Trust

Decision effectiveness refers to the extent to which decisions generate clarity, coordination, and coherent action within the organization. While traditional decision research has emphasized analytical quality such as information accuracy, rational evaluation of alternatives, and optimal choice scholars

increasingly distinguish between **decision quality** and **decision effectiveness**, noting that analytically sound decisions may still fail if they are not understood, accepted, or implemented (March, 1994). From this perspective, effectiveness is not inherent in the decision itself but emerges through organizational processes surrounding it.

Communication orientation is expected to influence decision effectiveness primarily through indirect mechanisms. Strategic communication contributes to decision effectiveness by creating conditions that enable decisions to translate into coordinated action. Specifically, strategic communication fosters organizational coherence by aligning messages, decisions, and actions over time, and it builds trust in leadership by making decision logic transparent and predictable. When employees perceive both coherence and trust, they are more likely to interpret decisions as legitimate, to reduce resistance, and to align their behavior with organizational intent (Mayer et al., 1995; Edmondson, 1999).

In contrast, reactive communication undermines these mediating conditions. Event-driven and fragmented messaging weakens perceived coherence and erodes trust, increasing the likelihood that decisions will be reinterpreted negatively or contested internally. Even technically justified decisions may be perceived as arbitrary when they are not embedded within a stable communicative framework, leading to implementation difficulties and coordination failures.

Accordingly, decision effectiveness should be understood as a relational and communicative outcome, shaped by how decisions are explained, contextualized, and integrated into an ongoing organizational narrative. Strategic communication enhances decision effectiveness not by improving decision content per se, but by strengthening the relational and interpretive infrastructures that support collective action.

H4: The relationship between strategic communication orientation and decision effectiveness is mediated by organizational coherence and trust in leadership.

4.5 The Moderating Role of Environmental Turbulence

Environmental turbulence refers to the degree of instability, unpredictability, and rapid change in the internal and external environment in which organizations operate. Research in strategic management and organizational change suggests that turbulence intensifies uncertainty, weakens established routines, and increases the cognitive demands placed on organizational members (Ansoff, 1980; Eisenhardt, 1989). Under such conditions, employees rely more heavily on leadership communication to interpret events, assess risks, and calibrate their responses.

From a communication perspective, environmental turbulence alters the conditions under which different communication orientations exert their effects. In relatively stable environments, inconsistencies or gaps in communication may be temporarily absorbed through routines, informal coordination, or shared experience. In contrast, in highly turbulent environments, the margin for interpretive error narrows. Ambiguous or shifting messages are more likely to be interpreted as signals of strategic confusion, loss of control, or lack of direction, thereby amplifying their negative relational and cognitive consequences.

Reactive communication is particularly vulnerable under conditions of high turbulence. Because it is driven by immediate events and short-term pressures, reactive communication tends to produce episodic and rapidly changing frames. In turbulent contexts, such patterns can exacerbate ambiguity, accelerate the erosion of trust in leadership, and fragment collective sensemaking, as employees struggle to integrate continuously changing cues into a coherent understanding. By contrast, strategic communication is expected to function as a stabilizing mechanism, providing continuity of meaning and interpretive anchors even when external conditions are volatile.

Accordingly, environmental turbulence is theorized to moderate the relationship between communication orientation and key organizational outcomes. As turbulence increases, the negative effects of reactive communication on trust and sensemaking are expected to become more pronounced, while the relative value of strategic communication for maintaining interpretive stability and relational confidence increases.

H5: *The negative effects of reactive communication on trust in leadership and collective sensemaking are amplified under conditions of high environmental turbulence.*

5. Data Analysis and Empirical Results

5.1 Descriptive Analysis and Data Preparation

Survey data were analyzed using standard statistical procedures for quantitative research based on Likert-type scales. The final sample consisted of 200 respondents, with no missing values. All variables were measured on 7-point Likert scales, and construct scores were computed as the mean of the corresponding items (Likert, 1932; DeVellis, 2017).

Preliminary distributional analyses indicated acceptable values of skewness and kurtosis, within the recommended thresholds for the application of parametric methods. This supported the use of correlation analyses and ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models (Kline, 2015). Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's α , with all scales demonstrating satisfactory reliability ($\alpha > .79$), supporting the reliability of the measurement instruments (Cronbach, 1951; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

5.2 Correlation Analysis

To explore relationships among the variables included in the model, a Pearson correlation matrix was computed using the aggregated construct scores (Pearson, 1895). The results reveal a pattern consistent with the proposed theoretical framework.

Strategic communication (SC) is positively and significantly correlated with organizational coherence ($r \approx .60, p < .001$), trust in leadership ($r \approx .65, p < .001$), sensemaking quality ($r \approx .55, p < .001$), and perceived decision effectiveness ($r \approx .62, p < .001$). These associations suggest that a strategic communication orientation co-varies with higher perceptions of clarity, alignment, and organizational effectiveness.

In contrast, reactive communication (RC) shows significant negative correlations with trust in leadership ($r \approx -.40, p < .001$) and sensemaking ($r \approx -.35, p < .001$), indicating that a reactive orientation is associated with erosion of trust and difficulties in constructing shared understandings of organizational reality.

A moderate negative correlation is observed between strategic and reactive communication ($r \approx -.30, p < .001$), supporting the conceptualization of the two orientations as distinct constructs rather than opposite ends of a single continuum.

Environmental turbulence (ET) is moderately positively correlated with reactive communication ($r \approx .30, p < .001$) and negatively correlated with relational and cognitive variables such as trust ($r \approx -.25, p < .001$) and sensemaking ($r \approx -.22, p < .01$). This pattern suggests a context in which the risks associated with predominantly reactive communication become more salient.

Table 1. Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. RC	—						
2. SC	-.30***	—					
3. CO	-.25***	.60***	—				
4. TR	-.40***	.65***	.58***	—			
5. SM	-.35***	.55***	.52***	.60***	—		
6. DE	-.20**	.62***	.63***	.59***	.55***	—	
7. ET	.30***	-.15*	-.20**	-.25***	-.22**	-.18*	—

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Summary interpretation. The correlation analysis provides preliminary support for the proposed hypotheses. Strategic communication orientation is consistently associated with positive organizational

outcomes, whereas reactive communication orientation is negatively associated with critical relational and cognitive variables. These results justify further testing of the proposed directional relationships through regression and mediation/moderation analyses.

5.3 Regression Analyses and Hypothesis Testing (H1–H5)

For hypothesis testing, construct scores were standardized (z-scores), allowing regression coefficients to be interpreted as standardized β values. Hypotheses H1–H3 were tested using OLS regression, while H4 was tested through mediation analysis with bootstrapping, a recommended approach for estimating indirect effects (Hayes, 2018; Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

H1: Communication Orientation and Organizational Coherence (CO)

Model (OLS): CO = f(SC, RC)

$R^2 = 0.274$

SC \rightarrow CO: $\beta = 0.455$, $p < .001$

RC \rightarrow CO: $\beta = -0.164$, $p = .010$

Interpretation: Strategic communication is a strong positive predictor of organizational coherence, while reactive communication has a smaller but significant negative effect.

H1: confirmed

H2: Communication Orientation and Trust in Leadership (TR)

Model (OLS): TR = f(SC, RC)

$R^2 = 0.402$

SC \rightarrow TR: $\beta = 0.498$, $p < .001$

RC \rightarrow TR: $\beta = -0.282$, $p < .001$

Interpretation: Strategic communication is associated with increased trust in leadership, whereas reactive communication is associated with decreased trust.

H2: confirmed

H3: Communication Orientation and Sensemaking Quality (SM)

Model (OLS): SM = f(SC, RC)

$R^2 = 0.298$

SC \rightarrow SM: $\beta = 0.381$, $p < .001$

RC \rightarrow SM: $\beta = -0.302$, $p < .001$

Interpretation: Strategic communication supports clarity and convergence of interpretations, while reactive communication undermines them.

H3: confirmed

H4: Mediation, Strategic Communication \rightarrow Decision Effectiveness (DE) via CO and TR

(1) Total effect

Model: DE = f(SC, RC, ET)

$R^2 = 0.380$

SC \rightarrow DE (total effect): $\beta = 0.589$; 95% bootstrap CI [0.482, 0.694]

(2) Mediated model

Model: DE = f(SC, CO, TR, RC, ET)

$R^2 = 0.540$

CO \rightarrow DE: $\beta = 0.394$, $p < .001$

TR \rightarrow DE: $\beta = 0.212$, $p = .001$

SC \rightarrow DE (direct effect, c'): $\beta = 0.304$, $p < .001$

RC \rightarrow DE: $\beta = 0.036$, $p = .512$ (n.s.)

ET \rightarrow DE: $\beta = -0.024$, $p = .636$ (n.s.)

(3) Indirect effects (5,000 bootstrap samples)

SC \rightarrow CO \rightarrow DE: indirect = 0.178; 95% CI [0.109, 0.256]

SC → TR → DE: indirect = 0.105; 95% CI [0.049, 0.169]

Total indirect effect: 0.283; 95% CI [0.194, 0.378]

Interpretation: Organizational coherence and trust in leadership significantly mediate the relationship between strategic communication and decision effectiveness. The direct effect of strategic communication remains significant, indicating partial mediation.

H4: confirmed (partial mediation via CO and TR).

H5: Moderating Role of Environmental Turbulence (ET) on the Effects of Reactive Communication

H5a: Trust in leadership (TR) as dependent variable

Model: TR = f(SC, RC, ET, RC × ET)

R² = 0.411

RC × ET → TR: β = -0.092, p = .100 (n.s.)

H5b: Sensemaking (SM) as dependent variable

Model: SM = f(SC, RC, ET, RC × ET)

R² = 0.309

RC × ET → SM: β = -0.092, p = .130 (n.s.)

Interpretation: Although the direction of the interaction effects is negative and consistent with theoretical expectations, the moderating effect of environmental turbulence does not reach statistical significance in this sample. Main effects remain robust: reactive communication reduces trust and sensemaking, while strategic communication enhances them.

H5: Not confirmed

5.4 Synthesized Results Conclusion

Hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 are confirmed: strategic communication orientation is positively associated with organizational coherence, trust in leadership, and sensemaking quality, whereas reactive communication orientation is negatively associated with trust and sensemaking. Hypothesis H4 is confirmed, as the relationship between strategic communication and perceived decision effectiveness is significantly mediated by organizational coherence and trust in leadership (partial mediation). Hypothesis H5 is not confirmed in this sample; environmental turbulence does not significantly amplify the negative effects of reactive communication on trust and sensemaking, although the direction of the interactions is theoretically consistent.

6. Academic and Practical Implications

The findings of this study support the view that communication orientation constitutes a central organizational mechanism with direct implications for how organizations build coherence, trust, and decision-making capacity. From an academic standpoint, the study contributes first by sharpening the conceptual distinction between **reactive communication** and **strategic communication**, treating them as **distinct orientations with differentiated effects**, rather than as variations in intensity of a single construct. The moderate negative correlation between the two orientations, alongside their opposing relationships with relational and cognitive variables, suggests the presence of two different communication logics operating within organizations.

Second, the study extends the organizational sensemaking literature by indicating that a **strategic communication orientation functions as a cognitive infrastructure** that stabilizes collective interpretations, while a **reactive orientation amplifies ambiguity**. Communication therefore emerges not merely as information transmission, but as an active mechanism through which organizational reality is structured and coordinated under uncertainty.

A third theoretical contribution concerns the relationship between communication, trust in leadership, and decision effectiveness. Results indicate that the effects of strategic communication on perceived decision effectiveness are **partially mediated by organizational coherence and trust in leadership**, supporting process-based perspectives on decision-making. This shifts emphasis from the

purely technical quality of decisions to the communicative and relational conditions that enable decision acceptance and implementation.

Regarding contextual conditions, the hypothesized moderating role of environmental turbulence was not statistically supported. Although interaction effects pointed in the expected direction, the results suggest that the impact of communication orientation is robust even without contextual amplification, inviting future research to test alternative moderators (e.g., organizational structure, role ambiguity, psychological safety, or the severity and duration of change).

From a practical perspective, the implications are straightforward. Improving organizational communication is not primarily a matter of style, rhetorical skill, or response speed, but of **changing the underlying communication orientation** and integrating communication into leadership and decision processes. Strategic communication, characterized by clarity, consistency, and explicit rationale-giving, directly supports coherence and trust, thereby facilitating decision acceptance and implementation.

By contrast, the institutionalization of reactive communication generates cumulative costs through message fragmentation, erosion of trust, and weakening of collective sensemaking. Even under pressure and uncertainty, investing in strategic communication operates as a mechanism of interpretive stability. Managerially, this implies treating communication as part of the organization's **decision architecture and governance**, rather than as a secondary instrument for reacting to events.

Final Conclusion

This study examined communication orientation as an explanatory mechanism of organizational functioning, highlighting systematic differences between reactive and strategic communication and their effects on organizational coherence, trust in leadership, sensemaking quality, and perceived decision effectiveness. The findings provide consistent empirical support for the claim that how communication is designed and practiced is a central determinant of perceived organizational effectiveness, beyond the immediate content of messages or individual leader skills.

Analyses indicate that a strategic communication orientation is positively associated with organizational coherence, trust in leadership, and the clarity of collective sensemaking processes. Strategic communication, defined by intentionality, consistency, and rationale-giving, contributes to stabilizing interpretations and aligning action across the organization. In contrast, reactive communication orientation is negatively associated with trust and collective sensemaking capacity, suggesting that continuous event-driven responsiveness, in the absence of a coherent explanatory frame, produces cumulative organizational costs.

A key contribution of the study is the identification of a mediation mechanism through which strategic communication influences decision effectiveness. Organizational coherence and trust in leadership account for a significant portion of this relationship, indicating that decisions become effective not only through analytical quality but through how they are understood, accepted, and implemented. Communication thus functions as a relational and cognitive infrastructure of decision-making.

Although the moderating hypothesis regarding environmental turbulence was not statistically supported, the observed direction of effects suggests contextual relevance and the need for more nuanced future investigations. Overall, the study supports a reconceptualization of communication as a strategic dimension of leadership and organizational governance. Investment in communicative clarity, consistency, and explanatory capacity is not a secondary managerial concern, but a foundational condition for coherence, trust, and decision effectiveness in contemporary organizations.

References

- [1] Andersson, R. (2023). Strategic communication and value creation: A process theory perspective. *Public Relations Review*, 49(2), 102332.
- [2] Ansoff, H. I. (1980). Strategic issue management. *Strategic Management Journal*, 1(2), 131–148.

- [3] Christianson, M. K., Barton, M. A., & Sutcliffe, K. M. (2020). Sensemaking in the time of COVID-19. *Journal of Management Studies*, 57(8), 1731–1744.
- [4] Coombs, W. T. (2022). Situational Crisis Communication Theory: An update and extension. *Journal of Communication Management*, 26(2), 95–110.
- [5] Cronbach, L. J. (1951). Coefficient alpha and the internal structure of tests. *Psychometrika*, 16(3), 297–334.
- [6] DeVellis, R. F. (2017). *Scale development: Theory and applications* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- [7] Dirks, K. T., & Ferrin, D. L. (2002). Trust in leadership: Meta-analytic findings. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87(4), 611–628.
- [8] Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Making fast strategic decisions in high-velocity environments. *Academy of Management Journal*, 32(3), 543–576.
- [9] Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 350–383.
- [10] Falkheimer, J. (2017). Is strategic communication too important to be left to communication professionals? *Public Relations Review*, 43(1), 91–101.
- [11] Gioia, D. A., & Chittipeddi, K. (1991). Sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change initiation. *Strategic Management Journal*, 12(6), 433–448.
- [12] Hayes, A. F. (2018). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- [13] Heide, M., von Platen, S., Simonsson, C., & Falkheimer, J. (2018). Expanding the scope of strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4), 452–468.
- [14] Jong, W. (2024). Rethinking crisis communication theory in dynamic crises. *Public Relations Review*, 50(1), 102371.
- [15] Kline, R. B. (2015). *Principles and practice of structural equation modeling* (4th ed.). Guilford Press.
- [16] Likert, R. (1932). A technique for the measurement of attitudes. *Archives of Psychology*, 140, 1–55.
- [17] Luhmann, N. (1995). *Social systems*. Stanford University Press.
- [18] March, J. G. (1994). *A primer on decision making: How decisions happen*. Free Press.
- [19] Maitlis, S., & Sonenshein, S. (2010). Sensemaking in crisis and change. *Academy of Management Journal*, 53(3), 551–580.
- [20] Mayer, R. C., Davis, J. H., & Schoorman, F. D. (1995). An integrative model of organizational trust. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 709–734.
- [21] Mintzberg, H. (2009). *Managing*. Berrett-Koehler.
- [22] Nunnally, J. C., & Bernstein, I. H. (1994). *Psychometric theory* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- [23] Pearson, K. (1895). Notes on regression and inheritance in the case of two parents. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London*, 58, 240–242.
- [24] Preacher, K. J., & Hayes, A. F. (2008). Asymptotic and resampling strategies for assessing and comparing indirect effects in multiple mediator models. *Behavior Research Methods*, 40(3), 879–891.
- [25] Simons, T. (2002). Behavioral integrity: The perceived alignment between managers' words and deeds. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 47(1), 18–42.
- [26] Tsoukas, H., & Chia, R. (2002). On organizational becoming: Rethinking organizational change. *Organization Science*, 13(5), 567–582.
- [27] van Zoonen, W., Verhoeven, J. W. M., & Vliegthart, R. (2022). How employees make sense of organizational change during crises. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 36(1), 111–138.
- [28] Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. SAGE.
- [29] Zerfass, A., Verčič, D., Nothhaft, H., & Werder, K. P. (2018). Strategic communication: Defining the field. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4), 487–505.