

LYSSA ADKINS

# #future-fit leaders

EXPAND THEIR OWN  
SENSEMAKING

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# What is SENSEMAKING?

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You do sensemaking all day, every day. You are doing it right now. You are taking in these words and making sense of them. At its most basic sensemaking is just this: making sense of the world and the things that happen in it. Each of us sees our world through our lived experiences which condition us to believe, think, and take action in concert with that conditioning. When we come together, we make sense of our various perspectives and create a shared view. To be quite scholarly about it, sensemaking is a term usually applied to groups while meaning making is done individually. There are a couple other nuances between the terms, but for our purposes the singular term sensemaking serves. As you will see, by the time we get to the end of this series there will be a call to extend all of your future-fit leadership capabilities, including sensemaking, to the groups you work in. For now, though, back to you.

# EXPANDING SENSEMAKING THROUGH GROWTH

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As we live and grow, the repetition of common situations creates well-worn patterns that get applied automatically. As we become adults, life hands us circumstances that challenge our beliefs and call into question some of the automatic patterns. If life circumstances apply enough pressure, and if we are open to change, we may expand our sensemaking to include new beliefs that replace the older, less effective ones. This leads to new patterns of thought and new options for action. In short, we expand our sensemaking.



# Complexity in Business Demands Expanded Thinking

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This is a crucial capability and key advantage in modern business as we face an era of increasing complexity riding alongside constant and turbulent change. More and more, we are likely to encounter business conditions that challenge our beliefs and thought patterns. Experts have this to say:



**When we experience the world as “too complex” we are not just experiencing the complexity of the world. We are experiencing a mismatch between the world’s complexity and our own at this moment. There are only two logical ways to mend this mismatch—reduce the world’s complexity or increase our own.**

**- Robert Kegan & Lisa Lahey**

# A Call to Increase Our Complexity

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I vote for reducing the world's complexity. How about you? Wouldn't that be great? Alas, that option is not on the table. However, the option of increasing your own complexity to be more of a match for the complexity of the world is always an option. One of the ways to do so is to expand your sensemaking.

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# DISCOVERING A NEW MINDSET FOR GROWTH

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Expanding your sensemaking requires you to start looking at the way your mind works as if it were an object that you could hold in your hand and investigate. A useful first step is to take on this unconventional notion: don't believe everything you think. One more time: don't believe everything you think.

**With this notion on board, let me offer two ways to expand your sensemaking:**

1. Compare your thoughts with levels of adult development to “see” your sensemaking and increase your options
2. Expose yourself to heat experiences to develop your sensemaking

# Action Logics and Adult Development

First thing's first: compare your thoughts with levels of adult development. You have probably heard it said that once we hit adulthood we are basically fully developed; we're done. "We are who we are." We now know this is simply not true. Adults can, and do, develop their whole life long, but they don't have to. As adults, we don't grow physically but we can grow cognitively and emotionally. If you are open to growing, this type of development allows you to take on more complex situations and not just barely make it through, but flourish. There are a handful of adult development models and while there are differences, they are quite consistent for our purposes. Let's use the model of action logics created by [Bill Torbert](#):

**Opportunist:** Wins in any way possible, self-oriented manipulative, blame is externalized, "might makes right." Good in emergencies and sales opportunities.

**Diplomat:** Avoids overt conflict, wants to belong, obeys group norms, rarely rocks the boat. Good as supportive glue within an organization.

**Expert:** Very task oriented, rules by logic and expertise, seeks rational efficiency, limited openness to feedback. Good as an individual contributor.

**Achiever:** Effectively achieves goals through teams, juggles managerial duties and market demands, action and goal oriented. Well suited to managerial roles.

**Individualist:** Interweaves competing personal and company action logics, explores the subjectivity behind objectivity, creates unique structures to resolve gaps between strategy and performance. Effective in venture and consulting roles.

**Strategist:** Generates organizational and personal transformations, exercises the power of mutual inquiry, vigilance and vulnerability for both the short and long term. Effective as a transformational leader.

**Alchemist:** Ego is seen as a limit to further growth, can integrate material, spiritual, and societal transformation. Good at leading industry and society-wide transformations.

# MATCHING ACTION LOGICS WITH BUSINESS COMPLEXITY

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These are levels of adult development. You can think of them as stair steps from less complex sensemaking to more complex sensemaking. Opportunist action logic is less of a match for the complexity of the world than Diplomat action logic. Diplomat is less of a match than Expert, and so on. Alchemist action logic is a good match for the current complexity of the world, and there are levels above. At each of these levels, whole new categories of thought and options for action open up.

It's not so much that one level is better than another and there is no edict that everyone needs to "make it to the top." It's more of a question of what action logic is fit for purpose. If the strategies and options available at a given action logic are fit for purpose for your life and work conditions then there's no need to develop. The reverse is also true: when life and work conditions become more complex, then you may notice that your thoughts and strategies don't work as well as they did before. You may notice that the methods you have for working with these conditions are not sufficient. If so, it's time to expand your sensemaking. To step into that possibility, start inspecting your own thinking.



# SEEING YOUR OWN SENSEMAKING IN ACTION

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To “see” your sensemaking, it’s best to work with a real-world situation. So, think of a challenge you currently have in your leadership at work. Now let’s try to objectify the sensemaking you are doing related to this challenge. Imagine it’s a physical object that you could hold in your hand. You can turn your hand to see the object of your sensemaking from different angles. You can hold it up to the light and see it better. You become curious about it. Questions start to arise in your mind: What are the thoughts I repeatedly have about the challenge? What are the qualities of those thoughts? What motivates them? What needs of the organization are they trying to satisfy? As you ask yourself questions like this, you start to see that the track of thoughts your mind has been running in is all about getting a known list of things done through activating others and teams. You are actually quite good at activating others and teams and, in general, your focus is on translating business intent into manageable chunks of execution. Given this, you guess that the action logic you have been operating from is Achiever.

# Using Different Action Logics to Solve Challenges

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To expand your sensemaking, you now start to look at your challenge through the eyes of the other action logics.

The Individualist action logic understands that objectivity is a myth because each of us sees **our** world instead of **the** world. As each of us has a subjective experience, and there is no “capital T” Truth for much of what we experience in business, the Individualist becomes open to different viewpoints, especially ones counter to their own. This causes the Individualist action logic to seek a wider set of perspectives that yield a systemic view. Looking at your challenge through the eyes of Individualist, you ask some new questions:

- **What about the way I compose and direct teams is unwittingly contributing to a lack of performance?**
- **What do those teams need in the surrounding environment that I can uniquely provide that would help them execute on strategy?**
- **Is my “translation” of strategy into do-able chunks of work part of the problem? Do I need to be doing as much of this as I am? Are others closer to the work capable, or could be made capable if they had the same context I have?**
- **Are my own goals overshadowing other important goals? Or pushing people too hard or fast?**

# The Strategist's Holistic Approach

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The Strategist action logic is capable of holistic systems thinking because the Strategist sees the interplay of all of the systems it is engaged in: its own organization, the wider ecosystem of organizations, the whole industry, family, and society at large. It is also attuned to what is happening at all levels in the organization and takes a long-term view to optimize outcomes for the organization, its members and wider systems. The Strategist action logic is interested not only in what work gets done, but also in how the work gets done with an eye toward optimal effectiveness for all. Capable of system-wide transformation, as you look at your challenge through the eyes of Strategist, you ask some new questions:

- **What is the overall health of the inter-related systems in the organization? (strategy, execution, finance, operations, people, etc)**
- **Are we accomplishing the work in a way that is both healthy and effective?**
- **Who can give useful feedback to help me see my blindspots? Who is more expert in this than me? Who is a better leader than me?**
- **How can we activate more people in the organization toward the abilities and qualities that would help not only this challenge but other challenges likely to come?**

Having received a lot of new information by seeing your challenge through these more complex action logics, you decide to stop here. No sense in looking through the eyes of the Alchemist action logic at this time. Your brain is already stretched and full of many new options. However, there is something that feels like it's missing, and it's the Expert

# Learning from the Expert Action Logic

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To flex your mind and see what may be useful from a “previous” action logic, you also look at your challenge through the eyes of the Expert. The downside of the Expert action logic in the modern business world is that it is so concerned with craft excellence and standards of execution that it often does not see beyond current challenge to the wider set of influences. Solving a challenge is exciting enough! If you execute your leadership from Expert, your scope of concern will be restricted, but your focus is unparalleled. You dive deep into the technical or knowledge-specific aspects of the challenge, you ferret out where the people and teams do not have sufficient craft knowledge to execute well, you interrogate the processes that support execution and find ways to make them more effective. Looking at your challenge through the eyes of Expert, you ask some new questions:

- **Where do we not have the hard skills to solve this challenge or to avoid challenges like this?**
- **What about the systems and processes, at the nitty-gritty level, is getting in people’s way?**
- **Where have we sacrificed efficiency for effectiveness or speed? Are there parts of our process we need to refactor to be more efficient?**
- **What outside experts could we consult who would bring new knowledge or methods?**

Looking through the eyes of the various action logics, you can see so much more! You know that it will take some practice to make your mind turn to these other perspectives, especially the ones that feel like a stretch, but it is already paying off. It’s a great first step.



# LEVERAGING HEAT EXPERIENCES FOR GROWTH

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The second recommendation for expanding your sensemaking is to expose yourself to heat experiences. A “heat experience” is one that calls into question a familiar (but usually unconscious) sensemaking pattern. It is not simply an experience that offers a new idea to consider, it is one that shakes up what you thought to be true about your world. Hence, the heat. To learn more, check out [The Anatomy of a Heat Experience](#) video with Michael Hamman who is a vertical development and transformative learning practitioner and teacher. Now that you know what a heat experience is, how do you get it?

Transformative programs and coaching relationships are two ways to encounter heat experiences. I have participated in several transformative programs to develop my own leaderfulness and I come out each time more capable of working with complex situations as they are, especially the ones I do not prefer. Many, but not all, leadership development programs are transformative. A pro tip is to talk with past participants of a given program and ask about the changes in their work and life – not on the level of knowledge, but on the level of capability. What types of situations are they now more capable of handling?



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# COACHING FOR DELIBERATE DEVELOPMENT

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Another way to expose yourself to heat experiences is to work with a professional coach who is skilled in deliberately developmental coaching. Deliberately developmental is a term used to differentiate coaches who know how to help leaders increase their mental complexity to become more of a match for the complexity surrounding them. They will be experts in adult development methods and they will also be capable of supporting growth in many dimensions including cognitive, emotional and energetic.

It may be tempting to think that expanding your sensemaking is a “nice to have” professional development opportunity that you can do when you have extra time, but that would be shortsighted. For the business world as it stands today, and for the added complexity of the exponential era we are just now entering, expanding one’s sensemaking is not optional. Most of us are simply not a good enough match for the complexity of the world and the business situations it serves up.

# The Majority of Leaders Need to Expand

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Leaders' sensemaking measured through action logics assessments by adult development specialists at [Harthill](#) shows that 1/3 of us are operating at the logics most capable of working with complexity: Individualist, Strategist and Alchemist. The majority of this small population operates at Individualist, so there is significant upside as we continue to develop to Strategist and Alchemist, as our work and life creates the demand to do so.

On the other side of the coin, this also means that the majority of leaders operate at action logics associated with below-average corporate performance and an inability to work with complexity. More than half of us are operating at Achiever, which is close but not good enough if we want to be a match for complexity. We have room to grow!

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# A Preview of FUTURE-FIT INSIGHTS

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To give you a sense of where we are going, let me whet your appetite with the next headline:

**#Future-fit leaders integrate their shadows.**

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# LYSSA IS A LEADERSHIP COACH & AN EXPERT IN THE FUTURE OF WORK

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