Sense Making Lessons
FROM THE PRIVATE SECTOR
Reasons for my civic duty

1. The messes you all face have me in awe
2. I know how hard it is to make sense
3. I have tools to share to make it feel more manageable
The Department of Complexity
Prerequisites w/ Low Probability

- Convinced ourselves we already have our arms wrapped around complexity enough to judge the fittingness of others’ approaches to managing it.
- Documented examples of good and bad complexity management in practice
- Published academically-based theories, frameworks and recommendations to reference to sense makers across all industries and fields of practice
### Three Lessons & Three Tools

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Swoop Up and Down
Swoop Round & Round
Swoop up

and down,

swoop round and round.
“Do organizations generally just give you everything you need at the start of the project or how does that all work?”

A student recently
Me

Images: https://emojipedia.org/apple/
Actionable Areas of Inquiry

1. Context
2. People
Context

- What is the historical context?
- What is the end user context?
- What is the internal user context?
- What is the systems’ context?
- What is the data context?
- What is product, market or industry context?
- What is the context of time, team & resources available?
People

Who are the people or teams:

- **within** what you are working on?
- **below** what you are working on?
- **above** what you are working on?
- **adjacent to** what you are working on?
- **behind** what you are working on?
Stakeholder Interviewing

What is stuck in peoples’ heads?
Set boundaries before the questions start.
Boundaries I Set

• You were chosen because your experience matters to the work I am trying to do
• I am recording so I can listen back and transcribe fully
• What you say in this room is private, and your identity will never be revealed to anyone
• I am interested in your experience, and your ideas — so there are no wrong answers
Lean on the script, a perfect prop to push people further
Plan a flow to build trust
Trust Building Flow

1. **Position:** Questions that explore the stakeholders position in relation to the subject being explored in the interview.

2. **Beliefs:** Questions that push to explore the things the stakeholder believes to be true as it relates to the subject being explored.

3. **Doubts:** Questions that push the stakeholder to explore the things that make them less comfortable in the subject being explored.

4. **Color:** Questions that you feel they are uniquely positioned to answer given their background, experience and/or answers to the above.
Talk to the Right People
What does it mean to hold stake?
Find the people who...

- Could change the course of your project mid stream
- Sign off on your work or the work of your partners
- Will help you make the thing you are making
- Market the thing you are making
- Measure the success of the thing you are making
- Maintain the thing you are making
- Translate/interpret/adapt the thing you are making
- Provide customer service on the thing you are making
Give as much *after* the interview as *before* and *during*
Hard Truths

• You *actually* have to listen and take your own notes
• Transcripts are NOT notes, outsourcing doesn't work
• Unorganized, long-form notes and transcripts are useless when you get to analysis
My notes for a small stakeholder interview project with 10 participants (30 min each) across three departments

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### Hrs Prepping

### Hrs Interviewing

### Hrs Listening Back

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Abby Covert
Unmapped Complexity Breeds Fear
Welcome to the MIDDLE of the BEGINNING
PEOPLE NEED MAPS
“Do you have a map of what exists?”

Me in many a meeting with sense-making advice-seekers
Systematic Audits

What is the shape of the problem?
Identify the bounds of the problem space
Based on Stephen Covey's Circles of Control, Influence & Concern

Circle of Control
- Reverse engineer everything you can to uncover the true current state and honest accountancy of past efforts

Circle of Influence
- Document the measurement, labels and intentions

Circle of Concern
- Document the risks
Gather the right inputs
Do you have full access to:

- Functionality?
- Content?
- Data?
- Users?
- Stakeholders?
Create a framework with the future use in mind
Diagram vs. Spreadsheet
Create a *humane* plan of attack
Assume best intentions of past sense makers
BECAUSE

REASONS
It’s people all the way down
Kindness & Bravery

How can we plan for the *human* part so that we aren’t disappointed when that’s where we inevitably end up?
When NOT in doubt, ask a question
Define & Defend Enough
Pay it Forward
Be clarity for those drowning in ambiguity
THERE IS NO HOPE

IT DEPENDS

THERE IS NO HOPE
GOODBYE CONFLICTION
There is an “i” in “kind”
Permission

Granted
Thank you!