

# Making Sense in the Fire: Leadership, Crisis, and the Collapse of Meaning

The Mann Gulch Tragedy and lessons in leadership from Karl Weick.



# Webinar Agenda

Welcome and Introduction (5 min)

1

Topic introduction, Mann Gulch overview, and contextualization of Karl Weick's influential research on organizational sensemaking.

2

Mini-Case: The Mann Gulch Disaster (10 min)

Video summary of the 1949 tragedy, highlighting the breakdown of communication, role confusion, and identity loss among smokejumpers.

3

What is Sensemaking? (15 min)

Exploration of Weick's definition and the seven properties: identity-grounded, retrospective, enactive, social, ongoing, cue-focused, and plausibility-driven.

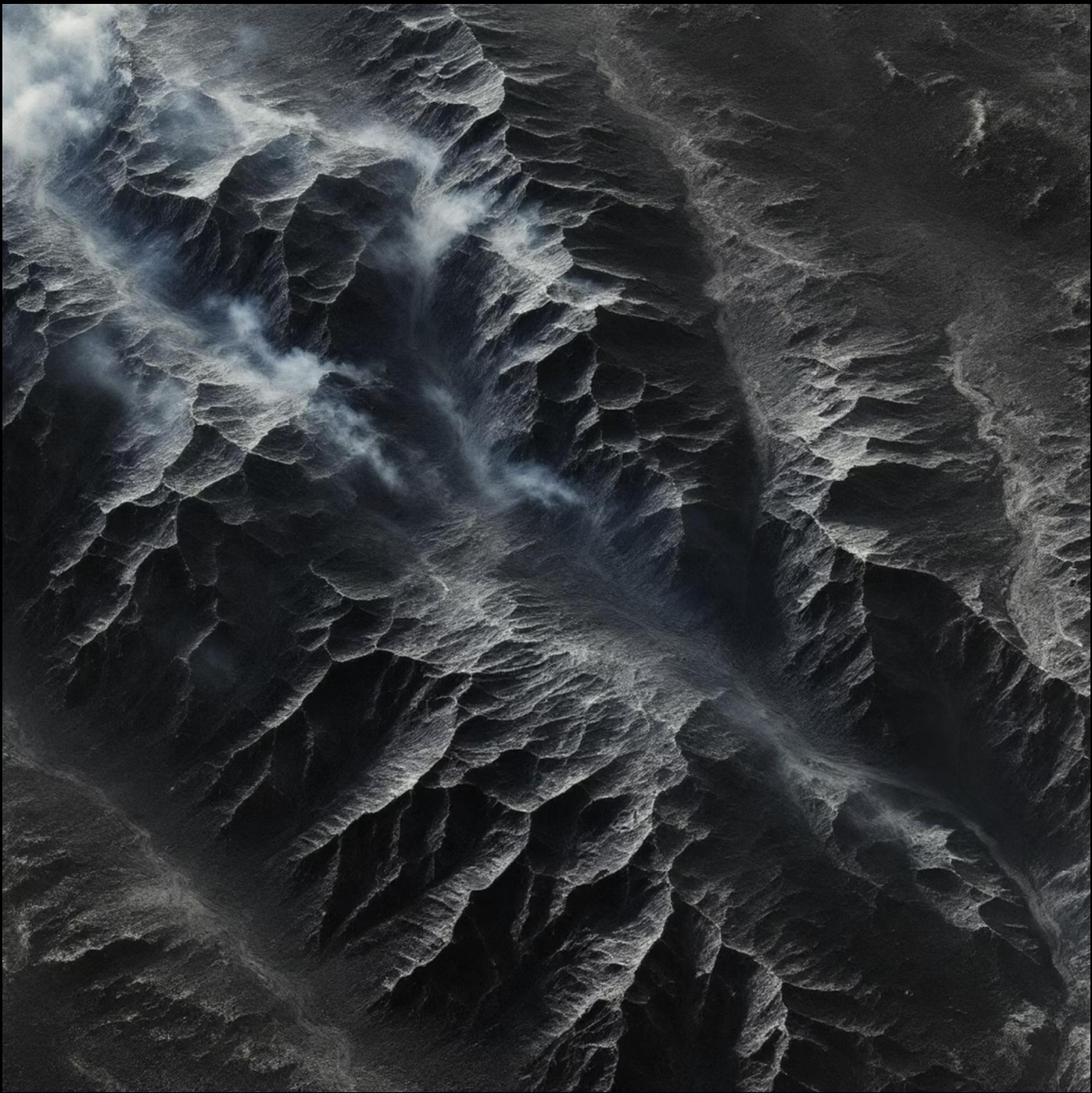
4

Application (30 min)

Deputy Director Deer and Undersecretary McClinton discuss sensemaking in modern day public organizations, including crisis response, identity maintenance, collaborative meaning-making, and decision-making under uncertainty.

5

Collective Sensemaking (10 min)



The 1949 Mann Gulch fire killed 13 smokejumpers when sensemaking collapsed under extreme







An aerial photograph showing a large fire burning through a dense forest. A bright orange line of fire snakes across the middle of the image, with thick white smoke billowing upwards from the burning area. The surrounding trees are mostly green, but some appear charred or dead. The right side of the image is dark, serving as a background for the text.

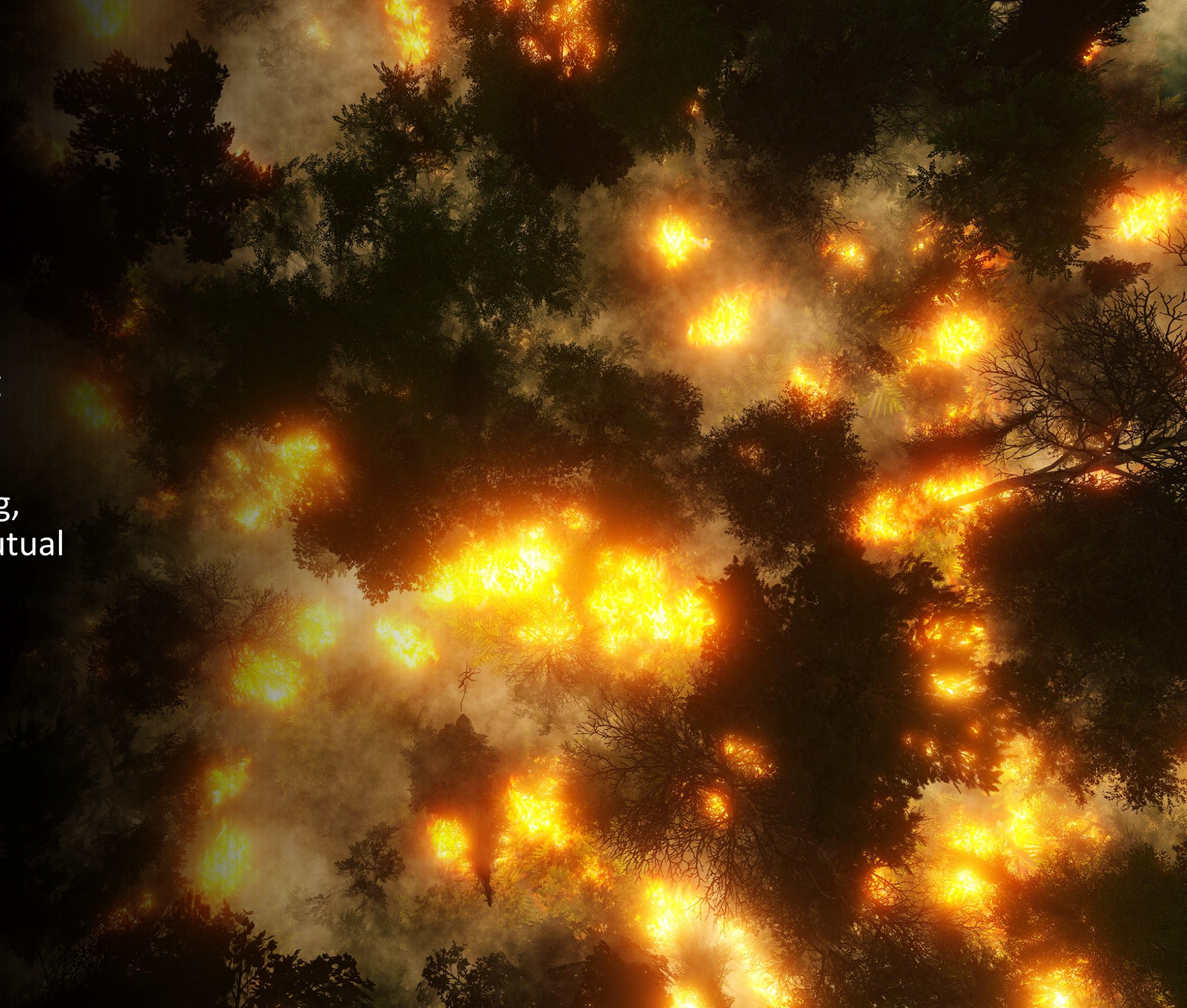
# Open-Ended Poll Question

- What caused this tragedy? What could have prevented it? What role did leadership play, if any?



# Sensemaking Defined

- Sensemaking is about placing items into frameworks, comprehending, dealing with surprises, constructing meaning, and interacting in pursuit of mutual understanding.





# Weick's Seven Properties of Sensemaking

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1. Grounded in Identity
2. Retrospective
3. Contextual
4. Socially constructed
5. Ongoing and Continuous, not sporadic or periodic
6. Focus on cues that become the basis for meaning-making.
7. Plausibility over objectively accurate





# What Disrupts Sensemaking?

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- Loss of Identity or Role Clarity
- Communication Breakdowns
- Absence of Shared Goals
- Absence of Shared Mental Models
- Information Overload – ESPECIALLY when info is ambiguous or contradictory
- Emotional Stress and Fear
- Leadership Inconsistency or Unpredictability
- Fragmentation of social structures or trust





# Take-Aways and Applications for Leaders

- Do some identity work.
- Build Trust
- Identify the current mental models in use in your team.
- Work on consistency in your leadership. This doesn't mean to be an automaton, but recognizing your behavior cues how your team builds meaning.
- Build reflection into your practice.

In times of change and crisis:

- Overcommunicate
- Take steps to help control or eliminate fear.
- Understand the power of mental models, but don't be a slave to them. Try to consciously set them aside when dealing with something new to ensure you see all the possibilities.
- Practice Bricolage – more modernly known as McGyvering

**“Sensemaking begins with the sensemaker. And sensemaking is always about identity.”**





# Post-Webinar Resources



## Sensemaking Properties and Disruptors

Comprehensive PDF explaining Weick's seven properties and potential Sense-Disruptors.

## Recommended Reading

Weick's Address on Sensemaking