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HR & Finance

HR Director Boardroom Summary

August 2025



Chaired by

EVERSHEDS SUTHERLAND

Speakers:



Naeema Choudry
Partner
Eversheds Sutherland



Stephen E Morris
Executive Leadership Coach

Discussing the topic:

'The Art of Sense-making: Enabling Valuable Conversations Between Individuals and Across Organisations'

On 13th August, senior HR leaders came together for a thought-provoking session exploring "The Art of Sense-making: Enabling Valuable Conversations Between Individuals and Across Organisations."
The event was led by Stephen E. Morris, an accomplished author, speaker, and leadership specialist, with legal insights from Naeema Choudry, Partner at Eversheds Sutherland. Together, they delivered a rich and engaging discussion that blended leadership theory, practical application, and legal considerations equipping HR professionals and senior leaders with tools to navigate increasingly complex organisational environments.



Rethinking Leadership: From "Hollywood Heroes" to Contextual Practice
Stephen began by reflecting on his early perceptions of leadership, confessing he once held a "Hollywood view" of leaders as heroic figures whose high salaries signalled superior effectiveness. Research, he explained, tells a different story: the measurable impact of a CEO on organisational outcomes is often far smaller than popularly assumed. Leadership, therefore, is best understood in context, not as a set of isolated traits or behaviours.

Tracing the evolution of leadership theory, Stephen took participants through the shift from early trait-based models, through behavioural and contingency approaches, and back to traits in the 1990s. Today, over 100 leadership styles circulate in professional literature many unproven underlining that leadership is a contextual practice, not a formulaic one.

The session's core concept was sense-making, the ongoing process of creating and negotiating meaning through experience and interaction. Rather than seeking a single "correct answer," sense-making encourages leaders to appreciate different perspectives, allowing for better shared understanding and coordinated action. Stephen illustrated the process with a simple model:

- A current situation
- A gap in understanding
- The act of sense-making
- A bridge of ideas, values, beliefs, and intuition guiding action

He used relatable examples, such as deciding when and how to eat when hungry, demonstrating how personal and collective frames of reference help solve problems. A brief exercise using the word "lion" showed that individuals may interpret the same cue differently yet still find common ground for action, a powerful metaphor for organisational communication.

The discussion explored the unintended consequences of ignoring context. Stephen shared a case where a flat organisational structure initially boosted engagement but eventually caused confusion, loss of direction, and client drift. Centralised processes had to be reinstated, highlighting a familiar HR challenge: well-intentioned reforms can fail when leaders overlook lived experience and context.

Attendees reflected on parallels in their own organisations, noting moments where over-correction had undermined engagement, or where staff feedback had been ignored, only to result in reversals. One participant remarked: “I realised we often overcomplicate problems that are actually clear a simple process could save time and frustration.”

To navigate complexity, Stephen introduced the Cynefin framework, which categorises issues into:

- Clear: best addressed with standard procedures
- Complicated: requiring expert analysis
- Complex: needing experimentation and adaptation
- Chaotic: demanding immediate stabilisation



Placing issues in the correct domain is critical: treating a complex problem as clear, for instance, risks failure, while overcomplicating a clear issue will waste resources.

Delegates applied Cynefin thinking to a prepared exercise on AI adoption, tackling ethical questions, authorship, governance, and accountability. Group discussions revealed significant variation in problem classification, reflecting how context organisational culture, industry, maturity shapes interpretation.

For example:

- Ethical concerns were viewed as either complicated (requiring expert guidance) or complex (requiring iterative experimentation).
- Governance and accountability were often confused, illustrating a need for clearer decision rights and oversight mechanisms.
- Questions about authorship and output quality sparked debates on professional accountability, demonstrating the human element in technology adoption.

These exercises emphasised that HR leaders must blend context, expertise, and experimentation to guide organisations through new challenges.

Naeema added that complex situations require early legal consideration. Employment law, discrimination, equal pay, data protection, and intellectual property cannot be treated as afterthoughts; instead, they should form part of the sense-making process from the start. This proactive approach reduces risk and ensures ethical, compliant organisational decisions.

Practical Applications for HR Leaders

The session offered several concrete takeaways for HR teams:

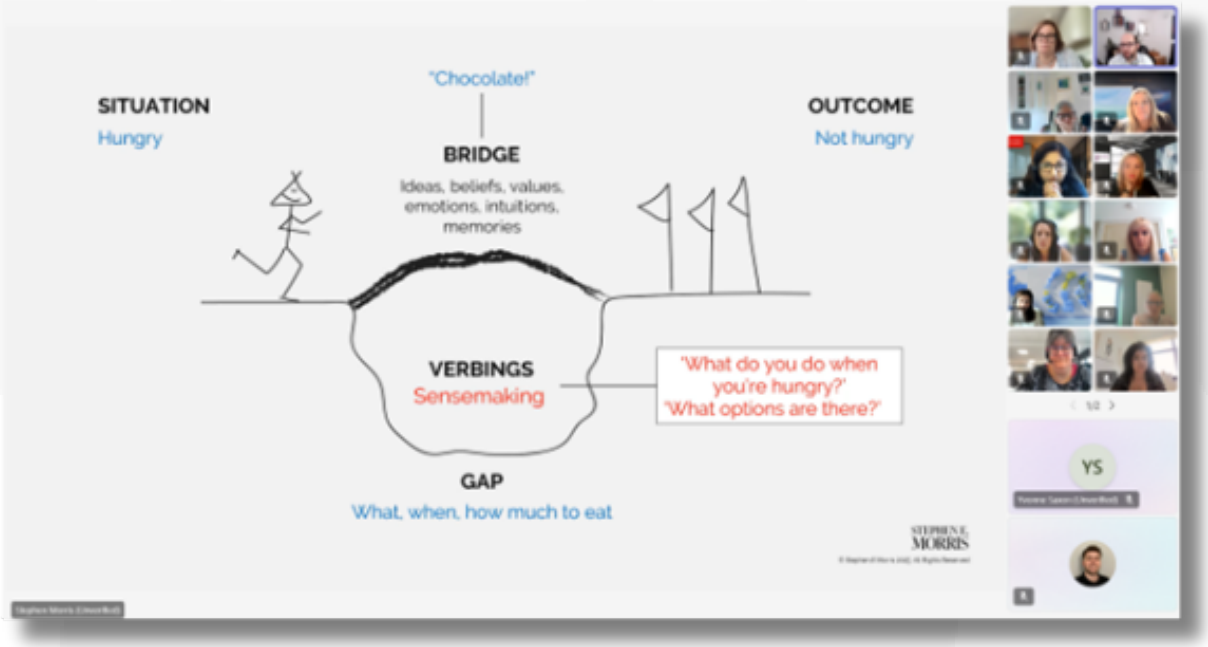
- Integrate sense-making into leadership and team discussions to align understanding of ambiguous challenges.
- Use frameworks like Cynefin to classify issues accurately and choose the right response approach.

- Apply sense-making to new technology adoption, policy changes, and workforce planning to anticipate unintended consequences.
- Incorporate legal and ethical considerations early in organisational change to avoid costly mistakes.

Key Takeaways

- Context is everything: Leadership effectiveness and organisational choices depend on situational awareness.
- Leadership has no silver bullet: Success requires ongoing negotiation of meaning, not adherence to a single model.
- Change succeeds when lived experience is considered: Engagement and adoption improve when employees feel heard.
- Frameworks provide clarity: Tools like Cynefin help leaders act thoughtfully rather than rely on slogans like "be agile."
- HR's role is critical: Facilitating sense-making conversations across teams builds trust, shared understanding, and confident decision-making in uncertainty.

Above all, the session reinforced that HR leaders are uniquely positioned to create meaningful conversations within and across organisations, adopting enough shared understanding to act effectively, even amid ambiguity and complexity.



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