

The New Management Imperatives: Culture, Connectedness, Performance, Leadership Sensemaking, Organizational Trust, And Employee Voice: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the new management imperatives shaping contemporary organizations by examining the interrelationships among organizational culture, connectedness, performance, leadership sensemaking, organizational trust, and employee voice. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 14 participants, including managers and employees across diverse organizational roles. Using thematic analysis, the study identified four central themes: leadership sensemaking as a catalyst for cultural coherence, connectedness as a foundation for organizational trust, trust-enabled employee voice as a driver of engagement and learning, and the alignment of culture and voice with perceived performance outcomes. The findings reveal that leadership sensemaking plays a pivotal role in interpreting organizational values and fostering meaningful connections, while trust emerges as a critical enabler of open communication and employee participation. Employee voice was found to function both as an expression of trust and as a mechanism for continuous improvement and adaptive performance. This study advances qualitative management research by foregrounding the lived experiences of organisational actors to formulate a unified explanation of how relational and interpretive processes influence organisational performance in contemporary contexts. The findings provide practical insights for leaders seeking to cultivate trust-based cultures that encourage connectedness, amplify employee voice, and support sustainable performance.

Keywords: Organizational culture, Leadership sensemaking, Organizational trust, Employee voice, Connectedness

INTRODUCTION

Modern organisations are structured in an environment of increased uncertainty due to the untamed digitalisation process, mobile working habits, and the growing demand for significant and meaningful work. The existence of hybrid and remote modes of organising has reshaped the daily patterns of interaction that have tended to undermine the social well-being and interrelationship of employees with their colleagues in the case of an institutional support of low strength (Marozva & Pelsner, 2025). Meanwhile, systematic striving to augment connectedness, inclusion, and involvement has been depicted to promote participation and results in sophisticated institutional contexts, revealing that relational processes have taken a central phase in organisational performance instead of marginal issues (Davies et al., 2025). The implication that is paramount is that relationship and communication quality in organisations has emerged as an imperative in management. In this setting, six constructs in correlation with each other have gained special relevance in the study of organisational life: organisational culture, connectedness, performance,

leadership sensemaking, organisational trust, and employee voice. The limited literature on organisational culture in the banking industry demonstrates that organisational culture has a substantial impact on organisational learning, employee engagement, and performance, and shared values and norms can be regarded as a long-term guide to behaviour and adaptability (Hasan, 2023). Complementary evidence suggests that the organisational learning culture, through continuous learning and job crafting, is related to better work engagement and work competencies that facilitate effectiveness (Iman et al., 2025). Similar studies on the role of high-performance work systems and stewardship climate prove that supervisor-related trust is one of the primary mechanisms that help to motivate employees to express their suggestions and concerns (Badru et al., 2024) and paradoxical leadership that fosters knowledge-sharing behaviour by promoting the voice (Silva et al., 2024).

The leadership sensemaking is also a specific management imperative that has been identified in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis and other disruptions. One qualitative study of crisis leadership in Norwegian companies demonstrates that leaders interpret the uncertain situation and put it into perspective to help followers by enabling the employees to navigate emotional tension, thus remaining resilient and performing well in a challenging situation (Dale Oen et al., 2022). This interpretive work is encompassed in the hybrid and digitally mediated workplaces through making sense of organisational values, resolving competing demands, and creating stories that would allow linking organisational purpose with everyday practices. The leadership sensemaking occupies an interface between culture, trust, and connectedness, influencing the way employees comprehend what it consists of, contributing to performance in turbulent circumstances (Dale Oen et al., 2022; Marozva & Pelsner, 2025). The context of this research is thus an organisational environment where organisational culture, connectedness, trust, voice, and interpretive leadership are all that constitute the new management imperatives.

Most empirical studies analyzing the relationship between culture, trust, voice, and performance investigate the relationships between the country of origin and different countries to a minimal extent in dyads, although these issues have developed interest. As an illustration, culture performance or culture-engagement connection is an often studied topic of research (Hasan, 2023; Iman et al., 2025), whereas other studies use trust-voice relationships, e.g., the impact of supervisor trust on employee voice or knowledge-sharing behaviour (Badru et al., 2024; Silva et al., 2024). These contributions elucidate specific pathways but rarely theorise on culture, connectedness, trust, leadership sensemaking, voice, and perceived performance as one relational system.

Simultaneously, there is an increased awareness that organisational life is value-sensitive and relationally densely populated. Hybrid work studies draw attention to the inability to ensure social employee welfare, belonging, and connectedness when the work arrangements shift rapidly (Marozva & Pelsner, 2025). The systematic reviews of interventions to establish connectedness and engagement highlight the significance of intentional relational strategies, yet are often placed within sector or educational settings and fail to take into account the leadership sensemaking or voice relations (Davies et al., 2025). In the meantime, crisis leadership studies have shown the significance of sensemaking and communication to resilience and seldom discuss how the practices are observed in relation to daily patterns of trust and employee voice in organisations (Dale Oen et al., 2022). This gives the justification of the holistic qualitative research on how the organisational actors themselves comprehend and relate these phenomena. The questions used in the search are as follows:

RQ1: What do organisational actors say about the importance of leadership sensemaking in influencing cultural coherence?

RQ2: What is the experience of connectedness and organisational trust as a condition, and result of, employee voice?

RQ3: How do the participants associate culture, trust, and voice with their perceived performance and learning outcomes?

THEORETICAL AND AXIOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION

In theory, these research organisations are placed as value-rich cultural communities where performance not only constitutes a technicality, but also a measure of collective signification, moral anticipation, and relational quality. Even the existing research on organisational culture and learning indicates that values and norms draw attention, systematise learning opportunities, and shape the behaviours that are accepted and reinforced (Hasan, 2023; Iman et al., 2025). Trust and employee voice evidence shows that expectations of fairness, reciprocity, and psychological safety are the basis behind speaking up or staying silent desires, and that voice behaviours, in their turn, are positive predictors of innovation and knowledge sharing (Badru et al., 2024; Silva et al., 2024). Additional insights on qualitative studies of crisis leadership are that sensemaking and narrative framing are the primary drivers of resilience and shared purpose in uncertainty-prone situations (Dale Oen et al., 2022). These strands suggest that the aspects of leadership sensemaking, connectedness, trust, and voice are better understood as moral and interpretive practices by which organisational members negotiate what constitutes responsible and good performance. The novelty of the study is that the constructs are integrated into a single relational sensemaking understanding of performance as co-produced by everyday meaning-making, rather than viewing it as a solely technical product.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organisational Culture as a Value-Laden Framework

The popular view of organisational culture defines it as a pattern of mutual values, norms, and taken-for-granted assumptions that inform behaviour and define meaning in organisations. Along with recent empirical research, culture is not an abstract setting but a pragmatic structure by which employees perceive expectations and assess fairness, belonging, and performance. Indicatively, research on the subjects of logistics and education depicts that the presence of supportive, participative, and learning oriented cultures correlates with increased employee performance, knowledge sharing, and quality of conflict management (Cabrera Nuñez et al., 2025; Kostovski et al., 2025; Pham et al., 2024). These results point towards culture as a value system as an organizer of everyday behavior and not merely a symbolic attribute. The culture of learning has assumed a focal point in associating values with results. The study of the organisational learning culture suggests that the culture that facilitates experimentation, feedback, and knowledge sharing promotes innovative behaviour, engagement, and reduces turnover intentions (Jung et al., 2021; Mingaleva et al., 2022). Culture with a focus on learning and long-term responsibility in the case of public-sector and sustainability-oriented organisations are associated with performance and knowledge-management practices in a positive manner (Cabrera Nuñez et al., 2025; Pham et al., 2024). Such studies indicate that culture is cognitive, shared beliefs, as well as axiological, shared values of what is worthwhile, exhibiting both tangible impacts on commitment and performance.

Leadership Sensemaking and Cultural Coherence

The sensemaking theory establishes leaders as essential decoders who assist others in interpreting ambiguous events by creating stories that convey the meaning of what is going

on and why it is necessary. The research on contemporary crisis leadership indicates that the interpretive work of leaders plays a decisive role in turbulent situations when uncertainty and danger may compromise collective meanings (Riggio & Newstead, 2023). Leader sensemaking includes the diagnosis of conditions, framing of problems, and the expression of values in a manner that lowers ambiguity and facilitates coordinated action. An interpretive work being consistent with the organisational values strengthens the culture, whereas an inconsistent or instrumental approach weakens the culture, and trust is destroyed (Gleibs, 2025). Empirical literature on leader sensemaking in crisis and change situations indicates that the different styles of sensemaking are related to varying psychological implications on followers. As an example, reflective, inclusive, and transparent leader sensemaking has been correlated with increased follower trust, security, and engagement, and rigid or self-driven sensemaking has been associated with anxiety and withdrawal (Medeiros et al., 2022). Narrative-based research on leadership education also holds that stories are primary modes of leadership communicating organisational identities and moral expectations, and makes narrative a way to research the construction and challenge of values (Connable, 2025). Leadership is introduced in these strands as a cultural practice and axiological practice where sensemaking either embodies or disintegrates organisational culture (Üztemur et al., 2025).

Connectedness, Social Climate, and Organisational Trust

Connectedness and social climate entail the sense of belonging of the employees, recognition, and supportive interaction among the employees of organisations. Recent literature highlights that a favorable social climate is defined by equitable procedures, leader support, and significant peer relations, which, in combination, provide an atmosphere of engagement and psychological well-being (Ha & Lee, 2022; Tian et al., 2023). The perceived organisational support and inclusive treatment are found to decrease loneliness at the workplace and enhance work engagement, especially in high-stress environments (Tian et al., 2023). These results demonstrate that, as well as an interpersonal feeling, connectedness is an emergent quality of structures and practices that are indicative of respect and inclusion. The most common definition of organisational trust is the conviction of employees that the organisation and its leaders are good, capable, and of integrity (Gleibs, 2025). Recent findings indicate that procedural justice and ethical or supportive leadership behaviours are critical antecedents of trust, which subsequently mediate between trust and work engagement, well-being, and job satisfaction (Daud et al., 2025; Burhan et al., 2023; Üztemur et al., 2025). When leaders are open, appreciate professional autonomy, and make decisions based on shared values, they build trust (Ha & Lee, 2022; Üztemur et al., 2025). The spiritual leadership and identity-related research also reveals that elucidating a powerful common mission and exercising value congruence can enhance organisational trust (Daud et al., 2025; Gleibs, 2025). The interconnectedness and trust create a social climate that is reinforcing: caring and fair practices create trust, and trust enables employees to enjoy connectedness and psychological safety.

Employee Voice, Participation, and Engagement

The expression of ideas, concerns, and suggestions, which are usually discretionary and directed to better the work processes or solve a problem, is generally called employee voice. Recent studies differentiate between promotive voice (improvement suggestions) and prohibitive voice (concerns), and demonstrate that both types of voice play the key role in the learning and adaptation in dynamic environments (Katsaros, 2025; Liu et al., 2025). Research in the hospitality field, healthcare, and technology-based environments shows that inclusive and transformational leadership styles make employees have more voice through promoting psychological safety, affective commitment, and power (Katsaros, 2025; Liu et al., 2025). Such results underscore that voice is not a personal personality

aspect but a social consequence of the perceived safety, inclusion, and influence. The issue of trust and identification has become a prerequisite for maintaining a voice. Nursing and other public service experiences provide evidence that voice behaviour can be predicted by organisational trust, and career resilience or other psychological resources mediate the expected behaviour (Zhang et al., 2024). Equally, organisational identification not only motivates employees to represent the organisation but also influences how their voice will be assessed by the managers (Jung & Choi, 2025). The voice engagement relationship is further enhanced by an inclusive leadership style that rewards efforts and views dissent as a positive quality. Collectively, these studies imply that voice, on the one hand, is a manifestation of trust, as well as a learning and adaptation mechanism.

Integrative Models of Culture, Trust, Voice, and Performance

The organisational culture and sustainability indicate that culture management facilitates corporate sustainability through learning, innovation, and responsible behaviour, which subsequently results in performance outcomes (Mingaleva et al., 2022). Research on logistics and education has affirmed that culture not only directly affects performance but also through knowledge management, collaboration, and conflict management (Cabrera Nuñez et al., 2025; Kostovski et al., 2025; Pham et al., 2024). Such results suggest that culture sets up the circumstances in which trust, collaboration, and voice may arise, and, consequently, the performance is indirectly determined. The procedural justice has been revealed to promote work engagement with the help of organisational trust and commitment as dual mediators (Ha & Lee, 2022), as well as team-content collaboration and trust, which improve work team efficiency by promoting active participation and open sharing of ideas (Paredes-Saavedra et al., 2024). At high pressure, voice behaviour is predicted by organisational trust, which consequently facilitates adaptive performance and innovation (Katsaros, 2025; Zhang et al., 2024). The insights of crisis and identity leadership studies can also be added to the evidence that shared identity and value-compatible sensemaking can establish the trust-favorable climates in which voice and collaboration can thrive, hence promoting performance and resilience (Gleibs, 2025; Riggio & Newstead, 2023). An integrative approach is needed, in which culture, leadership, sensemaking, connectedness, trust, and voice are viewed as mutually constitutive in the formation of organisational meaning and performance. Yet the qualitative literature provides very few lived-experience reports describing how these interdependencies are realised in practice.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design used in this study has been an interpretivist qualitative design to determine how organisational actors make sense of culture, connectedness, trust, leadership sensemaking, employee voice, and performance in day-to-day work. An interpretivist position presupposes that organisational reality is socially constructed, and should be conceived in terms of the meanings attached to their impressions by participants. This suits on the basis that the focal constructs are value-based and relational, which entails making judgments concerning organisational values, decisions to trust, and decisions to speak up or not. These meanings were accessed through semi-structured in-depth interviews. This format was a standardized format in all interviews and gave flexibility to explore personal experience. The participants could tell the events, relationships, and organisational practices using their own words and could expound on the cases where they thought culture, trust, or voice was more salient. In-depth interviewing was thus

appropriate in order to get some of the finer mechanisms, like leadership sensemaking and perceived connectedness.

Sampling and Participants

The purposive sampling method was applied to select 14 participants who included a combination of managers and employees associated with the various functional areas and levels of hierarchy. It was aimed at conceptual diversity as opposed to statistical representation. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) 10 years of organisational experience, which guaranteed the knowledge of the cultural norms and leadership practice; (b) the experience of voice, trust or change was relevant now or in the recent past; and (c) the readiness to reflect on the experience of speaking up, staying silent, and interpreting leadership actions. Middle and senior levels were used to attract managers whose role is to capture the construction and communication of cultural narratives. Sampling of employees was done in the operational and professional positions to demonstrate how such narratives are received and performed. The entire manuscript will include a descriptive table that will summarize role, level, functional area, tenure, and sector, and will maintain anonymity.

Data Collection Procedures

The participants were contacted either through email or through internal messages with a concise description of the study. Interested ones were given detailed information, and informed written consent was acknowledged. The interviews took place within four to six weeks, either in person in a private meeting room or on the Internet via a secure platform, which is a hybrid workplace setup. The interviews took about 30-40 minutes and were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. The interview guide included open-ended questions about organisational culture, connectedness and disconnection experiences, leadership communication and sensemaking, trust and distrust, voice and silence episodes, and perceived relationships between these experiences and performance or learning. Concrete examples and an explanation of the interpretation were obtained by using follow-up prompts. Contextual notes were then prepared after every interview on applicable organisational developments, e.g., restructuring or recent crises.

Data Analysis

Transcription of interviews was verbatim, and reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the interviews. The first reading of transcripts was done repeatedly by the researcher to become familiar with the transcripts and make preliminary impressions. Salient features on the research questions were then identified by line-by-line coding using inductive codes of the language used by the participants, and sensitising concepts of the literature. The related codes were grouped into candidate themes and were checked and edited in relation to the whole data set, to ensure coherence and uniqueness. Five concluding themes were subsequently established and explained, with the help of exemplary quotes. The analysis was based on participant narratives, and theoretical constructs were employed to elaborate on, but not predetermine, interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

The consent of the concerned institution was secured to conduct the research ethically. Written information was provided to the participants regarding the study, their rights, including the right to withdraw, and confidentiality. All reporting is done under pseudonyms, and the identifying information is taken out. Due to the sensitivity of the topic concerning trust and silence, the participants were reminded that they could refuse any of the questions or cut the interview short at any point, so as to reduce possible discomfort and encourage openness in sharing.

RESULTS

The results of the 14 semi-structured interviews have been structured in four interrelated themes that mirror the lived experiences of participants on the subject of culture, leadership, connectedness, trust, voice, and performance. All themes were obtained after coding and refining the theme, and they are supported by anonymised quotes of managers and employees, as shown in Table 1. The analysis is based on the interpretation of organisational values and practices by the participants themselves and how these interpretations relate to their readiness to trust, speak up, and perform.

Table 1: Themes and coding

Theme	Short Description	Codes
Leadership sensemaking as a catalyst for cultural coherence	The way leaders define and tell values, change, and priorities determines how this telling holds or dismays the culture.	"translating values into daily language"; "leaders making sense of chaos"; "mixed messages from senior team"; "values as story versus slogan."
Connectedness as a foundation for organisational trust	The role of everyday experiences in belonging, support, and quality of relationships in the foundation of trust in leaders and the organisation.	"feeling part of a community"; "only see my boss on screen"; "silos and cliques"; "manager checks in as a person."
Trust-enabled employee voice as a driver of engagement and learning	How trust causes disposition to speak up and how voice influences engagement, learning, and improvement.	"I speak when I know it is safe"; "ideas go into a black box"; "we learned from mistakes because we could talk about them"; "voice as risk."
Alignment of culture and voice with perceived performance outcomes	The relationship between cultural values, trust, and voice, and their relationship with performance, both in the short and long term, is examined for the employees.	"numbers versus values"; "doing the right thing costs time"; "silent compliance looks like performance"; "when they listen, we perform better."

Theme 1: Leadership Sensemaking as a Catalyst for Cultural Coherence

Participants will always position leaders as the main decoders of the meaning of what the organisation is and what behaviour will be acceptable. Some of them said that their bosses translated abstract values into practice. According to one middle manager, "the walls just made sense when the values were explained to me by my director about what they entailed regarding our deadlines and the choice of clients we were to serve" (P4, manager). In this participant, the meaning of the formal value statements was realised when they were supported by narrative illustrations of how values were used to make real decisions.

Cultural coherence was enhanced where leaders indulged in deliberate sensemaking. A member of one of the operational teams explained that their manager used weekly briefings to publicly discuss his conflicting pressures: "Each week, the manager would tell us, How to prioritise: I know we are under pressure to deliver faster, but our value of safety does not change" (P9, employee). This type of explicit framing served to help staff balance

performance requirements and core values and perceive fewer contradictions. Members of these teams were more likely to report the culture as being consistent and as being fair, indicating that consistent sensemaking would support the compatibility between the values espoused and those in action.

A number of respondents reported incidents in which senior leaders shared a changing or contradictory story on both strategy and values. One interviewee noted that "one week we are told people first, the next week it is cost first, and no one tells why there was a change" (P2, employee). A different manager also noted "how they changed their slogans three times in two years, but no one would sit with the teams and argue what that meant, and thus everyone eventually ceased to believe" (P6, manager). Under such circumstances, values were lived out as slogans and not as guide principles, and sensemaking in leadership was seen as non-existent or skin deep.

Another subtlety was that sensemaking does not just exist when leaders believe that they are saying it. Respondents reacted well when the leaders acknowledged that they did not have it all. One of the managers remembered "how they could tell their staff, 'I do not know whether this restructuring will be helpful to us, but I would tell you what I learn and I would fight for what we agreed is important'" (P5, manager). According to the team members, such candour enhanced their trust and made them more ready to wait and see instead of disengaging. On the contrary, reassurances that were told with confidence and ambiguity were viewed as either avoidance or manipulation. When the leadership sensemaking is visible in its value clarity and truthful consideration of the ambiguity and limitation, it is perceived as credible.

Theme 2: Connectedness as a Foundation for Organisational Trust

The second theme sums up the degree of relatedness felt by the participants in their everyday interactions, or the lack thereof, and the degree to which it influenced their trust in the leaders or the organisation. One of the most common descriptions of connectedness mentioned by many of the participants was being seen and known as persons. One employee stated that, "my manager is able to remember information about my family and is inquiring about the state of my family, not only about the numbers; that makes me feel that I matter as well" (P3, employee). This type of relational attention was associated with trust many times, and participants indicated that individual, minor gestures indicated care and respect.

Hybrid work arrangements generated a chance as well as a challenge of connectedness. Other participants "liked the flexibility and believed that relationships were getting thinner. One said that when we do video calls we go directly to the agenda, there is no hallway conversation, and thus you miss those informal check-ins" (P11, employee). One of them added that "it has been employed here three years and has never seen some of his colleagues face to face, as it is more difficult to trust with a small square on the screen" (P8, employee). These reports indicate that online communication is capable of restricting unintentional social interaction, which further complicates building trust.

On the other hand, where leaders intentionally provided the informal interaction space, connectedness was reinforced, in spite of hybrid arrangements. One manager explained the method of arranging an informal coffee chat online with no set agenda and no official meeting by saying, "I wanted people to discuss life once again, not just work, and that is when trust began to be restored following lockdown" (P1, manager). One of the co-workers on the same team affirmed this impact by stating that, "those sessions made me realize that I am not a task machine, but part of a team" (P10, employee). This was seen as an indication that the organisation upheld relationships and well-being, and not only output.

Nevertheless, other respondents mentioned ongoing feelings of being out of touch with the different departments and levels. One of the employees noted "that there were two worlds within the same company that include the head office and the rest, and that, when something had gone wrong, we only heard senior leaders" (P7, employee). Another point mentioned was inter-team silos, where they said that "it was a competition as opposed to cooperating with the teams; that it was difficult to trust the intentions when the information was not shared" (P12, employee). Such distance and competition patterns were eroding horizontal and vertical trust and were seen as contrary to the claimed values of cooperation and openness.

Theme 3: Trust-Enabled Employee Voice as a Driver of Engagement and Learning

The third theme relates to the willingness to speak up and the role of voice in engagement and learning in cases where trust is present. Individuals reported voice as inherently risky. An employee had relatively straightforward words when he claimed "that there is always the consideration whether you should talk or not, and trust is what will put the scale" (P9, employee). The other one used to explain that "the shares ideas when she is sure that her manager will not penalize her in case of failure; otherwise, she remains silent and merely performs her duties" (P13, employee). These descriptions show that voice is perceived as a calculated action that relies on perceived psychological safety and patterns of responding to the leader.

In high trust, the participants associated voice with more engagement. One of the managers described a quality improvement initiative in which front-line employees were called on to redesign a troubled process: "We said to them, 'You are the professionals, tell us what is wrong.' The thoughts that they carried with them were something much more than we were anticipating and you could watch their energy pick you up" (P5, manager). One of the employees who participated in the same initiative said that "he felt proud that our suggestions were listened to; it made me more serious about ensuring that the new system is functioning" (P4, manager). These examples indicate that the employees tend to be more invested in the process and results of work when they feel that their voice is consequential and respected.

These values of voice highlighted by the participants were the opportunity of learning, as it was possible to talk about the mistakes. One manager told about a debrief following a failed project: "We had an ugly session of no blame and every one of us, including me, told us what we could have done differently; that discussion made us change our way of planning now" (P1, manager). One of the employees in a different unit observed that "we learn as a unit when we are able to discuss mistakes without fear, as opposed to having secrets" (P10, employee). These examples demonstrate the fact that voice generates common learning opportunities that enhance subsequent performance, given the environmental non-punitive atmosphere.

In comparison, at low levels of trust, voice had covert forms or was eliminated. The response of organisations to input was referred to by some of the participants as a black box. According to one worker, the response is that "we fill in surveys and suggestive forms, but nothing comes back, we feel that our voice goes into a black box" (P2, employee). One of them remarked, "that people were taught to keep their heads down since one of the colleagues was sidelined due to opposing a decision" (P14, employee). The silence in this context had been felt as a rational survival technique and not an apathic condition.

Theme 4: Alignment of Culture and Voice with Perceived Performance Outcomes

The last theme is how the participants associated culture, trust, and voice with their perceptions of performance. Several of the respondents acknowledged that performance was measured formally on a quantitative basis, such as output, efficiency, or a financial measure, but they also described a broader concept, incorporating value alignment and

long-term sustainability. This tension was summed up by one manager: "We are rewarded when we hit numbers, but we are proud when we hit numbers without having to compromise on our values" (P6, manager). Another respondent stated that in situations when "we have no other choice but to cut corners, it is said that performance has improved, yet we are aware that we have ruined trust among clients and employees" (P7, employee). Based on these accounts, employees have a distinction between the nominal performance and what they view as real or ethical performance.

The respondents reiterated several times that cultures that encourage trust and voice produced stronger performance in the long run. One worker gave an example of a group where they negotiated effectively after voicing their worries about unachievable targets: "A team that I dealt with discussed the reasons why the targets were unrealistic; the manager heard them and rescheduled the plan; the team made more reliable deliveries throughout the quarter" (P11, employee). The other manager connected voice with innovation and said, "that our most effective process changes were through the people on the floor who were comfortable enough to go against old ways" (P3, employee). Performance improvements in these instances were created through a continued conversation between the management and the workforce regarding what can and should be done.

Meanwhile, some subjects told how they had experienced settings in which they had apparently performed well at the expense of voice suppression. One of the employees stated that "we are high performing on paper, but that is due to the fact that people work tirelessly overtime without getting paid and never say no" (P8, employee). One also noted "that managers applaud the spirit of a can-do attitude, yet it actually implies not to inquire about the target" (P12, employee). Critical voice was discouraged implicitly, and silence and over-compliance were rewarded in such environments. These patterns, as proposed by the participants, were said to risk burnout, mistakes, and damaged reputation, despite the short-term indicators being positive.

The respondents had identified performance as a factor that affected their intention to stay or leave the organisation. Workers who stated that culture, trust, and voice were consistent with performance results were committed. One of them claimed that, "I am here since I can sleep at night; we are not 100 percent, but we do the right thing and we can speak to them when we do not" (P9, employee). Quite to the contrary, other people explained intentions to leave when they experienced continued misalignment: "I am looking elsewhere because I am sick of faking that all is well when it is not; performance is a show, not a reality" (P14, employee). These findings show that performance is not only measured by the organisational measures but also by the moral evaluation by the employees of practices in which the organisational measures are being practiced.

DISCUSSION

The theme reveals that sensemaking of leadership is an imperative process whereby parties maintain or disrupt cultural coherence. The evaluations of the leaders did not only depend on the technical capacity, but they also depended on the sincerity of the stories that leaders had to tell about change and priorities that were steady and consistent and aligned with the publicized values. This is in addition to organisational culture and learning research that conceptualises culture as a meaning system that guides attention and behaviour (Hasan, 2023; Jung et al., 2021; Mingaleva et al., 2022). It has already been proven that leader framing influences the emotions and resilience of followers in a turbulent situation (Dale Oen et al., 2022; Medeiros et al., 2022; Riggio & Newstead, 2023). The current data extend this evidence to reveal that employees interpret leadership stories through the prism of axiology: that when leaders retell promises of fair play and respect when they openly reflect

on their lack of knowledge, the sensemaking process is understood as a form of ethical stewardship; when leaders shift their stories and make untrue promises, the sensemaking process is perceived as manipulative and the culture as empty. Leadership sensemaking thus comes out, in the narrations of the participants, as a moral activity that either pulls or pulls apart cultural coherence (Mingaleva et al., 2022).

The second theme implies that connectedness is realised as the daily foundation on which organisational trust is founded. The respondents were reporting seeing themselves and knowing themselves to the managers, and they perceived such interpersonal signs as reflecting the claimed values of respect and care. This is in line with the fact that research has indicated that inclusive treatment and perceived organisational support through social climate enhances engagement and well-being due to a sense of belonging and mutual recognition (Ha & Lee, 2022; Tian et al., 2023). Studies about autonomy and trust among teachers and on spiritual or ethical leadership also discover that supportive and value-consistent leader behaviour promotes more organisational trust and job satisfaction (Daud et al., 2025; Burhan et al., 2023; Üztemur et al., 2025). Based on participants' narratives, the study shows that hybrid work relations revealed the weaknesses of connectedness when relational practices were not sustained, when thin transactional routines undermined trust, and when deliberately formulated spaces of informal connection served to reinstate trust. Connectedness, therefore, becomes a practical examination of whether people's first narratives are actualised in practice and trust is built or lost depending on the effectiveness with which such a test is conducted.

The third theme reveals that the employees consider voice as a calculated risk, which relies mainly on the trust in the leaders and the organisation in general. Participants said that they only spoke up when they thought that the leaders would act in a fair way to ensure that they would not be retaliated against or have their ideas dismissed. This trend follows the trends in quantitative research, which find organisational trust to mediate the impact of justice and leadership on work engagement and well-being (Ha & Lee, 2022; Burhan et al., 2023), along with trust of leaders to mediate voice and knowledge-sharing behaviour (Badru et al., 2024; Silva et al., 2024). These models are supplemented by the interviews: trust is not an abstract attitude but the cumulative judgment that follows from the experience of responses to past episodes of the voice. Employees were found to be more engaged and tended to perceive a sense of shared responsibility when issues were raised in the form of constructive dialogue, whereas when voice was lost in black boxes or led to indirect forms of sanctions, employees retreated and reassessed the organisation as either unsafe or insensitive. These experiences are echoed by the research on career resilience and voice among nurses, which demonstrates that the presence of trust and perceived support determines whether employees will voice risks and errors. In all the descriptions, the trust-enabled voice is depicted as a moral and functional process: it confirms the respect of employees as valued contributors, and leads to learning by making knowledge that would not be surfaced otherwise visible.

The fourth theme is about how participants associate culture and voice with performance, which is not to be taken simply as the quantitative output but also as ethical and sustainable performance. The employees separated formal performance measures and what they perceived to be real performance, which meant achieving targets without compromising on the aspects of safety, fairness, or long-term relationships. This view addresses the literature on culture management and sustainability that indicates that learning-based and responsibility-based cultures contribute to corporate sustainability and a stronger performance (Cabrera Nuñez et al., 2025; Mingaleva et al., 2022; Pham et al., 2024). The participants in the current research reported performance improvement that was directly a by-product of voice processes, including workflow redesign or reduction in errors, which

is in line with the evidence that voice and collaboration mediate leadership and culture effects on team effectiveness and innovation (Katsaros, 2025; Paredes-Saavedra et al., 2024). Meanwhile, they recognized the false performance, in which spectacular measures were constructed on unpaid overtime, repressed dissent, and disregarded ethical issues. In that scenario, employees considered performance to be weak and undermined morally, which aligns with the studies that indicate that a violation of trust and justice has a deteriorating effect on participation and well-being (Tian et al., 2023; Üztemur et al., 2025). The results indicate that the employees consider performance in a holistic prism where cultural coherence, trust, and voice are a precondition of results that they could agree with, as rightful and sustainable.

The four themes reflect organisations as communities of value, interpreting how leadership sensemaking, connectedness, trust, and voice are interdependent practices creating identity and performance. This perspective aligns with organisational culture and research studies on learning, which conceptualise culture as a system of shared meanings that supplies orienting behaviour (Hasan, 2023; Jung et al., 2021; Mingaleva et al., 2022), but elaborates more by characterising the micro processes by which values are affirmed, disputed, or flouted. Leadership stories are the main explanatory code of values; connectedness is respect and daily contact; trust is cumulative evaluation regarding justice and honesty; voice is a practical generator of learning and a moral judgment as to whether the organisation is keeping its word. It has been demonstrated through quantitative models that culture, trust, and voice are linked to engagement, innovation, and performance (Badru et al., 2024; Jung & Choi, 2025; Paredes-Saavedra et al., 2024), but tend to define these constructs as variables instead of practices. In comparison, this axiological, qualitative analysis demonstrates how employees make sense of leadership morally and handle voice, and how such judgments recycle themselves in their participation and retention intentions.

Limitations

The purposively sampled 14 respondents represent a small sample of organisations and construe transferability to other fields, nations, or organisational types; thus, the results were only helpful in analytical generalisation. The data are based only on self-reported interviews, and they might be influenced by recollection bias, impression, and a limited understanding of higher-level decision-making; research may be incorporated in the future with interviews and observations, as well as documents or multi-level surveys. Sensemaking at a single point in time is also captured in the cross-sectional design and is unable to trace the progress of narratives, connectedness, trust, and voice over time in a lengthy change. Interpretivist position and assumptions about research inevitably influenced analysis, and therefore, the research must be regarded as a context-specific exploratory contribution.

CONCLUSION

This research has explored the experience of managers and employees in the interrelationships of organisational culture, leadership sensemaking, connectedness, organisational trust, employee voice, and performance within the current organisations. It employed an interpretivist qualitative design to identify four interlocking themes, which include the notion of leadership sensemaking as a driver of cultural coherence; the notion of connectedness as a source of organisational trust; the notion of trust-enabled employee voice as a source of engagement and learning; and the notion of aligning culture and voice to perceived performance outcomes. Through these themes, participants never depicted culture, trust, and voice as independent entities; instead, they explained a chain of relationships where the leadership discourses relate to values, connectedness is the manifestation of inclusion or exclusion, trust is the control of the perceived risk of speaking

up, and voice determines learning and legitimacy of performance. The results indicate that leadership sensemaking is both a moral and a cognitive practice, given that employees assess leaders in terms of consistency, honesty, and inclusiveness of their stories. Connectedness and trust also become experiential challenges to the espoused values of respect, fairness, and care as they are practiced in the daily interactions. Employee voice is a way of demonstrating trust, as well as a means of challenging systems and rendering them better and safer. Safe and consequential voice, in the eyes of participants, is not an optional additional, but it is at the core of an organisational requirement and a precondition to adaptive performance. Sustainable performance is a concept that is perceived to necessitate long-term consistency between cultural values, practices of trust building, participatory voice processes, and measurement guidelines that define success.

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