# Understanding employee responses to the covid-19 pandemic: a sensemaking humanitarian solidarity perspective

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**Abstract** Most organisations in the world are facing great challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They must struggle to sustain their business operation. Through a qualitative study, this study investigates how employees make sense of the COVID-19 pandemic, driving them to take actions of humanitarian solidarity to keep their organisation sustainable. Through a semi-structured interview, eight employees from various organisations were interviewed. The data were coded and analysed inductively. The findings reveal that employees' sensemaking towards the pandemic encourages them to take actions on humanitarian solidarity to their organisation by working together, helping and supporting each other, promoting a feeling of unity, and being productive, motivated, and enthusiastic to maintain the sustainability of the organisation. Moreover, internalization of organic organisational values to employees promotes their humanitarian solidarity behaviours due to the pandemic by collecting information, processing information, reducing ambiguous and clearing complex information, building simple information, and supporting organisation.

**Keywords**: employee; COVID-19 pandemic; sensemaking; humanitarian solidarity; organisational communication

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic brings a unique and challenging situation for most organisations in the world (Santoso et al., 2021). Preventive strategies were then employed to minimise the cases. Besides, most countries implemented a community quarantine or lockdown policy by strengthening health protocols (Tria, 2020). This policy limited people's activities and face-to-face interaction. They were also required to stay at home to protect them and prevent the spread of the virus. This situation then significantly affected the business operation of most organisations in the world. They were suffering since their customers

should limit their activities influencing their consuming behaviours. Only in a matter of weeks, revenues tremendously dropped (Hudecheck et al., 2020). Therefore, the organisations had to struggle to survive due to this uncertain and unpredictable time. Employee support in this hardest time, on the other hand, becomes crucial to the organisation's existence since they are vehicles running the business (Lee, 2019; Schlosser, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic gave experiences for employees to be sensitively aware of the organisation's condition. They countered the current situation with a fight response to keep the sustainability of the organisation (Florea et al., 2013). Their responses highlighted the importance of employees in the organisation. Gill (2015) opined those employees are the key stakeholders. Therefore, their support becomes a core determinant for the organisation to maintain the business. In the face of this pandemic, their support principally helps the organisation survive through their willingness to be adaptive in this changing environment. Adaptive employees could be more capable of gaining and using resources such as information, digital technologies, and social networks (van den Heuvel et al., 2013; Engelbrecht et al., 2019; Leonardi, 2020).

On the other hand, this pandemic encouraged employees to give meaning to a crisis they face. Employees' sensemaking about the COVID-19 pandemic drives their behaviours in responding to this pandemic. Ancona (2012), Robert and Ola (2021), and Mattar (2021) argued that sensemaking is critical for the employees, particularly due to this pandemic since they must understand the environment rapidly changing and be ready for the change. Therefore, employees must be making sense of this challenging situation to properly support the existence of the organisation.

In sensemaking due to the pandemic, employees collect and process the information about the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the organisation (Combe & Carrington, 2015; Cook & Gregory, 2020). Besides, they communicate their ideas after making sense and giving meaning to the pandemic and its effects on the organisation and solving the problems faced by the organisation during this challenging situation (Combe & Carrington, 2015). Furthermore, sensemaking in the crisis of COVID-19 could be understood as activities enabling employees to support the complexity of the organisation into a situation that can be explicitly comprehended. After making sense of this difficult situation, employees might make some actions (Ancona, 2012). These actions aim to support the sustainability of the organisation.

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, sensemaking can mean learning about adopting a new work environment since this pandemic changes the way employees work leading to reactive adoptions (Qi et al., 2021). Employees learn and adopt digital technologies to help them do their responsibility (Santoso et al., 2021). It can mean figuring out how to support the organisation to keep the business surviving (Ancona,

2012). Furthermore, Ancona (2012) pointed out that sensemaking due to the pandemic occurs since employees need to deeply understand and know what is going on in this uncertain time and how this pandemic significantly brings negative effects to the organisation. Sensemaking also involves a cycling process– it moves from the simple to the complex and returns; collecting new information and taking actions is to drive the movement to the complex. Besides, new information and patterns are labelled and identified. The complex situation about the COVID-19 pandemic becomes simple and employees sensitively have a higher understanding (Ancona, 2012).

Having a good understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the organisation could encourage employees to have humanitarian solidarity. Epistemologically, humanitarian refers to seeking to treat people humanely and equally to be prosperous (Fekete et al., 2017). It could build the resilience of the community (Hinds, 2015). Meanwhile, solidarity refers to people's contributions towards interests, objectives, or standards produced by a community (Koster et al., 2007; Cramm et al., 2013). Therefore, humanitarian solidarity in the context of an organisation facing the COVID-19 pandemic could be understood as contributions of employees to passionately support the success of an organisation's business during the hardest time. The humanitarian solidarity of employees might help the organisation to be resilient in the face of the pandemic since employees are willing to support and help each other find solutions to the problems.

The notion of humanitarian solidarity in the organisation, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic as the global crisis is relatively new and it has not been investigated yet by scholars. Employees' humanitarian solidarity becomes critical during the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic since they must virtually and interdependently work to keep the organisation surviving. Moreover, the nature of work during the crisis is interdependent with co-workers to coordinate efforts to support the organisation in sustaining the business. Coordinating with other employees aims to prevent unforeseen and unfamiliar daily task setbacks during the pandemic (Chong, et al., 2020).

Involving employees in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic brings effectiveness for the organisation to keep the business sustainable since they could be more productive and innovative (Bani-Melhem et al., 2018). By involving employees, they could support the organisation by humanely solidarising. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, employees focus on their department's goals (Iqbal et al., 2015). They were hired with certain qualifications to complete certain assignments in a certain department. It is important to realize that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the organisation's primary focus is how to make the business sustainable. Therefore, employees focus on the sustainability of the organisation. They might help other employees from other organisations if they were needed without being selfish.

The humanitarian solidarity among employees due to the COVID-19 pandemic may help the organisation survive and give valuable contributions to energise their spirit to save the organisation from the worst effects of this global pandemic. Employees realise that the organisation becomes their second home where they can earn money to fulfil their daily needs (Osibanio et al., 2014). Therefore, humanitarian solidarity actions might occur since employees should protect their organisation by giving them income.

In making a sense of humanitarian solidarity towards the COVID-19 pandemic, employees might better know what is going on in their environment (Ancona, 2012). Their knowledge could influence their actions in dealing with this pandemic. Therefore, emphatic actions from employees were expected to encourage their support of the organisation. Their support is vital for making appropriate responses to the changing environment caused by the pandemic (Hornung & Rousseau, 2007).

On the other hand, every organisation has its unique culture influencing employees' behaviours. Organisational culture makes sense of the work environment and refers to the proper way to behave within the organisation based on values, vision, goals, and strategies (Ostroff et al., 2012) communicated through norms and artefacts (Hogan & Coote, 2014). Behaviours of humanitarian solidarity in the organisation could be related to the internalisation of organisational values to employees. The organisational values internalized to employees might drive certain behaviours of humanitarian solidarity. Therefore, analysing how employees make sense of the COVID-19 pandemic that drives them to take actions of humanitarian solidarity to keep the organisation sustainable is a highly relevant question for research on organisational crises alike.

## METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative approach since it could achieve the objective of this study. Research questions became the anchor in driving theoretical and conceptual frameworks in qualitative research. In analysing the data, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks were elaborated to be able to understand the deep insights (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). To get rich data, communication between researchers and informants is critical since the researchers should deeply understand their informants to bring out the data. Valuable data, on the other hand, could help researchers answer the objectives set at the beginning of research planning (Petters et al., 2013).

Informants consisted of eight employees were chosen from various business sectors heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic such as travel, hotel, retail, café, and mall, as shown in Table 1. In selecting the informants, the researcher employed purposive sampling. Experience at an information-rich level became a significant consideration in this study.

**Table 1**. Informants' Profile and Organisational Values

| Informant | Business Sector | Location | Working Experiences | Organisational Values |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Travel | South Sumatera | 4.2 years | Success together, learn forever, customer orientation |
| 2 | Retail | Jakarta | 8 years | Integrity, innovation, quality, productivity, teamwork, service quality |
| 3 | Hotel | Yogyakarta | 4 years | Passion, professionalism |
| 4 | Hotel | Yogyakarta | 3.6 years | Loyalty, good communication, good customer service, togetherness |
| 5 | Hotel | Yogyakarta | 3 years | Integrity, professionalism, teamwork, guest satisfaction, innovation |
| 6 | Travel | Jakarta | 4.2 years | Religious, sincere, honest, persistent, innovative |
| 7 | Café | Yogyakarta | 11 months | Solidarity, family, quality |
| 8 | Mall | North Sulawesi | 9 years | On time, detail, partnership |

Source: Interview (2020)

A semi-structured interview was employed in gathering the data since this method could collect rich and definite data, from July 14 to 30, 2020. An interview guide was designed to guide the researcher in interviewing the informants. The questions were open-ended allowing various and rich responses from the informants (Marshall et al., 2015). Before questioning the main questions, the researcher started with a social conversation to make the informants comfortable and build chemistry with them. The main questions were asked to encourage the informants to narratively share their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic they face in their organisation, particularly their efforts to sensitively understand the situation and its effects on the organisation and support the sustainability of the organisation. The interview was conducted via WhatsApp call and Google Meet.

After finishing the interview, the researcher transcribed the recording. Subsequently, the researcher carefully read while concurrently listening to the recording of the interview to ensure the truthfulness of the data. The data were coded based on the objective of the research and study framework. The coding resulted in three themes from 15 initial codes. These themes were presented in the findings supporting textual descriptions from the transcription to provide examples. The researcher employed an inductive approach to producing reliable and valid findings in analysing the findings (Thomas, 2006).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
## Employees' Sensemaking in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Most employees are making sense of the COVID-19 pandemic as an economic crisis since it makes a greater threat to the economy that cannot be predicted. Besides, this pandemic substantially gives negative revenue effects to the organisation. Most organisations' revenues significantly decrease from 50% to 70%. Therefore, employees see this pandemic as a situation posing an immediate risk threatening the sustainability of the organisation. Informant 5 shared *"I see this pandemic as an emergency [...]. Hotel occupancy has drastically dropped"* (Informant 4). Informant 4 added *"The impact of this pandemic is that the hotel's revenues have significantly shrunk 50% to 70%"*. Consequently, employees' wages also declined since their working hours or days are also reduced. This policy aims to reduce the organisation's expenses. On the other hand, this policy can be sincerely accepted by employees since they sympathetically understand the actual situation faced by the organisation. *"If the salary we get is only 60%, that is how our work performance is and we think it is very fair. When we work, we are paid for what we can afford and when we don't work, we don't get paid"* (Informant 4). Informant 8 added, *"We are still lucky although we only get paid a half".*

Employees also see that this pandemic makes them anxious. They are worried about being infected with the COVID-19 virus since some of them must be working at the office since their administrative duties cannot be done at home. Nonetheless, the government suggested employees work from home to minimise the spread of the virus. Informant 5 shared *"I am very worried about working in the midst of the pandemic. It should be in accordance with recommendations of the government that we have to stay at home. However, my job does not allow for WFH (Work from Home) because it relates to operational matters".* Besides, they are anxious since they directly interact with customers, particularly those who do not follow the health protocols. For example, one interviewee said:

> "Because I am in the payment department, I meet other people quite often and, in this pandemic, to be honest, I feel anxious because there are some people who adhere to health protocols, but some are not yet adhering to the Health protocols. When asked to wash their hands and wear a mask, not everyone does that, so to be honest, I was very worried" (Informant 6, 30 July 2020).

Employees are also worried if this pandemic will cause chaos since the government of Indonesia implemented Large-Scale Social Restrictions (LSSR) to prevent the massive spread of the COVID-19 virus. Besides, working away from the family could influence employees' anxiety in this challenging time since they feel alone at home while working. Informant 2 cited *"(I am) worried about chaos. (I am) worried*

*about riots and so on. At that time, I personally started to get scared. Plus, we work here away from family".*

Although this pandemic could make employees anxious and their anxiety could bother their work performance, three informants (Informant 1, 2, and 3) highlighted that this situation becomes a challenge for the organisation to step one ahead. Employees are then encouraged to think positively and creatively to keep the business sustainable. Moreover, employees also assume that this pandemic make their lives harder since it has dramatically changed how they live and how they work and interact with others. In one case, the participant thought that:

> "This is difficult because we usually communicate with many people. Due to this pandemic, the visits (of employees to prospective congregations and agents) and meetings that we usually have with prospective congregations and prospective agents are limited" (Informant 6, 30 July 2020).

On the other hand, employees are making sense of this pandemic as a moment to show their gratitude. Four informants (Informant 2, 4, 5, 7, and 8) are grateful since they still have a job due to this difficult time. They still have income while their friends from other organisations must be laid off, and do not have the income to fulfil their daily needs. This gratefulness encourages them to evaluate the value of work. They have more respect for their job. Moreover, they also make sense of the pandemic as a moment to be patient. "*This pandemic taught me to be more patient"* (Informant 8).

## Employee Performances in the midst of the COVID-19

Employees admitted that working due to the COVID-19 pandemic is challenging. They must maintain their performance to keep the business continuity while minimising the risks of community spread of the COVID-19 virus. Besides, to continue running business operations during this challenging situation, they must work harder and be more enthusiastic than before the pandemic although their work become difficult and complex. Informant 5 shared "*My performance during the pandemic did not decrease because the company needed employees who were mentally enthusiastic during this difficult period, even though they had to be extra than before".*

On the other hand, this difficult situation encourages employees to be more productive and motivated to sustain business performance. Informant 3 cited "*Working in the midst of a pandemic makes me feel very productive".* Informant 4 added, "*I think I am more motivated during a pandemic like this".* However, for employees working from home, productivity during the pandemic firstly decreases because they are not ready to work from home. Their internet network is also not set up to professionally work from home. This situation could make employees depressed since the working environment at their home does

not support them to work better. Therefore, they do not feel comfortable working at home. They also need time to adjust to this situation. As two interviewees put it:

> "Then (we) WFH (Work from Home) and without any preparation. With a makeshift network at home, automatically (it) reduces productivity. Initially I was afraid, but slowly (because of) education from the media, then education from the company given to employees so far, we have started to enjoy and understand the true meaning of new normal" (Informant 2, 29 July 2020).

> "(It is) very challenging. Because the situation of working at home is very different from working in the office, especially in terms of facilities (working desk and Wi-Fi) and communication with the team. At the beginning, like in the first two months, I was very depressed about the situation [...]. So, in the first two months (I) was really depressed because of one situation [...]. Sometimes Wi-Fi also doesn't connect so it's really stressful, right" (Informant 1, 14 July 2020).

**Employees' Humanitarian Solidarity during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, employees passionately support the organisation's sustainability by willingly participating in "*gotong royong*" (communal work—a gathering for mutually accomplishing a task). Employees voluntarily clean the organisation to prevent the spread of the virus although they do not get extra payment for doing this. Informant 7 shared *We had "gotong royong" to maintain the hygiene of the café"*. Likewise, employees support each other in the face of a pandemic. Without being selfish, they help other employees, not only in the same department but also across departments needing help to strengthen the organisation's sustainability. One informant stated that:

> "During this pandemic, this is an opportunity to support one another and not be selfish. Helping each other and backing up positions in other departments needing the help. So do not only focus on your own department" (Informant 5, 20 July 2020).

Helping other employees, particularly from other departments can encourage employees to learn new knowledge, skills, and experiences and develop themselves. "*[...], I ended up learning a lot outside my job description as an accountant. At first, I was only dealing with data and documents, finally, I had to help friends in the Marketing and Front Office departments, and in situations like this, I gained a lot of knowledge and experiences"* (Informant 4).

Not only help other employees from other departments, but they also share food with other employees. Giving food to other employees symbolises the support that they are united in the organisation. This

way is in hopes to generate the same feeling in the face of this pandemic. One participant commented:

> "So, we provide support for our friends who are at the forefront. During Ramadan, that was the peak of the hassle of friends in shops and warehouses. We, at the office, send food to friends in warehouses and shops to break the fast. This is solely to provide support. You are for us and we are for you. Your interests are our interests. We have the same feeling. So that's what we do at the office: we provide support to each other. We buy food for our friends who may not have time to find food because they are too busy in the shop. We support each other. Whatever the form of support" (Informant 2, 29 July 2020).

Furthermore, due to this difficult time, employees' participation is manifested through intensive mediated communication. This communication aims to support each other in going through this pandemic. Informant 5 shared *"Communication with other employees is getting closer because, during this pandemic, communication is more intense, both going through difficult times and struggling together"*.

Supporting each other through mediated communication also aims to help if other employees face problems. A group chat becomes an effective medium to directly share and respond to problems faced by employees. Informant 1 cited *"(It's) like you if you have a case, you can share in a group (WhatsApp) or if your friend has a case, you can help (him/her), (you can) help by answering or solving the issue, like that!"* Informant 8 added, *"We use a WhatsApp group to share any information during the pandemic"*.

The group chat, on the other hand, can also be functioned to boost the spirit of other employees and keep them connected since they cannot directly meet their co-workers. "*[...], as simple as saying 'good morning' in a group (WhatsApp) or just 'keep spirit!' and 'what are you doing?'. [...] This way is good to maintain the relationship. Although we cannot personally meet, we keep in touch"* (Informant 1). Moreover, through the group chat, employees can make fun by making jokes to decrease anxiety. *"We encourage each other. Although this is the hardest time, we can still make jokes"* (Informant 4).

## COVID-19 Sensemaking Humanitarian Solidarity Process

Before taking actions to support the sustainability of the organisation, employees need to sensitively understand the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on their organisation. Their understanding can be seen from their sensemaking under this pandemic. They collect and process the information about the COVID-19 pandemic from any resources, including from their co-workers and leaders shared through mediated communication to understand how this pandemic affects the business continuity. As Weick stated, sensemaking occurs when individuals struggle to reduce ambiguity and complexity (Weick, 1995, p.13-23).

Subsequently, employees make sense that the pandemic brings an economic crisis since their organisation's revenues dramatically dropped. Their working hours or days are lessened to reduce the organisation's expenses. Consequently, their salary is also reduced. This policy is tackled to save the organisation. However, this policy encourages employees to stay productive and motivated. What is surprising is that this finding disagrees with the finding of Asaari et al. (2019) discovering that salary is significantly associated with employee performance. Although their salary is cut off, employees can keep their productivity since they understand the real condition of their organisation affected the pandemic. Besides, the condition of other employees from other organisations who were laid off motivates them to maintain their performance.

In the process of seeking information about the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the organisation, employees make sense that this pandemic brings psychological risks. They feel anxious to get infected with the virus, particularly for those working at the office where they must give services to customers. They feel isolated since they work at home and they are required to stay at home. Besides, they are worried if this pandemic will cause chaos. These perspectives exist since the information collected by employees becomes complex. Complex information is the mixing of quantity, ambiguity, and variety of information (Weick, 1995, p.87). After processing the complex information, it moves to simple information that employees could easily understand. Although this pandemic has changed their lives and how they work and interact with others, they finally see it as a challenge to move one step ahead by being creative and staying motivated to support the organisation's sustainability. Also, they feel grateful since they still have a job.

The movement from the complex to simple information is manifested through employee performance. Although they first feel that they are not ready to work from home since their facilities at home do not support them to professionally work and their work also becomes difficult and complex, they work harder. The simple information also encourages employees to be more productive, motivated, and enthusiastic. The simple information is resulted from minimising and clarifying the information (Thiry, 2001). Therefore, this study highlights the importance of clarifying the information to employees in making sense since it can drive their work performance and minimise the ambiguous information.

The findings also emphasise that employees' sensemaking towards the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the organisation encourage them to make sense of humanitarian solidarity. Their understanding of the pandemic and its effects on the organisation contributes to passionately supporting the organisation's sustainability. Employees do 'gotong royong' by voluntarily gathering for mutually accomplishing a task such as sanitising the office. Although they do not

get extra wage, they sincerely do it to support the existence of the organisation. Suwignyo (2019) cited that 'gotong royong' aims to strengthen economic and social resilience. Employees' willingness to voluntarily sanitise the office helps to ensure the customers that the organisation's office is clean and safe. Therefore, they will trust the organisation. Their trust will bring benefits for the organisation to boost the business performance. Besides, through volunteering, employees can build meaningful work experience (Rodell, 2013). The organisation does not only become a place to earn money, but it could be their second home to build relationships with others.

It is also interesting to note that due to the pandemic, employees also contribute to supporting business sustainability by helping other employees in the same department and across departments. It is by helping other employees that they learn new knowledge, skills, and experiences that can develop their capacities. This finding disagrees with the finding of Iqbal et al. (2015) discovering that employees focus on their department's goals. Employees' understanding of the actual condition of the organisation sincerely encourages them to make the business sustainable.

On the other hand, in making sense of humanitarian solidarity, employees share food with other employees, particularly those who work at the forefront. Sharing food could symbolise social support in which employees should care for each other to go through this challenging time.

Perceived support from other employees enhances their well-being and fulfils their socioemotional needs during this difficult time (Shanock et al., 2012). Moreover, employees' humanitarian solidarity is also manifested through supporting each other via mediated communication. Through a group chat created in digital media, they have a chance to share their problems and actively respond to other employees' problems to find solutions. As Yahefu (2016) opined that digital media nowadays has become an essential part of modern humanitarian communication.

One interesting finding is that employees' humanitarian solidarity flow is horizontal since employees share and respond to information across all organisational levels. Horizontal humanitarian solidarity flow aims to promote a feeling of unity in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. This feeling encourages them to collectively support organisational sustainability. Moreover, the flow empowers employees to contribute to the organisation to be resilient in the face of the pandemic. Vogus and Sutcliffe (2007) opined that the resilience of the organisation is crucial to maintain positive adjustment under challenging situations. Therefore, organisational resilience becomes the key to keep the organisation surviving.
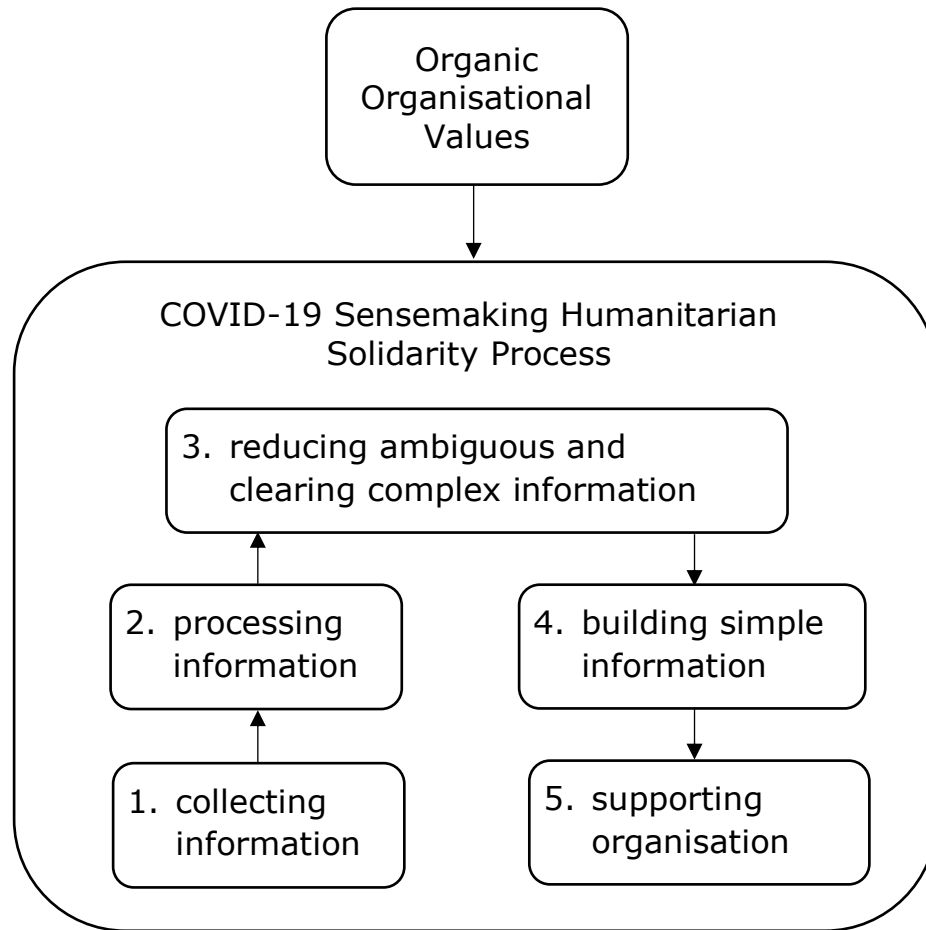
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**Figure 1**. COVID-19 Sensemaking Humanitarian Solidarity Process
Source: Processed by researchers, 2020

The findings also highlight that organisational values internalized to employees drive their humanitarian solidarity behaviours due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as shown in Figure 1. Li (2015) explained that organisational culture, including values, affects employee behaviour. The findings reveal that the organisational values internalized to employees such as success together, learning forever, customer orientation, integrity, innovation, quality, productivity, teamwork, service quality, passion, professionalism, loyalty, communication, togetherness, religiosity, honesty, and partnership are categorised into organic organisational values. Jin and Drozdenko (2010) cited those organic values provide a more open and freer environment. Employees are empowered and freely share and exchange ideas with employees at all organisational levels. Therefore, employees' humanitarian solidarity behaviours become a result of the internalisation of organic organisational values. To keep the sustainability of the organisation, the values of being collaborative, relationship-oriented, creative, encouraging, sociable, and trusting drive employees to make humanitarian solidarity actions.

**CONCLUSION**

This study has identified how employees make sense of the COVID-19 pandemic driving their deep understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on their organisation. Their sensemaking towards the pandemic encourages them to take actions on humanitarian solidarity to their organisation by working together, helping, and supporting each other, promoting a feeling of unity, and being productive, motivated, and enthusiastic to maintain the sustainability of the organisation. Moreover, employees' internalisation of organic organisational values promotes their humanitarian solidarity behaviours due to the pandemic.

These findings suggest that in general, the organisation should be transparent to their employees since the transparency of the organisation could drive their sensemaking towards the pandemic and its effects on the organisation. The transparent information could speed up the movement from complex to simple information in the process of sensemaking. Therefore, they could make actions faster, particularly in making humanitarian solidarity actions to sustain the business operation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, the humanitarian solidarity of this present study could be the foundation in developing the concept of humanitarian solidarity from the perspective of communication, particularly in organisational communication in the context of crisis. Therefore, future studies could involve more informants from various organisations to deeply understand and develop the concept of humanitarian solidarity. Besides, the question raised by this study is to test the organisational values with humanitarian solidarity behaviours by using a quantitative approach.

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