

“We’re consistent, and we persist.”: An Examination of Organizational Sensemaking And Its Impact as a Non-Profit Transitioned From Start-up To Sustainability



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Abstract

Black Women Education Leaders, Inc. (BWEL) is a national, nonprofit professional organization that began as a social media outlet to amplify the voices of Black women in educational leadership roles and celebrate their contributions within local, state, and national contexts, offer professional development, and to award scholarships to aspiring leaders in pursuit of Education Leadership Licensures. In Fall 2022, BWEL conducted four virtual strategic planning meetings. Various stakeholders participated and shared their ideas on how BWEL can achieve organizational growth and transition from the start-up phase to full-scale sustainability. The questions that guided this project were:

PQ1: What do stakeholders perceive as priorities for BWEL's sustainability as a burgeoning professional organization?

PQ2: What do stakeholders perceive as growth opportunities (or challenges) in transitioning from startup to BWEL's longevity?

PQ3: How do patterns of interactions afford or constrain decision-making and collective action toward BWEL's development?

This qualitative ethnographic study relied on the Four Forms of Organizational Sensemaking framework, structured interviews, observations, and document reviews to inform the analysis of BWEL's patterns of discursive interactions that might drive the organization toward sustainable practices. In short, I found:

1. There is a demand for more in-person engagement, along with online programming.
2. Member engagement may impact BWEL's sustainability as the organization grows.
3. Leadership solicits member input regularly, but all stakeholders do not consistently complete surveys.
4. There were conflicting values surrounding the priority of member recruitment compared to member engagement between the leaders of BWEL.

Based on findings and extant literature, I recommend gradual implementation of regional, in-person programming, extending the new member onboarding process, establishing authentic opportunities for member interactions to encourage guided sensemaking, and opening membership periodically until BWEL can nurture new members and engage established members simultaneously.

Keywords: guided sensemaking, Black women, start-up, transition, decision-making, organizational development

About the Author

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Executive Summary

Founded in 2020, Black Women Education Leaders, Inc. (BWEL) is a national, non-profit professional organization that began as a social media outlet to amplify the voices of Black women educational leaders to celebrate their contributions within the local, state, and national contexts, and to award scholarships to aspiring leaders who were in pursuit of Education Leadership Licensures. BWEL offers a professional, member-oriented, affirmative, and nurturing affinity space that fosters advancing and celebrating its members' educational leadership work.

BWEL has established itself as a startup organization, but officers and members were ready to scale the organization to the next level while maintaining the pillars of the organization. As noted in strategic capstone planning meetings, BWEL's identified areas of improvement included member recruitment, providing relevant professional development opportunities for its members, and improving the engagement of current members. Even though members generally reported a connection to the mission and vision of BWEL, members shared a common desire for clarity over the trajectory of BWEL's future and impact as a member entity. It is common for transitioning start-up organizations like BWEL to find themselves in this pivotal space - one of moving from the initial vision to a fully functioning organization.

Given the nature of BWEL's position as a startup non-profit looking to scale and the importance of developing effective processes and infrastructure during their current transitional phase, Maitlis's (2005) Four Forms of Organizational Sensemaking was adopted as the conceptual framework for this project. The Four Forms of Organizational Sensemaking Framework defines how social processes of sensemaking manifest through either guided, fragmented, restricted, or minimal sensegiving. Where sensemaking falls in this analysis depends

on the degree of stakeholder sensegiving – their attempts to get others to understand an issue (Maitlis, 2005). This framework informed data collection by designating how observed patterns of discourse and decision-making between leaders (*controlled sensegiving*) and stakeholders (*animated sensegiving*) impacted BWEL's movement through the transitional phase of development. This capstone project aimed to answer the following questions:

Project Question 1: What do stakeholders perceive as priorities for BWEL's sustainability as a burgeoning professional organization?

Project Question 2: What do stakeholders perceive as growth opportunities (or challenges) in transitioning from startup to BWEL's longevity?

Project Question 3: How do patterns of interactions afford or constrain decision-making and collective action toward BWEL's development?

This study relied on a qualitative, ethnographic approach through structured interviews, observations, and document reviews to inform the analysis of BWEL's patterns of discursive interactions. The findings and strategic recommendations will inform BWEL's next steps as they implement foundational practices leading to sustainability. In a broader context, this capstone project contributes to extant research by providing qualitative evidence on Black women's work to organize professional spaces that mentor, affirm, advocate for, and create a community for Black women across the country.

Findings	Recommendations
<p>There is a demand for in-person engagement. BWEL members want opportunities to engage offline and in person through conferences, professional development, and regional meetups. <i>(PQ1)</i></p>	<p>In addition to its solid virtual presence and consistent engagement in that arena, BWEL should gradually move toward regional, in-person programming. The administrative functions of BWEL may be best operationalized centrally, but BWEL’s nationwide membership would benefit from regional services and regional delegates to meet growing demands for in-person engagement.</p>
<p>Member engagement may impact BWEL’s sustainability as the organization grows. While some leaders aim to recruit more members, many stakeholders saw the lack of current member involvement as challenging. <i>(PQ2)</i></p>	<p>Consider extending the onboarding process for new members, including committee introductions and opportunities to connect with another BWEL member in her local area. Fostering an immediate sense of community for new members could increase their sense of belonging and encourage authentic member engagement – or animation - within the organization.</p>
<p>Leadership solicits member input regularly, but all stakeholders do not consistently complete surveys. This yields an unintended consequence of high control in finalizing decisions for BWEL’s collective action. <i>(PQ3)</i></p>	<p>In addition to surveys, establish opportunities for dialogue between members, such as semi-annual strategic planning meetings. BWEL leaders must deliberately create arenas for members to become vested in the dynamics of guided sensemaking necessary to move their organization to new heights.</p>
<p><i>Emergent:</i> There were conflicting values surrounding the priority of member recruitment (finding new members) compared to member engagement (interactions of current members) between the leaders of BWEL.</p>	<p>To address conflicting values surrounding membership, consider opening membership periodically, as opposed to ongoing, until BWEL has the capacity to nurture new members and engage established members simultaneously, with the level of attention and care intended by the organization.</p>

Introduction

While the scope of this project includes analyzing the moves made by a startup organization to scale successfully, what is also considerable is *why* a non-profit like Black Women Education Leaders, Inc. (BWEL) is necessary in the first place. The COVID-19 pandemic changed how public education was delivered and monitored and called for strictly imposed accountability measures. Researchers Njoku and Evans (2022) addressed the intersections of race, gender, and the impact of the pandemic on Black women in academia - highlighting that while Black Americans coped with a heightened risk of infection and death, the world simultaneously witnessed the brutal deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. They offered that challenges were exacerbated for Black women when mentorship, proper support, and representation were lacking.

Further, Njoku and Evans (2022) argued that COVID-19 intensified inequalities for Black women faculty, with reports of racial fatigue, isolation, overextension, frustration, exhaustion, under-evaluation, and alienation affecting their mental health, academics, and career paths. In a 2022 nationwide poll of its 3,621 members, the National Education Association found that 55% of K-12 educators reported plans to either retire or leave the profession sooner than retirement, given the impact of the pandemic – with issues of burnout and stress as the top two reasons. Hispanic/Latino, at 59%, and Black educators, at 62%, were more likely to report plans to leave the profession.

BWEL's beginning as an online, nurturing affinity space fosters a network of support, advocacy, and amplification of the needs of Black women leaders across the country. Grassroots organizations such as BWEL are essential learning and healing spaces, leading to sustainability for educators of color by centering their voices, needs, and shared knowledge (Pour-Khorshid,

2018). Critical professional development spaces also address the personal and professional well-being of Black women, often reducing forms of isolation by providing networks of peers, familiar dialogue, and shared leadership (Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020). Traditional educational leadership theory centers on Whiteness while emphasizing charismatic male leaders – which contradicts the positionalities of Black women and leads to the silencing of Black women principals' experiences in literature (Jang & Alexander, 2022). As such, BWEL is a necessary and timely organization for Black women leaders. This capstone project contributes to research by providing qualitative evidence on one organization's work to create professional spaces that mentor, affirm, advocate for, and create a community for Black women across the country.

Organizational Context

Founded in 2020, Black Women Education Leaders, Inc. (BWEL) is a national, non-profit professional organization that began as a social media outlet to amplify the voices of Black women educational leaders, celebrate their contributions within the local, state, and national contexts, and to award scholarships to aspiring leaders who were in pursuit of Education Leadership Licensures. Black Women Education Leaders, Inc. offers a professional, member-oriented, affirmative, and nurturing affinity space that fosters advancing and celebrating its members' educational leadership work. BWEL aspires to offer national conferences, workshops, networking opportunities and to foster contributions to the field of education through collaborative research.

Target members are Black women educators from preschool to the university level, including school administrators, superintendents, and other non-school based, district office level administrators, supervisors, and directors. From 2020-2023, BWEL's organizational structure

comprised a Board of Directors, national offices of the President, Vice President, and Secretary, Special Committees (Membership, Professional Development, Special Events, and Marketing and Communications), and general membership. In April 2023, BWEL elected new biannual officers, shifting its leadership structure, as outlined in **Figure 1**:

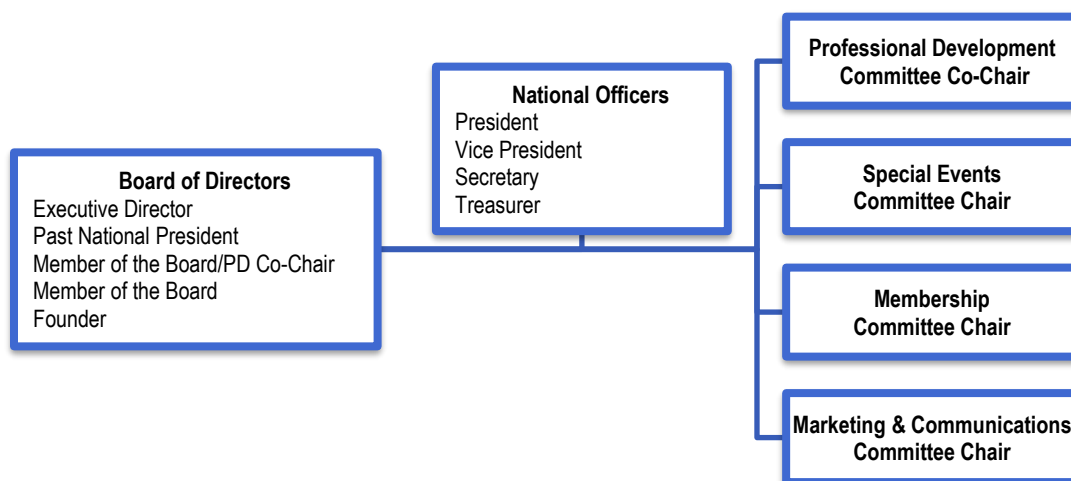


Figure 1

2023-2025 BWEL, Inc. Leadership Structure

New national officers and board members were elected. Rolling, general membership opportunities continue as BWEL solidifies its presence as a safe space of empowerment, encouragement, and professional development for Black women leaders nationwide. At the time of this study, general membership grew from 42 to 74 members, a 76% increase between November 2022 and March 2023.

Problem of Practice

While BWEL has established itself as a startup organization, the executive board and members are ready to scale the organization to the next level while maintaining the pillars of the organization's mission. Specifically, in November 2022, BWEL's executive board and members

voluntarily participated in four scoping conversations to identify organizational learning and growth areas. The following concerns emerged:

- a desire for organizational focus and follow-through
- continuity of programs and professional development opportunities
- creating community and connections among members
- engaging the talents of members to strengthen BWEL
- filling in gaps of support that members lack on-the-job
- member engagement

The fourth planning meeting was a one-on-one conversation with the founder of BWEL. The Founder agreed that previously discussed themes were well known, given BWEL's position as a new organization. She also expressed interest in identifying how the executive board can move the organization towards founding goals and addressing concerns raised during planning meetings.

As a recently established professional organization for educators, BWEL seeks to improve member recruitment, provide relevant professional development opportunities for its members, and improve the engagement of current members. While individuals reported a connection to the mission and vision of the organization, there was a desire for follow-through, fellowship, and fidelity of consistent, relevant workshop offerings. It is common for organizations like BWEL to find themselves in this pivotal space - one of moving from the initial vision to a fully functioning organization.

Capstone Purpose

This project examined factors that either afforded or inhibited the scalability of Black Women Education Leaders, Inc. (BWEL) as the organization moved through the foundational

stages of organizing. The project explored BWEL's management and membership moves toward scaling through the social concept of organizational sensemaking. As BWEL transitions to sustainability, the project examined stakeholder perceptions and analyzed BWEL's capacity to maintain momentum in scaling. Stakeholders for this project included BWEL's executive leadership and general members.

Review of Literature

While reviewing relevant literature, I focused on two consistent themes in non-profit organizing research. The first area of focus involved factors that may afford or inhibit the scalability of non-profit startup organizations as they move through the stages of organizing. From the literature, I sought answers to the following questions:

- What are the critical stages of organizing, and why are they essential for startups?
- Are there potential barriers within critical stages?
- How do founders successfully navigate scaling from grassroots to sustainability?
- How do discourse and storytelling impact decision-making, especially in start-ups?

Driven by the organizational development literature findings for the latter question, the social concept of organizational sensemaking was explored and later applied as the conceptual framework for this project.

Critical Stages of Organizing

It is common for organizations like BWEL to find themselves in a pivotal space, one of moving from the initial vision to a fully functioning organization. Along with the vision and mission of non-profit organizations, founders must consider growth and sustainability measures

when projecting scalability. Non-profits vary considerably in development. However, five standard organizational elements through which all service-based non-profits' levels of development and capacity may be assessed: are governance, financial resources, organizational development, internal operations, and core services (Schuh & Leviton, 2006). This capstone focuses on the organizational development of a startup non-profit. The following literature provides context for what could be considered organizational patterns followed by successful non-profits.

Both organization strategy and structure influence the performance of non-profit organizations as they transition from startup to fidelity of programs, especially when considering avenues of financial resources to aid in sustainability (Ogliastri, Jäger, & Prado, 2015). While literature conceptualizes the life cycle of startup organizations differently, there is a consensus that the process includes four phases (Ogliastri, Jäger, & Prado, 2015; Picken, 2017). One approach found that highly functioning non-profit organizations move through four critical organizational stages influencing scalability: startup, professionalizing, decentralizing, and conglomerating (Ogliastri, Jäger, & Prado, 2015). A later approach offered a broader cycle: startup, transition, scaling, and exit (Picken, 2017).

Picken (2017) posits that the transition phase is the most influential determinant of scalability. This critical phase overlaps with Ogliastri, Jager, & Prado's (2015) professionalizing and decentralizing stages and serves as the bridge to sustainability (Picken, 2017). During the transition phase, typically an 18–36-month period, non-profit founders must set the strategic direction, establish a solid executive board, shape a supportive culture within the non-profit, and consider the organization's competitive edge to attract potential funders. This critical phase can

make or break the new non-profit, and to successfully navigate the transition, Picken (2017) suggests eight essential tasks that leaders must meet, as seen in **Figure 2**:



Figure 2

The Eight Essential Tasks of the Transition Phase

Note. Based on the research of Picken (2017), *Table 1. The Eight Hurdles of Transition*, p.589

Scaling from Grassroots to Sustainability

As an organization grows, the leadership team's capacity must also increase. Non-profit founders often shape organizational culture – which engages values, beliefs, and norms that will uphold the mission and vision. Failing to set a solid cultural foundation leads to dysfunction and, often, a failing non-profit (Schein, 1983, as cited in Picken, 2017). On the other hand, as suggested by the literature, founders must also engage the management teams and other stakeholders in the social process of sensemaking when developing appropriate strategies and

infrastructure that identify the non-profit within larger contexts/markets (Picken, 2017; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

Sensemaking is a social process that allows stakeholders to grapple with uncertainty and vagueness by creating "rational accounts" of the environment that facilitate action (Maitlis, 2005, p. 21; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Sensemaking occurs both before and after decision-making, and, in turn, decision-making incites ambiguity that creates opportunities for sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005). As stakeholders interact, they construct accounts that enable comprehension and collective action.

Organizational sensemaking has been empirically studied in two streams of literature. Earlier streams of sensemaking literature examine decision-making under duress or when groups are faced with environmental threats (Gioia, D.A., & Thomas, J.B., 1996; Weick, 1993). The second, more recent iteration of the literature focuses on how leaders engage with sensegiving and sensemaking to address ongoing structuring and restructuring (Gioia, D. A., & Chittipeddi, K., 1991; Maitlis, 2005; Miles, 2012; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). The latter approach was relevant to this capstone project as a frame of reference for collecting data on BWEL's transition into sustainable practices, along with members' voiced concerns during capstone strategic planning meetings in November 2022.

Operationalizing the vision and mission of BWEL requires tenets of organizational sensemaking and sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Sensegiving is "the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others towards a preferred redefinition of organizational reality" (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). Maitlis and Christianson (2014) argue that sensemaking is critical in studying organizations because it involves individuals

working to understand new, unanticipated, or perplexing experiences, causing the same individuals to create new frameworks for understanding as they move through organizing. Both sensemaking and sensegiving, as organizations move toward strategic change, are applicable in identifying how startups develop cultural norms around storytelling to make meaningful changes toward the organization's growth – a relative phenomenon faced by BWEL.

Discourse and Decision-Making

As organizational sensemaking is a social process, leaders and stakeholders all play a role in corporate identity and decision-making through discourse (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2015; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Researchers Brown, Colville, & Pye (2015) suggest that when organizations deliberately and discursively share decision-making while constructing meaning, it results from dynamic sensemaking processes. The importance of decision-making and the intentional act of creating spaces – or *situated contexts* – for discourse to occur invites actors to share perspectives that lead to organizational change and growth (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2015). As such, organizational sensemaking takes on different forms according to varying levels of leader and stakeholder sensegiving.

Organizational Sensemaking

Maitlis (2005) described four forms of organizational sensemaking based on interactive dimensions of animation and control – two derivatives of sensegiving. Animation refers to the extent of stakeholder involvement in sensegiving, while control refers to the extent of leaders' involvement in sensegiving. Elevated levels of stakeholder sensegiving lead to an animated sensemaking process, where information is regularly shared within stakeholder groups, who then

actively shape interpretations of events or issues and then share these interpretations with leaders, who - in turn - give more information to stakeholders (Maitlis, 2005). Leaders' sensegiving often changes *perceptions* of reality – or the organization's reality altogether (Miles, 2012). When stakeholders are not as involved in sensegiving, and leaders only hold systemic, intermittent discussions over time, this leads to controlled sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005). According to Maitlis (2005), the unique overlap of animated and controlled sensegiving amongst leaders and stakeholders defines the four forms of organizational sensemaking: guided, fragmented, restricted, and minimal.

In guided sensemaking, both leaders and stakeholders are highly involved in sensegiving. There is high animation and control, and actions are emergent and consistent. Fragmented sensemaking involves high animation and low control leading to multiple, often narrowed interpretations and emergent yet inconsistent actions. Restricted sensemaking involves low animation and high control, where stakeholders have little input, leading to a unitary, narrowed interpretation of an issue – driven by leaders. The outcomes are either a one-time action or a monotonous set of pre-planned actions. Minimal sensemaking occurs when there is low animation and low control. Leader and stakeholder sensegiving is lacking, leading to a superficial interpretation of an issue and often a one-time, compromised action or decision (Maitlis, 2005).

Conceptual Framework

Given the nature of BWEL's position as a startup non-profit looking to scale, and the importance of developing effective processes and infrastructure during their current transitional phase (Picken, 2017), I adopt Maitlis's (2005) Four Forms of Organizational Sensemaking as shown in **Figure 3**, as the conceptual framework for this project. BWEL has established an

executive team and amassed a membership of Black women education leaders nationwide. During our capstone strategic planning meetings, members shared a common desire for clarity over the trajectory of BWEL's future and impact as a member entity. Examining how BWEL executives and members collectively engage discourse in meeting this need pairs well with Maitlis' (2015) organizational sensemaking framework.

The Four Forms of Organizational Sensemaking Framework defines how social processes of sensemaking manifest through either guided, fragmented, restricted, or minimal sensegiving. Where sensemaking falls in this analysis depends on the degree of stakeholder sensegiving – their attempts to get others to understand an issue (Maitlis, 2005). I incorporated this framework to observe patterns of interactions between BWEL’s executive team and membership that inform the organization’s ability to move through its transitional phase of development and to gather data on how these interactions may afford or constrain progress toward development.

Figure 3

The Four Forms of Organizational Sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005)

Leader Sensegiving	High Sensegiving	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Guided Organizational Sensemaking</i></p> <p>Process Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High animation • High control <p>Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unitary, rich account • Emergent series of consistent actions 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Restricted Organizational Sensemaking</i></p> <p>Process Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High animation • High control <p>Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unitary, rich account • Emergent series of consistent actions
	Low Sensegiving	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Fragmented Organizational Sensemaking</i></p> <p>Process Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High animation • High control <p>Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unitary, rich account • Emergent series of consistent actions 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Minimal Organizational Sensemaking</i></p> <p>Process Characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High animation • High control <p>Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unitary, rich account • Emergent series of consistent actions
		High Sensegiving	Low Sensegiving
Stakeholder Sensegiving			

Note. Adapted from Maitlis's (2005), *Figure 1 Four Frames of Organizational Sensemaking*, p. 32

Project Questions

Considering the analysis of the problem of practice, the desire to understand how BWEL, Inc. is transitioning from startup to sustainability, the review of relevant literature, and the Four Forms of Organizational Sensemaking framework, the following project questions were defined:

Project Question 1: What do stakeholders perceive as priorities for BWEL's sustainability as a burgeoning professional organization?

Project Question 2: What do stakeholders perceive as growth opportunities (or challenges) in transitioning from startup to BWEL's longevity?

Project Question 3. How do patterns of interactions afford or constrain decision-making and collective action toward BWEL's development?

Project Design

Maitlis' (2005) framework suggests collecting data on organizational sensemaking through structured interviews and observations in real time over multiple years. While the timing of this capstone project did not lead to a multi-year study, six months of engagement with BWEL constituted an abbreviated model of Maitlis' (2005) methodology. Maitlis (2005) suggested including the following components during the data collection phase:

- Creating narratives of the sensemaking processes by looking for the issues raised by BWEL members' concerns noted in pre-capstone strategic planning meetings and observing discourse around these issues.
- Identifying forms of organizational sensemaking – through leader or stakeholder sensegiving – by observing how stakeholders and leaders talk amongst themselves and each other, how often actors meet up, and the nature of their interactions and activities.

- Identifying the outcomes of each form of organizational sensemaking – what impact did animation and control have over decisions made?

The relationship between project questions, data needed, and the data collection method is outlined in **Table 1**.

Table 1

Data Collection Outline

Conceptual Framework	Project Question (PQ)	Data Needed	Data Collection Method
Organizational Sensemaking	PQ1: What do stakeholders perceive as priorities for BWEL's sustainability as a burgeoning professional organization?	Indicators of BWEL stakeholders' perceptions, input, and explanations to inform sensemaking, monthly newsletters	Qualitative Interviews Document Analysis
	PQ2: What do stakeholders perceive as growth opportunities (or challenges) in transitioning from startup to BWEL's longevity?	Indicators of BWEL stakeholders' perceptions, input, and explanations to inform sensemaking	Qualitative Interviews
	PQ3: How do patterns of interactions afford or constrain decision-making and collective action toward BWEL's development?	Evidence of decision-making processes and discourse, discernable patterns of interactions, monthly newsletters	Ethnographic observations Qualitative Interviews Document Analysis

This study relied on qualitative interviews, ethnographic observations, and document analysis data. Qualitative interviewing highlights the value of others' perspectives, holding their input meaningful, understandable, and explicit (Patton, 2002). Qualitative interviewing allows us to learn what is on someone else's mind and to hear their stories on an issue. Realistic ethnographic methods consist of understanding a culture and witnessing a group to gain a descriptive understanding - of which the researcher is an outsider - through immersion and observation (Bhattacharya, 2017). Observations are often paired with interviews to give the researcher greater insight into the "how" or "why" a phenomenon occurs. Lastly, to corroborate findings from qualitative interviews and ethnographic observations, monthly newsletters were analyzed (document analysis) as suggested by Bowen (2009).

Members of BWEL ranged in experience but had the commonality of holding leadership positions. As such, members' availability often depended on loads of their workdays, obligations to their families, and obligations to other organizations. Participation in this study was voluntary and opportunistic. Participants were recruited via email for qualitative interviews (see Appendix B). Furthermore, as Maitlis (2005) suggested, *snowball sampling* – participant recruitment by other members – was used to identify and recruit members following interviews with the Executive Director and President, who were in office at the time of this capstone project.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection occurred sequentially for a period of four months. Ethnographic observations occurred during one BWEL Board meeting (Saturday, February 25, 2023) and two Professional Development Committee meetings (April 3 and 24, 2023). Observations were each one hour long. Nespore (2006) posited that observers best capture patterns by describing relationships and processes through which matters move and change. To ensure I collected data methodically, I created a template for structured field notes, the *BWEL Observation Document*, to capture social patterns and align them to the Four Forms of Organizational Sensemaking (see Appendix A). The document also included space to capture multiple member interactions aligned with guided, restricted, fragmented, and minimal sensemaking.

Fifteen interviews were scheduled with BWEL members, including board and general members, between March 29 and May 4, 2023. Due to unforeseen work obligations, three interviews were canceled by participants. One-on-one structured interviews were conducted, and when possible, interviews occurred with committee chairs following ethnographic observations.

This sequential method allowed in-depth analysis of structured observation notes while capturing stakeholders' perspectives on the observed discourse and the overall integration of sensemaking.

BWEL hosts general membership meetings once per year, thus limiting my opportunity to observe that level of exchange and discourse. However, BWEL's Book Club, Twitter Ed Chats, committee meetings, and professional development workshops occurred frequently. To mitigate the limited opportunity to observe general membership meetings, I observed the following BWEL programs:

- February 19, 2023: Book Club #3 (professional development program)
- March 1, 2023: New Member Orientation
- March 9, 2023: Women's History Month Program, "Sista Are You Ready to Lead?"
- March 15, 2023: Women's History Month Program, "Representation Matters!"

These immersive, ethnographical experiences with BWEL allowed insight into the organization's impact.

During data collection, I expected to align interview responses to both process characteristics of sensemaking and dimensions of sensegiving, determining whether there was evidence of animated or controlled sensegiving discourse. I sought to capture which stakeholders' stories were integral in BWEL's transition into the next organizational phase.

Table 2 delineates how I planned to capture such nuanced interactions.

Table 2

Conceptual Framework and Interview Question Relationships

Project Question	Interview Question	Process Characteristics of Organizational Sensemaking	Dimensions of Sensegiving: Animated, Controlled
PQ3: How do patterns of interactions afford or constrain decision-making and collective action toward BWEL's development?	How often do opportunities for open discussions over perceived challenges occur?	Discourse patterns/narratives, animated sensegiving	Evidence of animated sensegiving: member-driven discussions and interpretations of issues,
	Who, in your opinion, tells the story behind the challenge? Is it a collective discussion between members and leaders?	Animated sensegiving Controlled sensegiving	

	<p>Questions for Leaders: How does member feedback affect decision-making for BWEL's future?</p>	Animated sensegiving	<p>regular check-ins, shared decision-making, sharing of multiple views or interpretations of issues, and continuity of discussions throughout decision-making.</p> <p>Evidence of controlled sensegiving: leader-driven decisions, private or one-to-one meetings to discuss issues, little flow of information between leaders and members, and inconsistency of discussions leading to decisions.</p>
	How do you share information with members when or if something goes wrong?	Discourse patterns/narratives Controlled sensegiving	
	What is the process when deciding BWEL's priorities or programming? Are members immediately involved? Briefed? Why or why not?	Discourse patterns/narratives, animated sensegiving, controlled sensegiving	
	<p>Interviews following Ethnographic Observations: What worked best to bring the organization to a decision over <i>[insert identified decision]</i>?</p> <p>If the issue was tabled, how do you recommend BWEL resolve this issue? What steps will be taken to move stakeholders and the organization forward?</p>	Discourse patterns/narratives Controlled sensegiving	
<p>PQ1: What do stakeholders perceive as priorities for BWEL's sustainability as a burgeoning professional organization?</p> <p>PQ2: What do stakeholders perceive as growth opportunities (or challenges) in transitioning from startup to BWEL's longevity?</p>	As BWEL transitions from the startup space – which typically takes about 18-36 months – what do you perceive as priorities for BWEL to address? Challenges?	Animated sensegiving	
	How have priorities been established and addressed in your experience with BWEL so far?	Discourse patterns/narratives, Animated sensegiving	
	Who tells the story behind the need (addressed through this priority)?	Discourse patterns/narratives, animated sensegiving, controlled sensegiving	
	What is your role in the decision-making process?	Animated sensegiving, discourse patterns/narratives	

Qualitative Analysis

Maitlis (2005) defines animated and controlled sensegiving characteristics and details how each impact organizational sensemaking. Evidence of animated sensegiving includes member-driven discussions and interpretations of issues, regular check-ins, shared decision-making, sharing of multiple views or interpretations of issues, and continuity of discussions throughout decision-making. Evidence of controlled sensegiving includes leader-driven decisions, private or one-to-one meetings to discuss issues, little flow of information between leaders and members, and inconsistency of discussions leading to decisions. Referring to the above characteristics of animated and controlled sensegiving allowed me to clearly delineate the impact of a participant's voice on pre-determined themes related to project questions. For a quick reference to Maitlis's process characteristics and outcomes in each form of sensemaking, I also referred to **Table 3**.

Table 3

Process Characteristics and Outcomes of Guided, Restricted, Fragmented, and Minimal Sensemaking

Form of Organizational Sensemaking	Process Characteristics	Outcomes
Guided	high animation, high control	A unitary, rich account; Emergent series of consistent actions
Restricted	low animation, high control	Unitary, narrow account; One-time action or planned set of consistent actions
Fragmented	high animation, low control	Multiple, narrow accounts; Emergent series of inconsistent actions
Minimal	low animation, low control	Nominal account; One-time, compromise action
<i>Adapted from Maitlis's (2005) Four Forms of Organizational Sensemaking Framework</i>		

As a result, I could track their statements' implied impact on BWEL's ability to scale – or not – and determine which form of sensemaking was evident.

For instance, when asked about perceived priorities, if both a BWEL leader and general member replied to “increase member engagement once women become members of BWEL,” this received a code for guided sensemaking because the issue was addressed with equal participation of leader – *high control* – and member – *high animation*. Their unitary account that member engagement is a priority suggests that BWEL will take action to mitigate this phenomenon as it scales. The evident process and outcomes deduced, then, align with guided sensemaking.

Though most interactions were coded as guided sensemaking (24 out of 52 occurrences), instances of restricted (19 out of 52 occurrences), fragmented (8 out of 52 occurrences), and minimal sensemaking (1 out of 52 occurrences) were also deduced. Evidence of minimal sensemaking - an anomaly in this study - was noted during an interview. When asked about members' opportunities to pitch new ideas to the board, the respondent stated:

Formally, I would say no. Informally it might come after a debrief, and I can email [the founder] with ideas. It might also come after a session that we've had or like, for example, we have a PD meeting this evening. So, I know some ideas will be tossed back and forth [within the committee]. But there is no formal, again, not to my knowledge, venue in which I can share or which I can, you know, introduce a topic.

The member's response indicated a lack of formality through which members may address the board with new ideas but also acknowledged her opportunity to address board members individually if necessary – implying a temporary solution. Therefore, the incident was coded as minimal sensemaking. I followed this process to code all three Observation Documents and interview transcripts, as seen in **Figure 4**.

Figure 4

Deductive Process of Coding Observation Documents and Interview Transcripts



Virtual interviews were transcribed via Zoom using an integrated transcription service, *Otter.ai*. A total of **12** interview transcriptions were coded using the steps outlined in **Figure 4**. To optimize my ability to answer project questions, I extracted interview questions that addressed stakeholders' perceived priorities for BWEL's sustainability (Project Question 1) and stakeholders' perceived challenges in transitioning BWEL from startup (Project Question 2). Other themes included storytelling, decision-making roles (both relating to Project Question 3), and emergent findings. Member quotes and observation notes were first coded by four themes: perceived priorities, perceived challenges, storytelling, and decision-making roles. Emergent patterns were also noted. Next, responses were color-coded for instances of animation and

control detected. Lastly, each response was color-coded for guided sensemaking (purple), restricted sensemaking (green), fragmented sensemaking (blue), and minimal sensemaking (orange) based on either direct or implied outcomes driven by the existence of animation and control detected in the response. **Table 4** includes a sample of coded interview responses.

Table 4

Sample of Coded Interview Responses

Pre-determined Themes	Interview Responses (sample)	Form of Sensemaking Guided: High Animation, High Control Restricted: Low Animation, High Control Fragmented: High Animation, Low Control Minimal: Low Animation, Low Control
Perceived Priorities to Achieving Sustainability (PQ1)	“[Some board members] are really interested in ensuring <u>constant and consistent growth of membership.</u> ” [Control]	Restricted sensemaking regarding a focus on membership growth
Perceived Challenges to Sustainability (PQ2)	“Yes, members have input, but it still goes back to that engagement piece that I want to prioritize - whereas maybe 1/4 of the members respond to that survey. I think some people have <u>unplugged so much that it creates a challenge. The organization could be moving forth at a greater impact if more members engaged.</u> ” [Animation]	Restricted sensemaking regarding programming due to inconsistent member engagement with surveys
Evidence of Decision-Making Discourse between Leaders and Members (PQ3)		
Storytelling (PQ3)	“We solicit interest from our members whenever we’re going to <u>put new ideas into place</u> [Control]... <u>We vote on items that we know would be beneficial or more helpful to the organization</u> [Animation]... <u>We ask for members’ input quite frankly through committee meetings</u> [Control]... <u>every member is asked on the application, on which committee would you like to serve?</u> ” [Animation]	Guided sensemaking regarding expected involvement once becoming a BWEL member
Role in Decision-Making (PQ3)	“We talked about some activities that we could do to <u>increase membership</u> [Control], <u>but honestly, I shared with her that I wanted to strengthen our membership first. I believe that although recruiting is important, retention is the number one priority.</u> ” [Animation]	Fragmented sensemaking regarding this respondent’s perception of the importance of member recruitment

I used *Dedoose*, a web-based data analysis software designed to handle interviews and observation data sets to increase the validity of my qualitative analysis. I created a comprehensive table of interview responses to increase confidentiality and reduce the risk of sharing participant names from interview transcripts. This data set included thirty-seven

interview quotes relative to perceived priorities, perceived challenges, and evidence of decision-making discourse between leaders and members (through storytelling and perceived roles in decision-making). As emergent themes arose that did not apply to answering project questions, I added them to the comprehensive table along with interview responses to support the prevalence of the pattern. Finally, I uploaded the table into Dedoose for analysis. I tallied the frequency of each sensemaking code as they occurred in all data sets: three observation documents and the comprehensive table of pre-coded interview responses – for an overall total of 52 occurrences of sensemaking codes. Analysis revealed that BWEL engaged in guided sensemaking 24 out of 52 times, or 46% of the time; in restricted sensemaking 19 out of 52 times, or 37% of the time; in fragmented sensemaking 8 out of 52 times, or 15% of the time; and minimal sensemaking 1 out of 52 times, or 2% of the time. The specifics of this analysis can be found in **Figure 5**.

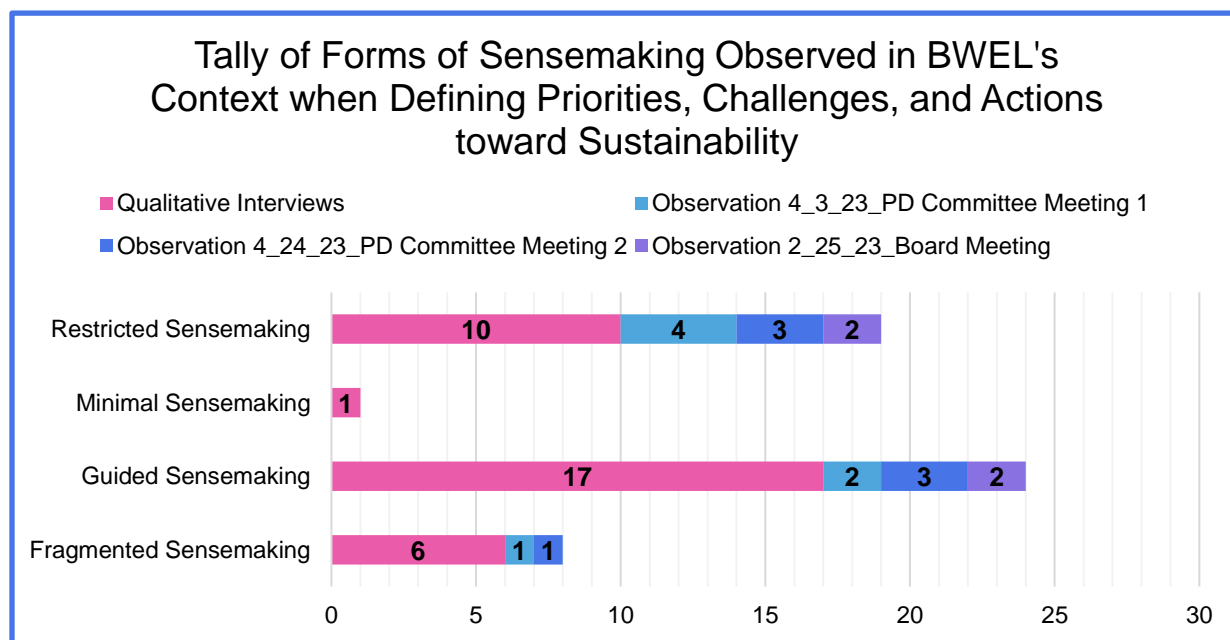


Figure 5

Tally of Forms of Sensemaking Observed in BWEL's Context

The last step of my analysis included document analysis. Monthly newsletters were analyzed to corroborate findings from qualitative interviews and ethnographic observations, as Bowen suggested (2009). Newsletters substantiated organizational priorities such as:

- empowerment as evidenced by member-submitted editorials and calls-to-action
- professional development is an ongoing priority, as evidenced by the advertisement of an average of six opportunities per month; and
- BWEL solicited member voice, as evidenced by a call to write for the newsletter or submit words of wisdom – which appeared monthly.

Conclusively, reviewing monthly newsletters enhanced this study and provided context over BWEL's broader impact while validating both leader and member perceptions of BWEL's priorities.

Emergent Sub-Themes As a Result of Analysis

This study's project questions addressed members' perceptions of priorities and challenges faced by BWEL and examined how patterns of interactions afforded or constrained BWEL's ability to scale from start-up to sustainability. A deeper look at interview responses and ethnographic observations presented several leader and member perceptions related to project questions. To enhance the validity of identifying shared perspectives between leadership and members, I considered only data where guided and restricted sensemaking were indicated. I also considered whether interactions were repeated, indicating the presence of patterns within BWEL's governance to determine sub-themes. These sub-themes are identified in **Table 5**.

Table 5

Sub-themes Identified Through Data Analysis Leading to Project Findings

Perceived Priorities to Achieving Sustainability (PQ1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fostering in-person meet-up opportunities • Maintaining Professional Development offerings
Perceived Challenges to Sustainability (PQ2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low member engagement • Limited intraorganizational survey responses
Storytelling and Roles in Decision-Making (PQ3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member input is solicited (by leaders) through surveys that drive the organization’s decision-making • Surveys are explicit • Open opportunities for individuals to share ideas with either (past) Founder and President risks limited outcomes • Board meetings are the closest to an “open forum” for idea-sharing • Members are expected to participate on committees, with an expected outcome (by BWEL leaders) of increased engagement/impact on decision-making.
Emergent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member engagement and membership growth – as two priorities – sometimes appeared mutually exclusive.

Findings

Four findings emerged from qualitative interviews and ethnographic observations conducted. Each finding answers project questions while connecting to literature and this study’s conceptual framework. Finding #1 relates to Project Question #1, Finding #2 connects to Projection Question #2, and Finding #3 relates to Project Question #3. Finding #4 is an emergent finding related to *member engagement* and *member recruitment*. Findings were used to make four strategic recommendations to strengthen BWEL’s foundation as the organization moves to sustainability.

Project Question 1: What do stakeholders perceive as priorities for BWEL's sustainability as a burgeoning professional organization?

Finding #1

There is a demand for in-person engagement. BWEL members want opportunities to engage offline and in person through conferences, professional development, and regional meetups.

Based on identified sub-themes noted in **Table 5**, most members placed value in creating face-to-face opportunities to complement BWEL’s online approach to engagement – an emergent demand for the organization. Data suggested that while BWEL’s online presence drew the attention of Black women in educational leadership roles, once they became members, they grew a desire for in-person activity. Four board members and two general members - through interviews, the observed Board meeting, or both - indicated this perceived priority, as seen in the following quotes:

BWEL Member: *“Promote those regional meetups to strengthen membership and the bonds of the women based on where we’re all located geographically.”*

Committee Chair: *“Engagement of members. We have shared that we probably need to start small in terms of regional areas and build those relationships...BWEL is primarily functioning from a virtual platform. ...It’s hard to build relationships, true authentic relationships, from a virtual standpoint.”*

BWEL Member: *“Actually meeting each other and doing some professional development in person - even if it’s small to start, somewhere easy for everyone to get to like Atlanta or in the Potomac and Chesapeake area, Philadelphia...that would go a long way to increasing the bond and bringing the brain trust together to plan for the future.”*

Board member: *“We should consider regional leadership [positions] so community activities may be planned... We need unplugged activities....”*

BWEL members want opportunities to engage offline and in person through conferences, professional development, and/or regional meetups. Given BWEL’s foundation as an online platform to engage Black women in educational leadership roles nationwide, members’ desires for face-to-face interaction present an unanticipated outcome. Therefore, this is the primary finding related to Project Question #1, and BWEL’s adherence to this suggestion may lead to the positive, consistent outcomes projected when guided sensemaking is dynamic.

Maitlis and Christianson (2014) support this finding. They suggested that sensemaking is especially necessary when individuals work together to understand new, unanticipated, or perplexing experiences for the organization. Specifically, guided sensemaking denotes a high level of member input (animation) and leader input (control), with projected outcomes of consistent practices to move the organization forward (Maitlis, 2005). BWEL should consider this finding when planning future engagements for its members. More opportunities to engage in person will lead to greater chances of authentic, guided sensemaking when addressing the factors that affect the organization’s longevity.

The second sub-theme is related to professional development. 83% of interview participants mentioned the maintenance of professional development offerings as not only a priority to maintain but something BWEL does consistently well. This sub-theme was substantiated by a document review of BWEL newsletters, with an average of six professional development opportunities, per month. Professional development opportunities are either offered through BWEL’s network or through professional educational organizations across the United

States. As such, the sub-theme of prioritizing professional development denotes that members value it and reinforces BWEL's commitment to this standard operation.

Project Question 2: What do stakeholders perceive as growth opportunities (or challenges) in transitioning from startup to BWEL's longevity?

Finding #2

Member engagement may impact BWEL's sustainability as the organization grows. While some leaders aim to recruit more members, many stakeholders saw the lack of current member involvement as challenging.

As noted in **Table 5**, two sub-themes emerged when examining perceived challenges to BWEL's sustainability: low member engagement and limited intraorganizational survey responses. Low member engagement was raised during the observed Board meeting and mentioned by 58% of interview participants.

BWEL Member: *"Membership...once you have that solid involvement in membership and become a committee member of some sort wherever your passion lies, and I think that will keep the organization thriving...."*

BWEL Member: *"I think one of the challenges that BWEL has and [leadership] continually stress at the meetings is that they are looking for [member] involvement, and they want individuals not just to join but be involved, so they encourage individuals to be a part of committees."*

Committee member: *“We talked about some activities that we could do to increase membership, but honestly, I shared with her that I wanted to strengthen our membership first. I believe that although recruiting is important, retention is the number one priority”.*

Board member: *“How do we get members to engage and respond to surveys?” (also echoed by another board member)*

The second sub-theme related to limited member survey responses (also addressed in Finding #3) as an indicator of low member engagement. While the BWEL board and Committee Chairs regularly seek member input before making decisions, leaders reported an average of a 25% response rate.

BWEL Officer: *“Yes, members have input, but it still goes back to that engagement piece that I want to prioritize - whereas maybe 1/4 of the members respond to that survey. So, I think some people have unplugged so much that it creates a challenge. The organization could be moving forward at a greater impact if more [members] engaged.”*

Committee Member: *“After our in-person retreat, we received about five surveys out of 20 distributed.”*

Limited member engagement (animation) yields high control outcomes (Maitlis, 2015). When leaders are suddenly thrust into a position of high control, despite their best efforts to receive member input, restricted or fragmented sensemaking ensues. Maitlis (2005) accounted for these occurrences and found that some leaders may find themselves in positions of sensegiving around any active issue due to limited stakeholder input – and by no fault of their own. Therefore,

limited member engagement has induced restricted sensemaking for BWEL, leading to narrowed opportunities for well-rounded improvements.

Picken's (2017) research supports this finding. Picken's fifth hurdle of the transition phase encourages non-profit founders to develop effective processes and infrastructures to manage growing customer relations. As noted throughout the study, BWEL leaders value members' voices and regularly solicit their input through surveys. At the time of this study, BWEL expected members to immediately join committees upon acceptance into the organization, under the program theory that members would actively engage if they self-selected a committee to join and subsequently have a say over organizational decisions. However, at the time of this study, this initiative did not appear to yield desired levels of consistent member engagement within BWEL.

Project Question 3: How do patterns of interactions afford or constrain decision-making and collective action toward BWEL's development?

Finding #3

Leadership solicits member input regularly, but all stakeholders do not consistently complete surveys. This yields an unintended consequence of high control in finalizing decisions for BWEL's collective action.

Table 5 lists several sub-themes that emerged when examining BWEL's discursive interactions and how these patterns may afford or constrain decision-making and collective action toward BWEL's development. Project Question 3 directly correlates to this study's conceptual framework, and upon analysis, I identified which of the Four Forms of Organizational Sensemaking BWEL relied upon for decision-making: *restricted sensemaking*.

To broadly identify forms of organizational sensemaking, Maitlis (2005) suggested observing how stakeholders and leaders talk amongst themselves and to each other, how often actors meet up, and the nature of their interactions and activities. To capture the suggested “look-fors” during interviews, I asked *all* participants:

- How often do opportunities for open discussions over perceived challenges occur?
- Who, in your opinion, tells the story behind the challenge? Is it a collective discussion between members and leaders?

Responses included:

Board Member: *“It’s primarily in board meetings because the board meeting kind of dictates the direction of the membership. Often in the membership meetings is not a high attendance, and not everybody contributes to the conversation. So, it was still kind of board driven.”*

BWEL Officer: *“We solicit interest from our members whenever we’re going to put new ideas into place. So, we vote on items that we know would be beneficial or more helpful to the organization. And we ask for members’ input quite frankly through committee meetings.”*

BWEL Officer: *“When they become a member of BWEL, every member is asked on the application, on which committee would you like to serve?”*

BWEL Officer: *“But we want to ensure that we are inclusive, and everyone’s voices are heard, acknowledged, and valued.”*

Committee Chair: *“I have an established rapport and relationship with the founder, and even with our board, partly because we have met in person, and we have been on calls. I would email the board members and the founder and just say, “Hey, what do you think about this?” But I do not feel intimidated or that my voice won't be heard.”*

In addition, I asked *leaders* more questions to gain insight into the impact of member input, if any. What follow are those questions and a sample of responses:

- How does member feedback affect decision-making for BWEL's future?
- How do you share information with members when or if something goes wrong?
- What is the process when deciding BWEL's priorities or programming? Are members immediately involved? Briefed? Why or why not?

BWEL Officer: *“We choose our priorities based on where we see the need. We send out surveys as well to ask the members what areas they would like more engagement or involvement around, and we look at all that data, and then we plan how we are going to move forward.”*

Board Member: *“I think we can do better with that. I think we can do better [by] saying, ‘Hey, we need some **immediate** feedback.’ But then, the members have to provide the feedback, right?”*

BWEL Officer: *“Yes, members have input, but it still goes back to that engagement piece that I want to prioritize - whereas maybe 1/4 of the members respond to that survey. So, I think some people have unplugged so much that it creates a challenge. The organization could be moving forward at a greater impact if more [members] engaged.”*

Board Member: *"We conduct surveys; however, we do not receive an adequate number of responses."* **(Repeated by another respondent, almost verbatim)**

Committee Chair: *"After our in-person retreat, we received about five surveys out of 20 distributed."*

These responses told a unique story about BWEL's prevalent sensemaking identity - in terms of organizational storytelling and decision-making. Restricted sensemaking derives from low animation and high control, as identified by this study's conceptual framework. This finding, though, does not indicate an imposition on BWEL's trajectory toward sustainability. Restricted sensemaking implies a unitary, though narrow, account but still leads to well-developed actions or sets of plans for future actions (Maitlis, 2005). BWEL (leaders) demonstrated persistence in decision-making for the good of the organization, even with limited member input. This was evidenced through ethnographic observations of the Professional Development Committee and BWEL's commitment to formalizing this component of their mission.

To further examine this finding, discussing the impact of fragmented and minimal sensemaking as they relate to BWEL's scalability is necessary. Instances of fragmented and minimal sensemaking occurred the least – with a combined 9 out of 52 codes, or 17.3% of sensemaking occurrences altogether. Instances were coded as fragmented sensemaking when members' responses to either interview questions or observed commentary seemed uncommon compared to others. For example, when asked about perceived priorities for BWEL's transition to sustainability during the interview, one BWEL member stated:

“I think a priority should be retaining people in education...BWEL could encourage those already in the field to be [change agents] in addressing the poor treatment of teachers, [given the current state of] teachers leaving the field.”

In this example, the member’s response, although considerate of the state of education at large, did not appear aligned with BWEL’s stated mission or other members’ perceptions of BWEL’s programming priorities. Fragmented sensemaking involves high animation, low control and can potentially lead to an emergence of scattered, member-driven outcomes if left unchecked. (Maitlis, 2005). Since members defer to BWEL’s board and committee chairs for overall program implementation, BWEL is at no risk for such pervasive outcomes.

Maitlis’s (2005) research acknowledges that organizations driven to change may fall anywhere along the Four Forms of Sensemaking spectrum *except* in the quadrant of *minimal sensemaking*. Organizations in BWEL’s position should avoid this quadrant because minimal sensemaking implies that neither members nor leaders share a commitment to move beyond a trial faced by the organization and implement change. Minimal sensemaking neither synthesizes multiple stakeholder accounts nor does it produce well-defined outcomes (Maitlis, 2005).

Only one occurrence implied minimal sensemaking - which surrounded arenas through which members may share new ideas through discourse in general meeting spaces. Again, BWEL’s board expected members to engage on committees and, by default, have spaces to share ideas related to their areas of interest, and at the time of this project, BWEL hosts one member meeting per year. At the time of this project, BWEL’s practice was to host one membership meeting per year, with ongoing committee and board meetings. When asked during interviews about other opportunities to address perceived challenges, a respondent stated:

Committee Chair: “*Formally, I would say no. Informally it might come after a debrief after or a session that we've had...but there is no formal, not to my knowledge, venue in which I can share or which I can, you know, introduce a topic.*”

In the discussion of findings for Project Question 2 (Finding #2), some participants referred to their ability to contact the past President or Founder/Executive Director for one-to-one discussions but did not openly acknowledge a lack of formal meetings spaces for idea-sharing. Maitlis (2005) proffered that minimal sensemaking likely occurs in response to an external trigger, with each party awaiting the others’ interpretation of an issue (p. 42). In waiting, actors may confer in one-off conversations to seek clarity – which was clearly observed through BWEL’s interactions. An indicator of minimal sensemaking is when only a few stakeholders discuss issues, and leaders have little involvement in methodically collecting others' views on said issue. Even though this occurrence posed a low risk to BWEL’s sustainability under its current model, the organization should remain mindful of the influence of “quick calls” or one-on-one discussions on either committees or the organization.

Finding #4: *Emergent*

Unlike the previous findings, Finding #4 did not specifically answer one of the three Project Questions but emerged within leaders’ perceptions of priorities for BWEL - either noted during observations or directly stated during interviews. What emerged specifically relates to BWEL’s membership: **There were conflicting values surrounding the priority of *member recruitment (finding new members) compared to member engagement (interactions of current members) between the leaders of BWEL.*** I found it essential to highlight this apparent conflict because BWEL leaders may need to negotiate ways to address membership, as I will later discuss in this section.

Throughout data collection, on multiple occasions, I noticed conflicting values surrounding the priority of *member recruitment* (finding new members) compared to *member engagement* (interaction of current members). As noted in **Table 5**, member engagement and membership growth – as two priorities – appeared mutually exclusive at times. BWEL’s beginnings surrounded providing a safe, uplifting, and empowering online presence for Black women education leaders through social media and awarding scholarships to aspiring leaders pursuing Education Leadership Licensures. According to this study’s data, once the organization became a membership entity, the function of recruiting new members varied.

Board Member: *“XX is really interested in ensuring constant and consistent growth [of membership].”*

Committee Chair: *“We talked about some activities that we could do to increase membership, but honestly, I shared with her that I wanted to strengthen our membership first. So, I really believe from a recruitment perspective that although recruiting is important, retention is the number one priority.”*

BWEL Officer: *“...My goal really is to just make sure that we are a safe hub. So, if members want to engage, if they need support, if they want mentorship, I want to make sure that BWEL is available, but is it my goal to go out and [recruit]? No, because that was [not what BWEL was founded on] ...I just wanted to make sure we existed so that if a Black woman needed support, needed care, needed amplification, needed research conducted, we are here we are available to support those efforts.”*

The purpose of this capstone project was not to highlight conflicting values within leadership, particularly over defining organizational priorities. But almost any start-up

organization will face its share of conflict as it expands from founding principles to scaling into a larger entity. The literature addressed this possibility of differing values.

Researchers assert, in fact, that founders or charter members often have differing approaches as organizations expand (Ogliastri, Jager, and Prado, 2015; Picken, 2017). Picken (2017) suggests that the founding team regularly adjusts its leadership style and management behaviors, being sure to negotiate challenges – especially when contesting “original” ideas for the start-up. This does not suggest that the BWEL leadership team did not have “deep, meaningful conversations” surrounding member recruitment, per interview respondent. BWEL might also consider approaches that will meet substantive desires for increased membership while maintaining its capacity to fully meet the needs of the women who are already a part of the organization. They might consider the question: “How can we do *both/and* not *either/or*?”.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1

In addition to its solid virtual presence and consistent engagement in that arena, BWEL should gradually move toward regional, in-person programming. The administrative functions of BWEL may be best operationalized centrally, but BWEL’s nationwide membership would benefit from regional services and regional delegates to meet growing demands for in-person engagement.

Findings from this study suggest that BWEL members want opportunities to engage offline and in person, even though BWEL started as a social media outlet. The desire to meet face-to-face echoed in board meetings, committee meetings, and interviews. There appeared to be both high animation and high control contributing to this organizational reality for BWEL. As

a function of *guided sensemaking*, this rich, unitary account indicates the emergence of consistent actions (Maitlis, 2005).

BWEL should consider adding in-person programming as a main priority, given the buy-in from members and leaders alike. Since the organization's primary point of contact with members and its target audience, at large, is through social media, BWEL should consider incremental implementation. Not ignoring that BWEL is an established, high-performing national organization – with members representing several states – it is recommended that BWEL implement this strategy regionally to allow proper pacing of the new initiative.

This recommendation is supported not only by Maitlis's (2005) framework noting the outcomes of guided sensemaking but also by Ogliastrri, Jager, and Prado's (2015) work. The researchers posited that an essential step in organizing high-performing non-profits is decentralization. They defined decentralizing as organizing around services or regions. The administrative functions of BWEL may be best operationalized centrally, but BWEL's nationwide membership would benefit from regional services and regional delegates to meet growing demands for in-person engagement. Adherence to this suggestion may produce positive, consistent outcomes projected when guided sensemaking is active and dynamic, according to Maitlis (2005).

Recommendation #2

Consider extending the onboarding process for new members, including committee introductions and opportunities to connect with another BWEL member in her local area. Fostering an immediate sense of community for new members could increase their sense of belonging and encourage authentic member engagement – or animation - within the organization.

Based on this study's findings, member engagement may impact BWEL's sustainability as the organization grows. While some leaders aimed to recruit more members, many stakeholders saw the lack of current member involvement as challenging. Modifying the ways new members are engaged may improve this outcome. This recommendation suggests a different approach to BWEL's current practice of simply having members join a committee upon applying and being accepted into BWEL.

Picken's (2017) *fifth hurdle of the transition phase* encourages non-profit founders to develop effective processes and infrastructures to manage growing customer relations. As such, activities essential to attracting and building member relationships require flexibility and responsiveness (Picken, 2017). Following this recommendation from the literature, I recommend modifying new member engagement by extending the onboarding over a period, introducing members to committee chairs before new members decide which committee to join, and coordinating opportunities to meet other BWEL members in their local areas. Fostering an immediate sense of community for new members could increase their sense of belonging and encourage authentic member engagement – *or animated sensegiving* - within the organization.

Recommendation #3

In addition to surveys, establish opportunities for dialogue between members, such as semi-annual strategic planning meetings. BWEL leaders must deliberately create arenas for members to become vested in the dynamics of guided sensemaking necessary to move their organization to new heights.

The findings demonstrate that BWEL's leaders regularly solicit members' input, but members' survey participation is lacking. This produces an unintended consequence of high

control in finalizing decisions for BWEL’s collective action. On the contrary, BWEL’s member-perceived identity, as indicated by all study participants, is one of inclusivity, safety, trust, and community amongst Black women. To combat this paradox, BWEL leaders must deliberately create arenas for members to become vested in the dynamics of sensemaking necessary to move their organization to new heights.

According to Maitlis (2005), instances of high control are sometimes unavoidable and necessary, namely when there is little sensegiving opportunities around an issue. One of the practical implications of Maitlis’s (2005) Four Forms of Sensemaking framework calls for leaders to encourage empowerment in their organizations:

The findings presented here suggest a tension between the forces of animation and control in organizational sensemaking: animation is a powerful element that brings diverse understandings of an issue into discussion, but it is mostly the result of consistent actions when the sensemaking processes are also relatively controlled. (p. 47)

In other words, leaders may continue to be put in positions of having “the final say” until more opportunities arise for member dialogue. Maitlis also acknowledges that not every instance of sensemaking needs to occur in larger arenas. As members become empowered – through the fostering of managers or leaders – animation and control may move toward a more guided sensemaking experience, versus BWEL’s situation of restricted sensemaking at the time of this study and concerning organizational storytelling that drives BWEL’s decisions. This recommendation is also supported by Brown, Colville, & Pye (2015), who suggested that decision-making and the intentional act of creating spaces – called *situated contexts* – for discourse to occur invites actors to share perspectives that lead to organizational growth.

Recommendation #4

To address conflicting values surrounding membership, consider opening membership on a periodic basis, as opposed to ongoing, until BWEL has the capacity to nurture new members and engage established members simultaneously, with the level of attention and care intended by the organization.

The final recommendation addresses an emergent finding identified during this study. I noticed conflicting values surrounding the priority of *member recruitment* (finding new members) compared to *member engagement* (interactions of current members) between leaders of BWEL. Addressing this conflicting value within leadership leads to more explicit definitions of BWEL's priorities moving forward. My recommendation, then, offers a compromise that allows the organization to meet new desires for increased membership, while honoring the organization's capacity to fully meet the needs of the women looking to benefit from the organization's ideals.

Relative literature asserts that start-up organizations will face conflict throughout expansion, namely when moving from the founders' initial vision to adopting new initiatives (Ogliastri, Jager, and Prado, 2015; Picken, 2017). "Conflicts often arise between the need for stability and standardization in operations and customer demands for customization, variety, and responsiveness. These must be resolved, taking into account both the needs of current and prospective customers and internal constituents" (Picken, 2017, p. 591). Therefore, it is recommended that BWEL consider opening membership on a periodic basis, as opposed to ongoing, until BWEL has the capacity to nurture new members and engage established members simultaneously, with the level of attention and care intended by the organization.

Conclusion

This capstone project aimed to examine priorities, challenges, and other factors that either afforded or inhibited the scalability of a national, start-up non-profit and professional organization, Black Women Education Leaders, Inc. (BWEL), as the organization moved through the foundational stages of organizing and into sustainability. The project explored BWEL's management and membership moves toward scaling through the social concept of organizational sensemaking.

The three main findings suggest that the main priority for BWEL, as it moves from the start-up phase, is to address members' demand for in-person engagement. BWEL members want opportunities to engage offline and in person through conferences, professional development, and regional meetups. However, current levels of member engagement may negatively impact BWEL's sustainability as the organization grows. Lastly, while leadership solicited member input regularly, all stakeholders did not consistently complete surveys, leaving an unintended consequence of high control when finalizing decisions toward BWEL's collective action. An emergent finding suggested conflicting values surrounding the priority of member recruitment (finding new members) compared to member engagement (interactions of current members) between the leaders of BWEL.

The significance of these findings leads to recommended strategies that will guide BWEL toward sustainability. These recommendations call for BWEL to gradually move toward regional, in-person programming. Implementing this strategy will meet members' increased demands for such engagement through in-person community. BWEL should also consider extending the onboarding process for new members, including committee introductions and opportunities to connect with another BWEL member in her local area. By fostering an

immediate sense of community for new members, BWEL could increase their sense of belonging and encourage authentic member engagement – or animation - within the organization. In addition to surveys, BWEL should establish opportunities for dialogue between members, such as through semi-annual strategic planning meetings. BWEL leaders must deliberately create arenas for members to become vested in the dynamics of guided sensemaking necessary to move their organization to new heights. Finally, to address the emergent finding, it is recommended that BWEL consider opening membership on a periodic basis, as opposed to ongoing, until BWEL has the capacity to nurture new members and engage established members simultaneously, with the level of attention and care intended by the organization.

As BWEL strategically engages with organizational sensemaking, with high animation and high control, that is, *equal engagement over decision-making through sensegiving between leaders and membership*, the organization will improve its chances of achieving sustainability. BWEL is a necessary and timely organization that promotes its membership's professional development and overall wellness as educational leaders. Existent literature and lived experiences prove that Black women in educational leadership faced even more significant difficulties during the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath, including exhaustion from dealing with racial issues, loneliness, and feeling disconnected. This capstone project contributes to research by providing qualitative evidence on one organization's work to organize a professional space that mentors, affirms, advocates for, and creates a community for Black women education leaders nationally.

Appendix A

Strategic Planning Meetings with BWEL Professional Organization: Scoping the Area of Inquiry

Wed., November 16, 2022

6:00 p.m. – 6:30 p.m.

Zoom Meeting

Meeting ID: XXXXX

Passcode: XXX

By the end of this meeting, we will have participated in scoping a Capstone area of inquiry for the BWEL Professional Organization through a series of guiding questions.

Norms:

1. Be honest and clear about what the organization needs.
2. The conversation is a safe space for sharing desired growth areas for BWEL.

Agenda

Time	Topic	Process
3'	Introductions, purpose, and norms	Share
10'	Review Meeting Notes from 11/7, 11/9, and 11/14	Review
15'	Potential areas of focus	Discuss
2'	Next Steps <i>-Finalize the Area of Inquiry</i>	Determine

Questions to generate discussion:

1. What is the nature of a challenge faced by BWEL?
2. What problem does this create for the organization?
3. What decisions/changes might you make if you had more evidence about this challenge?
4. What information would best help you make this decision/change?
5. Who are the relevant stakeholders?
6. What data might already be available within BWEL?
7. What types of data collection would you all support (member interviews, member surveys, relevant document reviews)?

NOTES

Areas of Growth/Topics Discussed Wednesday, November 16, 2022, 6:00 p.m.

Participants:

Executive Director/Founder

Tenaeya Rankin

Notes:

- Issues discussed during previous meetings are well-known, namely given that BWEL is a new organization
- Possibly administer a Comprehensive Needs Assessment through this capstone project
 - Qualitative Data Collection
 - Interviews
 - Focus Groups
 - Online Survey
 - Seek to identify how the executive team can assist in
 - moving the organization toward future goals
 - addressing concerns recorded during 11/6, 11/8, and 11/14 meetings

Areas of Growth/Topics Discussed Monday, November 14, 2022, 6:00 p.m.

Participants: [redacted]

- Opportunities to home in on the talents of members to strengthen BWEL
 - Create spaces that allow members' areas of expertise to inform others
 - For example, research, grant-writing, etc.
- Fill in gaps of support that Black women don't receive
 - Overcoming the lack of support outside of the principalship
 - Some leadership positions are siloed within their districts
 - Connect with "authentic thought partners" within BWEL
- Engagement
 - Seeking out members' strengths
 - Changing trends in participation (in organizations, across the board)
 - "Member voice" and active involvement
 - Foster inclusion
 - Create informal spaces before immersion into the organization (ties into onboarding/orientation of new members)
- Getting members to respond
 - Improve transfer from joining BWEL to active engagement with BWEL
- Increase opportunities for members to engage in informal conversations surrounding topics such as:
 - Self-advocacy
 - Salary negotiation
 - Grant-writing
 - Resume-writing
 - Interviewing

Implement a monthly "BWEL Power Hour" (to address the above topics)

Themes, Questions, and Notes Collected Wednesday, November 9, 2022

Participants: [redacted]

- Continuity of programs and professional development opportunities
 - Implementing fidelity and regular communication
 - How do we know what members need?
 - Administer a needs assessment
- Create community and connection among members
 - Find ways to encourage conversations that foster community, trust, and engagement among members
 - Establish regional meetups
- Collect data on members' career progressions, over time, since joining BWEL
 - How is BWEL helping members' growth and development toward leadership?
 - In what ways does BWEL enable members' sustainability in leadership roles?
 - Connect members to people who will help them get desired leadership roles
- Addressing (the broader phenomenon of) Black women's support of other Black women in leadership – or lack, thereof
 - "How can BWEL create structures that lead to and support more Black women as leaders?"

Potential Areas of Focus Generated Monday, November 7, 2022, with BWEL Members:

Participants: [redacted]

- *Consider alternate forums for Professional Development opportunities
 - Zoom and In-Person

- Location of learning opportunities and accessibility for members
- **Added on 11/9/22** – Host mini-retreats for members unable to attend in-person retreats
- Clarity of leadership roles
 - Managing the load of responsibilities
 - Time commitment required by certain positions
- Fidelity of implementation of programs and communication ***repeated on 11/9/22**
- Use and activity of committees
- Organizational identity and direction, post-COVID
 - “What is our envisioned impact?”
 - Potentially narrow down the focus
- Alignment of activities with BWEL’s vision
- Member Engagement
 - Limited amount of participation
 - Connecting and regional networking for (new) members
 - Onboarding new members
 - Increase opportunities for members to connect BWEL with something relevant to their careers
 - Increase chances for relationship-building through sponsors, mentors, and networking – across the board ***repeated on 11/9/22**

General Themes: Organizational Focus, Fidelity, and Follow-through

*Revised, 11/9/22

Themes, Questions, and Notes Collected Wednesday, November 9, 2022

Participants: [redacted]

- Continuity of programs and professional development opportunities
 - Implementing fidelity and regular communication
 - How do we know what members need?
 - Administer a needs assessment
- Create community and connection among members
 - Find ways to encourage conversations that foster community, trust, and engagement among members
 - Establish regional meetups
- Collect data on members’ career progressions, over time, since joining BWEL
 - How is BWEL helping members’ growth and development toward leadership?
 - In what ways does BWEL enable members’ sustainability in leadership roles?
 - Connect members to people who will help them get desired leadership roles
- Addressing (the broader phenomenon of) Black women’s support of other Black women in leadership – or lack, thereof
 - “How can BWEL create structures that lead to and support more Black women as leaders?”

Appendix B

BWEL Observation Document

Date of Observation	
Type of Meeting	
Observation Start Time	
Observation End Time	
Number of Members Present	

Observation Evidence

Project Question 3	Observation Look-fors Relative to Sensemaking:	Notes:
How do patterns of interactions afford or constrain decision-making and collective action toward BWEL's development?	Discernable social patterns of interaction among stakeholders: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Who raises issues (member or exec team)? ● Who leads discussions (member or exec team)? ● Is the issue raised in an open discussion during meetings or one-on-one interaction? 	
	Forms of organizational sensemaking – whether through leader or stakeholder sensegiving: Evidence of animated sensegiving (member-driven discussions and interpretations of issues, regular check-ins, shared decision-making, multiple views, continuity)	
	Evidence of controlled sensegiving (leaders' views drive decisions, private – or one-to-one meetings to discuss issues, little flow of information between leaders and members)	
	Outcomes resulting from the observed forms of organizational sensemaking: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Is there a broad impact? ● Is there a plan for consistency? ● Are the next steps generalizable for the growth of BWEL? 	

Analysis: Observation Coding Key

Form of Organizational Sensemaking	Process Characteristics	Outcomes
Guided	high animation, high control	A unitary, rich account; Emergent series of consistent actions
Restricted	low animation, high control	Unitary, narrow account; One-time action or planned set of consistent actions
Fragmented	high animation, low control	Multiple, narrow accounts; Emergent series of inconsistent actions
Minimal	low animation, low control	Nominal account; One-time, compromise action

Adapted from Maitlis's (2005) Four Forms of Organizational Sensemaking Framework

Appendix C

BWEL Interview Recruitment Email

Dear Members of Black Women Education Leaders, Inc:

I am reaching out to request your participation in qualitative interviews that will allow me to better understand your perspective on priorities for Black Women Education Leaders' (BWEL) sustainability as a burgeoning professional organization and any challenges faced by BWEL during this pivotal transitional phase that may inhibit BWEL's longevity. I am particularly interested in your perspective as a valued participant within this professional organization.

Participation in this project is essential to your organization's overall growth and development. If you agree to participate, please schedule a time slot using my Calendly scheduler (linked below). You will receive a calendar invite as confirmation and an included Zoom link for the interview.

The Zoom call will take about 30 minutes. Participation is voluntary, and your responses will be kept anonymous. You will have the option to not respond to any question that you choose. Participation or nonparticipation will not impact your relationship with BWEL. You must be at least 18 to participate in this project.

If you have any questions about the project, please get in touch with me via email at tenaeya.s.rankin@vanderbilt.edu or my faculty advisor, Dr. Eve Rifkin, at eve.r.rifkin@vanderbilt.edu. Please print or save a copy of this email for your records.

Calendly Link: <https://calendly.com/tenaeyarw/30min>

Kind regards,

Tenaeya Rankin

Appendix D

BWEL Interview Protocol

Before beginning the interview:

1. Explain the purpose of the interview.
Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. As you know, I want to understand your perception of BWEL's progress as the organization transitions from startup to sustainable practices. I will ask questions about your interactions with other BWEL stakeholders, your opinion of the decision-making processes used to further BWEL's mission, and whether you detect challenges to BWEL's overall ability to thrive as a burgeoning organization for Black women educational leaders across the country. The goal is to learn how the organization involves discourse through leader and member interactions – moving BWEL forward in establishing sustainability.
2. Consent Process:
Before we begin the interview, I want to remind you that participating in this project is voluntary and that your responses are confidential. If you would like me to stop recording at any point during the interview, tell me to do so. Do you have any questions about the project before we begin?

Begin recording the interview. Turn on closed captions. Save the chat if necessary.

Introductory/Warm-Up Questions

1. What position do you hold in your school district? How long have you held this position?
2. How long have you been a member of BWEL? What influenced your decision to join BWEL?

Perceptions of BWEL's Priorities and Member Impact on Decision-Making

1. Why does BWEL exist? In other words, what is BWEL's story?
2. What does BWEL consistently do well?
3. As BWEL transitions from the startup space – which typically takes about 18-36 months – what do you perceive as priorities for BWEL to address?
4. How have priorities been established and addressed in your experience with BWEL so far?
5. Who tells the story behind the need (addressed through this priority)?
6. What is your role in the decision-making process?

Perceptions of Challenges to BWEL's Sustainability

1. Since 2020, has anything changed about BWEL's mission and vision?
2. In your opinion, what impact did this challenge have on the organization?
3. How often do opportunities for open discussions over perceived challenges occur?
4. Who, in your opinion, tells the story behind the challenge? Is it a collective discussion between members and leaders?

Questions for Leaders

1. How does member feedback affect decision-making for BWEL's future?
2. How do you share information with members when or if something goes wrong?
3. What is the process when deciding BWEL's priorities or programming? Are members immediately involved? Briefed? Why or why not?

Talking points for interviews scheduled immediately after ethnographic observations, with evidence of patterns leading to sensemaking:

1. What worked best to bring the organization to a decision over [identified decision]?
2. If the issue was tabled, how do you recommend BWEL resolve this issue? What steps will be taken to move stakeholders and the organization forward?

Say:

Thank you for participating in this interview!

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