

# *Social* SENSEMAKING

A Reflective Journal;  
how we make sense of risk

**ROBERT SAMS**

# Contents

Foreword By Dave Collins.....	x
Preface.....	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments - Friends, Family &amp; Influencers.....</i>	<i>xiv</i>
<i>A Special 'Thank-you' to Dr. Rob Long.....</i>	<i>xvi</i>
<i>What I mean by key terms used in this book.....</i>	<i>xvi</i>
<b>SECTION 1 – Welcome and Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Chapter 1 – Reflections of a Great Mate.....	2
Chapter 2 – A Learning 'Adventure' Begins.....	8
<b>SECTION 2 – Understanding People, Organisations &amp; Our Decisions.....</b>	<b>23</b>
Chapter 3 – Understanding People & Seeking the 'Truth'.....	24
Chapter 4 – Decision Making and Risk.....	34
Chapter 5 – Risk is about people, not just objects.....	39
Chapter 6 – Organisations, Their Decisions About Risk and Trade-offs.....	49
Chapter 7 – Looking at objects differently.....	56
Chapter 8 – An Introduction to Critical Thinking, Learning (& Why it Matters).....	63
<b>SECTION 3 – Risk and Communication.....</b>	<b>69</b>
Chapter 9 – The Unconscious in Communication.....	70
Chapter 10 – Reflective Listening.....	74
Chapter 11 – The Art of Humble Inquiry.....	79
<b>SECTION 4 – When Things Don't Go to Plan?.....</b>	<b>83</b>
Chapter 12 – Why We Make Mistakes.....	84
Chapter 13 – Just Get to the Bottom of It!.....	88
Chapter 14 – Just Toolbox It!.....	93
Chapter 15 – Reflection Makes Sense.....	96
Chapter 16 – Please don't try & fix me, I'm not a machine.....	99
<b>SECTION 5 – The Social Psychology of Injury Management and Workers Compensation.....</b>	<b>107</b>
Chapter 17 – The Discourse of Workers Compensation.....	108
Chapter 18 – The Semiotics of Workers Compensation.....	111
Chapter 19 – Collective Mindfulness Applied to Workers Compensation.....	116

<b>SECTION 6 – The Law, Due Diligence and Culture</b> .....	<b>121</b>
Chapter 20 – What is Excess Regulation doing to us? .....	122
Chapter 21 – Are You Creating an ‘Obedience Culture’ .....	127
Chapter 22 – Culture to Go! .....	132
Chapter 23 – A Culture of Care (and sackings...) .....	135
<b>SECTION 7 – The Illusion and Seduction of Control and Measuring</b> .....	<b>139</b>
Chapter 24 – We are in control and other such delusions!.....	140
Chapter 25 – Could Understanding ‘Grey’ Be the Silver Bullet? .....	146
Chapter 26 – Jerry won the safety award (but he didn’t do anything!) .....	149
<b>SECTION 8 – The Strong Temptation to Crusade</b> .....	<b>153</b>
Chapter 27 – Beware the Safety Crusader .....	154
Chapter 28 – You don’t need to be a hero to be a Leader.....	157
<b>SECTION 9 – A Focus on Resilience and Communing</b> .....	<b>161</b>
Chapter 29 – Building Resilience Trumps the Prevention of Harm.....	162
Chapter 30 – Fragility and the Risk Paradox.....	168
<b>SECTION 10 – Putting <i>Social Sensemaking</i> in Practice</b> .....	<b>175</b>
Chapter 31 - Thinking Groups.....	176
Chapter 32 – From Army to <i>I-Thou</i> .....	181
Chapter 33 – The Future of the Safety Profession.....	188
Chapter 34 – From Money to People .....	197
Chapter 35 – Final Reflections.....	201
<b>SECTION 11 – Wrap Up, Resources and References</b> .....	<b>205</b>
Chapter 36 – Wrap Up, Next Steps + Authors and Contributors.....	206
A Special Cohort of Friends.....	208
About the Authors and Contributors .....	209
<i>Robert (Rob) Sams</i> .....	209
<i>Deanne (De) Sullivan</i> .....	209
<i>Max Geyer</i> .....	210
<i>Gabrielle (Gab) Carlton</i> .....	210
<i>James Ellis</i> .....	211
<i>Hayden Collins</i> .....	211

<i>Scott McArthur</i> .....	212
<i>Dave Whitefield</i> .....	212
<i>Ron Gantt</i> .....	213
<i>Dave Collins</i> .....	213
References and bibliography.....	214

**List of Figures:**

Figure 1 – The *Social Psychology of Risk Map*® (Long, 2016 \*with permission)

Figure 2 – One Brain Three Minds (Long, 2012 \*with permission)

Figure 3 – The Decision Tree (Sams, 2016)

Figure 4 - The Trade Off Clock (Weick, 1979)

Figure 5 – The Competing Values Framework (Cameron and Quinn, 2011)

Figure 6 - Trade-offs Model (Sams, 2016)

## Preface

Have you ever thought to yourself after something unexpected occurred or after hearing of an accident or mistake; “*That just doesn’t make sense to me?*”

If you have, you’ve probably also asked questions like “*Why would someone do that?*” or “*What were they thinking?*”

Human beings have long been fascinated with the question of ‘*why we do what we do?*’. For some, the desire to understand this becomes a lifelong quest. For me, it was a fascination with this question that led to me to commence a *learning adventure* to better understand people and risk. It is my reflection of this adventure that I wish to share in this book. That is, how we make sense of risk through a means that I’ve coined *Social Sensemaking*<sup>™</sup>.

Understanding risk and people can be quite a challenge, especially when we are trying to understand risk from the perspective of ‘others’.

For example, how would you respond if you were to hear of someone who: sky dived; drove a fast car; fell in love; married; left a marriage; got married again; ate fatty/unhealthy food; drunk alcohol; smoked a cigarette; and/or, turned their back on their profession after working in it for 20 years?

The activities listed above may, for some people create anxiety (*How could you?*). Alternatively, they may elicit excitement (*I can’t wait to...*) and for other people the feeling may be neutral (*so what?*). So what can this teach us about risk?

It is a common misconception that the way we think and feel about risk can be simply described in one way or another, that is; risk is either good or bad (binary) or perhaps neutral. We can be easily seduced into thinking that risk is objective and easily understood, but how can it be?

Here’s a really challenging concept that goes to the very heart of this book.

What if I was to propose that perhaps for many situations, the feeling of, and our thinking about risk, is messy, complicated and constantly changing? Further, what if I suggest that it is only through our relationships and connection with others that we can start to make sense of risk?

That is the thesis of this book; making sense of risk is a social activity. In other words, people as individuals may have changing, conflicting, or even co-existing views and feelings about risk in their lives. Risk can often be simultaneously attractive, terrifying, rewarding, punishing, non-eventful or a mixture of these feelings at any one time. Understanding and dealing with risk can be messy.

However, when we ‘*sense-make*’ things (ideas, feelings, thoughts, viewpoints) with others through communing and when our aim is for exploration, understanding and enquiry, we can make better sense of risk.

So why cite the examples of risks listed above? It’s simple really, it’s because I can relate to all of them personally as these are all activities that I have done.

I can recall from personal experience that some of the activities described were the toughest and most challenging periods in my life so far. Others were the most fantastic and enjoyable experiences. A few were terrifyingly exciting, while some were frightening and harmful.

I now recognise that it is really only after reflecting on and learning from risk activities in my life, that I can begin to understand that such experiences have contributed to me growing, maturing and developing as a person, however painful, thrilling or uncertain they were at the time.

I also reflect and realise that it was through making-sense of things with others that was possibly the most helpful of all activities in which I participated. But would I seek out such feelings of pain and suffering again, in order to continue to grow and develop?

Very few people I know actively seek harm, misfortune or pain on either themselves or others. However, there is a growing body of research (for example Barbara Fredrickson's work in *Positivity*, 2009) that helps us understand that experiencing uncertainty (risk) and pain, as well as a range of positive experiences, are essential if we are to learn and develop as humans. In a sense we have to allow pain and suffering (and all that is in between) to co-exist in our lives if we are to find meaning, purpose and fulfilment.

So I guess the answer to my question is that by 'accepting' pain and suffering it doesn't mean I desire it as such, however I do welcome the learning from future pain and suffering, whatever that might be.

Through my conversations with many people over the past three years, I understand that this paradoxical challenge is one that most people find difficult to comprehend, particularly those who work in my 'home profession' of risk and safety.

My aim is that, through sharing my reflections of a learning adventure, I can support those who share the quest to better understand people and risk, and to further explore; *why we do what we do*.

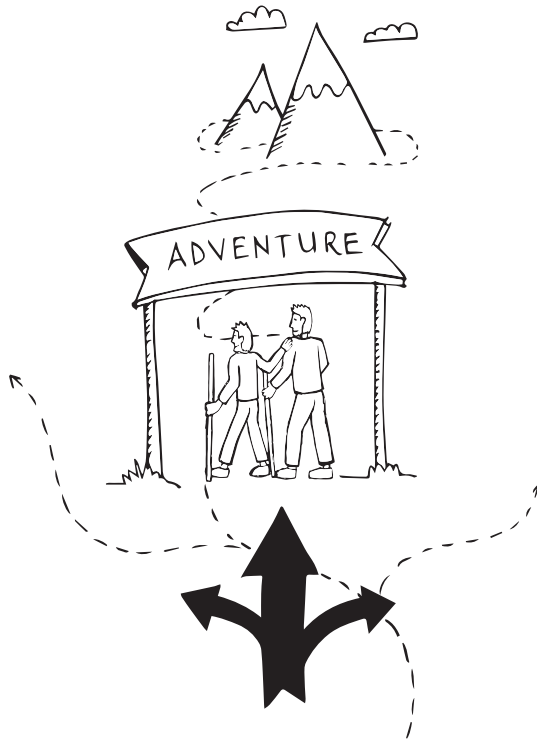
Welcome to *Social Sensemaking*. I hope that you enjoy reading through the reflection of my adventure as much as I have living it.

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1. The *Social Psychology of Risk* is a term coined by Dr Robert Long who, to my knowledge is the first person in the world to bring these terms together, certainly in a formal learning environment.

# Section 1

## WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION



# Chapter 1 – Reflections of a Great Mate

By Robert Sams

“I kid you not!”

Mark Allen Beavis

*(on numerous occasions when asked whether he was the fastest cricket bowler in Maitland, NSW during the period 1993– 2001)*

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## Risky backyard cricket

Mark Allen Beavis (Beavo) was born on 3rd of August 1974. Son to Wendy and Ron, and brother to Melissa (Missy) and Glen; Fiancé to Kasey, and mate to many. Beavo to me was a special friend.

Our friendship epitomized a ‘love/hate’ relationship. For most moments, we loved each other dearly, like brothers. Yet at other times we frustrated each other with great passion. If ever there was to be a friendship that could be described as a paradox, ours was it. It was special!

Beavo and I first met in 1983 during our first day of Primary School. We were in Year ‘Three T’ under the Tutorship of Mr. Phil Taylor. Beavo and I hit it off immediately; laughing and sharing stories; forming a bond that would continue for many years to come. We struck a chord with each other, the way you do when you meet a best mate.

Beavo and I shared in many memories. From playing ‘puddocks’ (a form of cricket) in the bottom playground at St. Josephs East Maitland, to moments at the sports shed near the incinerator (what happens near the incinerator, stays near the incinerator...); to Friday nights watching the Footy; to singing our rendition of The Beatles *A Hard Day’s Night* at the School concert in Year 4; through to playing ‘Miami Vice’ in the bush behind Beavo’s house in Verdant Drive. Beavo and I were best mates.

There were mostly good times, coupled with occasional battles. We regularly argued, then laughed; we debated, yet so often shared views; we sang yet also cried; we fought and later hugged; we loathed and then loved. That was the nature of our relationship. Beavo was a dear friend and taught me so much.

Beavo was also a smart bloke who excelled through school with considerable ease. His intelligence was obvious (and envious); he could pass an exam on the basis of a great mind and memory. Beavo was also passionate and lovable. If he were to pick up a cause, it would have his full backing. For example, in later life he would become a ‘Labor Man’, through and through.

Beavo valued relationships. When people in authority focused on their relationship with Beavo rather than seeing him as subservient, things were just fine. However, at times, he was also challenged by authority. For example, he respected many of his teachers and in return was much respected by them, however, if you showed him no respect or regard, he was known to ‘play with you’.



I loved to join him in the fun on many occasions. For example, when we used to go into our classroom and lock the door, and then jump out through the window so that when the teacher arrived, they would have to head back to the office to collect keys, thus creating a good 10 minutes more 'play time' rather than sit through boring lessons in maths. I reflect now and recognise that the teacher didn't respect Beavo, rather his focus was to try to control him; was it any wonder Beavo went out of his way to cause trouble in return? I can also recognise many moments of 'social learning' in those moments of 'play'.

Beavo also had a dislike of silly, irrelevant rules. However, he did have a keen sense of justice, fairness and respect for relationships.

I recall a particularly memorable occasion where he felt these things were tested. It was in the latter years of high school when our school library introduced a system to detect books being stolen from the library. The new process was introduced with a whole lot of hoopla around not being able to trust students, so the school was forced to implement a new system.

No-one was quite sure at the time, how the system worked, but what we did know was that if you tried to take a book from the library without checking it out through the system, a buzzer would sound and you were busted. Not particularly happy with the school's sense of distrust for its students, Beavo and I went about giving them a lesson...

It didn't take us long to work out that the detectors were activated by a very small metal strip that was inserted into all library books. When you checked the books out of the library, it deactivated the strip, but if not, the alarm sounded. We came up with a plan to give the school a lesson of their own.

We ripped out a few of the metal strips from some books, then inserted them into our school ties and walked out of the library. Of course, the alarms sounded and we were both 'detained for questioning'. We hadn't stolen any books and the teachers could not work out what was going on.

Unfortunately, word soon got around about our trick and we were both caught. The result for Beavo was three days' suspension (due to some carry over offences) and for me weeks of detention. I have many similarly fond memories of great times with my best mate at school. There was much that we learned together through our adventures.

It's funny that I reflect back now and laugh at these stories. As I do, they provide much insight of the man that Beavo was to become; and help me reflect on my learnings about people and risk over the past few years.

After school, Beavo followed in the tradition of many from my home region and started an apprenticeship at BHP in our beloved steel town of 'Newie'. Beavo was a 'Sparky' (electrician). It made sense that he would progress into a job that required some smarts, because while a larrikin on the surface, Beavo was the smartest bloke I knew, without peer. I loved Beavo.

After some years working at the 'Steelworks', Beavo moved on to work on 'the railways', with Speno Rail Maintenance. While I didn't work with Beavo in this job,

the many mates that he made while working there were testament to the great mate he continued to be.

Regrettably, it was also in this job where things changed forever.

On Tuesday 8th of February 2001, the care free spirit and life, that was Beavo, would come to an end. Beavo was sitting atop a rail maintenance vehicle which was travelling through northern NSW. As the train travelled under a bridge his head came into contact with the bridge. He went into a coma, and died a few days later.

The NSW Industrial Relations Commission in their report<sup>3</sup> on Beavo's death described:

“The train was approaching a pedestrian bridge over the railway line that connected Federation Street to Schwinghammer Street in Grafton. Darren Thompson was on the walkway of C carriage. He called out several times to Mr. Beavis to warn him of the approaching bridge, however, Mr. Beavis did not respond. The back of Mr. Beavis' head hit the pedestrian bridge. Mr. Beavis died on 8 February 2001 as a result of the head injuries he had received.”



Beavo pictured here with Fiancé Kasey at their Engagement Party. Sadly, they would not marry, however Beavo's spirit continues to live on.

Beavo was taken early. He is missed by so many, and his death impacted on our local community in a way rarely seen. Beavo's funeral was in the church attached to our primary school, and was attended by a large number of people, it was a significant day.

I carried Beavo for the last time that day, down that long aisle in the church where we had previously shared in much mischief as Alter Boys secretly hiding from the Priest and sipping the Alter Wine. This time it was the Priest presiding over Beavo's farewell to the world as we knew it. It was a heart-rending day.

Beavo was cremated. Putting his coffin on the trolley so that he may exit the (physical) world for good was gut wrenching. Beavo the person was gone forever, but there was no way that bugger would let his spirit leave us that quickly. Welcome to Beavo's wake!

It started out as a pretty sombre and quiet event, a few beers with mates sharing stories about Beavo (there was no shortage). As the lubricants settled the discomfort and the sadness lifted, the night became a celebration of a wonderful life.

3. As accessed at <http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/nsw/NSWIRComm/2004/html?stem=0&synonyms=0&query=speno%20rail%20and%20Regulator> accessed on 12 May 2016

First it was group songs, Cold Chisel, Midnight Oil and if I recall correctly (you'll understand shortly why my memory of the night is a little jaded), some Beatles too. The lubricants continued, we were celebrating a special life and this would be no ordinary night. Then the real fun began!

I can't recall the exact time, but boy did it take people by surprise. Pete (Hodgy) Hodgson started it all. He suggested, let's have a game of cricket, one of Beavo's favourite sports (after his death, he was honoured with Life Membership at his beloved Norths Cricket Club). The cricket started in a fairly nonchalant way, with a few of 'us boys' joining in. We were in Beavo's parent's backyard where around a hundred or so people had gathered. We were having a great time lamenting; doing all of the things that Beavo enjoyed.

Hodgy is a real larrikin himself who everyone loved (and still do). The cricket was going along just fine, but Hodgy thought we could step it up a level. I still recall clearly looking up and seeing Hodgy 'ripping off his gear' and declaring "*Nude Cricket! This is how Beavo would have done it and would have wanted it, so let's get the gear off boys!*".

Right there in front of everyone, including Beavo's parents, Grandparents and so many others, Nude Cricket began. It was an absolute blast, and a real tribute to a guy who never seemed bounded by the social norms to which we so easily conform. I suspect that had Beavo been present in person, rather than in spirit that night, he not only would have joined in, he wouldn't have waited nearly as long as Hodgy did to start it!

As I reflect back on Beavo's wake and the sight of Hodgy and so many others running around nude, it was really no surprise and it seems so fitting as a tribute to him. Beavo was a risk taker, he was so often the first in our group to try something new; smoking, drinking, marijuana, driving fast (very fast!). It's no surprise that the song played at his funeral was Kenny Rogers' *The Gambler*.



The Weston Bridge, NSW.

For instance, I remember one-night driving through the sleepy town of Weston in NSW, not far from where we lived. The town is between Kurri Kurri (where I was born) and Abermain. In order to get from one town to the other, one is required to traverse the Weston Bridge. The bridge is rather unique in design in that it has a curve to navigate half way through. The photo to the left depicts this.

You may be thinking, what's the point of this story and how does it relate to sensemaking?

You see Beavo was no ordinary driver, as he was no ordinary bloke. He took a slightly different view of posted speed limits than most other drivers. For Beavo, occasionally, they were a challenge to see how far he could travel above the posted minimum speed;

not necessarily a safe driving speed. As an indication, double the limit was usually considered a success.

On the one night that I can remember (and in honesty, there were many), we cracked that challenge, achieving the goal of 80km/hour in a recommended 40km/hour zone, while navigating the Weston Bridge. As I reflect back now, I realise there was a fair amount of chance (luck) involved in Beavo and I advancing beyond our teens!

There were many other times during our friendship that Beavo would push the limits. He was fun to be around, he dared to do things that I often balked at; he challenged me in ways that made me feel uncomfortable at times yet I learnt so much. However, I also reflect and realise that Beavo 'lived', mostly as he would have wanted to live, that is as a carefree spirit.

I wasn't there on the train when Beavo died, but I've spoken with the guys who were. They were the same guys on top of the train, yelling in vain to warn Beavo of the upcoming bridge. I can only imagine how this image and associated feelings stay with them through their life. They tried everything that day.

The company too seemed to have sound safety practices and a number of 'controls' in place (as acknowledged by the Court), where it might have been expected that Beavo would not be on top of the train smoking a cigarette when he came to his death. What more could anyone have done for a bloke who saw rules and authority as a challenge? What's more, he enjoyed a ciggy and his freedom. Beavo lived a good life in the few years that he was with us and I don't imagine him being controlled, would have worked well for him.

It's hard to imagine what I would have done had I been in a risk and safety role and came across a fella like Beavo. I'm pretty sure in my 'heyday' of *control and crusading* in risk and safety (Section 7), people like Beavo would have been met with a myriad of processes, training, more training and discipline; I suspect he would even have been sacked. Some might argue that this could have been a good outcome as at least he would still be with us. But would he have been? And what would this have done to a guy like Beavo?

As I reflect now, I can appreciate that at a very early age Beavo was clear about who he was as a person and what he stood for. He was free flowing and some might describe him as a 'wild child'. He didn't dislike all in positions of authority, but if you didn't treat him with respect, he could be a real challenge. The people in authority that Beavo respected were those who engaged with him, who sought his ideas and who shared theirs with him.

Beavo was smart, both intellectually and 'street smart'; he was also practical and hands on. It is likely that he would have known about risks and about rules and dangers, yet he still climbed up on that roof.

No-one can ever really know why Beavo did what he did on Tuesday the 8th February 2001, and many will wish forever that he didn't get on top of that train. However, that is the very nature of risk and human beings. There are some things we do, that sometimes just don't make sense, at least not at the time that they happen.

I doubt that Beavo would have been 'saved' by attending further training, instilling further rules or through discipline. He wasn't a 'stupid idiot' (as is often so commonly described in risk and safety) who made a choice to work unsafely. That would be the greatest insult anyone could portray of him. He most likely died because he didn't expect to come across that bridge on the day, not because of a lack of intelligence or awareness. Beavo was smart, he was intelligent and he was experienced, all of these things make understanding risk even more challenging. This goes to the very heart of this book.

So why do I include a reflection of my friendship with such a special mate at the beginning of this book?

If we want to better understand how we make sense of risk, Beavo is a great example of how an approach to dealing with risk that is focused on dealing with objects, numbers, rules, processes and binary thinking is limited. Instead, this book is a reflection on the importance of understanding people as subjects and beings, who often make decisions based on feelings. It provides an encouragement for more critical thinking in how we go about risk and safety.

I don't believe that any one approach to dealing with risk would have saved Beavo's life. I believe instead, that fate, chance and 'emergence' played a far greater part than a lack of 'Safety'.

Organisations, and people could have tried to control Beavo. Perhaps even, somehow they may have been able to prevent him from being atop that train on that fatal Tuesday in February 2001. However, I believe that would have just meant those control, and freedom-sapping efforts, would have 'killed' his spirit.

I miss Beavo and grieved after his death. There are still many occasions when I sit and reflect; sometimes sadly, sometimes while laughing but on most occasions with a feeling of peace. His was a life that provided so much for so many, and while most people would still love to have the bugger in our lives, it's hard not to feel that he achieved his reason for being on earth. I haven't played nude cricket since but would give anything for one more game with Beavo and the rest of the guys.

RIP Beavo, and thank you for helping me, in part, to make sense of things in life. This book is in memory of a best mate.

Samsy