

Phenomenological Study of Senior Executive Experiences in Navigating Strategic Ambiguity in VUCA Environments

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 30-03-2025

Revised 06-05-2025

Accepted 17-05-2025

Keyword:

Strategic Ambiguity,
Executive Leadership, VUCA
Environment,
Phenomenological
Exploration, Decision-Making,
Collective Sensemaking

ABSTRACT

Strategic decision-making in the VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity) environment has become a central challenge for executives, yet little is known about how they experience and navigate ambiguity in real-world contexts. Existing research often focuses on rational, external factors of decision-making, neglecting the subjective experiences of leaders facing uncertainty. This study addresses the gap by exploring how executives interpret and manage strategic ambiguity in VUCA environments. We conducted in-depth interviews with seven senior executives from diverse industries, including technology, finance, and manufacturing. Using a phenomenological approach, this study investigates the cognitive, emotional, and social processes that shape their sensemaking of ambiguity. The research revealed three primary themes: (1) embracing uncertainty as a strategic constant, (2) engaging in collective sensemaking, and (3) navigating emotional tensions related to responsibility. These findings highlight the complexity of decision-making in uncertain contexts and suggest that ambiguity is not a temporary obstacle but a permanent feature of strategic leadership. The study contributes to our understanding of leadership in VUCA environments and emphasizes the need for further exploration of emotional and cognitive aspects in decision-making processes.



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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary organizational landscapes, strategic decision-making is increasingly shaped by environments characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity—commonly referred to as the VUCA world. This phenomenon has emerged as a defining challenge for leaders and executives, particularly in the aftermath of global crises, accelerated digital disruption, and sociopolitical instability. Amid these dynamics, ambiguity is no longer an occasional disruption but a persistent condition under which strategic thinking must function.

Strategic ambiguity refers to the absence of clear, consistent, or predictable patterns in information and outcomes, complicating decision-making and limiting the utility of linear planning. While rational-choice models offer structured approaches, they often fall short in capturing the lived complexity and interpretive demands faced by executives in VUCA contexts. For executives, navigating ambiguity extends beyond technical skill; it requires personal resilience, cognitive agility, and interpretive judgment. This condition places individuals in a space where they must act decisively despite incomplete or conflicting information, often under significant organizational pressure and moral accountability (Sadler-Smith, 2016; Blume et al., 2020).

Despite growing interest in leadership under uncertainty, limited attention has been given to the subjective experiences of senior executives as they navigate strategic ambiguity. Therefore, this study aims to explore how senior executives experience and interpret strategic ambiguity in VUCA environments. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions: (1) How do senior executives make sense of strategic ambiguity? (2) What cognitive, emotional, and social processes support their decision-making in such contexts?

Understanding how executives experience and respond to such ambiguity is critical not only for advancing management science but also for recognizing the deeply human dimensions of leadership. Strategic choices are not solely informed by data and models—they are lived experiences that reflect internal meaning-making processes shaped by personal values, organizational contexts, and socio-cultural environments.

Given these conditions, there is an increasing need to explore the lived experience of executives within ambiguous strategic environments. A phenomenological approach offers the epistemological foundation necessary to uncover these experiential realities. Rather than analyzing decisions as abstract outcomes, phenomenology attends to the subjective, emotional, and interpretive nature of human action, emphasizing how individuals experience and construct meaning within complex situations. Such inquiry contributes to a more holistic understanding of leadership in the VUCA era—one that respects the ambiguity not only of the context but of the human condition itself.

Research on leadership and decision-making has increasingly recognized the importance of exploring the lived experiences of executives in navigating complex organizational phenomena. Within strategic management, a growing body of literature acknowledges that decision-making in uncertain environments involves not only cognitive analysis but also emotional engagement and personal meaning-making (Dane & Pratt, 2007; Yildiz, 2021). Despite this shift, much of the existing empirical work remains dominated by quantitative models and rational-choice frameworks that prioritize objectivity over subjectivity.

These conventional approaches often reduce ambiguity to a calculable risk or situational variable, overlooking the deeper psychological and existential dimensions that shape executive behavior. As a result, they fail to capture how ambiguity is actually experienced—how it is interpreted, embodied, and emotionally processed by those responsible for high-stakes strategic choices. The methodological reliance on surveys, simulations, or secondary data further limits our ability to access the personal, often non-linear, processes through which leaders navigate the unknown.

This limitation has created a methodological gap in understanding the full essence of strategic ambiguity. While descriptive analyses of organizational outcomes and decision-making patterns have offered valuable insights, they are insufficient for revealing the internal landscapes of experience that drive those outcomes. There is, therefore, a pressing need for approaches that allow researchers to step inside the world of executive actors and engage with the meanings they construct in real time, under real pressure.

A phenomenological inquiry—particularly one grounded in interpretative analysis—offers a pathway to address this gap by providing the tools to explore ambiguity as it is lived and made sense of by executive leaders. By focusing on the subjective and context-dependent nature of strategic experience, such research enables a more nuanced understanding of how meaning is constructed in conditions of uncertainty, and how this meaning informs adaptive and responsive leadership.

While traditional models of strategic decision-making in the VUCA context often focus on quantitative methods and practical solutions, these approaches fail to capture the full depth of the lived experiences of executives. Existing research tends to rely on rational frameworks or risk-assessment tools, which prioritize external factors such as market conditions, financial data, and organizational structure. However, these solutions overlook the subjective nature of decision-making, particularly the emotional and cognitive processes that leaders engage in when faced with uncertainty. As such, current literature provides a limited understanding of how executives truly experience and navigate ambiguity in strategic settings.

The practical approaches that dominate the field of strategic management focus on providing actionable insights for decision-making but do not account for the internal processes that underpin these decisions. While these models offer important guidance for organizations, they often fail to capture how uncertainty is subjectively interpreted and how leaders manage the emotional burden of responsibility and uncertainty. The absence of a deep, phenomenological exploration leaves a gap in our understanding of the personal and experiential aspects of executive decision-making, which are crucial for a holistic view of leadership in ambiguous environments.

A more profound and holistic approach is needed to understand the essence of strategic ambiguity from the perspective of the executives who face it. Phenomenological methods provide a unique opportunity to explore this gap by focusing on the lived experiences of leaders as they encounter and make sense of ambiguity. By using phenomenology, this research aims to uncover the meanings and emotional nuances that influence decision-making in real-world VUCA contexts, providing insights that go beyond conventional models. This method allows for an in-depth exploration of the internal world of executives, capturing their reflections, interpretations, and feelings in ways that traditional models cannot.

Previous research has explored various aspects of decision-making in the VUCA environment, often focusing on rational decision-making models or the external factors influencing organizational choices (Sadler-Smith, 2016; Blume et al., 2020). However, studies that delve into the subjective experiences of executives navigating ambiguity remain limited. Some research has acknowledged the emotional and cognitive dimensions of decision-making but typically through quantitative measures or broad surveys (Dane & Pratt, 2007). These studies often fail to capture the nuances of individual experiences, which are essential for understanding how executives perceive and act within uncertain environments. The lack of in-depth qualitative analysis leaves a significant gap in understanding how ambiguity is personally experienced and managed.

In response to this gap, this study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of executives in strategic decision-making under uncertainty. Phenomenology is chosen because it provides a method to explore not only the actions executives take but also the meanings they attach to their experiences in the face of ambiguity. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how executives construct meaning from their experiences, something that is not achievable through purely quantitative or rational analyses. The goal is to answer the question of how strategic ambiguity is experienced, understood, and managed by leaders, thus offering insights into the emotional, cognitive, and strategic dimensions of decision-making. By focusing on the subjective nature of decision-making, phenomenology provides a richer, more holistic view of leadership under uncertainty.

The article is structured to first introduce the phenomenon of strategic ambiguity, followed by a detailed explanation of the phenomenological approach used in this study. It includes a description of the data collection process through semi-structured interviews, followed by a thematic analysis of the data. The results are then discussed in relation to the existing literature, providing a comparison of the findings and their implications for leadership practices in uncertain contexts. Finally, the article concludes by summarizing the contributions of the study, highlighting the need for a more experiential and human-centered understanding of leadership in the VUCA world.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of executives in navigating strategic ambiguity within the VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity) environment. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected due to its capacity to capture the depth of personal meaning and subjective interpretation of lived experiences, particularly in complex decision-making contexts. Phenomenology, by its nature, emphasizes understanding how individuals perceive and make sense of specific phenomena in their lifeworld. The interpretative dimension of this approach enables the examination not only of what is experienced, but also how those experiences are understood within their social and organizational contexts. The design was deemed appropriate for uncovering the nuanced ways in which ambiguity is experienced and strategically managed by executive leaders.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance and depth of experience with the phenomenon under investigation. The sample comprised seven senior executives (five male and two female), aged between 38 and 59 years (mean age: 47.6), from diverse industries including technology, finance, and manufacturing. All participants held top-level strategic roles (e.g.,

CEO, Managing Director, Chief Strategy Officer) with at least ten years of experience in executive leadership and direct involvement in strategic decision-making during periods of uncertainty or transformation. Inclusion criteria required participants to have recent (within the last three years) exposure to strategic ambiguity in high-impact decisions. Individuals without decision-making authority or with less than five years of executive experience were excluded from the study. The decision to include seven participants aligns with IPA guidelines, which emphasize depth over breadth and recommend a small, homogeneous sample to facilitate rich, idiographic analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Data saturation was considered achieved when no new emergent themes were identified in the final transcripts.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in person or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participant availability and geographic location. A flexible interview guide was used to explore participants' interpretations, feelings, and strategic actions in ambiguous situations, while allowing space for spontaneous elaboration. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in a quiet, confidential setting to ensure participant comfort and openness. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. The interview protocol was adapted from validated phenomenological instruments and tailored to fit the executive leadership context.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following a structured sequence of steps to capture the essential meanings embedded in participants' narratives. The process began with multiple readings of each transcript to gain a holistic understanding. Meaning units were then identified and coded line-by-line, focusing on significant statements that illustrated the phenomenon. Emerging codes were clustered into preliminary themes, which were refined through iterative comparison across transcripts. Theme development was validated through several procedures, including researcher triangulation and member checking. Two researchers independently coded a subset of transcripts and discussed discrepancies to enhance analytical reliability. Additionally, participants were invited to review and comment on the preliminary themes to ensure representational accuracy (member validation). Thematic development was guided by both descriptive content and interpretative layers that revealed how participants made sense of their strategic ambiguity experiences. NVivo 12 software supported data organization and aided in theme tracking but did not replace interpretative engagement. The final themes represent shared experiential structures while preserving individual nuances.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics review board prior to data collection. Written informed consent was provided by all participants, including consent to record interviews and publish anonymized excerpts. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms and removing any identifying details from transcripts. The study adhered to international ethical standards for qualitative research, ensuring respect, autonomy, and data protection throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The phenomenological analysis of in-depth interviews with senior executives revealed a set of thematic experiences in navigating strategic ambiguity in the VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) era. These themes reflect the cognitive, emotional, and strategic dimensions of how executives perceive, make sense of, and act upon ambiguous strategic environments. Three primary themes emerged: Embracing Uncertainty as a Strategic Constant, Sensemaking through Collective Reflection, and Emotional Tensions and the Burden of Responsibility. These themes represent the shared, yet individually nuanced, experiences of the participants.

Embracing Uncertainty as a Strategic Constant

Participants consistently described the VUCA environment not as a disruption to strategy, but as a new normal that requires adaptive and anticipatory thinking. Rather than perceiving ambiguity as

a threat, many executives described it as a space of opportunity—one that invites experimentation, flexibility, and iterative decision-making.

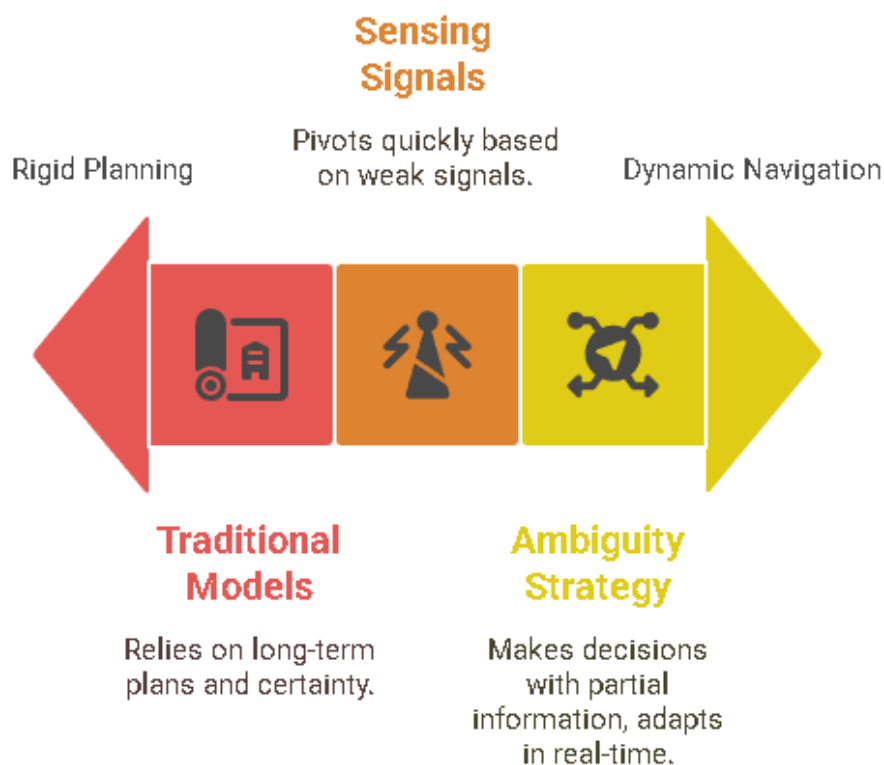
“You can’t expect clarity anymore. That’s gone. What we do now is make decisions with partial information, test them in real time, and adapt. Ambiguity is the strategy.” (P2, CEO, Tech Industry)

Executives highlighted that traditional strategic planning models no longer suffice. Instead, agility, scenario thinking, and rapid feedback loops became essential strategic tools. The notion of control was redefined—not as certainty over outcomes but as responsiveness to change.

“I used to rely on long-term plans. Now, I rely on sensing signals—weak ones—and preparing to pivot quickly. It’s uncomfortable but necessary.” (P6, Director of Innovation)

This theme underscores the transition from rigid planning paradigms to dynamic navigation strategies grounded in the acceptance of ambiguity as a strategic constant.

Navigating uncertainty: From rigid plans to dynamic, adaptive strategies.



Sensemaking through Collective Reflection

Another prominent theme was the role of collaborative reflection and dialogical sensemaking among leadership teams. Rather than making decisions in isolation, participants described how they relied heavily on team discussions to co-construct meaning from ambiguous situations.

“When ambiguity hits, I open the floor. Everyone sees things differently, and that’s our strength. I don’t need certainty, I need perspectives.” (P4, Chief Strategy Officer)

These reflective spaces—often informal and iterative—served as a cognitive buffer, helping leaders avoid cognitive overload and broaden their interpretative frames. The VUCA context, in this light, demanded a more distributed approach to strategic reasoning.

Executives also noted the importance of psychological safety in enabling honest dialogue and divergent thinking, particularly in moments when strategic direction was unclear.

“The best ideas come when no one’s afraid to say, ‘I don’t know.’ In ambiguity, admitting you don’t know is the first step toward insight.” (P1, Senior VP Strategy)

This theme highlights how ambiguity catalyzes new forms of collective intelligence and collaborative leadership.

Emotional Tensions and the Burden of Responsibility

Participants spoke candidly about the emotional and psychological strain that accompanies strategic ambiguity. Feelings of anxiety, isolation, and moral pressure were recurring sentiments, especially in contexts where strategic decisions impacted livelihoods, organizational futures, or ethical considerations.

“People look at you expecting answers. But you don’t have them. And still, you must decide.” (P7, Managing Director)

Several executives shared that ambiguity exacerbates internal conflict—balancing what they feel is right with what they are expected to deliver. The weight of responsibility was described as both intellectually and emotionally taxing.

“It’s not just about making the right call. It’s about being okay with not knowing and still standing behind your decision.” (P3, Regional CEO)

The emotional labor of leadership in uncertain times, though often invisible, emerged as a profound part of the experience. This theme draws attention to the inner world of executives, often hidden beneath the surface of outward confidence.

The lived experience of executives in the VUCA era is characterized by a cognitive shift toward adaptability, a relational shift toward collective meaning-making, and an emotional reckoning with the weight of responsibility. Ambiguity is not merely a contextual challenge but a defining feature of strategic life in contemporary organizations. These findings reveal the nuanced interplay between strategic sensemaking and the deeply human aspects of executive leadership under uncertainty.

This study explored the lived experiences of executives in navigating strategic ambiguity within the VUCA environment. The analysis revealed three primary themes: Embracing Uncertainty as a Strategic Constant, Sensemaking through Collective Reflection, and Emotional Tensions and the Burden of Responsibility. These findings highlight the complexity of executive decision-making under uncertainty, revealing that ambiguity is not just a challenge to be mitigated, but a fundamental aspect of strategic leadership in today’s business landscape.

The research provides valuable insights into how executives experience and make sense of strategic ambiguity in the VUCA world. The study reveals that executives do not simply tolerate uncertainty; instead, they engage with it as an ongoing, dynamic process. Rather than seeing ambiguity as a temporary state to be resolved, executives in this study reframe it as a permanent feature of strategic life. This shift in perspective—embracing uncertainty as a strategic constant—challenges traditional models of strategic decision-making that assume clarity and predictability. Furthermore, the role of collective sensemaking emerged as a critical strategy for executives to navigate ambiguity, emphasizing the importance of collaborative decision-making in uncertain contexts. These findings suggest that leadership in uncertain environments requires not only technical and strategic acumen but also the ability to manage the emotional and cognitive complexities inherent in strategic ambiguity.

The findings of this study align with existing research that highlights the increasing relevance of adaptability and agility in strategic leadership (Blume et al., 2020; Sadler-Smith, 2016). Previous studies have acknowledged that traditional, linear models of strategic decision-making are insufficient in the face of VUCA conditions (Dane & Pratt, 2007). However, this study adds depth to these arguments by demonstrating that executives actively embrace uncertainty and adapt their strategies accordingly, rather than merely responding to external variables. The theme of Sensemaking through Collective Reflection echoes earlier work on the role of collaboration and shared cognition in organizational decision-making (Weick, 1995), reinforcing the idea that collective sensemaking is an essential tool for navigating ambiguity. Furthermore, the emotional challenges identified in this study resonate with research on the psychological burdens of leadership, particularly in uncertain environments (Yildiz, 2021). These emotional tensions, while not widely explored in strategic

management literature, highlight the affective aspects of leadership that influence decision-making in ways that go beyond rational analysis.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study have significant implications for both theory and practice in strategic management. The recognition that executives embrace uncertainty as a strategic constant suggests a shift in how organizations should approach leadership development. In a VUCA world, training programs for executives could focus less on risk management and more on fostering cognitive and emotional resilience in the face of ambiguity. Additionally, the importance of collective sensemaking identified in this study highlights the value of creating collaborative leadership environments where diverse perspectives are encouraged, particularly in high-stakes decision-making processes. These insights are not only relevant to the business world but also carry important implications for organizational culture, as they call for a more open, reflective, and adaptive mindset in leadership teams. Socially and culturally, the findings also suggest that executives in different regions or industries may perceive and react to ambiguity in similar ways, but the strategies for managing it could be culturally specific, requiring tailored approaches in leadership training and development.

Limitations of the Study

While the findings offer valuable insights, there are several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the study focused on a relatively small sample of seven senior executives, which limits the generalizability of the results to a broader population. The sample was purposively selected based on their leadership roles in strategic decision-making, and this could mean that the experiences of executives in lower or mid-level positions might differ significantly. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data through semi-structured interviews, which may be subject to biases such as social desirability or retrospective interpretation. The findings also reflect the experiences of executives in specific industries (technology, finance, and manufacturing), and therefore, the strategies for managing ambiguity may vary across sectors with different levels of uncertainty. Future research could expand the sample size and include executives from a wider range of industries and organizational levels to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Building on the findings of this study, future research could explore the role of emotional intelligence in managing strategic ambiguity. While this study identified emotional tensions as a key aspect of executive decision-making, further investigation into how emotional competencies influence strategic outcomes could deepen our understanding of leadership in uncertain environments. Additionally, comparative studies could be conducted across different cultural or regional contexts to assess whether the experience and management of strategic ambiguity vary globally. Longitudinal studies might also provide insight into how executives' approaches to ambiguity evolve over time, particularly as they gain more experience or encounter different organizational crises. By exploring these dimensions, future research could contribute further to the development of leadership models that emphasize adaptive, emotionally intelligent, and collaborative strategies in dealing with uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the experiences of executives in navigating strategic ambiguity within the VUCA environment, addressing the gap in existing research that overlooks the subjective aspects of decision-making in uncertain contexts. The findings revealed that executives view ambiguity as a constant feature of strategic life, with decision-making shaped by both cognitive adaptability and emotional resilience. Key themes such as embracing uncertainty, collective sensemaking, and emotional tensions were identified, offering a deeper understanding of how leaders manage strategic ambiguity.

This research contributes to the field by providing rich insights into the internal processes of executive decision-making, complementing traditional rational models with an interpretative understanding of sensemaking, emotional navigation, and social interaction. The use of IPA revealed how ambiguity is not merely a structural challenge but also a personal and interpersonal experience

embedded in leadership practice. In practical terms, the findings suggest that organizations should invest in leadership development programs that build not only analytical capabilities but also emotional intelligence, reflective thinking, and collaborative sensemaking skills. Executive coaching, simulation-based training, and experiential learning in high-ambiguity scenarios could help leaders become more adept at navigating complexity. Furthermore, creating organizational cultures that legitimize uncertainty and promote psychological safety may enhance collective decision-making under ambiguous conditions.

Future studies could further explore the role of emotional intelligence and cross-cultural differences in managing ambiguity, extending the findings of this research. Longitudinal studies and comparative research across sectors and cultural settings would deepen our understanding of how different leadership contexts influence ambiguity navigation. These directions will enhance the applicability of the study's insights and offer actionable guidance for strategic leadership in increasingly unpredictable environments.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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