

How Leaders Propose Meaning-Making: A Psychological Perspective

By

Dominick D. Hankle PhD

Regent University College of Arts and Sciences

Author Note:

Dominick D. Hankle, department chair of Regent University College of Arts and Sciences.

Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed to Dominick D. Hankle, Regent

University, College of Arts and Sciences, 1000 Regent University Drive, Virginia Beach Virginia,

23464. Contact dhankle@regent.edu

Abstract

Meaning-making is essential for the flourishing of people and is innate to the human experience. People will make meaning whenever they sense a discrepancy or threat that contradicts their global beliefs. Leaders can facilitate meaning-making in their constituents in order to manage change, gain acceptance of new initiatives, and overcome organizational distress. To do so leaders can utilize a number of psycho-social interventions. The first of these is to embody the vision and mission statements of the organization and create an environment where the culture reflects the organizational values. Secondly, leadership can communicate these values in a way that is aspirational and creates aspirational discrepancy. Lastly, the leaders can create a strong organizational identity which causes people to psychologically assimilate the values and ideals of the organization and to use them when making meaning.

Key Words: Leadership, meaning-making, psychology, social identity, change

Introduction

Psychologists have known for some time the importance of meaning and purpose as a mediating factor for human thriving and well-being. Victor Frankl (1984) pioneered this approach to understanding and helping people and since his seminal work, others have found significant evidence in multiple spheres of human life that continue to support those initial findings. For example, community psychologists note that it is in one's struggle to matter and to thrive that meaning-making becomes important. Individuals need their communities to recognize them and they need to believe their work within these communities matters. As Prilleltensky (2014) has indicated when an individual is recognized by their community they get the sense that their presence matters. When they understand their work positively impacts their communities they get the sense that what they do matters. It is this struggle to matter that gives life meaning and purpose.

The idea that work is an important source for finding meaning and that community membership is part of that process has been demonstrated in numerous studies. For example, one study empirically demonstrated that meaning has a direct and mediated relationship with not just work but also through belonging to an organization (Maharaj & Schlechter, 2007). For most people, it isn't simply the work that matters, but it is the fact that the work matters to a community of other individuals and makes a difference. Human beings are social creatures and the work they do is meaningful when it serves their communities. Belonging to a community is a key factor for acquiring a sense of meaning and purpose and therefore emphasizes that being in relation to others is significant for meaning-making. Meaning-making is not just an isolated cognitive process people engage in; it is significantly important that this meaning be made in a shared context (Lambert, et al., 2013).

Why people need to make meaning is, of course, to gain that sense of having a purpose and mattering to others previously discussed. As has been noted, one makes meaning within the context of a community, and while not an isolated process, meaning-making is a cognitive

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process that occurs within one's mind. Work on this process has been well articulated by Dr. Crystal Park who proposes a multidimensional model for how people make meaning of their experience. Park (2017) believes people are motivated to make meaning as part of their need for significance, comprehension, and transcendence. It fulfills the individual's need for agency, control, certainty, identity, social validation, values, and as a defense against the anxiety of mortality (p. 15). The meaning-making system according to Park is an essential way that human beings frame their world experiences. An important aspect of meaning making that Park and others identify is that the meaning making system is engaged mostly when people experience some form of distress that creates a discrepancy between what one believes and what one experiences. According to Park (2013):

The Meaning Making Model is discrepancy based, that is, it proposes that people's perception of discrepancies between their appraised meaning of a particular situation and their global meaning (i.e. what they believe and desire) creates distress, which in turn gives rise to efforts to reduce the discrepancy and resultant distress (p. 40).

An important facet of the above quote is that it proposes the majority of meaning making that occurs in a person is prompted by a problem at minimal and more often by a life stressor. It may be the loss of a job, the death of a spouse, or some other factors that challenges one's worldview. When this happens it is important that the individual attempts to make meaning of the stressful situation and so engages the meaning making system to resolve the cognitive dissonance. If as has been proposed previously that the community one belongs to has an impact on that meaning making process, one can see that leadership in that community is an important aspect of meaning making. People will look to leaders in the community to help them make meaning when situations cause communal and personal distress.

The fact that leaders have a role in meaning making has been noted by other authors. In fact, it may be argued that the facilitation of meaning-making is integral to the role of the leader, particularly in the need to create shared meaning (Kouzes & Posner). John Varney (2009) writes:

In times of change, the work of leadership is to make new meaning quickly as corporate survival depends upon it. Because much meaning is implicit in our cultural norms, shaking off those norms will be a prerequisite of the successful leadership of change and innovation (p. 3).

If the leader is going to lead, particularly in the context of change, he or she needs to find ways to engage the people in their organization's meaning making process. One can find that leaders do this frequently in the context of such events as a "flash crises" where an unexpected tragedy occurs. Someone needs to help people make sense of an event that shakes their global meaning. There are effective strategies leaders use in these instances (Helsloot & Groenendaal, 2017). In this regard one can argue that a key facet of leadership is to facilitate the meaning making process for the group.

The purpose of this paper is to draw on the psychological research that explores initiating mechanisms for the meaning making within individuals and identify how leaders can use them in a multitude of different contexts, not just when there are such events as a flash crisis. Most importantly, since it seems that meaning-making emerges from discrepancy, this paper explores how leaders can use this psychological process to provide an organizational environment that is meaningful and allows for those within it to flourish on a more regular non-emergency basis.

Human Beings and Meaning Making

As previously noted human beings have an innate desire to make meaning of the world around them. This happens in a regular daily context and certainly when life presents situations that are unexpected and difficult to assimilate into one's life narrative. For example, most people believe when they have children, the children will be healthy and able to flourish. Yet it is evident that there is a portion of the population who have children that experience disabilities and birth defects. This difficult situation immediately initiates the meaning making process in the human brain for these parents. As noted in the introduction, discrepancies in expectations cause the process to begin and we attempt to apply global meaning to understand the assessed

meaning we face. Parents of special needs children were assessed using psychological instruments to measure one's sense of meaning making on numerous data points. It was found that those parents who had more positive self-actualization and self-acceptance scores correlated with higher perceived physical health ratings (Bekenkamp, Groot Hof, Bloemers, & Tomic, 2014). Self-acceptance and self-actualization are noted to be indicators of accomplished meaning making within the context of their child rearing situation. What is important about this study and others like it is they provide some empirical evidence that when human beings make meaning they flourish and function well. When they struggle to make meaning they suffer on numerous human levels.

Meaning making is also significant because of its mediating factor in eliminating anxiety around feelings of mortality and other existential crises. If one is continually plagued with a sense that life does not matter and there is a pending annihilation in the future they will experience health issues physically, emotionally, and mentally and lack the ability to flourish (Kesebir & Pyszczynski, 2014, p. 54; Schmotkin & Shrira, 2013, P. 78). In the end, what has been discussed thus far in the paper is that meaning making is an integral part of the human condition and when we cannot make meaning we suffer, lack motivation, and experience multiple levels of distress. Much of this is related to another facet of the human experience which has to do with our need to create a personal narrative to support this meaning making process.

Narrative allows human beings to make sense of and integrate their experiences into a greater context, manage life changes, overcome difficulties, and work within numerous life events that occur every day (Crocket, 2013). Narrative helps people maintain their experience of time as it relates to them. They need a consistent experience of having a past and the tension of the present as it relates to a projected future (Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006). People will even rearrange past events to eliminate dissonance within that tension of the present in relation to past experience and future expectations. All of this is to have a meaningful sense of

the self in the experience of their life. Narrative is the primary way people create, form, and live their sense of self (Goodson, 2013; Dunn & Burcaw, 2013). Kedar Nath Dwivedi (1997) discusses how narrative is useful in the meaning making process when he writes:

Life is a continuous process of organizing or structuring of experience. We have a strong longing for order and sense but we live in a world that may not have any. As we do not have a direct knowledge of the world, our knowing requires that we interpret or ascribe meaning to our experiences, which become intelligible or comprehensible when seen in a historical sequence of beginning, middle and end. Thus, the lived experiences and events get turned into stories. (p. 19)

From the above discussion one can understand those who find meaning and purpose are able to flourish and function well. We also understand a powerful tool to help individuals create meaning is narrative. Those who cannot create meaning will struggle on multiple levels. Those in leadership have a responsibility to the people in their organizations to create an environment that can facilitate meaning, particularly when significant organizational change is being implemented. To do that leaders must become meaning making facilitators for their organizations.

The Leader as Meaning Making Facilitator

Thus far it has been demonstrated that individuals have an innate meaning making process they initiate when they experience a discrepancy between what they believe a situation should be like and what is currently presented to them. This meaning making process provides the individual with a sense of agency and helps them flourish and eliminate anxiety so that they can function. Meaning making is not merely an isolated cognitive process, it occurs in the context of a community. Much of what is part of an individual's meaning making experience is part of the organizational and community norms in which they are members and that is why meaning making is also a social process. Leaders in these organizations can play a significant role in helping facilitate the meaning making process by using the psycho-social interventions

that initiate meaning and engage cultural norms, creating a way to inspire, encourage, and make any organizational transitions acceptable for the people they lead.

How Leadership can Facilitate Meaning Making in an Organization

One of the first and most important things a leader can do to facilitate the creation of meaning and purpose is to continually embody the values of the organization. These are the touch points that frame what is most important to those who are members of the organization. These values are derived from the vision and mission statements of the organization. Leaders create symbolic acts and rituals to help individuals within the organization assimilate these values and make them part of who they are (McAllister-Wilson, 2004). This vision centric leading is contagious. When one leads with a vision it empowers those who follow to do more than just think that something needs done, it gives them a desire to do what they feel needs to be done. While this seems like a subtle difference current psychological research has demonstrated the motivation to do or not do something has less to do with what one “thinks” and more to do with the emotive centers one experiences as part of the decision-making process (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). This emotive part of motivation is at play in individuals when they decide to follow someone or embrace an idea proposed to them. This is why vision centric leadership is so important. By being vision centric and focused on mission, a leader can establish the key principles that will become part of an individual’s global meaning dimension of the meaning making process. Global meaning is the overarching ideas, beliefs, and principles that an individual uses to assess particular experience (Park, 2017). It is in a sense the key aspects of a worldview. Good leadership helps members of the organization begin to see the work they do and how they function in the organization through the lens of its vision and mission statements. This provides the individuals with key data for assessing and making meaning from the standpoint of important organizational principles.

A second tool leaders can employ to strengthen the vision and mission of the organization from which members of the organization can develop meaning and purpose is

through the use of narrative to communicate organizational experiences. Denning (2007) is considered an expert in leadership communication and describes the most effective way to communicate change in an organization is to use story and narrative. In his book *The Secret Language of Leadership: How leaders Inspire Action Through Narrative* effective leadership communication is described in the following way:

The successful leaders communicate very differently from the traditional, abstract approach to communication. In all kinds of settings, they communicate by following a hidden pattern: first, they get attention. Then, they stimulate desire and only then do they reinforce with reasons. (p. 27)

Effective communication of the vision and mission of an organization is not abstract nor does it directly address the rational nature of the individual, it prefers to be concrete, inspirational, and motivational. It grabs the attention of the listener by pointing out some discrepancy in regard to the current state of affairs and what the organization aspires to be. As you may recall, this is an essential step for initiating the meaning making process in people (Parks, 2013). Then, the leader uses this dissonance to help individuals make meaning of the situation and provide a path toward a more aspirational end which is the vision and mission of the organization. Narrative is the most effective way to do that and can be a complete style of leading when used effectively (Hankle, 2019).

A third and important component for facilitating meaning making in individuals is to foster a strong organizational identity. Research has found when individuals strongly identify with their organizations it essentially becomes a part of their sense of self. This idea has been developed and tested in what is known in psychology as social identity theory. Integrating social identity with the concept of social exchange theory, Tavares, van Knippenberg, & van Dick (2016) found that people who are high on social identity (i.e. their sense of who they are is strongly connected to their organizational membership) are committed to the organization, have assimilated the organization's values, and are less likely to consider leaving the organization. When they feel a

strong sense of support from the organization, they are more likely to perform extra role functions.

With these three conditions met, leaders can be facilitators of meaning making within their organizations and the meaning that is made will be developed from the key principles, values, and ideas found in the organizational mission and vision statements. This is important because it creates cohesion among the members, singleness of purpose, and a psycho-social experience that allows the organization to accept and adopt change more readily and more effectively.

Conclusion

Whether leaders facilitate meaning making or not for their organizations the point is people will make meaning regardless when change is requested or some organizational crisis strikes. However, good leaders find a way to facilitate that meaning making that is in line with the organizational mission and vision. They can do this by utilizing three important concepts. First, to embody and create an environment in which the vision and mission statements are constantly communicated to their constituents. This means they must be vision centric as leaders and make sure people in the organization know why what they do matters. By making the vision and mission of the organization permeate the culture, individuals will use the values and ideas from these statements as part of their global meaning making system and thus assess organizational changes and shifts based on these important aspects of the organization's life.

A second important aspect for facilitating meaning within the organization is for the leader to use a narrative approach to constantly maintain a sense of aspirational tension between the current state of the organization and what it intends to be. Psychology has demonstrated meaning making occurs primarily when there is a discrepancy between global meaning and the assessed experience individuals are currently having. Leaders can continue to create that experience even when the organization is not in the midst of extreme change or

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problem resolution by creating an aspirational tension between where the organization is now and where it needs to be. This will cause those in the organization to need to make meaning and an opportunity for the leader to facilitate that meaning making in relation to the new directions and initiatives they want their people to adopt.

A third and final tool that leaders can use to create meaning and purpose in the people they lead is to create a high level of organizational identity within the organization. If the members of the organization develop a sense of self intimately connected to their organizational membership they are more likely to go above and beyond their basic responsibility to help facilitate change, overcome organizational issues, and support new and difficult initiatives.

From this brief review one can recognize there is a significant opportunity for leaders to be influential with those they lead by being facilitators of meaning and purpose. People will go above and beyond if they believe what they do has meaning and purpose within an organization. As Victor Frankl (1984) has stated in his seminal work *Man's Search for Meaning*, "Those who have a 'why' to live, can bear with almost any 'how'."

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