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MEANING THAT MATTERS

John Epps,
 LENS International
 P.O. Box 10564,
 50718 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 tel. (603)757-5604;
 fax. (603)756-4420
 e.mail: jlepps@pc.jaring.my

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I. Introduction

Given the multiple approaches to meaning at work and the complexity involved in experiencing it, what can we as facilitators do to assist clients to foster a sense of meaning in the workplace?

By "*meaning*" we mean the "**worth-while-ness**" of an undertaking, a sense of importance in a larger framework. "**Meaning**" is the contribution of the particular undertaking to a larger



enterprise that the meaning-seeker values. Work that contributes to nothing beyond itself is said to be meaningless. Meaning, then, is the relationship between the particular undertaking and a larger framework in which it subsists and to which it contributes.

A necessary pre-condition for meaning is a sense of value. If you do not value the larger context, then particular contributions to it carry no weight. If you don't care about your organisation, then your work's importance to it does not freight meaning for you. On the other hand, if the self is tops in your value chain, then work that contributes to the self (whether it be relative to growth, pleasure, or compensation), will be meaningful to you.

A popular and scandalous misconception is that in the world of business, people's overriding value is the self. In fact, most people's values extend much further outward; we have found that people are pulled beyond themselves by a care that reaches the broadest possible context. It's the frustration over finding ways to effectively enact that care that sometimes drives people inward towards self-seeking.

Meaning is the connection between the particular activity one is doing and some object of one's care. As a relationship, it is both *objective* and *subjective*. Objectively, the connection, however remote, does exist; in the contemporary worldview of quantum physics, everything is related to everything else. Subjectively, the quality of meaning varies with the state of your valuation of the broader contexts in which you operate. Those valuations constantly shift and so make meaning into a dynamic reality that varies on a daily basis.

Despite the variations, **there are three discernable phases through which you pass in the quest for meaning.** In *Phase One*, you are subjectively fixated on the broader context. In *Phase Two*, your attention reverts to the particular activity in which you are immersed. In *Phase Three*, you experience attraction to the relationship between particular and universal. Another way to put it is that in Phase One, you have a naïve attachment to a grand cause; in Phase Two, the cause shows up as finite,

fallible, and/or fraudulent, wholly unable to allay consciousness of your life being spent in trivial-seeming particulars. In Phase Three, you "see through" to the ultimate relatedness of all that is and therefore your work is objectively meaningful as part of a connected, interrelated whole. We will describe the three phases on the journey in relation to three different pathways to meaning, then explore the role of facilitators in disclosing meaning.

II. Journey Along Three Pathways to Meaning

Three broad pathways provide access to the dimension of meaning: the Past, the Future, and the Present. Meaning relative to the past is often called **SIGNIFICANCE**; relative to the future, it is called **PURPOSE**; relative to the present, it is often called **PROFESSIONALISM**. Whichever pathway you choose, you journey through the three phases described above.

A. SIGNIFICANCE (The Past)

Phase One

Meaning in terms of significance relates to the past. You sense that the organisation or profession has a noble tradition, and you are honoured to be part of it. In fact you sense an obligation to uphold the highest standards that make it a significant contributor to the human journey. There are landmarks that heroic people have achieved in the past, and you aspire to play a similar role in the present.

Organisations that take advantage of this approach to meaning usually make a great deal over their corporate heroes, whether they come from the executive suite or from the front line. Some organisations have a "hall of fame" in which heroes are displayed along with their contributions; others have photographs or quotations liberally sprinkled throughout the facilities. People are expected to take note of these "heroes" and to sense what is possible now. The objective is to remind people of the noble and significant work in which they are engaged.



When you actually “latch on” to a hero in his/her profession, then you have a role model. This model supposedly dealt with the difficulties you face, and in spite of them, made a notable contribution to the profession. A role model is an inspiration to do your best, to go beyond the norms and to excel.

Meaning also comes through the past in the form of significant events that mark the organisation’s life. Perhaps a breakthrough was made, a startling achievement that transformed the way things were done. People hark back to that, not as “good old days,” but as exemplifying an ongoing possibility for achievement. These “great moments” are also inspiring. NASA's frequent recall of the landing of men on the moon illustrates a way in which an awesome event of the past continues to inspire people with a sense of meaning.

Meaning, in terms of significance of the work, depends on a living past that informs and guides the present.

Phase Two

As someone once said, “The past is not what it used to be!” The closer you get to your “heroes,” the more distant their heroism becomes. Very few reputations can sustain intense scrutiny. Hero myths have an agonising tendency to crumble in the face of examination. So, as you pursue your role model, that life appears decreasingly admirable and you come to realise that this one was not much different from yourself, and hardly one to inspire you to greater efforts. You are alone in your undertaking, and unlikely to make much of a mark. Hero-worship inevitably leads to a depressing “twilight of the gods.” There’s essentially no one to look up to.

The inspiring significance of “great moments” in the organisation likewise tends to fade away. Maybe those were important contributions back then, but what’s that got to do with us here and now?!? You begin to sense that the conditions were so different in the past that

comparisons are not really justified. You look back on the history, no longer as a corporate story of our past, but now as a curious set of alien events totally irrelevant to the present undertaking. Our “glorious history” has become “just one damn thing after another.” You’re caught up in a venture of never-ending tedium.

Phase Three

Once your disillusionment with the past is complete, you sometimes get a sense that the work is nevertheless on-going. It has not been sucked down the drain of history, but persists in all its imperfections, tedium, and downright perversity.

You sense that this situation has never been different, that the organisation and everyone in it is sustained in operation by something that exceeds the capacity to understand or to explain. Because it exists, it is significant, a contributor to the entire human enterprise. And your role in it, because it too exists, is worthy of every effort you can undertake: it’s your life.

The quest for meaning on the pathway of significance goes through the three phases outlined above as the past is first source of inspiration, second, occasion for disgust, and third, evidence for appreciation.

B. Purpose (The Future)

Phase One

Meaning in terms of purpose relates to the future. It has to do with congruence between personal intentions and the organisation's purpose. A mission statement, rightly done, expresses the purpose of the organisation, the “WHY” of its being, the cause to which it is devoted. When you think in terms of the mission of your organisation, you are proud to be part of that undertaking. A lot has been made of developing a “mission statement” for organisations, precisely because of this fact. A good mission statement addresses the issue of staff pride more



than the corporate sense of strategy. When you have a clear sense of purpose, a definite cause to serve, you may not know what tomorrow will bring, but you know what you will be about, whatever happens.

Disney, for example, is about “making people happy.” Someone working for Disney may be called on to sweep the grounds, but (s)he understands that task to be in the service of making people happy, something (s)he is committed to.

As this example shows, in this dimension of meaning, you derive meaning from the “macro-purpose” rather than the particular job. You may or may not be committed to the profession of sweeping, but you are thoroughly devoted to making people happy, and if it takes sweeping, then so be it. The connection between the job and the purpose must be visible, obvious, and sustained. Once someone feels isolated from the purpose, demoralisation sets in. When it is maintained, however, you may rightly be expected to perform a variety of necessary tasks, and will likely carry them out with no complaints.

Not all mission statements convey the “noble purpose” of the organisation. Some are a waste of paper. Some appeal only to the competitive instincts (like “Beat Caterpillar!” for Tomatsu or “Be #1 or #2 in every market we enter” for Proctor & Gamble). Others appeal to the challenge of innovation (“Push the envelope of aviation technology” for Boeing or HP’s “Solving problems through innovative use of technology.”) Only occasionally do you run across one that actually touches into the profound purpose of the organisation. Disney is one example. Another is Merck Pharmaceuticals (“Victory over disease to help humankind”). When a company has determined its genuine and “noble” purpose, then its people find meaning in

pursuing it energetically.¹ Actually some people do find meaning in pursuit of competition and challenging innovation. For them these are noble purposes. This is another variable in the realm of meaning.

Phase Two

However committed you are to a noble purpose, following through “on the ground” soon takes away all romanticism you may have held. “What looks so noble when seen from the heights is so muddy on the ground,” remarked Tagore, the Indian philosopher. It usually doesn’t take long for Disney’s sweepers or Merck’s secretaries or Boeing’s engineers to realise that the purpose is a grand abstraction, that what they are doing is spending their lives picking up rubbish that careless visitors dropped, or filing useless notes for an unappreciative boss or plotting specifications for a hair-brained scheme. The details get you every time.

It’s not that the purpose is any less powerful; rather you sense that the work one is actually doing contributes so little to the purpose that it is useless. Surely you could do better in some other position. Despite this feeling, you also recognise that any other pursuit would fall prey to the same morass: the human condition is inescapably tedious. All the fuss about purpose seems mere hype designed to delude the slogging workers into one more round of effort.

At this point – which may last for some time – you face the choice of cynicism or persistence. The one expresses resentment, the other, resignation in face of reality.

¹ For a discussion of this point, see “More than Profits”, Chapter 3 of *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* by James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras (London: Century, 1994) pp. 48-79



Phase Three

Sometimes, during the persistence, you get a glimpse of results. It is as if, through a combination of unpredictable events, something that you deeply intended actually got done. You are clear that it was not because of your efforts – that your efforts contributed a minuscule amount to the accomplishment.

When that occurs, the gratitude that accompanies the perception turns your labour into meaningful destiny, as if you were meant to be doing what you are doing. And you are willing to keep doing it for the long term.

Purpose is high on Maslow's hierarchy of motivational factors. We have referred to it as the major factor in long-term motivation – having a sense of purpose. But we go through the three phases outlined above as we quest for meaning as purpose. Meaning appears in each of the phases related to purpose and the future. But it is a complex phenomenon.

C. Professionalism (The Present)

Phase One

Meaning in terms of professionalism involves skill or artistry, and relates to the present. Some people really **like** what they're doing and would keep doing it regardless of the circumstances. There are musicians who find special "gigs" during breaks from their seasonal commitments, actors who do "summer stock," accountants who volunteer to help friends with their income tax. There is a preschool teacher in a war zone who, when her school was overrun and she became a refugee, set up a series of preschools in temporary refugee camps so the children would be cared for and the parents could get a break.

Some times for some people, there seems to be a "fit" between the personal talents and interests and the work one does. When this "fit" happens, the quality of work is superior; it

reaches a level of artistry unattainable by the majority. You find it more than simply meaningful -- you find it a "calling," a vocation. Finding this "fit" is the aim of vocational counselors and HRD professionals around the world.

Phase Two

The fascination, however strong, doesn't last. A unique manifestation of burnout occurs with the professionals. You tend to lose perspective, to find performance flaws intolerable in yourself and unbearable in others. Instead of joyfully carrying out the professional responsibility, you find it burdensome in the extreme. Each miniscule part of the task seems to open itself to infinite possibilities of flaw, and you are consumed by the need to address them. It's again the particulars that get you. There still may be fascination with the profession, but its attractiveness has disappeared in a morass of flawed details, each demanding attention.

Frustration accelerates, because you know it CAN be done, even if not by you. Perfection is elusive, but anything less is unacceptable. Outsiders and admirers may counsel taking it easy or giving yourself a break, but those comments only add to the frustration. You know what is possible and begin to sense the length of time and amount of efforts required to approach it. You wonder why you ever chose something so demanding and begin to suspect that you're doomed to mediocre performance if you continue.

Phase Three

It is a never-ending journey to master a craft, whether that craft be violin-making or golf or medicine or sweeping or consulting. You become identified with your profession and, in the eyes of others, appear blessed with extraordinary skill, commitment, and artistry. To yourself, it never seems quite like that. It seems more like an endless journey towards miniscule improvements that rapidly decline if you ever let up.



On his 95th birthday, the famous cellist Pablo Cassals was asked why he still practiced six hours per day. "I think," he replied, "I'm making improvements."

In your own eyes, you remain an apprentice.

Meaning at this level consists of living in the relationship between the ideal and your actual performance. ***"I'm making improvements" is as good as it gets.*** Of course your performance, in the eyes of others, far surpasses any standards of acceptability, but at this stage, you are not playing to the crowd but to the art itself. It doesn't get easier, it just gets better. All it takes is all you have, and if you give any less, you know it.

III. Disclosing Meaning as Facilitators

Given the three approaches to meaning and their three "levels" or phases, how can facilitators assist an organisation to use its past, future, and present to disclose the dimension of meaning to its members?

a. The Past

Regarding the past, facilitators can assist an organisation to develop its history. It is important to capture the "legends" of the founders and the stories of great and not-so-great moments. These can be developed by a history task force or by a participative workshop in which people "remember" their experiences and develop a "Wall of Wonder."

When the data is compiled, it needs to be made accessible throughout the organisation. Perhaps a brief handbook can be printed for newcomers, and perhaps some time for reminiscing can be part of corporate meetings. Photos of the founders can be prominently displayed, and perhaps a "museum" case of old technologies can be set up. One particularly interesting display is in a state-of-the-art computer training institute. They have established a showcase of ancient computers and IT technologies. One views the display with a combination of appreciation,

humor, and significance at just how far the industry has come in a relatively few years. The display presents a very lively history that is moving ahead at a breakneck pace.

Because people's experience of meaning expands with size of the context, that history needs to get "behind" the founding of the particular organisation to its roots in primordial human experience. When one can link the latest hotshot hi-tech IPO with the proto-humans whose innovations included the use of fire for cooking, then one is not only part of this organisation, one is also part of the human process of innovation.

b. The Future

Regarding the future, facilitators can assist organisations to develop their statements of mission and purpose. According to the research by Collins and Porras, it doesn't matter so much WHAT that purpose is, so long as it's clear and is followed vigorously. One sure-fire way to get a purpose vigorously and rigorously pursued is to engage as many people as possible in defining it. Maximize the participation and you maximize the commitment.

It is important to delineate a noble purpose, one that lets people sense their contribution to society. Since care is a defining characteristic of human beings, then mission statements that tap into that care are desirable. Few organisations would find this difficult. By far the majority of organizations do in fact contribute positively to civilization or they would not last. **It's a matter of inquiring into what that contribution is that the organisation makes, what human need it serves, what difficulty it addresses.** Boeing, for example, might state its mission as providing the means for people to get together, rather than "pushing the edge of aviation technology." But, as this example shows, people are different, and it may be that engineers need the hard challenge of staying on the edge rather than the "softer" one of bettering human life. In any case, they aren't exclusive.



However the organisation purpose is defined, it needs to be visibly displayed and rigorously pursued. Lip service will not enhance meaning; that will enhance only cynicism. The display could be in posters or as slogans or on uniforms. Certainly it needs to be published in a piece that every members of the organisation has access to. Mission and purpose are not about company strategy so much as they are about company meaning.

Symbolic events can serve to dramatize the organization's purpose. A large insurance company in Malaysia conducts quarterly workdays at homes for the aging around the country, and people who participate in them understand themselves to be in a service industry. Many organizations hold periodic family days or outings that dramatize teamwork; perhaps they can become events that also dramatize purpose. Recent work on "The Experience Economy" suggests that customers are increasingly expecting a unique experience from their vendors; perhaps this can also be applied to staff -- people who want more than to make a living, who want to make a difference.

It will help to consider periodically the long-range intent of this purpose -- to conduct exercises in which people imagine the positive consequences of carrying out the organization's mission. Although the results may seem far-fetched, the exercise pushes people to have a positive relation to the unknown future

.c. The Present

Regarding the present and discerning meaning through professionalism, facilitators can help organisations to expand their skills. Facilitators can acknowledge and appreciate the prowess demonstrated by workers, and can facilitate discussions, conferences and "sharing approaches that work" sessions with staff engaged in similar pursuits. This is a way to manifest the latent collegiality that is present.

Professional associations exist for the purpose of enhancing the meaning of their particular profession. When people who are skilled in a particular craft get together, there is always and inevitably lively discussion. In fact, the level of discourse is likely to assume a language of its own, one that leaves "outsiders" far outside. People take great delight in talking about their work with people who understand what they're talking about and who share the same attraction for it. The gathering of people engaged in similar pursuits is itself a source of meaning, far more so than any particular presentation made at those gatherings.

Each profession adopts its unique technical language. Clergy discuss eschatology and soteriology; health professionals talk about hematology and oncology, policemen discuss perpetrators, lawyers discuss torts, and geeks talk about gigabytes. (Both facilitators and physicists talk about force field analysis, though you suspect they aren't talking to each other!) The language not only provides useful technical terms for detailed descriptions, it also makes one part of the in-group of the profession and so bestows a sense of meaning.

Certain styles of dress tend to mark particular professions, and donning the professional "uniform" provides one a sense of belonging to a special fraternity/sorority. Nurses, doctors, yachtsmen, lawyers, security guards, clergy, businessmen, rock musicians -- virtually any profession has a unique style of dress that members adopt.

The dress and the language heighten a sense of belonging, and the professional finds delight in the "chemistry" among people of the same profession. Even when people disagree totally, their tensions seem more within the "family" and are incomprehensible to outsiders.

Organisations wishing to capitalise on this access to meaning can provide uniforms or special forms of dress for the different professions operating inside. Or it may tend to group people together as one within the organisation. Whether the emphasis is placed on the



organisation or on the profession one is holding within the organisation, adopting a distinctive dress code can disclose meaning. It may also be useful to provide places for informal discussions among people carrying out similar functions. A space for "sharing approaches that work" will be a welcome addition to most organizations.

As will be obvious to the reader, the above methods mainly apply to Phase One of the meaning journey. When the crisis of Phase Two occurs, there is little point in trying to reinforce the joys of Phase One. People are now focused on the tedium of the particular, and references to the glories of the larger framework will only increase frustration.

In Phase Two, the facilitator role shifts from indicating the grandeur of the past or the future or the skill, to exploring the wonder of the particular. One attempts to disclose meaning in every trivial detail and every onerous flaw. Each particular aspect of the work that tends to occasion disgust in Phase Two can also be a moment of wonder. Without coming across as hopelessly naïve, the facilitator needs to find ways of disclosing that wonder -- ways like creating art from the everyday, or developing stories about mundane experiences. After all, "Up close, miracles look a lot like daily drudgery."²

Regarding Phase Three, when people reach this stage, meaning is not really an issue for them. Yet they tend so to embody the meaning of their work that they don't bother to mention it at all! One of the paradoxes of meaning is that those who are most in touch with it tend to talk least about it. It is simply assumed in everything they do. The facilitator role in this situation is to assist the "saints" to become mentors. This may involve helping people in Phase Three to reflect on their own journey and to mark its stepping stones. But it may also involve equipping them

² Cheryl Hood, e-mail of January 2000

with facilitation skills and mentoring finesse so that people who encounter them benefit from their journey.

IV. Conclusion

The purpose of the pre-conference workshop in April 2000 is to share our approaches to disclosing meaning as facilitators. We will use the design described above as starting point for a discussion that will be considerable and lively. We anticipate participants will bring exercises or stories of experiences in which meaning has been disclosed. We should have a delightful time.