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Finding Meaning in the Organization

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Finding Meaning in the Organization

by Joe Raelin

Traditionally, an organization's executives are expected to create the vision for the organization; in fact, that is perhaps the most fundamental of all leadership functions. Leaders, according to the conventional view, articulate a vision to give a sense of purpose to the organization.

Once the vision is developed, the executives' next task is to promote its adoption throughout the organization. There are particular expressions that depict this process, such as "aligning the organization with its strategy," or "cascading the vision down the ranks." The tacit operating assumption is that the leaders, in a classic top-down fashion, divine a mission that becomes actualized as it is adopted by the ranks. Here's how former Secretary of State General Colin Powell describes the visioning process in his *Leadership Primer*¹: "Effective leaders articulate vivid, overarching goals and values, which they use to drive daily behaviors and choices among competing alternatives. Their decisions are crisp and clear, not tentative and ambiguous. They convey an unwavering firmness and consistency in their actions, aligned with the picture of the future they paint."

The theme of this excerpt is that leaders need to be very clear about their vision. Notice also the choice of words – especially the word "drive," which suggests that people need to be driven

toward the vision. Furthermore, the vision has been pre-formulated and is now firm rather than tentative or ambiguous.

In a similar vein, John Kotter,² in his discussion of leadership, talks about alignment. One of the first jobs of top managers, according to Kotter, is to "get people to comprehend a vision of an alternative future." The managers' next challenge is what Kotter refers to as sustaining credibility, namely, "getting people to believe the message." Finally, people need to be empowered to carry out the vision.

Kotter's view of empowerment, however, is constrained. Workers are empowered when they acquiesce to the vision. Here's how he puts it: "When a clear sense of direction has been communicated throughout an organization, lower-level employees can initiate actions without the same degree of vulnerability. As long as their behavior is consistent with the vision, superiors will have more difficulty reprimanding them." This quote is striking in that it suggests that employees operate in a punitive system to begin with. It is their acquiescence to a vision, through so-called empowerment, that protects them from further punishment.

But can a vision be heartily adopted if the ranks serve only as recipients of the vision? What happens if people in the ranks don't truly "believe the message?" It is axiomatic that people who have a say in the vision underlying any endeavor will naturally be more committed to carrying out that vision than those who are simply handed a mandate. Indeed, if a vision is handed down from the top, employees may have a good reason for resisting it if it does not incorporate local concerns.

Meaning-Making

There is an alternative to top-down vision creation. An organization's vision should preferably arise out of the group as it accomplishes its work. The leader doesn't walk away to create the vision; the vision is often already present. It just needs articulation in the form of "meaning-making."

Within an organization, a meaning-maker is someone who gives expression to what members of the group or organization are endeavoring to accomplish in their work together. (See "About the Research.") He or she articulates a collective sense of what the group stands for. Meaning-making can come from anyone in the group, though usually the meaning is voiced by someone who listens well, is close to the rhythm of the team, and is expressive. He or she may use a variety of techniques to articulate the group's meaning, whether by portraying an image or using an example to depict what the group is doing or not doing, by identifying what is missing or isn't happening, by using humor to describe a situation, by synthesizing the facts, by looking for patterns in a situation, or by turning a problem upside down and looking at it from a new perspective.

A former student of mine, a CFO, was able to distinguish the difference between traditional top-down visioning and meaning-making in a project in which, after an acquisition, he was endeavoring to integrate the financial structures of the bank's new subsidiaries. This would require an in-house financial management training program, frequent visits to the subsidiaries, and a business leadership forum. As he was working through his project, he noted the following in his journal: "I had originally thought that meaning-making was all about providing vision. I

came to find out that it was more directed at drawing out thoughts and ideas that already existed from individuals and groups. My project proposals are not new ideas. I am simply trying to change the current business focus in order to draw upon and leverage the knowledge and information that currently resides at the subsidiaries but have never been fully utilized to make informed business decisions. As a meaning-maker, I am focused on what Margaret Wheatley³ refers to as ‘...creating meaning from work, meaning that transcends present organizational circumstances. As long as we keep purpose in focus, we are able to wander through the realms of chaos.’”

The meaning-maker (who, incidentally, need not be the authority figure) requires no special intrinsic powers other than his or her own awareness. After the fact, we might have a tendency to ascribe special powers to the meaning-maker for having identified a unique vision, but the meaning is often there for the taking. What has been lacking is often the courage necessary to detect and then act upon it. In the field of strategic management, there is a so-called "deterministic" approach that suggests that the role of the leader is not so much to establish a vision as it is to reflect an organization's cultural predispositions. According to this view, determining the strategy of the firm does not arise from a single-minded enunciation of a vision as much as from an understanding of organizational actions.⁴

Even in presidential politics, it is far more important to detect meaning than create it. Here's how David Gergen, an advisor to four U.S. presidents, puts it:⁵ “A president's central purpose must be rooted in the nation's core values. They can be found in the Declaration of Independence. All of our greatest presidents have gone there for inspirational strength. Lincoln said he never had a political sentiment that did not spring from it. It was not intended to be a statement of who we

are but of what we dream of becoming, realizing that the journey never ends. It is our communal vision. That's why a president...need not reinvent the national vision upon taking office. He should instead give fresh life to the one we have, applying it to the context of the times..."

Meaning-makers may seem to emerge "out of nowhere," but in fact, they are intimately involved in their work settings. They also tend to be particularly observant people. They tend to question such things as how the group arrived at its current moment in time and what the commitments of each member might be. They also tend to see things through the eyes of others as well as through their own eyes. In this way, meaning-making represents a higher order of thinking and feeling that "re-presents" the facts in a more encompassing way, rather than merely specifying a litany of activities and judgments. As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry once wrote: "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the [crew] to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."⁶

Meaning-making can have a forward-looking orientation. Especially during times of uncertainty, when a group may seem stuck as it tries to determine the proper course of action, the meaning-maker seems able to call forth a community's collective insight. Daniel Goleman⁷ recounts the case of a floundering national pizza restaurant whose senior managers were at a loss for what to do. The managers would get together to strategize, only to come up with the same limited options. Then at one meeting, the vice president of marketing, Tom, made a bold move. He made an impassioned plea to the group of managers to alter their perspective and think of their company not as a restaurant but as a distribution business. At that moment, Tom filled the vacuum for meaning with a conceptual breakthrough so powerful that it became the core of the restaurant's future strategy. Within weeks, local managers responded to the new strategic

initiative by finding ingenious locations to open new branches: street corner kiosks, bus and train stations, hotel lobbies, and the like. Although Goleman refers to Tom in this story as a visionary, he is, in my view, more likely a meaning-maker. His vision did not come "in from the cold," but came out of a community struggling to find the core of its identity.

As the pizza company example illustrates, meaning-makers tend to elicit alternative perspectives and innovative thinking. They also possess the ability and, in particular, the courage to attempt a framing or a reframing of the situation at hand. Their first attempt may not work. People in the group may be contending with vague and conflicting feelings. However, in speaking from the heart, the meaning-maker may provide a path that can lead the group through its contested terrain. What was indefinite can become clear. What was conflictual can become harmonious. The meaning-maker, essentially by the sheer act of framing reality, consolidates the prevailing wisdom of the entire group.

The account of the Quakers (the Religious Society of Friends) and their decision to rid their community of slavery is instructive along these lines. The Philadelphia Quakers were advising their members not to import slaves as early as 1696.⁸ However, a pivotal role was played by John Woolman, a tailor and writer, who in the mid-1700s was able to find the inner meaning of the Quaker family and communicate that sense of justice and equality throughout the American Quaker community. He did this over many years, by traveling hundreds of miles at a time on horseback and even on foot, visiting other Quakers, sharing his concerns about slavery and engaging in dialogue with them. The Quaker community then discussed and considered the questions and issues raised by Woolman and others opposed to slavery. In time, the Society of Friends became the first religious group in America to formally condemn and forbid slavery among its congregation.⁹

Woolman's extensive interaction with his community is typical of meaning-makers. They are rarely individuals who can burst in from the outside and disrupt things. That might sound appealing to the would-be heroes among us, but such individuals are unlikely to possess the credibility to sustain any commitment from the community. They can at best direct action. Meaning-makers, on the other hand, function best when they articulate ideas within the flow of the organization as it performs its work.

Managers who are meaning-makers are as much responsible for encouraging others to articulate the meaning of the group's work as for expressing the meaning themselves. They may enable others to discern the significance of their work together or reflect with them on emerging concerns. At times, the managers may need to endorse and even personify meaning when it is only faintly articulated by less outspoken community members.¹⁰

Meaning-makers also appreciate that the value of leadership itself is subject to an interpretive process. Some leaders may tell people in their organization exactly what they will do as a leader now and in the future. Other leaders may recognize that leadership is expressed in how they and others behave together in their daily interactions. Meaning-makers tend to fall into the second group. They know that leadership is bound up within the culture of their entity and so its nature can change from day to day as new experiences arise and as challenges are confronted. Consider how Dr. Iva Wilson, former president of Philips Display Components Company, described her changing views of leadership: "[T]here are going to be difficult moments for both yourself and the organization until you reframe and are truly seen as a leader that is not using power in the old ways... You have to be humble and accept that you do not have all the answers. But knowing when not to act so that things come out better than if you did act is difficult. I wish I had more

practice in letting go, having faith in the flow of things, and realizing that we're not the center of the universe."¹¹

Meaning-Making in Communities of Practice

Meaning-making thus aligns with a view of leadership that sees leadership as a collective process more than an individual practice. According to this view, everyone on a team can contribute to the team's leadership, not just sequentially, but concurrently.¹² Perhaps the most relevant environment for observing meaning-making as a basis for this collective leadership is in groups known as "communities of practice," a concept identified by Etienne Wenger.¹³ These communities of practice assemble their membership on the basis of members' mutual knowledge. Communities of practice form as people united in a common enterprise develop a shared history as well as particular values, beliefs, technologies, ways of talking and ways of doing things.¹⁴ Meaning-making becomes core to such a group's existence since there needs to be agreement on the group's identity.

Members of a community of practice thus come together not through formal memberships or job descriptions but by being involved with one another in the process of doing a job. They coalesce around professional identities. Communities of practice don't necessarily follow any prescribed regimen, yet, in time, their efforts as a community become natural. Here is how Tracey Kidder described the Eclipse project team in his famous book about the design of a minicomputer, *The Soul of a New Machine*¹⁵: "The entire Eclipse Group, especially its managers, seemed to be operating on instinct. Only the simplest visible arrangements existed among them. They kept no charts and graphs or organizational tables that meant anything. But those webs of voluntary,

mutual responsibility, the product of many signings-up, held them together. Of course, to a recruit it might look chaotic. Of course, someone who believed that a computer ought to be designed with long thought and a great deal of preliminary testing, and who favored rigid control, might have felt ill at the spectacle.”

Since members of a community of practice have learned how to work with each other as part of their mutual tacit understanding of what needs to be done, there is little need to formalize leadership. Members commit to one another in order to do what's needed and that may include leadership. Much as members of a jazz band may alternate in taking the group in new directions as they play together, the leaders in a community of practice become the persons who articulate the team's evolving identity, especially during times of change.

Transcendent Meaning

Another important meaning-making role is to "see" emerging realities before they occur. Claus Otto Scharmer¹⁶ refers to this ability as "self-transcending knowledge," the ability to see what does not yet exist. This futuristic meaning-making is often associated with artists, rather than with managers. For example, there is a quip attributed to Michelangelo, when he described how he carved his famous David statue. He is said to have explained that "David was already in the stone. I just chipped away everything that wasn't David." Applying this idea to meaning-making, we can see how an organization's meaning-makers can articulate where the group may be going even before the group gets there. And yet, the key question may be not so much "Where are we going?" as "What do we plan to care about?" Meaning-maker managers have an

uncanny knack for bringing out this collective consciousness in the organization mainly because of their ability to conceive of action while in motion; they can act and observe at the same time.

Maestro Michael Tilson Thomas used this sense of meaning-making when he served as guest conductor with the Chicago Symphony. Although the role of symphonic conductor is often interpreted as a directive practice in which members of the orchestra are asked to carefully follow the direction of the conductor, Thomas used a more collective approach in his rehearsal with the orchestra of Tchaikovsky's Sixth. "Of course, they had played the *Pathétique* hundreds of times," recounted Thomas. ["But] when we got to the second theme, instead of beating it note by note in the typically international schoolmaster way, I raised my hands into the air and gently indicated a breathing space that would precede this phrase. At first they were baffled. 'Let's breathe together, hold the first note slightly longer, and then let the melody gracefully fall away from it.' I couldn't make the music happen alone. We needed to share the feeling, we had to find that shape together, and we did. It was miraculous."¹⁷

I have often been asked if the meaning-maker is the person who can awaken the spirituality in each of us. Judi Neal¹⁸ has defined spirituality in the workplace as being "about integrity, being true to oneself, and telling the truth to others." She goes on to suggest that spirituality also helps an individual "live his or her values more fully in the workplace." Since meaning has been associated with the pursuit of a personal identity that may connect with universal values, might it have a transcendental quality?

Although any given individual may find a deeper meaning that connects with the universe in some way, the task of the meaning-maker in most organizations is a here-and-now phenomenon that captures the essence of what the community finds purposeful in its current work together. In

other words, the connection members of the group feel is as likely to be toward each other and their mission as toward the universal. In our age of complexity and uncertainty, it is understandable that people will search for meaning as a means of apprehending the mysterious ways of the cosmos. But there is meaning in the very work that people do together. Discovering and articulating this meaning may serve as the ultimate challenge of leadership in our era.

Endnotes

¹ The quote is from “Lesson 14” of General Colin Powell’s “A Leadership Primer,” a PowerPoint presentation produced while he was Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, United States Department of the Army.

² See John Kotter’s 1990 article, reprised as a Best of HBR tract, in a special issue of the Harvard Business Review on “Breakthrough Leadership,” and entitled “What Leaders Really Do,” Harvard Business Review 79 (December 2001): 85-96.

³ M. J. Wheatley, “Leadership and the New Science: Learning About Organization from an Orderly Universe” (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1994), 136.

⁴ See, for example, W. H. Starbuck, “Organizations as Action Generators,” American Sociological Review 48, no. 1 (1983): 91-102; and D. A. Cowan, C. M. Foil, and J. P. Walsh, “A Midrange Theory of Strategic Choice Processes” in R. L. Phillips and J. G. Hunt, eds., “Strategic Leadership: A Multiorganizational-Level Perspective” (Westport, CT: Quorum, 1992).

⁵ D. Gergen, “Eyewitness to Power: The Essence of Leadership - Nixon to Clinton” (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 348.

⁶ A. de Saint-Exupéry, “The Wisdom of the Sands,” translated by S. Gilbert from the French *Citadelle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

⁷ D. Goleman, “Leadership that Gets Results,” Harvard Business Review 78 (March/April 2000): 78-90.

⁸ H. H. Brinton, “Friends for 300 Years; The History and Beliefs of the Society of Friends Since George Fox Started the Quaker Movement” (New York: Harper, 1952).

⁹ R. K. Greenleaf, “The Power of Servant-Leadership” (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1998), 133-135.

¹⁰ See A. Godard and V. Lenhardt, “Transformational Leadership: Shared Dreams to Succeed” (Paris, Village Mondial, 1999; transl. New York: Macmillan, 2000), 76-78, 93, 110-111.

¹¹ See Iva Wilson’s commentary in B. Frydman, I. Wilson, and J. Wyer, “The Power of Collaborative Leadership” (Boston: Butterworth Heinemann, 2000), 223, 247.

¹² J.A. Raelin, “Creating Leaderful Organizations: How to Bring Out Leadership in Everyone” (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003).

¹³ E. Wenger, “Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity” (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁴ W. H. Drath and C. J. Palus, “Making Common Sense” (Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership, 1994).

¹⁵ T. Kidder, “The Soul of a New Machine” (New York: Avon Books, 1981).

¹⁶ C. O. Scharmer, "Self-transcending Knowledge: Sensing and Organizing Around Emerging Opportunities," *Journal of Knowledge Management* 5, no. 2 (2001): 137-150.

¹⁷ D. Schiff, "An Older, Wiser, Humbler Wunderkind," *New York Times Magazine*, August 20, 1995, 31.

¹⁸ J. Neal, "Spirituality in Management Education: A Guide to Resources," *Journal of Management Education* 21, no. 1 (1997): 121-140.

About the Research

This research builds on the ongoing research by the author into the foundation of collaborative leadership, or what he refers to as 'leaderful' practice.¹ This model of leadership, itself contributing to an emerging paradigm viewing leadership as a shared or collective property, is based on four tenets: that leadership can be concurrent, collective, collaborative and compassionate. The development of the model of leaderful practice was initially guided by an exhaustive review of the literature. The next step was to identify best practices in management deploying some of the unique approaches characterizing each tenet. Finally, over a five-year period, the author asked participants in his executive and management education courses to keep journals about their experiences in experimenting with some novel approaches consistent with nontraditional, collaborative models of leadership. The journals were meant to be honest appraisals of the value of these approaches – affirmative or ineffectual – and they deeply shaped the author's practical understanding of principles such as meaning-making. Journals were retained by this author in exchange for a grant of total confidentiality, and were later content-analyzed.

¹ J.A. Raelin, "Creating Leaderful Organizations: How to Bring Out Leadership in Everyone" (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003).