Applying Meaning at Work: Effective Use of Meaning in the Workplace

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Abstract

In response to growing mechanistic perspectives of organizational behaviour and organizational psychology, a meaning-centred approach to work may be needed, which recognizes the importance of meaning-making processes and their correlations with job satisfaction and productivity. This paper builds on Wong's (2007) call for the development of models that examine the dynamic relationships between meaning and work. Exploratory models of meaning are needed as it provides an infrastructure that assert meaning-making and sense-making processes as essential in their impact on worker beliefs and behaviours. To build the exploratory model, two management theories were examined: Freeman's (1984) Stakeholder Theory and Hunt and Morgan's (1996) Resource-Advantage Theory of Competition. The resultant exploratory model is comprised of Responsibility, Proactivity, Addressing External Stressors, Humane Orientation and Adaptation and Growth. For its contribution, the working model encourages enhances firm-level and individual-level performance and assesses the impact of a meaning-based methodology on corporate governance. As organizational behaviour and I/O psychology depend on both a posteriori and a priori methodologies, a monolithic mechanistic perspective of work may be deficient in integrating data inputs particularly as human capital, business relationships, real-time information, accounting and analytical information that contains disparate elements that can obstruct firm vision. This exploratory paper facilitates a working model of applying meaning of work and provides impetus for business management studies, organizational literature, leadership and I/O psychology for action-oriented research.

Applying Meaning at Work: Effective Use of Meaning in the Workplace

The relevance of meaning within the workplace has taken a pivotal role within counselling, psychiatric and psychological studies in recent years. The average individual works between 80 to 100 thousand hours over their lifetime (Pryce-Jones, 2010), while facing a wide variety of individual and organizational stressors leading to work alienation (Sarros et al., 2003), decreased meaning at work (Burger et al., 2012) and worker burnout (Philp, Egan & Kane, 2012). Wong (2007) offers a strong link between the need for meaning and management research, particularly as macro and micro pressures assail both the individual and organizations in multiple sides. Macro pressures include factors such as: (1) increased globalization and global interdependence, (2) increased diversity in the workforce leading to complexity, (3) sustainable development issues, (4) increased political domestic and international volatility such as terror threats, and (5) widening resource inequality between the Global North and the Global South (Baylis, Smith & Owens, 2011; Wong, 2007).

Micro level forces, on the other hand, focus individual level interactions and behaviour in response to micro-level, meso or macro-level pressures (Voeglin, Patzer & Scherer, 2012). Wong (2007) delineates some micro level pressures: (1) unchecked greed culminating in “widespread corporate scandals” (p. 351), (2) breakdown of communal values, (3) decreased social responsibility, (4) increased worker burnout and (5) imbalance between work and family life. Clearly, an alternative model is necessary in understanding the value of meaning in the workplace and it is in this line of reasoning that the creation of a viable model of applying meaning at work is predicated.

This paper builds on Wong's (2007) call for the development of comprehensive models on the relationship between meaning and occupation, which integrates current relevant research in psychotherapy, clinical, industrial/organizational psychology and management studies. In construction of an exploratory model, the paper builds upon previous theoretical and empirical frameworks provided by Wong (2007, 2011a, 2011b, 2014), Philp and colleagues (2012), Ashkanasy, Ashton-James and Jordan (2003), Grant (2012), and lastly Burger, Crous and Roodt (2012). These studies elaborate on a multidimensional perspective on work and meaning.

Steger, Dik and Duffy (2012) define the concept of meaningful work from a two-fold approach: (a) the extrinsic meaning behind the occupation, and (b) the intrinsic value of the occupation via significance and positive valence. Within
the positive valence of meaningful work, Steger, Dik and Duffy (2012) also posit that an eudaimonic orientation supersedes the hedonic orientation. This broader view suggests that finding meaning at work is more than just finding value for oneself. Finding meaning is also about a reorientation of helping others find their own meaning while considering the shared human condition that confronts all individuals within the organization (from leaders to followers) (Wong, 2011b).

The five-fold exploratory model introduced here is comprised of (1) Responsibility – Responsibility for one's actions, thoughts, feelings and decision-making, (2) Proactivity – Making a proactive and conscious effort to spend time meaningfully and positively, (3) Addressing External Stressors – Finding meaningful ways to neutralize and channel stressors, (4) Humane Orientation – Cultivating seeds of compassion and virtue towards all stakeholders, and (5) Adaptation and Growth – Associating meaning making with growth and learning.

Figure 1 Exploratory Model of Applying Meaning at Work

Need for an Exploratory Model of Work Meaning

To expound on the paper's exploratory model, an essential focus must consider the interface of meaning, macro-level and micro-level pressures and the conjoined theoretical underpinnings that underlie meaningful work as it presents considerable challenges for academics, organizational leaders, employees, followers and other stakeholders. Two management theories are especially relevant in relation to the construction of the model: Freeman's (1984) Stakeholder Theory and Hunt and Morgan's (1996) Resource-Advantage Theory of Competition. Stakeholder theory is defined as a comprehensive account of identifying both stakeholders (agents) as well as the conditions (environmental factors) to better
understand how relationships between business ethics, business processes, social change, stakeholder differentiation, management and values operate in the real world (Freeman, 1984; Friedman & Miles, 2002). Resource-advantage Theory is defined as the normative perspective that firms “seek superior financial performance” via the accumulation of both tangible and intangible assets, which are utilized to gain strategic market position, brand equity and operational efficiency (Hunt & Morgan, 1996). Stakeholder theory is particularly associated with component four (Humane Orientation) (Bledow, Frese & Mueller, 2011) in the model, while Resource-Advantage Theory is associated with component three (Addressing External Stressors) and component five (Adaptation and Growth) (Hunt & Morgan, 1996). These assertions will be elaborated in the next section.

Through integration of both theories, the model addresses the pragmatic question of how organizational leaders can proactively engage the complexity of work meaning and fluidly apply their leadership orientation to be effective facilitators of change within any given industrial and cultural context. The exploratory model offers a complementary perspective to Wong's (2007) spiritual oriented meaning model of work suggests that both leaders and followers need to engage the work place mindfully, meaningfully and spiritually, while attending to business best practices/processes that optimally differentiate one's firm from competitors to gain superior financial performance (Friedman & Miles, 2002; Hunt & Morgan, 1996). Moreover, the exploratory model can also be utilized to gain a better understanding of the seemingly contradictory forces that underlie normative business practices and corporate social responsibility behaviours.

Identification of Theoretical Foundations

The primary aim of this paper is to identify some of the key theoretical foundations within the proposed exploratory model of applying meaning at work. More specifically, the paper is a deeper investigation of the two management theories (Stakeholder and Resource-Advantage Theory) and their contributions to processes that are in thematic parallel to a meaning oriented approach. Building on such parallels suggest that despite distinctive theoretical underpinnings between different disciplines (management, organizational behaviour and psychology), similar and analogous concepts can be found at both the individual-level and organizational levels.

Given the exploratory nature of the paper, arranging a comprehensive list of theoretical foundations was not the primary goal of the study. The theoretical propositions identified here however provide impetus as to how the exploratory model can be shaped as it addresses the conflicting challenges of applying meaning to a workplace based on numerous stakeholder needs and dynamic market environments. Section 2 provides the literature review. Section 3 introduces the exploratory model in detail. Section 4 concludes with emphasis on practical implications, limitations of the study and future recommendations.

Literature Review

Research studies pertaining to meaning in the workplace has primarily come from a clinical psychology perspective (Burger, Crous & Roodt, 2012a), while management theories pay less attention to personal meaning. This observation may be due to business studies' emphasis on quantitative research and data driven management. As the current study is a theoretical and exploratory paper in applying meaning to work, it is then critical to utilize both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Stakeholder Theory. Utilizing stakeholder perspective is an essential component of the model as it can foster effective communication between employees, managers, clients as well as primary, secondary and even tertiary stakeholders. The initial stakeholder theory model as conceptualized by Freeman (1984) surmised that there were 6 agent perspectives that should dictate and guide firm planning, strategy and communication. These agents comprised of the management, owners, suppliers, local community, employees and customers. According to Freeman, agentic actions and stakes within the model imply variable reciprocal relationships as each agents can unquestionably influence other agents, whether their actions will have advantageous or disadvantageous implications. Through further model refinement over time and research studies, other agents have been added such as judicial/legal systems, financial institutions (banks), interest groups (e.g., NGOs, lobbyists, etc.), media (e.g., Rising social media power, traditional media, new media), scientific/academic community and shareholders (Polonsky, 1995).

The addition of stakeholder perspectives to the exploratory model strongly suggest that both leaders and followers should not only focus on their narrowed, experiential mindset but also on the numerous and diverse perspectives which emphasize balancing paradoxical competing interests inherent within agents. As such, applying meaning at work
R-A Theory for managerial action. In the same thematic vein, Hunt and Madhavaram (2012) developed a robust conceptual framework of R-A Theory, which aimed to facilitate and provide an impetus for managerial action. The authors asserted that resources especially higher-order resources are based on individual (managerial) competencies and capabilities which may be then classified into tangibility (socially complex and interconnected) and intangibility (procedural knowledge, experience level of different stakeholders specifically managers and employees) (Hunt & Madhavaram, 2012). Moreover, individual higher-order resources can also provide a “reference to the firm's overall marketing strategy” particularly in the areas of market knowledge competence, market sensing capability, market planning capability and marketing strategy making capability (Hunt & Madhavaram, 2012, pg.587). This in turn leads to facilitation of managerial action in the domains of absorptive capacity (acquisition, transformation and internalization of external knowledge), successfuly necessitates that firm leaders and followers avoid a monolithic rigid approach in stakeholder sensitive areas, such as project/operational communication, business processes, accounting information management and innovation management to name a few. Successful firms are comprised of leaders and followers who balance between big-picture thinking (macro-level processes), detail-focused orientation (micro-level processes) with meaningful identity (both collective and individual). Concurrent with this line of reasoning, Bundy, Shropshire and Buchholtz (2013) assert the importance of recognizing stakeholder concerns via strategic cognition especially in the key areas of stakeholder agent issues, needs and goals. In the authors' study, strategic cognition (related to big-picture thinking and detail-focused orientation) plays a mediating role in regards to business issue salience (how stakeholder issues are perceived and understood) due to the 'importance of organizational identity and strategic framing' (Bundy, Shropshire & Buchholtz, 2013).

Through identification, perception, meaning making processes, leaders and managers can appropriately justify issue prioritization based on the organization's intention and willingness to address the issue. This in turn may be contingent not just in gathering as much information or data in relation to a certain business issue but also in gathering the relevant information which can contribute to optimal decision-making towards account portfolio management issues. Micro-level processes within stakeholder theory which emphasize 'best practices' must be balanced with individual-level approaches which signify unique styles and problem solving attributed to differentiated phenomenological work experiences.

How does one find the balance between micro-level and macro-level processes? It may ultimately depend on how well leaders and followers effectively identify different stakeholder resource availability and resource accessibility (Adams, 1997). In summary, through an understanding of stakeholder theory and strategic cognitive framing, the essential components of issue identification, perception, sense-making and meaning-making processes become important cognitive tools that directly contribute to the exploratory model of work meaning. Since issue resolution is integral in the workplace, the following section will explicate why differentiated stakeholder issues arise in the first place. One theory which can account for this management phenomena is Hunt and Morgan's (1996) Resource Advantage Theory.

Resource-Advantage Theory. The development of Resource Advantage Theory (R-A) can be best described as a theoretical model which has garnered a multidisciplinary approach ranging from marketing literature, management, economics, ethics and general business literature (Hunt & Madhavaram, 2012). R-A Theory basically proposes that marketplace hierarchy arises from both comparative advantages or disadvantages (Hunt, 1997; Hunt & Morgan, 1995). According to Hunt (1997) and Hunt and Morgan (1995), there are 8 main components that primarily comprise the theoretical model: (1) heterogeneous demand across industries, (2) imperfect and expensive consumer information, (3) constrained human motivations, (4) imperfect and expensive organizational information, (5) wide variety of firm resources, (6) heterogeneous and imperfectly mobile resource characteristics, (7) strategic management roles, and (8) innovation endogenous and disequilibrium provoking competitive dynamics.

Firms and individuals make decisions according to what is meaningful. Resources may influence firm and individual perception of what is meaningful and relevant. Amount, availability and accessibility of resources influence perception of meaning because it determines what can or cannot be done (output). Firstly, firms and individuals think of the end result of a business process. Thus, evaluating needed resources is an essential component of meaning-making. If there are some resources that are deficient, this can affect the output, products and services by different stakeholders in the supply chain. Secondly, the urgency of market survival drives reactive actions. How do desperate individuals (firms) perceive threats? Does this perception drive desperate actions? Being desperate may be a sign of deficiency and demonstrates lack of security. As such during difficult transitions and organizational changes, firms can become polarized and monolithic in response to perception of a firm struggling. Instead of seeking alternative options, decisions may become embedded in static principles which may emphasize rule-based decisions rather than adaptation to market reality. Lastly, R-A theory emphasizes that there are temporal constraints. There are certain time frames which may be optimal (or detrimental) for the release of projects, operations, products and services.
market-focused strategic flexibility (generation of reality based options for optimal customer value proposition), learning platform capability (commitment to learning, information transparency and receptivity) and lastly organizational learning capability (overall organizational capability for processing knowledge) (Hunt & Madhavaram, 2012).

Fundamentally, R-A Theory is a theory about resources and this sphere encompasses the areas of interpersonal and intrapersonal resources. Resources, perceived from this approach, can also be seen as ultimately relational and runs the same thematic parallel with a meaning-making theoretical perspective. In this regard, the exploratory model asserts that this relational aspect can also be extrapolated for organizational assessment, business planning interventions and collaborative actions with other organizations. Organizational assessment refers to the identification of both external and internal threats (similar to a SWOT analysis) and a deep understanding of how these threats interact with each other in multiple levels and with different stakeholders. More specifically, individual threats (such as rising industry competition, operational losses, etc.) to organizations may be somewhat manageable as they are addressed by standardized procedures. However as these threats proliferate, the likelihood for multiple threat interactions also increases which can result in significant losses to the organization which affects the stakeholders in the organization.

Creating Value Propositions. First, leaders and followers should take into consideration the importance of creating unique value propositions. Examination of value propositions requires a holistic meaning model of work and this implies a constant endeavour for continual development of both small (micro-level) and large (macro-level) advantages (Clark, Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2012). Value propositions may be simplified as basically asking the question: How does my company make money and earn a livelihood? However, a deeper investigation into firm value propositions present a more complicated task because the market environment like biological systems are inherently systemic, efficiency-oriented, nonlinear and dynamic. Furthermore, different niches exist within the market environment which allows for further differentiation among competitor interests, abilities, assets and innovations. In a study of competitive environments by Slater and Narver (1994), the authors assert that although their results provide limited support for competitive environment role on the market-orientation performance relationship, it is essential for firms to be 'market-oriented' as it provides maximum cost-effectiveness in the long term despite short-term market environmental effects. Using Samsung as an example, Samsung has been aggressively finding different niches which their diversified strength can be applied to complement their core business strength. In 2012, Samsung achieved No. 1 market share results in their mobile business niche by outpacing competitors (Apple, Nokia, LG) in hardware and software (Android) technology. The creation of inimitable advantages within Samsung has come from the realization that market advantages can shift to different competitors given enough time and resources.

Second, there is value in understanding the application of meaning-based processes (particularly in the exploratory meaning of work model) and its relationship to the larger market environment whose nature hinges on extensive competition, network-like systems and nonlinear behaviour. On a cursory glance, it may seem that the larger market environment tends to be predisposed towards an alienation of the individual whether one is a leader or follower as observed by Sarros, et al., (2003). However, past and current research scholars like Ashkanasy, Ashton-James, Jordan (2003). Burger et al.,(2012a), Levy (2005), Luthans (2002), Philip, Egan, Kane (2012), Wong (2007) and many others define a new conceptual dissemination that seeks to explore how individual meaning-making processes within organizations interact with exogenous factors such as level of market environmental competition and how these interactions provide a foundational basis for theory of meaning within organizations.

As an example, Luthans (2002) encouraged new theory building that effectively integrates positive psychology with organizational behaviour research to produce theory and research driven criteria that can be validly measured. Concepts such as “confidence, hope and resiliency” (Luthans, 2002, p.695) were identified as possible state-like psychological capacities that can meet positive organizational inclusion criteria. Given the complexity of interactions between a meaning-based approach towards work and the dynamic business environment, it is essential to construct exploratory models of work meaning that provide a conceptual basis of organizational behaviour, psychology and management in the current business and economic milieu.

One of the consequent aspects of the nature of competition in business is that it may predicate meaning in leadership towards making opaque choices due to stakeholder pressure and high emphasis in profitability orientation which neglects stakeholder transparency and corporate social responsibility. In this regard, further research into the meaning of stakeholder pressure and its relationship to corporate social responsibility may prove to be a fruitful avenue for scholars. Leverage effects of stakeholder pressure may pose as varied and critical thresholds of meaning towards both followers and leaders in which organizational and individual factors are largely interdependent. For example, in terms of organizational factors, González-Benito and González-Benito (2006) have identified two dimensions of stakeholder pressure that can be
identified: governmental and non-governmental stakeholder pressures. Does stakeholder pressure stemming from market environments shape the way meaning is perceived by different stakeholders? If so, what is the extent of their influence on leaders and on followers? Conclusively, the purpose of this essay hinges on whether certain presuppositions regarding management theoretical phenomena, psychological meaning and organizational behaviour are interrelated.

Organizational Behaviour and Psychological Models of Work Meaning

Previous scholarship within organizational behaviour and positive psychology has yielded several insights in confirming the relevance of meaning within work (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Wrzesniewski, 2003). From an organizational behaviour viewpoint, Wrzesniewski (2003) argues that there are three basic orientations that influence predisposition in finding meaning in work: (1) job orientation - work as a sole source of tangible resources necessary for basic survival, (2) career orientation – work as a source of career advancement, status and honor, and (3) calling orientation – perspective of work as a goal in itself and associated with the virtues of contribution, higher calling and personal growth.

In contrast to a positive psychology perspective, Pratt and Ashforth (2003) differentiates meaning within work as stemming from two distinct sources: (1) meaning in the work – refers to the idea that what one does (job, task, role) is inherently good and contributes to stakeholders outside the organization positively (i.e., pleasure in the firm's mission and vision), and (2) meaning at work – refers to the idea that what one does is inherently satisfying (i.e., enjoyment of functional tasks), meaningful and contributes to stakeholders within the company. Aside from these two sources, Pratt and Ashforth (2003) add that individuals usually find a sense of work purpose by combining the two sources. A matrix table is provided to observe the different interactions the two distinct sources create.

Consequently, these models provide a broad outline of work meaning that is based on a bottom-up approach which is within the context of individual level perception. These models suggest that individual level perception is strongly associated with work meaning. Moreover, these models also contain similar thematic attributes to Freeman's Stakeholder Theory such as the consideration of multiple stakeholder needs which is highly relevant in explaining leader behaviours contingent on typology of industry need.

Towards an Exploratory Model of Work Meaning

The fundamental driver for the promotion of an exploratory model of work meaning in this paper is innately interconnected to previous attempts by Wong (2007) and Burger, et al., (2012a, 2012b) in addressing the broader environmental, societal, organizational and individual-level concerns currently facing the disciplines of management research, organizational psychology and leadership studies. As Wong elucidates (2007), business research must transcend the mechanistic understanding of personnel as mere numbers/resources to be consumed. Rather, consideration for stakeholders' need for meaning particularly in the realms of phenomenological, spiritual and noetic experiences must also be accounted for. This important facet in Wong's conceptual framework is strongly associated with the foundational premises for the development of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) as "more and more companies are embracing spiritual values" (Wong, 2007), which transcend mere profit maximization behaviour. The link between CSR and profitability remains inconclusive in current management research as some studies suggest a positive relationship (see Carroll & Shabana, 2010; McPeak & Tooley, 2008), while other studies dispute the relevance of serving multiple stakeholders (Jensen, 2011) which strengthens the premise that little or no relationship exists between CSR and financial performance (see Henderson, 2009). While Wong's model focuses on the emphasis of noetic and spiritual values of organizations, Burger, Crous and Roodt's (2012a, 2012b) model emphasizes the role of how logotherapy (an important corollary of a meaning-based approach) can facilitate positive organizational changes. The authors found the importance of framing using the 'application of logotherapy as an organization development intervention' (Burger, et al., 2012a, p.2). Figure 2 explicates the role of framing in facilitating organizational changes. As such, the exploratory model of work meaning in this paper connects the strengths of psychological research with management studies to mitigate inherent weaknesses such as the myopic view of work meaning as mere individual-level or mere organizational level processes.

Call To New Models of Work Meaning. The current exploratory model in this article adds to Wong's call to new models of work meaning by introducing two management theories (Resource-Advantage Theory and Stakeholder Theory) that were only indirectly addressed in Burger, Crous and Roodt's conceptual framework. The resource-advantage theory contributes specifically to the second component (the model perceives time as a relevant intangible and heterogeneous resource) and fifth component of the exploratory model (the model perceives absorptive capacity, learning capabilities and
competencies are important resources). The stakeholder theory contributes to the exploratory model through its consideration of multiple stakeholder pressures. Consequentially, this concept was further combined with Wong's emphasis on compassion as an important virtue within the workplace. In this aspect, the virtue of compassion becomes relevant as this paper strongly argues that is associated with how most companies perceive organizational citizenship behaviour and corporate social responsibility. In support of this assertion, a recent study by Moon, Hur, Ko, Kim and Yoon (2014) found that employee perception of corporate social responsibility correlate positively to compassion at work via the sequential process of organizational justice perceptions and affective organizational commitment.

There is an inherent difficulty in integrating value/virtue theories with management theories to form exploratory meaning-based models of work as most management theories. By large, academic scholarship remains averse in integrating the seemingly dialectical viewpoints as it demands an honest commitment and rigorous investment in analyzing both individual-level and cultural-level approaches which seems quixotic in both organizational psychology and in leadership studies. In response to this difficulty, this paper provides an initial, exploratory and conceptual model that attempts a 'holistic' perspective. The five propositions/components in the exploratory model cover a broad range of concepts necessary in addressing the two-fold need of any organization: (1) providing long term value to customer-stakeholders through firm performance while also (2) delivering value maximization (i.e., ROI profitability), which increases the likelihood of organizational survival.

The exploratory model suggests that a monolithic perspective to work is inherently deficient in addressing individual and organizational needs. Rather, the model suggests that leaders need to take into consideration synergistic interactions between micro, individual-level and macro-level, cultural processes. Consequently, this means that both leaders and followers should be trained in competently alternating between behaviours suited to different contexts, needs and situations. This adaptive flexibility was defined by Bledow, Frese, and Mueller (2011) as ambidextrous leadership.

Components of the Exploratory Model

Responsibility. The first component is directly related to Wong's study on meaning specifically borrowing 'Responsibility' from the PURE model (Wong, 2011a). By placing responsibility for one's actions, leaders as well as employees effectively place their locus of control internally, leading to self-efficacious behaviour and conscientious work performance. Freedom of the Will hypothesis states that 'people who believe in the inherent human capacity for freedom and responsibility, regardless of circumstances, will show higher autonomy and authenticity than those without such beliefs' (Wong, 2014, p.1). As organizations grow, there is a propensity that they will become bureaucratic structures with rigid hierarchy and entirely dependent on command-and-control type processes. There are two primary reasons as to why responsibility should be an essential component of an exploratory model of work meaning.

First, the likelihood of placing responsibility outside of oneself can increase within organizations due to simultaneous increase of task-dependencies inherent within complex, hierarchical organizational systems that normally undertake large projects and operations (Adams, 1997). To address this issue, reducing hierarchical levels may be undertaken. However this decision can only be made by senior management without prior input to mid and lower level employee stakeholders. As a result of this perceived powerlessness, work locus of control (WLOC) may decrease within the organization. Work locus of control refers to an individual's belief in the extent that work events can be controlled (Ng, Raymond & Ke, 2014; Rotter, 1954). The authors add that work locus of control is also strongly associated with decision-making (Ng, Raymond & Ke, 2014). The component of responsibility addresses this issue as it empowers both leaders and followers into active and assertive decision-making without crossing the boundary of leader-follower protocols. Moreover, responsibility entails leaders and followers to articulate expectations necessary in achieving operational and project success. Responsibility does not just lie within the sphere of action within the leadership but also within the followers as attempts in defining what constitutes appropriate actions will occur during the course of the business operation and/or project.

Second, individual responsibility paves the way for individual self-efficacy and by association the overall collective efficacy within the organization. A responsible culture within the organization orients both leaders and followers towards high meaning at and in work (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). In support of this argument, Walumbwa, Wang, Lawler and Shi (2004) found two important findings in their study of banking employees within China and India. Firstly, the authors found that “transformational leadership is positively related to organizational commitment and job satisfaction and negatively related to job and work withdrawal” (Walumbwa et al., 2004). Secondly, the authors found that collective efficacy contributes to job and work withdrawal, while also contributes to organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Walumbwa et al., 2004). These findings reveal that as leaders and employees place their locus of control internally, the
likelihood of self-efficacious behaviour and conscientious work performance increases. Thus, responsibility at both the individual and organizational level increases meaningful behaviour at work, while a lack of responsibility decreases individual and organizational accountability and purpose.

**Proactivity.** Meaning encourages us to be proactive in how we spend our time (both inside and outside of work) and by extension, our resources and assets. For example, current research has shown that time spent outside of work meaningfully will have a significant impact on how time is spent inside of work particularly as this time is indirectly influenced by individual differences in personality and life values (Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010). Proactivity was defined by Parker, Bindl and Strauss (2010) as the aspiration and endeavour in bringing an idealized goal into reality. Three attributes have also been identified with proactivity: (a) self-initiation, (b) oriented towards practical change, and (c) high future orientation (Parker et al., 2010). The first attribute (self-initiation) refers to consistent engagement by the individual to not just start tasks, projects and operations but rather have the persistence to see the task, operation or project through to completion. The second attribute refers to application of the plan towards a workable and feasible implementation. The last attribute refers to the vision of the future that the individual or organization seeks to bring into reality.

Furthermore, the current exploratory model identifies proactivity as an important facet of a meaning based approach to work as the component's central focus considers the dual endeavour in facing two important temporal data distinctions: historical-driven and future-oriented data. For the proactive individual and the organization, the possibility and potentiality of decision-making requires foresight development and timely execution of plans. In this regard, proactive individuals and organizations are then rarely caught off-guard as they have learned to anticipate not just future problems but also learned to use current obstacles as assets; working meaningfully under constraints. Timely execution is also critical as actions that appropriately fit one context may be inappropriate for a different situation. This involves a two-fold approach as the agent (either individual or organization) needs (1) sufficient background knowledge of the ascertained problems and issues, and (2) an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms that underlie the problems' processes.

Without sufficient background knowledge (what agents already know), ability in learning new information (external and internal) could be adversely affected. Broadness of background knowledge must also be integrated with an in-depth understanding. In-depth understanding of the mechanisms that underlie potential problems and issues is contingent upon achieving a certain mastery and consequent specialization of a specific body of knowledge. This masterful diving into the 'deep end' of a subject allows the agent to (1) identify facts and empirical data as the lower level aspects of experiential learning, (2) determine any patterns or relationships between the empirical data which can be utilized for crisis prevention at work, and (3) participate in abstracting workable models that systematically integrates all available empirical data meaningfully. Thus, it is predicted that proactivity at the individual level and organizational level increases meaningful experiences at work.

**Addressing External Stressors.** Third, it is essential to find meaningful ways to neutralize organizational and work-related stressors. Meaning provides one with the ability to identify and regulate emotions through constructive emotional intelligence (EI). According to Ashkanasy et al. (2003), 'emotional intelligence is a key moderating variable in mediating the impact of workplace stressors on individual and organizational performance outcomes.’ Emotional intelligence within the work place has certainly been visited and revisited by several theorists (see Goleman, 1995; Law, Wong & Song, 2004; Ng, Raymond & Ke, 2014). The third component of the model emphasizes that appropriately applying meaning within the organization requires not just cognitive intelligence but also the ability to regulate, adapt and create positive changes through emotional intelligence. Changes from within and from outside the organization are an unavoidable facet in today's current milieu. In order to successfully deal with external stressors, healthy individuals and organizations must first come to the realization that internal needs and priorities must be met. The internal (substance) takes precedence over the external (form). The external aspect of organizational needs are usually comprised of several issues such as: (1) identification of stakeholder needs, (2) decision to either maintain, stay or expand into new business territories, and (3) establishment of stakeholder alliances. These aspects are usually the peripheral and most salient to the organization which reinforces the amount of time spent in dealing with these issues. The internal aspect, on the other hand, deals with reflexive blind spots which are inherently subjective for both the organization and the individual. The internal aspect is usually comprised of leadership development which ranges from recruitment, continuous learning, maintenance and development of individual competencies.

**Emotional Intelligence and Meaning.** The differential nature between the external and the internal aspects of organizational needs has befittingly raised important concerns in relation to the development of the exploratory meaning model. Two concerns are pertinent in this discussion: (1) the effectiveness of emotional intelligence in neutralizing external stressors, and (2) the extent of EI's relationship to a meaning-based approach. Establishing a definitive and comprehensive
relationship between EI and meaning was not the primary intention of the exploratory model. A more pragmatic stance was undertaken which boldly asserts that emotional intelligence facilitates the neutralization of organizational stressors through (a) perceptive reorientation of stressors, (b) empathy and self-compassion for others' weaknesses or one's weaknesses, and (c) proactive problem-solving through networks and social support systems. This stance was echoed by Ng, Raymond and Ke's (2014) study of EI among nurses. The authors emphasize the importance of emotional intelligence as a critical leadership attribute as it can enable and empower nurses to deal with external stressors by accepting, coping and then transforming one's emotional energies (Ng, Raymond & Ke, 2014). Moreover, perceptive reorientation of stressors runs a thematic parallel to Wong's (2007, 2014) assertion that meaning requires a cognizance of meaning potentials in each situation. Perceptive reorientation, which is a significant component of EI, demands that right attitudinal orientation and appropriate actions be applied in situations particularly within an organization and within the workplace. Finding meaningful ways to neutralize organizational stressors requires the development and exercise of emotional intelligence at both the individual and collective levels.

Humane Orientation. Aside from responsibility, proactivity and development of emotional intelligence, efficacious leadership also requires humane orientation which encompasses virtuous qualities and by extension how these qualities are related to leadership (Wong, 2011a; Grant, 2012). Two theories here are pertinent in understanding humane orientation. First, stakeholder theory contributes to the development of humane orientation by suggesting that leaders and followers should focus on the numerous diverse perspectives while balancing seemingly paradoxical competing interests. Second, resource-advantage theory contributes to humane orientation development by its emphasis on adaptive actions in addressing heterogeneous aspects of work at both the macro and micro-level.

A corollary of humane orientation, compassion, which was previously studied by scholars within management studies (see Biberman & Tischler, 2008; Lantos, 2002; Lips-Wiersma & Nilakant, 2007; Solomon, 1998) remains an intriguing aspect of the exploratory model because it seems to flow against the bulk of management studies which adhere to strict rational decision-making aimed at achieving maximum shareholder value. Indeed, the rational approach has culminated in one of the main arguments against CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) in that maximum harm will be done to both society, organizations and the vast majority of stakeholders if businesses do not conform to their main goal of maximizing shareholder value (Jensen, 2011). This argument however falls into a fallacious pitfall as it does not allow further distinctions between various kinds of CSR as proposed by Lantos (2002) and Carroll (2001). Carroll (2001) for example, classifies various types of responsibilities that underlie CSR: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibility while Lantos (2001) classifies CSR types as based on ethical, altruistic and strategic CSR. Essentially, CSR types may have different levels of influence in correspondence to stakeholder needs, and as such should account for other stakeholder relationship typologies aside from the normative transactional/contractual relationship.

In this aspect, humane orientation within management scholarship draws compatibility and association with altruistic corporate social responsibility particularly as it involves transcending the contractual relationship between different stakeholders. This is not to say that contractual relationships are non-essentials. They are essential especially as the foundation of business and capitalist philosophy hinges on the foundation of contractual obligations and the respect of individual property. A humane orientation transcends the contractual relationship between stakeholders because it recognizes that people within the organization and outside the organization operate as sensemaking and meaning-making agents in addition to agents that just “exist to consume.” A single-minded pursuit of profitability without consideration to the context and diverse attributes of CSR will ultimately drive organizations towards meaninglessness and leader-follower disillusionment. Additionally, humane orientation can facilitate beneficiary contact between different stakeholders that can drive linguistic perception from transactional to a relational design. As Grant (2012) has observed, “beneficiary contact interacts with leadership to influence perceptions of prosocial impact and performance.” The paradox of humane orientation was articulated by Bledow, Frese and Mueller (2011) in which it can hinder innovation by its overemphasis on harmony while it can increase “exploratory behaviour through trust and error tolerance.” Humane orientation, while inherently paradoxical, remains a complex component of work meaning not because it calls for social harmony as an end result of stakeholder interaction but because humane orientation attaches great value to the proposition that individuals as well as organizations are meaning-making entities in addition to being transactional agents. Thus, humane orientation perceives individuals and organizations as meaning-making entities that primarily value virtuous actions over non-virtuous actions within leadership.

Adaptation and Growth. Lastly, the fifth component associates meaning with adaptation, growth and learning. Finding meaning at work will not be a clear cut, formulaic process for all individuals and for organizations as growth needs, learning goals and development orientations will differ according. However, the main essence of the fifth component points
to growth and learning as necessary requirements to facilitate appropriate meaning-making processes within the workplace. According to Maurer (2002), continuous learning involvement orientation is posited to be a motivational state which depends to the extent learning and growth are relevant to the cognitive, affective and behavioural self. In this regard, both individual and organizational propensity levels for learning and growth may either contribute or vitiate meaning-making processes. For example, high propensity levels for learning and growth are positively correlated to firm performance while low propensity levels for learning are found to have a negative correlation with overall firm performance (Ellinger, Ellinger, Yang & Howton, 2002).

Work meaning must essentially cater to both followers and leaders in such a way that learning becomes second nature. Moreover, individual and organizational beliefs about learning should focus more intensively on self-development and organizational development rather than assessing the self (organization) against others to the point that any progress is downplayed. This is not to say that interpersonal and inter-organizational comparisons are irrelevant especially as quantitative comparisons between individuals and organizations illustrate key differences in strengths and weaknesses. Through adaptation and growth, employees can start to acquire beliefs that attributes and competencies are improvable (movement from an entity theory of the self towards an incremental implicit theory of the self) (Maurer, 2002). An entity theory of the self is static and not conducive to learning as the self attributes are perceived as crystallized and rigid (Maurer, 2002). In contrast, an incremental implicit theory of the self refers to the idea that “one's characteristics are conceptualized as malleable” and thus improvable (Maurer, 2002, p.13). The Adaptation and Growth component, with its strong association with an incremental implicit theory of the self, also has a direct (albeit untested) relationship with Wong's (2010) meaning management theory which emphasizes that meaning plays a central role in human adaptation especially in the overlapping areas of cognitive stress appraisal, attribution, decision-making and creativity (Wong, 2010). Adaptation and Growth are interrelated with Wong's meaning management theory as cognitive processes have a direct influence on organizational decision-making particularly as one's adaptation and growth beliefs reflect either a mature or immature understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses. A mature organization views adaptation and growth not just mandatory but essential to the intrinsic interests of the individual and the collective. These organizations (and individuals) have a high degree of self-determination which then influences levels of motivation and expected learning outcomes. The exploratory model's Adaptation and Growth Component and Wong's meaning management theory encourages that leaders and followers utilize the power of choice and freedom to learn as a way to understand the phenomenological and subjective meaning of work.

**Proposition 5.** Adaptation and growth beliefs are essential aspects of work meaning. A fluid approach to learning will be positively associated with a mature understanding of meaning management.

**Conclusion**

The proposed model advocates for willing partnerships and collaboration between different fields and disciplines as numerous stakeholders all stand to gain in bridging the theory/praxis divide. There are 5 components to the proposed model encompassing areas such as time management, decision-making, communication and learning. The model espouses: (1) Responsibility, (2) Proactive and conscious effort, (3) Finding meaningful ways, (4) Cultivation of Virtue, and (5) Association of meaning making with adaptation and growth. A working model of meaning within the contextual space of work and occupation is possible but it must stimulate a multidisciplinary discourse by distilling key insights from clinical psychology (Wong, 2011a & 2011b), management studies (Grant, 2012; Steger et al., 2012) and leadership literature (Leonard et al., 2013).

There are still theoretical and empirical gaps in understanding the value of meaning within the workplace. Firstly, organizational psychology has often distanced itself from meaning as if it was more related to counselling. Hence, organizational psychology tends to focus on work environments, behaviour, health, general well-being, human resources and work dynamics (Levy, 2005). Second, management studies locate meaning under the general umbrella of leadership literature which in itself is a valid claim. Lastly, the nature and applicability of meaning in organizational psychology is generally complex and multifaceted. Thus, building meaningful bridges between theory and action presents real challenges to organizational leaders, academics and workers.

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