

## Realize Your Will to Meaning: Viktor Frankl's Principles at Work

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*“A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the ‘why’ for his existence and will be able to bear almost any ‘how.’”*—Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*

“It’s going to be a fun week, sailing the *Endeavor*, tennis, golf, eating, drinking. All the things we are best known for,” said former Tyco International Ltd. CEO Dennis Kozlowski. This statement was recorded on a videotape of a \$2-million birthday bash that Kozlowski threw for his wife on the island of Sardinia in 2000. An edited version of the tape was shown to jurors in Kozlowski’s larceny trial, and it provided further evidence that Tyco had funded its ex-CEO’s lavish lifestyle for years before he resigned in June 2002. Alas, Sigmund Freud would be proud for Dennis Kozlowski demonstrated that his theory of the “Pleasure Principle,” also known as the *will to pleasure*, is alive and well in corporate America!

Tyco, of course, is not the only major company in recent times that has faced public scrutiny, as well as the wrath of government regulators and the courts, due to corporate scandals. Nor is Kozlowski the only (ex) CEO to have gained such notoriety. Do the names Ken Lay (Enron), Bernie Ebbers (Worldcom), and Martha Stewart ring a bell? Interestingly, there are even web sites dedicated to profiling such infamous individuals, even on playing cards, and highlighting the most notorious of the corporate scandals in which they were involved.<sup>1</sup> However, many of these executives, it should be noted, did not appear as interested in following Freud’s will to pleasure as they were in pursuing Alfred Adler’s “will to power” (in Adler’s words, “striving for superiority”). Dr. Adler, you may remember, was also a contemporary (and, to a degree, a mentor like Dr. Freud) of Viktor Frankl.

To Dr. Frankl, however, both Freud’s will to pleasure and Adler’s will to power were manifestations of something missing, which hinted that there was yet another explanation for the kinds of behaviors exhibited by the former corporate icons identified here. In effect, the need or drive to seek pleasure à la Freud and the relentless pursuit of power ‡ la Adler were really just attempts to cover up, but not necessarily fill, a void of *meaning* that existed in the lives of these individuals. Put differently, because their “will to meaning” had been frustrated, for whatever reasons, they chose alternative paths to follow; paths based on the premise that pleasure and/or power would somehow be able to replace what had been missing.

Only the search for meaning, Dr. Frankl would say, holds the potential to bring the kind of authentic enrichment and fulfillment that most people desire from their work and in their everyday lives. And it is the ability to realize our *will to meaning*—our authentic commitment to meaningful values and goals that only we can actualize and fulfill—that guides us in the quest to tap into this distinctly *human* potential. Unlike either Freud or Adler, Dr. Frankl considers the main concern of human beings to be fulfilling a meaning and actualizing values, rather than simply the gratification and satisfaction of drives and instincts.

“Not all values are created equal.”

We are probably familiar with examples of people, including corporate executives, who clearly demonstrate the central importance of Frankl's will to meaning in their work lives. And while this is not to say that such individuals also do not want (or seek) pleasure and authority, the primary motivation for their existence is not aimed at such objectives. So, when Bill Hewlett and David Packard, for example, built their company, Hewlett-Packard, from a one-car garage into one of the world's most admired success stories, it was a particular set of *meaningful values*, known as "The HP Way," that guided them in identifying and meeting their objectives, in working with one another, and in dealing with customers, shareholders, and others.<sup>2</sup>

"When power is the playground, there's always another power waiting in the wings."

It is also important to mention, of course, that not all values are created equal. Actualizing certain values, like those associated only with seeking pleasure and power, would not, in Dr. Frankl's mind, constitute the way to fulfill authentic "meaning." Against this backdrop, let me share a statement made to me by a government employee, who referred to values as the "things that make life worth living." In other words, by relying on our moral compass, or what psychologist and author James Hillman refers to as our "Soul's Code," we may uncover values that are truly meaningful and worth pursuing in our work and everyday lives. A personal (and organizational) commitment to such positive, life-affirming values is clearly a manifestation of Dr. Frankl's will to meaning!

How many of us have looked forward to a beautifully planned holiday and then felt disappointed after it was over? How often does the promise of pleasure captivate us only to leave us unsatisfied after the event happens, no matter how perfect it seemed at the time? This is true with everything from drugs and sex to pay raises and vacations. It's the promise of pleasure that we are lured by; yet pleasure itself is fleeting. As is our ability to always appreciate pleasure. We come down with a cold on the plane to paradise. We get a sad phone call from a family member that thwarts the beginning of a romantic evening. Our teenage daughter puts a dent in the new car and it's no longer perfect. We feel excited about what we purchased during a shopping spree, only to find the thrill gone after only a week. Moments of true pleasure, however, come to us when we aren't looking for them. They are gifts uncalled for, moments that transcend our planning, moments that transcend even our perception of pleasure.

The search for power in our lives is parallel to our search for pleasure. It is "out there." Power over our employees, our bosses, our customers, our shareholders, our kids, the waitress in a restaurant, or a clerk in a retail store is illusory at best and terribly destructive at worst. We think we might have power but we never know for sure. And even if we do, in the power game there's always an opponent, the ground is always shifting. Much like Sisyphus, the Greek hero who was ordered by the Gods to push a big rock uphill only to see it slip out of his hands in the last moment, our search for power becomes an endless—and joyless—undertaking.

"The will to meaning comes from within. Only we can find it, control it, and fulfill it."

A few decades ago, when group therapy took center stage in the self-awareness movement, one exercise, in particular, illuminated the power principle. A group was asked to spend some time together and choose a leader. After they had carefully selected a leader, the group was then asked to go back and select the person most responsible for choosing the leader. It was the leader behind the leader who was the real leader. When power is the playground, there's always another power waiting in the wings. It's an exhausting game to play and, like pleasure, power is fleeting and always subject to outside, unforeseen forces.

Yet these two principles in life—power and pleasure—have been the focus of much attention and analysis in psychotherapy, and have been used as a platform for designing and managing both organizations and work. As we have already discussed, the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, weighed in on the pleasure principle; Alfred Adler, also known as the founder of individual psychology, weighed in on the will to power. A huge body of work has gone into defining us by these principles—all of which require outside forces to come into play.

It is here, in the vast exploration of our inner and outer lives, that Dr. Frankl's will to meaning rises above, and distinguishes itself from the will to pleasure and the will to power. The will to

meaning comes from *within*. Only we can find it, control it, and fulfill it. It is meaning that sustains us throughout our lives no matter how little or how much power and pleasure come our way. And, most important of all, meaning sustains us through any pain and suffering that we must endure.

"When tenderness prevails, we love and forgive ourselves and others."

In his book *Full Catastrophe Living*, Jon Kabat-Zinn writes about staying connected to our original wholeness no matter what the challenges to our health, well-being, and welfare. His book explores the lives of many people to whom life-threatening illness became a transforming experience. They connected, not only to others in a way that anchored them in love, acceptance and forgiveness, but also to themselves. Some survived and triumphed over illness, others didn't. They all deepened their experience in ways that honored meaning in their lives as well as in death.

When we take the time to cultivate our relationship to our original self, all our experience becomes grounded in meaning. This was true for Dr. Frankl when he observed the behavior of those imprisoned in the Nazi concentration camps; it was true for those interviewed throughout Kabat-Zinn's book; and it's true for anyone who has survived tragedy and allowed their grief to break open their heart to tenderness. When tenderness prevails, we love and forgive ourselves and others. When the opposite happens, when bitterness seals our hearts shut, we are isolated from ourselves, from others, and, ultimately, from meaning itself.

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1. See, for example: [www.thestackeddeck.com](http://www.thestackeddeck.com); [www.wallstreetmostwanted.com](http://www.wallstreetmostwanted.com).
2. David Packard, *The HP Way* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), p. 82.

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