

Prisoners of our Thoughts

Viktor Frankl's Principles at Work

It was in a meeting with Viktor Frankl at his home in Vienna, Austria, in August 1996 when I first proposed the idea of writing a book that would apply his core principles and approach explicitly to work and the workplace.

Dr. Frankl, the world-renowned psychiatrist, Nazi death camp survivor, and author of the classic best-seller, *Man's Search for Meaning*, was more than encouraging when, in his typically direct and passionate style, he grabbed my arm and said, "Alex, yours is the book that needs to be written!"

When one considers the amount of time that people spend "at work" during their lifetime, it should be expected that the search for meaning at work is an important concern. However, when the question of personal meaning arises, work and the workplace are viewed only superficially as legitimate sources of meaning. For many people, it is as if authentic meaning only happens outside of the work environment!

It is time to bring meaning to work; that is, to do for the domain of work what Dr. Frankl was able to do for psychotherapy. Work, in this broadly-defined context, applies to volunteers as well as to paid workers, to people working in all sectors and industries, to people who are self-employed, such as operating home-based businesses or serving as independent consultants, and to those who are in some kind of job/career "transition." Work and the workplace, in

this connection, comprise something that is relevant to most people over the course of their lives.

Core Principles

Drawing upon Viktor Frankl's System of Logotherapy, as well as my experience working in mental health, business, and government, I have derived seven "Core Principles" that can be used to open up new opportunities for finding personal meaning at work and for living an authentic life. Let me briefly introduce these principles and demonstrate how they may be applied to work-related situations.

Exercise the freedom to choose your attitude

This first principle pertains to our Freedom of Will, a cornerstone of Dr. Frankl's philosophy and perhaps the

most widely-known aspect of his teachings. In all situations, no matter how desperate they may appear or actually be, we always have the ultimate freedom to choose our attitude.

At Work: Choosing a positive attitude during stressful times, such as working with a difficult supervisor or co-workers, dealing with a budget reduction or job lay-off, and meeting rigorous quality standards not only directly and positively influences our performance but also our health and well-being. Likewise, a negative attitude may serve to accentuate our stress and, in effect, result in a self-fulfilling prophecy. To be sure, we can't always control what happens to us but, in any particular moment, we do have a choice to respond in a positive or negative way. And, importantly, this is OUR choice.

Realize your will to meaning

The second principle pertains to our Will to Meaning. In other words, we need to commit authentically to meaningful values and goals that only we can actualize and fulfill.

At Work: It is vitally important to find a connection between our work (and workplace) and our personal values and goals. If, for instance, we find that interacting with others is an important personal value, then we must find a way for our work and workplace to offer meaningful human encounters. Similarly, if we truly value our personal creativity, then we must find a way for our work and workplace to offer opportunities for creative expression. We are all unique individuals, so our values and goals will be unique. It is our responsibility to clarify our values and goals and find ways to actualize them in our work and everyday lives.

Detect the meaning of life's moments

The third principle pertains to the Meaning of Life, which requires that we see both the trees and the forest of our work/lives. Importantly, only we can answer for our own life by detecting the meaning at any given moment and assuming responsibility for weaving our unique tapestry of existence.

At Work: Ultimately, we alone are responsible for our personal job, career, or work path and therefore for detecting

the meaning of each situation or experience along the way. Exploring the deeper meaning behind losing a job or moving from one kind of work to another offers the potential for us not only to learn from each experience but also to grow in ways that make work overall more fulfilling and life more meaning-full. By staying attuned to such potentialities, we may also be able to visualize our job/work “path” more clearly over time.

Don't work against yourself

The fourth principle pertains to Frankl's concept and technique of Paradoxical Intention. Simply put, it asks that we avoid becoming so obsessed with or fixated on an intent or outcome that we actually work against the desired result.

At Work: Supervisors who are accused of “micro-management,” more often than not, have good intentions even though their behavior frequently results in the opposite effect desired. Paradoxically, by focusing so intensely on monitoring and controlling the actions of others, there is increasing risk that worker performance will be adversely effected. The same thing often happens with workers who become fixated on receiving some kind of recognition, such as a raise or promotion. The more they obsess and strive for their objective, the less likely they are able to achieve it.

Look at yourself from a distance

The fifth principle pertains to Frankl's concept of Self-Detachment. Dr. Frankl, in this regard, underscored that only human beings possess the capacity to look at themselves out of some perspective or distance. This capability, it should be noted, includes the uniquely human trait known as our “sense of humor.”

At Work: Even when we closely identify ourselves with our jobs, it is important to remember that we are not our jobs, nor are our jobs really us. Being able to laugh at ourselves, even at work, is an effective way to “free” ourselves from our jobs, gain perspective, and see more clearly the real situation that is confronting us. Maintaining a sense of humor, even during hard times, helps to unfreeze us for action. Viewing ourselves and our circumstances from

a distance also opens up new opportunities for personal learning and development.

Shift your focus of attention

The sixth principle relates to Frankl's notion of Dereflection, that is, the ability to shift our focus of attention from the problem situation to something else, to something positive, in order to build our coping mechanisms for dealing with stress and change.

At Work: What can we do when we are burdened by a difficult situation at work? By shifting our focus of attention to a more positive situation or experience, or even to the positive attributes of the situation at hand, our coping skills and capacity to resolve the situation actually increase. Focusing on a complex problem situation directly often immobilizes our ability to act and constrains our view of how best to deal with or resolve the situation. In the case of downsizing an organization, for example, both labor and management would benefit from focusing on the opportunities, rather than only the “problems”, that confront them.

Extend beyond yourself

The seventh principle pertains to the concept of Self-Transcendence. Simply put, self-transcendence allows us to manifest the human spirit at work by relating and being directed to something more than ourself.

At Work: Ideally, there is more to our work than simply a paycheck. To make work meaningful, most of us want to make a difference in some way. In many cases, the larger purpose of the work that we do is clear. In others, it requires that we look at our jobs or work in a larger context in order to see that it brings value beyond our personal needs or desires. We need to ask ourselves, “how is my work contributing to our customers, others within our organization, and society in general?” The more that we can see our work from such a “self-transcendent” perspective, the more likely we will detect its ultimate meaning in our lives. All work contains the seeds of self-transcendence. In the final analysis, it is up to the people doing the work to determine if such a quality exists for them.

By applying these seven principles of Frankl's Logotherapy to work and the workplace, I have found that the “search for meaning” can be used to advance transformational management and elevate the human spirit in the workplace. Moreover, these meaning-focused principles can be used to address a wide range of existential, work-related issues, such as job loss, underemployment, fear in the workplace, stress, interpersonal conflict, and career transition.

Viktor Frankl's legacy was one of hope and possibility. He saw the human condition at its worst, and human beings behaving in ways intolerable to the imagination. He also saw human beings rising to the heights of compassion and caring in ways that can only be described as miraculous acts of unselfishness and transcendence. There is something in us that can rise above and beyond everything we think possible. Our instinct for meaning, in our work and in our everyday lives, is ours right now, at this very moment. As long as we do not allow ourselves to become prisoners of our thoughts.

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