

How Leaders Propose Meaning Making - A Psychological Perspective

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People - Meaning Makers

- People are meaning makers. This was pioneered by Victor Frankl in his experience in concentration camps and his work as a psychiatrist. He found people will survive any terror when they have a particular meaning and purpose:

“What was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life – daily and hourly. Our answer must consist not in talk and meditation, but in the right action and in the right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.”



People as Meaning Makers

- More modern research demonstrates this need for meaning making as well:

“Community psychologists note that it is in one’s struggle to matter and to thrive that meaning-making becomes important. Individuals need their communities to recognize them and they need to believe their work within these communities matters. As Prilleltensky (2014) has indicated when an individual is recognized by their community they get the sense that their presence matters. When they understand their work positively impacts their communities they get the sense that what they do matters. It is this struggle to matter that gives life meaning and purpose.”



Dr. Crystal Park and Meaning Making

“The Meaning Making Model is discrepancy based, that is, it proposes that people’s perception of discrepancies between their appraised meaning of a particular situation and their global meaning (i.e. what they believe and desire) creates distress, which in turn gives rise to efforts to reduce the discrepancy and resultant distress.”

Cr. Crystal Park Model of Meaning Making

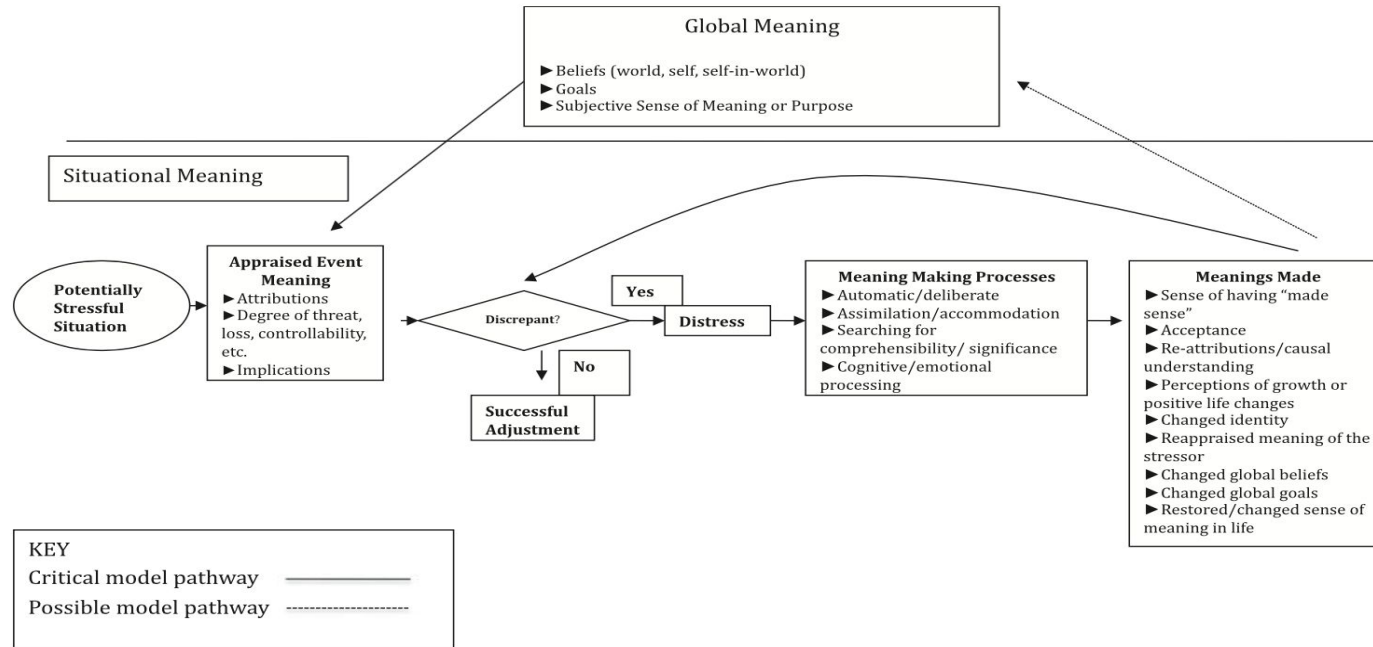


Figure 1. The meaning-making model.



Meaning Making and Leadership

- Leader's have a significant role in making meaning for their teams John Varney (2009):

“In times of change, the work of leadership is to make new meaning quickly as corporate survival depends upon it. Because much meaning is implicit in our cultural norms, shaking off those norms will be a prerequisite of the successful leadership of change and innovation (p. 3).

- Kouzes and Posner emphasize the need for leaders to create shared meaning.



How Leaders Make and Communicate Meaning

- First, to embody and create an environment in which the vision and mission statements are constantly communicated to their constituents. This means they must be vision centric as leaders and make sure people in the organization know why what they do matters.
- A second important aspect for facilitating meaning within the organization is for the leader to use a narrative approach to constantly maintain a sense of aspirational tension between the current state of the organization and what it intends to be. Psychology has demonstrated meaning making occurs primarily when there is a discrepancy between global meaning and the assessed experience individuals are currently having.



How Leaders Make and Communicate Meaning (Cont.)

- A third and final tool that leaders can use to create meaning and purpose in the people they lead is to create a high level of organizational identity within the organization. If the members of the organization develop a sense of self intimately connected to their organizational membership they are more likely to go above and beyond their basic responsibility to help facilitate change, overcome organizational issues, and support new and difficult initiatives.