

Efficacy of a Sense of Meaning Intervention Amongst Managers at South African Institution of Higher Education

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The study evaluated the efficacy of a sense of meaning intervention with a sample of higher education managers. Participants were 14 members of the campus management committee of a university of technology, in South Africa (age range = 32 to 64 years, females = 36%, majority ethnicity = 50% White). Data were on their sense of meaning with intervention were collected using the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) and Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ). In addition, qualitative data were collected on the participants' subjective experience of development in creative potential. A one group pretest-posttest design employed. The quantitative data were analysed using t-tests for paired samples. The qualitative were analysed by means of themes. A sense of meaning intervention appears to result in significant improvement in levels of work related meaning and job satisfaction among higher education managers.

Keywords: sense of meaning intervention, sense of managers, higher education, South Africa

Life is full of challenges and it is vital that people should be resilient by developing a stronger sense of meaning and purpose (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). People with a high sense of purpose realize that their choices are determined by the meaning each person detects in life and in the moment (Wimberly, 2010). People who lack meaning perceive themselves as victims of circumstances and refuse to acknowledge their contribution to the harmful situation. For instance, a high sense of meaning is a mitigating factor for personal wellbeing (Meraviglia, 2005; Pinquart, 2002; Reker, Peacock & Wong, 1987; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Shek, 1992; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). Evidence is also available from research that lack of meaning is associated with psychopathology (Pinquart, 2002; Ruffin, 1984). This relationship needs investigation in work settings, including higher education. This study investigated whether teaching 'meaning-theory' to the participants would result in an increase in the levels of meaning of participants, and facilitate better adjustment in the work environment.

Meaningful Work Settings

There is evidence to suggest that meaning in work settings is related to job satisfaction (Barsh, Mogelof, & Webb, 2010; Leung et al., 2012; Reutter & Northcott, 1993). For instance, Barsh, Mogelof, and Webb (2010) reported that leadership meaning has a significant impact on satisfaction with both work and life however; there are situations where employees experience feelings of inner emptiness. These employees are more likely experience a phenomenon that could be described as "despair despite success" (Frankl, 1988). In an ideal world most of us prefer to experience a phenomenon which could be described as "fulfilment with success". Research studies have indicated that, career uncertainties are one of the major causes of depression (Rengito, 2003).

Interventions to reconstruct meaning are possible. For instance, Fillion et al. (2009) reported on a meaning intervention with nurses in palliative care following which nurses in the experimental group reported more perceived benefits of working

in palliative care after a meaning-centred intervention. Meaning may be explained by expected work outcomes (Judge & Watanabe, 1993; Makola & Van Der Berg, 2010; Steger & Dik, 2009). Makola and Van Der Berg (2010) reported a high sense of meaning in students who indicated interest in service oriented careers and others who values primarily the compensation they would receive. The construct of meaning in life provides a theoretical framework for understanding and intervening with employees in danger of not being satisfied in their work environment, and thus it has far-reaching effect in management theory (Frankl, 2006).

Goals of the Study

The aim of the current study was to investigate the efficacy of a meaning focused brief therapy intervention on the sense of meaning in higher education managers and as related to their job satisfaction. The primary research question was: Can a brief intervention focused on creative, experiential and attitudinal values enhance the levels of work-related meaning and job satisfaction of a higher education management team?

Method

Research Design

The study comprised of both the qualitative and quantitative research methods. A pre pretest-posttest quasi experimental design was used in this study. The study is exploratory in its intention is to determine whether the efficacy of a meaning oriented intervention in a higher education setting.

Participants

The participants are members of the campus management committee at a university of technology (n=14, females = 36%, majority ethnicity = 50% White, mean managerial experience =9.21 years, SD=5.87). The sample was purposely selected.

Data Collection

Participants completed the Purpose in Life Test (PIL; Crumbaugh & Maholic (1969) and the Short-Form Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ; Weiss et al. 1967) pre and post-intervention. Data on their demographics were also gathered.

The PIL was designed to operationalize Frankl's ideas and to measure an individual's experience of meaning and purpose in life. It is a 20-item scale, and each item is rated on a 7-point scale and total scores therefore range from 20 (low purpose) to 140 (high purpose). According to the criterion provided by Crumbaugh and Maholic (1969), PIL scores of 92 or less are indicative of low meaning, and scores of 112 and more indicate definite purpose in life, with moderate meaning in between. A Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.86 to .87 were observed for the study sample.

The MSQ is designed to measure an employee's satisfaction with his or her job (Weiss et al. 1967). This form consists of 20 items, with the following five response categories, Not Satisfied; Somewhat Satisfied; Satisfied; Very Satisfied and Extremely Satisfied. The scale has been used effectively in a number of studies in South Africa (e.g., Bester, Richter, & Boshoff, 1997; Boshoff & Hoole, 1998; Van der Vyver, 1998). The biographic questionnaire, of the *Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ)*, was also used to gather the biographic details of the participants. A Cronbach's alphas of 0.65 to 0.73 were observed with the study sample.

Qualitative interview. A questionnaire with open-ended questions was used to gain insight into the participants' impression of the brief meaning-centred intervention. The following aspects were covered: were they satisfied with the content of the content of topic; what new skills did they learn or improve upon; how will the skills help them to do a better job or contribute more to their team work; and how they rate the presenter. The researcher conducted a member-checking process by sharing the findings with those from whom the data was collected. Sharing the themes which emerged from the findings provided an opportunity to, not only validate the findings, but also elicit further clarification of the results.

Procedure

Planning for innovation/ transforming assessment practice. Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the executive management of the Central University of Technology, Free State. After permission was granted, the researcher conducted a one hour session, to inform the participants about the purpose of the study. All participants gave consent to take part in the study, and consent form were duly completed.

Pre-Intervention. *The Purpose in life test (PIL) and Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) were administered to 14 participants. Thereafter, the group reflected and interpreted outcome of the planning phase.*

Intervention. The intervention applied didactic and process-oriented strategies, including guided reflections, experiential exercises, and education based on themes of Viktor Frankl's logotherapy. During the intervention the facilitator presented the theory (based on a self-compiled manual and slides), as well as practical exercises, i.e., songs and videos with themes on meaning and purpose of life.

The following topics were presented:

- Who is Viktor Frankl?
- Background to Logotherapy

- Three ways to discover meaning
- Five areas where meaning can found
- Practical ways to apply logo-theory in our lives

The intervention offers a holistic view of the entire person in the present moment. It emphasizes that, although meaning is personal, it cannot be found in one place. Meaning can be found everywhere, even in the workplace. The intervention differentiates between the physical, mental, and spiritual levels of existence. The three levels are not clearly separate from each other and they do influence each other. The human spirit has the following important resources; the will to meaning; task orientation; conscience; self-transcendence; self-distancing; and humour. There are three principal ways to discover meaning in the workplace; (i), what we give to the work (creative values); (ii), what we receive or take from work (experiential values); and (iii), the attitudes we attach to work (attitudinal values). Coupled with the latter there are five areas in which meaning is most likely to be found: self-discovery, choice, uniqueness, responsibility and self-transcendence.

Post-intervention. The researcher and participants reflected on the intervention phase by re-administering Purpose in Life test and Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire. The main purpose of re-administering the questionnaires is to determine whether the intervention did have an influence on the participants' feelings of purpose (as measured by the PIL) and improved job satisfaction (as measured by MSQ). The participants also completed an open-ended questionnaire to provide additional information of how the brief meaning-centred intervention had an impact on the lives. The main purpose of using the questionnaire was to evaluate the participants' impression of the intervention. Specifically, the questionnaire was used to determine in which ways, if any, did the intervention assist participants to improve on their creative, experiential and attitudinal values. The questionnaire was also used to establish whether the intervention did assist participants to gain a better insight into the five areas (i.e., uniqueness, self-discovery, choice, responsibility, and self-transcendence) in which meaning can be discovered.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed qualitatively and quantitatively. The independent variable (brief meaning-centred intervention) on the dependent variable (PIL score/sense of meaning and MSQ score/job satisfaction) was examined for change post-intervention. The data from the one group pretest-posttest design was analysed with non-parametric test procedure for small sample size designs. The qualitative data were thematically analysed using the procedures recommended by Guest (2012). These procedures focus on examining themes within data. Thematic analysis is a very useful method in capturing details of meaning within a data set.

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics. As can be observed from the Table the intervention increased PIL scores by 7.14 ($p < .01$). Changes to the MSQ scores were not significant ($p > 0.05$).

<Insert Table 1 about here>

The improvement in creative, experiential and attitudinal values appeared consistent with the intent of the workshop intervention. With regard to the *Creative Values*, the management team affirmed that that they learned new skills and/or they

Table 1
Pre-Post Intervention Means (with Standard Deviations) for Work-Related Meanings and Satisfaction FOE

Variable	N	PreIntervention Mean (SD)	Postintervention Mean (SD)	Difference Score	Two tailed P value	One tailed P value
Satisfaction with work	14	81.93 (4.94)	84.86 (6.13)	-2.93 (6.032)	0.1909	0.0954
Meaning	14	120.43 (9.77)	127.57 (6.96)	-7.14 (6.20)	0.0002	0.0001

Note. N=14

have improved on existing ones such as self-realisation, the importance of knowledge sharing, problem solving, self-realisation, interpersonal skills, relationship building, and resilience. Illustrative statements for this include:

I have learned that a positive meaning in life can help one to achieve his/her full potential. (Participant 1).

The topic is new to me; as such it broadened my perspective on the meaning and purpose in life. (Participant 4).

The content was in line with the current challenges which we face in our work environment and society. (Participant 3).

My listening skills have improved. (Participant 10).

They further indicated that they realize value of actively dealing with life situations. More importantly, the management team acknowledged that the skills they have acquired will result to increased productivity and goal achievement. Illustrative statements for this include:

I will be able to set more realistic goals. (Participant 7).

I have acquired skills which will help me to achieve personal and organizational goals more efficiently. (Participant 9).

The skills we have learned will result to increased productivity. (Participant 14).

The latter are a vital a components in most work environments.

Changes in *Experiential Values* are reflected by the fact that the managers indicated that the skills, they have acquired, will help them to be an inspiration to others; they will be able to assist their fellow colleagues to find meaning in their lives. Illustrative statements for this include:

I skill I have acquired will assist me to be an inspiration to others. (Participant 2).

I will help others to find meaning in their lives and assist where possible to fulfil this task. (Participant 12).

The skills I have learnt will help me to motivate others. (Participant 13).

In addition the skills will help them to build solid work relations, to encourage them, serve as role models, improve interpersonal relations and change the mind sets of fellow colleagues from negative to positive. Illustrative statements for this include:

To listen to my colleagues' point of view and understand their stance on certain issues. (Participant 1).

I will be able to encourage my colleagues. (Participant 8).

The skills I have learned will help me to be a role model. (Participant 9).

The skills I have learnt will help me to change the mind-set of people I am working with; this will enhance performance, which will lead to the achievement of organisational goals. (Participant 3).

With regard to the *attitudinal values*, the managers expressed a view that they have developed a more positive attitude towards work, they are resilience, fulfilled, more considerate, have greater tolerance and are more determined to find meaning in their work and life. Illustrative statements for this include:

I have learnt that I can have hope under all circumstances, and find meaning and purpose in my work and life. (Participant 9).

I learned the importance of being true to myself and appreciating who I am. (Participant 2). I have learnt to be more resilient, and to persevere. (Participant 11). I will be more tolerant. (Participant 14).

Post intervention, the meaning related attitudes of the workers were enhanced, in that they no longer perceive themselves as victims of circumstances.

Discussion

The outcome of this study discovered that there was an improvement in the levels of meaning of the lower-level managers after a brief meaning-centred intervention. Creative meaning improved in that the management team affirmed that that they learned new skills and/or they have improved on existing ones such as self-realisation, the importance of knowledge sharing, problem solving, self-realisation, interpersonal skills, relationship building, and resilience. These findings are supported by Steger and Dik (2009) who report that people seeking general meaning in life are, indeed, satisfied by experiencing meaning in their careers.

Experiential values improved in that managers specified that the skills, they have acquired, will help them to be an inspiration to others; they will be able to assist their fellow colleagues to find meaning in their lives. These findings are consistent to those of Fillion et al., (2009) in which a meaning centred intervention helped to change the perception of palliative care nurses about their job.

Attitudinal values were positively impacted in that the managers expressed a view that they have developed a more positive attitude towards work, they are resilience, fulfilled, more considerate, have greater tolerance and are more determined to find meaning in their work and life. These findings are consistent to those of Leung et al., (2012) in which a minimal intervention, such as the MCI, supported bone marrow transplant nurses in finding positive personal meaning and purpose in their otherwise highly stressful work culture.

Furthermore, this study revealed that exposing the management team to a brief meaning-centred intervention does improve job satisfaction. These findings are consistent with previous studies (e.g., Fillion et al., 2009); Steger and Dik (2009) in

that they report similar a high sense of meaning has a significant impact on job satisfaction.

Limitations of the study include use of a purposeful sample brought only workers with moderate to high levels of meaning in the study. Also, the the sample size small. As a result, one cannot generalize the results lower level managers in similar institutions of higher learning. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that a brief, meaning-centred intervention in the work environment appears to enhance the levels of work related meaning of managerial employees in an education setting

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