

An Imaginary Conversation

Involving David Bohm, Jerome Bruner, Viktor Frankl, and Robert Terry

On The Topic "Meaning and Leadership"

ORLD 672, Winter 1999

Michael Ayers

25 Feb 99

[Written for a course at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, MN)

Moderator: I'd like to welcome you all to this evening's panel discussion, held under the auspices of The College of St. Catherine's Imaginary Conversations Series. We are very pleased to welcome four people who have each written books touching on the idea of meaning: David Bohm, Jerome Bruner, Viktor Frankl, and Robert Terry. Thank you all for joining us. As I've read through your works, I've noticed that each of you has touched on the topic of meaning. In some cases it has served as a central topic, in other cases in a more peripheral fashion. It seems, however, that you use the word in slightly different ways.

By way of introduction, let me suggest a few synonyms for meaning. Consider the expression, "She stepped back – I wonder what the meaning of that was?" Here it appears that by meaning we had in mind significance. Consider instead the expression, "Do you take my meaning?" Here it appears we were thinking of intention. Or consider "What is the meaning of this interruption?" Here it appears we were thinking of purpose. One word, but three slightly different, well, meanings.

Let me begin by posing this question: How does the concept meaning relate to the workaday lives of individuals within contemporary organizations?

Robert Terry: Over the years, I have found that most issues center on meaning, mission, and power, but that our leadership slides too quickly to structure, resources, and existence. We reorganize (structure), throw money at the problem (resources), or pray for a miracle (existence).

We focus our attention inappropriately for three reasons. It is easier, quicker, and safer When we address fundamentally authentic issues of meaning, mission, and power, we are dealing with the heart and soul of a culture or a person's life. (p 92)

Moderator: You find dealing with meaning more difficult than, say, structure. You seem to focus on the purpose facet of meaning, since you connect it to mission and power: getting things done. And you mention meaning in connection with "heart and soul," the meaning for either a culture or a person. What about meaning for the individual alone,

not considered as part of a group. Does meaning start with the individual? Viktor, you've written mostly about meaning and the individual ...

Viktor Frankl: According to logotherapy, this striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man. That is why I speak of a will to meaning in contrast to the pleasure principle (or, as we could also term it, the will to pleasure) on which Freudian psychoanalysis is centered, as well as in contrast to the will to power on which Adlerian psychology, using the term "striving for superiority," is focused. (p 104)

Moderator: Hmmm ... So you see meaning as a primary force, but suggest that we strive to find it rather than create it. Is this about purpose as well? Is this meaning some sort of a static thing out there, existing on its own, that we strive toward? How do we move then from the life of the individual to the organization or group?

David Bohm: Meaning is not static; it is flowing. And if we have the meaning being shared, then it is flowing among us; it holds the group together. Then everybody is sensitive to all the nuances going around, and not merely to what is happening in his own mind. From that forms a meaning which is shared. [sic] And in that way we can talk together coherently and think together. Whereas generally people hold to their assumptions, so they are not thinking together. Each one is on his own. What blocks sensitivity is the defense of your assumptions and opinions. (p 30 – 31)

Moderator: Okay, we impede our ability to talk together by our defensiveness. It sounds as though you're saying that meaning relates somehow to our collective intention, what we intend to do as a group, and that it must be shared for an organization to thrive. You point out that we can't get that through defending our version of the facts as seen through our private assumptions. How do we get past these differences? For an organization to succeed, we all need to feel like we're living with the same meaning, telling the same story. Is there something that can help us achieve the state where we can narrate the same story? Jerome? What are your thoughts on the contribution of a collective story in this context?

Jerome Bruner: When you encounter an exception to the ordinary, and ask somebody what is happening, the person you ask will virtually always tell a story that contains reasons (or some other specification of an intentional state). The story, moreover, will almost invariably be an account of a possible world in which the encountered exception is somehow made to make sense or to have "meaning." (p 49)

Moderator: Now you seem to have shifted to significance – "Why does that person not eat meat?" "Well, maybe she's a vegetarian and so she does not want to eat food made from animals. That's the meaning of her not eating meat." Thus, the reason for that exception shows its significance. Are you saying that nothing has meaning except in one of two ways: either someone teaches us that meaning – whether thoughtfully or thoughtlessly – or we create it for ourselves? Will it work for each of us to invent a solo meaning?

Bruner: Another critical feature of narrative is that it specializes in the forging of links between the exceptional and the ordinary. . . . The viability of a culture inheres in its capacity for resolving conflicts, for explicating differences and renegotiating communal meanings. (p 47)

Moderator: You say that we try to incorporate the exceptions into the normal story. And you specifically mention "communal meanings." But a frequent criticism I hear leveled against today's organizations is that we do not have a sense of the common good, that we're arrayed in isolated domains with no sense of the common good. When we talk of the common good, of course, we are necessarily talking about a group. Is there a role for leadership here?

Terry: Leadership occurs in the commons, safe places in which leadership faces fear and discerns the common good. A common place may be as small as a face-to-face dialogue or as large as the globe, but through it, leadership steps into the world of public scrutiny. Even the prophet who has few, if any, followers requires shared space. Shared space, however, is not initially value-free or safe. It is the ethics of authenticity that transforms a common space into a common good, creating safe places for action.

In the commons, leadership presses for convergence amid great diversity, searching for bonds that protect and enhance the very diversity that threatens the possibility of the commons. In the commons, pluralism endures and thrives. Courage challenges the fear of diversity that can destroy the commons; thus leadership offers hope that in our commons we can discover and live toward the common good. (p 257)

Moderator: Open a magazine and you'll find an article on diversity. Diversity based on race, ethnic origin, religion, you name it. You point out that, paradoxically, diversity can flourish in the commons – "convergence amid diversity." I'm reminded of part of a collect in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer: "So guide us in the work that we do, that we may do it not for the self alone, but for the common good." How can any organization hope to create a sense of the common good, a common understanding?

Bohm: I'm going to suggest the way it ought to work. Assumptions will come up. And if you hear somebody else who has a assumption that seems outrageous to you, the natural response might be to get angry, or get excited, or to react in some other way. But suppose you suspend that activity. That means that it is sort of there in front of you. You are not suppressing it, not carrying it out, not believing it or disbelieving it, you are simply seeing the meaning of your assumptions along with the other person's. You may not even have known that you had an assumption. It was only because he came up with the opposite one that you find out that you have one. You may uncover other assumptions, but we are all suspending them and looking at them all, seeing what they mean. . . .

That is part of collective thought – people thinking together. At some stage we would share our opinions without hostility, and we would then be able to think together; whereas, when we defend an opinion we can't. (p 13)

Moderator: So we think together, and that permits us to examine our assumptions and biases in that safe place Robert mentioned, that non-hostile environment, fostered by the leader. So leadership has a clear role here in permitting or even promoting the idea of "thinking together." And through that process a group or an organization can ...?

Bohm: I am saying society is based on shared meanings, which constitute the culture. If we don't share coherent meaning, we do not make much of a society. ... I find that something like [dialogue] is necessary for society to function properly and for society to survive. Otherwise it will all fall apart. This shared meaning is really the cement that holds society together, and you could say that the present society has some very poor quality cement. (p 16 - 17)

Moderator: I like the metaphor of the "poor quality cement" afflicting our society. But I don't see shared meaning connecting specifically to the culture of the group.

Bruner: Consider first how contextualism affects ideas about knowledge and how we acquire it. As Roy Pea, David Perkins, and others now put it, a "person's" knowledge is not just in one's own head, in "person solo", but in the notes that one has put into accessible notebooks, in the books with underlined passages on one's shelves, in the handbooks one has learned to consult, in the information sources one has hitched up to the computer, in the friends one can call up to get a reference or a "steer", and so on almost endlessly. All of these, as Perkins points out, are parts of the knowledge flow of which one has become a part. And that flow even includes those highly conventionalized forms of rhetoric that we use for justifying and explaining what we are doing, each tailored to and "scaffolded" by the occasion of use. Coming to know anything, in this sense, is both situated and (to use the Pea-Perkins term) distributed. To overlook this situated-distributed nature of knowledge and knowing is to lose sight not only of the cultural nature of knowledge but of the correspondingly cultural nature of knowledge acquisition. (p 106)

Moderator: Ah, now I see. In your dialogue we take bits of knowledge contained in the knowledge flow, share those bits, and actually create new knowledge and new meanings beyond what any of us knew before. And that comes from re-examining our assumptions. And this will offer us better societal cement. But can we go too far that way? We have cultural knowledge, and we hope to add to it and transmit it with each new generation. We have seen some situations in this century, however, where the cultural knowledge has become somehow contaminated and the contamination has spread very widely. Doesn't the individual have some sort of ongoing responsibility on his or her own, the obligation to maintain some sort of independence of thought?

Frankl: Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress. ... the men who walked through the huts comforting others ... offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. ... It is this spiritual freedom – which cannot be taken away – that makes life meaningful and purposeful. (p 74 – 76)

Moderator: Choosing one's own way ... Viktor, you've put meaning and purpose together again ... Do you think that there is some kind of single ultimate truth for man to discover? David, what about ultimate truth?

Bohm: How can you share if you are sure you have truth and the other fellow is sure he has truth, and the truths don't agree? How can you share?

Therefore, you have to watch out for the notion of truth. Dialogue may not be concerned directly with truth – it may arrive at truth, but it is concerned with meaning. If the meaning is incoherent you will never arrive at truth. (p 26)

Moderator: Viktor, you posed the idea that each individual must discover his own meaning. David, you caution against focusing on truth to the exclusion of meaning.

Frankl: 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.

These tasks, and therefore the meaning of life, differ from man to man, and from moment to moment. Thus it is impossible to define the meaning of life in a general way. (p 85)

Moderator: We've talked a good deal about meaning, but we have strayed a bit from the role of leadership. All right, if there is no general "meaning of life", then what is the role of the leader? Perhaps we have confused two layers of meaning: one the meaning of an individual's life, and another the meaning of the organization.

Terry: Meaning is the primary concern of the ethical leadership theorists. (p 60)

Moderator: And that relates to the leading of organizations? Can you tell us something more about the role of "ethical leadership" and meaning within organizations?

Terry: The way we frame an issue invariably determines how well we focus the issues, judge what is really happening, and direct our attention and intervention for change. This hypothesis is critical because we typically frame issues poorly, thereby mis-focusing, mis-judging, mis-directing, and failing in our leadership. Our ability to assess existing perspectives on leadership and to provide a new perspective that helps leaders to inform and direct engagement with the world hangs on a deep appreciation of [this idea]. Framing of issues is a skill that is crucial to effective leadership diagnosis and action because that is one major part of what leadership does. It frames issues. (p 87)

Moderator: So your contention is that leadership helps us identify what is important given the meaning of the organization and how we will address those important things? It imposes a sort of collective perspective?

Bohm: If each of us in this room is suspending, then we are all doing the same thing. We are all looking at everything together. The content of our consciousness is essentially the same. Accordingly, a different kind of consciousness is possible among us, a

participatory consciousness – as indeed consciousness always is, but one that is frankly acknowledged to be participatory and can go that way freely. Everything can move between us. Each person is participating, is partaking of the whole meaning of the group and also taking part in it. We can call that a true dialogue. (p 14)

Moderator: Ah, you suggest that it is not imposed by the leader, but is somehow adopted freely by the participants. So I see that the suspension and participation are critically important. But for that participation to work, we must use a language in common. And most of this entire panel discussion has dwelt on the complexities of a single word.

Bruner: Language is acquired not in the role of spectator but through use. Being "exposed" to flow of language is not nearly so important as using it in the midst of "doing". Learning a language, to borrow John Austin's celebrated phrase, is learning "how to do things with words." (p 70 - 71)

Moderator: "Doing things with words" sounds almost like another way of describing dialogue. Through the actual use of the language, building our own sentences, telling the common story in our own words, exposing our assumptions, we come to a common understanding. And we can then use that common understanding to appreciate the common good, is that the idea? We can come to a sense of what it all means?

Bohm: The picture or image that this derivation [of dialogue] suggests is of a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which will emerge some new understanding. It's something new, which may not have been in the starting point at all. It's something creative. And this shared meaning is the "glue" or "cement" that holds people and societies together. (p 1)

Moderator: So for the group or organization, it's about the glue which we discover through dialogue. Do any of you have closing comments you'd like to offer on how all this impacts an individual within the organization? Any last words?

Frankl: There is much wisdom in the words of Nietzsche: "He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how." (p 109)

Moderator: That sounds reminiscent of the book of Proverbs: "Without a vision, the people perish."

Well, this has been a most entertaining and enlightening discussion – although I'm not sure that we ever got to the point of genuine dialogue as David has described it. To try to bring things together a bit: meaning in some cases seems to revolve around significance, in other cases around purpose, in still others intent. But when we talk of the meaning for a group, especially from the leader's perspective, I suggest that the leader has a profound impact on the meaning of the group in all these ways: the significance of the group, the purpose of the group, the intent of the group.

I want to thank each of the panel participants for taking time to join us today, and invite those in the audience to join us again next time for another in the continuing series of St. Catherine's Imaginary Conversations.

* * * * *

Works Referenced

Page references refer to quotations from the works cited below. NB, the comments as used and assigned to these four "speakers" come directly from these works.

Bohn, David. On Dialogue. Ojai CA: David Bohm Seminars, 1990.

Bruner, Jerome. Acts of Meaning. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Frankl, Viktor. Man's Search for Meaning. New York: Simon & Shuster, 1984.

Terry, Robert W. Authentic Leadership. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.