

Flow beyond Systems: Development through Somatic Intelligence

Editors: Maria Spindler and Tonnie van der Zouwen

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Michaela Bristol-Faulhammer

The Efficacy of Different Values Interventions in Transformative Meaning Making and Transition

Abstract

Meaningful private and professional transition is related to the identification of what is important and significant for an individual. Meaningful values emerge from a reflective process that helps the client to (re)discover and reaffirm qualities that made past experiences meaningful. This study addressed the process of values-based meaning making by demonstrating how values coaching (VC) and values reflective writing (VRW) facilitated the process of meaningful behavior change. The identification of one's meaningful values was achieved by using "Life Journey Map" (LJMap®), an educational technology to discover values that are relevant, significant, and important for a person. Online values ranking, followed by a coaching or writing treatment, and a final efficacy inquiry were conducted to explore how different characteristics in the intervention supported meaning making and the behavior change process. The results provide evidence that meaning making unfolds in making distinctions and bringing significant experiences to the foreground. Individuals who enact their motivational values perceive their work to be meaningful. Because LJMap VC and VRW targets cognitive and emotional engagement, both treatments are suitable to facilitate meaningful transition.

Keywords: values, meaning making, transformational change, coaching, reflective writing, behavior change, Life Journey Map

1 Introduction

The most recent employee satisfaction report by Gallup (2015) indicated that from a group of 25 million respondents in the period 2011-2015, 32% of the U.S. workforce are actively engaged in their jobs, 50.8% of workers are not engaged, and 17.2% are actively disengaged. The Gallup (2015) study also found that a similar (dis)engagement level was present in the European workforce. This level of disengagement results in a loss of productivity in the United States between \$450 and \$550 billion each year (Gallup 2015). Scholars who explored engagement at the workplace found that disengagement was related to the absence of career happiness (Henderson, 2000), the lack of meaning, personal goals, and purpose (Fairlie, 2011; Wrzesniewski & Schwartz, 2014). Happiness, meaning, and purpose were linked to living according to one's values and goals, fulfillment of needs, self-authorship, and developmental growth (Baxter Magolda, 2009; Fairlie, 2011; Kegan & Lahey, 2000).

Narrative therapies present storytelling as a pathway toward a meaningful life; some researchers (Pennebaker, 2004; Wilson, 2011) have argued that narratives are the window to clients' values and meaning system. Meaningful agency and meaningful decision making involve a process of developing a way of understanding and being in the world (Bristol, 2001; Gadamer, 2013; Kegan, 1982). Inherent in this process of meaning making is making sense of experiences and events. Maturana and Varela (1992) hypothesized that reflexive feedback, "emotioning" and "linguaging" allow individuals to make aware choices. Bristol (2001) and Rokeach (1973) argued that the reflection of what and how something makes sense is related to individuals' meaningful values. They further argued that aware choice of these values holds the potential for transformational change. Thus, changing individuals and social systems demands expansion of and the inclusion of individuals' values framework.

Bristol (2001), Hall (1986), and Rokeach (1973) suggested that as individuals make meaning and transform meaning, they alter their set of values and vice

versa. This new values framework brings new experiences and explanations of realities, and new meaning schemes to the foreground (Mezirow, 2000). New meanings of realities and values are brought forth in language (Bristol, 2000).

Grounded in constructivism and hermeneutics, I contend that meaning is constructed and requires both critical reflection and a safe place for reinterpreting beliefs, feelings, and experiences for new understanding to occur. Utilizing interventions where individuals can enter these reflective spaces and learn their values as well as a values-based understanding of their models is of crucial relevance in meaningful value behavior. Because LJMap values intervention create those reflective spaces, I suggest that LJMap interventions (values coaching, values reflective writing) are a potential social technology for addressing the shift of mental and behavioral frames.

2 The Use of Meaning and Meaningful in LJMAP

Frankl (1963) suggested the prime motivator of human being is meaning, not pleasure. He further argued that when people practice their priority values, they experience their lives as meaningful, important, and significant. Bristol (2000) claimed that something is meaningful for a person when it is related to his or her significant, important, and relevant values. Meaningful values, according to Bristol, exist in verbal and written language, and are expressed in words.

3 The Role of Coaching in Meaningful Transformation

The field of life or personal coaching offers several methods to support transitions and meaningful transformations. Transformational coaching approaches are designed to integrate positive emotions that arise from one's inner strength and virtues (Seligman, 2011), to utilize experiential learning

or storytelling for individuals to realize their visions, and to use these visions to navigate transitions and personal development (Biswas-Diener, 2009; Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, Sandahl, & Whitworth, 2011). A coaching approach designed to facilitate the process of meaning making was built on Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning theory. He argued that central to transformation is the reflection of experiences to create a new frame of reference and new behavioral frames. Coaches who build on values as influencing factors in human transformation either focus on identifying and creating awareness for value voids (Demartini, 2013), or aim at making the client more aware of the specific value words he or she spontaneously uses, hence building values literacy as a catalyst for meaningful change (Bristol, 2000).

The primary strength of the in-person models is the focus on strengths, virtues, and personal vision, or on values as a means for meaningful transition, and that they are built on recognized theories from developmental psychology. However, only the LJMap values coaching model specifically focuses on identifying values that are important and significant through a ranking process and building values literacy as a catalyst for meaningful change. Coaching models incorporating positive psychology with life and values coaching help clients to facilitate transition to a desired outcome but do not educate them on how to get there. Hence, it may not be the most effective approach for clients to learn how they can use the process of meaning making as an avenue for personal transformation.

According to the Association for Coaching (n.d.), coaching rates for individual life coaching per hour range from \$70 to \$350 (publications). Thus, in-person coaching might not be affordable for individuals with lower income. Identifying low-touch coaching models as a means for transformative meaning making and change might target a population that was excluded from nonclinical coaching interventions.

Research in the field of psychotherapy has shown that writing about emotional experiences creates transcendence (Pennebaker, 2004). According to Pennebaker, transformative and empowering dynamics are due to emotional disclosure that reduces inhibition, and the expression of emotions influenced by emotional and cognitive reappraisal of experiences. The positive outcomes of redirecting stories and behavior through writing was supported by Wilson (2011), who also showed that recovery processes for posttraumatic stress patients through writing were beneficial for clients. Given the successful application of writing about emotional experiences in transformative meaning making, it becomes important for coaches and consultants to know how they can leverage values-based interventions to facilitate clients' emotional reflection, and hence meaningful transition.

4 Research Interest and Research Question

The intent of this research was to explore the effectiveness of high-touch interventions (values coaching, VC) and low-touch interventions (reflective writing about values, VRW) as a means to influence transformative meaning making and consequently, promote behavior change that is considered to be meaningful. Following the research question, "How does values coaching (VC) and values reflective writing (VRW) influence meaningful behavior change," this study was aimed to contribute to developing alternative models of interventions in relevant change processes.

5 Methodology

The research was designed as a case study with six participants between 37 and 50 years of age. All of them identified themselves as being in a professional transition due to the perceived lack of meaning in their current career. A professional transition was defined as a process of finding or entering a

new career, either in the same profession or a new professional field. Five out of the six participants were White females; one was a White male. Two were Americans; four were Austrians. Two of the participants were no longer engaged in their job; four were still holding the job position from which they sought to transfer. All participants reported that they had been thinking about a professional transition from 2 years to 6 months. All the participants were gainfully employed for at least 4 years; five were embarking on their transition to leave from a corporate job, one from an entrepreneurial position. Narrative research and expressive writing was applied to understand how measuring value priorities and high-touch (coaching) and low-touch (writing sessions) interventions helped participants to develop values awareness and transformation.

The length of this study was 8 weeks. Data was drawn from LJMap values map, two 60-minute telephone coaching conversations, email reports from eight 20-minute writing sessions, a final 60-minute telephone interview or a final writing exercise, and the researcher's field notes. Qualitative data analysis using computer-aided technology was conducted. A coding workbook was developed to code interventions of the coach (e.g., emotional attunement) and writing instruction (e.g., marking value words). The coding structure was used to identify interventions that resonated most with the clients, and was based on transcribed audio files with Atlas.ti. The first analytical framework in this category involved exploring the match of oral or written words expressed in the narratives with the ranked words presented in LJMap. The second analytical lens explored participants' epistemologies and ontologies. The specific focus was on how the process of making meaning of events and experiences unfolded and how participants used their narratives to describe and explain their perceived realities. The third analytical framework was concerned with new action, and how this new action was triggered. The specific focus was how the treatments (VC or VRW) stimulated the new action.

6 Results

Meaningful change was identified as a process of coming to understand one's meaning system (i.e., understanding important, significant, and relevant experiences and events) by making sense of past experiences or periods of time. This sense making was a process of crystallizing one's motivational, concerning, and aspirational values symbolized in oral and written narrative. This crystallization of values and the linkage to experiences happened in language and was related to emotions. Thus, meaning making involved a process of making distinctions of experiences noteworthy, those experiences that were memorized and linked to a certain feeling frame.

Specific value words that occurred the most in this process of making meaning were *being authentic*, *genuine*, and *congruent*. I argue that this is a clear indicator that people were in search of something meaningful to them.

The specific interventions shown by the coach that resonated most in the coaching group were (a) connecting meaningful value words with reported experiences (such as pointing out value words from the values map and connecting them to narratives); (b) showing supportive behavior (such as paraphrasing, active listening) and emotional attunement (such turn toward emotions); (c) discussing sentiments (such as initiating conversations about non-observable thoughts and feelings); and (d) providing advice and guidance for change initiatives and emphasizing expressed meaningful behavior. A paradox intervention, which was the result of the coach who mistakenly discounted a meaningful value, was also reported as a helpful specific intervention. These specific coaching behaviors might have initiated reflection, self-reflection, emotional reflexivity, languaging, and emotioning past experiences.

The specific writing instructions that resonated most in the writing group were finding patterns through used value words, internally verbalizing and documenting recent events, documenting critical reflective behavior, and

writing about feelings and connected experiences. These specific writing instructions might have initiated reflection, self-reflection, emotional reflexivity, languaging, and emotioning past experiences.

Five participants reported that one or more these specific behaviors facilitated a change in thinking, feeling, and acting; they all leveraged this change in their private transition. Four participants reported that one or more of these specific behaviors facilitated a change in thinking, feeling, and acting, and they leveraged this change in their professional transition. For example, one participant was able to evaluate a negative experience in a new and positive light, and learned to understand the resources she developed from this experience (changed thinking). Another participant discovered that sadness was a necessary emotion in the healing process (change in thinking/feeling). And yet another participant found that her procrastination to apply for jobs was a result of an aspirational language she took on from her partner rather than coming from her own vision. As a result of this awareness, she started volunteering, which helped her to express what was important for her (change in acting). One of the participants reported that a change in thinking and acting did happen, but she was not able to leverage this change in her private or professional transition. To fully interpret this phenomenon, one could build on transition theories, embodied cognition theories, and system theory.

7 Future Research

Future research on meaningful behavior change and transition could take advantage of a larger sample to validate the results. In this study, emotional immersion was a key factor in meaningful behavior change and transition. Future research could investigate what alternative educative interventions facilitate the transition from rumination and reflection to emotional reflexivity, and what supports clients' openness to stay with and explore specific

emotions. The participants' change narrative and evaluation of the interventions was based on post-intervention interviews and there are restrictions to causal interpretations. More work is needed to explore how other methods of data collection (e.g., action research) can facilitate the specifics of meaningful values enactment in participants' lived reality.

8 Conclusions

VC and VRW facilitates meaningful behavior change and transition. In a period of 6 weeks, five participants who completed an online ranking of values, followed by two 1-hour coaching or eight consecutive writing session (15 minutes each), reported meaningful transition. Depending on current life circumstances, the intervention supported five of the participants in their professional and/or personal behavior change. Although initially feeling alienated from their meaning system in life and/or work, all six participants had profited from being clearer about what was meaningful, motivational, and concerning for them and from making connections toward meaningful change initiatives. Five participants applied meaningful change initiatives in their professional or private transitions.

Meaningful professional transition is an interactional process. When a person enters a transition, he or she enters a search for value fit. The predictor for successful transition is the degree of values fit. Values fit is the emergence of shared meaning coming into force via language. Shared meaning is an observable propensity to use the same value words to frame and enact problem solving.

8.1 General Patterns in Professional Value Fit Search Behavior

Three patterns in the professional value fit search behavior were identified:

First pattern: The search happens in the same organization, and values fit is identified. The searching person applies motivational or aspirational values. The recognition of a value fit leads to positive emotions and re-engagement in the organization. A meaningful professional behavior change and transition is completed.

Second pattern: The search happens in the same organization and a values misfit is identified. The search person applies motivational or aspirational values. The recognition of a meaning gap leads to negative emotions and disengagement in the organization. People who adhere to their meaning system resign and either seek employment in a different organization or pursue a career that provides an opportunity to practice their meaningful values. One predictor of entering an independent, meaningful career path is a felt opportunity to practice one's motivating values outside of existing organizational frames. A meaningful professional behavior change and transition is completed.

Third pattern: The search happens in a different organization and because of display rules or other reasons that inhibit enacting motivational or aspirational values, the search cannot be completed. This leads to indifferent or negative emotions and blocks meaningful behavior change and professional transition.

8.2 General Patterns in Meaningful Change and Transition

The formula for meaningful transition is identification of important values plus positive emotioning, plus values-based action. Only the completion of the formula leads to a perceived meaningful transition.

Values identification is a process of becoming aware of one's concerning, motivational, and aspirational values. The process of becoming aware happens through values ranking and connecting significant values to past, present,

and future experiences. The exploration of motivational and concerning values integrates cognition, feelings, and actions. Making this connection occurs in both writing and coaching. Several specific behaviors facilitate meaningful transition. Self-reflection and emotional reflexivity are the precursors for languaging meaningful action. The data confirmed that meaning making involves a process of reflection, self-reflection, and emotional reflexivity and is enacted through languaging (Burkit, 2012; Maturana & Varela, 1992).

However, talking about experiences conceptually (i.e., reflection) does not trigger feelings. Because emotions compel action, narratives need emotional immersion. Rumination (i.e., repetitive narrative that retriggers emotional flooding) does not lead to completion of emotions. Value words get one to the starting line, but emotions get one going. Yet, immersion into low levels of emotional flooding (risk taking) is still needed. Soothing behaviors from coaching (e.g., support, emotional attunement, marking value words) or self-distancing through writing help complete the emotion–values–action arch.

8.3 Effective Interventions for Meaningful Change and Transition

This study suggests that interventions that seek to support meaningful behavior change and transition need emotional immersion as a catalyst for self-reflection and emotional reflexivity. Thus, for interventions to support discovery and enactment of significant values, interventions need to target both intellectual and emotional stimulation, and trigger both emotional engagement and dialogue for emotional and cognitive understanding of events. Since LJMap values coaching and reflective values writing targets both cognitive and emotional engagement, both educative interventions are suitable to facilitate the completion of the meaningful transition formula. Hence, LJMap values coaching and values writing can be an educational technology to facilitate meaningful private life and professional life transitions and to (re) establish engagement in work and life goals.

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The future is an unknown garment that invites us to weave our lives into it. How these garments will fit, cover, colour, connect and suit us lies in our (collective) hands. Many garments from the past have become too tight, too grey, too something...and the call for new shapes and textures is acknowledged by many. Yet changing clothes leaves one naked, half dressed in between. Let's connect in this creative, vulnerable space and cut, weave and stitch together.

Our target group is reflective hybrids – leaders, scientists, consultants, and researchers from all over the world who dare to be and act complex. Multi-layered topics require multidimensional approaches that are, on the one hand, interdisciplinary and, on the other hand, linked to theory and practice, making the various truths and perspectives mutually useful.

If you feel you are a reflective hybrid you are very welcome to join our COS movement, for instance by:

- Visiting our website: www.cos-collective.com
- Getting in touch with COS-Creations. A space for personal & collective development, transformation and learning. Visit our website: www.cos-collective.com
- Following our COS-Conference online: www.cos-collective.com
- Subscribing to our newsletter: see www.cos-collective.com
- Subscribing to the COS Journal: see www.cos-collective.com
- Ordering single articles from the COS Journal: www.cos-collective.com
- Becoming a member of our LinkedIn group: go to www.linkedin.com and type in "Challenging Organisations and Society,reflective hybrids" or contact Tonnie van der Zouwen: office@cos-collective.com

SAVE THE DATE
4th COS Conference
19. – 21. September 2019
in Venice, Italy

The Journal with Impact

The Journal “Challenging Organisations and Society . reflective hybrids® (COS)” is the first journal to be dedicated to the rapidly growing requirements of reflective hybrids in our complex 21st-century organisations and society. Its international and multidisciplinary approaches balance theory and practice and show a wide range of perspectives in and between organisations and society. Being global and diverse in thinking and acting outside the box are the targets for its authors and readers in management, consulting and science.