The Existential Leader

Existential Approaches to
Understanding and
Developing Existential
Leadership

Monica Hanaway

*What is
leadership and
why does it exist?*

What is leadership?

→ '*The only definition of a leader is someone who has followers'* – **Peter Drucker.**

→ *'Leadership is the ability to turn vision into reality'* – Warren Bennis

→ *'Leaders are those who empower other'* – Bill Gates

→ *'Leadership is influence – nothing more, nothing less'* – John Maxwell.

Common thoughts on Leadership

→ Leaders are born not made.

→ Leaders who focus on what they have to do and are able to learn how to do are covered by 'functional theories' [SEP]

→ Leadership in relation to context [SEP]

→ Archetypal behaviour patterns [SEP]

→ Leaders focused on their relationships with others, followership and issues of motivation[SEP]

→ Leaders who see their role as making a better world

→ Leadership which aims to fulfil specific organisational needs/ emphases.

Some different types of leadership

- Charismatic Leadership
- Participative Leadership
- Situational Leadership
- Transactional Leadership
- Transformational Leadership
- The Quiet Leader
- Servant Leadership

Spectrum of participation

← Not participative   Highly participative →

Autocratic decision by leader	Leader proposes decision, listens to discussion, then decides	Team proposes decision, leader has final decision	Joint discussion with team as equals	Full delegation of decision to team

Why do we seek Leaders?

Different societies value different characteristics in their leaders

The concept of leader seems a universal one

Whenever leaders appear they are set apart from the crowd, treated as different, often superior to ordinary people.

Something makes us treat them as special

Is it something about them?

Is it something about Us?

Sandling (2015) suggests that,

'…*we do not need leaders because society tells us we do, and we do not need leaders because our employers enforce it upon us, we need leaders simply because we are born with a natural desire to be led. We are predisposed with a need to be guided, nurtured and supported throughout our lives at all levels and in all situations.*'

What do followers need?

Leadership is conferred by the followers

Without the supporters' consent, the aspiring leader cannot lead

Those individuals who can meet potential followers' needs become leaders

- Webber & Simmel
- Barnard
- John Gardner

Devil's bargain

→ Leaders give security

→ In return we get

→ Subservience

→ Need to play by their rules

→ Frustration and boredom

→ Risk their dissatisfaction

→ Being misunderstood

→ Being one of many

Most Leaders consider

Benefits usually outweigh the costs
- Loneliness at the top

Those at the top experience greater levels of satisfaction to those the bottom
- 1950s research by Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Leaders also need to protect themselves from their existential fears
- Entrust themselves to others (divine or human)
- Consign their fate to a powerful, controlling institution
- Depend on an ideology
- Interpret their leadership position as evidence that they really **are** in control of their destiny

ambivalence

→ An appetite for power, together with enormous self-confidence can lead to corruption, bullying and tyranny

→ An arbitrary and unpredictable leader can intensify, not relieve our existential anxiety

→ We want our leader to be strong but knowing his/her faults can reassure us

  → Allows us to draw a little closer to our ego ideals

  → Offer us a safety valve – leaders can be brought down if necessary

Existential thought in leadership

Existential Leadership and organasational ethos

→ Lipman-Blumen (1996) published her seminal study on Connective Leadership tying together her quarter-century of study in the field of leadership.

→ She posits

→ *in order to succeed in today's changing world, leaders must adopt models of leadership which tackle the "tensions between interdependence and diversity"*

→ *as these tensions continue to escalate and impact personal, professional, organizational, and communal relationships*

→ Previously, we were in the physical era, where physical boundaries – such as rivers and mountains – formed the barriers between groups of people.

→ Leaders in the physical era used these barriers both offensively and defensively.

→ Slowly there was a shift to what she calls the geopolitical era, where geopolitical boundaries and ideologies defined differences

Leaders as a tool to fight off the two existential demons : uncertainty & anxiety

→ At the core of our human condition lies the immutable reality that we can neither predict nor totally control our destiny - existential uncertainty

→ This realisation that we cannot reduce this uncertainty, perturbs our sense of mastery and efficiency and leads to deep seated dread – existential anxiety

Lipman-Blumen believed that we were moving into the connective era
(we need to consider whether that applies more, or less post-Brexit, post-Covid etc)

→ where "the connections among concepts, people, and the environment are tightening,"

where physical and geopolitical boundaries no longer define us or prevent us from moving from place to place, and where – at the same time – diversity, differences, and interdependence are more important and more vital than they were in previous eras.

Our ways of living change.
For many people pre the Covid-19 pandemic-

01	02	03
Their contact with other people primarily happened at work	Their ideals take shape at work	They found or actively sought meaning in their lives at work

Work has become

- More complex

- Demanding that people use both head and heart

→ AND REQUIRES

- Competent, authentic people with meaning in their lives

- A zeal for high standards

KEY ASPECTS OF AN EXISTENTIAL/CONNECTIVE LEADERSHIP MODEL

QUESTION OF MEANING

RESOLUTION OF CONFLICT

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

This calls for new existential thinking

A new barter between company and employee: *meaning* in exchange *for meaning*

New vision based on coherence and meaning

Harmonious understanding of shared concerns – freedom, meaning, aloneness, death

A common reality – concurrent vision

Cohesion of 'soft balance sheet ledgers' – social/ethical/knowledge/environmental

Key Existential Issues

Freedom and Responsibility

Uncertainty

Authenticity

Meaning

Aloneness - Relatedness

Values and Beliefs

Death – time and temporality

Emotions

How are these part of our business life?

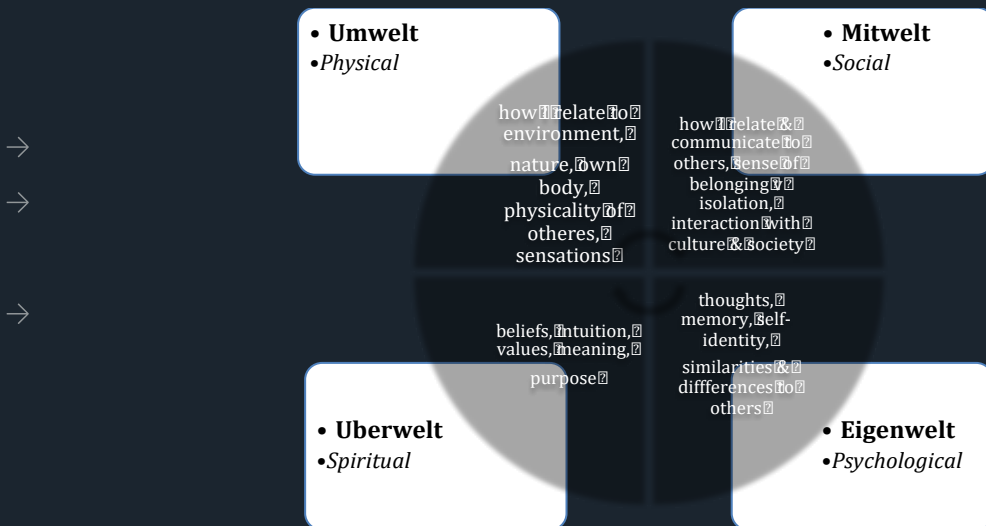For some, they find life's meaning in work

Through committing to a 'leader' or organisation we can access a belief system to guard against uncertainty, provide structure, offset responsibility, safeguard us from existential freedom by 'seemingly' limiting our choices.

Work can offer "life expanding experiences" which will deaden the existential fear.

Work can provide us with a way to transcend our own mortal death by leaving something permanent, a "permanent footstep in the shifting sands of immortality."

This is similar to the needs Covey (2004) defines as being universal for every human. Covey suggests every person has four innate human needs: to live, to love, to learn and to leave a legacy.

The Existential Dimensions

• **Umwelt**
•*Physical*

how I relate to environment, nature, own body, physicality of otheres, sensations

• **Mitwelt**
•*Social*

how I relate & communicate to others, sense of belonging v isolation, interaction with culture & society

beliefs, intuition, values, meaning, purpose

thoughts, memory, self-identity, similarities & diffferences to others

• **Uberwelt**
•*Spiritual*

• **Eigenwelt**
•*Psychological*

The four dimensions

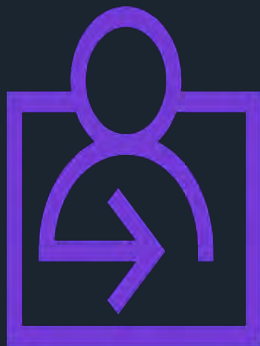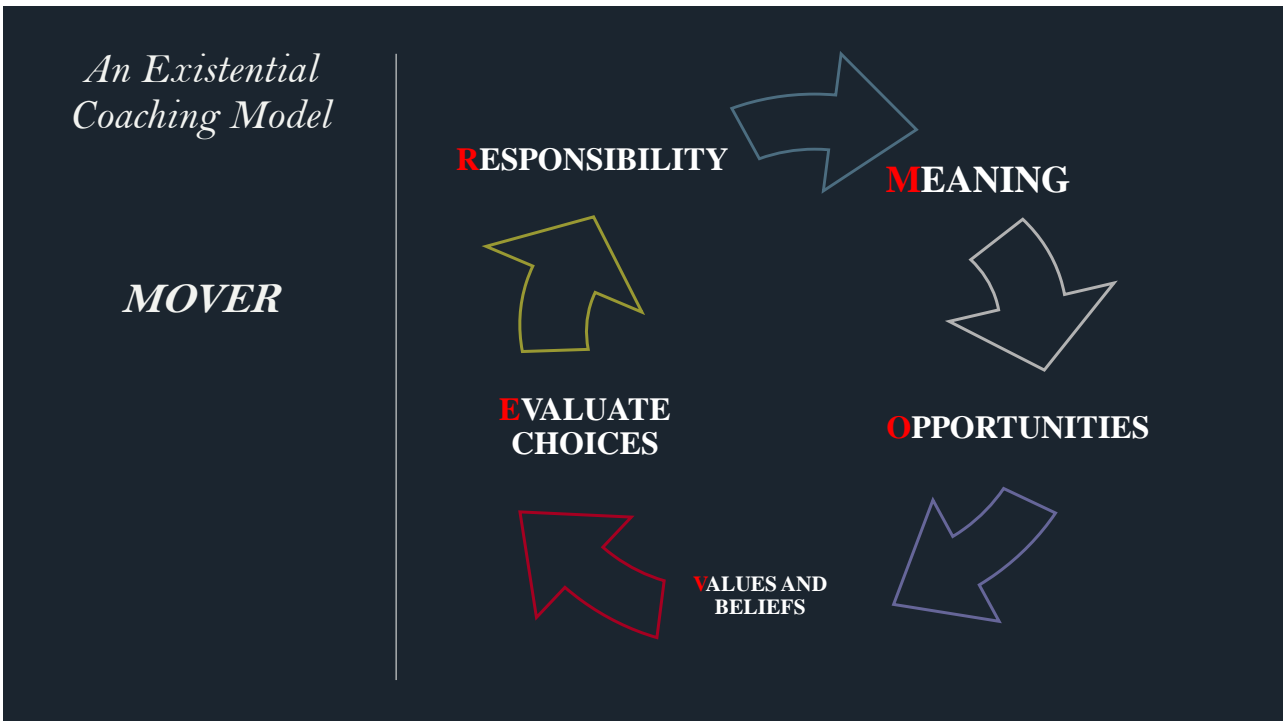| Physical	Social	Spiritual	Personal

• The concrete and material/non-cultural realm
  • offices, gardens, bodies, environment
	• Relations with others
	  • Lovers, friends, colleagues
		• What we believe in
		  • Ideas, values, meaning, beliefs
			• Relation to self
			  • Self-concept, identity, self esteem

Relationship to business

→ A new vision of the individual in working life

    → Complexity of individual

    → Search for coherence and meaning

    → Search for harmonious understanding of organisation/company and employee

    → Shared dilemmas

    → Coping with death (physical, redundancy, vision, concepts, status, hope)

    → Maintaining integrity

Coaching towards
Existential Leadership

An Existential
Coaching Model

MOVER

RESPONSIBILITY

MEANING

EVALUATE
CHOICES

OPPORTUNITIES

VALUES AND
BELIEFS

Coaching through the Key Existential Issues

Authenticity

'…perhaps the most central characteristic of authentic leadership is the relinquishing of the impulse to dominate others.'

David Cooper

→ *Bill George (Harvard)*

→ Explore their life stories in order to understand who they are.

→ The process of learning, growing, and developing an integrated self is a process of construction and meaning–making. (Lakshmi Ramarajan)

→ As leaders explore their life stories and process their experiences, they develop deeper understanding of themselves and feel increasingly comfortable being authentic. As leaders discover their truth they gain confidence and resilience to face difficult situations.

→ Engage in reflection and mindful introspective practices by taking time every day to step back from the day to day world and reflect on what is most important to them.

  → This can be done through practices such as meditation, mindfulness, prayer, long walks to clear one's mind, or simply sitting quietly and reflecting.
  → The key is to set aside preoccupation with to do lists, electronics, and the news in order to reflect privately.
  → In this way the urgent does not take precedence over the important in one's life, and leaders examine how they are living their lives and engaging with the world around them.

→ Understand their leadership purpose so they can align people around a common purpose.

  → Purpose defines the unique gifts people bring to leadership challenges, through which they can align others with their purposes in order to create positive impact.
  → This is far more important than focusing entirely on achieving success through money, fame and power, yet ultimately produces sustained success in those areas as well.

→

→ Seek honest feedback from colleagues, friends, and subordinates about themselves and their leadership.

→

→ One of the hardest things for leaders to do is to understand how other people see them, which is often quite different from how they want to be seen.

→ To gain greater understanding of how they are coming across, authentic leaders obtain real-time feedback by listening to their "truth tellers," who give them candid critiques about their leadership. Those that surround themselves with loyal sycophants, who only tell them how well they are doing rather than being brutally honest, risk going off track.

→ Leaders also gather feedback through regular 360 degree reviews from peers and subordinates. The qualitative comments shared in 360 reviews can be of great benefit if leaders take them to heart, and genuinely try to change.

→ Develop flexibility, becoming skilled at tailoring their style to their audiences, to the imperatives of the situation, and the readiness of their staff to accept different approaches.

→ There are times when leaders must make difficult decisions that are sure to displease people, and they'll need to give tough feedback. At other times they need to be inspiring, good coaches, and consensus builders. These flexible styles aren't inauthentic if they come from a genuinely authentic place.

→ In this sense leaders' styles become the outward manifestation of their authenticity.

→ As leaders gain experience and develop greater self-awareness, they become more skilful in adapting their style, without compromising their character.

Facilitate the client in addressing

what are other words for facilitate?

ease, help, promote, further, expedite, assist, aid, simplify, alleviate, forward
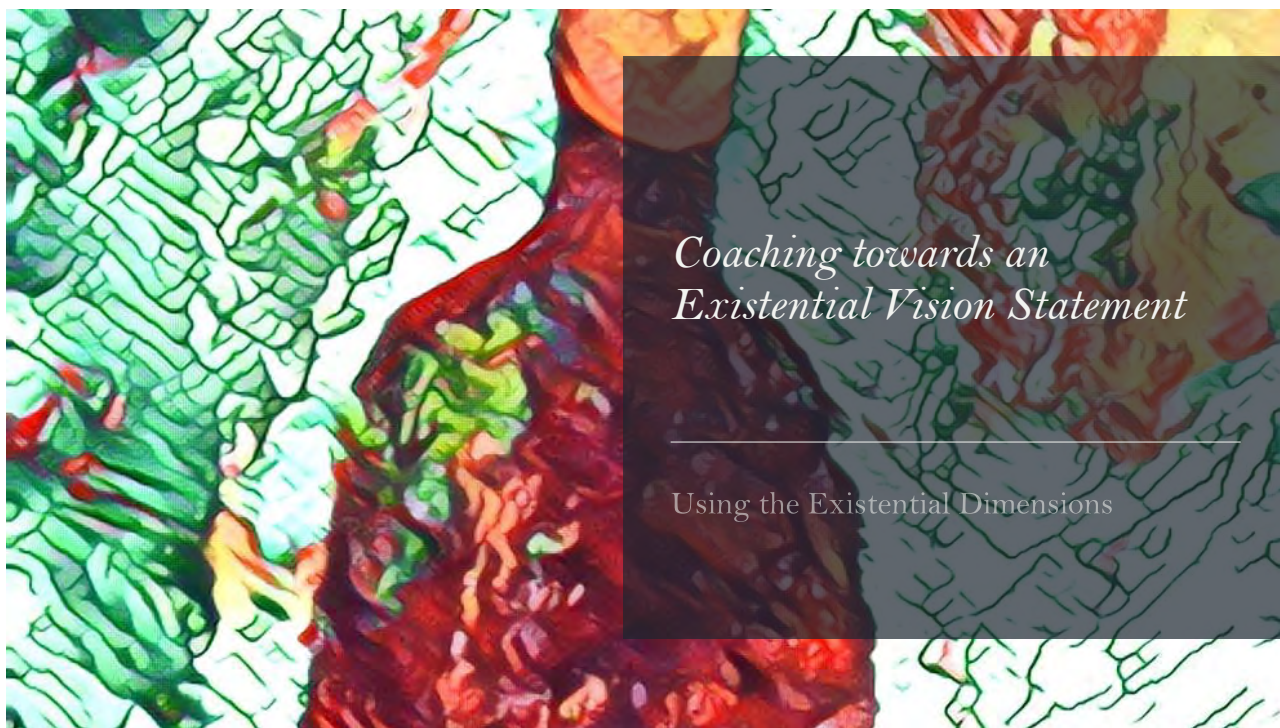
Thesaurus.plus

→ How would I define my values?

→ What elements provide meaning for me?

→ How would I communicate these to others?

→ Would I consider myself spiritual in any way?

→ How do my values and beliefs make me who I am?

→ What are the core values?

→ What is the corporate/team culture?

→ How strong are the values?

→ What are the fundamental values that the company/team was built on?

→ What is the 'style' of the organisation,

→ How participative is the management/leadership style?

→ How effective is that leadership?

→ Do employees/team members tend to be competitive or cooperative?

→ Are there real teams functioning within the organization or are they just nominal groups?

Style of organisation

→ What are the core values?

→ What is the corporate/team culture?

→ How strong are the values?

→ What are the fundamental values that the company/team was built on?

→ We would then consider the 'style' of the organisation,

→ How participative is the

→ management/leadership style?

→ How effective is that leadership?

→ Do employees/team members tend to be competitive or cooperative?

→ Are there real teams functioning within the organization or are they just nominal groups?

→ What positions or specializations are represented within the team?

→ What positions need to be filled?

→ Are there gaps in required competencies?

→ What are the strongest skills represented within the company/team?

→ Are there any skills gaps?

→ What is the company/team known for doing well?

→ Do the current employees/team members have the ability to do the job?

→ How are skills monitored and assessed?

*Coaching towards an
Existential Vision Statement*

Using the Existential Dimensions

**Umwelt/
Physical**
Concerned about
physical health in their
products and staff.
Encourage physical
activity
Concern for the
environment

**Mitwelt/
Social**
Encourage social
activities amongst
employees
Provides free breakfast
so people can meet

Uberwelt/spiritual
Value led company
in relation to products
and actions to support
and develop staff

Eigenwelt/psychological
Giving and receiving
honest feedback
Providing stimulating
development
opportunities

Umwelt /physical

→ What is your vision in relation to your company/organisation's relationship with the physical environment?

→ What does your vision statement need to say about the physical landscape, environmental issues and the physical comfort of the staff?

→ What values does this demonstrate?

→ Does your company hold a concern/ responsibility about the physical health of staff? How is it demonstrated?

→ Does your company hold a concern/ responsibility about the health properties of your product? How is it demonstrated?

Uberwelt/spiritual

→ To what extent do you wish to portray yourself as a value led company in relation to products?

→ What are your values?

→ How are you portraying them in your vision and actions?

→ What actions are you proposing to support and develop staff?

→ What would you consider makes your organisation meaningful to you?

→ What would you consider makes your organisation meaningful to the rest of the people working in it?

→ Are you uncomfortable with anything the organisation is planning to do? If so how will you address this?

→ Are you uncomfortable with any of the organisation's processes? If so how will you address this?

Eigenwelt/psychological

→   Do what extent do your thoughts match your actions?

→   Is there anything which concerns you in the vision?

→   Do you give and receive feedback openly and honestly?

→   Do you provide stimulating development opportunities for people working with you?

→   Am you committed to your own self-reflection and further development?

→   How are you promoting well-being?

→   What mental health support does the organisation give?

→   How do you personally deal with mental illness and stress in yourself and/or others in the organisation?

→   How do I build the self-esteem of everyone in the organisation?

Mitwelt/Social

→   How does the organisation build a sense of belonging?

→   Does it provide social opportunities for those working in the organisation?

→   How do you choose team members?

→   How do you encourage teamwork and collaboration?

→   How do you deal with interpersonal conflict?

*Remaining an
Existential Leader*

→ *'The existentialist cannot escape into the cozy corridors of rational thought,
away from the rough and hard, to contemplate the realities of life, never mind
structure. All the uncertainties of life cannot be plotted, measured, and insured
against. To meet life head on or tangentially, or even to watch it slipping and
sliding past in all its glory, it is necessary to be brave.'* Kelly & Kelly

Self Reflective Questions

→

→ Encouraging the development potential of others [SEP]

→ Dealing with the ambiguities which other leaders may find threatening [SEP]

→ Guiding supporters along unfamiliar footpaths of leadership, transforming passive followers [SEP]

→ Offer richer vision drawn from their diverse networks [SEP]

→ Am personally engaged in the endless search for greater meaning [SEP]

→ Searching for authenticity in self and others

→ Continuing to ask –

   → What are our challenges? [SEP]

   → What are our dreams? [SEP]

   → Where is our common ground?

   → Who will follow me? [SEP]

   → Who will support my dream? [SEP]

   → Who is different from us? [SEP]

   → What can we do for and with each other?

   → How can we make room for everyone around the table of human reconciliation?

→

Authenticity

→ *To what extent am I remaining true to myself?*

→ *What factors are obstacles to my authenticity and how do I overcome them?*

→ *Am I happy with the balance and appropriateness of what I disclose to others in consideration of any anxiety which may result?*

*Authenticity is more than speaking;
Authenticity is also about doing.
Every decision we make says
something about who we are.*

Simon Sinek

Freedom
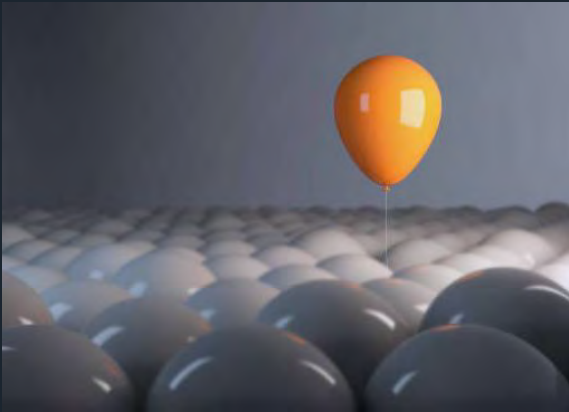
→ Does my leadership inspire freedom and courage?

→ Does it promote fear?

→ Do I hide behind the role of 'leader?

→ Are you taking away freedom from others to defend your own freedom?

→ What are my fears about sharing power and increasing the freedom of other?

Anxiety

→ What is making me anxious in my leadership role?

→ Am I aware of the anxieties of those around me?

→ Am I trying to rescue others from anxiety and so disempowering them?

→ Am I expecting others to take on anxieties which I should deal with rather than pass on?

→ If anxiety stems from lack of meaning, how am I making work meaningful for myself and others?

→ If anxiety comes from a dissonance between values, am I clear about my values and those of the organisation? Do these differ from those working in the organsiation and how do I address that?

Time and Temporality

→ *What is my own relationship to time?*

→ *Do I consider work/life balance for myself and my staff?*

→ *Do I portray a false certainty regarding time – 5 year plans etc?*

→ *Do I feel I need to control how I / my team uses their time?*

→ *Do I value the amount of hours put in more than the quality of the outcome?*

Uncertainty

→ *For those bold enough to lead in this age of uncertainty, the challenges are immense.*

→ *Our world is a new world, and it requires a new kind of leadership'*

Boyatzis & McKee (2005)

How do I feel about the fact that there is little certain beyond the fact we shall die?

How do I deal with uncertainty?

What messages to I give to others regarding uncertainty?

Do I give messages implying things are certain when they are not?

How have I felt when when something I have taken as certain turns out differently?

Do I consider uncertainty an invitation to be creative?

Does uncertainty paralyse me?

Meaning

'…the ongoing excavation of the leadership concept is part of a deeper search for the meaning of life, a search for how each of us mere mortals fits into the larger picture.' [SEP]

Jean Lipman-Blum

→ *What does your work mean to you?*

→ *What does your position mean to you?*

→ *What gives your life meaning?*

→ *What meaning to those who work for you find in their work?*

→ *Do the whole team know how their individual contribution fits into the overall strategy and success of the organisation?*

Values and Beliefs

. 'Desire, purpose, and goals are the main difference between life as a biological mass and life as a human being'

(Reiss, 2000).

→ What are your person values?

→ What are the organisational values?

→ Are the two value sets compatible/

→ What do you do where there are tensions between individual and corporate values?

The Post Pandemic World

Impact for business

→ I look at the word 'recovered'

→ I want to change it to the word 'recovering'

→ I am not sure that I will be 'recovered'

→ As for that old self,

→ He is the guy I knew six months ago

(Rosen2021:178)
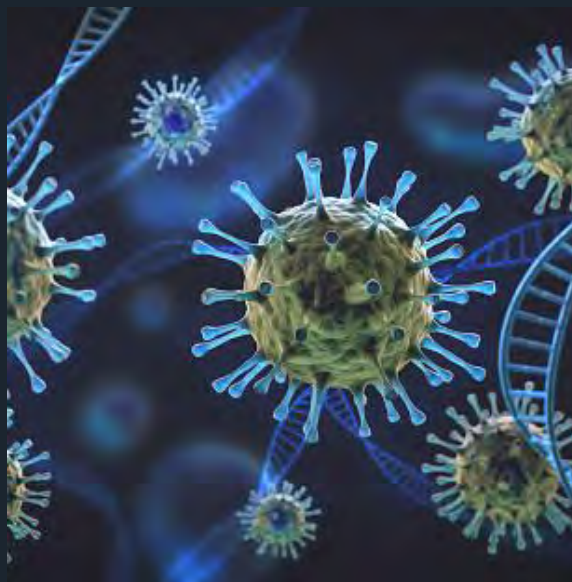
→ 'trying to predict the future is a mug's game'

    → but it is increasingly

→ 'a game we all have to play because the world is changing so fast'.

    → Douglas Adams (2002:102)

Not to fall into Sartrean Bad Faith we must ask

→ • Has my idea of meaning, and the places I might look for it changed through my pandemic experience?

→ • How do I now feel about other people?

→ • In what way do I now relate differently to others?

→ • How have I dealt with the uncertainty of the past months and has this brought a deeper change in how I approach uncertainty going forward?

→ • Has Covid-19 brought me more in touch with my own vulnerability and temporality and what implications does that have for how I experience time and how I want to spend the rest of my time on earth?

→ • What level of anxiety have I experienced and are there ways to use this positively?

In Conclusion

Aim of Existential Leadership Coaching

Helping clients to work towards Boyatzis and McKee (2005) definition of a great leader –

→ Boyatzis and McKee (2005),

→ *'Great leaders are awake, aware, and attuned to themselves, and to the world around them. They commit to their beliefs, stand strong in their values, and live full passionate lives. Great leaders are emotionally intelligent and they are mindful: they seek to live in full consciousness of self, others, nature, and society.'*

Key references

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Monica Hanaway
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monica.hanaway@ntlworld.com