

## A Personal or Systems Concept? An Investigation of Meaningful Work\*

Dr. Marjolein Lips-Wiersma  
University of Canterbury, New Zealand

### 1 Content of the lecture

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, staff & students of Kobe University. First of all, I would like to say thank you very much for coming tonight. It's wonderful to see you all here and I would really like to say thank you very much to the Kobe University for hosting me. I feel very privileged for being at this beautiful university, which I know has a very good reputation. So, it's a real honor to be here tonight. Also, I want to thank Kanbe-san, your Ph.D student, for bringing the work on meaning to Japan. When you develop something in one country and find it is useful in another country that is really special. So, thank you very much for making it useful to Japan. Also, of course, thank you to Associate Professor Krahnke-san for making the connections between all of us in all the different countries in which we have lived and are living. Thank you very much for that. It's much appreciated. Also, of course, to Professor Fujimoto for really making this happen in the material way as well as being here and taking an interest, thank

you very much. Last of course but not least to Professor Kanai for also hosting me here and all the work you've done. As academics we never develop our theories alone. We always stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us and so I am very grateful to all of you for making this possible.

Today, I am going to talk to you about meaningful work. I am going to talk to you a little bit about my past research which is basically what Kanbe-san has used and developed, and then I am going to take a larger sociological perspective on it in terms of "what does this mean for the world?", "how do we create meaningful work and why is this important for the world at large"? "How do we rethink our work so that it positively affects our well-being as individuals but also creates a better world"? I want to ambitiously address both of those topics tonight. We will see how far we get.

### Challenges and Opportunities

#### Efficiency and Deadlines

I would like to start with talking about some of the challenges to meaningful work at the moment. This is not an inclusive list, but these are some of the challenges that are popping up in the literature at the moment. I'll outline some of these challenges to meaningful work but also some opportunities in terms of us redefining why we are working.

---

\*本稿は平成26年度経営行動科学学会西日本部会研究会(2014年6月23日:神戸大学)で開催された講演の記録を一部修正してまとめたものである。  
※文章の構成は、講演の企画者が行った。

On the one hand we all know that we need to be efficient. We do need to be useful in our work. We do need to get things done through our work and so that is important. On the other hand, in always trying to meet deadlines, trying to do more things faster we often forget to ask why we do them in the first place. As a result of that, employees spend a lot of time on things which they don't believe actually makes much of a difference. They ask "why am I doing this"; "what is the point of this" and if they don't get satisfactory answers they might disengage. You'll find you probably have the same experience as a student. On one hand, you want to spend all your time on your research question because it's so interesting. On the other hand, you have to constantly meet these deadlines and so there is always a tension with that. So it's really important to keep it close to your heart because what comes from your heart that is going to really make the difference. So be as efficient and effective as you can be. But never lose your own interest in any of your research projects and always ask yourself "why am I doing this; what difference is this degree or this research going to make?". It is challenging to stay close to your heart when you spend so much time in your head, but you need to find that balance, otherwise your research may be technically great but it may not be very useful to humanity.

### Bureaucracy and Hierarchy

Secondly, hierarchy, or at least the inappropriate use of hierarchy can get in the way of MFW, particularly because of the bureaucracy that comes with it. Recently leadership theory has moved away from looking at leadership qualities in individuals and talked about how everybody should become a leader. We refer to this as leadership. Yet we don't seem to get away from the

hierarchical model, where one or a few people are in charge of deciding the direction of the organization and the design of our work. At the same time, the challenges facing the world are so big that they require the hard work, talents and insights of every human being. Meaning is not about being perfect. Meaning is about finding something to do that makes a difference, getting started, and constantly evaluating whether what we do is still meaningful. So as long as we look for this perfect person who is somehow going to save us and lead us, we are not addressing the challenges of the world. The world needs all of us to step up, not just one person or the heroic leader, as we have tended to refer to this person. Secondly, research shows there is a clear correlation between self-determination and experiencing MFW. That doesn't mean that we can control our whole lives, none of us can, but that we get the opportunity to step up and be as responsible as people can be. When organization treats employees like children, they behave like children. They say things such as "I didn't do that because you didn't tell me to do that" rather than looking for what needs to be done and have the freedom to do it responsibly. To have meaningful work we need to be able to take responsibility for our little part of the world that we can change.

Another challenge to meaningful work, so in addition with the need for more empowerment and participative decision-making, is that in fact we don't seem to be able to get beyond all the paperwork. With the introduction of new public management, decreasing trust and the increasing call for accountability, in many organizations the time that people spend on paperwork, rather than what they consider to be their "real" work, is increasing. You are all likely to have experienced this and certainly you would also

know as academics and people working for universities, we are getting more and more paperwork basically that has nothing to do with our students and the achievements of our students. It gets in the way of why we are really here which is to teach and do research and often we wonder, well, why are we doing this, what is the point of this? ※*MFW=Meaningful Work*

### Rapid Ongoing Change

Another challenge to MFW is the rapid ongoing change currently taking place in most organizations. In organizational behavior literature we now talk about the permanent white water of change. To make work MFW we make changes, then reflect on what we actually gained by those changes before taking further steps. However, what tends to happen in current organizations is that the effectiveness of most changes is not properly assessed. Now, why is this so negatively affecting meaningful work? One reason is that changes are often framed in ways where we're actually not honoring the past work that people have done. A lot of change in organization takes place with people saying, "well, we got it wrong and now we're going to get it right" and that dismisses whatever people have done before and hence it dismisses the meaning in their work as they cannot see the continuity. Another reason is that because organizations change so rapidly, employees don't get to complete anything and hence do not experience a sense of achievement. Say for example, you are in the middle of your Ph.D. thesis or other work you're doing and in the middle of it someone says "well, now just stop this, get out". Then, you have this awful sense that it never went anywhere, right? You'd start it and in the middle of it we'll say now start on another project. We know that completion leads to meaningful work because it gives a

sense of achievement. Thirdly, when we change so often employees don't feel that anything matters anymore because they know that whatever management technique we rely on today will be out of the window tomorrow. An important question with organizational change is to ask ourselves "what is permanent, what can we hold on to, what actually really matters?". This way employees can see themselves as part of a continuing story, not just as cogs in a wheel to be manipulated at a whim.

### Job Security

Finally, we're increasingly seeing loss of job security. I know that that is more the case, say, in America than it is in Japan, but even here you don't have the lifelong guarantee of work. I originally come from the Netherlands, so I have lived in New Zealand the last 25 years. But in both of those countries in spite of having good social systems, we have more and more work insecurity. Why does this impact on meaningful work? There are two aspects of job security that provide meaning. One of them is sense of belonging. If you are in a company and you are there for a long time, you do have a sense of belonging and the sense of belonging is important for us to feel that our lives are meaningful. As human beings we don't exist on an island, meaningless comes from feeling isolated or excluded at work. We need to experience a sense of community for our well-being. Meaning is also experienced when we contribute to something beyond ourselves, something that is enduring. In contributing to a company over time, we could see collective outcomes that were more than just the individual input or work or job that we had in this company. What we are now seeing is that people say: "well, the company can't commit to me, so I am just going to

commit to my career". But that can easily lead to people just spending time in organizations. You are just there. You are here for 2 years and then you are somewhere else again. You may have some adventures and develop some skills but beyond that, what do you evaluate it against, how do you know that your work was worthwhile if you are hopping from company to company all the time? This is the reality in which many or especially younger people between 25 and 30 are now finding themselves. Of course there are advantages to not working for one company for the rest of your life, it can certainly make life more adventurous. But you do need to ask yourself "what am I going to evaluate my life against, what is going to make my work important if it isn't a company anymore"? Clearly you can evaluate it by how much money you make, how far you go up the career ladder. But at some point you are going to wonder what is my life is all about and it would be good if you ask that question from now onwards rather than just when you arrive in a midlife crisis because it is often not a great time to think when you're in crisis.

These are the challenges that we find ourselves in and they often drive organizational behavior. We spend 90% of the time, 95% of the time talking about the outer parts of the world of work; how do we respond to our competitors, how we show we are being accountable, how we stay within limited or decreasing budgets, be successful, grow, and what measures do we use for those. This is what we spend a lot of our time talking about in the world of work. In spending so much time talking about the outer world of work, we tend to ignore that work is done through human beings with hearts and souls who yearn for meaning. When we do talk about this it is often in the negative sense, we complain

about not being consulted or not being appreciated but this is rather ineffectual. The question that I asked very early on in my research was, how do we make that human yearning visible in all of this decision making. Amabile and Kramer found for instance that because leaders are not aware of what actually makes work meaningful, they unintentionally often destroy meaningful work. So we are currently in the odd situation where, on the one hand, organizations are spending all of this money on leadership training and organization development; and on the other hand, by not taking into account how all the decisions of our outer work actually affect us as human beings, we are consistently destroying meaningful work. Around the world we therefore see a worrying decrease in the percentage of workers at all levels of the organization who report to be engaged in their work.

### The Map of Meaningful Work

Against that background about 15-16 years ago, I started doing research on meaningful work, and the Map of Meaning is the outcome of my research. Over the last 15 years I did three phases of research where I was interested in, a) what is meaningful work, b) do we all have the same idea of what meaningful work is, and c) can we change our work so that it can become more meaningful? Currently, together with my colleague Dr. Sarah Wright I am working on antecedents of meaningful work.

Previous research has already established the effects of meaningful working and living on our health and well-being. Personal and community health and well-being increase when people experience that their life is meaningful. With regard to work, we also know that meaning has significant influence over creativity and productivity.

But what exactly people talking about when they indicate that their work is meaningful? It is very important to have an answer to this question, because otherwise we do not know what to do more or less of and therefore we do not know how to create organizations and even societies that support meaningful living and working. My research had quite an organic design. I just started somewhere and then I learned a bit more and then I decide something else and then I learned a bit more and design something else. To answer the first question of “what do people mean when they say their work is meaningful or meaningless”? I collected people’s work stories. I asked them “tell me the story of the last 25 or 10 years of your working life, what choices that you make, what happened then, what happened next”, very simple. As students who do qualitative research, you’ll find you spend a lot of time thinking about the questions you’re going to ask, but people are often answering different questions to the ones you had in mind and often they love talking about themselves. I encouraged my research participants to talk about themselves. I summarized those stories into about four or five pages in which I had all the major events that they had basically talked about and then I asked them to identify in their own stories where their work was meaningful and where it was meaningless. I choose this method rather than sticking the microphone in front of people and say, “well, what is meaningful about work to you or what is meaningful about life”? When you do that people just go, “oh, that’s too big a question. I have no answer to that”. But what is interesting is that they do have an answer to this question. When I asked within the context of their daily work, people knew really well what was and was not meaningful to them. And these were ordi-

nary people such as a packer in a supermarket, an oyster farmer, an artist and a funeral director. Please remember that at this stage, 15 years ago, the research on meaningful work was vague, so we only asked what made work worthwhile or meaningful but had not exact themes or categories of MFW. The research was also very fragmented so researchers would focus on one aspect of MFW such as a sense of belonging or of making a difference. To really understand meaningful work, I decided to go back to the roots and ask people in the context of their daily work, “what is meaningful to you? ”.

When I mapped all the findings and all these stories that I had, essentially these were the themes that came up (Figure 1).

So essentially all of the stories had four themes in common “developing the inner self”; “expressing full potential”; “serving others” and “unity with others”. I mapped these as above and gave it all back to the people who participated in my research. They said “it’s great but it’s not the whole story”. They said we have also changed careers because we constantly have tension between the needs of ourselves and the needs of others. So sometimes we pay too much attention to the needs of others and we get burned out or we lose ourselves, our own unique identity and who we are because we so much like to belong. Or we do too much of service to others and we don’t look after ourselves or we don’t stay close to our own values.

I relooked at the data and found that research participants describe meaning as a process of finding and losing it time and time again. Not every day and even every year but over time, our lives and work is meaningful if we have the right balance between the needs of ourselves and the needs of others. If we lose that balance, par-

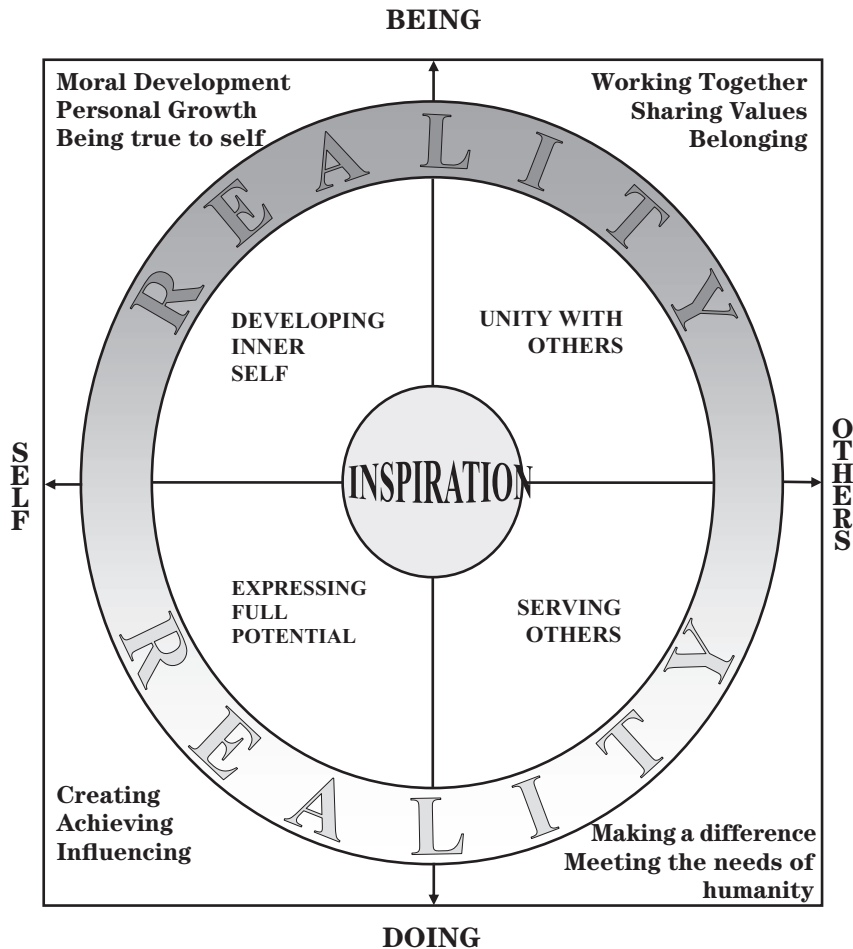


Figure 1 Map of Meaning

ticularly if you become burned out, you lose all meaning. You can't see anything as meaningful anymore because you cannot care for anything anymore and then it can take years to get over that.

They said the same thing about, being and doing. If we are doing too much running around without ever reflecting on what we are doing, and why we are doing all this hectic work, we lose meaning. We're always in the future, always striving, never being satisfied, never enjoying the small insights and pleasures of the here and now, or simply letting things be. I love the Japanese Haiku and so many of them speak

to that quality of being, of letting things come:

“Sitting quietly, doing nothing,  
Spring comes, and the grass grows, by itself.”  
— Matsuo Bashō

On the other hand, if we are only “being” and thinking and reflecting and belonging and having lots of meetings without taking any action, we don't contribute to anything anymore and that too makes life meaningless. So meaning required having a balance over time. That's why it's so wonderful to do qualitative research and then go back to the people and say, “well, did

I tell the whole story or is there more to your story”? and their wisdom clearly created a richer theoretical and practical understanding of the concept of meaning.

Secondly, they said you need a balance between inspiration and reality. At first, based on my own interests and worldview, I labelled the center of the Map “spirituality”. But then people started to use it and they got annoyed with me and they said, well, “spirituality is not something we believe in, it excludes us, but we do believe in all of this, so do you have to use the word ‘spirituality’?”. I said “not really, I can also use other words”. The spirit is still in the word ‘inspiration’ for those who have a spiritual belief, but inspiration means literally that which breathes life, light or energy into you and gives you hope for the future. That energy can for some people be spirituality, for some religion, for some their children, for some nature, people get inspired by all sorts of different things. So, inspiration is not so much an idea but is about the beliefs and practices that bring life into what you’re doing. It could be a Haiku, or meditation, anything that gives us hope and temporarily takes us out of ourselves and our daily lives and connects us with the whole of humanity and/or the universe. Sometimes we can just be sitting under a tree and feel the Universe.

Finally research participants had input into adding the outer circle of “reality”. They said meaningful living takes place between inspiration and reality. If there is too much dreaming and we can only talk about the positive it becomes unreal to people. People go “my life is not exactly like that, my life is also a life of struggle, a life of imperfection and a life of not knowing what to do”. On the other hand, if you have too much reality and people say “I am imperfect

and therefore cannot make a difference” or “let’s get real here” or “in reality this is never going to work”, reality becomes a graveyard of your dreams. Human beings and the circumstances we find ourselves in are not perfect. The world at the moment is facing huge challenges. We can’t wait for meaning until we have a perfect world. In fact meaning comes from creating a better world, in whatever conditions we find ourselves.

Again this expression of beauty and ugliness, hope and despair, struggle and lightness, inspiration and the reality in which we find ourselves is so well expressed in Japanese Haiku:

“Come, see the true flowers  
of this pained world.”

— Matsuo Bashō

“Poverty’s child  
-he starts to grind the rice,  
and gazes at the moon.”

— Matsuo Bashō

In the 50s, 60s people in the Western world did not experience such an extensive crises of meaning. They were working towards better hospitals, better roads, better futures for their children. But once the basics were established the purpose of work became less clear. Do we work to create more materialism, does this materialism satisfy our need for meaning? We’re just so unclear, what is our work, the whole of all our work what is actually contributing to the world and often feel this question is beyond us, too big to ask. We live meaningfully by making a difference. By expressing all of our unique talents so that we don’t die without having sung our own song as Krahnke-san expressed it so

beautifully. Meaning comes from developing the inner self, by asking whether our work makes us courageous, develops empathy, makes us kinder human beings, makes us proud and not ashamed of who we are becoming. At what point does work make us the kind of human being we no longer like? This is probably the most subtle pathway to MFW. One that we are not always aware of when we are working but stares us in the face from time to time:

I kill an ant  
and realize my three children  
have been watching.  
— Kato Shuson

When participants said my work is more meaningful, they would say for example, “well, actually I became more empathetic in my work because I saw the condition of other people”. When they commented on it being less meaningful they might say “Well, actually, I got completely out of touch with myself. I didn’t know who I was anymore and I found myself not speaking up and having courage anymore” Or “I found myself becoming so negative” or “I started to put people down, talk about them in their absence”.

With regard to “unity” they might say “we worked together on this project, it was great, we were all supporting each other, I really felt a sense of meaning in my work there”. Or where they reflected on the loss of meaning “well, we were in this lovely team and then they reorganized the whole organization and our team got split up, and I didn’t get to work anymore with people who cared for me or that I cared for”.

With regard to “expressing full potential” they might say “in this job I feel I am really stretching myself, I’m using many of my talents and devel-

oping others” or “if felt a real sense of achievement, because I know we did the job well”. Often participants talked about taking pride in their jobs. Where they talked about not being able to express their full potential they talked about knowing that they could do the job better given more time or resources or more empowerment to do it the way they knew how to do it best, or sometimes simply by having the time to give it more attention:

Over-ripe sushi,  
The Master  
Is full of regret.  
— Buson

With regard to “serving others” people would say, “well, I really could make a difference to my patient, to my client, to my customer. I really felt that what I contributed”. They could talk about something quite significant but also often about something really small that actually made a difference. It could be somebody in a supermarket still being allowed to show a customer where to find a product. It could be something really small but also easily lost when such a worker was told to only concentrate on one particular task such as filling shelves. It is therefore very important that managers understand where employees actually find meaning, otherwise they design tasks and teams in ways that can destroy meaning and hence well-being and productivity.

### The Map of Meaningful Work- Second Part (How to use)

The second part of the research started in 2004. Usually, as a researchers you do a piece of work, you have some findings and then you move on again. But this work didn’t allow me to move on because people started using it to eval-



uate whether their work was meaningful and to create more of it. I thought I better actually find out how this is working for people then. What was it about this Map that seemed intuitive and easy to work with for people? The second phase of the research was an action piece of research to answer this question. Professor Krahnke and I were talking about this in this afternoon. People had a map of their outer world. They knew quite clearly, what to do to be successful in an organization; you have to be effective, you have to be efficient, you have to understand your position in the hierarchy, you have to make your boss aware of your own or your team's achievements, you have to keep learning, etcetera etcetera. But how about a map to our inner world? A Map of Meaning helps us to make choices about what is and is not meaningful to us. What, given a choice, we do and do not want to spend our lives on, what will and will not make us happy and what will and will not make the world a better place. Similarly to a map of the outer world, if you cannot make it visible it cannot be managed. So when we can make what is meaningful visible to us, we can start to become responsible for it.

Firstly a Map of Meaning helps all members of the organization to make meaning visible to themselves. So often people in organizations are asked to contribute to a vision or mission statement without getting some time to reflect on what is personally important to them. So, the Map helps employees and leaders to articulate their personal or team vision so they are clearer on their values when they contribute to any organization-wide type of visioning exercise. This ensures that an organizational vision is embraced by the organization and everyone takes responsibility for it.

When an organization enables people to

engage in a structured reflection about what is meaningful to them, people at all levels of the organization actually can articulate what about their work is meaningful to them. Once individuals felt confirmed that they do actually know what is and what is not meaningful to them, they can have constructive conversations in their teams, what do we do that enhances meaning, what do we do that destroys meaning. What do we have control over and can change ourselves? As a result many teams could put things into place that enhanced the experience of MFW.

Next, because it is not visible, MFW can be used as a criterion in decision making. I think some of my colleague experts here to date would have more accurate figures but my understanding is that work engagement is now down to 35% around the world. We have a crisis there. We really do.

Now, no employee, manager or leader goes to work in the morning thinking "I'm going to destroy some meaning today" but we do need to make the human being visible again in organizations and that is much more simple when you have a map. So, with any decision, any change, using the Map of Meaning, organizations could simply check: does this decision enhance employee, manager, leader ability to make more or less of a difference? More or less of an opportunity to express their full potential? More or less of an opportunity to experience unity with others and more or less of an opportunity to develop the inner self? How would we know? How do we engage the people affected by our decisions in these types of questions? How can we in this way not only plan for work engagement but also ensure that everyone in the organization feels responsible for keeping up engagement? Depending on what decision one makes one could for example ask those

employees working on the front line “does this decision here really make a difference to customers or does this make their life more complicated”? For instance, you have the Oticon hearing aids in Sweden, and I am interested in that because I wear a hearing aid. They found that when they actually asked that question customers did not want more and more sophisticated hearing aids. What they wanted was a hearing aid that is always working and simple to use. Or a team might say “we understand that we need to split up because of this change initiative but we would still like to have a lunch break at the same time so we can continue to have a sense of belonging”. Or a person might say “this change means more paperwork for me, which is not my area of strength or interest, is this an opportunity to redesign certain roles and tasks?” What we found with that was how helpful it was to have a Map of Meaning that because meaning is framed positively, people themselves usually came with constructive solutions.

Then, the final research step was where we asked ourselves does everyone talk about the same four pathways when they talk about meaningful work or are there gender and cultural differences? Are there differences in age? Are there occupational differences with occupation, for instance? That was interesting so then, based on our qualitative work, we developed a scale which was published in *Group & Organization Management* in 2012. We found that indeed it was a universal concept. Thus while people use their own words for each of the dimensions of MFW, they universally found all these dimensions important. At the same time, in working with the Map we found it was important for people to use their own language as this represents their own world view. So, all cultures would indicate that developing the inner self

was important, but some would refer to this as “self-realization” whereas others would refer to this as “getting the self out of the way”, depending on their worldview. For the Map to work it does need to honor people’s worldviews but at the same time people need to see that they have this search of meaning and that it is not just a personal pursuit or self-indulgence but a collective driver at work. This legitimizes speaking about meaning in the workplace.

## Social/Environmental Challenges and Opportunities

### Social/Environmental Challenges and Opportunities

The research question I am currently working on is “how do we create a society in which we can all experience meaningful lives?” At present, even for those of us who live in privileged societies, we have seen an increase in materialism, an increase in the discrepancies between the wealthy and the poor, a decrease in participation in democracy and of course we are continuing to pollute the planet that sustains us. I briefly summarized some challenges currently facing humanity. There is not one item on the global agenda for change that can be understood (much less responded to) without a better understanding of organizations and the people who make them up.

### The Map of Meaningful Work: Integrating self and society

I therefore look at how we can create a society in which life and work are meaningful. It might be helpful to briefly return to the inspiration/reality theme of meaning at a social level. You may have heard about the work of Joanna Macy. She discusses how at present we have three

business models that co-exist. One is what she refers to as “the great unravelling”, this is where business is simply interested in short term profit and contributes to the destruction of the planet, undermines democracy and contributes to local or global inequity. Business as usual refers to businesses that change certain things, but not enough to address the world’s problems. Think for example of a hotel that asks you to use your towels twice “to save the planet” but that is not using green cleaning solutions, sustainable building material, or pays its employees a pittance. Then you have businesses that radically change the way that business is done, Macy refers to these as “the great turning”. All three models are currently co-existing and in the final ten minutes of this talk I would like to focus on businesses that are already creating “the great

turning” and how their practices and purposes enable people to live meaningful working lives through taking part in a meaningful society. I draw on an example of organizations that work towards the “great turning”.

### Co-operation

These companies increasingly work from a worldview of interdependence. They seek collaboration with other companies, NGO’s, communities and governments and move away from the competitive paradigm. Unity with others is easiest expressed in a company that seeks collaboration. To give an example, Unilever is now working together with university-based scientists to obtain independent reports on the extent to which the existence of Unilever in a particular country, say South Africa, increases or decreases

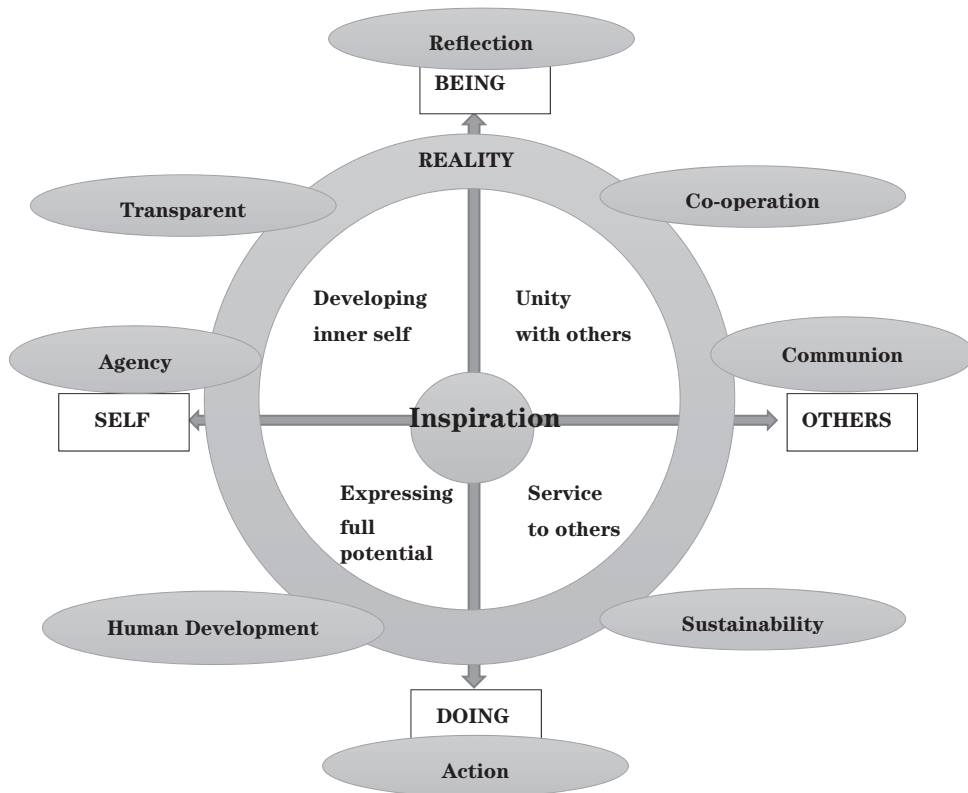


Figure 2 The Map of Meaningful Work: Integrating self and society

inequality there. They co-operate with the World Health Organization and the Indian government to address hygiene related health issues, and work with Greenpeace to address problems relating to unsustainable palm oil production. They report that cooperation helps them to become better at their core business, that it creates meaningful work as a collaborative model of doing business creates more opportunities for employees to experience unity which leads to work engagement and of course all of this helps to create a better world.

※ *Underlines were provided by Dr. Lips-Wiersma throughout this article.*

### Human development

When we turn to human development, we see that increasingly organizations, in terms of the great turning, are experimenting with radically new forms of organizing. They are moving away from overly hierarchical and bureaucratic businesses models and are starting to organize more organically to really meet the needs.

A short example is an organization translated called Neighborhood Care (Buurtzorg) in the Netherlands. This health organization looks after people in the community, a combination of nurses, age carers, GPs, councilors etc. form one team. Traditionally these were organized through the traditionally hierarchical and bureaucratic regional health systems. Buurtzorg originated in 2006 from the staff's dissatisfaction of traditional home care organizations. Bureaucratic duties, working in isolation from other care providers, and, above all, neglect of their professional competencies, were amongst the numerous problems that got in the way of MFW. Buurtzorg decided to organize organically, in a patient-centered way without managers. They co-ordinate their activities themselves and are

supported by a back-office of only 30 people. They now run 600 teams and have served 50,000 patients without a single complaint. Their work engagement has significantly increased. Since then Buurtzorg has become a major success story in the Netherlands drawing accolades from the Dutch Ministry, patient organizations and others. This way of organizing really supports "expressing full potential" as workers can use their professional competencies, are encouraged to solve problems themselves and hence can take responsibility for the welfare of their clients. In other words such new forms of organizing not only create a better world but also provide the opportunity for workers to experience more meaning.

※ GP=General Practitioner (家庭医)

### Transparency

An organization that develops the inner self of its employees and stakeholders has to be a transparent organization. No organization will get sustainability right. Every time there's a claim towards sustainability, consumers or NGO's find an exception. Now, what exemplary organizations are doing is quite similar to people who seriously seek to develop their inner selves. They regularly seek feedback on themselves. Some of these organizations are now putting 100% of their data online so that we can help them become better organizations. But most importantly, they ensure employees understand the impact of their values and actions. For example, as part of Patagonia's organic cotton program, hundreds of employees took tours of cotton fields, where they could see for themselves the dangers of pesticide use and the benefits of organic farming. Companies such as these therefore assist employees to become more compassionate, kinder, and

thoughtful human beings, in other words they help employees grow and improve their inner selves, student groups etc. to think along with how they can achieve sustainability targets. For example, where they cannot yet deliver on their promises because of lack of reliable supply or technical difficulties, companies such as Patagonia communicate this openly. As such companies become more honest and trustworthy towards the outer world, employees are also encouraged to be more honest and trustworthy to themselves to listen and be courageous and thus have more opportunities to develop their inner selves.

### Sustainability

Then, finally, you know what is the ultimate purpose and contribution, how do we create more sustainable systems and again as we know companies such as Interface are setting very high targets to have completely closed loop production systems and zero impact on climate change in 2020. Such companies have one thing in common: in the true spirit of service they consistently ask “how can we do more” rather than “what can we get away with”? In doing so they not only make a difference by sustaining the planet, but also make a difference by creating business models that other companies can learn from and which create meaningful work and meaningful societies.

### Reflection and Action

All these companies spend a lot more time reflecting and they say that because they have to organize organically, they need to spend more time actually evaluating and thinking and taking some time out to reflect on their practices and their direction. At the same time we see that these companies are not afraid to give new

initiatives a go. They are quite action driven that is very interesting about them. They might not always advertise all the wonderful things they are doing behind the scenes, but they are constantly trying out new things.

## The future of Work

### Hope

These organizations are all quite hopeful. They have a sense of faith in their future of humanity. Whether this is rational or irrational, I don't know, but the discourse or what they talk about is very positive, it's hopeful, it's not unrealistic but it is hopeful.

They have a strong sense of agency and localism that we need to take the power back and we actually can do things, we can make a difference and each one can be responsible for that. At the same time, they have a very strong sense of communion, we are part of the community and we live by the grace of the community, we are not independent of it.

What we were finding, well, this still needs to be developed a lot more, is that a meaningful working life converges with a natural way of organizing that leads to a better future of humanity.

I really want to say thank you so much for your patience. Thank you very much. If you have questions, then I'd love to answer them, and if you don't, I really understand that you also want to get home and get something to eat.

## 2 Questions and answers

**Questioner: Kanai (Professor, Kobe University)** I am curious to know two dimensions, one is for example, you mentioned with contrast agency was new and you cited David Bakan, that's one of my favorites. I need to see the connection between what Bakan has said in his book "The duality of human existence". Also, most of the participants who are studying organizational behavior and other areas of management might be quite familiar with the works done by Chris Argyris, so the vertical dimension reflection versus action reminds me of multiple works done by Chris Argyris in his notion of reflection in action – the action in reflection and things like that. I'd be pleased if you would like to make some additional comments on this vertical contrast and also in vertical contrast.

**Lips-Wiersma** Yes. As Professor Kanai also already mentioned, meaningful work is not only an integrated concept but also an old concept. Themes of reflection and action are again becoming topical and that's about standing on the shoulders of giants, if you like, that come back in the work of Chris Argyris who talks about reflection in action and he says we need to integrate action and reflection to achieve ongoing learning. We create constant cycles of action, improvement, reflection. In his earlier work that was very much oriented towards quality improvement. In his later work, he also writes more about how important reflection is to us in order to get a sense of achievement, a sense of meaning and what have you. Then, there is Bakan who started writing in the early

60s. He basically says that agency and communion are the basic drivers of human existence. Agency is about themes of achievement, self-determination, success and striving. Community has such themes as belonging and caring. The themes of self- and other orientation in the Map of Meaning are very similar to agency and communion. The concept that Bakan came up with initially in the 60s was more between what is also referred to as a self-orientation and then other orientation and these are very familiar tensions in particular Western thinking: "how do we look after ourselves while meeting the needs of others? How do we create a society in which we are not just striving towards our own individualistic pursuits but also to create well-being for all human beings"? I think also very much and you would understand much more about it, the reflection versus action is much more tensions that have been much better described in the eastern world. This is because you are more aware of the importance of the "being" dimension as already described earlier in this talk. And also because you are more aware of the role that time plays in how we organize. The importance of being present as well as that of long-term planning. We still can learn a lot from each other, the East and the West and I hope we can have further conversations about this.

**Questioner** I have a question about another version of the map. Could you go back forth to that? I mean that one, inspiration. And then you said that you did like interview based on storytelling methods. Then, you asked many people about like what is the meaning of working life. Then, my question is about like what kind of event did you find as like inspiration?

**Lips-Wiersma** Oh, that's a wonderful question. Where did people feel inspired in their work? The answers to this were very diverse,

because that totally depended on people's worldviews. I would talk to a person who might say something about, well, I am a Jewish person here and they start prayers with God and being Jewish, I don't have a concept of God. As a result of that I was feeling not included in prayers and this inspired me to look at other things the organization needed to really accommodate a diverse workforce. So that would be somebody who was inspired by a reality that did not work for them but that they felt passionate to change through a personal experience. I think Kanai-san had similar examples of people who found something difficult in their own lives, had a challenge or a test and then all of a sudden there was a spark of, hey, but I could actually use this towards making a difference. Other people talked about actively seeking inspiration in for example nature, or silence or community, whereas others would talk about a dream. Anderson of Interface talks about the inspiration of a poem that one of his employees wrote. The poem is titled "tomorrow's child" and inspired Anderson to think about the contributions Interface would make to the next generations. But other people talk about things like, well, I was sitting and meditating and all of a sudden it came to me. It seemed to be a place where ideas, passion and some form of guidance outside of the person would come together. That's why I have kept it so open and also moved away from putting the word spirituality in the middle because it so much depends on your worldview and what you are open towards. I think it's really important in organization to invite people into conversations about what they need to stay inspired without judging where such inspiration might come from. I know that "inspiration" in the West does not so easily translate into a word in the East and so possibly one

day with your help finding more universal wording for that. The literal meaning in the West is "that which breathes life into".

**Questioner** When we did leadership research they listed adjectives which included "inspiring" and it's a little bit hard for us to how to possibly transfer and describe it in our everyday language.

**Lips-Wiersma** Yeah. I think you are absolutely right. Leadership literature has been about looking to others, that is Leaders, who are usually above us in the hierarchy to inspire us. I am not at all negating that idea but also where on maybe a day-to-day, week-to-week basis, we are actually being responsible for our own inspiration because these CEOs may only give us a talk once a year, or we may only go on a retreat once a year with the spiritual teachers that we might have. So it is also about asking ourselves that question of what keeps our spirits towards the light, what keeps us looking up, what energizes us, what lifts us above our daily tasks to the bigger picture of why we are here.

I think one day we'll all collectively, hopefully find a better word for this that represents inspiration for both East and West without tying it down into too narrow a definition. Maybe we need 10 words for it.

When we work with the Map of Meaning, we do not prescribe the words. We encourage people to rewrite the Map in their own words, so someone might have "loving self" for developing the inner self and someone might have "high quality connections" for Unity and someone might have "Spark" for inspiration. When we work with the Map, that would be the first invitation for people to use words that resonate with them and their worldviews. If I was say a member of the Buddhist faith, and I know I'm generalizing here, but I would not likely to be

writing “loving self”, I’d more likely to be writing “getting the self out of the way”, so this is an example of different worldviews but both of these individuals would agree that as a result of being engaged in work we can either become better or worse people and we need to make some conscious decisions about that. I think it is therefore a very helpful as a tool for working with diversity in organizations. It shows where people differ but also what they have in common.

**Questioner** As I look at this figure, it appears to me that it is actually gravitating towards the center. Is that the correct way to look at this picture? That’s the first question. You also talked about the third stage of your research. You talked a little bit about the individual differences and you referred to, for instance, gender differences and you mentioned that a woman maybe more inclined toward others as opposed to men. In that case, does inspiration also gravitate more towards the right. Do you know what I am trying to say?

**Lips-Wiersma** To be honest, I don’t know the answer to that question. On the one hand, they are all interconnected and inspiration breathes life into everything. So, yes it would be in the ‘right’ place in the middle. In addition, the “agency and communion” research shows that an over-expression of one of the quadrants at the expense of the others leads to a loss of well-being. On the other hand this research also shows that for example women tend to seek meaning on the right hand side, in Union and Service. But the question remains: is that nature or nurture? Or is this what they feel most comfortable talking about, e.g. is it ok for a woman to say she has ambition? Women’s initiatives do often start with a group of women deciding something is not ok and they will do something

about it, collectively. But if there is too much service and not enough development of the inner self, or building of personal capacity, they too end up either burned out or the organization just peters out. I think what I would argue, in this long answer to your question, is that it is more likely initiatives start collectively but that over a life time people need development of all quadrants to work meaningfully as they are interdependent. For example we get to know ourselves through working with others. We build courage or honesty by serving others. Does that make sense? I would love for someone to do more research on a cross-cultural perspective on how good ideas are initiated and sustained in different cultures.

**Questioner** 日本には、古来から、働くというのは、端々を楽にさせるという考え方がありまして、このフレームワークでいくと、インスピレーションがアザーズに向かってミーニングフルになっていくことが、ワークの本来であると私は思うんですね。インスピレーションがセルフに向かってミーニングフルになっていくと、そもそもこれ悪いことになるんじゃないかなという印象をものすごく強く受けまして、左上のようにそういう心があるとなることは分かるんですけど、左下にいくと、例えば具体的にいうと、ファンドマネジャーとか、投機スキル、投機技術を駆使して短期で利益を得るというような仕事がありますよね。そういうのは、ワークであるけれども、そういうものにミーニングフルをたくさん感じていくと、アメリカが2008年リーマンショックを起こしたのも、そういう結果の総体がそういう形になっていったと思うんですね。社会に対していい仕事をしていくとなると、インスピレーションがセルフのほうにミーニングフルになっていくということ を重視するというのはいかがなものかなという ような感想を私は感じました。ということを一 言申し上げます。



The question is that traditionally work in Japan is meaningful when it makes the lives of other people better. Therefore, inspiration really should gravitate towards the right-hand side. Maybe we see the left-hand side as that which causes the world trouble.

**Lips-Wiersma** I understand where you come from. From my own world view too, I would say that work cannot possibly have meaning if it does not make a difference so that criteria should be more important than any of the others. But it was not what the data said nor was it my experience in doing my PhD. To just use my own example: I wanted my work to make a difference, but it quickly became apparent that if I could not build relationships with research participants (had no unity) I would never get the quality data I needed; if I could not grow my inner self by for example letting go of my prejudices, the data would never be truly reflective of the whole of humanity, and if I did not quickly learn some skills to better express my full potential, the findings would never get published, the PhD would never make a difference. So the first answer to that question is that the meanings are interdependent. The second one is that all elements of the model make work meaningful. Think about it from a different perspective: you are a nurse and know you make some difference to your patients, but you have no colleague whom you can trust (no unity), people exclude you from decisions that affect you (no expressing full potential) and you feel you have to do things, such as privileging some people on the waiting list that you know is unethical (no developing of the inner self), will you experience that work as meaningful? I am not asking whether objectively, in such a case, your work is meaningful. The question is whether you will experience it as such because if you don't you'll

either completely disengage, or will burn out or will decide to become say a real estate agent. From a social perspective I also believe we need a balanced society. In the Netherlands, where I come from a very individualistic culture. We are honest and outspoken people and build personal strength, develop a lot of talents, and we are very good at being real, it is a very pragmatic culture. But we are not so good at giving each other hope or looking after our neighbors. In another society, people might have built really strong communities, but they have not had an opportunity to develop their capacity and find a way out of poverty, in another society people might have put the community before all individual expression of talent or uniqueness, and something is lost in such societies too. I'm not a sociologist, and again, I think more research needs to be done at this level, but I think we need all of them to create whole human beings and healthy societies. I have put myself into a Buddhist university for 4 months, as I decided I needed to know some things better. I always had a prejudice against people who emphasized the "being". I always thought, "well, what difference does that make"; Isn't it better to just get started and do something, anything"? But I found that all the reflective skills these students were learning, such as meditating, listening, honestly assessing themselves, gave the students a lot of courage and skills to get out there and make a difference. They started with their inner selves, but quickly moved through the other quadrants and made a difference while being quite unique and vibrant individuals, who worked very well together. OK that is a very long answer that started with "I don't know" so , I think it's more about what we have judged to be the correct starting place and that is very much co-defined by our culture and our gender or even our sta-

tus in society, but I have no research to show that. Again, the closest comes Bakan's research on agency and communion, which identifies

that unmitigated expression of any of the quadrants at the expense of another, leads to a lack of individual and collective well-being.