CAMPBELL INSTITUTE

PSYCHOLOGICAL MEANING: REFOCUSING THE LENS

Jordan Sannito,
National Safety Council

PSYCHOLOGICAL MEANING: REFOCUSING THE LENS

Feeling like what we do matters can inspire us to personally engage at work. In a *previous blog post*, I reviewed William A. Kahn's 1990 paper, "On the Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Personal Disengagement at Work" and described his view that psychological safety is one of three psychological conditions (i.e., safety, meaning, availability) that drive personal engagement. Since personal engagement is a key topic for environment, health and safety (EHS) professionals, in this second post, I dive into Kahn's conception of psychological meaningfulness and briefly describe its connections to psychological safety and personal engagement. I then describe how organizations can use these concepts to create new perspectives that could lead to safety innovations.

To Kahn, meaningfulness "can be seen as a feeling that one is receiving a return on investments of oneself in a currency of physical, cognitive or emotional energy" (Kahn, 1990, p. 704). The idea is similar to psychological safety – but here, people engage when they feel a sense of equity or a greater return than the personal investment they put into their work.

The distinction here is between a unique person (who they are) and their outputs at work (what they accomplish at work). However, these divisions aren't always as tangible. When they play out as patterns in the world, people express themselves through their roles in unique ways. Kahn points out three critical elements of personal engagement. Organizations can structure their processes such that *task characteristics*, *role characteristics* and *work interactions* make space for people to create and derive their own sense of meaning from work.

For example, people who see themselves as competent at their job, and who confront achievable challenges which offer a chance for personal and professional growth, find more psychological meaning in the workplace.

Some Incentives to Meaning

Task Characteristics include:	**Role Characteristics include:**	**Work Interactions include:**
· A balance between the feeling of competence and challenge · Variety, creativity, autonomy and clarity	· Level of attraction between preferred internal self-image and role status · Making an impact	· Dignity · Respect

This is both fascinating and unsurprising at the same time. EHS professionals know how vital supportive work interactions, clear tasks and clear communication are in generating and sustaining a safe workplace. Let's explore Kahn's definition more to understand meaningfulness for our personal and organizational contexts.

"Psychological meaningfulness can be seen as a feeling that one is receiving a return on investments of one's self in a currency of physical, cognitive or emotional energy."

The definition (Kahn, 1990, p. 704) has a money and time metaphor guiding it (i.e., currency, ROI). It talks of feelings and energies and alludes to conceptions of the self and not simply a "worker" or "employee."

The phrase "meaningfulness can be seen" points toward an observer of the definition itself. It may be flexible or possible to see this definition more clearly from a particular position, but it doesn't try to assume a monopoly on its meaning–it points to other possible definitions of meaningfulness. Further, this definition creates space between the idea, definition and the real human interpreting the words and actions behind it. This space allows a person to form images, imagine scenarios inclusive of meaning and share in the collaborative conceptual space. Here, people can share their own conceptualization of meaning, how they define it and come to a shared understanding with others and the organization.

"A feeling that one is receiving" assumes, from my view, two things 1) an embodied response (i.e., through feeling) and 2) an availability to receive. Feelings aren't always visible, even to the person feeling them. This might be particularly the case in the workplace. In addition, people at times, feel pressure from others to actively hide their authentic feelings. Research in voice suppression (Shore and Chung, 2021) suggests this feeling is emphatically true for people from groups who have been marginalized–that, to fit in, one must assimilate to the expected cultural workplace norms and therefore must change their authentic embodied responses (e.g., voice, body language) to be accepted.

When we think about receiving and the ability to do so, we may point toward the insecurity of a culture that rejects gifts and has trouble receiving feedback or help, blocking its meaning-making processes. However, for EHS professionals, indicators that block the necessary emotional, cognitive and physical energies are time and production pressures, fatigue, environmental conditions, power and status, and financial compensation, among other things. For example, if someone feels pressed for time, they may not have the bandwidth to receive a sense of return on their personal investment in their work role; they may be too hurried.

In the above example, if the organization were to slow down, its people could derive a more profound sense of personal return on their personal *investments at work*. Availability, in this sense, is essential to a person for them to personally develop and organize a sense of meaning in the workplace.

Organizations can use this or similar thinking patterns to ground emerging safety concepts with data. For example, many organizations already track overtime as an indirect measure of fatigue. With a lens for meaning-making, organizations can look at fatigue as an indicator of "availability," which, as Kahn points out, ultimately affects safety and engagement. With a refocused lens, the data may point to otherwise unseen problems organizations can address with new solutions.

References

Kahn, W.A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33, 692–724.

Shore, L.M., & Chung, B.G. (2021). Inclusive Leadership: How Leaders Sustain or Discourage Work Group Inclusion. *Group & Organization Management*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601121999580.