Developing meaningful leadership in organizations: Evidence from a cross-case analysis in India

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Introduction

Meaningful leadership is a pivotal factor in driving member engagement, motivation, and overall organizational success (Frémaux and Pavageau, 2020). It seeks to instill a profound sense of purpose and significance among members, compelling them to align their efforts with the overarching organizational vision (van Knippenberg, 2020). Meaningful leaders try to create an environment where individuals not only understand the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of their tasks but also deeply resonate with the ‘why’. However, the quest to cultivate meaningful leaders remains complex, requiring a unique blend of skills, including making members feel coherent, purposeful, and significant. Through a comparative exploration of two cases, this paper identifies the distinctive strategies and practices that separate effective and ineffective meaningful leadership.

On meaningful leadership

In the domain of leadership, various mechanisms contribute to instilling meaning in team members. Leaders infuse purpose into the organization, aligning it with members’ values, and emphasize goals, identity, mission, and purpose to shape employees’ perception of work’s significance (Rosso et al., 2010; van Knippenberg, 2020). Leadership is also seen as managing meaning, framing reality for members (Smircich and Morgan, 1982). Leaders’ past experiences drive their meaning-making that serves as leaders’ motivation source for influencing members (Frémaux and Pavageau, 2020). Challenging situations become an integral part of the leader’s personal meaning framework. Additionally, through work design, leaders can fulfill members’ psychological needs, motivations, and desires, fostering intrinsic engagement with organizational goals (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003) nurturing a sense of meaning (Rosso et al., 2010).

Methodology

We select two cases within the same industrial sector: one leader successfully fosters member meaning (Organization X), while another fails (Organization Y) [1]. Choosing the same sector enables the control of external environmental conditions. Both leaders attain organizational goals and metrics, yet in one case, members find fulfillment, contrasting the other. Here, the goals and metrics were assessed based on the industry standards, and the fulfillment among organizational members was assessed using both objective measures such as attrition rates and extent of member participation in organizational initiatives, as well as subjective judgments based on informal conversations.
We conducted ethnography and participant observations cumulatively across five years, to uncover the leaders’ strategies and practices. The data collected was in the form of field notes describing the observations, and informal conversations with the members of both organizations. We also used the organizational policies drafted and implemented by both the leaders as data. The data were analyzed by both the authors independently using thematic analysis, and the final themes were arrived based on mutual discussions and consensus. Finally, the final set of themes were organized and supporting data instances were related to the respective theme.

Findings and discussion

Based on our observations, we identify distinctions in leadership approaches of Organizations X and Y. Notably, the leader in X (hereby, Lx) adopted several distinctive practices that contributed to a sense of meaning among members, in contrast to the leader in Y (hereby, Ly). These practices along with their case evidence are presented in Table 1.

By emphasizing foundational objectives, leaders provide purpose and direction, aligning tasks with overarching goals. Prioritizing organizational values nurtures an ethical foundation, fostering trust. Exemplifying participative leadership demonstrates commitment and collaboration, motivating active employee engagement. Mitigating meaninglessness through effective communication reduces disengagement. Fostering learning and growth empowers personal and professional development.

Table 1. Leadership approach distinctions: Organization X (Lx) vs. Organization Y (Ly)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key differentiators</th>
<th>Lx (organization X)</th>
<th>Ly (organization Y)</th>
<th>Case-based evidence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highlighting foundational objectives</td>
<td>- Emphasized broader objectives over short-term goals</td>
<td>- Emphasized short-term objectives, enabling team members to understand tasks without grasping the broader purpose</td>
<td>While submitting a report to the same external body, Ly took a short-term approach by instructing subordinates to prioritize its immediate necessity. In contrast, Lx emphasized its long-term importance, linking its submission to their vision of achieving excellence</td>
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<td>- Ensured task-alignment with foundational objectives</td>
<td>- Emphasized rewards, recognition, and punishment.</td>
<td>During COVID-19, organizations faced government regulations and declining markets. Ly instructed subordinates to implement the rules directly, leading to some subordinates implementing them unethically to gain Ly’s favor. In contrast, Lx contextualized the government rules using organizational values, so that members could comprehend them within their current context. They could feel more coherent in these drastic times accepting the changes more wholeheartedly</td>
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<td>- Cultivated a sense of significance and coherence</td>
<td>- Lead members to prioritize gains over adherence to values.</td>
<td>Both organizations adhered to a specific criteria-based external rating system. Ly instructed employees to meet these criteria, while Lx actively participated alongside them in the process</td>
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<td>Prioritizing organizational values</td>
<td>- Focused on nurturing adherence to organizational values</td>
<td>- Resulted in less ethically aligned and committed members</td>
<td>An instance of participant observation highlighted an employee striving for job confirmation under Lx’s leadership. He expressed, “Lx has said to me, if I keep contributing, it will happen soon.” In contrast, a similar situation within Organization Y saw an employee remark, “I need my job confirmation, but Ly keeps rescheduling the dates. I don’t know what to do.”</td>
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<td>- Contextualized instructions within the organization’s values</td>
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<td>In contrast to Ly, Lx introduced extensive training programs and established unique employee growth policies, resulting in superior employee retention</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Fostered ethical alignment</td>
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<td>Exemplifying participative leadership</td>
<td>- Exhibited participative leadership by engaging in tasks and welcomed feedback alongside members</td>
<td>- Directed members toward tasks without participation or encouragement of feedback, resulting in reduced motivation</td>
<td>Both organizations adhered to a specific criteria-based external rating system. Ly directed employees to meet these criteria, while Lx actively participated alongside them in the process</td>
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<td>Mitigating meaninglessness</td>
<td>- Minimized mundane tasks or enhanced their significance through effective communication</td>
<td>- Assigned tasks without addressing potential meaninglessness</td>
<td>An instance of participant observation highlighted an employee striving for job confirmation under Lx’s leadership. He expressed, “Lx has said to me, if I keep contributing, it will happen soon.” In contrast, a similar situation within Organization Y saw an employee remark, “I need my job confirmation, but Ly keeps rescheduling the dates. I don’t know what to do.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fostering learning and growth</td>
<td>- Promoted continuous learning and growth by encouraging skill development, advancement of opportunities, and viewing mistakes as learning opportunities</td>
<td>- Lacked focus on learning and growth, resulting in role-stagnation of members</td>
<td>In contrast to Ly, Lx introduced extensive training programs and established unique employee growth policies, resulting in superior employee retention</td>
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Source: *Authors
Contributions, implications, and future research

The comparative analysis of leadership practices within Organization X and Organization Y offers valuable insights into the intricacies of fostering a sense of meaning among members. Effective leaders understand and communicate personal meaning, aligning it with organizational values. This cultivates shared purpose, bolstered by participative engagement. Addressing meaninglessness involves transforming tasks to alleviate members’ ennui. Additionally, fostering a culture of continuous learning and growth empowers members to see their roles as dynamic avenues for personal and professional development. The quest to develop meaningful leaders is a nuanced undertaking and may require a natural inclination for connecting vision and practice. Imbuing these distinctive qualities for meaningful leadership may not have a definite formula. Organizations may find more success in identifying and nurturing existing leaders that exhibit meaningful attributes rather than solely relying on attempts to construct them.

Future research can expand on several aspects drawing from this paper. The characteristics, antecedents, and consequences of meaningful leadership can be examined in different contexts, using different research paradigms and methodologies.

Note

1. We have intentionally withheld the names of organizations and leaders to avoid personal information breaches. Emphasizing the differing cases takes precedence over disclosing specific company details, given its impact on both leaders and organizational discussions.

References


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