

# Meaningful Leadership: How Can Leaders Contribute to Meaningful Work?

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## Abstract

This study addresses the question of how leaders can contribute to their own meaningful work and to the meaningful work of their employees. Based on 42 interviews with leaders, including 27 life story interviews, our article examines the extent to which leaders give meaning to leadership practices that are regarded by the existing literature as factors contributing to meaningful work. This article provides new insights into the concept of meaningful leadership that complements meaningful work theories. Our first contribution is identifying new components of meaning related to leadership activity: moral exemplarity, self-awareness, personal or professional support, community spirit, shared work commitment and positive attitude towards individuals and situations. Second, we also delineate the dynamics of meaningful leadership related to leaders' past experiences and employees' meaningful work. We contend that awareness of these components and dynamics can help leaders encourage employees' meaningful work while making sense of their own leadership activity.

## Keywords

leadership, meaningful leadership, meaningful work, sensemaking, work

It has previously been argued that while business expansion and process development may generate a loss of meaning, the desire to give full meaning to the experience of work is gradually increasing with the growing awareness of economic, social, and environmental challenges (Castillo, 1997; Wrzesniewski, 2002). Meaningful work has thus become a prevalent concept in management theories, seen as a job characteristic that organization members particularly value (Grant, 2007; Harpaz & Fu, 2002), either as a deeply human need (Brief & Nord, 1990; Deci & Ryan, 2014; Frankl, 1969), as a result of a calling (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Palmer, 2000; Word, 2012), as a fundamental right (Yeoman, 2014), or even as a component of the common good of the firm (Sison & Fontrodona, 2012; 2013).

This consideration of meaningful work contrasts sharply with the hegemonic approach, which construes paid work as a means to achieve a result on behalf of, or for, an organizational entity. Indeed, it postulates that work is more than merely a way to earn a salary or to participate in the production of goods and services: other dimensions, social and symbolic, often called intrinsic dimensions as opposed to extrinsic or materialistic orientations (Maslow, 1964), are also mobilized to understand work activity in some depth. Experiencing these intrinsic dimensions could help organization members give meaning to their work.

Leaders may contribute to clarifying and fostering these dynamics of experienced meaning. This would not entail leaders' exercising "ethical training" by stating a predefined direction for production or service activities, or by disseminating well-intentioned communication on meaning, which

is too often flat, fuzzy, and disconnected from work (Spicer, 2013). Discourses on meaningful work would risk encouraging leaders to emphasize spiritual attributes such as listening, honesty, attention, conscience, and empathy, even in cases where they are concealing organizational and managerial dysfunctions. Ashforth and Vaidyanath (2002) claim that managing meaningful work might even be counterproductive, as it could reduce individuals' freedom to give meaning to work. There is a consensus among researchers that dynamics of meaning are not the exclusive responsibility of leaders, but are linked to leadership (Lysova, Allan, Dyk, Duffy & Steger, 2019; Michaelson, 2005).

How may dynamics of meaning be connected to leadership? The literature on meaning has recommended leadership practices that can help employees pursue more meaningful work (Frankl, 1969; Morin, 2008). Hence, the objective of this study is to examine whether leaders give meaning to these leadership practices, and to address the more general question of what meaning they give to their leadership activity. To answer this question, our article is based on 42 interviews comprising 15 exploratory interviews, and 27 life story

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interviews, and it conducted with a sample of senior managers from the banking and industrial sectors.

Our contribution is to argue for the concept of meaningful leadership and to shed light on moral exemplarity, self-awareness, personal or professional support, community spirit, shared work commitment, and positive attitude towards individuals and situations as new components of meaningful leadership. At the same time, we also delineate and further clarify the dynamics of meaningful leadership related to leaders' past experiences and employees' meaningful work. Our study enriches the literature on meaning by identifying the particular components of meaning given by leaders to their own activity and by highlighting the close links between leaders' meaningful leadership and employees' meaningful work.

The article is structured as follows. In the first section, we discuss various theories of meaningful work, the constituent dimensions of this concept, and the resulting recommendations in terms of leadership practices that could help employees generate greater meaning surrounding their own work. The second section then describes the 42 interviews with senior leaders, the context in which these interviews were conducted, and how the data were collected and analyzed. The results are discussed in the third section, where we identify the dimensions of meaningful leadership by distinguishing those that match the managerial recommendations, suggested by the literature on meaningful work and those that are hitherto unexplored. We also observe the different dynamics of meaningful leadership that are built upon both past and present relational experiences. The final section explains the theoretical and empirical contributions of the concept of meaningful leadership, and identifies a number of avenues for future research.

## **Review of the Literature**

In the very well-known hierarchy of needs ranging from physiological needs to esteem and self-actualization needs (intellectual, emotional, and spiritual fulfilment), Maslow (1964) qualifies the search for meaning as a deeply human need (Schwartz, 2006). Work in the broadest sense can respond to this human need to make sense; it is defined as an activity that has a purpose (Brief & Nord, 1990; Deci & Ryan, 2014; Frankl, 1969). Whereas meaningful work would be experienced by individuals as providing a deep level of intrinsic motivation (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009; May, Gilson & Harter, 2004; Michaelson, 2005), meaningless work would be alienating and disengaging (Nair & Vohra, 2009; Shantz, Alfes & Truss, 2014).

The concepts of meaning of work, meaningfulness, and meaningful work are sometimes interchangeable (Mitra & Buzanell, 2017), although they can cover different realities. Indeed, the meaning of work refers to objective characteristics related to a type of activity (Bailey & Madden, 2015).

Meaningfulness evokes a subjective experience regardless of the type of activity, and it aims to measure "the degree to which the employee experiences the job as one which is generally meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile" (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, p. 162; Pratt & Asforth, 2003). The concept of meaningful work refers to both objective characteristics and subjective experience. Some authors emphasize the subjective dimension, defining meaningful work as "the value of a work goal or purpose, judged in relation to an individual's own ideals or standards" (May et al. 2004, p. 14; May, Li, Mencl & Huang, 2014). Other authors are more concerned with the causes or sources of meaningful work, and define meaningful work as the result of a match between the objectives that an individual hopes to realize at work (expected job characteristics) and the perception the individual has of the extent to which those objectives are realized in the real work context (perceived job characteristics) (Isaksen, 2000; Morin, 2008; Ros, Schwartz & Surkiss, 1999).

These two constructions of meaningful work are far from being opposed or separated: "it is quite common for there to be comingling between causes or sources of meaningful work and the experience of meaningful work itself" (Steger, Bryan & Duffy, 2012). We therefore adopt a complex definition of meaningful work that encompasses both of these dimensions, and we refer to meaningful work in this paper as 'that which results from a sense of coherence between the expected and perceived job characteristics according to one's own ideals or standards'.

Many scholars have previously sought to identify the work characteristics to which people give particular meaning. Work characteristics were first identified by Hackman and Oldham (1976): employees perceive jobs as meaningful when they provide task identity (completing a whole piece of work from start to finish), task significance (the work has a positive impact on others), skill variety (being able to use a range of capabilities), autonomy (having discretion about when, how, and where to complete tasks), and feedback (receiving information about one's progress and performance). Ketchum and Trist (1992) also suggested a classification of the objective characteristics of meaningful work into six aspects: variety and challenge; continuous learning; discretion and autonomy; recognition and support; social contribution; and desirable future.

New insights on meaningful work have also been offered by the spiritual literature (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). In particular, comprehensive studies by Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) underscore the importance of becoming and expressing self, creating unity with others and serving others. Becoming and expressing self imply moral development, personal growth, and the ability to stay true to oneself and to create, achieve, and influence. Creating unity with others relates to sharing values, belonging to a group, and working together. Serving others means the ability

to see a connection between work and a transcendent cause that meets the needs of humanity (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009, p. 501).

Lastly, the psychological literature on meaningful work describes the different ways in which individuals can reinforce the meaning they give to their work (Brief & Nord, 1990; Frankl, 1969). Scholars in this area (e.g., Fox, 1980; Isaksen, 2000; Morin, 2008; Ros, Schwartz & Surkiss, 1999) identify three similar entry points: the sense of autonomy and liberty in accomplishing one's work; the possibility of having good relationships with others and to attend to their well-being; and the sense that the work benefits society (Isaksen, 2000).

These different perspectives, based on the spiritual and psychological literatures on work respectively, all emphasize three main categories of meaningful work that are related to the person of the workers, to workers' relationships with their co-workers, and to their societal utility. All these analyses are not only focused on employees' capabilities to pursue meaningful work but also invite researchers to reflect more deeply on the role of leaders. Leadership may be one of the most meaningful activities, since leaders can only help employees to give meaning to work if they themselves are open to all the dimensions of meaningful work. Inspired by the work of Weisskopf-Joelson (1968), Frankl (1969), and Yalom (1980), Morin (2008) drew up a set of managerial recommendations intended to help employees give greater meaning to their work in the hope of preserving their mental health and their organizational commitment in the workplace. Addressing this issue in four different organizations, Morin (2008) proposed six work characteristics that are positively and significantly correlated to meaningful work, which led to nine managerial recommendations.

Table 1 connects the three main categories of meaningful work to the six subcategories of meaningful work and the nine managerial recommendations.

Despite these numerous research streams suggesting a non-exclusively economic view of work, there is much that we do not know about how organization members give meaning to their work. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine how leaders actually give meaning to *their* work. Although past research provides guidance on some dimensions of meaningful work (Frankl, 1969; Isaksen, 2000; Morin, 2008; Ros, Schwartz & Surkiss, 1999), we want to gain a richer understanding of the specific dimensions of work to which leaders give meaning. Hence, we take an inverse approach to that adopted by past research on meaningful work: whereas scholars in psychology or spirituality began by identifying the overall dimensions of meaningful work, from which they infer behavioral recommendations for leaders, we begin by identifying the specific dimensions of meaningful leadership. We then examine whether these inherent dimensions of meaningful leadership could match the behavioral recommendations for leaders drawn from the literature on meaningful work.

## Methods

### *Sample, Data Collection and Interview Protocol*

We commenced our investigation by observing eight leadership development programs offered by an international coaching firm. Participants in these programs were not necessarily established leaders or considered to possess leadership skills; in some cases, they were involved in these programs because their superiors thought that they needed to improve their "leadership ability". This provided us with the opportunity to launch a study on the perceptions of meaningful leadership by conducting 42 interviews with current and emerging leaders having participated in these programs. These leadership development programs prepared the participants to question their own career, identity, and experience (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm & McKee, 2014; Strange & Mumford, 2005), but they did not address the issue of meaningful leadership or provide guidance on meaningfulness either.

We conducted 15 exploratory interviews lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, from September 2013 to April 2014. This exploratory approach revealed the importance of the question of the meaning given by leaders to their work activity. At this stage, we had already identified the three main categories of meaning related to the person of the leaders, to their relationships with co-workers, and to societal utility. This exploratory approach has also enabled us to understand that meaningful leadership is not a fixed notion and a definitive construct. We were already able to perceive that the meaning given to leadership activity is linked to past and present events, and that the employees' current situation is a source of meaning for leaders. Given all these observations, we aspired to identify more accurately the sub-categories and the dynamics of meaningful leadership. We then decided to pursue the investigation with a life story approach in order to capture the richness found in personal stories that are "*depositories of meaning*" (Shamir & Eilam, 2005, p. 403). The second phase of inquiry was composed of 27 biographical interviews, which lasted an average of 105 minutes and took place between April 2014 and November 2014. Empirical saturation was obtained at 27 biographical interviews, when we found that the additional information was becoming redundant. By the time the investigation ended in February 2015, we had conducted a total of 42 interviews that addressed the question of how leaders give meaning to leadership.

The diversity of the population identified was checked at the time of the formation of the group of leadership development programs participants, and during the choice of the two samples: 15 of the 48 participants involved in the first leadership development program were selected for the exploratory approach, and 27 of the 38 participants of the next leadership development program were chosen for the second phase of inquiry. We used a heterogeneous sampling approach in terms of gender, age, and activity sectors: one-third of the

**Table 1.** Dimensions of Meaningful Work and the Resulting Managerial Recommendations.

Meta-dimensions of Meaningful Work	Sub-categories of Meaningful Work		Managerial Recommendations
	Isaksen 2000; Morin 2008; Lips-Wiersma & Morris 2009		
<b>The person of the workers</b>	Moral correctness	Work performed in a workplace that values justice and equity, and respects human dignity	Ensuring that all employees enjoy their work Assigning responsibilities to their personnel and facilitating their professional development Giving their team enough leeway to organize the work in the way they consider most effective Allowing their personnel to exercise their judgment and influence in their work environment Valuing and recognizing individuals' results Recognizing the skills of their personnel Adjusting the workload to each individual's capacity and resources Providing their team with very concrete support
	Learning and development opportunities	Work that people enjoy doing, that lets them to achieve their objectives, to develop their competences and talents, and to realize their aspirations and ambitions	
	Autonomy	Work that allows people to assume responsibilities, exercise judgment to solve problems, and take initiatives in order to improve results	
	Recognition	Work that corresponds to people's skills and in which competences and results are recognized (including satisfactory salary and outlook for promotion)	
<b>Their relationships with co-workers</b>	Positive relationships	Work that enables interesting and good relationships	Facilitating the development of positive and significant professional relationships
<b>Societal utility</b>	Social purpose	Doing something useful for others and for society	Giving their personnel clear orientations and stimulating objectives coherent with the organization's strategy

respondents were female; half the sample was less than 45 years old; and two-thirds of the population were working in the banking sector, while one-third were working in the energy industry. We also considered initial training, which was diversified in both phases of the investigation. Half of the participants were from engineering or business schools; a quarter of the participants had completed university education (mathematics, economics, finance, law, biology, and geography); and the remaining quarter had completed another school (e.g., political science or military academy). The main criterion for participant selection was to be a member of executive committees and participate in strategic management. The functions exercised by these current or emerging leaders were diverse and representative, including regional or departmental directors, human resources directors, chief financial officers, heads of risk management, and directors of legal affairs.

All these interviews were recorded, transcribed, and checked as an accurate depiction by the respondents, giving us the opportunity to focus on the leaders' answers as the interview process continued. Initially, we provided a brief description of the study and assured respondents that all information would be kept confidential. During the first

phase of inquiry, we asked a broad question related to their role and their activity as leaders. During the second phase of inquiry, we focused a little more on the concept of meaningful leadership without ever referring to the theoretical framework on meaning that we had already been working on. Having confirmed the sociodemographic characteristics of the interviewees, we simply began the interview with an open-ended question: "What meaning do you give to your experience at work as a leader?" This question aimed to stimulate an autobiographical narrative that the interviewees were not supposed to interrupt. A few follow-up questions were prepared in order to obtain clarification or to cover all aspects of the leadership experience (e.g., "Which experiences have had an impact on your leadership activity?", "How would you describe yourself as a leader?", and "Can you give us some additional examples of your projects and practices as a leader?"). At the end of the interview, we asked them to describe how the sharing of their life story has made their own perception evolve during the interview. Most often, we observed that we did not need to prompt the respondents, insofar as they spontaneously addressed all the general themes in the interview guide, which is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Interview Guide.

Themes	Questions and Key Words
<b>Presentations</b>	Name, age, gender, marital status, number of children, function and activity, company and subsidiary, seniority and chronology of positions held, and training and qualifications
<b>Life story and experience at work</b>	Family and cultural background, and professional and non-professional experiences
<b>Preferences as leader</b>	Personal role and values
<b>Projects and practices as leader</b>	Vision, commitment to society, confidence in the team, managerial practices, and relationship with the teams
<b>Narrative identity</b>	Analysis of the past, interpretation of the life story, and answer to the question “Who am I as a leader?”

### Data Analysis

At the end of the two phases of inquiry, we decided to capture the dimensions of meaning given to leadership by coding the 15 exploratory interviews and the 27 life story interviews. We were able to perform this coding by using a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, NVIVO 11 QSR International. To that end, we reviewed the 42 transcripts independently and generated a list of conceptual categories that leaders mentioned. We then discussed and refined the two lists, combining categories that reflected the same underlying ideas and splitting categories where we felt that more fine-grained distinctions were needed. This iterative process is close to the one used by Shamir and Eilam (2005) for life story analysis. We addressed the data with a toolkit composed of theoretical references, in particular the managerial recommendations emanating from Morin (2008), yet we also recognized the new conceptual categories emanating from the field, and thus avoided overlaying a theoretical framework on field situations (Klenke, 2016). A consensus was reached rapidly on the four categories—meaningful leadership related to the leaders themselves, to the employees, to the relationship between leaders and employees, and to societal purpose—and on the subcategories that had already been identified by literature on meaningful work. However, we alternated discussion phases and joint coding phases on the basis of a restricted sample in order to ensure that our two lists covered the same reality, enabling us to identify new dimensions related to meaningful leadership. Further discussion was needed to agree on the names, definitions, and characteristics of these new sub-categories of meaning. In particular, we wondered at some length about the names of the last two emerging sub-categories: shared work commitment and positive attitude towards others and events. These two concepts are particularly complex, heterogeneous, and innovative: the first covers both a personal commitment to work and a desire to stimulate the commitment of employees to their work; the second covers both confidence in team members and confidence in the existence of solutions. The coding was performed in a single step at the end of the two phases of investigation, but the changes

in the names and the definitions of these two sub-categories led us to recode certain data.

We also conducted a hermeneutical reading of the life stories to identify recurrences and causal pathways in the biographical narratives (Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Sparrowe, 2005). As emphasized by Sparrowe (2005), the hermeneutic philosophy of Ricoeur (1992) allows us to “characterize the self as a narrative project through which individuals interpretively weave a story uniting the disparate events, actions, and motivations of their life experiences—much as novelists enliven their characters through the plot” (Sparrowe, 2005, p. 420). This approach helped us to consider meaningful leadership as the resolution of a plot in that leaders rediscover the meaning of their activity in a dynamic way by linking it to their past and present personal and professional experiences (Bailey & Madden, 2016; Ricoeur, 1992; Sparrowe, 2005).

In order to ensure the quality of results in the life story approach, we followed the advice from Klenke, who “considers fidelity (credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability) as a measure of quality” in the biographic approach (2016, p. 233). In particular, this author recommends prolonged engagement as a quality criterion, which we have satisfied in that we participated in the leadership development programs from their beginning. We could thus carefully examine the coherence and the plausibility of the meaning given by leaders to their activities.

### Results

Our results confirm that leaders give particular meaning to components that correspond to the managerial recommendations drawn from the literature on meaningful work—moral correctness, employees’ learning and development opportunities, employees’ autonomy, employees’ work recognition, positive relationships, and clear and coherent objectives (see Table 1). Equally, they point to dimensions related to leaders themselves, which were not identified by the literature on meaningful work. Indeed, the leaders give meaning to their own working conditions, and in particular to their own moral correctness, learning and development opportunities, autonomy, and recognition.

**Table 3.** Dimensions of Meaningful Leadership Drawn from Literature and Emerging from the Data.

	Leadership activity which helps employees give meaning to work (drawn from literature on meaningful work)	Leadership activity to which leaders can give meaning (emerging from the data analysis)
<b>Dimensions of meaningful leadership related to the leaders themselves</b>		<i>Leaders' moral exemplarity</i> Ensuring that there is a consistency between the values they promote and the practices they adopt <i>Leaders' learning and development opportunities</i> Ensuring that their own leadership activity is a source of learning and development for themselves <i>Leaders' autonomy</i> Ensuring that they have clear authority to act <i>Leaders' work recognition</i> Ensuring that their work is recognized <i>Leaders' self-awareness</i> Ensuring that there is a consistency between who they are and what they do
<b>Dimensions of meaningful leadership related to the employees</b>	<i>Employees' learning and development opportunities</i> Ensuring that all employees enjoy their work; Assigning responsibilities to their personnel and facilitating their professional development <i>Employees' autonomy</i> Giving their team enough leeway to organize the work in the way they consider most effective; Allowing their personnel to exercise their judgment and influence in their work environment <i>Employees' work recognition</i> Valuing and recognizing individuals' results; recognizing the skills of their personnel; adjusting the workload to each individual's capacity and resources; and providing their team with very concrete support	
<b>Dimensions of meaningful leadership related to the relationship between leaders and employees</b>	<i>Positive relationships</i> Facilitate the development of positive and significant professional relationships;	<i>Personal and professional support</i> Providing support according to employees' needs <i>Community spirit</i> Creating the conditions for the emergence of the community dynamic <i>Shared work commitment</i> Creating the conditions for the emergence of reciprocal work commitment
<b>Dimensions of meaningful leadership related to the societal purpose</b>	<i>Clear and coherent objectives</i> Giving their personnel clear orientations and stimulating objectives coherent with the organization's strategy	<i>Positive attitude towards others and events</i> Giving their personnel a positive sense of themselves and a positive vision of the future

The most significant result of our study is that it identifies the following six new dimensions of meaning that leaders give to leadership activity: moral exemplarity, self-awareness, personal and professional support, community spirit, shared work commitment, and positive attitude toward others and events. Table 3 compares the managerial recommendations drawn from the literature on meaningful work with the meaning that the respondents give to leadership activity, and it highlights those dimensions of meaningful leadership emerging from the data analysis. Table 4 specifies the importance that respondents place on each dimension and subdimension of meaningful leadership. This descriptive analysis of the dimensions of meaningful leadership is complemented

by a study of the dynamics of meaningful leadership revealed by the introspection resulting from the life story interviews.

### *New Dimensions of Meaningful Leadership*

Six new subcategories specify or complement the existing managerial recommendations: moral exemplarity, self-awareness, personal and professional support, community spirit, shared work commitment, and positive attitude towards others and events.

*Leaders' moral exemplarity.* Most often related to the moral purpose that the leaders embrace, moral correctness is renamed

**Table 4.** Dimensions of meaningful leadership that respondents consider meaningful.

Dimensions	Subcategories	Exploratory Interviews		Life-story Interviews		Total	
		Interviews	References	interviews	References	Interviews	References
<b>Dimensions of meaningful leadership related to the leaders themselves</b>		<b>15</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>545</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>588</b>
	Leader's moral exemplarity	7	18	25	87	32	105
	Leadership learning and development opportunities	10	20	23	140	33	160
	Leader's autonomy	6	11	13	22	19	33
	Leader's recognition	5	12	26	113	31	125
	Leader's self-awareness	15	49	26	183	41	232
<b>Dimensions of meaningful leadership related to the employees</b>		<b>15</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>266</b>
	Employees' learning and development opportunities	11	28	24	88	35	116
	Employees' recognition	12	27	20	54	32	81
	Employees' autonomy	8	22	17	47	25	69
<b>Dimensions of meaningful leadership related to the relationship between leaders and employees</b>		<b>15</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>418</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>516</b>
	Personal and professional support	12	32	27	212	39	244
	Community spirit	6	9	24	64	30	73
	Shared work commitment	15	57	23	142	38	199
<b>Dimensions of meaningful leadership related to the societal purpose</b>		<b>15</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>193</b>
	Clear and coherent objectives	13	49	27	98	40	147
	Positive attitude towards others and events	9	16	15	30	24	46

moral exemplarity. Not only do leaders commit themselves to respecting moral values, but they also report concern for coherence and honesty in the way they transmit and exemplify these values. They are convinced that the way they respect moral values in their relationships with some individuals may have a positive impact on all their co-workers' behavior.

What I'm trying to do is to explain the meaning of what we're doing, explain why we're doing it, and I try to get involved personally in the choices, I make sure that what we say is done and what we do is said. Coherence: saying things honestly. (Male, bank)

I simply say that we judge a company, an entity, a structure by the way it treats its weakest. And it is not just the weakest individuals who are grateful for that, but all those around who see how these weakest individuals are treated. (Male, bank)

**Leaders' self-awareness.** Leaders' self-awareness is a strongly represented subcategory: becoming a leader is an opportunity to improve self-knowledge and to question the coherence between who you are, what you do, and how you are perceived.

We are dealing with things that are deeply rooted, we cannot change them overnight. We must. . . . Already, self-awareness is important. And then, we must try to put in place. . . a constant vigilance on a daily basis where we say to ourselves: be careful, this is where you are now, but try to move and to become more yourself. (Female, bank)

Some participants spontaneously accept to engage in deep self-reflection that leads them to consider the mistakes they have made and to question certain beliefs or managerial behaviors.

I thought I was good with my team, but I wasn't that good after all. I know that I am unable to take care of the relational aspect in the teams, to organize convivial events. However, I managed to give them the impression that they were acting for the company by involving them in the analysis of our own functioning. I've devoted a lot of time, energy. . . . But I made the mistake of not supporting them in their relationship with customers: I didn't protect them enough. I felt that it wasn't always up to me to bring in the right ideas in order to better value teams. I tried to make them as autonomous as possible by letting them organize convivial events, but I didn't always go to them, not realizing how bad it was in terms of message. I had succeeded in sharing my convictions, in achieving the objectives, but I had not managed to make it a committed group. (Male, bank)

**Professional and personal support.** The majority of leaders interviewed give meaning to the attention that they devote to each work activity and to each of their team members. Professional support provided to their staff takes many forms including common projects, advice and information spontaneously shared. Personal support implies consideration of personal problems and help to those who are in greatest difficulty. It is also perceived by leaders as a way of helping their team give meaning to their work activity.

It is rather informal, listening to people, listening to their complaints, trying to provide something, to help, to support them, rather than leading them. (Male, bank)

I spoke with the receptionist: showing the interest we have for each employee, it also means showing that every job is important in an agency; without her, we could not open the agency! (Female, bank)

**Community spirit.** The meaning given to leadership activity does not result from developing a court around the leader, but rather stimulating the emergence of a community of persons sharing a common cause enabling them to experience a sense of belonging.

I arrived for the start of this new entity: people got on well with each other and we really had the feeling we were building it together. (Male, industry)

**Shared work commitment.** It is even easier for leaders to give meaning to their work with their team when they set an example by investing time and effort in their own work, thereby inviting the employees in turn to be committed to their work.

Co-workers around you must feel that you are committed. In terms of management, there are two things that I think are just as important: commitment and exemplarity. At least you can say to the team members in front of you, look how committed I am. (Male, bank)

If they had had a boss who only forced things onto people without knowing in depth the subjects, they would have supported me less easily. . . . (silence) They accepted change because I knew how to make them part of the adventure, because I set the example rather than imposing objectives. (Male, industry)

**Positive attitude towards others and events.** A new subcategory that emerges from our data reflects a positive view of the future and confidence in the team members, allowing them to trust each other and to overcome difficulties. Whatever the mistakes made by co-workers or the difficulties encountered, leaders adopt a positive and confident attitude.

There is always a solution to a problem: don't consider the constraint, why it will not work, but consider why it has not

worked, and focus on concrete solutions that will work, and show legitimacy through competence and relevant proposals. (Male, bank)

### **Dynamics of Meaningful Leadership**

All the leaders reported that life story interviews renewed the sense they gave to leadership activity by reminding them of past relational experiences, which may have influenced their professional and ethical choices, and by encouraging them to be aware of the interactions between meaningful leadership and their employees' meaningful work.

**Past relational experiences.** Past experiences are divided into four main subcategories: relationship with previous employers (26 out of 27; 118 references), moral education (24 out of 27; 102 references), non-professional experiences (25 out of 27; 93 references), and professional successes (22 out of 27; 71 references).

**Relationship with previous leaders.** Life story interviews indicate that the meaning given to leadership is strongly related to past relational experiences with previous leaders. Our study reveals how leaders have given meaning to their activity by imitating or, conversely, rejecting the behavior of other leaders.

I was taking responsibility for an HR department. I took on a hierarchical responsibility within a distribution center. I used to have a boss I loved: a very honest woman. She said to me: you're going to work like a madman. And she added: but I'll help you. She helped me. She was a real mirror. (Female, industry)

It's true that I am a very protective father in my management, especially with my project managers. I am completely opposed to management by terror. I had a boss who acted like this: he was putting his own teams in competition with each other. (Male, industry)

**Moral education.** Leaders can give particular meaning to their activity by observing that the aspiration to be recognized as leaders is partly connected with the education provided by their parents. Standards set by the family may serve as examples that the future leader can emulate.

This interview is very interesting since, to some extent, I have rebuilt my life, it makes me relive my past: my family group is where I have structured myself and is what gives me values today, not only as a leader, but in all my personal identity. (Male, bank)

**Non-professional experiences.** Almost all the respondents link meaningful leadership to extracurricular activities. For example, a bank sector leader underlines that the meaning given to her activity as a leader is related to her political activity in her youth, during which she was inspired by



personalities whose vision and values made a positive difference in society.

*Professional successes.* Past professional successes also strengthened the leaders' determination to give a specific meaning to leadership activity and enabled them to acknowledge that they had developed leadership skills.

*Interactions between meaningful leadership and employees' meaningful work.* During the life story interviews, leaders became aware of the interactions between the meaning they give to leadership activity and the meaning that their teams give to their work. By observing other leadership behaviors, future leaders develop a vision of the needs of society and take responsibilities in the hope of being useful to it. Leadership is therefore a means to pursue this goal by instilling this vision in their team (dimensions related to a societal purpose), being attentive to the respective qualities of each member of the team (dimensions related to others), and developing relationships of trust and support (dimensions related to relationships between leaders and employees). Subsequently, other members of the organization assume responsibilities and give increased meaning to their work. The fact that leaders observe that they have an impact on their team's meaningful work also has a positive impact on their own personal fulfillment (dimensions related to the leader).

You see, when we manage to share values, when I see young people who are now branch managers, I feel that I have transmitted something, I am proud of that! . . . I tell myself: if that happened, if I helped it to happen, that's a good thing! You see, I left my mark! When we ask what use we are, I think we serve some purpose. I want to transform people, I'm sure there is always good in each individual. (. . .) The fact of getting to know myself better, also spending time with my team, initiating projects, having new ideas, I like this! So it builds me up! (Female, bank)

Almost all the life story interviews were an opportunity to develop an awareness of the interconnections between meaningful leadership and employees' meaningful work.

First, leaders establish a close link between the progression accomplished by their employees and their own progression. Not only do learning and development opportunities result from the same organizational dynamic, but also leaders' progression allows them to foster employees' career development, which subsequently has an impact on their own progression.

What is important is how we fight to help them to find a job they enjoy, which enables them to make progress. (. . .) They have also contributed to what I am today and to how I made progress. So when I can help them, it is a pleasure for me. (Female, bank)

Second, discussions on the tensions and difficulties of work provide a favorable opportunity to develop dynamics

of meaning since they enable leaders and employees to experience positive and significant professional relationships.

I have the pleasure of seeing them work together. We take two hours out of our busy schedule together and we share things. When we are confronted with a difficulty, an obstacle, the others give their opinion : it enables us to see things from different perspectives and to participate in codevelopment without saying it. I organize moments of friendly exchange regularly. (Male, industry)

Stephanie wanted to leave, and I knew I couldn't offer her a career path, so I found her a job before the official publication. The others knew that I did this: it gave them a vision of the future: he helps us to leave, it's a plus compared to other managers who prevent us from leaving! I am happy to see my team members progress. (Male, industry)

Third, support provided to employees intended to help them to give meaning to work conforms to the leaders' values, allowing these leaders to develop the feeling of being authentic and true to their values.

I help them to grow professionally, to develop their careers: that is good for them, for the group, for the team because word soon gets round. Accompanying them is very time-consuming, but I find this normal. I would like to be able to look at myself in the mirror every day: I share, I help, it makes sense to me, it seems in harmony with my values. (Male, Bank)

I had a member of the team who had been to the overindebtedness commission three times. Occupational medicine advised me to let this lady be evicted from her home. I made sure that her move and the storage of her furniture did not cost her anything. She threatened to take a period of sick leave! Then she realized her situation and agreed that I could help her move on. So I did everything I could to help her find a post in the region. She was promised a position, then she was denied the position, which is contrary to the company's values. I rushed to the office of the director, and she was taken. She left happy. It's a beautiful story [tearfully]. I left tired, but happy. (Female, industry)

Hence, leaders develop an awareness of their leadership abilities through the analysis of their past relational experiences with previous leaders, parents, influential personalities, or co-workers, but also through analysis of how they have succeeded in stimulating employees' meaningful work. Dynamics of meaningful leadership result from both a process for linking past and present experiences and a process for linking meaningful leadership and employees' meaningful work.

## Discussion

The evidence presented in this article shows that the meaningful leaders give to leadership activity is composed of four

**Table 5.** Subcategories of Meaningful Leadership Not Identified By the Meaningful Work Literature.

<b>Moral exemplarity</b>	<b>Definition:</b> The leaders share values like justice, equity, and respect for human dignity, and they strive to adopt exemplary behavior <b>Practices:</b> Personal values shared, choice of exemplary moral practices
<b>Self-awareness</b>	<b>Definition:</b> The leaders search for coherence between the leadership activity they practice, how they are perceived, and who they are <b>Practices:</b> introspective work, awareness of past experiences, conceptualization of leadership, self-knowledge, and self-criticism
<b>Personal or professional support</b>	<b>Definition:</b> The leaders provide support at a personal or professional level <b>Practices:</b> Common projects, shared information, consideration of personal issues, recognition of the right to make mistakes, and attention paid to those in difficulty
<b>Community spirit</b>	<b>Definition:</b> The leaders build a community in which each member can contribute to a common cause and develop a sense of belonging <b>Practices:</b> Identification and sharing of common goals, conviviality, and solidarity
<b>Shared work commitment</b>	<b>Definition:</b> The leaders are themselves committed to work, in order to create a shared work commitment among team members <b>Practices:</b> Time and work devoted to others, and responsible attitude
<b>Positive attitude towards others and events</b>	<b>Definition:</b> The leaders share a positive view based on trust in others and in the existence of solutions <b>Practices:</b> Democratic behavior, integration of team members in leadership activities, and signs of trust and confidence

dimensions that are, related to the person of the leader, to the employees, to the relationship between leaders and employees, and to societal purposes, respectively. Six new subcategories emerged from our data—moral exemplarity, self-awareness, personal and professional support, community spirit, shared work commitment, and positive attitude towards others and events. They complement and substantiate past recommendations in terms of leadership practices that may foster meaningful work.

These new components of meaning have in common the fact that they highlight the deeply altruistic nature of meaningful leadership that had already been underscored in the positively-oriented theories (Dinh et al., 2014; Greenleaf, 2013; Hackett & Wang, 2012; Lean & Ganster, 2017; Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum & Kuenzi, 2012; Parris & Peachey, 2013) such as authentic and transformational leadership (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012; Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans & May, 2004; Lips-Wiersma & Algera, 2008). For example, according to Avolio and Gardner (2005), self-awareness is an appropriate starting point for interpreting what constitutes authentic leadership development, and it means that leaders are aware (a) of how they think and behave; and (b) that they are perceived by others as being aware of who they are. Likewise, moral exemplarity may be close to the moral identity and moral attentiveness cited by Zhu, Trevino and Zheng (2016) to evoke leaders' desire to represent this aspect of themselves to others (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Reynolds, 2008). Community spirit is also evoked in leadership literature whereby transformational leadership would help the members of the organization develop a sense of community (McKee, Driscoll, Kelloway & Kelly, 2011). Our study demonstrates how these three

concepts already evoked in the positively oriented theories of leadership could be components of meaningful leadership, and also reveals other new components of meaning related to leadership activity. Each of the new subcategories of meaningful leadership is defined and illustrated in Table 5.

Therefore, we propose to define meaningful leadership by mobilizing two dimensions highlighted in this study: a sense of coherence between the job characteristics expected and perceived by the leaders (components of meaningful leadership), and their ability, stemming from their past and present relational experiences, to foster a sense of coherence between the job characteristics expected and perceived by their employees (dynamics of meaningful leadership).

Our analysis of the *components of meaningful leadership* complements theories on meaningful work by suggesting new components of meaning. Moral exemplarity means that individuals give meaning to work that can be performed in an exemplary way. Self-awareness implies that work is more meaningful if it allows people to ensure coherence between who they are, what they do, and how they are perceived. Providing personal and professional support to all colleagues, contributing to community spirit, and participating in a shared work commitment help all organization members give meaning to work. A positive attitude helps colleagues gain a positive sense of themselves and of the future in a meaningful way. Some of these components have already been suggested in literature on workplace spirituality. For example, addressing the issue of moral qualities akin to exemplarity, Rozuel (2013) has defined moral exemplarity as a commitment to the self that clearly sustains a commitment to serve others. Likewise, Saks (2011) has described the importance of workplace spirituality for meaningfulness at

work and has considered community spirit as a core dimension of workplace spirituality. Hence, these components of meaning might be identified in other kinds of work activity and among the other members of the organization, but this study shows that they are typical of leadership activity.

Our analysis of the *dynamics of meaningful leadership* further clarifies how leaders can contribute to their own meaningful leadership and to their employees' meaningful work at the same time. Rather than argue that leaders are responsible for creating conditions for the emergence of a shared search for meaningful work, we demonstrate that meaningful leadership also results from the dynamics of meaning. These dynamics are based on past relational experiences (Ligon, Hunter & Mumford, 2008; Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Sparrowe, 2005), and on interactions, even entanglements, between meaningful leadership and employees' meaningful work. Following studies by Brief and Nord (1990), Pratt and Ashforth (2003), and Grant (2007) who have suggested the existence of dynamics of meaning, we propose to define dynamics of meaningful leadership as the process whereby leaders, current or emerging, impart meaning to leadership activity by becoming aware of the key role played by their past relational experiences and of the way they have influenced their employees' meaningful work. Therefore, the present study sheds new light on the interconnections between meaningful leadership and meaningful work, awareness of which contributes to fostering meaningful work.

One limitation of our study is that meaningful leadership has been analyzed solely through the discourse of leaders themselves. This limitation is attenuated by the fact that interviews have been conducted from a hermeneutical perspective (Bailey & Madden, 2016; Ricoeur, 1992; Sparrowe, 2005), whereby meaningful leadership emerges from a dialectic between self and other through which one becomes an other in the narrative process. Answering questions such as "Who am I as leader?" or "What is the meaning of working?" is like the resolution of a plot (Sparrowe, 2005), creating unity from discordant events and revealing who the leader truly is. Nevertheless, interviews with employees in the same organizations as the leaders could enrich our results by comparing the views of leaders with those of employees in order to consider how the components of meaningful leadership are perceived and even shared by the team. Moreover, an ethnographic approach that includes a long-term observation of several teams in their natural settings would provide a deeper and even more informed understanding of the ongoing dynamics of meaningful leadership (Day, 2011).

Our study also risks giving the impression that leaders can easily experience virtuous dynamics of meaning. However, a rigid organizational culture based on predefined processes as well as an economic culture based on individualistic values can act as barriers to the development of this virtuous spiral, in as far as they are likely to impede cooperation. Therefore,

even assuming that leaders supported by leadership development programs wish to engage in this altruistic and reflective approach, they run the risk of being confronted with the dominant values of the socio-economic system and the lack of flexibility of their organizations. These dynamics of meaning might be encouraged by organizational and managerial levers that future studies could analyze. Our study is a first step in this investigation, emphasizing the importance of these dynamics that leaders can, in some cases and in a reflective process, learn to live and relive. In his book entitled "Let your life speak," Palmer invites us on this "inner journey" that allows us to give a meaning faithful to the complexity of our own experience: "before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent" (2000, p. 5). This presupposes that leaders are in a position to distance themselves from individualistic values and to experience the profoundly human and realistic need to make others grow (Bruni, 2012). It also means that leaders are given the opportunity to move beyond a fixed vision of meaning of work that focuses on the objective characteristics of a given activity, in order to broaden their views with a consideration of the dynamics of meaning.

## Conclusion

Our study focused on the synergy between meaning given to leadership activity and contribution to employees' meaningful work. Meaningful leadership assumes that leaders should experience all the dimensions of meaning in order to be able to encourage each member of their team to give meaning to work. Leaders strive to favor the working conditions and professional development of their employees, to create positive and significant relationships with their employees, and to set clear and coherent objectives. However, other components of meaningful leadership demonstrate the deeply altruistic nature of leadership and imply that leaders, effective or emerging, are capable of (a) adopting morally exemplary behavior; (b) searching for coherence between who they are, what they do, and how they are perceived; (c) providing support to each team member; (d) encouraging community spirit; (e) creating a shared work commitment; and (f) adopting a positive attitude toward co-workers and events. By revealing that leaders can pursue meaningful leadership and help all employees to give meaning to their work at the same time, our research may also serve as a foundation for future studies on the close links between leaders' meaningful leadership and employees' meaningful work.


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