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HOW DO HIGHLY ENGAGED EMPLOYEES AND MANAGERS
FIND MEANING IN THEIR WORK?

A Research Project
Presented to the Faculty of
The George L. Graziadio
School of Business and Management
Pepperdine University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
In
Organization Development

by
Bruce Barkis
April 2017

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been submitted to and accepted by the faculty of The George L. Graziadio
School of Business and Management in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

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ABSTRACT

Multiple studies have shown meaning as a driver of employee engagement. The literature indicates that the primary focus of employee engagement research has been on engagement's *performance* outcomes rather than on the *conditions* such as meaning that influence that performance. Along with contributing to the body of engagement research, this study will benefit employees' and managers' work experience.

The purpose of this study is to understand how highly engaged managers and employees discover meaning in their work. The phenomenological qualitative research method was chosen to explore and describe the individual managers' and employees' lived experiences of finding meaning in work. The company chosen as the setting for the study invited 10 highly engaged employees and managers to participate in the study. Qualitative data was collected from 10 forty-five minute interviews. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) enabled in-depth exploration of the participants' descriptions of the research phenomenon.

In this study, participants described a progressive discovery of meaning in work. Participant comments focused on the conditions favorable to finding, discovering, and experiencing meaning. Four major themes emerged: (a) leadership, (b) culture, (c) impact and (d) the work.

The employees and managers most often mentioned appreciation for their leadership, especially about how leadership lives the core values. When describing the culture, most comments were about how leadership, managers, and employees contribute to the culture. The culture is intentionally created rather than merely received. Impact is the third major component of a meaningful work experience. This impact includes others, the business, and the greater good. For most, making a difference in other employees' lives was most meaningful. Almost as

important as impact, is the work itself: serving other employees while doing what they do best and like doing most.

The experience of meaning in work not only benefits the employees, it benefits the company. Interview participants expressed a desire to work harder, deliver better quality, continuously improve, grow, develop, increase responsibility and to continue making a difference. Participants also described how they feel experiencing meaning in work: fulfilled, happy, enjoy their work, secure, have fun, celebrate and feel better about themselves.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

If recent Google searches are a reliable indicator, the public has shown great interest in the relationship between meaning and their work. For example, recent searches on *meaning and work* turned up 13.4 million results: *meaningful work*, 436,000 results; *purpose and work*, 26.7 million and *meaning and engagement*, 403,000. In the academic world, the results are quite different. For example, similar searches for scholarly articles and books through EBSCOhost “Academic Search Complete” produced these results: *meaning and work*, 950; *meaningful work*, 551; *purpose and work*, 546; and *meaning and engagement*, 46.

The Opportunity for this Study

Given this level of interest, it is surprising there has not been more scholarly research on meaning and work, and it is more surprising to consider the research showing meaning as a *driver of employee engagement* (Burger, Crouse & Roudt, 2012; May & Harter, 2004; The Energy Project, 2014). One possible explanation is that the primary focus of employee engagement research has been on engagement’s performance outcomes rather than on conditions such as *meaning that influence that performance*. (Shuck & Rose, 2013)

What we don’t know

The business and academic worlds approach engagement from different perspectives. On the business side, the major engagement survey providers and consulting firms emphasize cognitive-behavioral, deterministic, utilitarian, and pragmatic approaches to examining engagement. Grounded in abundant data, they identify the drivers of workforce engagement, produce prioritized, weighted lists of actions that, in turn, are intended to deliver engaged

workers. The engagement-consulting firms then point to subsequent data to further calibrate their interventions and to demonstrate the efficacy of their recommendations.

By contrast, academic scholars tend to emphasize the employee engagement experience. For example, “In essence, work engagement captures how workers experience their work” (Bakker, Demerouti, & Zanthopoulou, 2011, p.15). And the literature suggests that academic research on workforce engagement is relatively nascent. According to an *Advances in Developing Human Resources* article published in 2011, “Employee engagement is an emerging concept in the HRD literature, with demonstrated organizational benefits; yet little is known about its antecedents” (Wollard & Shuck, p. 429). Studies found in the literature show that meaning is strongly correlated with engagement (Bakker et al., 2011; May et al., 2004). Other studies go further to show that meaning is an antecedent of engagement (Maylett & Warner, 2014; Wollard & Shuck, 2011). Engagement in relation to meaning presents abundant opportunities for academic exploration. One outcome of this thesis is to bridge the business-academic gap with rigorous research into the phenomenon of highly engaged employees and managers finding meaning in their work. The nature of the work for this study is where employees and managers contribute to a business organization’s key business outcomes.

What we know

This research explores meaning and work rather than purpose and work. Although Chapter 2 presents research about the meaning of meaning, it’s important to establish how the word *meaning* is used in this study, as well as to distinguish it from the related word *purpose*. Meaning and purpose are closely related. Of the two, the literature points to meaning as the broader, more encapsulating term. Seeking meaning is preferred over seeking happiness (Baumeister & Vohs, 2003; Seligman, 2002). Meaning is an orientation toward something greater than the self (Aakker, Garbinsky, Baumeister, Vohs, 2013). Doing for others produces

meaning as the intrinsic reward (Aaker, et al., 2013). Purpose refers to “an intention or aim; a reason for doing something” (Cambridge Dictionary). That result, on one end of the spectrum, could refer to the purpose of a task or, on the other end, the purpose of one’s life. Leider (2015) described the highest sense of purpose as “an active expression of the deepest dimension in us—where we have a profound sense of who we are and why we’re here” (p. vii). That said, work is meaningful when it aligns with an individual’s higher purpose, how the individual defines that purpose, and how high they choose to take that purpose (Maylett & Warner, 2014). Work can be difficult and still be meaningful. Work, in fact life, is meaningful to the extent that challenges or difficulties are seen as opportunities rather than obstacles (Feld, Leskinen, Kinnunen, & Mauno, 2000).

In a 2010 dissertation, Marquard found that “the literature has established solid linkages between employee engagement and organizational performance” (p.xiv). And from a 2015 dissertation Nowacki stated that, “Employee engagement is an increasingly salient topic in organizations given the reported financial, attitudinal, and behavioral gains of having an engaged workforce, and as such, considered a means for achieving effective performance” (p. ii). An integrative review of employee engagement-related literature reported, “Grounded in empirical evidence, there are well-researched axioms regarding the presence of employee engagement... From the research it seems clear, employee engagement matters” (Wollard & Shuck, 2011, p. 430).

Abundant data confirms the supervisor’s impact on employee engagement. For example, the Gallup Organization with, at most recent count, 27 million employees’ levels of engagement measured, is one of the pioneers in measuring employee engagement and a frequently cited source for engagement information. The most prominent finding in Gallup’s 2015 report, *State of*

the American Manager: Analytics and Advice for Leaders (Harter & Rigoni, 2015) is that, “Our research shows that managers account for as much as 70% of variance in employee engagement scores” (p. 2).

Studies also show a strong correlation between meaning and engagement. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) published the results of a two-year engagement study involving 9,000 employees in the United Kingdom. They found that finding meaning in work was the number one driver of engagement (Alfes, Gaternby, Rees, Soane & Truss, 2010, p. 2). DecisionWise, a U.S.-based global engagement survey provider with over 100 million surveys completed, found meaning as one of five key drivers of engagement (DecisionWise, 2016). Another study found meaning as one of four intrinsic rewards that drive employee engagement (Thomas, 2009). The meaning employees attach to their work has powerful practical consequences (Shuck & Rose, 2013).

The Importance of This Study

How employees perceive their work—meaningful or meaningless—impacts the degree to which they are engaged (or disengaged) in their work. Shuck and Rose (2011) found employees will commit little energy to tasks they find meaningless. Instead, employees feel their work is meaningful when their time, knowledge and skills are used productively.

This study has the potential to enhance any employees’ and managers’ work experience, not only those in professions that are regarded as callings. From over 14 million employee engagement survey responses across 70 countries, Maylett and Warner (2014), found opportunities for all employees and managers to create meaning:

Not everyone saves lives in an emergency room, fights poverty in developing countries, or negotiates peace treaties. But we can all create meaning in what we do. In some way, our work contributes to the world, our company, our team, or even our families (White Paper, pg. 2).

The Purpose of This Study

The purpose of this study is to understand how highly engaged managers and employees discover meaning in their work. In choosing participants for the study, this researcher chose to avoid those in professions in which members would likely describe finding meaning as a response to a calling—for example, nurses, school teachers, therapists, missionary or not for profit employee or manager. Of more interest are environments and types of work where the connection to meaning is less obvious—for example, office environment or geographically remote and independent; those whose work is heavily weighted with routine administrative tasks or regularly in situations dealing with resistance and potential legal consequences or providing other operational support services.

From the study's inception, this researcher sought to learn: Do employees and managers really find meaning in their work? If so, how do they describe their experience? What's meaningful about it? In fact, what do they mean by meaning? How do those personal definitions correspond with those held in the business, psychological and academic communities? How did they find meaning in their work? Or is meaning in work something individuals actively create or passively realize? What benefits are there to find meaning in work? Are these benefits sufficiently compelling that organizations could justify expending resources to facilitate or accelerate the process of finding or creating meaning? And, as a bonus, can the study participants suggest how others could find meaning in their work?

Research Method and Setting

The phenomenological qualitative research method is chosen as a method that enabled me to bring genuine curiosity to exploring the individual managers' and employees' lived experience (Groenwald, 2004). Most distinctive about this method is that the researcher

approaches data collection and analysis open to any insights about the phenomenon that emerge. This approach is the antithesis of other qualitative methods where the research begins with a hypothesis to test and assumptions to confirm or dismiss. The interviews, the data collection method, are themselves acknowledged as contributing to this exploratory study. Another feature of this method is that insight into the phenomenon is this outcome rather than a theory or other purpose that could bias the process (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009). Given that research into finding meaning in work is relatively new, it makes sense to use a method that casts a wide net rather than one with predetermined limits.

The environment for the study was a business with 10 highly engaged employees and managers. While the study method is subjective, an objective and validated survey was used to identify a cohort of “highly engaged” employees and managers from which to select study participants.

The business from which the participants were drawn has measured their workforce’s engagement for over 14 years using a validated research instrument: The DecisionWise Leadership Intelligence Employee Engagement Survey. From the cohort, the vice president of talent management selected seven employees and three managers to participate. The Phenomenological Research Guidelines (Waters, 2016), Groenwald’s Phenomenological Research Design (2004) and *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method, And Research* (Smith et al., 2009) are among the resources accessed to ensure the academic rigor of the research design.

Data was collected from 10 forty-five minute interviews. Great care was taken to minimize researcher and participant bias. Participants received an email that explained the purpose of the interviews and the time required with assurances about their option to choose not

to participate and confidentiality. Care was taken to present instructions and define terms, if necessary, to influencing comments. The interview protocol is presented in Chapter 3 along with actions to avoid influencing responses.

Interviews were professionally transcribed, accuracy confirmed against audio recordings, and then coding performed. Transcripts were scrutinized for key words, phrases, and quotes within the context of the questions, then entered into an Excel spreadsheet. The coding of key words and phrases for analysis tracked how frequently they were mentioned and, through an iterative process, consolidated related themes to reveal four major themes. The analytical method maintained continuity with the context of the question where the word or phrase is first identified through to the major theme to which it ultimately contributes.

Thesis Outline

Chapter 1 introduced the general public's interest in meaning and work, the opportunity for more study about the antecedents to employee engagement, the impact of meaning on engagement, and the potential for benefits for managers and employees. Chapter 2 presents the results from a review of existing and relevant literature about meaning in the workplace, employee engagement, and the relationship between meaning and engagement. Chapter 3 presents the choice of the phenomenological research methodology and its purpose and relevance to exploring the phenomenon. Specifics described include: setting selection, participant identification, data-gathering methods, interview protocol design, and data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 presents the data collection experience as well as results and findings. Chapter 5 discusses insights from analysis of the data. Limitations in the study will be acknowledged and opportunities for the OD community presented along with encouragement for further research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

"Why am I here?" "What's my ultimate purpose?" These are the existential questions men and women have asked before the beginning of recorded history. Philosophies and religions all, in one form or another, answer these questions. How one answers these questions influences, even determines, how one chooses to live one's life. The answers affect the quality and satisfaction derived from that life. The degree to which one can find or create meaning that aligns with that purpose can have life or death consequences as Viktor Frankl (1946) described in his classic *Man's Search for Meaning*. Baumeister et al. (2013) found the pursuit of meaning as a distinctly human activity "such as expressing oneself and thinking integratively about past and future. The quest for meaning is a key part of what makes us human, and uniquely so" (p. 516).

Snyder and Lopez (2005) reported that people are increasingly relying on their work as a significant source of existential meaning. Most of our life when not asleep is consumed at work. These authors noted a cultural shift that has transferred more of the burden of meaning-finding from the personal and spiritual to the workplace. Snyder and Lopez described how meaning is often found today, "In American culture, career often takes the place of religion in people's lives, which then compels people to find significance in their work" (p. 615). But this doesn't work out so well for many people, "because work does not easily lend itself to existential significance...relying on career for meaning in life is associated with career burnout" (p. 615). People may find their careers "quite satisfying in some respects" (p. 616) but careers aren't sufficient for the full experience of meaning. "Family life, however, may provide that very sense

of value (e.g., doing what is best for the children is typically regarded as an important good) that is not found in workplace activities” (p.609).

A recent multi-year study about finding meaning in work frames the situation less fatalistically: “While systems to which individuals traditionally turned for meaning decline, organizations become increasingly important for employees’ experience of meaning” (Burger, Crous, & Roodt, 2013, p. 1). Organizational influence on meaning in work is confirmed by multiple studies. For example, a Harvard Business Review/Energy Project research study of 20,000 employees “in dozens of countries around the world” (“The Human Era,” 2014, p. 2) revealed one of the four factors that most influence how people feel at work is to find a sense of meaning and purpose in their work. The Harvard Business Review/Energy Project study went on to state that employees who derive meaning from their work are “2.2 times more satisfied with their job and 93% more engaged” (p. 9). Engaged employees, as will be shown, outperform those who are disengaged on eight key business measures (Harter, Schmidt, Killham & Agrawal, 2009).

Among the purposes of organizational development (OD) is to improve overall organization effectiveness: “Organizational effectiveness” is defined as “an engaged, satisfied and learning workforce” (Cummings & Worley, 2014, p. 4). It’s relevant to OD that the greater the level of employees’ engagement, the greater their sense of well-being (Harter et al., 2002). And engaged employees carry this well-being home with them at the end of the day (Alfes, et al., 2010). However, when Gallup started measuring engagement in 2000, they found that less than a third of employees were engaged. For the hundreds of millions of dollars spent each year on engagement-related surveys and initiatives, that number remains about the same. That means that, “the majority of employees are indifferent, sleepwalking through their workday without

regard for their performance or their organization's performance" (Harter & Rigoni, 2015, p. 18).

The OD profession has the theories, models, and frameworks that practitioners can access to transfer the skills and knowledge necessary to increase and sustain employee and manager engagement (Cummings & Worley, 2014).

Each individual member of an organization is personally responsible for determining what's meaningful. Maylett and Warner (2014) found from their analysis of more than 14 million DecisionWise Employee Engagement Assessments that, "It's up to each individual employee to find his or her own meaning in the work he or she is doing" (p. 74). The authors conclude that even where work is to produce income for survival, employees can find meaning in what the work or income enables them to do, if not the work itself (p. 76).

This current study seeks to reveal how highly engaged employees and managers find meaning in their work. A review of existing literature was conducted to understand what research has revealed about meaning, employee engagement, and conditions conducive to finding meaning in work. The information developed is organized into three sections: meaning, employee engagement, and meaning and engagement.

Meaning

This section explores nuances of meaning through other definitions and descriptions in relation to self, others, and employees. Meaning examined from a diversity of perspectives equipped me to recognize meaning in its various forms such as impact on others, doing satisfying work, using strengths, cultivating relationships, growing, feeling valued when investigating the phenomenon firsthand in the workplace.

Meaning and purpose.

In Chapter 1, I distinguished between meaning and purpose where individuals tend to find life meaningful as it aligns with their sense of purpose. It is not difficult to imagine how people in professions we normally associate with a *calling*—minister, doctor, nurse, or teacher—can create meaning their work. What about those who find meaning in work that, at least on the surface, appears relatively mundane? Given the limited number of *calling* jobs, their experience has the potential to benefit other employees and their organizations. Consider the powerful influence of meaning on engagement. The literature suggests that even a minimal level of meaning can generate sufficient engagement for some employees (May et al., 2004; Alfes, et al., 2010; 2014 HBR/Energy Project Study).

Emergent meaning of the experience.

This study seeks to infer meaning, in the definitional or understanding sense of the word, from the participants' descriptions of their experience. The research method for this study is phenomenological. The aim is to collect examples of experiences—the experience and finding of meaning—and then report, as accurately as humanly possible, how the participants described those experiences (Groenewald, 2004; Smith et al., 2009; Waters, 2016). A tenet of phenomenology is that “realities are treated as pure phenomena...the only absolute data” (Groenewald, 2004, p. 4). Shuck and Rose (2013) explained this point of view as how individuals attribute meaning to phenomena: the perception of the experience is uniquely significant to the individual: “What is interpreted as meaningful to one person could not be interpreted as meaningful to another” (p. 345). The participants' descriptions define the phenomenon—the experience and finding of meaning—rather than referring to an objective external definition.

Meaning and the self

If there are benefits to finding meaning, what are they? The literature presents that individuals do experience benefits when they find meaning: Baumeister et al. (2013), for example, described “understanding one’s life beyond the here and now” and “life satisfaction” (p. 4). Wong (2011) found meaning as central to “well-being, resilience and optimism” (p. 409). Baumeister and Vohs (2003) found that individuals can experience the benefits despite being unable to describe the experience:

Meaningfulness is presumably both a cognitive and an emotional assessment of whether one’s life has purpose and value. People may feel that life is meaningful if they find it consistently rewarding in some way, even if they cannot articulate just what it all means. (p. 3)

Another benefit is that meaning can reframe obstacles in life (or at work) in ways that reduce their negative effects. From their longitudinal factor analysis, Feldt et al. (2000) found that individuals can experience meaning despite obstacles to overcome:

Meaningfulness refers to the degree to which individuals feel that life is emotionally meaningful and that, at least, some of his or her daily problems and difficulties are perceived rather as challenges than as hindrances. (p. 240)

One expected outcome of this study was to hear how or if participants describe benefits to experiencing meaning. However, this study’s primary focus is to explore the degree to which the participants seek, discover, or create meaning in their work. The literature (Baumeister et al., 2013; Frankl, 1946) indicates that humans actively seek meaning in life. For example, in their *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, Snyder and Lopez (2005) stated that “human beings are hardwired to seek meaning” (p.613). Shuck and Rose (2013) further stated that they found that employees seek opportunities to make a positive impact in their work, relationships, and life.

Baumeister et al. (2013) stated that before meaning can be found, four needs must be met:

- Purpose: Connect present actions and events to future outcomes. Set objective goals for subjective fulfillment.
- Values: Enable decisions about right and wrong. Justify certain courses of action. Lend a sense of goodness or positivity to life.
- Efficacy: Belief that one can make a difference.
- Self-worth: Conviction that one is a good and worthy person

A by-product desired from the field research was to reveal the extent to which meeting these needs (if they were met) contributed to the experience.

Meaning and others

Up to now, this literature review has focused on meaning and the self: it's exploration and benefits. But much of the literature related to meaning redirects attention from the self to others. Some might find this surprising given America's preoccupation with finding happiness. As Seligman (2013) expressed it, "The pursuit of happiness is enshrined in the Declaration of Independence as a right of all Americans, as well as on the self-improvement shelves of every American bookstore" (p. 11). The literature sheds light on the distinction between the pursuit of happiness and the pursuit of meaning. This distinction is important as context for this study to be alert for the possibility that descriptions may include experiences without expressions of happiness.

While meaning and happiness are related, meaning may be experienced without happiness (Baumeister et al., 2013) but "happiness without meaning characterizes a relatively shallow, self-absorbed or even selfish life" (Baumeister, 2013, p. 15). When individuals seek to satisfy immediate needs and desires, they avoid challenges or getting entangled with others. Snyder and Lopez (2005) presented an example most can identify with: "A happy life and a meaningful life are not the same thing...having children reduces life satisfaction of parents but this loss may be compensated by an increase in meaningfulness" (p. 612). Frankl (1946) believed

that it is not happiness that humans ought to pursue but the reason for the happiness: the meaning inherent to the situation. He found that “it’s the very pursuit of happiness that may thwart happiness” (p. 89-90).

How do those who pursue meaning relate to others? Martin Seligman (2011)), one of the pioneers of *positive psychology*, stated that to live a meaningful life, “Use your signature strengths and virtues in the service of something much larger than you are” (p. 423). Baumeister et al. (2013) found people who sought to live meaningful lives tended to be “givers, rather than takers” (p. 10). Weinstein & Ryan’s 2010 study stated that when we choose to engage in pro-social actions, it helps to meet our basic psychological needs for autonomy (feeling that we freely choose our actions), competence (feeling that we are capable), and relatedness (feeling close to others). Using our strengths in the service of others produces meaning. When we serve others, we feel in control of our choices, feel we’re good at what we do and build and sustain relationships—all important for our well-being. An outcome of this study sheds light on how serving others contributes to finding meaning in work.

Meaning and the employee

Throughout his classic work *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1946), Frankl showed man’s innate drive to seek meaning in work and its life-sustaining value under the harshest conditions imaginable. While Frankl described meaning in work as an innate drive, Maylett and Warner (2014) also found it to be a personal decision:

But nobody can tell you what’s meaningful to you...No one can attach meaning or mission for you; that’s a do-it-yourself project. Each of us translates our effort, sacrifice, and accomplishments into meaning based on our background, upbringing, beliefs, morality, and a host of other factors that are private, personal, and unique to us. (p. 73)

The authors conclude that it is ultimately up to individual employees and managers to satisfy their search for meaning in their work. Their environment, experience, and other factors shape how they define that meaning for themselves.

Meaning and the manager

What are the benefits when managers find meaning in their work. Amabile and Kramer (2013) studied members of project teams in seven companies to learn how everyday events affected their inner work life and how those changes to inner work life affected individual performance. They defined *inner work life* as “the conditions that foster positive emotions, strong internal motivation, and favorable perceptions of colleagues and the work itself” (Amabile & Kramer, 2013, p. 1). One outcome intended for their study was to gain insight into the influence of an organization’s leadership on the presence of meaning in work and how it was found. Employees kept a daily journal describing their mood, behavior, and the influences on it. The value to employees and organizations of finding meaning in their work is noted throughout their findings.

For Amabile and Kramer, the study’s findings showed how management contributes to finding meaning and the benefits of doing so, “Having meaningful work that is supported by management can enhance life immeasurably” (2013, p. 42). Conversely, their study showed the consequences to personal and work life when employees and managers didn’t find meaning in their work, “Work that is devoid of meaning, interest, and joy can lead to lives that feel very empty indeed” (Amabile & Kramer, 2013, p. 99). This presents an opportunity for managers to invest in finding the meaning in their work and promoting the conditions for their employees to find meaning, “By taking actions that support inner work life, they can ... add meaning to their work as managers—which in turn will nurture their own inner work lives” (Amabile & Kramer, 2013, p. 42).

Micro-meaning

Meaning making is not just at the macro level of impact and significance. Employees create meaning at the micro level of tasks and management expectations. If a given work task is perceived as meaningful, employees are more likely to invest themselves in it (May et al., 2004). On the other hand, employees are unable to justify the value for performing tasks that are perceived as counterproductive, capricious or arbitrary. This is especially true when post-baby boomers ask, “Why?” Goh and Hennessy’s (2011) study included presented managers’ verbatim responses to questions about their experiences managing Gen Y employees. They said: “When you ask them (Gen Y) to do something, they just ask you 'why?’ They are more questioning than we were!” “So, the Gen Y will say, why do I have to do this?” (Generations and Leadership, below 2nd paragraph of introduction). Goh and Hennessy encouraged managers to express respect and to communicate the value of the task.

Employee Engagement

Cummings and Worley (2014) concluded their definition of OD by stating, “OD is oriented to improving organizational effectiveness...an effective organization has an engaged, satisfied, and learning workforce as well as satisfied and loyal customers or other external stakeholders” (p.3). Contained in this definition are the words “engaged, satisfied, and learning workforce.” OD is about much more than enabling organizations to produce bottom-line profits and revenue. OD is values-oriented. Cummings and Worley explained, “OD’s behavioral science foundation supports values of human potential, participation, and development in addition to performance and a source of competitive advantage” (p. 4). And this balance of “human” and “performance” aligns with the human and performance outcomes of employee engagement described in this section.

Engagement definitions

Employee engagement is a concept, a condition, a set of business outcomes, and an essential performance metric today (Coffman & Sorenson, 2013; Harter et al. 2002, 2009). Understanding engagement provides a context for meaning, a key component of engagement (May et al., 2004).

Kahn (1990) is generally credited with introducing the concept of employee engagement. He concluded that employees are engaged to the extent they exercise their freedom to choose to bring themselves—their personal skills and interests—into their work. Engagement definitions often refer to employees' choice about the level of energy to bring to achieving organizations' intended outcomes (Coffman & Sorenson, 2013; (May et al., 2004; Maylett & Warner, 2014; Wollard & Shuck, 2011). From their study, May et al. (2004) spoke to the psychological dimension of engagement, what they referred to as the “human spirit” (p. 12). This is the need for “fulfillment through self-expression at work” (p.12).

That the definitions, theories, and constructs are still being sorted out is to be expected given employee engagement's relative youth as an area of scholarly inquiry. Consider that Kahn's seminal work was published just over 25 years ago. In 2011, *Human Resource Review* published Wollard and Shuck's extensive integrative literature review to synthesize the current state of scholarly review of employee engagement literature. Despite reviewing over 100 sources, they found no single, authoritative, generally agreed-upon definition of employee engagement. Harter et al. (2002) offered this definition:

Employees are emotionally and cognitively engaged when they know what is expected of them, have what they need to do their work, have opportunities to feel an impact and fulfillment in their work, perceive that they are part of something significant with coworkers whom they trust, and have chances to improve and develop. (p. 269)

Note the presence of concepts in this formal, precise definition associated with meaning: “feel an impact and fulfillment in their work” and “perceive they are part of something significant.” Today, Gallup’s definition is simpler, more practical and emotional: employees “involved in, enthusiastic about and committed to their work and workplace” (Engagement, n.d.). Coffman and Sorenson (2013) added that a person who is engaged at work, “sees the value of what they do every day and that they are working on teams with people they like and trust” (p. 33). In other words, the employees see their work as meaningful.

Engagement outcomes

Harter et al. (2002) presented a meta-analysis of the results of a study of 7939 business units in 36 companies. This has been cited 2626 times (as of 4/6/2015, Psynet); it is fair to say it is the benchmark for the correlation between employee engagement and business performance. They found, “For business units across companies, those above the median on employee engagement had a 103% higher success rate than those below the median” (Harter et al., 2002, p. 274). Profitability, productivity, and turnover measures showed similar outcomes associated with engagement results. A subsequent meta-analysis (Harter et al., 2009) involving 199 research studies across 152 organizations and almost a million employees measured nine outcomes: customer loyalty/engagement, profitability, productivity, turnover, safety incidents, shrinkage, absenteeism, safety incidents, and quality (defects). The authors concluded, “The relationship between engagement and performance at the business/work unit level is substantial and highly generalizable across organizations. Employee engagement is related to each of nine different performance outcomes” (Harter et al., 2009, p. 3)

Across the Atlantic Ocean and a year later, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (Alfes, et al., 2010) published the results of its two-year study of eight organizations across the UK. That study produced a dataset of 5,291 questionnaires and around

180 interviews. In addition to findings consistent with those of the studies cited, they found engaged employees are more innovative, perceive their workload as more sustainable, regard themselves as “fit-performers” (p. 2) and “enjoy high levels of personal well-being” (p. 2).

Wollard & Shuck (2011) concluded their structured literature review about engagement, “Antecedents to employee engagement,” finding that small improvements in engagement can produce significant gains in business results:

The potential of a fully engaged workforce would be tremendous. Consider the benefits of raising engagement levels inside organizations by only 5% or 10%; the implications could be enormous for an organizational life cycle and the overall well-being for the workforce. (p. 442)

Engagement and the manager

Gallup’s position on the contribution of managers to their direct subordinates’ engagement is based on “over four decades of extensive talent research, a study of 2.5 million manager-led teams in 195 countries and analysis from measuring the engagement of 27 million employees” (Harter & Rigoni, 2015, p. 3). They found that the manager accounts for “70% of the variance in engagement scores across business units” (p. 4). Later in the study, the authors explained that managers set job expectations, provide constructive feedback, encourage growth and development and build strong teams (p.22). When managers are disengaged, it’s a “one-two punch: Employees feel miserable while at work, and that misery follows them home, compounding their stress and putting their well-being in peril” (p. 22).

Maylett and Warner (2014) looked at the effect of an organization’s managers on employee engagement, as well as how the managers’ levels of engagement affected the employees’ engagement levels. They based their position on the responses of 14.4 million employees surveyed in 70 countries. They found that the engagement levels of managers correlate with the levels of their direct reports: “The percentage of employees who are Fully

Engaged increases by 50 percent when the manager is Fully Engaged” (p. 211). Managers produced the conditions that enable employees to choose to be engaged. These conditions include: “open communication, rewards and recognition, proximity to the impact and meaning of work, hygiene factors such as pay and benefits, respect and listening, and effective teaching” (Maylett & Warner, 2014, p. 213). Engaged managers produce the conditions that enabled them to be engaged while adapting them to their individual employees “based on what he knows about their passions, interests, and needs” (p. 213).

One other recent study shows the influence of the manager on employee engagement. A 2014 nationwide study of 1500 employees by MSW Research reported a similar finding, “although there are multiple factors affecting engagement, the personal relationships between a manager and his or her direct reports is the most influential” (Enhancing employee engagement, 2014, p. 2). The report’s authors illustrated how manager (supervisor)-employee personal relationships impact employee engagement: “When supervisors communicate positive emotions, the employee feels good about the organization as a whole. Likewise, negative reactions cause a decrease in productivity and morale, leading to disengagement” (p. 4).

Engagement and the work environment

Why consider the work environment and engagement? Kurt Lewin, one of the pioneers of organizational development, regarded “environment” a fundamental determiner of human behavior. Lewin’s equation is $B = f(P, E)$ or “Behavior is a function of the Person in their Environment” (Sansone, Morf, & Panter, 2004, p. 119). What can a manager do to produce work environment that supports meaning and engagement? The seminal work on this subject is “The Psychological Conditions of Meaningfulness, Safety and Availability and the Engagement of the Human Spirit at Work” (May et al., 2004). That it has been cited over 1300 times is some indication of the respect in the academic community for its insights. The authors found that of

the three psychological conditions: meaningfulness, safety, and availability, meaningfulness displayed the strongest correlation to employees' engagement in their work with psychological safety linked to meaningfulness. The authors stated, "The relation with one's immediate manager can have a dramatic impact on an individual's perceptions of the [psychological] safety of a work environment" (May et al., 2004, p.16). They found that effective supervisors express "concern for employees' needs and feelings, provide positive feedback and encourage them to voice their concerns, develop new skills and solve work-related problems" (p. 16). Another characteristic of an environment conducive to engagement is self-determination. May et al. (2004) defined self-determination as having a "sense of choice in initiating and regulating one's own actions" (p. 16). These employees are "likely to feel safer to engage themselves more fully, try out novel ways of doing things, discuss mistakes and learn from these behaviors when they are in such supportive environments" (p. 16).

Gallup's 2015 report on the "State of the American Manager" referred to their survey of 7,712 U.S. adults who were asked to rate their manager on specific behaviors related to communication, performance management and strengths. Responses included: "reliable and meaningful communication" (Harter & Rigoni, 2015, p.19), "on-going performance management rather than the typical annual performance reviews" (p.20) and for their managers to "build on my strengths rather than fix my weaknesses" (p. 21). Gallup found that when managers meet these needs, employees are engaged.

Meaning and Engagement

The first section of this literature search defined and explored Meaning; the second section, Employee Engagement. This section presents findings from the review literature on meaning and engagement together. What is the value of looking at the relationship of meaning to

engagement? Shuck & Rose (2013) found that “Reframing engagement within the context of meaning and purpose provides a unique lens from which to view the conditions that cultivate the development of engagement” (p. 341).

May et al. (2004) found the experience of meaning is an important condition at work. They defined meaning in work as “the value of a work goal or purpose, judged in relation to an individual’s own ideals or standards” (p. 14). In other words, the individual’s ideals or standards are the measures by which individuals judge their work or the intended result of their as meaningful or meaningless.

Before proceeding, it’s important to disclose that not all behavioral psychology research scientists agree that meaning is a driver of employee engagement. In a personal interview, Emily Killham, co-author with Jim Harter of several frequently cited engagement meta-analyses, made the distinction of “meaning as a characteristic of engagement,” rather than a driver of engagement (put date of your personal communication here). As a characteristic, meaning is viewed as an essential quality of engagement. Again, Killham stated, “It’s difficult to separate the two. Where you find engaged people, you’re almost certain to find people who find their work meaningful” (phone interview, April 15, 2016). For meaning to be a driver, Killham said that it would have to be actionable. If meaning were a driver, you could do more “meaning” and get more engagement. or you could recruit and hire people who have more meaning. She used an analogy to make her point. Blood pressure within a certain range is a characteristic of good health. You can’t do more blood pressure in the way you could do more exercise. But, you could act on the drivers of optimal levels of blood pressure by eating certain types of food or taking a supplement or medication that will positively affect blood pressure.

Meaning at work

Coffman and Sorenson (2013) described the emotional energy that meaning releases for engagement: “to really impact business results, we need to engage our hearts and minds around the purpose and meaning of our work” (p. 181). May et al. (2004) framed this passion as “the human spirit to thrive at work” (p. 12). They stated, “individuals must be able to completely immerse themselves in their work. That is, they must be able to engage the cognitive, emotional and physical dimensions of themselves in their work” (May et al., 2004, p. 12).

When employees do not find meaning in their work, the literature revealed negative consequences. May et al. (2004) warned that meaningless work can produce apathy and detachment (p. 13). Shuck and Rose (2013) found that when work lacks meaning, employees invest little energy and attention, especially when they feel their time is being wasted. They also resist organizational change efforts (p. 345). Conversely, May, et al (2004) found meaningful work increases employee motivation and commitment (p. 15). The authors presented how employees described the experience of meaning in work:

- The work I do on this job is very important to me.
- My job activities are personally meaningful to me.
- The work I do on this job is worthwhile.
- My job activities are significant to me.
- The work I do on this job is meaningful to me.
- I feel that the work I do on my job is valuable (p.36).

Leadership actions can enable employees to find meaning in their work. Telling the corporation’s story, communicating a clear organizational mission, and explaining the organization’s purpose connects to the employee’s personal meaning to the organization’s (Maylett & Warner, 2014). Job enrichment, work role fit, and co-worker relations contribute to meaning in work (May et al., 2004).

How to find meaning in work

A Google search on “how to find meaning in work” produced 261 million results¹. If the Google search results and recent articles in the popular press are an indication, people want to know how to make their work more meaningful. An article that in *Fast Company* (Amortegui, 2014), “Why finding meaning at work is more important than feeling happy” is an example. The author cited a Stanford Research Study that concluded, “Increasing a sense of meaningfulness at work is one of the most potent—and underutilized—ways to increase productivity, engagement, and performance” (paragraph 7). Amortegui presents these tips:

- Become a master crafter: give more of your talent
- Ignore the what and heed the why
- Remember that other people matter

An article on positivepsychologynews.com concluded with these suggestions:

- Downplay internal competition and recognize collective achievement.
- Encourage social gatherings where people learn to know each other as more than just fellow workers.
- Encourage high-quality connections that build trust, respect and openness (as cited by Britton, n.d.)

My literature review has produced no peer-reviewed research offering specific recommendations for employees to find meaning in their work or to make their work more meaningful.

An Opportunity to Enrich the Field of Organizational Development

From the literature, it is clear that there is a strong business case for enabling employees to find more meaning in their work. Those who find meaning in their work express high levels of engagement. Evidence of the impact of employee engagement on key business outcomes now is

¹ As of March 18, 2017.

supported by 25 years of employee-engagement commercial and scholarly study. Organization leaders recognize the value of high engagement levels to justify their investment of about a billion dollars each year on engagement-related services (Kowske, 2012). From an OD professional's perspective, it is equally clear that greater insight into ways to help employees to find meaning in their work would improve employees' experience of their work while improving the organizations' performance. But little is known about how highly engaged employees and managers find meaning in their work. Exploring this phenomenon could benefit organizations and OD professionals.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

Chapter 2 provided a working definition of meaning in relation to others and work. The phenomenon of meaning that is in view for this study is that which is experienced by individual highly engaged managers and employees. As was shown in Chapter 2, the literature suggests a high probability that highly engaged managers and employees experience meaning in their work. Hypotheses and presuppositions are set aside to let the truth emerge from the lived experiences of a study's participants. Chapter 3 presents the rationale for choosing the phenomenological qualitative research method, the goals of the study, the setting and sample, how data was collected, and the application of the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework to interpret and analyze the data.

Research Design

The Literature Review presented in Chapter 2 revealed abundant potential benefits of finding meaning in work and a surprising scarcity of scholarly research into engagement in relation to meaning in work. Given the lack of theories, frameworks, or models available, the phenomenological research approach enabled me to explore and describe the *lived experience* of the participants in the study (Waters, 2016, paragraph 1). This form of qualitative research produces understanding about the participants' experiences rather than an emergent theory. The goal, then, is to describe the phenomenon rather than explain it (Waters, 2016, last para.). Patton (2006) has found that phenomenological inquiry, at its essence, seeks to answer, "What is the structure and essence of this phenomenon for these people?" (p. 69). This method "borrows other people's experiences because they allow us, in a vicarious sort of way, to become more experienced ourselves (Ferguson, 2014, p.59)."

Meaning of Meaning, Phenomenon, and Experience in This Study

Before proceeding further, let's establish working definitions for the two ways in which we are using the word *meaning* along with *phenomenon* and *experience*. Foundational to phenomenological research is examining the meanings people derive from their experiences. Here are two different, but related, denotations of meaning. One is in the sense that it is found in the behavioral and social sciences literature where meaning denotes significance or purpose. In the other sense, meaning denotes the "idea associated with a word or phrase...something that is conveyed or intended, especially by language" (meaning, 2011). In the first sense of meaning, the research participants express what they find significant about the phenomena they describe. The experience of the interview is also "meaning-full" (Smith et al., 2009, p.66). In the second sense, the researcher seeks to extract the ideas associated with the participant's language, words, and phrases. The research connects meaning to the words.

Phenomenon refers to anything that manifests itself. Kant's definition of phenomenon, "a thing as it appears to and is constructed by the mind (1770, para. 1)," speaks to the subjective nature of the whole phenomenological research enterprise. The word's Greek origin meant simply *to appear*. Keeping this in mind, I was alert, open, and receptive to the appearance of the unexpected.

Experience, per the *Handbook for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (Smith et al., 2009, p. 1-3) is a complex concept. The authors point to four levels of experience to be alert for during the interviews: (1) unconscious—the flow of everyday life, (2) awareness—the smallest unit of perceived life, (3) significance—a *comprehensive unit* where, for example, the event includes anticipation or other events, and (4) reflection—a major event with implications the individual has thought about.

The Self as Instrument

It's an awesome challenge to prepare for and then perform interviews as an unobstructed conduit for meaning to emerge from the participants' experiences. Fortunately, the Pepperdine MSOD program begins developing this capacity from the start of the program. Jamieson, Aurun and Schechtman (2010) described the level of integration ideal for phenomenological data collection and analysis as seeing, knowing, doing simultaneously (p. 8-10). Biases or assumptions that surface are disclosed, to the extent that I'm aware of them. Appendix A presents elements of my background that influence my point of view.

Data Collection

Research setting

The interviews were conducted at the headquarters of CHG Healthcare Services (CHG) near Salt Lake City, UT. Appendix B presents a brief profile of the company. The company has measured employee engagement for over 14 years using the DecisionWise Employee Engagement Survey. A Pepperdine Ed.D. alumnus recommended CHG as an optimum match for the research purpose. Later, I discovered my primary contact there was a recent Pepperdine MSOD graduate. His support made the conditions and logistics ideal. Initially I intended to avoid the healthcare industry because I felt the proximity to a "calling" to be too close. However, CHG's business is akin to a talent recruiting service with half its employees in sales, the other half providing support services. I was curious about how leadership messages about employee impact might influence how employees find meaning in their work. Would employees restate leadership's messages about the meaning of their work?

Patton (2002) encouraged paying attention to the immediate environment for interviews. CHG provided a private office near where at least half the participants work. Closing the sliding

glass door blocked virtually all sound in and out of the office. This enhanced the recording quality and contributed to confidentiality and candor. Smith et al. (2009) called attention to the need for interview participants to “feel comfortable with you...to trust you” (p. 62). I took steps to enable participants to feel physically and emotionally comfortable. I dressed to match how I anticipated the participants to dress (blue jeans, casual shirt), minimized physical barriers (open laptop kept to the side, minimal use of notepad), and kept my posture open, relaxed while expressing attention and involvement.

Research sample

Irving Seidman’s, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research* (2013) is primarily directed toward phenomenological research. Seidman’s response to the question, “How many participants are enough?” was to refuse to give a number. Instead, he concluded “Enough is enough” (p. 92). Smith et al. (2009) concurred: “There is no right answer to sample size” (p. 80). A sample size of 10 participants would yield a diversity of perspectives while keeping the data set manageable.

CHG has measured their workforce’s engagement for over 14 years using the DecisionWise Leadership Intelligence Employee Engagement Survey. The annual study measures each employee’s level of engagement: Fully Engaged, Key Contributors, Opportunity Group and Fully Disengaged. Fully Engaged employees and managers in the Talent Management group were identified. From this set, the senior vice president of talent management selected seven employees and three managers. His intention was to provide a group diverse in experience, time with the company, levels of responsibility, education, and type of work—and, he added, “available while you’re here.” Through email, he invited the selected employees and managers to participate in the study (See Appendix C). He made it clear that participation was at their option, “Please do not think twice if you do not want to participate, just let me know.” All 10 accepted the invitation. Table 1 presents a summary of the participant demographics.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

AGE	#
· 21–29	2
· 30–39	5
· 40–49	1
· 50–60	2
TIME AT CHG	
· Less than 1 year	1
· 1 year to 2 years	5
· 2 years to 5 years	2
· 5 years to 10 years	0
· Over 10 years	2
LEVEL OF RESPONSIBILITY	
· Director (one of two direct reports to SVP)	1
· Leader (first level manager)	2
· Consultant (no direct reports, comparable to leader)	2
· Specialist (includes trainers)	3
· Coordinator (admin)	2

Participant preparation

I weighed the benefits and consequences of preparing the participants with a follow-up message and decided that giving them a fuller description of the project and time for reflection would increase the potential for richer, more thoughtful descriptions (See Appendix D for this message). It turned out to be the right decision as several expressed their appreciation for the message; others mentioned its value during their interviews.

Interviews

Qualitative data was collected from 10 semi-structured 45-minute. One of the resources used in preparing to conduct the interviews was Seidman's (2013, p. 81-95) interview techniques and reminders (see Appendix E: Phenomenological Interview Techniques).

Interview process

The consensus from the literature is to structure the interview with the flexibility to follow participants' lead when they chose to jump to another category or respond in a different sequence. I kept in mind the three main categories of data I sought – *experience*, *discovery*, and *benefits*. This allowed the interviews to flow as a conversation and, when appropriate, to return to a category to probe on key words for further description. After each interview, participants suggested ways to help other employees and managers find meaning in their work. This gave participants another perspective from which to view their discovery experience to add new insights or elaborate on earlier comments. And while not strictly phenomenological, their suggestions could improve the well-being of others outside the study.

Interview protocol

Questions prepared for each category enabled the questions to be asked succinctly (See Appendix F for the interview questions). The flow of the interview was to establish rapport with brief general comments, and then to present the research purpose and background, confidentiality disclosure and measures to protect confidentiality. The purpose of recording the interview was explained. All participants were offered opportunity to opt out. Questions about their current job responsibilities was the transition into interview.

Interview technology

Audio recordings of the interviews were captured on an iPhone 6 Plus using professional recording app: Voice Recorder Pro 7. Participants wore a lavalier microphone to further ensure recording quality. Handwritten notes were kept to the minimum to maintain eye contact and to reduce formality. One interview needed to be conducted remotely. Zoom.com video conference technology enabled that interview.

Data Analysis

Foundational to analyzing phenomenological research data is to enable meaning to emerge (Waters 2016, para. 4). After considering and using various methods, I discovered Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

As its name implies, IPA was conceived and validated for phenomenological research. Clifton, Larkin, and Watts (2006) found that IPA is most effective at “giving voice” (p. 1) to research participants. Brocki and Wearden (2006) found in their critical evaluation of IPA its benefits to include the potential for providing “interesting insights true to a study’s purpose, to the experiences of participants and to the richness of participants’ accounts” (pp. 99-100). IPA enables in-depth exploration of the reasons behind people’s thoughts, beliefs and behaviors regarding the research topic. And, they found that “it’s particularly suitable when one is interested in complexity or exploring a new domain” (pp. 99-100). The analytical process is “bottom-up” as with other qualitative analytical approaches. IPA “balances *phenomenological description* with *insightful interpretation* anchored in the *participants’ accounts*” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3). The method rigorously preserves continuity from the micro-data of a single word through to the superordinate themes into which the data ultimately coalesce.

IPA process

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method, and Research (Smith et al., 2009) examined in detail the IPA analytic process. In doing so, the authors added that the process is not linear; there’s no single right way to do it; and they encouraged innovation. The IPA process confirmed Maxwell’s advice (2013, Kindle loc. 2366) to set aside enough time for reflection and introspection. Appendix G presents the steps of the process I adapted from Smith (2009, p.79-99). Implicit in that process is extended periods of time for reflection and

integration. Also implicit is the attention to preserving themes unique to individuals while aggregating collective themes. From the process emerged superordinate themes—overarching sets of related patterns—that present powerful insights into the research purpose. These steps were performed to ensure each contributor’s voice is heard, sustain connection to context, minimize the intrusion of bias and to infer the most reasonable meaning:

- Read and re-read the transcripts on screen where I could highlight, boldface and underline key words, phrases, quotes and enter notes in various fonts and colors to call out distinctive ideas, capture distinctive characteristics of the speaker, insights, write summaries. I produced a final set of files, each interview distilled to its essentials.
- To protect participant confidentiality, each interview was assigned a number in random order to avoid associating them with how they were scheduled.
- All key words, phrases and essential quotes for each interview subject was entered into an Excel worksheet with minimal consolidation. However, several questions were consolidated within their category—meaning, discovery, benefits, advice—where it became apparent there wasn’t sufficient nuance. For example, what most participants “Like” about their jobs matched what they found “most meaningful.”
- Next, I made a first pass at assigning codes to the key words and phrases—e.g. PPF, CVA-L. Each code was counted, and then entered into a column assigned for the participant number.
- Prior to each iterative consolidation cycle, I copied the worksheet in the Excel *Workbook* to maintain access to the preceding context.
- The superordinate themes that emerged were segregated among the three main categories: meaning, discovery, and benefits. Further analysis revealed many of the themes shared similar meanings despite the different contexts. This prompted further consolidation of many, but not all, themes into a final set.

Further cuts at the data explored the research purpose in relation to managers and their direct subordinates, and between leadership and discovery and more.

Data analysis technology

Rev.com transcribed the audio recordings. Transcriptions were read and annotated on screen. Each iteration was preserved in separate secure files. The word files were combined into

a single pdf binder using Adobe Acrobat DC. This enabled quick, periodic checks of key word frequency and context.

Summary

This chapter presented the research design, data collection methods, and the framework for data analysis. The literature search indicated that academic research into meaning in relation to engagement is in its early stages. The phenomenological research method is most suitable under those circumstances because it casts a wide net to capture lived experiences of the phenomenon without the restrictions of a specific outcome other than to learn about the experience. The two ways in which the word meaning is used this study were defined, as well as phenomenon and experience: the other frequently used words. The data collection setting and sample exceeded expectations in terms of support for the study, environment, and diversity and qualification of participants. A semi-structured interview method was prepared and performed. The questions supported three categories of phenomenon to explore: *experience (of meaning in work)*, *discovery*, and *benefits*. Keeping these categories in view enabled the interviews to proceed as a conversation while keeping the purpose of the exploration in view.

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis method was chosen for data analysis. IPA was conceived and validated for phenomenological research and found to provide “insights true to a study’s purpose.” This is especially important where context determines the meaning, rather than prior experience, education or assumptions. IPA is noted to be particularly suitable for “exploring a new domain,” and “complexity (Smith et al., 2009, p. 1).” The IPA process was presented, with special attention to the steps taken to give voice to the individual participants.

Chapter 4 presents the themes that emerged from the data collected. Participants describe their experience of the conditions that contributed to their discovery of meaning in work, the experience of discovery, and how they experience these phenomena.

Chapter 4

Results

This chapter reports the results of the interview analysis. These results support the research question: How do highly engaged employees and managers find meaning in their work? As described in Chapter 3, 10 forty-five minute interviews were completed. Participants described how they discovered meaning in their work. Deeper insights into the phenomenon emerged as they described their experience of meaningful work, as well as its personal and professional benefits. After each interview participants were invited to share advice to enable others to find meaning in their work. Applying the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method to the data collected revealed these four superordinate themes: leadership, culture, impact and the work. The findings show that highly engaged employees and managers find meaning in their work through *leaders* who live out the organization's core values and care for their employees, in a *culture* where employees live out those core values and care about each other, where they feel they're making an *impact* and where *the work* enables them to serve each other and do what they do best and enjoy most.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Iterative, deliberative, discriminating and, yes, subjective. The researcher culls through the transcripts for key words, discerns shades of inference, and then codes them into categories while remaining faithful to their context. Similar words coalesced into themes that, in turn, crystalized into the four superordinate themes that emerged.

Research analysis decisions

Date collected supporting each of the three categories of phenomenon explored—experience, discovery, and benefits—were initially kept separate. See Table 2 for the frequency of responses in each category.

Table 2
Interview participants

Note: E = Employee, M= Manager

	N	%	N	%
EXPERIENCE	528	60%		
DISCOVERY	160	19%		
- Experience-related			142	89%
- Other			18	11%
BENEFITS	185	21%		

The experience category—descriptions of the experience of meaningful work—accounted for over 60% of all interview responses so it made sense to start there. This category is where the four superordinate themes first emerged. Nineteen percent of interview responses were to questions in the next category, discovery, where participants described how they discovered meaning in their work. Of the 160 comments in this category, 89% directly corresponded to one of the experience superordinate themes.

Even where meaning was discovered prior to joining CHG, most of those comments referred to one or more of the experience superordinate themes. Given this correspondence, experience and discovery sets were combined. Subordinate themes retained their sequence in priority after the merge. This shifted from imposing a bias about experience and discovery as discrete phenomena to presenting the data consistent with the participant descriptions.

Exceptions—words and phrases that have a different meaning in the context of a superordinate

theme are called out. For example, senior leadership “lives the core values” in the leadership context; employees and managers “live the core values” in the culture context.

That left the question of how to treat the benefit category data: 21% of all interview responses. Among the four superordinate themes, leadership and culture emerged as *conditions* that enhanced the experience and discovery of meaning. The work and impact emerged as what the participants *do* that’s meaningful. Among the benefits, both personal benefits and CHG benefits emerged as the *results* that the four superordinate themes produced. I decided to treat benefits in their own category rather than risk diluting the superordinate themes. Instead, the benefits themes are presented—e.g., about “making an impact,” personal benefits included “happiness,” “feel good,” and more.

Giving voice to each Participant

A distinctive characteristic of IPA is to “give voice” to the individual participants. To this end, verbatim comments are associated with their sources. I shuffled the participants’ names away from the order in which the interviews were conducted and assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. Roles—manager (M) or employee (E)—are indicated for context. See Table 3 pseudonyms and roles.

Table 3
Interview participants

Note: E = Employee, M= Manager

Jacob	E	Carol	M
Omar	E	Riley	E
Roger	M	Alex	E
Paula	E	Terry	E
Gabriel	M	Sarah	E

The Superordinate Themes

What did the data reveal? Data from the study clustered around these superordinate themes: leadership, enacted culture, impact and the work (See Table 4 Superordinate Themes). Leadership is far and away the predominant theme with 300 comments and 42% share of the total—about 75% more comments than the next major theme.

Table 4
Superordinate Themes

	N	%
LEADERSHIP	300	42%
CULTURE	170	24%
IMPACT	125	18%
THE WORK	112	16%

CHG's leadership surfaced as, by far, the most significant influence on experiencing and finding meaning in work. Leadership holds 42% of all participant comments (300). This is 75% more than the next major theme: culture. Leadership is appreciation for the leaders—how they lead and their positive personal influence. CHG refers to its managers as *leaders*. At times, it was difficult to determine whether a comment referred to senior leadership or a manager. That said, many comments clearly refer to senior leadership. The numbers and words don't adequately capture the intensity of appreciation for CHG *senior* leadership.

The remaining three themes are within 8% of each other. *Enacted culture* had 170 related comments, about a quarter of all comments. Where leadership is how leaders contribute to meaning, enacted culture is primarily about how the employees contribute to meaning, most of which is enacting the core values. Third in priority is impact with 125 comments and 18% of the total. Participants derived meaning through their impact on others along with the responsibility to do so. The work had 16% of the total comments (112), just 2% lower in importance to impact.

The work is serving fellow employees and managers, doing what they're best at and enjoying the work.

Before committing to this final set of themes, an option considered was whether to further consolidate leadership and culture into environment. I chose not to do that. Environment connotes conditions akin to Herzberg's hygiene factors: you may not think about them, but you miss them when they're not there. The CHG employees and managers asserted the opposite. Leadership and managers are the agents producing the conditions for meaning to flourish. The employees, in turn, contribute to building and sustaining this culture.

Leadership

At CHG, the leadership—both senior leaders and managers—has the most powerful influence on the experience and finding of meaning. Table 5 presents the leadership themes that contribute to the CHG employees' experience of finding meaning.

Table 5
Leadership Themes

	N	%	N	%
LEADERSHIP	300	42%		
Appreciate leaders			115	38%
Recognizes my value			69	23%
Communicates			66	22%
Enables development			30	10%
Provides resources			18	6%
Outliers			2	1%

Over a third of the leadership comments expressed some form of appreciation for the leadership. The next two themes are virtually tied: recognizes my value (23%) and communicates (22%). Both are sets of actions that build value and are reported as valuable. The remaining three: enables development (10%), provides resources (6%), and a couple of outliers (1%) are actions leadership perform *for* the employees.

Appreciate leaders. One hundred fifteen of the 300 leadership comments (38%) relate to this theme. Of those, over half are appreciative descriptions of leadership actions, especially the senior leadership. Employees and managers praise CHG senior leadership for living, advocating for, and sustaining the CHG core values. Jacob, as one example, captured the essence:

It's driven by senior leaders. Like if you talk to Scott Beck, I mean if you're talking to the president and hearing him speak, he really is living by those words and will try to tie it in [the topic being discussed and decisions] ...It starts from the top. I would say that is one of the biggest drivers that makes a difference here...But it truly is the action, they're not just saying it, they're doing it, right?"

CHG managers appreciate senior leadership living the core values. Gabriel, one of the managers, compared his experience CHG with that of previous employers:

I was tired of that culture of sell, sell, sell, sell. Here it's different because [the Core Values are] taught but it's also believed in and reinforced and expected by the senior leaders of the company.

“Putting people first” is the heart of CHG’s core values (see Appendix F to see the CHG Core Values card). The extreme test of senior leadership’s commitment to this value became a defining moment in the company’s history. That it came up in an interview is not surprising. That I heard it unprompted two other times during my two days there is surprising. Here’s how Paula described its significance:

I really got meaning, realized how important our Putting People First was during the recession. When most companies were laying off or cutting all the perks, that didn't happen here. They sat down with almost every employee in this company and did focus groups. What is most important? What are you willing to give up? That, to realize that they cared enough about us, I think helps put into perspective how valuable we are.

Recognizes my value. For Paula, leadership’s commitment to protecting employees’ jobs during the depths of the recession testifies to how leadership recognizes her value. How leadership values employees accounted for 23% of leadership-related comments. Being and feeling valued came up in the context of all three meaning-in-work categories studied:

experience, discovery and benefits. "Feeling valued" is mentioned as directly contributing to finding meaning. Leaders express value through significant events as described above and by giving autonomy, recognition, encouragement and respect. Sarah confirms that leadership treats employees with respect, "Every single person here matters and is treated as so." Paula describes how respect affects motivation, "We're more willing to give a lot because there's respect, again, from top down." Another way senior leaders express they value their employees is to meet one-on-one with each once a month. "I definitely feel valued in just that he would take his time to listen to me," said Sarah. She goes on to connect feeling valued to finding meaning:

I think that, through feeling valued, I've been able to see the meaning of what I'm doing...I think that the company does a really great job at valuing its people, and with a company that values its people, you're constantly feeling important. You're feeling reinforced. You're feeling like you're here for a purpose. I'm always feeling like I'm needed.

Communicates. Leadership communication is of almost identical importance as the preceding theme (22%). Leadership keeps the channels open where employees and managers feel it's safe to communicate with anyone in leadership. "You can bounce ideas off them" and "ask for feedback," such as "am I on the right track?" CHG has a distinctive approach to onboarding new employees. After they're hired, leaders communicate clear but attainable expectations that start new employees learning and living the values. They're told to get to know their team, build an informal network of relationships throughout the company, and "find themselves."

CHG leaders keep their people informed. Leaders meet consistently and productively with their direct reports and keep employees and managers informed. Meetings described as valuable include: "daily stand-up," "Monday morning," "weekly one-on-ones," and "monthly with Director." Carol has her team members and consultants bring their "best story of the week." They're to report how they made a difference in someone's life that week. She reminds them,

“You’re not just processing paperwork.” CHG leadership seeks ideas and feedback, engages in conversations, collaborates as peers and builds relationship. Sarah expressed with almost disbelief the extent to which leadership is interested employees feedback:

I'm being sent surveys of senior leaders in the company saying, ‘All right, well, what is your experience with this leader?’ ... Excuse me ... I've never worked for an organization where my opinion of one of my leaders was relevant, but here it very much is.

Enables development. Managers found developing their people and “seeing them grow” as a great source of meaning in work. Participants commented about leadership’s interest in their professional *and* personal development. Several commented about how the skills they use—crucial conversations, for example—transferred to home and community service. Paul, for example, “They make them better leaders here at work but also at home. It inspires them to be better moms and dads and husbands and wives.” Professional and personal development is integral to CHG’s leadership philosophy and practices. “It’s not like, ‘This is what we want you to do.’ It’s more like, ‘How do you want to grow? How do you want to develop? What do you need? I’m here to help you,’” as Terry described this experience.

Provides resources. Resources and tools were mentioned 18 times. Employees said their managers and company provided meaningful resources. Referring to one leader, Jacob said, “We use Carol as a resource, she’s always there to help us and make sure that we have what we need and to make sure that we’re fine.” Managers found meaning in providing and being those resources.

Culture

Schein (2006, p. 614) pointed to three sources of data when assessing a corporate culture: artifacts; espoused values; and tacit, shared, assumptions, but he also encouraged the researcher/consultant to remain humble and curious. As he tells his clients, we need to be “aware

of the depth and complexity of the culture in which they live (Schein, 2016, p. 25).” With that in mind, examining the research data reveals tight alignment of espoused values and shared assumptions. In fact, the artifacts, such as personalization of cubicles, casual attire, employees using the ping pong table in the break area, bear further testimony to this alignment. See Appendix D: Research Setting for more examples. CHG’s culture is intentionally enacted, rather than passively received. Leadership actions continuously nurture the culture. Employees support and protect the culture and contribute to building the culture.

Table 6
Culture Themes

	N	%	N	%
CULTURE	170	24%		
Values Alignment			98	58%
CHG People			46	27%
Environment			26	15%

The culture superordinate theme (see Table 6) contributed 24%% to the total number of comments. Over half of the enacted culture-related comments were about how employees Live the CHG core values (58%). The remaining 42% are divided between the CHG people theme (27%) and the environment theme (15%).

Values alignment. Fifty-eight percent of the participants’ comments related to *values alignment*: CHG core values align with their personal values and how the participants live the core values. Participants appreciate the core values and discussed the CHG’s *situational leadership philosophy* with its implications for employee development and constructive approach to employee relations issues. Participants described how the core values align with their values. For some, realizing their values aligned with CHG’s contributed to defining meaning for themselves. Riley said, “I’m really defining it [purpose]. I feel like you have a job to do. You have a vision. You know what you're there for.”

Live the core values. Over half of the comments for this theme had to do with employees living the CHG core values. Jacob said, “They’re words to live by.” At the core of the core values is “putting people first.” This core value is explicitly called out or implied in the comments about the *enacted culture*. The word *situation* was used 48 times among the interviews—an average of 4.8 times per participant. It has a specific meaning at CHG. Situation (or situational) refers to how leadership puts people first: the focus is on the individual, on professional and personal development, and, when there’s an employee issue, remedy, and restoration. Carol, one of the managers, said that a situational approach to putting people first means “helping an employee with whatever situation they have.” She went on to say that even in the most difficult employee relations issues, “[we’re] very situational in our company so we take each situation and evaluate. We spend more time looking at the root cause and coming up with a solution versus [enforcing policy].” For an employee’s perspective Riley said:

The leaders, even though we were talking about separation and harsh things, they were still talking about core values. Are we putting this person first? Are we treating them with dignity? Are we really doing the right thing? I feel like that was refreshing for me.

Participants indicated that they realized CHG’s core values align with their personal “values,” “mission,” “integrity” and “openness to grow.” Living the values turns up in the quality of the employee’s work, another core value. Consider how this form of meaning influences an administrative task that Terry described, “When I send off an offer letter to somebody, I know what’s it like to be on the other end like I decided to start a new job.” Without identifying the core value of “continuous improvement,” Mike and Justin mentioned the effort they put into continuously improving the courses they delivered. At times, they’re making improvements on their own time after an exhausting day leading a workshop. Living the values also turned up in *integrity*. Five mentioned that they felt they were “doing the right thing.”

CHG people. 24% of comments in the context of The Enacted Culture had to do with the regard managers and employees have for each other, the experience of interacting and their relationships with each other. Paula described the experience of relationships in this culture, “I love the people I work with...when you have that type of connection, it’s enjoyable to come to work.” The managers expressed enthusiasm about and care for their people. Gabriel said, “I think my team is awesome. The people that I work with, we all are very passionate about helping others and serving others.” In the spirit of putting people first, managers see their team members as individuals rather than a collective aggregate, even when the numbers are quite large. Roger has led about 100 people in the last four years and learned about each individual employee: “I’ve been able to kind of see what everyone is passionate about, but each individual is different.”

Riley described how it feels to receive that individual attention:

For me, I find meaning in that because I respect my leaders for doing that and for doing a little bit beyond their job description and getting to know their employees well enough where they can identify what’s going on and not just make assumptions.

A consequence of CHG’s growth is the need to bring new people into the culture. That means ensuring people are a good *fit* because as Sarah put it, “I’m bringing them to work for a company where I love coming to work every day.” Paula said that cultural fit is more than doing the job well because, “if you can’t play nice in the sandbox with others then that’s a problem because the sandbox gets bigger and bigger every year.” Managers and employees share the responsibility to ensure that people are hired who will fit into the CHG “family.” Carol connects this responsibility to significant value she contributes:

This is our family, right. We all work hard and we want to celebrate as well. I always am cognizant of who we bring in, and do they fit, and are we going to fit with them. If they are in, and they don’t fit, and they’re ruining it for others, because putting people first isn’t just about them, it’s about how they’re impacting everyone. When I saw how that impacted the big picture and everyone else, and how it continues, that’s where I feel I bring the value.

This system protects itself. Paula described situation where a position was filled too quickly and the person turned out to, in fact, start ruining the culture as Carol warned. “As the time went on and the real personality came through, they were not a good fit. You could feel the tension when this person walked in the door and the relief when they walked out. It was like, okay, we can go back to normal.” How did they resolve that situation? “We freed up her future.”

Relationships are fundamental to enacted culture. Participants talked about relationships and the enacted culture. Participants reported that the ability to form relationships is essential to fitting into the enacted culture. In fact, forming relationships is so important that leaders set the expectation that the highest priority in the first six months is for newly hired employees and managers build relationships. “Go out and get to know the people,” Gabriel recalled being told. In the context of discussing the enacted culture, participants described the importance they found in “building relationships,” “building trust” and “interacting.”

Environment. This theme contributed 15% of descriptions of the enacted culture. It includes general comments about the culture: it’s a fun place to work, it’s a safe environment, managers and employees enjoy work-life balance and they’re “free to be me”—a value within the culture. Leadership provides a culture that enables people to people to do their best, to learn and grow. It’s a culture that’s “not just about the numbers” and it’s where “culture contributes to meaning.” Participants described an outcome orientation in contrast to being micromanaged by previous employers. This frees creativity and innovation, and enables better results. Work-life balance was mentioned three times. Roger described how work-life balance is integral to the culture, “It’s good to have people, even your own team members and your own direct reports, like forcing you to take some time. You need to take some time off.”

Impact

The impact superordinate theme contributed 18% to the total number of comments. Seven of the 10 interviewed mentioned impact as significant to the meaning they experience and discovered in their work. Table 7 presents the impact themes. Within impact, the impact on others theme captured the majority (47%) of all impact comments. The remaining 53% is divided among impact on CHG (15%), Impact on the community (10%), the participants' impact discovery (12%) and their responsibility (16%) associated with their impact.

Table 7
Impact Themes

	N	%	N	%
IMPACT	125	18%		
Impact-Others			59	47%
Impact-CHG			19	15%
Impact-Community			12	10%
Impact discovery			15	12%
Responsibility			20	16%

Impact on others. The impact on others theme includes the participants' impact on others within the company, their contribution to CHG and the community beyond, and the realization of how their impact contributed to finding the meaning in their work. Participants described making a difference for others at CHG. One way is through developing other employees. Gabriel described the satisfaction of seeing the "light bulbs go on" when they enabled someone "to learn something they can apply." Jacob described the satisfaction of helping employees through difficult times in their lives. Alex discovered meaning while helping employees and leaders learn and grow: "Man, I had something to do with that. They're ultimately the ones that did it, but we had a discussion and I was a part of that. That's what, for me, gives me meaning to my work." Participants commented on the meaning they found knowing the

impact they made on others within the company extended beyond it. Gabriel, for example, expressed it this way:

I love the fact that we get to inspire and influence people, yeah, to be better employees and better leaders to their people here, but the skills that we're able to focus on and teach them don't just make them better employees.

Impact on CHG. Comments in this context contributed 15% to impact. Alex experiences meaning through the impact of his work extending beyond the individuals he serves: “I'm impacting leaders that are impacting the entire company because these leaders are now impacting individual contributors, that's what applies meaning to work for me.” CHG takes deliberate, specific actions to enable its employees and managers to recognize how every person and every job is essential to the function, results and growth of the company. One way is through “Anatomy of Our Business,” Lesson 3 of the CHG foundational training course. It illustrates the journey from an initial contact through putting a doctor in place. Without referring to that document, Sarah describes how it contributes to her experience of meaning in her work:

I know that maybe from someone looking from the outside in, I might be a little bit removed from the actual placing of doctors where they need to be, but I don't really see it that way... We're all here to help this function as a well-oiled machine. Without one piece of the puzzle, it wouldn't flow as nicely, so I think that my sense of meaning is feeling like I'm contributing to something important and something good.

Impact on the community. Comments in this context contributed 10% to impact. Roger described the nature CHG's contribution to the community at large: “[We] help put physicians into places other physicians don't want to go which helps patients.” Understanding CHG's impact on the community contributed to participants realizing the meaning in their work. Carol can see that the good she does extends beyond the 2400 people she impacts within the company: “That was when I really thought, Oh I'm really making an impact. This isn't just in the office; this is my whole community.” Gabriel identifies with CHG's positive impact: “We're not just

benefiting CHG, we're benefiting the community as a whole. I identified really, really well with that. What I do contributes to a greater good.”

CHG leadership shares the stories about the profound impact CHG people have on getting healthcare services out to the people who couldn't access it otherwise. Five years ago, the marketing department initiated a campaign that continues today: “Making a Difference.”

Periodically, it publishes on their internal website dramatic stories that bring to life “how placing a doctor in a job it affects a community.” Paula gave an example and its effect:

We put this doctor in a role and immediately. It was a rush job because the surgeon died and we had to get somebody in place... But then you could walk it back and say, okay, well if that employee hadn't gone through the training they wouldn't have known how to place that physician.

CHG employees' “simple acts of service” are also an important part of CHG employees impacting the community. CHG also publishes “What We Do Matters” stories online. These are also included in the foundational training course. These include letters recognizing employees, community service, and “acts of kindness.” Paula continued, “It's kind of a trickle-down effect... Even our facilities person who brings our mail plays an important role in that for us. Because it's everybody working together.”

Discovery of impact. Comments in this context accounted for 12% of this major theme. Managers spoke of their impact on helping others discover meaning. Roger does this through series of conversations with each individual employee to build trust, to learn the individual's strengths and about what might be meaningful to each person. For one it might be making a difference to others in the company, to the community at large or it might be a form of meaning the person's work enables them to do outside of CHG—serving the community or church, caring for loved ones. These conversations may continue for a year before the person discovers the impact their work has beyond the work itself. Sarah's discovery of meaning was, in part,

influenced by leaders: “They've kind of helped me see that. I think that through feeling valued, it's made it easier for me to see where I'm making an impact.” Paula said it wasn't until she heard the stories the salespeople were hearing and about the experiences they were having that she could “walk it back and say, you know what? I really am part of something amazing.”

Discovering the impact of their work, they also realized they were experiencing the personal benefits of doing so: “happiness,” going home at the end of the day happy, enjoying work, “feeling good,” “feeling fulfilled,” “gratitude,” “growing,” “secure,” and “trusted.”

Responsibility. Comments in this context contributed 16% of the total for impact.

Responsibility includes the sense of importance of their work and responsibility for the impact it makes. That sense of importance accounts for 60% of this theme. The comments are descriptions of the responsibility they carry and the value of their contributions. Riley said that it's knowing that “someone is depending on me.” Sarah said, “I'm their main point of contact.” For others, it's the impact on someone's future—if guide someone through an employee relations issue, they may help that person save their job. On they have the responsibility to the company to recommend the person be terminated if necessary. Others described their responsibility of being responsive applicants: to get the people who will fit best into the company. They also expressed a related responsibility: to protect CHG's reputation for the dignity and respect with which its people treat all who contact the company. In the context of discovery, Sarah expressed the personal value of performing their responsibilities:

That's one of the greatest things about this company: everyone here is important. People aren't just numbers, and their core value of putting people first, every single person that's here matters and is treated as so. It's hard to feel like what you're doing isn't important when you feel that value that the company has for you.

The Work

The work superordinate theme contributed 16% to the total number of comments. See Table 8 for the work themes. 68% of The Work is serving others, how employees and managers choose to work. The remaining 32% were descriptions of the experience of using their strengths to do the work they do best and enjoy most.

Table 8
Work Themes

	N	%	N	%
THE WORK	112	16%		
Serving Others			76	68%
Strengths			36	32%

Serve others. This theme is what participants do for and with others in their work. It’s what they like about their work that contributes to it being meaningful. These activities include interacting with others, helping, building relationships, putting people first and expressing empathy. Preston expressed the importance of interacting with others: “It’s meaningful to me that I get to interact with everyone in the company.” Riley added, “What I feel I gather from those interactions is the variety. Just getting to know different perspectives...the broad range of people I get to work with and interact with, that's meaningful to me.”

Helping. Seven of the 10 participants commented about helping others. They described meaningful ways they helped others. They help people “through difficult situations,” “understand where and how they can change,” “overcome their limitations,” and “see what their purpose is.” They actively seek ways to help others. Paula expressed the desire to help others this way: “Even if I can't do somebody else's job I can be there to support them and help them and take on some tasks that I can help them with.”

Relationships. Seven of the 10 participants referred to relationships. The context is in the spirit of working together, collaborating, building informal networks to access resources and forming deep connections with clients to anticipate their needs. Roger described developing “personal, genuine relationships” with his people. Those relationships contribute to his “happiness and engagement.” He gave an example of a friendship that continued after Roger moving on to manage another team:

She had invited me to her daughter's quinceañera. To me, for her to say, hey, I want you to be a part of this big time in my daughter's life, for me it was like yes! I want to be a part of that... so when you go back to what is meaningful to me and what keeps me engaged and what I'm passionate about, it's the invite to the quinceañera. That's it.

Relationships are described as necessary for being a resource. And, they’re essential for trust. One person described how relationships contribute to productivity: “I've built relationships within the organization, so when a team that I support is in need and I help them fill that need, I can help them grow and can support them.”

About relationships, a paradox. Terry described as most meaningful, “I get to meet new hires. I get to work with everyone here in our talent management division...It's kind of a broad range of people I get to work with and interact with and that's meaningful to me.” At the same time, he’s found a way to experience this meaning in his own way. He describes this experience:

Yeah, I don't know if this will help in any way but I'm not like an extrovert. I'm not the person that's going to go and talk to everybody, be super outgoing all the time because usually when you think of people who love relationships, you think of that type of person. I feel like that's not me. It takes me a while to warm up to people.

CHG leadership enables Terry and all CHG employees to be “Free to be me.”

Putting people first. This value is how employees and managers work. Participants liked the challenge of balancing the individual’s and company’s interests while enacting this value. Omar described putting people first demonstrates “you really are interested in what is meaningful to them and in creating opportunities for them.” Expressing empathy, care and

understanding contributes the participants experience of meaning in their work. This came up a number of different ways: in the way they dealt with employee relations issues, taking care of their team members and others and recognizing the need to step in and help someone.

Strengths. Participants expressed the importance of doing what they do best, “where I excel most” and doing what they like doing most. For Jacob, “One of my strengths is to be able to connect with people, at different levels, different mind sets, and be able to adjust that to some degree.” One of Omar’s strengths is to “help leaders work through a solution.” Alex found it important to recognize his strengths and “connect them to a bigger purpose.” Terry describes doing what he does best, “I’m an administrative person. I see the importance in it. Yeah, I’m really good at it. It fits my personality and my skillset. I see the value in what I do.”

Enjoying the work. Along with doing what they do best, it’s enjoying the work. Sarah said, “I love that not only do I enjoy the mission of our company and what we do, but I enjoy finding people the right fit for a job.” Jacob, “I love working with leaders and employees.” He goes on to say, “I love...putting them first. I’m happy to be able to earn a paycheck doing the work that I love.” Terry’s willing to do more because he enjoys his work, “I’d also say, getting here early or staying late when I don’t need to because I’m working on something and I want to get it done or I am enjoying it.”

Benefits

Participants were asked, “What are the benefits of finding meaning in your work?” We discussed personal and company benefits (see Table 9).

Table 9
Benefits

	N	%	N	%
PERSONAL	105	100		
Happy			35	33
Confident			29	28
Intrinsic Rewards			24	23
Growing			17	16
COMPANY	33	100		
Quality			15	45
Work Harder			10	30
Produce more results			8	24

Personal benefits

As with discussing the discovery of meaning, participant described the conditions that contributed to the benefits they experience. I challenged each participant to describe how their feelings, how it feels to experience meaning. When analyzing the data, I extracted the comments that related to the superordinate themes to include the analysis with that analysis. The remaining comments clustered around four themes: happy (33% of all comments about personal benefits), confident (28%), intrinsic rewards (23%) and growing (16%).

Happy. Participants describe feeling happy as feeling good, enjoyment, feeling fulfilled and grateful. Michael expressed happy as “I’m happy to do something I actually love.” Gabriel’s described happy as, “Well, I think that I’m a much happier person on a day-to-day basis because I don’t dread going to work on Monday. When I get off work, I’m not a miserable person when I get home. Most of the time, when my roommate asks me, ‘Oh, how was your day?’ ‘It was great! It was fine.’ I usually don’t have bad things to report because I like my job.” Sarah: “I’m happy when I come to work. I’m not dreading when the alarm goes off. I feel like, again, what I do here while I’m at work is providing meaning or providing value to other people.”

Confident. Riley described confident as, “I know I tried my best and I collaborated and I tried to make a difference in whatever I was working on.” For Alex, it’s “a feeling of pride. There's a sense of fulfillment that comes with that. There's a feeling that I can succeed in what I'm doing, and in succeeding in what I'm doing, I feel positive about it, that I can then do what I need to do to provide for my family as well. Yeah, I think those would be some benefits.” Riley describes her experience of confidence as, “I feel like you have a job to do. You have a vision. You know what you're there for. You know what you are as a resource and what you can provide to others.”

Intrinsic rewards. Comments about intrinsic rewards included, “feeling good about what I’m doing,” “to know that they’re [the person he helped] walking away feeling better about their situation.” Riley expressed intrinsic rewards in similar terms, “Knowing I’ve done my best to help someone with their situation.” Michael his experience as, “It's hard to describe other than a kind of intrinsic reward. I guess it makes me feel good about what I do...that’s the meaning...how it all drives me.”

Growing. Omar expressed growing as, “I’m growing as an individual. What that feels like is liberating to me. Confidence, strength, increased capacity. Just the freedom, being liberated from some of those limitations that really keep you from achieving what you're capable of.” Gabriel says that when he’s growing, “It keeps my brain going...I’m learning which gives me experience for the future.”

Company Benefits

Participants described how finding meaning in their work benefits CHG. The perform their work at a higher level of quality (45% of all company benefits), work harder (30%) and produce better results (8%).

Quality. They described the discretionary effort they invest to improve the services they perform. Omar describes quality in terms of one of the CHG core values: continuous improvement, “We’re always looking for ways to do things better.” Alex describes a similar expression of quality: “After I’m done teaching the class, I’m going to go back to the drawing board and look at: How do we make this better? What do we need to take out, add to it? And so there would be additional discretionary effort.”

Work harder. Comments that described this benefit included, “Willing to make personal sacrifices,” “Willing to contribute personal time,” and “I want to do more.” Paula said, “If I have to put in some extra hours it’s not a burden. It’s like, you know what? With all the perks we have I’m okay if I have to stay 10 or 15 extra minutes to finish a project.” Michael expressed something similar: “I don’t mind working extra hours, because if I can feel that, or see that I’m making a difference, I guess that’s what drives me.” Alex is also willing to do more: “You don’t just do what you need to do to keep your job. There’s a greater purpose that’s driving you.”

Results. One manager described his experience with his employees over the years: “If you grow your people, if you take care of them and help them be happy and successful, they’re going to produce more for you. It’s the idea of if people feel safe, if they feel like they’re valued, they’re going to work as hard as they can to be successful.”

Summary

Four superordinate themes emerged from the data: leadership, culture, impact and the work. The data revealed that highly engaged employees and managers find meaning in their work through *leaders* who live out the organization’s core values, in a *culture* where employees and managers live out those core values, where they feel they’re making an *impact* and where *the work* enables them to do what they do best and enjoy most. These themes represent the

conditions that make finding meaning accessible and the experience of meaning in work. These conditions and the experience of meaning in work are what the participants chose most often to discuss rather than elaborating on their experience of discovering meaning.

At CHG, the leadership—both senior leaders and managers—has the most powerful influence on the experience and finding meaning. Leadership is appreciation for the leaders—how they lead and their positive personal influence. Leaders recognize the value of each individual employee and manager, keeps their people informed, persistently seeks feedback, develop their people and provide the resources they need and want.

CHG's culture is intentionally enacted, rather than passively received. Leadership actions continuously nurture the culture. Employees support and protect the culture and contribute to building the culture. Employees and managers build and sustain the culture by living the core values; respecting, liking, and helping each other; and by contributing to and benefiting from a fun, safe, high-trust environment.

Impact, the third superordinate theme, is the positive impact that employees and managers have on each other, on CHG business results, the community-at-large (greater good), on helping others discover meaning and the sense of responsibility from knowing the importance of their jobs.

The work is how CHG leadership enables employees and managers to do the work they do best and enjoy most. Employees and managers find meaning in the work that serves those they work with and for, in and outside the company. Activities include helping, building relationships, putting people first and expressing empathy.

Chapter 5 concludes the study, interprets the findings, examines them in relation to the literature review, suggests implications for practice in the field, discusses limitations and recommend opportunities for further research related to this study's purpose.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

There is an experience in which it is possible for us to come to the world with no knowledge or preconceptions in hand; it is the experience of astonishment (Cogan, para. 1).

This exploratory study's purpose is to answer this question: "How do highly engaged employees and managers find meaning in their work?" Understanding this phenomenon requires understanding its context: the experience of meaning in work and the benefits experienced. Little, if any, peer-reviewed research about this topic is available. That being the case, a research method was chosen that emphasizes describing participants lived experiences of the phenomenon with the burden of explaining, justifying, editing, or interpreting them. Data collected was analyzed within an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis framework. Themes coalesced around four superordinate themes: leadership, culture, impact and the work. Consistent with the IPA framework, this study gave voice to the individuals who experienced the phenomenon. This chapter concludes the study by discussing the results, identifying its limitations, offering recommendations for future research and for the OD community, and then presenting conclusions.

Discussion of Results

The opening quote captures the spirit of the researcher approaching phenomenological data collection and analysis. While "astonishment" might be more hyperbolic than realistic, the research produced unexpected insights at times—all efforts to set aside expectations, biases, and assumptions notwithstanding. The results are presented and discussed in these subsections:

1. The answer to the research question
2. Favorable conditions for meaning in work

3. The experience of discovery
4. The experience of meaning
5. Managers and meaning
6. Meaning creation
7. Other reflections on the research
8. The interviews and meaning discovery
9. Meaning and key business outcomes

Each subsection starts with a summary of the topic's key results preceding the content for each topic. This content typically includes the research findings, something significant about the results, the relationship of the result to related literature and an implication.

1. The answer to the research question

How do highly engaged employees and managers find meaning in their work?

Phenomenological research requires setting aside assumptions, expectations, and biases to the extent humanly possible and to the extent the researcher is aware of them. The literature about this method suggests engaging in mindfulness practices and other forms of meditation and reflection prior to the interviews. Through reflection, I realized that I needed to be open to the possibility that some participants may not find meaning in their work and that meaning may be something they became aware of at some point rather than sought and found. Others may create meaning. I read one example of a forklift operator who created ways to make his work meaningful. This subsection presents and interprets the three results that directly answer the research question:

- All participants experience meaning in their work
- Meaning was discovered, not found in almost all cases
- Participants shifted the conversation from Discovery to Experience

All participants experience meaning in their work. All participants are highly engaged employees or managers. That qualification was essential to the study's purpose. All participants,

in their own way, described nuances of meaning that correspond with the generally accepted definitions presented in Chapter 2: an orientation to something bigger than the self, intention or aim, purpose, significance, and importance. Words participants used to describe their experience included “impact,” “mission,” “passion,” and “pouring myself into doing the best for others.” This finding corresponds with the research presented in Chapter 2 that shows meaning as correlated with engagement, if not a driver of engagement.

Discovered, not found. In retrospect and only when writing this chapter, I realized that asking about “finding meaning” assumes that meaning is a need or desire that employees and managers intentionally seek to satisfy. The literature reinforced that assumption. The title of Frankl’s (1946) authoritative, classic book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, is unequivocal: all men and women search for meaning. Chapter 2 of this study presents this quote “humans are hardwired to seek meaning (Snyder & Lopez, 2005, p. 613).” Here’s what’s surprising: Taking the interviews in total, I used the word *find* well over 100 times and *discover* only nine times. If anything, I would have expected that to have biased the results. But, no, nine of the 10 participants were clear that they discovered or realized or became aware of the meaning in their work rather than actively sought or created it. Implication: Would teaching the benefits of finding meaning and suggesting ways to do so influence employees and managers to actively seek rather than discover it? What effect would that have on employee engagement?

The shift: from discovery to experience. When asked about how they found meaning in their work, participants gave thoughtful and candid comments. Later, as I read through and analyzed the transcripts, a pattern emerged. Participants would shift the discussion from discovery of meaning to the experience of meaning and the conditions that best support that experience and its discovery: the influence of one or more of the major themes—leadership,

culture, impact or the work. The key words, phrases, and quotes associated with these themes were similar in both the experience and the discovery contexts. The data suggest that the experience and discovery of meaning are inseparable. I found no precedence in the literature for this pattern. Implication: OD interventions influence, improve, change, and sustain the conditions around each superordinate theme.

2. Favorable conditions for meaning in work

Following the participants' lead, these are insights that emerged from participant descriptions of the conditions that enhanced their experience of meaning and contributed to its discovery. In Chapter 4, all four superordinate themes are examined in detail. Three—leadership, impact and the work—presented insights that demand attention in the context of favorable conditions for meaning in work:

- Senior Leadership: the prime movers of favorable conditions
- Impact: more often personal, rather than corporate
- The Work: an apparent paradox—other vs. self

Senior Leadership: the primary source. As shown in Chapter 4, 40% of all comments were leadership-related. Seven of the 10 interviewed brought up leadership's contribution to their discovery—“feel valued,” “implemented an idea,” “listens,” and more. *CHG leadership activates, creates, influences and sustains circumstances for meaning's experience and discovery.* Preceding the interviews, I assumed I would hear that the immediate supervisor had the greatest influence—a bias from my history with The Gallup Organization and their engagement studies. As noted in Chapter 1, “Gallup estimates that the manager accounts for at least 70% of the variance in employee engagement scores across business units (Harter & Rigoni, 2015, p. 2).” I assumed the conditions for finding meaning would mirror those for high engagement. The data showed otherwise.

Impact: more often personal, rather than corporate. In Chapter 3, I expressed my original intention to avoid industries like healthcare that seemed to have an apparent advantage from the meaning inherent in producing community or societal benefits, such as relieving suffering. Looking at this assumption in another way, I wondered how those benefits would show up among employees and managers in an organization with those inherent meaning advantage. Going a step further, how would they show up among *highly engaged* employees and managers? The data did not explicitly show CHG with this advantage. Only two of the 10 participants described a form of meaning directly related to CHG's higher purpose: providing healthcare where it be otherwise inaccessible and contributing to the healing of the sick and suffering. On the other hand, 70% described forms of meaning advocating for and living out CHG core values, especially "Putting people first." That percentage climbs factoring in comments that implicitly refer to the core values. This finding supports Shuck and Rose (2013): "what is interpreted as meaningful to one person could not be interpreted as meaningful to another" (p. 343).

The Work: Other-centered/self-directed. Many of the comments about the experience of meaning were other-centered; impact, help, contribute. They were seeking to "help," "support," "contribute," "make a difference" and in many other ways serve others in their immediate or broader community. This supports what was found in the literature. In Chapter 2, Baumeister described people who found meaning as givers rather than takers. On the other hand, participants described using "my strengths," "doing what I excel at," and "enjoying my work." A paradox? Returning to Chapter 2, we quoted Seligman (2011) as writing that to live a meaningful life, "Use your signature strengths and virtues in the service of something much larger than you

are” (p. 423). The findings in this study clearly connect how participants use their strengths, in their words, “to make a difference.”

3. The experience of discovery

Three insights about the discovery experience stood out: In general, participants described progressively becoming aware of the meaning in their work rather than a single epiphany. Half of the participants discovered meaning in their work before joining CHG: an apparent paradox given the volume of comments about CHG leadership’s influence on their experience. The inherent meaning in the work contributed to participants’ discovery in working conditions contrary to doing so. But another participant’s experience shows the work’s inherent meaning is not necessary for finding meaning in work where the conditions don’t otherwise support its discovery. Let’s take a closer look at each of these key results:

- Progressive self-discovery
- Meaning discovered before CHG
- Inherent meaning in work and the discovery of meaning

Progressive self-discovery. All participants discovered meaning on their own. That’s not surprising. In the literature, finding meaning is referred to as an “inside job.” Throughout the interviews, implied or specifically stated, the experience of discovery was progressive without the awareness of an external agent guiding that discovery. Significant, personally meaningful experiences did contribute to the discovery. Paula pointed to two powerful and personal experiences. Sarah made the connection while teaching others about CHG’s mission and values. For Omar and Terry, the satisfaction of idea implementation was a powerful influence.

Meaning discovered before CHG. Given all that the participants described about the impact of leadership, finding meaning with this type of leadership would seem unlikely. It is surprising then that five of the 10 participants interviewed did so before joining CHG. They did

so despite work environments almost hostile to the notion. Gabriel's former employer: "sell, sell, sell." Omar described "the pain of being in an industry or in a job that I really hated, that was almost suffocating to me." Roger described his previous employer's lack of management support: "We teach similar things here, but at [company name] it was never reinforced." Then, how did they find meaning under those circumstances? Jacob connected with an "awesome manager." Others said, while "using talents," "giving guidance," and "helping people grow." This suggests the possibility of helping those in less than ideal working conditions discover meaning there. After joining CHG, these participants discovered a deeper level of meaning in their work.

Inherent meaning in work and the discovery of meaning. Two of the participants who discovered meaning before joining CHG attribute the discovery to the inherent meaning they found in their work: developing and delivering training. A third participant also discovered meaning prior to joining CHG. Contrary to the others, it wasn't the inherent meaning in her job that prompted the discovery. In fact, her work primarily involved handling employee relations issues: performance issues, policy violations, and employee assistance issues. Doing work that's inherently meaningful is helpful but not a necessary precondition.

4. The experience of meaning

As noted earlier, participants' descriptions of what they do that's meaningful is what they do for others. Exploration into the experience of meaning became an exploration into the conditions favorable for meaning to flourish. There came a point in each interview where I would shift from the head to the heart. Four insights emerged:

- All described positive feelings
- All described benefits for CHG
- Meaning and engagement benefits are similar
- Experiencing and producing benefits preceded awareness of their source

How meaning feels. I would ask, “What’s it feel like to experience meaning in work?” Chapter 4 described feelings that included: “Much happier,” “fulfilled,” “enjoy,” “feel good,” “really fun” and more.

How CHG benefits. After their responses, I’d ask “How does CHG benefit when you experience meaning in your work?” Also shown in Chapter 4, employees and managers “work harder,” “do extra,” “continuously improve” and produce “better quality.”

The experiences of meaning and engagement. The personal and organization benefits of meaning the participants described in Chapter 4 correspond to the personal and organizational benefits highly engaged employees experience and produce presented in Chapter 2. This also supports the literature that showed meaning as correlated with or as a driver of engagement. The implication is that enhancing the conditions for finding meaning in work could increase engagement.

Most experienced the benefits before discovering their source. It’s important to note that they were experiencing the personal benefits and producing better work results *before* becoming aware of the meaning in their work, not after discovering it. Expressed another way, there isn’t a quid pro quo where the employee discovers meaning and then produces more. Omar, for example, described how he took initiative and did more than was expected before discovering the meaning in his work. Terry was doing more than required, expressing deep empathy and service, before becoming aware of the personal benefits of doing so. And there are many more examples. From what the participants described, there’s a virtuous cycle of doing more than expected, experiencing personal benefits that generate energy to continue producing more.

5. Managers and meaning

As noted in Chapter 4, CHG refers to its managers as leaders. But those interviewed often used the word manager. During the interviews, insights about the role and influence of managers

on meaning emerged from the interviews. Without being directive, I was curious about the influence of the immediate supervisor on the discovery of meaning. Three insights emerged:

- The immediate supervisor *does* contribute to meaning
- CHG leadership development contributes to meaning
- Managers can indirectly contribute to meaning

The influence of the direct supervisor. Employees described actions that contributed to their discovery and experience of meaning that include:

- Promoting a safe environment. Employees can test out ideas or ask for feedback about their performance with complete trust.
- Autonomy to work in the way that uses their strengths best and is most comfortable.
- Recognition of extra effort and innovation. It's not expected but highly valued. In one case, it contributed to the individual's awareness of the meaning he was experiencing in his work.
- Communication and productive meetings. One person tied those meetings as evidence of the supervisors (and other leaders') recognition of her value
- Interest in their professional and, especially significant, personal development. We had multiple comments about that.
- Providing resources and "tools."
- Expressing trust in multiple ways.

These and other comments about managers tightly align with the literature search results presented in Chapter 2. For example

- Psychologically safe environment. May et al. (2004) wrote about the "The psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability and the engagement of the human spirit at work" (p.16)
- Autonomy and trust. Weinstein and Ryan (2010, p. 223) wrote autonomous helping (choosing to act on behalf of others) produces the sense of well-being interview participants described.
- Communication, resources, recognition, feedback all show up in various Gallup engagement studies and reports.

Commitment to leadership development. Participants described an integrated, comprehensive leadership development system with a range of activities and resources that include: identifying employees with leadership, leadership development curriculum, staff dedicated to leadership development, mentoring and more. CHG continuously identifies potential leaders and enrolls them in the leadership development process. This ensures that CHG has a cache of leadership talent from which to draw and support as its rapid growth creates opportunities for promotion. This strategy ensures that the leaders who fill the new management positions will advocate for, live and sustain the core values. This process enables professional development that contributes to experiencing meaning.

You never know who's watching. Three participants described managers who indirectly inspired them. Early in his career, Omar saw how an “awesome manager” in HR related to others. “He was always available to hear your concerns...like being a counselor.” Carol had a “mentor-leader” encourage her to enter the talent management field. This opened the door for her to do work that she would later find meaningful. CHG recognizes the value of mentors. Mentorship is a component of CHG’s leadership development strategy.

6. Meaning creation

Entering the research, I sought to keep the scope of “finding meaning” broad to learn the extent to which the participants would describe seeking, then finding meaning. Would I discover they created meaning in the sense that they reinterpreted and calibrated their work experience to make it meaningful? Or, would I find that they discovered meaning—became aware that the work was meaningful. The study showed:

- The experience of meaning creation wasn't clearly described
- Managers and their employees didn't share the discovery of meaning

Creation of meaning not explicitly described. The distinction between seeking and discovering meaning is shown in this study. Earlier in this chapter I make the distinction between “finding meaning” and “discovering meaning.” Meaning creation falls in a gray area between the two. The study did not show any of the participants as having intentionally created meaning as defined above. However, those instances when they seek to do that which is meaningful could be interpreted as creating meaning. The literature supports that creating meaning is active rather than passive and giving rather than receiving. Seligman (2002) and Baumeister (2010) have written that meaning emerges when we do something for others or for a purpose bigger than ourselves. The participants in this study reported that they continue to “do something for others or for a purpose bigger than” themselves. That’s what they did before they recognized the meaning in their work and it’s what they do now. Acting out of intention separates discovery from creation.

Manager-employee co-created meaning? My original intention was to explore how employees and their direct managers co-create meaning. That study purpose would have quickly taken me to a dead-end. All three managers had one or two employees participate in the study. The employees had unsolicited, specific praise for their managers. Manager actions enabled meaningful work and, in two cases, contributed significantly to its discovery. The managers and employees, however, described different rather than shared discoveries of meaning.

7. Other reflections on the research

Stepping back from the discussion of the results, the congruence between the findings in the literature and the findings in the field is notable. The interviews produced other insights related the research worth mentioning before moving on.

Participate in decisions. Managers that involve employees in decisions promotes engagement and meaning (May et al., 2004). This was not shown in this setting. Participants did not bring it up. However, the absence of its mention, does not preclude it being practiced.

Meaning even when overcoming difficulties. Several of the participants spend all or most of their work lives overcoming difficulties. As consultants and managers dealing with employee relations, when they sit with an employee it's likely serious to the point where the person's job is in jeopardy. These participants described their work as giving managers valuable support and as helping employees remedy the situations that put their job at risk. They overcome resistance, rejection and difficulties and find meaning in their work.

Importance of work. Participants described the importance of what they do and what others do. "Even our facilities person...plays an important role." May et al. (2004) found that employees who find meaning in their work describe their work as "important," "significant," "worthwhile" and "valuable" (p.36).

8. The interviews and meaning discovery

Smith et al. (2009) in their Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis handbook encouraged me to be alert for the unexpected. Three participants in this study reported the interviews contributed to their experience of meaning in their work. Gabriel described how the pre-message revealed different forms of meaning his employees may experience:

Yeah, your pre-message, you leave the door open that it's different for everybody. What's meaningful for me isn't necessarily going to be meaningful for the guy on my team. I really enjoy knowing that I can't necessarily be wrong in this. It's really what gets me going, gets me excited about what I do.

Omar found the interview to stimulate renewed awareness: "For me, just having a conversation about it has reignited some flame like, 'Oh. Yeah. This is what is important to me about work.'"

An interview question prompted Roger to discover that others don't think about meaning as he has in his career:

Yeah, that's a good question. I think you've helped me to just come to the realization that not everybody has ever really thought about it. I guess to me that's surprising because of how it's played a role in my career, at least the way I've perceived it.

Gabriel saw potential benefits for the other interview participants:

I think one of the best things that you're going to be doing is just raising the awareness, of maybe even posing a few questions that you have, to ask, "Hey, are you happy at work? Does what you do really matter? How do you know and why do you enjoy doing that?", just bringing the topic up of what is meaning, which it sounds like you're going to do, and then provide some examples.

9. Meaning and key business outcomes

Considering CHG's well-earned accolades as a "Best Place to Work," it's possible to lose sight of CHG as a business. Leadership's sustained commitment to creating and sustaining the conditions participants described have corresponded with years of significant growth. Without revealing financials, visits with employees and managers outside the interviews described the new headquarters building that will be twice the size of the current headquarters, low turnover, high percentage of employee job candidate referrals and the hundreds of people hired last year and similar numbers projected for 2017.

Limitations

The study has these limitations: All interview participants reported to the Talent Management group. However, half of CHG positions are sales-related. Unexplored is how adding highly engaged managers and employees from this division would have affected the findings. The senior vice president for talent management selected the sample. Participants chosen could have been biased in some way. That said, the candor of the responses and diversity of experience and demographics militates against a bias, if one existed, inhibiting the results. All

interview participants were highly engaged. Unexplored is what might have been the effect of including participants from the other DecisionWise engagement categories: key contributors, opportunity group and fully disengaged. The research was performed in one company. Including other “Best Places to Work” and companies that are not good places to work would enrich the findings.

Recommendations

The recommendations in this section are opportunities the study’s findings and results stimulate. Further research related to this topic is an opportunity to improve work experience and productivity, to expand OD’s contributions improving engagement, and the conditions conducive to meaning experience and discovery, in order to begin to help employees and managers discover and create meaning in their work. The last topic in this section is a suggestion for researchers intending to use the IPA framework. These are the subsections:

- For further research based on this study
- For exploring related topics
- For the od community
- For others to begin finding meaning in their work
- For researchers using the IPA framework

For further research based on this study

Over the months producing this study, I thought of opportunities for related research that would be rewarding to explore, given the time and resources. Enabling employees and managers to experience the benefits of finding meaning in their work would be meaningful rewards.

Opportunities for further study include:

- Is meaning the key engagement driver?
- Influencing meaning discovery
- Grounded theory research

- Hiring for meaning

Is meaning the key engagement driver? One of the inspirations for this study presents meaning, autonomy, growth, impact and connection as key drivers of engagement (Maylett & Warner, 2014). Participant comments touched all five drivers. Of them, is meaning the key engagement driver? The CIPD study referred to in Chapter 1 showed that “meaningfulness is the most important driver of engagement” (Alfes, et al., 2010, p.2). Further research might support a meaning-centric strategy to increase engagement.

Influencing meaning discovery. This study showed that individuals discover and define meaning for themselves. All participants became aware of meaning without the direct, intentional influence of a manager toward this outcome. Further research could test the value of intentionally educating employees and managers about meaning in work and about how to discover and create it. Various methods and messages could be tested for their impact on engagement and key business results.

Grounded theory research. This study revealed how CHG’s distinctive leadership and passionately-enacted core values contribute to the phenomenon explored. What is the effect of other corporations’ leadership in other industries and of other corporate values on the meaning experience? Grounded theory research could reveal a generalized theory.

Hiring for meaning. Half of those interviewed found meaning before CHG hired them. Further research could reveal meaning as a predictor of a candidate’s success after being hired. If there’s a correlation, then what changes to the hiring process would increase the possibility of identifying this characteristic?

For exploring related topics

- **Sustaining meaning.** A longitudinal study could reveal the long-term effects of Finding meaning in work. Do those employees tend to remain engaged despite environmental changes?
- **Hostile environments.** What can we learn from those who find meaning in organizations where managers and employees have found meaning in circumstances that militate against doing so?
- **Brand identification.** How does brand identification affect the finding meaning in work? Are those who work for luxury brands or virtuous organizations more likely to find meaning than those who don't? What can we learn to increase meaning and engagement in those environments?
- **Using strengths.** How would enabling more employees and managers to do what they do best and like to do most affect the experience of meaning? What are the most effective ways to ensure employees' work aligns with strengths?
- **Meaning and personality.** Are there personality types that have a higher propensity to find meaning in their work? Is there a relationship between personality type and what an individual is likely to find meaningful? A study could compare personality types (using validated psychometrics) against their descriptions of meaning in work. How could this information be used to enable the discovery, nurture and sustainment of meaning distinctive to the individual?
- **Awareness of meaning.** Do all highly engaged employees experience meaning in work whether they recognize it or not? If so, what about the inverse? Are all employees who experience meaning highly engaged? Is there a question that could be added to an engagement survey that would reveal those who are experiencing meaning whether they recognize it or not? Would there be value to enabling them to realize that meaning?

For the OD community

The interviews revealed the complexity of the phenomenon studied. No easy formula emerged. Participant responses emphasized the conditions conducive to experiencing and discovering meaning rather than a simple process. Organizational Development interventions to influence, improve, and change the conditions the participants described include: leadership

development, core values discovery and description, enacting the values, job design, professional as well as personal development and in other ways.

For others to begin finding meaning in their work

The intention of this study is to be *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*. After each interview, while continuing to record, I asked for the participants for suggestions to help other employees and managers find meaning. Often the suggestions corresponded with experiences described during the interview. Also, two managers described current actions to help their employees to find meaning in their work. Highlights include coaching managers about:

- Relationships: Form genuine relationships with their employees as individuals.
- Strengths: Enable their people to discover their strengths.
- Motivation: Discover the source or sources of each individual's motivation.
- Impact: Guide discovery of their impact.
- Purpose: Enable them to discover the higher purpose beyond the money they earn.
- Development: Invest in their professional and personal development.
- Support: Adapt support to the needs of each individual.

Coach employees to ask themselves about their work, company, and impact. For example:

- Your work: What do I enjoy doing? What am I good at? What excites me?
- Your company: What do I like most about this company? How well do I connect with the company's mission? Am I where I can find meaning in my work?
- Your impact: What impact am I making here? How essential is that impact?
- Your management: Clarify their expectations. Communicate what you need to meet them.
- Your fellow employees: Build relationships outside of work. Collaborate.
- You: Learn, grow, change if you're not seeing results, do something extra.

See Appendix J: Interview Participant Advice for the full list of suggestions.

For researchers using the IPA framework

The authors of the IPA handbook (Smith et al., 2009, when pressed for an interview sample size, wrote “five or six” (p. 80). This study sample size was 10. The consequence was an unexpected ocean of data to manually process. I recommend other researchers doing phenomenological research with this sample size invest in a software solution to help with the theme analysis.

Conclusion

This research set out to explore the phenomenon of how highly engaged employees and managers find meaning in their work. Rather than find, participants discovered meaning progressively. They became aware that they were experiencing it. Participants preferred to discuss the experience of meaning rather than how they discovered it. However, they offered suggestions to help others experience the phenomenon. When describing their experience, they most often expressed appreciation for their leadership, especially about leadership living the core values. When describing the culture, most often the comments were about how leadership, managers, and employees contribute to the culture, culture that’s enacted rather merely received. Impact—on others, the CHG business, and the greater good—is the third major component of a meaningful work experience. For most, making a difference in other employees’ lives was most meaningful. Almost as important as impact, is the work itself. Participants described the satisfaction they derive from serving other employees while doing what they do best and like to do most.

Should leadership invest the resources to create conditions that support and enable employees to find meaning in work? Since 2003, CHG has experienced a compound annual growth rate of 18.5% EBIDTA—about twice the average growth rate of all other companies in

this industry (Kevin Ricklefs, phone conversation, March 1, 2017). The research showed meaning correlated with this company's dramatic growth. Employees and managers interviewed expressed a desire to work harder, deliver better quality, continuously improve, grow, develop, increase responsibility, and to continue making a difference. What about employees and managers? Should they seek meaning in their work? Participants described how they feel experiencing meaning in work: fulfilled, happy, enjoy their work, secure, have fun, celebrate and feel better about myself.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Researcher's Point of View

The phenomenological researcher participates in the experience of finding meaning in phenomenon while making every effort to maintain the purity of the data and integrity with the interpretation. My background is naturally present in the process so should be given voice.

Perspective about interviewing

- Facilitative teaching/training style that maintains attention on the learner, the learner's experience and learning discovery
- Over 500 interviews – phone, in-person, and by video – most to capture unfiltered descriptions of experience for one purpose or another

Perspective about meaning in work

- Decades of personal experience pursuing, finding, creating and experiencing meaning in work
- Decades of interest in positive psychology going back to involvement in the Human Potential Movement and working for Dale Carnegie Systems
- Meeting and interviewing Don O. Clifton recognized in 2003 as the father of Strengths-Based Psychology and the grandfather of Positive Psychology

Perspective about workforce engagement and strengths theory

- Meeting and interviewing Curt Coffman co-author of *First Break All the Rules* the best-selling book which introduced employee engagement to a broad audience
- Working under contract for the Gallup Organization for a year after they acquired a company I co-owned. My work was not directly related to engagement consulting.
- In 2014, worked as an independent contractor for Evolve Performance Group. EPG sells and provides consulting services supporting a customer and employee engagement studies the developed and validated in collaboration with former Gallup research scientists. My work was unrelated to this part of their business, however.

Appendix B: Research Setting—CHG Healthcare Services

The environment in which the phenomenon is experienced, found and investigated is integral to the phenomenon investigated. This is a profile of the company.

The Company

- Primarily a healthcare staffing company for temporary assignments
- Over 2400 employees
- Expects to double size in two years
- 93% engaged (DecisionWise Engagement Study)
- 60% of jobs filled by referrals
- 22,000 applicants for 460 jobs in 2016

Values

- Putting People First (Core of Core Values)
- Continuous Improvement
- Integrity and Ethics
- Quality and Professionalism
- Growth

Recognition (includes)

- #18 on the Fortune Magazine 2016 “100 Best Companies to Work For”
- Fortune Magazine 2016 “20 Best Workplaces in Consulting & Professional Services”
- 2016 Best Places to Work in Healthcare

Culture

- “Free to be me” – attire, cubicle/office decorations and anecdotes
- Carnival wheel sales associates can spin when they make a sale
- Ping Pong and Pool Tables in break areas
- Employees nominate peers who made the most difference in others’ lives. 2016 winners and their guests got expense paid trips for a safari in Kenya.
- Flexible schedule; Paid time off for volunteer work
- Employee network groups to explore hobbies and other shared interests

Appendix C: Email to Invite Interview Participants

Subject: Involvement in an Engagement Study on the Meaning of Work

I have been approached by a colleague from Pepperdine University asking if he could interview highly engagement employees and leaders at CHG. The data from the interviews will be used in his thesis on engagement and the meaning of work. Because of your high engagement levels, I would like to ask if you would be willing to and available to participate in a 45-minute individual interview with Bruce Barkis. The dates he will be in Salt Lake City are Tuesday, December 13 and Wednesday, December 14. (Name of participant we can do your interview over the phone). This is a great opportunity for the company since CHG will get a copy of the thesis when finished.

Please let me know 3 things:

- Are you interested in participating.
- If so, are you available during this timeframe for a 45-minute interview.
- If you are interested and available, let me know the times during that timeframe you cannot be schedule for an interview.

Please do not think twice if you do not want to participate, just let me know.

Thanks for your consideration.

Kevin Ricklefs
Senior Vice President, Talent Management

CHG Healthcare Services

Appendix D: Email to Prepare Participants

Subject: Meaning and Engagement Interviews - Background

On Tuesday and Wednesday, I'll visit CHG Healthcare Services to interview you about your experience as highly engaged employees and leaders. You're participating in a research study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a graduate degree in Organizational Development from Pepperdine University.

The purpose of the study is to learn how highly-engaged employees and managers discover meaning in their work. That's where you come in. I'd like to hear from you about your work experience: what you find satisfying about what you do. I'd like to get your thoughts about the role of meaning in your work and how it might affect how you work. That's basically it. The insights you share could enable others to find meaning in their work along with the benefits of doing so.

What do we mean by meaning? The definition is really up to you. We experience meaning in our work in different ways and for different reasons like...

- I get to do work that I really enjoy.
- I get to do something I'm really good at.
- The work I do contributes to a greater good.
- Through my work, I get the satisfaction of encouraging and helping the people I work with.
- My work enables me to do something of value in another area of my life (providing for family or serving the community).
- And for other reasons...

Perhaps between now and the time we visit you could give this a little thought. In the meantime, thank you for agreeing to participate in the study. I believe you'll find value in the experience.

Bruce

Bruce Barkis

Appendix E: Phenomenological Interview Techniques

1. Above all else, listen more, talk less.
2. Follow up on what the participant says.
3. Ask questions when you don't understand.
4. Ask to hear more about a subject.
5. Explore (shared experience), don't probe (too directive).
6. Ask real questions (open, not leading).
7. Follow up, but don't interrupt.
8. If participant sounds too formal, invite her to think of you as someone else.
9. Ask participants to tell a story.
10. Ask participants to reconstruct, not remember. Memory is faulty. Ask directly, "What happened?" or "What was [experience] like?"
11. Keep participants focused and ask for concrete details.
12. Limit your own interaction.
13. Avoid reinforcing your participant's responses—e.g. short, affirmative responses.
14. Explore laughter.
15. Follow your hunches.
16. Use an interview guide cautiously.
17. Tolerate silence.

(Seidman, 2003, p. 81-95)

Appendix F: Interview Questions

MEANING

What do you find most meaningful about your work?

- How would you describe what's meaningful about your work?
- Tell me about your experience of meaning in work.
- How do you define meaning in work?

FIND

- WHEN did you become aware of the meaning in your work?
- What can you think of that led to that awareness?

EFFECT

- What are the benefits of finding meaning in your work?
- ...to you?
- ...to CHG?

ADVICE

- What advice do you have that I could share to help others find meaning in their work?

Appendix G: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

1. Transcribe the audio.
2. Listen to the interviews while reading the transcriptions. Confirm accuracy of transcription. Correct any transcription errors. Make notes where the audio a dimension not conveyed in the text alone.
3. Re-read the transcripts suspending judgment and assumption while highlighting key words, phrases and quotes related to the phenomenon.
4. Read through again analyzing the narrative structure, looking for contextual relationships, identifying distinctive characteristics of each of the interview participants, reflecting, interpreting and making notes as meaning emerges.
5. Produce an Excel worksheet listing key words, phrases and quotes for each interview question or set of related questions.
6. Code the interview data. Take a first cut at associating a brief phrases or abbreviations to the key words and phrases to reveal similarities. For each participant, count and enter the frequency with which each word or phrase is used.
7. Identify themes—recurring patterns of meaning. Continue the iterative, cyclical process on successive worksheets to continue to reveal themes while preserving the integrity with the original context and access to the source data.
8. Query the data from alternate perspectives—e.g. meta-level (awareness of meaning of experience reported), for deeper insight into individual nuances in collective themes and in other ways.
9. Sort the themes into a final set of superordinate themes.

(Smith, et al. 2009, p. 79-99)

Appendix H: Table of Sub-Themes

	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. LEADERSHIP	300	42%				
Appreciate leaders			115	38%		
Appreciate our leaders (in general)					69	60%
Live core values					34	30%
Define and sustain core values					12	10%
Recognizes my value			69	23%		
Leadership comment about my impact					41	59%
Autonomy (trust)					15	22%
Encourages					4	6%
Reinforces, recognizes					8	12%
Partner as equals					1	1%
Communicates			66	22%		
Safe to communicate					13	20%
Onboarding - expectations & relationships					12	18%
Explains their impact					7	11%
Productive meetings					7	11%
Informs					5	8%
Seeks ideas & feedback					5	8%
Listens					5	8%
Conversation					4	6%
Collaboration					4	6%
Build relationships					4	6%
Enables development			30	10%		
Develop my people					5	17%
My Development					3	10%
Develop employees					16	53%
Career development					6	20%
Provides resources			18	6%		
Resource-Leaders					10	56%
Resources-Company					7	39%
Support-Leadership					1	6%
Outliers			2	1%		
Re-hire					1	50%
Perks					1	50%

Table of Sub-Themes (continued)

	N	%	N	%	N	%
2. ENACTED CULTURE	170	24%				
Values alignment			98	58%		
Live core values					51	52%
Core Values					14	14%
Situational					13	13%
Aligns with my purpose					7	7%
Realized values aligned					6	6%
Integrity					5	5%
Open to grow					2	2%
CHG People			46	27%		
CHG People					26	57%
Subordinates					7	15%
Interactions					7	15%
Relationships					5	11%
Respect					1	2%
Environment			26	15%		
Culture					13	50%
Fun					5	19%
Safe environment					3	12%
Work-Life Balance					3	12%
Free to be me					2	8%
3. IMPACT	125	18%				
Impact-Others			59	47%		
Impact-CHG			19	15%		
Impact-Community			12	10%		
Impact discovery			15	12%		
Responsibility			20	16%		
Importance					12	10%
Impact-Work					8	6%

Table of Sub-Themes (continued)

	N	%	N	%	N	%
4. THE WORK	112	16%				
Serving Others			76	68%		
Interact					29	38%
Help					16	21%
Relationships					14	18%
Putting people first					10	13%
Empathy					7	9%
Strengths			36	32%		
Strengths					22	61%
Realized using strengths					5	14%
Realized enjoyed work					8	22%
Doing work I love					1	3%
TOTAL ALL SUPERORDINATE THEMES	707	100%				

Appendix I: CHG Core Values



CHG Core Values

Putting People First

Putting people first is at the core of everything we do. Our people-centric culture fosters an atmosphere of respect, caring, support and fun.

Continuous Improvement

Getting better every day is a part of our culture. We move our company forward by improving ourselves, our culture and our business.

Integrity and Ethics

All of our actions and decisions are guided by an unwavering commitment to integrity and ethics. We strive for the best in ourselves and inspire and encourage others to conduct business ethically.

Quality and Professionalism

Our reputation for industry-leading quality and professionalism is earned every day with each placement we make. We hold ourselves to rigorous standards when placing healthcare professionals with clients to ultimately benefit the patients they serve.

Growth

Everyone wins when we grow. A thriving business creates more opportunities for our people, our healthcare professionals and our clients.

Appendix J: Interview Participant Advice

What advice can you give me to help others find meaning in their work?

COACH THE MANAGERS

Relationship:

- Form a genuine, sincere relationship
- Build the trust and respect that are important to you.
- Learn about the individual as an individual, not just as an "employee."
- Ask questions about...
 - o Interests shared--e.g. both like the same sports team
 - o As a person, personal life

Strengths

- Recognize their strengths
- Connect those strengths to a bigger purpose
- Call out the strengths you see them using

Motivation

- What motivates this individual?
 - o Professional goals
 - o Personal goals
 - o Purpose of their work

Impact

- Discuss their impact. Guide discovery.
 - o Personal: life, family, other areas of personal life their work benefits
 - o Personal related to work: clients that are now like family, friendships at work
 - o Others helped
 - o Discuss relationships that contribute to meaning in their life
- Show them how their job fits into the big picture.
- Tell stories to bring this to life.
- New employees: show how they're going to make a difference

Purpose

- New employees: Give time to figure out how and where best to contribute
- Plant seeds: things to think about
- Help them see a purpose the money they earn enables.
 - o Values that are important
 - o Adapt to the individual: a little guidance is sufficient for them to find their purpose
- Weekly team meetings, "How did you impact someone's life in the last week?"
- Challenge them

Develop

- Mentor them
- Enable them to achieve their goals and make the impact that's meaningful
 - o Invest in their professional development
 - o Invest in their career development, if that's important to them
 - o Coach to develop their skills

Support:

- Keep in mind that you're supporting them, not them supporting you.
- Situational leadership: lead in the way that's appropriate for their situation.
- Be available and ready to help
- Let them know the resources available

Participant Advice (continued)

COACH EMPLOYEES

Your work

Ask yourself:

- o Do I enjoy what I'm doing? Why or Why not?
- o What do I want to do? What am I good at? What can I do to provide value?
- o What is it that I do or can do that most excites me? How do I know?
- o Find what you love and do it.

Your company

Ask yourself:

- o What do I like this company? (Can't think of anything? Go somewhere else.)
- o In what ways can I connect with the mission of this company?
- o Am I where I can find meaning? (if not, find the right company?)

Your impact

Ask yourself:

- o We're all here for a reason. Where do I fit? What's the reason I'm here?
- o Who do I impact?
- o Does what I do make a difference? How do I know?
- o How essential is what I contribute? If I weren't here, what gap would that leave?

Your management

Communicate with management:

- o Clarify what's expected of you.
- o Tell management what you need

Your fellow employees

Build relationships

- o Start or join a club within the company related to an interest you're passionate about.
- o Collaborate with others

You

Learn and grow

Change. If you're not seeing results, reflect. Is it internal or external?

Initiate a project you're passionate about outside your normal job duties

Do something extra.