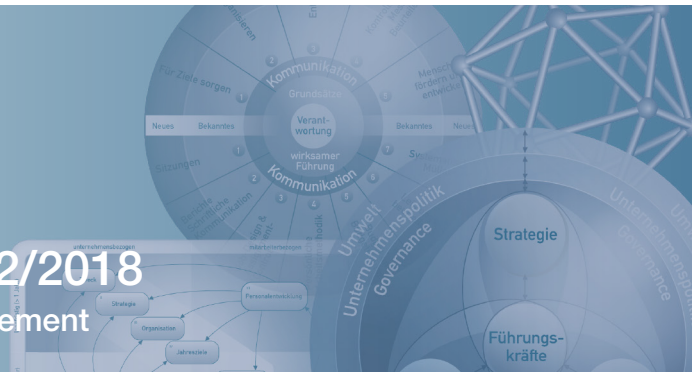




## Malik Letter No. 12/2018 for Right and Good Management



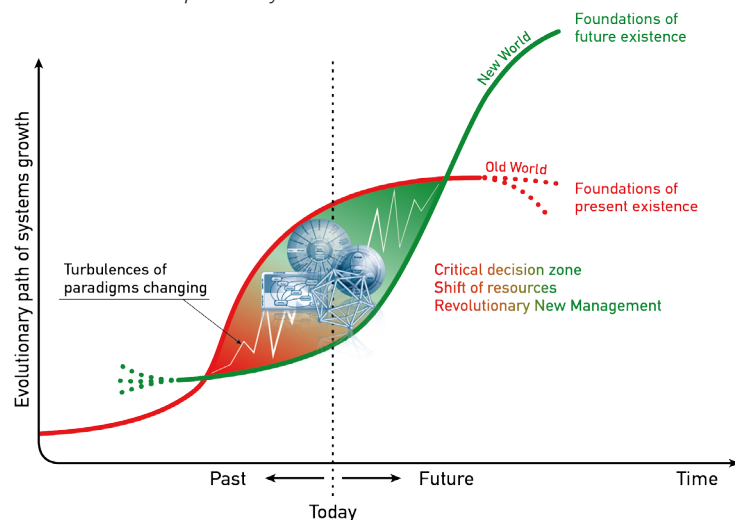
Prof. Dr. Fredmund Malik:

### Motivation through meaning

- › The teaching of Viktor Frankl
- › Meaning as strongest motivation
- › Almost unknown in management

### The Great Transformation<sup>21</sup>™

*The old world is replaced by a new world*



#### Imprint

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## Preface

Much has been written about motivation. Most managers consider this to be one of the most important issues. What does motivation mean today? When people are in the radical changes of the Great Transformation<sup>21</sup> and don't know what to expect, many of the previously reliable orientation marks disappear and the new makes them afraid, then for many the question of meaning comes to the fore. Then the teaching of the meaning of life, as shaped by Viktor Frankl, becomes more and more important for more and more people. Meaning is the strongest motivation.

St. Gallen, December 6, 2018

Sincerely,



Prof. Dr. Fredmund Malik

## Motivation through meaning

### 1. The best was overlooked

Hardly any other topic has occupied the management world in the last 40 years as much as the motivation of people. There was and is no leadership training without this topic. When asked what is the most important task of managers, over 90 percent of all managers answer "the motivation of employees".

Remarkably, if one continues to ask what motivates people, Viktor Frankl's<sup>1</sup> teaching is almost never mentioned. He is the creator of the teaching of the meaning of life. In my seminars I am using the basic ideas of Frankl since a long time. Not five percent of managers know Frankl's name—and even fewer know his teachings.

<sup>1</sup> Viktor Emil Frankl (1905-1997) was an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist—in 1955 he received the title of Professor of Neurology and Psychiatry at the University of Vienna, visiting professorships led him to the USA (Harvard University, Dallas and Pittsburgh). He founded logotherapy and existential analysis, which is often referred to as the "Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy". He was considered one of the greatest experts in his field. Frankl has written 32 books and received 29 honorary doctorates worldwide.

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With the exception of Abraham Maslow, who had a controversy with Frankl in the 1950s, there is no reference to Frankl among the well-known motivation theorists, neither among McClelland, Herzberg, McGregor or Gellerman. During my studies I never heard the name Viktor Frankl. I was already 40 when I discovered his teaching on the meaning of life.

I think Frankl's teaching is the best that has been said about motivation so far. One should know his teachings. Whether one then wants to accept them is a different question and a personal decision.

In short, Viktor Frankl says that people are motivated by meaning. He describes his teaching and the therapy based on it as "logotherapy". This approach is occasionally referred to as the Third Austrian School of Psychotherapy (the first is that of Sigmund Freud and the second that of Alfred Adler).

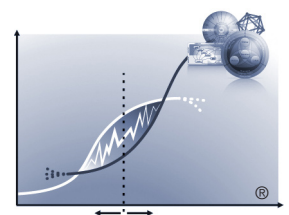
According to Viktor Frankl, man is motivated by meaning and by the search for meaning. He quotes Friedrich Nietzsche: "He who has a 'why' to live for can bear almost any 'how'". When a human being—as Frankl says—has found meaning, when and as long as he is able to see meaning in something, he is ready to perform at his best and is even capable of achieving things, which can be regarded as almost superhuman, and he is ready and able to make sacrifices and to waive. However, if a human being can no longer find meaning in his life, then he loses his willingness and his ability to perform, and he is then even willing to throw away his life. He gives himself up and sometimes even ends his life himself.

Viktor Frankl's teaching goes to the deepest roots of human existence. For people as executives and for employees in organizations, only a part of his teaching is significant, but this one is very important. For executives as people, and above all for those people for whom one has responsibility as an executive, his entire teaching is important.

## 2. Particular credibility

Since I have known his conceptions, Viktor Frankl has been important because he was credible because of his own life and experiences.

He himself survived Auschwitz, but his family did not. After his liberation, he published the book: "*Saying Yes to Life despite Everything: A Psychologist Experiences the Concentration Camp*" (known in English by the title "*Man's Search for Meaning*"). It is one of the most shocking,



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but also one of the most humane and optimistic documents of human capacity to suffer and to perform. It has been translated into dozens of languages and has reached a total circulation of more than 12 million.

Not only that Viktor Frankl himself had to cope with a difficult fate and therefore able to speak from his own experience, he also had to confront his life as a doctor and psychiatrist with people who had to endure strokes of fate—physically and mentally severely injured people through accidents and illnesses, paraplegics, quadruple amputees, criminals, drug addicts, depressives and those who had attempted suicide.

Someone who has such experiences and then reports about when and what motivates people to not only master ordinary life, but also to cope with extreme situations and life situations, should be heard. Perhaps it is also remarkable that Frankl did not come to his teaching of meaning through or because of his personal experience. Rather, he had already developed them in the 1920s as a reaction to and a development of the theories of Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler, and his teaching was then convincingly confirmed by his own experiences.

### 3. The essence of Viktor Frankl's theory of the meaning

In short, his teaching is as follows: The human being is a being in search of meaning. The search for meaning is his moving power par excellence. Sense cannot be given by anyone, but *every person must seek his own meaning for himself or herself.*

*You can take people's meaning away, though. You can frustrate their quest for meaning and thus destroy their most important source of power. Not to do this, but to create the possibilities that every person can find meaning—is therefore one of the most noble tasks of executives.*

In my opinion, this is ultimately the only thing that can and must really be done to motivate people. Relative to this, all other motivation methods are insignificant, because without meaning they are at best ineffective and at worst cynical.

Viktor Frankl goes even further: Not only does he say that everyone is motivated by the search for meaning, but that he and she must search for personal meaning themselves, but he also says that *there is a meaning for every person in their lives, and that everyone can find it.*

Viktor Frankl is not satisfied with posing a big question, but he *gives answers*—for everyone, down-to-earth answers, simple and understanda-

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ble. Based on the result of numerous research projects carried out internationally, he shows the ways in which people find meaning in their lives.

The result is that people find their meaning in three main ways. The first way is particularly important for management. The second way belongs to private life and the third refers to the existential, fateful human borderline situations.

People find meaning:

1. In the service of a cause: by fulfilling a task, by performing a service, by creating a work. This is the key to motivation for management and leadership.
2. In service to other people—in devotion to his family, to friends, to people who need help. Although this path to meaning can also occur in professional life, in the form of experiences of special collegiality and helpfulness, it is mostly a matter of private life, civil partnership and personal, interpersonal relationships.
3. Frankl points out a third way: The human being finds meaning in transforming suffering into achievement, in testifying to perhaps the most human of all human achievements, namely to master a difficult fate with dignity.

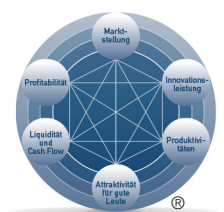
#### 4. Self-realization, by what?

One of the most important things about Frankl's teaching is that he convincingly demonstrates that the search for meaning is related to *self-transcendence*. With this term he describes the fact that man reaches beyond himself, puts himself back and enters into the service of something else, something more important.

He is thus in diametrical contrast to the self-realization teachings that are so widespread and whose origin is the motivation theory of Abraham Maslow, the best known of all motivation theories. Finding meaning is the highest form of self-realization. However, Frankl's approach is completely different from Maslow's.

While the self-realization teachings—as they are usually understood—lead to ego-centrism, to the fact that man puts himself in the center of his own interest, the situation with Frankl is exactly the opposite. The human being forgets himself in his search for meaning and is completely devoted to his task or work—and thus finds self-realization—meaning in life.

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Frankl compares this with the functionality of the human eye. The healthy eye sees nothing of itself. As soon as it notices something of itself, it is sick—then it suffers from either a cataract or a glaucoma; it sees clouds or a halation and notices its own dysfunction.

Frankl refers to surveys carried out on the subject of "meaning", on the question for whom people feel the greatest respect and the greatest esteem. It has been shown that these are not the celebrities of our time, the media stars, the athletes, politicians, artists, etc., but that it is people who selflessly help other people and those who—as already said—master a difficult fate with dignity.

The pursuit of self-realization and the pursuit of meaning are thus related in terms of motivation. However, concerning the question what self-motivation is and how it can be achieved, the opinions of Maslow and Frankl are exactly the opposite. Self-realization through finding meaning in the sense of Frankl and self-realization through egocentrism are fundamentally different. After long discussions with Frankl, Maslow agreed to this publicly and also in writing. This fact, however, did not find its way into the usual representations of Abraham Maslow's theory of motivation, which is taught millions of times in seminars.

## 5. What is meaning?

A small, very important component for the question of meaning is still missing. The ways in which meaning is found are clear, and—what is particularly pleasing—they are ways that are open to everyone. They are not big, abstract, philosophical drafts, but practical ways.

What is meaning? Frankl compares the finding of meaning with the process of the so-called perception of form – Frankl uses the hard to translate German term Gestalt. In our perception of form, a figure jumps into our eyes against a background. In finding meaning, according to Frankl, something similar happens: *We recognize a possibility against the background of reality—a possibility to do something here and now, to change the situation, to do something.*

Is not this what is at the core of the activities of executives and entrepreneurs? To do something, to seize the *opportunity* against the background of reality and to change, use and shape the situation as it presents itself here and now?

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## 6. Self-responsibility

The logical consequence of Frankl's teaching of meaning is the individual *self-responsibility* of the human being. Who is going to do it if it is not me? And when should I do it, if not now?

In all his writings and lectures Frankl does not tire of fighting against the widespread "apology philosophies" — as he calls them. This refers to the attitude that emerged decades ago and continues to exist, that the reasons for errors and failures are not to be found in oneself but in the "circumstances". Personal responsibility is pushed away. Causes of failure are attributed to society, an unhappy childhood, bad teachers, organizational structures, incompetent bosses, bad colleagues or whatever other circumstances may exist.

Isn't that also one of the attitudes that we expect from executives and demand as values, namely the acceptance of their own responsibility and the renunciation of excuses and alibis? This element of self-responsibility is also the basis for genuine humanism in contrast to the illusory humanism of self-pity, excuses, alibis and escape routes.

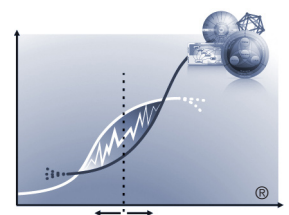
## 7. Consequence for the leadership

If Frankl's teaching is right at its core, then one of the tasks of every manager is to create opportunities for employees to *find meaning*. I specifically do not say give sense. Frankl's first approach is to give employees big tasks and the opportunity to perform a service that makes sense to them individually.

Motivation methods, psycho techniques, incentive systems, reward strategies and the like will therefore not disappear from the world of organizations, but we know from many of these things that they are questionable—not only morally, but also in terms of their effect. Reinhard Springer's book on the "myth of motivation" has rightly attracted a lot of attention. I don't know why he does not quote Frankl.

The main problem of Taylorist forms of work, which are tried to be overcome practically everywhere, is not so much the monotony of work and its difficulties, but the fact that people can no longer see any sense in it. And instead of the concept of the "alienation of work" one would probably should have said "emptiness of meaning". The solutions would then be obvious.

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If you want people to see meaning in their work and find meaning in it, you have to explain to them better and better what meaning a job has for the *company as a whole*, and above all what meaning a job has for the customer. Even less pleasant and stressful works could become more meaningful and thus more bearable, although not necessarily easier.

Remember, "He who has a 'why' to live for..." However, dealing with Frankl's teaching of meaning is important for executives for other reasons than leadership. I see two additional important reasons for this: Where do executives themselves get the strength to get up every morning and to face the demands of reality again and again? It is accepted that executives should motivate employees. But who motivates the managers? We have to ask the question differently: "Not who, but what motivates him?" You can make it easy for yourself and say, "the money" or what he can buy for it, or power and influence. For many others, it is their family, but almost everyone tells me with these or similar words: I have the great privilege of having a meaningful task.

I have experienced it often enough to take seriously how managers face a sense problem towards the end of their careers. Just recovering from their first heart attack, they start to think about their lives. And then they sneak up on the question: Was that my life?

There is a second reason that makes the question of meaning important and topical for management: Not all executives are spared the need to cut jobs and send people into unemployment. Hardly anyone finds it easy. Most people suffer from it. Many people are most afraid of the question of these people: "What was the meaning of all this now? I worked for this company for 25 years, and I gave it all I had. And now you are firing me...?"

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