Summary

Making the difference
A qualitative study of the search for meaning and purpose in the context of organizations and the workplace, and the role of leadership at the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee

This dissertation is centered around the search for meaning and purpose within the context of organizations and the workplace. In the introduction to this dissertation in Chapter 1, I establish that meaning and purpose in the context of organizations is a topic of scientific interest in modern society, as well as in scientific debate. The workplace and organizations are regarded as a new area of life in which people search for meaning, since topics such as spirituality, religion and meaning were previously considered to be part of the private sphere. Employees prefer to have a meaningful job and to make a significant contribution to society and to other people as well as themselves. Organizations and their leaders are therefore obliged to anticipate this need and to provide a workplace that offers the opportunity of finding meaning and purpose.

Work, organizations and leadership are increasingly linked to concepts such as meaning, a sense of purpose, spirituality, authenticity and inspiration. The field of organizational leadership increasingly recognizes and acknowledges the fact that devoting attention to meaning and inspiration can make a valuable difference in terms of the wellbeing and development of employees, and therefore to the power of the organization as a whole. There is a strong demand for leadership styles which devote attention to meaning, purpose and inspiration. However, in scientific literature as well as in the professional leadership practice, this theme has not yet been fully accepted. This is because there are no generally accepted definitions of these concepts, no adequate metrics and indicators, and the corresponding theoretical background needs to be developed further. There is also some skepticism within the scientific debate, caused by the use of terms such as ‘spirituality’ (business spirituality, workplace spirituality) which is associated with religion and therefore not welcome in the workplace. It is necessary to develop a better definition of the concept ‘meaning and purpose within the context of organizations and the workplace’, based on scientific research. This study aims to do just that: to construct a better definition based on empirical data, as well as to provide insight into the way in which meaning could be embedded in organizations by leadership practice.

The research in this study was conducted at the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee, an organization with military status and one of the four divisions of the Dutch armed forces. The Royal Netherlands Marechaussee has a wide range of tasks within the civil and military services in the Netherlands and abroad, in maintaining the security of the Dutch state. Chapter 3 of this dissertation describes its organizational history, culture and structure.
This dissertation aims to answer the following question:

**In which way can leadership address the concept of meaning and purpose within organizations such as the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee?**

This study is grounded in qualitative research. I conducted 56 qualitative in-depth interviews with supervisors who work on the strategic, tactical and operational levels of the organization. Other types of data collection used in this study were literature review and field research (participant observation, document and content analysis). An extensive process of analysis (deductive, inductive and conceptual) formed the basis of the results, as described in Chapters 5 and 6. The study resulted in a model that reflects the discourse about meaning and purpose in the context of work and organizations, which is discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

**General observations**

I discovered that it is difficult to separate meaning and purpose within the workplace from meaning and purpose outside the workplace. The two contexts are subconsciously interwoven. However, in order to achieve my research goals, I did isolate them both. In the initial review of the empirical data it became clear that for the respondents, meaning and purpose comprise a complex combination of factors that are closely related to “who you are and how you feel”, as well as to your own ambitions, drives and values and the urge to find your own path in life. People experience life as meaningful when they feel like they matter and are able to make a difference. Meaning and purpose are also associated with positive feelings such as happiness, fun and feeling close to others.

**Meaning and purpose at work and in organizations**

The model that reflects the discourse about meaning and purpose in the context of work and organizations is based on the analysis of empirical data. The data analysis established that meaning and purpose in organizations are created by a variety of aspects found at three different levels: the individual employees, the collaboration in teams and the organization as a whole. Below is a summary of these aspects.

**Individual** employees experience a sense of meaning and purpose at work when they:

- Have an inspiring goal that contributes to a sense of purpose in the workplace.
- Feel that their individual contributions add to the overall success.
- Are able to contribute to the improvement and overall progress (increased professionalism) of the organization and feel that they can make a difference in this sense.
- Have the opportunity to grow and develop.
- Are able to align the work with their personal values.
- Are recognized for who they are and what they contribute to the organization.
At team level, a sense of meaning is experienced when:
- There is a strong sense of team spirit (or the esprit de corps within the research subject of the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee).
- There is an opportunity for team development, focused on the connection between team members, inter alia asking questions that help create meaning, such as: What is my role within the team? How do I contribute to the success of the team? How can we support each other? It also adds to the sense of meaning if the team is able to develop common goals and have structural conversations about issues that matter.
- Team spirit and opportunities for team development create the foundation for working on quality and professionalism, learning and creating expertise.

An important part of experiencing meaning and purpose in the context of work and organizations is the contribution that the organization makes to society. The individual experience of an organization's meaning is primarily related to the idea that individual efforts contribute to the overall impact of the organization on society. Having a clear and inspirational vision that defines the impact on society strengthens the feeling of being of consequence, and improves the feeling of meaning and purpose in the individual employee. Meaning and purpose at work and in organizations are also developed by several components of the organization's strategy, such as:
- Does the organization address questions about meaning and purpose? This depends on how the leaders communicate with their employees on this topic.
- The extent to which high-quality leadership is achieved and a focus on meaning and purpose can be implemented. Continuity of leadership contributes to this.
- Room for the unique character of the organization and the chance to convey one’s expertise both contribute to the experience of an organization’s meaning. In the organization in which the study was conducted, the combination of formal authority and the control of the organization has led to bureaucracy. This halts the development of technical skills and expertise and leads, on a regular basis, to frustration (which is not meaningful).
- Improvement, progress and innovation in an organization are relevant factors for a sense of purpose. Multiple interviewees described how a different type of leadership (by supervisors who have received a different type of education) would contribute to the progress and professionalism of the organization and therefore to the meaning and purpose experienced in the organization.
- The structuring of tasks is a critical aspect of how individuals experience meaning and purpose. Are processes designed to allow employees to contribute to the overall success of the organization? Can an employee grow and develop? Both the amount of work and the challenge presented by the work contribute to how the employee experiences meaning and purpose.
- The opportunities to grow and develop that are embedded in the HRM and HRD policies.
Conclusion
Based on the findings of this research I conclude that meaning and purpose at work and in organizations are experienced when:

- There is space for professional as well as personal development;
- Individual employees are aware of their own contributions to the organization and its goals, in particular to the progress, innovation and improvement of the organization, and they feel that they have been able to make a difference;
- There is room for individuality and authenticity and people are acknowledged for showing their individual talents and qualities.

The results of this study tell us that employees and leaders at different levels of the organization do have questions about meaning and purpose aimed at the organization. The discourse reveals that questions about meaning and purpose are asked not only at the level of individual employees, but that these questions are connected to the organization as a whole, and to its leadership.

I also observed that discussions about meaning and purpose take place if they are initiated by the organization. Explicitly addressing the topic of meaning and purpose at work and in organizations has an immediate impact on the employees’ experience. It is therefore a good idea for the organization to stimulate these discussions and embed them into both its HRM and HRD policies and its leadership education. Based on the above, I conclude that meaning and purpose is not just potentially a topic for organizations, it is already an important aspect of organizations.

Leadership plays a critical role
The discourse on meaning in organizations is not the only result that the empirical data produced. In Chapter 6 of the dissertation, I describe how leaders can contribute to an organization’s meaning as experienced by the employees, based on the empirical findings. For this purpose, it is necessary to provide leadership development with meaning and purpose (in the organization) as one of its essential components.

Chapter 6 starts with an outline of the respondents’ opinions on leadership and how they practice leadership on a daily basis. Developing and sharing their vision, devoting attention to the development of the employees, creating a positive work environment and the importance of being approachable are all considered important areas of focus in leadership. The reflections of the respondents on how they as supervisors can contribute to the sense of purpose led to a noteworthy observation. It was only when the respondents were asked to reflect more specifically on the question of how leadership can impact the sense of meaning at work, that they began to incorporate attention for the ‘why’ into their view of leadership. For example, a respondent’s outlook becomes more profound
if they focus on the question of why exactly creating meaning in an organization is important. Managers asking their employees more substantial questions (questions of meaning), and inviting them to assess their motivation and ambitions, will help build a more open environment for employee development. When they decide to increase the sense of meaning within the organization, managers focus more on the growth of others and become more aware of ways in which they can stimulate employees’ development.

**Questions about meaning and purpose as a central theme in leadership development**

In my research, leadership development emerges as an essential and necessary process for the improvement of the sense of purpose in organizations. The results of the research show that although leadership development is an individual process, it can be stimulated by the organization. Leadership development for individual supervisors and organizational leadership development are two processes that influence each other. In Chapter 6 I describe which specific questions about meaning and purpose are relevant to the process of leadership development.

**Being able to connect** with others is a crucial factor in contributing to the organization’s sense of purpose and to the employees’ sense of purpose. It is this connection that creates the openness and space necessary for discussions about what really matters, and for addressing dilemmas and road blocks. Creating a connection is a reciprocal process. It requires an open attitude and vulnerability from both the manager and the employee. This is where leaders need to practice self-reflection by asking themselves meaningful questions, such as: Why am I a leader? How can I motivate people and make a difference? What are my intentions?

Leadership development, with an emphasis on questions about meaning and purpose, is needed to create this connection with employees. In leadership development, leadership and meaning then become closely interlinked; interviewees describe it as ‘creating meaning for myself’. This process centers around questions on meaning, and the development of leaders is the immediate result of these questions. This process is in perpetual motion and ever-changing.

Leadership development is challenging; it will result in dilemmas and challenges for the managers, both as professionals and as human beings. The respondents state that these challenges affect them as human beings, and that they use them to steer their professional and personal development process in the right direction. The most formative aspect of leadership, as described by the respondents, is the inherent challenge that comes with being a manager. In this position they are responsible for caring for their employees. At the same time it confronts managers with questions related to meaning and purpose, such as: Who am I as a manager? What kind of manager do I want to be? What are my responsibilities towards others? How can I support others? The respondents experience leadership as a continuous balancing act between the demands of the
individual employee, the organization, and themselves. The expectations leaders set for themselves determine whether they are able to balance these demands. What can I do? What actions should I take or avoid? How much control do I need? Do I dare to let go? What are my boundaries and limitations? These are some questions related to an organization's meaning that should be answered. The respondents describe how they had to learn to stay true to themselves and their own beliefs. Growing confident as a leader is important for developing their own sense of purpose, but also for improving the sense of meaning for others. The most striking revelation on leadership development in this research was that the respondents had to learn to shift their focus away from themselves and reaching their own goals, and focus more on others. An environment that allows questions about meaning to be asked provides support and coaching, examples to follow and inspiration. These are all essential factors in the process of leadership development.

The organization can provide an important impulse to leadership development

The research demonstrates how important it is that the organization provides an impulse to leadership development as it relates to meaning in an organization. This can be achieved by encouraging managers to address questions related to that meaning or sense of purpose. In Chapter 6, I explain that based on the empirical findings, it is helpful if the organization actively stimulates the desired style of leadership, e.g. inspires managers with leadership philosophies and styles that spark a sense of meaning within the organization. However, allowing space for individual interpretation by the managers is even more valuable in accomplishing this goal. It is important that this is anchored in the organization, in order to permanently stimulate a focus on meaning and purpose in the organization. As the saying goes, ‘what you feed will grow’. Creating space for leaders to develop their own authenticity and leaving room for reflection, to learn and find their own inspiration, all appear to be essential factors. A sense of purpose and meaning within an organization is best developed by creating space for the supervisors.

Leadership as an impulse for purpose and meaning in the organization

In this research, I state that leadership is the primary impulse for the sense of meaning within an organization. Based on the findings from this research, I argue that encouraging and instilling meaning into an organization is the role and responsibility of both the organization and its leaders. Managers should be held accountable (by the organization as well as themselves) for this. This will stimulate the development desired in existing managers and the training of new managers. Managers handle the majority of the questions related to meaning and purpose in the organization, which are addressed to them from three different directions (themselves, their employees and the organization). This should shape the way we think about leadership development and the support of managers throughout their careers. Managers at all levels of the organization should
possess in-depth knowledge of the organizational process related to a sense of purpose and meaning, understand the different aspects of meaning and know how to support others in their quest for meaning at work. In the theoretical review of this study I state that many occupational groups are concerned about meaning and a sense of purpose and that managers being excluded from this discussion is a missed opportunity.

In this study I was able to substantiate why managers need knowledge of and insight into the processes related to meaning and a sense of purpose at work. Only then are they able to support others in their search for meaning within the organization. This research provides sufficient insight into how the training and development of future leaders can be enhanced to ensure that they become, and remain, the main motivators of meaning in the organization. The study concludes that leadership development is a critical process in the search for meaning and purpose within the workplace and organizations, therefore the concept of leadership development (for individual managers and impulses given by the organization) was added to the model and the discourse on meaning in organizations.

The discourse, as depicted in the model, provides the answer to the research question. The model sheds light on what meaning in an organization is, and shows that leadership development and providing appropriate leadership are the most essential processes in addressing the need for meaning in an organization.

What can we learn from this discourse and what have we learned from this research? These questions were answered in Chapter 7. In this closing chapter of the dissertation, I presented these lessons and their theoretical and/or practical impact.

**Insight**

One of the main results of this research, and the model created, is a better understanding of meaning and purpose in organizations; how it is connected to leadership and how this is translated to the actual workplace. The research provided definitions, showed that leadership plays a major role and that the level of meaning experienced in the organization is determined by different levels throughout the organization. This research yielded a new understanding of the subject matter, and demonstrated the relationships between the different factors that impact meaning in an organization. Contrary to many other scientific studies and organization reviews, this research identified in detail which aspects of the organization contribute to the employees’ experience of meaning, and at which levels. The goal was not to create a ‘theory of everything’, but to demonstrate how complex the concept of meaning in an organization is. The research clarifies that organization issues that can impact the experience of meaning at the workplace require a holistic and integrated approach and evaluation, in order to understand which actions actually improve the experience of meaning in the organization. The model created can
provide insight for both professionals and those in scientific disciplines, and is therefore helpful in real-life situations and also in research settings. With the model, I emphasize the need for coordination between organization levels, between organization structures and cultures, between policy and reality, which is necessary to effectively address the concept of meaning. This insight can be used in future research into meaning in organizations.

The research also revealed that creating and finding meaning in organizations is an ongoing, dynamic process. It is a process that requires constant evaluation. Whether or not employees experience meaning at work depends on the constant changes within organizations. Change, whether it’s initiated from within or outside the organization, is the only constant in current organizations. The organization will have to continually assess how changes impact the meaning and purpose as experienced by employees.

The connection between the system and the real world helps anchor meaning in an organization

To truly anchor the focus on meaning and purpose in the context of the workplace and organizations, a connection should be made between the organization as a system and the organization as a social environment. The concept of meaning arises in the organization as a social environment, but it is only truly embedded when included in the systems side of an organization. The social environment of an organization can be used as a guideline to structure the organization as a system, e.g. creating organizational structures and processes.

The sense of meaning in an organization is more pronounced if the two sides of an organization are connected, rather than separate. This observation has theoretical value for organization theory, and provides direction and guidance on how to structure, govern and lead organizations. It also sheds light on how to direct an organization and what the intended outcome is. Generally speaking, metrics and indicators are available for the systems side of an organization, such as measurement tools for command and control procedures. These tools shape the discussion within organizations. However, measuring the level of meaning in an organization is much more challenging, but it can contribute to the social side of and the sense of purpose experienced within the organization.

The impulse for an interdisciplinary approach to the concept of meaning in an organization

The concept of meaning and a sense of purpose at work is a topic of discussion in several scientific disciplines. Each discipline researches and reviews meaning from its own perspective and perception of reality. It is therefore not unusual for sciences such as public (business) administration and organization sciences to review meaning from the perspective of the workplace and the organization, even though based on their scientific backgrounds neither of these sciences are concerned with questions related
to meaning and a sense of purpose. These disciplines traditionally focus on the effect and efficiency of certain factors in terms of success. This causes some resistance in the sciences that traditionally focus on questions of meaning and purpose, such as theology and philosophy, because how can you translate meaning into dollars and cents? Or is meaning possibly being used as a means to manipulate? The slower and more reflective approach of these disciplines in turn creates resistance within the organization sciences and leads to a reluctance to share findings, or to work together to enhance the research from the various perspectives. The scientific discipline of spiritual care (on behalf of various denominations as well as non-denominational spiritual care) is not inclined to conduct research within the context of secular organizations. I noticed a restraint on their part towards the subject of meaning in organizations, to some extent because they represent freedom of religion and philosophy of life. I have shown through my research that the search for meaning is an issue for organizations. Therefore this research aims to encourage them to further research how the expertise of spiritual caregivers, when applied to meaning, can contribute to the research performed at (secular) organizations. The complexity of meaning in an organization is such that it is difficult to capture in indicators. The nature of the concept makes it difficult to measure and express in rational paradigms. Whereas organization sciences have traditionally focused on quantifying processes and collecting data and connections to study their impact on organizations, the humanities, including spiritual care, are more reflective and aimed at qualitative data. If both sciences could be open to each other’s approach and field of research, the concept could be reviewed and researched from a different perspective. Based on my research I conclude that there is an added value to an interdisciplinary approach when researching the concept of meaning within the workplace and organizations. This research provides an incentive to assess the possibility of an interdisciplinary approach, in spite of its possible pitfalls. The various sciences should be prepared to look beyond their traditional boundaries, and let themselves be inspired by the perspectives and thought processes of other disciplines. It is my belief that interdisciplinary research will inspire organizations to have an open attitude when it comes to approaching organization questions from a different angle than the one they are accustomed to. This in turn will create a connection between the social and the systematic worlds present within organizations. It will no longer be unusual to involve theologians, philosophers, pedagogues and anthropologists when reviewing organizations, rather than just looking through the eyes of the organization sciences.