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Meaningful Misalignment: How Anti-Meaning Impacts Senior Executive Wellbeing

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Abstract

This study explores how conceptualising meaning in life as a bipolar construct – comprising both meaning and *anti-meaning* – can deepen our understanding of the wellbeing of senior executives. Using a cross-sectional qualitative design, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight male CEOs and MDs from the private sector. The findings revealed that while executive roles offer substantial meaning, they also generate unavoidable anti-meaning through stress, time constraints, and relational strain. If unbuffered, these pressures often generate additional anti-meaning, compounding emotional fatigue, existential erosion, and reduced wellness. A theoretical model was developed to illustrate the dynamic interaction between meaning, anti-meaning, and the buffers needed to preserve wellbeing. The study highlights a critical gap in current organisational support structures, which often fail to address the unique, multidimensional needs of executives. It calls for bespoke, credible, and confidential support frameworks as a meaningful alternative to the elusive work-life balance ideal.

Keywords

Anti-meaning; executive wellbeing; senior executives; meaning in life; leadership fatigue; multidimensional support; burnout; existential resilience; work-life integration

Biography

Dr Juan-Mari Kruger is a psychiatrist and MBA graduate from the University of Stellenbosch Business School, where she received top research recognition for her thesis on anti-meaning in executive leadership. She has worked in private psychiatric practice for the past four years, following three years as a consultant psychiatrist in the public sector. After graduating from medical school in 2009, she began specialising in psychiatry in 2013. Her clinical work spans a diverse range of presentations, with a particular focus on existential wellbeing, meaning-in-life therapy, and leadership-related stress. Alongside her clinical practice, she explores the intersection of psychological insight and philosophical reflection through creative writing. Her current projects aim to translate thought processes and lived experience into narrative and metaphor – bridging the abstract and the practical in ways that speak to both clinicians and the broader public. Her work is shaped by compassion, curiosity, and an enduring commitment to depth.

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