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*Ikigai in Existential Executive Leadership Coaching: Findings
from Germany and South Africa during COVID-19*

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Abstract

Ikigai and existential therapy both aim at finding meaning and purpose in life and thereby contribute to overcoming life's challenges. This chapter presents ikigai as a valuable approach to existential executive coaching in an executive leadership context. This approach has been applied not only in Japan, but also in German and South African leadership contexts. The chapter contributes to closing the gap of empirical and theory-based approaches to ikigai in non-Japanese contexts. An example of existential executive coaching is provided, thereby offering new insights into the concept of ikigai used in two specific cultural and professional situations during the time of the coronavirus pandemic. The chapter expands the cross-cultural discourse on ikigai and existential coaching. Findings present the development of two female leaders in four primary areas of ikigai: (a) what one loves, (b) what the world needs, (c) what one is paid for and (d) what one is good at. Finally, conclusions are presented and recommendations are offered for future theory and practice.

Keywords: Ikigai; Existential Coaching; Executive Coaching; Germany; South Africa

Introduction

Ikigai is a construct that originated in 14th century Japanese culture (Ishida, 2011), but it has increasingly been drawing attention in other cultural contexts during more recent years (Fabius, 2017; Fido, Kotera & Asan, 2019; Mayer, 2020). It is a socio-cultural and philosophical concept that reflects on the development of the self with regard to life's purpose and can therefore be defined as an approach to meaning-making in life.

At the same time in Europe, existentialist philosophies (Kierkegaard, 1844) have wrestled with the issue of purpose in life (Ishida, 2011). While existentialism has manifested in various forms (Yalom, 1980; Cooper, 2016), Spinelli (2007) argues that it can be summarized with a few key concepts. These include: relatedness (all human beings express themselves through inter-relational grounding), uncertainty (reality is experienced as uncertain, unpredictable, and inescapable), and existential anxiety (the ultimate incompleteness, the inevitable unease and anxiety that permeates all reflective experiences).

As an approach to meaning-making, it has been argued that ikigai is congruent with existential therapy and coaching concepts (Ishida, 2012b). These concepts usually focus on basic meaning in life to minimise or preventing mental illness, destructive psychological conditions, and drug addiction (Ishida, 2012a). They further contribute to a growing independent spirit (Ishida, 2012a) and loving kindness in leaders and as leadership skills (Mayer, 2020).

During the past decade, there has been a reported increase in suicides internationally, and existential suffering and loss of the worth of living has increased in certain societies such as Japan (Ozawa-de Silva, 2008). This has been described as a fundamental crisis, which is “typical of modern societies in which people do what they are told to do, or what others do, rather than what they want to do” (García & Miralles, 2017, p. 415). Ikigai has been translated into English as “that which most makes one's life seem worth living” (Tanno & Sakata, 2007, p. 114), as well as a sense of “life worth living” (Sone et al., 2008, p. 709).

This chapter aims to present ikigai as a valuable approach in existential executive leadership coaching using examples from Germany and South Africa, thereby helping to closing the gap of empirical and theory-based approaches to ikigai outside of Japan. It provides new insights into the concept of ikigai used in two specific cultural and professional contexts during the times of COVID-19, expanding the cross-cultural discourse on ikigai and existential coaching.

First, this chapter describes the state of the art in research on ikigai and how it fits with contemporary approaches in existential therapy and coaching. It further presents a case study of the use of ikigai in existential coaching processes for two female leaders based in Germany and South Africa. Findings present the development of these two leaders in the four primary areas of ikigai: (a) what one loves, (b) what the world needs, (c) what one is paid for and (d) what one is good at. Conclusions are drawn regarding ikigai and its application for these two cultural contexts in executive leadership coaching. Recommendations for future existential executive coaching in specific cultural contexts are offered.

Ikigai in Existential Perspectives

Ikigai and existential therapy both aim to find meaning and purpose in life as a method for overcoming life's challenges (van Deurzen, 2019) such as personal or professional setbacks, depression, burnout, anxieties, obesity or other kinds of crises (Wong, 2018). These crises might occur as a pattern in one's life or happen in specific domains such as professional or family context. In Japan, policies promoting ikigai have been recently implemented to reduce the growing numbers of suicides and suicide attempts (Ministry of Health and Labour Welfare, 2017). Fido, Kotera and Asan (2019) found that higher scores in the ikigai survey in the United Kingdom are associated with greater well-being and lower levels of depression. Fabritius (2017) argued that leaders and entrepreneurs should make use of ikigai as a leadership development approach to support leaders to define their mission, vocation, profession and passion, and thereby build meaningfulness in their life and at work. Schippers (2017) further affirms that reflection and personal life-goal setting, in addition to defining direction and purpose in life, contribute to increasing performance, happiness and well-being.

According to van Deurzen and Adams (2011, p. 155) existentialism is more about the fact "*that we are than about what we are.*" It provides support in coping with stress and existential crises based on an existentially informed worldview (Krum, 2012). The role of the coach in existential executive coaching "*lies in the attempt to be with and be for the client*" (Spinelli, 2010, p. 100), thereby expressing a willingness to attempt a challenging, non-judgemental, and descriptively focused explanation of that worldview. In existential coaching, the coach provides space to give equal emphasis to the "*divided stances, aims and aspirations that may well exist as competing values and beliefs held by them*" (Spinelli, 2010, p. 101).

Spinelli and Horner (2008) argue that existential coaching—which is mainly used in counselling and therapy—can also be used in coaching to address existential values,

assumptions, and beliefs at their core. Ikigai overlaps in part with existential therapy, existential counselling and coaching, aiming to support individuals in mastering the “art of living” (van Deurzen, 2002, p. 19). According to van Deurzen, individuals are not considered to be troubled or ill in existential therapy, but rather need support to make sense of their life and show them that sense-making is possible in any life (Krum, 2012), which is congruent with the ikigai philosophy.

Multiple types of coaching exist (Bachkirova, 2007). In existential executive coaching, the focus is on the relationship between the coach and the client in a work-related situation. In this chapter, coaching is defined as a short-term process focusing on the present and the future, often taking aspects of improving health, decision-making, and stress reduction into consideration (Krum, 2012). In existential coaching, it is important to understand the client and the significance of the meaning the client ascribes to the situations experienced, while taking emotions, values, beliefs and aspirations into account (Folkman, 2008).

Ikigai in Cultural Contexts: Germany and South Africa

Several research articles have compared the concept of sustainable living across cultures, highlighting ikigai as a concept of cultural wisdom for the Japanese context (Bilash, 2019), while a concept such as Ubuntu¹ suits the African context (Hayward & Roy, 2019). Bilash (2019, p. 257) argues that in global and complex systems, people must draw from various sources of cultural wisdom to empower themselves to “be agents of their own change.” However, ikigai has scarcely been researched in German or South African contexts. Only a few studies refer to Ikigai, such as a German study on psychosocial influencing factors on the development of cancer, refers to a Japanese study indicating that women who experience meaning in life (as described by ikigai) are less prone to breast cancer than women who do not (Nielen et al., 2007, in Schwarz, Messerschmidt & Dören, 2007). However, while no research could be found on ikigai’s impact in German or South African contexts, practical guides and programs do exist (e.g., Arauner, 2018; Mogi, 2018). This suggests that ikigai is being used in self-help programs in these countries.

In a 2019 article, German writer Sarah Kampitsch discussed the controversial and seemingly contradictory nature of how Japanese culture relates to work life. On one hand,

¹ Ubuntu is an African philosophical concept which focuses on the importance of human connection, relationships, care and humanism. It provides guidance in terms of ethical, loving and caring behaviour and ways to see the world (Mayer, Louw, & Boness, 2019).

ikigai is promoted as the ground-breaking philosophy of defining the worth of living, while on the other hand, thousands of people die in Japan from exhaustion due to overworking. Ikigai can help find personal meaning in life and work, foster motivation, and the journey towards the inner self. It can also help to build an organisational culture of common visions, alignment of individual and organisational values and approaches. Therefore, Kampitsch argues, German employees and organisations could learn from the Japanese philosophy of ikigai, but it also needs to be implemented in the stressful daily routines of post-modern lives, which Japan has in many ways failed to do.

Research Methodology

The study reported in this chapter used a qualitative research methodology (Creswell, 2012) in the form of a case study design (Yin, 2013). Findings are presented for the cases of two executive leaders in two different socio-cultural contexts, one in Germany and one in South Africa. An interpretivist research paradigm was used.

Research Process

The research was conducted on an existential executive coaching program, which was based on a three-phase coaching model anchored in the existentialist paradigm (van Deurzen & Martin, 2011; Spinelli, 2007, 2010):

- Phase 1 is the introductory phase, using a phenomenological approach (including the steps of bracketing, description and horizontalization as described in Spinelli, 2010), listening to the participant’s stories, values and “existential tensions” (Wahl, 2003).
- Phase 2 includes four coaching sessions exploring the client’s experience, pointing out ambiguities and exploring the patterns of thought and actions. In this phase, ikigai is used to adhere to existential themes within the coaching process.
- Phase 3 comprises one final coaching session to encourage changed behaviour and find solutions for the way forward.

Sample

A purposive sampling method was used to select two exceptional participants, both women in executive leadership positions. They were chosen according to the following criteria: both wanted to explore existential phenomena during executive coaching sessions, both were

women in leadership positions, and both were willing to follow the prescribed existential coaching design, with ikigai as part of the method.

Case 1 presents a 37-year-old educator from Germany and married with a 12-year-old daughter. She is a team leader at a German university in a project involving digital learning. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many jobs have been suspended and unemployment has increased (Bauer & Weber, 2020). There is competition within her team, and conflicts over reorientation of work and about who will apply for the remaining jobs and who will not. She also experiences great pressure to reconcile professional and family obligations.

Case 2 presents a 29-year-old executive female leader in a South African medical context. She has taken on her first executive leadership position in a private hospital in the Gauteng area, and has embarked on an executive coaching program provided by the top management of her medical organisation. This has been offered to strengthen her as a frontline medical worker in the context of unpredictable stress and change related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Mbunge, 2020).

Data collection, analysis and reporting

Data were collected during the online existential executive coaching sessions. Notes were taken during all coaching sessions and observations were made and noted by the coach. The sessions were not recorded in accordance with the participants' wishes. The ikigai model was used during the coaching sessions and notes were taken regarding the different categories of ikigai (see Figure 1): (1) "What do I love?", (2) "What does the world need?", (3) "What can I be paid for?" and (4) "What am I good at?". Further, the passion, mission, vocation and profession of the client were also taken into consideration (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: The Ikigai Model (Vanderheiden/Mayer, 2020)

Data were analysed through the content analysis method used by Krippendorff (2018), following five steps: (1) information was collected and comprehensively surveyed with respect to the subject at hand; (2) topics were created; (3) information was coded; (4) the content was categorised into new units, which were then labelled; (5) meanings within the information were more deeply analysed.

Findings are reported in a qualitative reporting style.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was given by the Institut für Therapeutische Kommunikation und Sprachgebrauch (Institute for Therapeutic Communication and Use of Language), at European University Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder). The participants were informed regarding privacy and their rights, and gave informed consent to be studied and present the findings confidentially and anonymously.

Findings

In this section, two cases of existential executive coaching using ikigai are described. Case 1 was in Germany, and case 2 took place in South Africa. Both coaching sessions used ikigai as a point from which to create awareness, deal with the inner adversaries of the individual, and work on the question of how a meaningful and worthy life can look.

Case 1: Ikigai used in existential executive coaching within an andragogical context in Heidelberg, Germany

Clara is a 37-year-old, married mother of a 12-year-old daughter. She studied pedagogy with a focus on adult education, and her professional interest is in digital learning settings. Because she became a mother right after her studies, she stayed at home at first to devote herself to raising her child. When her daughter started school, she took on her first job in her field. In her free time, she likes to read, hike, and enjoy time with her family.

After having had several positions limited to one or two years, for which she sometimes had to travel long distances to reach, for two years she had been working at a university near her home, where she was responsible for digital teaching and learning settings as part of a research project. She would support professors in the implementation of their teaching activities through further training, with consultations or the creation of manuals.

Clara said that this was her dream job, however there were many conflicts in the team. In her opinion, most people in the team lacked the right work ethic. She also wanted to see a different strategic orientation of the department in terms of content, with closer cooperation with other areas of the university (e.g., the IT department, student services), which the department tended to shut itself off from. She was constantly torn between her duties as a mother and her professional obligations, and often felt inadequate despite all efforts to do justice to both sides. Her husband was head of a large public authority and was often away on business trips and therefore could not make long-term plans for childcare. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic also changed her professional situation: due to financial restrictions, the team was informed that only seven of the 35 staff positions would be maintained in the following month. All employees had to decide whether they want to reapply and try their luck.

In Phase 1, the coach mainly worked with Clara on the actual situation. She was asked how she would describe the situation, what she experienced as stressful, what effects these burdens had, and what she wanted to change.

Clara did not know whether she should apply for one of the seven remaining positions, because the competition in the team was enormous, and she felt torn between family obligations and a longing for professional self-realisation. She was afraid of applying and being rejected. Physically, she was not well, suffering from severe headaches, cried frequently, and felt extremely tired and thin-skinned.

In Phase 2, ikigai was used to clarify whether she should or wanted to apply for one of the remaining positions at the university during this period of upheaval. The coach worked out

with Clara to identify her strengths and talents. Clara said that she is good at explaining technical matters and making them understandable to others, and that that she is helpful and supportive. When asked what inspires her, she answered that she is a passionate adult educator. When asked what the world needs, the coach and Clara worked out that in the university context there is an urgent need for someone who works at the interface between IT (learning platform) and people (professors, students, other staff) as a “cultural mediator and translator,” because she understands both sides very well. This simultaneously answered the fourth dimension of ikigai, whereby the person creates added value, for which someone is willing to pay. Her vocation and passion also included being a mother and wife, and she wanted to have more freedom for this in the future.

After an intensive 2.5-hour counselling session based on ikigai, Clara decided to apply again. She recognised her specific vocation: to be able to combine her passion for educational work with adults with her interest in digital topics. She identified this as her mission. Teachers could support her in her new position to develop new forms of teaching and counselling, and students could support her in their study programs through digital learning settings. She saw many opportunities for synergy with other departments at the university. During the coaching interview, the idea arose for Clara to suggest to her husband that he negotiate two home-office days with his employer, so that on these days he could take responsibility for their daughter, allowing her time to focus on the re-organisation of the department. She wanted to discuss this with her current and potential future boss, with whom she had a good relationship, before applying for a job.

Over the course of the consultation, we observed changes in Clara’s appearance: her voice became firmer and clearer, her eyes lit up and her body and back straightened, and her face was shining at the end of the interview when she announced her decision to apply.

In Phase 3, Clara announced that she had been offered the job and that the boss had decided to use Clara's paper as one of the bases for a strategy development process for the new department. Her husband was also negotiating with his employer about the home-office arrangement.

The work with the ikigai model was to be continued in further sessions to provide more chances for self-reflection and finding meaning.

Case 2: Ikigai used in existential executive coaching within a medical context in Gauteng province, South Africa

Philia is a 29-year-old executive leader who was working in a relatively small private hospital in Gauteng, South Africa, which is the economic hub and metropolitan area of country and southern Africa as a whole. She has worked hard all her life, focusing all her energy on her goal to become a successful medical doctor. She has also taken various courses to refine her leadership qualities and devoted extra effort to becoming a specialist in anaesthetics. She is single and does not have a family of her own, but is very close to her mother with whom she talks every day on the phone. For relaxation, she enjoys running and meditation practices.

In order to take up a new position in the hospital, she had to move cities. In her new position she acted as the executive leader of the emergency unit in the hospital. She had just begun this role in January 2020 when COVID-19 hit Africa with the first reported case in South Africa on March 5th 2020 (Mbunge, 2020). Since the end of March, Philia had developed insomnia, extreme fatigue and tiredness, demotivation, anxiety, depression, and a lack of meaningfulness in her life. At the beginning of March, she decided to consult with a coach to help her to overcome the insomnia, which had started to impact on her ability to work. She wanted the coach to help her to make the right decisions to “get back on track.”

During Phase 1, the coach listened to Philia describe her symptoms, tell her stories and life history, and express her frustrations with the global and local situation related to the pandemic. Philia talked about her anxieties in being a frontline worker in a hospital, her fear of getting COVID-19 and spreading it to her family, her frustrations at being single, and her feeling that her life has been wasted on her career and studying while missing out on building a family of her own. She also talked about her background, describing how her parents migrated to South Africa to escape a war in her country of origin shortly before she was born.

In Phase 2, after having listened to Philia’s existential tensions, suffering and frustrations, the coach uses the ikigai model to explore the worth of living and how it could contribute to helping Philia make the right decisions going forward.

First, Philia explored what she loves. She described many social activities, meeting friends, running and all kinds of sports, and talking to her mother. She used to love being in nature, enjoying life and having fun, but said that she hardly ever did this anymore since she was always focusing on her career and finishing her studies with distinction. She had planned to do more of what she loves after her studies, but then began a new job, followed by the worldwide lockdown of due to COVID-19.

Exploring what the world needs, Philia was convinced that the world needs more kindness, joy and friendliness. However, this was difficult for her to express because her mind would always take her to “what the world does *not* need”, lamenting the social ills such as crime, poverty, and disease, as well as her own problems of insomnia and anxiety.

When looking at the question of what she could be paid for, she could only think of her profession, which she has dedicated herself to for many years. She believed that she could only be paid for her medical expertise and specialisation. Since she had only just begun in her new position, she felt she would rather be paid for the profession she has worked hard to succeed in.

Finally, on the question of what she is good at, she believed that she is a good specialist, and good at studying and running. She also believed herself to be a good daughter to her mother and a faithful friend to the few friends she had not seen in quite a while.

Investigating her mission in life, Philia has always thought her mission was to “do good in the world”, “help the sick”, and “contribute to the health of people”. However, since the onset of COVID-19 shortly after beginning her job, she no longer wanted to be a frontline worker and “do good.” She just wanted to “run away,” believing that she had lost the personal mission for which she had worked for so many years.

Regarding her vocation, Philia believed she was called into the medical profession to contribute to the health of human beings. She thought she had chosen the right profession, but has felt extremely overwhelmed by the existential threat she experiences as a frontline worker during the pandemic. Her passion had always been her studies and the medical profession, but she felt that this passion had vanished.

During the third and fourth coaching sessions, the coach worked with Philia on exploring her passion and her vocation, which had “gone missing.” Besides existential coaching approaches, the coach included systemic coaching tools and active imagination developed by Carl Jung. At the end of this process, Philia had reconnected to her passion.

During Phase 3, when the coaching came to the point of taking action, Philia decided to withdraw from her leadership position at the hospital and start applying for new positions abroad. She had discovered that her passion for studying, exploring new topics and moving forward in her personal development could be served by leaving the country she was born in. She thought she could earn a higher income in another country, that COVID-19 had opened new doors for doctors and medical staff to move abroad, and that she could go on living her dream of lifelong learning by moving to a new, stimulating environment, as opposed to formal

studies as in the past. In the last session, she mentioned that she sometimes felt guilty about leaving her colleagues behind who were struggling with COVID-19 pressures and high death tolls. However, she felt that her passion could only be fully restored by starting a new life with her original mission, vocation and profession, but in a completely different environment. She could thereby continue doing what she is good at—professional medical care and leadership—while simultaneously improving her earning capacity.

Discussion

This chapter provided insight into the application of ikigai in existential executive coaching in Germany and South Africa, contributing to the growing support for applying ikigai in non-Japanese cultural contexts (Fabritius, 2017; Fido et al., 2019; Mayer, 2020). Both case studies demonstrate how ikigai can stimulate self-reflection and personal growth in a professional or individual context. Both cases further show the importance of self-reflection and finding meaning and purpose in life and work.

The clients in each case presented their relatedness to the world, their uncertainties, and their existential anxieties in the executive coaching session (Spinelli, 2007), and we argue that meaning-making is created between the coach and the client, thereby relating to concepts of existential coaching (Ishida, 2012a, 2012b). Not only was the meaning-making aspect of existentialism explored, but also the questions of what the world needs, what people can be paid for and what they are good at. The challenging psychological conditions in professional contexts were described, as well as the growth of the clients through working with the ikigai philosophy (Ishida, 2012a, 2012b). Both clients found themselves in an “existential crisis,” and through the application of ikigai in existential executive coaching, both women were led towards what they wanted to do, rather what they would have to do. This, according to García and Miralles (2017), is one aim of the approach. Consequently, they found themselves coming closer to “that which most makes one’s life seem worth living” (Tanno & Sakata, 2007, p. 114). It could even be interpreted that by working with ikigai in the coaching sessions, their worth of living increased (Sone et al., 2008). The women overcame selected life challenges (as described by Deurzen, 2019) and both felt improved well-being (as in Fido, Kotera and Asan, 2019) while examining their mission, vocation, profession, and passion in life, thereby creating meaningfulness and reduced personal stress (Krum, 2012).

This case study research supports the need for more empirical research on ikigai and its impact in cultures outside Japan, as recommended by Arauner (2018) and Mogi (2018).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The aim of this chapter was to present ikigai as a valuable approach in existential executive leadership coaching in non-Japanese contexts, using examples from German and South African leadership contexts. The cases reported can help to closing the gap between empirical and theory-based approaches to ikigai in non-Japanese settings, and expand the cross-cultural discourse on ikigai and existential coaching.

It can be concluded that phenomenologically-based existential executive coaching sessions could successfully include ikigai as a tool to explore the life worth living on a deeper level, providing guidance with the coaching session focus and with aims in the lives of executive clients. Focusing on a specific aspect of ikigai helped the coaches to make decisions and implement the decisions into actions. This was true in both the German and the South African cases.

Future research should further explore the connection of existential coaching and the implementation of culture-specific tools such as ikigai. The applicability of ikigai should not only be researched for use by coaches and clients in certain cultural contexts, but to the wide diversity of socio-cultural subgroups into consideration.

Because studies in Japan have shown that older people are at higher risk of having their ikigai diminished (Nomura, 2005; Fukuzawa et al., 2018; Kawachi, 2020), it could be fruitful to focus research on specific phases of life. It has also been shown that ikigai can help people who are caring for relatives suffering from dementia to pursue, maintain or regain their well-being, despite the hardships associated with providing this care (Yamamoto-Mitani & Wallhagen, 2002). Research on this could also be of interest, to develop and test appropriate support and therapy concepts for non-Japanese settings.

A further need for research results from the sustainable global change processes resulting from the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which will fundamentally change the way people live, work and interact with each other. As Klaus Schwab said at the World Economic Forum in Davos, In “its scale, scope and complexity, this transformation will be an unprecedented experience” (2016, p. 1). There is already some initial research in Asia that is testing ikigai for qualification contexts (Hikmawan et al., 2020; Hikmawan et al., 2019, Vanderheiden and Mayer 2021 (see chapter 3 in this book)).

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