Existential Alignment Theory: An ontological Framework Highlighting How Purpose and Authenticity Impact Organizational Life

Nwabuatu, Emmanuel Nnajiubah. Ph.D
Department of Entrepreneurship,
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education,
Rumuolumeni, Rivers State, Nigeria.
Email: nwabuatu@gmail.com
DOI: 10.56201/ijebm.vol.12.no3.2026.pg270.282

Abstract
Existential Alignment theory (EAT) is grounded in existential ontology, which examines the nature of human and organizational existence, being, purpose and authenticity and provides the philosophical foundation for understanding how individuals align their existential identity, values and purpose with organizational goals to achieve meaningful and authentic personal and organizational life. Contemporary organizations also face a growing crisis of meaning. Employees increasingly report disengagement, purposelessness, and a profound sense of alienation between their personal values and the institutional demands of organizational life. Existing organizational and management theories address performance, structure, motivation, and leadership but have largely failed to provide a philosophically grounded account of how individual purpose and organizational existence can converge to produce genuine, transformative impact. This study introduces Existential Alignment Theory (EAT), a virgin theoretical framework that draws on existentialist philosophy particularly the work of Sartre (1946), Camus (1942), and Heidegger (1927) to argue that organizations thrive when individual existential purpose aligns with collective institutional goals, enabling authentic impact rather than mere functional output. Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) proposes five core propositions: (1) individuals seek existential authenticity in their work; (2) organizations function as vessels for shared existential projects; (3) convergence of individual and organizational purpose liberates employees to create authentic impact; (4) acknowledging organizational absurdities fosters resilience and creative engagement; and (5) existential alignment defines authentic organizational success. The theory further identifies three leadership imperatives: creating intersectional spaces of purpose, adopting existentially resonant leadership styles, and measuring success through authentic impact. The article delineates the theory's philosophical underpinnings, core propositions, and practical implications while positioning Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) in dialogue with existing scholarship on meaningful work, authentic leadership, and organizational purpose.

Keywords: *Existential alignment, organizational purpose, authentic leadership, absurdity, meaningful work, existentialism, authentic impact*

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of organizations has long been preoccupied with outputs: performance metrics, productivity indicators, shareholder returns, and competitive advantage. While these concerns carry genuine practical weight, they have progressively displaced a more fundamental inquiry: what does it mean for an organization to exist in a way that is authentically valuable to the people within it and to the society it inhabits? This question, which lies at the intersection of philosophy and management science, has gained renewed urgency in the twenty-first century workplace.

Evidence of a widespread meaning deficit in organizations is compelling. Blustein et al. (2023) observe that meaningful work is aspirational and that the conditions supporting it remain unevenly distributed across occupations, sectors, and societies. Jasinenko and Steuber (2023) identify persistent definitional ambiguity in the organizational purpose literature, noting that despite growing scholarly attention, the construct of purpose remains underdeveloped in its theoretical foundations. Meanwhile, Alagaraja and Shuck (2015) find that organizational alignment and employee engagement remain loosely coupled constructs, with limited conceptual architecture explaining why individual purpose integration with organizational goals produces superior outcomes.

The dominant theoretical responses to these challenges have been primarily instrumental: self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), the job characteristics model (Hackman & Oldham, 1975), transformational leadership theory (Bass & Avolio, 1994), and strategic alignment models (Lee et al., 2020). While each contributes to understanding employee motivation and organizational performance, none engages the deeper existential dimension of organizational life, the lived experience of confronting meaninglessness, the freedom and responsibility inherent in institutional choice, and the creative possibility that emerges when individuals engage organizations as shared existential projects rather than mere employment arrangements.

This article introduces Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) to fill that conceptual gap. Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) is a virgin theoretical framework, that is, an original, previously unpublished theoretical contribution that integrates philosophical existentialism with organizational and management theory to develop a novel account of how individual and organizational purpose can converge to produce authentic impact. The theory is philosophically grounded in Sartrean existentialism, the Camusian philosophy of absurdity and revolt, and Heidegger's ontology of being-in-the-world. It is further informed by contemporary organizational scholarship on meaningful work, authentic leadership, and purpose-driven organizations.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical landscape that contextualizes Existential Alignment Theory (EAT). Section 3 presents the philosophical underpinnings of the theory. Section 4 develops the five core propositions of Existential Alignment Theory (EAT). Section 5 articulates the three leadership imperatives derived from the theory. 6 positions Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) within existing literature and identify directions for future research. Section 7 concludes.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

2.1 The Crisis of Organizational Meaning

The challenge of meaning in organizational life is not novel, but its intensity has accelerated. The contemporary workplace, characterized by rapid technological change, institutional volatility, and the erosion of traditional career narratives, has intensified individuals' experience of what

existentialists would call the absurd; the felt contradiction between the human longing for significance and the structural indifference of institutions to that longing (Blomme, 2013). Basnet et al. (2024) observe that existentialist philosophy, particularly in its Sartrean and Heideggerian forms, addresses precisely the kinds of ambiguity, moral dilemma, and meaning-making challenges that pervade organizational contexts. Yet this philosophical inheritance has been inconsistently drawn upon in management theory.

Research on organizational purpose has grown substantially. Jasinenko and Steuber (2023) define organizational purpose as a multidimensional construct reflecting the perceived overarching reason for an organization's existence and its contribution to society beyond profit generation. Their systematic review reveals that when employees perceive their organization as genuinely purposeful, outcomes including job satisfaction, commitment, and wellbeing improve measurably. Yet the mechanisms through which individual purpose integrates with organizational purpose remain under theorized. EAT addresses this gap by providing an existentially grounded account of that integration process.

2.2 Existentialism and Organizational Scholarship

The application of existentialist thought to organizational behavior has a nascent but meaningful tradition. Blomme and Bornebroek-Te Lintelo (2012) demonstrate that existentialist conditions including the awareness of death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness offer productive frameworks for understanding organizational change and sense-making processes. Blomme (2013) applies Camus's notion of absurdity specifically to organizational contexts, arguing that moral development within organizations requires the conscious engagement with, rather than denial of, the absurd conditions that characterize institutional life.

Lawler (2005) explores the essence of leadership through an existentialist lens, arguing that authentic leadership is not merely a behavioral pattern but an ontological orientation toward freedom and responsibility. Lawler and Ashman (2012) develop this further through a Sartrean perspective, positioning leadership authenticity as an ongoing existential achievement rather than a stable trait. Helmuth (2024) critically examines the authentic leadership literature, noting that the original construct drew explicitly on Sartrean and Heideggerian existential philosophy but that subsequent empirical operationalizations have severed this philosophical grounding, reducing authenticity to a cluster of behavioral indicators divorced from its existential origins.

The existential dimension of organizational behavior has also been developed through Karl Weick's sensemaking theory. Maitlis and Christianson (2014) and Brown et al. (2015) situate sense-making as an ongoing, meaning-generating process through which individuals and organizations construct intelligible realities from equivocal experience. Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005) explicitly connect sense-making to Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world, suggesting that organizational experience is fundamentally ontological; a form of situated, purposive engagement rather than merely cognitive processing. EAT builds on this tradition while extending it to foreground the alignment between individual existential purpose and organizational existential project as the generative mechanism of authentic impact.

2.3 Gaps in Existing Theory

Three theoretical gaps motivate the development of Existential Alignment Theory (EAT). First, existing accounts of organizational purpose focus primarily on cognitive and motivational mechanisms, neglecting the deeper ontological question of how individuals come to experience organizational existence as an extension of their own existential project rather than an externally

imposed set of demands. Second, while the authentic leadership literature draws implicitly on existentialist themes of freedom, responsibility, and authentic selfhood, it lacks an explicit and systematic philosophical architecture that can ground these themes in a coherent organizational theory. Third, the literature on employee engagement and strategic alignment treats purpose alignment primarily as a function of role clarity and goal congruence, failing to account for the existential dimension of that alignment—the experience of investing one's being in a shared project of collective meaning. EAT addresses all three gaps.

3. PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF EXISTENTIAL ALIGNMENT THEORY

3.1 Existence Precedes Essence: Organizations Create Essence Through Aligned Action

The foundational philosophical premise of EAT derives from Jean-Paul Sartre's (1946/2007) central claim that existence precedes essence. For Sartre, human beings are thrown into existence without predetermined nature, purpose, or identity; they constitute themselves through the choices they make and the projects they undertake. This is not merely a claim about individual psychology; it is a metaphysical position with profound organizational implications. If human existence precedes essence, then organizations which are constituted by the purposive actions of human beings also lack a fixed, predetermined essence. An organization's identity, meaning, and value are created, not given; they emerge through the aligned actions of individuals who invest their own existence in the organization's collective project.

This Sartrean premise inverts the conventional managerial logic that organizations define their purpose (essence) and then recruit individuals to fulfil it. Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) proposes instead that organizational essence is an emergent achievement, continuously constituted through the existential alignment of individual purpose with collective action. When individuals act in genuine alignment with their core values within an organizational context, they co-create organizational essence rather than merely enacting a predetermined institutional script. Pardosi (2025) confirms that Sartre's conception of freedom and responsibility remains relevant to institutional contexts, arguing that individuals and organizations are equally responsible for the meanings they bring into existence through their choices and actions.

3.2 Embracing Absurdity Enables Authentic Engagement and Purpose

The second philosophical pillar of Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) derives from Albert Camus's (1942/2018) philosophy of the absurd. Camus identifies the absurd as the confrontation between the human demand for clarity, order, and meaning and the world's irreducible silence in response to that demand. Organizational life is particularly fertile ground for the experience of absurdity: bureaucratic routines, contradictory institutional demands, the gap between stated values and actual practices, and the fundamental contingency of institutional success all generate the kind of existential dissonance that Camus diagnosed as the human condition.

However, Camus's philosophical response to absurdity is not despair or resignation but revolt the conscious refusal to allow meaninglessness to extinguish engagement. Muller (2021) develops this Camusian insight in the context of management, arguing that the recurrence of crises in organizational life mirrors the Sisyphean cycle and that existential management requires precisely the kind of revolt that Camus prescribes: a clear-eyed acknowledgment of the absurd conditions of organizational existence combined with a renewed commitment to purposive action. Blomme (2013) demonstrates that this Camusian orientation can foster moral development in organizations by cultivating what might be termed existential resilience—the capacity to engage creatively and authentically in the face of institutional contradiction.

Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) integrates this Camusian insight by arguing that organizations that create space for individuals to acknowledge and creatively engage with organizational absurdities rather than denying, concealing, or suppressing them generate greater resilience, innovation, and authentic engagement. The acknowledgment of absurdity is not a concession to nihilism but a precondition for authentic revolt, which in the organizational context takes the form of creative, purposive action that transcends the merely functional.

3.3 Organizational Existence Is Revealed Through Purpose

The third philosophical pillar of EAT draws on Martin Heidegger's (1927/1962) ontology of being-in-the-world. For Heidegger, the being of entities is not a static property but an ongoing disclosure; a revelation that occurs through engaged, purposive presence in the world. Heidegger's concept of Dasein (being-there) emphasizes that human existence is always already situated in a network of practical concerns, relationships, and projects that constitute the horizon of meaning within which individual actions become intelligible. Existence is not a backdrop to purposive action; it is constituted through such action.

Applied to organizations, this Heideggerian insight suggests that organizational existence is not simply the fact of institutional incorporation or structural presence. An organization truly exists in the full ontological sense only insofar as it is inhabited by individuals who are genuinely present to its purpose, who experience their work as a mode of being-in-the-world rather than merely as instrumental activity. Basnet et al. (2024) confirm this Heideggerian orientation in their analysis of existentialist leadership, noting that authentic leaders guide their followers through a situated awareness of both individual and organizational conditions, creating the dynamic conditions under which genuine purpose can be disclosed. The organizational sensemaking tradition, from Weick (1995) to Maitlis and Christianson (2014), similarly emphasizes that organizations come to be through ongoing processes of situated meaning-making rather than through the mere execution of predetermined plans.

Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) extends this insight by proposing that organizational existence is most fully and authentically disclosed when individuals are enabled to inhabit their organizational roles as an expression of their own existential project rather than as a constraint upon it. Alignment, in this ontological sense, is not merely strategic fit or goal congruence; it is the convergence of individual and organizational modes of being-in-the-world.

4. THE FIVE CORE PROPOSITIONS OF EXISTENTIAL ALIGNMENT THEORY

Proposition 1: Individuals Seek Existential Authenticity in Their Work

Existential Alignment Theory's first proposition holds that individuals do not merely seek compensation, advancement, or even job satisfaction in their work; they seek existential authenticity—the experience of acting in alignment with their deepest values, aspirations, and sense of personal meaning. This proposition draws on Sartre's (1946) argument that human beings are fundamentally projects of self-constitution and that bad faith being the denial of one's freedom and the adoption of identities imposed from outside represents a form of existential self-betrayal. Authenticity, in the Sartrean sense, involves the courageous acknowledgment of one's freedom and the willingness to define oneself through genuine, self-chosen action.

Empirical support for this proposition is substantial. Blustein et al. (2023) demonstrate that meaningful work distinguished from merely decent work by its aspirational, significance-generating character is a fundamental human pursuit with profound implications for individual wellbeing, organizational commitment, and social contribution. Jasinenko and Steuber (2023)

find that employees' perceived organizational purpose is strongly associated with their experience of meaningful work, particularly when that purpose resonates with individual values. Helmuth (2024) demonstrates that authentic leadership which fosters conditions for follower authenticity produces outcomes of trust, creativity, and engagement that exceed those generated by behavioral compliance alone.

Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) proposes that organizations that acknowledge and respond to individuals' quest for existential authenticity by creating roles, cultures, and leadership practices that enable genuine value expression rather than mere role performance generate deeper engagement, greater creative contribution, and more durable commitment than organizations that treat authenticity instrumentally or reduce it to an employee branding exercise.

Proposition 2: Organizations Are Vessels for Shared Existential Projects

Existential Alignment Theory's second proposition holds that organizations are not merely functional entities designed to coordinate productive activity and generate economic value. They are, at their most meaningful, vessels for shared existential projects: collective endeavors through which groups of individuals pursue purposes that transcend individual survival and cumulative self-interest. This proposition extends Sartre's (1946) concept of the existential project to the collective level, drawing on his analysis of how individual freedom and responsibility extend beyond the individual to encompass the whole of humanity.

The organizational purpose literature provides important empirical context for this proposition. Jasinenko and Steuber (2023) demonstrate that organizational purpose functions as a multidimensional construct with individual, relational, and societal dimensions; it is not reducible to mission statement rhetoric but encompasses employees' lived experience of why their organization exists and what it is ultimately for. Dalain (2023) finds that when employees experience passion for work aligned with organizational learning culture, engagement deepens in ways that go beyond instrumental motivation; suggesting that something more than goal congruence is at work in high-engagement organizations.

Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) argues that the distinction between organizations as merely functional entities and organizations as existential vessels is not merely philosophical; it has practical implications for recruitment, culture formation, leadership development, and organizational design. Organizations that succeed in constituting themselves as genuine existential vessels where individual purpose and collective project converge, unlock forms of creative energy and relational commitment that purely instrumental organizational designs cannot access.

Proposition 3: Convergence of Individual and Organizational Purpose Liberates Employees to Create Authentic Impact

The third proposition of Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) holds that when individual and organizational purposes genuinely converge, employees are existentially liberated; freed from the alienating experience of performing a role that contradicts their values and empowered to create what EAT terms authentic impact. Authentic impact is distinguished from mere functional output or metric-defined performance by its character as genuine, values-driven contribution that matters both to the individual who creates it and to the people and communities it affects.

Lee et al. (2020) provide empirical support for the performance dimensions of this proposition, demonstrating that strategic alignment between individual goal clarity and organizational objectives mediates the relationship between organizational strategy and performance outcomes,

with employee engagement as a key mechanism. Alagaraja and Shuck (2015) further establish that organizational alignment and employee engagement are mutually reinforcing, with individuals who experience strong alignment reporting greater investment in organizational success, higher levels of discretionary effort, and more creative engagement with organizational challenges.

Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) deepens this empirical picture by providing the philosophical architecture that explains why alignment has these effects. Drawing on Sartre (1946) and Heidegger (1927), EAT proposes that the liberating effect of purpose convergence derives from the ontological shift it enables: individuals move from experiencing organizational life as an external constraint on their freedom to experiencing it as an expression of their freedom—a chosen existential project rather than an imposed institutional demand. This shift from constrained to authentic existence generates the conditions for authentic impact.

Proposition 4: Acknowledging Organizational Absurdities Fosters Resilience and Creative Engagement

Existential Alignment Theory's fourth proposition holds that organizations that create space for the honest acknowledgment of organizational absurdities including structural contradictions, institutional hypocrisies, and the inherent contingency of organizational success foster greater resilience and more creative engagement among their members than organizations that suppress or deny such absurdities. This proposition draws directly on Camus's (1942) philosophy of absurdist revolt and its organizational applications developed by Blomme (2013) and Muller (2021).

The Camusian insight that the appropriate response to absurdity is not resignation but revolt—a creative, conscious refusal to be defeated by meaninglessness translates into organizational terms as the capacity to engage with institutional contradictions without being paralyzed by them. Šimůnek (2021) argues that Camus's conception of cyclical crisis and renewal provides an important framework for existential management, particularly in contexts of recurrent organizational crisis and volatility. The COVID-19 pandemic, as several scholars note, provided an acute demonstration of how organizational survival depends not merely on technical adaptation but on existential resilience; the capacity to maintain purposive engagement in conditions of radical uncertainty.

Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) proposes that leaders play a critical role in mediating the organizational encounter with absurdity. Leaders who acknowledge contradictions with honesty and meet them with creative purposiveness rather than projecting false certainty or retreating into bureaucratic defensiveness, a model the existentialist orientation that Camus identifies as the only dignified response to an inherently uncertain world. This proposition has important implications for organizational culture: cultures that create psychological safety for the acknowledgment of institutional tensions, contradictions, and uncertainties are better positioned to cultivate the creative resilience that authentic impact requires.

Proposition 5: Existential Alignment Generates Authentic Impact, Defining Organizational Success

Existential Alignment Theorys fifth and culminating proposition holds that authentic impact the values-driven, transformative contribution to individuals, communities, and society that results from existential alignment is the most meaningful definition of organizational success. This proposition challenges the dominant metric-centric conception of organizational performance,

arguing not that metrics are irrelevant but that they are derivative rather than constitutive of genuine organizational success. Organizations that achieve authentic impact will, over time, generate sustainable performance; but organizations that pursue metric optimization as an end in itself at the expense of authentic purpose risk hollowing out the existential foundation upon which genuine organizational vitality depends.

Empirical support for this proposition emerges from multiple directions. Jasinenko and Steuber (2023) demonstrate that perceived organizational purpose is associated with employee wellbeing outcomes that go beyond standard performance indicators, including reduced emotional exhaustion and enhanced psychological flourishing. Aguinis and Glavas's (2019) framework for corporate social responsibility (CSR) through a sensemaking lens shows that the most meaningful organizational commitments to societal impact are those experienced by employees as authentic expressions of organizational values rather than strategic communications exercises. Vu and Shin's (2025) analysis of meaning-making in CSR work reveals that authentic impact in organizational life requires sustained engagement with the tensions between commercial imperatives and genuinely social purposes—an engagement that can only occur when individuals experience their organizational role as existentially meaningful.

Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) proposes that authentic impact be understood as encompassing three concentric circles: impact on the individual employee (through the enablement of existential authenticity and the satisfaction of the human need for meaning); impact on the organizational collective (through the generation of genuine alignment, creative collaboration, and resilient purpose); and impact on society (through the organization's contribution to human flourishing beyond its immediate commercial constituency). This tripartite conception of authentic impact redefines organizational success in a way that is both philosophically grounded and practically actionable.

5. LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVES OF EXISTENTIAL ALIGNMENT THEORY

The five core propositions of EAT generate three interrelated leadership imperatives. These imperatives are not prescriptive formulas but existentially informed orientations that leaders can adopt to create the conditions under which individual and organizational purpose can genuinely converge.

5.1 Create Intersectional Spaces of Purpose

The first leadership imperative holds that leaders bear a fundamental responsibility to create what Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) terms intersectional spaces of purpose—organizational environments where individual values and organizational mission can genuinely meet, interact, and co-constitute one another. This imperative extends the insight of Algera and Lips-Wiersma (2012), who argue for radical authentic leadership as the co-creation of conditions under which all organizational members can inhabit authentic modes of being, and of Basnet et al. (2024), who demonstrate that existentialist leadership requires the integration of self-awareness, situational responsiveness, and ethical responsibility.

In practical terms, this imperative requires leaders to invest significant attention in understanding the existential projects that their team members bring to organizational life—the values, aspirations, and sense of purpose that individuals carry into the workplace. It requires the creation of organizational practices—through storytelling, reflective dialogue, participatory strategy-making, and purpose-integrated performance conversations—that enable individuals to see their own existential project as genuinely reflected in the organization's collective purpose.

Jasinenko and Steuber (2023) emphasize that organizational purpose must be cascaded, enacted, and absorbed rather than merely declared; EAT extends this insight by insisting that such cascading must engage the existential level of individual experience rather than merely the cognitive or motivational level.

5.2 Adopt Existentially Resonant Leadership Styles

The second leadership imperative holds that the leadership styles organizations adopt whether formally or informally either encourage or discourage employees' investment in shared existential projects. Transactional leadership, which operates through reward-contingent exchange, is existentially neutral at best and existentially corrosive at worst: it trains individuals to relate to their organizational role as an instrumental exchange rather than as an expression of purpose. Transformational leadership is closer to the EAT ideal but remains insufficiently attentive to the existential dimension of follower engagement.

Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) proposes that existentially resonant leadership is characterized by four qualities. First, existential honesty: the willingness to acknowledge uncertainty, contradiction, and organizational absurdity rather than projecting false confidence or institutional infallibility. Second, purposive vision: the capacity to articulate a compelling organizational narrative that connects individual existential projects to collective goals in a way that feels genuinely true rather than rhetorically constructed. Third, relational authenticity: the cultivation of leadership relationships founded on genuine reciprocity, vulnerability, and mutual recognition rather than hierarchical performance. Fourth, existential hospitality: the creation of organizational cultures where individuals feel genuinely welcomed to bring their whole selves including their values, existential anxieties, and deepest aspirations into their professional lives. Basnet et al. (2024) and Lawler (2005) both identify similar qualities in their analyses of existentialist leadership, though EAT systematizes and extends these observations into a coherent imperative.

5.3 Measure Success Through Authentic Impact

The third leadership imperative holds that organizational success should be measured not exclusively through conventional performance metrics: revenue growth, market share, efficiency ratios, or even employee satisfaction scores but through authentic impact: the genuine, transformative contribution the organization makes to the flourishing of its members and the wellbeing of the broader society it inhabits. This imperative is perhaps the most challenging of the three, as it requires leaders to resist the institutional pressures that consistently privilege short-term, quantifiable indicators over longer-term, qualitative assessments of organizational value.

Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) does not propose the abandonment of measurement but its enrichment. Blustein et al. (2023) call for approaches to work quality that integrate both structural and psychological dimensions; EAT extends this call by insisting that authentic impact the existential contribution an organization makes to human flourishing, be treated as a primary rather than derivative indicator of organizational success. This reorientation has practical implications for organizational reporting, stakeholder communication, leadership development, and strategy formation. It requires leaders to develop the capacity for what might be called existential accounting the ability to assess and communicate the value created by their organizations in terms that honor the full dimensionality of human existence rather than reducing organizational contribution to its financial and operational components.

6. DISCUSSION: EXISTENTIAL ALIGNMENT THEORY (EAT) IN DIALOGUE WITH EXISTING THEORY

6.1 Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) and Meaningful Work

Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) enters into productive dialogue with the growing literature on meaningful work. Blustein et al. (2023) distinguish between decent work—the baseline of workplace dignity and basic need satisfaction and meaningful work, which is aspirational and significance-generating. Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) situates meaningful work within a broader existential architecture: it is not merely that individuals desire significance in their work but that the human condition, as Sartre (1946) and Heidegger (1927) analyze it, constitutes individuals as fundamentally meaning-seeking beings whose mode of engagement with the world is inseparable from their pursuit of authentic purpose. EAT thus provides the philosophical infrastructure that the meaningful work literature has largely presupposed but not explicitly articulated.

6.2 Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) and Authentic Leadership

The authentic leadership literature represents the closest existing theoretical neighbor to EAT. Helmuth (2024) identifies the severing of authentic leadership theory from its existential philosophical roots as a significant theoretical limitation; EAT can be understood in part as a response to this limitation—a reaffirmation and systematic development of the existential philosophical foundations that undergird authentic leadership but have been progressively displaced in the construct's empirical elaboration. EAT extends authentic leadership theory by shifting the unit of analysis from the individual leader to the dyadic and systemic relationship between individual purpose and organizational project, arguing that authentic leadership is a necessary but insufficient condition for existential alignment.

6.3 Existential Alignment Theory (Eat) and Organizational Purpose

Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) engages with the organizational purpose literature through the concept of the existential vessel. While Jasinenko and Steuber (2023) provide a systematic empirical account of perceived organizational purpose and its employee outcomes, their framework remains primarily cognitive and motivational. Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) enriches this account by proposing that organizational purpose, at its most potent, functions as an existential invitation; it calls individuals not merely to align their goals with institutional objectives but to find in the organizational project a genuine extension and expression of their own existential project. This ontological dimension of purpose alignment, which EAT foregrounds, goes beyond the cognitive and motivational mechanisms currently emphasized in the organizational purpose literature.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

As a virgin theoretical framework, EAT necessarily carries limitations. First, the theory draws principally on a Western European philosophical tradition; future development of EAT should engage with non-Western philosophical traditions including African, Asian, and Indigenous philosophical frameworks—that offer alternative accounts of purpose, community, and the relationship between individual and collective existence. Second, the empirical implications of EAT require systematic testing. Future research should develop operationalizations of key EAT constructs—including existential alignment, authentic impact, and intersectional spaces of purpose—and test the theory's propositions in diverse organizational contexts. Third, EAT's

relationship to theories of power, inequality, and structural constraint in organizations requires further elaboration; the theory's emphasis on authentic purpose should not obscure the ways in which structural and material conditions shape the availability of existential alignment for different organizational members.

7. CONCLUSION

This article has introduced Existential Alignment Theory (EAT), a virgin theoretical framework that draws on the philosophical resources of existentialism particularly Sartre's (1946) doctrine that existence precedes essence, Camus's (1942) philosophy of absurd revolt, and Heidegger's (1927) ontology of being-in-the-world—to develop a novel account of organizational thriving. Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) proposes that organizations create their most authentic and valuable existence when individual existential purpose converges with collective institutional goals, enabling authentic impact rather than merely functional output.

The theory's five core propositions—that individuals seek existential authenticity in their work; that organizations are vessels for shared existential projects; that purpose convergence liberates employees to create authentic impact; that acknowledging organizational absurdities fosters resilience; and that existential alignment defines authentic organizational success together constitute a coherent philosophical and organizational theory with specific implications for leadership practice.

The three leadership imperatives that Existential Alignment Theory (EAT) generates: creating intersectional spaces of purpose, adopting existentially resonant leadership styles, and measuring success through authentic impact, offer leaders a philosophically grounded orientation toward organizational life that transcends both the purely instrumental logic of performance management and the superficial rhetoric of corporate purpose that frequently substitutes for genuine organizational meaning.

Existential Alignment Theory (EAT's) contribution to organizational and management theory lies in its insistence that the most important questions facing contemporary organizations are not ultimately technical but existential: not merely how to optimize performance but how to create organizational conditions within which human beings can engage their deepest capacities for purposive, authentic, and transformative action. The theory invites future scholarship to take this existential dimension seriously not as a supplementary concern for organizational philosophy but as a central preoccupation of organizational science.

REFERENCES

Aguinis, H., & Glavas, A. (2019). On corporate social responsibility, sensemaking, and the search for meaningfulness through work. *Journal of Management, 45*(3), 1057–1086. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206317691575

Alagaraja, M., & Shuck, B. (2015). Exploring organizational alignment-employee engagement linkages and impact on individual performance. *Human Resource Development Review, 14*(1), 17–37. https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484314549455

Algera, P. M., & Lips-Wiersma, M. (2012). Radical authentic leadership: Co-creating the conditions under which all members of the organization can be authentic. *The Leadership Quarterly, 23*(1), 118–131. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2011.11.010

Basnet, N., Luitel, S., & Tamang, S. (2024). Existentialism and its implications for leadership: Examining the existential philosophical perspective in leadership practices. *Journal of Business and Management Research, 6*(1–2), 44–59. https://doi.org/10.3126/jbmr.v6i1-2.76521

Blomme, R. J. (2013). Absurdism as a fundamental value: Camusian thoughts on moral development in organisations. *International Journal of Management Concepts and Philosophy, 7*(2), 116–127. https://doi.org/10.1504/IJMCP.2013.055720

Blomme, R. J., & Bornebroek-Te Lintelo, K. (2012). Existentialism and organizational behaviour: How existentialism can contribute to complexity theory and sense-making. *Journal of Organizational Change Management, 25*(3), 405–421. https://doi.org/10.1108/09534811211228120

Blustein, D. L., Duffy, R. D., & Allan, B. A. (2023). Understanding decent work and meaningful work. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, 10*, 289–314. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031921-024847

Brown, A. D., Colville, I., & Pye, A. (2015). Making sense of sensemaking in organization studies. *Organization Studies, 36*(2), 265–277. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840614559259

Camus, A. (2018). *The myth of Sisyphus* (J. O'Brien, Trans.). Penguin Modern Classics. (Original work published 1942)

Dalain, A. F. (2023). Nurturing employee engagement at workplace and organizational innovation in time of crisis with moderating effect of servant leadership. *Sage Open, 13*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231175150

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The 'what' and 'why' of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry, 11*(4), 227–268. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Harper & Row. (Original work published 1927)

Helmuth, A. (2024). Actions are authentic, but are leaders? A reconceptualization of authenticity and leadership practice. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 45*(4), 521–537. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2723

Jasinenko, A., & Steuber, J. (2023). Perceived organizational purpose: Systematic literature review, construct definition, measurement and potential employee outcomes. *Journal of Management Studies, 60*(6), 1415–1447. https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12852

Lawler, J. (2005). The essence of leadership? Existentialism and leadership. *Leadership, 1*(2), 215–231. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715005051860

Lawler, J., & Ashman, I. (2012). Theorizing leadership authenticity: A Sartrean perspective. *Leadership, 8*(4), 327–344. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715012444685

Lee, S., Lee, D., & Kang, C. Y. (2020). The impact of employees' perceptions of strategic alignment on sustainability: An empirical investigation of Korean firms. *Sustainability, 12*(10), 4180. https://doi.org/10.3390/su12104180

Maitlis, S., & Christianson, M. (2014). Sensemaking in organizations: Taking stock and moving forward. *The Academy of Management Annals, 8*(1), 57–125. https://doi.org/10.1080/19416520.2014.873177

Muller , M. (2021). Albert Camus and management: Opening the discussion on the contributions of his work. *Philosophy of Management, 20*(4), 441-456. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40926-021-00166-0

Pardosi, M. T. (2025). Freedom and responsibility in Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism. *Jurnal Satwika: Kajian Ilmu Budaya dan Perubahan Sosial, 9*(1), 316–324. https://doi.org/10.22219/satwika.v9i1.40466

Sartre, J.-P. (2007). *Existentialism is a humanism* (C. Macomber, Trans.). Yale University Press. (Original work published 1946)

Vu, M. C., & Shin, H. (2025). Securing meaningfulness in corporate social responsibility: Exploring meaning-making mechanisms via economies of worth. *Organization Studies, 46*(2), 201–228. https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406241300251

Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science, 16*(4), 409–421. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1050.0133