

MANAGEMENT AS A CALLING

Overview of MO635: Management as a Calling, 2024
Stephen M. Ross School of Business, University of Michigan
Andrew Hoffman, Holcim (US) Professor of Sustainable Enterprise
<http://www.andrewhoffman.net/>
For more information, contact: ajhoff@umich.edu

Thanks to a grant from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, we have developed a program at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business to help students discern their calling in management.¹ This model is just one way of approaching the task of instilling a sense of calling. There is plenty of room for innovation and creativity to find more. To build the program, I consulted academic experts, coaches and organizations that have decades of experience in taking people on retreats and assisting in their personal growth.

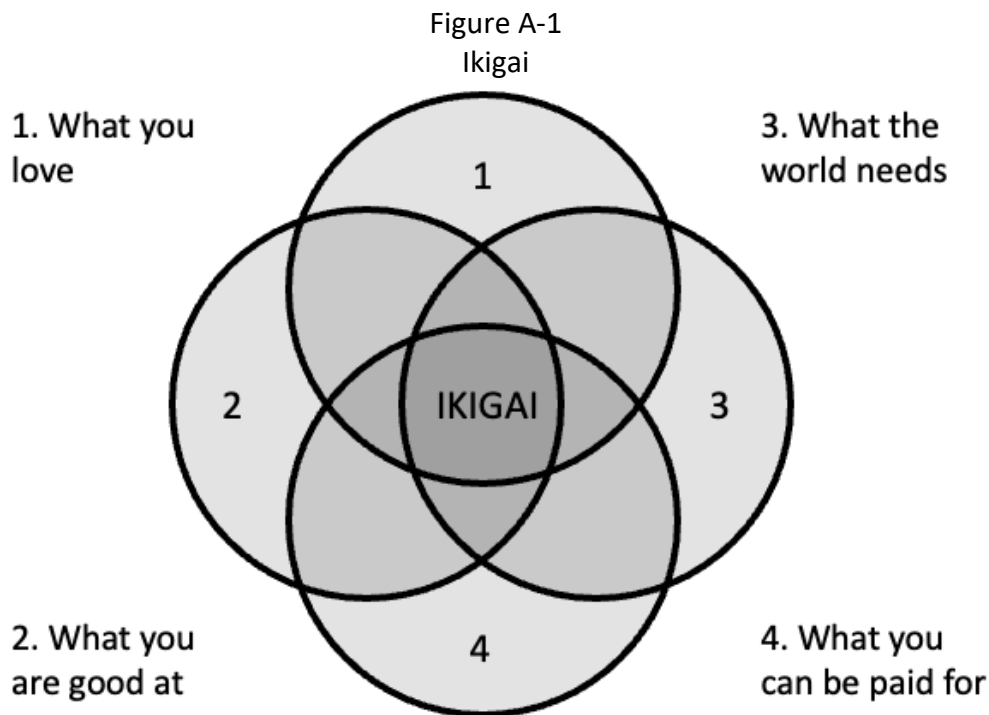
The program at Ross is available to business students in their final year of study, and takes them on two offsite, weekend-long retreats.² The first is at the beginning of their final year and the second at the end, just before they graduate and enter the workforce. The first helps them to begin to discern their calling. The second continues that quest and offers skills and tactics for staying true to that calling when it inevitably faces resistance at work and in their personal lives. As General Dwight D. Eisenhower once said, "every battle plan is perfect until you meet the enemy," or boxer Mike Tyson said more colorfully, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face." Students will get "punched in the face" when they leave the safe confines of the academy and enter the world of business practice – we want to make sure they are braced and ready.

Each retreat takes place at a site in nature because research shows that stress hormones go down when we are in the natural environment,³ and we become more pro-social and "other focused" when we experience awe in the face of natural beauty.⁴ And in each retreat, cell phones, computers and social media are prohibited because research shows that these distractions limit creativity⁵ and a capacity for being fully present.⁶ Within this environment, we employ four central elements: (1) inspiration reading, (2) guided exercises, (3) community and peer engagement, and (4) private reflection. Students are given a blank journal that is intended to be a place for their private thoughts – not just noting their experiences but examining what those experiences mean for them personally. The community is warned never to open another's journal and to never repeat publicly what people say during the retreats. This is critical for establishing a level of trust, safety and vulnerability that is central to the retreat experience.⁷ Another element for establishing trust is what is called the "Quaker Clearness Committee," where students are encouraged not to try to fix other people's problems, but instead to ask honest and open questions to help them work on their path themselves.

The First Retreat.

In advance of the first retreat, students are assigned a series of articles and the book *Man's Search for Meaning*.⁸ First published in 1946 by psychologist Viktor Frankl, it chronicles his experiences as a prisoner in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. Listed by the Library of Congress as one of the "ten most influential books in the United States," it answers the question "How was everyday life in a concentration camp reflected in the mind of the average prisoner?" and answers it with Frankel's ideas of meaning and his theory called logotherapy.

Once onsite, we draw upon a selection of exercises for exploring purpose. One is Ikigai, which in Japanese has several meanings including your "reason for being," "the process of allowing the self's possibilities to blossom," and "the reason for which you wake up in the morning."⁹ Ikigai encompasses a balanced view of what it takes to achieve a fulfilling life and is based on four components: (1) Your interests or what you love, (2) Your strengths or what you're good at, (3) Your contribution or what the world needs, and (4) What you can be paid to do (see Figure A-1).



For some, these four categories do not carry equal weight or matter at all. For example, some people do not consider making money as part of their Ikigai. For others, it doesn't have to be something that the world needs, or something that they have to be highly skilled or proficient at, or even something they necessarily love. Nevertheless, these four conditions form a foundation for considering one's calling or vocation in life. I have found that students are drawn to this model as a way of beginning the examination of the path of their life in its totality.

While the Ikigai exercise is certainly illuminating, more important is how other exercises help students see their life as an arc, with their present position being at the relative beginning of that arc. To achieve this perspective, we walk students through a process of examining their past, present and future. In examining one's past, students think about questions like: *When was I most alive? When did I most thrive? What are common features of those moments and what do they say about who I am as a person?* Then they draw a graphical representation of their life-thriving history, with their age along the Y axis and their level of thriving on the X axis. The curve is inevitably sinusoidal, identifying peaks and troughs of high and low points through time, and helping students uncover patterns in their life that determine their level of flourishing.

To help understand students their present perspective, we then administer a personal value's inventory, which is a short a short survey that helps people identify their core values and beliefs (many versions of which are available online). And in examining one's future, we encourage students to envision how finite and fleeting life can be, reviving a practice called *memento mori*, a Latin phrase meaning "Remember your death." The concept is to intentionally think about your own death as a means of appreciating the present and focusing on the future.¹⁰ One way we do this is have students mark the year of their death based on average life expectancy (73 years for men and 79 years for women in the United States) and then to write their obituary. Our post-retreat surveys show this to be the most powerful experience for the students.¹¹

With these three components complete, we charge students to look at the life that this past, present and future describes. They are in the midst of this life, we remind them, and while their life will have an arc, the shape of which is not entirely within their control, they certainly have some influence in guiding it. Borrowing from Socrates that "The unexamined life is not worth living," we compel them to examine that arc – what it is, what it could be, what they want it to be. We tell them that what they have done is written their, as yet unfinished, life story. We then ask them to connect the three exercises (the life-thriving history, the personal value's inventory and the *momento mori*) into a coherent and interconnected whole in the form of a narrative or story, and then share it with peers for another perspective and reflection on what their story means, and what it is trying to tell them about their future. Marshall Ganz at Harvard University has developed a framework known as the "story of self,"¹² which we utilize to facilitate our students in mapping out their personal narratives and uncovering the origins of their unique callings. This framework further includes the "story of us," where individuals invite others to connect over shared purposes, and the "story of now," which encourages joint action towards these common goals.

Deliverables. With these as a foundation, the outputs of the weekend are three-fold. The first is to establish a community of people who are embarking on similar quests. We create exercises where students can find others who are focused on the same issues (such as climate change, inequality, or poverty) and sectors (such as finance, consulting, automotive, or health care).

Second, students will write a Personal Mission and Purpose Statement. This statement should define who they are as a person and identifies their purpose and passion. It explains how they aims to pursue that purpose, and why it matters. *Why did you set these goals? How do your goals make you a better person?* The statement should answer these questions in as

much brevity as possible, getting to the heart of who they are and exclude unnecessary details. Every statement is different because no two people are the same. The statement has two parts. The first is a few paragraphs that describe a calling or vocation. The second is one sentence that summarizes it.

The third output is asking students to write a letter to their future self, the person they will be a year, or even 5 or 10 years from now. *What kind of person would you hope to be? What goals would you want to have achieved? What will be some of the challenges in living out this Personal Mission and Purpose Statement in business school and business and did you overcome them?* There is a body of research to show that people who connect with their future self tend to be more mindful, humble, ethical, and able to achieve long terms goals.¹³ So in their letter, they will think about the actions they would like themselves to take to realize their goals in the expected time frame. They then re-read the letter before the second retreat, providing the opportunity to assess the things that match (or don't match) up with their expectations and reflect why they may have veered from the path they intended when they wrote the letter. Reading the letter lets them see how their life trajectory has changed since writing it. It also makes them pause and think about what they are doing, and whether they are on the track or trajectory that they want to be in life. In addition, when they write such a letter, their consciousness and thoughts are stored in their words. When they read it, it's like they are being contacted by the person they once were. It provides them with a different perspective and lets them see how much they have changed since they wrote it.

Students submit their personal mission and purpose statement but are also encouraged to put it someplace conspicuous in their apartment, reading it every day and continuing their discernment process of refining it. In between the first and second retreat, we have monthly lectures on the pursuit of a calling to help students keep the topic front of mind through the year.

The Second Retreat.

For the second retreat, students are assigned another series of advance articles and the book, *Life on Purpose: How Living for What Matters Most Changes Everything*, by Vic Strecher, a professor at the University of Michigan's School of Public Health and its Director for Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship. It a very comprehensive text, linking the idea of purpose to living a more fulfilling life and offering tips and skills for finding and keeping aligned with your calling.¹⁴

This retreat retraces the exercises of the first retreat, instilling in students the ideas that (1) the pursuit of a calling is lifelong pursuit, and (2) as they advance in life, their sense of a calling may change or become clearer. There may have been changes in their life that caused a shift in priorities, like getting married or having a baby. They may also have an experience that was so profound as to get them to reassess their life priorities, such as losing a loved one or trying a new career. We find that the eight months between this first and second retreat, and an opportunity to stop and reflect on all that has changed in that time, both in their private journals and in conversation with their peers, helps them to dive deeper into their idea of a calling.

We revisit their assessment of their past, present and future, updating and amending it in light of the prior eight months. This help reinforce the idea that the pursuit of a calling in an ongoing, life-long quest and help them to continually strive towards a deeper understanding of

the kind of person they aspire to be, the kind of world they aspire to live in and the structures they will create to build both. We task students with constructing another narrative of the arc of their life using the “story of self.” But we add one more twist, challenging them to refocus their retelling of that arc with the model of the “Hero’s Journey” by Joseph Campbell.

The Hero’s Journey. While the idea of a hero’s journey can be traced back to 1871 with anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor’s observations of common patterns in the plots of great heroes, Joseph Campbell fully developed the idea in his book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*.¹⁵ Picked by *TIME* Magazine as one of the 100 best and most influential nonfiction books written in English since 1923,¹⁶ Campbell’s book studied religious, spiritual, mythological and literary classics to describe the common structure of “the hero’s journey,” or the “monomyth”¹⁷, as emblematic of one universal mythology that spans the world’s religions. The common template is that of a hero who goes on an adventure, is victorious in a decisive crisis, and comes home changed or transformed. Campbell found this monomyth in the stories of religious figures (i.e. Osiris, Prometheus, Jesus, Moses, Muhammed, the Buddha) as well as timeless literature (i.e. King Arthur in *Knights of the Round Table*, Odysseus in *Homer’s Odyssey*, Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick*). His book also incorporates a mixture of Freudian concepts, Jungian archetypes, unconscious forces, and studies of the rites of passage rituals to support his theory.

"The hero's journey" has been a strong influence on artists and intellectuals in contemporary arts and culture. Its structure can be seen in movies like *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), and *The Lion King* (1994) and is believed to have been used in the development of the *Matrix* series. Many scholars and reviewers have noted how closely the *Harry Potter* books followed the monomyth pattern and the pattern was used explicitly by George Lucas in creating the script for the film *Star Wars* (1977).

Campbell’s pattern is broken down into 3 sections which are then broken down into 17 stages. The first section is called Departure, where the hero or protagonist lives in the ordinary world and receives a call to depart that world and go on an adventure. The hero is reluctant to follow the call but is helped by a mentor figure. From there the hero “crosses the threshold” to begin the quest, leading them to a supernatural world and entering “the belly of the whale” (reference to Jonah) where familiar laws and order do not apply. The second section is called Initiation, which comes after the hero traverses the threshold to an unknown or “special world,” facing tasks or trials, either alone or with the assistance of helpers. The hero eventually reaches “the innermost cave” (that is, the central crisis of the adventure) where they must undergo “the ordeal” (that is, overcome the greatest challenge of the journey) undergo “apotheosis” (that is, the culmination or climax) and gain the reward (that is, a treasure of wisdom, skill or power). The third section is called Return, where the hero must then decide to return to the ordinary world with this reward but face more trials on the road back. They may be pursued by the guardians of the special world, or they may be reluctant to return and may be rescued or forced to return by intervention from the outside. The hero again traverses the threshold between the worlds, returning to the ordinary world with the treasure that has been gained, which may now be used to improve the lives of others in the hero’s ordinary world. The hero is transformed by the adventure and gains wisdom or spiritual power over both worlds.

Not all monomyths contain all 17 stages, nor are they always in the same order. But the key insight is that the repeated pattern of this motif is a model for how students may choose to live a life of meaning and purpose. In fact, many have used the monomyth as a metaphor for

personal spiritual and psychological growth. With this as a framing, students are encouraged to return to their story of self, blending their past, present and future into their, as-yet-unfinished, life story, but with a shift in focus by retelling the story as a “hero’s journey” in which they are the central hero on a quest, or about to embark on one. This can help them treat their dark times as necessary periods of discernment to be prepared for their quest and gain their reward, such as wisdom, skill or power. Some students are hesitant to think of their life on these heroic terms, but the task is not to elevate themselves as much as it is to see their life as having sacred meaning.

Exercises for staying true. The second retreat is also augmented with a reading of their letter to their future self, examining what they learned about themselves in the intervening eight months. We also use new exercises to help students develop skills and tactics for staying true to their calling. One is a panel with alumni who have been in the world of work for a while and can talk of their pursuit of a calling and ways that they have stayed true to their purpose in the face of adversity. We also include exercises on peer coaching, communication skills and visioning. These exercises are intended to help students coach others in finding their calling. Lastly, we also use this time to reflect on all we have done in these retreats and all they are about to do in your life.

Deliverables. Students again submit their Personal Mission and Purpose Statement and are again encouraged to put it someplace conspicuous in their home, reading it every day and continuing their discernment process of refining it. Then they are encouraged to implement tasks or activities in their life to keep the statement top-of-mind: go on retreats, keep a journal, join a group that discusses these issues, form a group that discusses these issues, attend lectures, read inspiring readings, form a mentoring relationship or any number of other ways of keeping a calling in their life.

The end goal is to create a space for students to stop, breath and reflect, leading to a more well-rounded individual with the skills to run effective businesses, an awareness of the challenges facing society and the role of the market in both causing and solving them. More importantly, it is designed to help students find a sense of purpose in which they will thrive in life. At the end of the day, someone who is not fully thriving cannot offer his or her gifts to society.

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