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The Secret Sauce

Integrating Use of Self in Organizations

By Carla L. McKnight

Abstract

The concept of Use of Self is one of the foundational building blocks of the field of Organization Development (OD). It is the “conscious use of one’s whole being in the intentional execution of one’s role.” Though Use of Self is becoming increasingly well-known as a competency of organization development practitioners, it is less understood as an application for leaders who are primarily responsible for the organization’s health. This article provides insights on how OD practitioners can partner with leaders to integrate the concepts of Use of Self into an organization’s culture.

Keywords: Use of Self, organization development, organization development practitioner, leadership development, middle-level leadership, talent management, talent acquisition, talent activation, talent retention

Tales of an Unconventional Journey

Six years ago, I was naive about organizational structure. I did not even know the difference between the roles of payroll and compensation. But now I serve as chief human resources officer (CHRO) in one of the largest community colleges in America. Some may attribute my rapid rise to luck; others may call it fate. I thought my unconventional journey into executive leadership was pure happenstance until I understood a crucial fundamental skill of an organization development (OD) practitioner.

While still a college student, I began a career in higher education. For ten years, in both the university and community college setting, I worked in departments like housing and residential life, student conduct, and advising. Eventually I joined the full-time faculty ranks teaching a first-year seminar course at a community college.

In that role, I experienced the value of teaching. Over sixteen short weeks, I watched hundreds of students transform

from having no idea what they wanted out of life to identifying potential careers in alignment with their purpose. I found the opportunity to improve their lives to be intoxicating, and I expected to be settled in that role. Then I was offered an opportunity that completely changed my career: to become a regional Director of Organization Development and Human Resources. When I pointed out my lack of experience in HR, the offering CHRO affirmed my qualifications, saying, “Everything you need to excel in this role is already inside you. I can teach you everything else.” Her words were comforting, but as I considered her offer, I was plagued with questions:

What is inside of me?

How did it get there?

How does she see it?

Why is it more critical than knowing HR stuff?

Saying yes to the role did not answer those questions for me. I worked tirelessly to learn more about human resources, but I felt like an imposter. Nevertheless, after

serving as the director for nearly three years, the CHRO (now my supervisor), asked me to join the leadership team as the Assistant Vice President. I was confident in my work as a director but had doubts about leading at the next level.

When I expressed my fears to my leader, she said again, “Everything you need to excel in this role is already inside you. I can teach you everything else.” We both smiled at the irony of being back in this moment. But this time, I committed to understand what was inside me. I did this for two reasons: first, so I could walk into my next chapter knowing the value I bring based on my knowledge, skills, and abilities; second, to figure out how to identify similar untapped potential in my new team and, if possible, create an infrastructure where other leaders in my organization could do the same.

As an OD practitioner, I turned to the resources most readily available: leadership and talent development books and sites, and LinkedIn Learning courses. I sought to find language to describe my unidentified skill. The resources helped me think about leadership development competencies but got me no closer to a concept, theory, or framework I could understand or use.

Discovering The Secret Sauce

Having no label for what I sought, I affectionately began referring to my mysterious qualification as “the sauce.” The sauce represented a combination of knowledge, skills, and abilities that makes people effective regardless of task, industry, field, or environment. The sauce, much like the special blend of ingredients that turn an ordinary dish into a culinary masterpiece, is distinct, delightful, and difficult to replicate.

Perhaps the sauce made the CHRO pluck me out of the classroom to lead the largest region in our service district even though I had no direct experience. Perhaps the sauce is what helped me excel despite the steep learning curve. When the organization’s president appointed me to serve as CHRO, I realized that the sauce is the key to transferability.

But what is the sauce? I got my answer during my first semester in the Doctorate of Organization Development and Change program at Bowling Green State University. The program welcomes learners from diverse professional and academic backgrounds, so the first course was an introduction to the OD field and profession. In that class, I was exposed for the first time to the concept of *Use of Self*, which was introduced in the 1890s by Frederick Alexander (Jamieson & Davidson, 2019). It is well-known and considered a building block of the field of OD (Cheung-Judge & Holbeche, 2021).

I was excited to find language that revealed components of the secret sauce. In many respects, the very definition of Use of Self made sense of my career progression. According to Jamieson et al., it is the “conscious use of one’s whole being in the intentional execution of one’s role for effectiveness in whatever the current situation is presenting” (Jamieson et al., 2010, p. 5).

Now I felt legitimized. No longer did I feel like an impostor. I stopped thinking of myself as effective despite a lack of subject matter expertise. Instead, my lack of experience had forced me to approach every situation as a learning opportunity. This was consistent with Jamieson and Davidson’s description of the Situational Action Learning Cycle (2019).

Most of all, I was perplexed. I wondered why leaders and managers in organizations are not exposed to this valuable concept that is a trademark of OD practitioners (Cheung-Judge & Holbeche, 2021). I wondered why this powerful concept is absent from leadership development programming (Jamieson et al., 2022). I wondered what it would take for OD practitioners to engage with leaders and show them that everything they need to excel is already inside them.

A Cause for Concern

As I thought more about the current state of business in the U.S., I grew concerned. The entire world has experienced widescale change over the past two years. The global pandemic forced many organizations to

quickly change products and service models to meet changing behaviors and needs. In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, many organizations expanded their internal and external focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion. And increased disengagement and turnover in the workforce increased the workload and burnout of remaining employees (Lam et al., 2022).

Labor trends in the last two years suggest that focusing on employee engagement is a strategic imperative. According to a recent report, the percentage of job quits during an entire month was higher in November 2021 than in the past 21 years (Gittleman, 2022). The quit rate more than doubled between June 2009 (1.3%), which was the end of the great recession, and November 2021 (3.0%) (Gittleman, 2022).

The vast number of resignations has significantly affected organizations throughout the country. In addition to adapting to the ever-changing external landscape, organizations have amended their normal operations due to widespread vacancies. Delayed service and production times, modified hours of operation, and reduced service quality have degraded the customer experience and reduced profits.

Organizations now compete to attract and retain talent in response to the workforce trend dubbed “the great resignation.” Aggressive recruitment, paired with an increased focus on financial incentives are common tactics used. Organizations have also monetized their retention efforts by offering bonuses for hard-to-fill positions, increasing wages, and providing lump-sum payments to current employees.

However, a recent study indicates that compensation is less critical for employee retention than employers think. Smet et al. found that while employers thought work-life balance, compensation, and health were the primary reasons for wide-scale resignations, employees cite their top three reasons for resigning as not feeling valued by their organization or their manager, and not feeling a sense of belonging (2021). Furthermore, employees are now more willing to resign without another job offer, likely due to reassessment and reprioritization of life goals during the pandemic.

Cultivating a Culture of Use of Self in Today's Organizations

Organizations seeking to retain employees must develop and deploy a holistic engagement strategy. Traditional schools of thought place human resources at the center of employee engagement, but leaders at all levels of the organization are essential for this (Crocitto & Youssef, 2003; Holbeche, 2018).

Jamieson et al. suggest that Use of Self can help leaders “create and maintain an atmosphere where employees can learn, innovate, and flourish in psychological safety” (2022, pp. 6, 38). To that end, they call for integrating Use of Self into leadership development programming.

My experience suggests that to effectively teach leaders how to use themselves in their roles, we must first integrate the concepts of Use of Self into the organization's culture. I offer a few recommendations for potential next steps:

Articulate the Why

Concepts associated with Use of Self are not unfamiliar in a business context. Ideas such as self-awareness, self-understanding, emotional intelligence, and feedback are commonly used in leadership development programming (Cheung-Judge & Jamieson, 2018; Jamieson et al., 2010; Jamieson & Davidson, 2019). However, in challenging times, senior executives are often focused on being lean and agile (Holbeche, 2018). For Use of Self to be adopted and prioritized, we must develop a strong business case and a clear rationale for its significance to the health and performance of the organization. OD practitioners interested in this approach may consider taking a social constructionism approach to data collection, paying careful attention to institutionalized language, beliefs, and desires as people's communicated focus are their reality (Cheung-Judge & Holbeche, 2021).

Systemically Embed Use of Self into the Culture

Integrating the concepts of Use of Self into organization culture requires a holistic talent development strategy. Areas associated with talent development include talent

acquisition (advertising, recruitment, selection), talent activation (onboarding, training, and development), and talent retention (rewards, recognition, and performance management and evaluation) (Cappelli & Keller, 2017). Each area presents an opportunity to highlight the significance of Use of Self in leaders throughout the organization. Consider the following:

- » **Talent Acquisition.** Incorporate the principles of Use of Self in the job description. Describe the knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences required for a role. Communicate values of self-understanding and emotional intelligence to potential candidates. Recruit candidates with diverse identities, knowledge, skills, and styles. Reflect a culture of presence, self-reflection, and feedback in images, taglines, etc. Enable the hiring process to show who candidates *really* are and how they show up in the workplace. Assess what candidates see, know, or do in familiar and unfamiliar situations.
- » **Talent Activation.** Invite newly hired leaders to show up as their authentic selves. Design social integration exercises that encourage authenticity and vulnerability between leaders and their teams. Develop training and development opportunities that expose leaders to the concept of Use of Self. Create space and opportunity for leaders to reflect.
- » **Talent Retention.** Practice the situational action-learning cycle. Create an expectation of presence. Discover and mitigate biases. Understand and address the unique needs of leaders. Celebrate exemplary displays of Use of Self. Create a culture of feedback throughout all levels of the organization. Embed the principles of Use of Self into performance management and evaluation systems.

Activating Middle-Leaders

There is an ongoing debate in the field of talent development having to do with who in the organization should receive the benefits of talent development. Inclusive approaches suggest that everyone should be entitled to some form of development,

whereas exclusive approaches limit development efforts to high-potential employees or to those who are in strategic roles (Cappelli & Keller, 2017). Regardless of an organization's developmental focus, I believe that one way to support rapid integration of Use of Self is to target middle-level leaders.

Middle-level leaders are well positioned to affect employees because of their organizational function. They can operationalize organizational strategy by leading front-line managers and individual contributors in design and implementation (Dasgupta, 2015). Additionally, middle-level leaders are attuned to the day-to-day operations of their organizations and can recognize and communicate significant challenges that would otherwise go unaddressed.

Middle-level leaders also have broad influence based on their positioning between senior executives and front-line managers. Both Floyd and Lane (2000) and Dasgupta (2015) describe middle-level leaders as *networkers* who synthesize strategic and hands-on information, *negotiators* who share knowledge and sell messages, *champions* who search for new ideas and present them to senior management, and *implementers* who motivate employees to take action and monitor progress for leaders (Dasgupta, 2015; Floyd & Lane, 2000).

Because of these roles, wise senior executives see middle-level leaders as advisors who can innovate and implement (Floyd & Lane, 2000). Wise front-line managers see middle-level leaders as advocates who can understand and communicate their challenges. Middle-level leaders' visibility, accessibility, and trustworthiness make them ideal organizational vectors for cultivating Use of Self in organizations. However, being well-positioned for these efforts does not mean middle-level leaders are automatically qualified to lead them. After clearly articulating the “why” and considering ways to embed Use of Self into the culture systemically, OD practitioners should exercise their roles as educators, trainers, and facilitators (Rainey & Jones, 2014) to help middle-level leaders learn to leverage their abilities, skills, attitudes, and values. The outline of descriptors of clusters in Use of Self (Cheung-Judge &

Holbeche, 2021; Cheung-Judge & Jamieson, 2018) may be useful in these efforts.

Everything We Need

I have encountered concerns about the health and longevity of the field of OD. I humbly suggest that the measure of our profession's success rests not in the number of subscribers to OD publications or the recruitment to the OD Network or NTL. Rather, we will be successful if leaders in organizations are equipped to use their whole being to execute their roles. Helping our clients integrate Use of Self into organization culture will be no doubt difficult, but I have confidence that if anyone can do it, OD practitioners can. Everything we need to excel is already inside of us.

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