

ORGANIZATION USE OF SELF

A NEW SYMBOL OF LEADERSHIP

by Mila N. Baker

The corner office is a symbol of leadership and the “organization man” from a bygone era.

The corner office was an aspiration and a destination of choice for many Baby Boomers and Gen Xers as they entered the workforce. Today, the walls of the corner office are figuratively and literally being dismantled. If you entered the workforce visualizing your career as a series of steps and career moves that would guarantee upward mobility and lead to the corner, you may be a bit apprehensive and/or disillusioned. The current perception of the corner office and C-suite is more reflective of a traditional hierarchy than a vibrant representation of a twenty-first-century organization.

The corner office emerged from the Industrial Age, when employees were thought of as “cogs in a machine” and those in the corner office reflected the symbol of prestige, power, and command-and-control in the modern organization of the twentieth century: a conservative office with large opulent furniture and overstuffed chairs, thick paneling, windows along the perimeter, and personal artifacts expressing the lifestyle and preferences of the occupant. Family photos, golf

memorabilia, award plaques, and prize possessions adorned the walls. A gatekeeping secretary and junior staff sat in cubicles in close proximity. The corner office created an aura of importance, success, privacy, and exclusiveness reserved for leaders at the top of the organization pyramid.

If you entered the workforce in the twenty-first-century you live in a different organization and might not have a perception of the corner office at all. You have been influenced by the 2008 economic recession, rapid technology changes, shifts in how we work and where we work. Your career path may be paved and smooth but may also be bumpy and tenuous. If your career path as a leader has not taken you far enough down the corner office road you may be wondering if you will have to take a detour or have to pack your bags, and all your possessions, and move along a road not taken. Perhaps taking the road to an “open space organization” where no one has an office. You may be embracing the diversity in your organization by using different leadership styles to accommodate differences or thinking of other symbols of leadership. If this sounds familiar to you, you are not alone.

The corner office created an aura of importance.

You are facing disruptions and challenges in organizational life that could not have been imagined twenty-five years ago. Major social, political, economic, and cultural shifts in society affect your organization every day. The U.S. Labor Department predicts that jobs in the United States will increasingly use technology and automated components that did not exist ten years ago. The companies that have been the bedrock of the U.S. economy are experiencing strife and threats both from and within competitors. These challenges are disrupting the corporate landscape and the status quo and unraveling the fabric of an American institution: the organization.

In order to succeed, you have had to continually adapt and acquire new leadership skills in order to keep pace with this rapidly shifting environment.

In 2009, Adam Bryant began publishing a column, “The Corner Office,” in the *New York Times*. Each column is a CEO conversation on leadership and management. The column is entitled “The Corner Office”; however, the conversations from CEOs often reflect a very different leader from the corner office CEO of the past. There is an irony in the disconnect between the corner office symbolism of the past and the real conversations from today’s leaders.

As Jeffrey Immelt noted when he took the helm at GE in 2001, the command-and-control style of former CEO Jack Welch will not work today. Leadership in the twenty-first century has to be all about change and becoming more humble.

You are part of the cadre of leaders that must continually adapt to the new landscape and generate new symbols of leadership better suited to the twenty-first century.

It is likely that you have direct control over very little because of automation and social media, but you probably feel energized, ready, and eager to put your leadership mark on your organization. If you find yourself in this position, your perceptions, knowledge, and experience are well suited for today’s organization. But without the old command-and-control model how will you make that mark?

One answer to the question is to look for a symbol and hallmark of leadership through which you maintain control—that symbol is “use of self,”—a concept borrowed from the social sciences, mainly psychology and sociology, and effectively used in organization development practice. It has been described by David Jamieson, professor and director of the doctoral program at St. Thomas University, as “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.” The Use of Self is used widely by practitioners in organization development and change consulting, mentoring, and coaching. It is viewed as a critical skill for understanding one’s behavior and impact, but seldom is it considered a core competency for leaders in organizations.

Organization Use of Self (OUS—pronounced “us”), as shown in Figure 1, is becoming a new symbol of leadership. It is an expansion of the foundational use of self and is being used to support leadership that is reciprocal, relational, and collective. OUS focuses on the management of tension that occurs and the balance needed between core organization leadership factors—*resilience*—the tension and balance needed between adaptation risk and mitigation risk and ego strength—the tension and balance needed between *confidence* (the belief that you can rely on your sense of self-worth and abilities) and *humility* (the view you hold of your own importance and worth).

Adaptation risk is the degree to which a leader can move swiftly to action in a volatile and complex environment when impact is often based on an event that has already occurred and requires a swift, decisive, ethical, and compassionate response. This is similar to the concept of being “audible ready.” A football or soccer analogy



FIGURE 1. ORGANIZATION USE OF SELF

is helpful; you need to be able to recognize what your opponents are planning to do and then able to call a play different from the one you were prepared to execute. In your organization, you need to be prepared for unexpected outcomes and unintended consequences and able to adapt to those situations.

Mitigation is the degree to which a leader must leverage ongoing observation, data, and knowledge to plan for shifting circumstances. Through mitigation, you plan ahead to maximize positive outcomes and take action quickly and nimbly based on current needs and circumstances.

Organization Use of Self enables you to model adaptability and mitigate risk through a delicate balance of confidence and humility by three distinct actions: (1) being on purpose, (2) expressing what matters, and (3) aligning your personal ethics with organization ethics. Your own actions and nimbleness can set the tone for the rest of the organization. Your foresight and adaptive response to unexpected outcomes and unintended consequences can help to mitigate the adverse impact of the unexpected. By being deliberate every day in demonstrating OUS, you become the guidepost for others as they observe your actions.

Your human touch can become a competitive differentiator. Organization Use of Self gives you control of your own actions and enables you to communicate

with more transparency and authenticity. Demonstrating command-and-control of your own actions (versus others') is where you have ultimate muscle flexibility and where you can do things no machine can presently do. OUS is the most powerful instrument or tool you have in reshaping the culture of the workplace and ensuring sustainable success for the future. It is the most powerful instrument you have to unite everyone in the organization around a common bond—a higher purpose bond that is tighter than any one entity be it the individual, a group, or shareholder interest.

Six Key Steps for Effective Organization Use of Self

1. *As communicator:* Make certain that your communication style is anchored around conversations that provide perspective on organization purpose and core values and beliefs that serve a greater good that extends beyond returning value to shareholders. Conversations in which you are consciously aware of what, when, and how they occur and the impact they have on you and others. Your conversations should embed meaning that allows you to express what matters, allows ideas to emerge, invites and expects diversity, and energizes everyone. Practicing conversations in which listening is a habit that has been perfected through

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repetition and in which listening precedes talking. Gervase Bushe and Bob Marshak see organizations as conversations whose actions result from self-organizing streams of narratives and stories through which individuals make meaning of their experiences. Bushe and Marshak are practitioners in the evolution of organization change and outline the work on conversation and narratives in their recent book *Dialogic Organization Development*, published by Berrett-Koehler. Changing your conversations can result in shaping the way others think and behave and align personal and organization ethics, values, and purpose. Increasing the number of formal and informal conversations will increase your understanding as well as the understanding of others. An example is Morning Star, a company founded in 1970 that is the largest tomato processing company in the world. Morning Star is an innovative and successful self-managed company that uses both formal and informal communication to maintain strong performance, solid profits, and low turnover. Chris Rufer, founder and CEO, has said that one indicator of their success can be attributed to how free their employees are to open up and communicate directly with one another. There are no bosses or managers in the company. Employees prepare their own lists of job roles and responsibilities based on their experience and interests. They then talk with their peers and negotiate a final set of roles and responsibilities. The informal discussions are formalized each year into a colleague letter of understanding known as a CLOU. These letters of agreement guide further conversation and decision making throughout the company.

- As decision maker:* Develop a habit of respecting and understanding the value of opposing points of view. Develop a decision-making mind-set that reflects an awareness and understanding of the tension inherent in paradox and polarity where interdependent values and points of view exist and must be addressed as both/and, rather than either/or decisions. Situations that involve tension between opposing points of view and paradox are much more common in today's complex organizations than in the past. Common examples of interdependent values and point of view include cost and quality; task and relationship; flexibility and structure; security and privacy; stability and change; and talking and silence. Sir Paul Callaghan, an award-winning New Zealand scientist who before his death in 2012 talked eloquently and passionately about the future of the world, remarked, "The nature of paradox, turning things on their head, flipping ideas upside-down—and knowing how to reconcile and ride the tension of opposites—is at the heart of leadership and indeed life." He was referring to the importance of expressing interdependent alternatives where one intentionally moves the conversation back and forth between the opposing views, both of which are important and meaningful.
- As builder:* Convene and engage in dialogue with everyone. Be present and accessible to all levels of the organization; involve everyone—build coalitions around common intent and purpose and build peer to peer network communities in which everyone engages in reciprocal relationships as an equal and where the catalytic action of the community and the shift in the relationship dynamic strengthens the community and enables it to disrupt, transform, and build new narratives for the organization. One story that is told often by Vineet Nayar, former CEO of HCL Technologies, an information technology company based in India, describes his communication practice. He says he learned to communicate in extremes by asking himself, How do I communicate in a way that destroys hierarchy and says I'm one of you? On one occasion he decided to go into a big

gathering of employees dancing to a very famous Bollywood song, even though he was not able to dance. He danced in the aisles with employees and made lots of noise. What happened? It completely destroyed the gap between him and his employees.

4. *As designer:* Use physical space and technology as enablers and as a manifestation of your persona and expression of self; design for cognitive, emotional, and physical well-being; create both public spaces (areas or zones) and private places (site, venue). Because technology leaders now have more options than ever about when and where to work. Virgin Group founder Richard Branson proudly quips that he has never worked from an office in his entire career and never wanted to. This would not be a choice for all leaders, but there are now more opportunities than ever to align the physical environment with your organization culture and to integrate your workspace, work processes, and leadership. Michael Bloomberg recognized the importance of physical space when he started *Bloomberg News* in 1982 and opened his flagship company headquarters in midtown Manhattan in 2005. The design features open eating and gathering areas, and everyone working in or visiting the Bloomberg offices must stop on the sixth floor—known as “the link”—designed for random encounters. The stairwells were designed to enable workers to see and be seen. Bloomberg wrote in his 1997 book, *Bloomberg by Bloomberg*, “As is true with markets, transparency produces fairness.” Being conscious of the relationship between physical space and human contact allows you to see how tacit knowledge can be transferred, how chance encounters with others can occur and spur a new initiative or solidify a relationship. Expanding your workspace beyond your personal office or conference room can also expand the expression and perception of your persona, spirit, and physical mobility. Each of these helps to reflect an organization’s culture and goals. Shifting where and how you work can signal the type of relationship you have with other workers, the outside world, and the work that is done.

5. *As giver-and-taker:* Become a mentor; surround yourself with a cadre of intergenerational trusted advisors, mentors in various roles and at varying stages in their career. One example is a quote from the classic book *Leadership Is an Art*, by noted business executive, Max De Pree, former CEO of Herman Miller and son of the founder D. J. De Pree: “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last responsibility is to say thank you. In between the two, the leader must become a servant and a debtor. That sums up the progress of an artful leader.” Max De Pree is known for his efforts to combine a caring, compassionate, inclusive organization with extraordinary and sustained business success. Another example is from Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, who in December 2015 while he was still on paternity leave took time to return to the office to attend a ten-year anniversary celebration for one of his first employees. Behavior that is not reciprocal is often perceived as undervaluing the role that we can play in the success of other people and the roles they play in the success of each other. Having a network—people from different backgrounds whom you trust, who can give you advice on different aspects of work, and to whom you can reach out is crucial to success and work satisfaction.
6. *As a model of virtuous character:* Be humble, honorable, and humorous. The CEO of Delta Airlines, Richard Anderson, describes his actions succinctly and authentically in his Corner Office conversation with Adam Bryant. “I’ve learned to be patient and not lose my temper. And the reason that’s important is everything you do is an example, and people look at everything you do and take a signal

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Work toward making these actions a habit.

from everything you do. And when you lose your temper, it really squelches debate and sends the wrong signal on how you want your organization to run. You've got to be thankful. So, I find myself, more and more, writing hand-written notes to people. I must write a half a dozen a day."

Conclusion

How you act as a leader determines how you are perceived by others, and how you are perceived by others determines how much trust, cooperation, and respect you receive. Organization Use of Self raises the level of your conscious awareness of self-behavior and its impact on others. The next time you think about how you might have the greatest impact on an outcome, consider practicing OUS. Work toward making these actions a habit. This is an opportunity for you to add to your leader portfolio and pivot into an unknown medium. Take notice of your conversations and watch how others engage with you. Take notice of your decisions and observe how they are received and who joins you. Examine new and old relationships and see whether they are enriched and more satisfying. OUS can be a symbol of your leadership and a major resource to help you contribute to your organization and to your personal work satisfaction.



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