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ADLERIAN PSYCHOLOGY APPLIED TO WORKPLACE SITUATIONS⁽¹⁾

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The world of work is changing rapidly, just as society itself is changing, and many find societal alterations frustrating. Rules of behaviour that seemed stable instead change significantly and continue to evolve (Sims, 2002), and what one learned 10 years earlier is likely to be obsolete. The workplace has seen important changes in many countries, and the concept of being employed in one organisation for one's whole lifetime has been drastically replaced. Workers today are likely over the years to be employed in many organisations and even to make several career changes. Demands for new learning, for personal growth, for adapting to constant change are, on the one hand, enabling individuals to find new strengths and insights they never dreamed possible but on the other hand, this places strains and obstacles in their path that can lead to painful feelings of failure, demoralisation and deep discouragement.

The contemporary challenges can lead to enormous stresses both for the individual and for organisations. At the level of the individual worker, these challenges may require the person to have many more skills of adaptation than the individual possesses. Parenting and schooling experiences from childhood years become quickly outmoded as guidelines for work and for adult human relationships. Willingness to learn, to overcome barriers and to see stability in a constantly changing society may not have been part of one's education or personality development. Adlerian psychology can help individuals to adapt and to grow, to feel confident in the face of obstacles, but many people in today's society have not been exposed to its teachings and methods and are searching for solutions in ways that do not seem helpful to them.

⁽¹⁾ Paper presented at the NASAP Convention, Tucson, AZ, (U.S.A.), June 17, 2005.

To help companies deal with today's rapid changes, consultants abound and books have been written. One example is *The Capable Company: Building the Capabilities that Make Strategy Work* (Lynch, Diezemann and Dowling, 2003). This book addresses the need for companies to know how to meet evolving standards and procedures, but the individual workers often have to fend for themselves with little guidance on how to meet human relationship problems that they encounter. Technological aids abound, but these do not address issues of emotion, motivation and confidence. Help from personal coaches may be available (Page, 2005), but for many people the demands of work, family and community may be painfully bewildering when rules of conduct and standards for relationships are in constant states of flux.

To those familiar with the Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler (1931) and Rudolf Dreikurs (1955), it is not surprising that some of the new models and prescriptions put forward for contemporary companies are akin to ideas that Adlerians for many years have taught and put into practice. For example, Lebow and Spitzer (2002) point out that companies should avoid extrinsic rewards and management by control and they should avoid the punitive use of performance appraisals. Instead, administrators should stimulate employees to take personal responsibility for their jobs, to take risks and not be afraid to be innovative, to be able to learn from their mistakes, and to have trust and faith in others. Managers should trust employees. Companies should foster an atmosphere in which employees are willing at times to put the interest of others ahead of their own. Many human resources offices in contemporary organisations advocate the value of diversity and of working in teams, which represents core ideas that for a long time have been evident in the writings of Adlerians (Adler, 1931, 1939; Bottome, 1943, 1957; Dreikurs, 1955; Ferguson, 1991, 1996).

Unfortunately, Adlerian principles and methods that help people work effectively with others and with co-workers whose views differ from their own are still not widely known nor cited in books written to help companies deal with contemporary complexities. For example, in their book *Accountability: Freedom and*

Responsibility Without Control, Lebow and Spitzer (2002) indirectly refer to concepts that Adlerians (Ferguson, 2004) have discussed, such as *courage*, *Social Interest*, and *autocratic versus democratic leadership*, but Lebow and Spitzer (2002) do not give the depth of these concepts. There is no attempt by these authors to show how these concepts relate to personality, goals and values, nor do they identify "freedom" as being different in *laissez-faire* versus democratic processes. They advocate "freedom" versus "control" but do not recognise the fullness of meaning that Adlerians (Dreikurs, Cassel and Ferguson, 2004) refer to in discussions of styles of leadership and social climate. Lebow and Spitzer (2002) advocate equality in decision-making and choices and in taking responsibility for one's work, but they do not show how people can overcome discouragement and increase Social Interest.

The present paper describes how key Adlerian concepts and methods can help individuals and organisations improve their effectiveness and their sense of satisfaction in the contemporary workplace.

Courage and Social Interest: Key Adlerian Concepts for Work and Human Relationships

The concept of *courage* in Adlerian psychology refers to one's willingness to face life's challenges with an optimistic approach and to fulfil the tasks of social living required of each of us as a member of the human community (Dreikurs, 1998; Ferguson, 2004). Courage does not mean heroism. Rather, it reflects our commitment to live fully and in a way that is both personally beneficial and that enhances the well-being of others. Adlerians discuss "life tasks" (Dreikurs and Mosak, 1966) because as social beings, each of us lives in a community, and the well-being of the community requires each of our contributions (in work, love, and friendship). The community may be small (a couple, a family) or large (a township, a country, or humankind) but regardless of its size, our actions invariably have an impact on our lives and the lives of others.

Pepper, 1998; Grunwald and McAbee, 1998). As has already been pointed out (Miranda, Goodman and Kern, 1996), corporate leaders have arrived at conclusions that are similar to Adlerian formulations regarding the high value of Social Interest. However, corporate leaders are not aware that Social Interest is required for effective human relationships in general and not only in the workplace; nor do these leaders have the Adlerian expertise for training Social Interest in individuals in all groups and starting already at an early age in childhood.

Goals and Values

The role of *mutual respect* has already been mentioned, and as can be seen in countless organisations, people often do not have a goal of mutual respect and a value of problem solving by consensus building. Instead, there is a goal of superiority and power, and competition is highly valued. The issue is who wins, rather than a concern for how to establish co-operation and contribution for the welfare of all (Ferguson, 2004). Does the individual strive to be superior to others or seek to live in a mutually supporting way with others? Goals of personal power and competitive winning over opponents are commonplace in the workplace.

Examples abound. One was reported recently and occurred in a large city. The whole community of that city was hurt by the power contests in a labour dispute that occurred within a major symphony orchestra. The players and management at the end of a symphony session had been locked in dispute, with concerts cancelled and tickets-holders not knowing from week to week if a performance would take place. The Symphony had attained high standards of excellence and an international reputation, but the dispute resulted in the loss of salaries for the players and the loss of beautiful concerts was distressing for the music-loving patrons. An article (Miller, 2005) detailed the complex power goals of the musicians, a labour union and the Symphony management. There was a clear lack of seeking solutions that would benefit all parties. A goal of dominance and power was clearly described for all parties in the dispute, without evident concern by the various leaders for those

Courage is closely tied to the concept of *Social Interest*, also translated as Community Feeling from the German word *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*. What Adlerians mean by this term is a commitment to and a feeling for the community and its welfare (Ferguson, 2004). Humans, as social beings, have a fundamental need to belong to and feel valued by the community and to contribute to that community (Ferguson, 1989). For Adlerians, Social Interest is the basis for mental health and optimum functioning (Adler, 1939; Dreikurs, 1969). When people's Social Interest is high, they have the courage to make mistakes and to learn from their mistakes. They approach life and other people with optimism and openness because they are more concerned with contribution to the common good than with personal vanity or defensive concern with "proving" themselves. High Social Interest means the person feels belonging and strives to do what is best for all in terms of a given situation and in both a short-term and long-term perspective. Moreover, with high Social Interest a person strives to function so that there is mutual respect between self and others.

Research has given broad evidence regarding the pivotal role of Social Interest for effective functioning and mental health. For example, Kern, Gfroerer, Summers, Curllette et al. (1996) found that a person's perceptions regarding belonging as a child were positively related to present functioning in terms of coping resources. Belangee, Sherman and Kern (2003) found that the Belonging/Social Interest scale from a widely used measurement tool derived from Adlerian theory, the BASIS-A, was negatively correlated with a scale that measured Interpersonal Distrust. Many studies have found that various forms of maladaptive behaviours are negatively correlated with Social Interest and positively correlated with discouragement rather than courage. Being connected and contributing to others is truly healing, as Kopp (1997) and other Adlerians have written.

Specific practical steps have been developed by Adlerians for training Social Interest and for helping people to increase their courage (Dinkmeyer and Dreikurs, 2000; Dreikurs, Grunwald and

who would be hurt by the lack of co-operation and consensus building. The headline of the article "Sour notes from Symphony fight" portrays power contests that are not uncommon in organisations, whether they are non-profit (like a symphony orchestra) or a for-profit corporation.

When Social Interest prevails, the social climate involves finding solutions through shared participation and value outcomes that have maximum positive effect on the community in the present time and in the future. When goals of power or revenge prevail, concern for the community invariably is replaced by concern for some at the expense of all. An organisation devoted to the community welfare will be concerned with sustainable development and with sharing of resources, yet many organisation managers or owners are still focused on a strategy of superiority and winning rather than a value system characterised by Social Interest. As Manaster, Cemalcilar and Knill (2003) pointed out, individual and societal values are interconnected and to the extent that society either tolerates or supports group values that disregard the common welfare, groups and individuals may adopt goals that are destructive to others as well as to self.

Lebow and Spitzer (2002) write about organisational effectiveness in ways that are congruent with Adlerian psychology and they point out that a company with freedom and responsibility as its goals and values will not only improve the organisation's welfare but also its productivity and profits. These authors advocate trust and mutual respect, but without Adlerian methods they lack the needed expertise to train individuals for these goals and values. Organisations can be taught the basics of understanding personality and group dynamics, and it was Dreikurs' hope that Adlerian psychology, with its methods for improving an individual's and a group's functioning, would be implemented widely (Dreikurs, 1972). Because Adlerian psychology is a personality and social psychology, its ideas and practices apply to human relations in all spheres. People can learn to recognise their individual goals not only as objective and explicit sources of motivation but in terms of their "private logic" goals that may sabotage their explicit aims.

It is common that individuals do not recognise their private logic (Ferguson, 2004), but they can learn to identify it and thereby they can formulate new assumptions and seek new goals. When individuals come to know their private logic and implicit goals, they are able to make new choices that they had not realised were possible. Likewise, organisational goals may have "private logic" components that undermine the organisation's explicit goals. When mediators are effective, they can help organisations identify mistaken goals and strategies, and help the group adopt more Social Interest-oriented approaches. Organisations can be taught to recognise their corporate private logic, and subsequently the organisation can work towards new decisions and choices that are more in line with Social Interest. Adlerian theory provides well-established concepts and methods for organisations and individuals to identify their private logic and thereby to be able to optimise their aims, procedures and values (Ferguson, 2000, 2001, 2003).

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