

(1717) P√(16)

## Business & Organizations

Linda J. Page and Eva Dreikurs Ferguson, Column Editors

In the working environment, relations among people can be far more complex than in other spheres of human life. The focus of this column is to show how the ideas and methods of Individual Psychology are useful in the workplace as well as to compare Adlerian methods with other approaches. Individual dynamics as well as organizational and group dynamics issues are discussed in detail. Potential contributors are encouraged to submit manuscripts, including case studies, illustrating the application of Individual Psychology to business and organizational settings. Send manuscripts to Linda J. Page, Adler International Learning, 890 Yonge Street, 9th Floor, Toronto, Ontario M4W 3P4, Canada, [ljpage@adler.ca](mailto:ljpage@adler.ca).

### What Adlerians Consider Important for Communication and Decision-Making in the Workplace: Mutual Respect and Democratic Leadership Style

Eva Dreikurs Ferguson

Communication is an issue in countless work settings, including medical practice (how the medical team members communicate with each other and with patients, e.g., Kington & Short, 2010; Wynia & Osborn, 2010), interaction between managers and employees (e.g., Ladegaard, 2011; Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009), and the way businesses relate with customers (e.g., Chikudate, 2010). Many non-Adlerian writers concerned with communication in the workplace address topics long considered essential by Adlerian theorists; but without that Adlerian background, these writers tend to treat them as independent topics rather than as belonging to an integrally coherent set of concepts. For example, one can speak of transformational and charismatic leadership (Levine, Muenchen, & Brooks,

The Journal of Individual Psychology, Vol. 67, No. 4, Winter 2011  
©2011 by the University of Texas Press, PO Box 7819, Austin, TX 78713-7819

Editorial office located in the College of Education at Georgia State University.

2010) but not consider the group dynamics that relate to these styles. From an Adlerian perspective, the workplace has many characteristics of group dynamics, and communication needs to be understood within the context of both the leader's style and the group culture that emerges.

### **Leadership Styles, Culture, Communication, and Mutual Respect**

Some non-Adlerian writings have been concerned with leadership styles, but they do not relate such styles to the larger group culture and group dynamics. For example, Ladegaard (2011, p. 4) refers to an "indirect, people-oriented, democratic management style" as fitting a more female style of management, which overall is preferred by employees, compared to a "direct, task-oriented and authoritarian approach" that is suggested as being more akin to a male management style. From the Adlerian perspective, these leadership styles represent different ways for people to interact at many levels beyond gender alone. They affect communication because these styles alter the whole pattern of group dynamics (Ferguson, Hagaman, Grice, & Peng, 2006).

The type of leadership found in organizations strongly affects the group culture. Each organization develops a culture of its own, with members of the organization sharing a set of beliefs, values, and practices. Sometimes this culture can be characterized by its "mood" (Lee, 2010) in terms of degree of cooperation or opposition the organization experiences both internally and externally with respect to other organizations. Organizational culture concerns many aspects of how or whether viewpoints are expressed. Some researchers have investigated organizational "voice" (Wolfe Morrison et al., 2011), or the degree to which the group believes people should make their ideas and viewpoints known.

The important Adlerian principle of "mutual respect" (Adler, 1932, 1939; Dreikurs, 2008) applies to organizations as well as to one-on-one relationships. Implementing mutual respect can heighten sharing within the group and willingness of members to listen to diverse and alternative perspectives. In a culture of trust and mutual respect, diversity is accepted and negative sanctions are not triggered by deviant points of view. A culture of trust based on mutual respect will increase the communication between members of the organization and will heighten organizational "voice" (Wolfe Morrison, Wheeler-Smith, & Kamdar, 2010). Diversity of views provides opportunities for new learning as well as for reaffirming the fundamental beliefs that the organization values. The need for fresh perspectives that lead to innovation is well known in contemporary organizations, but it is also true that new viewpoints can lead to confirmation of existing values considered basic to the well-being of the organization.

### Leadership and the Democratic Process

Much has been written about styles of leadership since the pivotal research of Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939). Adler (1932, 1939) and Dreikurs (1969, 2008; Dreikurs, Grunwald, & Pepper, 1999) pointed out that the *democratic process involves fundamental ways for people to relate with each other*. That is, in addition to the importance of a democratic style of leadership, all human interactions in a group can function democratically. Thus, not only the leader can follow a democratic style, but all members of the group can choose to adopt democratic ways of relating with one another. Clearly, a democratic leader will facilitate the adoption of positive human relationships in an organization.

Confusion has occurred in discussions of family life between what is a democratic compared to a *laissez-faire* style of parenting (Ferguson, 2004, 2011; Ferguson et al., 2006). My ongoing research indicates that parents tend to describe their leadership style as democratic primarily because they strive to avoid being autocratic. They assume being democratic means simply avoiding strictness and not requiring obedience. Many organizational leaders also define their style as democratic, based on their not being autocratic. The autocratic style is "order without freedom." Unfortunately, in striving not to be autocratic, leaders too often seek only the "freedom" part as they reject the autocratic style. They mistakenly also reject the "order" aspect. This results in their adopting a *laissez-faire* style, of "freedom without order," in which the leader is permissive or neglectful. This is not a democratic style.

To be a democratic leader is more than "not being autocratic." Democratic leadership involves a clear style of its own, described by Lewin et al. (1939) and by Dreikurs (1969; Dreikurs et al., 1999) as being "freedom with order." Many leaders in organizations, as in family life, who wish to avoid autocratic leadership and to be democratic, erroneously adopt an approach that creates the *laissez-faire* "freedom *without* order" rather than the democratic style of "freedom *with* order."

Adlerian books exist that describe democratic parenting (Dreikurs & Soltz, 2006; Lew & Bettner, 2000). Fewer publications exist to show how administrators of organizations can be democratic leaders. However, because the principles for leading work organizations are not very different from those for leading classrooms, books describing how to be a democratic leader (teacher) in the classroom (e.g., Dreikurs, Cassel, & Ferguson, 2004; Dreikurs et al., 1999) are also applicable for workplace administrators.

A classroom is a place of work. The child has tasks and responsibilities in school, and in school assignments the child learns and displays work ethics. School prepares for the adult work arena. Adlerian methods have been proven effective in classrooms, and similarly, the democratic leadership

style described for the classroom is effective in the workplace. There are common themes for being a democratic leader, whether in school, at home, or at work:

- *Shared decision making.* Rules are agreed on by all the members who are affected by the rules. In very large organizations, separate groups may need to take votes independently, as in unions accepting contractual agreements made by their representatives, but in smaller organizations there may be face-to-face discussions with all concerned, leading to agreements on rules.
- *Problem solving with mutual respect.* The organizational culture may encourage democratic processes as the basis for finding solutions. Steps for democratic problem solving within an Adlerian framework have been described by Rudolf Dreikurs and colleagues (Dreikurs et al., 1999), and organizations following these steps have reduced workplace problems. With democratic leadership, the work organizations foster individual responsibility and accountability as well as group cohesion. High value is given both to the individual and to the group. Diversity is appreciated and so is group welfare.
- *Common sense rather than private logic.* For shared decision making and problem solving with mutual respect to be enacted, members of the group need to communicate effectively. Sharing of information requires judgment of what is important and when and how to share it. The more that all members of the organization adhere to *common sense rather than private logic* (Adler, 1939), the more likely the communications will be effective. Common sense is based on the realities of situations, and various viewpoints are often needed for a leader to grasp the full realities of the work situation.
- *Sharing responsibilities.* This principle is an important key to effective leadership. The leader cannot be the only one carrying the burdens of the organization. In this way, the democratic process at work is similar to that at home. Morale is increased and productivity is increased as freedom with order is institutionalized.

New emphasis in psychological writings has focused on the concept of "social resilience," which "emphasizes strengths that encourage patterns of positive adaptation rather than sources of vulnerability" (Cacioppo, Reis, & Zautra, 2011, p. 46). In line with Adler's emphasis that humans have an *innate tendency for the "need to belong"* (Ferguson, 2010), to be connected with and to contribute to the welfare of the group, modern writers point out, "social resilience depends on the development of greater awareness of our connections with others and multiple capacities for social action that lead to the attainment of both personal hopes and social purposes" (Cacioppo et al., 2011, p. 50). The *democratic leader* with Adlerian training in human

relationships is the one who will help to increase social resilience in the organization and will increase effective communication between all members of the organization.

### Conclusion

Many organizations still vacillate between autocratic and laissez-faire styles, as if these were the only options. By changing to a democratic style, however, and following guidelines set forth in line with Adlerian principles, organizations can improve all aspects of communication, not to mention productivity. Leaders can learn to be democratic (Ferguson, 1996, 1999, 2003) and to be effective in sharing and problem solving. Organizations can help individuals to grow and learn as part of the process of the organization itself undergoing improvements. Through democratic processes the organization can increase its social resilience. This is especially likely to happen when both the individual and the group are valued and respected.

### References

---

- Adler, A. (1932). *What life should mean to you*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Adler, A. (1939). *Social interest: A challenge to mankind*. New York: Putnam.
- Cacioppo, J. T., Reis, H. T., & Zautra, A. J. (2011). Social resilience: The value of social fitness with an application to the military. *American Psychologist*, *66*, 43–51.
- Chikudate, N. (2010). Reinterpreting corporate apologia as self-discipline. *Corporate Communications*, *15*, 397–409.
- Dreikurs, R. (1969). Learning to live together in a democracy. *Canadian Counsellor*, *3*, 4–9.
- Dreikurs, R. (2008). *Social equality: The challenge of today*. Chicago: Adler School.
- Dreikurs, R., Cassel, P., & Ferguson, E. D. (2004). *Discipline without tears: How to reduce conflict and establish cooperation in the classroom* (rev. ed.). Toronto, Canada: Wiley.
- Dreikurs, R., Grunwald, B. B., & Pepper, F. (1999). *Maintaining sanity in the classroom*. Philadelphia, PA: Taylor & Francis.
- Dreikurs, R., & Soltz, V. (2006). *Children: The challenge*. New York: Plume.
- Ferguson, E. D. (1996). Adlerian principles and methods apply to workplace problems. *Individual Psychology: The Journal of Adlerian Theory, Research, and Practice*, *52*, 270–287.

Ferguson, E. D. (1999). Individual Psychology and organizational effectiveness. *The Journal of Individual Psychology, 55*, 109–114.

Ferguson, E. D. (2003). Work relationships, lifestyle, and mutual respect. *The Journal of Individual Psychology, 59*, 501–506.

Ferguson, E. D. (2004). The 2003 H. L. and R. R. Ansbacher memorial address: Democratic relationships: Key to Adlerian concepts. *The Journal of Individual Psychology, 60*, 3–24.

Ferguson, E. D. (2010). Adler's innovative contributions regarding the need to belong. *The Journal of Individual Psychology, 66*, 64–75.

Ferguson, E. D. (2011). Mutual respect relates to need to belong and contribute. In P. Prina, A. Millar, C. Shelley, & K. John (Eds.), *UK Adlerian year book 2011* (pp. 78–90). Cambridge, England: Adlerian Society (of the United Kingdom) and the Institute for Individual Psychology.

Ferguson, E. D., Hagaman, J., Grice, J. W., & Peng, K. (2006). From leadership to parenthood: The applicability of leadership styles to parenting styles. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice, 10*, 43–56.

Kington, M., & Short, A. E. (2010). What do consumers want to know in the emergency department? *International Journal of Nursing Practice, 16*, 406–411.

Ladegaard, H. J. (2011). "Doing power" at work: Responding to male and female management styles in a global business corporation. *Journal of Pragmatics, 43*, 4–19.

Lee, L. W. (2010). The mood of a firm. *The Journal of Socio-Economics, 39*, 615–618.

Levine, K. J., Muenchen, R. A., & Brooks, A. M. (2010). Measuring transformational and charismatic leadership: Why isn't charisma measured? *Communication Monographs, 77*, 576–591.

Lew, A., & Bettner, B. L. (2000). *A parent's guide to understanding and motivating children*. Media, PA: Connexions Press.

Lewin, K., Lippitt, R., & White, R. K. (1939). Patterns of aggressive behavior in experimentally created "social climates." *Journal of Social Psychology, 10*, 271–299.

Mesmer-Magnus, J. R., & DeChurch, L. A. (2009). Information sharing and team performance: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 94*, 535–546.

Wolfe Morrison, E. W., Wheeler-Smith, S., & Kamdar, D. (2011). Speaking up in groups: A cross-level study of group voice climate and voice. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 96*, 133–191.

Wynia, M. K., & Osborn, C. Y. (2010). Health literacy and communication quality in health care organizations. *Journal of Health Communication, 15*(suppl. 2), 102–115.

Copyright of Journal of Individual Psychology is the property of University of Texas Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.