Adlerian Organizational Health
Adlerian Theory to Improve Workplace Culture
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Abstract

Adlerian organizational health used to build workplace morale, and change culture is an initiative that emphasizes the value of building relationships within the workplace. The goal is to build organizational health, increase value in the workforce and to create a workplace where people want to work and are proud to work. I believe a person’s work is attached to personal identity and general life satisfaction more than it has been in generations. When a person’s work life is unsatisfactory it affects the other areas of life. Adlerian Psychology applied to organizations in order to improve workplace culture will advance the health of the organization and employee wellness. This thesis applies Adlerian principles to organizational functioning and provides techniques to apply in the workplace to address morale, improve worker happiness and productivity.
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Dedication

I am thrilled to have achieved this great accomplishment and have many people to thank. I never could have completed this great feat on my own. My community of support and their ongoing encouragement has allowed me to finish with great pride. I have been lucky to have many Adlerian mentors along my way and I am grateful to them all. My family is due a great thanks. First and most importantly is my son. All of this was for you, for us. I wanted to build the best life for us and to teach you that anything can be accomplished. I love you oceans deep and beyond infinity. To my mother, who through her many ways of support made this possible not the least of all being the free babysitting, I appreciate and love you. Many thanks to my dad for being interested in my learning and always asking me if I am happy and loved. To my best friend Kristin, you supported me, you were curious and you were forgiving when I disappeared into books of Adlerian theory. Finally, to my love John, thank you. This journey has been simply better and more fulfilling with you by my side. I am thankful to all my friends who have supported me and loved me through my journey of learning. I love you all very deeply and hereby profess my gratitude. Saying thank you simply does not seem enough. I love you and I am proud to complete this adventure with all of you alongside me.
Adlerian Organizational Health; Adlerian Theory to Improve Workplace Culture

There are 8,760 total hours in one calendar year; the average person spends 2,080 of those hours working a full time 40 hour per week job. If we include the average 8 hours of sleep per night for one year that equals 2,920 hours sleeping; this leaves roughly 3,760 hours remaining for commuting, eating, personal activities and pleasure.

In our current economy many people work more than one job and more than 40 hours per week in order to make ends meet. Individuals are working extra hours to meet work performance standards, achieve promotions or simply because they love their work. This translates to roughly one third of available hours spent on work tasks each year. Over the span of a twenty year career the 40 hour per week worker is spending 41,600 hours at work. This number does not include the additional hours that people spend thinking about work and continue to problem solve once they are off the clock.

The precious hours spent on work should be hours that are enjoyed, hours that are valued and hours in which workers experience respect, equality and productivity. Individuals deserve a healthy workplace. Adlerian theory in the workplace to build positive culture change can improve the hours we dedicate to work.

**Healthy vs. Unhealthy**

Organizations can be healthy, unhealthy or something in between. An unhealthy organization could resemble a workplace in which the environment is filled with tension, stress and fear, “when people begin to feel as though their jobs may be threatened and hence their security, they are much less concerned about their need for achievement or affiliation” (Marciano, 2010, p.8). This tells us that fear is not a motivating or healthy factor and feeling safe in our work is a critical requirement to build a healthy workplace.
A healthy organization’s culture could resemble a workplace with autonomy, effective communication, and a clear avenue to solve problems between the workers and the management. I imagine that a healthy worker experiences encouragement, feels safe in their job, finds significance in their work and has a sense of belonging within the work culture.

Alexander Kjerulf, one of the world’s leading experts on workplace happiness whose job title is “Chief Happiness Officer,” examined how Danish workers were happier than American workers and why (Kjerulf, 2014a). He discovered 5 policies that make Danish workers happier; 1) reasonable working hours; 2) low power distance; 3) generous unemployment benefits; 4) constant training; 5) a focus on happiness (Kjerulf, 2014a). A greater power distance contributes to an unhealthy organizational culture by resembling a dictatorship in which the boss gives all orders from above. A lower power distance represents a culture in which the boss collaborates with the staff, providing suggestions and encouraging collective thinking (Kjerulf, 2014a).

Workers who experience a workplace where the power distance is lower “experience more autonomy and are more empowered at work” (Kjerulf, 2014a, p.3). Kjerulf provides an example of workers having a seat on their workplace board of directors, which facilitates collaborative leadership. However, I believe, for the use in this thesis, that a lower power distance means fewer layers of management between the front line worker and the top boss. I believe it also means organized structures through which to communicate directly between front line workers and the top boss.

Two other key factors addressed by Alexander Kjerulf are constant training and a focus on happiness. According to the article, Denmark has focused on life-long education of its workers. Both the union and government enforce the value of education by allowing almost any employee to attend paid trainings and a strong encouragement to pick up new skills (Kjerulf,
A focus on happiness is driven from Danish culture, which believes that a job is not just a way to get paid; the workers expect to enjoy themselves at work (Kjerulf, 2014a). Denmark and several other Nordic countries each have a word within their language to express happiness at work; such words do not exist in the English language (Kjerulf, 2014a). It is important to realize that even our language can define our perceptions of workplace culture and health. In the United States we have trendy words and concepts such as organizational development, organizational health and wellness and organizational culture (hence this thesis); each title defined by whomever the writer is. At the core of all the organizational concepts, are we evaluating happiness at work? And more importantly shouldn’t we be?

The American culture plays a role in how work is perceived and as time progresses Americans may begin to see work in a different light. According to Paul Marciano (2010) who wrote that people are now sacrificing work for more family and personal time, people are taking care of themselves more. Today’s parents, especially men, want to be more involved in their children’s lives (Marciano, 2010). The American culture may be moving away from following the American dream that if you work hard enough you can make enough money and be happy.

This is especially prevalent as the deck is continually stacked against the common working person with the increase of corporate greed, deregulation of trade and outsourcing, and hysterical rates of arguably illegal increases of wealth for the elite few. Workers deserve more than a paycheck; they deserve joy in the workplace, dignity, respect and healthy workplace cultures.

Kjerulf (2014a) discussed the value placed within each worker and that the happiness of the worker is important to the company because, simply put, “happy workers are more productive and innovative and that consequently, happy companies have happier customers and
make more money”. Research shows that companies that invest in their workers, the working conditions and make deliberate choices towards happiness make better profits and survive financial crisis better (Kjerulf, 2014a). Hence, why Danish workers are among the most productive and why Denmark weathered the recent financial crisis relatively well (Kjerulf, 2014a).

How workers are encouraged and the implementation of change is important. Paul Marciano addresses in his book, *Carrots and Sticks Don’t Work* (2010) how reward and recognition programs do not work. Marciano outlines 20 specific reasons why reward and recognition do not work. I believe the two most important reasons he cites are that such programs have no impact on workplace culture and that reward programs decrease overall motivation. Marciano asserts that reward and recognition programs have no impact on organizational culture because as he stated “culture drives behavior and behavior reinforces culture” (2010, p. 34).

Furthermore, Mark H. Stone addressed compensation in his article “The Task of Work in Individual Psychology” (2007) stating that there is a psychological loss when the only thing a person derives from their work is a paycheck. Jobs that lack a craftsmanship and become repetitive and unappreciated task oriented work, can leave a person without a basis to evaluate what he or she has accomplished, which defeats our need to feel wanted (safe), needed (significant) and productive (belong) in the workplace (Stone, 2007).

It is imperative that a very clear distinction and declaration is made; as the writer of this thesis, I under no circumstances believe that organizations or corporations *are* people nor should they be treated as such. However, organizations are made up of people and their collective mental health translates to the culture of mental health in an organization. I do believe that
healthy workers equal a healthy workplace and therefore a better organization. The intent of this thesis is to critically examine an organization’s health and plan for treatment in order to build a more collaborative culture that values wellbeing and encourages growth.

The goal is to identify ways in which to improve the workplace culture by building safe roads to conflict resolution, and nurturing the ongoing health of the organization. In some areas competition can be fierce. With an improved economy comes a workforce that is more mobile in search for improved working conditions. Organizations need to offer competitive wages and benefits but they also need to offer competitive working conditions, which includes having a reputation of being a great workplace.

According to Kjerulf’s article comparing office policies that make Danish workers happier than American workers, 18% of American workers are disengaged, emotionally disconnected from the workplace and less likely to be productive (2014a). With high rates of disengagement there is much work to be done to implement a culture of cooperation, autonomy, and workplace happiness. Utilizing Adlerian theory in the workplace provides avenues in which to think and act with a holistic view as well as an individualistic perspective. The whole is more than the sum of its parts. The organization is more than just workers but also the interactions between workers and the subsequent culture based in worker (and management) behavior. The worker and the organization require an individual approach as defined by Adlerian Theory so as to improve workplace culture and health.

**Adlerian Theory**

Adlerian theory is based on the ideas of Alfred Adler, a psychiatrist who hypothesized alongside Sigmund Freud. The two men differed when Freud focused on unconscious drives and subsequently fathered psychoanalytic theory, while Adler preferred to focus on goals and wrote
that consciousness and unconsciousness move together in the same direction and are not contradictory (Adler, 1969). It has been said that Freud made psychotherapy a science whereas Adler made it a practice. Adler was the first social psychologist and he believed that the social and community realm was equally as important to psychology as the internal realm of the individual (Adler University, 2014).

Adlerian Psychology emphasizes the human need and ability to create social change and impact (Adler University, 2014). Therefore applying Adlerian theory to workplace culture naturally addresses the social collectivity of a workplace and the subsequent culture that develops. Adler took a holistic approach to understanding individuals, which starkly varied from other psychoanalysts of his time (Adler University, 2014).

Alfred Adler’s theory of psychology consisted of several theoretical components. Among these key components, the most relevant to the application of Adlerian theory to changing workplace culture and building morale are the concepts of social interest, holism, goal striving, the drive towards significance, belonging and encouragement.

Briefly put, social interest is our innate potentiality which must be developed to cooperate and function in the social culture (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Social interest, also known as social feeling is one’s attitude towards life and is developed solely through the social context (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Adlerian theory is a social psychology theory according to which all problems are social problems and the level of social interest ultimately determines the overriding psychological health of an individual. Our attitudes and behaviors are built, reinforced and successfully altered through the social context; hence workplace cultures must also be built, reinforced and successfully altered through the social context.
Adler believed that “all partial processes, such as drives, perception, memory and dreaming are subordinated to the whole (Adler, 1969, p. xi).” The “whole” that Adler described became what he called the individual’s style of life (Adler, 1969). The lifestyle is the vehicle that moves individuals towards their goals. The lifestyle encompasses all of our influences from birth order, early recollections, mistaken goals, perceptions, convictions and more. Adler wrote that “our whole understanding or striving to understand individuals would be futile if we could not be sure that the human being is a unity. If we presupposed two sides without relation to one another it would be impossible to see life as a complete entity” (Adler, 1969, pp. 16-17).

Adler’s theory clearly requires a holistic view of the individual but just as important is the social context and social relations of the individual and their environment (Adler, 1969). The human unity and social relations serve as the backbone of the theory and practice because, as Adler wrote: “We must always look at the whole social context of the facts we study. We must look at the social environment in order to understand the particular goal of superiority an individual chooses. We must look at the social situation, too, in order to understand a particular maladjustment” (Adler, 1969, p. 19).

Adler wrote that “The history of social progress tells the story of how men co-operated in order to overcome deficiencies and lacks” (Adler, 1969). This is crucial in evaluating how to improve workplace culture and morale through Adlerian theory. Adlerian theory supports what Paul Marciano (2010) wrote regarding culture driving behavior and behavior reinforcing culture. In order to achieve progress we co-operate to change the culture through our behavior and, as Adler taught behavior is based on goals and the social context, therefore we must recognize the goals of the workers and how they relate to one another through their lenses of individual goals met through social relationships.
The goals of individuals direct the movement of the individual and any movement that is away from the goal is self-defeating behavior (Reardon, 2001). Adlerian psychology is the psychology of movement. John Reardon (2001) wrote that Adlerian practice believes “people are in a state of movement or purposeful stillness” (p.30). Behaviors such as confusion, procrastination, repeated failure and unpreparedness are purposeful behaviors that have a goal (Reardon, 2001). The question to reflect on when faced with such behaviors is “what is the purpose of that behavior?”

Adler wrote that without the sense of a goal, individual activity would cease to have any meaning (Adler, 1969). If we think about this in terms of the workplace, we must ask ourselves what is the goal of the current culture? And what goals do continuing and reinforcing these behaviors achieve? Our workplace culture serves a purpose and it is perpetuated by our workplace behavior, as we ask ourselves the purpose of our behaviors we must also ask ourselves what the purpose of the culture is in order to begin to identify how to change it.

Adler conceived the idea that individuals determine their final fictive goal, which is the goal one continually strives towards early in childhood (Adler, 1969). All behavior is directed towards the perception that it will help achieve the goal (Adler, 1969). As the child develops, he or she does so along a “line of direction fixed by the goal which it chooses for itself” (Adler, 1969, p. 3). The goal dominates every movement and the goal is ultimately a measure of the individual’s social interest (Adler, 1969). Adlerian theory teaches that all goal striving and movement towards such goals is movement from a perceived minus to a felt plus (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).

Throughout Adler’s writings he described concept of goal striving. Every person has a driving goal and as children we strive to emulate the strong characters that we observe, which
helps shape the goal. As the child develops into an adult, the goals become more concrete and begin to shape career paths. For example, a child with a goal of always being right could grow up to become controlling of others. The child may grow up to become a judge, presiding over decisions of right and wrong. The child could also grow up to become a criminal, stealing what he believes is rightfully his. The goal does not determine the outcome. Adlerian theory would indicate that the goal outcome is dependent upon learned social interest. The line of direction chosen to achieve the goal is greatly dependent on an individual’s social interest (Stone & Drescher, 2004).

All individuals have inferiorities of some sort and strive to overcome them; this striving is defined as striving for superiority by Adler (1969). The behavior of striving is moving from a perceived minus to a felt plus (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Each individual determines what their perceived minus and felt plus may be hence the need for an individual approach to understanding and evaluating behaviors. Similar to the phrase “perception is reality,” whatever an individual or a culture of people identify as their perceived minus and felt plus could direct the movement and change the culture.

In addition to goal striving, Adler described three major life tasks within the lifestyle; love, work and social/friendship. These tasks have been expanded by contributing theorists but for the purpose of this topic only the original three will be addressed. When one task is engaged in a struggle the remaining tasks will be affected. Adlerian theory asserts that because all problems are social problems they must be solved in the social context (Adler, 1969). In his writings, Adler discussed that animals of weaker nature live in groups for their combined power and skills, whereas animals such as lions, bears or gorillas survive alone because nature has provided them what they need to protect themselves (Adler, 1969). Since we are social beings
our problems must be solved socially, our skills built socially and our health depends on the social situation. In order to be successful in impacting workplace culture, there must first be cooperation because such change simply cannot be achieved by one person or by a directive of one person. The change requires participation of the whole group of workers; the organization as a whole.

**Social Interest**

Social interest is derived from the German word gemeinschafsgfühl, which translated means social interest or social feeling (Ansbacher, 1991). It is the cardinal personality trait that reflects the relationship of an individual to his environment (Ansbacher, 1991). To best understand Adler’s concept of social interest, consider this passage:

> It is almost impossible to exaggerate the value of an increase in social feeling. The mind improves, for intelligence is a communal function. The feeling of worth and value is heightened, giving courage and an optimistic view, and there is a sense of acquiescence in the common advantages and drawbacks of our lot. The individual feels at home in life and feels his existence to be worthwhile just so far as he is useful to others and is overcoming common, instead of private, feelings of inferiority. Not only the ethical nature, but the right attitude in aesthetics, the best understanding of the beautiful and the ugly, will always be founded upon the truest of social feeling. (Ansbacher, 1991, p.774)

Alfred Adler stated that the three tasks of life (love, social, work) are all actually social problems that require social interest for a successful solution (Adler, 1969). Adler proposed that social interest is interwoven into all desirable traits and the absence of social interest is interwoven into all undesirable traits (Ansbacher, 1991).
An individual’s degree of social interest speaks directly to the investment and perceived value of a person to their work. One could hypothesize that a greater the perceived value leads to a deeper investment which would then lead us to believe that a workplace of individuals with a greater degree of social interest is a workplace of happier and industrious workers, i.e. a healthy organization.

Edward Watkins (1993) wrote that work comes to be a prime means of contribution by providing the person a way to give to the whole and thereby further society’s existence. Watkins went on to state than an “individual’s productivity on the job seemingly would be affected by and reflective of their degree of social feeling. Thus, the output of quality work would tend to provide some measure of a person’s general attitude of social interest” (Watkins, 1984, p. 35). Edward Watkins also wrote that the “greater the individual’s degree of social interest, the more apt the person (is) to be a productive worker on the job” (Watkins, 1984, p. 40). This means that great strides are needed to establish opportunities for increased social feelings and social investments in the workplace, both of which begin through encouragement.

We are social beings, our sense of significance and belonging is socially related. The use of the term social needs is not speaking solely of social interactions, but rather the social contribution; recognizing the greater whole and our individual contribution to a better, improved workplace. A greater social interest allows for a greater ability to be significant and to belong in the constructs of our lives. With one third of our lives spent working there is a strong need and benefit to investing in our work lives.

Adler’s belief in equality supports his greatest contribution which was the idea of social interest. Adler identified that people with high social interest would, of course, be mentally healthy, since social interest is the criterion for mental health (Ansbacher, 1991). If an
organization focuses on improving social interest in terms of the work environment to align with what Watkins theorized about work as a form of contribution to society as a whole, then we may deduce that establishing greater social interest should be a priority for employers who wish to have a maximized participatory workforce.

Adlerian theory has several components that, when applied to a workforce can assist in creating social change within the workplace. Adlerian interventions used to establish safe environments, build morale, identify solutions, and encourage growth will facilitate a healthier workforce and thus a healthier organization.

**Safety, Significance, Belonging**

Adler’s theory has continued to develop with the contributions from current Adlerian theorists. Along with the lifestyle, final goal, and social interest, there was also the concept that individuals share three common goals which are to feel safe, significant, and to belong (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964). The same goals exist for workers in the workplace. In order to develop within a career and thrive in a workforce people need a sense of safety, significance, and belonging.

Safety in the workplace allows individuals to develop skills and display them without fear. Significance in the workplace would promote the ability to contribute and cooperate with recognition of an individual’s uniqueness. A sense of belonging in the workplace could come from experiencing respectful and equal treatment.

In order for a worker to be the most successful, invested, and productive employee it is unequivocally required that each worker be safe, significant, and belong in their workforce. An unsafe working environment breeds fear and subsequently a fight, flight, or freeze response, none of which allows optimal working conditions (Reardon, 2001). Significance in the work creates a fulfillment of the individual’s work life task. Significance breeds pride and pride
equals investment. Workers who care about the work do better work. A sense of belonging promotes building relationships to do the work cohesively. The amount of time spent at work and amongst peers demands a sense of belonging and acceptance. I would propose that a sense of belonging breeds a desire to put forth effort to make positive workplace culture changes in order to increase the likelihood of enjoying the thousands of hours dedicated to work. Edward Watkins (1984) theorized about the approach of individuals to their work life task and how an individual approaches work relationships affects the type and variety of people that the individual can work with. Subsequently, Watkins described how work relationships carry their own unique demands and can exert a great influence on the worker’s feelings toward the workplace. In summary, the relationships we build or destroy at work can have a large impact on how we feel and perceive the workplace. Happiness at work is related to both the personal fulfillment of doing work as a contribution to society and the relationships we build and maintain in our workplace. This thesis asserts that the ability to build, encourage and support healthy sustainable relationships at work directly impacts the happiness of workers as well as the workplace culture and ultimately productivity.

When an individual belongs they may be more likely to experience respect and equality which may reduce turnover in the workplace. Belonging is crucial to the ability to develop the social relationships which enhance collective problem solving and facilitate workplace culture change.

Both the organization and the workforce will need to identify self-defined criteria for safety, significance, and belonging in the workplace. Clarifying these will help detect inconsistencies and begin the work of uncovering workplace values, which are addressed later in this thesis. The organization needs a clear direction and understanding of goals and an idea of
current and desired working environments. An individual may define safety as having nothing to do with locked doors and tempered glass and everything to do with preventing a select few from monopolizing discussion in a staff meeting. Inquiring into what individuals need to experience in order to foster safety in the workplace may reveal unexpected results. I encourage each individual to define their own ideals on safety, significance, and belonging as a powerful and encouraging leadership tool.

**Equality**

In order for all workers to be safe, feel significant, and to belong there must be equality. Workers who are not experiencing equality may have a hard time finding where they belong in the workplace. According to the Merriam Webster online dictionary (2014), equality is described as an ideal of uniformity; in the context of the dictionary definition, Adler would describe equality in the uniformity that we are all human. Equality does not equal uniformity; Rudolf Dreikurs (Dreikurs & Stolz, 1964) wrote “equality means that people, despite all their individual differences and abilities, have equal claims to dignity and respect” (p. 8). Equality is how people are regarded amongst their individuality; it is not a measurement of value or importance.

Adler’s view of equality is not meant to minimize accomplishments or differences. Equality means that regardless of accomplishments, or lack thereof, the person next to us is no better or worse because of such differences. We are equal because we are human. The child is equal to the mother in their humanity. The boss is equal to the worker in their humanity. The man is equal to the woman in their humanity. Equality based on humanity allows for people to make their own choices and to have an influence on their own environment.
Adler referred to equality as an ability to identify with the other person so as “to see with the eyes, hear with the ears and feel with the heart of another” (Adler, 1969, p. 113). When we are able to feel with the heart of another we are able to honor equality amongst all individuals.

**Encouragement**

Another cornerstone of Adlerian theory is the definition and use of encouragement. Adlerian encouragement must not be confused with praise. Praise expresses evaluation and approval of behavior, such as “I like what you did, you have accomplished what I expected of you” and it implies comparison with others (Oberst & Steward, 2003).

Encouragement avoids placing too much emphasis on the individual; instead it emphasizes the social or functional value of the behavior or product (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). Encouragement acknowledges the effort more than the result, and encouragement is still present in the face of failure (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). “The concept of encouragement implies avoiding criticism and emphasizing the positive aspects” (Oberst & Stewart, 2003, p.113), which means that an organization that encourages spends its energy building skills through positivity with its workforce. Encouragement provides the space for positive solution based problem solving as opposed to pass or fail praise based evaluation.

Praise has the ability to make someone want to work for approval; encouragement has the ability to make someone work for mutual cooperation. Encouragement supports team work and team building naturally. Over time the encouraged worker could avoid burn out, and frustration and enjoy their work life more. Adler spoke about encouragement as the need to instill courage into others (Stone & Dresher, 2004). “Only individuals who feel that they are part of the whole, who feel as if they are at home on the earth, who expect both advantages and disadvantages, who sense a feeling of belonging with others, are individuals who express courage. Courage is seen
only on the useful side of life, in solving the problems of work, society and intimacy. The useless side of life does not insist on courage” (Stone & Drescher, 2004, p.28). Adler also quantifies how to accomplish such courage when he said, “No one ever succeeds in becoming courageous by thinking about courage, or by separating from the group and determining to be courageous. Courage can only be learned in practice. The foundation for all courage is social courage- courage in our relationships with others” (Stone & Drescher, 2004, p. 35).

Adler taught encouragement as a social phenomenon. Through which, one encouraged person shares it with another person by being courageous themselves. Individuals promulgate encouragement when we embody it through social interactions thus allowing encouragement to grow and prosper. According to Adler’s teachings, encouragement in the workplace would be contagious as it overcomes the culture and the workforce experiences the utmost satisfaction of being courageous in their work.

Adlerian theory to build workplace morale aims at changing the workplace away from false rewards to a culture of courage, co-operation and holism providing rewards far deeper. Adlerian theory to build workplace morale intends to modify the work life task so that individuals are motivated to achieve self-fulfillment of their work task. We are spending at least a third of our available hours per year, at work. We deserve to enjoy those hours and feel good about those hours spent.

**Goal Striving**

Adler defined goal striving as “the power which expresses itself in the desire to develop, to strive and to achieve and even to compensate for defeats in one direction by striving for success in another” (Adler, 1969, p.1). Individuals have goals in each of the life tasks, Adler believed that without goals, the activity and behavior of individuals would lack any meaning.
The goals in our work life task would lead individuals to find meaning in their work life and to assure that the time spent on the work task is fulfilling.

Adler’s theory about striving, as described by John Reardon (2006), is that individuals tend to strive either along a vertical axis which would be against others or they strive along a horizontal axis which would be with others. Individuals who strive vertically tend to have conflict that reflects beliefs such as feeling that people are against them. Vertical strivers will elevate themselves over others and this interferes with their ability to respect equality. A vertical striver’s behavior would resemble a ladder on which all movement is over/under others and others are mere ladder rungs to step on to reach higher on the ladder. Horizontal striving resembles working towards a common goal and raising the water so that all boats rise. Horizontal strivers view the world from a collective social context perspective which recognizes that the value lies outside of themselves as individuals.

John Reardon further explains Adler’s theory of horizontal striving by recognizing that equality and cooperation are tools for horizontal striving and that behind horizontal striving is a wish to belong and contribute (Reardon, 2001). Furthermore, vertical striving occurs when an individual lacks a sense of place or belonging and a sense of contribution or significance and therefore desires to dominate others (Reardon, 2001). There cannot be equality or cooperation in the workplace when vertical striving reigns. Career advancement and promotion are possible without vertical striving. Leaders emerge from encouraging cooperation of solving workplace programs.

As previously discussed, Alexander Kjerulf (2014a) wrote about a lower power distance, which, when combined with Adlerian theory, would result in a lower power distance being conducive to horizontal striving, collaboration, and ease of communication. On the other hand, a
greater power distance would facilitate vertical striving and poor communication. The concepts are intertwined and dependent. A greater power distance will hinder communication and suffocate horizontal striving leaving only vertical striving behaviors to be supported and recognized within an organization.

Adler’s theory of goal striving encompasses how goals are accomplished and also how belonging is achieved through goal striving. Individuals seek to be encouraged and to encourage others, which is another way to experience belonging. Goal striving is the lifelong movement towards belonging and contributing towards the greater whole; it is never complete and continues to form.

Values and Priorities

Goal striving of an individual are guided by values, whether an individual is aware of them or not (Ansbacher, 1991). People will stick to bad habits because they continue to find them to be useful and a tool to achieve wants. Only when a behavior no longer reaps reward will it be abandoned (Dreikurs, 1964). When achievement of a goal is stagnated, the individual or organization must re-evaluate the behavior and steps in the efforts to achieve a goal. When a goal is not achieved it does not necessarily indicate a bad goal, but perhaps rather a poor plan to achieve the goal.

Values are often what motivate and move people to take action. Evaluating what our values are helps us to recognize what motivates us to make change. In order to change a workplace culture the individuals within the culture will need to identify values. One way to identify values is an exercise introduced by John Reardon, an instructor at Adler Graduate School in Richfield, Minnesota. The exercise asks individuals to list their top 10 values. Individuals are then guided through a series of eliminations of the listed value ultimately
resulting with one final value selection which is driving value. The final value represents the most prevalent driving value of that individual and a major contributing value of any goal striving.

The exercise encourages critical thinking and can assist in identifying incongruences. For example, if an individual identifies health as a driving value and they are working for a corporation that genetically modifies food, they may find themselves in conflict and subsequently unhappy in their work task of life. Identifying the cognitive dissonance between what a person believes in and the work life task can encourage a person to modify perspectives and make peace with dissonance or modify behaviors to live and work within the value to achieve congruence.

An additional concept that complements Adlerian theory regarding values is the Pew Priorities theory, as identified by Nira Kefir, W.L. (Bill) Pew, and Scottky-Schoenaker. The Pew Priorities are a system to identify the goals of a particular behavioral inclination. Although individuals have a unique style of living, i.e. Adlerian Lifestyle, there are some common tendencies and motivations amongst most people (Schoenaker, 2011).

The four Pew Priorities are: comfort, pleasing, control, and superiority—also referred to as significance (Schoenaker, 2011). Whichever priority is identified also inversely reveals the fear to be avoided at all costs. For example, an individual whose Pew priority is comfort will protect that priority because the priority exists to avoid stress. Stress is the avoided response, so in order to avoid stress the individual surrounds himself/herself with comfort and protects their sense of comfort. The priority of pleasing protects the individual from experiencing rejection. The priority of control protects the individual from unexpected humiliation. The priority of
superiority (significance) helps the individual to protect against feeling as though their existence lacks meaning.

The individual will surround themselves with the priority behaviors and constructs in order to avoid the feeling most disturbing to the individual because, as Theo Schoenaker stated in his book *Encouragement Makes Good Things Happen*, “fear is the emotion behind avoidance behavior” (Schoenaker, 2011, p. 61). For example, an individual who completes the value identification exercise and identifies equality as the driving value and subsequently has superiority (significance) as a Pew Priority could have a heightened awareness of gender inequality and would subsequently align all goals to eliminate the inequality and would find significance in doing so. With the awareness of the inequality there must be effort to rectify this inequality, otherwise the individual may feel insignificant to be discriminated for gender and not take action against the discrimination. A lack of action to eliminate the inequality could result in feeling a lack of meaning for a person who values equality and whose PEW priority is to be significant.

The identified value and Pew Priority likely will work in conjunction to drive the individual’s goal striving and subsequent behavior. Having a self-understanding of what our own values and Pew Priorities are allows us to be better co-workers, communicators, and to consciously align our values and priorities in workplace behaviors. As an example, a leader who is aware of his/her own Pew priority and knows what he/she wants to avoid can become a more productive leader by intentionally choosing leadership behaviors that protect his or her priority. Schoenaker also stated that “attaining one’s priority, therefore symbolizes attaining peace” (Schoenaker, 2011, p. 63). Schoenaker promotes the importance of identifying the priority because, “problems and symptoms will lose most of their unpredictability” (2011, p. 64) and
therefore dissipate. Our workplace conflicts rooted in fear and unpredictability can dissipate when we explore priorities and values and how they are exposed in the workplace.

A workforce that has the tools to better understand their role within the organization not as instructed by the organization but through a process of identifying personal priorities, values and genuine social interest as self-motivating factors would naturally feed the propensity to maintain a healthy workforce.

The roles we acquire throughout life develop the values we grow to live by. Our values shape our goals and our goal striving determines our behavior. An individual’s birth order plays a role in development of problem solving, communicating and potential leadership styles.

**Birth Order**

Adler’s theory of birth order was one of his many great contributions and many contributors to the field of psychology have identified similar values to birth order. It continues to be studied and used for evaluations to date. Birth order contributes to the individual lifestyle and “is often considered to affect the type of character a child establishes within the family and, ultimately, in society” (Watkins, 1984). Birth order can also assist in clarifying or understanding how individuals communicate with others. Adler theorized about how the psychological birth order affected a person’s lifetime of functioning and role playing. Edward Watkins Jr. asserted that “a person’s vocational self is considered an extension and replication of that individual’s basic attitude toward self” (Watkins, 1984, p. 29). Watkins also wrote that an individual’s vocational expectations will be consistent with an individual’s personal expectations of themselves (Watkins, 1984). Understanding the role of birth order in the workplace is useful to leaders in order to promote and encourage different communication styles.
A key to understanding Adler’s birth order theory is recognizing the difference between psychological birth order and chronological birth order. The psychological birth order is what the person perceives as their birth order and reflects the situation into which a person is born (White, Campbell, Stewart, Davis, & Pilkington, 1997).

White et al. (1997) wrote about Adler’s birth order theory and described the psychological first born as individuals who strive for perfection, desire to please adults, value following rules, and impose rules upon others. Adler wrote in his book *The Science of Living* (1969), that the first born enjoys great power; they “have the feeling that those in power should remain in power and it was only accidental that they have lost their power; therefore they have great admiration for it” (p. 91).

Oldest children in the workplace are likely to be the most aware of the power structure and balance within the organization. Studies have shown that being first born is not necessarily an indicator for who are most likely to be striving for promotional opportunities (White et al., 1997). First born children are likely to be natural leaders who are highly respected and followed by co-workers even mimicking a natural family dynamic in the workplace. First born children could be instrumental in leading positive change in the workplace and to building workplace morale as they are likely to be keenly aware of equality or lack thereof as well as goal striving. The first born is the child with strong tendencies to continue to strive to be first and to maintain their position or power often making them goal oriented. Goal striving could speak strongly to first born individuals in the workplace.

The second born child holds a unique position and tendencies may vary whether they are a second born or middle child. Adler described the second born as the child who goes along, not as the center of attention (Adler, 1969). The second born child “does not recognize power, but
wants power to change hands. He feels a forward urge as in a race. All his movements show that he is looking at a point ahead in order to catch up to it. He is always trying to change the laws of science and nature. He is really revolutionary—not so much in politics, but in social life and his attitude toward his fellows” (Adler, 1969, p. 91). The second born could be a uniquely creative problem solver who is able to brainstorm without the restrictions of the “should” in the world. Second born children often defy laws of nature and reality; this is evident from early days of playing through adulthood life choices.

Middle children can be peacemakers, often sandwiched between two children with very different roles within the family; the first born and the baby. Middle children may refrain from the spotlight and conflict because there is no role for them there, the oldest and baby may fulfill such role obligations.

The psychological youngest child is often the child with the special position and faces fewer demands from others (White et al., 1997). Adler described the youngest child in his book *The Science of Living* (1969) as a remarkable position because the youngest child can never be dethroned. The youngest child “in general takes an entirely different way from the rest of the family… he must always be different” (p. 92). The youngest child may very well be an excellent organizer since they have a family history of organizing the family to serve their own needs. The youngest child in the workplace may be the creative innovator marching to his or her very own beat.

Finally, there is the ever remarkable only child. The only child is the center of attention in the family; he or she lives with a great deal of perceived pressure (White et al., 1997). The only child carries the hopes of the family on their shoulders (White et al., 1997). The only child can present variously different in the workplace based on childhood experiences, however, they
are often abnormally mature. The likelihood that the only child has been a part of the adult world far longer than a person with other birth orders puts them in a position of understanding relationships and interactions in the workplace with a keen eye and deep understanding of roles and behaviors.

Adler clarifies in *The Science of Living* (1969) that such predictions based on birth order are simply tendencies. They are not assured. Many things can influence these tendencies such as gender, family structure, trauma, and the modern blended families. Birth order plays an often various and unpredictable role. There are themes within each birth order relating to communication styles, creativity, and approaches to life. Birth orders are worth knowing to understand and recognize to determine effective ways to encourage workers on an individual basis in the workplace. There is no cookie cutter approach to encourage workers and to create culture change. All people and each workplace culture must be addressed on an individualistic basis just as Adler approached his patients with individual psychology. When we look at the whole we can see how to approach the individual parts, and when we examine the individual parts we learn how to approach the whole in the workplace.

**Adler in Action**

Certain strategies could be used to introduce Adlerian theories in the workplace. Start with a critical analysis of the current culture, then identify the goal of what the culture could be. First the organization as a whole, with the contribution of all workers, needs to identify what the current morale of the working environment is. Then, the same group needs to identify what desired or ideal working environment would look like. One strategy to stimulate creativity in the search for the best solution is to employ the Miracle Question, developed by Steven De Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg in 1982. Simply put, the question is to the effect of “Tonight when you go
to bed while you are sleeping a miracle occurs, the problems you have presented (whatever they
may be) are solved. Because you were asleep you do not know how they were solved
(eliminates barriers of how to achieve the solution), when you awake in the morning, how will
you discover the problem is solved? How could your friends, family or co-workers know this
miracle has happened?” The answer is more important than the question (De Shazer, 2000), as
whatever the answer is will indicate the solution and reveal a path of achievement. The Miracle
Question shifts the conversation to the future when problems are gone (De Shazer, 2000). When
people are asked to speak about an ideal picture, they avoid listing all the barriers of how to get
there and just talk about what the ideal is. This is a time saver and maintains a positive, solution
focused route to change.

After the current environment and the goal environments are identified, it is necessary to
move into more personal questions and evaluations. This can be a delicate area because often
people do not want to share personal information at work. There is a distinct purpose to
engaging in self-evaluation and identification, just as all behavior serves a purpose (Adler, 1969),
the following activities do as well. Rudolf Dreikurs, an Adlerian disciple of sorts, wrote several
books which I personally revere as bibles to encourage change in humans, one of which being
Children the Challenge (1964). Although this book explores behaviors of children and parenting
issues, it is expandable to almost every life situation with some creativity on behalf of the reader.
Dreikurs wrote, “If we want to help a child change his direction, we must understand what makes
him move. Unless we are aware of what is in back of his behavior, we have little chance to
change it. We can only induce him to behave differently by changing his motivation” (Dreikurs
& Stolz, 1964, p. 12). Replace the word child with worker and you now understand why we
must go through the exercises of identifying for each individual worker what makes them move.
To repeat what Paul Marciano wrote (2010), “culture drives behavior and behavior reinforces culture.” We are learning what drives the behavior based on Rudolf Dreikurs and Alfred Adler to then learn how to change behavior to change culture in the workplace.

Alexander Kjerulf studies how to be happy at work and wrote that relationships are what make us happy at work and can fulfil our need to belong (2014b, p.36). Kjerulf (2014b) also wrote that when workers were asked to identify what make them happy at work, four topics were identified most: nice co-workers, a good manager, good communication, a sense of humor in the workplace (Kjerulf, 2014b, p. 37). All of the topics identified are social and relationship based. How we interact determines our happiness at work. In order to interact successfully we need to feel safe, significant, and to belong, but how do we know what that means for each individual person? We ask and find out.

The workers will first identify their criteria for a workplace where they experience a sense of safety, significance, and belonging. Using a simple guided survey to encourage individuals to identify what they need to feel safe in the workplace. For example, “what do you need to not only feel physically safe at work but to feel emotionally safe to contribute at work?”

The same question could be asked for significance. “What do you need to feel significance within your work and in your workplace?” There are no wrong answers, each answer helps gain an understanding as to what an individual needs and wants from their work life experience.

Finally, there is a sense of belonging. This can be a bit more difficult to identify. I would encourage that individuals first be asked to think about a place or time in their lives that they felt they belonged; this does not need to be shared with anyone it serves only to begin thinking a certain pathway. What about that time or place where you belonged made you feel a
sense of belonging? Everyone has at least one moment, so the question cannot be avoided. Whatever that aspect, small or large, detailed or not, that created or allowed a sense of belonging is what we need the individual to identify as how they achieve a feeling of belonging in the workplace.

The answers to the above questions need to be submitted anonymously to the organization to cumulatively look at the responses of what the workforce needs to feel safe, significant, and to belong, as well as what the solution looks like. These answers should shape the organizations goal of the new workplace culture. The workplace culture goal should never be identified based on assumptions without worker input.

The current environment of the workplace has been identified; the goal environment is identified so we now know where we are and where we want to go. Next, the leaders within the organization need to practice how to encourage and motivate their workforce. All activities require 100% participation. A good leader cannot lead others without self-awareness and humility. One place to begin is an evaluation of values.

A fast and easy value exercise is one which John Reardon developed and practices. The purpose of the exercise is to identify one driving value of an individual. Each person will identify a list of 10 values. Then, through a timed exercise, each person will reduce their list to one value. All movement will align with that goal and the individual maintains a keen awareness of that value. Identifying the driving value is helpful in understanding why individuals preserve certain attitudes and positions.

Leaders can be more effective when they identify their own driving value because that will enable them to understand how workers values can shape attitudes, positions, and motivations. It will also provide space for greater understanding of others. For example,
someone who values loyalty may struggle with a change of leaders within the organization. When we know these pieces of information about ourselves and those we engage with and work with every day, there is a possibility to foster better communication and greater workplace satisfaction and ultimately, productivity and personal success.

After identifying a driving value the next important piece to identify are priorities. Life demands pull people in various directions. All day, everyday people are prioritizing tasks, feelings, and decisions, so the awareness of an individual’s general driving priority will provide insight into workplace behaviors. The Pew Priorities exercise is a basic identification method that categorizes individuals into one of four categories. The priority is identified by the individual choosing which feeling (of four choices) is most important to avoid at all costs. The avoided feeling is conjoined to the Pew Priority. The avoided feeling is one of the following: stress, rejection, insignificance, or humiliation. Divide the room into four corners sending each group to a space. When the group is able to physically see that they are not the only person who avoids humiliation or rejection it is not only comforting but brings awareness of who in their workplace is similar to them. Individuals may feel a sense of belonging which is a positive side effect of the exercise. The Pew Priority will be described to the group as a whole with an opportunity to determine if that priority fits, some people may need to wander to a different group if they feel it fits better.

Next, the individuals will identify their psychological birth order. A brief list of general tendencies of each birth order will be shared and discussed as to how the general traits may play a role in the workplace. All descriptions are fluid and some pieces may apply better than others as none of these tendencies or identifiers are concrete or stagnant.
Learning about our own communication skills and vacancies provides opportunity for improvement. Communication is fluid, individualized, and difficult. People need practice and routine re-evaluation of their skills, their success, and how to constantly improve. So many workplace culture problems are rooted in poor communication but improving communication doesn’t occur by reading inspirational stories; it happens on purpose with effort and trial and error. Everyone must be willing to try and fail and then try again. There must be a commitment from all parties to bravely do this work and see it through to the end.

Finally, now that we have all of this information what can be done with it? First, the group collectively identifies ways in which to experience social interest in the workplace. Some potential ideas are to create brainstorm groups, begin collaborative projects that are true group projects. Job shadowing between workers are opportunities for individuals to learn what the other people in their workplace do. Another idea is to engage in purposeful team building events and build comradery; even doing something as simple as starting a meeting with trivia can begin facilitate humor, a connection, and a sense of team work which facilitates belonging.

Beyond building social interest and a sense of belonging, how can actual culture change occur? This is the toughest part. Based on the magic wand solution that is identified, we can build steps to achieve it. I suggest a rough timeline be established. It is important to be realistic and build in time to spend with the workforce. Stay dedicated to completion; keep in mind that flexibility is necessary.

Some requirements that exist across all workplaces are transparency in process, decision making, and communication. If something cannot be changed or achieved, explain why. Workers may not agree, but at the very least they know why and have an answer as opposed to a lack of response which allows assumptions, rumors, and a feeling of disregard.
Along with transparency is communication and follow up. Soliciting the information, some of which is quite personal, with no follow up or communicated timeline is disrespectful. Plan far ahead and allow for flexibility. Share the timeline with everyone who is a contributor. When people know what to expect, behavior improves. If a deadline will be missed, share that. Try to stay on schedule and when you can’t, admit it. In the long term plan, identify possible barriers and share if that barrier occurs. Don’t be afraid to accept input on problem solving from the workforce, they are likely to be helpful in overcoming the barrier. Don’t be afraid to share, what is there to hide? This is the collective workplace culture, everyone is a contributor there is no reason to hide information, experiences, or barriers.

Now that we have goals, timelines, self-awareness, priorities, and commitment from the workforce and its leaders, there is an opportunity for culture change. Commitment to transparency and honesty is of utmost importance. Without those pieces it will not matter what happens, because success of a large group is contingent upon equal knowledge, input, and value.

Conclusion

As we utilize the multiple facets of Adlerian theory in the workplace, we are building a better understanding of ourselves and the impact we have on others as well as how to better communicate and effectively work with others by understanding the uniqueness of each person.

As human beings we are problem solvers, we solve problems all day every day. As we move through our day solving problem after problem, we make assumptions about the world around us in order to move onto the next solution faster (Reardon, 2013, personal communication). Building relationships is complicated work. Learning to work with people in order to motivate them, encourage them, and move them takes learned skills. To be a leader in an organization and to lead with success it takes effort to gain understanding of the self and
others. Leaders need to reflect and re-evaluate their communication styles frequently and make an effort to learn about others and match the audience. A critical component to building positive workplace culture is the workforce feeling as if they and their opinions matter or, as Adler called it, feeling significant. Being significant in the workplace supports workers being invested in their work. Adler taught that cooperation begets cooperation and encouragement begets encouragement (Stone & Drescher, 2004). Leaders within organizations have a special role to foster cooperation and provide encouragement because we know it produces a workforce of cooperation and encouraged workers.

Organizations that value the health of the workforce care if morale is good or bad, and strive to have a cooperative workplace. Failing to include the workforce in forming the vision of the workplace is like opening a restaurant with a great menu but no chef or service staff. If you want a great organization, fill it with good people then get to know those people. Support their ideas, listen, honor their humanity and create a safe place where people belong and are significant in their work. For the number of hours everyone spends in their work, everyone deserves to have dignity, respect, and joy in those hours. It becomes a responsibility to be an employer that facilitates such working conditions.

Using Adlerian theory to improve workplace culture, build morale, improve organizational health, and subsequently employee wellness, addresses the larger social problem through social contextual problem solving methods. Finally, as Alexander Kjerulf stated a “happy employee is a productive employee,” (2014a) and any intelligently led organization wants both.
References


