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### Improve Organizational Commitment by Leading Like a Therapist

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# Improve Organizational Commitment by Leading Like a Therapist

## Abstract

The 21st-century workplace underemphasizes the importance of relational leadership, at the expense of the bottom line. Although there is a plethora of both popular and academic literature on the importance of good leadership in the workplace, relational leadership techniques have been misunderstood and underutilized. Dynamic psychology theories that emphasize the importance of relationships—such as self psychology—can be used to produce organizational results.

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## Improve Organizational Commitment by Leading like a Therapist

The 21st-century workplace underemphasizes the importance of relational leadership, at the expense of the bottom line. Although there is a plethora of both popular and academic literature on the importance of good leadership in the workplace, relational leadership techniques have been misunderstood and underutilized. Dynamic psychology theories that emphasize the importance of relationships—such as self psychology—can be used to produce organizational results.

This discussion reflects a theoretical, interdisciplinary approach to leadership. Specifically, I have applied Kohut's clinical theory of self psychology (1971) to current organizational research on leadership and organizational commitment, with the hope of demonstrating that relational leadership can improve organizational outcome. The benefits of such an approach are myriad, but in business terms, this approach can be used to reduce overhead expenses associated with employee turnover.

Historically, the scientific interest in leadership development has grown as modern-day industrialism has advanced. There are extensive examples of leadership throughout history, religion, literature, and myth from whom we can learn, but serious scientific inquiry into the field began only within the last century (Terman, 1904; Smith and Krueger, 1933). Since that time, leadership theory has received such rapidly increasing attention that the field is now one of the most popularized areas of psychological study. Despite this advancement, organizational theorists are in the early stages of understanding the importance of a leader's relational abilities for improvement in organizational outcomes.

Consistent with other psychological theories that evolved during the mid-nineteenth century, leadership theories that grew out of this time (e.g., Carlyle's Great Man Theory, 1841)

emphasized intrinsic attributes, rather than developmentally-honed skills, behaviors, and attitudes over one's lifetime (Frew, 2006). These trait-based theories came under increasing scrutiny during the early 20th-century as the importance of societal context on a person's development became emphasized, and by the 1940s the transition of leadership theories towards behavioral, contingency, and transactional theories had begun (e.g., Stogdill, 1948). These theories suggest that leadership must be acquired, developed, and honed over the course of our lives. Clinical theories that provide insight into human relational development (such as psychodynamic theories of self psychology and intersubjective systems theory) hold valuable potential for such leadership models that incorporate a "work-in-progress" approach—and yet, to date, such clinical applications have been limited.

Changes in the landscape of the workplace have also contributed to a shifting need for new approaches to leadership. With the onset of the technological revolution toward the end of the 20th century, industry—and as corollaries, leadership and management theories—moved into a "knowledge-based economy" (Northouse, 2013, p. 328), where staying abreast of rapidly shifting technological developments became (and continues to be) of central focus and challenge. Arthur & Rousseau (1996) suggest that such rapid shifting of employment, industrial, and technological trends has given rise to the phenomenon of the protean career—in which individuals must make themselves increasingly proactive and flexible to remain marketable. As industry advances and changes, so must employees. Correspondingly, a different approach to leadership is required if a manager hopes to retain employees who are constantly on the lookout for the next best thing. That is, targeted retention tactics are necessary to retain the flexible and proactive employees of today's workforce, in contrast to the tactics required to retain individuals

of the mid-20th century who often maintained a steady skill set and commitment to their employing organization through the entirety of a career.

Psychodynamic approaches to leadership are well suited for modern challenges in retaining committed employees, primarily because they emphasize the importance of psychological flexibility within relationships. Freud (1921) noted that employees tend to have strong emotional attachments to leaders, and as such, a dynamic approach to leadership is more than fitting when considering employee organizational commitment. Ragins and Kram (2007) suggest that where employee commitment may have once been economically derived, the protean career has shifted the grounding of commitment to work relationships and social aid that are “developmental and growth enhancing” (p. 6). In other words, 21st-century employees stay put when they experience relationships that help them grow. Such shifts in the manner by which workforce commitment is maintained “has major implications for leadership practice” (Northouse, 2013, p. 328). It takes a different kind of leader to retain an employee motivated by facilitative relationships as compared to a sole household wage-earner (usually male) motivated by the need to put food on the table for his family. Although Freud considered leadership theory as early as 1921, psychodynamic tactics appropriate to industry shifts of the technological age have only garnered attention within the last two decades (e.g., Klein, Gabelnick, and Herr, 1998; Goethals, 2005; Northouse, 2013). To date, it appears that psychodynamic theorists have not yet considered the relationship between dynamic leadership and organizational commitment, nor how such relationships connect to organizational outcome.

Industrial and organizational theories of leadership have incorporated ideas based in psychodynamics into their re-conceptualizations of modern leadership. Transformational leadership theory, first described by Burns (1978), was one response to the shifting needs of

today's workforce, in which the leader's primary task is to elicit enough change that her employees experience improvement in morale and motivation. According to Fletcher (2007), "many different labels [have been used] to describe this new leadership prototype, such as authentic leadership [Luthans & Avolio, 2003], quiet leadership [Badarraco, 2002], humble leadership [Collins, 2001], transformational leadership [Bass, 1998], and connective leadership [Lipman Blumen, 1996]" (p. 348), but they all assert the importance of working "in and through relationships and [fostering] relational health in their organizations" (p. 348). This is fundamentally a psychodynamic concept. Despite the emphasis on relationships within these models, however, there remains a limited understanding of *how* such styles affect organizational outcomes. This is partially a result of our limited knowledge of the "mechanisms that connect leaders and followers" (Densten, 2008, p. 106, citing Lord and Brown, 2004). Given that clinical theories have a good understanding of the mechanisms that connect individuals in relationship with one another (particularly dynamic theories), it is surprising that the organizational leadership literature has incorporated so little clinical understanding. One notable exception is Frew's (2006) discussion of the application of Gestalt theory to transformational leadership theory. To date, however, it appears that there is an absence of published work on the specific connection between organizational outcome and the leader-follower relationship, as viewed through a clinical lens.

Thus, given the recent revisioning of leadership theories towards transformational models that emphasize the importance of growth within relationships, it follows that a managing leader's ability to influence employee commitment may be connected to her ability to form relationships with her employees. Clinical psychology theories that focus on the use of relationships as a way of effecting change are thus highly useful to individuals who want to become better relational

leaders and improve organizational outcomes. In particular, self psychology—a more recent psychodynamic theory—can be used to provide a roadmap for understanding this connection as well as to enhance work relationships that foster employee organizational commitment. Self psychology may be distinguished from other dynamic theories in that it was the first to suggest that an individual's growth is not fostered through intentional and active change; instead, self psychology proposes that if an individual's emotional needs are met at a developmentally appropriate level within the context of a relationship, he will experience himself and behave differently (Lessem, 2005). Although psychodynamic theories have been applied to leadership theory as organizational psychology has recognized the importance of relational leadership, it appears that self psychology has not yet received consideration.

Not only does self psychology provide a unique relational and developmental perspective on leadership that has not yet been considered, it also holds potential applications for the use of work relationships as a mechanism of organizational change. Specifically, existing research that suggests a link between organizational outcome and the quality of work relationships (Hom & Griffeth, 1995) can be understood and extended through the application of a self-psychological lens. As the trend of organizational research moves toward leadership theories that emphasize work relationships, self psychology will be an increasingly useful theory for application. Ultimately, self psychology offers a tool for leaders to improve their employing organization, the lives of their followers, and themselves.

### **Self Psychology**

Self psychology is an approach to psychotherapy developed by Heinz Kohut (1971) in response to his experience working as a Freudian psychoanalyst (Lessem, 2005). Kohut's psychotherapeutic approach was one of the first that recognized the importance of empathy as a

central tenet to working with patients, which was in contrast to Freud, who had emphasized the importance of the therapist acting as a blank slate onto whom the patient could project his or her internal conflicts. For the self psychologist to be successful in facilitating a client's growth, it is important to be an empathic, attuned, and self-aware person.

Kohut also departed from Freud in his conceptualization of internal conflict. Whereas Freud considered all intrapsychic conflict to result from psychosexual transferences (at least in his early career), Kohut understood internal conflict to result from the absence of “selfobject needs”—important developmental experiences within the context of a relationship with a caregiving other (Lessem, 2005). These needs, as Kohut saw it, are born from an infant's desire to maintain a sense of unity and cohesion with the mothering figure, and later in life to maintain an internal sense of cohesion with the self (as individuation occurs). Such needs take various forms, which Kohut expanded upon throughout his career, such as idealization, mirroring, and twinship (see Appendix A for an expansion upon these terms and additions made by later theorists). Each of these selfobject needs is relevant in the consideration of approaches to therapy, and by extension, to leadership. To Kohut, the psychotherapist's (and leader's) task is to empathically facilitate self-structuralization and nurturance of selfobject needs that have gone unmet through an individual's development. Kohut's conceptualizations of the self, selfobject needs, and empathy are especially important for the self-psychological leader, and are discussed below.

It would be prudent to pause here for a moment to make a distinction between the roles of leaders and therapists. I am not asserting that they are one and the same, that the practical tasks of leaders should be different than they are, nor that leaders *must* behave like self-psychological therapists to be good leaders. I am asserting, however, that successful approaches to each role



overlap significantly, and that good leaders embody many of the characteristics and behaviors of good self-psychological therapists: reflective listening skills; the ability to detach from one's own perspective to understand another's; an understanding of the ways in which problematic behaviors can also be protective, valuable and useful; and an awareness of personal history that a person brings with them to the proverbial table. Leaders and therapists play similar roles.

Few works have considered clinical approaches to leadership development in this way; however, the current trend of organizational leadership towards transformational leadership theory is highly consistent with self psychological approaches that emphasize growth within relationships. Frew (2006) asserts that this new wave of transformational approaches to leadership emphasizes the importance of the process between leader and follower, especially when the needs of the follower are central to the leader. This aligns nicely with self-psychological approaches to therapy, which emphasize an intersubjective relationship in which the therapist provides a corrective emotional experience for a client such that the client can experience himself in a new and different way. Given the similarity of roles between leaders and therapists, leaders can benefit from self psychology's approach of meeting the needs of another in their efforts towards gaining employee commitment.

### **Leadership and Organizational Commitment**

Leadership inherently assumes a relational position. In order to lead, one must have another *to* lead. The same is true for the concept of following, where a relational position under another is assumed. In other words, both leading and following are mutually connected within an interdependent, dynamic relationship. Assuming this premise, leadership development can be understood to be the process by which leaders tailor their influence. "Most definitions of leadership explicitly recognize the role of influence and there is growing acceptance of what

leadership is required to influence, namely emotions, cognitions, and behaviors of others” (Densten, 2008). Leaders are thus individuals who can effect change by influencing others to follow.

One indicator of the influence of a leader is the extent to which a follower is committed to that leader. The importance of employee commitment has become emphasized in recent years as the technological revolution has advanced, especially given the rapid outsourcing of human jobs to computerization (Miller, 2017). There is debate over the impact that computerization will have on human employment, but it appears clear that remaining and newly-developed positions will require increased talent in interpersonal and strategic domains (Miller, 2017). Securing and retaining this kind of talent will likely become more difficult as the pool of potential applicants becomes increasingly heterogeneous (as those whose former positions are robotically outsourced), and employers and organizations will need to be cautious in their screening methods given this likely trend.

Once talent is secured, organizations have significant financial and organizational incentive to retain the talent that they have worked so hard to acquire, given the organizational costs associated with employee turnover (for a discussion on this topic, see Duda and Žůrková, 2013). Such outcome incentives are often connected to organizational variables indicative of relational functioning, such as employee well-being (linked to competitive advantage outcomes) (Robertson and Flint-Taylor, 2009); leadership (linked to efficiency, creativity, and effectiveness) (Densten, 2008); and positive social capital (linked to resource generativity) (Rousseau and Ling, 2007; Baker and Dutton, 2007; Glynn and Wrobel, 2007). In other words, organizations benefit by employing individuals who are positively connected to others, well, and effectively led. Unsurprisingly, these factors have also been linked to employee loyalty (Bloemer

and Odekerken-Schröder, 2006). Organizations benefit from having committed employees, and committed employees are often committed because they have positive work relationships.

### **Leaders Can Affect Outcome by Fostering Employee Organizational Commitment**

Given the understanding that there is organizational incentive to be had from securing commitment from employees, leaders have a unique opportunity to influence employee commitment by developing relationships with them. To demonstrate the link between the leader-follower relationship and organizational commitment, however, it is prudent first to expand on the construct. I have chosen to use the term “organizational commitment” rather than “loyalty” to remain consistent with terminology used by previous contributors to the literature (e.g., Meyer & Allen, 1991, and Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974).

Organizational commitment may be understood to be a subset of employee participation—which considers the entire domain of an employee’s involvement with industry (Wilkinson, Gollan, Marchington & Lewin, 2010)—and is generally defined using Porter et al.’s (1974) definition as “the strength of an individual’s identification with and involvement in a particular organization” (p. 604). This strength can be evaluated by both overt and covert indicators. For example, Meyer, Allen and Smith (1993), citing Meyer and Allen (1991), break organizational commitment into three different types of *attitudinal* commitment: affective (“an affective attachment to the organization”), continuance (“a perceived cost associated with leaving the organization”), and normative (“an obligation to remain in the organization”) (p. 253). This stratification of the construct is the most predominantly used in the organizational commitment literature.

Bloemer and Odekerken-Schröder (2006) note that Meyer and Allen’s approach of stratifying attitudinal commitment into three distinct subsets is useful for conceptualizing loyalty

*behaviors* such as complaining about or commending an organization. They found, for example, that affective commitment is “the most important determinant of employee loyalty behaviors” (p. 261) such as positive word-of-mouth, benefit insensitivity, complaining, and intent to stay. In other words, an employee’s feelings about her employing organization best affect the way that she behaves in relation to that organization. While obvious, this is essential to note, because it suggests that the literature base currently accepts organizational commitment to be empirically measurable through behavioral observation. Regardless of whether these behaviors are actually reflective of the construct that the research attempts to measure, this trend will become useful as we begin to incorporate self psychology theory into leadership theory. Such observation provides leaders a useful entryway into the assessment of their employees’ emotional commitment to the organization—information that is useful for understanding employees and leveraging the formation of positive work relationships. For example, it might be more worthwhile to invest relational energy into an employee who speaks positively about the company but whose commitment to it is uncertain, rather than an employee who badmouths the company and indicates that he is already on the way out the door.

A number of relational factors have been shown to influence and be indicators of an employee’s organizational commitment. Bloemer and Odekerken-Schröder (2006), for example, examined the relationship between organizational commitment and employee relationship proneness, which refers to “an employee’s relatively stable and conscious tendency to engage in a relationship with an employer” (p. 263, citing De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci, 2001). They found that employee relationship proneness is a significant influencer of affective and normative commitment to an organization. That is, employees who tend to build and foster work relationships are more likely to feel committed to their employing organization and stay

committed to it out of a sense of communal obligation. Other relational factors, too, have been shown to increase employee organizational commitment, either directly or as mediating or moderating variables. These include teamwork (Hanaysha, 2016); associations an employee makes between a supervisor and the employing organization (Eisenberger, Karagonlar, Stinglhamber, Neves, Becker, Gonzalez-Morales and Steiger-Mueller, 2010); trust in the organization (Dedahanov and Rhee, 2015); and supervisor loyalty (Çelebi and Korumaz, 2016). This last finding is especially relevant for our purposes, because it supports a link between the leader-employee relationship and organizational commitment.

It is interesting that much of the literature on organizational commitment focuses on relational factors, and yet does not seem to consider relationships (leader-follower or otherwise) of primary importance. This is likely a result of a predominance of research that relies upon Meyer and Allen's (1991) breakdown of the construct into measurable attitudinal variables, rather than relational theories (such as self psychology or attachment theory, for example). It would be interesting for future research to examine alternative conceptualizations of organizational commitment by use of the latter approach. Presumably, this approach has been underemphasized due to financial considerations in the industrial/organizational (I/O) research base that have resulted in prioritizations of empirical measurement and construct operationalization that are easier and cheaper to study. It is difficult and costly to empirically measure such a construct as "work relationships" within complex systems, but much easier and cost-effective to break constructs into variables that may or may not actually reflect useful information about the construct attempting to be studied. Furthermore, investors want measurable, clear-cut results, so the emphasis of I/O research is often dependent upon areas for potential capitalization. Constructs get deprioritized when they are costly, difficult to measure,

and complicated to explain to shareholders. In short, research has focused on constructs that may have limited practical utility in comparison to what actually affects outcome. This trend also frequently occurs in clinical research (Shedler, 2015).

Despite the absence of a relational approach to organizational commitment research, all cases mentioned above explore relational variables that suggest organizational commitment is dependent upon dynamic, interdependent relationships. This further suggests that an employee's commitment to an organization cannot be separated from that employee's relationships within and to the organization. As such, the attempt of the research to understand specific variables of influence on organizational commitment misses the larger picture: that employees are committed to their organizations when they experience relationships that are suited to each individual's varying relational needs. That is, all variables linked to organizational commitment occur within the context of a complex system of interdependent and mutually influencing relationships. No employee works in a vacuum.

Additionally, one significant problem with isolating factors that influence organizational commitment is that such an approach reduces an incredibly complex question down to variable analysis, which—while useful in examining nomothetic patterns—paradoxically diminishes leadership's ability to contribute more generally to organizational outcome. That is, if a leader's focus is directed at improving microprocesses connected to organizational commitment in the hopes of affecting outcome, it becomes difficult to maintain awareness of the sidelining moderating factors that also contribute, which ultimately makes leaders less effective and efficient in leading their employees. Furthermore, no employee wants to be considered expendable: everyone wants to feel uniquely valued. This is likely one reason the current research landscape holds a limited understanding of the mechanisms that connect leaders and

followers, and thus also contributes to the misunderstanding of a leader's potential impact on organizational outcome. Leaders have long been focusing on factor analysis, but factor analysis is irrelevant in relation to what actually contributes to “underlying structures that create team behavior or explain the generative processes that characterize effective teams” (Ancona and Isaacs, 2007, p. 19). In short, what matters are unique and individualized relationships—not overgeneralized and isolated relational factors that dilute relational impact.

It is worth noting here that I am referring to leaders attempting to affect the commitment of employees who fall within the middle of a standard distribution. On one end of the continuum, there are employees who are disinterested (and will always be disinterested) in committing to organizations, and on the other are individuals who cannot help but to commit to organizations regardless of circumstance (see the review of Bloemer and Odekerken-Schröder's work on employee relationship proneness above). For whatever reason these individuals are prone to these outlier tendencies, leaders should direct the bulk of their effort in obtaining employee commitment towards individuals for whom the jury is still out.

### **Leaders Can Foster Commitment by Developing Relationships with their Employees**

Not until the last decade did theorists begin to take note of and collaborate on the importance of the interdependent dynamics of work relationships. Ragins and Dutton (2007), in particular, edited an extensive interdisciplinary compilation on “positive work relationships” (PWRs), the central focus of which is the importance of work relationships across multiple domains (e.g., mentor-mentee, familial, and leader-employee), theories, and dimensions. Each contributor to the compilation defines PWRs somewhat differently; however, most agree that mutual benefit is an essential component. In other words, both parties must benefit from the relationship for it to be considered positive.

Ragins and Dutton note that relationships are the cornerstone upon which our work lives are built, where “at their best, they can be a generative source of enrichment, vitality, and learning . . . [and] at their worst . . . can be a toxic and corrosive source of pain, depletion, and dysfunction” (p. 1). They build on the view that PWRs “are the means by which work is done and meaning is found in organizations” (p.5), suggesting that interdisciplinary, multi-level, non-variable-bound scholarship is necessary to fully understand the impact of PWRs. They similarly suggest that scholastic focus on PWRs has been underemphasized, resulting in a misunderstanding of the true importance of work relationships. This misunderstanding has contributed to limitations in the knowledge about relationships in organizations. This resulted, they assert, from an over-reliance upon social exchange theories that “[fail] to acknowledge processes in positive work relationships that generate and create new resources” (p.6, cf. Baker & Dutton, 2007). They also suggest that our understanding of work relationships needs updating as career and work landscapes evolve. Finally, they suggest that we are limited in our knowledge of the interaction between work relationships and “other aspects of social life within and outside organizations” (p.6). This is relevant to our considerations here, because a self-psychological perspective offers an explanation for the power that attuned relationships can have in generating alternative understandings of and approaches to relating to one’s environment.

Despite the usefulness of Dutton and Ragins (2007) contribution to the work relationship literature, the compilation does not address the connection between the leader-employee relationship and organizational commitment, nor the application of clinical theories to leadership development. Since publishing this compilation, additional contributions have been made to the relational leadership literature that suggest transformational leadership is becoming increasingly accepted as the status quo (Whittington, Meskelis, Asare, & Beldona, 2017; Carmeli, Tishler, &



Edmondson, 2012; Nicholson and Kurucz, 2017); however, it appears that even transformational leadership deemphasizes what many clinical theories have acknowledged for more than half a century: transformation and organizational commitment occur *because of* relationships. As Fletcher (2007) puts it:

these new models are largely silent on the specific microprocesses between leaders and followers that would operationalize two-directional concepts such as egalitarianism or mutuality in a leadership context. Nor do these leadership models explicate or give a theoretical frame for understanding the process by which outcomes achieved at the dyadic level link to broad leadership outcomes (p. 350).

Given the consistent inattention within the relational leadership literature to the mechanisms that connect leaders and followers, and the resulting lack of understanding about the ways in which relational leadership can impact organizations, it is time to consider alternative approaches to leadership development.

Self psychology has long appreciated the transformative power of relationships, and has a seasoned history of looking for the psychological underpinnings to connection and psychological growth. Although self psychology is infrequently applied outside of the therapeutic context, the literature on relational leadership can benefit strongly from insights self psychologists have incorporated into their practices for many years. Similarly, self psychology theory can conversely benefit from the leadership literature in the consideration of how to hold the therapeutic frame. Both self psychology theory and leadership theory can inform one another towards the elevation of both disciplines by widening the scope of their applications.

**Leaders Can Foster Employee Work Relationships by Acting like a Self Psychologist**

Every individual is different and comes to an organization with a different set of life experiences, values, attitudes, goals, skills, and beliefs. What causes an individual to be committed to an organization will look different for every individual. Joe, for instance, might be a bit of a loner (he probably works in IT) and does not tend to seek out work relationships, whereas Jill is known as the social butterfly of the office (she probably works in marketing) and thrives on the relationships she has at work. These two individuals would experience organizational commitment differently, depending upon the demands of their position, personality, relationship proneness, financial needs, physical health, work life balance, etc. A leader attempting to build relationships with both Joe and Jill would need to adjust her leadership approach to the unique relational needs of each individual. Given this, I suggest that a clinical approach to leadership is warranted if leaders hope to influence organizational commitment, and thereby organizational outcome, at a macrosystemic level. This approach is idiographic, whereby leaders get to know and develop attuned relationships with *every single one of their employees*, just as therapists get to know and develop relationships with every single one of their clients. “A patient [i.e., employee] will not be the same with every therapist [i.e., manager], and [managers] will likewise be different with each of their [employees]” (Lessem, 2005, p. 171). Without a personal, individualized approach, it is too easy to lose employee commitment (and experience associated employee turnover costs) and miss potential opportunities for organizational improvement and outcome. Thus, an idiographic approach to leadership is warranted—one in which every employee is considered separately, as an individual.

Obviously this is a lofty—if not impossible—goal for management in many organizations. Many practical factors inhibit a supervisor’s ability to consider the idiographic experiences of every employee she manages. Supervisors may never have direct contact with

their employees, have insufficient time or resources to prioritize getting to know their employees, and/or may have limited interest in doing so. Self psychological approaches to leadership would thus be most effective in organizations that accept the utility of a limited number of supervisees per manager. A leader will likely experience diminishing returns on relational leadership the more followers she has. As Harari (2011) notes, humans have difficulty existing in groups of more than about 100 without myths to unite them (such as a vertical organizational structure in which the CEO is king).

This is where the distinction between management and leadership arises: management carries out the essential, practical job functions of the supervision of employees without striving toward the higher relational ideals of truly knowing each of her employees. Leaders do both. Thus, the most important factor that distinguishes leader from manager is the leader's attunement to the individual needs of each individual employee she oversees. In this way, leadership is both aspirational and practical. This is what I mean by a self-psychological approach to leadership.

### **Selfobjects**

As mentioned above, one of the primary tasks of the self-psychological leader is to attempt to meet the selfobject needs of her employees by providing a developmentally appropriate relationship experience within the context of a leader-follower frame. Before expanding on ways in which the leader achieves this, however, it is worth discussing Kohut's understanding of the connection between a person's self and his selfobject needs.

The self and one's selfobject needs are mutually interdependent, so separating them into two constructs is somewhat unhelpful. According to Lessem (2005):

Above all, the self is viewed as embedded in a selfobject matrix. And it is almost always, although in different degrees, seen as in need of selfobject experience.

From this perspective, the self cannot be meaningfully thought of apart from the self-selfobject matrix within which the self originates, develops, and is maintained. (p. 26)

To discuss the self without also discussing selfobjects, then, is to decontextualize an inherently contextualized concept. In this way, when conceptualizing an individual's "self," so also are the selfobject needs of that individual under consideration (as is the environmental context related to that selfobject need). A person is simultaneously a self and his unique array of selfobject needs that have accumulated throughout the lifespan. The mutual-embeddedness of the self with selfobject needs, then, is an important concept for the self-psychological leader, because when a leader manages an employee, she will also be managing the employee's selfobject needs. That is, each employee's given work reality is one in which the self consistently interacts with one's selfobject needs, within the wider context of a work environment. From this perspective, the leader is always in a position to influence both the contextual work environment (i.e., organizational outcome) as well as the meeting of an employee's selfobject needs (i.e., employee commitment).

Kohut understood the tension between self and selfobject need as illustrated above to be at the center of motivational growth (Lessem, 2005, p. 27). That is, selfobject needs drive an individual's behavior in an attempt to maintain self-cohesion, or consistency with one's organization of experience. For example, if we reconsider Joe, the loner IT guy, we can wonder whether his loner nature might have developed out of a consistent absence of important twinship selfobject needs throughout his life. Given this absence of experience, he came to an understanding about himself that no one is like him nor can understand him, and so he is better off spending time alone. This behavior, of withdrawing from others out of a belief that he is

better off by himself, only reinforces his self-cohesive belief, or “organizing principle,” that he cannot be understood. Joe’s behavior can be understood as an attempt at “striving for health” (Buirski & Haglund, 2001), where his most effective strategy for getting selfobject needs met is one that maintains his experience of himself as a loner. In the presence of an attuned other, however, Joe can experience himself as someone who can exist within the context of a relationship (such as with a leader or therapist, for example), but also maintain his self-structuralization such that the world still makes sense to him. In this view of the self-selfobject matrix, personal growth is never complete, and an individual’s self can be understood as a process of lifelong attempts at needs-fulfillment.

The concept of the self-selfobject matrix is an imperative one for the leader. If all self experience is born, developed and maintained within a network of relational selfobject needs, then the relational leader’s task is to promote growth in her employees by providing selfobject needs that have previously gone unmet. In doing so, she fosters an experience for the employee wherein he can experience himself in a new way and as a different kind of person. The trick in doing so, however, is to determine *which* selfobject needs are necessary for each individual to maximize his or her growth as a person and employee. For example, an individual might have missed important idealization selfobject experiences during development, and correspondingly interprets his environment as unsafe and uninspired (Lessem, 2005). In reaction, he might seek to get his needs met by idealizing others in his life—such as his boss, for example—in an anxious and needy way, constantly seeking reassurance and approval on his job tasks at every step of a project. A supervisor who recognizes that her employee is attempting to get a developmental need met (rather than purposefully trying to be annoying) and responds to that need sensitively will be much more likely to develop a positive work relationship with him, improve his

commitment to the organization, and affect organizational outcome than would a supervisor who brushes the employee off out of annoyance at his needy behavior. According to Kohut, this process (recognizing a person's selfobject needs) requires an empirical approach of empathy.

### **Empathy**

Given the premise that leaders who seek to meet their employees' selfobject needs will impact employee commitment, how would one meet these needs? The first step would require an assessment of what the individual's selfobject needs *are*. Kohut believed this could be achieved through empathy (Lessem, 2005). Kohut (1984) defined empathy as "the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person" (p. 82). Early on in his formulations, Kohut asserted that empathy may be used as an observational, "value-neutral method" (p. 65) of understanding another person (Lessem, 2005). From this perspective, empathy is a tool used for broadening one's understanding of another's experience. As Kohut progressed in his career, however, he emphasized a second, potentially more important, aspect of empathy: its relational potential for inducing responsiveness in an other (Lessem, 2005). In other words, empathy also stimulates individuals to respond to and meet the emotional and psychological needs of another. These two functions of empathy—observational data collection and responsiveness elicitation—are the cornerstones upon which self-psychological approaches to therapy are built. These functions are emphasized because they are understood to be the means of facilitation of a client's (i.e., employee's) personal growth.

A necessary precondition for the process of empathizing with another is awareness and use of one's own experience. Kohut (1984) used the term "vicarious introspection" to describe such a process where "one [person attempts to] experience the inner life of another while simultaneously retaining the stance of an objective observer" (p. 175). In other words, empathy

requires the ability to simultaneously introspect about oneself and apply the results of such introspection to the potential lived experience of another. This is commonly referred to as “insight,” and the concept is beginning to receive attention in popular literature on leadership (e.g., Eurich, 2017; Gallagher and Costal, 2012). In order to lead effectively (by which I mean influence others towards personal growth and organizational growth), a leader must have awareness of one’s own subjectivity.

Empathy has been extensively addressed in both popular and academic literature on leadership. Daniel Goleman’s approach to emotional intelligence (2005) is perhaps the best and most well-known example, given that his work has inspired the development of hundreds of training programs and books, all of which claim to teach individuals emotional intelligence skills that essentially boil down to empathy. Goleman uses Salovey and Mayer’s (1990) original definition, which breaks emotional intelligence into five domains: knowing one’s emotions, managing emotions, motivating oneself, recognizing emotions in others, and handling relationships (Goleman, 2005, p. 45). These are all facets that are consistent with a self-psychological view of empathy, and they also reflect a more recent example of internal approaches to empiricism.

Self psychology as Kohut thought of it does not emphasize empirical observation of a client’s behaviors; however, it would be a mistake to assume that the theory itself is not conducive to empiricism. As we have seen from Bloemer and Odekerken-Schröder’s work (2006), behaviors such as positive word-of-mouth about an organization are linked to a person’s commitment to that organization. Similarly, we might assume that a client’s positive word-of-mouth about their relationship with the therapist suggests the client’s commitment to therapy attendance (so long as there has been mutual agreement between the client and therapist that one

task of therapy is to continue attending, and notwithstanding unconscious psychological motivations that lead the individual to praise the therapist). Behaviors such as positive word-of-mouth are only meaningful, however, as long as a mutually-agreed-upon frame has been set, so Bloemer and Odekerken-Schröder's work presumes that within the frame of organizational commitment, positive word-of-mouth is a desirable, empirical outcome. Similarly, leaders would do well to hold a frame in which employee behaviors can be interpreted on a spectrum of desirability.

The concept of frame-setting was introduced by Freud (1912-1915) and expanded upon by multiple theorists (e.g., Bateson, 1972; Goffman, 1974; Langs, 1998), and, although rarely discussed in the context of self psychology, is an important consideration for the self-psychological leader. The main tenet of frame-setting is that phenomena can be empirically observed and measured within explicit structure. For example, if the self-psychological leader wants to influence her employees' organizational commitment by building individual working relationships with each employee, she should first make it clear to her employees that working relationships are an expectation of the position. For example, from the frame perspectives of Bateson and Goffman, the leader might have an onboarding conversation with a very social and friendly employee that the work relationship is an essential job requirement but only exists Monday through Friday between the hours of 9 and 5. In doing so, she has communicated to this employee that she maintains a socialization boundary outside of the work setting, and as such, frees the employee to work without an imagined job description bullet point of "happy hour socialite." Once the expectation is outlined, both the leader and employee can mutually determine a definition for a working relationship, as well as subsequent goals and tasks on which



to work within such a relationship. Once the frame is set, the leader can use empathy as an observational assessment tool (e.g., to measure progress towards predetermined goals and tasks).

### **Self-Psychological Work Relationships**

The literature on positive work relationships aligns nicely with this self-psychological approach to leadership. For example, many of the contributors to Ragins and Dutton's compilation offer valuable insights that can be applied to self-psychological leadership. Ragins and Verbos (2007), for example, discuss positive relationships from a mentorship lens, suggesting that "positive relationships involve a 'need-based' fit between members of the relationship" (p. 94). In other words, mentorship relationships work well when both the mentor and the mentee benefit from the relationship in terms of their "personal, career, and developmental needs" (p. 94). This expectation of mutual benefit is consistent with self psychology when considering the interaction between the self-selfobject matrix, where both leader and employee engage with one another from the basis of their individual selfobject needs.

Kahn (2007) addresses the connection between work attachment (a construct similar to organizational commitment) and positive relationships, and suggests three useful points that suggest that self-psychological approaches to work relationships foster employee commitment. First, "when individuals are embedded in relational constellations that they experience as positive, they are more likely to attach themselves to others at work, and more generally, to their organizations" (p.199). This likelihood of committed attachment would also apply to the self-psychological leader-follower relationship, where, when the individual experiences the relationship with his leader or her follower as positive, *both* leader and follower are more likely to attach themselves to their organization. This is consistent with self psychology when considering that both individuals exist in the organization within a self-selfobject matrix. It is

also another way of saying that when individuals are getting their selfobject needs met (the experience of “positive” relationships), they remain committed. This does not, however, discount the importance of working through relational conflict, which is equally important for the meeting of selfobject needs and having productive working relationships. In self psychology, this is often referred to as “rupture and repair” and is considered to be a key principle of the theory (Lessem, 2005).

Secondly, Kahn expands upon the positive work relationship literature base by suggesting that, although the meaning of work attachment has traditionally been applied literally (i.e., working for an organization), it also applies to the “psychological meaning (i.e., the extent to which someone feels personally connected to others)” (p. 199). In other words, the meaning that the individual makes of the relationship (leader-follower or otherwise) affects the way in which he experiences attachment to his organization. This point is also consistent with a self-psychological approach to leadership (and more specifically an intersubjective systems theory approach), where an individual’s understanding of himself in a relational self-selfobject context influences the way he interacts with his organization. In other words, when an individual experiences himself as getting selfobject needs met within his work relationships (leader-follower or otherwise), he will feel more attached to the organization.

Finally, Kahn suggests that an individual’s experience of relational work constellations falls into five categories, including task accomplishment; career development; sense making; provision of meaning (i.e., relationships that provide validation, link work to a larger purpose, and are consistent with a meaningful identity); and personal support; and that “people whose relational constellations consist largely of the former are likely to be less psychologically attached to others at work than those whose constellations consist largely of the latter” (p. 200).

In other words, when employees have work relationships that are more self-psychological in nature (i.e., “the latter”), they will feel more psychologically attached to their work relationships. This is essential for the leader to note because it suggests that employees may be more likely to remain committed to their organization (to the extent that the constructs of commitment and attachment overlap) when they have relationships that help them make sense of their lives and provide meaning, validation, and support. The self-psychological leader can benefit from this by attempting to provide such experiences for their employees (as well as similarly seeking work relationships that foster a personal sense of meaning and experience of validation).

Let’s return to Joe. Let us assume that his manager Jane has set an organizational frame during the onboarding process in which she has highlighted the importance of employee commitment to the organization. During the onboarding conversation in which Joe asserts that he tends to be an employee who generally likes to keep to himself, but will interact with others to the minimal extent necessary, Joe and Jane come to an agreement that Jane will allow Joe to work independently on projects with minimal team interaction. Through this frame-setting process, Jane recognizes (through the use of empathy-as-assessment tool) that Joe has had twinship needs that are currently unmet. With Jane’s recognition of Joe’s selfobject need, she can more effectively manage him within the working relationship frame on which they have collaborated by providing the twinship experience he has been missing. In turn, because Joe feels recognized and seen by Jane’s management approach, he’s going to be more likely to stick around at the organization under her leadership, because she has made a distinct effort to meet his management needs in an attuned way. Joe will feel much better equipped to work under Jane’s leadership than under his previous boss who never made an effort to get to know him as an individual.

Fletcher (2007) also highlights a number of useful points about organizational commitment for self-psychological leaders. She asserts, for example, that the trend of conceptualizing leadership practice from a transformational lens provides new opportunities for analyzing leadership as a relational construct. Using Stone Center Relational Cultural Theory, she suggests that five key outcomes must be mutually created within a relationship across cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains for it to be considered positive: zest, empowered action, an increased sense of worth, new knowledge, and a desire for more connection. Such a relationship makes space for what Fletcher terms “growth-in-connection” and suggests that such a relational approach to leadership implicitly is connected to “organizational-level outcomes such as organizational learning, innovation, and adaptability” (p. 355). She suggests that the manner by which the outcomes associated with growth-in-connection can be achieved is through a process of “fluid expertise” (1999), whereby power and expertise shift mutually between the parties involved in the relationship to cocreate new knowledge. Thus, with Fletcher’s assertions, we again we see a theoretical trend towards emphasis on mutually-constructed relationships between leader and follower that facilitate growth.

The previous examples imply an assumption that growth in an individual’s personal life also corresponds with the growth of an individual’s work life. What happens, you might wonder, if the individual’s personal growth and meeting of selfobject needs precludes their desire to continue working as an employee? Am I espousing ideas here that could potentially *reduce* employee organizational commitment and increase turnover? Potentially, but probably not. Just in the way that most people who fall in love with a partner want to remain in a relationship with that person, so do most people who get selfobject needs met by a leader or organization want to remain in a relationship with that supervisor or organization, even if the selfobject need is

adversarial in nature. To put it bluntly, when people are getting their needs met, they're likely to stay put. Furthermore, many individuals choose work environments that are “based on their own needs and predilections, the extent to which they quite naturally move toward instrumental or authentic work relationships” (Kahn, 2007). So for those individuals for whom attempts at meeting selfobject needs lands flat (those seeking instrumental work relationships, for example), no harm is done by attempting to meet them where they currently are.

### **Self Psychology and Androgyny**

I have used female pronouns throughout this discussion for examples of leadership. This is intentional. If one conjures an idea of the prototypical American corporate leader, this person is most likely a White male with varying traits such as charisma, egocentrism, a preference for rationality over warmth, control, and confidence verging on arrogance (or in some particularly timely cases, bombastic arrogance). Much of the leadership literature has focused on the charismatic leader (e.g., Bass, 1990 and Northouse, 2013), but in recent years, as the landscape of American industry has shifted, so has the picture of the prototypical leader. As we have seen, the leader of the age of knowledge is one who is capable of empirical empathy used to advance organizational outcome through enhancing her employees’ organizational commitment. This is in direct conflict with the outdated (and marginalizing) prototypical model of the Trump-era corporate leader. The use of self psychology as a theoretical lens through which to view leadership is particularly apropos given these shifts, not only because it is a more practical and effective way to approach leadership given the changing landscape, but also because it neutralizes a playing field that has heretofore favored White male privilege over androgyny.

Many theorists have remarked on gender considerations and inequalities in leadership positions (e.g., Northouse, 2013; Fletcher, 1999 and 2007; Bass, 1990; Eagly and Johnson,

1990). According to a McKinsey report, as of 2017, women represent 21% of positions at C-suite levels (Krivkovich, Robinson, Starikova, Valentino, and Yee). Yet, there is supporting research to suggest that “women’s leadership is more effective in contemporary society” (Northouse, 2013, p. 350). Northouse continues:

Additionally, women exceed men in the use of democratic or participatory styles, and they are more likely to use transformational leadership behaviors and contingent reward, styles that are associated with contemporary notions of effective leadership (p. 352).

Although a self-psychological approach to leadership is not “gendered” per se, a transition towards the Kohutian idea of a leader mimics the transition that occurred in the 1970s from a Freudian conceptualization of a White, male therapist with control over the course of therapy towards an androgynous, mutually co-constructed therapeutic field. Treating others empathically and with consideration for their emotional needs has traditionally been considered a feminine task and therefore emasculating to male leadership; however, it is difficult to argue with the organizational results such tactics produce. From a social justice perspective, a self-psychological approach to leadership equalizes the playing field while simultaneously improving performance of the whole.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Taken together, the previous examples and considerations emphasize the importance of mutual connectedness for the experience of positive work relationships and facilitative personal growth, which are concepts foundational to and rooted within self psychology. Indeed, more recent conceptualizations of self-psychological approaches to therapy (e.g., intersubjective systems theory), suggest that attuned, mutual connection *is* the mechanism by which growth

occurs, because it creates space to experience and make meaning of oneself in a new and unique way (Buirski, 2005; Buirski & Haglund, 2001; Atwood & Stolorow, 1984). Stolorow, Atwood, and Brandchaft (1994) suggest that intersubjective systems theory is “a unifying framework that could account not only for the psychological phenomena that other theories address but also for the theories themselves” (p. 33). In other words, intersubjective systems theory, the more recent branch of self psychology, accounts for all of the research on and theories about positive work relationships by suggesting that people are effective in their lives and capable of growth when they experience mutual and attuned relationships with important others in their lives. If a leader wants to affect organizational outcome by keeping their employees on board, the simplest and most effective way to do so is to act like a self psychologist.

## Appendix A

The following is an excerpt taken from Lessem (2005, p. 38):

Seven types of selfobject needs are defined here:

1. *Mirroring need*: a need to feel recognized, accepted, affirmed, and valued, especially when showing something important about oneself to a valued other
2. *Idealizing need*: a need to experience oneself as being part of and protected by an admired and respected other; needing the opportunity to be accepted by and merge into a stable, calm, powerful, wise, protective other who is experienced as possessing the qualities that the subject lacks
3. *Alter ego or twinship need*: a need to experience an essential likeness with the other
4. *Efficacy need*: a need to experience that one has an impact on the important other and is able to evoke needed selfobject experiences [citing Wolf, 1988]
5. *Adversarial need*: a need to experience the attachment figure as a benignly opposing force who continues to be supportive and responsive while allowing or even encouraging one to be in active opposition and thus confirming an at least partial autonomy; the need for the availability of a selfobject experience of assertive and adversarial confrontation vis-à-vis the attachment figure without the loss of selfobject responsiveness from that person [citing Wolf, 1988, p. 55]
6. *Self-delineating need*: the need for assistance with the articulation of perceptual and affective experience [citing Trop and Stolorow, 1992]
7. *Validation need*: the need for validation of one's subjective reality; perhaps the most important aspect of validation is of one's affective experience [citing Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood, 1987]



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