Beyond the Shadow of A Doubt

Self-Doubt and the Development of Self As Instrument:

Implications For OD Practice

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ABSTRACT

Use of self is a concept familiar to Organization Development (OD) practitioners and students. The purpose of this paper is to explore the use of self-doubt in the development and use of self as an OD consultant.

The primary focus of this study is to examine if, when and how self-doubt can be of service to the OD practitioner and her clients. The secondary focus is to explore how practitioners work with their uncertainty to develop self as instrument. Finally, this paper will identify what implications exist for OD practice in surfacing the consultant’s self-doubt. In a field where use of self is the primary tool for supporting organizational transformation there may be benefit in investigating what lies beyond the shadow of self-doubt.
Introduction to Study

“In today’s complex and demanding world, no one is impervious from feelings of anxiety and insecurity” (Tannenbaum & Eisen, 2005, p.10). All humans experience varying degrees of self-doubt\(^1\) throughout their lifetime. “At the core, you scratch an American and you are going to find an insecure person” (Sibbet Interview, 2006). However, because of a Western cultural bias towards confidence and certainty, most people interpret self-doubt as a sign of weakness and as something to be ashamed of (Tannenbaum & Eisen, 2005; Niose, 2005). It seems everyone has it, yet the message is that it is not okay, and therefore people tend to repress or deny their feelings of self-doubt rather than accepting and examining them — a tricky paradox. As a result, an integral part of one’s experience remains lurking in the shadows of consciousness, thus creating a potential obstacle to stumble over unexpectedly.

One of the goals of Organization Development (OD) is to help people within systems illuminate submerged issues that prevent them from achieving desired results and to clear the path for new possibilities. The same goal can be applied to the OD consultant whose ability to create positive change and guide others “requires the absence of getting in one’s own way” (Hanna & Glassman, 2004, p.13). Many OD practitioners hold the cognitive model that self, one’s awareness, intuitions and choices, is the primary instrument for facilitating organizational transformation (Seashore, Nash Shawver, Thompson, & Mattare, 2004). “Our job isn't to ‘fix’ things...it's to connect with systems’ own capacities for increasing health” (Eisen Interview, 2006). Using this frame, it becomes imperative to explore the parts of ourselves that trip us up. In my experience as a new OD professional, I have found at times, self-doubt limits my capacity to be fully effective with the client.

\(^1\) For the purpose of this paper, self-doubt is defined as a lack of confidence or trust in one’s abilities or self. (Guralnik, ed., 1992).
The purpose of this paper is to explore if, how and when OD practitioners’ experience of self-doubt can aid the development and use of self as tool. Further, it examines how practitioners’ understanding and framing of this self-doubt impacts their choices and effectiveness during client interventions.

The following are some conventions I will use throughout the body of this paper. For consistency, I will use the feminine for all pronouns. In addition, I will use the term “consultant” interchangeably with “practitioner” and the terms “uncertainty” and “lack of confidence” interchangeably with the term “self-doubt”. The following sections of this paper include Literature Review, Delimitations, Data Presentation, Data Analysis and Discussion, and finally Implications and Conclusions.

**Literature Review**

The literature review provides information about the core concepts and terms that underlie this paper: self-doubt, shadow self, parallel process, and use of self. Additional portions of the literature reviewed are embedded within the text of the entire paper.

Few publications referred to the benefits of self-doubt. Text was directed toward either the psychosocial developmental and personality theories on self-doubt (Bandura, 1993; Jung, 1965; Rogers, 1961), its negative impact, or how to overcome it. Mirels (as cited in Dittman, 2003) submits "Because you don't trust your own judgment, you hesitate, and this makes you accomplish less, confirming your poor self-esteem." Despite its potential usefulness, the topic of self-doubt receives little attention in the literature.

Within the context of use of self, the literature paints a slightly different picture. “I believe it is important that practitioners be aware of ‘self-doubt’ with respect to many of their clients—those highly competent and successful others; and also that they as consultants know
they are not alone in carrying troublesome feelings of self-doubt” (Tannenbaum & Eisen, 2005, p. 16). Tannenbaum and Eisen offer that denying and masking feelings of doubt from oneself and others renders the consultant less effective in helping clients deal with their own doubt. McCormick and White (2000) suggest that in paying attention to feelings and reactions, such as self-doubt, the consultant is more able to illuminate her implicit assumptions and make space for deeper inquiry, which allows for greater presence with the client.

Shadow Self

Self-doubt is one aspect of the shadow self, a concept that represents everything that the conscious person does not wish to acknowledge within herself (Jung, 1965). The importance of the shadow self as it relates to the OD consultant is that in her work, self is the primary tool. Authors such as McCormick and White (2000), Page (1999), and Tannenbaum & Eisen (2005), hold the belief that aspects of the self that remain hidden or buried in unconsciousness are out of one’s control and may unintentionally interfere with and adversely impact one’s work. “Worse, the shadow side has its own agenda that often times runs contrary to the best interests of clients” (Page, 1999, p.18). The practitioner’s ability to integrate her shadow selves is vital to her efficacy. “If we fail to engage in self work activities, it is certain that high performance will entail high personal cost, both to our clients and ourselves” (Cheung-Judge, 2001, p.14). One cannot use something skillfully that remains outside of one’s awareness.

Theorists who write about use of self from the OD lens, such as Cheung-Judge (2001), McCormick and White (2000), Page (1999), Seashore, Curran and Welp (1995), Tannenbaum and Eisen (2005), hold the viewpoint that as a consultant, it is valuable to allow oneself to experience the full range of human emotions. Illuminating unconscious parts of the self can deepen one’s understanding of others’ behaviors (Seashore, et al., 2004).
Parallel Process

Part of the importance of awareness of the shadow self, and self-doubt in particular, is the potential for a parallel process -- a concept utilized in the psychotherapy and social work fields that refers to dynamics and behaviors that move between and are mirrored by interconnected groups and/or people (Rayden, Skalbeck & Snyder, 1993). Fritz Steele (cited in Rayden, et al., 1993) states that parallel process can occur in two directions: The consultant can display behaviors that are being personified in the client system or the client system can pick up and exhibit the issues and unconscious patterns of the consultant.

A consultant’s feelings may be shared by others in the group, who are not yet ready to voice or recognize them (McCormick & White, 2000). “When one perceives something ‘outside of self’ it is helpful to do an internal check to see what is being stirred up ‘inside of oneself’” (Seashore, Nash Shawver, Thompson & Mattare, 2004, p. 59). By identifying and naming the phenomenon of parallel process, the can help the client and her self to illuminate unconscious blocks that may be impeding or sabotaging organizational success.

Use of Self

According to many OD theorists, a consultant’s awareness of who she is, what drives her and how she engages with the world around her is her primary and most powerful instrument available to help her clients navigate change (Seashore, et al., 1995; Cheung-Judge, 2001; Tannenbaum & Eisen 2005). The consultant’s ability to use the self in this way directly impacts the success or failure of her consultation. Tannenbaum and Eisen (2005) assert,

What is frequently underemphasized in the profession (although it is often given lip service) is the personhood of the practitioner as a key variable in achieving professional effectiveness in practice. As a consultant, you become the implementer of all of that learning as you try to facilitate desired change within the client system with which you are engaged” (italics part of quote) (p.3).
Self-doubt, on its own, receives little if any positive recognition in the literature. However within the context of OD and therapeutic professions, the literature sends a clear message that there is, beyond the shadow, a benefit and value to self-doubt.

**Research Design**

Primary data for this study was provided by interviews with thirteen OD consultants (Appendix A) whose professional experience range from six months to over 30 years. The sample set included four men and nine women. Nine out of thirteen participants were affiliated with Sonoma State University’s (SSU) OD program. All interviews were transcribed for the purpose of thematic analysis. The data were extrapolated into common themes from which conclusions were drawn.

An initial request for research volunteers (Appendix B) was sent to a database for OD practitioners associated with SSU as well as to a handful of practitioners unaffiliated with the SSU program. Upwards of 25 participants responded. The selection criterion was limited to external consultants who specifically identified themselves as OD practitioners. A standard list of 17 primary questions was used for each interview (Appendix C). With the exception of one phone interview, all interviews were conducted in person within the greater San Francisco Bay Area. Actual quotes from the interviews and from the literature are provided to validate the findings. Respondents whose quotes appear in the research signed an interview release form giving the researcher permission to use their names (Appendix D).

This qualitative phenomenological study explores the respondents’ life experiences of the phenomenon of self-doubt and shares the researcher’s interpretations of their collective experiences (Creswell, 1998). The scope of this paper does not include examination of the root causes of self-doubt.
**Assumptions:**

The following assumptions underlie this study:

- The primary tool of OD practitioners is use of self
- There is a self and it is useful as an instrument for organizational transformation
- Self-doubt is part of the human experience
- Self-doubt can be productive to developing use of self
- How practitioners work with their own self-doubt impacts how they work with, and how effective they are in supporting, their clients

**Limitations**

The reader is cautioned to keep the following information in mind when considering the information and opinions expressed in this paper. I am obtaining my masters in Organization Development at SSU through the Psychology Department. I’m a woman who leads with her feelings, the youngest of four children, an extrovert and no stranger to self-doubt. Fascinated by the human condition, I seek to understand and explore its vast terrain. My research aims to further understand one of the complexities of the human existence, self-doubt, and to uncover its value and worth. For me, this topic is an outgrowth of my beliefs, values, culture and history. I am invested in the belief that people are deeply capable to heal, grow and create. This inquiry is my contribution towards manifesting that belief.

The following interpretations should be taken in the context with which they were formed. The scope of this research is limited to OD practitioners, a subset of the population who may be biased towards self-exploration. Over half of the consultants in the sample set are
graduates or faculty of the SSU OD program. Thus their experiences do not necessarily represent a global perspective and cannot be generalized to all consultants who practice OD.

No clients were interviewed for this paper, thus any assertions about clients’ experiences of self-doubt or the usefulness of self-doubt for clients are interpretations and assumptions based upon the literature, data set, and personal experience of the researcher.

Data Presentation

The themes generated from the interviews are presented below. Results are summarized in narrative form either under emergent theme headings or specific interview questions, denoted by an *. Where relevant, data are quantified. The data are separated into three categories: 1). Practitioner Self-Doubt, 2). Client Doubt, and 3). Best Practices.

1). Practitioner Self-Doubt

Common Triggers of Self-Doubt for the Practitioner *

All respondents identified similar kinds of stimuli that activated their self-doubt. Their triggers fell into two main categories: personal and client centered. Personal Triggers: Seven of the respondents cited “not having enough expertise or knowledge about content or client” and five noted “criticism” and “need for approval/desire to be liked.” Client Centered Triggers: Three identified the client’s “doubting the practitioner’s ability,” “hostility or aggression,” “resistance” and “unresponsiveness.”

Two Levels of Self-Doubt

All thirteen respondents experienced a degree of self-doubt on two levels. I will henceforth refer to the two levels as cognitive and emotional. The former refers to the practitioner’s uncertainty about her ability to be effective, to choose the “right” intervention or course of action, and her knowledge of content. Emotional self-doubt refers to the practitioner’s
feelings of diminished self worth at a core level and is personalized and historical. This is not to say there is not cross over between the two levels or that there are not feelings associated with cognitive self doubt or that a person experiencing emotional self-doubt is not also analyzing their feelings.

**Cognitive Self-Doubt As Opportunity**

All interviewees stated they experienced more comfort with their cognitive rather than their emotional self-doubt. They indicated a positive association with the former, referring to it as “normal,” “an opportunity,” “a friend,” “useful,” “a gauge,” “a check and balance,” “feedback about the client system,” “a prompt to get curious” and “a reminder to stay humble.” All reported multiple benefits of this level of self-doubt including: “igniting inquiry,” “expanding humility and empathy,” “increasing openness” and “enhancing client preparation.” Nine practitioners attributed an ability to be “fully present” to acknowledging their uncertainty. Seven shared that ignoring or denying cognitive self-doubt was a precursor to experiencing “terror around” or “spiraling into the grip” of emotional self-doubt.

**Emotional Self-Doubt As A Tool For Self-Development**

Eleven respondents attributed a value to emotional self-doubt for their ongoing development of self, but not on client time. They also stated that acknowledging, rather than denying, the feelings associated with a lack of confidence allowed them to better focus on the client. Seven of the respondents viewed it as an important indicator for further and future self-development. Two stated that selective sharing of the practitioner’s emotional self-doubt was valuable for the client.
Limitations of Usefulness of Emotional Self-Doubt

Eleven of thirteen respondents attributed a negative value to revealing their emotional self-doubt during client engagements. Seven practitioners expressed a belief that expressing this level of doubt during a client intervention is more about meeting the consultant’s needs than the clients’, and thus is inappropriate.

2). Client Doubt

Manifestations of Client Doubt *

Respondents were asked if their clients experience self-doubt. All thirteen unequivocally said “yes.” When asked if their clients directly stated they were experiencing doubt, the response was primarily negative. Because no clients were interviewed for this research, the consultants’ responses to how they know their clients are experiencing self-doubt are their interpretations: “When people hesitate, equivocate and don’t make decisions,” “When a client asks a lot of questions,” “When there is lots of push back from the client” and “Saying ‘I don’t know how to do this, or what to do next.”

How Practitioners Support Client’s Experiencing Self-Doubt*

The respondents shared a variety of techniques for supporting clients who are experiencing self-doubt, as follows: seven emphasized “the development of self-efficacy” and “encouraging the expression of clients feelings;” five identified “facilitating client inquiry” and “listening, reflecting and mirroring;” four mentioned “real time feedback from group members and/or the consultant;” and two noted “role modeling” and “coaching.”

Six of the consultants revealed a two-step process they found effective in helping clients acknowledge and work productively with their self-doubt. The first step involves encouraging

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2 “Self-efficacy is the perception or judgment of one's ability to perform a certain action successfully or to control one's circumstances” (F. N. Magil, ed., 1993).
the client or client group to acknowledge and verbalize their feelings; the second step includes inviting them to analyze these feelings and focus attention on problem solving and generating creative options.

3. Best Practices

Leveraging Cognitive Self-Doubt

During the client engagement, respondents identified “curiosity,” “inquiry,” “naming their experience” and “real-time feedback” as methods that enabled them to test the accuracy of their perceptions about themselves and the client, while at the same time modeling a healthy relationship with their uncertainty.

Leveraging Emotional Self-Doubt

Interviewees found the occurrence of emotional self-doubt during the client engagement most useful as a signal of their own unresolved issues for future exploration. Across the board, respondents cited “reflection,” “personal therapy,” “peer feedback venues,” “T-group,” “relevant literature,” “meditation” and “journaling” as vital practices to working with emotional self-doubt after a client engagement and on an ongoing basis.

Data Analysis & Discussion

The following section is an analysis and interpretation of the collected data. All quotes from the data set are in italics followed by the initials of the person who said them. Direct quotes from the literature review contain quotation marks.

3 “T-group provides participants with an opportunity to learn about themselves, their impact on others and how to function more effectively in group and interpersonal situations. It facilitates this learning by bringing together a small group of people for the express purpose of studying their own behavior when they interact within a small group” (Gallagher, 2001).
All thirteen respondents, in different ways, agreed on three basic tenets about self-doubt: 1). It’s part of the human experience; 2). Most people don’t want it or reveal it and 3). Self-doubt is extremely valuable and useful toward the development and use of self as instrument. *Self-Doubt fosters compassion and empathy because people are facing it all the time. It opens up a learning space and reminds me to open up to new ways of looking at and doing things, new ways of understanding...I see it as an opportunity (NP).*

The data illuminate two different levels of self-doubt — cognitive and emotional, each possessing a distinct value to the client, the practitioner, or both. If one imagines self-doubt along a continuum of usefulness to the client, as illustrated in Figure 1, cognitive self-doubt appears more valuable. Because this level of self-doubt is less personalized it is easier to acknowledge and utilize and has multiple benefits. *Self-Doubt reminds me to be humble. It contributes to my continuous learning and reminds me to have an open mind. If we didn’t have it, we’d be too arrogant to work with clients (BS). Self-doubt keeps me from being careless in my preparation for my client. I think it keeps me honest. It’s like a reality check. It’s part of the creative process for me (MR).*

One of the most vital functions of cognitive self-doubt, according to those interviewed, is its function as a prompt to slow down and get curious. *The first thing I try to do is accept my doubt and understand what it is trying to tell me (DS).* From a space of inquiry, rather than reaction, the consultant uses her feelings as a gauge of the client system and herself.
While emotional self-doubt has less value during the client engagement, it is important to note that towards development of self, the practitioner’s awareness and acknowledgment of it is useful.
My self-doubt is useful information and feedback about what is happening in the system rather than about mine or theirs. I use my self and my self-doubt as a barometer (TV). In addition, the data indicate naming one’s uncertainty can add value to the intervention for the following reasons: It reminds the client and the consultant they are in a partnership, and ultimately the client owns their solutions. In addition, it can give the consultant real data about her perceptions. I encourage myself to say what I’m thinking to test the accuracy of my perceptions (AH).

The findings suggest a point along the continuum at which self-doubt can interfere with the consultant’s ability to use her emotional responses as reliable data (See Figure 1). Part of the consultant’s work is to discern what part of her uncertainty is useful in the moment and what needs to be worked on privately. In using self-doubt to develop the self as instrument, “we need to be mindful that the instrument has its limitations” (Tannenbaum & Eisen, 2005, p. 7).

An interesting paradox was illuminated in the data related to the use of feedback to mitigate self-doubt. I’m constantly looking for feedback in the moment that is real and useful, primarily from the client (MR). While requesting client feedback was cited by many as a helpful tool to reduce self-doubt, it was also identified as a potential pitfall when employed to meet the practitioner’s needs rather than the clients’. This creates a bit of a paradox. I notice that when my need for approval gets triggered, I tend to be meticulous about getting various forms of feedback even though it may not be that helpful for the group. So who am I serving here? I’m trying to make sure I’m okay (JM). This is not to suggest that requesting client feedback is not valid (Seashore et al., 2004), rather there is a benefit and an importance in investigating one’s impetus for it.
In our culture, we value leaders who display confidence and don’t show signs of uncertainty or insecurity (Niose, 2005). The data indicates that if the consultant reveals self-doubt too early in the client engagement, she runs the risk of damaging her credibility. *My self-doubt is my own business because it can undermine the client’s trust in me* (SE). The practitioner’s lack of confidence can have a negative impact on the consultation. *The client doesn’t give a shit about your self-doubt. That’s not their issue. They just want results. If I’m full of self-doubt, there is no place for me to feel what anyone else in the room is feeling. I’m clogged. We are putting our own needs above the clients’ when we allow our self-doubt to pull us down into the grip of self worth* (LL).

The art of consulting arises, in part, from skillfully choosing appropriate feelings to share (Nevis as cited in McCormick & White, 2000). *A perfect example of appropriate authenticity is knowing when to shut up and what things to shut up about* (SE). *I ask myself ‘what is the job that I am there to do?’ It is to meet the client’s expectations and desires. The boundary I draw is, will sharing this help to illuminate the process or is it just about my stuff* (MR).

This is not to say the consultant should deny her feelings of self-doubt because, as the findings suggest, if unacknowledged or suppressed, cognitive self-doubt may spiral into emotional self-doubt, which can be debilitating. *I start to feel fearful and frustrated and powerless* (KV). The research indicates that repressing or ignoring such feelings decreases the consultant’s effectiveness; it limits her intervention choices, and separates her from the client and from potentially useful information and insights (Page, 1999, Stein, 1994, Tannenbaum & Eisen, 2004). *The important message is that as a feeling, it is okay to feel self-doubt. Because, if we don’t acknowledge and allow it, people deny it*
and then they get into terror around their self-doubt (MR). When people push away their self-doubt, it grows. When the brain kicks in judgmentally about our reactions and says “I’m not supposed to have these reactions or even notice that I’m reacting”…this is ridiculous that I’m reacting…that can spiral into the grip of self-doubt (DS).

Emotional self-doubt tends to be valuable in the larger context of developing self and less useful during real time client engagement (See Figure 1). It may take me the rest of my life to work out the deep intricacies of self-doubt, but while engaged with the client I have to move past it fast enough to be useful to get the information I need, not the reassurance I want (KG). As the consultant continues to develop herself, she becomes more effective and skillful in identifying her blind spots and finding appropriate venues to gain self-awareness.

The whole self-doubt thing is one of the real gems of the human experience. It’s a flag for me that this is something that I need to work with, not necessarily with the group, that’s my work and it doesn’t serve anyone to be working it out in front of the group. When I’m with the group, their work is my work (ST).

Strategies identified by respondents to leverage their emotional self-doubt, such as reflection and personal growth work, correspond with those cited in the literature for development of use of self as instrument (Seashore et al., 2004, Tannenbaum & Eisen, 2005). Many interviewees identified professional peer support as a rich but underutilized source for receiving real time feedback and sharing best practices for effectively dealing with self-doubt. The place to work on self-doubt is in a community of peers (LL). The more the consultant owns her feelings of self-doubt and other unwanted emotions, the better able she is to support her clients with theirs (Stein, 1994). “In order to select the
most appropriate consulting intervention, you must have the capacity to perceive accurately and fully what is going on in the client’s world” (Tannenbaum & Eisen, 2005, p. 8).

One way practitioners can gain more awareness of their self-doubt and effectively engage it is to notice and reflect on what triggers it. *I learned early on that certain settings set off my self-doubt and I needed to learn to manage that better. I developed a practice of rehearsal, meditation and visioning of how I wanted it to go* (BS). It is natural to get “hooked” by certain personality traits, and when the consultant does, she becomes caught up in her own reactions, which diminishes her range of appropriate responses (Seashore, et al., 1995). Thus, the consultant’s ability to identify what hooks or triggers her self-doubt can help her circumvent potentially troublesome reactions.

The data indicated some of the triggers that activated self-doubt in the consultants coincided with their interpretations of client manifestations of self-doubt. This generated curiosity about the potential occurrence of a parallel process. It is this researcher’s hypothesis that two phenomena are at play when consultants perceive or interpret self-doubt in their clients. One is that the consultant is accurately perceiving or intuiting a level of client discomfort, insecurity or doubt. The other is that there is a parallel process occurring, whereby either the client or practitioner is unconsciously picking up on and mirroring the manifestation of doubt in the other (Rayden, et al., 1993). There is a way in which the client’s own development and learning is displayed in the consultant’s behaviors (Nevis as cited in Cheung-Judge, 2001).

Awareness of this type of phenomenon can be of great benefit to OD practice. The consultant’s feelings and reactions can serve as crucial information about herself and
the client system (Stein, 1994; Tannenbaum & Eisen, 2005). When self-doubt manifests in either the consultant or the client, it is an important signal to slow down and get curious about whose uncertainties have been triggered. This type of awareness can sharpen the practitioner’s diagnostic skills, increasing her range of choices for effective interventions.

If the consultant locates the source of the doubt in the client, there are a number of strategies, contained in the data, available to support the individual or the group. Given there is much negative stigma in our society about self-doubt, practitioners can promote a large degree of sanity in organizations by helping people acknowledge the universality of self-doubt and productively working with it. *If I see my client is struggling with his or her own self-doubt, and that it may be a crucial turning point for them, I might share my own, model and make it O.K. to help the client to work through theirs* (SE).

Finally, an intriguing two-step approach for productively engaging client uncertainty was illuminated by the data: The first step involves inviting the individual or group to feel and voice their self-doubt; the second step prompts them to question what is actually going on and what they can do about it. *Our job is to uncompress the atmosphere by first letting more emotion into the space and then create an environment where insight can come into play. To do this, we have to help the client move past the emotional state where people can be analytical about their emotions* (JM). The consultant’s capacity to access and utilize both her left and right-brained selves greatly increases her effectiveness as a practitioner (Tannenbaum & Eisen, 2005).

In summary, by welcoming and exploring unwanted parts of the self, such as self-doubt, the consultant promotes integration and health inside of herself and in the systems
with which she interacts. Cognitive self-doubt, if managed skillfully by the consultant, can be useful during the client intervention. Emotional self-doubt has less direct benefit for the client, however, exploration of this phenomenon on personal time can greatly enhance the practitioner’s development of self, which ultimately serves the client. As OD legends such as Seashore (2004), Eisen (2005) and Cheung-Judge (2001) assert, developing the self is a life long process, not an end goal. It is this researcher’s conclusion that, akin to developing the self, befriending self-doubt is a life time practice and one worth undertaking.

This section focused on the main themes that evolved from the analysis: two different levels of self-doubt—cognitive and emotional, the continuum of usefulness of doubt; potential of a parallel process between client and consultant; and how to support the client or client group when dealing with doubt. The final sections of this paper will address the implications and conclusions drawn from the research.

**Implications For The Field**

“Great doubt, great awakening.” Zen Maxim

Practitioners, and in theory clients, each have their own personal experience of the very real phenomenon of self-doubt. *There are a whole lot of leaders and people in groups that we are tending to that are filled with self-doubt so it’s a really important emotion and state to be familiar with (ST).* This has powerful implications for OD practice. Allowing and acknowledging our feelings of uncertainty can greatly benefit the practitioner and her clients, who are also ripe candidates for self-doubt; not only because all humans feel it to some degree, but also because they are undergoing the painful process of change. *If you push away self-doubt, you can’t really get to the other side,*
which is self-acceptance. No one writes about self-doubt and people don’t realize that self is a common thread to the work and it connects us. The corollary to self-doubt is self-honesty (JM).

Implications for the client

Allowing self-doubt into the client engagement can promote valuable inquiry both about what is actually going on in the system and what to do about it. This awareness can free the practitioner from unconscious reactions or from missing a crucial piece of information about the client system. Used in this way, the practitioner’s uncertainty becomes a barometer, helping her to gauge the emotional temperature in the room and in her self. Ultimately, this leads to a greater access to the organization and a wider range of choices (Stein, 1994).

As a practitioner, owning and strategically revealing one’s self-doubt cultivates empathy for others. If clients do not need to hide or mask their doubt; they can bring their whole selves to the workplace. In this way, the consultant’s self-doubt becomes a powerful tool for recognizing and supporting the clients’ experience of it. My modeling self-doubt supports a learning environment and helps the client go ‘Oh, I can do that to, and that is how it looks’ (TV).

How we work with our own levels of self-doubt can impact how we engage with our clients and how productively we can help them manage their own self-doubt. Modeling appropriate self-doubt can help deepen the level of trust and relationship between the practitioner and the client and serve as a powerful catalyst for the client.
Implications for the practitioner

You can’t really be a successful and true OD consultant using self as instrument if you don’t know what self-doubt is (ST). A key implication for the practitioner is that by acknowledging and reframing her self-doubt, she reduces the stigma associated with it and is more able to use it to her benefit. Because one of the principles of OD is creating a 50-50 partnership with the client, one’s own uncertainty is a reminder that one doesn’t have to have all the answers. Consider how the consultant might feel about self-doubt if she reframed thoughts such as, “I don’t know the right thing to do here and I’m supposed to know” into “Oh, I don’t know it all and I’m not supposed to, lets figure this out together”? If self-doubt is viewed as a potential gauge of the client system and a message to the consultant to drop her savior complex, it can greatly diminish “the grip” that practitioners and the literature referred to.

By identifying common triggers and early signs and symptoms of self-doubt, such as “I don’t know enough” the practitioner is reminded to slow down, get curious and refocus on the client. Asking simple questions such as “I’m not sure where to go right now.” or “I’m not sure what is going on right now, I’m noticing a lot of emotion in the room.” can release some of the internal dialogue and potentially strengthen the partnership. In sharing an appropriate piece of her uncertainty with the client, the consultant may find she has successfully moved beyond the shadow of her doubt. What was once feared can become an ally. Some self-doubt is unnecessary. If I can catch this type of self-doubt in time, I can short circuit myself and get my ego out of the way so that something else can come in because that’s pretty powerful (JM).

When the consultant experiences emotional self-doubt, it is a signal that there are unresolved issues bubbling up to the surface. Ignoring or becoming critical of her lack of
confidence may make it impossible for the practitioner to be fully present, and worse, may manifest in unconscious ways. The more familiar the practitioner becomes with her emotional self-doubt the less reactive and more proactive and resourceful she becomes. Strategies such as identifying triggers, acknowledging and reflecting on the feelings, and practicing new responses and behaviors in venues T-group or therapy only deepen the practitioner’s capacity to skillfully use her self as instrument.

Self-doubt is universal, thus these implications may be applicable to other professionals who seek to engage and improve human systems.

Recommendations for the profession

Based on the discussion of the results of this research, three recommendations are offered for OD practitioners and the OD field.

1. Include acknowledging and effectively working with self-doubt as a core competency for OD practitioners.

2. Incorporate the competency of effective use of self-doubt into the curriculum of OD training programs.

3. Develop and promote professional peer feedback groups for OD consultants to practice new approaches and responses to self-doubt.

Conclusion

I do get jerked around by self-doubt, but the first thing I try to do is accept it and understand what it is trying to tell me. I find it’s transforming itself into something like humility. I go in with an orientation to service, self-questioning and inquiry (DS).

This paper demonstrates that, contrary to commonly held beliefs, self-doubt is useful. Within the context of the OD field, self-doubt, both cognitive and emotional, is
valuable in the development and use of the self to support healthy systems. As practitioners, awareness and cultivation of our uncertainty expands our capacity to help organizations become self-sustaining and whole. Self-doubt may be a signal that something needs attention in the client system or inside one’s self. The consultant’s job is to discern what the message is and to use the information appropriately to best serve the needs of the client (See Figure B).

The ability to recognize and access one’s doubt keeps the practitioner whole, fully engaged and bringing all she has to bear on the consultation at any given moment. It is my intention that the implications of this study will offer the reader a new lens with which to view a familiar and often unwanted and uncomfortable experience, promoting a productive and healthy relationship with self-doubt and offering new insights for the field of OD practice.
**Figure B: Links and Loops**

Reinforcing Negative Loop of Self Doubt & Subsequent Intervention Points to Break the Cycle of Self-Doubt. These interventions can help the practitioner to use her doubt to be more effective and expand her range of choices during the client intervention.

POTENTIAL INTERVENTION POINTS

- **Unexamined Self Doubt**
  - Suppress or Avoid
  - Break the cycle
  - Reestablish 50-50 partnership
  - Name Uncertainty
  - Build culture of trust and empathy
  - Increase awareness & intervention choices
  - Get Curious
  - Ask Questions to get Data

R
References


Appendices:

A: Research Participants
B: Request to participate
C: Interview Questions
D: Release Form
E: Reflection Questions
Appendix A: Research Participants

KV - SSU graduate 2006 pending, 1 year in the field
AH - SSU graduate 2005, 2 years in the field
KG - SSU graduate 2003, 2 years in the field
NP - SSU graduate 2000, 5 years in the field
JM - SSU graduate 2005, 5 years in the field
KE - SSU graduate 2000, 6 years in the field
TV - 8 years in the field
ST - SSU graduate 1995, SSU faculty, 15 years in the field
MR - SSU graduate 1991, 18 years in the field
LL - 22 years in the field
BS - 30+ years in the field
DS - 30+ years in the field
SE - SSU faculty, 37 years in the field
Appendix B: Request for Participation

Dear ____,

Happy New Years. My name is Elissa Berrol and I am a current Masters candidate in the OD program at SSU working on my culminating research paper. I'm seeking external OD consultants who are willing and interested to speak about self-doubt as it relates to Use of Self as an instrument for organizational transformation.

I am curious to discover and understand how to best develop and use “self as tool” when self-doubt takes hold; how to stay engaged in the client relationship, how to remain transparent, and how to reframe self-doubt. I am interested in the relationship/relevance of self-doubt to Use of Self as a tool for change and how OD practitioners deal with self-doubt during client engagements.

I believe these conversations will generate rich learning that will be of value to our field, our clients and our selves. My goal is to interview a cross section of OD consultants who have been in practice less than 3 years, 3-5 years and over 6 years. I invite you to share your wisdom and experience so that other practitioners may learn to more effectively use self as tool for organizational transformation.

**Logistics:**

- Our conversation will run approximately one hour.
- We will meet at the location of your choosing.
- Interview material will be confidential; the culminating research paper will protect your anonymity.
- If you know of OD consultants who might be interested in this topic please pass this information along to them.
- I will be happy to provide you with a final copy of my research paper upon request.

If you find this topic of interest and would like to participate in this research study, please contact me at 510-206-2110 or elissa66@hotmail.com, before January 31, 2006.

Thank you in advance for your time and your support,

Elissa Berrol, Ed.M

“To the degree that OD includes valuing the development of the full potential of people inside the organization, a framework for understanding the effective Use of Self can be a powerful instrument to use in building strong, viable, and sustainable organizations. It is not the simplest way to go about our business, but may be one of the most intriguing, rewarding and powerful of the tools available to us.”

Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. What is your name? (Graduate from SSU? Year)
2. MBTI type?
3. How long have you been an OD consultant?
4. How do you define OD?
5. What are the guiding principles upon which you base your OD work?
6. What does Use of Self as tool, mean to you? How do you/have you develop(ed) your use of self as a tool for organizational change?

7. Have you ever experienced self-doubt when working on a client project/intervention?
8. How do you define self-doubt? What does that mean to you?
9. What tends to trigger your self-doubt in a consultant role? (certain people, situations) Can you give me an example?
11. How do you work with your self-doubt towards the development of use of self as a tool for organizational change?
12. Do you believe self-doubt is useful in the development of self as tool? How so?
13. Do you think and how do you think your self-doubt and how you work with it impacts client? Can you give an example?

14. Do your clients experience self-doubt? How can you tell they?
15. How do you support your clients when they experience self-doubt?
16. Is that effective? How so? Congruent with how you work with your own?

17. Has your relationship to/with self-doubt changed over time? How so?
18. Do you have any final thoughts/wisdom you’d like to share about self-doubt, use of self as tool for org. transformation or otherwise for practitioners dealing with self-doubt?
Appendix D: Interview Release Form

Dear Research Participant,

Your participation in this project is greatly appreciated. The purpose of this study is to explore self-doubt and its potential usefulness in the development of self as tool for OD practitioners. I am interested in the relationship/relevance of self-doubt to use of self as a tool for change and how OD practitioners deal with self-doubt during client engagements. I am excited by this topic and hope you will find our conversation useful, thought provoking and enjoyable.

With your permission, I will audiotape and transcribe our interview. I may also take notes. At the end of the interview, I will make sure to ask you if there was sensitive information you shared that you prefer not be included in my paper. Should you wish to not have your name and/or organization identified, I will assure your confidentiality.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may ask any questions regarding the research and they will be answered fully. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

If you agree to participate, please complete the following:

I, (print your name legibly) ______________________________________________, have heard and read the purpose of this study. Any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand my right to withdraw my consent to participate at any time.

I hereby freely give my consent to participate in these aspects of the research project:

☐ Yes  ☐ No:  Permission to use my name and/or organization
☐ Yes  ☐ No:  Recorded interview

NAME (Signature): _________________________________ DATE: _______________

Please feel free to contact me if you have any further ideas or concerns about the project. I will post a copy of the final paper upon completion of my paper at the following address: www.sonoma.edu/users/s/smithh/odlibrary/default.htm. If you would like me to send you a copy of my final paper please indicate your request in the box below and provide an address or email for me to do so.

☐ Yes  ☐ No:  I wish to receive a copy of the final paper

Please send to the following address:

Thank you again for your participation,

Elissa Berrol, Sonoma State University Organization Development MA candidate
Appendix E: Reflection Questions


1. “What happens to my ability to choose my behavior when I get “hooked” by something the client says or does?

2. How do I know when I am meeting my needs through the intervention vs. meeting the client’s needs?

3. Do I know when I am being motivated by an unknown part of myself vs. meeting client needs?

4. If I know I’m being motivated by my own needs or by something within me, can I do anything about it?

5. Do I know why I want to give feedback in a situation?

6. Some of the issues we can be hooked by include: authority, conflict, intimacy, diversity issues, fear, and ego. How do I use myself when I have not resolved all of these issues? (p.3).