

Enabling a Person's Occupation: Congruence Between the Values of Occupational Therapy and the Characteristics of an Effective Leader

By Jane A. Davis

Effective leaders are crucial to the development, promotion, image, culture and sustainability of any profession, and they reflect the values of their profession. Occupational therapy leaders are no different. As you read the profiles of the key leaders contained within the pages of this magazine, it becomes apparent that the core concepts and fundamental values of the profession of occupational therapy are close to the hearts of these leaders.

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A mark of any great leader is whether he or she “enables the successful performer to do her [sic] work” (Drucker, 2004, p. 31). Great leaders invest their time and energy to enable the successful pursuits of others (Cox, 2001). If this sounds familiar, that is because it is congruent with the domain of concern of Canadian occupational therapy - to enable occupation. This is what is unique about the profession of occupational therapy and what occupational therapists do. The fundamental ideas behind enabling occupation and the basic values of the profession provide a backdrop for realizing the affinity between the profession of occupational therapy and

the characteristics and values of a great leader. The fundamental values of Canadian occupational therapy have been outlined in *Enabling Occupation: An Occupational Therapy Perspective* (CAOT, 2002), an internationally recognized document published through a collaboration of Canadian leaders in occupational therapy, including educators, researchers and clinicians.

Occupation and leadership

With the publication of the Enabling Occupation document and the concurrent, yet independent, creation of the discipline of occupational science in the late 1980s, came the declaration that occupation was a key concern of occupational therapy. This has placed occupation front and centre within the profession, now viewed, unequivocally, as a core concept of both occupational therapy and occupational science. Since their focus is on occupational performance, occupational scientists and occupational therapists believe that people are occupational beings and that engagement in meaningful and purposeful occupation is a basic human need. Inherent within the profession and discipline are foundational beliefs and values related to the nature of occupation and the person, which come together within the concept of client-centredness. There is remarkable congruence between these beliefs and values and those of effective leadership!

About occupation*

Occupation gives meaning to life:

Effective leaders encourage the people around them to do what is important to them and strive to be successful at it (Cox, 2001). Occupational therapists work with individuals who have difficulties in performing their daily occupations or activities. They enable people to re-engage in meaningful and purposeful occupations, or engage in new occupations, which can provide their clients with meaning and a sense of fulfillment, and

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structure and organize their everyday lives.

Occupation develops and changes over a lifetime:

Effective leaders view change as an opportunity, and because of constant societal shifts, it is viewed as the only way to survive and succeed (Drucker, 2004). Leaders encourage change, not the status quo (Cox, 2001). They understand that life improvements come through change. Occupational therapists believe that an individual's occupations are constantly developing across an individual's lifespan. One individual may become more competent in a certain occupation, while another individual may transform his or her occupation into a different one requiring similar skills.

Occupation shapes and is shaped by environments:

Effective leaders believe that through their actions they can alter the environment around them, and when motivating, this environment can then lead to growth and change in others (Bennis, 1994; Cox, 2001). Occupational therapists understand that people engage in occupations that their physical, social, cultural and institutional environments afford. And in response, people's engagement in occupations influences the environments, in which they live and work. Occupational therapists strive to create environments that allow to fulfill their goals, meet their needs, and uncover occupational opportunities.

Performance, organization, choice and satisfaction in occupations are determined by the relationship between persons and their environment:

Effective leaders believe that an individual's ability and potential to perform and achieve are best enabled when there is a fit between the individual and his or her environment (Cox, 2001; Drucker, 2004). Occupational therapists create nourishing and enabling environments for their clients and students that promote occupational choice, development, performance, and satisfaction.

About the person(s)*

Every person is unique, having diverse abilities and capacities for engagement in occupations:

Effective leaders believe that all possess abilities and capacities that are unique (Covey, 1992), thus every individual has something to offer (Drucker, 2004). Occupational therapists view this diversity as enriching, since no one individual can have all the answers (Walls, 2003), or do everything. Thus, occupational

therapists promote and support the diversity and uniqueness of their clients.

Every person has intrinsic dignity and worth:

Effective leaders show empathy towards others, value others' knowledge, believe in others (Covey, 1992; Drucker, 2004) and have a high standard of personal ethics (Cox, 2001). Occupational therapists follow a code of professional ethics and have a strong belief in the value and worth of people and communities. They hold a respect for all persons, which helps them to enable their clients toward successful occupational engagement. They offer encouragement, realistic hope, and direction.

The task of a great occupational therapy leader ... is to multiply the occupational performance capacity of their clients and students.

Every person has the capacity for making choices about their life, for self-determination, and for personal change: Effective leaders focus on an individual's strengths and ability to change, instead of their weaknesses (Drucker, 2004). They enable momentum and encourage change, which leads to improvements in one's accomplishments and abilities (Cox, 2001). Occupational therapists strive to create an environment for their clients, which promotes and enables change. They offer ideas, but allow their clients to make the choices to determine their unique occupational trajectory.

About client-centredness*

Clients have experience and knowledge about their occupations and are active partners in the occupational therapy process:

True leaders do not lead, they serve others (Covey, 1992). All leaders need to have a general knowledge of the work that has to be done. However, they also recognize that they do not know all there is to know. Thus, effective leaders work with the around them and not above them (Cox, 2001). To do this, effective leaders must be excellent communicators, including being a great listener of people's experiences (Covey, 1992; Cox, 2001; Walls, 2003). Occupational therapists view their clients as experts of their own strengths, weaknesses and experiences, thus first

and foremost they listen to their clients and ask questions about their occupational lives. They enable their clients to set and achieve their occupational goals.

Risk-taking is necessary for positive change: Effective leaders are risk takers (Bennis, 1994; Cox, 2001). They have the courage to try new things based on their knowledge, are creative, and think outside the box (Covey, 1992; Cox, 2001). This focus provides momentum and enables change, not consistency and complacency. Occupational therapists understand that to enable a client to perform occupations they must create a relationship of mutual trust and be willing to take risks. They will do what is required to adapt their skills to the unique occupational needs of their clients and make situations work for all involved.

... occupational therapists have the ability to be effective leaders because of the congruence between leadership values and those of the profession of occupational therapy.

Client-centred practice in occupational therapy focuses on enabling occupation:

“Leadership is the lifting of a man’s [sic] vision to higher sights, the raising of a man’s performance to higher standard, the building of a man’s person beyond its normal limitations” (Drucker, 2004, p. 6). The basics of effective leadership are having a clear vision, passion, and integrity (Bennis, 1994). Effective leaders are goal oriented and provide the co-ordination, organization, and prioritization required to achieve positive outcomes in various tasks (Cox, 2001). They have gained the trust of others, radiate positive energy, and are optimistic, enthusiastic and hopeful (Bennis, 1994; Covey, 1992; Cox, 2001). Enabling occupation requires leaders to inspire others and encourage their participation in achieving the desired outcome. Occupational therapists work with their clients to set goals, and once these goals are set they strive along with them to achieve them, through many creative means. Occupational therapists enable occupation by forming a relationship with their clients built on trust and honesty, and instilling realistic hope. One way of providing hope is to “pick some low

hanging fruit” (Wall, 2003, p.26); working with clients to achieve small goals, will help create momentum.

Effective leaders are those individuals who reflect many of these values in their everyday personal lives. Occupational therapy leaders exemplify these values to the extreme; occupational therapists have the ability to be effective leaders because of the congruence between leadership values and those of the profession of occupational therapy. As well, they enable their clients to be leaders in their own occupational recovery, strive for positive change in their occupational lives, and reframe their occupational trajectories. The task of a great occupational therapy leader is “not to change human beings”, it is to multiply the occupational performance capacity of their clients and students by enabling them “to use whatever strengths, whatever health, whatever aspirations” they have (adapted from Drucker, 2004, p. 107), and by creating an environment open to positive occupational change.

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* These values are taken, with minor adaptation, from CAOT (2002).