



HUMAN DEVELOPMENT & LEADERSHIP DIVISION

A Primer on
**Organizational
Commitment**

An exploration of organizational commitment, its possible influence on organizational efficiency, and actions leaders can take to build highly-committed workforces

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT

“Unless commitment is made, there are only promises and hopes . . . no plans.”

Peter Drucker (1909-2005)

Introduction

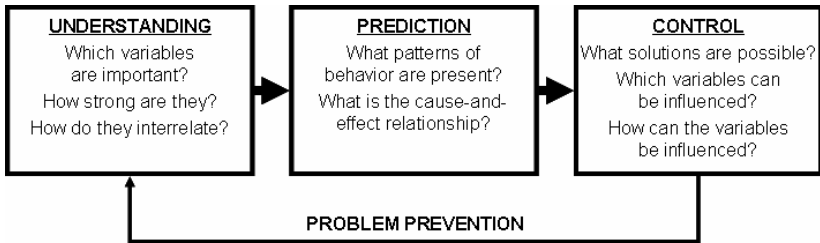
It is commitment that gets the job done. This intense dedication is more powerful than our best intentions, willpower, or circumstances. Without commitment, influence is minimal; barriers are unbreachable; and passion, impact, and opportunities may be lost (Maxwell, 1999).

This primer explores the topic of organizational commitment, its possible influence on organizational efficiency, and actions leaders can take to build highly-committed workforces.

Organizational behavior is the study of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors displayed by people in the workplace. Behavioral scientists argue that managers who know why workers behave the ways they do are better equipped to motivate employees to contribute to the achievement of organizational goals. Gray & Starke explain in their book, *Organizational Behavior, Concepts and Applications* (1988, p.6) that the process for obtaining this knowledge involves understanding, prediction, and control. (See Figure 1) They write:

Understanding is aimed at identifying and measuring (as accurately as possible) the major factors affecting a situation. If understanding is successful, patterns of behavior may emerge, and one can make certain *predictions* about behavior in light of acquired knowledge. The ability to understand then predict makes it possible to *control* behavior.

Figure 1: The basic process of organizational behavior



Source: Gray and Starke (1988, p. 6)

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, work was primarily accomplished in entrepreneurial environments and it is likely the commitment to work came from the autonomy and pride of individual ownership. The Industrial Revolution brought people together in factories and unions where they had to learn how to work with each other and become committed to organizations in which they had little control.

The first organizational behavior research, such as the famous Hawthorne Studies, focused on improving worker productivity. Later studies focused on examining the relationships between job satisfaction and job performance, and it was found that this relationship was not all that strong. Researchers then began to look at other attitudinal concepts, such as organizational commitment. Meyer and Allen (1997, p.viii) reported:

We started to conduct research on commitment in the early 1980s. Our interest was stimulated initially by practical considerations: What made some volunteers in nonprofit organizations so highly committed to their work and how might this sense of commitment be instilled in others?

Definition, Types, and Perspectives of Organizational Commitment

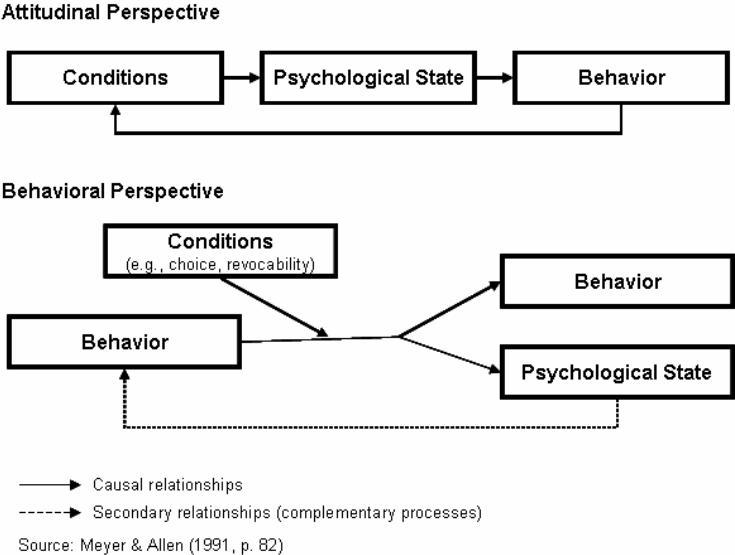
Organizational commitment is the employees' state of being committed to assist in the achievement of the organization's goals, and involves the employees' levels of identification, involvement, and loyalty (Caught & Shadur, 2000). It is an emotional response that can be measured through people's behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes and can range anywhere from very low to very high. John Meyer and Nancy Allen (1997) have identified three types of organizational commitment: affective, continuance, and normative.

- ***Affective or moral commitment*** occurs when individuals fully embrace the goals and values of the organization. They become emotionally involved with the organization and feel personally responsible for the organization's level of success. These individuals usually demonstrate high levels of performance, positive work attitudes, and a desire to remain with the organization.
- ***Continuance or calculative commitment*** occurs when individuals base their relationship with the organization on what they are receiving in return for their efforts and what would be lost if they were to leave (i.e., pay, benefits, associations). These individuals put forth their best effort only when the rewards match their expectations.
- ***Normative commitment*** occurs when individuals remain with an organization based on expected standards of behavior or social norms. These individuals value obedience, cautiousness, and formality. Research suggests that they tend to display the same attitudes and behaviors as those who have affective commitment.

Zangaro (2001) suggests that an additional type, ***alienative commitment***, may also exist. He writes that this occurs when individuals feel they have little or no control or impact, and would like to leave their jobs. These employees usually demonstrate low levels of performance.

In 1991, Meyer and Allen recommended that employee commitment be studied from both the attitudinal and behavioral perspectives. The *attitudinal perspective* focuses on identifying the events that contribute to the development of commitment. The *behavioral perspective* focuses on identifying the conditions where behavior, once exhibited, tends to be repeated, along with its effects on changes in attitudes. Figure 2 highlights the differences between these two perspectives.

Figure 2: Attitudinal and behavioral perspectives on organizational commitment



Assessments of Organizational Commitment

To obtain the data needed to effectively assess and manage employee commitment levels, employers may consider surveying their employees. The two most commonly-used assessment tools in organizational behavior research are Mowday, Steers, and Porter’s (1979) Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ), and

Allen and Myers' (1990) Three-Component Organizational Commitment Scale. (See Appendices A and B)

Employers interested in measuring their employees' acceptance of the organization's goals, willingness to work hard for the organization, and desire to stay with the organization may find the OCQ useful. Employers interested in measuring their employees' levels of affective, continuance, and normative commitment could use the Three-Component Organizational Commitment Scale.

Prerequisites for Organizational Commitment

Regardless of what companies do, some employees display greater organizational commitment than others. Researchers have found that certain characteristics, attitudes, and relationships may play key roles in environments with high levels of organizational commitment. (See Table 1)

Personal characteristics are important factors in the development of an individual's level of organizational commitment. Mathieu and Zajac (1990) have identified several personal characteristics:

- **Age:** Older workers tend to be more committed than younger ones. Some researchers have emphasized negative reasons for this finding: older workers have fewer occupational alternatives and would risk their benefits if they left an organization. Others have focused on findings that older workers have greater job satisfaction and have better jobs.
- **Gender:** Men tend to be somewhat less committed to organizations than women.
- **Education:** More highly-educated workers tend to be less committed. One explanation is that they may have greater expectations of the organization which cannot always be met.

- ***Perceived competence***: Employees who perceive themselves as having higher levels of competence tend to display greater organizational commitment. It has been proposed that this occurs because these workers can use the organization to meet their needs for growth and achievement.
- ***Protestant (or Puritan) work ethic***: Employees who believe in the intrinsic value and necessity of work also believe that the organization is the place where their need to do work can be satisfied.

Job attitudes also contribute to an individual's level of organizational commitment.

- ***Job satisfaction*** is the only attitude variable studied more than organizational commitment. Job satisfaction is “the degree to which people like their jobs” (Spector, 1997, p.vii) based on “what they receive from working compared to what they expect, want, or think they deserve” (Klinger & Nalbandian, 1993, p.175).

Much debate has focused on the causal relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment. While most studies suggest that individuals must be satisfied with their jobs before they can become committed to the organization, other studies report an inverse relationship—that job satisfaction is an outcome of one's level of organizational commitment.

Even more confusing are studies reporting there is no evidence that a relationship exists between employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Testa, 2001). Researchers also differ regarding whether job satisfaction research should be considered globally or in various facets (e.g., supervision, promotion, pay). However, in a meta-analysis study, Mathieu and Zajac (1990) found the correlation between job satisfaction and organizational commitment to be high.

Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) is another attitude-linked concept that has been studied with organizational commitment. Robinson and Morrison (1995, p.289) explain that OCB refers to “employee behavior that is extra-role, that promotes organizational effectiveness, and that is not explicitly recognized by an organization’s reward system.” Research findings indicate that there is a clear link between organizational commitment and OCB (Morrison & Robinson 1997). It is widely believed that organizations could not survive unless employees were willing to occasionally engage in OCB.

Job characteristics also influence the development of organizational commitment.

- Those whose **job level** is high tend to show greater organizational commitment. This may be related to other findings that older workers and those with longer **position tenure** are more committed.
- Workers who can apply a variety of **job skills** have greater **autonomy** on the job, find greater **challenges** in their jobs, and tend toward greater organizational commitment (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990).
- Employees can experience **role stress** at work, and away from work, as well. Lack of clarity in work role (**role ambiguity**), inconsistencies between role expectations (**role conflict**), and unreasonable expectations of time and energy in a role (**role overload**) all contribute to low organizational commitment.

Relationships with co-workers and supervisors also appear to be related to organizational commitment.

- **Group cohesiveness** refers to the forces that keep a group of coworkers together. For group cohesiveness to occur, members of the group must be committed to the group and identify with the organization. Thus, group cohesiveness may be a prerequisite for organizational commitment.

- Studies of *leadership* have found that two complementary behaviors are important for effective leadership. The extent to which leaders define their own and their subordinates' roles (*initiating structure*) and the extent to which leaders are concerned with the well-being of their subordinates (*consideration*) are both positively related to organizational commitment.

Table 1: Prerequisites for organizational commitment

Personal Characteristics	Age	
	Gender	
	Education	
	Perceived Competence	
	Protestant Work Ethic	
Job Attitudes	Job Satisfaction	
	Organizational Citizenship Behavior	
Job Characteristics	Job Level	
	Position Tenure	
	Job Skills	
	Autonomy	
	Challenges	
	Role Stress	Ambiguity
		Conflict
Overload		
Relationships with Co-workers and Supervisors	Group Cohesiveness	
	Leadership	Initiating Structure
		Consideration

Co-occurring Emotional Responses and Related Concepts

Numerous affective, or emotional, responses have been found to be related to organizational commitment. It is unclear as yet whether these are possible causes or effects of commitment. Is an employee's motivation related to organizational commitment? Most of the research has focused on the importance of accomplishment and self-fulfillment (*internal motivation*).

Stress can be attributed to the roles people play away from work, as well as their roles at work. Regardless of the source, it makes sense that high levels of stress are associated with low levels of commitment.

Finally, there are a few additional concepts that have been found to be related to organizational commitment. The extent to which individuals identify with their jobs (*job involvement*), are committed to their professions (*occupational commitment*), and are loyal to their unions (*union commitment*) can contribute to their level of commitment to the organizations in which they work (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). Since a union is itself an organization, an individual's commitment to the union can be affected by the health of management-labor relations.

Morrow (1993) has proposed a model of the relationship between the forms of commitment as a series of concentric circles. (See Figure 3) Protestant work ethic can lead to occupational commitment; followed by the continuance aspect of organizational commitment, the affective aspect of organizational commitment, and finally job involvement. According to Morrow, the inner circles are more determined by personality, while the outer circles are affected by environmental factors. Evidence from testing this model is mixed.

Figure 3: Relationships among forms of commitment



Source: Morrow, P. (1993), *The theory and measurement of work commitment*. Greenwich, CT.: JAI Press.

Effects of Organizational Commitment on Job Performance, Absenteeism, and Turnover

What are the consequences of organizational commitment? Employees with high levels of organizational commitment would seem to be desirable, but how do they affect the bottom-line? Are employees with high levels of organizational commitment better workers? Do they stay longer?

One of the most disappointing findings in the literature on organizational commitment is its relationship to **job performance** (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). While studies using **supervisor ratings** have found a positive relationship between organizational commitment and job performance, the relationship is weak. Studies that examined performance with **worker output** measures (e.g., productivity) found no relationship.

Employees who are more committed to the organization are less likely to exhibit withdrawal behaviors, such as; **absenteeism**, **intention to leave** their jobs, or leaving their jobs (**turnover**). This seems to be especially true with employees who have high levels

of affective commitment. However, the relationship between these actions is not strong. Cognitions, such as intentions, may moderate the relationship. Studies that have examined *intention to search* for another position or *intention to leave* found that these two behaviors have a much stronger relationship with organizational commitment than does employee turnover (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990).

Table 2: Effects of organizational commitment

Job Performance	Supervisor Ratings
	Worker Output
Withdrawal Behaviors	Absenteeism
	Intention to Search
	Intention to Leave
	Turnover

Organizational Commitment in the 21st Century

Considering the changes in organizations in the 21st century (e.g., globalization, growth of information technology), some have suggested that organizational commitment is an outdated concept. Meyer and Allen (1997), however, offer three reasons for the continued importance of organizational commitment:

- Organizations are not disappearing; they are becoming leaner, and leaner organizations require greater flexibility from their employees. Since organizations have fewer managers providing less oversight, employees will have to perform the correct actions by themselves. Employee commitment to the organization can help ensure the correctness of their actions.

- Organizations that outsource their work depend on the quality of temporary workers. Perhaps these workers will not have the type of commitment that permanent workers will have. Commitment of temporary workers will be necessary for quality to be maintained.
- Developing commitment is a natural response to being part of a group. If organizations do not take advantage of this response, they will be encouraging alienation. The outcomes of alienation are detrimental to organizations.

Globalization has led to organizations becoming more diverse and has increased interest in studying organizational commitment in other nations. What influences have these changes had on organizational commitment and are they compatible?

Managing Diversity

Kirby and Orlando (2000, p.367) explain that managing diversity:

Includes a variety of voluntary activities related to recruiting, hiring, and using the skills of people who differ along such dimensions as race, gender, and ethnic background. ...Managing workplace diversity presumably provides organizations with a competitive advantage through the benefits associated with ... organizational commitment.

Although organizations apply diversity management policies to increase the organizational commitment of employees, evidence exists that these actions may actually have an inverse effect. Both majority and minority employees have shown lower commitment to organizations that have undertaken diversity actions. Perhaps the context in which these diversity actions takes place determines whether organizational commitment will be increased or decreased. Diversity initiatives may have more positive effects on organizational commitment when coupled with high interaction among employees and a focus on achieving common goals.

International Differences

Most researchers have examined organizational commitment in the United States, so generalizing their findings to organizations in other countries should be done cautiously. However, case studies on organizational commitment outside the United States have found relationships similar to those found in the United States. For example, organizational commitment has been linked to higher organizational citizenship behaviors in Israel and New Zealand. Other studies indicate that the relationship between organizational commitment and intent to leave the job is weaker in Mexico, lower in Japan, and nonexistent in India. An Israeli sample of occupational welfare workers found that the nonprofessional workers had higher organizational commitment than the professionally-trained workers (Mannheim & Pap, 2000).

Managerial Implications

In several research studies, employees in both professional and occupational fields identified variables they feel are important for the development of high levels of commitment to their organizations. These variables are listed in Table 3.

Management actions that are useful for developing an organizational culture of high commitment include: the establishment of good communications channels, visible ethical standards, hiring people with belief and values systems similar to the organization, and reward systems that recognize individual achievement and commitment styles.

Establishing *good communications channels* appears to be one of the most important elements needed for organizational commitment. Zangaro (2001) argues that “this communication must be bidirectional—that is . . . continually flow between employees and organizational management to nurture high levels of commitment.” Publishing a company newsletter is one way of achieving this goal. Other management actions for achieving bidirectional communication channels are the use of open-door and open-book policies.

Table 3: Variables related to high organizational commitment by professional and occupational fields

Profession or Occupation	Organizational Commitment Variables
Police officers	Management support, fairness in command, management sensitivity to diversity
Food service management	Identification and involvement in the company
Waste, water, and sanitation employees	Promotion satisfaction, job characteristics, communications, leadership satisfaction, job satisfaction, good communications, extrinsic rewards
Senior-executive service employees	Leader-member relations, subunit power, involvement in quality decisions, beliefs about the importance of politically neutral goals
Service employees	Adherence and enforcement of organizational ethical values
Health care maintenance organization physicians	Control over the practice environment, support from colleagues, availability of resources
Psychiatrists	Similar ideological perspectives with coworkers
Psychiatric technicians	Perceived level of expectations matched the realities of the job environment
Nurses	Balance between work and family needs, job satisfaction, opportunities to learn, monetary benefits, job stability, ability to fulfill potential
Teachers	Autonomy, participation in decision making, collaborative actions, collegial support, goal congruence, feedback, reasonable and clear expectations, good student quality

Sources: Baker & Baker (1999); Freeborn (2001); McNeese-Smith & Nazarey (2001); Meyer, et al (1989); Morris, et al (1999); Mueller, et al (1999); Porter, et al (1974); Testa (2001); Young & Worchel (1998); Wilson (1999); Zangaro (2001).

Organizations where managers display *high moral standards*, live up to their commitments, and visibly enforce organizational ethical policies are more likely to have morally-committed workforces than organizations where management does not demonstrate these traits (Fritz, Arnett & Conkel, 1999).

Hiring practices where managers look for a match between the values held by the potential employee and the organization help build commitment. John Wanous, a pioneer in organizational commitment, suggests that employers should attempt to make new hires feel like organizational “insiders” as quickly as possible (Smith, 2000). Providing new employees with an organizational mentor may be one way to achieve this goal.

Designing **reward programs** to recognize personal accomplishments may also lead to higher levels of commitment. These reward initiatives may include employee-of-the-month programs, gift certificates, trips for productive work, scholarships for employees to advance their education, pay raises, promotions, and time off.

Additional management measures for obtaining and maintaining an organizationally-committed workforce include:

- **Implementing decentralized organizational structures.** As organizations increase in size, they may become depersonalized and make it harder for employees to identify with them. However, if larger organizations become decentralized, they may reduce this problem. Team-oriented work structures may help promote coworker support and team spirit (Freeborn, 2001).
- **Permitting employees to redesign their work processes** in ways that allow them to use their skills and abilities more fully. Such actions can make jobs more challenging, rewarding, and fun for employees; thus, encouraging them to excel (Albrecht, 1999).
- **Incorporating commitment objectives** into the organizational goal-setting process.
- **Offering human motivation training** seminars to all levels of management.

- ***Focusing management attention on issues of common concern*** among employees such as: equity, fairness, support for difficult working conditions, and work/family balance” (Morris, Shinn, and DuMont, 1999, p.88).
- ***Helping employees to identify with the organization*** by providing them with products (e.g., coffee mugs, t-shirts) printed with the company logo or slogan.
- ***Providing opportunities for socialization*** with other employees through company parties and picnics.

The effectiveness of specific strategies will vary based on the culture of each organization, and any prevailing leadership and organizational challenges.

Conclusion

This primer has highlighted the importance employee organizational commitment may play in the effective and efficient functioning of an organization. The phrase *organizational commitment* was defined and four types were identified. The influence of personal characteristics, job attitudes, and job characteristics on levels of employee commitment was explained; and two assessment tools for measuring employee commitment levels were introduced.

The suggestions for developing high levels of affective commitment will be useful to leaders who want to positively impact the performance of their organizations. Without organizational commitment, “the most creative and sophisticated plans and programs of top managers don’t seem to get far. With it, the most modest plan and the most straightforward programs seem to come out well” (Albrecht 1999, p.173).

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Appendix A

Organizational Commitment Questionnaire

By Richard T. Mowday, Richard M. Steers, and Lyman W. Porter

Instructions: Listed below are a series of statements that represent possible feelings that individuals might have about the company or organization for which they work. With respect to your own feelings about the particular organization for which you are now working please indicate the degree of your agreement or disagreement with each statement.

Scale: Responses to each item are measured on a seven-point scale with the anchors labeled: (1) strongly disagree, (2) moderately disagree, (3) slightly disagree, (4) neither disagree nor agree, (5) slightly agree, (6) moderately agree, (7) strongly agree. An “(R)” denotes a negatively phrased and reverse-scored item.

1. I am willing to put in a great deal of effort beyond that normally expected in order to help this organization be successful.
2. I talk up this organization to my friends as a great organization to work for.
3. I feel very little loyalty to this organization. (R)
4. I would accept almost any type of job assignment in order to keep working for this organization.
5. I find that my values and the organization's values are very similar.
6. I am proud to tell others that I am part of this organization.
7. I could just as well be working for a different organization as long as the type of work was similar. (R)
8. This organization really inspires the very best in me in the way of job performance.
9. It would take very little change in my present circumstances to cause me to leave this organization.
10. I am extremely glad that I chose this organization to work for over others I was considering at the time I joined.
11. There's not too much to be gained by sticking with his organization indefinitely. (R)
12. Often, I find it difficult to agree with this organization's policies on important matters relating to its employees. (R)
13. I really care about the fate of this organization.
14. For me this is the best of all possible organizations for which to work.
15. Deciding to work for this organization was a definite mistake on my part. (R)

Source: Mowday, R.; Steers, R.; & Porter L. (1979). The Measurement of Organizational Commitment. *The Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 14, 224-247.

Appendix B

A Three-Component Organizational Commitment Questionnaire

By Natalie Allen and John Meyer

Instructions: Listed below are comments about how people may feel about their organizations. Using the seven-point scale provided, please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each comment.

Scale: (1) strongly disagree, (2) moderately disagree, (3) slightly disagree, (4) neither disagree nor agree, (5) slightly agree, (6) moderately agree, and (7) strongly agree. An “(R)” denotes a negatively phrased and reverse-scored item.

Affective Commitment Scale Items

1. I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization.
2. I enjoy discussing my organization with people outside it.
3. I really feel as if this organization’s problems are my own.
4. I think that I could easily become as attached to another organization as I am to this one. (R)
5. I do not feel like ‘part of the family’ at my organization. (R)
6. I do not feel ‘emotionally attached’ to this organization. (R)
7. This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me.
8. I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to my organization. (R)

Continuance Commitment Scale Items

1. I am not afraid of what might happen if I quit my job without having another one lined up. (R)
2. It would be very hard for me to leave my organization right now, even if I wanted to.
3. Too much in my life would be disrupted if I decided I wanted to leave my organization now.
4. It wouldn’t be too costly for me to leave my organization now. (R)
5. Right now, staying with my organization is a matter of necessity as much as desire.
6. I feel that I have too few options to consider leaving this organization. (R)

7. One of the few serious consequences of leaving this organization would be the scarcity of available alternatives.
8. One of the major reasons I continue to work for this organization is that leaving would require considerable personal sacrifice—another organization may not match the overall benefits I have.

Normative Commitment Scale Items

1. I think that people these days move from company to company too often.
2. I do not believe that a person must always be loyal to his or her organization. (R)
3. Jumping from organization to organization does not seem at all unethical to me. (R)
4. One of the major reasons I continue to work for this organization is that I believe that loyalty is important and therefore feel a sense of moral obligation to remain.
5. If I got another offer for a better job elsewhere I would not feel it was right to leave my organization.
6. I was taught to believe in the value of remaining loyal to one organization.
7. Things were better in the days when people stayed with one organization for most of their careers.
8. I do not think that wanting to be a “company man” or “company woman” is sensible anymore. (R)

Source: Allen, N. and Meyer, J. (1990). The measurement and antecedents of affective, continuance, and normative commitment to the organization. *The Journal of Occupational Psychology*, 63, 1-18.

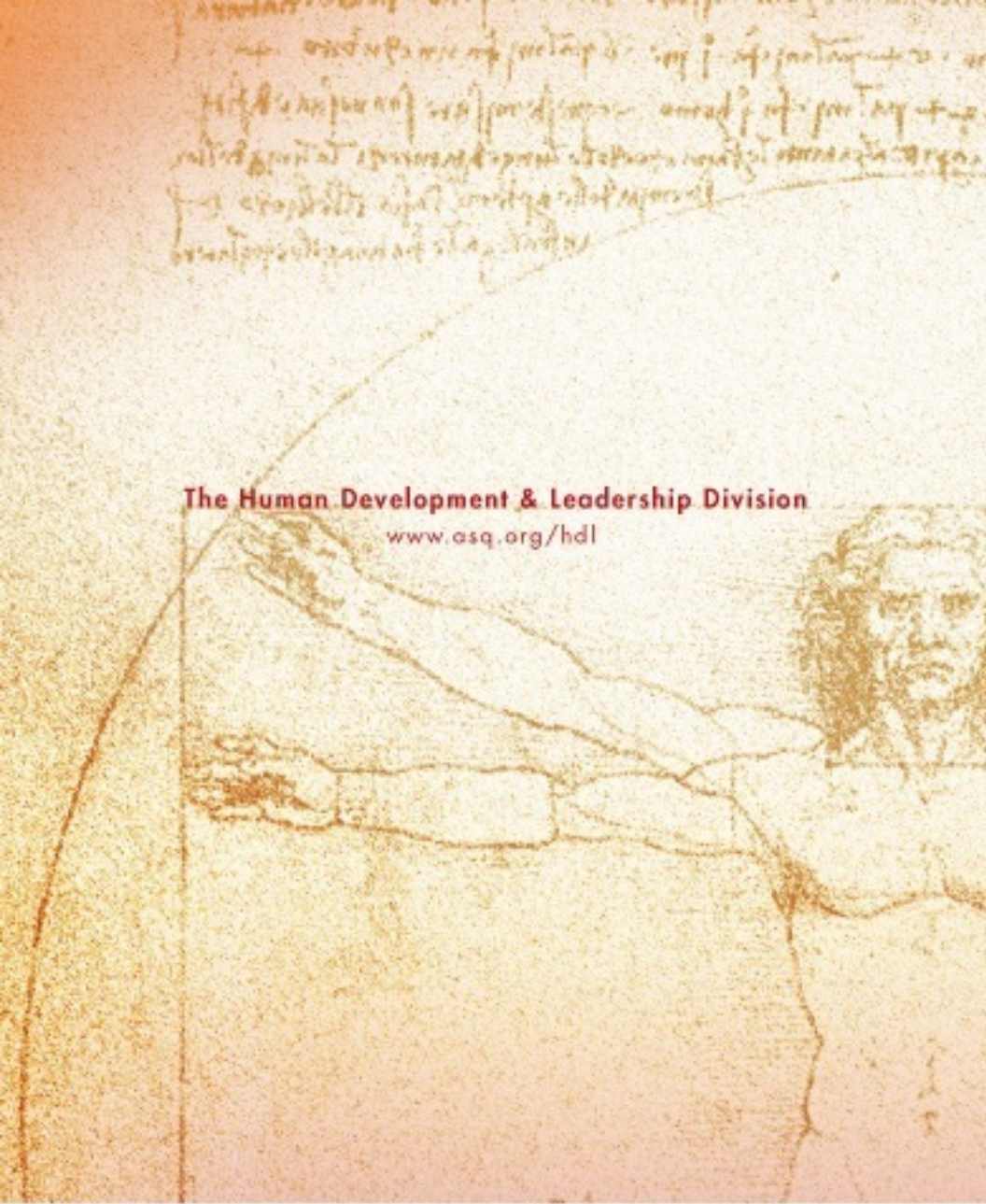
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Notes

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