

“The body of knowledge around use of self is still developing and has not yet become coherent. It mostly resembles the ‘prescience’ stage, lacking a generally recognized central paradigm . . .”

Exactly How Do You . . . Use Yourself?

By Matt Minahan &
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By now, OD circles have accepted “Use of Self” as having been delivered on the tablets handed down by our forebears over the years in OD. It is taught about in OD graduate programs. It is written about in practitioners’ journals, student theses and reflection papers.

We have a fairly long but thin body of knowledge about use of self. Most of the writing on the topic has been focused on the counseling and therapeutic worlds, starting in 1932 (Alexander, 1932). Since then, there has been approximately one journal article every decade (Goffman, 1959), (Jung, 1964), (Weiner, 1978), (Nevis, 1987), (D. Jamieson, 1991). By 2000, OD began to figure out how to apply these principles, developed in psychotherapy, to our work as consultants (Cooperrider, 2000), (Cheung-Judge, 2001), (Seashore, Nash, Thompson, & Mattare, 2004), (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2005), (Patwell & Seashore, 2006), (D. Jamieson, Auron, & Schectman, 2010), (Nash, 2014), (Rainey & Jones, 2014), (Forrester & Minahan, 2019), (Bennett & Berthoud, 2019), (D. W. Jamieson & Davidson, 2019).

The body of knowledge around use of self is still developing and has not yet become coherent. It mostly resembles the “prescience” stage, lacking a generally recognized central paradigm (Kuhn, 1962). After some time in prescience – a term that is notable for its similarity to prescient – an idea enters “normal science” which is defined by an agreed upon central paradigm during which extremely productive “puzzle solving” research occurs. Kuhn goes on to describe the next period, when

anomalous research findings build up to the point when a new paradigm emerges.

It is likely that our body of knowledge about use of self is the result of a couple of post-paradigmatic shifts, one from the world of industrial engineering about what makes for effective change processes, and the other from the world of psychotherapy where the grounding paradigms of the 1950s–1980s were about which techniques of therapy (Adlerian, Rogerian, Gestalt, etc.) and which regime of medication (daily, weekly, monthly, by mouth or injection, in combination with which drugs, etc.) were most effective. It is likely that the research in those two domains, and possibly others from social psychology and other related fields exhausted itself, causing established paradigms to gradually reach the end of their natural lives in the 1980s and 90s, bringing forth the early stirrings of 21st century thought.

Simultaneous paradigm shifts in leadership, organization theory, business process simplification, communications, and the social sciences may well have contributed to this state of prescience for use of self.

The evidence points to a body of knowledge and thought around use of self still in its infancy. There are few shared concepts. Each author brings a unique definition, perspective, and voice to what use of self means. Some have advice; some have models. There are no unifying theories or models or methods or even academic citations that create congruence across these few sources.

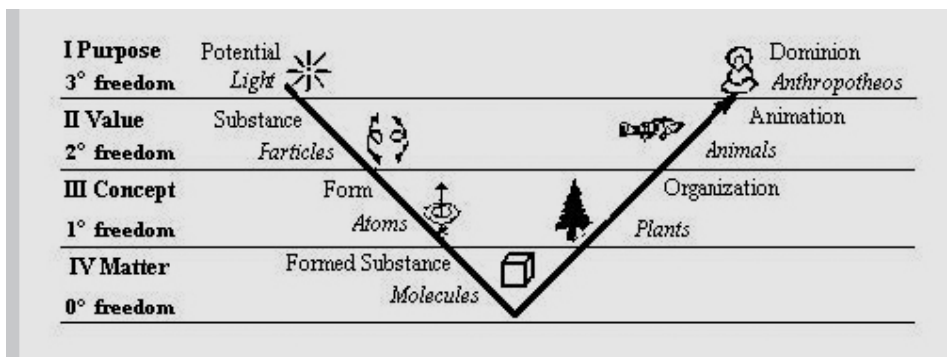


Figure 1.

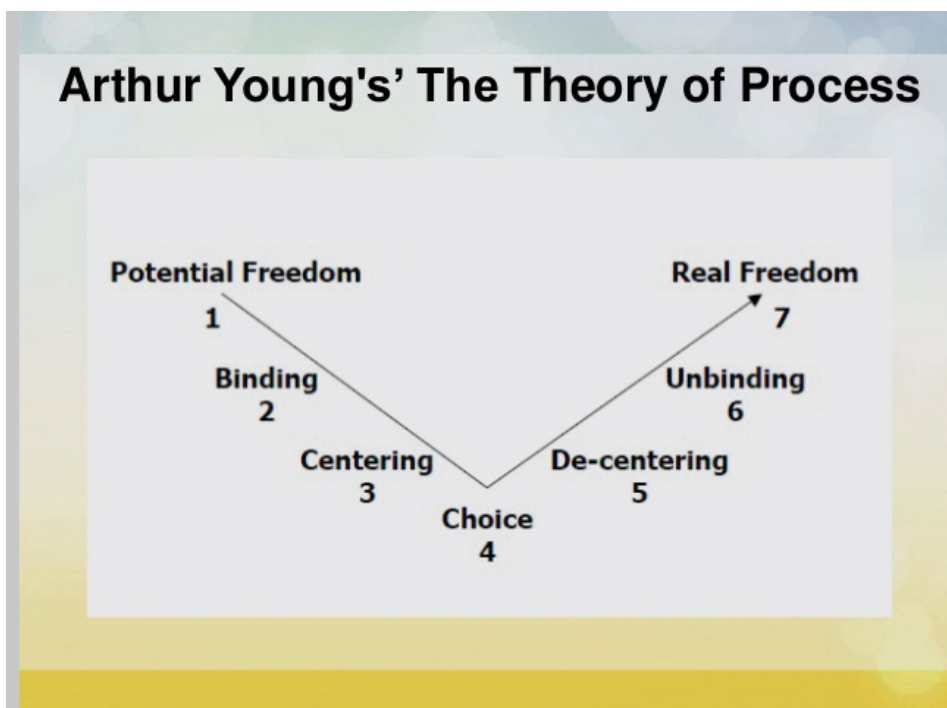


Figure 2.

Despite the fragmentation of knowledge in our field, there is substantial grounding in philosophy and psychology to guide our thinking.

The very term “use of self” connotes reflection and interiority and self-examination, making the self and its actions the object of our attention; we say as much in our model below.

However, we also believe that whatever actions the self takes in pursuit of its own development and insights are in fact *actions* and *re-actions* in *inter-actions* with others. “The I of . . . I-You appears as a person and becomes conscious of itself as subjectivity . . . Persons appear by entering into relation with other persons.” (Buber, 2012).

“The I is actual through its participation in actuality. The more perfect the participation is, the more actual the I

becomes” (Buber, 2012). It might seem a bit paradoxical, but the route to knowing our self and refining the way the self operates in the world is actually through relationships and communications with others.

There are also insights from theories of adult development psychology that underpin the Use of Self Process Model. Jane Loevinger’s Ego Development (1976) follows the arc of maturation from conforming to self-awareness to conscientious to autonomous to integrated, as does our model.

Another developmental model that tracks through the Use of Self Process model (Sullivan, Grant, & Grant, 1957) is described in terms of successive levels of integrations, each of which has its own unique characteristics, as do the stages in our own model. In addition to the lack of

coherence in our field, there is no common guidance about exactly what or how this use of self might occur in a given setting or period of life, or what use of self means in practice, and none have ways to determine how *well* you are using your self as an instrument. We are hoping to address that by the Use of Self Process Assessment, a link to which you will find at the end of this article. We invite you to answer the questions in the online self-assessment, which we will score confidentially and return the results to you via email.

The model itself is rooted in the revolutionary theory about evolutionary process of all living systems by Arthur M. Young (1976), who was a physicist and philosopher in the mid to late 20th century. He wrote about the ways in which light, with the most potential freedom, over time becomes binding particles or substances with less freedom, taking on more form centering in atoms with another degree less of freedom, and then creating a formed substance in molecules, which have the least freedom.

Over time, freedom increases as the inert molecules become organized, first into plants, and then animated as animals, and finally evolve into full being (Figure 1).

The simplest direct application to human behavior is represented in Figure 2.

In the field of OD, the most recognizable application of Young’s process theory to teams is the Drexler-Sibbet Team Performance Model (Figure 3).

Our Use of Self model applies the same Arthur M. Young framework – increasing complexity and decreasing degrees of freedom over time, a pivot or commitment point, leading to decreasing constraint and increasing freedom. (Figure 4).

The Use of Self Process Model describes seven stages by which we engage with ourselves as we engage with the world. It is a reciprocal cycle. As we grow, learn more about ourselves, and become more in touch with our own inner thoughts and feelings, we are able better to relate to events and people in the outside world . . . while at the same time, if we are paying attention, our interactions with the outside world can be the ground on

which we discover new depth and insights about ourselves.

In general, the stages are slow to evolve, and we work through them over a period of years and sometimes even longer, especially stages 1, 2, 6, and 7.

However, we note the three stages outlined in green function differently. These three stages are the Experience Cycle. We work through these stages with every client engagement we encounter. In stage 3, Self in Situ, we make a choice to attend to a situation. In stage 4, Self in (Inter)Action, we engage with the situation and take action. In stage 5, Reflective Self, we learn from what has happened. When we encounter a different situation, the cycle begins again. It is the continuous repetition of this cycle, and the lessons that we draw from it, that enable our growth into the sixth stage, Intentional Self.



The Presentable Self: The model begins with the most free, least constrained self we can imagine. This is the nascent, natural, default, not-deeply considered self. The superficial, socially acceptable self that we are readily willing to show to others and to see ourselves – our “perfect” self, blind to our flaws or mistakes.

And so it is really an imaginary self, a fiction created by the norms or expectations imposed by others and accepted by us without questioning. This is not the true self that we will become, but it is who we are willing to accept and to present to others right now. We are living in our positive core of goodness in terms of personality, temperament, preferences, aptitudes, talents, and virtues, not yet ready to confront the less positive aspects of ourselves.

One may spend a considerable period of time in the pretense of the Presentable self. This stage encompasses the characteristics of three of the early stages defined by Loevinger: the “Impulsive” stage in which people are typically dependent and needy, pigeonholing others by how the others meet their needs; the “Self-protective” stage, in which individuals recognize social rules and are guided by rewards and punishments; and the “Conformist” stage, wherein one’s actions are driven by social desirability and shaped by the avoidance of disapproval. Sullivan et al. also describe several stages of development that match up with life in our Presentable stage: Their Level 2 is defined by constant demands, unaware of others’ feelings, and without regard for the consequences of their actions. At their Level 3, individuals, typically conformists, demand simple rules and absolute role definitions in order to know exactly what is expected of them. Our conception of the Presentable Stage coincides with these earlier developmental models.

The Work of this stage is largely forming. At first, the incipient self shapes itself to fit the expectations of others, to please them and be accepted, the pretense that we are what we ought to be. By being blind to our own flaws and negative impulses, we don’t often recognize our contributions to breakdowns in relationships. This is a relatively passive stage in which things are happening without much reflection, self-awareness, or deliberate effort.

We are *ready to move on* when we recognize in ourselves a feeling unfulfilled or

stymied, or find ourselves seeking, desiring more substance in life.

The Emergent Self: Over time, greater self-awareness builds. Some degrees of freedom decrease as the self confronts more constraints, some in the outside world but mostly in the inner world of the self. There is an unfolding discovery process, in which we recognize and own the shadow or dark side, including unacceptable impulses, fears, anxieties, transferences, defenses, biases, egoism, and hooks. This is also a time for the self to realize and embrace the core of goodness within. Taking both the light and shadow sides together, the self is crystalizing a truer identity to own and stand up for, increasingly differentiated from others and more independent of their needs or expectations.



The central questions are about our true identity – values, beliefs, needs, virtues and flaws, the good, the bad and the ugly – all in the process of being recognized, accepted and expressed without judgment or pride or shame.

Jung (1956) asserts that “... development of personality means fidelity to the

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law of one's being... it really means trust, trustful loyalty... personality can never develop itself unless the individual chooses his own way consciously and with conscious moral decision... He has placed his law above all conventions." This process of choice and development begins with the Emergent stage. It is the same process referred to by Loevinger in her "Self-aware" and "Conscientious" stages, which she suggests is the modal level for adults in our society. In these stages, individuals move through increased self awareness, relational feelings and awareness of variations in social rules, to a level of self awareness that permits the emergence of conscience, clarifying goals and ideals, differentiated self-criticism, and a gradual shaping of an internal code of conduct. Level 4 of Sullivan et al. gets to the same dynamics, with the individual identifying oneself as different from the norm and from specific people. Their Level 5 brings with it insight into patterns of behavior, differentiated role conceptualization and a greater capacity for empathy. Each of these models describes a breakthrough that enables further development.

The Work of this stage is disrupting – breaking the veneer of our superficial selves and coming to grips with our true self. It is about removing the gloss of the supposed perfect self, and exploring more deeply those parts of the self that undermine the image projected by the Presentable Self. This stage is about exploring and coming to grips with the "undesirable" parts of the self, those that are not socially acceptable or consistent with what I want to be known for. This is also about calling

When entering the Experience Cycle, the self is confronted with specific circumstances beyond itself that must be dealt with and acted upon. This cycle repeats itself multiple times as a person encounters the outside world and must make choices about if or how to engage with it. Each repetition of the Experience Cycle provides an opportunity for the self to try new behaviors, seek feedback, reflect upon the results, and make different or better choices each time.

into question the default conceptions of the Presentable Self, embarking on a discovery mission to find the true self.

We are *ready to move on* when we can accept our light and dark sides as equally important and valuable sides of our selves. We may have a sense of disillusionment with the world we have constructed so far in life. We may feel tentative and even embarrassed about some of our past behavior and actions, but that is often followed by a sense of resettling into a new normal that can help to establish a grounding that lasts a lifetime.

A Transition: Before moving on to the elements of the lower tier, we must recognize that the discoveries associated with the first two stages, the Presentable and Emergent Selves, do not necessarily occur discretely or chronologically. The key thing about making progress toward the Experience Cycle and then the Intentional Self is that we recognize and acknowledge all aspects of our personalities and how they contribute to the overall shape of the self.

Entering the Experience Cycle: The next three stages, together referred to as the "Experience Cycle" are substantially different from the first two and the last two, which are mostly about the self and its growing knowledge and awareness. When entering the Experience Cycle, the self is confronted with specific circumstances beyond itself that must be dealt with and acted upon. This cycle repeats itself multiple times as a person encounters the outside world and must make choices about if or how to engage with it. Each repetition

of the Experience Cycle provides an opportunity for the self to try new behaviors, seek feedback, reflect upon the results, and make different or better choices each time.

Self in Situ: In this stage, something is happening that we can either engage in or ignore. This is the moment in which the self is aware of and makes a choice to attend to a person or event, to be present to the situation, and the possibilities of a positive or negative outcome. We make an assessment of the situation and choose a course of action.



The central questions are about whether the situation warrants our attention, the quality and amount of attention that we pay to it, the care and thoughtfulness with which we assess it, the consideration of our options for action, and our preparation to engage.

Since the Self in Situ stage depicts the sizing up that needs to be done in a particular situation rather than a general state of being, there is not a direct counterpart to the stages set for by Loevinger or Sullivan, et al. However, there is match between the behaviors we find in this stage and some of those described by the other authors, which are enabled by the progression through the stages. For example, Loevinger attributes the "appreciation of multiple possibilities in situations" and awareness of one's own feelings such as embarrassment, confidence or self-consciousness as manifestations of the transition from Conformist to Conscientious stages. Her Conscientious stage notes an expanding sense of responsibility for other people, and a recognition of the complexity of distinctions between 'right' and 'wrong'. In the same vein,

Sullivan et al. describe some typical Level 5 characteristics: recognition of behavioral patterns, a capacity for empathy, understanding other people more, and responding to them as complex individuals. All of these features are needed to do the work of Self in Situ well.

The Work of this stage is readying the self for action. This requires an awareness of our own thoughts, feelings, intuitions, dispositions, and reactivity. It requires paying attention to others' behaviors, appearance, reactions, apparent states, and the impact of our behavior on them. It requires consideration not only of the current event, but preceding events, context, history, local culture, possibilities and limitations. Attending to all of this and making sense of what is happening requires the self to be present, open, concentrated on the situation and the other person(s), willing to take risks, and aware of possible discomfort. It requires a choice to act or not, and if so, how. To do this well, we have to acknowledge our own subjectivity, be in touch with our beliefs and values, and be curious about the people and situation.

We are *ready to move on* when we have taken in as much data about the situation as we can and are ready to move on and take action. We may have an accurate assessment or not. We may be ready or not. We may be successful or not. But we are in touch with ourselves, prepared to engage and poised to take deliberate action.



Self in (inter)Action: Having assessed the situation and our ability to act in it, this is the moment in which we speak, or don't. Both are an (Inter)Action. This is the moment in which the self takes action in the situation to achieve the desired result. This could be anything we do, or don't do,

to communicate, intervene, make contact, or influence things. This is the moment the self engages directly with the situation or person, with more or less skill, and with more or less success.

The central questions here revolve around how to intervene, with whom, with what data, with which approaches, when, etc. The focus in this stage is the quality and effect of the action taken or foregone. The quality of action is conditioned by the work not only of the preceding stages but the later ones, particularly Stage 6, integrating. The same is true for the other models we have been tracking. For example, Loevinger's Individualistic stage refers to an increased ability to tolerate paradox and contradiction. Her Autonomous stage includes the capacity to acknowledge and cope with contradiction. For Sullivan et al., Level 5 includes the need to play roles that may be felt to be ambiguous or incompatible. Though these other models don't contain a direct counterpart to Self in (Inter)Action, successful action in this stage is dependent on a comparable flow of development.

The Work of this stage is any action to communicate, be direct, reframe, express support or affection, challenge, confront difficult issues, address power dynamics, engage conflict, listen, inquire, experiment or take risks. In short, this is the full range of things the self can say or do, or not do, to show up in the situation. It requires a willingness to be a force in the moment, risk taking, persistence, empathy, emotional availability, respect, positive regard, openness, a willingness to self-disclose if appropriate, and a wide behavioral repertoire. Once we take action, we are in the moment of least freedom and most constraint because we have acted, or refrained from acting, in a particular way. Once done, the action or inaction can't be erased. It can be nullified by a later action, but in that particular moment what is done is done. There is no taking it back.

We are ready to move on when we have completed the (Inter)Action. We will have engaged, made choices, and something has happened as a result. We are inquisitive about it and open to the full

range of possibilities that might arise from our choices and the ways in which we have acted in that moment.



Self in Reflection: Having completed an (Inter)Action, we notice the immediate experience and are curious about what happened and why. We reflect on the meaning of the event. We explore the learnings for the self, including what worked and what didn't in the (Inter)Action, we notice and reflect on what happened to and with others, and we begin to incorporate those learnings into the body of our own experience.

The central questions here revolve around learning. We notice what happened in the event. We notice our own personal subjective experience of the event and our own role and behavior in the situation. We are curious about what might have motivated our and others' action. We notice the differences between intent and impact both for ourselves and others. We begin to consider what might happen next.

Neither Loevinger or Sullivan et al. have stages or levels that are explicitly about reflection and learning. However, the movement through their stages or levels implies a widening capacity for learning. Loevinger refers to "differentiated self-criticism" and the inclination at the higher levels to "evaluate and choose the rules for yourself." She also notes the heightened sense of individuality that accompanies the Individualistic stage, a sense that has to be derived from learning and reflection. The seven levels defined by Sullivan et al. are each characterized by a specific problem to be solved, such as the integration of continuity and the integration of self-consistency. Progressing through these problems

implies the kind of reflection, learning and change posited in our Stage 5.

The Work here is self-examination and reflection. We revisit the event, choose the object(s) of our reflection, think about it, write about it, talk with someone else about it, and identify learnings about ourselves and others. This requires a large measure of openness, neutrality, humility, honesty, and responsibility. It also requires objectivity, ironically, about our own subjective experience of the (Inter)Action.

We are ready to move on when we encounter a new situation and restart the Experience Cycle all over again, armed with the lessons from this experience, starting to see general patterns and tendencies in ourselves and in others, which offer insights into our next trip through the Experience Cycle.

Completing the Experience Cycle: As we grow and pay more attention to the self and the results achieved in the world, we improve our ability to make better assessments when we are In Situ, in (Inter) Action, and in Reflection. This Experience Cycle represents the fundamental process by which we learn, improve, and grow through our everyday interactions, assuming we are paying attention and make ourselves the object of our own reflection. We complete the Experience Cycle galvanized to act on our new insights and with a healthy balance in our assessment of our strengths, weaknesses, abilities to influence others, and how the use of our self can make those things happen. Multiple repetitions of the full Experience Cycle are indispensable to the insights needed to move on to Stage 6.

After multiple repetitions of the Experience Cycle, we begin to see patterns emerge both in ourselves and in others. We begin to make better choices about what to do and when to do it. We become more skilled at intervening. We now see the whole self, both the positive core and the shadow, embraced and reconciled in more stable and refined forms. We develop a world view and deep values that are reality based. We arrive at a more enduring clarity about our self and others.



The Intentional Self: After multiple repetitions of the Experience Cycle, we begin to see patterns emerge both in ourselves and in others. We begin to make better choices about what to do and when to do it. We become more skilled at intervening. We now see the whole self, both the positive core and the shadow, embraced and reconciled in more stable and refined forms. We develop a world view and deep values that are reality based. We arrive at a more enduring clarity about our self and others. We are intentional about who we are and what we do in the world. This is about our maturing self.

The central questions here are about developing an approximately accurate self concept and an articulated world view that we can explain and justify. We grasp clear beliefs and values for our self and our work. We have clear goals about what we want to contribute to the world and how to serve it.

The substance of this stage is most like Loevinger's Autonomous stage, which is defined by the capacity to acknowledge and cope with inner conflict; seeing reality as complex and multifaceted; recognizing the autonomy of others; and adopting self-fulfillment as a goal. Sullivan et al.'s Level 6 speaks to a surer sense of self-consistency,

independence from restricting roles, and formulation of long-term goals and relations with others. In each of these systems, the keynote is a settling and coalescing into a mature self.

The Work of the Intentional Self is integrating, creating a whole from the many parts that have grown and been perfected over time. This represents the ongoing synthesis of both the Presentable Self and the Emergent Self, incorporating successive repetitions of the Experience Cycle, when reflected upon, continue to shape the self and its intentions. There are growing elements of self-knowledge, whole heartedness, patience with self and others, constancy, steadiness, and right choices for the self.

We are *ready to move on* when we develop, and are aware that we have developed, a sense of authenticity about who we are and what our core purpose is. We become more clearly focused on the few most essential elements of our life. We become more purposeful about who we are and how we want to spend our time. We have less patience and lose interest in superficial ideas, and yes, even people who do not deepen our lives and selves.



The Transcendent Self: Returning us to the top of the model, this is the moment of maximal growth and simultaneously, the moment of least constraint. It is the passage of time, the accumulation of experience, and the continuous effort to reflect and learn over decades that bring this moment of depth. This is the stage of personal mastery. The Transcendent Self grows an ever-deepening connection to its own inner core while at the same time undertakes an expansive effort to reach out and connect with something greater than itself.

Personal growth has now become a way of life for this self, which can show up as physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual self-actualization. This can create an expanded behavioral repertoire, a healthy balance between constancy and change, a sense of being a part of something greater and unity with others that may well permeate the hard boundaries of individual self-identity. Freud's "collective unconscious" becomes figural for the Transcendent Self (Freud, 2012).

Loevinger calls her highest stage "Integrated", which she deems "rare". The Integrated stage involves transcending the conflicts typical of the Autonomous stage, and the "consolidation of a sense of identity. For Sullivan et al., the highest level of development is about the integration of relativity, movement and change. This internal integration allows for a turning outward and attending to the growth of others. One feature of our Transcendent stage that neither Loevinger or Sullivan et al. address explicitly is what Maslow calls the "mystic experience" or "oceanic feeling" that characterizes self-actualizing people, a relatively small population.

The Work of the Transcendent Self is about mastery and actualization. The practice of reflection, feedback, and self evaluation have become habituated and are seldom compromised. The commitment to growth and learning is continual. There is a sense of tranquility in this self, which, when combined with curiosity and openness, make this person a wonderful role model and sought-after mentor for others.

Summary: We began our journey in a stage representing the highest degrees of freedom and a lack of external and internal constraint in the Presentable Self. We developed the capacity to see and accept a more nuanced, complex self concept, accepting the light and dark of our lives in the Emergent Self. We build our skills and refine our insights by the repetition of the Experience Cycle by approaching a circumstance In Situ, engaging in (Inter) Action, and learning in Reflection over and over again. Now seeing patterns and habits in our selves and others, we sharpen the sense of who we are in the world in the

Intentional Self, finally returning to the top of the model again, the moment of least constraint and most freedom in the Transcendent Self.

The stages are not clearly marked. They are not crisply bounded. There is no bright line or assigned date or age for movement from one stage to another. We can be working on the material from more than one stage at the same time.

Finally, there is no right or wrong or timetable to reach a stage in the model.

But we believe there is integrity in the model, built on Arthur M. Young's Theory of Process, and that there are insights that might add to your knowledge and skill in the Use of Your Self.

Use of Self Process Assessment

Returning to the question in the title of this article, how do we know how or even if we are making good use of our self? Measuring effective use of self in practice is a tricky proposition. There are numerous personal styles that play out differently in given situations, and almost unlimited ways of growing and embodying use of self. The principle of equifinality is hugely in play: there are a multitude of ways to be effective in deploying oneself, and at least as many ways to mess up. There are also an infinite number of combinations of qualities, traits, behaviors, strengths and weakness that might compose the state of use of self in any given individual.

Undaunted by the difficulty of measuring use of self, we have developed a prototype instrument to do just that. It is based on the terms of our model and is titled the "Use of Self Process Assessment". It is a 35-item inventory that individuals can use to compare themselves to the theoretical ideals of each of the seven stages of the model, and identify strength and gaps in their own use of self.

This is obviously a work in progress, but we invite you to take the assessment online. If you provide an email address as part of your response, we will send you the results and a brief interpretation. Your participation should shed some light on where you stand with respect to use of self, and will also provide us with a data base to

continue to refine our own thinking about use of self and how to measure it. If you decide to complete the assessment, the online link is: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/NYNHLZC> Thank you for considering it.

Use of self is central to our work in OD and it is critical to our lives outside of work. It is gratifying for us to be part of the thinking and development about use of self, and we look forward to the field advancing from prescience to a full-fledged body of knowledge.

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