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Is OD Still Relevant?

By Christopher G. Worley, Ph.D.

Organization development (OD) is at an important crossroads in its evolution. Serious questions have been raised about the future of this applied behavioral science discipline.

For example, some believe the more traditional OD practice, with its reputation for focusing on group and interpersonal level issues, such as team building, conflict management, diversity awareness, and other human process-oriented concerns, is out of touch with today's business realities. They question whether traditional OD practice addresses key value-added issues in organizations. Others criticize that too many in the field "chase every faddish trend that comes along."

Irrelevance Explained

I happen to believe that OD is alive and well. But if you listen to those who believe that OD is dead or on the life support of well-known practitioners, you can see how it got into this situation. The field's definitions are fuzzy, its most successful interventions have become institutionalized, and it's too easy to call yourself an OD practitioner.

Fuzzy boundaries. The problem begins with the definitions and boundaries of organization development. Although there are more than a dozen definitions of OD, most suggest that it concerns system-wide planned change, uses behavioral science interventions, targets human and social processes of organizations (specifically the belief systems of individuals, work groups, or culture), and intends to build the capacity to adapt and renew organizations.

Moreover, there is considerable overlap in the activities and interventions listed within most OD textbooks. In fact, the boundaries are not all that clear, and that's the source of some of the problems.

With few exceptions, almost every OD intervention is claimed by at least one other discipline. Reward system and performance management interven-



tions are considered part of human resource management; leadership and strategic change methodologies are shared with the strategy and business policy discipline; and reengineering is practiced by industrial engineers and information technologists.

Where do these other fields end and OD begin, or vice versa? Where do emerging issues, such as environmental or sustainability auditing, creating an internal information system knowledge base, or managing cross-cultural organizations belong? These fuzzy boundaries make it difficult to determine what OD is and what it isn't.

Adoption of successful methods. Another reason for OD's weak reputation is that it may be a victim of its own success. Many of the techniques and interventions invented and practiced by OD professionals have become "mainstream."

Consider the following:

- Flip charts (and other input collection devices) are a standard part of almost every meeting
- Team building is as prevalent in organizations as budget planning.
- Organization surveys, feedback, and problem solving meetings are considered a normal part of organization life.

More and more OD practitioners are sitting at the business-planning table, integrating strategic management and change management principles for formulation and implementation.

The issues and interventions that were once closely identified with organization development are now part of traditional business practice. Our interventions have become institutionalized or "refrozen" as Lewin would say, and that's a good thing. But it also supports the criticism that OD is just a bag of tools and techniques, and unless OD generates new interventions and approaches for dealing with today's business and organizational problems, it will lose its identity.

Continued on next page

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Is OD Still Relevant? continued

Continued from previous page

Low practitioner entry barriers. In some senses, OD has shot itself in the foot by coddling a variety of untrained and inexperienced people. In its attempt to be inclusive, people who do not have the background, education, or experience to support an organization through complex change can call themselves OD practitioners. The most misunderstood qualification of being an OD practitioner is the most fundamental: the role of personal growth and self-development.

There are two aspects to this characteristic. First: should someone who doesn't understand their personal motivations for doing OD be called an OD practitioner? Second, should someone who puts personal growth (their own or their client's) ahead of organization improvement be called an OD practitioner? I am deeply concerned that part of the reason OD's relevance and rigor are being challenged is because we haven't addressed these issues.

In the first case, too many people enter the field of OD because its roots are in the counterdependent tradition of overthrowing oppression. Some people who call themselves practitioners are doing the work to overthrow a generalized belief that all management regimes are authoritarian...and they are unaware of that motivation. When people become "OD practitioners" because they think organizations "should" be changed, because they were treated unfairly in an earlier context, or because all managers are bad and there is no awareness of these motivations, OD becomes a "cause."

Personal growth work is central to the practice of OD because it helps to answer the question, "Whose needs are you working?" Unfortunately, too many practitioners are working their own needs, are unaware of those needs, and are unconsciously intervening in organizations to alter power and authority distributions when that may or may not be appropriate. These self-proclaimed OD practitioners unconsciously promote their view of "right" without concern for the organization's current state, strategy, or values... and that hurts the field's reputation.

The second case is more difficult because, as an applied discipline, it is hard to separate the theory from the practice and even harder to separate the practice from the practitioner. But problems emerge when personal growth as part of the practitioner's development is confused with personal growth as an objective of OD practice.

For example, OD practitioners with strong commitments to personal growth as an end in itself are often found focusing on human process interventions and

more comfortable with theories of individual psychology. If that knowledge is used to promote the consultant's own development rather than the client system's effectiveness, then an ethical breach has occurred and OD's reputation as a field is hurt.

This is a difficult conundrum to unravel because of OD's value of transferring capacity. That is, the objective of a true OD effort is to build capacity in the client system to handle change in the future. If the practitioner sees that goal as the primary or only goal, then improving the system's effectiveness is not as important and claims of irrelevancy cannot be far off and may be justified.

"too many practitioners are working their own needs."

What we must do

Several key forces, including globalization, technology, the workforce, and organizations themselves, will influence the future of OD practice. OD is likely to become more embedded in the organization's culture, more cross-cultural, and more diverse in the client systems it serves. OD practitioners will need to be more technologically adept, and be ready to deliver on shorter cycle times. Their focus is likely to shift toward innovation and learning; they will need to be more familiar with a wide array of disciplines, and clearer about the values that guide their practice and behavior.

Specific actions the field must undertake to be ready to meet these trends include:

1. Define the field. A group of traditionalists believe OD was and always should be confined to issues of human process. Another group of "relevance seekers" believe the field has something powerful to offer the overly analytic and rational approaches to strategy and organization design.

Unfortunately, the traditionalists see the "relevance seekers" as having "sold out" to the power elites, coopted and "politically correct."

Conversely, the relevance seekers see the traditionalists as remnants of the irrelevant side of OD and retainers of the "touchy-feely" tradition. They inquire as to how spirituality in the work place, training, and attention to group process will contribute to the success and survival of the organization in a time of great turbulence.

Yet each camp sees itself as part of OD. The traditionalists see themselves as the keeper of the flame while the strategic wing sees themselves as the relevant rescuers. The current boundaries are too inclusive and

Continued on next page

Is OD Still Relevant? continued

Continued from previous page

too fuzzy. Clearly, there is a need for OD definitions to specify the scope and boundary of the field. What is included and more importantly, what isn't excluded as OD?

My initial thinking on this suggests three criteria.

For an activity to be labeled "OD" it must:

- a) involve a change in the system that is the focus of the effort,
- b) it must have the intent of improving the system,
- c) it must have the intent of building the capacity of the system to change in the future by involving people in the process (not a dictated change).

2. Clarify values. The lack of clarity around the values of the field is an important contributor to fuzzy definitional boundaries and to the possibility of practitioner cooptation through a lack of self-knowledge. Together, they produce a situation where the OD practitioner is less likely and less able to take tough stands on tough issues. Since the profession has no agreed upon value set, practice values default to the individual's values in a specific situation.

For example, if a client system ignores environmental sustainability in its operations, the practitioner's tendency to address the issue will be more a function of his/her environmental values than the field's. Similarly, the field had no stance on the downsizing movement or the reengineering fads of the 1980s and 90s (see Burke, 1997 for an exception), and it has no stance on technological proliferation, third-economy development, child labor, or the current rounds of downsizing. With strong roots in the social change movement, this is an embarrassing state for a field that places values so central to its practice. OD must clarify the values that guide its practice and those values must imply stands on the critical issues facing society.

Unfortunately, we are heading in the wrong direction; there has been a clear movement away from focus, agreement, and clarity to confusion, bickering, and fragmentation. That is, while there is good agreement that the field needs to clarify what the values are and many efforts have resulted to bring disparate groups together to discuss them, there is painfully little progress on a solution.

A renewed and invigorated discussion is necessary, one that doesn't produce a long, convoluted, and easily ignored list of "shoulds" and "don'ts" but looks for creative ways to expand thinking and provides a point

of agreement that will inform decisions in practice and guide development in organizations and society.

3. Develop Practitioners. The development of future OD practitioners must be more balanced in terms of the self, practice, and theory.

Most centrally, there is nothing more relevant at this juncture of OD's development than for OD practitioners to understand their lives, styles, sources of anxiety, and emotional intelligence. The work of our emotional intelligence colleagues is clear, it is a skill that can be learned and it contributes directly to personal effectiveness, whether it is as a change agent or organizational member.

Curiously, and despite the growth in the number of OD graduate programs (including both masters and doctorate programs), the focus on personal growth is declining. Only two or three masters programs require a T-group-like experience, and only NTL, Stanford, the Gestalt Institute, and UCLA maintain any type of ongoing laboratory training experiences.

Instead, many of the new educational programs are emphasizing more business-oriented curriculums or going deeper into the traditional process interventions, such as team building, or change management practices. This trend must be replaced with a more integrative stance.

In addition, the development of OD practitioners must include a solid grounding in the fundamental theories of change and intervention dynamics as well as the broad disciplines that underpin those theories. Competent OD practitioners must be familiar with a wide range of social sciences, including anthropology, sociology, psychology, and economics, but also issues of organizational and national culture, philosophy of science, research methods, and technology.

These are no small tasks. To efficiently develop OD practitioners in the future, new methods of exposing people to this broad and deep knowledge base will need to be developed. As a practical matter, no single program is likely to be able to address all of these issues in any depth. More likely, programs should develop distinctive competencies and encourage applicants to match their needs with curriculum offerings.

Finally, OD practitioner development must include practical experience and application of the material. It is one thing to lead and manage an organizational system, it is quite another to *help* someone lead and manage

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Continued on next page

Is OD Still Relevant? continued

Continued from previous page

a change in an organizational system so that the capability to do it better the next time is enhanced.

This suggests that individuals entering the field either need to have amassed a significant amount of work experience or, in the absence of experience, need to have internships or other supervised field work to understand the intertwined nature of practitioner, practice, and theory.

Organization development is a powerful technology that can help organizations manage change, achieve objectives, and implement strategies. While many have pronounced OD dead or dying, these prognostications have been occurring for 20 years. OD, like other behavioral science disciplines, is going through its growing pains and there is every reason to believe that it will thrive and survive into the future.

I conclude by borrowing a page out of the appreciative inquiry handbook and noting that we have a choice. We can talk about what's wrong, or we can talk about the contributions that good OD practice makes to individuals, organizations, and society. I know what my choice is. ☞

Christopher G. Worley is the director of the Master of Science in Organization Development program at Pepperdine University and co-author of Organization Development and Change (with Tom Cummings) and Integrated Strategic Change (with David Hitchin and Walter Ross). He can be contacted at chris.worley@pepperdine.edu.

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