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In Defense of an Old Style

**By Nicholas Mann**

### **Introduction**

Depending on which event one points to, the field of organization development (OD) is anywhere from thirty-five to over fifty-five years old. Though a number of significant events certainly contributed to its emergence, it's probably safe to say that none deserve all the credit as the seminal event. The field didn't emerge in academe, but rather in the marketplace of organizations undergoing change. The founding sages, for the most part, eschewed the forming of a distinctive theory base in favor of setting up a practitioner discipline that had the ability to adopt whatever bodies of behavioral science knowledge were useful in helping organizations learn, adapt, and thrive in their shifting environments.

But, over the years there have been points where claims have been made that the “old OD” is out-of-date and needs to be reconstituted. One well-known example is when appreciative inquiry enthusiasts began to challenge the viability of action-research as a core way of approaching the work. Another was when the large accounting organizations shifted into organization consulting under the banner of “change management.” And, the story told in the last edition of this publication by Marshak in which an audience challenged OD ways -- “If anyone actually practiced that value system they would not get any work” – is actually pretty commonplace. In the early 1990s I witnessed Edgar Schein in a Summer session on Cape Cod, as he patiently waited on a person who had made a similar threat to collect his things and huff out of an auditorium, filled with several hundred people who hungrily stayed for more of what he had to say.

“This game to me is done on sight and feeling and knowing your personnel and having some idea about the players and people that you're competing against.”

The above quote is from Frank Robinson, the hall of fame baseball player who once hit grand slam home runs in two successive at bats, was the first Black manager in the major leagues, and who now manages the Washington Nationals. It's taken from an April 11, 2005 article in the Washington Post in which Robinson laments the shift to making

managerial decisions based on cold statistics rather than experience and feel for players and the game in the moment.

In recent years, principles that I consider to be at the heart of OD have been questioned. This questioning doesn't make me doubt the relevance and viability of OD. Doubt would only come for me if the teachings of the sages no longer made sense, and that is not the case. I've also occasionally been aware of efforts to develop consensus about OD values. I rarely participate, and when I've gotten involved it's been half-hearted. Rather than consensus building, some conscientious trips to the library seem more appropriate to me. I'm reminded of a quote by Lencioni (2002) who writes: "Values initiatives have nothing to do with building consensus – they're about imposing a set of fundamental, strategically sound beliefs on a broad group of people." The original sages -- from Lewin to people like Beckhard, Tannenbaum, Blake and Mouton, Bion, Lawrence and Lorsh, Likert, Maslow, and particularly McGregor (1967) – built an enduring foundation of theories about organizations, groups, people and processes. They didn't ask me about what the values should be. They laid them out, I learned them, and found them so compelling that OD turned into what I wanted to do in life.

McGregor, for instance, chided us that the perceived need to choose between productivity and human concerns is a paradigmatic effect of carrying around a theory x view of the world. This profound insight, in my view, leads to perhaps the most central value of what I'm referring to as the old style OD. In this article, I want to stand up for the old OD as I understand it and have tried to practice it since about 1976. To accomplish my purpose, I follow this introduction section with one on "The Intent of OD." Thereafter, I explicate some of the key beliefs, values, roles, constructs, and techniques that have influenced my understanding of OD and its practice.

## **The Intent of OD**

When in the 1950s, as stories have been told, Robert Tannenbaum and Richard Beckhard sat together at a kitchen table and gave the name "***organization*** [not organizational] ***development***," to the emerging field, they intended the discipline to be values-based rather than neutral about the way organizations should function. They hoped OD would have the impact of enabling systems to change appropriately in relationship to their environments and the needs of their people and stakeholders. Later, Beckhard (1969), writing about OD, defined it as "... an effort 1) planned, 2) organization-wide, and 3) managed from the top, to 4) increase organization effectiveness and health through 5) planned interventions in the organization's "processes," using behavioural-science knowledge."

Huse (1975), in my view, bracketed the discipline best by describing what OD intends and what it is not. He writes: "OD is intended to increase the *health* and *effectiveness* of the organization ... OD is *not* management development ... *not* a specific technique ... concerned *not* only with 'making people happy.' Rather, OD is concerned with organizational competence, including both effectiveness and efficiency." Burke (1994) adds: "The methodological model for OD is *action research*; data on the nature of certain

problems are systematically collected and then action is taken as a function of what the analyzed data indicate.” Bringing these views of the discipline together, OD practitioners believe in using a variety of methods drawn from multi-disciplinary fields in a systematic way, usually guided by action research, to help clients build and maintain *healthy* (i.e., performing and viable) *human* (i.e., respectful and uplifting) *systems* (i.e., holistically balanced and integrated organizations). This idea of organizations as systems is so central, that I go in the next section to a reminder of the term’s meaning. Organization as system is certainly a metaphor – just as alternate metaphors such as organization as machine, organization as culture, or organization as family. But, not to debate other metaphors, I believe the system metaphor is the most ubiquitous and enduring in our field.

## Systems

To work from a systems-perspective is to be holistically aware, even when working on individual parts of an organization. For me, the utility of the system metaphor is that it allows OD practitioners to see through surface differences in organizations. No matter whether it’s a bridge club, corner grocery store, government agency, or multi-national conglomerate, beneath it all the sub-systems are essentially the same. Luciano (1979) describes six archetypal sub-systems which, for the skilled OD practitioner, allow collected data to be organized and then serve as potential levers for change:

- Environmental sub-system
- Psycho-social sub-system
- Structural sub-system
- Intentional sub-system (i.e., vision, mission, goals, objectives)
- Technological sub-system
- Managerial/leadership sub-system

Healthy systems maintain quasi-equilibrium (i.e., relative balance) between things like: a) demand and capacity, b) content and process, c) tasks and relations, and d) growth/change and stability. A healthy organizational system is also “in control,” i.e., organizational leadership is in a position to start, stop, and/or steer the system. One of the most potent change levers in the organization is that of leadership and management. System leaders must be competent, fair, sensitive and perceptive, and adaptable to diversity and change. Ultimately, the “art” of practicing OD is in working with clients to determine which levers of change are the best intervention targets because they offer viable opportunities for helping the organization to adjust and meet its needs. Again, these notions, at the heart of old-style OD, are enduring because they are profoundly useful. If, in some instances, we encounter impatience from potential clients for our ways of systemic thinking, I think we should remind ourselves about why we cling to systems theory – because it’s illuminating. Now, I move on to another bone of contention for some critics of OD – the issues of content and process.

## Process versus Content

Once we understand the intent of OD and how to use appropriate metaphors for illuminating complex dynamics, the next area of unwavering clarity for me is that OD practitioners support organizations through process as opposed to content work. Schein (2002) has been a major force in helping to crystallize this distinction. Content is the substance of technical, administrative, or esoteric work being performed. As subject matter experts, content consultants bring specific solutions to client problems. In effect, their services allow organizations to act, without having to undergo the pain of figuring out how or why. The use of content consultants by organizations is rooted in a need to tap into known bodies of knowledge. As the old saying goes: “Why reinvent the wheel?”

On the other-hand, the process-oriented work of OD consultants has a number of tenets different from content work.

- Interventions are best judged by their long-term impact more than by short-term treatments for here-and-now problems.
- Specific here-and-now decisions are less important than the ability to learn, make decisions, and then remake them as needed.
- Healthy human systems realize two co-equal and interdependent benefits: 1) they meet their organizational mission and/or profit targets, and 2) they satisfy the needs of members and key stakeholders.

Clearly, this content versus process thing, that we make such a big deal of, can be off-putting to some clients. They may think: “Why am I paying you when I’m not getting the answers I need?” And we may be tempted to doubt the value of drawing these boundaries, especially under criticism of OD’s relevance and the fear of losing work assignments. “Bottom-line” thinking clients may be eager to challenge the third tenet above by saying things like: “Touchy-feely people stuff is cute, but it’s all about making money.” I think that many client systems aren’t a good fit for OD – not because we couldn’t be helpful, but because of receptivity issues and the expectations for quick fixes. And I believe that, if those quick fixes are available elsewhere, clients should make a bee line to where their needs and expectations can be quickly met. But OD stands ready if the expedient doesn’t materialize. In fact, quick-fix seeking clients commonly rebound to OD after becoming frustrated that they haven’t found easy solutions to their complex issues. The kinds of interventions explicated in the next section are, even for reluctant clients, exactly what are needed in order for healthy human systems to emerge.

## Interventions: What Does The OD Process Look Like?

OD practitioners continue to help through their interventions. Cummings and Worley (1992) write: “The term intervention refers to a set of planned change activities intended to help organizations increase effectiveness.” Further these authors offer three characteristics that OD interventions must have:

- They must be based on valid data concerning the functioning of the organization.

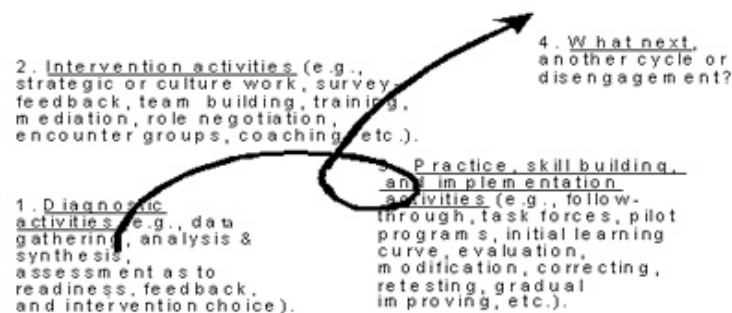
- They must provide organization members with opportunities to make free and informed choices.
- They must gain commitment to act on the choices that have been made.

Our handling of data focuses our interventions. There are so many demands and so much information confronting today's organizations, that perception and focus are pervasive problems. In fact, distraction may be the biggest factor undermining organizational competence. So, the OD practitioner's challenge comes on many levels:

- Where are my clients focused?
- Are they all focused in the same direction?
- Where am I focused?
- Is there a more useful focus?

The well-known metaphor of "figure and ground" comes from Gestalt therapy. As Perls (et. al.) wrote: "For anything to be noticed at all ... it must somehow be distinguishable from its background." The organizational "ground" contains so many features competing for attention that clients often are unable to focus on an appropriate figure. Or, having focused on one, they become frustrated because either their colleagues, managers, and direct reports are focused elsewhere or distractions make it difficult for them to keep their focus.

So much of the work of OD is mitigating distractions and facilitating focus, but it's impossible to generalize about how this happens in each assignment and every context. Nevertheless as the saying goes, "a picture is worth a thousand words." So, with the caveat that it is only representative, the diagram below (drawn in the style of the action-research cycle) provides some sense of the systematic nature of how OD has been practiced for at least fifty years.



Nevis (1987) and others in the Gestalt tradition write convincingly about the importance of the use-of-self concept to the practice of OD. He describes five major activities that may take place when an OD practitioner makes interventions:

- Sharing selective observations.
- Paying attention to what one is experiencing in the process of working with clients.

- Helping clients come together to focus energy in working on common figures to make something happen.
- Facilitating meaningful contact or interactions.
- Helping clients increase their awareness of and learn about their systems and processes.

Wells (1998) brings home the use-of-self concept for me by providing metaphorical images. He uses the term “nautical navigator,” and offers that, for the OD practitioner with a strong sense of her or his authentic self, coupled with the motivation to facilitate without ego or selfish agenda:

- Vision can function like radar
- Hearing is akin to sonar
- The heart operates to provide a window to the organization, similar to loran (i.e., long-range navigation instruments)
- The other senses (smell, touch, etc.) are like various important meteorological devices

## Conclusion

What’s the use of describing as “new,” a field that was formed to work dynamically on the realities of change in organizations? OD was conceived to be robust enough to grow and adapt by incorporating new streams of thinking and emerging techniques. When these evolutions occur, OD, in my view, simply fulfills its promise. At the end of the day, I want to know if the basics that I learned thirty years ago are still there. Yes, they are! For instance OD practitioners, I believe, continue to be values-based when they work in the client systems. I think we still believe that healthy human systems don’t go for the bucks at the expense of their people. We continue to support organizations as they balance and re-balance the quasi-equilibrium state between the need for productivity and profits on the one-hand, with the human needs for wellness, well-being, growth, learning, and self-esteem or empowerment on the other-hand. We also continue to use the powerful metaphor of organizations as systems to help us organize information and choose viable levers for organizational change.

Beyond these enduring characteristics, when OD practitioners intervene, we still focus mostly on process even though we have more strategies for doing so than in the past. I consider us to be a field that unapologetically cannibalizes whatever can help, so long as our few core values and principles remain the same. So, TQM comes along and claims to be different, but useful parts just get included. Appreciative Inquiry appears on the scene and adds new insights and, in doing so, adds another arrow to the sheath. Whole systems approaches enhance our ability to facilitate sustainable outcomes for even more clients. But I’m staking out a Frank Robinson-like position in saying what remains the same is that one must *come from somewhere* in order to practice OD effectively. And practitioners

of old style OD continue to come from a set of principles laid out by the sages many years ago.

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