



PART ONE

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ORGANIZATION  
DEVELOPMENT AS A  
PROFESSION AND FIELD  
OF PRACTICE

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## CHAPTER ONE

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# ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT AS AN EVOLVING FIELD OF PRACTICE

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Organization development (OD) has been a recognized field of practice since the early 1960s with many of its origins in the 1940s, but it still proves difficult to explain what it is, what it does, and why you might want it or need it. The reasons for this seem twofold. First, it requires an understanding of an integration of several sets of knowledge united by an underlying philosophical belief and value system. Second, it is a field of practice that is continually evolving and expanding. Consequently, the range of definitions offered over the years all sound somewhat similar, and they also seem to miss the mark in explaining to outsiders, “So what exactly is OD?”

Consider these definitions:

- Organization development is 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 behavioral science knowledge (Beckhard, 1969, p. 9).
- Organization development refers to a long-range effort to improve an organization’s problem-solving capabilities and its ability to cope with changes in its external environment with the help of external or internal behavioral-scientist practitioners, or change agents, as they are sometimes called (French, 1969, p. 24).

- Organization development is a planned process of change in an organization's culture through the utilization of behavioral science technology, research, and theory (Burke, 1982, p. 10).
- Organization development is the process of increasing organizational effectiveness and facilitating personal and organizational change through the use of interventions driven by social and behavioral science knowledge (Anderson, 2012, p. 2).

Now, at this point in most discussions of “what is OD?” the author offers his or her or their definition of OD intended to make clearer what it is and what it does. No such effort is expended here. Instead, the intention of this discussion is to go behind the words to the underlying ideas and values that not only give definition to organization development but make it distinct from other forms of management and organizational consulting. First, the underlying knowledge and philosophical systems that help define what is and is not OD are described. Next, how the knowledge bases that support OD practices have evolved from the 1940s until the present is outlined. Finally, some of the tensions and dilemmas confronting OD at this point in its evolution are described.

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## The Field of Organization Development

There are some who would not describe OD as a field, partly because it draws from many academic disciplines and partly because it is a field of practice more than a field of academic inquiry. Nevertheless, over the years OD practices have been informed and defined by more or less integrated sets of theories, ideas, practices, and values and therefore qualify as a field of applied knowledge. Consequently, to understand what OD is and what it does, we must first understand the dimensions of knowledge and values that in combination produce practices that are labeled as organization development.

There are three primary sets of knowledge and an underlying value system that leads to what is called organization development. The discussion that follows errs on the side of attempting to simplify and present essential characteristics. No attempt is being made to elucidate the full characteristics and nuances involved. In this sense, the discussion aspires to make clear some of the fundamentals for understanding organization development at the risk perhaps of appearing to be too simplistic or leaving some important dimension(s) out of the discussion.

## Understanding Social Systems

The first set of knowledge, at its simplest level, is understanding the potential subject(s) of an intended development or change effort. Because OD seeks to foster the improved effectiveness of organizations and other social systems, a range of knowledge pertaining to the functioning of individuals, groups, organizations, and communities—separately and as integrated systems—is required. Thus organization development draws on theories and ideas predominantly from the behavioral or social sciences, but also physics and biology. However, as is explained in more detail later, OD does not draw equally from all types of theories and ideas about human behavior in organized social settings. Instead it tends to be based in those theories and ideas that are consistent with its underlying, and sometimes unarticulated, philosophical value system. So, for example, most organization development practices are predicated on the assumption that people are motivated by factors beyond purely economic incentives.

## Understanding the Hows and Whys of Change

A central aspect of OD is fostering development and change in social systems. This means that the bodies of knowledge that help explain how individuals, groups, organizations, communities, and even societies change are all pertinent to organization development. How do we go about inducing, supporting, and/or accelerating change in a team, an organization, a community, a network of organizations? The range of ideas about change and development coming from, for example, education, training, economics, psychology, social psychology, sociology, anthropology, biology and physics is all potentially relevant to OD practice. Again, however, not all ideas about change are embraced by the underlying OD value system. For example, we might be able to force or coerce people to make certain changes, but this would not be considered organization development (and would in fact be refuted by OD practitioners).

## Understanding the Role of a Third-Party Change Agent

The final set of knowledge helping define OD pertains to the role of the OD practitioner. When working with an organization to help bring about a desired change, the OD practitioner is not the person in charge. Instead the OD practitioner is a third-party change agent aiding the person or persons in charge as well as the system itself to bring about or encourage

the desired changes. An OD practitioner, whether internal or external to the subject system, must understand the issues, politics, psychological processes, ethics, and other dynamics associated with being a third-party change agent working with people called clients in complex social systems. Here too, not all theories and ideas about the third-party role are endorsed or embraced by organization development. Once again, it is those ideas and practices that are consistent with the underlying values and philosophy of OD that become part of the theories and practices associated with the role and responsibilities of an OD practitioner. For example, a third-party role wherein an expert tells people what they should do is an accepted if not essential part of a great deal of management consulting but is rejected in organization development as a general mode of practice.

These three sets of knowledge about (1) social systems, (2) how to change social systems, and (3) third-party change agent roles are the essential areas of expertise for an effective organization development practitioner. They are also insufficient to fully understand the theory and practice of OD as distinct, for example, from other forms of consulting intended to foster or induce development or change in organizations or other social systems. To make this distinction requires understanding the underlying philosophical value system of organization development and how it links and integrates selective aspects of each of the main bodies of knowledge making up various OD practices.

### **Understanding the Underlying Values and Philosophy of Organization Development**

Organization development is often referred to as a values-based or normative field of practice. This has been true since its early beginnings in the 1940s with Kurt Lewin, as will be discussed below. While it has proven difficult to precisely enumerate the exact values that are the essential ingredients making OD more or less uniquely OD, it is possible to describe some of the broad characteristics of the underlying value system. At some considerable risk of oversimplifying, four key value orientations have helped to form the underlying philosophy of organization development:

- A humanistic philosophy
- Democratic principles
- Client-centered consulting
- An evolving social-ecological systems orientation

***A Humanistic Philosophy*** Organization development not only accepts but also promotes a humanistic orientation to social systems and the positive potential of people. This includes beliefs that people are inherently good, not evil; that they have the capacity to change and develop; and that through the exercise of reason and judgment they, not outside forces or inner drives and emotions, are capable of empowered action in the best interests of the collective enterprise. This orientation also affirms the value and dignity of each person. Furthermore, to be effective, social systems should not restrict, limit, or oppress people regardless of their role in the organization or their demographic background. In organization development the human side of enterprise is always a central consideration, along with other aspects such as economics, technology, and management practices and principles. Historically, this orientation in OD has been expressed by the assertion that an organization that empowers its people will also be a more effective organization.

***Democratic Principles*** Partly because of its humanistic philosophy, Lewin's strong belief in democracy, and the roots in World War II of many of its founders, organization development also advocates democratic principles—meaning involvement in decision making and direction setting should be broadly rather than narrowly delineated. Another way of saying this is that OD rejects the notion that there are elites who possess superior knowledge and who alone should make decisions on behalf of others. Instead, OD believes and advocates that important and relevant knowledge is more broadly distributed and that more rather than fewer people are capable of and should be involved in making inputs or in the actual process of decision making. In practice therefore organization development advocates more democratic processes not simply as a way to get buy-in (although buy-in is famously associated with involvement) but because there is a belief that the resulting decisions are also superior, implementable, and more relevant to important audiences and stakeholders.

***Client-Centered Consulting*** Organization development believes that change efforts should be client-centered, not practitioner-centered. This expands on humanistic, democratic, and rational inquiry values and assumptions and asserts that human systems are capable of self-initiated change and development when provided with appropriate processes and supportive conditions. The role of the OD practitioner is therefore to partner with the client system in self-directed change efforts operating from a third-party change agent role. In carrying out this role, the practitioner uses

knowledge and skills about how social systems function and change in order to support, educate, facilitate, and/or guide the client system in its work. The role of the practitioner in client-centered consulting is not to impose or enforce an unwanted change agenda on the client system, nor to furnish “expert” answers to the client’s issues. Therefore a primary action by an OD practitioner is often to suggest and facilitate participative engagement processes for inquiry, informed decision making, and building client-system commitment for change.

***An Evolving Social-Ecological Systems Orientation*** A social-ecological systems orientation is, perhaps, a more recent or emerging aspect of the underlying values and beliefs that guide OD practices. In its simplest form, it means that ends should not be defined solely in terms of a specific individual, group, or organization. Rather, a perspective of the much larger and broader social, economic, and environmental system(s) must be held, and ends should be considered in terms of their impact on the broader, even global, system. Thus, if maximizing the profits of a specific organization might threaten the environment or negatively affect a community or country on the other side of the planet, it should be avoided in favor of outcomes that take into account the broader global or ecological system of which everyone is a part. On the basis of this orientation, it could therefore be a legitimate role for an OD practitioner to help an organization understand the full range of impacts of its choices, beyond perhaps what was considered in the past. This orientation might also lead an OD practitioner to seek to help a client system rethink or reposition endeavors that are intended to contribute to a specific organization’s success but could ultimately be harmful from a broader social, economic, or ecological perspective.

A summary depiction of OD’s three core knowledge areas and integrating underlying values is shown in Figure 1.1.

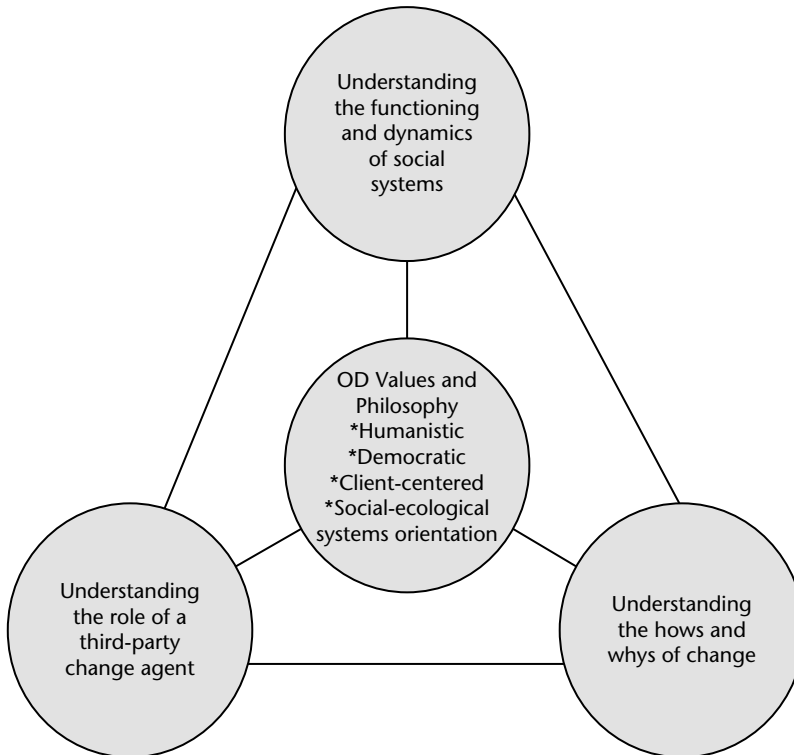
## **Organization Development Results from an Integration of Ideas and Ideals**

What is called organization development results from putting into practice various combinations of premises and practices drawing on these three sets of knowledge and associated skills, integrated by an underlying normative value system(s) and intended to enhance an organizational system. Thus it is the underlying value system that most importantly distinguishes what is and is not organization development. Consequently, change activities aimed at, for example, profit maximization alone, or based on prescriptive



**FIGURE 1.1. CORE KNOWLEDGE SETS AND UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHY OF ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT**

Organization Development Results from an Integration of Ideas and Ideals



methods, may be important forms of consulting but are not considered to be organization development. To help illustrate these important points, a few examples will be given as stand-ins for a more thorough and complex discussion.

### OD and Social Systems

First, let us consider that there are numerous theories and ideas about human nature. In psychology, for example, psychoanalytic theories such as those advanced by Freud and his followers postulate that individual behavior is influenced by basic inner drives and that individual behavior can be controlled by unconscious and non-rational processes. In contrast,

behavioral theories such as those associated with B. F. Skinner consider the positive and negative reinforcements coming from an individual's environment to be the determinants of behavior. Partly in response to the limiting view of human nature advanced by these two schools of psychology, a third school, called humanistic psychology, emerged in the 1950s and suggested that individuals were inherently capable of higher-order functioning, that they could determine for themselves how to develop and behave, and that individuals were capable of transcending narrow self-interest in service to themselves or others.

In general, it was the ideas of the pioneering humanistic psychologists in the 1950s, notably Abraham Maslow (hierarchy of needs), Douglas McGregor (Theory X and Theory Y), and Carl Rogers (unconditional positive regard), that helped support the emerging field of organization development by contributing to its underlying humanistic philosophy. Consequently, in practice humanistic theories of human behavior have a central role in how OD practitioners think about and work with human systems, even though they may augment those theories with an eclectic array of other theories and belief systems. Similarly, given the range of theories about groups and organizational behavior, OD tends to reject, for example, those theories and ideas that postulate the need to provide economic incentives (alone) or closely monitor and control people. Consequently highly directive management based on Theory X assumptions is rejected as unwarranted and ultimately counterproductive.

## **OD and Change in Social Systems**

Just as there is an array of theories about individual, group, and organizational behavior, there are also theories about how individuals, groups, and organizations change and develop. Staying at the individual level of behavior and again contrasting psychoanalytic, behaviorist, and humanist schools, one confronts varying ideas and emphases about how change and development occur. For example, from a behavioral orientation one would seek to condition new behavior through manipulation of the environment of rewards and punishments resulting from an individual's behavioral choices. From a more humanistic perspective, one might assume instead that people are capable of rational, self-directed learning and growth, especially in a supportive environment that treats them with dignity and respect. Thus, change theories and practices that might suggest or support the notion that people must be forced, coerced, manipulated, or ordered to change are rejected in favor of theories and practices that

assume people can, on their own, rationally assess the need to change and are capable of changing, especially when given the appropriate data or feedback information.

Although OD draws on a variety of theories and ideas about individual, group, and organizational change and has a range of methodologies and practices, all or almost all OD practices are predicated on more positive and humanistic ideas and ideals about change in human systems. For example, action research, which is one of the historic fundamentals of organization development, is based on the assumption that people can and will change when involved in a process of rational inquiry into their present situation to determine new courses of action. These theories and supporting values and assumptions about change lead to OD practices that tend to emphasize giving the involved or affected people supportive processes wherein they can assess their situation and develop new actions, behaviors, and directions. Theories and practices predicated on somehow directing people to change, or developing answers for them because they are somehow incapable of doing so themselves, are not part of the accepted change philosophy and practices in organization development.

### **OD and Third-Party Roles**

In organization development, the third-party role of the practitioner is defined, in many respects, by its underlying values and supporting theories about the nature of change in social systems. If we assume that most people are capable of self-directed growth and development, especially when provided with feedback or information in a supportive environment, then the role of the third-party OD practitioner becomes clearer.

Specifically, the role of the OD practitioner is to collaborate with the subject system by facilitating, coaching, or otherwise supporting self-directed change. This is done by suggesting and facilitating processes that encourage and support inquiry, discovery, and motivation to change, while establishing and re-inforcing new behaviors, actions, or directions. An assortment of skills, interventions, practices, and ethics are required to successfully carry out this role, but the first and most essential ingredient is to operate from a client-centered, collaborative, and facilitative mind-set. If instead one were to assume that people were not capable of changing on their own, or were totally governed by narrow self-interest, or were lacking somehow in intelligence or capability, then quite different third-party roles could be justified as necessary and appropriate. After all, why would you want to involve people in working on a change initiative if you think they are incapable of

developing a good or appropriate answer to whatever the situation is under consideration? Might you not instead be more helpful by offering them the right answer to implement based on your neutrality or your superior knowledge or information? Because organization development tends to reject this set of assumptions and resulting reasoning, it also tends to reject the expert third-party role in favor of a more collaborative one.

In sum, then, organization development is an applied field whose practitioners draw on knowledge about how social systems function and change while working from a third-party collaborative and consultative role based on and integrated by humanistic, democratic, client-centered, and social-ecological values and principles. Organization development practices are applied in organizational and community settings where the responsible managers, executives, and leaders wish to enhance the functioning and effectiveness of their organizational unit or enterprise. Organization development is usually more successful when applied in a setting where the responsible parties are in at least minimum agreement with, or ideally wish to advance, its underlying normative values and principles. Thus settings where leaders and managers believe most people are willing and able to develop new organizational practices and behaviors if given a supportive, facilitated process of inquiry, may be more conducive for organization development than others.

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## The Evolving Nature of Organization Development

*The Tao produced the one; the one produced the two; the two produced the three; and, the three produced the ten thousand things.*

—Tao-Te-Ching

To better understand the field of OD practice(s) today it may be helpful to know how the combinations of organization development premises and practices have been evolving. Broadly speaking OD had its roots in the 1940s-50s; its foundations established in the 1960s-70s; significant branches emerged in the 1980s and 90s; and we are experiencing the blossoming of the ten thousand OD things today.

Throughout these periods of development the core values providing coherence to what is OD have not appreciable changed, although they have been further defined and elaborated. On the other hand, from the early beginnings with Kurt Lewin and his associates in the 1940s through the present era increasingly differentiated combinations of theories and practices

associated with the nature of social systems, how they develop and change, and the role of the third-party consultant have emerged. This has created a rich tapestry of approaches that based on their similar underlying value systems could all be considered forms of organization development. At the same time the increased theoretical and applied variations are making it even more difficult to clearly answer the question: “So, what exactly is OD?”

### 1940s and 1950s: Roots of OD Practice

As previously noted, many of the roots of OD are directly traceable to the thinking of the German social-psychologist Kurt Lewin, who immigrated to the United States in the 1930s to escape Nazi Germany. Lewin in the 1940s set forth a number of interrelated values, premises and practices about change in social systems that I will call the “three beginnings.” These include:

**Values** One beginning was a steadfast belief in a few core values to shape all change work in human systems. This included importantly his belief in:

- Democracy,
- The positive potential of people, and
- The use of scientific inquiry to address social issues.

**Premises** A second beginning included two core premises or theories that guided his approach to change:

- One premise was his field theory that postulates that all behavior is a function of a set of internal and external forces operating on a situation and that to change behavior you needed to change the field of forces.
- The second core premise was the primacy of small groups in the change process, that the target of change was not an isolated individual, but instead behavior in the context of the small group. This also included the notion that small groups had their own needs such as leadership, norm setting, decision making, and so on that needed to be attended to in the change process.

**Practices** The third beginning was the two practices he advocated as central concerns of any change process:

- One practice was the use of action research wherein members of a social system are involved in the investigation of their own situation—their

own field of forces—and develop their own potential changes. These would then be tried out and further studied and modified, as necessary, in a continuous iterative process of investigation, experimentation, and learning. Thus, the notion of democracy was extended to the inquiry and change planning processes—while in other change approaches those steps are usually performed by an elite or expert person or group.

- The second practice relates to his recognition that changes needed to be sustainable and that many change efforts were not lasting—that people reverted back to old behavior. Thus, his famous assertion based on his field theory that change included practices to unfreeze, move, and refreeze a system in order to achieve sustainability. This also related to his research that found that changes adopted in a group context were more likely to be sustained than in an individual context.

These three beginning roots of OD were developed further by Lewin's associates and followers in the 1950s leading to the Foundational period of the 1960s and 1970s.

## 1960s and 1970s: Foundations of OD Practice

In this period the three beginnings set forth by Lewin were expanded and further modified into a combination of underlying theories and practices related to social systems, change, and third-party roles that helped define and shape what became known in 1959 as “organization development.”

***Foundational Premises and Practices*** These included, principally, the following core set of premises and practices:

*Scientific inquiry and positivism.* Although not explicitly described in OD textbooks, the physical, biological, and social sciences of the mid-20th century were predominately based in scientific positivism and notions of a single transcendent truth. In brief, that there is a single, underlying, objective reality impacting people, organizations and events that can be discovered, analyzed, and changed using scientific methods.

*Social psychology and the primacy of small groups.* Much of foundational OD and planned change approaches of this era drew on social-psychological theories originally advanced by Lewin and his followers, in particular the primacy of small groups in setting and reinforcing norms and attitudes. This, along with the associated T-group movement, also contributed to the emphasis on teams and team building during this period (Bradford, Gibb, & Benne, 1964; Cartwright & Zander, 1968; Dyer, 1977; Lewin, 1943; 1947).

*Organizations are considered to be open, living systems.* Beginning in the 1960s, leading organizational theorists advanced the proposition that organizations should be conceived of as open systems needing to adapt to their environments, and not as closed, mechanistic systems primarily pursuing efficiency criteria (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1969; von Bertalanffy, 1968).

*A positive view of people and their potential.* As previously noted, the contributions of such people as Maslow, Rogers, and McGregor about a positive view of people and their potential to develop under the right conditions reinforced and helped further establish the humanistic values and practices that became a cornerstone of OD theory and practice (Maslow, 1954; McGregor, 1960; Rogers, 1961).

*Action research and process consultation.* Two of the most influential sets of related theories and practices about how OD consultants should work with client systems are action research (Lewin, 1947) and process consultation (Schein, 1969). These approaches and associated methods help provide the foundational OD premise that involving participants in self inquiry, reflection, and action taking can create change.

*Change can be planned and is episodic.* Linked to his original ideas about systems existing in quasi-stationary fields of forces, Lewin, Ron Lippitt and other later theorists proposed that change can be planned by intentionally altering the field of forces. Furthermore, following the Lewinian formulation of “unfreeze-movement-refreeze,” change is implicitly episodic and intended to purposefully move from a problematic current state to a more desirable future state (Lippitt, Watson, & Westley, 1958).

***Humanistic and Democratic Values*** Finally, all of these foundational premises and associated practices were configured and given coherence by a set of loosely defined humanistic and democratic values that built on the values originally advanced by Lewin: involvement, participation, dignity, respect, power equalization, social responsibility, and so forth (Tannenbaum & Davis, 1969).

Until recently these foundational premises have been the cornerstone upon which OD textbooks have been written, graduate and certificate programs designed, and practices developed and described.

## 1980s and 1990s: Branches of OD Practice

By the end of the 1970s the roots and foundations of OD had more or less been set, but newer and in some cases alternative ideas about social systems,

change, and third party roles led to the emergence of newer branches in the 1980s and 1990s.

***Branches of Premises and Practices*** These importantly included a range of newer ideas and methods that in one way or another raised possibilities different from foundational OD premises and practices, including:

- *Social construction.* Many more recent forms of OD, for example appreciative inquiry, are now explicitly based in theories of social construction and notions of multiple “truths.” There may or may not be objective facts in the world, but it is how we socially define and describe those facts that create meaning in social systems. Furthermore, there is no single objective reality; nor a single authoritative voice or version of reality. Instead, a multiplicity of diverse voices and actors need to be recognized (Gergen, 2009; Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996).
- *Large group/whole system events.* Instead of small group interventions, large group or whole system events are used to bring together broader sets of stakeholders to agree on common agendas (get the whole system in the room). While small group premises may be used within the context of any given large group event, these approaches imply not only a difference in size (large versus small), but also a difference in orchestration and change premises (Bunker & Alban, 1992; Holman, Devane, & Cady, 2007).
- *Organizations are meaning making systems.* Consistent with constructionist thinking, people and organizations are considered to be meaning making systems where reality/truth is continuously created through social agreement on one from many possible interpretations. What happens in organizations is influenced more by how people make meaning than how presumably objective external factors and forces impact the system (Boje, 1991; Weick, 1995).
- *Participative inquiry and engagement.* Ideas of participatory action inquiry have been expanding the original ideas about action research. In the original formulation, behavioral scientists involved client system members at various times in studying themselves and making action choices. Today, the methods and degrees of involvement reflect a much broader conception of participation; and inquiry versus a more diagnostic stance has been advocated by many as an alternative way to engage and change a system. The resulting processes of participative inquiry, engagement, and reflection are then presumed to lead to new social agreements and possibilities (Axelrod, 2010; Reason & Bradbury, 2008).



- *Creating change by changing the conversation.* The new field of organizational discourse studies emerged in the mid-1990s along with the linguistic turn in the social sciences. The relevant main presumption is that organizations are dialogic systems whereby language, narratives, stories, conversations, and so on are constructive of social reality and not simply representational. This is one of the principle theoretical justifications for “changing the conversation” as an intervention in and of itself (Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2005; Grant & Marshak, 2011; Marshak & Grant, 2008).
- *Change is continuous and self-organizing.* In contrast to planned, “start-stop” thinking about change processes, more recent theories and experience with organizational change suggest a different set of premises. Change is thought about as a continuous, ongoing process rather than an episodic, planned event. Following ideas from the complexity sciences, organizations are considered to be self organizing, emergent systems, not closed or open systems. (Holman, 2010; Marshak, 2002; Stacey, 2001).

***Expanding Set of Social, Humanistic, and Democratic Values*** Despite many of the differences in the expanding set of premises in this era, all or most all practices were still configured and given coherence by the same or a similar set of loosely defined and evolving humanistic, social, and democratic values as advocated in the original formulation of OD (Bushe & Marshak, 2009). Importantly the developments in this period also combined with the application of OD to increasingly diverse and multi-cultural environments to add “diversity and inclusion” to OD values, concerns, and practices.

## **2000s to the Present: Blossoming of OD Practices**

Today we are witnessing a complex blossoming of premises, practices, and still evolving values shaping what we call OD approaches to change. We also have interventions and practices supported in some cases by foundational premises and in others by some of the newer branches and in still other cases people are mixing and matching premises and practices to develop still newer approaches to change. It is a rich period of expanding ideas leading to a cornucopia of OD possibilities and practices.

So, for example, some people are working with large group approaches to appreciative inquiry using participatory ways of engaging system members in inquiry. Others are exploring the application of the complexity sciences and principles of self-organization to facilitating processes of

engagement and emergence in organizations; or using dialogic premises and methods in large and small groups to alter conversations to change mindsets and the resulting behavior; and still others are updating long established methods of data collection, feedback, and process consultation with in place and virtual teams. Elsewhere my colleague Gervase Bushe and I have proposed that there has been a bifurcation in approaches to OD between the premises and practices associated with the foundational period and those associated with many of the more recent branches. Trying to capture an essential aspect of each of these two approaches we have labeled the one “Diagnostic OD” and the other “Dialogic OD” (Bushe & Marshak, 2009, Marshak & Bushe, 2013). Thus, today’s OD practitioner is faced with an abundance of ideas and approaches and encounters advocates for one form or another of OD as the best path forward.

Despite these differences, the extensive array of blossoms we witness today all have more or less shared underlying values and their essential roots are based in the three beginnings of Lewin. In that sense all are also interrelated members of the same family of ideas, values, approaches, and traditions about change in human systems.

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## Tensions and Dilemmas Within Organization Development

There are a number of tensions and ongoing dilemmas within the field of organization development. These include whether or not OD focuses too much on “soft” people issues; whether it should address diversity and multi-cultural dynamics; issues related to dealing with lack of readiness for change; and dilemmas associated with the increasing differentiation of approaches.

### OD Is Too Touchy-Feely

Almost from its inception, OD was labeled by some as too touchy-feely. This reflects its strong humanistic and developmental orientations, as well as the founding psychological and social-psychological knowledge and methodology bases. Balancing humanistic values with more technological or business-oriented goals, such as economic efficiency, can be difficult. If the balance struck appears too rooted in humanistic values, perhaps as opposed to economic values and objectives, then organization development or the OD practitioner can be labeled too touchy-feely. On the other hand, if the core values of organization development are ignored or subjugated to a great degree, the practitioner is likely to be accused of

not practicing OD. These tensions are also revealed in the ongoing discussions within the field about the importance of “our values” as well as among those who on the one hand wish to adopt a more pragmatic values orientation and those who by contrast wish to remain strongly centered in the traditional orientation. These discussions and periodic challenges to the field raised in journals, at conferences, and by clients are inherent in a strongly values-oriented field, especially if the values are not taken for granted by everyone or by all managers and organizations.

### **Addressing Multiculturalism and Diversity**

Organization development promotes a range of values (for example, respect, inclusion, democratic principles, and empowerment) as core aspects required for effective functioning of groups, organizations, and communities. This has led to a number of challenges and tensions concerning whether organization development is applicable in all countries and cultures and whether addressing issues of diversity or social justice should be a central aspect of the professional practice of OD.

First, in terms of multiculturalism, there has been continuing commentary over the years questioning if a field of practice based so strongly on Western, liberal democratic, and humanistic values can be equally applicable in all countries and cultures. Others assert that with multicultural sensitivity and some adaptation OD is applicable in all cultures and contexts. This is a discussion fueled in recent years by globalization and the increasing number of OD practitioners working in multinational organizations. Although sensitivity and flexibility are called for, OD is also predicated on a core set of values; the choice therefore, in some settings, may be whether to use OD premises and methods at all, rather than trying to adapt or downplay some dimensions or practices.

Since the 1980s, interventions to help organizations effectively incorporate and leverage an increasingly diverse workforce located in many cases around the world has become commonplace. Interventions range from multicultural awareness training to transforming organizations with the intent of ridding them of hidden but institutionalized barriers to the full inclusion of all people. This set of practices, in the United States, is often called “dealing with diversity” or “diversity and inclusion,” and its practitioners diversity practitioners. Many but not all might also consider themselves to be OD practitioners. The tension within the field is whether or not diversity is a separate field of practice or an inherent aspect of organization development. If the latter, then it would be expected of all professional practitioners to be

knowledgeable, adept, and able to recognize and, as appropriate, deal with diversity, inclusion, and social justice dynamics and issues.

At this point, whether organization development practitioners should address the multicultural dynamics of groups, organizations, and communities seems no longer open to serious question or debate. Given the core values of OD and the increasingly diverse and multicultural organizational settings for its practice, all professional practitioners need to fully understand and, as appropriate, address multicultural and diversity issues and dynamics as they present themselves, just as they would need to address any other set of issues and dynamics central to the theory and values orientation of OD.

### **Change and Readiness for Change**

Organization development is about change in human systems, but not just any change under any circumstances. Instead, OD theory and practice promotes several key criteria related to change efforts:

- Change should be directed toward enhancing individual, group, and organizational capabilities, as well as the conditions under which people work and contribute.
- Change should be carried out consistent with social science knowledge about human systems and how they change, as well as a generally optimistic set of values and assumptions about human capability and potential.
- Change should be initiated and led, to the greatest extent possible, by the people involved; it should also be based on their assessment and concurrence with the need to change.
- Change efforts should not only lead to the desired change but also leave a client system with increased capabilities and skills to address future situations and needs.

A dilemma in organization development is what to do when one or more of these criteria are absent. Consider, for example, corporate downsizing, which has been going on since the late 1970s. In its early days, many OD practitioners felt it was inappropriate or even unethical to be involved in downsizing change efforts that did not seem to match any (or very many) of the implicit criteria needed for an OD change effort.

Another aspect of this ongoing tension relates to the concept of readiness for change. In organization development it is not simply a matter of there being a call or demand for change; there must also be readiness for

change in the system. Because of the values, assumptions, and criteria guiding OD change efforts, unless there is a felt need or readiness for change in the system, OD interventions may not work. Simply put, it would not be possible to enter into a client-centered, collaborative change effort intended to enhance the capabilities of the organization on the basis of social science theories and practices and guided by humanistic and democratic values if the client system was not ready and willing to do so at some level. In many contemporary organizations, however, OD practitioners (especially internal practitioners) are asked to conduct change interventions whether the target system is ready or not, and with little or no time to create readiness. This sometimes places the OD practitioner in the position of trying to carry out interventions under conditions where the premises for success are not fully met or else risk appearing to be unresponsive or unable to help.

### **Differentiation Dilemmas**

An important dilemma associated with the increasing differentiation within the evolving field of OD is the increasing difficulty in discussing OD as a single coherent field of practice. This seems to be both a generational phenomena as well as a result of practitioners becoming more identified with a particular change methodology versus the overall process(es) of fostering change. For example, some newer practitioners consider the premises associated with the more recent branches to be an updated version of OD replacing the earlier foundational approaches; perhaps thinking of them as OD 2.0 or 3.0. Some older practitioners, who may be more familiar with the foundational principles and practices, consider the more recent ideas as options to be built on the foundational configuration of ideas at best, or forms of heresy at worst. This tends to lead to debates or confusion within the OD field as a whole pertaining to a number of important considerations (e.g., Marshak, 2013). These include differences in philosophies, premises, and practices associated with such matters as:

- Do OD practitioners work with processes that assume an “objective” reality, a socially constructed reality, or somehow both?
- Is change an episodic process as suggested by the Lewinian unfreeze-movement-refreeze model of change, a continuous process as suggested by the complexity sciences, or somehow both?
- Do foundational processes associated with diagnosis tend to be biased towards a problem-centric view of the world versus a possibility or strengths based view? Or can both be reconciled?

- Should OD consultants consider themselves to be facilitators of small group dynamics, or as “hosts” and “conveners” of large group events, or somehow both?
- Is “planned change” possible or do we work with emerging processes of self-organization? Can both be reconciled?

Because these types of theoretical and philosophical differences and the resulting practices can lead practitioners in different directions, there is some tendency for the communities of practice associated with one or another of the foundational and newer approaches to interact and talk amongst themselves about what they are doing and where their specific domains of practice are headed. This strengthens clarity within the differentiated approaches, but can also weaken understanding of organization development as a field as a whole. This suggests that, even though there will undoubtedly be more differentiation going forward, seeking coherence among the many evolving OD approaches and practices is likely to be a needed future development.

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## Conclusion

Organization development is at once a simple and complex field of practice. Initially learning the many knowledge bases, roles, and skills required for professional practice and then integrating and internalizing how they all fit together in the context of one of the many different approaches according to an extensive, but sometimes only implied, value system or philosophy can be both challenging and confusing to would-be practitioners and clients alike. Once the sets of values, knowledge, and skills are understood and mastered, the practice of OD becomes much simpler and more straightforward. It is indeed the requirement to know an extensive range of knowledge and methodologies integrated by a philosophical system that makes organization development a worthy field of practice.

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