

INTRODUCTION TO ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT: A PRIMER

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In the broadest, most-layman-based terms, Organization Development (OD) is a multi-disciplinary branch of contemporary behavioral science that focuses on the ways in which organizations can improve their performance and well-being through planned, active interventions. As is the case with many contemporary social science disciplines that emerged in the latter half of the 20th Century, there is no single, universally accepted definition of the rules or parameters of OD, as the field and its academic underpinnings continue to evolve, both in the classroom and in the workplace.

It is important to stress the depth of those academic underpinnings within the contemporary OD movement, as many seminal scholarly research models have been “dumbed down” to the popular press, and have found their way into the workplace, marketed as easy fixes or sure-fire paths to organizational improvement. The ever-evolving litany of OD-themed management theories—some legitimate, some not—that pass into the popular business press can cause long-time managers to become cynical regarding their claims or methods, as this year’s best-selling flavor of management theory often tastes very much like the flavor which came before it. By better understanding some of the robust research that underpins the seminal works of the modern OD movement, managers may be better able to separate wheat from chaff when presented with proposals for OD interventions from consultants or colleagues, and may also be better prepared (and more willing) to seek outside assistance when events dictate that such an approach could improve their organization’s effectiveness.

In their influential and oft-reprinted handbook on the fundamentals of OD, Wendell L. French and Cecil H. Bell, Jr. compiled a survey of many of the definitions that have been applied to the field since its earliest days, then crafted their own composite definition, that explains OD as “a long-term effort, led and supported by top management, to improve an organization’s visioning, empowerment, learning and problem-solving processes, through an ongoing, collaborative, management of organizational culture—with special emphasis on the culture of intact work teams and other team configurations—using the consultant-facilitator role and the theory and technology of applied behavioral science, including action research.¹”

French and Bell’s specific reference to action research pays direct homage to—and indicates the enduring importance in OD practice of—Kurt Lewin’s seminal work in the 1940s in group dynamics and social psychology. Lewin coined the term “action research” in 1946, defining it as an iterative, feedback-intensive “spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action.²” In contemporary, practical terms, a white paper for managers prepared by the Organization Development Network (ODN) notes that action research remains a cornerstone of OD practice, as Lewin’s principles guide the processes whereby entire organizations or specific work units are taken through an assessment and problem solving process aimed at improving their overall effectiveness, typically

¹ Wendell L. French and Cecil H. Bell, Jr. (1999). *Organization Development: Behavioral Science Interventions for Organizational Improvement, Sixth Edition*. Prentice-Hall.

² Kurt Lewin (1946). “Action research and minority problems.” *Journal of Sociology* 1946 2(4): 34-46.

with an outside consultant or other professional practitioner guiding the multi-phased, feedback-producing process in contract with the organization's management.³

Stressing the utility of the outside consultant to organizational improvement is a cornerstone of contemporary OD theory and practice. Social psychologist Edgar Schein defined three types of consulting models: purchase of expertise, doctor-patient, and process consultation. The process consultation model is the most commonly deployed, and effective, approach to contemporary OD, wherein the contracted consultant works with both management and staff of the organization being evaluated, diagnosing strengths and weaknesses, identifying problems and opportunities, and developing plans to reach desired goals and objectives.⁴ Implicit in adherence to this consultative approach is a belief (perhaps a subjective, or even inaccurate one, in some cases) that the active deployment of the training, expertise and independent perspective of the outside consultant will allow an organization to see, perceive or otherwise experience insights and opportunities that could not be acquired or understood through existing, passive, non-interventionist, internal processes.

The act of entering into an OD process, therefore, requires an organization to be self-aware enough to understand that it needs additional, outside help in order to achieve its mission or goals most effectively. A report of the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation's Organizational Development Program suggests five indicators that may lead a self-aware organization to seek such an external, OD-based intervention:

- The desire to ensure organizational survival in changing or competitive environments;
- The desire to provide the highest quality of goods or services that the organization can realistically provide;
- Developing means to raise more resources for mission-essential work;
- Focusing on values that are foundations of the organization's mission; and
- Training staff and board members so that they can improve programmatic results.⁵

Another common element to contemporary OD practice is a commitment to the concept of learning organizations, which facilitate the ongoing training and development of their employees or members, thereby preventing individual intellectual ossification and the organizational stasis that such personal rigidity inevitably produces. Learning organizations possess five key identifying characteristics, as defined by Peter M. Senge in his influential work *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*:

- They embrace personal mastery, which requires a commitment by individuals in the organization to the process of learning;

³ ODN Chicago White Paper (2008). "What Is Organization Development?" The Organization Development Network.

⁴ Wendell L. French and Cecil H. Bell, Jr. (1999). *Organization Development: Behavioral Science Interventions for Organizational Improvement, Sixth Edition*. Prentice-Hall, citing

⁵ Ann Philbin and Sandra Mikush (2000). *A Framework for Organizational Development: The Why, What and How of OD Work. Perspectives from Participants in the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation's Organizational Development Program, 1995-1999*. The Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation.

- They challenge ingrained mental models and assumptions held by individuals and the organization as a whole;
- They build shared vision to create a common culture and identity, and provide the energy needed to pursue personal mastery;
- They practice team learning, wherein individual learning is shared, thereby expanding access to knowledge and expertise across the entire organization;
- They embrace systems thinking, an over-arching strategic process that unites the other four elements into a practical, useful whole.⁶

Abraham Maslow posited that when humans have their basic, selfish, lower-level needs met, they are able to focus more intellectual, emotional and physical energy into such potentially altruistic, higher-level needs as esteem and self-actualization.⁷ Contemporary approaches to OD are often rooted in a fundamental belief that the health and well-being of an organization may be directly correlated to the health and well-being of the individuals that comprise it, and that individual self-actualization may enhance organizational effectiveness, even when there may be inherent conflicts between the needs of the organization and the needs of its component members. Business and management theorist Chris Argyris has spent much of his career researching and documenting the ways in which those conflicts may be successfully addressed and mitigated, most especially in his books *Personality and Organization* (1957) and *Interpersonal Competence and Organizational Effectiveness* (1962).

While self-aware or self-actualized organizations which are generally healthy, effective and efficient may still opt to pursue improvement and enhancement through the use of OD techniques, a new field of study has emerged that sees a need for OD professionals to take a clear role in assisting organizations that may not be performing effectively and efficiently due to unresolved organizational traumas. Organizational trauma may be caused by personnel changes (either through retirements, layoffs, forced replacements, or deaths), negative economic factors that impede the organization's ability to discharge its mission effectively, changes to long-standing missions or objectives, harsh media exposure, or a myriad of other factors. Researcher Mias DeKlerk proposes that unresolved traumas of these natures within organizational culture may block individuals' capacities to perform effectively, thereby impeding organizational efficiency.⁸

While OD professionals should not serve as individual psychiatrists or psychologists in a "doctor-patient"-type intervention, they may work to help organizations identify the human tensions and conflicts between individual needs and aspirations and organizational goals and objectives, and may play a key role in finding opportunities that satisfy both collective and personal requirements. In the same ways that Maslow laid out a path upon which human beings may walk toward self-actualization, organizations may seek similar paths toward states of empowerment or even enlightenment by tending fully to their most basic needs, thereby creating opportunities to deploy systems thinking or other high-level traits typically associated with effective and innovative learning organizations.

⁶ Peter M. Senge (1990), *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, Doubleday.

⁷ Abraham Maslow (1954), *Motivation and Personality*, Harper.

⁸ Mias De Klerk (2007). "Healing emotional trauma in organizations: An O.D. Framework and case study." *Organizational Development Journal*, 2007 25(2), 49-56.