Organisation Development (OD)

An Alchemy of Coaching view

Introduction

Organisation Development is enjoying a resurgence. From its origins in the 1960s OD's fortunes have ebbed and flowed with shifts in cultural and economic perspectives. This paper aims to show how recent organisational research and thinking enrich OD's original concepts and make it very relevant today. We outline our view of why OD is important and the values, principles, key activities and applications that make OD successful.

OD – its origins

OD has its origins in the 1950s and 1960s building on the work of Kurt Lewin. Warner Burke, (1992) traces its roots to:

- Sensitivity training and T Groups at NTL. (McGregor and Beckhard and The Tavistock Institute)
- Socio-technical systems at The Tavistock Institute. (Trist and Bamforth)
- Survey Feedback. (Likert, Lewin and Mann)

By the late 1960s a group at MIT decided to gather the various writings and ideas about OD in a book series. In this series they specifically wanted to recognise that OD embraced a number of ideas and that there was not one central theory.
They did believe the conceptual core to OD was:

- a concern with process
- a focus on change
- an implicit and explicit concern for organisational effectiveness.

Beckhard (1969), in one of the first six books in the OD series, provides a definition of OD:

- A planned effort
- Organisation wide – involves the total system
- Managed from the top
- Seeks to increase organisational effectiveness and health
- A series of planned interventions that use behavioural science knowledge.

OD – recent developments

The changing environment has resulted in developments to practice and thinking about OD. In particular:

- Systems thinking (e.g. Deming; Senge)
- Complexity theories (e.g. Stacey)
- Emergence (e.g. Sharmer)
- Change through conversation (e.g. Shaw; Bohm)
- Servant and Authentic Leadership (e.g. Greenleaf; Szpakowski)

The impact of these developments requires a revised definition of OD.

So, our definition of OD embraces:

- A felt need for purposeful change
- A recognition that change is emergent
- Plans prepared and adapted in response to uncertainty – "not knowing"
- A system wide view (although it can be an autonomous part of a larger system)
- People engaged throughout the organisation, with commitment
- The commitment and involvement of those at the top
- Adaptability, flexibility and agility from those involved in the change
- An awareness of the impact of environment and sustainability

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The underlying principles and values of OD

OD was values based and principles led from its origin, and, we believe, continues to be.

Principles

- Positive and purposeful
- Acknowledges emergence
- Data driven
- Based on aligned values
- Action oriented
- Based on experience, grounded in theory and focussed on learning

Values

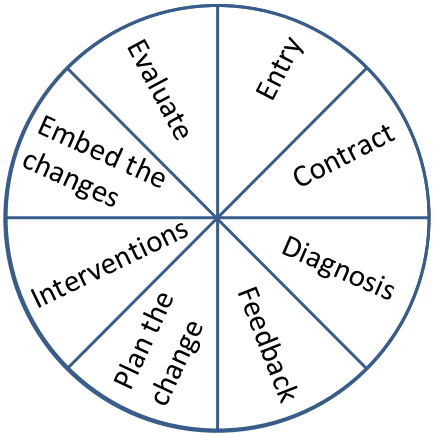
- Everyone has the right to learn, grow and value themselves
- It is essential that I, as an OD consultant, respect the right of people to be themselves
- It is right to be insecure about what is right
- I value improving quality of life
- It is good to move in life toward an ideal self - that is, a congruent self
- An OD consultant's behaviour sets an example, so has to be congruent with their values
- Value free OD is a myth and so we need to declare our values, assumptions and beliefs to our clients and explore theirs with them
- OD consultants work to help the client members make choices, to realise their own potential and contribute to their organisation's wellbeing
- We have a concern for human dignity
- My knowledge and discoveries are mine: I can only help others to discover their own

These values are manifested by - openness, participation, fairness, valid information, informed choice and shared ownership. These are easily articulated and difficult to deliver.

The anatomy of an OD project

An OD project will typically comprise:
Entry – making and building relationships and rapport
Contracting – agreeing all aspects of working together: the aims, objectives, rules of engagement, responsibilities, ownership and timelines
Diagnosis – gathering and making sense of data to understand the current state and identify opportunities and requirements for change
Feedback – sorting, summarising and communicating the outcomes from the diagnosis
Plan the change – planning the activities that will deliver the required changes
Intervention – taking action, delivering the plan – together with revising the plans in the light of emerging realities
Embed the changes – establishing the means to maintain and sustain the changes
Evaluation – identifying lessons learned so that they can be used in subsequent OD efforts

These phases are connected and require review again and again, iteratively, in all stages and sub-stages. The elements are not a one off set of activities and they need to be continually re-appraised as new information becomes available or new stages are begun.



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What works

There are key ingredients that underpin a successful OD change:

- Clarity of purpose based on an identified need for change
- Exploration, listening, feedback and trust between those involved
- Data collection and interpretation (recognising this has an impact in its own right)
- Integration of organisational and individual goals and aspirations
- Change is understood and addressed at the system level
- Time for and commitment to learning are built in
- Process and content are treated as equally important
- Recognition of the importance of making a better workplace
- Appreciating the position of the organisation in the 'wider world'
- Individuals have opportunities to develop themselves and achieve their potential
- Using appropriate measures to assess progress

All of these together are important for success. Missing any out diminishes the outcome.

What hinders

There are many obstacles to achieving success with an OD project. We have regularly encountered the ones shown below.

- Resistance – occurs for many reasons and needs to be successfully overcome for progress to continue. Passive or 'underground' resistance can be especially difficult to deal with.
- Blame culture – little hinders progress more than a blame culture. It can cause people to turn inwards and avoid making suggestions and commitments.
- Vested interest and pride – OD projects require a sense of "we are in this together".
- Perception of 'not enough time' – this is usually an indication that there is insufficient commitment to the project.
- Poor communication – the adage communicate, communicate, communicate is a good one and testing for understanding is a sound investment.
- Silo thinking – like a blame culture and vested interests this prevents the formation of a "we are in this together" environment.
- Lack of courage – change is tough and courage is a requirement for successful change.
- Failure to value difference – difference provides the opportunity for new ideas and possibilities. Creating environments that value difference is important.
- Inappropriate use of language – driving change, always, never, must, ought, should.
- Poor alignment e.g. of values and purpose.
- A failure first to honour and then to move beyond the past – acknowledging perceived and actual loss can be an important first step.
- Insufficient attention to managing the transition – time, feelings and resources required.

The skills an OD consultant needs

All our experience indicates that an OD consultant needs to be able and willing to:

- tolerate ambiguity
- influence in a wide variety of settings and circumstances
- confront difficult issues
- support and nurture others
- recognise one's own feelings and intuitions quickly and use them appropriately
- conceptualise
- discover and mobilise human energy
- create learning opportunities
- maintain a sense of humour
- engage sensitively and constructively with problem recognition and resolution
- collaboratively plan and agree goals
- understand the process of change and changing
- think systemically and undertake system diagnosis with the client
- reflect and learn continually

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Implications and opportunities

The speed, nature and complexity of environmental, technological, social, economic and political change are unprecedented. Sustainability and growth are problematic. Many organisations are reappraising their position in response to financial challenge and issues of governance, leadership, engagement, interdependency, turbulence and discontinuity. They can benefit from embracing the principles and practice of OD which give real attention to the diverse aspects and elements of organisational effectiveness. Taking a cost saving approach may be important and prove to be insufficiently holistic. OD is now more explicitly systemic, not necessarily top-down, and better understood and implemented as re-iterative and emergent. Effective responses to uncertainty are likely to be enabled by embracing the values, principles and key activities that make up OD – especially its people focus.

What next?

At the start of this paper we observed that OD is enjoying a resurgence. New ideas and experiences will add to the store of stories and possibilities. The more these stories and experiences are shared and communicated the more likely it is that the underlying values and principles of OD will be employed in Organisational Change – we believe this will be a good thing. So please do get involved in discussions and debates about OD and share practice and learning whenever you can.

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Contact us for more information

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