

STILL CRAZY AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

BY D.D. WARRICK AND
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Picture two organization development practitioners, one an internal consultant and the other an external consultant, intently engaged in a discussion of their OD experiences. Two things became evident in the discussion. First, it was rapidly developing into an "insights" session where both parties were eagerly gaining valuable insights and secondly it was becoming apparent that there is often a disparity between beliefs and actions of OD practitioners. WOW! Could this be true? Some experts label a disparity between beliefs and actions as craziness! Then the classic Paul Simon song "Still Crazy After All These Years" came to mind and we had a good laugh realizing that craziness was perhaps too strong a word to label this disparity that had been discovered, but that it does in fact exist and should be disclosed for OD practitioners to evaluate.

As you may have guessed, we were the two OD practitioners and some of the disparities hit home.

Furthermore, our discovery provided us with an opportunity to poke fun at the discrepancies between traditional OD values and theories and what in fact happens in practice. In doing so it is not our intent to put down the field of OD. Rather, we would like to place our observations in proper historical perspective recognizing that OD is a relatively new field and like any fledgling adolescent, it is not surprising to find differences between beliefs and actions in the struggle for maturity. In its evaluation, the popularity of OD forced it to grow up very quickly without enough time to question and evaluate. As Jerry Harvey once suggested, OD became like a religious movement with acolytes, converts, and monasteries and convents disguised as universities where people came to hear the truth about OD!¹ He later captured the need for a re-evaluation of OD in his article titled "Eight Myths That Consultants Live And Die By."² Hopefully our observations will help clear up some of these myths as we face a new decade and an opportunity to mature past some of the

craziness that we are still susceptible to after all these years.

We would like to point out one thing of importance as you read this article. This type of article at first glance may appear to be a somewhat critical and self-righteous look at OD. This was not our intent. OD is growing in impact and stature and we will frankly admit that many of our examples of what not to do came from our own personal experiences. Our intent is to encourage a re-evaluation of OD values and practices so that OD practitioners will not continue making the same mistakes.

A Look at OD Values

OD values read like excerpts from a holy book expounding many worthy virtues by which to live our organizational lives. We are proud of most OD values and the fact that OD is built on worthy values. However, differences between the stated values, their practicality as universal truths, and how they are in fact applied, became evident upon close examination. Our observations on some of these differences follow.

Client-Centered Approach: This value suggests that OD programs should be tailored to the specific needs of the client based on data collected from the client. And yet, how many practitioners must plead guilty to the "Johnny or Sally One-Note" approach? No matter what the client needs, they get whatever a practitioner happens to be selling. All problems are addressed with the same methodology or intervention. Such a strategy can prove to be a tremendous disservice to the client unless the strategy happens by chance to fit! A truly client-centered practitioner should be well versed in the wide variety of OD skills needed to practice OD or at least be willing to only accept assignments where his or her approach fits the needs of the client.³

OD is For the Whole Organization and Should Begin at the Top: It seems as though some OD purists live and die by this value which in most cases is essential to the success of an OD program. Many programs have failed because they included only one segment of the organization or started in the middle of the organization only to die a slow death from the lack of top-management commitment. Most experienced OD practitioners know that in fact there are exceptions to this important value. OD programs have in fact been successful in selected parts of an organization and without top-management involvement! The keys to risking such a sacrilegious approach are in doing enough homework to determine if a particular group in an organization is in a position to change without any undue negative influence or aftermath from other parts of the organization and to assure that there is top-management commitment if not involvement. This can occur when a group is relatively autonomous, the climate of the organization is favorable to change, systems are available for reinforcement of changes, and top management is sympathetic to OD values and practices.

An Expert Change Agent Leads an OD Effort: The notion of an expert change agent designing,

leading and performing all aspects of an OD effort started by necessity when there were in fact few OD practitioners. Although there are still numerous circumstances where the expert role is needed, for example where needed internal resources are limited, such a role can also limit the effectiveness of an OD effort and cause it to regress once the expert leaves. Some OD practitioners are beginning to realize that the real change agents are the managers and supervisors in the organization and that the OD practitioner is more of a "change catalyst," whose primary role is to assist the real change agents.

The clearer we become on what our role is, the more effective we can be in providing assistance to the real change agents. In order to help us out of the confusion over what it is that we do, we have found it helpful to utilize Argyris' definition of the way we can serve as effective practitioners.⁴ We subscribe to these components of the role of the OD consultant.

- Assist the client in developing data about the organization.
- Assist the client in making free, informed choices about the data.
- Assist the client in becoming committed to their choices.

When we operate within the boundaries of these three criteria, we develop relationships with our clients. In fact, strict adherence to these criteria empowers the line manager to be the real change agent.

Openness and Trust: Certainly some degree of openness and trust is needed to have a healthy and effective organization. The questions are how much is needed and do all organizations or different levels in an organization need the same amount of openness and trust? Is it possible that some OD practitioners impose their values of openness and trust in a way that becomes dysfunctional for the real needs of an organization? In early OD efforts the T-Group model was used to produce openness and trust and is still used by some OD practitioners. While many of the problems associated with the T-

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Group approach can be traced to inadequately trained trainers, the fact is that many people got burned because they returned to the real world and were so open and trusting that some people took advantage of them. The values of openness and trust should again be based on client needs, and we should also prepare clients to understand both advantages and cautions involved in openness and trust.

Participative Management and Power Equalization are Valued: It is often assumed in organizations that have been "OD'd" that participative management is tantamount to health. A second assumption that often follows is that participation also assumes that power needs to be equalized throughout the organization. The first assumption is a contradiction to the client-centered approach value that recognizes the individuality of a particular organization. Participative management may not only be unneeded in some organizations, it

may also be dysfunctional to getting the job done. A more realistic approach would be to find out how much, if any, participative management is needed and to what degree in different parts of the organization.

The second assumption of power equalization is also a contradiction to another OD value about starting at the top in implementing an OD program. Starting at the top is an excellent example of recognizing the need for differences in power. Change can be accomplished much quicker and is likely to last longer if we have the support, involvement, and yes, power, needed from top management. A clear understanding of power dynamics can be an advantage in OD if it is used within the three components of the consultant's role that we have suggested.

Theory-Y Assumptions About People: OD practitioners sometimes get experienced very quickly when they naively, as we have done, go into an organization

assuming that all people are basically good, trustworthy and committed to an OD effort, only to find out that in fact some members of the organization are after their skin! The potential for exposing incompetence or even outshining an already existing HRD or personnel department can sometimes surface enemies that put considerable energy into an OD effort. Unfortunately, their effort is designed to make sure the program does not work! Assuming the best about people is a rational assumption if you recognize the advantage of increasing the probability that people in fact will act that way and yet are realistic enough to watch out for the exceptions! Being sensitive to the needs of individuals in the system — i.e., the political climate — is a required skill for effective intervention with our clients.

A Look at OD Practices

Ideally good practice should be based on good theory. Although OD theory is often criticized — What theory? Is not OD just a combination of everything else? — growing literature available in OD along with the growing number of universities, colleges and institutes offering OD degrees or programs indicates that good theory training is available. However, as is so often the case when a field or topic becomes popular, there are many "instant" OD practitioners whose practices reflect their lack of a sound theory base. Like the disparities discussed concerning OD values, there are many discrepancies between our espoused theories of practice and our actual practice.

Such discrepancies usually reflect lack of an overall theory of practice. The term "practice theory" was first used by Peter Vaill in 1974 to describe a personal theory of changing organizations.⁵ Since that time, many of us have failed to recognize the real importance of this concept. While we do not all need the same theory of changing, we propose all practitioners do need to be clear on what they do and how they do it. Even more important, we really need to be able to discuss our theory of changing with our clients. This

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sometimes is very difficult with a language that is loaded with jargon such as "TA," "Interventions," "FIRO," "Diagnostic Models," and an endless list of others. The checklist that appears in Figure 1 can help address the issues important to building an effective practice theory.

Process Versus Content: In OD theory, differences between process and content are emphasized and training in both is encouraged as essential to good OD practice. Early OD practitioners seemed to place an over-emphasis on process skills because of their laboratory training roots and recent practitioners often over-emphasize content skills if they practice OD without adequate training. Another disparity occurs when we facilitate organizational issues using these skills but do not practice them ourselves. How often do we meet with the client to process our relationship or evaluate the effort and the methods being used? We have found such sessions an important component of our contract with clients. The message here is that both process and content are important and that we need a blend of both in our practice of building effective relationships with our clients.

Problem-Solving Focus: One of the major goals of an OD effort can be to assist organizational members in conceptualizing individual, group, and intergroup problem-solving methods and to apply these methods in resolving major problems in the organization. Unfortunately, some of the basic problem-solving methods used in OD place too great of an emphasis on "problem-finding" and "problem-rehashing" and too little on problem-solving. The thrill of uncovering buried treasure (problems), the need to justify our existence by uncovering key issues, and the excitement of leading a "conflict resolution meeting" can seduce us into a continuous search for new problems. The resulting problem-finding or problem-rehashing sessions often prove threatening and frustrating to managers and overwhelming to employees who did not know so many problems existed.

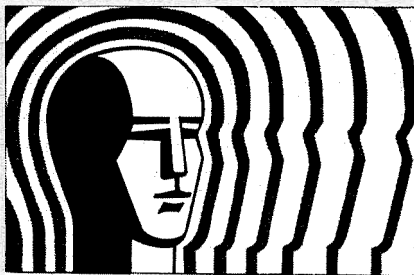
Figure 1.
A CHECKLIST FOR BUILDING A THEORY OF PRACTICE

VALUES	PRACTICES
1. Are the values I am advocating realistic and appropriate to this organization?	1. Have I identified who the real client is by considering "all" persons or groups who could significantly influence this effort?
2. Have I discussed these values with the client to see if they meet the client's needs?	2. Have I adequately evaluated internal resources and what has been done in the past before recommending an approach to take?
3. If I am not using a whole organization, top to bottom approach, have I checked to see if change is realistic and likely to be accepted?	3. Have I done a thorough job of involving the client in the intervention design and in doing the necessary planning and commitment building?
4. Is my approach truly client-centered and tailored to the needs of this client?	4. Does my theory of practice provide me with guidelines for approaching the effort?
5. Who is the real change agent and what is my most productive role as a consultant?	5. Do I practice what I espouse in relating to the client, in modeling what I teach, and in my ethical practices?
6. Are my assumptions about people and organizations realistic and accurate? Do I continually test these assumptions?	6. Have I been able to maintain a high level of objectivity and confidentiality with this client's data?
7. Is participative management appropriate for this organization or for different parts of this organization?	7. Am I practicing OD as an ongoing process or as an event with a beginning and an end? How will I know when my relationship with the client is completed?
8. What degree of openness and trust is appropriate for this organization?	8. Have I considered the real cause of any resistance to change? Is the resistance legitimate? Could the program design or my style be the real cause?
9. Is change necessary or appropriate? Is the timing right?	9. What process do I have for structuring my relationship with my client?
10. Am I willing to continually test my theory of practice and accept the results as a way of building a more effective theory?	10. Am I able to be objective and yet realistic about data and how close it matches reality?
	11. Am I sensitive to the needs and feelings of my clients as they experience the OD effort?
	12. What am I doing to help the client reinforce the changes made in the organization?

Some alternatives would be to use more positive approaches such as also focusing on organizational strengths, minimizing time spent on problem-finding and problem-rehashing, and maximizing time spent on problem-solving. The essence is to focus on the gap that exists between where a group or organization is and where they would like to be. Such an approach embodies both problem finding and action planning.

A Strong Sense of Ethics: In order to build trust, credibility and a healthy non-manipulative work environment, a strong sense of

ethics has always been emphasized in OD. This places considerable responsibility on those of us in the field to model ethical, straightforward behavior. And yet, OD practitioners have occasionally been accused of practicing the art of "questionable ethics." They may persuade organizations to pursue an unneeded program, stretch programs out longer than is necessary, tailor a program by changing a few words in their canned approach, create unrealistic expectations, plagiarize material and use organizations for personal research without their permission.



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While most of these practices go unnoticed, it does not excuse us from the fact that they do occur and that they tarnish the credibility of the vast majority of practitioners who follow a high code of ethics. "Letting go" of these unethical practices would be an important passage for OD in its evolution.

Maintaining Objectivity and Confidentiality: We are taught in OD that objectivity and confidentiality are essential to building trust and credibility with our clients. Anyone who has had the experience of basing findings on a sample of one — one high level official provides you with some "hot" data that you assume to be an accurate portrayal of reality without checking out the data further — or who has shared information "in confidence" which someone else thought that they were sharing with you "in confidence," has learned the hard way how important objectivity and confidentiality are. Care in this area is particularly important during the diagnostic phase of an OD effort.

Several things can be done to improve objectivity and confidentiality. Working closely with the client in deciding if or why an evaluation is necessary, who the primary users will be, the format in which the data will be presented, how the data will be collected and fed back, who will receive the data and even clarifying expectations ahead of time about the need for confidentiality can all improve objectivity and confidentiality.⁶

Other basics are to train yourself to distinguish between what is being said and what you want to hear, and to check out information from several sources. The contracting process is a useful process for setting expectations around data that is collected and used.⁷ We have found that collecting data and feeding it back anonymously can be an effective ground rule during team-development efforts. At the same time, it is often useful to point out that data collected is the client's data and that it will not be given to anyone but team members, except when the team grants permission. Such ground rules free

people up to share data and allow the consultant to function effectively.

Finally, adding sensitivity and reality to objectivity and confidentiality is important. Sometimes we become so detached in our attempts to be objective that we become insensitive to the impact and even shock, at times, that our objective data may have on the client. We also need to be more realistic about the factuality of our data. Early in his career, one OD practitioner fed back the results of a semantic differential questionnaire convinced of the factuality of the results, only to find out that almost one-fourth of the people who completed the questionnaire could not read English! Events and circumstances do effect the data and we need to keep these "facts" in mind.

Resistance to Change: Sometimes having an OD practitioner enter an organization is like admitting that you have the plague! Acknowledging a need for help or even a need for keeping an organization healthy, or better yet, risking being exposed, can be very threatening for clients. For those that are threatened, resistances may appear. Since we have been taught to expect resistance to change in OD and to deal with it by building commitment and confronting it, we would like to address the assumption that resistance is basically unfounded and can therefore be overcome.

Perhaps practitioners need to learn to sort out when resistance is legitimate and what is behind the resistance. Could it be that resistance is a natural reaction to a valid feeling that the organization does not need or is not ready for an OD effort, or that the timing is wrong? Or could the practitioner be the culprit? Resistance can be connected to a poor choice of strategy or methods, insensitivity to where the client's energy and needs are, or even the practitioner's style.

Since we sometimes act as if change is the major task of the consultant, we often find our clients "resisting." Something that has proven helpful to many practitioners is to be sensitive to where a

client's energy is and to begin projects with that energy. Forcing our favorite interventions on organizations will frequently lead to observing that our clients are resistant to change, when in reality these statements can usually be interpreted as being further from the truth. Interventions must start with the client's data. In fact, even if data has been collected using very sophisticated techniques, the client will frequently not act on the data unless it fits what their perceptions of what reality is in the organization. OD practitioners need to re-evaluate their assumptions about resistance to change to avoid the possibility of overlooking the causes of resistance.

OD As an Event

Some practitioners view OD as an event with a clear beginning and end; sometimes defined by how long it takes the practitioner to do his or her intervention and exit; while the need to recognize OD practice often suggests otherwise when there is a definite conclusion to an intervention complete with an end of the effort evaluation and departure of the "change agent." As practitioners we need to view OD as a process and to change our practices to reflect this view by making evaluation a continuing process, by developing "internal change agents" that can carry on the process, and by making planned disengagement and follow-up one of the most important phases of the effort.

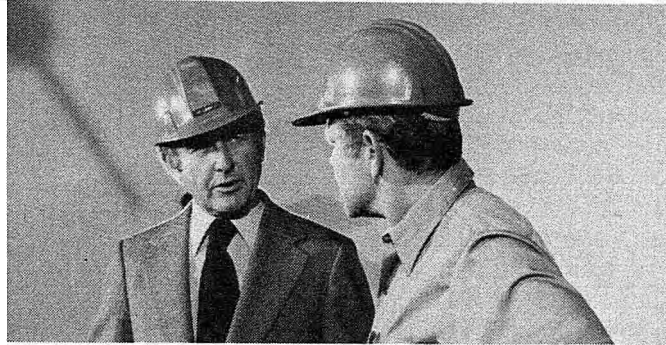
The process model of action research can be useful for those who tend to view our profession only as a linear series of events. In viewing our theory and interventions as events, we lose much of the richness of the data that takes place in more successful relationships with clients as expressed by the process model of diagnosing, planning, implementing and evaluating.

Practicing What We Preach: Perhaps the most glaring disparity between theory and practice in OD is manifest in the discrepancy between our espoused theory and our theory in practice.⁸ It is a most interesting phenomena to occa-

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sionally observe an OD practitioner, who has been facilitating confrontations and problem solving throughout the organization, become defensive when questioned about "his or her intervention." We know because we have experienced this rare phenomena! The comment that is really difficult to take is when a client wonders aloud why everyone is being evaluated but the consultant.

Those who decide to become OD practitioners need to consider the heavy responsibility and expectations placed on them to be able to model the healthy behaviors that they espouse in order to build credibility. Certainly OD practitioners are not expected to be faster than a speeding bullet or to be able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. There is a margin for error that makes us human. However, when discrepancies between what we say and what we do become too apparent, one can legitimately question whether an unhealthy, unintegrated person can

facilitate developing a healthy, integrated organization. We obviously have a responsibility to integrate our practice theories by learning to test our theories with each intervention. In our testing we need to attend to both negative and positive results. Only when we listen to these complete results can we build more effective practice theories.

Conclusion: Adding Reality To OD Values and Practices

Lest our observations appear to be a scathing indictment of OD values and practices, we wish to state our commitment to the need for creating and managing change in organizations! We do not believe that OD practitioners are crazy after all these years. However, we do believe that it is time to add some maturity to our practice of OD, to re-evaluate some of our traditional OD values and practices, to reduce the discrepancies between theory and practice and to temper our OD values and practices with reality, practicality and a theory base. The checklist in

Figure 1 will hopefully be helpful in evaluating your own OD values and practices, i.e., your own theory of practice. While there are no "right" answers to the questions in Figure 1, we feel that OD practitioners will eliminate many of the discrepancies by addressing them with a high degree of intellectual honesty. As Kurt Lewis has aptly stated, "Nothing is so practical as a good theory."

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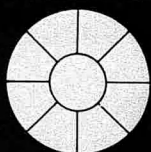
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