SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE

NEEDED: A NEW OD MODEL

Guest Commentary
BY TOM GOAD

"OD has the potential for solving even the stickiest organizational problems."

"OD is a growing field."

"OD practitioners count amongst their ranks some very impressive talent."

"New OD techniques and sophistications are growing rapidly."

Which of the above statements about organization development (OD) is correct? The answer: they all are. With all that going for it, OD would appear to be an outstanding method for coping with change in today's world. Those familiar with the situation would not deny this. There are some criticisms. Mostly though, they have to do with ethics and the usual questions of professionalism and validity.

The Traditional Model

A look at the model indicates that perhaps OD could be more than it is! The traditional model has three very distinct characteristics. One is related to people. The people involved usually bear the title "OD practitioner." They are for the most part operating on a third party basis, i.e., consultants hired to come in and solve a problem. These persons are often very highly regarded professionals, many of whom command handsome fees. If rosters of OD related organizations are an indication, the number of practitioners is growing. Many large organizations are establishing internal OD staffs.

The second characteristic is
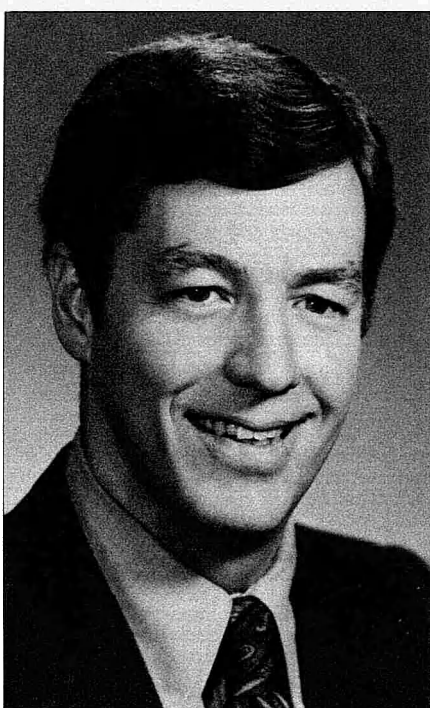
Tom Goad

closely related to the first. OD is generally applied to comparatively large organizations. Internal OD consultants are found in big corporations. Big businesses, along with governmental and other large institutions are the ones with the budgets for outside help.

The third characteristic is that the cases, at least according to literature, are classic in nature. Directly related to behavioral science, they have generally well defined approaches to problem solving (interventions). They deal with problems associated with interpersonal relations within group environments. Examples of these

classic problems are: conflict, group dysfunction, lack of human relations skills, ineffectual interpersonal communications, unclear values, etc.

It would be difficult to find anything wrong with these characteristics. The problem, rather, is with what isn't. Each of these characteristics has a corollary that can be viewed as a missing ingredient of the total OD model:

• Third party change agents, supplemented by insiders, can't cover the territory. If OD is all that it seems to be, there are far more potential applications.

• Large organizations have not cornered the market on problems. By definition, all organizations must have the same types of problems.

• There are many other areas that can be addressed. If not directly related, then they are at least indirectly related to human behavior.

Defining a precise new model is an effort requiring considerable time and thought from people in the field. Rather than attempting this, some examples of what an expanded model could do will be given. Stated as questions, three possibilities come to mind (there must be many more):

1. Why can't OD be used to help achieve conservation of natural resources in general and energy conservation in particular?

2. Why aren't some of the theories and practices of OD being

used to help give a "face-lift" to the tarnished image of business?

3. Why aren't smaller organizations being included in the practice of OD?

A fourth question encompasses all three: Why can't more people, especially those in responsible organizational roles, be OD specialists?

OD and Energy Conservation

Energy has been one of the most talked about — and biggest — problems in recent years. Dire warnings have been issued about rapid depletion of irreplaceable natural resources, with energy standing at the top of the list. Energy policy currently being formulated has as its key element energy conservation. Sacrifice, in the name of conservation, is essential for the success of this policy.[1]

Wastage and inefficiency are cited by the Federal Energy Administration as prime targets toward which conservation programs are to be geared.[2] Some of this can be achieved through new conservation minded engineering designs of the systems and equipments that consume energy. Some can be attained through legislation and higher prices for energy.

Yet gas guzzlers in the form of large cars and recreational vehicles are selling well. Lights are left on in empty rooms, doors are left open when air-conditioning units are running full blast, and swimming pools are kept heated to high temperatures. Energy is just not consumed efficiently on a broad-scale basis. There have been scares in recent years, but there is still doubt about the extent of reported shortages of energy, and consumption rises again after the scares.

The message here is that behaviors must change in order to cause an all-out, society-wide energy conservation effort to become reality. There is no reason why this change can't be achieved through planned intervention. And who knows better how to approach this than the people who practice OD?

Energy conservation is a real problem faced by any organization that consumes energy. Plotting the curve of the escalating cost of energy will make believers out of anyone, and there are those who advocate even higher prices for energy.

It could be that applying OD to this serious problem is a relatively easy task. "Energy Conservation by Objectives" is one example approach. A force field analysis to determine what is preventing conservation is another. Daniel Tagliere's model of interest relationships between encompassing society, owners, clients or customers and members of the organization is useful to show how OD should work very successfully.[3] Achievement of energy conservation, when viewed within the framework of the model, has a positive effect on all the elements.

OD and the Business Image

Foreign bribes, windfall profits, fines for polluting, government bail out of faltering corporations, business failures linked to executive dishonesty and faulty products are among the list of events that have contributed to a deteriorating public view of corporations and business in general.

There are a number of reactions and results of the current mood. Some of them are: antitrust suits, consumer advocacy groups, businesspeople turned inmates and public distrust. Much change has occurred in the realm of business organizations in the past several decades. Leaders have evolved from Whyte's *Organizational Man* to Maccoby's *Gamesman*. And, for whatever the reasons, the change process has left business in a far less favorable light than it was, say, in the 1950s.

Three basic options are available to respond to the situation. One is to do nothing. This would tend to have a strong connotation of a don't care attitude, which would surely antagonize an already volatile public. Another is to keep on trying with the old line tactic of teaching economics of the traditional free enterprise to a public that may not be receptive. In fact, there is evidence that education is not the answer either.[4]

The third choice is to try to do something different, to go all out, in an honest attempt to stem the antibusiness tide. After all, if business and big corporations (and little ones too) are all they are supposed to be, they will surely stand up to the closest of scrutiny, provided there is genuine concern for the society within which business operates.

The idea of redesigning the public image of business is a large task. But the negative feelings are emotionally, and therefore behaviorally, based. OD is equipped to deal with these kinds of problems. What's the difference between conflict represented by department A *vs.* department B and those of group A (the public) *vs.* group B (business)? Many potential approaches have already been set forth. One, for instance, puts social responsibility squarely on the corporation.[5]

This is an important problem, one that could be vital to the very system in which we now live. OD could certainly be expanded, under the auspices of its practitioners, to take a significant role in turning the tide of antibusiness sentiment.

OD and Small Organizations

One reason that OD is typically applied only to large organizations is probably due to the formal, specialized nature of the field. Fees, especially for top-notch external consultants, may have something to do with this. Lack of expertise in formal, sophisticated management techniques may also play a part in the lack of OD in small organizations. Yet many techniques, systems and theories that have in the past first appeared in large corporations have found their way down to their smaller counterparts. Computers and information systems technology in general are examples that come to mind. Complex electronic devices,

once the tools of only giant sized corporations, can be found almost everywhere today. New technology and techniques across the board, from accounting to finance to production and marketing, have been applied first to large then to small firms and groups.

One hypothesis that can be formed, based on the foregoing discussion, is that OD technology is available and can be applied to organizations of all sizes. In other words, an assumption can be made that OD does have its place in small organizations. Some of the reasons for this assumption are:

• Small organizations have the same kinds of problems as large ones. In fact, big organization problems are often an outgrowth of small organizations rapidly growing into large ones.

• Interventions have been successfully applied to small groups within a larger group.

• Managers of small organizations need help, too.

• Behavioral problems are also economic, such as when lack of team effort slows down the production process. Small organizations can cope less with economic binds than large ones.

• Since OD is oriented toward group (and therefore human) change, there should be a tendency for it to have an impact on small organizations. Assuming the right approach is taken, this would indicate a positive change potential.

• Change is vital for survival, and OD gives the opportunity for controlling it. A small organization may have a harder struggle for survival than the large one.

The question then, is not related to whether or not OD is practical for small organizations. But rather, it is a question of how to go about doing it.

OD would likely be applied to small organizations more on a "do-it-yourself" basis, as opposed to a third party change agent being brought aboard to do so. (Although volunteer counselors from the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) working through the Small Business Administration might very well fill the gap.) There are far too many smaller organizations for the consultants available to gain very widespread coverage.

There is no easy way to solve the problem of how to prepare management people of small organizations, and larger ones for that matter, to become change agents. However, some suggestions are:

• Workshops and similar approaches designed as short no-nonsense courses to help bootstrap small organization managers in OD technology.

• Attend graduate schools that have integrated management and behavioral science programs.

• Conduct awareness campaigns, through various media, on what being a change agent is all about. In other words, education on a grassroots level. This assumes use of language that everyone understands, rather than the jargon of behavioral scientists.

• Interchanges, through seminars or the like, between counterparts in other small organizations.

Trade associations and professional groups provide excellent media for this.

These are but a few examples of how the OD model can be expanded. If it is as worthwhile a tool of management as it is reported to be, then OD must be applied to a broader spectrum of organizations and associated problems. More people must become change agents. For instance, ". . . *today's leaders can also draw on the growing body of OD concepts and techniques, and bring them to bear on the problems and opportunities of their organizations. OD has proved to be helpful in making organizations successful and in meeting the needs of everyone involved in them."*[6]

OD is not magic. But it deserves to be expanded into a more extensive world of application. The people who practice OD can make this happen for the good of society.
— *Tom Goad*

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