

# Marginality, a Force For the OD Practitioner

practice is ahead of theory

Philip J. Browne  
and  
Chester C. Cotton

Organization development is a new discipline which has had and will continue to have a profound impact on organizations and their members. Though many organizations, large and small, have people (or units of people) engaged in organization development efforts,<sup>1</sup> little is known about the role of the organization development practitioner.

As Burke so aptly points out, in the field of organization development, "practice is *ahead* of the theory and conceptualization."<sup>2</sup> This article examines one of the least explored dimensions of the organization development practitioner's role: *Marginality Versus Non-Marginality*. The main thesis that will be advanced here is that

marginality is an important positive force upon which both organizations involved in organization development and the practitioners of organization development should capitalize.

Marginality has been defined, redefined, clarified and criticized in the sociological literature for over 40 years. Studies of marginality have included ethnic background (e.g., Polish-American), race (e.g., Afro-American), religion (e.g., American Jew), age (e.g., adolescence), and sex (e.g., homosexuals). In most cases, the studies emphasized the instability of the marginal person (or group) caught between two or more groups with conflicting value, goal and behavior systems. Stonequist

described the marginal person as "one whom fate has condemned to live in two societies and two not merely different but antagonistic, cultures."<sup>3</sup> Thus, a person in a situation of marginality operates under circumstances of conflicting reference and membership group ties.

## Positive and Negative Aspects

Thus, the negative aspects of marginality have received much attention, particularly the harmful social/psychological consequences of its stress, conflict and anxiety. Oftentimes, strategies were developed to discount, reduce or otherwise provide individuals with relief from marginality. The positive implications of marginal work

roles in organizational systems have been largely overlooked. The superior ability of persons in marginal roles to be objective and to perform successfully in linking and integrative capacities has received little attention beyond the convincing research of Ziller, Stark and Pruden,<sup>4</sup> Pruden and Stark,<sup>5</sup> and Liddell.<sup>6</sup> Marginality can have positive aspects both for the person in a marginal organizational role and for the organization in which that role must be assumed! As will be briefly demonstrated next, marginality is an essential, and inevitable, component of several important organization job types.

### Marginal Organizational Roles

What are the classic marginal roles in organizations? The first line supervisor must be the most famous "person-in-the-middle" in organizations. As Roethlisberger observed, "Again and again the supervisor is put in a position of either getting the worker's cooperation and being 'disloyal' to management or of incurring the resentment and overt opposition of subordinates."<sup>7</sup> Sales people are also marginal in that they exist in the interface between their employers and their customers, linking the two systems and having to please both, as noted by Ditz.<sup>8</sup>

A series of studies undertaken by Lawrence and Lorsch<sup>9</sup> investigated yet another marginal role in organizations, one they termed the "integrator." Integrators are those managers who coordinate the activities of several functional groups in an organization. For example, the manager of a project team which includes representatives of the engineering, manufacturing, marketing and personnel departments.

### OD Practitioner's Role

The marginal role of the OD practitioner has only been the object of passing discussion. Ben- nis<sup>10</sup> calls the change agent role a

"marginal" one and notes that the change agent does not have actual membership in the client system nor in groups of colleagues *near at hand*. Likewise, Argyris<sup>11</sup> suggests that the organization interventionist faces a marginality situation which forces him or her to live in two discrepant worlds: the client system and his or her professional field.

Walton<sup>12</sup> also emphasizes how frequently the OD practitioner takes on a "third-party" or marginal role. The integrative aspects of the change agent's role, working along the interfaces of the organization, have been described by

Lawrence and Lorsch.<sup>13</sup> Most recently, Mather<sup>14</sup> has described the OD practitioner's role as that of a "broker" located spatially between the employees and the organization.

Instead of relating completely to either world, the OD practitioner must be "co-worldly." The interventionist who becomes overly involved with the profession risks appearing too detached, disinterested and unfamiliar with the client system. Similarly, the change agent who becomes excessively involved with the client system risks becoming a "prisoner" of the system with consequent loss of objectivity and effective-

---

## the book that tells you how to make *Job Enrichment* work

JOB ENRICHMENT FOR RESULTS:  
STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

Roy W. Walters & Associates Inc.

In Press—Spring 1975

Roy W. Walters & Associates is an internationally known management consulting firm in Job Enrichment. In the book *JOB ENRICHMENT FOR RESULTS*, the Walters team reviews the theoretical framework of Job Enrichment and places it in the context of the current organizational dilemma. (Rising absenteeism, lack of motivation, counterproductive attitudes.) The Walters team gives the line or staff person a model for redesigning jobs that will *unlock* motivational drives. They use actual case histories to illustrate Job Enrichment techniques that have been successfully used.

*Enrich yourself.* To get your FREE TEN-DAY EXAM copy of *JOB ENRICHMENT FOR RESULTS*, write or call Charles Peers at Addison-Wesley (617-944-3700, Xt. 387) or circle the reader service number below.



Business & Professional Division  
ADDISON-WESLEY PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.  
Reading, Massachusetts 01867

Circle No. 636 on Reader Service Card

ness. Appreciating the duality of the position, the OD practitioner must avoid "overidentification" with either the client system or the profession so that skills of objectivity, expertise and confrontation can be utilized in organization problem-solving. Figure 1 depicts the marginal role of the OD practitioner.

The outside OD consultant may find it easier to maintain marginality than the internal OD consultant, who usually finds it difficult to establish and retain marginality within the organizational structure. Under the best of circumstances, such marginality usually comes at high personal and organizational costs: loneliness, role ambiguity, lack of technical support, budgetary vulnerability, and as reported by Mitchell,<sup>15</sup> "consultant burnout."

In summary, the internal OD practitioner lives permanently in two different and often antagonistic cultures (professional and employer) as well as in a series of third cultures (organizational unit clients). Efforts by the OD practitioner to avoid this three-way tug-of-war over his or her loyalties will, to the extent to which these efforts are successful, reduce the OD practitioner's effectiveness.

### Benefits of Marginality

The potential organizational benefits which derive from maintaining the OD practitioner's marginality are numerous. First, marginality can help the OD practitioner to develop a relationship with the client system such that he or she can maintain "organization distance" and avoid being co-opted, seduced or forced to collude with the client system's self-serving objectives.

Second, as a marginal organization member, the OD practitioner's interventions are more "membership free." The interventions can be more readily accepted as

genuine help offered to facilitate change, without regard for hidden organizational purposes or being perceived as what Baritz<sup>16</sup> has termed a "servant of power."

Third, the marginal OD practitioner, more than fully-integrated members of the organization, is likely to be in continuing contact with the outside professional world, and should be able to provide fresh approaches to old organizational problems. Fourth, the marginal OD position, with its realignment of the reward and penalty systems, puts the practitioner in the otherwise impossible position of being able to take the appropriate risks necessary to confront the organization with its often neurotic behaviors.<sup>17</sup>

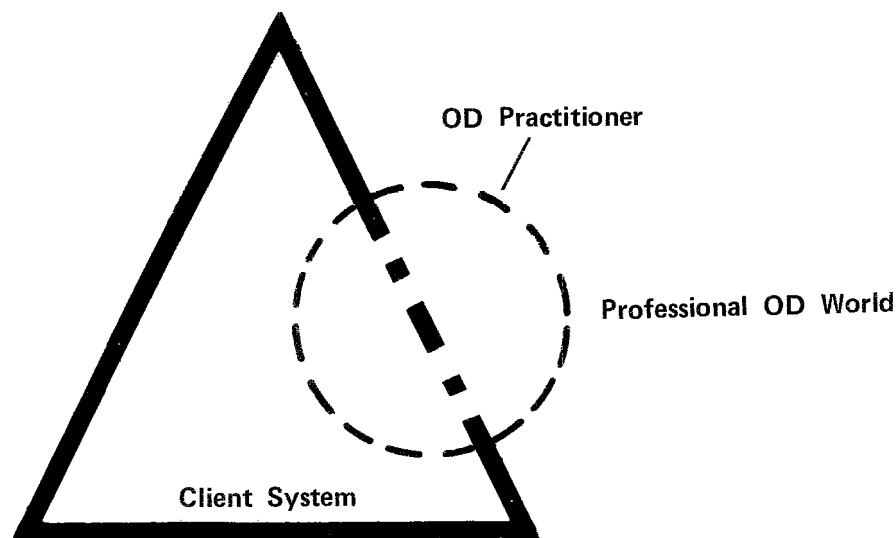
### Implications

For an organization that plans to utilize one or more internal OD practitioners, the OD practitioner's marginality implies at least

three considerations: First, the organization must accept the necessity for the OD practitioner's marginality and understand that marginality entails costs for the employing organization as well. As the OD practitioner attempts to maintain interaction with two different worlds he or she may appear to be inconsistent or even two-faced. The OD practitioner's behavior can be seen as incongruent with established ways of behaving in the organization with resultant reactions ranging from bewilderment to hostility.

An example of "deviant" behavior on the OD practitioner's part would be directly confronting conflict in an organization which has traditionally "smoothed over" differences. Negative reactions might be anticipated from employees who do not hold or have an appreciation of the dilemmas of boundary-spanning positions.<sup>18</sup> The organization will have to learn to cope with these pressures for

FIGURE 1.



conformity of thought and allow for differences in behavior.

Second, the organization should define the OD practitioner's job in terms of its basic behavioral demands<sup>19</sup> and seek candidates who can "stand alone" in functioning effectively under conditions of marginality with its complexities, ambiguities and uncertainties.<sup>20</sup>

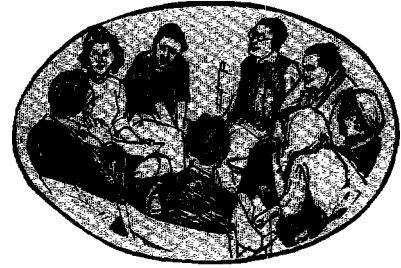
Third, to continue to receive the full benefits for which it pays the OD practitioner, the employing organization must act to sanction and legitimize the OD practitioner's marginality. In practice, this would probably include policies designed to buffer the OD practitioner from unnecessary stress<sup>21</sup> and to establish the independence of the OD unit. Structurally, it may involve the OD unit reporting to a powerful, sympathetic figure who can divert, or ignore, pressures directed at the unit while providing strong and visible support. Such organizational safeguards would allow the OD practitioner to function effectively.

Marginality, therefore, places one more burden upon the OD practitioner: To be absolutely certain to maintain his or her marginality with its independence, boundary-spanning and nonalignment characteristics. If a realistic assessment of the situation suggests the organization's refusal to support or permit marginality, the OD practitioner's choice is either to leave the firm or to be ineffective.

Alternatively, should the OD practitioner sense that he or she does not have a marginality orientation,<sup>22</sup> temperament or interest cannot continue to deal with the loneliness, conflicts and frustrations of marginality, the choice is either to leave the profession or to be ineffective.

## REFERENCES

1. For an up-to-date look at the application of OD in organizations, see: Rush, Harold M.F., *Organization Development: A Reconnaissance* (New York: The Conference Board, 1973).
2. Burke, W. Warner, "Organization Development: Here to Stay?" *Academy of Management Proceedings*, (August, 1971), p. 173.
3. Stonequist, Everett V., *The Marginal Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), p. xv.
4. Ziller, Robert C.; Stark, B.J. and Pruden, H.O., "Marginality and Integrative Management Positions," *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (December, 1969), pp. 487-495.
5. Pruden, H.O. and Stark, B.J., "Marginality Associated with Inter-organizational Linking Process, Productivity, and Satisfaction," *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (March, 1971), pp. 145-148.
6. Liddell, W.W., "Marginality and Integrative Decisions," *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (March, 1973), pp. 154-156.
7. Roethlisberger, Fritz J., "The Foreman: Master and Victim of Double Talk," *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Spring, 1945), pp. 283-298.
8. Ditz, Gerhard W., "The Internal-External Dichotomy in Business Organizations," *Industrial Management Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Fall, 1964), pp. 54-55.
9. Lawrence, Paul R. and Lorsch, Jay W., "New Management Job: The Integrator," *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 45, No. 6 (November-December, 1967), p. 142-151.
10. Bennis, Warren G., *Changing Organizations* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).
11. Argyris, Chris, *Intervention Theory and Method* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1970). (Continued)



## Vocational Exploration Group

By Calvin J. Daane

Are you employed with an organization or institution which is concerned with career aspirations of the employees? Does your worker placement involve a counseling process? Is internal promotion or mobility a standing policy?

If so, then you should be interested in *Vocational Exploration Group* (VEG). VEG is a structured group process which helps members examine their career goals, and identify realistic next steps to take in order to reach their goals. Research indicates VEG is effective in developing positive employability perceptions while reducing social alienation.

VEG is a small group involving 5 members and a Leader. During the two-hour sessions members explore the 3 critical links of *Job Personalization* which constitute the give and take relationship between a person and work: *Job Function* — what the job is like, *Job Demands* — what the job requires, and *Job Satisfiers* — what the job offers. The goal for each member is to experience this relationship and to apply it personally.

Almost 2000 VEG Leaders are now employed over the entire range of work settings. Leaders are trained during two-day Workshops. You may be trained at Regional Workshops or we will provide On-site Training for 4 or more Leaders within your organization. For more information about VEG programs, research or training, contact:

**Dr. William L. Elster**  
**Studies for Urban Man, Inc.**  
**P.O. Box 1039, Tempe, AZ 85281**  
**Phone: (602) 946-6190**

Circle No. 637 on Reader Service Card

12. Walton, Richard E., *Interpersonal Peacemaking: Confrontation and Third Party Consultation* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969).
13. Lawrence, Paul R. and Lorsch, Jay W., *Developing Organizations: Diagnosis and Action* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969).
14. Mather, Alan F., "ECHO: A Framework for Organization Development," *Training and Development Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (January, 1973), pp. 40-46.
15. Mitchell, Michael, "Consultant Burn-out," paper presented at the National OD Network Conference (October, 1973), Chicago, Illinois.
16. Baritz, Loren, *The Servants of Power* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1960).
17. For a fuller explanation of neurotic behavior in organizations, see: Harvey, Jerry B. and Albertson, D. Richard, "Neurotic Organizations: Symptoms, Causes, and Treatment," *Personnel Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 9 (September, 1971), pp. 694-699.
18. Leifer, Richard, "Boundary Spanning Activity and Boundary Spanning Personnel: A Conceptual Model," a paper delivered at the 17th Annual Midwest Academy Management Meeting, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, 1974.
19. Stewart, Rosemary, "The Manager's Job: Discretion vs. Command," *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Winter, 1974), pp. 67-80.
20. Fillmore, William J., "What is OD? No More Definitions, Please!", *OD Practitioner*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Spring, 1974), pp. 1-2.
21. Harrison, Roger, "Strategy Guidelines for an Internal Organization Development Unit," *OD Practitioner*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1972), pp. 1-4.
22. Browne, Philip J., "The OD Practitioner: A Marginal Man?" paper presented at the National OD Network Conference (October, 1973), Chicago, Illinois.

Philip J. Browne is an organization development consultant at Allstate Insurance Company, Northbrook, Ill. He is currently applying behavioral, management and organization development techniques in assisting organizations in solving organization and management

problems. His previous business experience includes working in training, management and organization development with Weyerhaeuser Company, and the Boeing Company. He is affiliated with ASTD, American Psychological Association, Academy of Management, and the NTL Organization Development Network. He received a Ph.D. from the University of Oregon in Applied Behavioral Science and attended the NTL Program for Specialists in Organization Development.

Chester C. Cotton is an assistant professor of management at California State University, Chico. His previous employment includes positions at Lockheed Missiles and Space Company and Macy's of California. He was a faculty member at California State University, Sacramento. His special interests include organization development. He recently completed research on "The Power Balancing Styles of Organization Participants." He is an ASTD member and is affiliated with the NTL Organization Development Network. He received his Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior from the University of Oregon.

# HELP THEM PERFORM BETTER. Do it with the LIFO® Method.

**This unique method is fast becoming the trainers' shorthand in the areas of managerial and organizational effectiveness.**

COMPLEMENTS EXISTING PROGRAMS on leadership styles, management development, team building, job enrichment and career assessment.

EASY TO ACCEPT by partici-

pants. Offers them an action plan for managing their strengths and controlling their excesses.

STRUCTURED VEHICLE which invites self-examination without defensiveness.

APPLIED TO JOB immediately and directly.

Talk with Stuart Atkins and Allan Katcher, developers of the LIFO Method, at the ASTD Convention in Las Vegas - Booth Number 157.

For immediate information on the LIFO PROGRAM and future seminars in your area, send the enclosed coupon now.

SUPPORTING-GIVING STYLE		CONTROLLING-TAKING STYLE		CONSERVING-HOLDING STYLE		ADAPTING-DEALING STYLE	
STRENGTH	EXCESS	STRENGTH	EXCESS	STRENGTH	EXCESS	STRENGTH	EXCESS
Thoughtful	Self-Censuring	Controlling	Dominating	Practical	Unreactive	Flexible	Inconsistent
Idealistic	Impractical	Confident	Arrogant	Economical	Stingy	Enthusiastic	Agitated
Trusting	Guilty	Persuasive	Disasters	Factual	Data Bound	Youthful	Childlike
Loyal	Obligated	Lighthearted	Impatience	Reserved	Unfriendly	Inspiring	Unrealistic
Helpful	Paranoid	Risk-Taker	Gambler	Steadfast	Stubborn	Tactful	Platzes
Receptive	Passive	Forceful	Coercive	Thorough	Elaborate	Adapts	Aimless

I'm interested in learning more about LIFO. Please send me the following:

Case Histories  Training and, OD Applications  Research results  Seminar dates

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE ..... ZIP .....

**LIFO** ATKINS-KATCHER ASSOCIATES, Inc.  
6363 Wishaire Boulevard, Beverly Hills California 90211 • (213) 653-0672

Circle No. 642 on Reader Service Card