



Looking Beyond the OD Mystique

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Some people think OD practitioners work magic. It's an attitude that troubles many members of the field and discourages others from contemplating planned organizational change.

Is there momentum in a process that's not fully understood? Jill Janov, for one, thinks not. Director of human resources for the Federal National Mortgage Association in Washington, D.C., Janov fears that too many people don't understand the technology of OD. "There's a very strong sense among those breaking into the field that there's something magical about the work," she said. "Some established practitioners and consultants hold on to that notion and perpetuate it. As a result, we may do something that works in an organization, but no one in that organization understands how we did it."

The multitude of specialty areas cropping up within organization development worries senior practitioners; most agree they have an obligation to newcomers to explain that OD is more than programs and concepts: "It's how we go about doing the consulting work in organizations," said Janov. "We've developed isolated pockets of specialists in too many areas. If OD becomes too much of a fad, it won't be taken seriously, and the field will become extinct. Buzzwords abound. One year it's 'teambuilding' and 'quality circles'; the next year it's 'strategic planning' and 'MBO.' Those are just ways of diagnosing what's happening in an organization. Understanding the

processes behind them is what's important."

All too often, new entrants to the field arm themselves with a variety of tools to overcome feelings of insecurity. "Newcomers run around with solutions looking for problems," said Pat Williams, professor of management at San Jose State University. "They're nervous about their capabilities, so they reach for tools, like grids

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and quality circles. It's important to understand those things, but the practitioner must recognize him- or herself as the single most important tool he or she can offer. The client buys the individual, not the tools."

Williams believes it's important for the practitioner to know and understand exactly what he or she does at every step of an OD intervention. "Know who you are and why you take a particular action—be experienced about whose needs you meet. How does your personality get in the way of what you advocate to the client? The ability to sort this out and explain yourself to a client erodes any barriers and clears the way for effective communication."

Jargon certainly contributes to the OD mystique. In any field, a client could consider it an expression of hostility, since he or she probably isn't familiar with the slang. "Whenever possible," said Williams, "use a word that's in the client's vocabulary instead of your own. It will put less distance between you."

According to Herb Sheppard, a member of the Portsmouth Consulting Group, labeling of oneself adds to the mystery of OD. "It's a distancing and threatening concept," he said, "and it's important not to have 'OD' written on your face when you approach organization management about planned change. I call this the 'Mary Poppins method'—she changed a wild, unruly family into a happy, creative one, but she used a conservative label for herself. She didn't approach them as a 'family therapist.'"

To help keep the mystery out

of OD, Sheppard sees the need to build a partnership with the client. "The notion of client and consultant is pompous to begin with. It's distancing. It's also a double-edged sword because the client wants someone to help him or her do something better. So he or she hires a consultant, and the consultant offers the client a package to solve the problem. In this situation, the mystification is attractive to the client. What goes unrecognized, however, is that the relationship has become a dependent one, and chances are the client won't buy the program in the end, because he or she won't own it or understand it."

Janov, too, believes in honesty between practitioner and client: "I once told a work group of employees in a financial institution that my solutions may lead to more problems. I told them I was fumbling with my own doubt—that I wasn't working magic. Practitioners have become so sophisticated with so many techniques that I'm afraid we've lost the ability to admit when we're unsure of ourselves."

Sometimes, practitioners continue to repeat a program and stop asking whether it's continuing to solve the problem. They become entrenched in a familiar routine and perpetuate only what they've done before. Without new questions and solutions, OD's future is endangered.

"The more we're able to make OD a part of everyone's knowledge base, the more we're able to accomplish what we're supposed to do, and that's help the organization solve problems," said Janov. "After an intervention, we should be better able to generate choice; the organization should be stronger as a result of having gone through the process. By being 'mysterious,' we make ourselves vital to the organization, but the organization becomes no stronger as a result. If they believe the OD consultant solved their problem, then that consultant debilitated them. If they believe they solved their problem, then they've become stronger."

Many think OD should align

itself with the training function to teach a practitioner's skills to line managers. These skills include understanding systems and systems theory, understanding problem diagnosis, group processes and process skills, and understanding the self enough to be willing to share doubts and raise questions about the plan outlined for the organization.

According to Williams, an organization development specialist needs three additional skills: the ability to help managers improve the quality of their meetings; the ability to conduct good survey feedback and understand the principles behind it; and the ability to facilitate good teambuilding sessions.

Experience in line or staff management, too, helps build a successful OD practitioner. "We don't take people into the Master of Science Degree in Organization Development (MSOD) program at Pepperdine University unless they have some kind of supervisory or staff background," said Williams, MSOD special program consultant. "Organization experience enables participants to relate to clients on a more practical, first-hand basis.

"Applying your professional experience to another problem facilitates successful organization development interventions," he continued. "The very best people in this field maintain that nothing mystical exists about their work. They make every effort to explain what they do and why they do it. The problem rests with those who imply they do work that someone else can't do."

Jill Janov sums it up. "OD is nothing more than knowing how to consult, which means using yourself as a tool. Explaining yourself—imparting the 'magic' to those with whom you work—will strengthen the field and ensure the future of organization development."

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