"IF YOU DESIRE TO PRACTICE IN THE FIELD OF OD YOU NEED TO BE AWARE OF THE KIND OF SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES THAT ARE REQUIRED TO SUCCEED."

DEVELOPING OD COMPETENCIES

BY GLENN H. VARNEY

Organizational development has emerged within the last 20 years as a viable and important part of the human resource development field. Examples of the role that OD is now playing in organizations can be seen in the number of openings available for OD practitioners and the spiralling interest that training and development personnel and practicing managers have in the field.

Training professionals, in particular, have migrated to organization development. In ASTD alone, those interested in OD, as evidenced by the membership in the OD Division, exceeds 3,500 people. There are numerous other organizations which are further testimony to the evolution of the field, including the Academy of Management and OD Network. There are a variety of university programs that have developed throughout the country, including such schools as Pepperdine, Bowling Green State University, Case Western Reserve, Brigham Young, to mention only a few.

All this activity leads us to several questions such as, what is an OD professional, what does he or she do, what kinds of skills and competencies are required to practice OD, and how do you go about acquiring these? I believe that unless we answer these questions the development of OD professionals will be haphazard and inadequate. The purpose of this article is to attempt to define an approach to developing OD skills and competencies, and secondly, to offer an evaluation process for individuals interested in the field to assess their own talents and skills.

A Brief History of OD

Organization development grew out of the academic disciplines of psychology and sociology. As applied behavioral scientists desired to enter organizations to test their research concepts, they soon realized that there was much more to applying their theories than simply handing them to managers to use. These practitioners were also interested in studying how organizations worked, and in particular

how they went about changing their basic way of conducting business. As time went on, some not-so-well trained individuals were attracted to the "glory and splendor" of the emerging OD profession. Many of these were from other academic fields or from personnel organizations and they began to label themselves as OD consultants. Entry into the profession was relatively easy because no credentials were required. The field was developing out of a multi-disciplinary set of philosophies. This meant that varied backgrounds were encouraged.

The field has also resisted legal guidelines for defining what an OD professional is or does. The International Association of Applied Social Scientists maintains that statutory regulations such as licensing or certification by a state or national agency is inappropriate because of lack of reliability and valid standards; because of lack of knowledge about how to train effectively OD professionals; and because methods of measuring a practitioner's competencies do not

exist; and because traditional means of disciplinary enforcement have not proved very effective.[1]

Since entry into the OD field is relatively easy and because there was a pressing need for organizational development professionals, a rapidly increasing number of individuals have proclaimed themselves OD professionals. Such individuals have been able to acquire quick schooling in OD through the various short workshops and seminars that are offered around the country. With only a few exceptions do these programs begin to deal with the broader and more important competencies needed for OD professional development, such as the skills in conceptualization, ability to design change strategies and understanding of data collection.

The result of all this is a loosely defined professional field that permits and, perhaps unknowingly encourages, incompetency and antiprofessionalism.

OD practitioners resist defining standards for entry and for sustained involvement in OD because they don't want to discourage innovation and the excitement of the field which often goes with maintaining high professional standards.

Client organizations are not without some responsibility in this dilemma. Their own lack of understanding of organization theory makes them vulnerable to the organizational "change artist" who has developed a flashy picture of how organizations should work and the three easy steps to get there.

The danger to the field in not defining an approach to professional development is obvious. Ill-trained practitioners increase the susceptibility of charlatanism and a quick treatment of organizational problems. This can cost us and the client a considerable amount of credibility within our own ranks as well as with other professional groups and organizations. People practicing in the field of OD should face up to the need to define a broad developmental framework. Such a framework need not eliminate innovation but should enhance individual development while pre-

serving the uniqueness of the field.

This leads to the conclusion that a complete examination of the basic issues and developmental processes surrounding OD professionalism should explore the need for a methodology or process for helping those desiring to practice OD to tune themselves up to become OD professionals. They need not go through a ticket of admission process, but certainly need to know what kinds of skills they're developing in order to become a successful OD practitioner.

What Is an OD Professional?

We have not systematically defined what an OD professional is or does. Edgar Huse notes that "although many authors have described the personal qualities of change agents, little empirical research has been done on OD practitioners."[2] OD practitioners may describe their experiences, conjecture what the traits of a successful OD professional are and even define the appropriate styles individuals should use in varying

situations. But there exists no detailed empirically based analysis of the skills and competencies needed to succeed as an OD practitioner. The limited documentation of OD competencies falls largely into the category of defining do and don't practices, specific traits or talents, and various rules of thumb for change agents (Shepard, 1975). In the absence of empirically based data we must rely on the judgments and opinions of experienced practitioners as our starting point.

Huse, for example, identifies the following eight personal styles and philosophies as important characteristics for an OD professional: (1) ability to assess themselves accurately; (2) objectivity; (3) imagination; (4) flexibility; (5) honesty; (6) consistency; (7) trust; and (8) stable and secure self-image. Cotton, Brown and Golembiewski identify neutrality, openmindedness and flexibility of processing information as the personal qualities necessary to practice OD successfully.

Partin identifies the following seven skill areas as essential for a change agent: (1) assessment of personal motivation and relationships to the changee; (2) helping the changee become aware of the need for change and for the diagnostic process; (3) diagnosis by changer and changee in collaboration concerning the situation, behavior, understanding, and feeling for deciding upon the problem; (4) involving others in the decision planning and implementation of action; (5) carrying out the plan successfully and productively; (6) evaluation and assessment of changee's progress, methods of working, and human relations; and (7) ensuring continuity spread, maintenance, and transfer information.

Margulies and Wallace suggest several aspects of the OD consultant's behavior important to successful OD practice. These include: (1) facilitating the diagnosis of problems; (2) assisting the clear statement and communication of problems; (3) pointing out those things not seen or said by the client; (4) facilitating the formulation of change plans; (5) acting as an integrator; and (6) providing internal continuity.

A distillation of various perspectives of what an OD practitioner does and of the skills and competencies necessary suggests two types of definition for a competent OD professional. First, we can define such a person by identifying the traits — characteristics — he/she should possess, and second, by defining the activities he/she needs to know. Based on the failure of the trait approach to predict successful behavior in other fields I believe it cannot succeed in defining or distinguishing competent performances in OD.

The definition of activities and knowledge holds more promise. A distillation of the literature yields the following list:

Self-Awareness and Personal Impact Awareness — Ability to sense organizational needs and generate organizational and individual awareness of need for change.
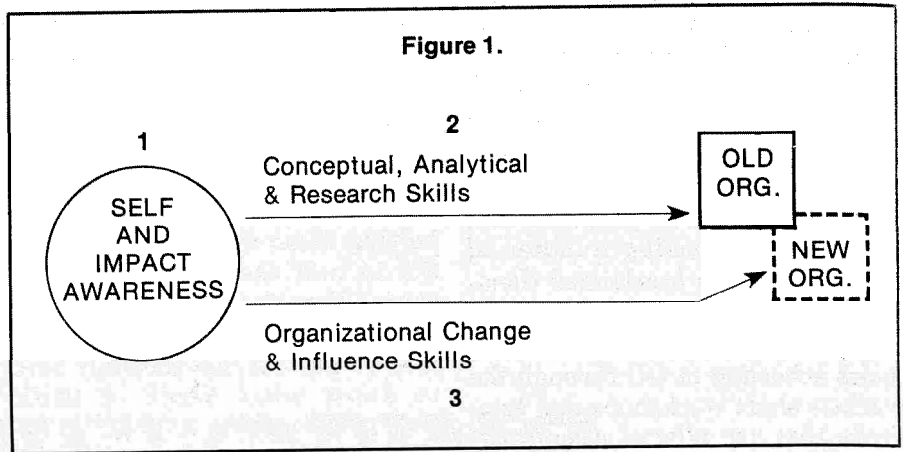
Conceptual, Analytical and Research Skills — Ability to link scientific and organizational information; ability to research and diagnose problems within the organization; ability to evaluate with the client the results of the change process.

Change and Influence Skills — Stimulation of the organization to change; facilitating and assisting the organization to change; following up and providing continuity of direction.

Development of an OD Professional

The three categories cited in the preceding section represent a starting point for defining the major developmental areas for an OD professional. We now can ask what content should each area cover, and how do we organize a learning sequence that provides a systematic acquisition of both knowledge and skills. We can organize the three areas as illustrated in Figure 1.

This diagram attempts to describe the three areas in relationship to the individual practitioner and the client organization involved. Let us define the three areas in more detail.

• *Self and Impact Awareness*

The skills which appear to fall into the self and impact awareness category are listed below.

Self-Awareness: Self-awareness refers to being aware of one's own set of values, beliefs, ideas, general emotional state, intellect and all those things that make up the total person, being aware of how these things interact within the individual as well as how they are stimulated from outside a person.

Self-Awareness and Others: This skill area has to do with the impact an individual has on others and being aware of the other person's reaction to you.

Other Awareness and Interpersonal Awareness: This set of skills has to do with the awareness of transactions and associated consequences growing out of interpersonal relationships.

Personality Theory: Being knowledgeable about personality models and how personality theories can be useful in understanding human behavior.

Group Theory: Being knowledgeable of how groups of people work together and what group dynamics can contribute to OD practice.

Organizational Theory: Organizational theory attempts to integrate various behavioral theories. The OD practitioner needs to develop an awareness of theoretical organizational constructs already developed.

• *Conceptual, Analytical and Research Skills*

The general category of conceptual, analytical and research skills involves the following basic skills and competencies.

Theory Building: OD practitioners need to be able to theorize about what's happening in organizations. Such theories help practitioners make predictions about the organization.

Theoretical Mapping: Assuming that the OD practitioner has knowledge about organization, group and personality theories, theoretical mapping simply takes that theory and applies it to the organization, describing the organization in terms of known theories.

Figure 1.

1

SELF AND IMPACT AWARENESS

2

Conceptual, Analytical & Research Skills

OLD ORG.

NEW ORG.

Organizational Change & Influence Skills

3

Concept Model Building: This skill involves the ability to conceptualize and design mental as well as graphic models of what an organization is like and in particular ways in which the organization can be conceptualized differently from what it is today.

System Analysis and Organizational Diagnosis: As the title implies, this involves being able to analyze the interaction between systems such as the technical and social systems and to be able to design methodologies and procedures for collecting information about the organization.

Data Processing: Here an OD practitioner needs to be able to assemble data which has been collected and apply statistical techniques to test hypotheses, thus assuring valid and meaningful information about the organization.

Feedback and Presentation: This skill has to do with the ability that a person has to develop approaches to feedback information to the organization.

• *Organizational Change and Influence Skills*

Finally, the basic organizational change and influence skills are as follows.

Change Strategy Design: This skill involves the ability to design basic strategies for helping the organization change. This is to be differentiated from the actual use of specific interventions such as team-building, confrontation meetings, etc.

Intervention Design: In this skill area we are referring to the specific activities which an OD practitioner uses to help the organization learn about itself and about the impact of change. This includes the full spectrum of experience-based exercises.

Persuasion/Power: OD practitioners need to develop skills as well as being able to know how to use the power of a consultant, either internal or external, to help the organization or to influence the organization to change.

Facilitation / Process Skills: These skills are commonly thought of when one thinks about an OD practitioner. The ability to "help" the organization and to facilitate changes. This is commonly referred to as "process skills."

Intervention Styles: This is being aware of the different styles which can be used to interact with the organization and the adaptability of the OD practitioner to the particular needs of the organization.

Teaching and Educative Skills: These skills have to do with the ability to conduct "stand up" teaching. both cognitively or experientially.

Although we have no doubt left out some areas which may be important to the well-rounded development of an OD practitioner, we have tried to cover the most important areas.

OD Assessment and Planning

Having discussed the basic skills that appear to be important to the development of an OD practitioner, the question logically follows, how do I know where I stand in my own self-development? For

Figure 2.

SKILL ASSESSMENT SCALE (Completed)

Figure 3.

SKILL ASSESSMENT SCALE
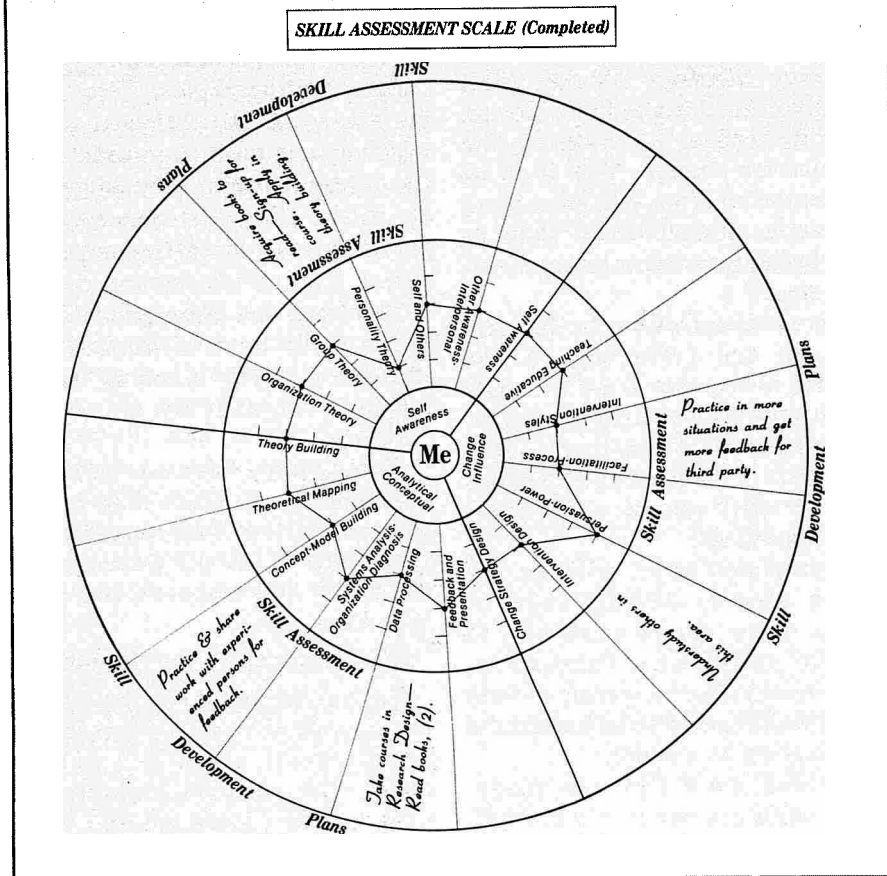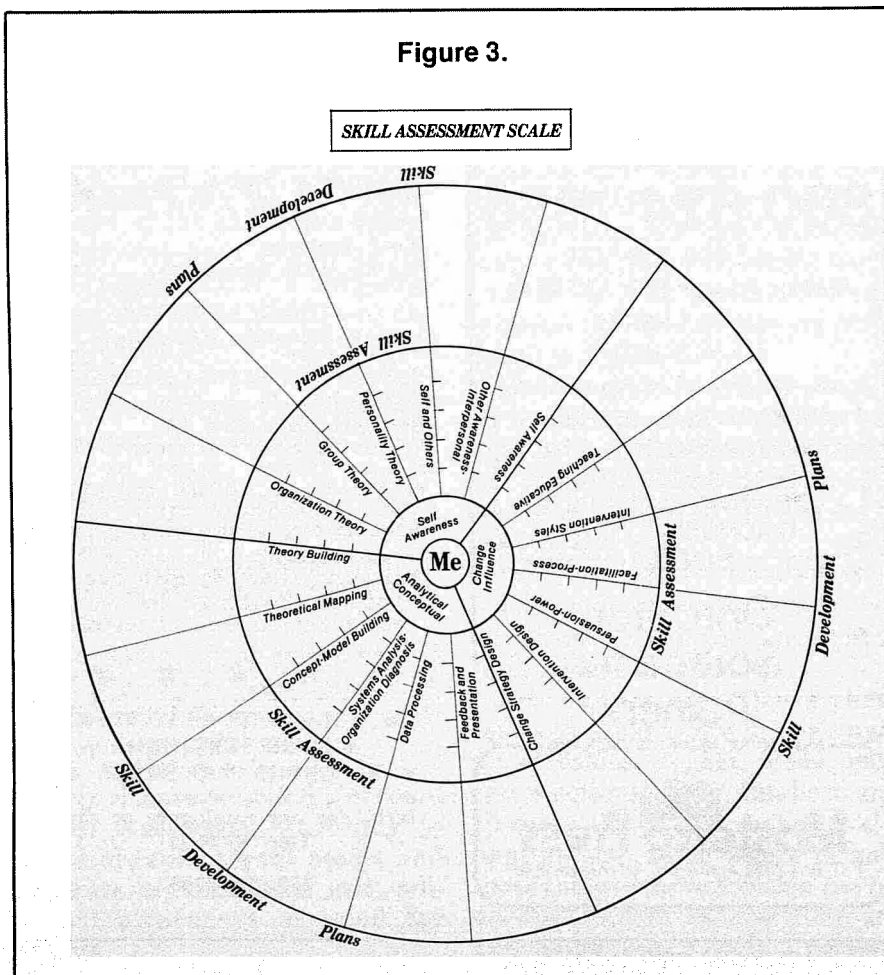

the convenience of the reader, we have included a developmental-skill-assessment scale in Figure 2 in the same manner as in Figure 3.

Caution should be used since you may misjudge your own skill levels. Thus it is suggested that those who are interested in a clearer picture of the level to which they are developing OD competencies and skills should invite comments from others who observe them in practice. In this way you will develop a broader perspective and develop a clearer picture of your level of OD skill development.

The skill-assessment scale also offers space for jotting down comments and suggestions on how you might develop your skills and competencies. There are three assumptions that typically underlie most individual development and these need to be questioned. These might be termed the traditional set of assumptions. They are as follows:

1. The most popular program is the best program to attempt. By this we mean attending the program which most people in the field attend.

2. It's good to say, "I've been there." What we mean is that it's nice to be able to associate with other OD practitioners and say, for example, "That I've been to the University Associates program on. . . ."

3. All training is good and helpful regardless of whether it's directly on target or not.

4. Programmatic training is the main resource and should be utilized fully.

These assumptions lead to a rather fragmented developmental process which may be good for the practitioner in terms of his or her association with other practitioners, but tends to be weak and insufficient when it comes to professional development. For this reason I would like to pose another set of assumptions which seem realistic in terms of our day-to-day world.

1. Professional development comes through a variety of different kinds of experiences. They are not limited to just programmatic

kinds of experiences.

2. Professional development involves a variety of different things. Individuals desiring to learn how to be more effective OD practitioners need to develop themselves through a variety of different approaches taking full advantage of all types of different ways of increasing one's competencies and skills.

3. Professional development involves skills and behaviors specific to the activities where the skill and behavior is going to be applied. What we mean by this is that it is of little value to develop a set of skills which will never be used. It would be like learning how to speak Spanish and never having the opportunity to use it.

Whatever skills you decide to develop, should be developed in an environment where they can be applied.

OD may or may not become a profession in the same sense as psychology, sociology, medicine, and so forth. However, it has the potential of becoming a highly useful practice in organizations which have a high level of need for systematic change. Whether or not the field of OD survives may largely depend on the kinds of people who practice in the field and the ability they have to influence and successfully assist organizations in changing. What all this amounts to is that if you desire to practice in the field of organization development you need to be aware of the kind of skills and competencies that are required to succeed. Not only will you be doing yourself a favor, but you'll also be aiding your own organization or client organizations in the long run. I believe that organization development is here to stay whether it is conducted by people who call themselves organizational development practitioners or by some other professional field under some other label.

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