

"WHAT ARE THE PRIMARY, BOTTOM-LINE RESULTS WE WANT TO ACHIEVE IN THIS ORGANIZATION?"

A RESULTS-ORIENTED APPROACH TO OD

BY MILAN MORAVEC

These days, the term "Organization Development" can mean just about anything. OD is a field that has come to include everything from group to systems reorganization . . . and it is looked upon, from various points of view, as everything from a panacea to a faddish, unjustifiable nuisance. Diverse associations, organizations, consulting groups and academic institutions have adopted the term. They use it to describe or promote their particular methods, while many line managers grow wary or confused by all this proliferation.

To bring some order out of the current chaos, OD systems can be organized — in terms of their *outputs* — into a spectrum like this: At one end is the "people" approach, designed to increase the value of human resources by making people feel better about themselves, educating them, and providing them with some new technical or managerial skills; at the other is the "getting-the-job-done" approach, focusing on action/task

identification, planning, operating decisions, and productivity. The mid-point is what is sometimes called "social engineering"; it includes team-building, restructuring of operational norms or communications channels, and managerial style programs designed to make individuals and groups more aware of their modes of behavior.

What Results Do We Want?

Virtually all these methods have been shown to have some value, depending on the results that organizations want to achieve. In Bechtel Corporation's organization development function, we have been moving from one end of the OD output spectrum to the other because of particular needs of the organization's corporate structure, divisions, services projects and clients.

From its San Francisco home office, three principal operating entities of the group head a worldwide network of offices which provide services to clients in industry and government. The three major entities are: Bechtel Power Corp., Bechtel Inc. and Bechtel Corp.

These entities employ approximately 30,000 employees worldwide.

The organizational framework includes eight operating divisions which conduct project operations in specified fields. Each is staffed to assume responsibility for design, engineering procurement, construction and construction management. Bechtel's tough-minded approach views OD *not* as a tool for increasing the value of human resources or for changing management style or organizational norms and values, but primarily as a tool that helps the line manager accomplish the tasks at hand and reach productivity targets.

Our rationale for choosing this particular type of OD has to do with ultimate and subsidiary goals. If your ultimate goal is to make people more skilled and happy in their work, the "people" approach is valid and useful. However, in most organizations (certainly in ours) the ultimate goal is to get the job done, and making people more skilled and happy is a subsidiary goal — a means for achieving the ultimate one.

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Generally, it is assumed that if people feel better and have more education and skills, the job will get done. Yet pragmatically that doesn't always hold true. What often happens is that the subsidiary goal is focused on so strongly that it is mistaken for the ultimate goal, and in the end *only* the subsidiary goal is achieved. That is, people feel better and know more, but the job *still* doesn't get done!

Therefore, in Bechtel's organization development group, we employ a system that focuses specifically on helping our line managers improve operations and productivity. We have not given up "people" and "social engineering" methods; they still are significant parts of the company's mix of training and development efforts. But we do feel that a results-oriented OD approach is a necessary complement to the education of the individual and the upgrading of departmental norms, attitudes, and management styles. In these times of sharper competition and increased government regulations, the line manager has more burdens and responsibilities than ever before. He or she needs all the tools that can possibly help achieve his or her management's goals and fulfill responsibilities to clients.

Help for the Competent Manager

One of the negative stereotypes of traditional organization development is that it is for "sick" departments and managers who can't manage well. The "get-the-job-done" approach to OD, however, assumes competence on the part of the manager and also the subordinates. OD is neither a crutch nor a vehicle for pointing out managerial weaknesses. It is simply a resource for the line manager that functions in the same way as, say, an accountant: taking over a specialized area of expertise so as to leave the manager free to pursue more critical managerial tasks. Management needs to spend its time *making decisions*, not hunting down all the various problems and issues.

Bechtel's OD system focuses on content issues rather than process variables. For example, if a member of a work group tells an OD specialist that "*we have communication problems*," that information is considered meaningless in itself. It would have to be broken down: Communication problems between whom? On what specific issues? What can and should be done about the issues or problems? Who needs to be assigned the tasks that will overcome the problem? This is an action-oriented program, and you can't take immediate action on something as vague as "communication problems." However, you can take action on the fact that Bill and Joann have not decided on the final format of Schedule 8 and they need to do this — or come up with a format for Schedule 8 that will get the job done.

This approach doesn't try to change people, communication channels or departmental procedures. And it doesn't tell top or middle managers that their style is "all wrong." It does identify areas where action is needed and it helps managers determine the types of tasks that require accomplishment so as to achieve a specific job objective.

Steps in the Process

The sequence of events usually proceeds as follows:

Step 1. *Initial discussion between the Bechtel OD specialist and the "sponsoring manager" who may be either a Bechtel line manager or a Bechtel client:* OD is part of Bechtel's Personnel functions; however, the OD specialist operates in response to the needs or requests of line managers directly. The introductory discussion, cov-

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ering the sponsoring manager's assessment of issues facing that particular work unit, is followed by a proposal from the specialist, which the sponsoring manager may accept, reject or modify. The proposal includes a summary of issues to be addressed by the OD effort, a proposed list of people to be interviewed, approximate person-hours needed to collect the data, an approximate budget, and results to be achieved.

Step 2. Introduction and entry: The sponsoring manager introduces the OD specialist (or specialists) to the employees in the department, either by letter, during a staff meeting, or both. It is always stressed that the OD specialist is there at the request of the sponsoring manager in support of the work unit, and that the specialist is not going to serve as a spy for the manager or an auditor for other executives. During this getting-on-board step, it is a good idea for the OD specialist to attend as many meetings as possible and to receive departmental memos. Lack of access to relevant data slows down the specialist's work. The specialist works on-site as much as possible so as to increase his or her access to people and to information about ways of operating, procedures, and methods. The sponsoring manager opens his or her unit to the OD specialist, who becomes assimilated into the work group.

Incidentally, one reason we refer to OD "specialists" rather than "consultants" is that the term "consultant" has a white coat connotation, suggesting a great deal of distance between the two parties involved. We do not want to cultivate the "seagull" kind of expert who swoops down, leaves expert "droppings" behind, and glides off again without seeing things through to their conclusion.

Step 3. Iceberg interviews: Here the OD specialist briefly interviews key people identified by the sponsoring manager. The term "iceberg," of course, refers to the proverbial tip of the iceberg. (In-depth, base-of-the-iceberg interviews come later.) During this step, the interviewer gets an overview of the way people in the de-

partment perceive their own roles and their department's concerns, strengths and priorities, as well as factors they feel are keeping them from fulfilling their roles and the work unit from getting its job done. Another aim of the iceberg interview is to assess the candor of the interviewees and their ability to describe operational issues — for these factors will affect the specialist's access to critical data.

Step 4. Review/confirmation of issues to be addressed: The OD specialist confers with the sponsoring manager to complete the list of issues to be attacked. The sponsoring manager reviews the list, which is based on both initial discussions and iceberg interviews, and decides which issues the OD specialist is to address. He or she may decide to drop issues or add new ones to the list. In any event, the final decision on which issues are to be worked is that of the sponsoring manager, not the OD specialist.

Step 5. In-depth interviews: This is the major data-gathering phase of the program. The sponsoring manager approves the interview questions as well as the selection of interviewees. In addition to staff members, higher-level managers and people outside the unit who receive the product or services of that unit may also be interviewed, with the sponsoring manager's permission. In order to make sure all relevant information is collected at the level of quality and detail required, structured interviews may take from five to 10 hours over a number of days or weeks. (People outside the work unit are usually interviewed one or two hours each.) The OD specialist then collates the information as he or she heard it and prepares to feed it back to the sponsoring manager and the staff.

Step 6. Action planning meeting: The sponsoring manager sets a date for an intensive meeting involving him or herself, the people who report directly to him or her, and the OD specialist. This meeting, led by the sponsoring manager, can last from three hours to two days depending on the number and complexity of the issues to be

resolved. After ground rules for the meeting are explained and expectations reviewed, all data from the interviews are fed back to the group anonymously — that is, only the information is disclosed, not who said what. Participants examine and discuss data that relate to their roles and scope of responsibility, then make one of four types of decisions regarding this information:

(1) I understand the issue and have decided not to take any action on it.

(2) Here is what I am going to do about this issue, and this is the date by which I expect to begin to work on it, have it completed, or deliver first feedback on my progress.

(3) I am not going to take any action on this issue myself, but I will delegate the following action item(s) to X and expect feedback by such and such a date.

(4) I need some time to evaluate all the ramifications of this issue; then I'll identify what needs to be

done, who is going to do it, and when the task should be completed.

The sponsoring manager goes through this data first and sets the standard of performance for the other participants. Thus, the success of the sessions does not depend on what the OD specialist does during the meeting — it depends on the quality of the data collected beforehand and on the behavior and expectations of the sponsoring manager.

Step 7. Implementation: Each participant has left the meeting with a specific list of items that he or she has identified and committed him or herself (and/or subordinates) to working on. Implementation of these action items begins immediately after the meeting.

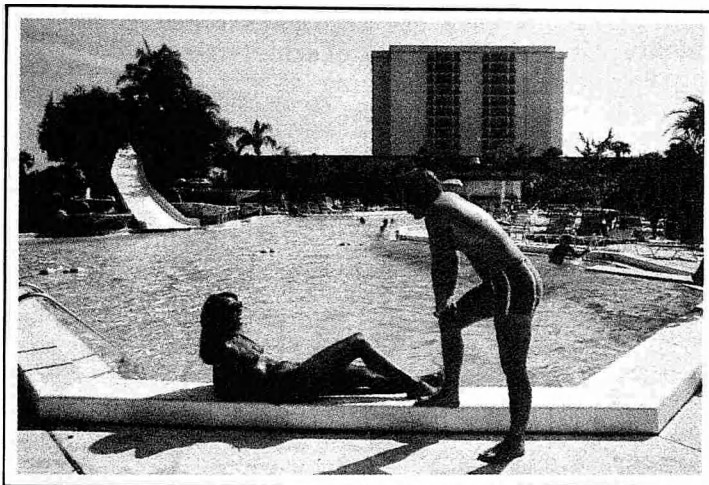
Step 8. Follow-up: The sponsoring manager holds an initial follow-up meeting to measure whether the action items are achieving desired results. During this meeting, action items may be revised, new

ones may be added, and those that have produced results may be dropped. Follow-up meetings are usually held twice a month for several months, and then the action issues become part of regular staff meetings.

At some time during or after this period, the sponsoring manager and the OD specialist may meet again to decide upon succeeding OD activities to assist implementation of action items or move the department or organization further toward achievement of its mission. They may identify additional areas needing work, such as the interface between Bechtel and Bechtel's client project teams.

Factors that can be used to measure OD results include quality of action items, timely implementation of action items, improvements in performance as seen by the sponsoring manager, improvements in performance as seen by those outside the unit who interface with it, increases in output, and achievement of cost and sched-

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"The get-the-job-done approach to OD is compatible with methods located elsewhere on the OD results spectrum and can thus be used in combination with them as well as by itself."

ule objectives.

Through experience, we have found certain advantages in this pragmatic, down-to-earth approach to OD.

The first is that it is *time and cost effective*. Because it does not deal with abstract issues but only with specific items that need action, it gets to the heart of improving operational effectiveness quicker than other, more process-oriented training and development approaches. Turnaround time, from the day the OD specialist comes on board to the point where action items begin to be implemented, is usually eight-12 weeks, or even as little as two weeks if there are fewer issues and/or this approach has been used by the group before. Results are viewed in terms of operational effectiveness and thus can be related directly to reduction of costs or person-hours, or increases in output. *Profit* is the ultimate motive for using this approach to OD.

A second benefit is *adaptability*. The system has been used productively in many different industries — construction, manufacturing, research and development, government, and so forth — at different levels, and even in foreign countries. If you try introducing classical OD approaches into certain cultures removed from the United States, you are likely to create confusion, since these approaches impose American cultural values and norms. However, a task-oriented OD system is readily understandable by managers and employees in just about any country. Whether they live in Kuwait, Argentina, Australia or France, managers are concerned with getting the job done.

We use this system not only internally but also in the Bechtel/client interface, often at the request of our clients (who may not have an OD capability) and with the sanction of our management. We have found that it makes projects run much more smoothly and increases

client satisfaction with work progress.

Third, the process is *nonthreatening*: It does not attempt to change people — managers or subordinates — or to tell them what the experts believe they need to do, so neither the sponsoring manager nor his or her staff are resistant to it. Personality issues are avoided by turning attention to the task itself. Our experience has been that issues identified as personality problems eventually fade away or move to a level where they are not disruptive to task accomplishment. Also, staff members know the OD specialists are not there to spy on them but to roll up their sleeves and assist them in fulfilling their responsibilities. Improved role performance — getting the job done — is a credit to the incumbent of the role.

Finally, the approach is *non-disruptive*: It takes departments, project teams and individuals where they are and helps them reach higher levels of achievement through the solving of specific problems. In many OD interventions, the sponsoring manager has so many unfamiliar recommendations thrust upon him or her that he or she inevitably ends up with a whole set of new problems to replace or add to original ones. The manager may find him or herself with employees who are better trained, but apply their training to the job in inappropriate ways: with new concepts and ways of managing that don't fit the work situation; with a group whose new team spirit doesn't help them overcome frustrating operational problems; with new communication norms that don't contribute to getting the job done. That doesn't happen in the kind of system described here, because input and decisions come from the line people responsible for implementation. The decision-making process itself does not change. Yet timely decisions are made, based on the data collected by the OD specialist and on the

action planning meeting.

I have not meant to suggest here that classical types of OD are not as valuable as this approach. They are most effective in doing what they are designed to do — improve interpersonal and individual skills and team cohesiveness. They also produce varying degrees of positive fallout in terms of increased output or reduced costs, albeit in a somewhat less sustained and more random manner.

Similarly, the get-the-job-done OD approach will generate some by-product results in skill development and team spirit. In our experience, what usually happens is that when results are achievable — the work is getting done — people feel a sense of accomplishment and movement, which leads to increased satisfaction with their work roles. New job skills are learned as action items are identified and implemented by participants. Finally, as people examine the same data and work with each other in implementing specific action items, a realistic, job-related level of cooperation and communication develops and team-building occurs as a by-product of results achieved.

The get-the-job-done approach to OD is compatible with methods located elsewhere on the OD results spectrum and can thus be used in combination with them as well as by itself. The questions to ask in making the selection of methods are, of course: "*What are the primary, bottom-line results we want to achieve in this organization?*" "*What is the most direct way to achieve these results?*"

Milan Moravec is program manager of Organization Development, Bechtel Corp. His current assignment includes the management of OD specialists positioned at jobsties and divisions. Prior to joining Bechtel, he held personnel positions with Corning International Corp. and the Pulp and Paper Industrial Relations Council.