ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT: SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, OR PHILOSOPHY?

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It a great privilege to be asked to comment on the state of organization development. This is an area of activities with which I have been associated for the past 30 years, but I must admit at the outset that I still do not really understand it. The remarks I will make today are my personal observations and intuitions. I have not surveyed the field nor done careful historical research, so if some of my observations strike you as inaccurate, it is a product of my biases and a desire to be somewhat provocative.

This talk will be divided into several parts. First, some comments about where we have been and what we have become. These comments will have a critical flavor to them because I believe we have lost touch with some of our important roots. At the same time, our present status in the organizational world can only be marvelled at, when one sees how much activity occurs today under the broad umbrella of OD.

Second, I would like to comment on where our confusion between science, technology, and philosophy may have led us astray. I would like to outline some of the forces that have been dysfunctional in that they have pushed OD into some activi-
ties that, in my opinion, will ultimately do us a disservice.

Finally, I would like to state where we should be going, given the growing evidence of global turbulence and lack of predictability. It was bad enough when the futurists told us that the rate of change is itself accelerating. Now they have added the depressing note that one cannot even safely extrapolate. The only certainty about the future, it seems, is that it will not be predictable. If that is at all accurate, think what that means for the function and process of planning, and think what new demands organizations and their leaders will place on us as helpers.

Throughout these three segments of the talk I will weave in the theme from the title. What is OD really--a science, a technology, a philosophy, or some complex combination of these? And what should it be?

I. OD: A QUIET REVOLUTION

I see the tap root of OD to be the seminal work of Kurt Lewin. He was able to combine in a most creative way the methodology of experimentation with strong theory and, most importantly, a concern for action around important social issues. From this perspective, our roots were clearly in science, and Kurt Lewin was a brilliant scientist. Under his influence the entire field of group dynamics was built with the experiments of Festinger, Back, Deutsch, Bavelas, Cartwright, Schachter, Thibaut, Coch & French in Alfred Marrow's pajama factory, Leavitt, Kelley, Lippitt, Radke, White, and Zander to name some of the early leaders.
The pressures of World War II, some of the racial problems in the U.S., and the need to explain how Nazism developed and operated lent a strong applied focus to these same endeavors. It was not enough to try to explain things; one also had to try to change them. It became clear to Lewin and others that the changing of human systems often involved variables that could not be controlled by the traditional methods borrowed from the physical sciences. These insights led to the concept of "action research" and the powerful notion that human systems could only be understood and changed if one involved members of the system in the inquiry process itself. Lewin's dictum that one can only understand a system by trying to change it, seems to me more true today than ever. Notice that the purpose of involving the client is not just to get them to accept change, but, more fundamentally, to enable us to understand more fully what is really going on. That last point is often forgotten.

I use the concept of "inquiry process" rather than "research" because the philosophy underlying action research really undermines some of the most basic assumptions of science as it was defined within social psychology in the 40's, 50's, and 60's. We have given up, I hope, the notion that we are clever enough or willing to gain sufficient experimental or statistical control of human phenomena to test formal hypotheses in a hypothetico-deductive process. Instead, we find that the more descriptive and qualitative scientific methods deriving from parts of sociology, anthropology, and clinical work in therapy and consulting are producing more powerful insights than the traditional laboratory
Especially relevant in the early post-Lewin days was the confluence of ideas that had come out of: 1) the Tavistock clinical studies of organizations by Jaques, Rice, Trist, Bion, Bridger, and Menzies; 2) the field of psychodrama as developed by Moreno; and 3) the field of intergroup relations as developed in the seminal field studies of Muzapher Sherif. What created OD, in my view, was the combination of a new inquiry approach based on a willingness to gather data in the field by non-traditional methods, with the vivid concerns of a set of practitioners who wanted to improve organizations, communities, the process of education, and leadership. In this context the names of Bradford, Benne, Bennis, Shepard, Gibb, McGregor, Marrow, Watson, Blake, Gordon Lippitt, and others become historically significant.

In the creation of the National Training Laboratories was embedded a new philosophy of how to conduct inquiry and a new set of assumptions about how to be most helpful to the learning process. The concept of experiential learning was initially applied at the individual and group level, but it was soon escalated by Blake and others to the notion that one should work with larger systems and organizations in essentially the same way. The new theme was: "Involve the client or learner in his or her own learning." Not only will this produce better learning, but it will produce more valid data about how the system really works. It is this philosophy of how to be helpful to client systems by jointly figuring out what is really going on that was, for me, the essence of OD, and that I tried to describe original-

Particular techniques such as role playing, the T-group, inter-group exercises, mirroring, post meeting reaction forms, and so on were invented to give concrete expression to this philosophy, and one of the most fun parts of working in human relations workshops was the continuous stream of innovative ideas that came out of the training staffs to enhance learning and to help in the process of surfacing individual and group data.

Nowadays the concept of "action research" gets tossed around rather glibly as applying to anything where a client or subject is asked or allowed to get involved in the inquiry process, most typically in interpreting his own interview or survey feedback data. It has become more of a technology of change than a powerful conceptual tool for thinking about how to uncover truth in such a form that one can do something about it.

What action research has meant to me, looking at it historically, is that one first of all picks important problems to work on, that one accepts the assumption that unless one attempts to change a system one cannot really understand it, and that one develops an intervention mode that does justice both to the needs of the client system and to the needs of a rigorous social science that advances valid and useful knowledge.

Not any old survey done with any old client system qualifies as action research just because the client is involved in analyzing the data and drawing conclusions from it. When this model was first articulated in the early evolution of the Nation-
the commitment to both a better method of learning and a better method of intervening was the main driving force. It was this commitment and the philosophy that lay behind it that made organization development a powerful new approach.

II. A QUIET REVOLUTION GONE ASTRAY: THE SUBVERSION OF THE ORIGINAL VISION

Several forces have corrupted, subverted or at least weakened parts of this philosophy. The first such force was the drive to create a technology that could be applied widely. The training group and all its accoutrements of role plays, questionnaires, games, and exercises came to be seen as a technology that could be learned by practitioners and that could be tried out in all sorts of organizational settings. As we know, this glib and often thoughtless experimentation led to disasters, usually in the form of an organization throwing out the baby with the bath water. In the drive to standardize and proliferate OD tools, we lost touch with the important assumptions that lay behind action research.

A closely related corrupting force was the drive to create salable products. OD worked, and that spawned several generations of new OD practitioners for whom it was a career and a living. But in the U.S. market environment one could not make a living on a philosophy, one had to have products, training packages, techniques that could be evaluated a priori by potential clients. As we successfully marketed not only tools but concepts like survey feedback, team building, role mapping,
intergroup exercises, and so on, we lost touch with why we were doing some of these things in the first place, what the assumptions were underlying them, and what skills were necessary to use them properly and responsibly. They became packaged techniques that could be used by virtually anyone if he or she followed the instructions on the package.

I felt this personally around my concept of process consultation. The whole thrust of that book was to articulate a philosophy of helping and to distinguish it from an alternative philosophy that led to expert advice giving and doctoring. Yet I still find that the most common usage of process consultation is as a technique for working with groups that is compared in research programs to a variety of other techniques. What is lost is the sense that when and how a particular intervention is used is the essence of OD, and that any given technique like survey feedback could be used in many ways, some of which we would definitely not regard as OD.

For example, how many of you would use the label OD if a President of a company ordered an employee survey to get feedback on the morale of his several divisions, and then fired the manager of the division with the poorest survey results? Yet he was using survey feedback methods. How many of you would say it was OD if the President brought in a consultant to do team building, and then used his observations of team member behavior to decide whom to promote and whom to fire? Yet he was using team building as an intervention. How many of you would consider it OD if in an intergroup mirroring exercise one group gained political ad-
vantage and took over the other group? I have seen this happen, by the way, and did not feel I was being a successful or responsible OD consultant when it did. Clearly, what we think of as OD is not which techniques we use, but how we use them and to what ends.

A third corrupting force was the drive to become more scientific in terms of the traditional psychological research model. That meant we had to measure things, and that, in turn, meant that we had to reduce complex ideas and concepts to measurable variables. And once we had measurement devices we lost touch with the concepts that lay behind them and the assumptions that dictated when and how they would be used.

In studying OD we did not draw enough on clinical research models or ethnographic studies that built credibility for OD interventions. We did not concentrate enough on building a body of case material from which key concepts could be derived and which would illustrate in greater detail what OD consultants actually did from moment to moment. We tried to measure things before we really knew what to measure.

Finally, a fourth corrupting force was the tendency in American culture to look for active solutions. The OD practitioner with a ready package of activities would appeal much more to the manager client than a thoughtful, inquiring, relatively impassive observer who only intervened actively now and then, even though the client would admit that the occasional intervention was very helpful. But, ironically, the client might add immediately "Why don't you do that a lot more often?" We equate
activity with effectiveness.

What all of this meant was that OD became product and technology driven, and lost its own ability to see itself as a philosophy, a paradigm for thinking about the complexities of socio-technical systems. There is an irony in all this because, in a sense, we lost the "socio" in our own OD socio-technical system, and over-emphasized the "technical" with the usual consequences that a lot of things we tried did not, in the end, work very well.

This is not to say that OD practitioners were failing in the market place. On the contrary, my guess is that they were succeeding all too well delivering all kinds of useful services. But these services were more akin to training and development in the traditional mode, and had less and less to do with the original OD philosophy and action research. OD practitioners became good group facilitators, meeting designers, seminar deliverers, individual counselors, interviewers, and survey administrators. But to the extent that they paid attention to the socio in socio-technical, they limited it to interpersonal and group issues, and they did not develop the philosophy and concepts of how to help organizations at the organizational level.

In a sense the technological thrust in OD made us forget both the "organizational" in OD, and the "developmental" in that we still lack clear models of what the organization of the future needs in order to be viable. But we do know something about the events occurring in the global environment in which tomorrow's organizations will have to function, and, in redefining our
III. OD: IS THERE A FUTURE AND WHERE IS IT?

In a recent conversation with Dick Beckhard he crystallized for me a number of thoughts, the most potent of which is that OD as a label may be obsolete. What the manager of tomorrow needs is concepts and tools for managing in a turbulent, global, technologically complex, multi-cultural environment in which the basic unit of management may not any longer be a discrete organization. The proliferation of acquisitions, mergers, joint ventures, strategic alliances, and now "virtual" organizations that exist only in electronic networks, suggests that instead of OD we need a new concept that will help the manager with four basic issues:

1) The management of **complexity**

2) The management of **diversity**

3) The management of **interdependence** and **integration**

4) The management of **perpetual change**

Each of these issues will cut across various kinds of organizational boundaries, and will, therefore, require a "client" concept that is not physically bound by organizational or group membership. Thus even the role of client and consultant will undergo unknown amounts of transformation and our tidy concepts of contracting, projects, time scales, and roles may evolve in directions that we cannot as yet even envision.

In order to understand how to position ourselves with respect to these issues we must understand historically why the organizational world is moving in this direction. There are
basically two major forces at work: 1) globalization, and 2) rapid technological evolution, especially in information technology.

Globalization has increased enormously the diversity of human resources that have to be managed and the complexity of the management process itself because different cultures are involved. It has created new problems of interdependence and integration because larger more geographically dispersed operations are involved. And it has focused on the management of perpetual change because any economic, political or socio-cultural change that occurs anywhere on the globe immediately affects the whole global system.

Technological advances have made each business function more specialized, thus heightening the problems of integration, and have put a greater premium on the ability of organizations to develop new products and services quickly. In the specific case of information technology, the low cost and increasing effectiveness of global communication systems has made it possible to consider broader scale enterprises, joint ventures, and virtual organizations, thus changing both the strategic options available to managers and the mechanisms of integration and control suitable to those options.

The mass media have given instant visibility to anything that happens anywhere on the globe, thus making it possible for any organizational innovation anywhere to be used in very short order everywhere. Information technology has shrunk both time and space to a dramatic degree, thus making it possible to make
complex decisions and communicate them much more rapidly. Transportation technology has made it possible to build things almost anywhere and to deliver things to customers more quickly anywhere. Biotechnology and other scientific advances are creating products and services that are creating new industries at an unprecedented rate.

As a result of all these changes, the nature of management itself is changing so rapidly that we cannot use OD models suitable for old style organizations in this new managerial world. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of all this is that we do not even know which of our underlying assumptions and values will continue to have validity in the future. If we are managing across cultural boundaries, for example, we cannot naively assume that open communication between boss and subordinate is a good thing. There will be cultures where protecting the boss's face by lying to him is more important than getting the job done efficiently. We cannot assume that participation and empowerment of workers is a good thing if we are dealing with a culture based on traditions of authority and paternalism. And, most of all, we cannot assume that OD technologies such as team building or survey feedback worked out in one culture will be applicable in another culture.

IV. **WHAT KINDS OF INTERVENTIONS MIGHT BE SUITABLE IN THE BRAVE NEW WORLD?**

In thinking about the future, one should distinguish between some philosophical assumptions that might guide us, and some practical realities based on guesses as to where the world
is moving. At the philosophical level, I find myself going back to the most basic assumption underlying OD which is what Warren Bennis and others so aptly tagged "the spirit of inquiry."

Implied in this phrase is the assumption that, as OD practitioners, we really don't know what is going on and what we should do about it, until we are connected with the client system in some way. And then our job is to use our knowledge and experience base to inquire intelligently and without too many preconceptions and prejudices to find out what is going on. And in this process we must maintain a clinical orientation so that we can help our clients to understand what is going on as well. As we begin to understand what is going on, our role is to intervene in the processes we observe in such a way as to facilitate the effectiveness of those processes and to help the client system to develop its own skills in becoming more effective.

What this means to me is that we do not bring a kit bag of devices and technologies to our clients, but an attitude toward inquiry and a set of skills in process interventions. It means that we identify the natural flow of those processes and go with them, that we maintain our flexibility and objectivity, so that, as we learn more, we can intervene more effectively. We must have the observational and inquiry skills of the effective ethnographer, and the intervention skills of the effective clinician.

Having said all this about our philosophical stance, what can we say about the likely practical situations we may be facing in the future. I have already said we cannot really
predict, but some things seem clear enough to permit speculation. Most of our typologies of intervention are predicated on traditional hierarchies and teams within those hierarchies. We advocate other kinds of systems, participation, power equalization, or human empowerment, but our own technology is not really geared to dealing with the problems of such systems were they to really come about.

If, as is predicted by many, we are moving toward more fluid, non-hierarchical networks that may not even have a physical base, in the sense of a particular group of people doing something together, how do we intervene constructively in such a system? Or, to put the matter another way, how do we help an electronic market, a virtual organization, or a non-hierarchical network to be more effective? Several possibilities suggest themselves:

1) We should help in the initial design and implementation of information technology, systems, and processes.

Probably one of the most important kinds of help that we can provide is to work with organization designers, especially those who are creating the structures and processes that will be utilized in the future. In working with IT professionals I consistently observe that they do not have a good sense of the human consequences of various technological options, and need both education and on-line help. Top managers especially need the help of IT professionals in order to understand the dangers of using the power of a network for control purposes and micro-management.
2) We should help at the supplier/vendor/customer interface.

As we see the boundaries between vendors, suppliers, and customers becoming more fluid, and, as information technologies are permitting these organizations increasingly to work inside each other's boundaries, it seems likely that complex intergroup problems will arise, and OD professionals will be needed to help understand and ameliorate those problems. We will need skills in working across cultural boundaries at the national, inter-organizational, and functional level.

3) We should help in the process of designing and consummating mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures and strategic alliances.

At least for the foreseeable future there is an obvious trend toward what can be called "new business arrangements" which cover mergers, acquisitions, and all the other forms of blending the efforts of several organizations. We must position ourselves to get into these processes early so that even the initial decisions are more carefully sorted out in terms of cross-cultural and human issues.

4) We should help with new kinds of workforces and employment contracts.

Most organizations are facing a sharp increase in the diversity of their work force--ethnic diversity, diversity in values, career anchors, life styles, and general expectations about the normal and proper role of organizations in our lives. Different countries are at very different places in regard to
these value sets, so one cannot make global generalizations except that increasing diversity seems to be happening everywhere.

Managers are having to cope with this diversity and they need help badly because our traditional theories of treating everyone fairly also imply treating everyone alike. How do we help managers to sharpen their perceptual skills so that they identify appropriate variations, and how do we help them to develop the flexibility to work differently with different people? Self insight and insight into others are once again critical variables, so we may see a new version of sensitivity training with a cross-cultural emphasis coming back into vogue.

5) We should help at inter-organizational interfaces both in the public and private sector.

Perhaps of greatest importance will be our ability to help in the management of conflict. As the world is becoming more of a global village we are also seeing the world wide consequences of religious, political, and economic conflicts. To attempt to intervene constructively in such conflict situations has always been a goal of OD so I am merely re-iterating here the fundamental importance of this goal.

In most of the situations mentioned above, the OD professional or process consultant must work on line with whatever issues surface. We cannot think in terms of packaged interventions, surveys, team building, organizational mirroring and other techniques that may have worked well in stable situations because we cannot really anticipate what kinds of troubles managers and
groups will run into. The OD consultant will simply have to be around when work is getting done, and intervene as needed in an expert, doctor, or process consultant role. We also have to get better at passing on our process skills so that the managers who are dealing with the problems can be more effective in their own right.

V. CONCLUDING COMMENT.

I would like to conclude by answering the question posed in the title of this talk. Is OD a philosophy, a technology, or a science? What I hope I have been able to convince you of is that primarily it is a philosophy, a perspective, a point of view toward human systems and human problems. However, in forcing our clients and the practitioners we influence to focus more on the processes by which human affairs are handled, we are also being eminently scientific. Not scientific on the now outmoded model of the old experimental physics, but scientific in the emphasis on careful observation and careful study of the effects of one's own actions on the human systems we deal with. In a sense we are trying to get managers and practitioners to be more scientific about their own actions, to work less from prejudice and preconception, and more from observed data.

We violate both our philosophical presumptions and our scientific goals when we fall prey to our own technologies applied routinely. My biggest fear is that we become victims of our own success in selling those technologies, and that in the implementation of those technologies we compromise ourselves. Let us be good ethnographers and clinicians before we fall prey
to becoming commercialized implementers of possibly obsolete OD products and technologies.

REFERENCES

