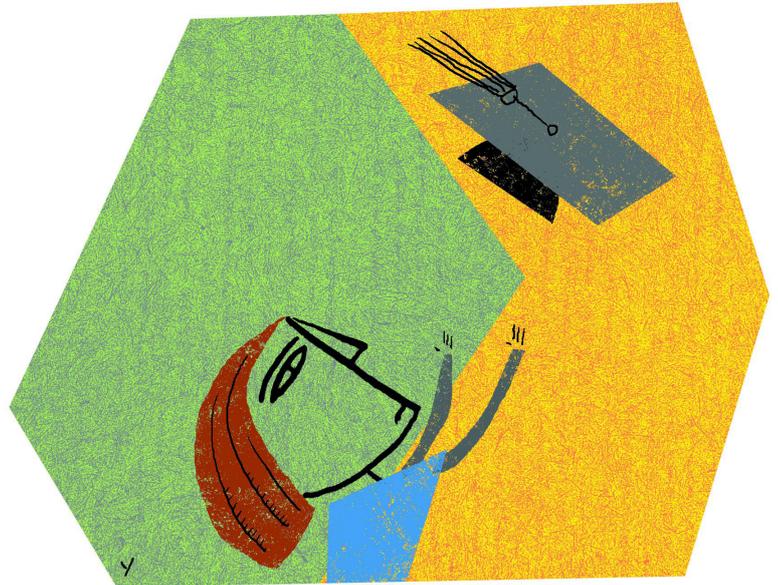




What Does an OD Practitioner Need to Know?

Katherine W Farquhar PhD



In the northeast regional office of a large bank, four Vice Presidents in three years have run the facility. Business has sagged. Employee and management turnover have increased to such a level that Headquarters have announced plans to close the office and distribute employees elsewhere. “Why does this keep happening to us? What is going on here?”

Hard-hit by economic conditions, a global NGO cut back services, downsized its workforce, and closed some local operations. The Director of Human Resources challenged an OD practitioner: “Our employees are demoralized. We’re badly overloaded. Our efforts to restructure go nowhere. How do we keep our organization and its mission alive?”

The management of a cash-strapped municipal library invited a staff committee to pinpoint where costs could be reduced in the library’s operations. Having studied the budget line by line, the committee realized that their research and recommendations would rely as heavily on the ‘people’ system as on expenses. They requested outside support to guide them in this process.

The airport bookstores brim with can-do solutions to address such challenges: better leadership, clearer mission and strategy, restructuring, system-wide training programs and HR interventions. Many organizational dilemmas can, seemingly, be fixed by charismatic leadership, top-level planning meetings, a cascade of memos and training programs, the roll-out of tasks, and the measurement of outcomes. The market rewards immediate results – then the charismatic leader may leave and the changes do, too.

This article examines how foundational knowledge of theory and practice can prepare an OD practitioner to support clients in such situations. It describes a more comprehensive perspective on transformational change: the Organization Development (OD) approach, focusing in particular on the core knowledge base for effective OD practice. OD’s roots are in the legacy of World War II in the United States (and later in Northern Europe), where

trauma of world war and the return of soldiers heightened focus on democracy, fascism, compliance, coercion, group dynamics, leadership, civil rights, gender equality, diversity and race relations. OD emerged as a values-conscious field of applied behavioural science where a skilled practitioner works with people in organizations to design and implement sustainable change. Always focusing on the dynamic human system, OD practitioners build collaborative relationships with clients and engage in data gathering and sense-making which enables clients to make changes that maximize creativity, performance and return on investment.

The Knowledge Base of OD Practice: A Five-Part Framework

What must you know and ‘be’ to become an effective OD practitioner? Start with the task. The OD professional works with a client along an arc from the organization’s



past through present challenges and realities, toward its desired future and outcomes. To get this right, he or she brings to this work certain knowledge, skills, techniques, and the use of Self (Figure 1). OD practitioners (managers, consultants) use these elements in supporting the client system to understand deeply and frame what is going on; to choose among alternative pathways forward; and to engage in sustainable change. The organization does not simply start changing the who, the what, or the how – it asks “Why”? and “What if”?, before embracing new perspectives to change its culture and operations.

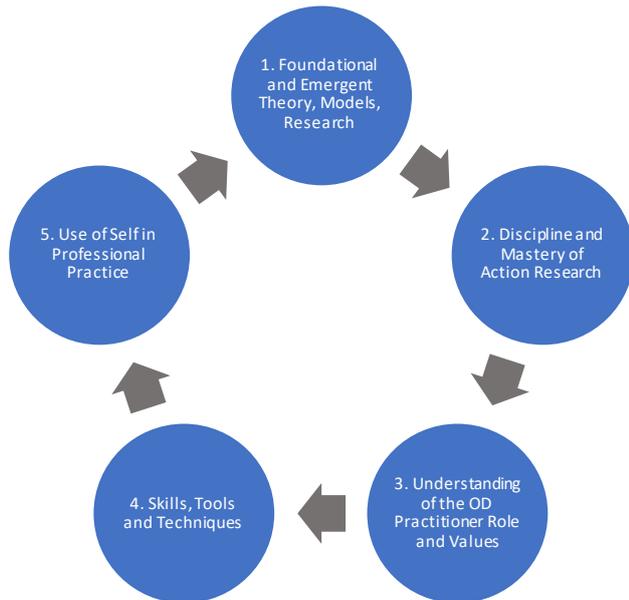


Figure 1: What an OD Practitioner Needs to Know

A capable OD practitioner has developed:

1. Knowledge of foundational and emerging theory, models, and research about change in human systems.
2. Discipline and mastery of the Action Research paradigm and its possibilities.
3. An understanding of the roles and values that distinguish OD practitioners from other types of consultants.
4. An expanding set of skills, tools and techniques to support change in client systems.
5. An intentional use of Self in professional practice – whether as an OD professional, manager, executive or staff member.

1. OD’s Bedrock: Foundational and Emergent Theory, Models, Research

In a graduation speech, Bob Marshak, scholar-practitioner and NTL Member, noted the uniqueness of the OD field: today’s practitioners follow in a direct lineage from the founders of the field. Some fifty years along, OD is still

guided by bedrock theories, models and research. These have been summarized and clustered by discipline; by the work cycle of an OD project; and by stages in the field’s evolution, and will be touched upon throughout this essay.

By discipline. In the 1960’s, OD pioneers, Robert Chin and Ken Benne, categorized theories of change from numerous disciplines into three groups based on their orientation to change: Rational-Empirical (logical persuasion), Normative-Re-Educative (verification by learning and experience - and the core of OD), and Power-Coercive (hierarchical or mandated). This schema placed the disciplinary antecedents (psychology, sociology, political science, economics etc) of OD into context as a field in applied behavioural science.

By phases of OD. In a more recent formulation of the knowledge and skills required in OD, scholar-practitioner and NTL Member, Ted Tschudy, updated the “Map” of the OD field created by NTL members in the 1980’s. The Map arrays knowledge areas and skill sets needed in each phase of a classic OD consultation cycle (please see *The NTL Handbook Of Organization Development and Change: Principles, Practices And Perspectives*).

By evolutionary stages of OD. Bob Marshak (eg *Practising Social Change, ‘OD Morphogenesis’*) and others have framed the field’s history as a multi-stage evolution:

- Traditional or classic OD: a positivist, quasi-scientific approach grounded in the research methods of applied behavioural science.
- “Neoclassic” or pragmatic OD: an orientation focused more on business processes and outcomes, often carried out within an organization as part of the HR or Organizational Effectiveness areas.
- Post-modern or ‘new’ OD: built on social constructionist approaches, such as dialogic processes, complex systems and chaos theories, appreciative inquiry, and on different platforms such as global work, cultural competence, virtual and asynchronous processes.

Effective OD practitioners incorporate behavioural science theory in ways that equip them to distinguish between impressions and data. From the strength of a good theory-base, with its associated models and research, OD practitioners can work with clients to understand and diagnose better organizational dynamics.

2. Action Research: The DNA of OD

Beginning in the 1940’s, psychologist Kurt Lewin and his successors developed the discipline of Action Research in applied psychological research. This sequence involved fact-finding, planning, and action, in concert with participants. OD practitioners have adapted Lewin’s work to the collection, analysis and feedback of data to guide change within a system, as an iterative, cyclical process



of research and action. In this approach, OD practitioner and client collaborate in designing and implementing data-collection strategies, and in moving from data to interventions as the data are analyzed and presented. This micro-sequence can be seen as the DNA of OD.

Critical to the Action Research cycle is the notion that data drive the momentum of change. In recent years, the original Action Research Model has been greatly expanded to include a variety of ways of facilitating organizational inquiries to foster or promote change and development. Even when an OD practitioner does not conform to an Action Research sequence, the values of inquiry, action, and client focus are at the forefront. An OD practitioner has foundational knowledge in asking questions, listening, reserving judgment, framing alternative hypotheses, and engaging with the client in making sense of the situation and possible ways to reach their goals.

3. Using the Power of Marginality: Understanding of the OD Practitioner Role and Values

Art Kleiner titled his 1996 book on the 1960s revolution in corporate culture and tradition, *The Age of Heretics: Heroes, Outlaws, and the Forerunners of Corporate Change*. OD predecessors and pioneers figure prominently in this book: Kurt Lewin, Ron Lippitt, Edgar Schein, Edie Seashore and Warren Bennis, among others. Years beyond this 'revolution', the importance of holding the role of the practitioner as somehow outside the client system's dynamics has remained in the form of a constructive marginality.

Ed Schein, for example, introduced the practice of process consultation which calls for the consultant to avoid providing expert advice or serving as an extra pair of hands. Instead, he or she inhabits a role at the margin: separate from the group or client, yet working as an involved professional. In Schein's enduring formulation, the practitioner brings expertise in modes of inquiry and support, without judgment or application of subject-matter expertise.

Thus, a process consultant to a city's Board of Education does not provide the budgetary solution to the Board's inability to reach a decision on budget cuts. That is the role of the 'expert'. Rather, the process consultant offers the strength of marginality by focusing the board's attention on its *process*, bringing awareness of, and approaches to address, factors interfering with transparent dialogue, conflict management, leadership effectiveness, the inclusion of all voices, and steps to advance decision-making. The minute the process consultant engages in the discussion content, he or she moves into membership and advocacy, compromising the capability to 'hold the container' in which others do the difficult work.

Over time, the values and perspectives held by the Caucasian men of Western European lineage who founded OD have broadened. Women and people of colour were included as OD practitioners and NTL

Members, and this expansion continued as people from other continents and cultures became interested in OD and joined the field. The focus on diversity and inclusion has broadened to incorporate recognition of cultural competence. A dominant focus on race, gender, and sexual orientation as the basis of diversity work now includes generational differences, national perspectives and different abilities, among other areas. What stays constant is that OD practitioners cultivate a role differentiated from the client in order to work powerfully alongside it, in an inclusive fashion.

4. Beyond Management Development and Training: Skills, Tools and Techniques in OD

OD practice requires skills and knowledge in process consultation, adult learning theory, and interventions at all levels. Additional key skill areas are feedback, coaching, conflict management, dialogue, emotional intelligence, diversity, cultural competence, appreciative inquiry and project management.

Most OD practitioners are certified in administering tools to support their coaching and team development work. Tools include instruments and activities that measure psychological preferences (as used in coaching and team-building), and that improve group or individual capabilities in, for example, conflict management, team performance and leadership effectiveness.

Over the years, OD practitioners pick up techniques to use in their work, to design effective and inclusive meetings and workshops, to formulate and deliver training in areas such as individual and team communications and interactions, diversity and inclusion, action research, and even training of trainers or facilitators. Now, OD practice also requires skills to coach executives, individuals and teams.

Finally, OD practitioners are facilitators who support a group to manage the task and the process of its work. They operate with the client to create an effective meeting, event or retreat. They guide the meeting based on the agenda, focusing on the desired outcomes and making it easier for these to be reached. In taking the facilitation role, the OD practitioner enables the team's leadership to participate, and the team members to feel safe in participating freely.

5. The Craft of Change: Use-of-Self in Professional Practice

To practice OD effectively and ethically requires an understanding of Self as an instrument of change, in the capacity of consultant or coach, or in the role of manager. In OD's earliest years, the 'use-of-Self' meant mastery of a clinical, dispassionate yet empathetic stance as co-researcher in beneficial partnership with the organization.

In recent years, the concept of use-of-Self has been broadened to mean an intentional and other-focused presence. As professionals, OD practitioners engage



in continuous learning about how and why they make the choices they do. They consider factors such as their personal and family history; their social identities; their 'hot buttons' and styles with regard to values, issues, people, conflict, authority, power and leadership; their interpersonal skills including the capacity to work effectively with diversity and differences; their ability to manage Self, perhaps best captured as emotional intelligence; and their capacity for giving and receiving feedback and reflecting on this. The result of this learning process is enhanced effectiveness in working collaboratively with client systems.

Without a focus on effective use-of-Self, an OD practitioner risks losing credibility, imposing views on the client, colluding or being co-opted by various interests in the system, sparking distrust with the client, and advocating instead of inquiring. The effective practitioner has benefitted from journaling, listening, absorbing feedback, seeking new skills and knowledge, recognizing boundaries and knowing when these are threatened or breached, and asking for help where needed.

In Summary

Each of the organizations described at the beginning of this article faced daunting challenges: halting revolving door leadership; stabilizing a downsized system; reducing operating expenses. While no one-size-fits-all change model effectively addresses such challenges, an OD practitioner, educated in the five elements of Figure 1, has knowledge, skills, and use-of-Self to add value so that clients reach their desired outcomes. Put simply, the essence of any solution lies largely within the energy and wisdom of the system. OD is an optimistic and value-added force for change, and a field whose practitioners are so deeply and passionately involved in their work that each project is a powerful new experience.

In 30 years of involvement with OD education, I am hard-pressed to recall an indifferent OD professional, or one who does not love his or her work. The secret is in combining knowledge and empathy with energy and skills to yield change.

BIOGRAPHY

Katherine Farquhar is a member of NTL and Associate Professor in the School of Public Affairs at American University in Washington DC, where she directs the AU/NTL Master of Science in Organization Development. She earned her Ph.D. in Social Psychology from Boston University, mentored by OD pioneer Robert Chin. Her academic research focuses on the dynamics of non-routine executive transitions. She has published in the OD Practitioner, Human Relations, Business Horizons, Public Administration Review, and Journal of Management Education, and has chapters in several edited volumes. Her work life revolves around the graduate education of professionals in the field of OD. She thanks AU/NTL MSOD Class 63 and Dr. Robert Marshak for their input into this article.



REFERENCES

Here is a baker's dozen of key books from a generalist OD practitioner's shelf (and that support this essay). You can load 9 of these onto a Kindle for handy transport whilst on holiday or in an airport:

Alban, B. & Bunker, B. (2006). *The handbook of large group methods: Creating systemic change in organizations and communities*. San Francisco. Jossey-Bass.

A powerful blend of theory, practice, practitioner comments and cases. (Kindle available)

Block, P. (2011). *Flawless consulting: A guide to getting your expertise used*. (3rd Ed.). San Francisco. Pfeiffer.

This is one of the most practical and popular books on consultation. (Kindle available)

Burke, W., Lake, D., Paine, J. (Eds.). (2009). *Organization change: A comprehensive reader*. San Francisco. Jossey-Bass.

A collection of 52 key articles and chapters from the full history of OD/Change.

Cooperrider, D., Whitney, D., Stavros, Fry, R. (Eds.) (2008). *Appreciative Inquiry handbook: For leaders of change*. 2nd Ed. San Francisco. Berrett-Koehler.

An overview of the AI field and applications including a collection of materials on the background of AI (Ch. 11). (Kindle available)

Jones, B. & Brazzel, M. (Eds.). (2006). *The NTL handbook of organization development and change: Principles, practices and perspectives*. San Francisco. Pfeiffer.

A 28-chapter "how-to" handbook for OD practitioners, with contributions from 38 NTL members/trainers. (Kindle available)

Lewin, Kurt. (1997; orig. 1948). *Resolving social conflict: and Field theory in social science*.

Washington DC. American Psychological Association. Reprints of two of Kurt Lewin's key articles. A social psychologist who emigrated from Nazi Germany, Lewin is viewed as the father of OD. (Kindle available)

Marshak, R. (2006). *Covert processes at work: Managing the five hidden dimensions of organization change*. San Francisco. Berrett-Koehler.

A popular book in the OD field, it demonstrates how covert processes work, and provides OD-oriented strategies for addressing these. (Kindle available)

Nadler, D. (1977). *Feedback and organization development: Using data-based methods*. Reading, MA. Addison-Wesley.

A classic introduction to the process of data collection and feedback in OD.

Plummer, Deborah. (Ed.) (2003). *Handbook of diversity management: Beyond awareness to competency based learning*. University Press of America.

A collection of articles and chapters by leading diversity practitioners, many of whom work in OD. (<http://www.univpress.com>).

Schein, E. (2009). *Helping: How to offer, give, and receive help*. San Francisco. Berrett-Koehler.

A essential contributor to the OD field, Ed Schein is one of OD's founders. This is the latest iteration of work featured in his classic Process consultation. (Kindle available)

Schwarz, R. (2002). *The skilled facilitator: A comprehensive resource for consultants, facilitators, managers, trainers, and coaches*. (Rev. Ed.). San Francisco. Jossey-Bass.

A deep, well-documented and educational handbook for those in facilitator roles. (Kindle available)

Senge, P., Kleiner, A., Roberts, C., Ross, R., Smith, B. (1994). *The fifth discipline fieldbook: Strategies and tools for building a learning organization*. New York. Currency/Doubleday.

A systems-focused toolkit with references to the original theory behind the techniques and tools.

Weisbord, M. (2004). *Productive workplaces revisited: Dignity, meaning, and community in the 21st Century*. (2nd Ed.). San Francisco. Pfeiffer.

An OD master's reader-friendly overview of the field. (Kindle available)