



# TELLING YOUR CLIENT THE BABY IS UGLY: Revisiting Herb Shepard's Rules of Thumb for Change Agents.... and other wisdom for consultants

by Terrence H. Seamon



## SUMMARY

In this article, I explore the use of Self in the practice of Organization Development (OD) consulting, including the challenges of saying difficult things to your clients and to yourself. As OD consultants who are intending to help our clients to change for the better, our primary tool is the use of the Self. This means our presence, our awareness, our mindfulness. Our honesty and courage. Our in-the-moment agility and ingenuity. Further, it means our humility because we are entering the client's domain, and there is always much that we do not know. This authentic humility is essential. And it may be very hard to acquire for those experts who carry a fully packed tool kit.

In this article, I also revisit and honor the work done by OD legend, Herb Shepard, whose essay called *Rules of Thumb for Change Agents* has influenced many since its publication. In so doing, I add a few suggestions of my own.

## INTRODUCTION

Essentially, OD is about change: change that renews and strengthens the organization, enhancing its capacity to pursue and reach its goals. Years ago, one of the seminal figures in OD, Dick Beckhard, defined it in this way: "Organization Development is the planned effort to increase organization effectiveness and health through interventions in the organization's 'processes', using behavioral-science knowledge." The intent of organizational change, then, is to improve the operating effectiveness of some part of the organizational system (or the whole system), improve the results, and improve the capabilities of the organization.

Whether the projects concerned address such diverse topics as leadership development, succession planning, merger integration, diversity, culture change, strategic planning, team building, or performance management, the common denominator

is change. And the person tasked with an OD role is an agent of change. Therefore, the effective OD practitioner is ever mindful of the change goal, understands the nature of organizational change, and utilizes change models.

The effective OD practitioner is also a consultant who manages OD projects by managing expectations with sponsors and clients, as well as those affected by the change, and other key stakeholders such as Human Resources. Because change causes uncertainty, stress, and even conflict in the organization, the effective OD practitioner is ready to help facilitate the conversations needed to help people navigate their transition towards change.

In the field of change management, it is widely said that 75% of organizational change initiatives fail. Why? For any number of reasons. The bottom line is that changing the way an organization works is far easier to talk about than it actually is to do.



In recognition of the dangers and pitfalls in this work, another seminal figure in OD, Herb Shepard, published his *Rules of Thumb for Change Agents*, an essay of wisdom for OD practitioners, that includes the following 'rules':

- **Stay Alive:** Staying alive means taking risks "as part of a purposeful strategy of change, and appropriately timed and targeted. When they are taken under such circumstances, one is very much alive." Shepard adds: "Staying alive means loving yourself. Staying alive means staying in touch with your purpose."
- **Start Where the System Is:** "Starting where the client is can be called the 'Empathy Rule'. To communicate effectively, to be able to build sound strategy, the change agent needs to understand how the client sees himself and his situation, and needs to understand the culture of the system."
- **Don't Work Up-Hill:** In this section, Shepard offers several practical guidelines for OD work including starting where it is most promising, working in a team, and understanding how systems work.
- **Keep an Optimistic Bias:** When facing conflict, the change agent must help the parties resolve their differences, if possible. "Individuals and groups locked in destructive kinds of conflict focus on their differences. The change agent's job is to help them discover and build on their commonalities. The unhappy partners focus on past wrongs, and continue to destroy the present and future with them. The change agent's job is to help them change the present so that they will have a new past on which to create a future."
- **Capture the Moment:** "One captures the moment when everything one has learned is readily available, and when one is in touch with the events of the moment."

Reading Shepard's principles, you sense that the effective OD practitioner is a blend of consultant, detective, facilitator, mediator, designer, and artist. It is no wonder that 'OD' is hard to define, hard to 'sell' and hard to do well. It is no wonder, too, that the field of OD attracts such brilliant, passionate, capable, and diverse people.

## SOME PRINCIPLES FOR CHANGE CONSULTANTS

With Shepard as my inspiration, I list here a few more principles I have collected on my journey over

these past 35 years that may prove useful to a new generation of OD consultants.

### Seek first to understand

This one simply means *before anything else, be sure to listen*. In Zen Buddhism, one is taught the idea of the 'Beginner's Mind'. S. Suzuki once said "In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind, only a few." So we must cultivate the Beginner's Mind, the attitude of curiosity, wiping clean the lens of preconceived notions, and dropping the baggage of assumptions at the curb.

Having an attitude of openness, being eager to learn, and walking in with a lack of preconceived notions when approaching a new client or problem, is the essence. Be receptive. Listen to your client, your team, your Self. Listen and you will learn. Listen well and you will be in a better position to help. This principle comes from the late Stephen Covey in his now-classic book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, itself a testament to the enduring value of having a good set of hardy principles to live by.

### Start small, think big

There is a great adage about organizational change that starts with a question: "How do you eat an elephant?" The answer: "One little bite at a time". Sometimes, as we face a big challenge, we know we are going to have to 'eat' the whole thing, but in no way do we have the capacity to do so. So we 'think big' and set our goal for the entire elephant. But then our tactical plan focuses on the many 'bites' or small steps that we will take to get there.

### Think global, act local

Systems theory has taught us the so-called 'Butterfly Effect' which describes how changes, even small ones, in one part of a system can have large effects elsewhere, even at a distance. So we must 'think globally' about the entire system we are working on whenever we 'act locally' on it. Do both at the same time, whenever you are engaged in organizational change, to be more aware of the outcomes, intended and unintended.

### When planning to change things, find out what is working well already

Change consultants, Jerry and Monique Sternin, in their work with intractable social challenges like hunger and malnutrition in poor countries, coined the concept of 'Positive Deviance' which urges us to *look for the positive deviant, the person or group that has*



*already found the better way.* Someone somewhere in the system is doing something 'right'. You should look for him or her, study what they are doing, and plan how to spread their practices to other parts of the system.

### Remember that all solutions generate new problems

The Quality engineers, like W. Edwards Deming, who first formulated TQM (Total Quality Management), understood the fact that no solution is ever once-and-for-all. Rather, the truth is that any solution, no matter how elegant or how clever, will, itself, trigger a cascade of new problems. This wisdom is built into the roadmap for problem solving I first learned years ago as a TQM facilitator. The roadmap always ended with the step called 'Start Again' which implied that there is always a new set of problems to be solved.

### Don't Assume

Organizations are created by people, inhabited by people, sustained by people, and destroyed by people. Organizations are human endeavors. Therefore, the fundamental concept of OD that I would suggest would be 'humanness'.

Humanness includes all that people bring with them when they come to work (or whatever organization they go to) each day:

- their hopes and dreams
- their fears and disappointments
- their goals and plans
- their strengths and gifts
- their weaknesses and wounds

Because OD work is about humanness, it pays for an OD practitioner to be an avid student of human nature. Human nature can be a very quirky thing. A mentor of mine, Communication professor Dave Davidson, used to say: "Never assume the next guy knows what he is doing...much less why".

Hmmm. If people in organizations do not necessarily know what they are doing, much less why, then what the heck are they up to? The effective OD practitioner is something of a sleuth, a Columbo<sup>1</sup>, asking questions, examining assumptions, poking around, 'playing dumb' in order to discover what is going on...and why.

### Get the whole system in the room

The credit for this principle goes to Marv Weisbord, the author of the classic book *Productive Workplaces*. In his journey from business owner to OD Guru,

Marv learned a lot about human systems and how to change them. One of Marv's insights was that change in an organization is possible if you get the right people into the room. Who are the right people? Anyone who is part of the process you want to change. If any key party is forgotten or missing, the entire effort will suffer.

### People support what they help to create

This one comes from Meg Wheatley who has taught us that change is made possible when the people who will be most affected by it are invited into the process of making the change. Invite and involve. Foster and facilitate participation.

### Tell Truth

Practitioners in the field of OD are guided by a set of core values. 'Telling the truth', for example, is an important core value embraced by OD professionals. Telling the truth about Yourself (ie truth in advertizing). Telling the truth to your Client (ie telling it like it is; no sugar-coating; no collusion to delude).

Some years ago, I worked for an OD Director who was very much a truth-teller. If a client's idea was an 'ugly baby', we had to find some way of telling him or her. If the client was the CEO, it was difficult. If the CEO was 'an emperor with no clothes' we had an acute truth-telling dilemma.

It brings to mind the Johari Window. Just as an individual can have a 'blind' area where they are unaware of some aspects of themselves, so too an organization can have a 'Blind Spot', unaware of its own rough, crude, stress-generating ways. If you so choose, an OD-er can try to do some good in such an arena. But it is also wise to 'know when to fold 'em, and when to walk away'.

### Seek the wisdom

In her book *Sharing Wisdom: A Process for Group Decision-Making*, Sister Mary Benet McKinney teaches that change is possible if you listen to the wisdom of the people who make up the group or organization. Sr. Mary says that whenever an organization is endeavoring to discern the 'right' path or course of action to take, share the wisdom.

It is a discernment process, of getting to the 'right' path. Sharing wisdom is based upon several underlying beliefs including one that says that the people in the organization already possess the wisdom to discern the 'right' path. The trouble is, no one individual has all the wisdom (although some



may think that they do). What is needed is respectful facilitation that seeks out everyone's 'piece of the wisdom' and puts all the pieces on the table, even if there is conflict and disagreement. Whenever there is a need for change, ensure the people share their wisdom with one another. The answers they seek are already there. The wisdom is in them. You need to facilitate patiently the sharing of the group's wisdom, hearing from each person. All the wisdom is needed, all the wisdom is honored.

### Let Go of the Banana

Sometimes we get stuck. Hanging on to something you have developed, while understandable, can hurt you. As the legendary negotiator, Herb Cohen, once said, "Care...but not that much". If you care too much, you won't be able to walk away when you ought to.

### Have Better Conversations

A few years ago, I had the good fortune to meet OD legend, Billie Alban. Together with Barbara Bunker, Billie has 'written the book', so to speak, on whole system change in organizations. In a brief presentation, Billie offered us a great deal of wisdom regarding organizational change, including the message that OD is about "injecting hope" into organizations, hope that things can be changed for the better.

She also said...

- You need both the head and the heart
- Our job is to help people to "sit down and reason together"
- Help people to learn how to have better discussions

### A FINAL THOUGHT

Another of my chief influences was my mom. She had a lot of sayings. "No good comes from fooling", she would say, admonishing us unruly children to behave, lest our ruckus cause some household mishap. She had many other maxims that, as I think back, formed her view of life. These sayings, many of which I am sure she learned from her parents and grandparents, represented her 'working wisdom', a set of principles for navigating the currents of life.

She was a simple farm girl, the child of immigrants who had made the momentous decision to come to America. Fleeing oppression in Russia, they left their old lives behind, and set out to seek a better life in the New World. So my mother knew something, deep in her bones, about the nature of choice and of change. She would say "You make your bed, you lie in it", to make sure we understood that our conduct had

consequences, and that we had better think before choosing a course of action. She also said "It doesn't hurt to ask". A variation of this was "If you don't ask, you won't get". I suppose these are related to the venerable "Seek and ye shall find" and "Knock and it shall be opened" <sup>ii</sup>.

Perhaps the one saying of my mother's that has affected me the most is "Life is what you make it", a principle that I have carried within me to this very day. In a nutshell, with this principle, my mother taught me that "If it is to be, it is up to me". That I am the agent of change in my own life. That I cannot sit around waiting for things to happen. That I must make it happen.

Perhaps this is why I have found a home in the field of OD.

### BIOGRAPHY

Terrence Seamon brings more than 30 years of extensive business experience in management training and organization development consulting. As Principal and Senior Consultant with Facilitation Solutions, his main practice areas are leadership development, executive coaching, and facilitation.

Prior to Facilitation Solutions, Terrence was the Portfolio Manager for Management & Leadership Development programs at the American Management Association. While working at AMA, his seminars included employee engagement, coaching, and virtual teams. Previous to the AMA, he held various internal consulting roles in Training & Organization Development in the energy, pharma-chem, and telecom industries.

Terrence writes frequently about topics such as change, organizations, engagement, and leadership. He contributed to the chapter on internal OD in the second edition of *Practicing Organization Development*, edited by Rothwell and Sullivan (2005). He is the author of three self-published books: *To Your Success, Lead the Way*, and *Change for the Better*. His blog, *Here We Are. Now What?*, has been going since 2004.

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## NOTES

- Columbo is a rumpled police detective from a popular American TV series. He is consistently underestimated by his suspects, who are irritated by his questions. Despite his unremarkable appearance and apparent absentmindedness, Columbo is patient and sharp, piecing the clues together and solving all of his cases.
- From the seventh verse of Chapter 7 of the Gospel of Mathew in the New Testament of the Bible