

¹Chapter 1. Whither OD, and Other Fantasies

Introduction

I have been a consultant all my working life, and I have participated in almost all the processes and developments that have contributed to what is now thought of as “the state of the art.” In this paper, I want to summarize the legacy of the past as it relates to the present, and I shall put forward my view of what are the current existential issues in the field of OD. By *existential issues* I mean those forces, events and processes which impact the *experience and feeling* of being an OD consultant now, in the last decade of the twentieth century.

The Legacy of T Groups

I attended my first sensitivity training session (T group) in 1958, not long after finishing my formal training in psychology. The experience changed my life, as it did many another's. I experienced in those five days a depth of intimacy and heartfulness with the other men in my T group that I had not known was possible outside of a love relationship. The experience brought to me a new vision of the potential of human relationships, and I soon became deeply involved in the study and practice of this work, which seemed to offer a way to humanize the workplace. Learnings from T groups addressed and awoke three issues that have continued to animate me during my career as a consultant.

¹ Note by the author, November, 2010: I wrote this piece in 1993, at a time when I was feeling dispirited about the work of OD. I offer it now, not because I continue to feel down about my work as a consultant, but because I believe that the perceptions of organizations that I set forth then have merit today, and I continue to hold the same goals for my work and for organizational life that I articulated at that time.

Those issues have been *empowerment, relationship and learning*:

- Groups operating by consensus make better decisions than leaders do, because they use everyone's resources.
- Groups don't need a leader to tell them what to do—they can manage themselves.
- Intimacy depends on willingness to risk, not longevity of relationship.
- It's painful to see yourself as others see you, but it's bearable in a group where trust and support are high.
- Through sharing feelings, you can learn to love people you don't much like.
- Who risks and experiments more learns more.
- Who risks, experiments, *and reflects with others* learns most.
- You are not alone. If you feel strongly about something you see, and everyone else denies it, some of the others are not owning up.
- Not everyone has the same experiences and assumptions as you; sharing your data as well as your conclusions saves time and conflict.

These learnings may not be completely true, but for many of us, they became articles of faith and foundations of our practice, as the sensitivity training movement ripened into OD. Before that transition occurred, we learned bitter lessons as we brought T groups into the workplace during the sixties. Our technology was more powerful than we were wise, and participants who were led by us to open themselves to colleagues were sometimes hurt later on, when their openness was used against them in workplace politics.

OD came to life in the form of such innovations as "process consultation," "task oriented team development," and "role negotiation," as we endeavored to bring what we had learned as T group trainers into organizations, and to make it safe for our

clients. For me, the sixties and early seventies were a time of passionate commitment to the cause of empowerment for individuals in organizations, and I saw myself as a freedom fighter for that cause in most of my work. During this period I developed the “Autonomy Laboratory” and (with David Berlew) the “Positive Power and Influence Program” both of which were oriented to helping participants learn to make things happen in their lives and organizations. I became less optimistic, though not cynical, about the possibilities for openness and intimacy in organizations during those years, and it was a time when my own growth and development were oriented to personal autonomy and empowerment.

As I look back now, until about 1980 we were knocking at the doors of organizations, asking for opportunities to contribute, but we were so strongly countercultural that we usually had to content ourselves with operating on the fringes, often concealing our true motives and objectives. There was no great felt need for change in organizations; they were “fat and happy” for the most part, and even when we could show them a better way, it was rare that the will existed to take advantage of it.

But things *were* changing in the wider society, and we in OD were a part of that change. People were expressing their individuality and a new found freedom in many ways. During the sixties it was the sexual revolution, the hippies, the communes, and “flower power.” In the seventies it was the emphasis on lifestyles; the ethic of “doing your own thing;” the continued questioning of authority; the weakening of the nuclear family and of societal constraints on individual behavior. When I returned to the US in 1976 after eight years in Europe, I found displayed on the airport newsstands a new America, one in which such books as *Power!: How to Get it, How to Use It* (Korda, 1975); *Looking Out for Number One* (Ringer, 1977); and *Winning Through Intimidation* (Ringer, 1974) announced

a swing from the relationship orientation of the sixties to a strong concern with personal power.

This trend gave me pause. I had begun by believing that empowerment *and* openness and cooperation were compatible and equally worthwhile objectives, and what I now saw about me in organizations was a world in which traditional authoritarian and bureaucratic cultures were giving way to an unbridled “Me First” competition in which the hand of each was raised against his or her fellows—empowerment *without* relationship. The ethic of this new organization culture has been well described by Michael Maccoby in his book, *The Gamesman* (Maccoby, 1976). It looked to me as though we were engaged in a reckless competition for the resources of our organizations and of society, with little care for the “ties that bind,” the social fabric of cooperation and mutual responsibility that made possible the creation of those resources in the first place. The process was not confined to organizations and society, but it went on between our species and the Planet, where it was becoming clear that we could not go on exploiting our environment without destroying the delicate web of cooperative and nurturing processes that makes life here possible.

What I saw about me paralleled my own story. I went to Europe in 1968 as a free lance consultant seeking freedom, fame and fortune, and I thought of myself as something of a freebooter. I lived by my wits; I was bound to no one; there was no one to catch me if I fell. It was a time for me of radical autonomy, self reliance, and more than a little selfishness. It was also a time of marginality and loneliness. In 1976, I returned home longing for love, connection and cooperation, and I found those things available to me within the Bay Area OD community. At the same time, I began working with client organizations in high technology and R & D, where people were more than ordinarily empowered and autonomous, but where their ability to connect and cooperate left

much to be desired. I saw in my clients what I had become, and what now saw as limiting to the human spirit.

I turned my attention to the relationship side of the empowerment/relationship frame, and asked once again what we could do to make organizations safe for trust, cooperation, friendship and love. In 1982 I wrote “Leadership and Strategy for a New Age” (Harrison, 1984*) in which I distinguished between *alignment* and *attunement* in organizations, and first came out publicly for unleashing the power of love in organizations. I have been working that issue in one way or another ever since, not because love is the only thing I care about, but because it is too often suppressed in organizations. Missing love, we are also missing cooperation, mutual responsibility, appreciation of diversity, responsive service, and the ability to manage rapid change with grace and humanity.

During the sixties there was a great deal of innovative ferment in OD, but it seemed to me that during the seventies not much changed. When I came back from time to time from England to attend a professional conference, I was relieved to find that I did not seem to have missed much by being in Europe. Consultants were putting their energies into being accepted as contributors; the problem wasn't to invent more powerful technology, but rather to get a foot in the door. At that time I was doing a good bit of training of consultants in Europe, and I remember saying somewhat ruefully to eager aspirants that as I saw it, the stages of consulting—Entry, Contracting, Diagnosis, etc., collapsed down to Entry, Entry, Entry. In those years one was seldom solidly in.

All that changed when the Japanese and others began to compete with high quality products and advanced technology that began to take business away, not just from the weaker Western businesses, but from the leaders as well. Then the doors on which we had been knocking swung open, and we stumbled across the threshold into the open

arms of clients who were hoping for miracles from us—miracles that hopefully did not require fundamental change on their parts! This new enthusiasm on the part of clients was more than a little embarrassing to those of us who found ourselves asked to make good on the promises we had been making for years, “Only give us the time and resources, and we will bring you high performance and a more humane organization, too!” We got the time and the resources, but we frequently did not perform (nor transform, either) partly because we did not know how, and partly because the leadership in client organizations was either unwilling or unable to walk their talk. I want to be clear in my assessment of our contribution as a profession, that I cast no aspersions on the quality of work that we do, nor the integrity with which it is undertaken. I have always felt myself in this work to be in the company of men and women of heart and good will, who frequently perform miracles through creativity, caring and persistence. But the power of traditional organizational cultures lies like a dead hand on much of our work, and even where we succeed in liberating the human spirit, it is like Pandora’s Box—what is released is not what we expected. So I have often said to consultants in training that in this business, if you cannot live on Hope, you had better find another way to make a living! We can all take satisfaction in the minds and hearts we have touched, and the learning we have stimulated, even while we continue seeking that perfect intervention or that perfect client organization that recedes like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

As I experienced it and some of us wrote about it, the sixties were the decade of the T group (Argyris, 1962), (Schein and Bennis, 1965), (Harrison, 1966), (Harrison, 1963*). That decade also saw the beginnings of our "technology" (Pfeiffer and Jones, 1969), the birth of OD (Clark, 1966), (Schein, 1969), and significant contributions to organizational theory (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967a). The seventies saw contributions to a theory of

practice (Harrison, 1970*), (Harrison, 1981*), team development (Kolb and others, 1971), (Harrison, 1972*-c) and a proliferation of training approaches to personal growth and empowerment (Harrison, 1972*-a), (Harrison and Oshry, 1972), (Harrison, 1978*). The eighties gave us visioning (Harrison, 1987*-a), (Harrison, 1988), organization culture (Harrison, 1972*-b), (Harrison, 1987*-b), systems thinking, and quality management. The nineties look like continuing the work on quality, and bringing forward the work of fostering systems thinking and organization learning (Senge, 1990), (Pedler and others, 1991), (Harrison, 1992), (Weisbord, 1993).

The current situation

Recently I have heard from a number of consultants, both here and in Europe, some of whom are experiencing a deep sense of disillusionment in their work, and others who are now convinced that the only change that is worthwhile to work on in organizations is radical change. I paraphrase some of their comments below.

- I have cut down my traditional work in organizations. My focus is on the personal/spiritual side of leadership and work life. For thousands of years we have tried every possible kind of leadership and organization method, which has brought us to a situation where we seem to have bigger problems and deeper crises than ever. I have looked at what esoteric sources like *A Course in Miracles* and Krishnamurti have to say about leadership functions like strategic planning, problem-solving, decision-making, etc. What they say is totally different from the way those functions are practiced today and have been throughout human history. Maybe such radical changes are the only “organization healing” that has any lasting effect?
- I’m more and more doubting what I/we are doing. In my dark moments I think our work actually is like bandaging dead corpses. For a real shift to take place it takes

much more crisis, much more stepping into the unknown than any of my clients are willing to experience. I question whether our work is not just making it possible for organizations to be efficient in an old mindset, and thereby prolonging the transition time. Even though my work is very rewarding from the point of view of the extraordinary results that happen, I question whether such results are enough.

- Something is different now. For the first time in my memory I have a sense that there is nothing much for me to do. It's not that I feel I have nothing to offer, or that I don't want to give what I have; it's more a feeling that there is a destructive process at work in our society, or perhaps it is a reconstructive process, that has to run its course before I can do anything. And I sense that as we move through this process, there will be new insights about how to be relevant. In this rather strange time, though, I don't believe in my own relevance.

Other consultants mentioned similar themes.

- I feel my clients have so much on their plates that they don't have the resources to learn a better way. By taking their time I am becoming part of the problem, rather than helping.
- There are good people in the organizations I work with. I take satisfaction in helping them understand their interdependencies, and in gently leading them to look at the interdependencies that exist in the wider environment, but I cannot really believe in the value these organizations are bringing to mankind through their products.
- I enjoy the time between assignments more than when I have work
- My *pro bono* assignments are more exciting and rewarding than my paid work.

- No matter how significantly I impact a system, it invariably falls back to the way it was before.
- I am finding myself unmotivated to seek new clients.

For these people there is a lack of *heart* in this work of being a consultant to organizations, a problem of *relevance*, a concern for *values* that are missing or distorted. For myself, I find that when I am in action, and particularly when I am immersed in the *skillful means* of my work, the designs and the technology, I become excited and involved. When I step back and ask myself the larger questions, I feel rather dispirited about what I am able to bring to organizations right now. I tend to agree with the consultants I quoted above, who feel that only radical changes will be beneficial in the long term.

In the present moment (1993), pressed by competition, and struggling to outlast a severe economic downturn, most organizations are endeavoring to squeeze all they can out of the old “Newtonian” paradigm. Value is measured largely in material terms. Organizations are perceived as machines, and the goal is to obtain the greatest output with the least input of energy (in the form of money) and material. People are seen as parts of the machine, and the game is to get the most output from the fewest parts, as fast as possible.

It sometimes seems as though organizations compete to see which can shed the most *parts* and work the remaining ones the hardest, and our social environment is becoming polluted with the anger, hopelessness and bitterness of the rejected *parts*, who incidentally happen to be our neighbours and fellow citizens, people we grew up with and shared our dreams with. As a society, we seem unable to take a human stance towards these *parts*, viewing the problem in abstract terms of economics, rights and law,

and disowning the ties of love and responsibility that bind each of us to those whom organizations are treating as human waste.

For me, it is not the chaos of the world in which we live at the end of the twentieth century that is distressing. It is the denial of chaos, and the extreme lengths to which we go to perceive our world as coherent and sane. Although I am hopeful about the long term, because we have to deal with reality sooner or later, I am a bit down about the present.

It is very painful to be a member of a self organizing system which is preparing for a reorganization at a higher level of consciousness. Many organizations seem to me to be exhibiting a "fortress mentality" at present, and they are therefore not much fun to work with. However, I am optimistic for the long term. We are engaged in natural processes of perturbation which should, if the transformation goes well, provide the conditions for movement to a higher level of organization.

There is, of course, no guarantee that it will go well, no assurance that our species will survive our current mindless destruction of the environment that supports us. The criteria by which our society currently evaluates the usefulness of its activities seem to me worse than irrelevant, for they are based on a notion of wealth creation that fosters the destruction of the ecosystems that nurture us—a paradigm which accepts the idea of taking from nature without giving back. Since our society operates on that paradigm, there are few organizations in which I can participate that is not operating on principles which I feel in my bones to be wrong.

When I ask for guidance as to what contribution I can best make to the transformative process in organizations, I am directed to pay attention to what has heart and meaning for me, what activities I engage in that feel inspired by a higher purpose than gain, egoistic recognition, or technical fascination. There are still moments in organizations

when I feel, “Yes, this is worth doing—this is what my life is about; this is what I came here to do.” Sometimes they are moments when my heart is open, when I am able to give love, especially to those embattled warriors whose hearts may be armored against the pain of love, or atrophied from long disuse. Sometimes they are moments of light, when I am able to *see* what feels like the truth, and help others to see it as well.

Sometimes they are moments of teamwork and camaraderie, when I and others experience true co-creation, or feel guided by our higher selves in the making of decisions that feel *right*. In those moments I feel the opposite of irrelevant; I feel myself to be taking part in the flow of an evolutionary stream which is moving us towards a higher level of participation in and with our universe.

For me there is no better guide than those intuitive feelings of *rightness*. I mistrust what passes for conventional wisdom and organizational values, because I believe they are based on a misapprehension of our true relationship with nature. That does not mean that I have given up on the ideal of right action and right livelihood—rather it means I have to take the responsibility for the value of what I do and for its consequences. It seems a heavy burden, but when I can bring myself to accept it, it makes for a meaningful and engaging personal and professional life.