

## **Chapter 3. Guidelines for an Internal Organization Development Unit**

### **Introduction**

This paper was originally written as an discussion piece for a group of internal consultants I worked with in the early seventies during my sojourn as a free lance consultant based in London. The content was stimulated by a talk I had heard Herb Shepard give in an NTL program in Bethel, Maine, and I added some material of my own. In it can be seen the beginnings of an "intervention theory" for the practice of organization development. I have continued to work with these beginnings over the years, my most recent effort being an ambitious attempt to provide a comprehensive manual for planning and implementing large systems change (Harrison, Cooper, and Dawes, 1991). I feel, however, that, "quick and dirty" as it is, this first effort captures in easily digested form, much of what one needs to think about in starting out as an OD consultant. The paper is much used today in training programs for organization development consultants.

After working for some months with the consulting group referred to above, I had come to the conclusion that the members of the group were not serious in their commitment to making change happen in their organization, and I wrote the "Guidelines" as a kind of "change manifesto." My (rather arrogant) idea was that if they embraced its precepts, then it was professionally correct for me to continue working with them. If they did not, then I would know our relationship was a collusive one, in which their having me as an external consultant was a way of convincing themselves they were doing something about change, whereas what they really had was what they

would have called a "talking shop, " meaning much discussion, but no real commitment to action

Adapting to British ways was not easy for me, in spite of an Anglophilia which had its roots in childhood. When I came to live and work in England, it was the realization of a dream I had carried for many years.

I found the quality of life in London in the late sixties to be almost everything I had hoped for, but work was another matter. It took me a long time to understand what the British really meant by what they said, and I perceived the pace of change in organizations to be just short of glacial. I sometimes described my experience of the pace of work and change in the UK as "walking in glue." It took me a long time to understand that we Americans do not differ significantly from the British in the length of time it takes us to make important changes—it is our style and level of activity that is so strikingly different. We embrace change enthusiastically, talk it up, and then often subtly sabotage it or change in outward forms only. The British are more apt to be skeptical of the new, and to question and resist. Underneath, though, they may be covertly evaluating and comparing the old and the new, and preparing to commit their time and resources to change.

My clients liked the paper, and passed it along to others, but their behavior did not change. I disengaged from them gracefully, having so far adopted British ways that I did not confront them with my real reasons for doing so.

During the early seventies I was greatly engaged in training internal consultants in the UK. With some other US consultants, notably Richard Beckhard, I took a role in

the attempts to transplant NTL's "Program for Specialists in Organization Development" (PSOD) to Britain. The paper was useful as a handout in these programs and was recirculated widely among internal consultants, first in the UK, and later in the US. It migrated to North America via the PSOD Programs NTL was running in Bethel, Maine, and some years later I published it in the OD Practitioner. I have appreciated the way it has held its relevance over the years, though much of what it says is common wisdom now.

### **Guidelines for an Internal Organization Development Unit**

These guidelines are intended as a kind of checklist or reminder, rather than as a comprehensive treatise on organization development (OD) strategy. My concern here is only with strategy, and not with the goals which the strategy is intended to achieve. These notes are relevant to OD means, not ends. I expect many of the points will be self evident to experienced OD practitioners and hope that they will provoke thought and planning on the part of others.

Major strategic problems of an internal OD unit

(1) To gain influence based on expertise and ability to help, rather than influence through channels of authority and power. To deploy limited economic and human resources in ways which maximize impact.

(2) To develop the skills and knowledge of the internal agents of change in the organization.

(3) To maintain the OD unit and to preserve the group and its members against the detrimental effects of pressure and stress. In so doing, to remain

independent of organizational pressures for conformity of thought and action while maintaining confidence and trust on the part of organization members.

Guidelines for gaining appropriate influence and deploying resources effectively

(1) Work *with* the forces in the organization which are supportive of change and improvement, rather than working *against* those who are defensive and resistant. It is better to find someone who wants help and work with him than it is to try to convince a skeptic that he has need of OD assistance. Wherever possible, follow the path of least organizational resistance to OD goals rather than confronting resistance. This implies *not* doing anything across the board: no mass training, no wholesale installation of Management by Objectives, no involvement of the entire organization in Staff Development Programs and the like. The limited OD resources available are weakened and absorbed by the organization in such frontal assaults on problems, and the results are invariably disappointing.

(2) Try to develop "critical mass" in each change project, a self sustaining organization improvement process which is motivated and powered from within the system which is changing. To do this, resources available to the OD unit must be concentrated on the target system for a time, to get the process underway. Organizations are self stabilizing systems which can absorb a great deal of energy from the outside without changing very much. Investments of resources which are insufficient to move the system beyond its natural equilibrium are wasteful and unproductive.

(3) When working with a given system, try to find multiple entry points into it: a variety of people, groups, processes and problems with which contact can be made and to which help may be given. It is useful when approaching a particular organization or subsystem to brainstorm all the possible points of contact which might be used, and all the different ways in which the unit could offer useful help to the system. As many of these multiple entries as feasible can then be attempted.

(4) Look for "felt needs", problems recognized by managers which can be dealt with by OD techniques and processes. The best opportunities occur when there exist problems for which there is no "standard" procedural or bureaucratic solution, and where the managers involved are really bothered by their difficulty in coping. Look for these problems where new technology is being introduced (e.g. computers); where a problem requires close collaboration and coordination across functional lines (e.g. "business areas"); where organizational boundaries are being changed (e.g. mergers and takeovers); where organization restructuring of any kind is taking place; where physical locations are being changed or new plants and facilities being built and commissioned; or where the organization is expanding or contracting rapidly (e.g. redundancies).

(5) Wherever possible, work with relatively healthy parts of the organization which have the will and the resources to improve. Avoid being seduced or pressured into working on "lost causes", individuals or groups which have lost the ability to cope with the situation as it is. Usually change requires additional energy and talent during the period of transition. Performance initially worsens even after the most beneficial

changes until people learn how to make the changed organization work up to its potential. Persons or groups whose performance is substandard or barely adequate usually cannot afford and are not allowed the additional resources and period of further decreased performance which is required to change successfully. They are often unusually defensive in their reaction to outsiders offering "help".

Unfortunately, higher management may put great pressure on an OD unit to work with the more ineffective subsystems, sometimes on the assumption that the offending group is so far gone anyway that little harm can be done even by an incompetent intervention!

(6) Work with individuals and groups which have as much freedom and discretion in managing their own operations as possible. It profits nothing to work out an agreed change with a manager who turns out not to have the latitude to carry it out. It is equally useless to work on a change with someone who *feels* dominated and controlled from above and who can therefore not muster the courage to risk experimenting on his own. These considerations cast great doubt on the wisdom of people-management training and Staff Development programs for lower levels of staff and supervisors unless the programs actively involve the management levels where effective control resides.

(7) Try to obtain appropriate and realistic levels of involvement in the program of the OD unit on the part of top management. This does not mean that the highest levels of management must necessarily be "at the cutting edge of change". They are too often too personally identified with the status quo for this to be possible.

Except in times of emergency the system tends to stabilize itself by placing people in the top positions whose values and styles perpetuate the accepted ways of doing things. Often the best supporters of an OD unit are among the ranks of management just below the top where the personal commitment to the present is less, and where the drive for achievement and advancement may be higher than at the very top.

There are three levels of commitment to OD objectives from top management which can be helpful. The minimum is *giving permission for change to occur*. Top management sees the necessity of change, at least at an intellectual level, and allows it to occur without active opposition. The unspoken qualifier is usually "as long as we don't have to do anything differently".

The next level is that of *support and encouragement for change*. The involvement in change activities of other parts of the organization is facilitated, and higher management monitors and evaluates the changes achieved. As before, however, the actual changes in work and relationship patterns do not extend to the highest levels. The latter are insulated from actual change.

The third level is *participation in change*, in which the higher management actively involves itself in the change process, often as a client for OD assistance. While this level is the most satisfactory, it is rarely achieved in practice. The failure to involve top management actively in the change process sets an upper limit on what can be accomplished, but the other levels of commitment still permit considerable useful work to be done. Unfortunately, in many change programs it is

not clear that even the first level, *permission* has been achieved, and such programs are usually rather ineffective.

(8) Try to establish direct communication and contact with all levels of the organization. Try to develop customs and accepted practices of operating which exempt OD unit members from following normal bureaucratic channels or the "chain of command". OD practitioners cannot work effectively through formal authority or by using sources of coercive power. The only way they can influence anyone is through expertise, persuasion and helpfulness. Direct contact and discussion with clients and with sources of information and support are vital, and reliance on intermediaries, no matter how well intentioned, hampers the work badly.

(9) Develop confidence and credibility on the part of organization members through situations where the OD unit's unique expertise shows to best advantage. One good way for behaviorally oriented OD practitioners to develop trust and confidence on the part of potential clients is in the course of experiential, action oriented training programs. In the atmosphere of openness and confrontation which often develops in such programs the client has a chance to size up the practitioner's ability to handle difficult situations effectively. Not only educational situations are a good way of allowing the client some low risk opportunities to evaluate the contribution of the practitioners but also diagnostic studies present chances to begin dialogue with a client. Many projects begin with a commitment to joint study of a problem which commits neither client nor practitioner to go further.



(10) Don't be afraid to ask to be involved in activities where you feel you may be able to make a contribution. Go directly to the potential client and tell him what you may be able to do to help. Since he probably does not know much about what you have to offer, he is unlikely to think of coming to the OD unit for help. The worst the client can do is to say no. Proactive practitioners get many more opportunities to contribute than do passive ones.

(11) Make known what the OD unit is doing, particularly when there are successes to report (but only with the client's permission, of course). A major failing of OD units is in not reporting widely enough their activities and achievements, perhaps out of modesty. The modesty may be commendable, but it does not advance the task to let the activities remain unknown. One good way is to hold a seminar for interested parties in which the client and the practitioner make a joint presentation of the change project, preferably with an honest description of the difficulties and drawbacks, as well as the successes.

(12) Use outside consultants in ways which enhance, rather than compete with the credibility of OD unit members. For example, outsiders are often used to develop entry to top management, because OD unit members do not have high enough organizational status to be acceptable as consultants at that level. If at all possible, the outsider should pair up with someone from the unit who works as closely with him as the client will permit.

Similarly, when outsiders are asked in to give courses and seminars they should be paired with OD unit members as co-trainers. A clear understanding should

be developed that the two will work in such a way as to permit increased visibility for the inside man's skills and talents, as well as enabling the insider to learn what the outside consultant has to teach.

Outsiders can sometimes also be used to gain acceptance for projects and to get them started. By involving the inside people from the beginning as coworkers, the latter can take over once the project is off the ground and run it with only occasional assistance from without.

(13) Link together people who are working to improve organization functioning, so their activities reinforce and complement one another. People working in such areas as training, methods improvement, computer technology, and manpower planning are all working in areas related to organization development. Frequently they are in different functional lines and plan and conduct their work quite independently.

This splitting of resources reduces the likelihood of developing the "critical mass" referred to above, that self sustaining change process which is the criterion of a really successful project. I feel strongly enough about the resulting wastage of resources to advocate the combining of these activities, either functionally or (perhaps as well) through some kind of matrix organization structure similar to the concept of the "business area". At the least, there should be some policy commitment supported by appropriate structure to ensure joint planning and coordination of strategy and projects, so that the organization improvement activities would all support one another.

One example of such coordination is the linking of training (especially in such attitudinal/style areas as man management, leadership, and effective group working) to follow up activities in the work situation. Any such training should be built into some on-the-job change activity of the OD unit and should reinforce and in turn be reinforced by the work of the OD practitioner (e.g. helping with problems of entry, diagnosis, team development, Staff Development, etc.). Attitudinal training and training in management style on an across the board basis should be avoided as a wasteful use of resources.

Training and or activities can also be linked into technological, procedural and structural changes stemming from application of management sciences to problems of rationalizing work. Such changes can be much more effectively implemented if there is adequate diagnosis of the readiness for and resistance to change, proper training of personnel who will be involved, and the establishment of ways of monitoring and dealing with human problems which develop during the change process. Activities which lend themselves to this sort of joint approach are the introduction of computer technology, the implementation of mergers, takeovers and reorganizations, the starting up of new facilities, and the changing of work methods and procedures.

Guidelines for developing the skills and knowledge of internal change agents

- (1) A substantial proportion of the time of internal OD practitioners should be budgeted for their training and professional development. If they tend not to be professionally trained and to be relatively inexperienced this should probably be on

the order or 20-25% of their time. Most of this training should be practical and experiential. Some useful training and development activities are the following:

Pairing less experienced people with more experienced ones or with outside consultants on projects. The more experienced person advises and supports, but the less experienced one does the actual work of the project.

Regular project problem discussion sessions led by an experienced practitioner in which participants share current problems they are having in their work. The other participants can then practice consulting and planning skills in helping with the presented problems. Such a group could include participants from outside the Division or Company as well as internal people.

Presentations and demonstrations of new techniques and processes by outsiders.

Participation in some projects outside the Company in which the practitioner takes the role of an external change agent. These are most valuable, in my experience, for providing opportunities for taking increased responsibility and freedom to take reasonable risks (a freedom which may be prevented at home by the exposed situation of the OD unit). Dramatic increases in confidence and competence can be achieved by the judicious use of such outside experiences.

Attendance at professional meetings and outside courses is also valuable, but I think less so than the other learning activities mentioned above.

(2) Acquire a library of books and journals on OD and behavioral science applications. Make a special effort to retrieve techniques and instruments which have

come into the hands of OD unit members through their work with outside consultants or by their own invention. Keep an up-to-date list of who has had experience with what different approaches and methods, so that unit personnel know where to go for practical help.

(3) Arrange learning activities between the related areas of training, management sciences and behavioral applications. In the process of teaching others people will become more competent in their own fields, and the cross functional education will make it easier to work effectively together.

Guidelines for protecting OD practitioners from undue pressure and stress

(1) Arrange most of the work in teams and pairs for mutual learning and mutual support. People should not have to work alone in high stress and high risk situations until they are quite experienced.

(2) Protect against premature evaluation of OD activities. Absorb a large proportion of the pressures from above and outside the unit in the senior manager(s) responsible. Management style in an OD unit should provide support and resources rather than direction, control and evaluation. The clients may be depended upon for more than the optimum amounts of the latter.

(3) Take special pains to build strong personal support relationships among OD unit members. Frequent team building sessions and some T-group or group process work are helpful in achieving this. The use of an outside consultant to help build supportive internal relationships is frequently found helpful.

(4) Develop career paths within and through the OD unit. The policy and practice should make it desirable for some to develop professional careers in change facilitation and for others to advance their line or staff careers by doing well in shorter (2-3 year) assignments in the OD unit.

One way of using this checklist might be to review the current organization of OD activities in the light of the guidelines. I am not so egoistic as to imagine that where the guidelines are different from current practice and policy it means the latter must be corrected; however, it may be that such discrepancies point to fruitful areas for discussion and decision.

Another way to use the guidelines is in planning particular change and development projects. The points can remind one of problems to be anticipated or resources which will be needed for a successful conclusion.

Similarly, it may help to review these ideas when faced with a particularly difficult problem in a project, or when an activity seems to go along rather poorly for no obvious reason. The framework provided may simply help to gain some perspective on the problem. Additionally, it may suggest diagnostic leads to the trouble or approaches to a solution.