



# What is OD?

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As someone who spent many years working in organizations—both for-profit and not-for-profit—I found the challenges with people far outweighed the challenges with technology. That is, it was the “who” that mattered more than the “how” or “what.” I came to believe that improving the interrelationships between human beings can go a long way towards increasing overall performance as well as better the workplace environment. This is a central reason for why I entered the field of organization development.

Last week here in Seattle I attended the annual OD Network Conference where more than 800 of us gathered to join and learn. It was exciting to be among such legendary OD professionals as Peter Block, Roger Harrison, Barry Oshry, Edgar Schein, Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff. It also got me thinking that, as a profession, we’ve been speaking primarily to ourselves rather than to the world at large. From my interactions with potential clients, the definition of organization development as well as its application is not widely understood. OD could certainly use a make-over to better define it in terms of benefits to the organization.

So what exactly is organization development? Quite simply, OD is a planned effort to increase an organization’s effectiveness and health. According to organizational consultant and author Warren Bennis, organization development is a complex strategy intended to change the beliefs, attitudes, values and structure of organizations so that they can better adapt to new technologies, markets and challenges. It can involve interventions in the organization’s processes, using behavioral science knowledge as well as organizational reflection, system improvement, planning and self-analysis.

From Kurt Lewin, widely recognized as the father of OD, came the ideas of “group dynamics” and “action research,” which are central to the basic OD process as well as the notion of a collaborative client/consultant relationship. OD is interdisciplinary in nature and draws on sociology, psychology, and theories of motivation, learning and personality. The OD consultant acts as a change agent with expertise in behavioral science and knows how to get people in an organization involved in solving their own problems.

Some specific contemporary examples of organization development efforts are team building, conflict negotiation, leadership develop-

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ment, change management, process improvement and more. These efforts can be implemented through process consulting, coaching, training, facilitation and other methods.

All organizations could benefit from organization development interventions because OD consultants use a systems perspective and help make processes more efficient, increase employee engagement, build better leaders and facilitate sustainable change initiatives. All of these interventions can directly effect the bottom line, but this may not be apparent in the short term.

I believe we OD professionals, both internal and external, could do our profession a great service by better measuring our efforts and then reporting the results more widely. Despite the fact that things such as group dynamics, employee engagement and improved leadership are difficult to measure, we should use both qualitative and quantitative methods to better justify these interventions and report them beyond the usual academic and OD professional communities. Only through this sustained effort will more potential clients be receptive to our work and actively seek it out to better their organizations.

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