OD: past, present and future

Valerie Garrow

Associate Director
Institute for Employment Studies
Mantell Building
University of Sussex Campus
Brighton BN1 9RF
UK

valerie.garrow@employment-studies.co.uk

Abstract

This paper explores the journey of Organisational Development as a discipline from its roots in the middle of the 20th century to its current status. It then considers whether and how OD can continue to be relevant in the 21st century.

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The first response to a question about the role of organisational development (OD) in any organisation is normally, 'It depends what you mean by OD'. In most cases there is some activity that people can group under the general banner of 'organisational development' but it is not always done through an OD practitioner and where there are recognised OD people, their interventions and focus can be so varied that it is hard to link them as a 'profession' or see immediate connections with their forerunners.

The eclectic nature of OD and the abundance of conflicting definitions combined with its seeming homelessness as a profession both in a corporate and academic sense, inevitably mean it is not well understood by outsiders. Waclawski and Church (2002) for example suggest that 'the field itself has yet to come to agreement on its basic boundaries or parameters... thus for some, OD represents anything and everything that might be offered' (p4). Its diversity is cited as both a strength and a weakness but leaves many thoroughly bemused. In addition, the lack of evaluation over the years has failed to enhance its reputation and credibility (Golembiewski & Sun, 1990; Porras & Robertson, 1992).

This paper explores the journey of Organisational Development as a discipline from its roots in the middle of the 20th century to its current status. It then considers whether and how OD can continue to be relevant in the 21st century.

Classical OD

Most books on OD begin with a range of definitions mainly from the US, where much of the academic work has taken place. Before revisiting a couple of these it is helpful to trace the legacy of some of the roots of 'classical' OD.

OD is generally considered as a post-war response to the dehumanising effects of scientific management practices (Taylor, 1911; Gantt, 1929; Fayol, 1949) where workers were small cogs in the well-oiled machinery of organisational bureaucracies. Work was fragmented into small tasks, designed and monitored scientifically by 'the management' often through time and motion studies (Gilbreth, 1911). Workers themselves had no autonomy and were easily dismissed if there was any dissent.

The humanistic approach of OD began to replace the machine metaphor of organisations with natural images of body and health and drew on the behavioural sciences to suggest how people, systems and technology could be organised in a more effective and humane way. The key strands of work that form the core of classical OD relate to new humanistic values, training and development, employee feedback, systems thinking and action research.

Root 1: The Human Relations Movement

The first important legacy that still distinguishes OD from general change management consultancy is its underpinning humanistic values: respect for human dignity; integrity; freedom; justice and responsibility. Psychologists and social scientists concerned with the alienation of workers brought a strongly values-driven approach to the study of leadership, management and motivation. OD recognised the potential of motivated people in organisations, a trend that has become increasingly important in the knowledge economy where individuals represent talent and human and intellectual capital. Rising post-war social aspirations provided fertile ground for these new values as well as OD's second important legacy.

Root 2: Training and Development

Early OD from UCLA (West Coast OD) focussed on personal development and growth and a strong belief that effective individuals would inevitably lead to effective organisations. Attention gradually shifted to relationships, teams and inter-group dynamics. In 1945 Kurt Lewin founded the Research Centre for Group Dynamics at MIT and two years later the National Training Laboratories (NTL) was established where individuals were encouraged to explore their own effectiveness and impact on others through the 'T group'. This ability to build effective relationships remains a key competency in many organisations today.

Root 3: Employee feedback

Rensis Likert's introduction of the employee survey at the Detroit Edison Company in 1947 paved the way for employees to have a voice in the workplace and a say in how they were managed. Employee involvement and participation has been an ongoing OD legacy becoming particularly important throughout the 'empowerment' and 'delayering' of the 90s. Meanwhile the staff survey is currently enjoying popularity as a measure of employee 'engagement' as well as providing an opportunity to benchmark against other organisations.

Root 4: Action research and change

OD today tends to be associated primarily with change. At its heart lies action research; cycles of data gathering, analysis, action or change, reflection and evaluation. The OD cycle (Kolb and Frohman,1970) of contract and entry, data collection and analysis, data feedback and negotiation of interventions, action and evaluation built on these principles. Early action research and action learning, however, were rooted firmly in the positivist experimental tradition and classical OD change was rational and orderly: top down; planned; linear; whole system and data driven. Lewin's unfreeze-change-re-freeze formula is a good example of linear, logical change that might occur in a closed system.

Root 5: Systems thinking

Much management and economic thinking has been informed by the 19th century theory of closed equilibrium systems, borrowed from physical and mathematical sciences. The perception of organisations as closed entities with impermeable boundaries gave an illusion of rationality and predictability to management and strategy formulation. Open systems theory recognised organisations as living systems with a permeable boundary to the environment.

In the UK, Trist and the Tavistock Institute approached organisations as both human and technical systems (socio-technical systems). Several experiments with self-directed teams, for example, mirrored workers' own social networks in the community.

These five roots are incorporated in two early definitions of OD as:

> *'A planned effort, organisation-wide, managed from the top, to increase organisation effectiveness and health, through planned interventions in the organisation's processes using behavioural science knowledge.'*
>
> (Beckhard, 1969)

> *'A response to change, a complex educational strategy intended to change the beliefs, attitudes, values and structure of organisations so that they can better adapt to new technologies, markets and challenges and the dizzying rate of change itself.'*
>
> (Bennis, 1969)

While OD still draws on this heritage, many attribute its longevity to an ability to evolve and adapt and to incorporate new paradigms in order to increase understanding of organisations and their environments as well as the changing nature of the workforce and its social expectations. We now examine the transition period of new ideas and influences.

OD in transition

Since the early days of OD, a new worldview has emerged to question the existence of objective reality. During this period there has been a serious challenge to the modernists' belief in rational, scientific progress and universal truth. Post-modernism denotes the end of the 'grand narrative' in favour of complexity, multiple perspectives and stakeholders with differing power bases. The rational and predictable world of the positivists is replaced by a potentially chaotic and uncertain landscape where cause and effect are unclear and reason and logic do not always win the day.

Social constructionism rejects the possibility of one objective truth in favour of a reality which is socially constructed. Context and culture both influence and are influenced by the actors in the scene and the worldview is constantly reformed and negotiated by coalitions and powerful players.

Organisations are suddenly far from the rational, planned, stable entities they once appeared to be. Reality is shaped by the conversations and dialogues that take place between people within them and is constantly shifting.

Early OD having been firmly rooted in the positivist tradition has, however, successfully embraced this new paradigm. Some of the key enablers on this journey have been: a holistic approach to organisation design; an extension of systems thinking to assessing culture as an important vehicle for change; a change in emphasis from individual training to organisational learning; a development of the early work on motivation to tap into positive psychology; a recognition that change is messy and unpredictable rather than linear and orderly; the search for new styles of leadership; and drawing on new sciences and metaphors to support understanding of living systems and change.

Organisation Design

In the OD sense, organisational design is a system wide approach that goes beyond reorganisation or restructuring. Stamford (2007) describes it as 'the outcome of shaping and aligning all the components of an enterprise towards the achievement of an agreed mission'. The McKinsey 7 S model and Burke Litwin's causal model of organisational performance and change have been particularly influential in visually mapping the alignment of the 'hard' and 'soft' elements of an organisational system. Some of the key OD messages around design are to ensure there is sufficient flexibility and adaptability to respond to and anticipate the external environment and to ensure internal connectivity to enable knowledge and learning to spread freely. Matrix structures for example breached vertical silos and 'delayering' in the 90s pushed responsibility down to the customer interface so that staff could respond more quickly to customer needs. From an OD perspective, however, a new design requires a change in behaviour which often necessitates a culture change.

Organisational culture

The interest in organisational culture in the 80s was in part a response to the success of Japanese organisations in fostering quality and excellence. Peters and Waterman (1982) inspired a quest for 'cultures of excellence' and the belief that corporate cultures could have an impact on economic performance provided a key role for OD drawing on both sociology and anthropology. Culture became particularly important for understanding post-merger integration problems and 'culture clash' (Buono et al., 1985) was a popular culprit for failure. Influential works by Hofstede (1980) and Trompenaars (1994) also highlighted the impact of national cultures at a time of increasing globalisation.

It became common practice to approach organisational change through what Jack Welch called the 'hardware' of an organisation ie its structure and processes as well as its 'software' ie its norms and culture. The search for the origins of organisational cultures led further to interest in the underpinning corporate values, beliefs and assumptions as well techniques to surface these through art, stories, myths, drama and metaphor in order to understand how they might be changed.

Learning organisations

Ashby's (1956) 'law of requisite variety' states that for a system to preserve its integrity and survive, its rate of learning must at least match the rate of change in its environment. The rise of the knowledge economy with its focus on managing knowledge, intellectual and human capital has placed a strong emphasis on learning and particularly learning at an organisational level.

Peter Senge's (1990) book *The Fifth Discipline* popularised the concept of the learning organisation 'where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning to see the whole together'.

While some complexity theorists now dispute that organisations are able to learn, the concept of flexible, agile and adaptable organisation remains central to OD. French et al. (2000) describe one of the distinguishing factors of OD as being reflexive and self-examining to facilitate constant organisational renewal.

Varney (2007) finds OD practitioners 'creating space (physical and psychological) for learning and being a catalyst for learning'. Closely allied to this is the role of the OD practitioner in 'removing barriers to learning' as well as using frameworks, tools and techniques such as storytelling and metaphors to 'help people break out of their normal patterns and shift their perspective'.

Positive psychology

An important new development in organisational research and consulting in the OD tradition, has come through various methodologies which come under the banner of 'positive psychology'. Positive psychology has its roots in social constructionism advocating that people create new reality by releasing and working with their energy and abilities rather than struggling with their faults.

Strengths based development and Appreciative Inquiry (AI) evolving from the action research tradition both move away from the tendency to want to fix what is wrong with organisations and people. By identifying what works best and transferring those ingredients into other situations, AI builds energy for positive change and has

a reputation for success in organisations that have been subject to negative public perception, where there is a history of conflict and where people feel demotivated or have low self esteem. Similarly strengths development looks for what individuals are good at and aims to build excellence rather than focus on development for weaknesses which at best might become average qualities or skills.

Transformational, discontinuous and non-linear change

Classical OD typically enabled incremental development and evolutionary progression, sometimes having to 'surprise' the system in order to shift behaviours and create momentum for change. However, as technology, the internet, deregulation, privatisation, globalisation and other external forces have required more radical survival techniques, OD has increasingly moved into the area of transformational and large scale change. Transformational change is described by Levy and Merry (1986) as 'multi-dimensional, multi-level, qualitative discontinuous, radical organizational change involving a paradigmatic shift' (p5). It has necessitated new OD methodologies such as Open Space Technology (Owen, 1997), Real Time Strategic Change (Jacobs, 1994) and Future Search (Weisbord and Janoff, 1995) in order to build a critical mass of commitment for the required change by bringing large groups or whole systems together.

New leadership styles

With this shift from top down, planned, linear change requiring hierarchical command and control, there has been an ongoing quest for a post-modern leadership style that is able to engage multiple internal and external stakeholders, co-create vision and values, build social capital and still lead organisations through change and uncertainty. From hero to servant, centralised to distributed, charismatic to engaging, there has been a real shift in emphasis to emotional intelligence, authenticity and sustainability as well as a new focus on 'followership'. The growth of strategic alliances and cross sector partnerships has demanded that leaders be able to work collaboratively across boundaries and cultures, facilitate multiple stakeholder groups and draw on this diversity to enable new ways of working.

Drawing on the new sciences

Finally there have been milestones in OD thinking through learning from the new sciences. Wheatley in her book *Leadership and the new sciences* (2006) suggests that it is 'time to realise that we will never cope with this new world using our old maps'. OD has always drawn on a broad range of disciplines: psychology; sociology; cultural anthropology and political science but it has also absorbed metaphors and theory from quantum physics; biological and evolutionary sciences; design science; social movement theory, chaos theory and complexity science.

Much of our current management and strategic thinking still remains anchored in the rational, predictable, semi-scientific 19th century theory of closed equilibrium systems. Many economists, however, are now incorporating complexity theory into their understanding of markets and organisations as open, dynamic systems which exist in a state of constant motion or 'dynamic disequilibrium'. Beinhocker (1997) identifies the characteristics of 'the new economics' as:

- **wisdom:** based on a realistic model of cognitive behaviour ie people do not always behave rationally or make optimal decisions

- **webs:** people interact in a 'dynamic web of relationships'

- **waves:** these interactions produce evolutionary changes and innovation

- **would-be-worlds:** in agent based models 'different futures unfold'.

The recognition that people do not always behave rationally has been an important transition from the machine metaphor of organisations where behaviour is uniform, unemotional and apolitical.

Relationships between people co-create the future but are seen as unpredictable, often driven by power, vested interest and coalitions. Some important lessons have been drawn from observing complex adaptive systems.

Plsek (2003) describes certain key properties of complex adaptive systems:

- relationships are central to understanding the system and the value and innovation comes from the interaction between agents

- they can be described by structures, processes and cultural patterns which are closely intertwined

- actions are based on internalized simple rule sets and mental models which set up patterns of beliefs and behaviours

- 'attractor patterns' encourage some behaviours over others.

The implications for organisational development are numerous. Firstly complex adaptive systems are extremely resilient. Chapman (2002) cites the NHS as an example, 'As the NHS has shown, complex systems also have remarkable resilience in the face of efforts to change them.'

Secondly small changes in complex adaptive systems can produce large effects (known as the butterfly effect) through exponential change, where effects are multiplied throughout interconnected networks. The initial stimulus for change does not have to be large once the 'simple rules' are identified.

Thirdly there are implications for leadership. Demos suggest that 'the use of command and control inevitably fails within complex systems and alienates people by treating them instrumentally' (Chapman, 2002). Complex adaptive systems naturally demonstrate self-organisation and emergence rather than respond to top-down planning.

Finally the new sciences have broadened the study of motivation, finding 'attractor' patterns and looking to 'pull' rather than 'push'. It has led to an interest in how social movements gain momentum. Gladwell (2000) explores how popular ideas and behaviours spread to reach 'tipping points' where the momentum for change becomes unstoppable. Tapping into discretionary effort has become something of a quest and undoubtedly explains much of the interest in employee 'engagement'.

OD Today

Where then does that leave OD today? The world of classical OD felt more predictable, boundaries between organisations and sectors were clear and largely impermeable as was the boundary between the customer and supplier, the links between cause and effect were more transparent and leaders believed in tried and tested formulas for business success. Globalisation, cross-cultural and cross-sector alliances and partnerships, the digital and networked age, deregulation, opensourcing, outsourcing, supply-chaining, customer involvement have led to a complex network of interconnections and cross boundary relationships that have challenged the way organisations operate and in some cases their core purpose.

Customers now get involved in the co-creation and co-design of products as well as viral marketing, while our service-dominated economy is increasingly becoming more patient, citizen and customer-centred.

We have seen a rise in the power of individuals and interest groups who publish their own books without a publishing house, reach a global audience through blogs, expand their social and business networks without leaving home, lend and borrow money from people they do not know without a bank, launch a music career on Youtube and even live, work and trade in a virtual world. Public marketplaces such as eBay provide a space to allow individuals to trade real products directly with each other. Virtual worlds such as Second Life meanwhile, have opened up a whole new market place of virtual goods, property and currency.

Survivors of the dot com bubble, however, illustrate the need for some tangible value beneath the illusion. Lastminute.com for example cite a solid network of strategic alliances underpinning their business model. Other good 'connectors' such as Amazon have a strong distribution network.

The art of organisation design has occasionally pushed the boundaries with, for example, Hock's chaordic (between chaos and order) design for VISA in 1970. Hock's (1995) realisation that 'it was beyond the power of reason to design an organisation to deal with such complexity' led to what he describes as 'an inside-out holding company' where the '23,000 financial institutions that create its products are at one and the same time, its owners, its members, its customer, its subjects and its superiors'.

There are more recent extraordinary examples of the power of technology-enabled self-organising networks. The case of the Linux operating system (Kuwabara, 2000) is a striking study of the power of the self-organising properties of thousands of volunteer programmers or 'hackers' who have created a product to rival those of the world's most powerful organisations. Wikipedia has been another self-organising phenomenon.

All this leads to questions about what organisations of the future might look like, how they will add value and how they can combine people, structures and processes in order to be effective in achieving their goals. These are challenges that OD practitioners should be well placed to address from their rich heritage of organisational analysis and their ability to absorb new ideas from multiple disciplines.

In the US, however, OD has experienced what some have described as a 'crisis'. (Burke, 2004) while the UK is seeing something of an OD revival, with a plethora of new posts particularly in the public sector and health.

Let us first take a look at some of the criticisms that have damaged OD in the US:

OD in decline

Various academics have suggested why OD may have had its day:

■ There has been a separation of theory from practice and a suggestion that OD has moved away from its theory based roots to become more tool and technique oriented (Bunker, Alban and Lewicki 2004).

■ OD has tried to impose its own humanistic values instead of working with organisations' own values (Porras and Bradford, 2004).

■ OD risks pandering to fads as organisational customers look for new fixes and solutions to facilitate change (Bunker, Alban and Lewicki 2004).

■ Internal OD practitioners are buried within the HR function and lack contact with senior executives (Burke, 2004)

■ Little of note is emerging in the field of social technology (Burke, 2004).

In addition the following criticisms were identified by OD practitioners themselves through a global survey of 6,000 members of various OD networks (Wirtenberg et al., 2004)

■ There is a lack of definition and distinctiveness in what OD does.

■ OD practitioners need greater quality control/effectiveness and business acumen.

■ There is a lack of clarity around return on investment and the value of OD work.

As the dedicated remnants of OD practitioners become somewhat marginalised in the US with many defecting to mainstream consulting, why is there so much interest in the UK?

OD in the ascendance

One possible reason is that the same fertile ground that nourished the early roots of OD is doing the same today. The UK public sector has embraced OD wholeheartedly, not only to achieve change in the services they provide but also to combat modern day worker alienation. Parker and Parker (2007) reflecting on the state of the public sector suggest 'the metaphor of the machine – the idea of predictable, rational, cause and effect analysis may have brought about some significant improvements, but it has also failed to tackle deeper questions of motivation and legitimacy. Public sector staff are disengaged and frustrated' (p15). The authors go on to describe the quest for a 'new narrative' with new 'organising frameworks' and 'sources of disruption'.

A further symptom of malaise in the public sector is the inability to learn. Chapman (2002) for example describes the obstacles to learning in government and policy making as an aversion to failure; using failures to score points rather than learn lessons; pressure for uniformity; command and control authority; lack of time other than to cope with events; secrecy used to stifle feedback and learning; turf wars; efficiency drives and vested interest.

The behavioural sciences are now once again much in demand in the quest for employee engagement in both public and private sectors where there is fairly widespread consensus that OD is concerned with organisational effectiveness. There is also some agreement that it relates to 'sustainability' both for the organisation but in a broader sense of social responsibility to communities and the use of global resources.

Rowland (2007) identifies a number of themes around OD today:

■ OD happens in different guises although it may not be badged as such

■ All kinds of people do OD, not just designated practitioners

■ Development experts may not have the title but may use OD interventions.

This brings us back to our initial dilemma that 'it depends what you mean by OD'. There is clearly a quest for organisational effectiveness but the means to achieve it relies heavily on the competence of the OD practitioners, whether they are 'designated' or simply have an intuitive understanding of how to engage and harness the creative energy of people.

The 'self as an instrument'

Cheung-Judge (2001) suggests that 'OD consulting necessitates a high degree of self-knowledge and personal development that must engage OD practitioners throughout their professional lives'. She argues that 'among the many competencies required of us (OD practitioners) the use of self as an instrument is at the heart of our uniqueness and effectiveness'.

OD still relies on the ability, effectiveness and commitment of individuals and can seemingly be a lonely role to play as one practitioner describes, 'I learned as well that working alone with a complex system is quite difficult. I was unable to internally hold all system members, that is, to take in all its parts, to validate them separately, to see them as all part of the whole. Yet during much of the project I held onto the grandiose illusion that I should do so—which speaks, I think, to how caught I was in the agency's search for a savior and in my fantasy that I could be one' (Kahn, 2004).

A key dilemma, however, for the development of OD professionals is what might be described as a nomadic status in organisations. Most OD specific academic training and networks are still US based. There is no standard professional qualification or accreditation to demonstrate competence, practitioners are from a variety of career paths and there are few robust evaluations of OD interventions. Similarly its corporate home is often dependent on the partnerships it forges with HR, learning and development, strategy, communications or other areas of the business.

Grieves (2000) describes the OD practitioner as a 'journeyman', a term from the Middle Ages conferring status and freedom of movement. The journeyman acquires skills and knowledge to become a master craftsman and Grieves suggest that in the future 'the OD professional will be equipped with a new set of skills and a form of knowledge that may derive from the past but will not be tied to it. In that sense it is more self-critical and self-reflective' (p434).

A scan of 22 senior OD manager, consultant and director roles during September and October 2008 suggest that organisations are indeed looking for 'journeymen' with a broad range of skills, qualifications and experience. Most required a post-graduate qualification in organisational behaviour, occupational/organisational psychology or HRM and some were seeking business qualifications such as an MBA or practical six sigma expertise. A range of experience is also demanded from partnering with key stakeholders, leadership, project management, commercial and sometimes global

experience to evidence of delivery in talent management, culture change, restructuring, organisational capability development and change management.

With such broad development required of practitioners it is unlikely that there is a quick fix or a single route to achieving this status of master craftsman other than through a long and varied apprenticeship. Unfortunately the lack of accreditation leaves plenty of room for charlatans.

OD: the future

How then can OD avoid the terminal decline that has been forecast in the US (Greiner and Cummings, 2004) and support the rising demand for effective OD in the UK? Is it time to come in from the cold and enter into merger talks with HR to strengthen support for OD practitioners and also spread their skills into the HR community?

Some have argued for a convergence of HRM, HRD and OD (Ruona & Gibson, 2004) or at least for a strong partnership. Ultimately they are all striving to make organisations more effective through people.

Burke (2004) identifies five models, two of which he sees as potential futures for OD:

1. The *traditional* model: OD a sub-function of HR

2. The *independent* model: freestanding OD not reporting in to HR but possibly administration, strategy or operations

3. The *decentralised* model: OD practitioners in business units reporting to unit head with perhaps a presence at HQ

4. The *integrated* model: OD integrated into all aspects of HR with change as a primary responsibility

5. The *strategy* model: OD as an integral part of the strategic-planning function reporting to the CEO

Burke argues that while the *strategy* model would put 'OD where it belongs in the organisation, that is, integral to possibilities of system-wide change', he believes OD professionals would require new business knowledge and skills as well as incorporating the bottom line into their values. Indeed this lack of business knowledge is also a frequent criticism of HR professionals. He therefore believes that the *integrated* model provides a practical way to strengthen and renew both functions and to spur new thinking and creative action for the future.

The HR/OD dilemma

Mergers are already happening between the two fields as we see from the many dual roles advertised, and organisations such as CIPD are starting to provide some OD development for HR practitioners. Some strategic activities such as talent management and employee engagement also now straddle disciplines. Meanwhile, while not having OD in their titles, some HR Directors in practice have a unique OD focus and mindset.

Ruona and Gibson (2004) argue for the emergence of 21st century HR as a 'meta-profession that can accommodate multiple fields under its umbrella' and suggest that the current focus on people, systems, strategic alignment and capacity for change require an integrated approach from HRM, HRD and OD.

Our own research (Garrow, Varney and Lloyd, in press) found some close working relationships between HR, internal OD and external consultants although there can be confusion over roles and responsibilities. It also suggests a tendency for people with an OD mindset to come from commercial and operational areas of the business, rather than an HR background. There are several reasons why a full merger of OD and HR is likely to be difficult or unsuccessful.

Firstly OD arguably works best at the boundaries of organisations rather than as part of the establishment. Early findings from our own research (Garrow et al) suggest that OD does not necessarily sit well as a functional discipline but is more of a field of practice. OD's systemic nature and organisation-wide remit mean that it rarely sits neatly in the organisational hierarchy.

It is likely that merger with a formal function such as HR would inevitably lead to 'collusion' with the system in the sense of becoming part of the establishment, which could compromise OD's ability to challenge. There are warning signs that this may already be the case. Peck (2005) for example suggests that 'since 1997, OD in healthcare has to some extent become a servant in support of local implementation of national policy' leading to 'uncomfortable tensions' (p23). Edmonstone and Havergal (1995) also warn that in the NHS, OD had become 'sanitised' and 'a supporter of the status quo' criticising the 'recipe books' that 'portray OD as the application of problem-solving tools and techniques'. They suggest OD had become the 'custodian of the softer organisational values' and the terrain of the 'agony aunt'.

Secondly OD practitioners have varied backgrounds and a very different skill set. Our interviewees (Garrow et al., op. cit.) had held roles in Marketing, Learning and Development, Purchasing, Project management, Operations and Comp & Benefits but none had been in an HR generalist role. While they did see some overlaps with strategic HR they felt on 'different planets' from operational HR. The difficulties many organisations have experienced in implementing Ulrich's business partner role

seem in part to stem from the lack of strategic capability in the individuals whose roles have been 're-badged' (Bentley, 2008). One business partner in her report suggested that in some organisations HR has been expected to make this transition without adequate support and argues, that 'if you re-badge people without giving them training and awareness, you are setting them up for failure'.

Finally OD may do better to be more ambitious and aim for Burke's *strategy model* reporting directly to the CEO. Several of the CE's in our own research (Garrow et al., op. cit.) had a clear OD vision linked to strategy and personally led the OD agenda starting with the Board and Executive team suggesting that an OD mindset is starting to become an important part of the leadership repertoire.

Some final thoughts

OD has a long tradition and a strong legacy which remain as relevant today in tackling worker alienation as it did in the post war years. Both the social and the technical sides of organisational systems would seem very different to pioneers of classical OD but there is still a need for both a whole system approach and one that is underpinned by values whether these are the original human relations values or more general organisational values that inspire employees.

While the physical space of 'systems' gradually becomes less relevant, the art of managing and co-ordinating global, virtual and alliance teams has become a constant leadership challenge. Behavioural sciences and an understanding of social systems still have much to offer here particularly in the use of 'pull' techniques or 'attractors' that tap into intrinsic motivation and lead to employee engagement.

Meanwhile organisational design for a post global recession age is likely to be high on the agenda. Hock (1995) may well have been prophetic in his belief that our institutions must become 'chaordic'. His key question then was 'whether we will get there through massive institutional collapse, enormous social carnage, and painful reconstruction, with the distinct possibility to that ultimate manifestation of Newtonian concepts of control – dictatorship'. There are already calls for regulation, centralisation and more control.

OD practitioners, however, remain upbeat about the future (Garrow et al., op. cit.) and believe they make an important contribution in tough times through ensuring organisations use the energy in the system efficiently, encouraging learning and innovation, retaining a focus on the future and upholding values when they come under pressure. There are challenges, however, to become more short term and bottom line focussed, provide ready made solutions and deliver *changed* rather than *change ready* organisations.

OD will only remain relevant if it can continue to demonstrate value. The tendency for it to be defined currently in terms of tools and techniques paves the way for it to

become quickly dated and there is constant pressure to find new ways to deliver value and support change.

OD in the UK has not yet become embroiled in the sort of self-doubting debate that has dogged HR for so long around whether it has a seat on the board, how strategic it is and how it can best measure value. Practitioners are quick to say that if a CEO has to ask for measures of how effective an OD intervention is then it isn't working. This may not be a view that is universally popular although senior executives also felt that they would know effective OD when they saw it (Garrow et al. op. cit.).

Wherever OD sits in the organisation it will find allies and forge partnerships with like minded individuals who have an instinctive understanding of how systems work and this is particularly effective when the leadership also has an OD mindset. Where HR and OD are sufficiently compatible they will naturally form a partnership rather than be structurally driven to an uneasy merger.

OD inevitably retains an aura of mystique because it takes so many forms, draws on multiple disciplines and operates in the moment according to context and culture. Genuine OD is non formulaic and is difficult to define but taking multiple perspectives helps to create a contemporary picture of OD practice. While the debate around definitions and structures is interesting it should not be allowed to undermine what is done and how it is done, nor limit OD activity to those with a title or a designated function.

Ongoing development for OD practitioners remains a real priority, however, as the nature of the work they do relies heavily on their individual ability to 'read' organisations and make effective interventions which are relevant and sensitive to the organisational context. Where HR practitioners are 're-badged' into an OD role it is particularly important that they are not set up to fail.

Finally, OD has survived and evolved through embracing new challenges, new disciplines and new paradigms and there is some evidence that practitioners are becoming more business focused (Garrow et al. op. cit.). While the quest for organisational effectiveness and high performance, agile structures and processes, effective leadership and the challenge of change remain top priorities for senior managers the requirement for OD is surely set to grow.

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