

# Valuing Both the Journey and the Destination in Organization Development

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In this chapter, we argue that since the 1980s OD has been framed by a meta image of itself that no longer serves it well, and that we need a new image of what OD is that emphasizes a different value proposition for the field. The current dominant image focuses on the journey of change without much emphasis on the destination. We discuss some of the value dilemmas this creates for the field and its practitioners and suggest we would be well advised to return to the roots of OD and fashion a new generative image that is more concerned with the destination, and view the journey as a means to those ends.

## The State of Organization Development in 2017

In the 40 or so years that we have studied, practiced and written about organization development, we have seen the popularity of the term wax and wane a few times. Over that time there has been more than one voice expressing concern that “OD has lost its relevance”. Beer (1989) famously observed: “In my view the field of OD is dying” (p.11).

In differing degrees neither of us ever got too worked up about it because we believed (and still do) that the underlying issues OD cared about, and the tools and perspectives it brought to those issues, were still very much alive even if the term was brought into question. We both assumed that businesses would still need what OD offered even as they might oscillate between times when what we considered OD was called something else (e.g., Quality of Work Life, HR Business Partners, Change Management) and when OD, as a label, would re-ascend.

Now we are not so sure. In the US, many graduate programs in OD are closing or changing

their names (often to some variant with the word leadership in the title, for example Change Leadership). In Seattle alone all three masters in OD programs have recently closed due to lack of student interest. There seem to be fewer and fewer OD titled jobs in industry (though more and more call for OD skills, using other names). Many of the institutional pillars of OD, like NTL and the OD Network are struggling. When we entered the field the OD Division of the Academy of Management had one of the largest memberships. Now it has one of the smallest.

Regardless of current trends and nomenclature we think there is still a tribe of people who are OD. We are part of that tribe of fellow travelers. Not everyone calls themselves OD but all over the world we have met people who are part of this tribe; we recognize each other fairly quickly. Even if the label OD is waning, the spirit that animates the field is, we think, still very much alive but is being stifled by a “generative image” that no longer serves us. We will be making assertions we think most people who identify as an OD practitioner will agree with. We will discuss why OD finds itself in the curious position of being relatively unknown or marginalized

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even as the world increasingly calls for perspectives and processes that OD practitioners have in abundance. We will argue that what OD is really about is obscured when we say it's about organizational change; that doing so puts OD practitioners in a situation where clients ask for things OD doesn't do well, and they don't know to ask us for things they want that OD can do well. Instead, a new image of what OD is about is needed and any new image raises important questions of what values are being promoted and which are being brought into question. We will suggest that what really binds us together as a tribe of practitioners is a passion to create great organizations. Think about that: would changing our brand image from *OD is about change* to *OD is about great organizations* in our texts, graduate programs, websites, and mindsets, fuel a renewal? And, might it also impact to some degree what values are at the forefront of our practices? To begin this discussion, we first briefly review some aspects of OD more than a half century after its inception.

## OD is About Change – A Depleted Image?

Is there any question that *OD is about change* is the dominant image that has been created for the field during the past 30-40 years? OD didn't start out that way – it started out wanting to create great organizations that, depending on the particular theorist/practitioner, would not only be productive, but also be healthy with a high quality of work life and concern for its community and the planet. Examples of popular influences were Argyris' (1964) interpersonally competent organization, Likert's (1967) System 4, and McGregor's (1961) Theory X and Y. Sometime in the late-70's to mid-80's, however, the "generative image" of OD changed. Here, we use the term generative image as Don Schön (1979) did<sup>1</sup> – a way of looking at things that

usually isn't openly remarked on or discussed, but that rules in certain choices, tradeoffs and preferred outcomes while ruling out others. For example, Schön discussed how the generative image, "the blight of the cities", shaped the policy choices facing many large cities in North America in the 1970s. This image encouraged thinking about how to cut away or slice up neighborhoods, supporting the introduction of highways cutting through previously connected neighborhoods. We suggest that the 1960's image of OD as helping to create great organizations was depleted by the 1980s because of competitors who were also interested in creating great organizations but operated from different root metaphors, for example total quality management, lean manufacturing, and process re-engineering. The field of OD began to use its expertise in *change* to differentiate itself from these other approaches. For example, the OD Division of the Academy of Management changed its name to the OD and Change Division in 1990. Around the same time the authoritative Research in Organizational Change and Development book series was launched. Most B-Schools added change to the title of what had been the OD course. Textbooks followed suit. OD and change became so intertwined that for the uninformed they were sort of the same. Today in most B-Schools courses no longer have OD in their titles, they are about "managing change" and the OD and Change Division of the Academy of Management just a few years ago seriously considered dropping "Organization Development" from its title.

### A Values Dilemma: When OD is (only) About Change

When OD began to announce itself as being about change, leaders could or would say, "OK – I want to implement this change. Please go do that." This makes sense if you are hiring someone who bills themselves as selling how to

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<sup>1</sup> And somewhat differently from how we have been using the term in our writing on Dialogic OD.

change an organization. The leader strategizes and determines the change and then hires someone to implement that decision. Whether explicitly stated or implied this creates a dilemma for OD theory and practice. OD is not suited to situations where leaders decide the change and hire professionals to execute (Bushe, 2017a). Instead the OD practitioner seeks to be collaboratively involved in decisions about what to change and how to change it. That's one of the reasons early OD practice talked about the difference between the "presenting problem" given to the OD consultant and the potentially "real problem" discovered after the consultant becomes involved in diagnostic activities (Block, 1987). Early OD theorists emphasized "consultation that is aimed at some improvement in the future functioning of the client system, rather than simply at getting the immediate task completed satisfactorily." (Steele, 1975, p.3)

When the generative image as conveyed in talk and text by OD consultants and theorists is that the primary focus of OD is change, consultants find themselves in the position of having others define the change and then ask OD practitioners for advice on how to implement it, how to facilitate it, how to manage it. It leads executives to think OD has something to contribute in implementation (the journey), but not in strategic decision making about what to change (the destination). This implicit framing, invited by an emphasis on changing organizations without an emphasis on what they should become, has put the OD field in an unfortunate position. The values dilemma an emphasis on the journey and not the destination creates is that an OD practitioner is confronted by two potentially conflicting value orientations. One value set is about being client-centered where ultimately it is the client's decision about what to do. The other(s) is a range of values dealing with how people should be treated, what organizations should or should not do, as well as various ethical questions that might come up in an improvement effort. What happens when a leader wants an OD practitioner to implement a

change that the practitioner professionally thinks is unhelpful, possibly harmful and certainly not a pathway to a great organization? If the main emphasis is on facilitating change then presumably the practitioner either provides services to enact the change a leader wants, perhaps after some pushback, or declines the engagement. This was one of the values dilemmas some of our organization design colleagues faced in the 1980s when organizational leaders wanted to hire them to downsize their organizations and facilitate significant layoffs. Some agreed to provide their expertise since they believed they should focus on the journey and not the destination, while others declined because they did not want to be a part of the end result. Both groups of practitioners were trapped by the OD field's increasing emphasis, at that time, on being in the change business and less so or not at all in advocating for and creating great organizations.

When OD is thought to be mainly or exclusively about facilitating or managing change (change management) the broader scope of the original impetus for OD is lost, the strategic aspects of the OD brand takes a hit, and others as well as OD practitioners are even more confused about what OD should or should not include. We argue that the generative image that *OD is about change* confuses the means with the ends, and helps contribute to important values dilemmas. Based on our interactions over 40 years with OD practitioners, academics and students we believe most people who identify with OD are not interested in change for change sake. Consequently, when we say organization development is about change, we mislead ourselves and others and reduce the opportunity we have to strategically influence our organizations and our world.

## OD is about Great Organizations – a Generative Image for Renewal?

The phrase *OD is about great organizations* may be a generative image that captures what is most important to today's practitioners while being closely connected to the concerns and passions of the founding generation. It states that OD practice is about ends (as well as means). As a word of caution, however, it will only remain generative as long as "great organization" does not get too tightly defined. Every experienced OD practitioner has a set of principles about organizing that they believe create great organizations, and are characteristics of great organizations. Different models operate from different theories and value constellations. An economic frame will produce an image of a great organization different than someone operating from a social responsibility frame; a practitioner using an organic root metaphor will have a different model from someone using a brain metaphor (Morgan, 2006). In the 1960s OD embraced the new open systems theories based substantially on an organic metaphor that was intended to supplant the mechanistic image of organizations that had dominated for the first 50 or 60 years of the prior century. This was reflected in definitions of OD that included "healthy", like Beckhard's (1969). However, some 50 or 60 years later we think it would be too limiting to say OD is only about creating "healthy organizations". Instead, let's have a space for healthy as one way to imagine *great*, and space for other dimensions of great to be ends that OD practitioners can and should advocate for as they collaborate with leaders in client systems.

If you scratch anyone who identifies with organization development, under the skin is someone who is passionate about creating great teams and organizations that are good for people, good for performance and good for the planet. And there are likely to be many leaders at all levels of organizations who want the same

thing. Maybe they have authority over a small team they want to be great, or a part of a company, or a large organization. Who do they seek out for expertise in helping them envision a great team, division and/or organization? OD practitioners may feel constrained in what they believe they can appropriately and ethically advocate in the client-consultant relationship if they presumably are there to provide expertise on creating change rather than creating great organizations. Wouldn't it be exciting, ultimately more helpful, and less of a values dilemma if OD consultants had a generative image that guided them to be advocates with clients of both means and ends; of the destination as well as the journey?

## Some Principles and Values Underlying the Practice of Creating Great Organizations

Although worthy of a more extended and detailed discussion, here we'd like to articulate three principles and some associated underlying values that help define aspects of the practice of creating great organizations. We offer them as a jumping off point to invite further conversations about how to think about OD in ways that enable it to flourish at a time when its help in creating great organizations is so needed in our civic, governmental and business pursuits.

*An OD practitioner works collaboratively to create great organizations and this involves knowledge and advocacy of both means and ends.*

This, of course, is the key premise we are suggesting in this discussion. We are in essence inviting the field of OD and its practitioners to embrace a generative image that encapsulates the field's normative roots as advocating dimensions that would make an organization "great" and not just efficient or profitable. We are interested in "improvement", not simply

change, and we use our knowledge of social technologies or ‘means’ to advance or achieve those ‘ends’. Aside from re-embracing the field’s roots this also has the potential to change the values equation for practitioners as consultants, managers or professionals. As discussed earlier, a generative image for OD that emphasizes OD practice as exclusively a change service invites in the extreme a value proposition where “change orders are taken and implemented” in an almost ‘the customer is always right’ paradigm. This is an extreme characterization and many consultants would push back based on various value or ethical grounds, but would do so facing the dilemma that the generative image of the field does not necessarily legitimate them doing so. If practitioners and leaders begin to operate under an “OD creates great organizations” generative image, then all parties understand that an OD practitioner can and will legitimately operate as a knowledgeable and values-based advocate for both means and ends.

*An OD practitioner promotes engagement and inquiry as characteristics of great organizations and OD change processes.*

From data-based interventions to experiential exercises, from group problem-solving to group visioning, from surveys to dialog, a wide range of OD practices can be characterized by the two qualities of engagement and inquiry. This is not because they are the only or even the best way to change. The best way to change depends on what you are trying to change and who has to change. Because we are suggesting that OD practitioners should be interested in creating great organizations and not change for change sake, some ways of changing are more congruent with intended outcomes than others. We also believe that most OD theory, practice, and values explicitly point to high levels of engagement and inquiry as being qualities of a great organization. OD works when the change

processes are congruent with intended outcomes because means create ends. We believe that OD methods that create great organizations will utilize **engagement and inquiry**. To us **this is what differentiates OD practitioners from others interested in organizational change**. It also helps explain to practitioners and sponsors that processes of inquiry and engagement are not just independent values being raised in a change effort, but are necessary ingredients for both the journey and the intended outcome. In that regard if OD is about creating great organizations then OD practitioners as consultants, managers or professionals have a legitimate obligation to explain in contracting and throughout an engagement the reasons for and importance to outcomes of engagement and inquiry.

*An OD practitioner is interested in “development” as the process by which individuals, groups and organizations become great, and values theories of development that not only tell us what the journey looks like, but describes the destination as well.*

OD adherents might vary on how interested they are in development at various levels. Some are interested in models of individual development, particularly social, emotional and cognitive development. Some are interested in group development and how that applies to both great teams and great organizations. Some focus primarily on the larger system where there are fewer developmental models and greater complexity. Most have some knowledge about all three, and consider knowledge from all three spheres relevant to OD.

The early OD practitioners and theorists were radically about development – it was part of the “human potential movement” of the 1950s-60s. But that changed after the 1970s. Around the same time that *OD is about Change* emerged and

solidified in the 1980s, so did an emphasis on change for the purposes of advancing organizational performance primarily in terms of economic criteria (profitability, market share, “lean and mean,” etc.) in an increasingly competitive global economy. Development gave way to “effectiveness”, often in terms of economic viability, a quite different standard in terms of both outcomes, values, and resulting logics and actions. For example, developmental models often describe later stages of development that don’t seem relevant at earlier stages if you hold only an effectiveness and/or economic viability lens when judging what to do. Take teams for example. Allowing a team to go through a period of disorganization and ineffectiveness makes sense from a developmental frame because we see it as a necessary step in a team’s movement past its dependency on authority to being able to manage itself. With only an effectiveness and economic viability framework, it makes little sense to let a group flounder when the leader could step in and get it working. A developmental orientation to thinking about means and ends leads to ways of thinking and acting and values orientations that can and should be different from “effectiveness” criteria alone and especially as measured by economic outcomes and values.

In brief, we argue that a concern with development is what differentiates OD practitioners from others interested in great organizations (Bushe, 2017a). All models of development describe increasing capacity and desire for integrity, authenticity and congruence at later stages on the developmental path towards individual, team or organizational “greatness”, and OD values those things. All models of development describe increasing capacity to be in beneficial relationships, and OD values that too. Later stages of development always depict greater concern for social justice, balance in human affairs, stewardship of the planet. From a developmental stance, long term social justice always trumps short term

effectiveness in OD’s calculus of great organizations.

## Conclusion

Our argument can be summarized as follows; the *OD is about change* generative image that emerged in the 1980s is no longer helpful for our field. It puts us in the position of being asked to do things we might not be good at and even don’t really want to do, re-orientes our focus from development to effectiveness, and reduces our visibility as a body of knowledge and practice that can make important contributions to desired means and outcomes for current organizational and social issues. We suggest that *OD is about great organizations* could be a better generative image suited to our times. After all, business organizations have been experimenting with new organizational forms for at least 50 years without a lot of success. Leaders and consultants all know we need to do things differently, but haven’t found many successes at moving past command and control models (Bushe, 2017b). While OD was involved in organization design in the 1950s-1970s, many practitioners declined to become involved when clients wanted them to provide change efforts that didn’t treat people well, like most process re-engineering, down-sizing, and the globalization of labor. Most were asked to provide ways to “reduce the fat” through designing “leaner” organizations. Not how to develop great organizations able to succeed in a global context. This was not just a moment in history. Nowadays many OD practitioners are asked to provide a particular change intervention (a means) like creating and facilitating containers for temporary moments of engagement and inquiry (e.g. future search, open space, world café, etc.), ignoring how to create great organizations where engagement and inquiry are the day to day experience.

Would OD practitioners be engaged in more strategic work if it was understood, from the outset, that a key purpose of OD was not just to provide a change method for the immediate

problem, but to collaboratively strategize and work towards developing a great organization? Would such a positioning allow OD to bring more of what we know to the table, and satisfy our desire to create a world in which collective intelligence is more potent than collective emotion; a world in which the diversity of experiences in any group are a source of collective good, not collective strife? If we said OD is about great organizations would we have more opportunities to co-construct a social reality where collective intelligence, collective creativity and collective wellbeing are common experiences? To do that we think OD needs a generative image guiding how it thinks and what it does that values both the journey and the destination.

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