



SECTION 4

OD PRACTICE TRADEMARKS

Practice Trademarks of OD

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By LMYCJ, Q&E Ltd. No circulation permitted

To understand the practice trademark of OD practitioners, it is important to revisit the nature of OD work.

Burke (1982:354) reported an occasion in which a human relations consultant was speaking to a group of aspiring OD consultants and stated: "You can learn the technology of OD in 15 minutes". But he went on to ask the group, "How can you learn a technique, design, methods, tactics – that is, a technology – for dealing with dependency?"

The point Burke was making is that, while it is relatively easy to learn a lot of "how to" techniques in OD, understanding the nature of such human processes as trust, dependency, and conflict will take a lifetime. Practically, it is the work we do that gives prominence to the concept of "use of self".

The nature of our trade, being able to distinguish and work effectively with human dynamics, group dynamics and system dynamics requires us to perfect our expertise and understanding of how human and group dynamics work. Because of the nature of our trade we also have to develop and refine our practical approaches so they reflect our values and beliefs. Because the relationship between practice and values is so significantly intertwined in OD, a high priority is always put on the need for the OD practitioner to understand, and be in control of their own beliefs, values, and needs, sufficiently enough to act in ways that are appropriate and relevant.

Self is the main instrument of an OD practitioner. On top of techniques and tool kits, the fundamental gifts OD practitioners can bring to the client system are who they are and how they work – and this is the fundamental tenet of the concept of "the use of self".

In this context of fulfilling the intention of the OD calling, the following **eight practice trademarks** anchor practitioners in the ethos of OD.

1. Two pronged goal of OD
2. Focus on Human Enterprise
3. Collaborative and developmental approach
4. Importance of relationship building in our work
5. Focus on 'process' as well as on 'task'
6. Process-facilitative-educator role rather than the expert-advice-giver role
7. Use of self – the "Big I" intervention
8. Total system approach (multiple system level of intervention)

1. Two pronged goal of OD

The goal of OD is not just to improve the health of the organisation but to ensure change is synonymous with development. In the process of doing that work, the client system is being supported to develop capability to sustain the change. This is a critical feature of what makes OD unique.

There are other forms of consultancy that work hard to improve the function of an organisation but their work is often marked by the lack of two things which define real OD work: (1) sustainability, and (2) the intentionality to increase the client system's ability to engage in self-renewal in an independent effort.

OD is firmly committed to the client's self renewal ability and truly believes that when given the right type of support, most clients can solve their own problems. Also, if they have solved their problems once, they are more able and more likely to solve problems again if we expand the system's understanding on human dynamics as a way to impact on the cultural fabric of the organisation. So we do not just pride ourselves on our ability to adjust system policies, do organisation design, or support effective change but we put a lot more methodological focus in designing processes that will help the members within an organisation to create the change they want and learn how to do it again and again. It is these two prongs of deep expertise backed up by knowing how to get people engaged in processes that can change their future which makes OD work stand out clearly from the jungle of consultancy approaches.

2. Focus on Human Enterprise

As Burke (1997) pointed out, what makes the OD field so dynamic and controversial – even from its earliest days - is that it overturned the dominance of the classic theory of organisation and fundamentally questioned the whole machinery image of organisation. So what made the field unique from the very beginning was its assertion that if any organisation is to remain healthy it has to take its people seriously. By that we mean all of the people - those whom the organisation serves, those whom the organisation employs, those whom the organisation partners with, because great strategies alone do not make an organisation healthy - it is the active members who will.

The early founders insisted that those who run the organisation need to be helped to understand that their organisation is made up of soul alive, spirit kicking individuals and therefore it is vital for them to take the human enterprise side of the organisation seriously through effective processes, better communication, functioning teams, better

inter-group relationships, and so on. It is through helping the leaders to focus on this critical human element of their leadership work that we can lend support and help.

Tichy (1974:169) sums up the nature of this focus clearly: -

"I work on the human side of the enterprise. That is I help people, mostly top executives, work out their problems of interpersonal relationships and communications, and conflicts of interest. I get involved in planning and implementing procedures of goal setting, decision making, conflict resolution, and the delegation of authority. In this way, I help an organisation develop and modify its governance and problem-solving mechanisms"

So the OD professionals' mandate is to focus on the human enterprise within the system in order to help organisation leaders to deliver greater health.

We know that if any consultancy work focuses on everything else without putting the people element in the heart of their change work, it is not OD. In so many words, we know our job is not to fix the organisation; we are to enlarge the capability of those who live within the system to fix and improve it.

This belief that organisation is a 'living system', has a life of its own is a critical premise of OD. Therefore, unlike the machinery focus, we take the human dimension within each of the jobs assigned to us seriously. We build our expertise in human dynamics, group dynamics, and system dynamics and it is this knowledge base that gives us the know-how to build the capability of those who live within the system to fix and improve it. So while our commission may be of a technical focus e.g. doing organisation design or aligning processes, at the same time OD will always focus on the impact of these changes on the people within the system.

If someone is great in designing organisational structures without paying close attention to psychologically supporting people through the changes, they are not doing OD work. Yet, so many consultancy firms do exactly that.

Therefore, organisations can always rely on OD professionals to help their leaders to deliver greater health through our expertise in human dynamics and in a sustainable way.

3. Collaborative and developmental approach

As the aim of OD is not to do the work of the client but to facilitate processes to enable the client not only to do their own work, but learn how to sustain the momentum of such work, our approach is inherently a collaborative one. We seize every opportunity to turn our clients into collaborators, co-investigators, diagnosticians, joint planners, helpers in executing the interventions, and co-evaluators. We do this because we want

to get the client system engaged in/understanding their own issues, and better able to carry on with the OD phases on their own, and eventually *own* the change processes. This way, we know we are building momentum for implementation – which is what sustainability is all about. This approach is informed by the action research theory of Lewin who believed that the best way to study the system is to collaborate with members of the system so that as people get involved as researchers, they will become a lot more willing to apply what they have learnt when they do it themselves. Moreover, decisions are best implemented by those who help make them.

The collaborative approach requires practitioners to work harder to build a mutually trusting relationship for which we, in the beginning of our contact, have to aim intentionally.

4. Importance of relationship building in our work

In order to provide support to the clients in the way we have just described, we need to turn our attention to building a trusting relationship with our clients from the beginning. We know without establishing effective, helping relationships with and amongst individuals and groups within the client system, we will not have a solid platform to deliver the 'content' and 'process' help. This central focus on effective relationship building and maintenance remains the same regardless of the consultancy assignment.

This is why Weisbord (1977:108) is so adamant that a successful contract needs to address both the task and relationship issues during the process of consultancy. He said:

"What do I mean by contract? I mean an explicit exchange of expectations, part dialogue, part written document, which clarifies for consultant and client three critical areas:

- 1. What each expects to get from the relationship.*
- 2. How much time each will invest, when, and at what cost.*
- 3. The ground rules under which the parties will operate."*

That is why we will always aim to have a strong contract with our clients that is social in nature, not economic, and that that covers both task and relationship issues.

5. Focus on 'process' as well as on 'task'

Another practice trademark is our concern for 'processes' and not just tasks. What do we mean by process? ***The human and social processes through which individuals, groups, and organisations go about their business.*** The particularly important organisational processes listed by French and Bell 1999:164 are communications, the roles and functions of group members, group problem solving and decision making, group norms and group growth, leadership and authority, intergroup cooperation and competition, conflict resolution. When clients ask us to address any task issues, we

know our duty is to ensure the task issues get resolved, but our job has to focus beyond **what** the task is about - we need to be intentional in **how** the task is being done. In practice this means we need to set up processes to help the client to define and clarify what the system really needs and wants in terms of change agenda. We also need to help them to determine what type of data they will need in order to make those decisions, what is the best way to obtain such data and who else needs to join the team to analyse the data - to be involved in the final decision making for ownership reasons so that, at the end, the system can work together to deliver what it wants. We know the various processes that define the 'how' is not just to get things done, but to pass on whatever skills we use during the journey to the client.

6. Process-facilitative-educator role rather than the expert-advice-giver role

The focus on process rather than just on task defines the OD practitioners' approach which is more as a facilitator-educator than an advice-giver, as illustrated by the following quote:

"We believe it is possible and desirable, for the OD consultant to be an expert in the sense of being competent to present a range of options open to the client, but any extensive reliance on the traditional mode of consulting, that is, giving substantive advice, will tend to negate the OD consultant's effectiveness." (French and Bell, 1999:257)

In all his writing, Schein has been very explicit about why the expert role does not fit into what OD is about (1988:5-11). He listed the following reasons:

- **Expert role builds dependency** - To help the client system to develop its own resources, we need to support continuous internal skill development. Our expert role will not do that; instead it will help to build a level of dependency.
- **Expert role is not conducive to collaboration** - The expert role will automatically lead to a "selling role" and a "defending role" when we present our recommendations. This style will cut short the joint exploration process and negate a collaborative and development approach to improve organisational effectiveness.
- **Expert role can lead to an adversary position** - The expert role, particularly when played out mainly among the senior leaders, will lead to us losing credibility with the people below. They will know that we did not have all the data to base our recommendations on as those who have the answers were not included in the decision making process.
- **Expert role will induce unrealistic expectations** - If we continue with giving substantive advice, it will increase the expectations from our clients that we are able to give more and more advice. This reliance would prevent us from achieving our central mission which is to help them to be self-sufficient in capability and resources with the change processes.

It is this distinct role - using process skills to facilitate multiple parties to get the task done in a sustainable way and not acting as an expert advocating a certain position that clients should take - that makes OD practices unique.

However, does this mean that we should be technically incompetent or commercially naive? Bradford and Burke (2005; 198-207) was critical of how many OD consultants are proud of the fact that they are not business people - as if business is a dirty word. While this criticism is fair, it is important to know that most OD practitioners – as open system subscribers – are committed to be contextually savvy and therefore, we are also proud of our various technical expertise and industry sector knowledge. So this practice trademark is not about advocating that we remain naive commercially or content that we are without technical skills; rather, while we are in possession of these skills and are committed to deploy them for the benefit of the clients, our default approach is via inquiry to enable them to solve their own problem – but will step in when the client's readiness and capabilities are low and therefore they need us to swing back to "giving them some expert support."

7. Use of Self – the Big "I" Intervention

OD founders make a major distinction between the many tools and techniques the practitioners employ to support clients from the use of oneself to effect changes. One of our practice trademarks is that we will deploy our 'self' constantly to intervene in the client system. From the moment we make contact, we use our 'self' to facilitate multi parties to come to agreement as to what type of future or outcomes they want for their organisation, we work with the various concerns of different groups before we can finalise the contract. We also use our intuition and judgement to guide the clients through every phase in the OD cycle and to personally model some of the ethics and values that we expound. All those processes are held together by our conscious intention to use ourselves for results and that is what Tschudy (2006) calls the "Big I" intervention which speaks to the "intentional use of self to create the impact" and "the artful interaction with the client system in which the organisation moves from its current state to some desired state." (Tschudy, 2006:166)

8. Total system approach (multiple system level of intervention)

The final key trademark of OD practice is our subscription to system theory. The following key concepts from the theory impact on the way we practice:

- Every organisation is living within an open system – having a diverse set of environmental forces coming in to shape the organisation, and paying attention to the environmental impacting factors.
- Every organisation will need to produce relevant sets of output to justify its position in the market place and in doing so leaders need to pay attention to the

type and quality of interaction between the organisation and its various stakeholder groups which all have different types and level of expectations.

- Every organisation is made up of a number of interconnected parts which in turn have linkage with other parts of the organisation. Touching one component will create a ripple impact on the others; therefore paying attention to interface and interdependencies is critical in an organisation health project.

In practice, even though we may be commissioned to carry out a specific task for a specific group, as OD practitioners we will need to focus on the multiple systems that may be impacted on by the introduction of the change, and hence we recognise the need to spend time with clients to map out the intended and unintended consequences of the change on the various part of the organisation. Sometimes, we do not have the mandate to touch those other areas, but it is our job to bring the system perspective to the attention of the clients, so that they can pay attention to them.

This is the question that Richard Beckhard has repeatedly asked – “where is the O in OD?” He sees that there is a difference between “using OD approaches” and “doing OD”. Doing OD, according to him, fulfils the following definition which he delineated: OD is an effort that is a) planned; b) organisation wide; c) managed from the top; d) increases organisational effectiveness and health through e) planned interventions in the organisation’s “processes” using behavioural-science knowledge.” (Beckhard 1969:9) Bradford and Burke commented that most OD consultants “use OD techniques” – and in doing so, they have minimal impact and are seen by Executives as providing marginal value.

In summary

I am sure there are other practice trademarks that I have missed, but I think it is important to start to delineate the practice trademarks that distinguish OD consultants from other types of consultants. Based on the eight practice trademarks above, it is evident that one cannot do OD consulting just from the “neck up” – using skills, a rational mind, tools and competency only. OD involves both “neck up” and “neck down” work. It has often struck me how hard it is to do good OD work because the OD approach to help actually goes against our human need to be needed, recognised and esteemed for our expertise and the value we can bring into the system. As Schein said, our greatest work is to resist the seduction of being an expert demonstrating our special gifts to the clients; instead we should be acting more like a shadow consultant to stay in the background and work ourselves out of a job. This approach will require us to be firmly grounded in our self worth. How many of us can truly say we are there?

Returning to the practice trademarks of OD, I wonder whether we can now risk stating boldly something most of us avoid defining: who is doing OD and who is not? Can we venture to name activities as only truly OD if they are done to:

improve an organisation's effectiveness in a self renewing way by focusing on the human enterprise of the organisation; paying attention to the total systemic relationship between parts; using process interventions that are based on behavioural science theories and principles and informed by the humanistic value framework? If all the support work is done in a collaborative and developmental approach; through a trusting partnership between the OD practitioners and the client system – then it is truly OD.

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