

"When I help clients progress on their terms, they accomplish more than when I insist on OD perfection. If they just understood their world the way I do, they would find my ideas compelling... They don't. We bring them guidance, not law."

# If I Knew Then...

## AN ESSAY

By Geoff Bellman

**W**HEN THE OD Network began in 1964, I was beginning too, fresh out of graduate school, newly married, and off to conquer the corporate world. I did not yet know that organization development would soon begin emerging as my life's work. OD was to be another marriage for me beginning with chance meetings, followed by frequent dates, engagement, commitment, and a shared life journey. This article describes that journey from one scenic viewpoint; it looks back for direction forward, offering nine points of wisdom.

I'm imagining that you, dear readers, are: between 25 and 45 years old, and would love some affirmation or guidance on your own journey. I've written what would have been useful to me then—had I been ready to read it—and hope it's useful to you now. I've done good work, and could have done better work, had I held these nine points in my mind and heart.

### Our clients are not crazy.

Hear me talk about my clients twenty or thirty years ago: "What is *wrong* with her?... Is she *crazy*?... Let me tell you about the *stupid* thing she did last week... or... I *told* him what to do, then he goes out and *screws* it up!... or... Do you think they *even care* whether this place works or not?" I thought it was entirely about them, what an obvious mess they had made—and how lucky they were to have me.

Notice my distance from clients while ranting. Notice the "knowing better than" and the "it would never happen to me" implied in the criticism. All that is the opposite of what I now do—when I am doing my better work. Here's what I try to do when working with a client organization that is in some distress:

- Move toward the client mentally, physically, emotionally. Show through action that I respect them. Lean toward them, listen to them, empathize with them... all that good interpersonal stuff that OD has taught us so well.
- Seek to understand their situation as they understand it—and show them to their satisfaction that I understand it. Be willing to get lost in their problems along the way.

- They have reasons for the difficulties they are caught in; they make their own sense of the difficulties. Discover why and how it makes sense to them. This is their starting point.
- If they knew how to make better sense of their difficulties, they would have done it. Start with that assumption; they occasionally disprove it, but start there.
- Deal with them as capable people presently caught up in a difficult problem. Recall how often this has happened to you. Remember that your life is not as sensible and orderly as you often present it.

All of the above results are a rollicking ride with someone else in control. No longer the distant, expert analyst: you become engaged and confused; you wonder whether you will ever escape, much less do any good. You feel like you've removed your protective consulting attire and are rolling naked in the mud with the client. And, you are getting paid for this! Whoopee! Now *that's* exciting!

OD is "action research"; so get in on the action while you do the research. We've learned that our mere presence influences the system so let's become more present. Much of my past distance from clients was not about effective consulting, it was about self-protection. With my high control needs, I was afraid

### CONFERENCE CONNECTION



Geoff Bellman is a presenter at the 2004 OD Network Annual Conference in San Juan at the following Pre-Conference Intensive:

**113PRE The Heart of Consulting: Facilitating Change in Organizations While Being True to Yourself**

Friday, Oct. 1, 1-5 pm; Saturday, Oct. 2, 9 am - 5 pm; Sunday, Oct. 3, 9 am - noon

to get too close. I might lose myself; I would no longer know who I am or what I bring. If I were starting my consulting career over, I'd wade in sooner. I'd find the "craziness" of my clients in myself and embrace it as the place to begin our work together.

A last point about these "crazy" clients: Many of them become friends; some are among my closest friends. I just made a quick list: I stay in touch with at least two dozen clients that I haven't worked with for many years. What better way to forge a friendship than to wade in and work together? Now, instead of working, we have lunch, or talk, or camp, or walk together. And, of course, we reminisce about the work we did... the days we faced the dragon.

### Embrace organizations as they are.

Organizations don't work. Well, at least not for very long or predictably. They are always trying to work, and occasionally do. When I got into OD, I thought organizations could, should, and will work. Give a company the right values, direction, structure, systems, culture, and this place will hummmmm! I worked at making them work. I applied myself to getting them designed, tooled, oiled, and... they regularly frustrated me. No sooner than people step into their new roles, they start changing things! They don't do what "we" designed this place to do. Instead, they start taking down walls, digging tunnels, hanging wall paper, and getting tattoos—all before the paint is dry on what their design team, management, and I so carefully created. If it weren't for those... *people*... organizations would work!

When it comes to organizations, our reach exceeds our grasp. We can imagine societies, communities, corporations, and agencies that fulfill our grand OD fantasies. But we cannot create them today. When I joined OD, I expected to feel the organizational earth move under my feet in some seismic way in this lifetime. That's not going to happen.

OD work becomes more fulfilling to us and useful to our clients when we embrace organizations *as they are*. We've got too much riding on this to only love organizations for what they might become. That's like marrying someone you plan to change; it doesn't work. Face and embrace organizations as they are. And how might that happen?

- Continue to be a student of organizations. Look at how complex they are. Dive into the complexity; appreciate the mystery; expect unpredictability. Delight in them!
- Consider your own paradoxical, conflicted, exciting, contradictory, and occasionally weird life. Consider the twists and turns of your career. Look at your love life. Notice your fascination with it all. That's a step toward doing the same with organizations. Quit asking them to make more sense than you do!
- Imagine 547 people living fascinating lives... Now imagine those people attempting to join in a common purpose while also meeting their own individual needs... Now imagine they are in fourteen cities across six countries. Of course, it's very difficult to get anything done! Of course, it's often worth trying! Of course, the organizational potential holds huge human potential!

- What if you saw yourself as an explorer of organizations, more like Columbus? There you are, crawling up the face of the organizational monolith, looking in the windows, trying to make sense of it, trying not to fall, trying to figure out what you are going to tell the Queen. Now *that's* exciting work!

This is what keeps me looking into organizations. Not so much my immediate contribution, but how my work might be contributing to new forms of organizations. Yes, I hold evolutionary dreams while carrying few illusions about the difference I'm making. Three decades, centuries, or millennia from today, no one will notice my work. And... what else is there to do?

### Searching, not finding.

This work is most compelling to me when I am exploring, not when I am all-knowing. After all these years, I still experience delight (and a sense of privilege) seeing the innards of an organization—the guts, the juices, the odors, and the colors. I love looking even when I don't understand... *Especially* when I don't understand! The intrigue, the mystery, draws me. It's not as much about solving organizational puzzles as it is about encountering them. When I was newer to this work, my excitement was almost entirely about making a difference. That has changed; I've become less of a problem-solving world-fixer and more of life searching choice-provider.

If I'm expert at anything, it's searching. Not finding, but searching. I am a jungle guide... get me a pith helmet! I accompany people into their organizational jungles. They've been living on the edge of their jungle while I've been traveling the world, exploring many jungles. I know how to enter and get around; I can read the signs, sense the danger and the opportunity. The organizational jungle attracts me, still more unknown than known. People ask me to guide them as they enter their jungle and make their way through it to... treasure. Often it's gold; sometimes it's happiness. But there's always treasures. Otherwise, it's not worth the risk.

When an organization calls forth my curiosity, the work goes better. When I act expert (which sometimes I do), clients act respectful, sit back, listen, and try to do what I want. They feed my ego; I go home, self-satisfied, inflated, and unengaged.

#### AUTHOR

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When I quash my curiosity, I die a little. When I step into the mysteries of the organizational jungle, I live.

### **Look for life.**

What gives life to this place? That question provides a great lens for seeing a person, a community, a department, or a society. My early OD questions focused on training, or planning, or people dynamics. Those questions told others what I stood for and gave me back what I wanted. If I asked about their need for training, sure enough, they needed it. When I asked about problems people had working with each other, sure enough, they told me about their problems. My questions highlighted what was important to me, not necessarily to the client.

Now, organizational life is my priority. Without life... well, you know. Life is where the energy is, energy vital to sustaining an organization and renewing it. Don't just interview: View! See where the life is—and it's not primarily in the management. Look for life among those deeply committed out of belief, duty or necessity. Their finest expression of life does not come out in an interview; it comes out in their work. Watch them do it, talk with them about it. Don't just be seduced by the powerful people at the "top." Also join with the powerful people at the "bottom."

### **Perception and Reflection.**

Years ago, I thought I brought clients new skills, methods, tools, systems, and structures. Now, I bring perspective. I bring that other stuff too, but it's not what my clients value most. The people I work with are pretty smart. When I help them see their world in a different way, they often act on their new insight. They rely primarily on abilities they already possess; they don't learn everything new.

How might my early consulting years have been different if I'd focused more on helping clients step back and see, rather than step in and do. The contrast is clear: Earlier, I was more often like a door-to-door sales person, pulling brushes and cosmetics from a bag, seeing what the client might like to buy. Today, I'm more like a tribal healer using incantations and medicines to help others see their world differently. The stark difference between those two roles conveys how I feel about my older and newer work. In reality, I'm probably a melding of the extremes... a door-to-door healer perhaps.

Reflection entwines with perspective. If you want to see your world differently, you must make time to step back. Stepping-back time is hard to come by nowadays. Many of us work with clients demanding results in hours instead of days. Much of our OD technology was designed in less hurried times and does not fit with today's pace.

How do I help organizations value reflection enough that they will create time to do it? When will they study what they have been doing and learn from that? How will they deeply connect with each other? When will they exhale? My yesterdays did not prepare me for the pace of today and tomorrow. Reflection is essential to organizations, and I'm not prepared to do it well. I'm hoping you will learn what I haven't.

### **Progress, not perfection.**

Aspirations to live my life and work perfectly do not serve me. My research shows I invariably fail. For individuals and organizations, this life is about progress, not perfection. This world needs residents and consultants who will live in its imperfect reality while leaning toward positive possibilities. My early consulting years focused on getting it right according to OD, blaming myself and others for getting it wrong. Hidden beneath my insistence was a lack of acceptance of myself.

Now, show me progress! Good enough! When I help clients progress on their terms, they accomplish more than when I insist on OD perfection. If they just understood their world the way I do, they would find my ideas compelling. But that's just the point: They don't. We bring them guidance, not law. For our work to continue, our clients must see movement forward that meets their standards. Insisting on the "right way" doesn't work nearly as well as discovering "a way" forward together. We ask them to be flexible, and so must we be flexible. We ask them to risk, and so must we risk.

### **Know yourself.**

Like you, I invested years learning about change, leadership, and organizations—all important to being an effective OD consultant. I piled up workshops, seminars, tools, and theories; I built my expertise in the fresh fads sweeping through OD. Much of my effort was rooted in anxiety: Somebody might discover I'm not really an OD consultant so I must learn to act like one! Though my learning was protective, I filled my OD toolbox with ideas useful to my work. My early learning apparently assumed that knowledge was out there and I needed to soak in it or inject and inflate myself with it to become a consultant.

How do you choose among the tools? When do you design your own models? What shall I do now? These are the questions that get past my shelves lined with books and the drawers full of articles. These are questions of the designer, the artist, and the architect, who confidently uses the resources available. These questions come closer to the self. For some reason, we find it easier to deploy ourselves at work when we regularly consider questions like these:

- Who am I?
- Where am I going?
- What's important to me?
- How might I best contribute to this world?
- Where can I find love and friendship?
- How can I make a difference?
- What work might I best do?
- What do I need to learn?

Common questions lurking behind our every action. As common as the questions are, the answers are still emerging—at least for me and for you. If OD work is to be near the center of your life, it will be part of the answers to these questions. I make better consulting choices about what to do next in this design, or this moment, or with this method, when I attend to my prevailing life questions. My choices in how to do OD work

are more informed by intuition than logic, and I am more artist than mechanic.

### Love yourself.

In my early consulting years, I had no notion of how my difficulties with myself interfered with my effectiveness as a consultant. I thought it was those S.O.B.'s out there when, in fact, it was usually this S.O.B. in here! I saw the world through a lens clouded by low self-esteem. I believed that my issues with my clients were all about them, what they should do to change. I used their struggles to elevate myself. I "knew" that in their situation, I would handle it better.

I didn't know that my irritation with them had to do with unlit corners in myself. I did not want to know that their problems were my problems! Why am I lying awake at three in the morning in a torment about a client that irritates the hell out of me? Chances are my pattern of pain with a client is a pain with myself. Years have shown me that when I am shining some light into my dark corners, it leads to learning about and acceptance of myself. Self-acceptance leads to acceptance of others. I still struggle with this—and not just at work—but now I have quite a different sense of what to do about it than I did 20–40 years ago.

This is not as easy as finding what's wrong with me and fixing it. I need to accept, forgive, embrace, and love myself for who I am now, not for who I might become eventually. Right now – warts and all! When I am able to do this, barriers between me and my clients melt. The practical implications of this:

- I am more at ease with myself, and therefore am more at ease with clients, reducing unnecessary tension between us. I convey my respect for them with seldom a hint of disdain.
- I'm more interested in and attracted to clients. I lean toward their work and lives rather than pulling back in disgust at what they are doing.
- I ask wider and deeper questions; my inquiry is less sharply problem-focused.
- I expect that the client has probably done the best they know how, even if it's gotten them into a fix. They feel that acceptance as I work with them so they, in turn, work with me more readily.
- I share struggles from my own life that parallel their own. I do not condemn them.
- I help them with a larger perspective; I help them see how they can live through this.
- I remind them of what they are doing well. I rely on their strengths to lift them up out of the mud, rather than focusing entirely on what is wrong with them.
- My questioning or criticism of their work is more readily accepted because they know that I care about them.

### Reward yourself.

The commercial marketplace has just called to tell you: "We are full of wonderful rewards! Rewards you should receive! Rewards that will make you more of whatever-you-want than you are today! You should reach for those rewards! Everybody

should! Pass it on!"

The OD marketplace holds out its own rewards. There's the work others could give you... the recognition they could offer... the money you could make... the trip you could take. Everyone holding out a reward knows we human beings need rewards. And they are right.

In my early years, I sought my primary recognition from clients, increasing my dependence on them. I shaped myself to gain their approval; it often mattered more than effectiveness. A client saying sweet words can still charm me; I watch myself falling off my self-directed track to bask in client approval. This happens less often than years ago, but I'm still vulnerable... something to do with my childhood, no doubt.

I've spent years leaping for gold rings held by others. Not that those rings are unimportant, but notice: Who designed the rings? Who holds the rings? And, who is leaping? Being dependent on others to decide all your rewards is not the likely path to fulfillment. The challenges: Decide your own rewards, design your own gold rings, and reduce leaping for others' rings. And how might you do that?

- Imagine what you might be contributing to the larger world and future generations. Do something about it and see how it feels. Find a small bit of world work that engages you and return to it regularly.
- Meet with people who share your aspirations, maybe even your work... maybe they are in the OD Network! See them, talk with them, email them, regularly. Talk with them about why you do your work, not just how you do it.
- Read books, magazines and websites of people who are on paths like yours. Always be in the middle of a related book because it will help maintain your excitement and the sense that what you are doing is rewarding.
- Notice what you find rewarding in your work. Notice your patterns of satisfaction.
- Ask others to join you in your work—and your celebrations of what you have done. Get a license to brag about what you have done—and ask them to cheer you on.
- In small and large ways, celebrate often.
- Read this article looking for ideas that might lead to greater fulfillment in your life. Convert one idea to action.
- Put your life aspiration on equal footing with some of your common work plans. In other words, get it on your calendar. Dignify your life purpose with plans and actions.

### Close.

Throughout this article, I've felt the constraint of creating a short list of consulting wisdom. I focused on nine points, when actually there are 213... or... is it 437? Living a life informed by purpose means wisdom will come to you from many sources and directions. Our wisdom is unlimited—when we pay attention. And it hovers over us like a guardian angel—when we pay attention. That's the clue: paying attention to your wisdom, to what your wiser self is telling you... and... what is your wiser self telling you right now? ■