

What is Organization Development (OD)?

This is a critical question for our field yet answered in many different ways.

To start, I share a definition from Dr. Warner Burke of Columbia University. He stated that, “To be OD it must 1) respond to an actual and perceived need for change on the part of the client, 2) involve the client in the planning and implementation of the change, and 3) lead to change in the organization’s culture.” Further, Dr. Burke went on to write that, “...organization development is a process of fundamental change in an organization’s culture. By fundamental change, as opposed to fixing a problem or improving a procedure, I mean that some significant aspect of a culture will never be the same.”

Warner Burke’s definition holds high expectations and excludes much OD practiced today. I will lower the expectations while still providing sufficient challenge to various practices.

To be Organization Development you must develop the organization and the people. Therefore, OD is an activity or intervention that develops the organization to reach greater business functioning (obtain measurable goals) and develops people at the same time. If you do an activity that only develops people then it is not OD and vice versa.

OD uses interventions (planned or ad hoc) that include, foster, and impact:

- Direct communication (as opposed to indirect, passive, and avoidant).
- Clarity of authority (including decision making authority and who is in charge of what).
- Task component clarity (who, what, and by-when).
- Greater self-awareness.
- Systems thinking related to work.
- Workplace alignment.
- Conflict utilization (one on one and group[s]).
- Group process.
- Engagement of all levels.
- Clarity of direction (measurable goals).
- Business problem focus.
- Communication skills (Applied Behavioral Science).
- Effective use of direct feedback (both giving and receiving).

OD can be focused towards an individual, group, or whole organization. Yet just because you work with an individual, group or system does not mean you do OD. To be OD you must have a systemic focus and help build the interactions between people. The core unit of such interactions is the boss to their direct reports.

Are feedback, coaching, surveys, or 360 degree processes OD? No. But they can be.

OD fosters direct communication between members which means that such items often are not OD. However, any coaching, work place survey, feedback process or 360 degree process can be turned into OD by ensuring that the participants are not allowed to stay anonymous and that they have direct, constructive conversations. The tools themselves can be filled out anonymously as long as there is a clear process for each person who filled out the tool to translate what they meant into behaviorally specific feedback and then dialogue with the person with whom they are giving the feedback.

Clean feedback means translating each judgment, adjective, or interpretive word to behavioral specifics. The science of communication comes from behavioral specifics.

Processes that are allowed to proceed with dirty feedback (filled with adjectives, judgments and interpretive words) have a destructive effect on organizations and cause harm. Plus, if you allow dirty feedback (i.e. opinions and judgments) to be shared anonymously, then you are not only doing harm but also increasing paranoia in the organization.

The use of the applied behavioral science in working through conflicts is critical. It can help participants take full ownership of their emotionality and ease through the conflict by being direct and appropriate with each other. The basics of such ownership lives in the statement, “When you said or did X, I felt Y.” Please note that *said* or *do* must be articulated as cleanly as possible and I stated “I felt” versus “that made me feel.” The words *that made me feel* consist of victim language which allows one to think that the cause of emotionality is outside of oneself. Do not confuse this with impact. Humans impact each other and one should strive to learn their impact on others and adjust accordingly. Yet, each of us interprets differently. Therefore, owning that interpretation, rather than blaming it on another, is critical toward being a creator in life and learning about ones unique way of interpreting is a life long journey.

Another core tenant of OD is that democracy, meaning learning how to manage from the middle, is a learned behavior. Therefore it will always be relevant and critical for the OD professional to help managers think through how they are managing and move in a direction that will gain more system health. Again, that direction could be toward more use of authority.

The founders of OD came out of WWII and were keenly aware that authority could be used in destructive ways. They studied its effect in the now famous boys group study.

When you clarify authority you may need to delegate more to provide people with the freedom to act quickly or you may need to pull back the reigns if decisions are being taken, or not taken, in a way that benefits the organization. This applies to work groups, between groups, or projects. In projects, clarity of authority often means that items which need resolution get highlighted, clarified to a single point of accountability, and then monitored to ensure effective execution.

Finally, OD involves the importance of the group and group process. Those trained in the Applied Behavioral Sciences are aware of Lewin’s systems theory that bridged the early 20th century divide between psychology and sociology, between nature and nurture. $B=f(p,e)$: Behavior is a function of the person and the environment. As Gordon Allport wrote, “His unifying theme is unmistakable: the group to which an individual belongs is the ground for his perceptions, his feelings, and his actions” (Kurt Lewin, 1948, 1997, p5).

This focus on groups takes us to the most critical relationship—between boss and employee. The founders were clear about this and did not demonize bosses. Instead, they saw that the immediate work group is powerful and shapes behavior more than anything else. Further, the most critical factor within a group is how it is led. Kurt Lewin’s boys group study and many since such as Gallup’s studies on engaged workplaces all indicate that positive impacts to the boss employee relationship have a direct impact on the bottom line.

Organization Development provides a powerful way to highlight dynamics in the workplace by engaging the employees to reflect and improve practices and processes, while focusing on measurable bottom line results as set out by an engaged leader.

-Chris Crosby (2018)