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An effective means of influencing positive change in organizations, the Organizational Development (OD) methodology on leadership training can help business leaders employ effective assessment strategies and focus on the important rather than the urgent in addressing organizational challenges. Focused on exploring the underlying needs of their clients, OD consultants help define the real issues and root causes of their clients’ concerns. OD Consultants who systematically engage their clients with these strategies while also gaining trust can develop long term successful relationships that impact positively over time.

More often than not, leaders are left to their own devices to determine organizational and developmental needs, often leading to yet another well-meaning workshop or training session. The problem is at its conclusion, attendees generally return to the workspace with similar, if not the same, obstacles and challenges still starring them square in the face! Have you ever considered how these decisions are made? What were the considerations for deciding that yet another workshop is the answer? Who should attend? What were the outcomes and results of the last session? How will it impact the organization? Why will this one be different? And the list goes on.

These questions, left unanswered, can lead to high dollar investments in quick solutions prior to properly identifying the problem. An incorrect diagnosis or no diagnosis at all of leadership and organizational concerns, prior to making expensive training decisions will likely lead to more of the same behaviors and actions and have minimal impact on organizational effectiveness. Thus, if you always do what you always did, you’ll always get what you’ve always gotten!

Consider this dialogue: They’re just not doing what I need them to do. I don’t seem to be getting through to them and productivity is not where it needs to be. We just aren’t communicating! I’m talking, but they’re aren’t hearing me! I don’t know if I have the right players on the team! Let’s talk to HR about getting someone in here to train them in … you name it! I’m at my wits end! Let’s get it scheduled and make it mandatory for all to attend! Blah, blah, blah …!!!!!!!
Sound familiar?

Maybe with slight exaggeration; however, it is not uncommon for leaders make decisions about training needs with minimal assessment and understanding of the root causes of situations. Applying Band-Aid training will only cover the visible perceived problem. Uncovering the root causes with the help of an OD consultant could lead to better, more measurable results and a lot less frustration. While assessing the situation may not likely be a skill set of the leader, it is however a skill set for an Organizational Development (OD) Practitioner. Collaborating with an OD consultant who can help mitigate the situation, help plan change, and minimize risk may be a better option to consider.

Central to the notion of OD consulting is the ability to identify a problem, research, recommend a solution and help implement that solution. According to the Society of Human Resource Management Glossary, the goal of Organization Development is to increase organizational effectiveness through planned interventions related to the reinforcement of organizational strategies, structures and processes, resulting in improvements in productivity, achievement of goals and employee satisfaction (SHRM, n.d.). Consultants who include this goal in their practice contribute to leadership’s most pressing concern – that is maintaining the organization’s viability in a changing world. In this model, the consultant is concerned with the organization as a whole even when the current assignment is confined.

Organizations must go through the exercise of identifying and prioritizing what is important for their leadership team to excel. Ackermann & Eden (2011), suggest there is a strong tendency for the urgent to drive out the important. The OD methodology provides a way to identify and focus on the important and is viewed as a positive and critically needed capability to effectively enable a new culture and transition to a new operating model.

This article is cultivated out of my experience leading organizations and teams, training and development and organizational development consulting, as well as from associations with other consultants and clients. It also stems from current research on effective Organizational Development consulting. These experiences lead me to propose a means of clarifying the purposes of organizational development as it relates to training and development. When clarity about purpose exists, both client and consultant are more likely to experience a satisfactory engagement process.

The following subtopics are addressed in this article:

1. The Advantage of Utilizing Organizational Development Consultants
2. The Systemic Approach to Organizational Development
3. The Consultant’s Dilemma of choosing between what needs to be done and what the Client expects to be done.
The Advantage of Using Organizational Development Consultants

Today the question isn’t how many companies are using consultants but how many are not using consultants (Pellegrinelli, 2002, p. 229-233). Never has it been more important for leaders to position their organizations strategically for competing successfully in the future. The use of the OD process adds responsibility to the employees and leaders alike, to maintain open communication, and constantly reevaluate the needs of the organization. Consultants take on the role of process facilitators. The goal of process facilitation is to increase the client system’s capacity for learning so that it can make its own decisions and fix its own problems. An organization that uses the OD model has developed a network of contact and communication with employees (Singh, 2005).

Often times the information a client needs differs from what the consultant is asked to furnish. Some leaders undercut their own effectiveness by sending mixed signals. This happens in a number of different ways. For example: a leader thinks out loud and some people take such words as a call to action but others do not; a significant gap opens between deliberate and emergent strategy or a leader highlights “key organizational priorities,” and yet goes on to put more resources into other things (Hughes & Beatty, 2005). Still yet, some leaders don’t differentiate among competing priorities at all, implying that everything is a priority. In such cases, others will be left to their own devices to know that’s important, and poorly aligned actions are nearly inevitable.

Consultants have the responsibility to explore the underlying needs of their clients to help defining the real issue and root cause. To do so, he or she explores topics such as:

- What’s not working well in the business?
- Past solutions and results
- Client ideas and suggestions toward a solution
- Plans for implementation
- How will the solution be socialized?

In doing so, the consultant increases the likelihood of gauging the client’s readiness and commitment to change. Be careful to convey that reasons for engaging is not to discover what’s wrong in order to assign fault but to encourage constructive ideas for solutions toward improvement. This is critical since a solution to the wrong problem may not be helpful to anyone! Benefits of effective OD programs are myriad. Several conditions that must be present if an OD intervention can have any meaningful chance of bringing about the desired change (Dyer, 1989):

- The OD effort has to be connected to other parts of the organization.
- The effort has to be directed by appropriate managers and guided by competent change agents (OD Professionals).
- Owners and managers should show their commitment to OD at all stages of the effort, including the diagnosis, implementation, and evaluation.
- Owners and managers need to show employees how OD efforts relate to the organization’s goals and overriding mission.
When an organization has stable methods in place for communicating and implementing change, it is better equipped to stay proactive in the industry.

Successful OD is collaborative and future-oriented. When this is the case organizations can improve effectiveness, achieve goals, build capacity, and creatively manage challenges and change. An added advantage of utilizing OD consultants is that we often provide a different perspective and have a less biased view of the organization’s problems and needs.

The Systematic Approach to Organizational Development

OD consulting is much more than giving advice. OD consultants focus on developing the structures, systems, processes, and people within the organization through a variety of activities, including organizational assessments, executive and employee development and coaching, mediation and conflict resolution, operational review and process improvement, retreat planning and facilitation, strategic and operational planning, team development and facilitation, and customized training.

The practice of OD is grounded in a distinctive set of core values and principles that guide behavior and actions. OD efforts basically entail two groups of activities: “action research” and “interventions.” Action research is a process of systematically collecting data on a specific organization, feeding it back for action planning, and evaluating results by collecting and reflecting on more data. Data gathering techniques include everything from surveys and questionnaires to interviews, collages, drawings, and tests. The data is often evaluated and interpreted using advanced statistical analysis techniques. The OD process can be viewed as a sequence of phases – entry, contracting, diagnosis, data collection, feedback, implementation, and follow up.

The systemic approach to OD highlights the value placed on collaboratively engaging clients in the process of clearly identifying their needs and developing action plans that outlines a path to success. Because of the limited awareness of the availability of OD services, organizations may experience threats related to the lack of understanding of the value of OD as a systematic approach to achieving organizational efficiencies and synergies. OD consultants like to leave behind something of lasting value. Consultants facilitate learning by including members of the organization in the intervention’s processes. Client engagement in the process will promote opportunities to aid members in identifying learning needs (Steele, 1975, pp. 11-33 & 190-200).

The Consultant’s Dilemma

Because there are various client roles in consulting projects, the consultant needs to be able to manage the different types of clients and their different interests, influence, and levels of participation regardless of the mode of consulting. In doing so, the consultant has a dilemma of choosing between what needs to be done and what the paying client expects to be done. A frequent dilemma for experienced consultants is whether they should recommend what they know is right or what they know will be accepted. Yet others may wonder if they should do ‘what’s inspected or what’s expected’? Professional etiquette supports the notion of the consultant recommending and the client making the final decisions of whether and how to implement.
Consultants beware that effective implementation requires a level of trust developed throughout the engagement. Being preoccupied with our own agendas is a recipe for distrust (Bleak & Fulmer, 2009). After all, “clients pay attention to us only if we first pay attention to them” (Green, 2006, p. 27). You develop trust and respect by building personal relationships as well as treating everyone with respect. Trust is not something you can take for granted. It may take months or years to build, and unfortunately, you can lose it with one indiscretion! Keep your word, tell the truth and be transparent. Some important ethical guidelines for consulting during organizational change include:

1. Do no harm to your client.
2. Keep client information private unless the client or law requests otherwise.
3. Do not create dependence by you on your client, nor by your client on you.
4. Anticipate and avoid conflicts of interest (for example, representing two opposing interests at once).
5. Do not act in the official capacity as an advocate for your client.
6. Do not go beyond your own expertise.
7. Do not skip the discovery phase of consulting.
8. Treat others the way you want them to treat you.

To avoid unethical behaviors, you also should develop strong self-awareness about your own biases and assumptions and about the limits of your own expertise. This self-understanding is critically important (Carter, 2006).

**Deciding what-not-to-do in alignment with what would Jesus do**

“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you” - John 14:26 KJV.

Christian work is not a specific type of occupation but rather an attitude that sees work “not primarily as a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do” (Sayers, 1942, p. 89). The essence of organizational development methodology and strategy is choosing ‘what not to do’ and an effective leader knows when to act or stand still. As a Christian consultant, the Holy Spirit is the Teacher, Helper, Advocate, and Guide. He is the source of spiritual understanding, enabling Christian living. My goal has always been to integrate principles of spiritual philosophy, ethical disciplines and Biblical insight into my consulting practice. A blend of organizational development, leadership and spiritual worldview has proven very effective in leading clients through challenging and complex organizational change initiatives. The intent is never to attempt to push spiritual beliefs upon clients. Consulting should begin and end with the business strategy and objectives in mind; it is however, important to maximize the potential for a compatible consulting relationship. When the use of a consultant is seen as a strategic imperative tied closely to the strategy and needs of the business, excellent organizational results can follow (Bleak & Fulmer, 2009).

Creating the future is not a purely abstract concept. Successful organization development (OD) is a collaborative effort. Clients should recognize that unless recommended solutions consider the big picture, they may be impossible to implement or may create further challenges in the
organization. Therefore, consultants must work to provide consultation, diagnosis and interventions aimed at achieving congruence among the components of the organization.

With the calling of a consultant comes great responsibility. Clients expect consultants to provide accurate, sound, ethical advice with the utmost integrity. If you want the client to continue to seek, pay, and act, they must trust you! Consultants must be sure the message is received and clients experience the relationship as intended. As a practice, once a consultant’s words are aligned with actions, clients will begin to trust them, as well as seek and follow their advice. Nothing creates genuine trust better than focusing on the client, not as a means to your ends but as an end in itself (Green, 2006, p. 28). Consequently, without communication based on trust, respect, and integrity in the eyes of others; there is little chance that persuasion can be successful” (Conger, 1998, pp. 24-25) and signing that ‘new contract’ or retaining the ‘current’ contract may be out of reach!

You teach a little by what you say. You teach most by what you are. When a person is given authority, he is in a legitimate position to exercise control and influence. For some this is ego-building and leads to autocracy (Engstrom, 1978, p. 100). Consultants must exemplify in their own behavior the behavior they expect of others and display honesty and integrity in all relationships. A good character suggests an ethical foundation that makes our audience trust us and be more receptive to what we say (Barrett, 2011). In turn, the higher the chances will be for a more compatible consulting relationship; and the more likely it is that collaboration will be successful and the consultant will be invited back! Someone once said, “your best client is the one you still have!”

Conclusion

There are a variety of strategies that lead to empowerment in organizations. They can be directed toward individuals, work groups, or the entire organization. Drucker (1997) once issued this warning: “knowledge constantly makes itself obsolete” (p. 20) implying that neither people nor organizations can rest on past laurels or strategies. The systemic approach to organizational development highlights the value OD places on engaging clients in the process of clearly identifying their challenges and developing action plans that outlines a path to success. In general, organizations that wish to achieve a high degree of organizational change will employ a full range of interventions, including those designed to transform individual and group behavior and attitudes. Whatever the process, the consultant must be able to help the client to help himself.

In general, organizations that wish to achieve a high degree of organizational change will employ a full range of interventions, including those designed to transform individual and group behavior and attitudes. Typically, organizational development programs will simultaneously integrate more than one of these interventions. Future success may be realized by those who continually build and use knowledge to the fullest extent possible; that may well include external guidance from a knowledgeable consultant skilled in shifting mindsets from the status quo and getting the organization to see through multiple lenses.

When asked what advice he would offer to a new consultant, Block (2010) admonished to narrow your focus. Don’t try to be the all-purpose consultant. Find out what you care most about and what you have a gift for, and let the world know about that. The need to create relationships will
be key. If we meet the client’s need in a way that is consistent with our brand, expertise, and experience, we can create exciting new revenue streams; as well as make a difference in the lives of individuals, businesses and organizations.

What Marvin Weisbord writes in “The Consultant’s Dilemma” is that we always arrive in the middle of somebody else’s movie and leave before the end. It’s someone else’s movie (story), you’re arriving in the middle (there’s a past and a context that you don’t know but need to learn), and it will go on long after you leave. You’ll always have more to learn, and if you’re curious enough you’ll benefit from the inevitable mistakes and enjoy the journey (Linden, 2010). Something to consider the next time a client simply asks for yet another training class!

About the Author

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