

Q&A: OD needs to take a 360-degree view

Ian Gee has worked in the organisational development (OD) field for over 25 years, with experience within global businesses, public services and not-for-profit organisations. He now runs his own OD consultancy, Edgelands, which helps clients diagnose organisational issues and implement plans for change and transformation. He gave us his views on the current state of OD and how he feels the function needs to engage with a wider range of stakeholders if it is to remain relevant.

How would you define OD?

I was very fortunate to have Richard Beckhard, one of the first theorists in this field, as a mentor when I was just starting out in OD and I still ascribe to his classical view of OD as the application of behavioural sciences – with a particular emphasis on psychology and anthropology – to organisational issues and problems. I find this definition gives you good scope to get involved in all sorts of things, but in essence I help organisations identify what they need to do to future-proof themselves.

I tend to steer clear of the more esoteric definitions of OD. There are various debates – for example, over whether you work in an ‘emergent’ or a ‘programmatic’ way. But I feel this is a redundant battle: it comes down to applying behavioural science to clients in the most helpful way. The more OD practitioners argue among themselves, the more they risk alienating the broader organisation and find themselves talking to each other rather than helping the organisation grow and develop.

I believe that each generation has spawned its own form of OD. The baby boomers were all about self-actualisation and gave us many of the OD techniques that are still in use today, such as T-groups, Action Inquiry and Future Search. Generation X probably looked at this sceptically, regarding a lot of it as navel-gazing! They are generally more focused on effectiveness, efficiency and cost-cutting, and brought us tools such as Six Sigma, business process re-engineering and quality circles. In part this is down to the economic climate but some of it, I believe, is a reaction to the tree-hugging behaviour of us boomers! It is too soon to say what the millennials will want and bring to the field of OD – perhaps they will return to navel-gazing as a reaction against the slash-and-burn we have experienced in the last few years!

What is OD’s relationship with HR?

The Beckhard view was that OD should report to the Chief Executive. And between the 1940s and the 1970s it pretty much did – but over time it got slotted into HR. The relationship between HR and OD can be a really good one if there is a mutual respect and understanding. But it can also be very difficult if the emphasis among an organisation’s HR leaders is on

mainly transactional activity – it can be hard in those circumstances for OD to find a voice. In many cases, OD has become a catch-all term and is linked directly to talent management and leadership development. This can mean you lose the benefits of applying true OD thinking to OD challenges.

If you are a good practitioner and are given the credibility to build your practice, I don’t think it matters where OD sits. But if you are in an HR department that has limited influence within the organisation, it can impact hugely on your scope and what you can work with.

How do you decide what interventions are needed?

It varies and you have to look at the organisation at different levels. Sometimes interventions arise from conversations with an organisation’s senior leaders. But you might find you keep overhearing the same concerns in less formal settings, such as the canteen or corridor – in which case, you need to take this to the key stakeholders and explain that they have an issue.

At a previous company where I worked, for example, the facilities department had a page on the corporate intranet where people could log any problems. I noticed that everyone seemed to be complaining about a dead pigeon that had been in the car park for a week. The longer it stayed there, the more people started to complain about other facilities problems and wider workplace concerns – they were starting to connect the pigeon with the fact that they could never book a meeting room, or that the meals in the canteen weren’t good enough, or that they were struggling to fill vacancies.

As an OD practitioner, you have to look past what people seem to be saying at a superficial level and determine whether their reactions to a problem are actually telling you more about the culture of an

More information

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organisation. Is the dead pigeon simply a facilities issue or does it in fact symbolise a wider systemic problem? Sometimes a dead pigeon is not just a dead pigeon, to borrow from Freud! You also need to establish the extent to which you should address the culture problems you identify. When you talk to senior stakeholders you may find those vacancies are on a team that is about to be closed down anyway.

So an OD person should be looking at the organisation in the round but also vertically – what conversations are you overhearing and what does your intuition tell you about them? But to do this, you must have good personal credibility so that the Chief Executive will listen to you and engage with you on these matters. And you need good data both to back up your intuitions and to highlight other organisational issues, such as problems with attrition or appraisal ratings in certain divisions, for example.

How significant are generational differences in OD?

Numerous studies have shown that up to 70 per cent of change initiatives fail to achieve their objectives. This failure rate would be unacceptable in other professions and is very serious for our credibility. In many cases, I believe this happens because generational differences aren't taken into account when planning change and designing interventions.

If I'm starting out with a new client one of the first questions I ask them is about the age breakdown of the workforce because this can have huge implications for how you manage, lead, retain talent and structure work. It also affects how individuals handle change. If you look at people's different life stages, you find they have a different appetite for risk, for example. Those in the 35 to 45-year-old bracket are inherently more risk-averse than those in other age groups. Younger workers, meanwhile, are generally much less cautious and OD can help employers capitalise on this without having too many loose cannons in the workplace.

Many Generation X employees also seem to be struggling with a lack of internal alignment with business strategy because they lack a sense of who they are in the workplace, relative to where the company wants to go. Those in Generation Y meanwhile – the millennials – really expect to be involved in decisions way above them. Instead of telling them not to be so arrogant, we should ask ourselves how we harness this willingness. You can't tell them they're not special; you need to work with whatever they think it is that makes them so special. Moreover, I get the impression that people in this generation are engaging their parents, peers and wider social network much more in how they should handle

work matters and, in future, we may well have to take account of these external personal stakeholders.

What skills does an OD practitioner need?

You don't have to be an anthropologist, psychologist or social scientist – it helps, but good consultancy skills, where you can ask the right questions, summarise, listen and intuit, are a prerequisite. You need an enquiring mind to be able to understand organisational issues in different ways. We need to keep a very generic curiosity going – it's not just about the latest thinking or textbooks, as good as they are.

We shouldn't feel we need to present ourselves in a certain way. A lot of talent management and leadership development work is too rigid; people seem to feel it necessary to refer to the same recognised models time and again. But you have to question whether this works for all organisations. A good OD person knows when to draw on particular techniques and how to blend them to make the differences that are needed, rather than confining each method to a specific approach. Not every nail needs a hammer!

How can OD practitioners engage employees with their work?

A lot of OD people will only work at C-suite level – ie with chief executives and their direct reports – but in future, instead of fixating on this, we need to be able to work further down organisations and hear what the people there are saying, otherwise we will lose the essential 360-degree view. You do need a top-level stakeholder but it doesn't always have to be the Chief Executive.

When I am working with new clients on big change or integration projects, I often organise focus groups so I can understand what people's experience of change has been in the past. I can then help shape interventions around the positives and minimise the negatives, although obviously with situations such as redundancies or job changes this may not always be possible.

There has been a lot of focus on leaders and ordinary employees in OD work but less on how organisations can engage managers. These are people who were more often than not recruited for their technical expertise but now manage large teams, often remotely, and are having to rely increasingly on self-service rather than the help of admin assistants. In sectors such as local government, healthcare and not-for-profit, they may have been brought in to deliver the organisation's vision because of their affinity with its values. But in practice, restricted resources mean they are often limited in terms of how much they can actually achieve and they end up being perceived as blockers. I believe

this clash of values and the general culture of austerity we are living through are having a very negative impact on engagement and morale. And as such this must also be having an impact on service delivery. I truly worry about people losing hope in both the organisation's mission and in their own capabilities.

What does the future hold for OD?

Designing bottom-up interventions is now key and tools that make the most of social media, such as sentiment analysis, will be integral to this. We can't afford not to experiment like that if we're to keep the OD trade alive and relevant. And we need to create organisational permission to make mistakes along the way. We need to become as familiar with social media and web 2.0 technology as we are with the psychological and other social sciences.

OD also needs to explore the entrepreneurial space, but it is hard to determine how we can gain entry and I do not know many OD practitioners who are currently working in this space. I believe it is the likes

of Silicon Roundabout [a cluster of small technology companies based near Old Street roundabout in London] that will pull us out of the economic downturn. Silicon Roundabout borders on Hackney and you can already see the effect it is having on that borough – a study has shown that since the technologists moved in, crime is falling, literacy is improving and young people's aspirations are changing as they see people like themselves achieving great things. I think OD has a great contribution to make to this and we need to be inventive and creative about how we gain entry and start making a difference.

I have been carrying out research into the role of OD and HR with entrepreneurs with my colleague Dee Ortner and we will soon be publishing a series of articles drawing on this. We plan to hold seminars on the back of these for OD professionals who wish to bring their skills and capabilities into this area.

Ian Gee's blog can be visited at <http://theillusionofwork.wordpress.com>