

Organization Development

By Yvette N. Tazeau, PhD

Organization Development (OD) is the use of planned interventions in the workplace based on behavioral science to improve both organizational and individual functioning. Part of the difficulty in finding a universally accepted definition of OD is that the field uses numerous concepts, models, theories, and techniques at individual, group, and system levels. According to one model, there are at least eight different roles for the OD consultant, that of advocate, technical specialist, trainer or educator, collaborator in problem solving, alternative identifier, fact finder, process specialist, and reflector (Lippitt & Lippitt, 1975).

In the United States, one of the central figures in OD was Kurt Lewin. In the 1940s, he worked at his MIT laboratory, The Research Center for Group Dynamics, and developed a 'field theory' of social psychology and applied behavioral sciences. His sensitivity groups or "T-groups" as they were known (T stands for Training), were unstructured, small-group activities. The participants learned from their own interactions in the small groups. They also learned from the evolving dynamics of the group. This learning allowed the participants to facilitate change back at their place of work.

Another major influence on OD was the use of survey feedback. Again, Kurt Lewin was a major player. Other important contributors include Rensis Likert and Floyd Mann at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research.

The third major influence on OD was the concept of *sociotechnical systems*. In England, the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations pioneered the sociotechnical systems orientation which focused on the interaction and interrelatedness of the human and technical dimensions of work. In the 1980s, the Tavistock holistic approach on human and performance factors made its way to the United States.

Other influential figures in OD include management experts such as Chris Argyris, Warren Bennis, Edgar Schein, Ed Lawler, Peter Drucker, and psychologists Abraham Maslow and B.F. Skinner.

What is a typical OD approach? An OD practitioner identifies the problem and selects and/or develops a set of procedures to solve the problem. Once an approach has been settled, the practitioner works to gain acceptance of the procedure (an important step). Then, he or she implements the procedure and evaluates the results.

A Case Study: The management of XYZ Manufacturing Company was puzzled. Why had productivity levels dropped over a six-month period when the previous year had witnessed steadily increasing productivity?

The team of internal OD consultants met with upper management as well as the line staff. Upper management was interviewed and focus groups were held with the line staff. It was learned that management had introduced a new work team structure to the line staff 18 months ago. The work team model involved cross-training specialization of all line staff. In a short amount of time, the introduction of the team model had enhanced overall worker productivity by, amongst other things, reducing production errors and decreasing product delivery times.

However, within a few months of the introduction of the new work team model, the company's human resource department introduced a change in compensation that it applied across all company divisions, including the line staff of the work teams. The new compensation model provided for the evaluation of team performance without any recognition of the contributions of individuals.

The line staff felt that they were not being recognized for learning other skills through the cross-training plan and that, in the transition to the team model, some individuals were "not carrying their weight" in learning the skills of new positions within the team. The emphasis on team performance rather than

individual performance meant that individual development objectives were no longer relevant, especially since productivity levels were now measured at the team level. The impact of the new compensation approach had been to lower the morale of the line staff.

The internal OD consultants were able to work successfully with the human resource department to modify the new compensation plan. Both individual and team contributions toward overall production goals were compensated. Also, a "phase-in" period for the eventual implementation of the new company-wide team compensation approach was created. After a few short months, line staff morale improved and high productivity levels returned.

This example illustrates the need for a systems approach not only to understanding the problem but also to implementing the solution.

References

Lippitt, R., & Lippitt, G. (1975). Consulting process in action. *Training and Development Journal* 29(5): 48-54; 29(6): 38-44.

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