

Introduction

From Mee-Yan

I have never forgotten the excitement I had in 1971 when I was sitting in my first social psychology class (SP 101). The lecturer was sharing information with the class about a field of knowledge that helps to understand human dynamics and group dynamics. He quoted research from Lippitt and Lippitt on the boy-scout summer camp, the Hawthorne study, and a host of experiments on how groups work, what conditions induce conformity, what conditions lead individuals to give up their own judgement, the impact of leadership behaviour on groups etc. As he went on lecturing, my skin was tickling and my mouth stayed wide open while I frantically scribbled down everything I could retain. At the end of the lecture, I went boldly to the lecturer and asked two typically 'Asian' questions – 'Can one make a living out of this field of knowledge?', and 'What should I focus on in the rest of my academic study if I want to specialize in this field to make a living?'

Dr Culver, who was a gentle person, looked kindly into my wide eyes, smiled and said, 'Yes you can make a living out of this field of knowledge. The field is called Organization Development and it is a practitioner field. You learn to design processes to help people, groups, and organizations to function better. And if you want to specialize in this, you should take all the courses you can find in the following areas: social psychology, psychology, sociology and anthropology.'

That was the first, most significant encounter in my career path as it started my journey into OD. In the following four years, I did what he told me to do... enrolling in every single class I could find in those four disciplines and like a true scavenger, I consumed every scrap of knowledge I found. At the end of my undergraduate years, I felt I knew the literature and research of the various applied social sciences pretty well, and yet I did not feel satisfied or ready to work because the more I learnt the less I felt equipped to work and wondered what else there was to know.

While I was pondering on what to do next, a professor of mine, Dr Stanley, who knew my love of the field, decided that I should go on to a PhD programme that would allow me to focus more on social psychology and social organization. I was still unsure about whether or not to apply to graduate school as my father had passed away in my last year of university

and I was left without financial support. Then, miraculously, Dr Stanley showed up in the office where I was working part time with a fully completed application form for graduate school together with the form that asked for financial assistance. All I needed to do, as he instructed me, was to sign.

As I look back, that was the second most significant event in my career path. Somehow I was so fortunate to have someone like him who knew of my thirst for knowledge in this area and put himself out there to ensure I got to pursue the study I craved. I am eternally grateful that there are angels like Dr Stanley in my world.

Graduate school was like a dream – yes there was hard work, but every day I felt like I had been given the opportunity to feast on the vast amount of literature on individuals, groups and organizations via lectures, tutorials and conversations with faculty members and colleagues on the programme. Every reading excited me and I sailed through a tough PhD programme within two and a half years – and became the fastest person in the history of my university to finish a PhD programme. I know this is possible not because I am ultra smart but because of my love and thirst for the knowledge area. Why do I share this journey with you? It is because my love of OD is heavily rooted in my study of the vast amount of literature through close to seven years of academic study. Since that first lecture, I have not looked back once without a heart of gratitude that I have found my life calling. I hope this book may help you in discovering or developing your calling.

But it has been very disheartening to me in the last few years to read and hear of the debate about the fading value of OD – questions regarding whether OD is dead or not and whether OD is viable or not, some posted by major OD writers. Along that line of debate came the rigorous movement of differentiation in which every new method, idea, tool, approach to practices were defined (by their authors) from the position of how different they were from the field of OD.

OD has started to become the field from which authors and practitioners differentiate themselves and their methods. Their publications often start with a critique of what had gone wrong in the field of OD, and how their new methods and approaches make up for what OD did not and could not do. I do believe that parts of the differentiations are necessary and healthy as some of the areas do have distinct characteristics and do need to develop their own brand in order to be accepted as something new. However, that is only one way to look at the situation; another way to look at the situation is that they are all products of the evolution of the field of OD. OD methods, approaches and thinking have moved on, but by and large, if you review the work and thinking behind these ‘new’ areas, you will find they have significant common ground with OD. In fact, what is branded as ‘we are different from OD’ in fact has its roots in OD.

Am I the only one seeing this? Does this way of seeing the field have something to do with my cultural perspective? I am not sure, but one

esteemed US colleague once commented, ‘I wonder if, given your Chinese background, you are prone to syncretic thinking... versus a Western way of thinking which tends to be more analytical?’ Whether I am a Chinese thinker or not, I believe there are a lot more OD practitioners out there who think the way I think, except they don’t have an audible voice to present their thinking – without publication, one has no public voice.

So my desire in writing this book is try to describe what the field of OD is, its history, roots, characteristics, its theoretical roots, its practice trademarks, goals, approaches and its core activities. I even venture to define what OD is and is not. By doing that, I feel vulnerable as I am sure others will disagree with me, but simultaneously I also feel passionate and courageous because I want to put the debate firmly back on the table so that the field (as it migrated from the USA) into Europe, Asia and other parts of the world will grow and flourish.

The world of work has been significantly shaped by the work of OD in the past, and in this current climate, we cannot afford for OD to die a premature death. The world of work needs OD researchers, academics, writers and practitioners to continue to expand their influence to help its leaders to know how to pursue organization health and sustainability without sacrificing the people who work for them and the people whom they serve.

May this book and the work of all those ‘silent’ but passionate OD practitioners continue to help enlarge the territory of influence for OD. May the legacy of the field stay bright and clear.

From Linda

I share Mee-Yan’s belief in the value of OD though my route into OD was very different from hers. During the first half of my career I worked in publishing, was a secondary school teacher and then a management development manager in a large American multi-national firm. These various experiences were enriching and varied, but also started me questioning why so much of what was happening in organizations appeared to be dysfunctional and got in the way of people doing a good job. That’s when I started to believe that HR, as well as line managers, could make a hugely positive difference to the effectiveness of organizations if they embraced an OD approach.

Then I had the opportunity to join Roffey Park Management Institute in the south of England – a real privilege because it was a wonderful place to work. I was attracted to Roffey by its ethos as well as my own experiences attending courses or sending colleagues on development programmes there. Roffey had begun as a residential centre offering experimental therapy to people who had been badly affected by their experiences in World War II. By the time I joined it Roffey had become a management college but had

maintained its tradition of experimentation and innovation with respect to development methodology. The overall aim of all our efforts was to equip people to help themselves in today's complex workplaces.

At Roffey Park I started carrying out research into how people were experiencing the changing workplace. I wanted to do this because at the American company I'd worked for I had witnessed but not personally experienced some of damaging effects on employees of organizational change. This was the era of downsizing and delayering and I remember being struck by how these changes had affected people's morale. All the risks, and fewer of the benefits in the employment relationship were being passed to employees as workloads expanded and job security disappeared. Managers in particular seemed to struggle with loss of status in flatter structures, and now worked alongside colleagues in open plan arrangements rather than closeted away in pleasant offices. Trust was gone; could it ever come back, especially when executives could not see the problem? At the same time the company was presenting these changes as part of a fantastic new strategic direction, and urged everyone to 'go the extra mile'. How, I wondered, was this going to happen, when people had become what we now think of as 'disengaged'?

So in my research ever since then I have been seeking to find ways in which organizations can continue to change to meet the demands of the ever changing competitive landscape, but without such negative fall-out for individuals; hence my interest in OD. And I know that managers and HR care about this too. Both players have significant roles to play in building effective workplaces; managers because they manage the daily reality of the changing workplace and HR because they have the overall responsibility for ensuring that people are employed and managed in the 'right' ways. However, it's not enough to use HR levers to attract and retain the 'right' people; even the best people working in the wrong environment will not thrive or give of their best. Therefore culture, climate, leadership and organization design must be firmly on the HR map; that's why HR needs to embrace an OD mindset.

In recent years HR has pursued the holy grail of alignment to the business strategy. While this quest may have helped HR seem more relevant to business, in practice something vital may have been lost along the way – the focus on the employee and a deep understanding of the essentially human nature of organizations. With its humanistic values and focus on human dynamics OD reminds us that organizational effectiveness, renewal and health depend on the active engagement of employees. This is about participation, treating people fairly and as adults. Healthy organizations are adaptable, agile and ethical; they value employees and make the employment deal genuinely mutual in terms of risks and returns. It's time for HR to re-embrace the notion that the most effective organizations are those in which human beings can thrive and do their best work, seeing success as a genuinely joint endeavour.

In its next stage of evolution HR needs to learn from and embrace OD. With its longer term, and systemic orientation OD is the key that unlocks the gate to sustainable performance and engagement over time. With its powerful levers HR can help organizations develop the adaptive people capabilities that will equip them for the future. That's why I'm so excited by this book; together OD and HR are a marriage made in heaven!

From Mee-Yan and Linda

What kind of book is this?

First, this is a book for both OD practitioners and HR professionals. Hence it has two parts. Part 1 (Chapters 1–9) by Mee-Yan focuses on the 'fundamentals' of OD practice for anyone who wants to understand the field better and build up their practice of OD.

Part 2 (Chapter 10–14) by Linda, focuses on the four key application areas where increasingly HR professionals are asked to support the organization – Organization design, Leadership, Change management, and Culture change. These chapters are preceded by a chapter looking into the challenges HR faces; what OD can offer to HR and the type of relationship the two disciplines should have with one another.

Second, this is intended to be a basic book – our intention is to keep it simple. By the words basic or simple, we mean getting back to the essential core, the basic premise and principles of the OD field to help practitioners refer to, review and affirm their day-to-day practice. So there are very few case studies in Part 1 (there are some in Part 2). We hope by going into the fundamentals more thoroughly, readers will have no problem applying them to their own client situations – generating their own case studies.

Third, our aim is make this book useful to a range of people – from those at OD entry level who want to learn the trade, to those who have been practising for a while and want to reflect and review their practice. For those very experienced OD practitioners – this book should help to revitalize their passion of what OD stands for in the world of work.

This book is also written for HR professionals who have the challenging role of steering their organization through turbulent times by investing in and taking care of their human system. Not least, this book is for leaders in any and every kind of organization because ultimately they are the custodians of organization health, hence they are the primary practitioners of Organization Development.

Finally, though we are two very different individuals in background and practice we are united in our great passion to ensure the organizations of today's world continue to stay effective and healthy for the next generation.

We stand with Demos in believing, ‘Design and development of organizations will have a fundamental impact on the wellbeing of millions of people in the future. It will influence the distribution of opportunity and wealth in a capitalist economy as well as influence whether the combination of work, family, and personal lives can be combined in a sustainable way.’

We (HR, OD professionals, leaders) all have the opportunity to shape the way that organizations work. Our vision is that when organizations work well, ingenuity, creativity, and joyful practice will be a collective phenomenon. So, may this book help each one of you contribute to the creation of that collective phenomenon.

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