

A PROCESSUAL APPROACH TO PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

INTRODUCTION

Due in large part to widespread failure of strategic change models to produce promised results, a sense of disappointment has accompanied the change process for many organizational analysts (Bate, Khan & Pyle, 2000). Consequently, practitioners have responded to a greater extent by “throwing the babe out with the bathwater.” This is unfortunate in light of the fact that there has been little critical reflection on the assumptions and frameworks informing the theory and practice of public organizational change (Bate, Khan & Pyle, 2000). To prevent these drastic actions from becoming commonplace, it is essential to openly challenge habitual ways of thinking and to distinguish the effective from the ineffective. As such, this paper reflects upon two constructive models for public organizational change. This reflection leads to the identification of apparent misunderstandings about these models and the necessity of promoting a paradigmatic shift to cohere to the original intent of the authors. Specifically, this essay illuminates habitual errors in the interpretations of assumptions underlying Organization Development and Action Training and Research and analyzes the impropriety of basic notions of leadership as it applies to public servants.

ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

Conceptual antecedents of Organization Development (OD) as a body of theory and practice appeared as early as 1945 in Leland P. Bradford's *Resistance to Re-Education in Government Administration*. In this article, Bradford captured the apparent paradox arising from the development of individuals in organizations as an activity separate and distinct from the development of organizations, and *vice-versa*. Bradford claimed that “in the functioning of the organization, continuous growth cannot be achieved through efforts to improve one part to the disregard of the whole. Yet, “training is all too frequently undertaken on just such a piecemeal basis” (McGill, 1974). Nearly ten years later, Neely D. Gardner, head of the Training Division of the California State Personnel Board, conceptualized “training as a framework for action.” This marked the first attempt by a public agency to operationalize a synergistic training design and was the first articulation and implementation of a program of “organization development” (McGill, 1974).

OD grew out of aspects of *traditional disciplines*, like industrial psychology, industrial sociology and social psychology and aspects of *evolving disciplines* like systems theory and socio-technology theory (Bruce & Wyman 1998; Pilarz, 1992). The field developed from two central techniques around which “a whole set of other tools was developed that allowed individuals to understand better the structures, processes, culture, values, and behavior within organizations.” (Gortner, Mahler & Nicholson 1997).

The evolution of Organization Development reveals that the 1960s were the decade of the T-group (Argyris, 1962; Schein & Bennis, 1965) and saw the introduction of Lewin's Force-Field Analysis and organizational theory in the form of open systems (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). The 1970s were defined by contributions to a “theory of practice” (Harrison, 1970) through intervention strategies and team development and “a proliferation of training approaches to personal growth and empowerment” through self-directed learning (Harrison, 1970). Visioning emerged in the 1980s along with organization culture, systems thinking, and quality management. The idea of values-driven approaches and organizational learning appeared in the 1990s (Pedler *et al.*, 1991).

Concurrently, an organismic, or systemic, sociological definition of the subject emerged using an implicit “health” metaphor involving diagnosis and organizational health monitoring. For example, Beckhard defined OD as a “planned change effort” involving “systematic diagnosis” of the “total organization” that is “managed from the top” to increase the “organizational effectiveness and health” of the overall “system.” Such definitions reflect the functionalist thinking of the time and it may be argued that this version of OD has come to characterize the subject area more effectively in recent years. It is, however, the often quoted definition of French and Bell that best characterizes the movement away from the social engineering approaches, practiced largely by psychologists, which sought to enhance the techno-managerial imperative of the Fordist period. The approach to managing and developing organizations proposed by French and Bell emphasized empowerment through the articulation of the change agent's values designed to facilitate visioning, organizational learning and problem solving in the interests of a collaborative management of the organization's culture (French & Bell, 1995).

French and Bell (1995) define OD as a long-term effort to improve an organization's visioning, empowerment, learning, and problem-solving processes through an ongoing collaborative management of organization culture – with special emphasis on the culture of intact work teams and other team configurations – utilizing the consultant-facilitator role and the theory and technology of applied behavioral science, including action research. The intent or purpose of Organization Development is to “open communication channels, increase trust, and create a more democratic environment in organizations” (Gortner, 1997). Although there is considerable debate about the practicability and propriety of the objectives and the techniques used to reach them, the debate includes many aspects of organization theory. French and Bell (1995) set forth the following characteristics that distinguish Organization Development:



Distinguishing Characteristics of Organization Development	
1	OD focuses on culture and processes
2	Specifically, OD encourages collaboration between organization leaders and members in managing culture and processes.
3	Teams of all kinds are particularly important for task accomplishment and are targets for OD activities.
4	OD focuses on the human and social side of the organization primarily, and in so doing also intervenes in the technological and structural sides.
5	Participation and involvement in problem solving and decision making by all levels of the organization are hallmarks of OD.
6	OD focuses on total system change and views organizations as complex social systems.
7	OD practitioners are facilitators, collaborators, and co-learners with the client system.
8	An overarching goal is to make the client system able to solve its problems on its own by teaching the skills and knowledge of continuous learning through self-analytical methods. OD views organization improvement as an ongoing process in the context of a constantly changing environment.
9	OD relies on an action research model with extensive participation by client system members.
10	OD takes a developmental view that seeks the betterment of both individuals and the organization. Attempting to create "win-win" solutions is standard practice in OD programs.

(Wendell L. French and Cecil H. Bell, Jr., *Organization Development: Behavioral Science Interventions for Organization Improvement* in Gortner, H., Mahler, J. & Nicholson J. (1997) *Organization theory: A public perspective*.

Change Interventions

Early OD theory embodied three broad categories of change interventions. These were structural, task-technology, and people-focused interventions (Gortner 1997). Structural interventions included reorganization, revamping reward systems and cultural changes. Task-technology interventions called for redesigning jobs, attending to socio-technical systems, and addressing the quality of working life. People-focused interventions held that sensitivity training, survey feedback, process consultation, team building and inter-group development were essential for organizational change. Golembiewski, Proehl and Sink (1981) later grouped these types of change interventions into eight categories of activities.¹ Change interventions capture the competing approaches in the field of Organization Development.

OD Approaches and Values

Within the field of Organization Development are competing approaches and values. Whether the OD value determines the OD approach or *vice versa* is a topic for another essay but what is important is to capture the contending views. Two of these views are illustrated in the table below. Interventions into an organization's design and structure of work are assumed to move an organization toward improved performance and profits. (Massarik, 1992). On the other hand, interventions into behavioral processes are assumed to move an organization toward an improved quality of work life for the organizational members.

The tension that arises is whether the organization should improve and increase performance and profits or improve and increase the quality of work life of its members. However, OD focuses on *total* system change and the tension is resolved when the organization change agents seek to improve both effectiveness and employee satisfaction. As such, interventions must occur at the design, structural, and behavioral levels. (French & Bell 1995).

Competing OD Approaches and Values	
OD Approaches	OD Values
Change the design and structure of work	Improve performance and profit, bottom-line measures
<i>OR</i>	<i>OR</i>
Change behavioral processes in organizations (the way people work together)	Improve quality of work life of organization members, especially those at mid and lower levels

Sashkin, M. & Burke, W. "Organization Development in the 1980s" in Massarik, F. 1992. *Advances in Organization Development*. New Jersey: Ablex.

¹ These groupings are: process analysis activities; skill-building activities; diagnostic activities; coaching or counseling activities; team-building activities; intergroup activities; techno-structural activities; and system-building or system-renewal activities.



Humane Values

Methodologically, Organization Development has shifted from the inherent positivism of earlier approaches to a humanistic approach that utilizes Action Research as a mode of examination. Behind OD theory is a complex set of values that may be summarized by using Robert Simmons's phrase, *humane organization*. (Simmons 1981; Gortner 1997). According to Simmons, "the first essential step in provisioning humane organization is to confront the full meaning of groups, organizations and bureaucracies in the context and fabric of our political, social and personal lives...the attainment of humane bureaucratic organizations is crucial for the full achievement of human dignity in industrial urban society. The social "payoff" is creative and producing human beings fulfilling their own capabilities, contributing to stable social institutions, and challenging the unknown horizons of human existence and understanding." The humane organizational approach emphasizes the importance of employee well-being perhaps at the expense of the necessity of efficiency and productivity.

The Habitual Blunder

Curiously, the historical movement of Organization Development toward an equal emphasis upon the individual and the organization developed more so in the private than the public sector. As such, activities only tangentially related to training were promoted. From early data gathered by Glueck, it is evident that attention to individual development was a secondary concern at best, largely obscured by attention to the corporate structure (McGill, 1974).² This relationship between attention to the organization and attention to the individual is the reverse of the relative importance attached to these factors in the organization development program developed by Neely Gardner. Yet, this imbalance pervades the implementation of current organizational change models – it is a blunder that became habitual.

ACTION TRAINING AND RESEARCH

As noted previously, Neely Gardner's "training as a framework for action" marked what appears to be the first attempt by a public agency to operationalize a synergistic training design (McGill, 1974). A 1974 *Public Administration Review* article authored by Neely Gardner suggests that Kurt Lewin and Carol Rogers were, perhaps, the most influential contributors to the theoretical framework on which Action Training and Research (AT & R) was predicated. Gardner noted that Lewin's research provided knowledge about leadership, tension, levels, aspiration, substitution, satiation, and anger all of which incorporated his concept of force-field analysis. Additionally, Carl Rogers' research on learning and interpersonal growth influenced the theory as well. Raymond Bruce and Sherman Wyman (1998) may be credited for operationalizing Neely Gardner's original concept of training as a framework for action. Like Gardner, Bruce and Wyman emphasize the imperativeness of employee "participation in the innovation, fact finding, analysis, problem identification and solving, response strategy development and evaluation of results" (Bruce & Wyman, 1998). AT & R's 12 steps may be illustrated as follows:³

AT & R Stages (Bruce & Wyman)	AT & R Cycles
Orientation	Research Cycle
Contract-Compact for Learning	
Reconnaissance	
Problem & Opportunity Identification	
Aspirations	
Analysis for Strategic Action Options	
Experiment	Action Cycle
Test Results Analysis	
Program Design	
Implementation	
Program Evaluation	
Re-Cycle	

² William Frank Glueck, "Organization Development Departments in Selected American Firms: An Exploratory Behavioral Analysis" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Michigan State University, Department of Management, 1966, and cited in McGill's 1974 article, "The Evolution of Organization Development."

³ Several works contributed to this author's sketch of Bruce & Wyman's AT&R process. These include Carnevale, D. G., (2001) Leadership, innovation, and organizational change in public organizations, *American Review of Public Administration*, Vol. 31(2), Coghlan, D., (1998), *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, Vol. 6(4); Neely Gardner's "Action Training and Research: Something Old and Something New" and "Perspective on Organization Development" in the 1974 issue of *Public Administration Review*.



These stages are not intended to be an inflexible step-by-step process; rather, the stages are navigational tools to guide practitioners through change processes. The stages are organic, systemic, and interdependent. Feedback generated through these processes serve as a “learning loop” to inform and re-create opportunities to revisit earlier stages. The entire model is cyclical, with action and reaction based on feedback and empirical facts. Through every step of this cycle, different forms of education and training are necessary.

AT & R is the method by which an organization may undergo Organization Development; it is distinct from OD, yet part of the same family. By fusing AT & R and OD, AT & R is the *process through which* OD may be realized. As such AT & R provides the cyclical grounding for OD’s long-term efforts to improve an organization’s visioning, empowerment, learning, and problem-solving processes through an ongoing collaborative management of organization culture – with special emphasis on the culture of intact work teams and other team configurations. Unfortunately, the literature addressing directly work teams and team configurations is scant. Instead, theories of organizational culture and leadership models converge to offer up effective change leaders capable of managing culture and employees.

LEADERSHIP

Leadership has been widely accepted as a critical factor in organization change in terms of visioning and steering the process (Boss and Golembiewski, 1995; Beckhard and Pritchard, 1992) and mobilizing and legitimizing power (Greiner & Schein, 1988; Hardy, 1996). However, the literature on leadership is not congruent with the premises of OD and AT & R – both of which recognize the reality of continuous, dynamic change.

Static theories of trait and behavioral leadership cannot meet the demands of change. Situation leadership models provide for contingencies but not long-term, ongoing organizational change. Transactional leadership models fail to meet the task on the grounds that, like social-exchange theory, assume a leadership role of reciprocity and employees bound by self-interest. The transactional leader cannot resist the forces of a powerful organizational culture. Moreover, the transactional leader “accepts and works within the structure as it is” and is thus bound to the status quo (Gardner, 1990). The transformational leader seeks to solve the shortcomings of the other leadership models in its promise to embrace and reinforce change. Yet, this leader’s attributes are unrealistic in its overly romanticized *Ecce homo*-ness. Unfortunately, this charge may also be waged against Robert K. Greenleaf’s Servant Leader.

The Conceptual Buffoon

The consistent notion that permeates all of these leadership models is the routinized conceptualization of properties of a single human being – the One Leader. In scrutinizing the environment of leaders (Fiedler, 1967), the relationship between leaders and followers (House and Mitchell, 1974), and the relationship between organizational culture and leadership (Schein, 1985), a familiar paradox arises: the development of Leader in an organization is separate and distinct from the development of organizations and every other individual member of the organization. This peculiar framework holds fast to notions of an independent-autonomous-mutually-dichotomous-different-from-every-other-One. These assumptions are not the apparent intent of Organization Development and Action Training and Research theorists.

“Leadership” in public organizations is the conceptual buffoon that got itself taken seriously. It is an omnipresent, habitual, blunder. Indeed, leadership must be reconceptualized to reflect the reality of “Leader” as a property of systemic, ongoing processes (Barnes & Kriger, 1986; Krantz, 1990) that, in turn, produce the capacity for leadership roles to spread out across the organization (Bate, Khan & Pyle, 2000). Through the synergistic process that arises from the fusion of Organization Development and Action Training and Research, the effective public servant is continuously re-created. Rather than “leadership,” this process may be more appropriately termed “servantship.” Servantship captures more closely the original intent and emphases of these authors and incorporates the hoped for attributes and characteristics of civil servants described by Robert K. Greenleaf’s Servant Leader.

Distinguishing Public and Private Orientations

Despite the increasingly shared rhetoric among public and private management literature, the separate and distinct orientations of these entities lend different goals and objectives which result necessarily in desired outcomes that are fundamentally different. A review of this literature reveals that OD and AT & R are two pieces of the same public organizational change puzzle. Together with a notion of servantship, they bring to life the synergistic process through which public organizational change is attainable. The distinction between leadership and servantship is more than one of semantics. Coining the term “servantship” is not to be coy or clever but to cause pause and invite critical reflection. The distinction is one of coherence to intent.

Leadership and the assumptions that inform the leadership literature fit well within private-sector management models in that they are compatible with the economic life sphere in which private industry functions. However, the assumptions that inform leadership models are not a cogent fit for public organizational change management in that



they are incompatible with the political sphere in which public entities operate (Dudley 1996). This is not to say that leaders per se are misplaced in the public realm; rather, a paradigmatic shift in the theoretical underpinnings of leadership models is necessary in order to be useful to public entities. Therefore, this author fuses OD and AT & R into a processual model—not only to lend clarification to what appears to be the original intent of the authors—but to also challenge the foundation upon which habitual blunders and conceptual buffoons have evolved into a “mainstream” approach to public organizational change efforts. A diagram of the Processual Approach to Public Organizational Change follows.



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