

A Positive Vision of OD's Future

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## A Positive Vision of OD's Future

The field of organization development (OD) is facing serious questions about its future (Burke, 1976, 2002; Cummings and Worley, 2005). Several observers have described the current situation as one of the more important crossroads in the field's history (Freedman, 1999; Farias and Johnson, 2000; Worren, Ruddle, and Moore, 1999; Hornstein, 2001; Worley and Feyerherm, 2003). On the one hand, OD is a powerful and institutionalized activity in many large and small companies and it significantly influences the way organizations are managed (Kleiner, 1996). On the other hand, OD is struggling with its own identity. It is often confused with change management and other forms of organizational change, its professional associations are grappling with their image, and many question the value of OD.

A critical question facing the field at this crossroad is: What does the future of OD look like and how will it get there? This chapter proposes one answer by describing a positive, possible, and hopefully provocative future scenario. This chapter stands in that future to recount the historical role that a rejuvenated OD played in creating this positive scenario. OD strongly influenced the future because OD practitioners 1) formed and leveraged an alliance among the field's professional associations and 2) supported the implementation of the responsible progress doctrine.

### A POSITIVE FUTURE SCENARIO<sup>1</sup>

The 2025 world is a culturally diverse, mostly safe, and increasingly connected society. A complimentary and aligned set of governmental, technological, organizational, and workforce trends and policies enable an overwhelming majority of the world's people to benefit from globalization. North America shares the economic leadership with other economies. Shifts in the United States' cultural identity – from unconscious imperialism to conscious capitalism –

between 2005 and 2010 hastened this more collaborative approach to global governance. The U.S.'s movement was similar to the more community oriented, connected, and sustainable vision that emerged in the European Union during the early 2000's (Rifkin, 2004). The move clearly changed the conversations among governments, religions, and other interests. A revamped United Nations is making progress to resolve centuries old conflicts around the world, and to slow the spread of AIDS/HIV considerably. Terrorism remains a global threat but its impact has been greatly reduced.

A tacit global industrial policy emerged following facilitated and coordinated action among the financial markets, organizations, governments, and other stakeholders in the early 2010's. A key element in development of this policy was an agreement among these groups to pursue moderate growth that allowed for environmental issues to be addressed alongside economic performance concerns. Moderated growth rates radically slowed greenhouse effects and created opportunities for sustainable economies. Tax policies were shifted through unprecedented governmental coordination to encourage ecologically responsible behavior. Investors from New York's Wall Street to Hong Kong's Hang Seng have become swifter in rewarding companies that "do the right thing" and equally swift in punishing organizations that fail to balance long term development against short term profit maximization.

Technology has helped and is helping to address a variety of environmental, health, hunger, and education issues in 2025. The demise of fossil fuels as the basis of most economies followed major viable breakthroughs in alternative energy sources in the late 2000s. Alternative energy sources – fuel cells, solar and wind power – and their development have become new economic opportunities. Remaining efforts to explore and extract natural resources are coordinated with environmental concerns in a truly sustainable fashion. Information technologies

also are used to empower extensive participation by all vested groups in governance, protect individual privacy, and secure communication. Broad-based information availability and access have created an environment where organizations and governments are expected to and rewarded for acting responsibly. The 2025 media has detailed many accounts of how individuals and organizations have used the Internet to promote public responsibility. The adaptable non-governmental organizations are one notable example. The NGO's and others have used the truly world-wide web of 2025 to monitor organizations and governments and to alert the media to unsafe or environmentally unsound activities, or violations of basic human rights.

The economics of collaboration replaced traditional notions of competition at the organizational level around 2018. Revised definitions of "wealth" and new methods of accumulation lowered wealth concentration and closed the gap between the haves and the have nots. Network structures that enable small systems to be part of large wholes have proliferated. These structures were ironically what made the early terrorist movement so effective. Large and small organizations, governments, and public infrastructure systems are less vulnerable to attack and disruption as a result. The triumph of loose over tight systems integration without loss of efficiency was enabled by advances in security and privacy software. The advanced software technologies obviated concerns over "Big Brother" and allowed for more effective monitoring of terrorist communications and planning.

Organization networks also support the policy of sustainability by decreasing the size of most organizations. Organizations in a network specialize in specific products or services across a variety of countries and cultures. The only constraint these organizations operate under is to provide what was agreed to. They are free to operate according to local custom, use local resources, and organize according to principles of sustainability.

## OD'S ROLE IN CREATING A POSITIVE FUTURE

The field of OD is broadly regarded as making a substantive contribution to this scenario. The keynote speaker, **INSERT NAME**, at the 2025 World OD Alliance (WODA) Conference in Baghdad, recounted OD's amazing rejuvenation as the most influential service offering the world has ever known. S/he proposed that the alliance among the professional OD associations and the enactment of the responsible progress doctrine were the two key events that energized OD influence.

### **An Orchestrated Alliance: From Fragmented to Coordinated Action**

**INSERT NAME** suggested that OD's rejuvenation began with the 2007 announcement of the World OD Alliance, a network of the professional OD associations. The alliance signaled the field's commitment to move from fragmented to coordinated action, and to discard what had been the unproductive promulgation of distracting and competing voices. The alliance committed almost immediately to a conversation about its values. "Learning" emerged as a cornerstone of practice. The alliance created an integrated marketing and education program as its next step. **INSERT NAME** detailed for the conference the alliance's initial rationale, the subsequent creation of an integrative and cornerstone value, and the alliance activities that promoted OD practice.

#### *Alliance Rationale*

The alliance announcement symbolized the field's intention to coordinate its efforts toward an integrative view of OD's potential. It sought to end the sometimes subtle and frequently distracting competition among three OD views or voices of the past. The traditional, pragmatic, and scholarly voices each believed that one form of OD was better than another, more

aligned with certain values, or more supportive of certain outcomes (Alderfer, 2003; Cummings and Worley, 2005; Worley and Feyerherm, 2003). One example is that the “traditional” OD voice believed that OD’s primary goal was to create organizational processes that were transparent, treated people with dignity, and served diversity. The traditional voice relied on humanistic values of democracy, trust, and human integrity. Traditionalists saw the key to improving organization effectiveness as the transformation of the relationship between the individual and the organization (Friedlander, 1998).

A “pragmatic” voice believed that developing the organization created an environment where people could become healthy. The pragmatic voice relied on instrumental values of relevance, utility, and professionalism to increase effectiveness by managing changes in the relationship between the organization and its environment (Friedlander, 1998). The pragmatic approach to change was seen as more helpful, less likely to address the distracting emotional aspects of change, and more concerned with implementation than traditional approaches.

A third voice was the “scholarly” voice and it focused on creating valid knowledge, and with generalizing conclusions about how change occurs, how it is triggered, under what conditions it works well, and so on (Pettigrew, Woodman, and Cameron, 2001). The scholarly voice was not concerned about how OD was defined, what its values were, how it was practiced, or whether an OD practitioner was involved except as a potential explanation for change success. OD was just one of several ways organizations could be changed.

Twentieth century OD practitioners had hoped that such diverse voices would strengthen and grow the field by encouraging innovation, exploration, and knowledge creation. However, the professional associations were ineffective at expanding the influence and reputation of the field despite considerable new interventions, processes, and philosophies. The reality was that

professional associations did not spend much time together, no infrastructure was available to orchestrate their efforts, and each group created and defended its own version of what OD should be.

The World OD Alliance that brought these divergent groups together did what the individual associations could not. The alliance increased the field's capacity for influence by leveraging members' unique resources and perspectives. Examples include recognizing that the National Training Laboratories (NTL) and the different university OD programs were the natural choices to lead the field in building OD practitioner process skills, and that the Academy of Management's ODC division, Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP), and other groups were the natural choices to generate knowledge on the empirical relationship between change and performance and the moderating effects of commitment, participation, communication, and organization capability. Additional capacity and leverage was created by setting and resetting the research agenda for the field each year in collaboration with the OD Network, the American Society for Training and Development, and other practice oriented associations to address both long-term issues and pressing business concerns.

The World OD Alliance succeeded because its members recognized the powerful and pervasive trend toward organizational networks. The advantages of organizational networks included smallness, agility, support for local culture and diversity, and global reach. These advantages were offset by a weak and impractical knowledge base that afforded OD an incredible opportunity. OD would be a microcosm (Alderfer, 1987) of an important organizational trend if it could resolve the voice and value conflicts fragmenting the field into an integrative belief and intervention system, and if it could implement the alliance with an eye on watching the alliance itself evolve. Practitioners then could develop powerful tools, concepts, interventions, and processes for facilitating the globalization

of the economy. The emerging networks of business, government, and non-governmental organizations were paralleled by an alliance among the professional OD associations.

*Learning: From Fuzzy Values to Clear Priorities*

The alliance's creation was a watershed event in OD's rejuvenation. A three-day strategy conference shortly after the alliance was announced resulted in the commitment by all parties to a conversation about values. Conference participants recount that it was clear to everyone that the field possessed a "fuzzy logic" with respect to values. The group was in 100% agreement that what made OD unique was "its values." However, little to no consensus existed on what the values were. Each voice prioritized a given set of values differently (Davis, 1999) and claimed to be speaking for the field. The conference resulted in a commitment to begin a conversation on OD's cornerstone values. A process crafted and started by Gellerman, Frankel, and Ladenson (1990) was used. Participants in this process were not asked to agree or commit to particular values. Participants were asked only to agree to being involved in the process of discussing and debating the values.

The conversation unfolded in articles, on-line messages, and informal exchanges among researchers and practitioners. One issue was that many traditional OD values were seen as hypocritical, judgmental, and often dogmatic, especially in the context of a globalized economy and cross-cultural practice. Examples include that honesty and integrity were culturally determined values. What was open and honest in one country was very different in another. Another example of culturally determined values is an unequivocal commitment to participation that leads to democratic change designs in highly autocratic or power distant cultures and colludes with an un-mindful capitalism to reduce cultural diversity.

The value of “learning” emerged as a means to reconcile differing voices and provided OD with a stake in the outcomes of economic and social activity. A change design focused around learning would decrease the chances for judgment and increase the chances for appreciating diversity in thought. For example, by incorporating periods of reflections and review during the change process, organization members could inquire into what worked and did not work in producing change. Such learning could then be factored into subsequent intervention designs.

Learning also was a value with a long tradition in OD. Educational interventions, for example, were one of the early change strategies (Bennis, Benne, Chin, and Corey, 1976) and remain an important element in many organization, management, and leadership development efforts. Moreover, learning was a long-held element of good OD practice in terms of transfer of skills and knowledge to the client system or the increased capacity of the client system to manage change in the future (Worley and Varney, 1998; Worley, Rothwell, and Sullivan, 2005).

The traditionalists saw learning as an important part of OD because it differentiated OD from change management. It was a legitimate answer to the question, “why is OD different?” Pragmatists favored learning as a value because a strong economic argument existed for building the learning and knowledge management capabilities of organizations. Successful innovation relied heavily on learning as new technologies were applied over time and in different contexts (Sahal, 1981). Organizations in rapidly changing environments and growing industries either had to increase their capacity to learn in proportion to their growth rate or suffer a competitive disadvantage in adapting. The capability to learn and change became a central part of the discourse in strategic management as a result.

*Alliance Contributions to Practice: Knowledge Management and Marketing*

OD practitioners operating under the umbrella of the alliance and the emerging consensus of learning modeled the new economics of collaboration through a knowledge management portal and a marketing website. A knowledge management portal was developed first to create a central location where OD practice knowledge was stored, to develop best practices in emerging areas quickly, and to improve the quality of change interventions and OD practice. The portal provided a place where new ideas could be posted, practice experiences shared and searched, and conversations about practice maintained. A variety of tools, concepts, interventions, exercises, frameworks, and experiences were captured including practical tips about how to understand and work with power and politics, when to intervene and when to be patient, how to resolve ethical or value dilemmas, or how to make choices about the speed of the process.

The portal was successful in increasing practice effectiveness. OD was better able to influence organizational effectiveness because OD provided valuable information for both beginning and seasoned practitioners, refreshed practice with new intervention ideas, recognized the contributions of practitioners to the portal through citation, references, and business referrals, and was easy to work with.

A second alliance effort was a marketing website to educate the public and potential client systems about OD. OD's reputation was in flux at the start of the millennium because many people simply did not know what OD was and many others were claiming to practice OD without any preparation, knowledge, education, skill, or experience. The website responded by describing the purpose, philosophy, and processes associated with organization development. It also described practitioner competencies, likely outcomes, and key differences between OD and other forms of change. The website was tremendously helpful in articulating differences among autocratic, fast, and

directed change, facilitated change management, and organization development. OD's focus on learning, building capacity in the system, and attending to improved effectiveness was seen as an increasingly relevant option for organizations. Educated clients were better able to make decisions about staffing an internal OD organization or hiring external consulting help. The website encouraged clients to seek out internal and external help that matched their particular needs and offered the opportunity to provide recommendations of good practice. The website also provided a broad set of resources related to the specialties within OD.

Individual alliance members included the address for the World OD Alliance website on their business cards, email signatures, and their own websites. This helped to build a community of practitioners and create an OD brand but did not homogenize OD practice. Practitioners retained their own unique skill sets, approaches, and value-add propositions, and did so within the boundaries of the field as explained in the website. The upshot of including the website address on client communications was the creation and communication of a de facto method of quality control. Practitioners unwilling to live by the generic guidelines described in the website were not forced to comply. The voluntary participation to support the website and its overview of the field effectively controlled the supply side of the consulting equation. The increasing sophistication of the client systems controlled the demand side. Some practitioners were successful despite resistance to the idea. However, many practitioners who were not qualified to deliver OD services found it increasingly difficult to find work.

### *Summary*

The World OD Alliance came together and signaled the OD field's commitment to resolving differences generating more harm than good and preventing the OD field from being a positive and

substantive force in organization and social change. The alliance's first two orders of business were a conversation about valuing learning as an integrative and overarching principle and acting on that value by educating the marketplace about what OD should do, how OD works, and what OD can offer. Two key events in this process were the knowledge management portal and the marketing website.

### **The Responsible Progress Doctrine**

The alliance's early activities were an important step in OD's rejuvenation and established a broader infrastructure for OD's influence on organizations. But **INSERT NAME** stressed that OD's ability to shape the globalization process required the articulation of a set of goals and strategies. To actualize OD's potential for organizational and social change, a strategic planning process was initiated that leveraged learning from the processes that created the alliance, developed the conversation on values, and promoted the field. The planning process resulted in the creation of the responsible progress doctrine.

The responsible progress doctrine called on the field to provide governments, non-governmental organizations, corporations, and other stakeholders with support to jointly optimize the four elements for global success: economic development, technological innovation, cultural diversity, and ecological sustainability. The doctrine was influenced by the joint optimization principle from socio-technical systems theory and recognized that each of the elements alone was insufficient to produce responsible progress; that the pursuit of each element's goal had to be achieved within the bounds of the other three. The doctrine was also influenced by Murrell's (2002, 2003) proposal to treat people as ends, drive for performance as an important outcome, address the balance and tension between trying to achieve both people and performance outcomes, and design for sustainability.

Finally, responsible progress doctrine was influenced by the “triple bottom line” that focused on the economic, social, and ecological value added or destroyed by governments, organizations, and individuals.

*Technological innovation* supported the goal of new and better ideas for progress. It was the economic drive train of responsible progress guided by the principles of sustainability. Investments prior to the responsible progress doctrine often favored incremental innovations with higher likelihoods of generating incremental profits over riskier innovations with great potential (Mensch, 1978; Sahal, 1981). Too often, these incremental investments increased commitments to fossil fuel-based paradigms. The progress that was achieved was fleeting and in the wrong direction. In contrast, the responsible progress doctrine encouraged OD practitioners to ensure that organizations included a broader set of criteria when choosing technologies to support, pursue, develop, or deploy. Organizations were recognized whenever practicable by media accounts and the financial markets for pursuing the development of clean technologies, the substitution of clean technology for fossil fuel-based business models, and the use of technology to preserve cultural diversity. Development of communications technologies that protected the security and privacy was also encouraged. These technological trajectories supported learning as a core organizational value, as the World OD Alliance founding had proposed.

*Economic development* supported the goal of organizations and countries to grow and operate effectively guided by the principles of cultural diversity and sustainability. It specifically recognized the importance of profit, productivity, and growth at all levels. Technological innovations were deployed to create effective organizations, productive countries, and a robust global economy. A variety of policy and tax incentive changes were needed to support the

technological investments, to look carefully at the distribution of wealth (specifically the gap between the haves and the have nots), to pursue growth not at the expense of cultural diversity but because of it, and to promote business models that examine the return on living capital.

*Ecological sustainability* supported the goal of living within the environment's ability to support life over the long run and contribute to diversity and growth. It was a link pin value in the responsible progress doctrine and suggested that business strategies built around the productive use of natural resources could solve environmental problems at a profit (Lovins, Lovins, and Hawken, 1999). These frameworks began with a simple premise: The economic models based on growth that were current in the early 2000's could not reconcile the increasing demand for finite and fundamental natural resources with the decreasing supply of those resources. Recognizing and addressing this incompatibility as part of the responsible progress doctrine created a larger number of available and socially acceptable solutions (Natrass and Altomare, 1999).

*Cultural diversity* supported the goal of human and cultural dignity and its key role in innovation and long-term adaptability. The models of globalization that emerged in the late 1900s consciously or unconsciously sought predictability and control over operations through standardization. Standardized operating procedures and technological platforms were not optimized within cultural norms that varied across global subsidiaries. Adopting a standard culture was preferred and encouraged in a variety of subtle and gross ways as a result. Although cultural diversity was important in its own right, it clearly supported other elements of the responsible progress doctrine. For example, cultural diversity was and is a real source of creativity and innovation. The cultural diversity principle raised into saliency what had been happening unconsciously and asked decisions makers to commit to the health of the long-term source of growth, development, and innovation.

The responsible progress doctrine reflected an updated view of industrial-organization economics (Scherer, 1980). An economic system's performance traditionally had been judged by the extent to which (1) scarce resources were efficiently used to maximize real income, (2) a broader and higher quality set of goods and services were produced over time, (3) employment was being maximized, and (4) outputs and outcomes were distributed such that people's needs were being met and productive effort rewarded. However, market conditions that evolved in the late 1900s warped those criteria. Globalization was less about economic equality than it was about standardization and the dominance of a certain view of capitalism. The globalization that resulted maximized short-term profitability at the expense of long-term viability, unintentionally homogenized national cultures, and failed to account for the ecology in its calculation of profits and return (Korten, 1995; The International Forum on Globalization, 2002; Lovins, Lovins, and Hawken, 1999).

The elaboration, discussion, and implementation of the responsible progress doctrine gave OD a voice in shaping and influencing significant social and organizational change. Because it embraced and integrated the traditional and pragmatic voices and leveraged the strengths of alliance partners and members, OD was not marginalized as it was during the reengineering, downsizing, and total quality management crazes.

**INSERT NAME** concluded his recounting of OD's rejuvenation by noting that members of the OD community around the world began adapting and promulgating the responsible progress doctrine in publications, conversations, and practice. The field began shaping organizational strategies, structures, and processes both internally and externally according to the policies of responsible progress. The changes were imperceptible at first and began occurring with faster momentum as time went on. The World OD Alliance sponsored large multi-governmental, multi-organizational, and multi-country conferences on cultural contributions to

innovation, alternative energy integration, government-business coordination, sustainability, network structures, and other transorganizational problems in line with the responsibility doctrine (Cummings, 1984; Huxham, 2004). OD practitioners were called on with increasing frequency and at higher and higher levels of influence to facilitate changes. These changes were intended to move globalization in a valued direction where more and more people became involved and benefited from diversity, innovation, development, and sustainability.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Returning to the present, this chapter presented a vision of the future and OD's role in it. Obviously we believe the future of OD is very bright. But a bright future for OD does not mean the field is now a coherent and singular voice for responsible progress and the organization changes that will be necessary. OD is currently fragmented and the voices in the field have strong beliefs about how the field should evolve. A bright future for OD does not mean it is now a vibrant community of practitioners and researchers developing new interventions and exploring the impact of the work. Our understanding of the relationship between change and organization effectiveness remains primitive. The task of conveying its credibility will not be easy. A bright future for OD does not mean it is now growing. Depending on how the field is defined, its reputation is quite weak and the trajectory of the field's development is not clear.

But dedicated members of the field do not view these challenges as reasons to give up or give in. The world is changing in positive and horrific ways, and OD practitioners believe that they have the knowledge and the skill to influence the trajectory of change. That is their passion and their calling. There is, in fact, considerable common ground among the voices within OD, and the emergence of a more integrated view of the field is not a pipe dream. For example, the traditional,

pragmatic, and academic voices agree that applying behavioral science to organizations can improve effectiveness and increase member satisfaction. The traditional and pragmatic voices believe that knowledge and skill should be transferred to a client system, and all three voices believe that a body of theory and practice underlie the process of change in organizations. The trends in the economic, social, political, and technological environment, and trends within OD itself all contain the seeds of an integrative and influential force that is capable of shaping the positive future of our world.

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#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The stage for examining OD's future is set by describing one decidedly positive future. Other scenarios are certainly possible, and good practice supports the articulation of several alternative scenarios (Porter, 1985; Klein and Linneman, 1981; Wack, 1985). However, our approach was to generate a positive and integrative scenario. Any view of what's positive is biased, and every effort will be made to be transparent about the choices made. The scenario draws from likely economic, social, technical, cultural, and organizational trends (Cummings and Worley, 2005), other views of the future (Murrell, 2003; International Forum on Globalization, 2002), and a variety of alternative future scenarios found on the Internet (e.g., [www.gsg.org/scenario\\_descriptions.html](http://www.gsg.org/scenario_descriptions.html), [http://mars3.gps.caltech.edu/whichworld/explore/scenarios\\_top.html](http://mars3.gps.caltech.edu/whichworld/explore/scenarios_top.html), and <http://www.futurestudies.co.uk/predictions/083.pdf> all accessed in October, 2004). The scenario includes appropriate citations of research published to date. However, citing work not yet written is a difficult task and we chose not to try. The authors apologize to future contributors to this effort not accorded the proper attribution for their work to come.