Organisational Development
Putting Theory into Practice

The Organisational Development Mindset

Megan Peppin offers up her thinking about why there are so many misconceptions, confusion and lack of clarity about what OD is and how stepping into the OD Mindset can allow organisations to work differently and more effectively.

As an introduction, my twitter handle is OD_optimist – I believe there is always an opportunity for better and more effective work, more collaboration and unlimited potential. The OD mindset creates energy, allows potential to be fulfilled and makes work so much more fulfilling. I came to OD, by "doing OD". It's work that I love, and believe in. I'm optimistic that amongst the sometimes murky, treacly waters of organisational life, clarity and movement can emerge.

OD is not a planned programme

I wonder if people struggle with understanding and defining OD because it is so often hijacked by more traditional change management methodology and consultancies with their own "right solution". The dominance of financial modelling too in organisations creates resistance to the natural flow that is OD – perhaps OD's simplicity is also too sophisticated. Because OD isn't about answers, or predicting and controlling.

I've often heard OD described as "a planned programme to improve an organisation's effectiveness" (oh for the love of a Gantt chart). We experience the pursuit of competencies to measure and control people's behaviour, sheep dipping workshops, the promulgation of values. Organisational Development work can and does utilise these tools and techniques, but *doing* these things does not mean you are doing organisational development.

So here's my take on "doing OD".

The OD Mindset

- When you're doing OD - your mindset is shaped by humanistic values and beliefs and the recognition that organisations are complex social systems.
- When you're doing OD, you're working with and connecting the system – asking what is happening, what can we try, how will we know what is happening, how will we know when something has been impacted? You're probably doing Action Research - whether or not you call it that.

- When you're doing OD, you're drawing on a set of skills, theoretical knowledge and resources to facilitate problem solving, trust building – whatever your intervention, you are grounded.
- When you're doing OD, you're part of what is happening in the system too; you're an agent of change, an influencer, and a role model. You are connected with the real work.

Engaging people in a conversation that cuts across usual organisational boundaries is a core part of doing OD. This often meets resistance. The hurry up, the quick fixers, the taylorists, the accountants, they want concrete, tangible results now. They want a plan!   Doing OD includes demonstrating respect for these differing perspectives of varying stakeholders and an ability to hold strong, inviting people to place trust in the process – creating space for the conversations that need to happen. The behaviour mirrors the prevailing culture. Everything is data. The OD mindset is rooted in understanding the connections between behaviour and results and effectiveness. People doing OD bring together multiple perspectives and deepen others' understanding of the system within which they operate.

OD – how do you do it?

- *You learn with everyone else.*
- *You are prepared to say the unsayable.*
- *You collect data and share the analysis with the "system".*
- *You discover together what is revealed, and create time and space for people to make meaning.*
- *You help people hear each other.*
- *You role model transparency, candour, respect, curiosity and courage.*
- *You stay with the difficult stuff.*

You don't jump into solutions; it's about sense making, seeing at a systemic level what is happening. You don't collude with the system so sometimes you may feel you are working counter-intuitively.

Sense making

I'm invited to facilitate a strategic planning meeting.   I start talking with the participants - I find that they don't recognise and connect to a shared purpose, although in one respect it seems quite clear. Perhaps this is the work – helping them develop clarity? When I start to enquire a little more, dig a little deeper, what is revealed is that there is a lack of trust amongst the team.   It takes time for someone to name it. Perhaps we spend time trust building?   When more of the organisational context becomes clear, the potential for more large scale disruption indicates that people are waiting to see what next.

The talking and exploring is the intervention.   Creating space for people to identify root causes and start working beneath the surface clears the way for whatever the

discussion they need to have to happen. It may be counter-interintuitive; as a facilitator it's easy to get sucked into their task and to know that at the end of a day they have a "plan". You potentially collude in their problem, avoiding going beneath the surface.

French and Bell say:

"Organisational Development focusses on culture and processes. Specifically OD encourages collaboration between leaders and members in managing the culture and process. Participation and involvement in problem solving and decision making at all levels are hallmarks of OD; OD focuses on total system change and views organisations as complex social systems. The OD practitioner (the doers of OD) are facilitators, collaborators and co-learners with the system.

OD relies on an action research model with extensive participation by client system members. OD takes a developmental view that seeks the betterment of both individuals and the organisation. Attempting to create "win-win" solutions is standard practice in OD programmes."

Megan Peppin works with organisations and individuals to increase their effectiveness through opening up communication channels and developing people. You can follow her on Twitter @OD_Optimist and find out more from her website.