Organization Development and Change:  
A Reflection on Where We Came From  
(revised 2009)

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Roots of ODC

This occasion, the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Organization Development & Change Division of the Academy of Management, provides an opportunity to reflect on our past. By reflect I mean we should recall, and also analyze and probe our past to understand how we got to today and who helped us get here. To start, we should review our roots – that is, what happened in the three decades before the founding of the ODC division.

The theories of change and the creative practices developed in that earlier period profoundly influence ODC today, more than half a century later. The pioneers innovated and put in place the basic elements of theory and practice: laboratory method, process analysis, team development, confrontation meetings, problem sensing, survey-feedback, trust building, collateral/parallel organization, and action research. Our present concepts and methods – open systems analysis, parallel learning systems, appreciative inquiry, coaching, and large systems change – consist of refinements and extensions of those basic elements. If we think of the field’s development as a spiral process, then ODC has traveled several loops up the spiral by creatively adapting and applying those original elements.

To appreciate our roots, we should look at the environment that affected the early thinkers. As social scientists they were interested in observing and analyzing the values, norms, and dysfunctions of their culture. In addition, as ODC specialists – that is, applied behavioral scientists -- they wanted to guide change by applying what they learned. Rather than remain content as observers and researchers, they wanted to develop theory and practice to improve the functioning and health of individuals and organizations.

Consider the environment of the founders, roughly 1940 to 1975. America went through decades of increasing anxiety, mistrust, and alienation caused by fighting several wars, trying to avoid atomic annihilation, facing internal subversion, mourning the assassination of dissenters, and discovering that the government was untrustworthy. The environment of that period determined, in large measure, what questions social scientists asked, and where, and how they looked for answers.

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Anxiety and Mistrust

Wars
America fought three wars in that period: World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. The 50 million deaths attributable to W.W.II left lasting psychological and social scars. With disbelief, astonishment, and revulsion we learned of the Nazi death camps. The Korean War from 1950 to 1953 almost pulled us into an all out war with China. From 1964 to 1973 we kept escalating the Vietnam War, one of the longest and most troublesome wars in American history. The Arab-Israeli wars of 1956, 1967 and 1973 pulled us into confrontation with the Soviet Union. The ensuing Arab-OPEC oil embargo increased the price of crude oil more than 1,200%, triggered rampant inflation for more than a decade, and depressed living standards of developed and developing countries by siphoning billions of dollars to the OPEC countries.

Atomic Chicken
America and the Soviet Union played “atomic chicken” with our lives. With one false move they could blow each other off the face of the earth. In the Cuban Missile crisis of 1962, America and the Soviet Union almost did.

Subversion
The McCarthy hearings riveted the nation on the specter of Communist infiltration of the government and industry to subvert U.S. policy in the interest of the Soviet Union.

Assassinations
We were plagued by assassinations that killed dissenters and tore the fabric of our democracy. President John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X were assassinated. Three young civil rights workers, James Cheney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, were murdered in Mississippi.

Untrustworthy Government
Finally, the Watergate cover up and the revelation of misused campaign funds brought us face to face with the ultimate test of our democracy: the impeachment of President Nixon. We were awakened to the sobering discovery that the government we trusted was not trustworthy.

The point of this recapitulation is that we had been living through decades of relentless anxiety and endemic mistrust.

Alienation

Authoritarian Norms
During those decade, the prevailing organizational norms for managers were be hard-nosed, be authoritarian, be directive. The norms for subordinates were be
compliant, maintain a pleasant façade, do not express dissenting views. These norms inhibited motivation to work, diminished commitment to the organization, and suppressed the openness needed for problem solving and creativity.

**Pathological Repression**
Organizations were generating the pathologies that interfered with their effectiveness. The prevailing norms were diminishing individual satisfaction with work, pride in one’s organizational role, and opportunities for personal growth. Organizations were shaping individuals into role automatons who had to suppress their needs as human beings.

**Coping with Crazy Organizations**
Behavioral scientists had uncovered a latent world of systemic anxiety, mistrust, and alienation. In a world of suppressive, dysfunctional, crazy organizations, behavioral scientists decided to study individuals and groups to help them find themselves, and devise methods to cope with and improve dysfunctional organizations. Kurt Lewin’s pioneering work on autocratic leadership, change, and social conflict, for example, was a response to an oppressive, alienating, pathological environment.

Much of what follows may seem like old hat, but that’s because what the pioneers did was so effective and is so widely accepted.

**Individual Development Becomes a Good in itself**
A dramatic shift occurred in the perception of the individual’s status. Individual development became a good in itself. Individuals were to be valued as unique human beings rather than tools of the organization or servants of the state.

Karen Horney (1950), Eric Fromm (1955), and Sigmund Freud (1949), proposed that the development and growth of the individual was a desired value, a good in itself, a criterion of health. Abe Maslow (1954) legitimized self-actualization and elevated it to the top of his hierarchy of human needs. Douglas McGregor’s (1960) Theory X, authoritarian management, versus Theory Y, humanistic management, made managers aware of how they were denigrating individuals and undermining the effectiveness of their organizations. Chris Argyris (1962, 1964) focused on alienation from self and work, and passionately argued for authenticity as the key to finding oneself and forming effective relationships. Carl Rogers (1961) pioneered non-directive counseling and helped us see that we were on an endless journey of “becoming”. Jourard (1964) systematically described the transparent self and called our attention to the close link between self-disclosure and well being.

**Groups: Mechanism for Individual Growth and Organization Development**
Group dynamics took on new prominence and emerged as the key mechanism for individual growth and organization development.
Years earlier the Hawthorne studies observed that members of a cohesive work group could restrict or increase production in conformity with the group’s norms (Roethlisberger, 1939), but there was little knowledge of the internal dynamics of groups. Behavioral scientists began asking questions about how groups operated.

A prolific body of group literature emerged. Lewin (1947) and Asch (1952) showed that groups could have a substantial effect on individual judgments and attitudes. Bales (1951, 1958) developed a system for analyzing the interaction process in a group and described the emergence of a task leader, a social leader, and the roles of members. Cartwright and Zander (1953) surveyed theory and research on group dynamics. Hare (1962) gave us a handbook of small group research. Shepard (1956) formulated a theory of training by group methods built around the concept of “valid communication” – that is, congruence between the private self and the public, interpersonal self. Bennis (1956) described the phases and subphases of group development and analyzed how members work on the issues of power and affection and move toward productive interdependence. Schutz (1958) refined the concepts of power and affection into three dimensions -- control, affection and inclusion -- and developed the fundamental interpersonal relations orientation (FIRO) questionnaire to predict how an individual would relate to others in a group.

**Laboratory Method: OD through Individual Sensitivity**

The earliest theory of organization development was that individual self-awareness, sensitivity to others, and skill in interpersonal relations would lead to improved organizational performance.

Sensitivity training, using the small group as the vehicle for personal learning, emerged as the path to individual growth. The here-and-now focus of one-to-one psychotherapy was blended with Kurt Lewin’s (1948, 1958) pioneering work on social change, Carl Rogers’ (1961) non-directive counseling, and Robert Bales (1958) small group theory to spawn the laboratory method for sensitivity training.

The innovation of the laboratory method was that the individual could, with supportive norms and the assistance of others in their small group, effectively investigate one’s feelings and behavior. In a so-called T-group, with proper guidance by a trainer/facilitator, individuals could gradually expose their feelings, behavior, attitudes and concepts and could learn from the feedback and reactions of others.

The laboratory method required carefully building trust among the members of the group, developing one’s ability to listen to oneself and to others, increasing one’s awareness of one’s own feelings, developing skill in giving and receiving feedback, and improving one’s ability to observe and understand the group’s process. It provided a safe environment to use one’s learning by experimenting – that is, trying new behavior to improve one’s interpersonal skills and relations.

Sensitivity training swept the country. The National Training Laboratories (NTL) emerged as the leading organization in the field. Under Lee Bradford it called on...
university faculty and practicing psychologists to staff its programs and began publishing the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, providing an outlet for theory and practice articles in the new field.


**OD Theory and Practice**

**Seed Theory**

Seed theory was the prevailing theory of organization development in the late 1950's. The idea was to seed the organization with a few sensitive, interpersonally skilled managers. They would model the openness, authenticity and interpersonal skills that would improve the organization’s effectiveness. For several years organizations sent large numbers of managers to sensitivity training programs.

This was a tonic for the individual manager’s development but managers did not have the concepts or skills to implement change within the authoritarian norms of their organization. Managers had great difficulty transferring to their hierarchical organizations the carefully built laboratory norms of trust, openness, authenticity, feedback, and constructive use of dissent. Modeling alone could not do it. Also, some managers had the mistaken belief that organizations could become T-groups.

**Batch Theory**

We concluded that rather than send one manager at a time to a sensitivity program it was better to send several different managers together so they could support each other when they returned to their organization. You might call this the “batch” theory of OD. It helped individuals by giving them more people, distributed across the organization, who understood what they were talking about, but it did not significantly change organizations.

**Family Group**

Gradually the “family group” theory of OD emerged. It consisted of sending an entire team composed of a manager and their subordinates to a program, distributing them to different T-groups for developing individual sensitivity in a safe environment, and then bringing them together in their family group, toward the end of the program, to work on back-home problems.
In Situ Family Group Morphs into Team Building

Ultimately, to improve transfer of learning from individual sensitivity to organizational problem solving we designed and began to deliver, within organizations, programs that blended some sensitivity training with process analysis, team goal setting, and problem solving. This might be called the "later family group" or "in situ family group" theory of OD. It was the beginning of team building without sensitivity training. It avoided sending managers to so-called stranger programs. The downside was a greatly diminished concern for individual development and growth. Also, it eliminated the broadening experience of exposing a person to managers and norms of other organizations. All of this was happening before the founding of the ODC division.

Evolution of Change Theory

Gradually, the ODC field moved away from individual sensitivity training as the primary component of organization change. The focus shifted to the work group, the department, the interaction between groups and between departments, and ultimately the larger organization and its strategy for prospering in a competitive environment.

Lewin’s early concepts of change as a process of unfreezing, moving, and refreezing and of force field analysis were refined into concepts such as felt need for change, client system, change agent, contracting, diagnosis, depth of intervention, intervention design, action research, and stabilizing change.

Bennis’ books (1961, 1968, 1969) examining the planning of change and the dynamics of human interaction, are milestones worth revisiting to this day. Lippitt (1958) wrote a comprehensive approach to planned change that analyzed many of the behavioral concepts in the process of change.

Problem-Solving Approaches to OD

People were increasingly exploring approaches to organizational change that de-emphasized sensitivity training. Implicitly these approaches assumed that, until proven otherwise, there was enough trust, openness, and interpersonal skill in an organization for people to work reasonably well on finding and solving organizational problems.

Confrontation Meeting

The confrontation meeting, described by Dick Beckhard (1964), was a method for bringing together several levels of an organization for one or two days to identify problems and propose solutions to top management. Many years later this and Zand’s (1974) parallel mode evolved into the workout meetings in GE during the tenure of Jack Welch as CEO.

Survey Feedback

Using survey questionnaires, Rensis Likert and his colleagues at the Institute for Social Research (ISR), studied work groups to learn why some were more effective
than others. At first, ISR reported its findings as research results. Then, to help managers improve organizational effectiveness, ISR blended its survey findings with laboratory method and team meetings, and developed the survey-feedback process. Likert (1961, 1964) conceptualized and summarized this work in his System 1-System 4 framework which he called new patterns of management.

**Managerial Grid**

As the demand for qualified T-group facilitators exceeded their availability, Bob Blake and Herb Shepard began experimenting with “instrumented” T-groups. Groups met without a facilitator and used a series of questionnaires to guide their agenda and interaction.

Bob Blake and Jane Mouton (1964) refined the instrumented approach and developed their managerial grid framework for OD. It was based on two-dimensions of leadership behavior – concern for people and concern for task. The grid program reduced the need for professional facilitators by providing questionnaires and detailed procedures that, with modest training, managers could administer to the organization. Using grid-based questionnaires, feedback, and some features of laboratory method, the managerial grid offered an integrated program that could move through the individual, group, and organizational levels of analysis with limited outside guidance from Blake and his associates.

**Process Consultation**

Gradually managers began to accept the idea that how a group worked – that is, it’s process – was a major factor in an organization’s effectiveness. Ed Schein (1969) built on the literature and work of the laboratory method to construct a concise description of the elements of group process. He framed process consultation in terms of analyzing and improving communication, group functioning, group problem-solving, group norms, group growth, leadership, and intergroup relations.

**Organization Change: Diagnosis and Intervention**

By the late 1960s organization change consulting had become a major activity. Harry Levinson (1972) wrote about assessing the history, structure, and processes of an organization as a basis for diagnosis and intervention. Blake (1976) disaggregated consultation into a diagnostic matrix with three-dimensions: 1) Issue (e.g. power, norms); 2) Intervention (e.g. acceptant, confrontational); 3) Level (e.g. individual, group, intergroup) and wrote about the diagnostic and action content of each matrix cell.

**The Early Division Chairmen**

Wendell French, (1969), to whom we are all indebted as the founding chairman of the ODC division, wrote about OD objectives, assumptions, and strategies. Wendell then wrote what may have been the first comprehensive textbook in OD (1973) and followed this with a second book of foundation articles in OD (1978).
Tony Raia, ever active as an OD consultant, examined values and goal setting (1965), and with Newt Margulies, edited informative collections of readings on laboratory method and change (Margulies 1971, 1978).

Craig Lundberg became the Will Rogers of OD, gently prodding us with wry wit to develop better theory and to ground our concepts more rigorously in the behavioral sciences.

Dale Zand (1972) formulated a dynamic theory of trust, induced different levels of trust in groups and demonstrated the beneficial effects of trust and the deleterious effects of mistrust on high-stake managerial decisions under uncertainty. Zand (1974) introduced the concept of collateral/parallel organization, detailed its theory, and described its application as a change intervention in two organizations.

Bob Golembiewski was already writing prolifically by the early 1970s pushing the frontiers of OD theory, practice and research with his books on sensitivity training (1970) and renewing organizations (1972).

Frank Friedlander (1970) examined the importance of trust as a factor in group accomplishment and wrote a comprehensive review of the status of OD (1974).

**Conclusion**

To appreciate OD today, I believe we have to review our roots and reacquaint ourselves with the remarkable creativity and risk-taking behavior of the pioneers. They sallied forth like little Davids with some behavioral science theory as a slingshot and a handful of experimental practices as pebbles. They confronted organizations girded like Samson in the armor of authoritarian management. It is a tribute to the pioneers that many of those early OD concepts and practices are still here and are familiar to most change agents and managers.

This short paper cites only a few of the many references in the OD literature. It also has left out or made insufficient reference to many people such as Warren Bennis, Ed Schein, Herb Shepard, Chris Argyris, Ronald and Gordon Lippitt, Stanley, Charlie, and Edie Seashore, Harry Levinson, Muzaffer Sherif, Bill Schutz, Floyd Mann, Dave Bowers, Bob Kahn, Bob Chin, Goodwin Watson, Bob Tannenbaum, Fred Massarik, Mike Beer, Warner Burke, Bob Golembiewski, Dave Nadler, Roger Harrison, and a host of others who blazed a path for OD. We owe much to all of them.

Practically all the citations and events described in this paper occurred outside of the Academy of Management before the ODC division was formed. In conclusion, I wish to pay my respect to Wendell French for bringing the rich theory, practice and literature of the OD field into the house of the Academy of Management. I want to compliment Wendell and all the chairmen who followed for carrying on the work of building this division and the field of ODC.
References

Biographical Note
Dale Zand chaired the OD Division in 1975. He attended his first T-group with Jack Gibb in 1955 and shortly after was trained as a facilitator by Lee Bradford, Doug McGregor, Warren Bennis, Chris Argyris, and Herb Shepard. He has worked on the staff of many laboratory, training of trainers, and OD programs. He served on the board of directors of NTL and was chairman of the Management/OB department at the Stern School, New York University. He has been a coach to many senior executives, a consultant to many private and public organizations, and a member of the board of directors of business organizations. His most recent work on trust and collateral/parallel organization appears in Zand, D. E. (1997) The leadership triad: Knowledge, trust, and power. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.