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WHERE ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT
THRIVES

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Where organisation development thrives

This article proposes that organisation development (OD) only thrives under specific change conditions and is particularly well suited to certain kinds of issues. OD thrives in that space because OD is not “about change”, but about creating great organisations (Bushe & Marshak 2018). Under these specific conditions OD can help leaders create change while developing a great organisation. However, there is no one viable, generalised model of a great organisation because any solution to a problem of organising inevitably creates another problem. Organising is a never-ending process of accommodating polarities, paradoxes and competing values that all organisations must grapple with to meet their local contingencies and constraints. We can, however, identify general characteristics of a more developed organisation, assume that developmental issues are always present (no one ever finishes being developed), and use those as criteria for assessing the success of OD efforts. The paper concludes by offering 3 underlying characteristics found in all developmental models and ideas on how we can use those to assess the success of organisation development efforts.



The success of organisation development

Most people estimate that 75% of change programs fail (Eaton, 2011). That statistic has been tossed around to the point where it's become cliché but it's not easy to find actual empirical studies of success rates. Hidden by that cliché is a different story about the kinds of change processes that almost always fail, and the kind that almost always succeed. If you look under the hood at what makes the difference it appears to do with two things: what leaders do and what stakeholders do.

In the Kotter type change model, the job of leaders is to have a vision, identify the change, and clarify who is supposed to do what. The big consulting firms' business model is firmly rooted in this narrative. They get hired to come up with blueprints for new strategies, organisation designs, marketing programs, supply chains, and so forth. They produce a big report and exit, leaving it to the company to try and implement. As Marv Weisbord (2017: 64) so aptly put it in a recent ODP article, "I put my kids through college following up consulting reports that my clients could not implement." I contend that it is this kind of change process, where leaders, or experts they hire, define the change, that leads to 75% or more of change effort failures (quadrants 1 & 2 in Table 1, below)

But when the stakeholders who will have to actually implement the change are the ones who define the change, then change efforts are almost always successful (Q4 in Table 1). Stakeholders include employees and managers, customers and suppliers, sometimes government and communities. Again, as Marv (2017: 64) put it "By helping people discover the right path for themselves, I fed my family." Having leaders decide on a change and then leave it up to middle managers or external consultants ("staff") to manage the process (Q1 in Table 1) is a recipe for failure and is not what Organisation Development was ever intended to be. Too often though, that's what happened in a failed change program (Eaton, 2011). In happier circumstances, leaders are more engaged as full sponsors, deciding on both the content and leading the process (Q2). Though this is what most change models propose as the right approach, it's where many of those 3 out of 4 failures reside. This is no place for OD. But in the marketplace, where real people try to make a living, the OD profession bought into the narrative that the job of leaders is to have a "vision" and the Kottresque, top-down, planning and control approach that fits with what leaders, their boards and their followers think is good leadership. It fits with a narrative of visionary leadership and a performance mindset (Bushe & Marshak, 2016). When looked at carefully, however, there is little evidence such top-down change processes are very effective, particularly for complex change.

OD, from the start, advocated the engagement of those who would be affected by the change in deciding on the change. There is evidence that this is a more successful approach to organisation development. My recent study (Maxton & Bushe 2017) found that most of the transition in personal schematas consistent with the change objectives during a Dialogic OD intervention were due to the engaging and emergent nature of the change process.

	Leaders Define the Changes	Stakeholders Define the Changes
"Staff" manage the process	Almost always fails Q1	Only succeeds if leaders buy in to what emerges Q3
Leaders manage the process	Often fails Q2	Almost always succeeds and where organisation development thrives Q4

Table 1: Where Organisation Development Thrives

The early action research studies that launched the field of organisation development were all examples where the people who would have to change fully participated in the interpretation of the research findings and in planning what to do about them. For example, the successful survey feedback effort at Detroit Edison from 1948 – 1950 involved an interlocking chain of conferences, starting at the top, where results were discussed and action plans formed, and continued throughout the organisation. At every level groups decided on what changes they would make, based on those discussions. Leaders managed the process and reported to their supervisors when they reached an impasse (Mann, 1957).

More recently, Stensaker, Falkenberg and Grønhaug (2008:175) studied what happened in three different business units (BU) that were supposed to implement a corporately mandated change program. One of the BUs “...focused on careful and detailed planning through representative but limited participation. The result was a lack of understanding as to what changes should be made and how to implement change. Employees struggled to make sense of the changes and were unable to act in any consistent manner.” The most successful change occurred in the BU that “...used a different approach. They relied on extensive participation and negotiations with employees during planning and decision making. The result was a unified account of change in the form of a customised change plan that was implemented in a stepwise and cumulative process through consistent action.”

A really convincing study is Rowland & Higgs (2008) who asked senior managers in a variety of large companies about their stories of change. In their study of 70 different change efforts they found those where leaders decided on the content and directed the process of change were usually failures. But those where leaders directed the process, engaging and focusing employees on the challenges they face while supporting emergent ideas about what to change, were almost always successful.

The claim being made here is that when leaders identify the issues that need addressing, and are personally engaged in bringing the stakeholders who are the ones who have to change into conversations where their ideas and motivation can find kindred others to champion innovations, and where the follow up from those events are well managed (see Roehrig, Schwendenwein & Bushe, 2015 for a discussion of that), the change is almost always successful. There is a lot of case evidence, and increasingly research evidence, to back that up. Whether you call it participatory action research, open space, complexity and emergence, appreciative inquiry, an organisational confrontation meeting, or work out, (and many other labels) it is this process of leaders managing the process while engaging stakeholders in defining the changes that leads to successful organisation development.

Not only are these elements required for successful, planned change, they are basis for great organisations.



Any solution to the problems of organising creates a new problem

In Bushe & Marshak (2018) we argue that OD practitioners are interested in creating great teams and organisations. We propose that OD is about great organisations is a more generative image for our field than OD is about change. Because we are interested in great organisations, practitioners pay attention to models of organising. From early models like System 4 (Likert, 1967), socio-technical systems (Trist et al, 1951, Emery & Thorsrud, 1969) to recent work by Laloux (2014) and Kegan & Lahey (2016), OD practitioners have been influenced by attempts to codify the structures and processes of organising. Bushe (2017) describes how OD was heavily focused on how to design great organisations in the 70s, but lost heart when sociotechnically designed plants started reverting to command and control, and work for design oriented OD consultants dried up in the 80s. What is consistent in the models of great organisations that influence OD practice, is they include widespread engagement and inquiry. When leaders lead the process and stakeholders decide the changes, you have widespread engagement and inquiry. Not only does quadrant 4 produce more successful change, it promotes a better organisation.

While models can help people see old things anew, inspire, and point in useful directions, no model of organising will ever be right for everyone. We will never solve the problem of how do we divide up work and then coordinate to achieve collective outcomes once and for all because effective collective action rests on a set of tensions that have been described in many different ways; for example, as paradoxes (Smith & Berg, 1987), and polarities (Johnson, 1992) and as competing values (Quinn, 1988). Quinn's competing values model is a great example. Organisational effectiveness requires managing outside and managing inside, of having enough stability and having enough flexibility. It requires adapting to external demands and standardising internal operations. It requires working through people and relationships and working through impersonal processes and routines. It is somewhat ironic that this model got turned into a popular survey to measure the gap between idealised and current organisational cultures. I think the more important lesson implicit in Quinn's research is that because effectiveness is bi-polar, any solution to a specific problem of organising today will inevitably create a new set of problems to be solved tomorrow. We centralize, then decentralize, then centralize in a never-ending search for effectiveness. We loosen up until we are too loose, and then tighten until we are too tight. We rely on rules until they become stifling, and then rely on relationships until they become too inefficient, in a continuous search for how to best meet the variety of challenges the world keeps throwing at us. This is not a new insight. The origins of sociology go back to the observation that social forms evolve through this dialectical process.

Does that mean that there are no useful models, no right answers, no places where a top-down approach works? No, it doesn't. A most useful perspective to deal with this question is Heifetz's (1998) distinction between technical problems and adaptive challenges. Table 2 is an attempt, influenced by an earlier table developed by Eric Svaren, to identify the differences between each. Technical problems can be solved in a top down process through the application of analytical models and expertise. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, cannot, and the single greatest failure of leadership, to paraphrase Heifetz, is to treat adaptive challenges like technical problems. Adaptive challenges are complex issues without a single right answer. They require the engagement of those with a stake in the challenge if they are to be managed. They require inquiry, experimentation and learning. Typically, they are never completely "solved". They are the sorts of issues that Organisation Development is uniquely qualified to work on.

When we take this idea seriously, and help leaders understand that any solution to an adaptive challenge will eventually create a new problem, we are freed up from trying to find "the answer". Instead, we can help leaders to work with their stakeholders and search for any answers that stakeholders will own and execute, secure in the knowledge that organisation development is a never-ending process of small wins. The purpose of the work is as much to increase the adaptive capacity of the organisation as it is to solve whatever problem is currently being attended to. We are creating a great organisation at the same time as we are working on an adaptive challenge.

TECHNICAL PROBLEMS	ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES
Easy to operationally define.	Difficult to agree on what the “problem” is
Lend themselves to operational (process and procedures) solutions.	Require changes in values, beliefs, relationships, & mindsets
People are generally receptive to technical solutions they understand	People generally resist adopting other-defined values and beliefs.
Often can be solved by authorities or experts	The stakeholders have to be involved in solving it.
Requires change in just one or a few places; often contained within organisational boundaries.	Requires change in numerous places; usually across organisational boundaries.
Solutions can often be implemented relatively quickly by changing rules or work processes.	Adaptation requires experiments and new discoveries as well as wrong turns and dead ends.
Technical problems stay solved until something else changes.	Adaptation creates new problems that will have to be adapted to.
Examples from Healthcare	
How do we ensure nurses know the safest methods for lifting patients?	How do we improve the health and wellness of nurses?
How do we ensure accurate information is provided during handoffs between care providers?	How do we increase collaboration among care providers?
How do we reduce errors in medications delivered to patients?	How do we get patients to take more responsibility for taking their meds?

Table 2. Differences Between Technical Problems and Adaptive Challenges

What is the point of OD?

Consider the humanistic values that inform our profession and are embedded in the psychological concept of “development”. Not development in the sense of how things normally evolve over time. Rather in the sense of progressing, growing, with a position on what is more developed and what is less developed, not linked to time. In this sense of development, there is no expectation that a person, group or organisation will ever fully develop. It does not naturally happen, it requires effort and intention. This is one thing that differentiates organisation development from facilitating and coaching approaches that don’t have a position on what a great organisation is. What they practice is not OD, and they’d be the first to say so.

Anyone identifying with OD has beliefs about what are better and worse ways of organising and strategies for how to be better. How consciously they work toward, and how successful they are, at creating developmental outcomes varies considerably. There are probably OD practitioners who don’t know where the developmental assumptions they take for granted originated. There are a few geniuses that most current models derive from: Freud, Erikson, Piaget, and Maslow. The suggestion made here is that underlying most developmental models are three common criteria. Theories of individual and group development can define the purpose of development in Organisation Development. I’ll propose how they can be used as a check list against which to ask “will this intervention help to create a great organisation”? If you agree the purpose of OD is to create great organisations, then I think you will find these criteria of development can identify what the point of any OD intervention should be.

1. The more developed a system, the more aware it is of itself; it can talk to itself about itself.

OD's paradigm originates with Freud (1922) and the psychoanalytic method that promoted self-analysis as a path to health and growth. The "talking cure" is buried deep in our DNA. Part of any OD practitioner's job is to help people work past denial, repression, or a simple lack of awareness to new knowledge about why what happens, happens; why we do as we do, feel as we feel, and want what we want. The more self-aware we are, the more developed we are. As we develop we increase our ability to articulate a narrative about the self that is deeper, broader, more complex and more integrative (Piaget, 1926; 1954; Kholberg, 1984; Loevinger, 1970). In his theory of group development, Gibb (1964) emphasised "data flow" among members, the most developed of which was spontaneous, authentic, unrestricted communication. Increasing authentic communication is central to Bennis & Shepard's (1956) description of a highly-developed group. Descriptions of highly developed organisations all include the capacity for authentic communication, transparency and employee voice (Laloux, 2014; Likert, 1967).

We can easily apply this criteria to our work. Are people in this team or organisation more able to talk to each other about what they really think, feel and want about how they work together? If so, then the organisation has developed. From this point of view, a great organisation is one where people feel compelled to speak out, to engage meaningfully, to bring up difficult issues, to reflect on what has taken place and learn from it, to question and challenge visions and plans, to collect data and learn from their own performance and the performance of others, to be able to see below the particular instance to the underlying pattern. To create a small or large group where such talking is possible, requires skilful and respectful discourse, an acknowledgement and appreciation of differences, an ability to make those differences a source of learning and innovation, and so on. But we can't specify in advance any of those traits because how much of what depends on so many other things: national cultures, the particular challenges facing the organisation and their urgency, the shifting contingencies that affect whose voices should be most influential, and on and on. Regardless, the more a group or organisation can talk to itself about itself, the less unaddressed mindsets that are short-term, reactive, small picture, and blame placing, can persist. While we can identify in general terms what a great organisation looks like, it must always be nuanced by situational constraints and opportunities. Perhaps it is enough to ask, are we really able to talk to ourselves about ourselves and if not, how can we increase that?

2. The more developed a system, the less it is driven by reactive, unconscious emotions, motivations and cognitive frameworks and the more decisions and actions are based on reason, rationality and cognitive complexity.

Again we begin with Freud (1936), where the arc of development is conceived as away from reactive (neurotic), out of control behaviour toward the capacity for choice and reason to guide behaviour. The idea that powerful motivations reside outside of awareness, and that the purpose of human and social development is to replace instinct and reactivity with reason and relationships, rests on Freud (e.g., 1924, 1930). The reasons for repression and lack awareness, and what to do about it, are what differentiate different schools of psychotherapy, but the underlying image of development is the same (e.g., Erikson, 1950; Bowen, 1978). This should not be understood as a negation of the importance of emotions or some kind of Cartesian ascendancy of mind over body. Humanism has always valued emotions and argued for their centrality in human relations (e.g., McGill, 1954; Montague, 1951) way before brain research found evidence that decision-making requires feelings (Bechara, 2004; Gupta et al, 2011). Emotional development is a process of becoming ever more aware of ones feeling and motivations, without being hostage to them; able to act rationally while fully feeling.

The cognitive side of developmental theory does not negate the importance of emotional intelligence, but stresses an increasing capacity to think about thinking. A more developed person is less a prisoner of unconscious frames of thinking, with the highest levels of development aware of the limits of rational analysis and of symbolic representation, exposing the assumptions and paradoxes that lay hidden in earlier developmental mindsets (Alexander & Langer, 1990; Cook-Greuter, 2000).

In a developed group people are not avoiding discussions that they are afraid will cause others to be upset or reactive, if those discussions are crucial for attaining the organisation's purpose. We know from group development theory that this is a state that must be achieved; it doesn't just happen. The early life of any group amplifies unconscious emotion and suppresses rational discourse (Bion, 1961; Slater, 1961). Our neurological inheritance amplifies the anxieties of status threat and shame (Boyatzis, 2011; Rock, 2008).

As applied to organisation development, we can ask are the decisions and actions of people in this team or organisation less driven by unspoken feelings and motivations than before? Are they able to deal with the pertinent issues in a calmer, more rational, deliberate and mindful manner than before? If so, then the organisation has developed. From this point of view a great organisation is not one where discussion of emotions is banned; just the opposite. It's when emotions that can drive irrational behaviour are described and acknowledged that they lose their potency to unconsciously influence people's decisions and actions. In a great organisation people say what's on their minds and in their hearts. The assumptions underlying our logic and rationales are open to examination and discussion (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

To create a great team and great organisation, where communication and decisions truly rest on free and informed choice, peoples' different feelings and wants have to be expressed and acknowledged. This requires some effort and a maturation process of becoming self-aware, emotionally intelligent, and self-differentiated. Different points of view need to be allowed expression and legitimacy. Clearly this, and the first criteria of development, are mutually reinforcing – the less we are driven by unspoken fears, the more we are able to talk to ourselves about ourselves. The more we talk about what is real, the more aware we become of the range of motivations and perspectives in the organisation and the less room for unconscious drivers.

How to do that in any particular instance, with a particular group of people facing specific challenges, can't be boiled down to a recipe, simple or otherwise. Perhaps it is enough to ask, to what extent is what is happening now driven by unconscious emotions or unspoken wants or unexamined frameworks? Have we increased the system's capacity to acknowledge difficult feelings and motives while making rational decisions?

3. The more developed the system, the more it is able to actualise its potential

While the notion of actualisation is most associated with Maslow (1954), it is latent in Freud and flowers in Jung's (1939) theory of individuation as the full realisation of an individual's self through integration of opposites. All stage theories of development have as their subtext the idea of arrested development; that development can stop before one's full potential has been realised. More developed individuals display increased behavioural complexity (Denison, Hooijberg & Quinn) as well as increasingly integrative cognitive complexity (Cowie, 2013; Torbert, 2004). We find this theme echoed in group development theory, where more developed groups are able to identify and utilise the variety of individual competencies and talents (Gibb, 1964; Hearn, 1957; Schroeder & Harvey, 1963) and therefore able to take on tasks more effectively (Bushe & Coetzer, 2007). Cooperrider broadened our scope for actualising potential beyond making the latent manifest, with the importance of the affirmative image of the future that guides decisions and actions (Cooperrider, 1990) and the benefits of talking about flourishing (Cooperrider, 2016).

Are people in this team or organisation more aware of what they are capable of, more motivated to bring the best of themselves to their work together, more able to create synergy from collective efforts, more able to manage the adaptive challenges facing them, than they were before? If so, then the organisation has developed. From this point of view, a great organisation is consistently able to achieve outcomes that it could not in the past, is able to grow its capacities, competencies and core strengths, is able to achieve synergies that were previously unknown. To some extent this is about organisational learning but it's about more than learning. It's about creativity, generativity and innovation. It's about the ability to perform and learn simultaneously, so that continuous improvement is a natural product of growth and maturation. Again, notice that each of these elements of development can be self-reinforcing. The more we can talk to ourselves about ourselves, the more we can understand the abilities and motivations that otherwise lie dormant and the less likely individuals will feel that the organisations they work for don't really see or use the best they have to offer. The less we are driven by unspoken anxieties and fears, a more fertile space is created that supports day to day experimentation and innovation. The more we actualise the potential of the system, the more it is likely to thrive in its environment, creating a less anxious climate and the time and space for talking to ourselves about ourselves.

Why is this important?

There are many leaders out there, in the C-suite and in middle management, who want to create great teams and organisations. Does it occur to them that Organisation Development is what they are looking for? Are they busy, like Google, re-inventing what OD has known for decades (Guhigg, 2016)? Somewhere along the way, in our quest for relevance and influence, OD subsumed the core values of its founders: the spirit of inquiry, free and informed choice, authenticity and collaborative decision-making (Argyris, 1970, Bennis, 1970, McGregor, 1960) for the siren song of change. Change is hard. Change is something managers grapple with. Change is something we can promote as our core competence. And for sure, our work does involve change. But not any change, and not a lot of what managers want to buy when they want to buy change.

It's not that these core values have gone away; they are the main reason some people choose to call themselves OD practitioners instead of change managers or meeting facilitators or something else. We are interested in improvement, not change. The core values expressed in these developmental criteria are what is central to our field, but our emphasis on change has reduced our ability to rise above the noise, as a field, and take a place at the strategy table. The emphasis on change "...puts us in the position of being asked to do things we might not be good at and even don't really want to do, re-orientes our focus from development to effectiveness, and reduces our visibility as a body of knowledge and practice that can make important contributions to desired means and outcomes for current organisational and social issues. We suggest that OD is about great organisations could be a better generative image suited to our times" (Bushe & Marshak, 2018).

The argument in this paper can be summarised as follows: organisation development thrives when it works with leaders who want to create great organisations and are willing to lead a process that engages stakeholders in proposing and acting on solutions to adaptive challenges. To be successful, leaders must be just as interested in improving the organisation's adaptive capacity as they are in any specific change. To develop their organisations, they use developmental change processes that do one or more of the following: increase the organisation's ability to talk to itself about itself, reduce the extent to which unconscious feelings and motivations drive decisions and actions, and increase the organisation's capacity to actualise its potential.



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Roffey Park is committed to improving the world of work through research and education in the fields of leadership and organisational development. The research competition helps achieve that objective by providing an opportunity for practitioners and academics working in leadership and organisational development to share their research and ideas with peers and all those with an interest in improving working lives. The competition is made possible through the Val Hammond Fund. Val, formerly Roffey Park's Chair and Chief Executive, is a keen supporter of Roffey Park's proud tradition as a charitable research institute and is still deeply engaged in Roffey's research work through her participation in Roffey's research advisory group.

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