Recent years have witnessed an emerging set of OD practices based on premises that are different from key assumptions of the founders. In this article we want to identify this new form of OD and bring the underlying assumptions into the mainstream of theory and practice.

Different Forms of OD

Many of the premises underlying the original or classical formulation of OD are based in modernist science. Classical OD assumes that a team or organization can be studied using empirical methods before intervening. Starting with Lewin the commitment to scientific inquiry may well be why OD is one of the few fields of consulting practice to also be recognized as a scholarly discipline. In many writings, and virtually all OD textbooks, the purpose of data gathering is described as “diagnosis” – the organization exists as an entity that needs examination prior to prescribing remedies. That formulation links with another element of classical OD, the emphasis on the organization as an open or living system. Classical OD assumes that like real living systems, if we can understand the interdependence between all parts of the organization and its environment, we can identify how it all ought to work together to produce the best outcomes.

Postmodern forms of OD think about organizations differently. Without denying the utility of open systems theory, a dialogical narrative has supplanted the organic one. Intervening into the meaning making process is the objective. In any large group there are multiple realities so any data collected is used not to identify the problem, or the truth, but to raise collective awareness of the multitude of perspectives at play in the system and/or the meaning-making process itself. Table 1 summarizes some of the contrasts between what we are calling classical OD and newer forms, or postmodern OD.

Another difference to note is classical OD’s focus on changing behavior. Postmodern OD practices focus on changing what people think, instead of focusing on changing behavior, with the assumption that once people change how they make sense of things they will change their own behavior. Table 2 provides a suggestive list of some current OD practices that might be considered, in whole or in part, to include postmodern forms of OD.

Continuing OD Values

While postmodern forms of OD have different assumptions about what can be changed and how, they continue to embrace classical OD’s humanistic and democratic values. These values and ideals are reflected in the empowering and collaborative nature of postmodern OD practices, the facilitative and enabling role of the consultant, and the underlying goal of developing and enhancing organizations and broader social systems.

OD consultants operating from postmodern premises use methods consistent with traditional OD ideals like...
free and informed choice, authenticity and congruence, participative democracy, trust and collaboration. Postmodern OD processes often attempt to circumvent the power of entrenched groups to equalize the variety of interests represented in the system, giving everyone as much equal footing in the co-construction of new realities as possible. The role of the consultant in postmodern OD is also consistent with facilitating and enabling others as opposed to providing expert advice. Like the classical OD consultant, the postmodern OD consultant’s expertise is in understanding human social dynamics and in offering change and decision-making processes that support organizational goals and OD values. The OD consultant, classical or postmodern, is concerned with developing the capacity of the client system and not developing client dependence on the consultant. The consultant therefore stays out of the content and focuses, instead, on processes while members of the system deal with the content.

This emphasis on the consultant’s role in capacity building links to the final characteristic all forms of OD share, an interest in development. There are, at a minimum, three common themes. First, a person, group, organization or network is more developed the greater awareness it has of itself – it can talk to itself about itself. Secondly, in a more developed system, emotional, reactive behavior decreases and rational, goal directed behavior increases. Third, the more developed the system, the better able it is to actualize its potential. These ideas about development are implicit in all forms of OD, although specific practices may differ.

Toward a Definition of Postmodern OD

To help define this burgeoning field of practice we offer in Table 3 a set of five characteristics for categorizing postmodern OD.

In brief, rather than collecting data to diagnose a system prior to intervening, postmodern OD creates events that facilitate collective inquiry into the multiple “realities” in order to generate new collective understandings and cognitive maps that will lead to a team’s or organization’s further self development.

Conclusion

We are witnessing the emergence of new forms of organizing that are co-evolving with the information revolution and it is not surprising that these require new forms of OD practice.
forms of OD. Postmodern forms of OD will not attempt to diagnose systems in the traditional sense so much as attempt to create events where organizational members increase their awareness of the system and how social reality is being constructed by them. This can then lead to the central contribution of postmodern forms of OD: generativity, the creation of new possibilities based on new meanings, new ideas and new energy to do something with them.

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