

What is the role of an OD Practitioner by Mee-Yan Cheung-Judge & Linda Holbeche

The primary goal of OD is to improve organisation effectiveness; therefore the primary role of an OD consultant is to establish helping relationships within the organisation, with and between individuals and groups, to achieve that objective. The way that goal is acted out depends on the nature of the task in hand. It may involve the OD practitioner playing a variety of roles – being the sounding board to the top people, guiding a change team, designing or redesigning an organisation or process, being a partner to key decision-makers on a transformation project, facilitating a work team, being a process consultant to a critical work group, providing methodological leadership to a change programme, being an extra pair of hands in an overloaded period, carrying out regular health checks in each strategic cycle, and so on.

So while OD roles can be diverse, the purpose and the outcome we aim for is consistent: to bring greater health and effectiveness to the organisation, especially in times of change. In addition, let's briefly look at the three elements that make OD consultants different in the world of consulting:

- the centrality of relationship-building
- expertise in human dynamics and the intervention processes associated with that
- the development process of OD practitioners.

Expertise in human dynamics

OD's primary goal is to help an organisation become more healthy and effective, especially during change. The key custodians of organisation health are not the internal or external HR or OD specialist; they are the organisation's leaders and managers. Therefore, an OD consultant has to be committed to encouraging ownership and the growth of organisation capability among the primary practitioners of OD, that is, leaders. By taking that stance, our main approach is not one of offering expert advice. Instead, our commitment is to design processes to facilitate an organisation's ability to help itself through the skilful engagement of its key leaders. Our goal is to help an organisation to secure from its own internal members the acceptance, energy, competence and commitment to make things work.

Relationship-building

As OD practitioners we cannot rely on just a formal role, rank or power to influence; instead, we have to earn the right to help by focusing on increasing our interpersonal influence to make things happen, which in turn makes managing the relationship arena a key focus. Managing relationships and using one's self to shift mindsets and behaviour requires an in-depth understanding of how the human system works. We need to draw not only on our understanding of various theories – psychodynamic, psychoanalytical, system, group dynamics, action research and change – we also need to have a heightened level of self-awareness and understanding to put ourselves into a good place to be of service to our clients.

The self as instrument

Unlike the expert technical consultant, it is not just our thinking skills (head) that will enable us to do the job; we have to bring our head, heart and all of our being to make real-time intervention effective. Even if we start off thinking that all we need is a bit of technique and knowledge, our experience will soon tell us that more is required. We will discover that we cannot take our clients to places to which we ourselves have not been able to travel. If we have never resolved conflict in our personal life, we can never help clients resolve conflict in their world. In other words, it is not concepts or techniques that will give us the competence to do our job – even though they are important for our credibility. It is the ability to stay acutely aware of our own inner processes

moment by moment, our ability to get in touch with the complexity of what's lurking below the waterline of human dynamics, that will stand us in good stead in this work.

Therefore the development of OD practitioners is not about academic study alone but about spending more and more development time getting to know this one instrument we own and learning to do more fine-tuning of that instrument through the integration of our learning and experience.

*This is an excerpt from "Organization Development: A practitioners guide for OD and HR"
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