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Review of the Organization Development and Change Conference

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Academy of Management, Organization Development and Change Division, "Building ODC as an Academic Discipline," 7-8 April 2006.

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Abstract
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Review of the Organization Development and Change Conference

April 8, 2006

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Introduction

The Organization Development and Change Conference (ODC) was held at the University of Pennsylvania on April 7 and April 8. The purpose of the conference was to provide a forum for academic leaders involved in the field of organization development (OD) to convene and discuss the direction in which the study, research and application of OD is taking. As noted in the program brochure the title of the conference was "Building ODC as an Academic Discipline". As part of the program, the conference also provided an opportunity to compare and discuss the various OD graduate programs offered throughout the country.

The opening day of the conference introduced the topic of the challenges faced by the field of study in OD. Several keynote speakers spoke. Russell Ackoff who spoke on "Organization Development and Change" led the opening commentary. This was followed by a discussion on Reflections and Predictions from the Founding ODC Academic Programs and a second discussion on Mapping Critical Issues of ODC as an Academic Discipline.

The second day of the conference three topics were discussed and debated amongst the attendees. The forum for each topic was the same. A moderator associated with one of the visiting universities introduced each topic. After the introduction attendees broke up into four discussion groups to debate the issues associated with the topic. Graduate students for the University of Pennsylvania took notes for the groups. At the conclusion

of twenty minutes, the four groups reconvened as one and each of the individual groups presented its' findings to the forum.

Summary of second day discussions and debates

As a graduate student of the Organizational Dynamics program at the University of Pennsylvania, I participated in the conference by compiling notes for each of the three discussions led in the morning on the second day of the conference. A review of each of the three topics follow along with overall commentary on observations and thoughts for the future development of OD.

The three major topics discussed on Saturday, April 8 were:

(1) Major concerns and issues related to faculty and teaching ODC

(2) Major concerns and issues related to research designed to expand and update core knowledge in ODC

(3) Resources available to rebuild or to start new ODC programs

The participants of our group represented a good mix of backgrounds. The group consisted of two full time OD program directors, two adjunct professors, one of whom is an OD practitioner and coach, a fulltime OD practitioner and two graduate students.

Jane Wheeler, Ph.D., Director of the Organizational Development program at Bowling Green University opened the first session. The topic was "major concerns and issues related to faculty and teaching ODC". Jane took the opportunity to reframe the topic and focus it on the positives rather than the negatives facing ODC. Jane encouraged the group to focus the discussion on major opportunities and possibilities for ODC. In her

brief presentation, she emphasized the need to create more of a pragmatic and positive approach to the discipline in the study and application of ODC. She wanted the group to look towards the future and to make way for it.

The group to which I was assigned identified three major concerns in its discussion: tenured fulltime faculty vs. adjunct professors vs. practitioners; respect for ODC programs within the university system; and what is important to the business community as it pertains to qualified faculty. The first point compared the use of tenured fulltime faculty and adjunct professors teaching in ODC programs. This led to several related questions. Does the wide spread use of adjunct professors lower the status of the program? Whose perspective is important? Is it the administration, faculty, the student or the business community or is it a combination of them all? What does the student perceive as value?

Jane expressed that at BGU there are limitations as to who can teach in the program. A master's degree is a minimum regardless of work experiences. At times this has limited her ability to utilize some of the available talent in the business world or ODC practitioners. From the students' perspectives (Mary Alice and mine), the use of adjunct professors as part of the mix of faculty provided a broad perspective and real life situational experiences often brought into the classroom. The adjunct professor often times an ODC practitioner, was also able to bring into the course curriculum current models or examples to which the students could relate back to the work place. It was also pointed out that those who taught in ODC programs and were also ODC practitioners

often employed the use of experiential learning as opposed to case study. There appeared, according to the group, to be no loss of prestige or credibility to the program by employing adjunct professors.

The second point discussed was the respect or lack there of, that an ODC program has within a university system. In many instances tension exists between traditional business school and ODC programs. This goes back to the validity question that ODC continually faces. At some universities respect or credibility has been achieved by the longevity of it, for example, Bowling Green University and by the amount of dollars brought into the university, as is the case with the program at the University of Pennsylvania.

The third point pursued by the group was: what does the business community look for in the faculty and how does this translate into pressures felt by the ODC program?

The business community looks for authors who are publishing marketable material or as someone referred to it as "the good stuff". The emphasis here was on what does the business leader read and care about as it relates to ODC issues or programs. This is where the adjunct professor or practitioner appears to be more attractive. However, from the university perspective, the interest in publishing materials is more clearly placed on the research done, materials developed and where it was published. There needs to be more collaborative work done between the academician and the practitioner. Finally, the question was raised, is publishing a criteria for either group?

The second topic brought forward to the conference attendees was:

"Major concerns and issues related to research designed to expand and update core knowledge in ODC". Steve Schepman, Central Washington University, introduced the topic. Steve provided some background on the program and his involvement at Central Washington University (CWU). He mentioned some concerns facing the program offered at CWU. These included its rural location, low pay for adjunct professors and a minimal amount of assistance from other professors from other disciplines. To this last point he was specifically referring to the chairing of the thesis committee within the ODC program and cross involvement with other graduate degree programs. In essence, the ODC program is on its' own.

Steve challenged the conference attendees with several questions. Should ODC research take a social or science perspective? Do we need to keep the "S" (science) in MSOD? Is the ODC program credible and to whom?

The attendees broke out into their respective four groups to begin the dialog on the topic Steve introduced. Our group began with the point that not all OD graduate programs award an MS degree. Some graduate schools confer an MA or Med degree. Once that point was clarified the group discussed the merits of keeping the science in the program and what that meant to the credibility of it.

Everyone agreed that science with respect to the scientific method or perspective was important to keep in ODC. Science provides a systemic process that in turn provides

academic rigor, helps to create new knowledge and helps to provide a venue to think outside the box.

The scientific process does provide something of a challenge. If ODC is to respond to the needs of the business community, there is at times a disconnect between using a scientific process and being able to be responsive to business in a timely manner. It was agreed that incorporating the scientific process into the classroom provides an opportunity for critical thinking, bringing in the rigor to allow for creativity and constructing qualitative data where applicable.

Eric Goodman, Acting Dean, Graduate School of Management, Kaplan University introduced the third topic for discussion. The topic was "resources available to rebuild or to start new ODC programs". Eric went onto discuss the need to review the curriculum design, how the program is sequenced and what do the learners (students) come into the program with?

According to Eric, external influences, marketplace demands, organization relationships, governance of the program, internal influence and discipline all have an effect on curriculum design. His further reference to program content included, service learning, internships, curriculum structure and instructional resources. Students also have an impact on the program because of what they bring into it (abilities). Eric did not necessarily focus on the resources available for OD programs but more on the curriculum process of learning and expected outcomes.

Our group chose to focus on how ODC is viewed as a body of knowledge and how does that translate to the needs of the students. This third discussion began with raising numerous questions such as, how do educators make a difference? Can educators be proactive with OD program design? How far reaching is OD? What is being done to broaden the diversity of the student population focusing on OD? (Historically, African American colleges have been left out of these programs.) Have the OD programs, curriculum, processes of teaching moved from the industrial age through to the technical age (new age) and now beyond into the learning age?

With these questions in mind, the group went onto discuss the students or learners as Eric referred to them earlier. The students in the OD graduate programs tend to be more mature and with some in career transition. Jane Wheeler raised the point that the teachers instead of professing, need to learn from each other. By further exploring the issues, new ideas are generated and researched. Learning becomes the application of knowledge. This point raised additional questions. Is there a vacancy of ideas? What needs to be done to fill the void? Are we at a plateau? In order to build in a love of learning, exploring for new ideas, the professors need to be there themselves.

Challenges that current OD graduate programs continue to face and challenges that new programs have the opportunity to address are things like, determining the best mix of course materials, course content and instructional design. It was agreed the learning process needed to include a balance of approaches. Assigned reading material, lectures, power-point presentations, experiential and subject matter were all part of making the process balanced.

Some of the discussion included identifying three stages of a graduate program, early, mid and late. The early stage might provide focus on the philosophical or theoretical background in OD, the midpoint of a graduate might focus on metrics and in the late or final stage of a program the application of what was learned would occur. The teachers also felt it was important to ask students what was effective for them in the learning process. Obviously, more questions than answers were brought forward in this discussion providing room for further debate on the future of ODC in academia.

General Observations

Although the focus of the conference was on "building ODC as an academic discipline", an underlying debate seemed to be the relevance of ODC in academia and the business community. There seemed to be this inference in the discussions among the educators and practitioners at the conference. Some even went as far as saying is ODC as a discipline irrelevant or dead? One of the practitioners noted that he had moved away from ODC and was fully focused on coaching as an applied discipline in business.

The relevancy of ODC was not answered nor is it going to be answered here. But the fact that it was part of the on-going discussions helps to put into context the issues that were discussed and debated in the three break out sessions. Obviously, there are concerns as expressed by academicians and practitioners about ODC as an academic discipline, relevancy in today's business world and perhaps, even how it should be defined. There is almost a defensive posturing or a second-class feeling by some as to how the ODC

programs are perceived by the university. There are those who would consider OD to be in a crisis position today. There are also those who make the argument that compared to the relevancy and influence it bore in the business community (and perhaps academia) during the 1960's and 1970's, OD seems to have lost it's position of strength. During that time period large companies such as General Foods, Union Carbide and Proctor and Gamble looked to the involvement of OD practitioners to help strategize and implement change throughout the organization. Today's businesses might adopt some OD methods or practices in segments of the organization but not necessarily as a company-wide top down initiative. (Burke and Bradford pp 9-13)

The point that OD seems to have lost it's way in business has to have, I believe, a direct relationship to the concerns expressed by the academic community. It also has to have some relationship as to how OD is defined. The discussion during the second session led by Steven Schepman on whether or not there should the "S" be in the degree for graduate OD programs is a good example. Why is it that some universities confer the M. S. degree and others award the M.A. or M. Ed. Degree? Why is the program in the liberal arts school at some universities and with others in the business school? What should the minimum academic standards be expected of a graduate student in an ODC program? These questions add to the confusion of defining OD and therefore, have an effect on the stature of the program in the academic setting. If the vision or definition of OD is unclear, how can one expect unequivocal support from the academic community? Before OD programs can reach the same stature as some other graduate programs such as business, there needs to be a greater consistency from academics, researchers and

practitioners in the ways in which they define, teach and apply what they know. There are those who feel that as society and business practices have changed during the past forty years, OD has not done the same. What worked in a more liberal environment during the 1960's and 1970's is not necessarily going to be acceptable in a more centrist or conservative society where companies have gone through periods of reengineering and building a culture much more bottom line driven. (Marshak pp. 25 – 33).

Another point as discussed in the breakout group during the first session was the debate between the fulltime academics (tenured professors) and part time academics (adjunct professors and / or practitioners). This discussion took on two points. The academics focused more on theory and research and in cases of publishing, focused on academic journals. The adjunct professor who is often a practitioner and generally seems more aligned with the business community focuses more on the application or "how to" aspects of OD and is more prone to publish accordingly. Taking this point into a broader context, work continues to be done by researchers and practitioners and the question becomes is there a way to bridge what the theorists are doing with the work of the practitioner? In the early years of OD the researcher and practitioner were often the same. As the field evolved the two areas separated and the OD field began to incorporate more individuals with divergent backgrounds. (Bunker pp. 164 – 165) Instead of looking at this as an area of conflict and confusion it would appear that the OD programs and OD itself benefits from both of these groups. This point goes back to the discussion on the academic community today and the use of tenured faculty working along side adjunct professors in OD graduate programs. From the student's perspective, tenured faculty and

adjunct professors and practitioners provides great value and an opportunity for balance between understanding theory and application in the workplace.

The difficulty with clearly defining OD was not alien to me but the fact that there exists much debate about the relevancy of OD and OD graduate programs was new. Listening to the conference attendees discuss the frustrations that exist within university programs, the application of OD and how to marshal it OD forward took on greater meaning and a broader context. Jane Wheeler seemed to have a good approach with respect to stopping the focus on the frustrations and begin thinking of new opportunities and areas of development within OD. (This perspective reminds me of a bit of an appreciative inquiry approach.) It was also evident to me within the context of my discussion group that the faculty wanted to hear the viewpoints of the graduate student. The debates involved tenured academics practitioners and students all of whom provided credibility to the questions raised and the few answers agreed upon by the group. Since the basis of the conference was on the positioning and strengthening of OD academic programs in the university, it was interesting to observe the interest level the academics had in the points being made by the practitioners and students.

<u>So what happens next?</u>

Organization development is not a losing cause or about to become an extinct species. It appears as if it is an academic discipline that is facing some transition. It must be noted that the desire to treat OD as it always has been is not the right approach if the interest is to see it evolve into something bigger and more influential. Providing and developing different approaches to educating students about the theories, practices and merits is fine.

As academic and business communities and societies have changed, OD theories and practices need to change along with it. The same approaches that might have been accepted or worked in the 1960's and 1970's might not have the same influence in today's world. Somehow there needs to be a sense that it is acceptable to create and take different paths to implement and influence change initiatives in an organization. Coaching seems to be an approach that is thriving in the current business community and an approach that is more focused on the individual as opposed to a full-scale corporate change initiative. It then becomes incumbent on the academic or university system to realize that and create the learning and perhaps research environment or structure to support it. I mention this simply as an example and not as an ultimatum for OD survival. The OD academic community needs to stop wallowing in self-pity and look outside the confines of the university and develop new opportunities for growth. Businesses are dynamic and need methods and ways to assist in change initiatives. It is through research and development that new ideas can be generated and constructed into applications for today's business environment.

OD graduate programs should continue to strive to remain engaged with businesses. The more universities build relationships through the means of consultancy projects, working with practitioners and part time students with fulltime careers the closer they become to the realities of what is needed. It also seems that OD programs need to provide a clear message and ways of marketing it to the business community. Companies in many instances need to be educated as to the benefits of OD initiatives and how they can contribute to the corporation's bottom line.

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