

## OD without context management is a luxury item

Hans Vermaak

*Small discussion paper for the symposium 'Future of OD: research and new developments'  
Academy of Management 2006, Atlanta*

OD has an established tradition. There is a community of practice, academic research, handbooks in all sorts, development of new practices, lots of publications, proven methods. All seems fine. At the same time there is recurrent talk and publications expressing worry about the future of OD. It discusses how OD thinking is neglected in boardroom decisions, in mergers and acquisitions, in large-scale strategic change. It expresses doubt about the impact of OD on the big issues of today. Some in OD express disappointment at the lack of recognition in the outside world for what the OD community could bring to the table. All this presents a puzzling contrast between the strengths of OD know how and tradition versus this lack of position in the arena of organizational change. The contrast presents different possible meanings. Should OD practitioners e.g. do their work better? Should know how be more aggressively presented?

The argument here is that the lack of position might have little to do with the quality of OD know how and practice, but more with the nature of what makes OD. Let me elaborate. There are many contrasting strategies of change. Bennis, Benne and Chin (1985) mentioned power-coercive, normative-reeducative (OD like) and rational-empirical strategies. Others use other typologies. Together with De Caluwé we often refer to five – color coded - contrasting paradigms of change of with political (yellow print), rational-empirical (blue print) and learning/OD (green print) are three (Caluwé and Vermaak, 2002). No matter what the exact labeling, the existence of contrasting paradigms and strategies of change often leads to conflicting views and practices of change in organizations. Especially when a common awareness and acceptance of contrasting strategies is absent, choices of change strategies are more based on reflexes than diagnosis. Contingency thinking, let alone dialogue between the paradigms, is not within reach in most platforms in organizations. In supervising and evaluating change projects, it has become increasingly clear to me that when there are conflicting views on change strategies in such platforms, the same strategies always win the fight: the political approach or the rational-empirical approach. This is almost regardless the situation, issue, change agents, organization, etc. OD is, in ecological terms, a recessive strategy and, thus, has to fight cleverer to gain its proper place.

*An example is e.g. the need for 'knowledge management' in a company. Knowledge management is a container word. It can refer to empirical research, quality handbooks and information systems (all blue print approaches) as much as to any other change strategies. In the OD (green) realm you might choose to explore peer coaching, quality circles, product development or action learning. Typically an IT firm might present clients the blue approach in clear PowerPoint presentations, boast about proven methods, show reference lists and benchmarks while guaranteeing results in a project based approach. An OD practitioner can never have a pitch as robust as that: they can't guarantee outcomes as experimentation and exploration is part of the process. Outcomes can shift based on emerging insights. The OD process is made to measure making benchmarks and standardized solutions hard to come by. Etcetera. The outcome of this sales competition is predictable: when views of change conflict, either political or rational strategies generally win out, because either power backs them or they have the best story.*

What to do in such contexts with conflicting views of change?

- One option is not to compromise. You can choose to restrict OD practice to clients and contexts that ask for it and are ready for it. This is a comfortable option and it is, in some ways, in line with OD thinking: the notion that we support clients to make their own choices, that we try to create the right conditions and safety for learning and exploration. As a colleague once put it: 'if they don't want to learn, who am I to force them even assuming that I could?' The downside is that the OD practice becomes a rather innocuous affair. To put it bluntly: if OD is most used in situations where the conditions are optimal for OD, those are probably also the situations where there is the least added value for our

expertise. They could have done it without us. In a way, external OD then becomes a luxury afforded at times when the economy is good and when OD is (back) in fashion.

- Another option is to sell ourselves as best we can, show our know how and practice, invite ourselves to the boardroom and so on. In order to compare well with blue- and yellow approaches, this might require camouflaging OD approaches as a plan of approach than can be predictable, guaranteed and so on. In other words: to meet the expectations of the client instead of starting out with reframing them. I've seen quite a few examples of assignments being successfully acquired this way. The downside is that client finds out sooner or later that the practitioners involved were misrepresenting themselves. Sooner or later it will become clear e.g. that success is more dependent on active participation than on the presented plan of approach, that outcomes are not predictable and so on. Worst-case scenario is that clients realize this right when they are experiencing a 'dip' in a learning curve. Not realizing that things are soon to take a turn for the better and having a hard time trusting the practitioners' word for it, they sometimes mistakenly conclude that OD is just not that effective and step out of the process before real gains can be made. In this way not only is there no success of the OD effort, but also clients learn that OD does not really work and will think twice embarking on it in the future.

This creates a dilemma: OD can't stick to its domain for fear of having little added value and OD can't score well on dominant criteria beyond its domain for fear of losing its credibility. The predicament is that OD has most value to add in arenas where conditions for OD are not met, not in arenas where these are already in place. However we would have to find a way to add this value without losing credibility. In my perception this is not a strong suit of OD, as it requires other skills, notions, reflexes than are part and parcel of OD. In other words: there is nothing wrong, weak or missing in the arsenal of OD to successfully pull off our types of change, but there is something extra needed to manage contexts to acquire, protect and anchor such change in organizations that lack OD thinking and qualities.

Let's explore this a little. In acquiring work, this would involve mastering intervention paradoxes. A paradox of feasibility may well be that OD practitioners who are serious about the practical uses of their work, can succeed only if they not only understand but also utilize the dynamics of the existing dominant practice of their client's organization (e.g Dutton & Ashford, 1993). This could mean that instead of offering a weak sounding sales pitch about how to fix a predefined problem, an OD practitioner would be better off enquiring and investigating if other more easily accepted (blue/yellow) strategies wouldn't do the job just fine. If so, than why bother with OD? If not, there is less a burden of proof on the OD practitioners to sell their stuff, but there is now a client who asks for help knowing full well that he/she might have to enter into unfamiliar territory to get the job done. In doing so, the OD practitioner handles the paradox successfully while for the most part staying with what he/she is good at: making the client aware of something, enabling learning. The unfamiliar part is that he/she might use considerable expert power to guide the process in this direction.

*An example: an engineering firm felt a need to improve the quality of its work processes. Apparently more mistakes were being made, quality assurance requiring more and more work. The organization, partly infected by the nature of its primary process, preferred and believed in blueprint approaches. The CEO, a former engineer, was no exception. At first glance, I could see no objection to putting in some blue print experts to help describe work processes, improve quality handbooks, monitor progress, etc. However, the CEO also shared that they had had quality handbooks for years, but it did not prevent the quality records to go down. This did not lead me to believe that another go at the handbooks was going to be much more of the same for which they neither needed external help, nor would it turn things around. I suggested more of a learning approach, using quality circles. The intervention paradox came into full focus when the CEO asked me to pitch this new approach to middle management. I could see where that was going: middle managers were likely to argue that having many parallel quality circles would be an inefficient approach, that different circles might come up with different answers endangering consistency, etc.: all true based on blue criteria. There would be no way to win that argument without reframing existing beliefs about blueprint working wonders for quality. So, instead, I asked middle management to prepare for the meeting by investigating the track record of the existing approach over the last years as a proper way to start things off. This put a dent into the belief in*

*the quality handbook approach. This also spurred questions during the meeting about alternative approaches, to which I could respond with sketching a view also outlining that e.g. quality circles can work well but that they might not be able to pull it off in their context. This led to a discussion on what it would require on their part to pull it off. In a real way, learning had started regardless of what the next step would be. In other words: in OD acquisition and learning cannot be separated in time without losing credibility.*

Within the context of this synopsis I would like to look at two other implications of context management as an additional challenge for OD practitioners. One implication concerns the kind of issues to focus on. The red flags put forward by Greiner and Cummings (2004) as issues to be confronted by OD for the discipline to be of significance, include neglected involvement in top management decision making, strategy formulation, mergers and acquisitions, globalization and corporate governance. While I acknowledge that OD might well be of value there, this list sounds to me very much like a yellow/blue list, prominent in boardrooms and fitting the dominant frames of reference in those settings. There is a risk here. If OD does not assist in getting other issues on the agenda that are plaguing organizations because of the dominance of blue/yellow change, it might be selling itself and its clients short. What I mean is this: in complex organizations where lots of different viewpoints and rationalities are inherently involved, competition between them generally leads to dominance of political/rational thinking. This appears e.g. to be the case in many hospitals, schools, ministries, etc. (especially hybrid and large organizations tend to move in this direction). Persistent issues, like cooperation between professionals, client/external orientation, systems thinking, knowledge management, etc. keep popping up as a result of the dominance of such one-sidedness. In the literature such issues are sometimes referred to as 'ill structured issue' or 'wicked issues' (Rittel and Webber, 1972), characterized by both content complexity (multidimensional, ambiguous, hard to pin down) and process complexity (many actors in many roles involved perpetuating the problem and having contrasting perceptions on how to address them). I would argue here that most added value in change efforts is to be had from addressing those wicked issues rather than aligning to the boardroom's agenda. This is good news for OD, because the nature of wicked problems actually requires a participative approach as it is bound to many actors and requires a learning approach, as the issues cannot be understood without addressing them. This is typically our expertise.

*In doing research in the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs over the last 5 years, I have noticed that the change agenda is generally overburdened and short term oriented, projects competing with each other in time and money with yellow/blue changes making up the bulk of them. The agenda does not correlate well with the list of wicked issues the ministry faces. These include for instance: policies driven by incidents, lack of specialist knowledge, coordination load, constipation in work processes, non intervention behavior, lack of diversity in staff and staff development. Many are well aware of these issues, fewer are aware of the mismatch, even less so are eager to learn how to address things differently in their own domain. This is partly due to an accurate gut feeling that it might not be so easy and quick to do so. Those that do take on such issues have shown considerable courage and willingness to embark on experiments in embassies and in The Hague over the last years, leading to slow but consistent spreading of new ideas and practice. All successful spreading of ideas and initiatives has taken place through informal contacts and networks. The more formalized and open the setting, the more superficial the OD impact invariably was: in itself useful for anchoring progress and safeguarding conditions for experiments but not the driver of the changes itself. (Kraijo, A. et al. 2004)*

The fact that wicked issues are hard to resolve makes them sometimes disappear from the change agenda. As some client's put it: "Yes, those issues bother us a lot, but it's just how things go around here. What is the use worrying over it?" This brings me to a second implication I would like to put forward here: the kind of platforms to work with. As in the Ministry example mentioned, the boardroom is often not the easiest place to start addressing wicked issues. It is much more viable to do that at the fringes of the organization where experiments to not right away attract prying eyes, where prevailing ideas can be challenged, contradictions and diversity are deemed more ok, etc. One could say that the 'deeper the change' (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> order), the smaller the setting to pull it off, the gains to be made in many incremental small wins. Somehow I've always found the notions of a 'learning organization' in that sense a bit a contradiction in terms. You start the change with those pioneers that are ready and able to take in on, not on their own small issues and in isolation from the rest of the organization. No, on wicked issues that

surely also play out in their domain. And as internal change agents in snowballing new insights and new practice in the wider organization. The idea is to marry ambition with feasibility by taking the long haul for fundamental change anywhere where the time is ripe, working your way through the system as you go.

Summarizing the argument, I would like to suggest that OD tradition and know how is strong and valid, but that context-management is an additional competence that distinguishes those practitioners who are able to use OD to its full potential in environments that are not at all geared to it from those who are condemned to superficial work or selling out.

#### References

- Bennis, W.G., K.D. Benne en R. Chin, 1985 The planning of change. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winstron
- Caluwé, L. de and H. Vermaak 2002. Learning to Change; A Guide for Organization Change Agents. London/Thousand Oaks/Delhi. Sage Publications
- Dutton, J.E. and Ashford, S.J. 1993 Selling issues to top management. Academy of Management Review, 18, 397-428
- Greiner, L.E., Cummings, T.G. 2004. Wanted, OD more alive than dead! Journal of Applied Behavioral Science 40, 4, 374-391
- Kraijo, A. et al. 2004. Sturing bij BZ. Report for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by Twynstra Gudde, Amersfoort
- Rittel, H. and M.M. Webber. 1973. Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. Policy Sciences 4, 155-169