

## Ideas in Currency and OD Practice: Has the well gone dry?

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How does the practice of OD renew itself? Where do new ideas in practice come from? Why are there not more new ideas that lead to innovation in practice emerging in the field today? This paper is an exploration of this issue.

### I The Early History of OD

- Ideas were translated into practice from the behavioral sciences in the 1950s and 1960s. Experiential exercises demonstrated group processes that had been discovered in research. Lay people were trained in these ideas and how to use them to understand group dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and intergroup process.
- Then (1940s-1960s), basic research in social psychology was interested in interpersonal and group level processes. This type of research translated easily into application to real life situations.
- Lewin, Trist and Emery, management theorists like Maslow, etc. provided the knowledge base for practical application with theory about leadership, motivation, group process.
- OD was the action arm of basic social and organizational psychology research “Nothing is so practical as a good theory”
- The 1980s movement in basic research in social psychology to interest in cognitive psychology and more recently to neuropsychology means that application to practice is much more difficult. The immediate relationships are not easy to see. With this trend, much less basic research was done on interpersonal and group level phenomena. Only in the 1990s has there been developing some really interesting research on groups. By this time, however, most practitioners are no longer on a faculty so they are not reading it. Practice and its knowledge base are now widely separated.
- Over the same time period, organizational psychology has moved from depts. of psychology to business schools. Basic research is applied to organizational settings from social psychology, anthropology, sociology
- Practitioners are entering the field with every kind of background. There is no longer a common knowledge core that can be assumed or one discipline that informs practice.

### II Recent research possibilities and their application to OD

We believe there are interesting developments in research that could enrich practice but that practice is so divorced from this knowledge base that not much is happening in that regard. Even though the early complementarity of theory and practice has shifted, we believe that there are areas that can be explored that could bring back some of the conceptual vitality that characterized the early days of OD

- What are the possibilities for a new infusion of ideas into practice from some areas of basic research? Here are some areas that seem possible. We will select a few as examples and describe what is going on in the field.

- 1 Trust research
- 2 Virtual teams
- 3 Small group research (Gersick, Wageman, research on faultlines, on inadequate information sharing effects on decision making)
- 4 Intractable conflict
- 5 Networks and networking
- 6 Creativity and innovation research (user demand from the pharmas)

III Macro-theory does still have an effect on practice.

- Systems theory – from the beginning
- Chaos theory – more recent
- Chaordic organization theory

V How do potential ideas get translated into practice?

- 1 Already developed ideas get picked up and elaborated and promoted by practitioners
  - Ex: Senge's Learning Organization (Argyris)
  - Ex: Cooperrider's Appreciative Inquiry promoted and described For practitioners by Diane Whitney and Jane Watkins
  - Ex: Large group interventions (Bunker and Alban)
  - Ex: Sociometry – Net Form Analysis

2 *Tipping Point* ideas about how things become popular Examples of ideas that are interesting but remain marginal to the field e.g. storytelling, Snowden's knowledge utilization research.

3 The current marketing orientation of many practitioners with tools and its implications for the field. They sell practices, packages, systems not consulting in the traditional sense.

VI Where is all this going? Is a new infusion of useful ideas possible. What new processes and structures are needed to connect practitioners and those who are generating the ideas? What are the structures for practitioner knowledge to be captured and utilized? In business, knowledge utilization and intellectual capital is big business. How does OD retain, organize and make available the knowledge which practitioners develop?