

## **An organization development (OD) approach to consulting - Elevating humanity**

**Author: Justine Chinoperekweyi . September 2021**

The soul of Organization Development (OD) includes creating healthy performance-based cultures, facilitating good business practices, elevating the human element, and creating space for people to explore, create and innovate. Unlike the Management Consulting approach, an OD approach acknowledges the Appreciative Inquiry sentiment that 'people and organisations are not problems to be fixed, but mysteries to be explored'. To effectively lead positive change in organisations and societies, consultants must adopt approaches that stimulate enduring or natural human capabilities rather than merely expanding people's intellectual capacities. To effectively use the collective capacities in an organisation or community, the OD approach, through process consultation, leverages on the strengths and wisdom inherent in the client system, rather than using Expert or Medical consulting models. Creating space for people to reframe their cognitive and emotional frameworks is critical to innovation, creativity, and new forms of engagement. This is supported by Broaden & Build Theory which suggests that positive emotions broaden one's awareness and encourage novel, exploratory thoughts, and actions. Consultants must support senior leaders engage all their stakeholders and enhance the capacity of organisations to flourish. Barbara L. Fredrickson and Marcial F. Losada<sup>1</sup> stated that "To flourish means to live within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience."

An OD approach to consulting should be premised on inquiry and effective engagement and further rooted in eclecticism. According to Patrick Trottier<sup>2</sup>, eclecticism emphasizes the design of a consulting approach based on what seems best for the client organisation and where the client is currently at instead of following some single doctrine, method, or tool based on an expert / medical consultant. This aligns with the old OD law, which states that 'start where the system is'. Organisations, like people, develop from where they are at, not where they should be. To be effective, consultants need to have the experience, competencies, and tools to support client needs. This article focuses on some of the approaches to enhance these elements towards supporting, humanising workplaces, humanising leadership, and facilitating positive change through consulting engagements. Patrick Trottier further pointed out that process consulting depends on how 'eclectic' a consultant's approach is and how many methods and tools they have in their toolbox. It takes time and experience to gather enough competencies, methods, and tools to create customised approaches, methods, and relevant concepts applicable to the unique needs, strategic focus, culture, stage of development, size, issues, maturity, dynamics, etc. of an organisation.

People are the centre of change initiatives and the effective functioning of client systems. The following quote captures this view and aligns with process consultation and the essence of OD – elevating

humanity.

*People are not "things" to be manipulated, labelled, boxed, bought, and sold. Above all else, they are not "human resources." We are entire human beings, containing the whole of the evolving universe, limitless until we are limited, whether by self or others. We must examine the concept of leading and following with new eyes. We must examine the concept of superior and subordinate with increasing skepticism. We must examine the concept of management and labour with new beliefs. And we must examine the nature of organisations that demand such distinctions with an entirely different consciousness."*

Dee Hock, Founder and CEO Emeritus, Visa; *The Art of Chaordic*

*Leadership*, 1999

How should consultants engage with clients and client systems in a manner that amplifies enduring human capabilities? How can OD practitioners make OD values alive in their practice? Following is a review of eight applied approaches to lead positive change through OD process consulting.

## **Create space for good conversations**

Consultants need to reinforce positive exceptions as a means to create space for co-creation and co-evolving conversations. As we engage with clients, it is worth noting that people love to talk about problems. Without downgrading problem-focused client engagement (and the long and well-respected history of problem-focused approaches), consultants should spin the consulting conversations to positive, possibility-seeking dialogue – meaningful and generative dialogue. As a consultant, take your eyes off the problem and focus on small yet significant events in a client system. To help a client system to actualise its potential, focus on what's working and amplify that. The consultant should ask present and future-focused questions. Broaden and Build Theory posits that positive affect broadens one's thought-action repertoire and stimulates creativity and goal striving. As you engage with your clients (either in-person or virtually), *what are some of your approaches to create space for meaningful generative dialogue?*

## **Complimenting and validating the positives**

As a motivator and inspirer of enduring human capabilities in a client system, always offer compliments and validate what the client is doing well and acknowledge the magnitude of their difficulties. Celebrate what's working in a client system and solidify by iterative processes to facilitate sustainable change vitality. Compliments enhance a positive mood, and people in the client system feel competent and, as such, awaken their creative abilities, again – I use the term '*again*' because most organisations are agents

of suppressing human capabilities through policies, procedures, cultures of shame, and so on. Compliments alter people's mindsets, widen the scope of attention, broaden behavioural repertoires, and increase intuition and creativity. The positive effect of solidifying and celebrating what's working in a client system facilitates generativity and widens the array of thoughts and actions.

## **Summarising, Synthesizing & Clarification**

Resonance is fundamental to effective consulting engagement. Effective consultants summarise the salient points of any client engagement to ensure you have the same understanding as to the client. In summarising the client's points, capture the concise form of what's said. As facilitators, OD Process consultants also synthesise key points by weaving together the salient points, ideas, and threads. It is also important to seek clarification through open-ended questions. In facilitating generativity, consultants need to operate at different levels of thinking: pattern thinking, whole system thinking, synergistic thinking, etc.

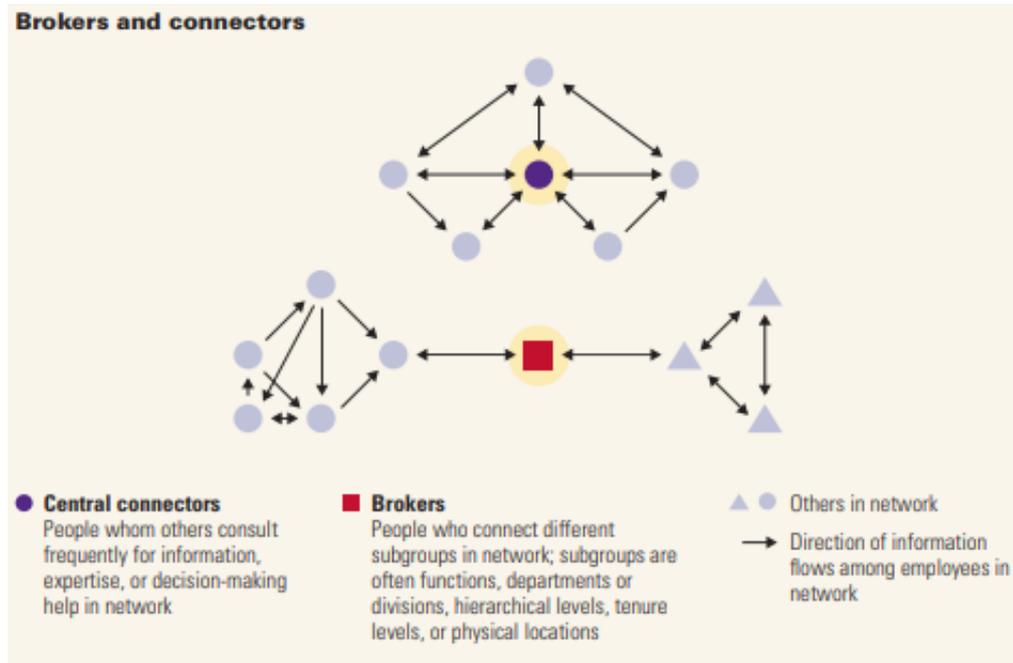
## **Commitment Testing**

In leading change, consultants support senior leaders in engaging all stakeholders in co-initiating, co-sensing, presencing, co-creation, and co-evolving (Otto Scharmer's Theory U)<sup>3</sup> of sustainable interventions. Without senior leaders' commitment, true change is difficult or impossible. Consultants should always check the intention and readiness of senior leaders and managers. Motive scrutiny is fundamental in ensuring the success of any change initiative. Ask powerful questions. Be a gadfly. To demonstrate commitment, senior leaders must establish a shared vision of an improved organisation, demonstrate their commitment by actions that are taken "in the heat of battle," engage other managers, provide resources, and actively address organisational incompetence. How do you, as a consultant, sense the level of senior leaders' commitment, readiness, and ownership to change initiatives?

## **Network Mapping & Relationship Building**

Consultants should also invest in widespread stakeholder mapping and relationship building. It is essential to flow with "intuitive leaps" and not deductions from any theory. The McKinsey Report asserts that boxes and lines of formal organisational charts mask myriad relationships in networks that crisscross the borders of functions, hierarchies, and business units. These networks define the way work gets done in today's increasingly collaborative, knowledge-intensive organisations. Consultants should invest heavily in understanding networks and collaborative relationships in client systems. Sophisticated approaches can map networks and identify key points of connectivity where value is created or destroyed. The consultant needs to work with influential employees as guides to understand the

networks and their culture. The Figure below depicts the use of brokers and connectors in network mapping.



Source: Network Roundtable, University of Virginia

In building collaborative relationships, consultants support client systems in breaking down silos. Using the Figure above, consultants should boost connectivity between brokers and other employees on the periphery. Mentorship and coaching programs should be established. The consultant should enhance the density (network connectedness), cohesion (steps to reach all network members), and centrality (number of connections per person in a network).

## Imaginative Hypothesizing

Most consultants are paralysed by an obsession with tools, frameworks, and models so much that they miss the transformational power of consulting. Engage in imaginative hypothesizing rather than being overly restricted by models and frameworks. Avoid preconceived notions and guard against paralysis by analysis. This calls for consultants to enhance skills around creativity, thinking conceptually and practically, and nurturing curiosity. Creativity enables ideas that go beyond existing tools and frameworks. Conceptual thinking indicates that the consultant is a visionary and is innovative. The OD consultant as a facilitator helps in meaning-making from abstract concepts. The use of provocative

questions by the consultant helps in imaginative hypothesising. Curiosity allows the consultant to ask thoughtful and focused questions and to listen sincerely to the answers.

## Procedural Fairness

To create resonance and gain acceptance from the client system, consultants need to facilitate effective engagement, explanation, and expectation clarity. Storytelling and Story-sharing become essential at this stage. Patrick Trottier<sup>4</sup> wrote that effective engagement means that "people are engaged in their work world in a way that has meaningfulness to them and each person as an individual, and as part of a team, 'experiences' accomplishment aligned to desired results." Furthermore, he added that there are three regular "streams of engagement": 1) Engagement through 'workshops', surveys, general assessments, events, etc.; 2) Engagement through people's day-to-day work functions, and 3) Engagement through 'job design' and the degree of 'control on the job'. The Axelrod<sup>5</sup> 4 Engagement Principles (principles of the fair process) are essential: widen the circle of involvement, connect people, create communities of action, and promote fairness. **Explanation** ensures that everyone involved and affected should understand why final decisions are made as they are. An explanation allows employees to trust managers' intentions even if their ideas have been rejected. It also serves as a powerful feedback loop that enhances learning. **Expectation clarity** meant that leaders would state clearly the new rules of the game once a decision was made. Consultants should provide clear decision rules along the spectrum of engagement and whether people are being engaged to inform, consult, co-create or delegate.

## Engage at different Levels of Thinking

The world is not a fixed canvas, and organisations are open systems characterised by complexity and chaos. Since OD consulting emphasises the whole system thinking, consultants should leverage other levels of thinking such as Pattern Thinking, Relational Thinking, and Synergistic Thinking. It is important for consultants to always think in strategic and operational multiples. Engage technology to display trends and patterns. In partnership with the client system, design thinking is encouraged in an OD approach as it enriches creativity and practical thought. The focus is on finding less obvious solutions to complex issues. To understand the client's needs and wants, the OD Process Design should observe the client in their natural environment and everyday situations. Combining design thinking with other thinking levels facilitates effective testing and iterating of multiple solutions. An expert approach to design thinking brings tried-and-tested methodologies to tailor to the needs of a client. An OD approach leverages the other levels of thinking to co-create novel approaches to deal with the client issue. This revolutionary approach opens up a client system to new ways of working. The following design thinking principles align with the process consultation approach: human-centred design, collaboration, being hands-on, iterative, reframing

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The eight approaches explored in this article align with SHARE Disruptive OD elements by Yabome Gilpin-Jackson and Richard H. Axelrod<sup>6</sup> as follows:

- *Systems Thinking*: Design interventions with the possibility of impacting the whole, the part, and the greater whole.
- *Humanistic Perspectives*: model humanity and design interventions that elevate the ability to connect deeply.
- *The architecture of Engagement*: Integrative mindset across the generations of our OD methodologies and technologies
- *Realism*: Disruptive OD confronts reality
- *Evaluation & Evidence-Informed Practice*: demonstrate organisational impact to fully practice what we preach and gain the trust of those we serve.

In conclusion, how are you supporting organisations and societies to lead sustainable strategic change, facilitate continuous improvement, and improve the human condition? As we push for positive change through industrialisation and innovation, practitioners and consultants should adopt approaches that elevate human capabilities and create high-value teams and high-value organisations.

## Author Bio

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