

OD 2001—'MAY YOU LIVE IN INTERESTING TIMES'

old Chinese proverb

FROM THE SERIES

THE
CHANGING
WORLD OF
WORK

Organizational Development is defined differently by different practitioners, but there are key links to be found among all the definitions. Ideally, OD serves as the bridge between company Strategy and operations.

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This article presents some thoughts about Organizational Development (OD) and its impact on individuals like you and organizations like yours. Our premise is that OD is a "job" for everyone. All managers and employees, too, need to be concerned about developing their organization—its people, systems and processes. OD is all about change in changing times, whether the change is transitional and temporary or complete and permanent.

CHANGING ENVIRONMENT AND PEOPLE RELATIONSHIPS

As always, technology is changing. But the rate of technological change has probably caused not only the empirical revision but also the potential retirement of Moore's law. It only *seems* that technology changes every 18 minutes rather than every 18 months as predicated by Moore. Ambiguity, rather than hard-and-fast rules, reigns. The advent of wireless technology has moved information from the stability of the office to the mobility of the person.

The middle of organizations continues to disappear. Mid-size and even large companies continue to be merged or acquired into larger ones. The big become bigger; the small become boutiques; and the mid-size go away. Local markets have become global and the Internet leads the pack in moving this change forward at breakneck speed.

Dot.coms have come and gone and, to para-

In preparation for this article, interviews were conducted a number of OD sources, including Rebecca Bruns, Bruns Leadership Consulting and M. Katherine Christopher, Principal, Christopher & Associates, LLC. Both companies provide independent contractor consulting work for **FLEX EXEC'S** MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS and are located in the Chicago metropolitan area.

phrase the old Irish proverb, "We hardly knew ye." Dot.com "refugees" are being reintroduced into the more traditional corporate World of Work at a heady speed.

On the people side, the ethnic and racial makeup of the work force has changed as Latino and Asian populations grow. The Boomers are nearing retirement and will soon be replaced by GenXers and other cohort groups. The "have" and "have-not" disparity between top execs and lower-level employee compensation continues to grow. This is the world for which OD was created!

THE ROLE OF OD IN THE FUTURE

Given the nature of and the speed at which business is changing, what can HR professionals do to help their internal constituencies successfully reach the future? How can they help make Strategy operationally successful? How can they integrate systems, work and people; divide work differently; build functionally disparate teams into positive forces in their organizations; identify the "value-added" each employee brings to the ultimate customer relationship, to the next merger or acquisition? OD practitioners will need to learn how to make lemonade out of lemons!

Katherine Christopher suggests that OD should position itself and its practitioners as "influencers." Inclusion in the strategic planning process is one option. It raises the odds for successful implementation of Strategy because good plans depend on people and systems to become more than just "works of art" in three-ring binders stashed away in a bottom drawer never to be looked at until next time.

Christopher, who defines OD as "evolving the relationship between the work and the person," lays out a process for OD practition-

Continued on next page

Continued from previous page

ers to ensure that their efforts are successful. She believes that in spite of current rapid-fire changes and assorted future predictions, the role of OD in the future won't change much from how she currently defines it.

She offers some tips for senior-level acceptance of OD:

■ First, senior-level executives should do some "landscaping," i.e., find the motivators for both the people and the organization.

■ Second, leaders of the OD practice internally should organize around capabilities and capacities. In her experience, some of the "hardest" end results are accomplished through some of the "softest" behavior-based requirements, e.g., listening. Processes and systems go nowhere by themselves when people don't listen.

■ Third, senior-level executives need to use their OD pros to plan on the front end about what to do with people whose skills don't fit into an organization changed by mergers and acquisitions.

■ Fourth, it's imperative for OD practitioners to know the business of their business. Content knowledge goes a long way to build credibility. Christopher also insists that quantifying success is vital for acceptance in the executive suites. "If ODers don't understand the deliverables they can't produce them," she points out. OD can help senior executives quantify and assess the impact of retention, turnover, margins per employee and other scoreboard items important within your company's corner offices.

WHAT CAN LIMIT OD'S SUCCESS IN YOUR COMPANY?

According to Rebecca Bruns, many senior-level executives really don't understand what OD can do for them. That knowledge-building task rests directly on the shoulders of OD pros and their colleagues in HR who need to "sell" executives on having a strong OD function in their companies. Senior-level executives need to be "sold" on how OD converts conceptual strategy into operating reality and success.

Bruns, who defines OD as "the process of aligning the growth of people and organizations," suggests that it may require the econo-

my to get worse before senior-level acceptance of OD improves. It requires people, processes and systems to be aligned with the goals and objectives of company strategy before strategy can equal reality.

In addition, she notes that the perverse mentality of "short-term results and reward systems directly conflict with the longer-term nature of the practice of OD." The long-held perception of anything that has to do with human resources as being "soft skills" or only paper processing should be addressed through a metrics approach to HR and OD success. OD pros must identify quantifiable goals, solid reporting systems and open communication lines and share this information within the company.

It's also the job of ODers to maintain the interest of top management. If the lead senior executive charged with introducing change (in concert with OD) loses interest, then the initiatives lose steam. When the rest of the organization sees top management is interested, then that's the employees' number one reason to remain interested. There's nothing wrong with moving on to other projects, say our experts, but the top brass should not abandon their original goals through disinterest or, worse, lack of interest. Remember the conflict between the short-term reward system and the long-term nature of OD. Top management needs to remember the long view.

If senior management wants a successful OD effort in their company, then they must care about it as much as the OD practitioners. If they choose not to care that much, then it may not be worth doing. Bruns offers this piece of wisdom: "Senior-level managers cannot expect their people to care more than they do." For her, as an OD practitioner, that's the balance between short- and long-term success. It's similar to dropping a project not because it's a "bad" project but because it's no longer a top management priority.

OD IN THE SMALL COMPANY

Finally, many senior executives at smaller organizations may believe that the problems they face are much different than those of their global-oriented brethren.

We asked our experts whether or not OD's success is dependent upon company size, or if the practice of OD is different in different sized companies. The answer was the same from both. A resounding "No!"

10 QUESTIONS TO A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF OD AND YOUR COMPANY

Think about the following 10 questions. Interview yourself, your peers and maybe even your operating management to see how you each answer them. Similar answers from different sources may help to lead your organization to greater success through a solid OD effort. On the other hand, identifying vast differences also helps because you then will know what you have to do to be successful.

1. What is the role and function of OD in today's world?
2. How can OD help my organization in economic times such as we are facing today?
3. How can OD affect organizational bottom line?
4. What is the role of HR and OD in the corporate Strategy formulation and implementation process?
5. How can OD help top management structure an organization to help avoid, mitigate or minimize major downsizing in down times?
6. Constantly changing technology is a given in today's business world. How can OD help businesses anticipate future needs?
7. How is the role of OD in a small business different than that in a large one?
8. How can OD efforts help improve employee loyalty and retention rates?
9. How do you quantify success arriving out of OD efforts?
10. How do I know when I need help getting Strategy implemented into daily operations?

OD & HR: SEPARATE BUT EQUAL?

OD has grown and evolved just as the business environment has. Bruns says that if you can get others to specifically articulate the business vision you can make OD work and, "When it works, it's exciting!" OD "works" when top management accepts OD as a full-time business partner. Bruns points out that organizations have worked diligently to reduce the number of silos, and that separating HR and OD into two separate but equal practices flies in the face of that effort.

Christopher put it most succinctly, "OD is

still the bridge between Strategy and operations and the way to maintain competitive performance," regardless of company size.

But just as children grow and go out on their own, it may be time in some organizations for OD to move from its adolescence to full adulthood in the corporate family. Is it, perhaps, the perfect time for companies to recognize the benefits of using OD and to enable it to take on a new function—to be the link between Strategy and operations? We do live in interesting times! What are you going to do about them? ■

Where Does FLEX EXECS MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS Fit In?

Since 1990, FLEX EXECS MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS has been working to help our clients break out of the traditional ways of thinking about the World of Work. Today there are different ways of doing things, and we are on the cutting edge of these new ways of thinking about business and work.

FLEX EXECS places interim executives, high-level managers and project experts. Many of these skilled professionals possess knowledge and expertise gained in functional areas, such as human resources, finance/accounting and general management.

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