

# UNDERSTANDING OD AND ITS ROLE

A THINK PIECE ON ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT



# INTRODUCTION

Organisation Development (OD) is an increasingly influential field of practice in the Singapore Public Service. One reason is that there is an increasing need for Public Service organisations to respond more deftly to the changes in their external environments.

This is however, easier said than done. An organisation is essentially a social system – not a machine. When a machine becomes out-dated, the approach is to locate the obsolete component(s) in the mechanical system, then replace them. Such a simplistic approach would not work in an organisation, because social systems are inherently complex, due to the numerous inter-personal relationships present within. In social systems, the relationship between cause and effect can often only be perceived in retrospect, but not in advance<sup>1</sup>. As such, facilitating organisational change which requires employees to change the way they do their work or make decisions, is a challenging endeavour - one that is much more complex than simply changing an obsolete machine part.

Another reason why OD is increasingly valued is that work issues are now much more complex, making it highly unlikely that a single leader would possess all the information needed to make sound decisions. This has led to the realisation that having engaged employees and possessing an enabling culture are crucial factors for a high-performing organisation.

Along with this shift, employees increasingly expect more than just fair wage for their work. They want recognition, a sense of achievement, fulfilling assignments and meaningful relationships with their managers and colleagues - and when these needs are not met, their motivation to perform declines.

Against this setting, the practice of OD has been growing in importance, because it is a practice that applies behavioural science knowledge to improve the performance of human systems. The goal of OD is therefore to help organisations improve, and even transform, such that they can attain sustained organisational effectiveness.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynefin>

**WITH THIS GROWING APPRECIATION FOR THE PRACTICE OF OD, THE CHALLENGE FACED IS IN BUILDING OD CAPABILITIES WITHIN THE PUBLIC SERVICE.**

**BUT WHAT IS OD, REALLY?  
HOW DID THE PRACTICE OF  
OD EVOLVE?  
WHAT IS THE ROLE OF OD?**

# WHAT IS OD?



OD has been around since the late 1950s / early 1960s. It is however a practice that is difficult to explain. This is because OD is commonly regarded as a “scavenger” discipline – one that has developed from various schools in the behavioural sciences, such as social psychology<sup>2</sup>, industrial/organisational psychology, psychotherapy, industrial sociology, cultural anthropology, systems theory and organisational behaviour.

Nevertheless, OD practice is informed and defined by a relatively integrated set of theories, ideas, practices and values and therefore qualifies as a field of applied knowledge<sup>3</sup>. More recent developments in the field of OD include the emergence of large group interventions such as Appreciative Inquiry.

There is no one standard definition of OD, but here are some common descriptions:

1

An effort that is planned, organisation-wide, and managed from the top, to increase organisation effectiveness and health using behavioural science knowledge. (Richard Beckhard)

2

A planned process of change in an organisation’s culture through applying behavioural science knowledge and research. (Warner Burke)

3

A long-range effort to improve an organisation’s problem-solving capabilities and its ability to cope with external changes in its environment, with the help of external or internal consultants (also known as change agents). (Wendell French)

4

A system-wide application of behavioural science knowledge to the planned development and reinforcement of organisational strategies, structures and processes for improving organisation effectiveness. (Cumming and Worley 1997)

While the definitions of OD vary in emphasis, there are a few key features that are common at the heart of the practice.

# THE PRACTICE OF OD:

Facilitates intentional change efforts based on informed diagnosis.

Addresses issues holistically with the system in mind (this involves the application of systems thinking and thereafter, making appropriate interventions/changes to structure, systems, & processes, an individual's behaviours and even social norms).

Designs interventions with people in mind - recognising that human behaviours are not just motivated purely by rational arguments, but also by emotive elements, such as sense of pride and belonging.

A simple way to understand OD is to examine the two constituent words: 'Organisation' and 'Development'. Organisation here refers to a group of people and resources to form a working unit in pursuit of one or more shared goals. And 'development' simply means a process of change that leads to improvement and transformation over time. Combine the two and you will have organisations that become more effective over time.

In the context of the Singapore Public Service, OD is the 'means/practice' behind the 'end/outcome' of attaining Organisational Excellence (OE).

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<sup>2</sup> This could also include the emerging field of 'Behavioural Economics'

<sup>3</sup> The NTL Handbook of Organisation Development and Change: Principles, Practices and Perspectives (edited by Brenda B Jones, Michael Brazzel)



# How Did OD EVOLVE?



At the turn of the 20th century, work was portrayed as a mechanistic process. But mindsets started to change from the 1930s. Research, beginning from the Hawthorne studies<sup>4</sup>, showed that human factors were important in producing quality work. Effectively managing people and groups was linked to attitude change, higher performance and greater commitment.

This new thought direction was further developed through psychologist Kurt Lewin's research later in the 1940s. To date, Lewin is widely regarded as the founding father of OD and was also instrumental in the establishment of the Research Centre for Group Dynamics at MIT in 1944<sup>5</sup> and the National Training Labs (NTL) in 1947.

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<sup>4</sup> Studies carried out at American factory Hawthorne Works found that there was an increase in workers' productivity when they knew that researchers were observing them. The key finding was the discovery that worker motivation could be influenced by the degree an organisation showed interest in them.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, M. K. (2001). Kurt Lewin, groups, experiential learning and action research. Retrieved from <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-lewin.htm>.

Besides Lewin, some of the early theorists that have been influential in the field of OD include<sup>6</sup>:

## Abraham Maslow

who argued that each individual had the capacity to pursue 'self actualisation', and that this quality was more likely to be achieved under conditions of openness and personal recognition.

## Erist Trist and Ken Bamforth

consultants at the London-based Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, who coined the term 'socio-technical systems' (STS), in recognition of how technology can influence an organisation's social dimensions and vice versa.

## Douglas McGregor

who proposed that different leadership styles resulted in different reactions. Leaders who adopted the Theory Y style – participatory and democratic – produced workers who were self-motivated and engaged. However, Theory X leaders, seen as oppressive and authoritarian, often produced disengaged workers. McGregor, together with his colleague Richard Beckhard, was also first to coin the term "Organisation Development" in the 1950s.

## Chris Argyris and Rensis Likert

who advocated that organisation-wide participation could help to motivate individuals and achieve greater performance.

These contributions from these OD pioneers had in some way contributed to the realisation that organisational effectiveness was influenced by relationships, people's social needs and motivations and the dynamics of work groups.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Source: <http://www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/corpstrtg/orgdevelmt/orgdev.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Making Sense of Organisational Development - A guide to understanding the role of OD in the workplace by Roffey Park

# Evolution of OD Practice

To gain a better understanding of the practice of OD, it will be useful to appreciate how it has developed / evolved over the years.

## T-GROUPS

**The Early OD Intervention – ‘T-groups’ (training groups).** This intervention had its beginnings in 1946 after the World War Two, when the Connecticut State Inter-Racial Commission held a conference to address racial and religious prejudice. Kurt Lewin was asked to lead the conference. At the end of each day, staff meetings were held to debrief and plan for the following day's agenda. At the start of one of the evening observers' sessions, three of the participants asked to be present. Much to the chagrin of the staff, Lewin agreed to this unorthodox request.

Initial tension started to rise when one of the participants disagreed with a staff member when the latter inaccurately interpreted the participant's behaviour during the day conference. Another participant agreed with the first participant's assertion and slowly, a lively discussion ensued about behaviours and their interpretations. Word of the session spread, and by the next night, more than half of the sixty participants were attending these feedback sessions which, had somehow become the focus of the conference. This process became the basic design of learning groups, soon to be called T-groups (“training groups”)<sup>8</sup>.

In short, T-groups are basically 8-12 people meeting for an extended period with only one agenda - to learn about group dynamics. These sessions were initially based on the use of sociology to understand individual behaviour in interaction with others and to understand the behaviour of the group itself. The purpose was soon expanded by the use of psychology to learn in more depth about interpersonal and intrapersonal processes.<sup>9</sup>



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<sup>8</sup> The NTL Handbook of Organisation Development and Change: Principles, Practices and Perspectives (edited by Brenda B Jones, Michael Brazzel)

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# Evolution of OD Practice

## STS

**Socio-Technical Systems (STS).** Erist Trist and Ken Bamforth's groundbreaking work about STS started when these Tavistock Institute consultants lent their services to a coal mining company in the late 1940s. In the past, coal mining teams were self-selecting and paid on the basis of group effort. But with the advent of technology and new machinery, individualised efforts, and not group work, became the norm. This led to a decrease in productivity as well as an increase in absenteeism. Trist and Bamforth suggested a new approach, which was to incorporate the new technology into the former team-based elements. This led to increased productivity and reduced damage and costs.

Their work on STS highlighted the need to recognise that organisations can be viewed as comprising two independent, yet interdependent systems: the technical and the social. As such when a change is made to a business process or technology (i.e. the technical system), there will be effects elsewhere in the system that needs to be considered, like the skills and motivations of people operating those new processes (i.e. the social system). Understanding these interdependencies within the 'work system' is critical to successful OD.

## OD CONSULTING

**OD Consulting<sup>6</sup>.** Beginning in the late 1950s, some of the first OD consultants were (1) McGregor – with Union Carbide; (2) Beckhard – with Procter & Gamble and ICI; and (3) Herbert A. Shepard – with Esso.

It should also be noted that OD consulting was different from the prevalent consulting modes at that time for the fact that it did not assume that the consultant had all the answers. The client had to take ownership of the situation, partner with the consultant to perform a joint diagnosis, and implement possible interventions. The consultant's role is more of a facilitator of this process rather than an expert. This distinction still continues till today and is known as 'process consultation'<sup>10</sup> – a term coined by former MIT professor Edgar Schein.

In a way, OD practitioners function like psychiatrists that help care for the health of the organisation. They patiently listen and skilfully dig deep into their organisation's issues to diagnose the ailments. Following which, practitioners then artfully raise these maladies to the organisation's awareness such that it will desire to implement corresponding solutions.

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<sup>10</sup> Schein, E. (1998). Process Consultation Revisited: Building the helping relationship. USA: Prentice Hall.

# Evolution of OD Practice

## SURVEY FEEDBACK

**Survey Feedback.** While much of OD work relies on understanding group dynamics and taking on a humanistic approach, it was late American educator Rensis Likert who introduced measurement to the field. He was interested in how the results of OD interventions can be measured tangibly. Likert pioneered this work by introducing quantitative data methods in OD. He did this through creating survey instruments, as well as the “Likert” scale which measured people’s perceptions on a five or seven point scale<sup>11</sup>.

Likert adopted the first survey feedback instrument in his consulting work with the Detroit Edison Company. This method involves collecting data by questionnaire to determine an employee’s perceptions of a variety of factors, like ‘trust’ and ‘communication’. The information was subsequently used as feedback to help leaders and managers devise improvement strategies. This enabled leaders and managers to understand the effect of various factors (i.e. behaviours, organisation structures, processes etc) on organisation outcomes.



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<sup>11</sup> O'loughlin, D. (2010). Origin and History of OD.

# WHAT IS THE ROLE OF OD?

The role of OD in organisations can be explained using the following two analogies: the “organisational coach”, and the “organisational counsellor”.

**The role of OD as “organisational coach”** – just as when an individual sets a goal of running a marathon, he/she will need proper preparation and training to achieve this goal. Having a coach plan out the training and diet regime, and ensure that the appropriate attire/gear is utilised, will greatly enhance the likelihood of the individual successfully achieving the goal.

Similarly, the role of OD is to ‘coach’ the organisation so that it is capable of achieving its strategic goals. This involves providing the broad planning and implementation of internal change so that the organisation can achieve its strategic goals. In other words, the role of OD is to help the organisation develop its internal capacity such that there is *alignment* with its strategic ambition<sup>12</sup>.

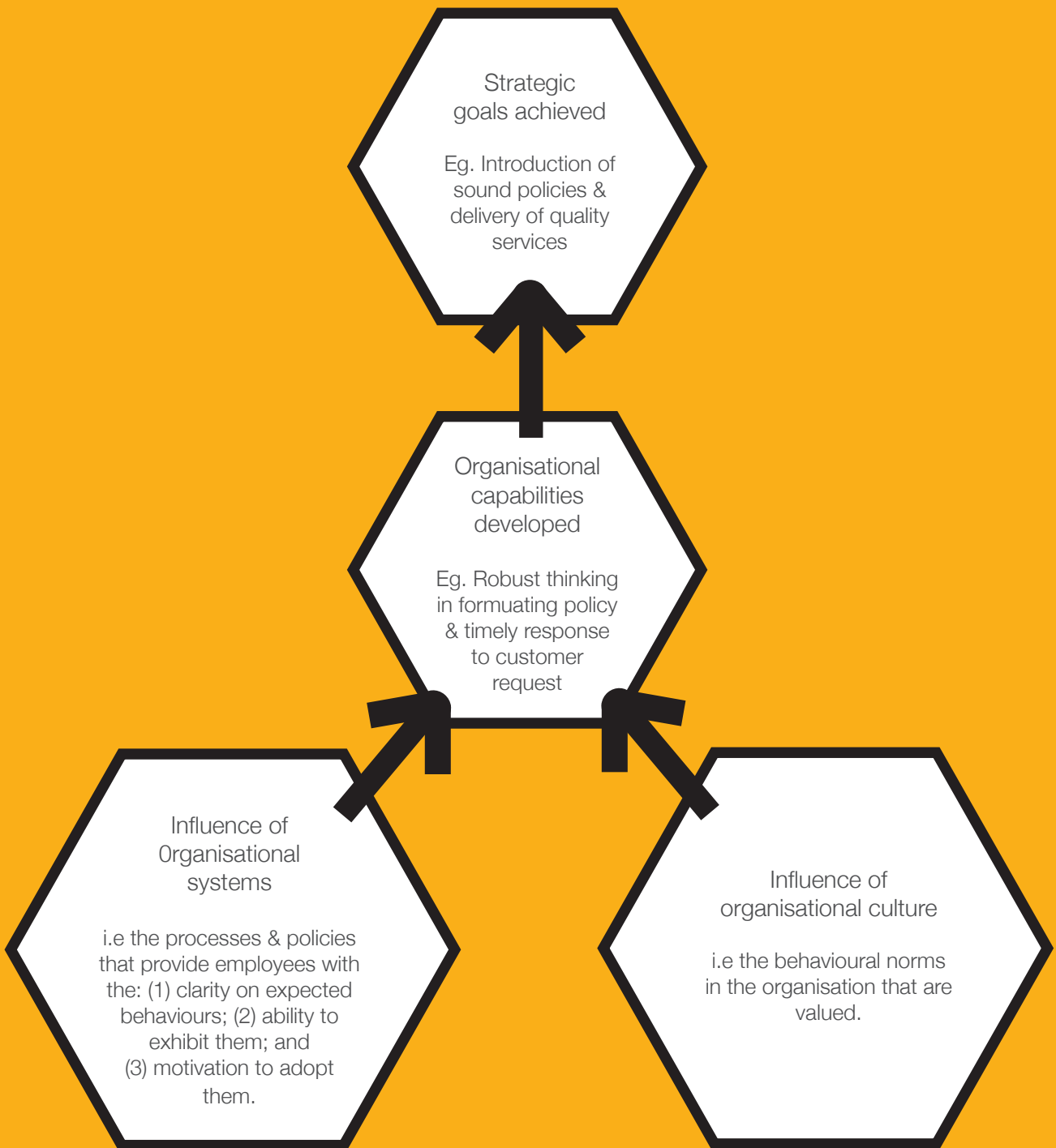


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<sup>12</sup> Mee-Yan Cheung-Judge and Linda Holbeche. 'Organisational development – what's in a name?' [http://www.quality-equality.com/fileadmin/user\\_upload/pdfs/IMPACT\\_Whats\\_in\\_a\\_name.pdf](http://www.quality-equality.com/fileadmin/user_upload/pdfs/IMPACT_Whats_in_a_name.pdf)



The graphic below illustrates the importance of aligning the organisation's capabilities – made up of its systems and culture, with that of its strategic outcomes.



**The role of OD as “organisational counsellor”** – when an individual is physically sick, he/she will need to see a doctor to help diagnose the physiological ailment and thereafter prescribe an appropriate treatment. In the event that the individual is facing a social or psychological dysfunction, a counsellor (or perhaps a psychiatrist) would be more appropriate.

While it is possible to see the role of OD as that of an “organisational doctor”, Schein preferred to equate the role of OD as that of an “organisational counsellor / psychiatrist” since the issues faced by organisations tend to be social / psychological in nature. In addressing such issues, Lewin believed that those involved in creating those social conditions must be involved in the process. It is this emphasis on creating social system change that makes Lewin’s action research model<sup>13</sup> a core process of OD practice.

An important feature of the action research approach is its emphasis on helping the organisational leader become more aware of the social environment / conditions, and the need for leader involvement / participation. As such OD adopts a “facilitator” rather than “expert” role, exactly like the process consultation mode that was discussed earlier<sup>14</sup>. Ensuring that the leader is aware of what is happening, and actively involved in the design of the intervention to address the issue(s) are crucial. This point is at the heart of action research, and of OD practice – that change is easier to accept when those affected by the change are involved in understanding and driving the change process. This is why OD efforts are marked by high levels of stakeholder involvement and participation, and why successful OD practices are very much dependent on the quality of relationship between the practitioner and the organisational leader / stakeholders.



<sup>13</sup> Lurey, J.S., & Griffin, M. (2002). Action Research: The anchor of OD practice. OD Practitioner, 34(3), 15 – 20.

<sup>14</sup> Schein, E. (1998). Process Consultation Revisited: Building the helping relationship. USA: Prentice Hall.

The action research approach consists of seven phases of action summarized below.

## Phase 1: Entry

Developing the practitioner/leader (or consultant/client) relationship and validating the fit between both parties. This is important because it sets the tone for the working relationship between the practitioner and the leader(s).

## Phase 2: Contracting

Clarifying the issue that needs to be addressed (i.e. the project statement and scope), and determining the expectations of the leader(s) regarding project outcomes, deliverables and schedule. This is also where agreement is established regarding the role of the practitioner, as well as that of the leader(s) in the project. Access to the leader(s), information, and other resources needed for the project should also be discussed at this phase.

## Phase 3: Data Gathering & Diagnosis

Collecting the necessary data and analysing it. This allows the practitioner and leader(s) to understand what is happening and how to move forward from here. Diagnosis is important because without a proper understanding about a situation and the issues involved, any planned intervention will miss more than it will hit.

It is also important to note that carrying out the diagnosis is in itself an intervention – because people will react during the data collection process. Warner Burke, one of the gurus of OD, likened diagnosis to throwing a rock in the pond. OD practitioners will need to watch the ripples that the rock has created and not so much where the rock ends up.



## Phase 4: Feedback

Presenting the findings, analysis, and any preliminary recommendations to the leader(s). The key here is to take the mountain of information that has been collected and reduce it so that it can be managed and understood. The practitioner would also need to decide how to involve the leader(s) in the process of analysing the information.

In giving feedback, the practitioner should also be prepared to encounter resistance. This can be a crucial point in the OD process, as the resistance will have to be addressed before any appropriate decisions can be made about how to proceed.

## Phase 5: Planning Change

Identifying specific courses of action (aka interventions) that address the situation and developing an action plan for implementation. At this phase of the process, the role of the practitioner is to help facilitate the leader(s) in identifying the steps that can be taken to move the system to the next stage.

In identifying/designing the interventions, three dimensions should be considered<sup>15</sup>:

- 1) the problem at hand (i.e. culture, communication, or work processes)
- 2) the focus of attention (i.e. an individual, team, or total organisation) and the subsequent
- 3) mode of intervention (i.e. coaching, training, task force establishment)

## Phase 6: Intervention

Implementing the specific intervention to the organisation. This is where application of change management practices would be important.

## Phase 7: Evaluation

Assessing the results and determining future courses of action. Although evaluation is placed as the final phase of the OD process, practitioners would need to work with the leader on deciding what should be measured right at the beginning of the project, i.e. at the contracting phase.

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<sup>16</sup> Schmuck R. A., & Miles, M. B., (1976). Organizational Development in Schools. San Diego, CA: University Associates.



# Concluding Thoughts

The role of the OD practitioner is a powerful one. Practitioners often find themselves having to wear the cap of an organisational coach, guiding the organisation in reaching its strategic goals. They also have to play the role of a counsellor, pinpointing and improving the social challenges that their organisation is going through.

This makes practising OD challenging because it involves working with a complex system – the organisation. Practitioners have to attain a firm understanding of themselves and the myriad of ways their practice can shape the organisation. It is however, a challenge worth undertaking as OD when effectively practised will help in the achievement of strategic goals, and the resolution of performance gaps.

And as OD becomes an increasingly influential field of practice in the Singapore Public Service, practitioners then need to ask themselves this pertinent question: How can they better develop ourselves to make stronger and more positive influences in our organisations?

This resource is developed by the Centre for Organisation Development (Centre for OD), Civil Service College. The Centre for OD promotes the effective practice of OD as a key capability to build excellent public organisations in the Singapore Public Service. We do this by engaging, educating and equipping OD practitioners and Public Service Leaders through our developmental programmes, research projects and advisory services.

For any enquiries regarding this resource or any questions on the field of Organisation Development, please feel free to contact us at [cscollege\\_COD@cscollege.gov.sg](mailto:cscollege_COD@cscollege.gov.sg). We will be happy to hear from you.