

OD practitioner

"It's Not My Dog"

EIGHT MYTHS OD CONSULTANTS BELIEVE IN . . . AND DIE BY!

Here's the paper Jerry read at the closing session of the ODN Meeting last October at Snowbird. It's likely to strike you in one of two places: 1) "Oh sure; I've been thinking that for some time now!" or 2) "Where the hell does he get off?"
Before reading it, you may want to take the brief "test" Jerry devised—in the box on page 2.
—Ed.

Today I want to talk about one of the critical issues facing the field of organization development—what I call the *Theory Trap*. In brief, I want to describe the way in which I feel OD consultants have been caught in a series of mythical theoretical propositions which not only rob us of our professional potency, but also contribute to the demise of the very organizations we are trying to help.¹

As a means of developing this theme, I would like to title my talk "It's Not My Dog: Eight Myths Organization Development Consultants Believe In and Die By." Since I suspect that the origin of the title may be somewhat obscure to many in the audience, I think some additional explanation may be necessary. That, in turn, requires that you understand something about how my family spends its vacations.

Every fall my wife, two kids and I rent a condominium on a gorgeous, white sandy beach in Ocean City, Maryland. Since we rent it after the tourist season, few outsiders are in town; and

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for all intents and purposes Ocean City is deserted.

A Walk, a Man, a Dog

Last year about this time, we were in Ocean City. One morning at approximately 6:30 I awoke before the rest of the troops, and I decided to take a walk along the beach. I don't know if you have ever walked along that particular beach during the off-season, but if you have, you know that you can walk out the door, look in any direction, and the only thing you can see is the horizon. The net result is an awesome feeling of vastness and solitude. It was in this context that I began my journey.

As I walked I suddenly became aware of two objects in the distance. I kept going toward them until I was approximately 20 feet away, and then

Jerry B. Harvey

*The George Washington University,
Washington, D.C.*

stopped. Before me was a huge, bald-headed man (I would guess he weighed approximately 320 lbs.), who was wearing a green checkered bathing suit which looked as if it had been fashioned from an old tablecloth. He sported a handlebar moustache, and he was engaged in the unlikely task of digging an enormous hole in the sand with a small purple plastic bucket. Adjacent to him was a large red Labrador retriever digging an equally big hole.

Well, observing that kind of activity is not the way my mornings usually start; so I stood and watched. The man was clearly a championship digger because he had a hole large enough in diameter and deep enough to drop a garbage can into. The dog was equally competent. Indeed he had burrowed so deep into the sand, that only his flanks and tail were visible. Periodically, both man and dog would emerge from their respective caverns, rest awhile, and then, as if activated by some unseen clock, would once again commence tossing great volumes of sand behind them much like ditch-digging machines at a construction site.

BELIEFS

Jerry B. Harvey

For each of the following sets of items, circle the statement or statements which come(s) closest to expressing your beliefs. For answers, see footnote.*

- A. 1. Resistance to change is a fundamental problem of organizations.
2. Resistance to punishment is a fundamental problem of organizations.
- B. 3. Coping with pressures to conform is a fundamental problem facing many people in organizations.
4. Coping with freedom to perform is a fundamental problem facing many people in organizations.
- C. 5. The inability to cope with conflict is a major cause of organization dysfunction.
6. The inability to cope with agreement is a major source of organization dysfunction.
- D. 7. Organization development is a long-term process.
8. Organization development is a short-term process.
9. Time is an irrelevant variable in organization development.
- E. 10. Confrontation generally involves conflict.
11. Confrontation is the process of discovering the underlying reality of a situation.
12. Confirmation is a powerful form of confrontation.
- F. 13. Management style is a more important determinant of organization effectiveness than authenticity.
14. The authenticity of a manager is a more important determinant of organization effectiveness than absolute management style.
- G. 15. The organization development consultant is a change agent.
16. Consultants can't function as change agents.
- H. 17. OD has a future.
18. The future of OD is past.

*Unless you circle items 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 11, 12, 14, 16 and 18 you disagree with the author on fundamental issues regarding theory and practice of organization consultation. [For details, see article, pp. 0-0.—Ed.]

began to have the feeling I was in an Andy Warhol movie, or at least was the subject for a Candid Camera episode. However, after I had watched the man and the dog for a good ten minutes without being interviewed by Allen Funt, curiosity got the best of me and I approached the man and said, "I beg your pardon, sir. I've been standing here watching, and I'm just curious. Are you and your dog digging for anything in particular?"

He look up, and replied simply, "It's not my dog."

I waited for some sort of additional explanation, but none came. So, as the man and the dog alternately appeared

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and disappeared into their respective burrows, I said with some sense of anxious desperation, "Oh, so it's not your dog." And he replied, "Nope, it's not my dog," and continued to dig.

After five minutes of silence, I realized that the conversation was over. I had said my piece; he had said his; and the dog could only bark. I also realized that I had participated in some sort of existential absurdity, but I was unsure what that absurdity was.

Feeling the primal anxiety that only existential crises can create, I literally ran home, burst into the apartment, woke up my wife, and in an excited, somewhat agitated voice said, "Beth, I have participated in the ultimate absurdity. You've got to hear about it." She was sitting in bed, half asleep, and the kids were running around the room shouting, "What's wrong with Daddy?"

Ignoring both her lethargy and their chaos, I proceeded with my story, describing the obese man, the green checkered bathing suit, the purple plastic bucket, the large Labrador retriever, the rhythmic digging. Eventually I got to the punch line: "His answer was, 'It's not my dog.' Isn't that absurd?" Beth's answer was trenchant

it's absolutely absurd that you would expect anyone to know the motivation of someone else's dog."

I spent the remainder of my vacation contemplating the two answers. To my surprise, the more I thought about them, the more I realized that both answers were more related to reality than was my question; but it took a lot of psychic energy on my part to reach that conclusion.

The Eight Myths

In the same manner, as I talk about the eight myths, some of you may feel as if I am saying "It's not my dog" to a number of assumptions that you have made about the theory and practice of OD. I hope, though, that you will try to follow my bass-ackwards reasoning as I say, "It's not my dog," and, occasionally, "How can you expect me to know the motivation of another person's dog?" I also hope that you will experience some of the same feelings of existential crisis and professional doubt which I felt while on the beach.

Let me talk briefly about what I see the myths to be. I shall not describe them in any depth. If they arouse your interest we can discuss them in detail later. Please don't be misled by my cursory treatment of them, though. The brevity of my discussion does not mean I think they are unimportant. To the contrary, I think they are very important. In fact, I believe that unless we learn to cope with these myths as consultants, we will contribute significantly to both the dysfunction of the very organizations we profess to serve and to our own professional demise.

The first is the myth of resistance to change. There is no such thing as resistance to change. I simply say that if you, as a part of your educational program or your OD consultation concern yourself with Lewin's Force Field Analysis as an analytical tool for helping managers overcome their resistance to change, you are wasting both your time and theirs. Let me say further how absurd it is to even think of resistance to change as a generic variable worthy of the expenditure of intervention energy.

Or, stated alternatively, do you know what it would require for the concept of resistance to change to have any validity as a theoretical construct governing managerial or consultation activities? Well, first it would have to explain why some of us resist change, while at the same time explaining why

ance to occur, others have to want change to take place. In addition, the concept would have to explain why some of us want to change on some days and resist it on others. For that reason, the concept ranks in practical value with the statement, "You're defensive."

If people aren't resistant to change, what are they resistant to? Needless to

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say, the question is rhetorical. They are resistant to being punished, or in a more Skinnerian sense, they are resistant to being subjected to aversive stimuli. And if you accept the assumption that each of us is universally resistant to punishment and carry it to its logical conclusion, what you are *really* saying when you want to help someone overcome his "resistance to change" is, "I want to help you overcome your resistance to being punished."

I think you will agree that's an impossible task. Furthermore, if we enter the organizations with the attitude that people are resistant to change, the punishing disrespect underlying that attitude becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and ensures that what *appears* to be resistance will occur, and in turn becomes the basis for the myth.

Consequently, I suggest that we forget the concept of resistance to change and search instead for those conditions in an organization which make change rewarding or punishing. Conceptualizing and intervening from such a theoretical base might even make us useful when an organization is in the process of changing.

The second myth is the myth of conflict. Some of you may have read the article I have just written called the "Abilene Paradox."² The theme of the article is that a basic dilemma of contemporary organizations is the inability

to cope with agreement and *not* the inability to cope with conflict. In fact, most conflict is phoney and is used only as a defense against acting and taking risks. Conflict is also frequently a symptom of mismanaged agreement. Therefore, unless you can differentiate between real and phoney conflict within an organization, and intervene as a function of that differentiation, you simply add to the dilemma you are trying to resolve.

One implication of distinguishing between real and phoney conflict relates to the apparently universal proclivity of OD consultants to engage in team-building as a behavioral science panacea. I say "universal" because at this conference there are a number of seminars on team-building despite the fact that many teams agree they don't want to work together, can't work together and have no reason to work together. Alternatively, there is no session in this conference dealing with team-destruction, even though team-destruction as an intervention frequently responds to agreed-upon reality when team-building does not. For instance, many people in organizations who want a divorce or could work more effectively with new partners are made to feel guilty for not wanting to work together by consultants who worship at the altar of team-building.

What do I suggest as an alternative to such monotheism? Well, I can't tell you what you *should* do, but on the basis of my unwillingness to enter into what I see as another Theory Trap, I have become competent in the theory and practice of agreement management and its corollary, team destruction—although I must admit I haven't received overwhelming initial acclaim when I have introduced myself as an expert in the field. But in the long run, by offering a reality-based choice rather than a moralistic echo, I have found I can better serve my clients. You might have the same experience too.

The third myth is the myth of time as a relevant variable in OD. Alternatively, the traditional notion that OD is a long-term (two-to-three year) process,³ or even a perpetual process⁴ is irrelevant. Time is simply something which passes and is used. The way in which it is used is only a statement of an individual's or an organization's priorities. It is nothing more. Time is also used, I think, as an excuse by which OD consultants explain failure. "If you'll just give me one more year I will succeed, because it is a

three-year process." And at the end of three years when the process has failed, "It's really a four-year process, and I need more time. There is light at the end of the tunnel. OD takes time."

If time is irrelevant, then what is relevant? The answer, as both Argyris⁵ and Bion⁶ imply, is the competency of the consultant to deal with issues which arise as time passes. If time is used competently, significant change in the emotional and technological climate of an organization can occur nearly instantaneously.

One major implication of disregarding time and stressing competency in using time immediately comes to mind; it deals with professional accreditation. For instance, if memory serves correctly, you have to have long-term OD consultation experience to be accredited by IAASS as an OD consultant (and I accept partial responsibility for that since I was a party to developing that criterion). However, I now realize that, in most cases, if you engage in long-term relationships in OD consultation, it not only indicates your incompetency, it increases the incompetency of the client you are supposedly assisting.

Fourth is the myth of conformity. If one reads the literature of OD, social psychology, and the popular press, he finds that there is a tremendous amount of material describing the pernicious effects of conformity on individual behavior in organizations. From the *Organization Man* to the *Street-Corner Society* to the Asch experiment to the

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Washington Post's vivid descriptions of the Ernest Fitzgerald C-5A case, we learn that organizations have a universal quality of demanding conformity on the part of their members. I believe that OD interventions based on the literature of conformity again reflect our professional collusion with myth more than they reflect our attempts to deal with the reality of organization dynamics.

For example, I frequently find that, in

provide nearly infinite freedom for individuals to act, and alternatively exert very little, if any, real pressure to conform. But if you *do* act, either as a consultant or as an organization member, then you have to take the existential risk that action involves. In that sense, freedom has real risks, and, for many of us, those risks are too great to bear. Coping with the risks of freedom, therefore, has become more of a problem than conformity in many organizations. I think we consultants have been

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as afraid of that freedom as our clients, and for that reason, have unanimously produced data, research, theories and interventions which support the myth and not the reality.

If you accept the premise that freedom is more difficult to cope with than conformity, then you are led to the conclusion that very few members of organizations are subjected to the tyranny of conformity, but that many fall victim to the tyranny of the *myth* of conformity. Consequently, a very different set of intervention skills is called for. Specifically, I think we need to learn to deal as competently with the problems posed by freedom as we have learned to deal with the dilemmas posed by pressures to conform. If we fail to develop such skills, we shall not be dealing with organizational reality. And to the extent we fail to deal with reality, we will contribute in yet another way to the ineffectiveness of the organizations we profess to serve.

The fifth is the myth that confrontation inevitably involves conflict. Again, if you read much of the OD literature, you'll find that confrontation generally implies some sort of conflict.⁷ In the language of my Texas heritage, if you enter into a confrontation situation you automatically make the assumption that “The shit's gonna hit the fan.” I

inevitably involve conflict. Confrontation is simply the process of discovering the nature of the underlying reality of organizational situations. Thus, when we confront in an organization we may find agreement or disagreement, love or hate, life or death, joy or sadness, profit or loss, effectiveness or ineffectiveness, pain or pleasure. In short, we find *reality*—not, necessarily, conflict.

I also find that most organization members know what the nature of that reality is, but frequently hesitate to state it or assume that they share it with others. Consequently, one of the most powerful interventions an OD consultant can make in an organization is to help its members confirm for one another what they already know, rather than face them with something they know nothing about. For this reason, confirmation is one of the most powerful forms of confrontation an OD consultant can employ, even though it has received virtually no attention here or other places as a theoretical or technological OD construct.

The sixth myth is the myth of the OD consultant as a change agent. Organization Development cannot be done by a consultant.⁸ In fact, as I mentioned last year, “Harvey's Law”⁹ is that the effectiveness of organization development is inversely related to the number of consultants involved in it. The rationale for that law is as follows: organization consultation requires that the consultant enhance someone else's competency to deal more effectively with problems of his organization. Consequently, any time a consultant conducts a team-building or a team-destruction or an inter-group conflict resolution or a deep sensing session for a manager, he increases that manager's incompetency. Why, you ask? Well, on a common-sense basis, if the consultant conducts a successful team-building session, who has demonstrated skills in team-building? The consultant has, not the manager; and it is the manager who needs to learn the skills. By implication he has also demonstrated that the formal manager of the team is less competent than the consultant in team development and has a lot to learn.

As a consequence, even if the consultant succeeds in the short run, it is inevitable that he will fail in the long run, because no manager will allow a consultant to replace him and to make him look bad in front of his people. The consultant who assumes a manager's OD responsibilities is no different from the

you pro who hits all the difficult shots for the person with whom he is consulting.¹⁰

In summary, it is a myth to say that consultants are change agents. An OD consultant can't change anything: the client can. It is the client's muscles and/or brains which must do the implementation. The OD consultant can *consult*, and that's all. If he does anything more, he has ceased to be a consultant and has become a manager, and if he wants to manage, he should get a managerial job.

The seventh myth is the myth of the primacy of management style. As I observe the practice of OD, I see much emphasis on management style as a variable of fundamental importance in OD.

For evidence of the emphasis upon managerial style one only has to observe the degree to which concepts like Theory Y, System 4 and 9/9 are all revered words in OD. However, as I interpret both the OD literature and my own experiences as a consultant, I contend that very little impact has ever come from attempting to help people change their management styles. Alternatively, my experience has been that under certain conditions, the *authenticity* of a manager—defined as the congruency between his character structure and the way in which he manages—is much more important than an *absolute* management style, as a determinant of individual and organizational effectiveness.

The three conditions which must be met are: (1) People in the organization are committed to achieving the organization's goals; (2) people in the organization have the necessary technical

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competency to achieve those goals; (3) people in the organization are there voluntarily.

When such conditions are met, those of us who try to change an individual's and/or the organization's management style from X to Y or from System 1 to

system of organization are empty, wasting both our own and our client's time. To illustrate what I mean, I just read a biography of Arturo Toscanini,

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and I think one could say unequivocally he was not System 4 or 9/9 in his approach to management. In fact, he would probably be “9/1 squared” in his approach. However, I can nearly see an OD consultant caught in the Theory Trap of management style working with Toscanini and doing a diagnostic survey of his approach to leadership and its effect on the performance of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.

The post-diagnostic conversation would go something like this: “I’m sorry, Art, but I have just done a survey of your managerial style and found that you are System 1, Theory X and 9/1 in your orientation toward the orchestra. Behavioral science research and OD theory clearly indicate that you can’t have a high performing system¹¹ unless you do something about that. Although I haven’t heard your bunch play, I can unequivocally predict that they will not only play out of tune, but that they will also be plagued with problems or chronic absenteeism. Therefore, I am going to recommend that we do some team-building with you and the orchestra in order to help you change your managerial style. Specifically, I would suggest an offsite session with the piccolo players as a pilot project. It will take a lot of work on your part, but I think if you really work on being more democratic we can get things shaped up in several years.”

Now for a three-dollar “zapper.” When the three conditions mentioned above are not met, spending time in trying to shift an organization’s managerial style is an example of what Drucker calls “psychological despotism,”¹² and, in my opinion, is both a destructive and an unethical OD practice.

The last myth is the myth of OD. For me, organization development as a capitalized noun does not exist. I don’t think it exists as an uncapitalized noun, either. This contention comes essentially from Bion’s assertion that the way in which one can render a powerful idea impotent is to institutionalize it in the form of a word which restricts its meaning or in the form of an organization which accredits it.¹³ Likewise, the way in which you render an individual genius impotent is to make him or her the head of a center which trains and accredits people in the practices he (or she) espouses.

As I see OD, it has become more of an institutionalized religious movement designed to perpetuate a series of moralistic myths than a process of applying scientific principles to improve the effectiveness of organizations.¹⁴ Again, as evidence of this, all you have to do is look at the kinds of criteria you have to meet, in order to be accredited either formally or informally as an OD consultant. You have to have a long-term relationship with a company—which to me frequently indicates incompetence. You have to know how to do conflict management, which frequently is an inappropriate intervention because conflict is often phoney. You have to do teambuilding when team destruction is

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frequently called for. You have to value democracy when one can argue, with equal morality and pragmatism, that authoritarianism is more appropriate. In fact, you have to enter into a whole set of ritualized activities which are based on mythical conceptions of the real world in which organizations operate.

* * *

These activities all contribute to making it difficult if not impossible for

people with new ideas and approaches for coping with complex organization problems to enter productively as OD consultants into organizational settings. So, all I would say about the future of OD is, “the future is past.” Particularly the future of OD as a capitalized noun is past. If it is again to regain its prominence as a viable concept it must become an adjective or a verb. Right now, OD is a dysfunctional capitalized noun that represents an evolutionary process which, in turn, *reflects* the culture, rather than a process of planned change which *shapes* it. For that reason OD as a pro-active determinant of a culture is a myth.

The last thing I would say to you is this. For the reasons I have outlined I am trying to divorce myself from the field of OD. Specifically, rather than being called an OD consultant, I am trying to establish myself as a consultant to organizations. Therefore, in the future if any of you should ever ask me, “Do you do OD?” don’t be surprised if I reply, “It’s not my dog.”

Notes:

¹Appreciation is expressed to Cecy McCormick for editorial assistance with the transcript.

²Harvey, J. “The Abilene Paradox,” *Organizational Dynamics*, Summer 1974, pp. 63-80.

³Beckhard, R. *Organization Development: Strategies and Models*. Addison-Wesley: Reading, Mass. 1969.

⁴Harvey, J. and S. Davis, “Some Differences Between Laboratory and Non-Laboratory Organizations,” in Dyer, W. (Ed.) *Modern Theory and Method in Group Training*. Van Nostrand-Reinhold Co.: New York, 1972; pp. 175-196.

⁵Argyris, C. *Intervention Theory and Method: A Behavioral Science Approach*. Addison-Wesley: Reading, Mass. 1970.

⁶Bion, W. *Experiences in Groups*. *Basic Books*: New York, 1959.

⁷Walton, R. *Interpersonal Peacemaking: Confrontations and Third Party Consultation*. Addison-Wesley: Reading, Mass. 1969.

⁸Foltz, J., J. Harvey, and J. McLaughlin, “Organization Development: A Line Management Function,” in *Theory and Method in Organization Development*. J. Adams (Ed.) *NTL Institute*, Washington, D.C., 1974; pp. 183-210. [See also Bill Dyer’s article elsewhere in this issue.—Ed.]

⁹Harvey, J., “Organization Development as a Religious Movement,” *OD Practitioner*, Vol. 5, No. 3, Winter 1973; pp. 4-5.

¹⁰Winslow, E. K., “It’s a Pro-Shot,” *Unpublished manuscript*. The George Washington University, Washington, D.C., 1974.

¹¹Vaill, P. “Toward a Behavioral Description of High Performing Systems,” *Unpub. manuscript*, The George Washington University, Washington, D.C., 1974.

¹²Drucker, P. “Hysteria over the Work Ethic,” *Psychology Today*, 1973; pp. 89-92.

¹³Bion, W. *Attention and Interpretation*. *Basic Books*: New York, 1974.