"Life and creativity has been squeezed out of many organizations at all levels, leaving them, and many times, us with just the triage of dealing with the most severe problems in the most pecuniary of ways."

Edging Toward the Center

An Opportunity to Align Our Values, Our Practices, and the Purpose of Our Work

By Matt Minahan
and Peter Norlin

So, how many OD consultants does it take to have a meeting? I figure it can be done with about 10:

    1 to provide a model
    1 to call for a vision statement
    1 to propose definitions
    1 to supply the online citations
    1 to write a poem
    1 to explain why God wants us to do it
    1 to denounce the cultural arrogance
      of American OD
    1 to question the reasons for doing it
    1 to ask the bulb why it doesn't want to
      change
    1 to ask "What was the original
      question?"

So wrote noted psychologist Karl Allbrecht on the ODNet email discussion a few months back. Jud Lawrie added, "You forgot the one to memorialize it all on flip charts. And someone to bring the donuts." Then Anne Donnelly added, "And one to facilitate participatory decision making!"

We laugh and we cringe at the same time. Yes, it is a bit funny, but it is also more than a bit true. We recognize ourselves and our field as if looking in a textured mirror. That is the troubling part and it is also the point of our thoughts here.

About 10 years ago, David Bradford and Warner Burke wrote that OD:

has developed many valuable approaches. It has stressed the importance of values in a time when too much behavior seems valueless. It would be a shame to have this lost. But for the field to grow and develop, it must do more in defining what it

is and what it is not. It also must be more demanding of what is required to be a competent professional. Doing that will not be easy, and we do not offer easy answers—only questions. But we believe that these questions must be addressed if OD is to achieve its potential. (Bradford & Burke, 2004, p. 369)

After describing the challenges facing OD today, this article tries to answer:

» What are the values and beliefs that underlie the practice of OD today?
» How have they supported our success?
» How have they limited our success?
» What new beliefs could/should we hold to create a better future for ourselves and the field of OD?

We then propose a reframing of the field that we hope will help get us past our historical squabbles and ineffectiveness, en route toward the common ground needed to take OD into a new and vibrant future.

Our Shrinking Appetite for Change: The Challenges Without

No matter how you slice it, it is challenging to do good OD work in the private sector. The unceasing and unbearable pressure to produce profits has created an ugly kind of accountability for leaders and managers; there is just no room for error. With activist boards of directors and executive compensation tied so tightly to financial performance, would any one of us be able to take risks, delegate to the lowest level, and

empower people to think, let alone behave, outside the box?

The burgeoning financial sector and the ever-growing industry of analysts who second-guess executives causes every action by a public company to be fodder for the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*. How did we do against "expectations?" Those "expectations" of financial performance are killing the kind of delegation, creativity, and empowerment on which the OD function thrives. They are killing the very companies themselves, too. Leveraged buyouts by firms such as 3G Capital have resulted in massive layoffs at Burger King and Anheuser-Busch, and staff reductions of 40% at H. J. Heinz Company in Pittsburgh in the summer of 2013: *http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/business/news/new-heinz-owners-cut-600-jobs-including-350-in-pittsburgh-699153/*.

Many social scientists say this is what Engels and Marx warned us against, and that we are living Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) movie in our own modern time: *http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wENE7O-Y6ME*.

The level of risk aversion in the public sector is just as high as in the private sector but for different reasons. The cost and consequences of even small mistakes is enormously high both personally and professionally. In the federal government, Congressional oversight and fear of being on the front page of *The Washington Post* drive out risk taking and innovation. In the name of "accountability," there is no room for experimentation, creativity, trial and error, the risk taking that comes with delegation, and for empowering people in their jobs. State and local governments these days are even more starved for resources so that there is no room to think, plan, try, and test.

Similarly, life in the nonprofit sector is driven by never ending member and fund drives, shrinking mandates, ever encroaching new entities, and doubts about the long term relevance of the membership model.

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Looking in the Mirror: The Challenges Within

We are buffeted in the field by many of the same insecurities as these organizations. Many internals' budgets are too tight to travel or attend training. Many externals are doing whatever it takes to hold on to clients and to hold on to house and home. We are doing in two hours the work that we would have spent two days doing ten years ago.

For many, the phone is not ringing with requests to do a long term change program; instead, the requests are to do a team building session for an hour as an icebreaker at the quarterly two day business meeting.

That raises questions for us about our relationship to our clients, such as:

» How do we navigate the tension between the needs of the individual versus the needs of the organization as a whole? Great, rewarding, well designed, and good paying jobs for individuals are no good if they force the organization out of business.
» Should we be values oriented, or values neutral at the service of the organization's larger goals around productivity, effectiveness, and profit?
» Has our commitment to humanistic values left us out of step with the larger zeitgeist of profit at all costs, and what are the possible consequences of this choice?
» How honest with our clients ought we to be about our concerns and anxieties in these times, or should we just clam up and send an invoice, smiling happily and saluting smartly?
» Who gets to define what effectiveness is for us and our work? It used to be fine for us to collaborate with the client to make those judgments, but there is precious little time and even less interest, in many case, for that kind of introspection and reflection in the go-go atmosphere in many client systems.

There are similar questions for us about relationship to the field of OD, such as:

» Who are we really as a field, anyway? The field has been progressively built as a hybrid of other applied behavioral sciences, and its central core has never been demarcated with rigor, clarity, or finality.
» What is it that we do? We do not have a definition for our field or our work that we all agree to. Every author (including ourselves) has their own pet, separate ways to define and describe what it is that we do.
» How do we relate with our clients? The very nature of the client/OD consultant relationships vests the power with the client, and leaves us starting one-down and subordinated. Must we contort ourselves into inequitable relationships in order to do our jobs?
» Are we really a community? The last best estimate was that there are 10 times more members of regional OD networks than the national OD Network, and a fraction of the actual practitioners in the field belong to either. So, we come together at the annual conference and in the regions and create our own magical Brigadoon for three days or three hours, but then after that there is not much there "there" for us as a field.

Some Uncomfortable Ironies

Over the years, we have heard repeated calls for a manageable list of professional competencies or "essential practices" that can ground teachers, guide students, and orient new entrants to the field. But the OD Network and the field as a whole have been paralyzed by those who believe that a top-down imposition of such guide posts, regardless of their specific content and regardless of which bottoms-up method might generate them, would violate our democratic values. Every time the idea has been brought up over the past 15 years, fears arise that such a list might be used to develop a professional certification that could be imposed on the field and ultimately prove exclusionary. Ironically, it is our desire to be better at what we do that falls prey to our fear of doing it so well that we might possible exclude some people who say they want to do it too but who cannot yet.

We have also been gathering additional

anecdotal evidence over the last 30 years by examining the FIRO-B profiles of groups of OD practitioners with whom we have worked. We have noted a distinct pattern in the Wanted Control (wC: comfort level of being in a situation that is defined by others) scores in these groups, specifically a predominant clustering of scores in the 0-3 range of the 9-point scale, with the largest frequencies of scores at either 0 or 1. This pattern suggests fierce independence among those in our field, and while fierce independence can be a positive force, it can also indicate an unwillingness to be guided or managed by others. That core feature of counter-dependence and resistance creates a dynamic that can promote isolation and self-absorption, which is ironic, given that much of our work is overtly focused on developing the competencies required for collaboration. As a field, we are pretty good at promoting collaboration among others and among ourselves at a small scale; but we are not very good at creating and sustaining large scale change among ourselves or our field.

We have observed a different, though related dynamic during our experience of facilitating meetings, work conferences, and learning events for OD consultants. We have frequently found these assignments challenging because people in our field often end up questioning the design and struggling for control. The irony here is that while we frequently tell our clients that they need to "trust the process," when we ourselves face the turbulence of learning and change, we often approach that injunction with as much skepticism as they do, and many times even more.

We have also noticed a keen ambivalence among OD practitioners. We know that the leverage and power of any system resides at the top and among those in the dominant coalition. Many in our field long to be included at that level and to have access to the senior-most decision makers in the system. Yet, historically, we have kept ourselves at the margins of systems because we have told ourselves that you can only truly see a system from the outside in; you cannot see the system as a whole when you are in it. We suspect that is partially why such a high percentage

of OD practitioners are external, including ourselves. The interesting irony is that those of us who are doing executive coaching are clear about the need for alignment with organizational goals, personal drive, and commitment to action that are needed by our coaching clients, yet many internals and most externals shun the very behaviors that we advise our clients.

Another irony is that we know that the language of business and organizations is the language of results: metrics and proof. Maybe it is our own ambivalence about power and being at the center of the organization, but for whatever reason, we refuse to get serious about measuring the impact of our work and making the strong, solid, fact-based case for doing OD. We seem to believe that our black box of icebreakers and four-cell matrixes should be valued on their own merits, rather than subjected to the same cost-benefit analysis that other organizational investments face.

> There are too many unknowns about the if, how, and why OD works (or doesn't) and yet there is no shortage of rhetoric about what OD can do or the "latest, greatest" intervention that should be attempted. This shows a marked departure from the strong historical roots of the field when equal emphasis was given to action and evaluation. When a field is more focused on practice than scholarship, it leads to the conversation about "my way is better" (without any real data to back up such a claim)—and contributes to confusion about "what is OD?" (Feyerherm & Worley, 2008, p. 2)

It would be at least some small comfort if we could say these were new phenomena. But alas, "OD has virtually disappeared as the title of departments in many organizations. During the late 1970s and 1980s, OD became a bad word in many companies, and this remains so today" (Greiner & Cummings, 2004). As early as 1972, there were similar signs, or "red flags," including putting the individual before the organization; emphasizing the informal organization over the formal organization; putting behavior change ahead of serious,

data-based diagnosis; and putting process before task (Greiner, 1972).

Evaluating Our Values: The Impact of Our Beliefs

If these are the questions that we wrestle with, the ironies we consistently encounter, and the perceptions we have of ourselves as a field, we must look at the values, beliefs, and actions that create them.

Over the years, there have been several attempts to codify OD values; many are captured in blogs and text books, but few have been truly collaborative efforts based on large scale consultations and input from multiple sources.

The Principles of OD Practice is one of those few. Building on the work of the Values and Advocacy Initiative sponsored by the OD Network in 2001 and 2002, Mary Eggers and Allan Church solicited input from a diverse group of OD practitioners and leaders of the field for discussion at the OD Network conference in Portland in 2003. With feedback from an additional 100 people, they published the Principles of OD Practice, which are accessible at: *http://www.odnetwork.org/?page=Principles OfODPracti@hhSearchTerms=values+and+ advocacy+initiative*.

Drawing a straight line from our values to our beliefs to our actions in this way can help us examine ourselves in extremis (see *Table 1*, next page).

How do we honor the values and principles that have been core to our field, and at the same time, build our way into a better future? We propose some slightly different beliefs, which could lead us as a field to a different set of actions, and consequently, outcomes.

For example, we could believe that underrepresented voices need our overt support, but the needs of the one or few must be balanced against the needs of the many, which might drive us to focus on group dynamics and process observation to achieve the goals of the group and organization, without fixating on creating space for "onlys" and other small groups at the expense of the needs of the whole.

We could also believe that jobs should be interesting and intrinsically rewarding,

Table 1. *The Straight Line from Values to Actions, and In Extremis*

Values	Beliefs	Actions	In Extremis
Respect and Inclusion – the OD practitioner equitably values the perspective and opinions of everyone.	We believe that under-represented voices need our overt support, and that the individual is just as important as the group.	We tend to focus on "onlys" and minorities to assure that their voices are heard. We tend to use group dynamics and process observation to "flatten the hierarchy."	Our drive for consensus and inclusion of all over-emphasizes views held by a few and decision processes can become slow and cumbersome.
Empowerment – the OD practitioner focuses efforts on helping everyone in the client organization or community increase their autonomy and empowerment to levels that make the workplace and/or community satisfying and productive.	We believe that employees have a right to make decisions about their workplace and how they do their work. We believe that employees are entitled to training and development as a part of their jobs.	We design and facilitate high engagement projects that often encourage staff to challenge the status quo. We make the case for satisfying, enriched jobs.	We tend to "side" with staff against management, and we tend to dismiss the role of legitimate authority in the system. We also tend to ignore the realities of organizational politics, and seal ourselves off from the role of power, hierarchy, and authority in the organization.
Collaboration – the OD practitioner builds collaborative relationships between the practitioner and the client while encouraging collaboration throughout the client system.	We believe that our work should focus on what people have in common, not what separates or divides them.	We model collaboration in our work. We avoid the risk of confrontation, even when it seems legitimate, and we emphasize common ground over conflict.	We tend to silence ourselves when we fear disagreement, at the expense of asserting what we know or believe to be right or better for ourselves or the system, often to ensure that the consulting engagement continues.
Authenticity – the OD practitioner strives for authenticity and congruence and encourages these qualities in their clients.	We believe that our actions are grounded in and aligned with OD values.	We hold ourselves to the high standards of OD values and assure that our behavior is aligned with them.	We tend to be dogmatic and inflexible on what we decide are matters of OD principles, which often gets us excluded from C suite and other decision fora.
Self-awareness – the OD practitioner commits to developing self-awareness and interpersonal skills. OD practitioners engage in ongoing personal and professional development.	We see value in learning from all of our actions and interactions, and we believe that our own personal and professional development is important.	We pay attention to what we say, how we say it, and how others speak to and treat us. We commit to personal and professional development and continue to invest in ourselves as life-long learners.	We have a tendency to fixate and obsess on small things and what we perceive to be microaggressions in our interactions, though we seldom raise these concerns with clients or colleagues. We also tend to acquire a long list of certifications to prove our competence. As seekers, we are tempted to draw our own personal and sometimes even spiritual practices into our work.

and that employees should have a say in their workplace and in how they do their work, but that management serves a legitimate and important role in the system, which might drive us to design and facilitate high engagement projects that acknowledge the serious tradeoffs between the legitimate interests and needs of the organization and those of the individual.

We could also commit to the only three principles that are held in common by both classical and what is becoming known as "post-modern OD: strong humanistic and democratic values, consultants stay out of content and focus on process, and a concern for capacity building and development of the system" (Bushe & Marshak, 2008, p. 10).

"Responsible progress" is a further challenge to the field. Built on the principles of socio-technical systems theory, and as an antidote to traditional industrial organizational economics, responsible progress provides "governments, nongovernmental organizations, corporations, and other stakeholders with processes and frameworks to jointly optimize four elements for sustainable success: economic development, technological innovation, cultural diversity, and ecological sustainability" (Feyerherm & Worley, 2008, p. 2).

There are others, too, which could well emerge if we had the right conversation in the field.

In the Center at Last:
The Power of Purpose

Since our values infuse our beliefs, and our beliefs drive our professional behavior, the fact that we have traditionally been a values-oriented field has proved to be a sword with two edges, and those edges have been palpable in the section above. Through our history as a field, our values have served both as a beacon for our work, and also as a source of ongoing professional uneasiness.

The challenge of being a values-oriented field is that we also tend to find ourselves, as a field, in a perpetual tussle of values clarification. However, if we believe that our visibility, effectiveness, and influence as a field does depend on what we value and how we act on what we value,

then we would be wise to consider adding another value to the list that we have been examining and deconstructing here. That missing value focuses on the critical importance of identifying the purpose of any human endeavor.

This is not to say that we have ignored purpose in our work. On the contrary, we have undoubtedly been consistent advocates for the importance of organizational purpose more visibly and vocally than many other fields that are involved in learning and change. For whatever reason, however, we ourselves, as a field, seem to have circled around our own purpose like the blind circling the elephant, disagreeing as we go, and because we have squabbled over our different perspectives through the decades, of course we have failed to agree collectively on our professional purpose and failed to see the elephant "whole."

If we were to back ourselves to the edge that we are supposedly on and attempt to see ourselves whole, as a system, how might we frame our purpose? And more importantly, could we reach consensus in time to salvage and reinvigorate our influence in the larger world? We will wait to deal with this latter question after we have suggested an answer to the former. Here is one way that we might finally pinpoint our purpose as an unassailable applied behavioral science.

What Must We Hold Close?
The Building Blocks of Purpose.

If we took the time to look through all the books and articles that include statements defining "organization development," these multiple definitions could illustrate a case study of our ongoing, ill-concealed counter-dependence. Obviously, we are now about to wade into the fray ourselves, but we will bring some colleagues with us, specifically Bill Gellermann, who has long been a champion for the position we are now about to reinforce. For many years, Gellerman has been vocal in proposing that the focus of our work should be *human systems*, rather than organizations. We agree, and when we look, we find this frame echoed in several contexts, one of which is the vision statement in the

Organization Development Network's current strategic plan:

Organization Development is a field central to creating effective and healthy human systems. . . We believe that this decision—to see our expertise focused on developing human systems, rather than organizations—has profound implications and significant possibilities for how we understand, present and market our work. https://c.ymcdn.com/sites/odnetwork. site-ym.com/resource/resmgr/files/ odnetstratplanv2.pdf.

And what do we do for human systems? We help them learn and change. And we do that by designing and facilitating processes that move human systems in the direction they are seeking to go. And that the larger container for this work is our commitment to democratic, humanistic values. Put simply, we choose to work with human systems because we believe that people, who seek to do productive work together, matter. So it is this values-rich container, in fact, that differentiates us from other disciplines, such as change management, who approach learning and change as a project to be managed, rather than as a process to be facilitated.

What is Ours and Ours Alone?
The Field's "Hedgehog."

In 2005, shortly after publishing his business-oriented analysis, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins authored a small, accompanying monograph, entitled *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: Why Business Thinking is Not the Answer*. To help leaders in the social sectors develop truly great, sustainable systems, he offered an organizing principle he called the "Hedgehog Concept." Based on Isaiah Berlin's famous essay, *The Fox and the Hedgehog*, Collins proposed that like the hedgehog, to survive and thrive, social sector systems had to organize their work around one big idea.

To use the Hedgehog Concept successfully, Collins recommended that social sector systems had to do three things: (1) identify what they are passionate about; (2) decide what they, and only they, can

be best in the world at; and (3) determine what "resource engine" would be required to maintain that relentless, passionate commitment.

1. **What all of us do: our "best in the world."** If we choose to apply the Hedgehog Concept to our own field, how would we proceed? We would propose that we use a clear statement of our purpose to pinpoint both our passion and our unique contribution, and that it is, in fact, fairly succinct, to wit: designing and facilitating processes that promote learning and change in human systems. In very few words, this statement describes the purpose of no other discipline that we are aware of— other than our own.

   The advantage of articulating our purpose in this way means that if we consider ourselves organization development professionals, we all do this work. There is real power here, because freed from endless debates about who we are, who we have been, and who we ought to be and for what purpose, we could finally concentrate on strengthening our foundation as a field, demarcating the boundaries between ourselves and adjacent fields, sharpening our core competencies, and walking confidently into public arenas to showcase the value of our contributions.

   And if we really mean to consolidate and assert our value, we must take another step and come to consensus about what is "essential" to fulfilling our purpose. What are the essentials that all of us who aspire to serve human systems in this way must use, i.e., the essential mindsets, the essential knowledge and skills, and the essential practices?

   Some of this work has already begun or been done. The *Essential Elements* of OD curricula have already been defined by the academic OD Program Directors (*http://www.odnetwork. org/?page=EssentialElements*). There are also two projects underway to define OD in a competency framework.

   We need to get over the aversion that some OD practitioners have to working in the private sector. David Bradford addresses this in his 2006 video message: *https://www. youtube.com/watch?feature=player_ embedded&v=5AbB3VEy1BM*. His main message is that we need to know and understand the core business functions and income dynamics of any organization or business in which we work, so that we can see and strengthen the link between strategy and operations. We need to speak its operational language, not just the humanistic language of participation, collaboration, empowerment, etc. We need to be willing to work on change that is pragmatic, directive, and top down, and not just principled, collaborative, and bottom up. We need to acknowledge that power is a necessary component of organizational life, and we need to align ourselves with the priorities and values of the CEO. And, if we cannot, we should walk away from the work.

   A shift in our own language would help as well. We externals say we have a consulting "practice," which resonates with the non-commercial elements of a doctor's or lawyer's office. If we changed our language to consulting "business," and thought of ourselves and our work with a bottom-line orientation, we might be able to more easily relate to the bottom-line orientation of our clients. A shift in these directions would help us expand our reach and our impact into the fullest range of public and private sector entities, and help get us off of the postage stamp we have created for ourselves, bounded by values and principles and shoulds and should nots and wills and would nots.

   International OD consultants already get this shift. In interviews and surveys with global OD consultants, business concerns were the top 5 rankings of the current state, and the top 8 rankings of the future state, including enhanced productivity, bottom line results and profitability, increasing efficiency or effectiveness, enhancing competitive advantage, and promoting quality of products and services. "For the global OD consultant, the concern for business effectiveness is . . . a both/and, not an either/or (Yaeger, 2002, p. 17).

   We would be even better served if there were also a solid consensus about the research needed in the field. Six topics identified a decade ago seem even more important now than they did 10 years ago: virtual teams, conflict resolution, work group effectiveness, social network analysis, trust, and intractable global, religious, and environmental conflict (Bunker, et al., 2004, p. 403). But the OD doctoral programs are marginal in most universities. We do not have a cadre of full time faculty who are conducting research on OD and its effectiveness. In most programs, a full time director or two are consumed with recruitment of students and adjunct faculty and program administration; they are too busy and too few to conduct research or write. As a result, the research done by doctoral students in the field is very "pracademic" and, while useful, does not easily contribute to a larger, systemic body of knowledge.

   We also believe we need much better tools and methods for evaluating the impact of our work and making the case for ourselves and our field. Research done on the Socio-Economic Approach to Management (SEAM) among 1300 organizations at ISEOR, the Socio-Economic Institute of Firms and Organizations affiliated with the school of management of Lyon, France (Conbere, et al., 2012) points to three variables: a cyclical improvement process, permanent management tools, and periodic political and strategic decisions for returning the full investment of an intervention in as few as three months, an average of 12 months, and many multiples when pursued over time. Their underlying belief is that the principles of Frederick Taylor, Henri Fayol, and Max Weber are a destructive virus that infects organizations, and

that "all actors need to be accepted, unconditionally, without judgment. In other words, the guiding principle about how all actors ought to be treated is love . . . not a topic which arises often in management consulting" (Conbere et al., 2012) but which certainly resides deeply the values of OD. So there may be less heavy lifting than we might anticipate. And the payoff might be worthwhile indeed. For instance, we might use this type of consensus-building as a foundation for, finally, developing professional certification, a much-needed acknowledgment of our legitimacy and credibility, we believe.

2. **And what some of us may do: our other choices and options.** Ironically, once we have finally agreed on our purpose as a field (and believe that we are all doing the same thing), we can then live comfortably with a whole smorgasbord of possible niches in which to practice. We will know that—whether we are concentrating on team development, inclusion and diversity, leadership development, succession management, or executive coaching; working with individuals, groups, or whole organizations; using our business acumen to influence strategy on leadership teams, partnering with human resources colleagues, or designing new inter-organizational networks—we are all fulfilling the same core purpose as a field of professionals.

This means that in whatever context, regardless of the activity, wherever we are working, we are all designing and facilitating processes that promote learning and change in human systems. To us, this feels like very good news. Consistency and stability at our core. Flexibility and opportunity in our options.

What Shall We Name the Baby?

Years ago, after listening to one of us deliver a long, neurotic monologue about the correct name of our field, a wise mentor ended that conversation forever by saying, "Actually, as long as we all know what we're doing, and we're doing it well,

we could call it 'plumbing and heating.' It really wouldn't make any difference." Years later, since we still seem to be debating that issue, perhaps we would benefit, as a field, from another name on the marquee. However, to us, the logjam around that decision might begin to break at last were we first willing to gather collectively around a statement of purpose that names, finally, the true core of our professional identity.

Note: Opinions expressed here do not represent those of the OD Network or its Board of Trustees.

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