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SPECIAL REPORT

CHANGING PEOPLE IS YOUR JOB! YOU MAY THINK YOU CAN, BUT THEY CAN ONLY CHANGE THEMSELVES

NATHAN CLEMENTS, GROUP HR DIRECTOR - DMG MEDIA

{ HEADLINE ATTRACTION }

“THE NEWSPAPER INDUSTRY HAS MANY CHALLENGES AHEAD, BUT CAN YOU NAME ME A SECTOR THAT DOESN'T?”

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MEDIATION & TRIBUNALS Litigation most often leads to mistrust between parties, accentuation of conflict and polarisation of views

HEALTH & WELLBEING How beneficial it would be to measure cognitive health, compared with peer groups, based on key objective norms?

ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT Efforts of OD practitioners are diluted by shortsighted imperatives and blamed for impending failure

FUTURE OF WORK Greater freedoms in a workplace where departments and hierarchy cease to exist may not be a far-fetched idea


 ORGANISATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT

FLEX THE OD MUSCLE

Organisation Development (OD) is both misunderstood and woefully underused. It is worrying that so few organisations take the time to understand it better and tap into its resources given that a particular strength of the field is the navigation of complex change, something we are all facing at an unprecedented level. But attempts to deal with complexity are being stifled by an over-reliance on a narrow range of identikit people practices.



ARTICLE BY TONY NICHOLLS, MANAGING DIRECTOR AND MANAGING CONSULTANT - WHITE STONE

Central to a long overdue overhaul is the need for a significant paradigm shift, with practices that were borne out of a command and control era and are now proving increasingly counter-productive. This will allow leaders and managers to see organisations, and their roles in them, in substantially different ways. In support of this paradigm shift, the field of OD combines philosophical discourse with insights from the behavioural sciences to create a diverse range of proven, value-add interventions. There is plenty of evidence that real breakthroughs are possible, even in the most complex and challenging of environments. Appreciative Inquiry, Action Research, Future Search and Gestalt-informed coaching and facilitation, to name a few, have all underpinned successful OD strategies in the public and private sectors. However, these breakthroughs are currently the exception, not

the rule. So, what is contributing to this lack of understanding and engagement with the field of OD? We can rule out any lack of purpose or clearly defined values, the field has both. It also has many, very capable and respected academics, thought leaders and practitioners operating around the globe.

One of the issues is a lack of sufficient insight into the field's core offerings. When exposed to the field's fringe offerings, potential buyers form a view that tree hugging and unproductive talking shops are the norm. Credibility is a real issue. OD does little to counter this perspective and promote its range of more grounded wares. It is left to individual practitioners to develop relationships and prove their worth. Some HRD's do understand the field and utilise practitioners well. Often OD practitioners sell their wares directly through

CEO's, but, again, these are the exceptions. A lack of consistency also adds to the credibility issues. Some OD practitioners restrict themselves to favoured interventions; these wares are then further differentiated through OD's core principle of the "self as instrument". This recognises and values the subjective, qualitative insights that each practitioner brings to bare on the client's situation. Perhaps the most pressing concerns are the lack of a unifying voice and any recognisable standard practice. This is where a supreme irony appears, in the fact that standardisation is actively resisted by many OD practitioners. It is seen as a force that will dampen innovation, limit evolving discourse and lead to HR-style identikit people practices. This resistance and the sheer diversity of practitioner styles results in poorly supported professional bodies. These

are run by volunteers as an add-on to their day jobs and they lack the time and money to even attempt the job of creating a unifying voice for the field.

Another factor getting in the way of better engagement is the temptation to buy shiny new toys - I've lost count of the number of leadership models invented over the last few decades. To the situational, servant and hero leaders we can now add the "connected" leaders. For everyone else we now have "mindfulness" to help us stay sane as we struggle to do yet more with even less. These personal development tools can be extremely useful, but are always at risk of being the latest fad. They are also rarely designed or deployed in such a way as to address the paradigm shift needed for a step change in our people practices. A further irony and credibility issue for the field is that these shiny new toys are often promoted by those practitioners within OD who are less-well versed in the theoretical underpinnings of the field. As already stated, OD has a diverse offering, those OD practitioners that do engage in the field's academic discourses can then alienate potential clients when they use language that is unnecessarily high-brow. In packaging their wares, OD solution providers often use impenetrable language or, worse still, the kind of flowery twaddle that, in the minds of their clients, puts them firmly in league of the tree-hugging brigade. Given these challenges and the diverse range of practitioner-centric offerings, some appearing to be "out there with the fairies", there is little chance of those outside OD recognising the existence of anything resembling a unified, professional, academically underpinned field. However, despite this confusion and cynicism, it is interesting to see so many OD functions within our modern organisations. Maybe our CEO's and HRD's do 'get it' after all?

On closer inspection, we see HR functions simply re-labelled as OD. There is often no discernible difference between these new functions and the HR teams that have chosen to retain their more traditional name. The cynic in me argues this is about rebranding in an attempt to appear reinvented and realigned. I would like to think it is a genuine attempt to introduce more systemic thinking into the design and implementation of people practices. Whatever the motivation for this re-labelling, the impact is simply not being felt in the majority of our businesses. The issue here is a lack of distinction between the activity of OD and the field of OD. OD, as an activity, is any practice, process or intervention undertaken that is intended to positively impact efficiency and effectiveness. In contrast, the field of OD sits outside any organisation. It is a diverse collection of academics, practitioners and commentators contributing to an evolving discourse about how we might understand organisations and support them in achieving their aims. This discourse is translated into interventions that recognise the complex, contingent nature of change that is increasingly seen. When re-labelling HR functions, HRD's are not, in the main, referring to insights



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Is OD an essential business imperative or a buzz phrase?

81% Essential for Business

19% Buzz Phrase

offered by the field of OD. They are, in fact, focused on the activity of OD. Only when these activities are reflected upon and redesigned through the perspectives and interventions offered by the field, can it be argued 'true' OD is being carried out. Some HR colleagues disagree, arguing that HR is responsible for people practices designed to develop the organisation, therefore HR is OD. My challenge back is that the field of HR is simply not diverse enough in its perspectives, or engaged deeply enough in any academic discourse, for it to offer the paradigm-shifting interventions needed. This argument is recognised by the CIPD in its call for members to move away from identikit best practices and explore more insight-led, fit-for-purpose interventions. However, it stopped short of suggesting members look to the field of OD for support.

If leaders were to seek support from the field, how would they assess credibility in any OD practitioner? For starters, they should check academic underpinnings, possibly through Masters or PhD-level studies. They should also beware the shiny toys. Is the practitioner pitching a model or looking to understand needs before tapping into a broad range of potential interventions? Is the practitioner entering into dialogue that supports paradigm shifts, not towards predetermined outcomes, but towards whatever emerges? Finally, does the practitioner have the breadth and depth of experience to understand the operational and commercial realities? Quality OD practitioners possess academic insight, a kitbag of interventions, genuine curiosity and more questions than answers. This all combines with their unique personality and mix of experiences to offer equally unique perspectives. However, once an OD practitioner has been engaged, organisations should not then expect the silver bullets. Instead, leaders then need to face into the serious work of reflection, discarding old paradigms and embracing the feelings of trepidation that can flow from a shifting sense of both personal and organisational identity. Added to this, true OD would have leaders embrace the complexities and uncomfortable truths, not a particularly palatable thought for many of today's leaders. Convincing leaders that all the above is both necessary and less challenging than it might first appear, is a critical next step in moving into a new era of adaptability and effectiveness. Given the increasingly complex and contingent nature of change, there has never been a more pressing need to explore and engage with the field of OD. Its academic discourse and diverse range of interventions can and does add value in creating significant paradigm shifts and revitalised, realigned people practices. It is incumbent on the field to present a more credible face to a skeptical market. At the same time, HR Directors, are missing a golden opportunity if they do not engage with the field in their attempts to reinvigorate outmoded people practices. ●

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