

ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

by

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Organization Development: an Overview

DEFINITION

There are several and often conflicting definitions of organization development. Theorists and practitioners hold different perceptions and employ different strategies of organization development. Moreover, the field is still in its infancy, and as it evolves more contradictory data are revealed. However, the phrase organization development has acquired a fairly specific meaning in organizational theory vocabulary. Many organization development specialists regard French and Bell's definition as a standard one:

Organization development is a long-range effort to improve an organization's problem - solving and renewal process, particularly through a more effective and collaborative management of organization culture - with special emphasis on the culture of formal work teams - with the assistance of a change agent, or catalyst, and the use of the theory and technology of applied behavioural science, including action research. 1

The phrase 'problem-solving' 'collaborative management', 'culture', 'change agent' and 'action research' need further clarification. Problem-solving and renewal process has often taken place behind closed doors, until the implementation stage when the cloak of confidentiality is removed. In the organization development context problem-solving has been perceived as:

the process of imitating, creating, and confronting needed changes so as to make it possible for organizations to become or remain viable, to adopt to new conditions, to solve problems, to learn from experiences 2

This process ideally takes place in an atmosphere of openness, flexibility and adaptability with the aim of encouraging individual motivation, development and fulfilment with

the context of institutional purposes.

Collaborative management refers to shared opposed to a hierarchiacally imposed management. Many Zambian organizations have espoused the ideal of participative management; in practice, however, the majority of them pay lip-service to this ideal. The so-called participative management turns out to be nothing more than manipulative strategies or play-acting scenarios camouflaging managerial power. Collaborative management as construed from the organization development viewpoint transcends thenarrow concerns of worker management to encompass participation of employees at all levels as well as sharing of problems between superiors and juniors.

Organizational culture has been defined as "prevailing patterns of activities, interactions, norms, sentiments (including feelings), beliefs, attitudes, values and products".³ There are formal and informal aspects of organizational life. Usually, organization development programmes are established through the formal system, but its initial strategies deal with the informal system (e.g. attitudes and feelings).

The use of a change agent is one of the distinguishing characteristics of organization development. The change agent or consultant may be a member of or external to the organization in question, as long as he/she is not part of the prevailing organization culture. More significant is the manner in which an organization development change agent relates to the client. According to Argyris⁴ the agent operates on valid and useful information or problems at hand, must deal with clients who have free and informed choice of possible alternatives and must secure internal commitment from clients on suggested solutions rather than impose recommendations merely because they are scientifically right. This is in sharp contrast to traditional change agents, especially experts or scholarly consultants,

who analyse situations and make policy recommendations to passive clients.

Finally, the team action research is basic to organization development model. It consists of six elements:

1. a preliminary diagnosis,
2. data gathering from the client group,
3. data feedback to the client group,
4. data exploration by the client group,
5. action planning and
6. action in a sense, organization development can be defined as organization improvement through action-research.

Organization Development can thus be described as a change strategy that:

- a) emphasizes group and organizational process in contrast to substantive content,
- b) focuses on the work-team as a key-unit for learning more effective modes of organizational behaviour,
- c) emphasizes collaborative management of the work team culture,
- d) considers the total organizational system,
- e) uses action research model,
- f) employs a behavioural scientist or change agent, and
- g) views the change effort as an on-going process.

SOME MAJOR ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTIONS AND STRATEGIES

Organization development has been classified in several ways in literature, and considerations of space precludes an exhaustive treatment of these classifications. Despite variations in strategies and purposes, organization development interventions are usually experience-based,

and require collaborative participation of the client group. Hornstein, Bunker et. al.⁵ provide a useful and simple classification of organization development. These include:

1. Techno-Structural Interventions. The approach involves environmental, technological or structural change, like organizational chart, office arrangement, work flow or some technical details of a job.
2. Team Development. This has been the major tool in Organization Development technology. It frequently consists of two or three days meeting at which team members consider reorganizing their department or work out new relationships. The focus is usually on authority and responsibility of individuals in the department, reflection of interpersonal relationships (especially in response to internal conflict), skill training in decision-making, problem-solving or conflict resolution.
3. Data-Feedback. This refers to learning new data about oneself, others, group processes, organizational dynamics - data that one did not previously take active account of. Feedback activities and process are aimed at mirroring the objective picture of the real world. Awareness of "new" facts may lead to change if the feedback is not too threatening.
4. Intergroup Interventions. These are aimed at dysfunctional conflict and promoting collaboration among various groups. A general design involves a sequence of events involving intergroup perceptions, communication, shared tasks etc.

5. Training Interventions. These are used to address a specific training need. Approaches could involve skill training, management development, laboratory training, on-the-job training etc. Participants are usually divided into small groups of about 8 to 12 and interact under their own initiative in a relatively unstructured laboratory situation. An organization development agent is present to act as a resource person. Training interventions are usually designed to upgrade knowledge and concepts, outdated beliefs and attitudes, and skills.

6. Interfaces in Organization Development Strategies.

The various types of organization development are not mutually exclusive. Many organization development activities usually employ a combination of strategies from various types. Additionally, they all begin by diagnosis followed by intervention which responds to the need as diagnosed. All organization development strategies avoid the imposition of preplanned packages as a way of solving organizational problems. Rather, they all seek to create conditions in organizations in which members at all levels can assume the responsibility and authority for solving problems that directly affect them.