

# An OD-based framework for advancing change practice

Sharon Varney



*In this article, I introduce an OD-based framework for advancing change practice. It comprises four inter-related elements: Diagnostic OD; Dialogic OD; Dynamic OD [‘the three Ds of OD’]; and the Use of Self. I then invite those involved in making change happen, whatever their job title, to adopt an OD orientation to their work. This challenges them to consider their instrumentality in change; developing a balance between ‘the three Ds’ of OD practice that will enable people to create change for themselves*

## Key words

organisation development, change, diagnostic OD, dialogic OD, dynamic OD, use of self, OD-savvy clients

## OD matters more than ever

With an unrelenting drive for change in organisations, Organisation Development (OD) has never mattered more than it does today. The quotes below suggest that the “cult of change” in organisations (Hodgson, 2011) shows no sign of abating. More worryingly, they also indicate that challenging the drive for change - whether this takes the form of traditional planned change programmes, or the insistent drive towards agility - has become ‘undiscussable’ (Argyris, 1980). Raising a challenge to change in such an environment is risky and potentially career-limiting.

*“We’re going through version 3 or 4 of an operating model  
that no-one understands”*

HR manager, private sector organisation (in-person).

*“We’re continually re-org[anis]ing the re-orgs”*

HR manager, public sector organisation (in-person).

*“Everyone focuses on the ‘why’ of change. If you ask about the  
‘how’, you’re criticised for not being on board with change”*

IT manager, private sector organisation (in-person).

## Change management

With an unquestioning drive for change in organisations, the need for expertise in the field has never been greater. The business of change management - and it is big business for many large consulting firms - is replete with structured approaches and toolkits. Yet, change management, as a discipline, is largely untethered from any coherent theoretical and ethical framework to guide its practice. The problem with this 'anything goes' mentality is that it offers little to grab onto, for the large number of people who now find themselves involved in making change happen. So, it is not surprising that those who will ultimately be held accountable for making specific changes happen, often reach outside the organisation for what they perceive to be the supposed 'safe haven' of the Big Names in change consulting to do this work for them.

## OD approaches to change

In contrast, OD enjoys a rich theoretical grounding in its approach to the theory and practice of change (see Cheung-Judge, M. Y. & Holbeche, L. [2015], for more on this). The roots of OD can be traced back to the late 1940s with the group dynamics work of social scientists such as Kurt Lewin and Ron Lippitt at the National Training Laboratories (now NTL Institute) in the US and the parallel group relations work of scholar-practitioners such as Eric Trist and Ken Bamforth at the Tavistock Institute in the UK (see Garrow, V. et al, 2009, for more about the history of OD).

From an OD perspective, the current practice of change draws on a rich body of theoretical knowledge, known as the applied behavioural sciences, which has developed and evolved over the past 70 years. This body of knowledge tells us more about why and how change processes work, and also considers their limitations, in different contexts. Much of it has been subject to peer review through the academic publication process and remains open to public scrutiny. Thus, it lends itself to an [evidence-based approach](#) to change practice rather better than the closed, proprietary change knowledge of particular change management providers.

From the outset, OD practice has been distinct from change management in terms of its explicit commitment to humanistic values, including democracy and participation; learning and growth; "enduring respect for the human side of enterprise" (Cheung-Judge & Holbeche, 2015: 19); and "for the purpose of bettering working life for all humans". This latter phrase is taken from the purpose statement of the [Tavistock Institute](#). These may sound like lofty ideals, but empowering people to create change for themselves lends itself to practical action. In practice, this often means including in the change process from the outset, those who will be affected by it; listening to their voices, including the ones that are rarely heard; and empowering and supporting them to develop their own agency.

This solid platform of OD, comprising the body of applied behavioural science knowledge and the application of humanistic values, offers huge potential to advance the practice of change from within the organisational system. No wonder, then, that Warner Burke (2011) argues that OD has "unfinished business". In this article, I go on to argue that part of that unfinished business is to extend the reach of OD; to enable those involved in change to develop an OD mindset, skillset and toolset.

*"The need for expertise in organization change has never been greater ... we who identify*

The question is not whether those in charge should reach outside the organisation to buy in expertise to ‘do change’ for them, nor whether they should look inside for expertise to create change for themselves. The question is how they can develop that internal change-capability so that they have a real choice.

## Extending the reach of OD

Nowadays, saying that Organisation Development is just for OD specialists is a bit like saying computers are just for IT professionals. It does not make sense to think that way any more, when so many of us use an array of computers (smart phones, tablets, laptops, desktops, etc.). Moreover, we also apply a range of software applications (such as social media, email and business productivity tools) to help us do our work, communicate and collaborate.

In the past, OD was the preserve of specialists. Yet, as suggested by Henley Forum [research](#), the job of creating organisational change and effectiveness is simply too big and too complex for one person or one team. As a result, more and more people are being involved in change and transformation work, as part of their day job. Managers and professionals with all kinds of job titles are working hard to introduce new, different, and potentially better ways of working. However, few of them know how to go beyond the basic project plan to make the magical transition between A and B happen for teams and organisations. All too often, therefore, well-intentioned change efforts take a substantial economic and emotional toll, and fail to deliver the hoped-for benefits.

It is not the fault of those involved. Few have had any training in this area. ‘Communication’ and ‘implementation’ may look like straightforward management tasks when they are time-boxed as deliverables on a project plan. Yet these labels mask the fact that communication and implementation are rather more open-ended processes that bring all the messy and unpredictable people aspects of change to the fore. They encompass a whole set of communicative and interactive activities where people are (hopefully) experimenting and learning how to take up the invitation to work in different ways, or groups, or places, and where they are ignoring, subverting and finding creative work-arounds to someone else’s plans.

Against that backdrop, acquiring change capability by developing an OD mindset, skillset and toolset is fast becoming essential for **all** managers and professionals. This call to extend the reach of OD is **not** a veiled proposal to disband OD teams where there is deep specialism. Rather it is an invitation to boost the impact of OD work by developing OD-savvy clients for such specialists to partner with. That is, clients who themselves have some agency and efficacy in applying an OD mindset, skillset and toolset, to create change in their part of the organisational system.

## A framework for advancing the practice of change: 'the 3 Ds' and Use of Self

There are many well-known change management methodologies on the market. Businesses are invited to buy into one or other of these and to invest in spreading a common terminology and structured toolkit throughout their organisation to help them deal with the challenging business of change. Such methodologies are often accompanied by a clear architecture by which managers and professionals can gain certification and recognition for progressing through different levels of expertise. The common terminology, structured toolkit and approach to development can be compelling because they help those who are new to the area to navigate around the thinking and to calibrate their progress.

Not so with OD. There is no complete agreement about what OD stands for: Organisation(al) Development, Organisation Design, or Organisational Dynamics. OD is not one thing; it looks and feels completely different in different contexts, making it hard to define (Garrow & Varney, 2009). Furthermore, the various centres that specialise in developing OD professionals in the UK use different terms and they have different approaches. Some do not even refer explicitly to OD.

When you are *in* the OD profession, these things actually do not matter too much. People who have completed Masters' programmes, or have experienced extended, intensive practitioner programmes in OD, all tend to have done important work in understanding their position in the field and in managing their own learning. These meta-capabilities (i.e. understanding your position in the field and managing your own learning) underpin OD practice, whatever you choose to call it. As a result, those already in the field benefit from diversity in OD because they have the knowledge and skills to navigate around the different practices and nuances in language and use it to flex and extend their repertoire of practice.

### Change in OD itself?

If OD is to become the go-to domain for a broader cadre of managers and professionals involved in creating change in organisations, then we might have to change a few things about the field itself, to make it more welcoming to outsiders. For example, those of us in OD might need to get better at making core ideas more accessible without dumbing them down. We might need to offer linguistic 'handholds' that enable those new to the field to join in the conversation more quickly. We might need to bring different ideas about OD together so they are more visible to those who need to do OD work.

I developed the framework (see Figure 1 below) for the Advancing your OD Practice workshop that I run at [Henley Business School](#). It is not the first word on this subject (the work of Mee-Yan Cheung-Judge, Cliff Oswick, Gervase Bushe and Bob Marshak, among others, has influenced my thinking). Nor is it the last. But I hope it is useful.

The framework comprises four inter-connected components: Diagnostic OD, Dialogic OD, Dynamic OD and Use of Self.

The 'self' is the instrument through which the practitioner works with others to better understand the context and thus to develop a bespoke balance between the 3 'D's that is attuned to the needs of that specific context.

### Diagnostic OD

Learning from data lies at the heart of OD's diagnostic approach to change. In line with the prevailing thinking about scientific management, much early OD work was diagnostic in nature: gathering data to identify and understand problems; feeding back that data; designing and implementing interventions; then evaluating the effectiveness of those interventions. Within each of these linear steps, OD practitioners had opportunities to intervene skilfully in the organisational system in an effort to optimise organisational health and performance.

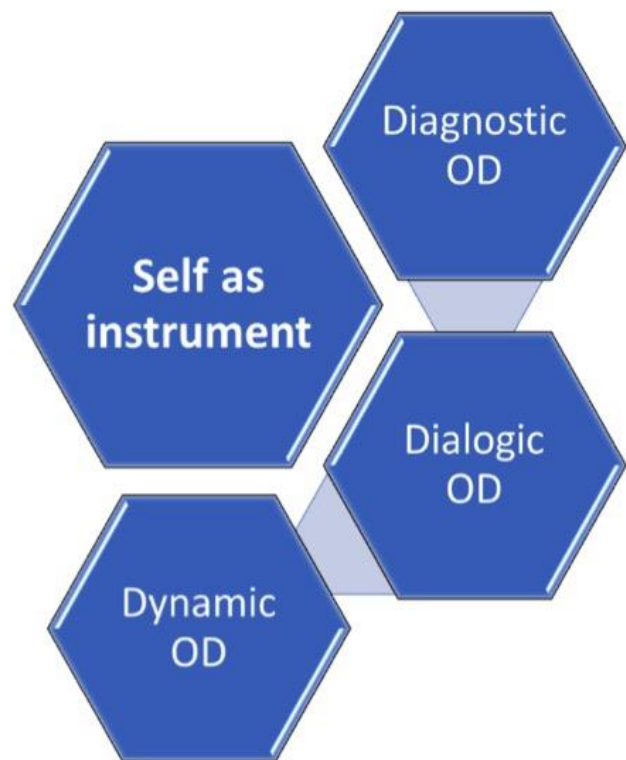


Figure 1: A framework for advancing change practice

As described above, Diagnostic OD approaches are often linear – but by no means all. For example, Kurt Lewin's Action Research methods invited groups to engage in gathering data through cycles of action and reflection in order to solve problems and bring about social change. (See: Bradbury. H., et al 2008 for more on Action Research).

### Dialogic OD

Dialogic OD uses conversation and dialogue to initiate change and improvements within an organisational system. The dialogic perspective views organisations as meaning-making or sense-making systems. Dialogic OD practice therefore strives to 'reveal', and make sense of, the multiple realities of diverse participants. It recognises that intervention starts at 'hello', or even before, and that the questions you ask matter as much as - perhaps even more than - the answers, as in [Appreciative Inquiry](#).

The role of the OD practitioner is largely to convene conversations and engage in light-touch facilitation, to ensure that all the voices are heard. Various Large Group Interventions (LGIs) – that is, approaches that seek to 'get the whole system in the room' - fit well with the notion that dialogue generates change.

## Dynamic OD

Dynamic OD is the term that I have begun to use over the past six years to articulate a view of organisations as complex adaptive systems, much like the ‘wiggly world’ that [Chris Rodgers](#) often talks about. In this view, change is an ordinary part of everyday life. Deliberate change efforts intertwine with one another and with the wider raft of interactions within a changing organisational landscape, so that surprises are commonplace and change itself seems increasingly fluid.

As the name suggests, Dynamic OD is concerned with the dynamics of change (an ongoing process of changing), rather than an end state. When changing is continuous, the role of the OD practitioner is to encourage experimentation and learning from action to inform next steps, so that momentum builds iteratively.

Taking action is the only way in which we can truly understand how that action will land. Yet that does not mean that ‘anything goes’. Data is critical, but Dynamic OD uses data in a different way from the way that it is used in Diagnostic OD. Rather than taking a detailed snapshot of a situation, which effectively freezes it in time, Dynamic OD is concerned with gathering real-time data about what is changing, more in the manner of time-lapse photography.

Dynamic OD actively invites multiple perspectives to gain insight into the dynamic complexity of organisational life. Inviting diverse views is critical, because any one person, or group, only has a partial view of what is going on. This focus on multiple, diverse voices has much in common with Dialogic OD. However, there is an incredibly important difference: Dialogic OD works to reveal *multiple realities*, while Dynamic OD is concerned with learning from multiple perspectives implicit in a *complex reality*. This point is underpinned by a wealth of philosophical debate (see, e.g., Fleetwood 2005).

## Use of Self

Without the conscious use of ‘self’, we would simply be “tool-oriented technicians” (Cheung-Judge & Holbeche, 2015:25). Use of Self is critical in distinguishing OD practice from change management. Simply put, it acknowledges that the OD practitioner is the primary *instrument* in OD practice:

*“To be effective, OD practitioners need to be able to trust their own inner resources, making discerning judgment in the ‘here and now’ moment, staying choiceful in deciding how to show up and behave, and what interventions may work better in a particular context to achieve a particular outcome”*

(Cheung-Judge & Jamieson, 2018:22).

In this view, the OD practitioner commits to both inner work and lifelong learning to pull themselves together “as a sharp instrument” (ibid.). Through their use of self, OD practitioners apply their acute social sensitivity and their ability to read the environment in order to flex their range of action (ibid.). Cheung-Judge and Jamieson (2018:22) describe use of self as developing both a *mindset* and a *skillset* which enables an OD practitioner “to act in different ways as appropriate to the situation”.



## Applying the 3Ds framework through Use of Self

*"Without data, OD is ungrounded;*

*without dialogue, it is imposed;*

*and without dynamism, OD is irrelevant".*

As the mantra above extols, the framework presented in this paper proposes that effective OD comprises diagnostic, dialogic *and* dynamic approaches. Without data, OD is ungrounded; without dialogue, it is imposed; and without dynamism, OD is irrelevant.

I invite practitioners to deploy their Use of Self (*mindset* and *skillset*) to draw from a *toolset* that encompasses diagnostic, dialogic and dynamic approaches to OD (see Table 1 below for examples). In this way, they can respond more effectively to the complex challenges arising in each particular situation. To do this well, they need to observe the current levels of diagnosis, dialogue and dynamics in their organisation; to sense patterns of 'stuckness'; and to consider where and how the current balance might need to shift.

**Table 1: A combination framework of different OD approaches**

	Diagnostic OD	Dialogic OD	Dynamic OD
<i>Learn from ...</i>	<i>... data</i>	<i>... conversation</i>	<i>... action</i>
Examples of tools and approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>employee surveys</li> <li>interviews and focus groups</li> <li>psychometrics</li> <li>action research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Appreciative Inquiry (AI)</li> <li>LGIs e.g. Open Space, World Café</li> <li>T-groups</li> <li>coaching programmes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dynamic Patterning (Varney, 2015)</li> <li>social movements</li> <li>viral change</li> <li>informal coalitions (Rodgers, 2007)</li> </ul>
Patterns of 'stuckness'	Analysis paralysis	All talk, no action	'Agile-itis' - all action, no learning

The purpose of this framework is to aid learning and development. For managers and professionals who are involved in change, it is designed to help remove some of the mystique surrounding OD. It maps out some of the different ways in which people *do* OD work and, importantly, it connects that with the Use of Self – the mindset and skillset that underpin the effective 'doing' of OD. My aim has been to help those new to the field to begin to understand more about what they already know, and about the strengths they bring, and to identify where they might need to take their next steps.

## An invitation and aspiration

For those of us in the OD field already, it is an invitation to reflect on the balance of our practice: to consider what we might need to dial up or dial down in different contexts, and where we might need to extend our range. We all have our biases and our favourite go-to approaches, often shaped by when and where we gained or are gaining our own development in the field. So this framework encourages us to stand back and take a fresh look at our practice in our current context.

As I said earlier, this paper is not the first or the last word on this topic, but I hope it is useful. My particular hope is that it helps in spreading the word beyond the OD community that OD really matters for everyone who is involved in creating change. Moreover, I hope that it encourages managers and other professionals, whatever their job title, to explore how taking a step or two in applying an OD mindset, skillset and toolset can boost the impact of their change work.

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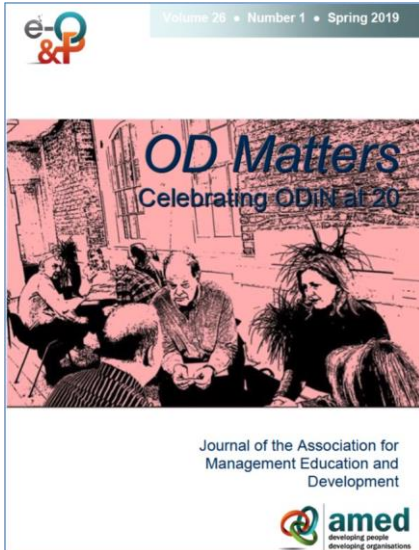
Space for Learning <http://spaceforlearning.com/dynamic-patterning/>



## About Sharon

**Dr Sharon Varney** is a specialist in developing organisations and people. She works at a strategic level, helping to create more effective organisations, and engages at a very human level, supporting people to manage personal change and transition. Sharon developed her cross-sector OD expertise working in large, complex organisations, including a global engineering and construction company in offshore oil and gas and a US bank with international reach. She now runs her own organisational consulting practice – Space for Learning - where she helps internal OD teams boost the impact of their work. She also leads the *Advancing your OD Practice* programme at Henley Business School, now in its 4<sup>th</sup> year.

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