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Reflections on Practice

A Conversation between an OD Practitioner and an OD Academic

By Anne Gardon and David Coghlan

OD PRACTITIONERS LOVE to tell stories. They love to recount the trials and tribulations of their adventures with clients, always maintaining the confidentiality of the client's identity or identifiability. Conferences and meetings of the OD Network, the OD Institute and publications in their respective journals provide vibrant outlets for experience sharing. Yet that experience sharing does not always contribute to learning because the cases described are presented as stories only and such factors as the cognitional processes and individual learning of the OD practitioner, the rationale behind the choice of intervention, evidence of critique and extrapolation of that particular story to a wider situation are omitted (Coghlan, 2002). This joint article between a practitioner and an academic is a collaborative adventure aimed at confronting this omission. Anne as the practitioner shares an experience of working with a client. David, as the academic enters into a conversation with Anne as to how she was thinking during the intervention and what learning she intends to share with the readers.

THE CASE OF THE CONFEDERATED CORPORATION

The newly promoted president of a regional, non-profit institution comprised of six sites and corporate office knew the business inside out. Though the organization had a long history and significant strengths, he recognized that increased competition, diminished revenues and the absence of a clear strategy would negatively impact its future and his ability to lead. Establishing consensus about the organization's future was complicated by an organizational culture that emphasized autonomy and individual performance.

I was recommended to the president as someone who could help him and his staff to make choices about the future that reflected the significant knowledge and expertise that existed within the organization. As the primary client, the president was explicit in his requirement that he and the staff drive decision-making. At the same time, he was not prepared, in this initial stage, to involve staff beyond the circle of 13 directors and managers who comprised the "management team" all of who were based in the corporate headquarters.

I began by interviewing the president and this 13 –person group about the organization's strengths, their visions of success and perceived obstacles to it. Interviewees described their desire to "go below the surface" and to establish shared priorities and real outcomes for their work that linked them to one another and to the other parts of the organization. They painted a picture of an organization in which each person or unit operated separately and autonomously rather than as part of a whole. (Though named "management team", this group essentially served to exchange information in bi-weekly meetings.) They expressed confusion about whether or how the corporate office and the sites needed to or could communicate with one another better. Similarly, the corporate office functioned as a confederation of independent businesses, (i.e., marketing, development, program, facilities, etc.) operating with individually defined purposes and distinct understandings of the institution's meta- purpose or mission. Individual excellence and maximum autonomy appeared to be the dominant values. High quality outcomes resulted from the work of departments because of the staff's significant skills and knowledge; however, the overall value and impact of the institution were compromised because of a lack of communication and integration across boundaries. The president and members of the management team recognized this and the need to radically 're-invent' the customer experience.

The results of this initial survey served as a springboard for a series of facilitated conversations among the members of the management group. In the initial feedback session, the group validated the survey results and discussed what it meant for them to operate with individual versus a shared sense of purpose, and what it would mean to work together as a whole. They explored a perceived tension between shared purpose and individual autonomy. They recognized that paradoxically they had come to rely on the previous president to make decisions or frequently 'non-decisions'. This contributed to creating ample arenas in which professionals at the corporate level could pursue their own interests.

In this cycle of discussion and exploration about the organization's history, the current environment in which it was operating, and possible future directions, I generated the following interpretations of what was going on:

1. **The organization had historically lived out a tension between two aspects of their business by alternating its focus on one or the other.** The organization's present challenge was to develop a vision and strategies that reconciled "*both* one *and* the other." Ronald Heifetz has labeled this adaptive work—that which requires new knowledge and changed values to be resolved.
2. **The confederated businesses at the corporate level and between the corporate office and the six sites represented significant schisms.** There was a hierarchy at work, which privileged the corporate offices and functions over the sites even though the sites represented the organization's primary interface with its audience. New structures and relationships would be needed if the organization were to live into a shared vision that "focuses on the entire organization fulfilling the potential of the sites" (internal communication).
3. **The concept and practice of executive leadership had evolved into an unspoken compact about power and decision-making.** The president was relied upon to make decisions—or not—and to represent—or not—the sites which were not otherwise directly included in the corporate management group. This created ambiguities about authority and decision-making that, in turn, contributed to a lack of clarity about accountabilities.

These hypotheses about what was going on within the organization had to be validated and meaningful to the client system if they were to be of any value in the consultation. After the initial feedback session and subsequent working retreats with the management group, the process of interpretation, validation and re-examination was continued in individual sessions with the primary client as he and I began to meet every three weeks. These sessions took the form of in-depth strategizing on issues raised in the group discussions and coaching regarding his role as the leader.

Over the course of the consultation, the president began to more deliberately guide what he had come to understand was a process of organization change which required specific behaviors of him. In his mid-30s, he had been promoted to by a board of directors comprised of highly accomplished, wealthy and generally older individuals. The new president felt significant pressure to excel. Change was essential and it also felt risky. He used our coaching sessions to reflect on emerging directions

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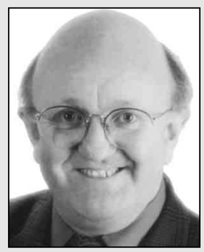

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and decisions and to develop structures and strategies for implementation that were congruent with the task of adaptive work and the role of a leader in modulating the levels of stress and anxiety experienced inside the organization (Heifetz, 1999). These included:

- Frequent written and oral communications to the staff about strategic developments and their implications and implementation.
- Creation of ad hoc, cross-functional teams composed of individuals from throughout the organization charged with researching alternatives and recommendations related to specific areas critical to the vision.
- Disbandment of the management team and formation of a directors' group comprised of both corporate and site directors that began to meet quarterly.
- Exploration of the possible implications for organization structure and management that a true integration of the sites and corporate office would imply.
- Preliminary exploration of the implications of these changes at the level of the board of trustees.

So far, I have described the role of the consultant in initiating and facilitating the action research cycle. In fact, this ongoing process was simultaneously (and subsequently) reenforced within the client system principally by the implementation teams. Each one of these cross-functional, corporate-site teams engaged in one or more of the following research processes: audience surveys and data reviews, review of internal documents, literature reviews, and compilation of best practices by visiting peer institutions. As a result, strategy implementation was research-driven with the component activities of data generation, interpretation, validation and action located, first, at the team level and subsequently, at the levels of the directors' group and executive leadership. By utilizing the internal resources of a highly skilled staff, and creating new structures and - with them - new working relationships, the organization as a whole began to see some concrete results. Among them:

- Responding to audience concerns on the basis of a better understanding of who their audience was and what it valued in their experience.
- Increasing cross selling between their flagship site and others, and building an identity as a "network" of multiple sites for their audience.
- Obtaining significant funding for site development.
- Electronic networking between and among the sites and the corporate office, with parallel people networking among site directors.
- Contributing to larger regional initiatives in their field.

The shadow side of this change process had largely to do with legacy of a highly autonomous, confederated corporate office and a structure in which the site managers, who oversaw the organizations primary interface with its audience, were underrepresented in communication networks and decision-making. The power differential between the corporate headquarters and the sites was reflected in their respective role definitions and salaries. Together, these factors posed a challenge in integrating the organization as a whole and promoting increased collaboration across boundaries through the ad hoc implementation teams and the directors' group. This was an organization with a long history and much tradition, and some of the individuals in the management group struggled at times with a sense that they had more to lose than gain in this process.

The ability of the organization to achieve the results it did was very much a factor of the integrity and competence of the individuals involved, and their ability to recognize and embrace the difficult issues their organization faced. They effectively forged agreements about a shared strategy and priorities and began to implement them. Their success was also a reflection of effective leadership in the context of a multi-faceted change process. In the initial stages of implementation, the new president did not shy away from following through on the implications of each of the decisions he and the group made about purpose and strategy. As the consultation evolved from planning to implementation, he appeared prepared to learn and apply the principles of adaptive work with the changes in organizational life that they implied.

THE CASE OF THE CONFEDERATED CORPORATION REVISITED: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE OD PRACTITIONER AND THE OD ACADEMIC

David writes. When I read or listen to accounts of OD projects I look for three features. The first is how the OD practitioner attends to her/his own inner data—cognitions, feelings, body awareness, values etc. So how she/he listens to her feelings, questions her/his assumptions, applies constructs from formal education and then tests those in action are important factors in effective intervention. These are considered as first-person inquiry and practice (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). I also look for how the OD practitioner works with the client system—how she/he figures out how to be helpful (Schein, 1999), how she/he interprets what the clients say and do and how these are tested in action. Working with clients is considered to be second-person inquiry and practice (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Thirdly, I want to know the OD practitioner's answer to the "so what?" question—why is this story worth sharing and what does the OD practitioner want the audience or readership to take from it and apply to their own practice or study of OD. This refers to third-person inquiry and practice (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). All good OD accounts for all three persons so that the third-person is an integration of first and second person. It is with this frame that I now enter into dialogue with Anne.

David: As you engaged in this consultation, what did you do to tune into your own experiences of what was going on and how you were thinking and feeling? What conceptual frameworks were you applying to yourself and your own behaviour as an OD consultant? Were these frameworks accurate and helpful? Were you able to test them in action? What and how were you learning about yourself in action? If you were starting again with this client would you work differently?

Anne: I tuned in to my own experience through individual reflection and writing, reading, and periodic shadow consulting to check and deepen my understanding and work. In conversation with the president and management group, I was able to validate my perceptions, and refine or adjust my interpretations and interactions. That's to say this was both an intuitive and analytic process for me. During the consultation, I also read quite a bit, pulling books off the shelf, such Heifetz' *Leadership Without Easy Answers,* which proved to be an incredibly useful model in this instance, not only in the process of diagnosis, but also in framing the work and my role in relationship to the primary client.

That said, in fact, I applied different conceptual models at different stages in the consultation, calling upon those that seemed most relevant and applicable. For example, in the initial stages, the president expressed nervousness about engaging a consultant and doing this work, (e.g., several times he stated that he wanted a consultant who would not "take over" as he had previously experienced.) In addition to practicing process consultation (Schein, 1999), I also talked to the president about how my approach differed from the expert consulting model (Block, 2000). These frameworks, in turn, guided choices I made about how to enter the client system which I do think were helpful because they supported strong relationship-building (Wheatley, 1992) and served to establish and strengthen the management group's capacity to function as a learning community (Senge, 1990). As I mentioned above, after my initial data-collection (which focused on establishing buy-in around a shared purpose for our work together), my diagnosis and subsequent consultations were informed by Heifetz' work on leadership, which I saw—and continue to see- as a primary challenge within this system. In this framework, my role gradually shifted from being a consultant to the group with the president as the primary consultant to that of an executive coach supporting implementation and the president's leadership development.

'What did I learn about myself in action?' For me—as is so often the case—many of the learnings here came as re-learnings or reminders of simple wisdoms. For example, I would have preferred to design this consultation with a greater part of the system directly involved from the beginning—at a minimum all of the site directors, whose absence felt glaring from the beginning. I explored this possibility with the president, but he was adamant about not expanding the initial group of participants. So, I leaned on the old adage "start where the client is" and had an opportunity to learn more about how a project can evolve to become more inclusive over time. I believe it is about trusting that people will do what they can do as they can do it. What I would do differently is informed by a view two years later which is defined by events which did not directly relate, but nonetheless impacted the consultation, (i.e., my leaving the country for a year, 9/11.) I recognize, in retrospect, that given what was essentially an interruption in our work together, the president had not as deeply integrated all the new practices that would be required to have *more fully* realized the potential of the path he and the organization were on. If I were to do it again, I would more strongly advocate for identifying and forming a second leadership tier, (e.g. an executive team) who could partner with the president. I would also more strongly recommend explicit skill building in teamwork for all directors and managers. If adopted these might have served to both support the president in his role and strengthen and institutionalize teamwork practices in the organization.

David: As you were working with the president and senior managers, how were you framing what they said and what they were doing? How did you judge what was critical and on what basis did you order the issues in terms of importance? How did you work out how to be helpful to this client? What was your evidence in action that *this consultation was working and how did you test that in action?*

Anne: Again, I viewed the words and actions of the players through multiple frameworks. Clearly, one frame had to do with the critical transition in leadership that was occurring. Not only had an older executive with a long tenure left the organization, but the new, relatively young president was negotiating an internal promotion in which he would needed to establish his authority and leadership generally, and with his former peer group specifically. I was tuned into issues about power and authority, decision-making, and relationships that had huge implications for the ability of the president and the group as a whole to accomplish what it had agreed it needed and said it wanted to achieve. To a large extent, what I judged was critical was based on what people in the organization told me they cared about and aspired to. (I asked.) Issues were ranked in importance according to their relationship and impact on the group's ability to achieve the outcomes it had established for itself and the consultation. I kept checking this out —either with the group as a whole or with the president privately.

Some of the choices I made about how to work with this client were based upon my experience of their culture and how they related to one another, (i.e., generally super polite except when a couple of them were honestly and energetically at odds on an issue, valuing of the organization's tradition though not uncritically, and ambivalent about change and risk-taking.) I perceived a tension between individuals' desire to push the boundaries and get better at what they did because they knew it was necessary and complacency. One way that I felt that I could be personally helpful was to model directness and support risk-taking (thereby increasing individual and group tensions) while making sure not to contribute to a dysfunctional level of anxiety. I based my judgment about what worked—or not - on both direct, spontaneous feedback (often offered on a one-to-one basis) and by personally touching base with individuals and the group as a whole at various times.

David: Why have you selected this OD case to share with the readership of the *OD Practitioner*? What does it illustrate for you that you want OD practitioners to learn from it for their own practice? What does your story add to the font of OD knowledge that would help students of OD?

Anne: This case is simply offered as a solid, practical illustration of a number of key principles underlying OD in action. I will mention three that I keep returning to in my work with not-for profit organizations and communities. All of these have implications for each phase in the consulting process and relationship over time.

The value of operating with a view of organizations as comprised of highly interdependent systems and of promoting information sharing and learning across boundaries. At its most basic level, this principle is about *thinking* systematically. I hope that the readers will recognize that this lens framed some of my initial conversations with the client, my diagnosis and process design. Ideally, translating this principle into *action*, means finding ways to engage the whole system in order maximize the quality and completeness of the information that drives decision-making and innovation. Though client perimeters and preferences precluded direct, broadly based involvement from the beginning, this story is an illustration of how a consultation can evolve from initial limited stakeholder engagement to include a greater part of the system over time. Today, retrospectively, this principle also helps me to envision additional possibilities for how I might have further increased the capacity of the whole system to work together better, and what I would do if given the opportunity to re-engage in the work.

The need to trust and nurture our clients' learning processes. For me, this principle is about how we, as consultants, model continuous learning and growth and nurture the same in our clients through our partnerships. In this consultation, I recognized from the beginning that my/our success would depend in large part upon the degree to which the president viewed me as a trusted partner and resource. I interpreted his openness to looking deeply and undefensively at issues, and to working with new models for thinking about the organization and his role in it, as guides to what he wanted and needed to learn more about. Today, this principle, informs my confidence that he pushed implementation as far as he could at the time and that, when he is ready, he will push his learning and the work to be done to the next level. Similarly, this principle applies to other levels of the system—not least of all the application of action research in implementing strategy.

Recognizing that our clients are in a process of continual change that does not begin and end with our entry in the system. The very process of reflecting upon and writing up this consultation has been another illustration for me of this principle. As part of writing this article, I met with the client and came away with a more complete understanding of how the work we began together evolved over time and how it was simultaneously impacted by the tremendous complexity in which the organization is imbedded.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this collaborative venture has been to see what happens when an OD practitioner and an OD academic look at the same case and converse about it. For me, David, I get frustrated at presentations of OD stories that don't go beyond the basic narrative. I want to know more, not more details of the story, but I want to learn how OD practitioners think, how they use what's in the books, how they learn in action and how their experience can develop OD theory and practice. In conversing with Anne on her experience of this case, I have been given an insight into how an intelligent and reflective practitioner works as she sees it. Obviously there's a whole other approach that could be taken, one that focuses on the efficacy of the consultation but that is not the focus of this article.

Anne writes. As a reviewer for the *OD Practitioner,* I have come appreciate more deeply the value of case studies as a learning tool for us all—practitioners and academics—if we are prepared to apply a level of rigor to the storytelling. This collaboration with David has helped me to describe and articulate the essentially internal, and what often *feels* solitary, process I engage in working through the stages of a consultation. It has helped me to recognize and treasure (once again) that I do not work alone at all but, through my practice, am deeply linked to my colleagues in thought and action.

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