

Taking the “al” Out of OD

By W. Warner Burke

Only an academic could fret about such matters, I suppose, but practice is equally important to me. And getting the meaning of our practice right reduces ambiguity about what we do or need to be doing. Moreover, reducing ambiguity about our practice is helpful to clients. So it's *organization* development not organizational development. Consider the following:

First, organization is a noun; organizational an adjective. Organization development (OD) means the development of the organization, the entity as a whole. Organizational development means some aspect of development. Organizational is a modifier of development – modified development, implying that the organization as a whole is not the focus. Instead, the focus is on some part, some dimension, some element of the organization, not the total system.

Second, let us consider the definition of OD, at least the most popular and accepted one: Organization development is an effort

- planned ,
- organization wide , and
- managed from the top, to
- increase organization effectiveness and health through
- planned interventions in the organization's "processes", using behavioral- science knowledge

Beckhard, 1969; p.9

Note that there is no “al” anywhere in this definition and that the main point to the argument being presented is (2) above – “organization wide.” Richard Beckhard for years would ask over and over again the same question, “Where is the O in OD?”

Third, much that occurs under the banner of OD is indeed “organizational.” That is, OD practice today is largely using OD techniques, e.g., team building, and tools, e.g., *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*, but not OD as defined by Beckhard (1969).

Fourth, confusion abounds regarding OD and “change management.” Focusing on *organization* development can help to reduce this confusion. Additional help can be

found in the article by Marshak (2005). After all, change management is largely piecemeal in its approach and that category of consulting practice can use all the help it can get.

Fifth, OD today is marginalized compared with the practice in the 1960s and the 1970s. Back then OD practice was more likely to have been following Beckhard's definition, but today OD practitioners, for the most part, do not "sit at the executive decision-making table as a partner in driving the organization" (Bradford & Burke, 2005; p. 1). This marginalization in part is due to many practitioners having lost sight of the original definition of the field – *organization wide* – and as a result have fallen into the "al" category, i.e., using OD technology in pieces and parts of the organization but not providing *organization* development for their clients.

For these reasons, and no doubt more could be added to my list, practitioners in our field need to return to our roots and conduct organization development not organizational; the latter is only a modifier not a noun.

References

- Beckhard, R. (1969). **Organization development: Strategies and models**. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Bradford, D. L., & Burke, W. W. (2005). **Reinventing organization development**. San Francisco: Pfeiffer/Wiley.
- Marshak, R. J. (2005). Contemporary challenges to the philosophy and practice of organization development. In D. L. Bradford & W. W. Burke (Eds.), **Reinventing organization development** (pp. 19-42). San Francisco: Pfeiffer/Wiley.

About the Author



W. Warner Burke, PhD, was the first Executive Director of the OD Network. Currently he is the Edward Lee Thorndike Professor of Psychology & Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. He is the Program Coordinator of the Graduate Programs in Social-Organizational Psychology. Burke continues to consult with organizations world-wide and he teaches Leadership and Organizations at Columbia. Burke and David Bradford's new book, *The Crisis in*

OD features current writings of well-known OD theorists on the state of OD today.

Warner can be reached at: wwb3@columbia.edu