Challenges Facing The Field Of
Organization Development
(An Academic Perspective)

GLENN H. VARNEY

For the past several years, professionals, practitioners, and academics have been abuzz with concerns about the life expectancy of Organization Development. Typically, these concerns involve issues like:

- What is OD?
- Where is OD going and will it be here in the future in a different form?
- Is OD just a “fad” on its way out?
- What qualifications does one need to have to do OD work?
- Why isn’t there more new research involving change?
- Why have authors stopped using OD in book titles and now use “change” instead?

Articles and, indeed entire, issues of some practitioner publications have been devoted to this who are we identity crisis...

These concerns have been expressed by many loyal and devoted professionals in the field, but especially by academics who have a strong commitment to the foundations upon which OD has thrived and grown. These foundations are deeply rooted in academy, where the founders of OD worked and lived. (Shephard, Bennis, Benne, Argyris, Schein, Blake, Mouton, French, Maslow, McGregor, Likert, Herzberg and others.)

Indeed, the authors of the now famous Addison Wesley “six pack” (1969) grew up in the academic world, and all of the “foundation literature” listed in the 2003 edition of the Bibliography of Organization Development and Change (p. 9-15) was authored by academics.

Furthermore, Richard Beckard, a highly regarded OD practitioner, “is also considered a founder of Organization Development and was a professor of organization behavior and management at Sloan School of Management at MIT.” (1992, Jossey Bass)

Because of the strong ties to the academic history and a concern about the health and future of OD, a group of AOM-ODC members (30-35) have for the past 7 years been studying the professional challenges facing the field. As an outcome of this lengthy process, a “Summit” meeting was held on April 18, 2005 hosted by Bowling Green State University. The purpose of this Summit was to identify “The Challenges Facing OD&C as an Academic Discipline.” In addition, short and long-term actions were considered designed to meet the challenges. Those in attendance represented a talented and scholarly group of academics who examined
the field from the following perspectives:

- Teaching OD&C
- Practitioners of OD&C
- OD&C Academic Program Direction
- Research in OD&C
- Scholarship in OD&C
- Authorship in OD&C
- Change Leadership
- International Practice of OD&C

The purpose, then, of this article, is to share the results of the “Summit” with all who have an interest in Organization Development’s future.

**Challenge One: Increase the volume and rigor of OD research**

**ACTIONS**

- Build on the position of applied research
- Study the approach taken by other AOM divisions
- Increase research on what does not work
- Understand and reapply the long held traditions of going from practice to theory and back to practice
- Introduce specially designed research courses in organizational change and include how to write articles and scientific papers
- “Learn how to teach what we have learned in our research”
- Develop new 21st century models to replace our existing models
- Improve the quality of articles being published in the OD journals – especially promote JABS as the leading OD journal

**Challenge Two: Repair the damage resulting from the fragmentation of the field, which has resulted in conflict between practitioners and academics, as well as, between OD and other professional disciplines**

**ACTIONS**

- Define more clearly what OD is and especially the interdisciplinary character of the field
- Build interdisciplinary alliances
- Identify and publish the contributions from other professional disciplines to the field of OD
- Conduct interdisciplinary research and studies

**Challenge Three: Talk up OD rather than constantly questioning its future. Go beyond defining OD**
“competencies” and “culture” as the only way to change organizations

ACTIONS

- Build on the “greatness of the field” (More broadcasting to develop appreciation of the roots of OD)
- Develop new interventions suited to the changing environment. Reinvent Action research process to meet continuous change in organizations
- Prepare our graduates so that they have a positive view of the field
- Build more doctoral programs
- Lobby to include OD courses in the other disciplines such as IO Psychology, MBA, etc.
- Promote the interdisciplinary “favor of our origins”

**Challenge Four:** Promote the field to organizations and other professions. Explain what we do and the value we add to all types of organizations

ACTIONS

- Tell the “world” about our global success rate in helping organizations improve
- Explain what we do in a variety of media including demonstrating successes, description of work and processes, “who’s who” in the field, etc.
- Bring the founders back to rekindle the “fire” we once had in the field
- Build the field with an Organization Development “brand identity” so that “OD is where you go to move your organization forward”

**Challenge Five:** Improve the quality and quantity of OD educative processes and programming

ACTIONS

- Encourage more potential teaching/research scholars to enter the field
- Develop pathways to entry and movement within the field
- Improve the quality of teaching/learning in existing graduate programs
- Increase the number of graduate programs, especially at the doctoral level
- Form a program directors group to share ideas and to encourage consistency with program content
- Develop programs/seminars to assist practitioners in developing their theory and knowledge base
- Study the extent of “bad practice” that is present in the field
- Encourage the development of OD skills and knowledge for all present and future leaders/managers
- Study the impact of the “for profit” education on university OD programming
- Understand the role of “on-line and at-a-distance programming
- Increase the global perspective of OD
**Challenge Six: Professionalize OD**

**ACTIONS**

- Teach OD values and ethics in ALL programs, seminars and courses
- Define what a credentialed OD practitioner is and does
- Systematically build scientific inquiry back into the field
- Instill professional pride and passion for the field in ALL students, faculty, and practitioners

**Challenge Seven: Understand the changing role of OD in globalization and the potential impact OD can have on ecosystems**

**ACTIONS**

- Study and understand the role of OD in global dynamics especially in India and China
- Develop an appreciation of how OD can help the aspirations of people in emerging nations

These are thought provoking observations about the life expectancy of OD. They suggest a viable, all be it, troubled profession searching for an enduring “self identity.” There is a strong drive in the OD&C Division of the Academy of Management to address these challenges. As a matter of fact, a core group of OD&C members have already started an initiative designed to study several of the challenges. These initiatives include:

1. Establishment of an Endowment Fund to further research and scholarly study in OD
2. Conducting collaborative discussions with ODN officials
3. Improving the quantity and quality of research in OD
4. Examining ways to enhance OD educational programming

“Building Organization Development as an Academic Discipline” can only be achieved if the entire global OD community is involved. You can join us as we move forward by contacting any one of these individuals:

Peter Sorensen Benedictine University psorensen@ben.edu

Larry Starr University of Pennsylvania lstarr@sas.upenn.edu

Arthur Freedman American University afreedm@american.edu

Raymond Saner C Send, Switzerland saner@csend.org

Glenn Varney Bowling Green State Univ. gvarney@bgnet.bgsu.edu

**PRESENTERS AT THE BOWLING GREEN MEETING**
John Adams Ph.D. Saybrook Graduate School

Terry Armstrong Ph.D. Georgetown University

Robert Golembiewski Ph.D. University of Georgia

James McFillen Ph.D. Bowling Green State University

Jean Neumann Ph.D. Tavistock Institute (England)

Beryl Robison Ph.D. Portland State University

Peter Sorensen Ph.D. Benedictine University

Larry Starr Ph.D. University of Pennsylvania

Don Warrick Ph.D. University of Colorado

Richard Woodman Ph.D. Texas A&M

Chris Worley Ph.D. Pepperdine University

Copyright 2005 OD Network, Incorporated