



A Short History of OD

Barbara Bunker Ph.D.

Billie Alban and I created the OD History Chart sometime in the 1990s when we found that people coming to our Large Group Methods workshops did not understand how these methods had developed and where they came from or how they were a part of Organization Development. Billie's granddaughter did the illustrations.

In about 2008, Dick Axelrod and I updated it in order to talk about the history of OD in the Columbia University/ Teachers College certificate program called Principles and Practice of OD. We even made a big wall chart of it. We found that its visual characteristics helped people to understand the several streams of thinking and research that created OD.

Recently Dick and I have made a new diagram about the history of OD that puts the chart in context. I will describe that thinking first and then explain the chart.

Everyone has a story about how it all began. Here is mine:

Before OD, there were three disciplines in the university that contributed the thinking and research that underpin OD practice. They are Social Psychology, Clinical Psychology and Sociology. Kurt Lewin, whose work on change led to the creation of the T-group and NTL, was the father of Social Psychology. He created it as an academic discipline in the United States. The earliest research by social psychologists was on small groups. What those researchers discovered was translated into practice by NTL "trainers". Most of the earliest NTL members were faculty at universities, who did both research and who practiced. Gradually, social psychology spread around the world and took on many research topics. Also gradually, the practice of OD separated from its academic roots. Today, many OD folk seem to be unaware of the origin of the knowledge that they take for granted.

HOW TO LOOK AT THE OD HISTORY CHART

Across the top you will see major events over the past 60 years that have affected the development of OD. As you look at four main rows, you will notice that each row represents a different level or type of intervention.

The top row focuses on understanding organizations by collecting data from them. This tradition started at the University of Michigan Survey Research Center which is linked to the sociology of organizations. In the middle 1960s, Matt Miles and a group at Teachers College Columbia University began to intervene in school systems by collecting data and then feeding back the data to the organization so that they could decide what changes they wanted to make. They believed that this data helped them locate the dissatisfactions in the organization which then led to "unfreezing" (Lewin) which promoted change and eventual "refreezing". Many subsequent interventions like Action Learning and the After Action Review begin with data collection and feedback processes.

The next row focuses on group level interventions. It goes back to Kurt Lewin's early research during World War II which demonstrated the power of small groups to change human behavior. Following that research, Lewin's students observed working groups and analyzed how they worked. This released a productive research tradition from which we learned the basics of group dynamics. In 1947, Lewin collaborated with Lee Bradford of the National Education Association and Ken Benne of Boston University to



establish a summer institute in Bethel Maine for the study of group dynamics. The sensitivity training group or T-group was invented in this setting and The NTL Institute became the focal training center for those who wanted to learn about groups and their dynamics. Group level interventions have always been part of OD practice as seen in team building, intergroup exercises, self-managed teams, and most recently in virtual teams.

Clinical psychologists became a strong presence at NTL's Bethel campus in the 1960s and at the Esalen Institute on the West Coast. They were more interested in the experience of individuals and in interpersonal interactions in groups. As groups developed, people came to know a lot about each other's behavior and "feedback" was possible. Trainers developed rules for giving feedback that could help people develop their skills in groups and become more effective interpersonally. As time went on, this knowledge was the base for coaching managers and executives in OD practices. As we know, today there are a cadre of OD executive coaches, people who specialize in this aspect of OD. Additionally, individual assessment has been taken to new levels by assessment centers which often use role playing and other activities developed in the "experiential learning" mode of NTL.

The fourth row represents the interest of OD in systems theory and in open systems thinking. Gestalt psychology and practice has always understood organizations as human systems. Open Systems Planning is a systems approach. Emery and Trist, when they articulated their Socio-Technical Systems (STS) theory, clearly understood systems as both human and technical structures. OD, however, talked systems for many years without having really good methods of intervening in the whole system. The breakthrough came when Marvin Weisbord described "getting the whole system into the room" in his book *Productive Workplaces*. About the same time, Kathy Dannemiller was breaking the training mode and taking five hundred Ford managers at a time to an intervention to change the culture, and Harrison Owen was inventing Open Space. These and other radical departures led to the development of (depending on how you count) fifteen or more "Large Group Methods" i.e. methods that could literally get the whole system in the room so that you really could intervene at the system level. So now OD practitioners can select the level at which they intervene and there are methods available to them to enable them to work at all these levels.

Finally, the bottom of the chart represents some of the organizations and companies that were early adapters of these methods. There were also a few early OD consultants whose practices were more focused on systems than on groups and teams. Dick Beckhard was notable, and he influenced and mentored others like Billie Alban, Warner Burke, and Harvey Hornstein who developed the early training programs for OD consultants at NTL and at Teachers College/Columbia University.

The whole development comes full circle with Large Group Methods because they rest on a deep understanding of small group dynamics and processes without which inventing this work in large groups would not have been possible.

BIOGRAPHY

Barbara Benedict Bunker (Ph.D. Columbia University) is an organizational social psychologist and Professor of Psychology Emeritus at the University at Buffalo (SUNY). As an active member of NTL, she was a Director for 7 years and Chairperson of the Board for 3 years. For the past 15 years, Barbara Bunker has become nationally and internationally known for her work systematizing a number of new methods of organization and community change that work at the systems level. And she has co-authored *The Handbook of Large Group Methods: creating systemic change in organizations and communities* (June 2006) with Billie T. Alban.

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History of Organization Development and the Environment

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