The Academy of Management

REVIEW

Organization Change and Development: A Systems View, by Michael Beer. Santa Monica, Cal.: Goodyear Publishing, 1980, 367 pp., $19.95 (cloth).

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I remember attending an Organizational Development session at the national Academy of Management meetings a few years ago. The chairperson asked the audience two interesting questions. First, he asked the approximately 60 attendees to indicate, by a show of hands, how many of them were active in researching and teaching in the field of organizational development. About 55 persons raised their hands. Then they were asked whether they were involved actively in the practice of OD or even engaged in OD projects on an irregular basis. Not more than five persons raised their hands.

One can question the generalizability or the validity of this survey, but I often have found that people who discuss, teach, and develop theories on how to conduct organizational change may never have been involved in an intense, ongoing, ups and downs, stressful experience of real-time OD. On the other hand, it seems a shame that some of the most exciting, creative, and useful examples of organizational intervention and change are not put in writing for others to read and to learn. Full time OD practitioners generally do not have the time, the interest, or the inclination to conceptualize, theorize, and present formally their learnings to a larger audience.

What is most evident about reading the Michael Beer book on OD is that the author has had such real-time experience in OD, and at the same time he is able to formulate and relate this experience to concepts, theories, and the growing literature in the field. The preface states that Beer was employed as

an internal OD person for Corning Glass Works for a number of years—and it is clear that this and other of his experiences were the real thing, not just efforts in performance appraisal or management training in the classroom. In fact, to write a book in the style and substance that he did, Beer must have encountered some significant failure experiences as well as successes. It seems that it is in the former that one learns the most about OD (although this shouldn't motivate people to fail!).

Beer's experience permeates the whole book, including the many examples and illustrations provided. For me this is portrayed most with the various discussions on organizational culture and the dominant coalition. Culture describes the intangible yet salient summary of the organization's history, beliefs, values, and norms that can undermine a change effort quite easily if the effect of culture on a social system is not managed explicitly. Further, if one does not consider the various attributes of those in power, their particular styles, beliefs, personalities, fears, and so on, then the appropriate type of intervention process will be missed. Although most OD discussions at least give lip service to "top-management support," Beer provides some useful concepts and insights on how the specifics of a management group and the characteristics of a culture can be understood better and made a part of the intervention process.

Other important concepts that seem to derive from real OD experience involve the function of reinforcing any intended behavioral and attitudinal change both during and after the initial intervention. Frequently, it seems that the effects of OD are short term, and it is relatively easy for the organization to revert back to its "old style" once a few key people leave or a crisis ensues. Beer very nicely addresses the issue of how the organization can be helped to *internalize* the behavioral changes and the process of *learning* itself.

With regard to the conceptualization of OD into theories, models, and general principles, I must applaud Beer's effort at a systems view of OD, as the subtitle of the book promises. It is not a systems approach in name only. Beer presents a general conceptual model of social systems early in his presentation and then sticks to it throughout the rest of the book as an organizing principle—as a guide to intervention targets and strategy, types of interventions, and an evaluation of the entire OD effort.

This is much preferred to an eclectic treatment of the subject or as simple dichotomies of micro/macro, individual/organizational, and so on.

The conceptual model includes the general categories: (1) source of human input, (2) people, (3) structures, (4) behavior and process, (5) culture, (6) dominant coalition, (7) environment, (8) human outputs, and (9) broader organizational outputs. Each of these in turn is defined by several dimensions (variables), making use of the body of knowledge that has developed for each category. Also embraced in the systems approach are the criteria of efficiency, effectiveness, and health (adaptability), and the principle of contingency theory: that people, processes, and structures have to be congruent in order to foster efficiency and that the dimensions within the organization have to match the demands and characteristics of the environment in order to foster effectiveness and adaptability.

The strong reliance on contingency theory is the weakest part of the book. Beer argues that maximum congruence among all elements in a system is desired and leads to the best individual and organizational outcomes. With such congruence "there is likely to be relatively little interpersonal or intergroup conflict between various constituencies" (p. 29). I must consider the role that conflict may have in enhancing the dissatisfaction with the status quo, motivating people and groups to examine the underlying assumptions that seem to divide them, spurring on creative and inventive solutions, and so on. Thus, *functional* (vs. dysfunctional) conflict can be promoted and not minimized. Perhaps one might consider the concept of an optimal level of congruence among the system's elements—a level somewhere between total mismatch and total harmony or complacency. Although the latter is not likely to exist in any complex organization, the theory, in my opinion, should allow for cases in which *generating* conflict among the elements in a system is considered necessary to motivate the organization toward search and adaption (or health, to use Beer's term). This is especially important to resolve because the congruence idea plays such a fundamental role in Beer's systems approach.

One other issue that causes me concern is the strain between keeping in concert with traditional OD values (openness, honesty, trust, Theory Y,

participative processes, shared definition, and solution of problems, etc.) versus compromising or even taking on the values of the dominant coalition (which may emphasize top-down implementation, closed-door politics, Theory X, minimum involvement of those affected by the change, etc.). At first I was disturbed that Beer took the latter stance. Specifically, depending on the values of the dominant coalition and the culture of the organization, the OD consultant "may take an organization in a direction opposite to traditionally stated OD values as long as the outcomes of such an effort have been clarified. Whether a change agent wants to help an organization move in such a direction is a matter of personal values and choice" (p. 43). Is OD now inclusive of *all* types of change efforts (top-down as well as participative)? In the "past," the one clear distinction I have had for OD vs. other "consulting approaches" was the former's value position and corresponding principles for intervention. Now it is all contingency theory with little room for glory and morality!

But as I take off my academic hat and become the real-time OD person, I have to realize and acknowledge all the times I have compromised my values in the past (just as other aspects of idealized OD programs get compromised in a world of limited resources and human nature). I remember the justifications as: "If L don't help this organization move a little bit in the short run they won't be in a position to attempt longer run changes in some OD program. Perhaps by having the organization incur some changes now, even if these are not in accord with my OD values, at least I will be around to present my alternative model as the short term situation is eased." I think this is what Beer has in mind, and as I suggested at the outset, it comes from someone who obviously knows how the real world will try to co-opt the change agent away from pure OD theory and values. However, as long as one can be aware of these many pressures and live in an inconsistent state with some patience, then this dilemma can be managed for organizational improvements.

The book gives much more on which to reflect and comment. In sum, I rate the book as excellent. It is not about one intervention for OD, nor is it a summary of the many separate methods of OD. Rather, it is a true effort at integrating the field by a person who has lived it.