The Consultant's Sense of Urgency: Steady-State Versus Front-Line Combat OD

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Abstract: Toffler (1990) noted the need for companies to be able to operate differently in normal and crisis conditions. Similarly, organization development (OD) consultants must develop the capacity to "shift gears" in terms of how they provide assistance to these organizations. The author differentiates two types of OD consulting: steady-state (operational) OD and frontline (combat) OD.

Operational OD consulting is appropriate in stable conditions. In these situations, change is incremental or evolutionary, having limited impact on the existing work force. Operational OD consulting is process-oriented, responds to the needs of organization members, enables recipients to discover additional issues, and educates.

Front-line or combat OD is called for in crisis situations. Here, whether the conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty are caused by internal or external turbulence, change can be revolutionary. Front-line OD consulting is results-oriented, opportunity seeking, directive and prescriptive, and proactive.

Each situation requires different skills on the part of the consultant; hence the type of OD should be considered when selecting a consultant.
Toffler (1990) discusses the need for “second-wave” (industrial) organizations to develop a capacity to operate in either of two modes, depending on the circumstances, if they intend to survive and be effective in the turbulent 21st century as they compete with “third-wave” (information-based) companies. As he points out, “Business...needs different behavior during normal operations and in the midst of crisis.... But few [firms] train all their employees to operate in two contrasting modes” (Toffler, 1990, p. 193).

Many companies will continue to call on and rely on organization development (OD) consultants to provide assistance under either set of conditions. To respond appropriately and effectively, the OD consultants themselves must be proficient in “shifting gears” from “normal” to “crisis” conditions. They must also be effective in helping their client organizations and their members to shift gears. Toffler predicts, “…we can expect crises to crowd in on one another.... Each [crisis] brings enormous power shifts with it as scapegoats are blamed, new leaders arise, and others are discredited and replaced. But the increased likelihood of crisis in a period of revolutionary change suggests we will see crisis teams and two-faced organizations spread through the business world and become a regular part of the flex-firm of tomorrow” (Toffler, 1990, pp. 193-194).

If Toffler is on target, it is essential that OD consultants have at least two gears from which they can shift, one to the other: one for “steady-state, operational (normal)” conditions and the second for “front-line, combat (crisis)” conditions.

**Steady-State, Operational OD**

Operational OD consulting is appropriate and most effective under relatively calm, steady-state organizational conditions: that is, when conditions are stable and predictable, there are few due-yesterday deadlines, and a low sense of urgency prevails. Steady-state conditions also mean that little change is taking place within the system, in its external environment, and among its significant suppliers and customers (i.e., the system’s stakeholders and constituents). Although change may have impacts on one intact work unit, other functional groups will be relatively unaffected by that change. Furthermore, whatever changes are taking place are either incremental or evolutionary.

“Incremental” change refers to relatively small additions to or modifications of existing elements of the organization. “Evolutionary” change refers to small-scale changes to existing elements of the organization. These addi-
tions, modifications, or changes might include improvements to elements such as the organization's structure, management information systems, technology, or the diversity of its work force.

These additions, modifications, or changes would have limited impact on staffing, work activities, processes, and relationships within a single intact work unit (or among the members of a network of interdependent organizational units). They would be easily assimilated and added to employees' existing responsibilities and probably would make an observable contribution to quality and productivity. Few sacrifices by employees would be required, and changes to the existing work-force composition would be only slight.

Operational OD consulting is (1) process oriented, (2) responsive to the felt needs and requirements of organizational members, (3) aimed at enabling recipients of OD services to discover additional issues by themselves, and (4) educative.

**Process Oriented**

Operational OD is process oriented, because it focuses on how people are performing their responsibilities in pursuit of their job objectives and unit goals. Operational OD consultants do not intervene on the subject matter of their client's work, nor do they presume to be experts in the contents of that work; the work force is assumed to understand and to be sufficiently skilled to perform the required tasks, activities, and functions.

**Responsive to Felt Needs**

Operational OD consultants are responsive to requests for their services from individuals or units. The recipients of OD consultation services typically initiate the intervention and specify any services that they feel they need. Operational OD consultants typically address these needs explicitly.

**Aimed at Enabling Recipients**

Simultaneously, operational OD consultants attempt to help clients to create conditions in which the clients can discover additional, related problems and opportunities to improve operations. This may be accomplished by introducing cultural norms that support the expression of skepticism and a spirit of inquiry. Clients are invited to consider, for example, how changes in their work can affect the operations of internal or external suppliers and customers. Once organizational members clarify and describe these discoveries and
their implications and possibilities, they may make an informed decision to invest additional time and energy in addressing these emerging issues.

**Educative**

Operational OD is educative in the sense that the primary payoff is for the organizational members to acquire proficiency in the OD consultants' technologies (i.e., concepts, methods, and skills). In this manner, the OD consultant can work his or her way out of the job. Meanwhile, organizational members empower themselves to deal with similar issues in the future.

Most OD practitioners have been trained to function as “escorts” under steady-state organizational conditions. The organizational clients lead while the OD consultants help them make sense of and take control over the human and organizational dynamics that are discovered. Many have become conditioned to operate primarily, if not exclusively, in this operational mode. When an organization experiences a number of unique and undeniable demands that are created by multiple changes in its internal and external environments, the OD consultant may have to switch into a “second gear,” one that is more proactive than the gear with which he or she is familiar, proficient, and comfortable.

**Front-Line, Combat OD**

Front-line, combat OD is (1) results oriented, (2) opportunity seeking, (3) directive and prescriptive, and (4) proactive. It is most appropriate and effective under the conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty caused by internal (self-generated) or external (imposed) environmental turbulence and chaos, where the stakes are high and time is a scarce resource.

Such conditions are unstable and unpredictable. There are many due-yesterday deadlines, and an extreme sense of urgency to complete many functions simultaneously prevails. Many major changes are taking place throughout the system—in its external environment and among its competitors, suppliers, and customers (i.e., the system's stakeholders and constituents). Furthermore, these changes are often revolutionary. Toffler (1971, 1981) refers to these upheavals as “sea-changes.” Vaill (1989) points out that change of this magnitude is becoming the operational norm in most industries throughout the globe. The idea that change is a predictable, controllable temporary condition is a convenient illusion that offers less and less comfort. The disturbing reality is, as Vaill calls it, “permanent white water.”
“Revolutionary” change refers to large-scale changes that affect all parts and functions of the organization and its environment. These changes affect elements such as the organization’s financial strength, market, staffing patterns, work methods, technology, structure, operational systems, and cultural assumptions and patterns. Most, if not all, of the organization’s intact work units and the lateral transactions among them are affected. The changes multiply and quickly overload employees’ capacity to assimilate and cope with the increased volume and variety of their work demands. Most of the changes are urgent, and they are essential if the organization is to adjust and adapt to the new, unprecedented conditions. Employees will not have an option to decline or postpone the challenge of creating effective responses to these demands. Many sacrifices by employees and work units are required. Major changes to the existing work force’s composition and numbers are likely.

Front-line, combat OD consultants who function effectively in this mode usually have a considerable amount of in-depth experience with a large range of different companies in a variety of industries. They probably also have experience with companies that were confronted by crises, as well as those that were doing well but wanted to capitalize on opportunities to do better. The consultant who wants to succeed in this mode must have a broad, systemic orientation and a long-term, strategic perspective. He or she must be assertive, have a resilient ego, and have considerable self-confidence that is based on self-esteem. In addition, it is essential to operate with integrity in all things. Most of all, he or she must not succumb to the temptation to accept any invitation to make strategic or operational decisions for line management.

Results Oriented and Opportunity Seeking

Front-line, combat OD is results oriented because it focuses on enabling the individual, unit, department, plant, region, and product group to achieve the work results for which they will be held accountable. These results must be comprehensive and effective, at least in the short run. In the “fog of battle,” false starts, mistakes, or errors are inevitable and should be viewed by all parties as learning opportunities.

OD consultants may get involved, indirectly, in the content of the work itself. For example, the OD consultant may urge a unit’s members to involve specialized technical experts to assist them to deal with the content of their work. OD consultants are likely to assume that line managers and the work force may not understand, may not possess the skills for, and may not be proficient in the work patterns needed to learn and perform a multitude of unfamiliar tasks, activities, and functions—effectively and simultaneously—under crisis conditions.

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Prescriptive and Directive

Operating in their front-line, combat mode, OD consultants try to direct the attention of organizational leaders and members to the complex, multifaceted network of interacting issues. They employ a prescriptive and directive (rather than an invitational) approach in addressing problems and opportunities to improve operations.

Proactive

Front-line, combat OD often requires consultants to be proactive and illuminate the demands confronting the organization, demands that unit members may not yet have recognized on their own. Instead of waiting for organizational members to discover an issue, OD consultants specify and define the existing or potential issues. They identify relevant goal options and action alternatives from which unit leaders and members might choose. They might confront unit members with the need to consider the consequences of any option for their significant stakeholders and constituents.

When the utility of applying a specific strategy or method is evident to the OD consultant but not to the client, he or she would describe and recommend it. Under crisis conditions, the OD consultant may urge unit members to consider the expediency of violating and cutting through the time-consuming and energy-draining organizational protocols, procedures, or politics that are expected under steady-state conditions. If the client lacks the skills, knowledge, or confidence to act on the recommendation, the OD consultant might function as the facilitator until line managers feel confident enough to reassert leadership. When significant supplier or customer groups and their needs, requirements, or conditions of work are ignored or overlooked, OD consultants take the initiative and bring these factors into sufficient prominence for unit members to incorporate them in their analyses, plans, and actions.

Front-line, combat OD consultants can be expected to exert influence in ways that they would not use under steady-state conditions. They are likely to push, prod, cajole, and coax unit leaders and members to decide and act in their own enlightened self-interest. Self-interest is assumed to be best served by making sure that every intact work unit's decisions and actions contribute to the realization of the larger organization's vision and mission while, simultaneously, enhancing the interests of the unit's suppliers, customers, leaders and members.

The educative function that is an essential element of steady-state OD consultation may be sacrificed or delayed. Rather than an ongoing parallel
process, the collecting, organizing, and archiving of lessons learned are likely to follow the corrective or preventive actions through which necessary, targeted results are achieved.

It is legitimate for managers who are screening prospective OD consultants to seek answers to the following questions:

- Does the prospective consultant have a track record indicating an ability to shift gears as conditions require?
- Does the consultant demonstrate that he or she has sufficient judgment to know when to shift gears?
- Does the consultant’s preferred pace match the organization’s current or anticipated condition?

References and Bibliography


Arthur M. Freedman, Ph.D., is the founder and director of Quantum Associates. He has been an organization development consultant and human resource development specialist and trainer since 1961, specializing in working with senior executive management teams in planning and managing transformative sociotechnical change and the management and utilization of resistance to transformations. Among his recent clients are Spiegel Inc., E.C. International AB (Sweden, Zimbabwe, and the U.K.), Search for Common Ground, the Consortium of Mayors of Closed (Russian) Cities, the Russian Ministry of Atomic Power and Industry, the Higher Humanitarian College of the Russian Ministry of Defense, R.R. Donnelley & Sons, the Illinois Education Association, and APV Crepaco. In addition to writing many book chapters and articles, Dr. Freedman is the coeditor of Consultation Skills Readings.

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