# OD (Simply Speaking!)

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## Introduction

You may have already picked up the "tongue and cheek" tone in this article's title. In our internal and external consulting practices, our clients have shared with us their frustrations with consultant "psycho-babble." Manifested in such ways as jargon, buzzwords, catchphrases, acronyms, doublespeak, euphemisms, metaphors, and mixed metaphors, this confusion can result in misinterpretations of the OD process. Don't get us wrong; some of these terms can expedite client communications. We simply have found that OD practitioners must use terms judiciously so that lightening-speed communication occurs accurately. After all, isn't this the intent in the use of such terms?

It's inherent in the organizations in which we work that OD practitioners need to model clear and to-the-point communications (Hensley, 1995; Ettorre, 1997; Watson, 1997; Grayson & Shulman, 2000; Kirby & Coutu, 2001; Magretta, 2002). Strategic change is ambiguous and difficult enough – we don't need to muck it up with endless trivial pursuit that takes footnotes to decipher. Our challenge is to communicate clearly in the face of the ambiguity that can accompany organizational change. Reducing the intensity of this ambiguity is important to OD success.

In this article, we will look at the use of OD terms and how these terms can come across to clients in confusing and unproductive ways, as well as how to make our communication clearer around these terms. Building on a recent *Organization Development Journal* article in which Egan (2002) identified alternative definitions of OD, our goal is to further define OD through the use of simple terms.

## No More Spas, Please!

In one of the organizations in which we had just started consulting several years ago, a leader asked us if we were going to jump into a spa and discuss philosophy. A bit dumbfounded, we looked perplexed. She said to us, "After all, isn't that what OD people do?" This leader was responding to some of the stereotypes we have generated in the profession. We do sometimes give mixed messages with the use of our terms that lead clients to believe we're way out there in left field. These terms may have come to sound like jargon and buzzwords to our clients; this can be a detriment to our cause and to the productive outcomes of our clients' efforts (Ettorre, 1997).

Well, you're probably smirking about this client's view of OD, but this reaction is the kind of reputation our profession has acquired in some organizations. While this confusion has diminished significantly as the professionalism of the field has increased, it's still in the backs of the minds of some leaders. We need to offset this perspective with clear language that leads to concrete actions that impact bottom line results (Magretta, 2002). And what better place to start than with solid terms that are not riddled with wishy-washy, touchy-feely jargon? Of course, jargon is part of how we communicate in shorthand form and can be appropriate at times. The issue is to appropriately use any communication tool as an "analysis of language from 'thoughts' to 'action' and from 'meaning' to 'sense'" (Watson, 1997, p. 363), helping the client within each of the phase of the OD process.

## Ambiguity: Where for Art Thou Clarity?

OD *is* about helping our clients make sense out of the sometimes ambiguity that can be associated with all the intervening variables associated with change. One word, or the misinterpretation of one word, can alter the planning and direction of any project from the intent the project owner wanted. As OD practitioners, we have seen this happen. Consider the parent of all diagnostic methods – needs assessment. How many of you have heard of a "training needs assessment"? This catchphrase is a misnomer and should probably be banished from OD terminology. The reason is obvious to astute OD professionals. The word "training" implies a built-in solution *before* the assessment is completed. While we have heard many OD practitioners use this catchphrase, it should be eliminated from our working dialogues. It is far better to conduct a needs assessment without any upfront preconceptions or biases, i.e., training. Well, you get the point. But, let's keep the horse in front of the cart. This misuse of a catchphrase is just a sampler of the kind of misuses we will unveil in this article.

We need to use OD terms for processes that contain clear and con-

cise meanings and expected actions so everyone understands and works to a common purpose, as noted by Marvin Weisbord in his magnificent book, *Productive Workplaces* (1987). His message of organizational improvement as common purpose is still is widely applicable 15 years later, "Productive workplaces are those where people learn and grow as they cooperate to improve an organization's performance" (p. xiv). Words play an important part in helping clients find and build a common purpose through organizational stories that link "the use of language to human potential and change" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999). As consultants in organizations, we need to use terms that walk our talk and that help create meaning and action in our clients' organizations. We have heard executives and managers talk about the need to use vocabularies that employees can understand and that can generate action by other managers, employees, and project teams. Likewise, OD needs to embrace terms that help clients understand what we do.

Interestingly, the term "O.D." itself presents challenges to some. Church, Waclawski, and Seigel (1999) have noted that, "The term 'O.D.' has been officially stricken from many executive and managerial vocabularies due to negative connotations, associations, and/or experiences" (p. 49). As the OD profession grows and gains acceptance with executives as a result of our successes, we need to remember to use simple OD definitions so non-ODers can easily understand the profession (Armstrong & Armstrong, 2002).

OD may sound like a secret language to some. Decision-makers (leaders) or participants (employees) may either accept or reject what OD has to offer based on their comfort with the terms we use. For example, consider the use of "action" instead of "intervention." Why is there ambiguity with the word intervention? There could be a number of reasons. One reason is that intervention smacks of a medically oriented model that many find inappropriate for this work. Some believe that it is reminiscent of substance abuse interventions. We believe the reasons this word may be misinterpreted are not so important. What *is* critical is that we need to become cognizant of these words that have ambiguous connotations, and select more behaviorally specific replacements. We are *not* saying you must avoid this word. What we *are* saying is that some words may generate confusion. So, check it out with your client or use an alternative word that inspires accurate interpretations.

With all this as a precursor, let's introduce simple terms and explanations of OD concepts so our clients, their workgroups, and employees can better understand us. We will identify key OD terms and suggest exchange terms that convey more precise meanings to non-OD type words. We need to keep reinventing our language to meet the needs of our clients (Kirby & Coutu, 2001).

## Words that Make a Difference

In reflecting on what we have heard from our own clients, here are some terms that seem to confuse and confound (Figure 1). What's important to us as practitioners is not "why" these words confuse. Rather, we simply want to improve the communication of what we do – creating more successful organizational behaviors and results.

Figure 1 is not the end-all of definitive terms. Our "Suggested Replacements with Meaning" represents our best description of traditional OD terms to date. It's up to you to find specific replacement words that mean something in your clients' organizational environments. You decide which terms could confuse, and then develop adequate replacements.

## Our Template for Clearer Communication

OK, so what do you need to do specifically to communicate OD perspectives more clearly? We *don't* recommend that you simply take our "Suggested Replacements with Meaning" words and use them as the definitive replacements. Again, this list is just a catalyst to spur your thinking and word selection. Instead, we suggest you use our template as a memory jog to help stimulate your thinking and create more clearly understood replacement terms. As you read voraciously and come upon a great definition, incorporate it into your working OD dictionary. While we'd be flattered if you thought highly enough of our terms to use them, this is not the point. Use what you feel comfortable with and what facilitates client understanding. Use other replacement words that you determine is best for the context of the situation. In much the same way that "Situational Leadership" (Hersey and Blanchard, 1982) advocated that leaders adjust their style depending upon the context of the situation, we suggest you authentically adjust your language to your respective clients' needs.

Although this template helps you select the more effective OD terms, it is not a step-by-step process. It gives you an alternative to consider when things don't seem to be moving in the direction you want when working with a client and workgroups.

## Stories from the Trenches – and Follow-up Reflections

As you read our following examples of how OD terms confused our clients, see how we had to backpedal

## Figure 1

### Words That Confuse and Confound—and Their Suggested Replacements.

| *Confusing & Confounding* | *Suggested Replacements with Meaning* |
|---|---|
| Intervention | Action |
| Diagnosis | Assessment |
| Action research | Data collection, feedback, then action |
| Process | Methods |
| Process consulting | Developing client insights & helping the client to act on these |
| Institutionalizing OD | Helping OD "stick" |
| Organization culture | Shared values, beliefs, & norms |
| OD | Planned system of change |
| Needs assessment | Data gathering |
| Adoption | Transfer of new skills to client |

## Figure 2

### Our Template for OD Terms (Simply Speaking)

A. Establish your OD vocabulary

1. Brainstorm selected terms you frequently use with clients.
2. Gather feedback from clients with whom you feel comfortable and from OD colleague by asking them:
   - What do they think of some of these terms from Figure 1 that may cause confusion?
   - What other terms not on this list can cause confusion?

B. Use your vocabulary with new clients

1. Interject one or two new terms and listen for responses.
2. Ask the client clarifying questions to determine if they know what you're talking about – even with these simpler terms. Modify your language, as appropriate – always making sure that your language is as concrete as possible.

to save further loss of credibility. We created a better solution by clarifying the OD terms, introduced new ones, or we reflected on the situation to remember to use simpler terms in the future. The stories reflect real situations, but in fairness to our clients, anonymity is built into the stories by altering selected components that do not detract from the important message we intend.

## Story 1

Recently, I was called into a manager's office to lend a helping hand with a change initiative that wasn't going as well as expected. The redesign of a work process required the merger of two departments, which maintained a somewhat confrontational relationship. They needed to work together seamlessly. The task of implementing the work redesign was the responsibility of the mid-level manager that sat behind her desk in front of me.

The success of this strategic change initiative depended on employees working together, setting aside past difficulties and periods of silence (decades, in some cases), and working together respectfully. A great OD venture, I hoped.

Although the executive's decision was for both departments to work together, animosity continued. This manager had concluded that teambuilding *was* the answer; it had to be. My role was to introduce an effective team building game – that magical elixir.

After a brief description of the situation, the manager asked me what teambuilding game would fit his requirement. I didn't hesitate to answer because I could see me acquiring ultimate responsibility for the success of this initiative. I jumped in by saying that a teambuilding exercise was probably a premature decision. This comment caught him off guard. I told him that I felt I needed to work with him to find an OD solution that would really address his observations. I quickly mentioned that I'd have to conduct a needs assessment to understand the "facts." In my desire to help, the thing that caught me off guard was the need for me to explain what OD meant. I had talked to him before about OD so his response made me concerned. First, I felt I hadn't made an impression with previous conversations about OD. Second, I knew I had to revert to basic OD terminology when talking about this situation. Lastly, he didn't like my use of the word "assessment." He shifted in his seat, slightly rolled his eyes, and folded his hands on the table.

No matter what, the discussion continued, and I knew I had to inform, education, and adjust – or so I thought. He moved back to the comment about teambuilding. He wanted to know more about the types of games that I could use for what he saw as the solution. I asked him on what he based his conclusion, and he responded by saying that he had heard that a few people were not talking to one another on this new team. Now came a more difficult part – the big jump from his solution to my OD process. I brought up the possibility of working with his team manager to conduct an action research project to provide him with information so we (he, I, and others) could come to a stronger conclusion about how to proceed. Well, as you can guess, the reference to "action research" did not meet with acceptance. My suggestion about taking more time to what he saw as a simple teambuilding solution didn't sit well. His response was one of questioning my abilities since he had made the decision about what was causing difficulty with his team.

In reflecting on this situation, I see that a few things needed "fixing." First, as an OD practitioner, we bring a fuller process to typical ordinary organizational solutions. We need to take the client at his/her level of understanding. Maybe I should have accepted his solution and tried to address other issues after I conducted the teambuilding exercise. Second, although I assumed the client had remembered a few other conversations about organization development and OD terms, I jumped to thinking he remembered the conversations. I'd suggest one not use OD terms in initial conversations. Lastly, when there is friction in the air, many people revert to comfortable language, which I did with my use of a few OD terms. OD is a powerful organizational tool. My desire to convert this client met with resistance. Basic business terms were required, and here I didn't pay enough attention to the friction in the air. Our OD terms can be perceived as esoteric language. Use OD terms appropriately to bring about greater understanding about the change effort.

## Story 2

As a board member for a mid-size product distributor, I frequently asked my fellow board members how OD has been used to address system and people issues. Many board members and management became familiar with my references to the OD process as defined by Rothwell, Sullivan, and McLean (1995). At one meeting, the board was introduced to a new human resource director who brought many years of corporate level human resource experience to the job. With the new human resource director, who I assumed was knowledgeable about OD, I continued to speak about OD as a way to address organization issues.

One day, the new human resource director pulled me aside at one board meeting to talk to me about my use of the term "OD." She informed me that she was responsible for the

employee welfare of the organization. She said she had updated the employee manual, had distributed it to all employees, and had confirmed that all aspects of the manual were in compliance. I appreciated her thoroughness, and was wondering where the conversation was going. She then told me that she was concerned of my use of the term OD since she had been paying special attention to all employees when I was around to make sure there were no drug issues. She then informed me that she was responsible for the drug policy in the organization, and that there was not an alcohol or drug problem. I looked at her and asked her what she thought OD meant, and she said that it referred to a drug overdose. I told her that when I used the term OD, I was referring to organization development. Remember, this person had over 15 years of human resource management experience. She looked at me with a blank stare, and I knew she was unaware of my meaning for OD.

I had assumed that all human resource professionals understood the meaning of OD. To make sure I would not make a similar mistake with other OD terms, I asked her what OB meant (I was thinking of "organizational behavior"), and she said obstetrics. It was a shock to me that not everyone in the human resource field knew about organization development and organizational behavior.

Today, as I discuss OD, I remember this situation and make sure that I don't embarrass anyone with what I think is common knowledge. This story reminds me to keep speaking simple OD terms. Please note that we are not being critical of others not knowing this term. It is our very own assumptions that get us into trouble. *We* need to change our own behavior by changing the way we communicate with others.

## Story 3

In my work with a large medical organization in Manhattan, I had the opportunity to facilitate a culture change in which the organization wanted to develop a more service-oriented bent. Specifically, my client wanted better patient service *and* better service to all key stakeholders—patient's families, vendors, suppliers, and volunteers. I thought I had done my homework by helping my client understand that this was an iterative process of diagnosis, feedback, and action planning—and jumping back to these phases periodically as the need permits. I accentuated over and over again the fact that the diagnosis was a participative one, in which I would provide my data analysis from the qualitative and quantitative methods used. I would then make interpretations and recommendations, but have these in my "back pocket" to provide them with an opportunity to first reflect on the data, interpret these data, and determine follow-up recommendations—and not be biased by my interpretations and recommendations. Of course, I would share my interpretations and recommendations *after* the client had an opportunity to discuss the data analysis that I would share with them. While I stated this process ad nauseum and emphasized the significance of their involvement in the interpretations and recommendations stages—it bombed at the feedback stage. When we sat down to discuss the feedback, the client was poised to have me deliver my "diagnosis" and didn't want to participate. I reiterated our contract and what we had previously discussed. The client and work group did not remember this. All they knew is that they were paying all this money for my diagnosis and that *I* stated that a diagnosis would be provided. Instead, I believe I should have said during the early stages of contracting that there would be 4 steps used:

1. My own analysis of the data;
2. The client's interpretations of this analysis;
3. Followed by my interpretations and recommendations;
4. Ending with action strategies built on both their interpretations and mine.

Interestingly, from adult learning theory we know that adults remember numbers that are digestible because they are in easy "chunks." These chunks above are simple, concrete, and memorable.

We're not sure some of you laughed or some of you shook your head in amazement at some of these stories. Most of you probably felt compassion for these unfortunate situations. Remember, we've all been here. We have confused our clients with our choice of OD terms. These stories support the need to speak simply about OD. We all have a passion for this great, growing field, and at times any one of us can be our own worst enemy. In discussions with clients, we need to stay focused on the client's needs and use simple OD terms that clarify what we're doing.

## Conclusion

Speaking clearly about OD terms so clients gain the most from our knowledge, skills, and expertise remains a mission for all of us. It's not about obliterating the language we use. It's more about using language people understand. With this perspective, we will be better heard.

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