

Lessons for Health and Safety Practitioners from the social science discipline of organisational development (OD)

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Aim

This briefing paper is devised to share with professional colleges experiences I gained in exploring the discipline of **organisational development (OD)** as a potential source of knowledge for use by health and safety practitioners (HSP).

My conclusions are that an awareness of OD is a potential positive enhancement to the traditional skill and competence areas of HSPs, particularly the areas of OD which are relevant if we accept the achievement of safety improvements as a **change-management** challenge. OD skills will be particularly important in large or complex organisations, but the concepts are equally transferable to any scale of work organisation (including small businesses and SMEs).

Organisational development theory takes many forms, some of which will be familiar to health and safety professionals. There are however potentially challenging issues which arise where OD theory questions some of the underlying assumptions we make about organisations. There is a particularly significant issue around doubts that *command and control* is an effective approach to achieving consistent behaviour. In theory, there is a risk that formal compliance frameworks we actively promote may be counter-productive, and serve only to inhibit the innovation and flexibility necessary for organisational survival.

Relationship between health and safety and OD.

OD is a **multi-disciplinary form of applied social science** which seeks to better understand organisations for the purposes of achieving optimum performance. OD has probably always been an influence on safety management theory, but as practitioners we often get information indirectly through secondary sources (HSE guidance notes or general safety textbooks).

OD is particularly focussed on the role of *change*, and OD practitioners may be seen as *change-agents*, with their processes being described as *change-agency*. There is no single dominant set of beliefs across the field of OD, instead significant debate about how 21st Century organisations should develop in order to meet the challenges of the future.

OD is increasingly emerging as an option in how to deal with rapidly changing markets and other features of contemporary organisational life. The search is on for new ways of organising business for challenging times. At the extreme fringes of the field some of these new ways could be significant departures from conventional management, for example fluid organisational structures, self-organising teams, leadership beyond authority, and even a role for *chaos theory* as a key condition for stimulating creative solutions (around particular markets, products or services).

It is easy to imagine how these departures from conventional management could present challenges to the conventions of health and safety management.

Shared heritage

OD and health and safety share the heritage of the classic research on organisation theory and work management developed by pioneers such as Weber (bureaucratic organisations), Taylor (scientific management), MacGreggor (X and Y theory), Maslow (Hierarchy of needs), Mayo (Hawthorn experiment). These will be familiar to many health and safety professionals.

The *ergonomics* and *work psychology* research by the **Tavistock Institute** (London) during the Post War period is hugely relevant, as is the influence of the **Harvard Business School** (and the resultant global *Business Schools Movement* that lead to the professionalising of business management and the rise of the MBA). Equally relevant as a historical influence is the subsequent rejection of scientific work design during the late Twentieth Century, and the rise of the *human relations movement* (which placed people-needs at the centre of policy and practice).

These combined influences fed into the world of occupational health and safety to establish *human factors and behavioural safety* as valid considerations for health and safety practitioners, and we can see a good fit between OD and safety management demonstrated in key organisational models presented through Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Guidance Notes (including HSG 65 - *Successful health and safety management*, and HSG 48 - *Reducing error and influencing behaviour*).

Lesson for health and safety practitioners from OD

Some OD theory reinforces what we already know, whilst other areas of theory potentially challenge some of our fundamental assumptions about organisations and the people within them. A selection of interesting concepts is provided below.

- Organisations are **complex, dynamic**, and not usually as **rational** as expected. They rarely fully follow the form set out by the formal organisational structure (see the concept of *the informal organisation*). People seek increasing levels of autonomy in organisations, and the command and control structure favoured by compliance regimes (such as those to meet the legal obligations) are increasingly challenged in modern organisations (which is probably a reflection of the wider society).
- The idea of **learning** is central to a lot of OD theory, and both *organisational* and *individual learning* are rich theoretical areas for the safety practitioner, and there is emphasis on practitioners continually being **reflexive** (to reflect on why we believe in certain assumptions, and to remain open to other perspectives of "reality"). The co-construction of shared local meanings is an alternative to prescribed rule-following.
- The **authenticity** of both **leadership and followership** is seen as essential for success, and conventional models of leadership are questioned, in part- because they are seen as part of a tradition of self-celebration by individuals whose effectiveness is rarely properly assessed (see the phenomena of *management gurus*),
- The influence of those being led is known to be equally important (**followership**). *Power distribution* across organisations is an important field. Interestingly, *worker participation* and *communication* is an example of where the health and safety world is generally leading ahead of the OD theory and practice (as the benefits of consultation

arrangements for safety are both well established- and a legal obligation) .

- *Organisational culture* is of course recognised as critical in determining organisational behaviour, particularly during change, however- the idea of imposing cultural values is questioned (so called *cultural imperialism*). Understanding culture is essential in countering *resistance to change (RTC)*- a well studied area which should be of interest to safety practitioners and others who have first hand experiences of promoting unpopular or misunderstood corporate values! The development of shared local meanings contribute to a developed rather than imposed local culture.
- *Change* from one state to another (eg a safety improvement initiative) is a complex and variable experience. Successful change outcomes require careful planning, but not all outcomes are foreseeable. The *unfreeze-change-refreeze* (after Lewin) and *eight-steps* (after Kotter) models are examples of established change processes.
- OD categorises different approaches to supporting and influencing others as consultancy (including where internal role holders can be considered as internal consultants). The *client-consultant relationship* is explored in detail, and various *modes of consultancy* are available (including modes which move beyond the traditional *expert consultant* role safety practitioners often adopt). OD encourages the client to develop their own diagnosis and solutions rather than to import them (from consultants). The role of consultants is to help the organisation do this (but not to impose either diagnosis or solutions as these may be biased or only partly-informed).
- OD emphasises that acknowledgement of the emotional impact of change will increase the success of change programs. Resistance to change (RTC) is likely to be part emotional, part political.
- Although OD is essentially a field of social science, there is a wing within OD that advocate that the knowledge we develop about matters effecting organisations- and particularly the people within organisations- cannot be properly served if we only apply a *scientific experimental approach* to developing that knowledge (eg we only accept those things that can be scientifically measured and proven). This is obviously controversial in a world dominated by scientific breakthroughs. There is an argument presented that people cannot be studied like other things in the natural world because people are complex and variable, and because they are influenced by both the act of being studied (as research subjects) and by doing the studying (as researchers)- and so the findings of research is often biased and unrepresentative. The implication of this is that we need to understand things about organisational life that can never be properly exposed by scientific experimentation, and that recognising and responding to unmeasurable *phenomena* is valid.

Conclusions

The purpose of the presentation was to share reflections and learning about the relevance of the field of organisational development (OD) as a source of professional and personal development for health and safety practitioners.

We have seen that there are already strong links between the two fields, and it is proposed that competence in OD is complimentary to the other established areas of HSP competence (the law, risks and risks controls, behavioural safety and human factors). Many aspects of health and safety management can be easily characterised as examples of change, and skills in change-agency are proposed to be highly appropriate. The relevance of OD is equally applicable in large or small organisations.

Work continues at in exploring the relevance of OD to occupational health and safety (and other professional and management disciplines). Please feel free to contact me at the University of Birmingham if you are interested in working in partnership toward OD influenced safety and wellbeing arrangements.

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Further information

Accessible definitions of OD http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organization_development
<http://organisationdevelopment.org/>

Reports about the future of work (from The Work Foundation)

<http://www.theworkfoundation.com/Reports/291/Good-Work-and-Our-Times-Report-of-the-Good-Work-Commission>

<http://www.theworkfoundation.com/Reports/275/Understanding-the-Deal>

Change management models http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Change_management
http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newPPM_94.htm
http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newPPM_82.htm

Safety related change management examples.

http://www.sdfmc.org/ClassLibrary/Page/Information/DataInstances/385/Files/2283/Mod_8_Change_Management.pdf

http://homepages.inf.ed.ac.uk/mfelici/doc/ChangeManagementSafetyCases_FASCS_abstract.pdf