

## **My experiences with OD education**

### **Sunita Raut- Nyqvist**

#### **Introduction**

This paper documents my personal journey of acquiring an OD practitioner certificate from National Training Laboratory, USA. I picked up some priceless jewels on the way and had some jolting pitfalls as well. None of this was planned. In some ways exactly like organizations develop, much unplanned.

My quest changed from getting a certificate, to adding OD skills to being OD i.e. becoming a “constantly developing organization”. This journey has got me closer to myself in ways that I had not imagined and on retrospect this is the real education. The certificate just became an artifact.

Organizational Development is becoming more and more established as a profession and many national and international educational institutions are offering studies in OD. There are also numerous short skill based certification programs that can be taken to enhance the competence in this area. As the choice broadens it also becomes more difficult to know what is right.

Through this paper I am attempting to outline my own ‘choice making’ and ‘non-choice making’ processes that led to my education in the OD field. I hope to be able to create clarity amongst present and future students of OD around what they need to be seeking through the journey of getting educated. Perhaps educational bodies, policy makers, curriculum designers could also get some insights about the critical elements of a holistic OD education.

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## **The Start: Focus on The Certificate**

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As a mother of a three month old son, expatriate wife and having worked for six years in both India as well as Sweden with Leadership Training, Competence Development and Change Management I wondered what I would like to do when I got back from my year and a half long generous Swedish maternity leave. Organizational Development seemed to be the logical next step. Clearly it sounded more glamorous, more serious, more long-term, and more impactful. All of these qualities made me motivated to find out what I can do to become an OD consultant.

I scanned the horizon to see the kind of people who were accepted as OD consultants by organizations in India, Sweden, Jamaica and US. These were the countries where I knew people who were working in this field. What struck me was that most of them were at least 10 to 15 years senior to me if they had their own consulting practice. I wondered what could give me the same seriousness that people attach with age. I figured that a certificate from a reputed international body in the field of Organizational Development could help. So that is what I set out to find – a reputed international certifying institution.

I zeroed in on NTL Institute of Applied Behavioral Sciences, USA. Some of the deciding factors for me were my familiarity with the institute through ISABS, India where I am a professional member. I knew NTL members and appreciated their level of competence, professionalism and commitment to the field of Organizational and Personal Development. The values that I practiced in my life matched their espoused values. I am listing them here:

- Social justice manifested through inclusion, equity, access and opportunity for all people and the elimination of oppression
- Experiential learning
- Ethical use of power
- Creation and dissemination of new knowledge and practice
- Diversity
- Continuous learning, collegueship and service
- Organizational excellence and quality

In addition I believed that NTL's approach to learning i.e. increased awareness to self through facilitated group dialogue is the critical building block to any change and development at personal and organizational level.

I registered for the NTL Institute's OD track which included a series of six one week programs at the end of which I would be given an OD practitioner certificate.

### **Next Steps: Focus on The Tools**

My next step was to look at the six programs which would cover my certification. The programs were well defined leading from the **theoretical and historical aspects of Organizational Development** to how to **contract into an organization** as an OD Consultant to **diagnosing**, to different **intervention techniques, working with self** and finally **integration and application**.

My focus as I went to attend these programs was to learn the technique of how to do it. I wanted tools in my kit. I mechanically went about collecting them. I tediously kept the course material. I made tabs so that when the opportunity came I would be able to pull out the appropriate model, the relevant exercise and use it. I felt confident that I would be able to work as an OD consultant as I was learning all of these wonderful techniques. All I needed was to get a client and I would be able to apply all my skills.

Meanwhile I moved from Jamaica to Sweden. I started a proprietorship firm there and started looking for assignments. I got assignments; however, were the assignments OD assignments? No—they were training assignment. I was truly disappointed from an OD perspective even as I enjoyed doing the training work. I had to have patience and hope. As I was in a foreign country daring to be on my own I lowered my initial expectations. I was frustrated.

A self focused program at this stage helped me get in touch with my deep seated sense of incompetence at not being able to get anywhere despite an expensive education, international certificates, and an increasingly heavy and sophisticated toolbox.

My Swedish stay lasted a year and I got a chance to move to India a year and a half back. India shining, India the land of opportunities, India where I have a big network of other OD consultants, India were I will get an OD assignment quickly and I will start practicing what I had learnt so far.

I continued to do training work for an international organization and started meeting practicing consultants. Training work was easy to find and consulting work difficult. I had less patience as this is my own country. I felt my frustration, anger, and sadness rising.

I had done four out of the six courses and knew that some paradigm has to shift before I took the next two courses. I had a sense that somewhere my mechanistic focus on tools could be one of the contributing factor to my not being able to

break away from the training mould. My plummeting confidence could be another detrimental factor.

I had two choices—One, accelerate and get the OD certification done and hope that all these feelings will disappear. Two, stop and get to the depth of what was really happening and get an answer from there.

I decided to pause in my OD certification program.

### **The Pause: The Mind Cocooning**

I felt stuck.

I had momentarily paused my certification process. The energy spent in achieving and running was not there any more. The sense of movement, however false-- as it was not getting me to my goal, was a safety blanket. I did feel secure that I was running all the time to achieve my goal. Once I stopped there was a real vacuum, a stillness which was frightening.

I had tremendous awareness of my stuckness as well as my desire to get unstuck. Stuck—Unstuck. It was like holding two conflicting ideas at the same time. It reminds me of F. Scott Fitzgerald's quote, "Intelligence is the ability to hold two conflicting ideas in mind and have the ability to function." I guess I decided to be intelligent. So, I started to focus on maintaining my psychological, physical, spiritual health and continued to be keenly aware of my sense of being stuck as well as my desire to be unstuck. I started a private limited company. I and my business partner started doing work with executive coaching, intercultural management, and personal and executive leadership development. All the work falls in the area of coaching and training.

The pause was two years long during which it seemed that there was no real progress on my OD consultant front. In fact from the outside it could even seem that I had abandoned the desire to do OD work. However, the inside story was quite different.

Suddenly one day I decided to book my tickets, and finish my OD practitioner certification. It seemed like the right time to do the two courses that I had left. I knew something had shifted but could not place my finger on it. I decided not to try. I would be completing my OD certification two years and nine months after I started it. It had taken me barely nine months to rush the first four courses and if I had not taken "The Pause" I would have got my OD Practitioner Certificate in one year.

The full extent of the value of the pause in my OD education did not become apparent till I went to the last two courses and then I realized what had actually fallen in place.

I was fascinated that I experienced myself in a completely different way. I noticed that I was not trying too hard to help and yet I was helpful. I did things and said things which went beyond the tools and techniques that I had focused on so much. I was able to integrate my life experience into the work I was doing. The only way I can describe that experience is to say, "In those moments I was OD."

I now call it the Mind Cocooning Process at the end of which the butterfly of knowledge emerges.

### **Knowledge after The Pause**

So what happened? What was it like after the pause?

The first of the two courses I took this summer at NTL Institute at Bethel, Maine in USA happened to be an intense Personal Development Lab. I noticed that I was no longer trying to help, however my being was helpful. In the second course which was Facilitating Large Systems Change I was keenly listening to the client, I experienced that I for those moments became the client system and out of me suggestions of interventions emerged which took me by surprise and were extremely helpful to the client.

I finally understood Mahatma Gandhi's words, "Be the change you want the world to be."

In me the change I notice is that the feeling of stuckness disappeared. I was not a prisoner of the toolbox I once was, rather the tools became my support.

I could also begin to see very clearly what knowledge I had integrated to be able to be effective in those situations. Some of the knowledge was a function of the courses I took as a part of the OD practitioner certificate. However, much was a part of the whole life I have lived so far. I believe that only this kind of integration leads to true and clear knowledge. This integration helps differentiate between knowledge and information. This kind of integration was possible for me due to the process of how I progressed through the education more than what topics were covered as a part of the education. The sequence of the OD courses, however, was critical. The timing of the self level program was critical in my journey.

I will list the different kind of knowledge I believe is critical for an OD practitioner:

Knowledge of Self

Knowledge of own past experiences with organizations

Knowledge of own competence level  
Knowledge of philosophy behind different OD practices  
Knowledge of current trends in OD  
Knowledge of different OD tools and techniques  
Knowledge of influence of culture on OD  
Knowledge of the market  
Knowledge of OD practitioner networks

I am sure that a few more can be added to this list and that it will continue to develop. I will attempt to describe each one of the Knowledge spheres to show how I see them.

### **Knowledge of Self**

Knowledge of self can be at various levels. It can be a knowledge of own standards which must be achieved. It can be knowledge of own competencies. Or it can be knowledge of self as a unique, feeling being. Each one of these motivates and drives us. Often the influence of one is more than the other and the only way of finding out is to be able to be aware of them and have the ability to notice self.

An OD consultant may believe that an intervention will benefit the organization. They must be aware if it is the organization's need or their need. If it is only the consultant's need to achieve success, present themselves in a good light, or feel that they are worth something, there is a high probability that it will lead to failure.

An unrealistic assessment of own competencies can lead to contracting into the wrong assignments and potential embarrassment, losing face, and an erosion of personal brand equity.

Knowledge of own uniqueness can lead to an awareness of what it is about OD that makes me want to be in the field. The answers are different for each and every person. They can range from—"I want to be a part of building a profitable organization.", "I love to work with people issues and human systems.", "I want to help individual's well-being in organizations.", "I want to build organizations based on love and respect." Sometimes what the consultant wants and what the organization wants and needs are not in sync and in that case it is prudent to walk away rather than pursue the assignment.

### **Knowledge of own past experiences with organizations**

We have all been parts of organizations. Schools, Resident associations, Cricket clubs, Temple committee, Churches, Government organizations, Non-Government organizations, Small corporate companies, Big Corporate companies, National organizations, International organizations, Voluntary organizations. We

have personal experience of what works, and what doesn't work. We have seen OD like interventions made by OD consultants or simple members of the organization. All these experiences are a rich source of data about organizational dynamics and organizational psychology. They are also deeply embedded in our psyche as we have been part of these organizations. The operating question is always, "Have I been here before?" i.e. in a similar situation. I am surprised at how many times the answer to that question is, "YES".

Being able to bring a connection to the situation through our own experience is like hitting a goldmine. When I can relate to the client situation, I become one with it and I can use my awareness of myself and my feelings to guide me through working with the client.

### **Knowledge of own competence level**

Jane Moosbrucker, a seasoned OD practitioner from the USA said to me, "If the intervention is such that you will have to go back home and read three books before you know how to do it—you are better off telling the client, you cannot do this." If the assignment is really important, the primary consultant could find a colleague who can do it and work along the consultant. The consultant may decide to not take any payment for the assignment themselves, instead giving it to the other colleague as a fee for the learning opportunity.

If the consultant experiences that their level of competence is good but they would like a sounding board, they can go for a shadow consultant. The shadow consultant is invisible to the client but acts as a sounding board for various ideas when the consultant gets back to the drawing board.

Knowledge of own competence level helps an OD consultant make better choices when contracting with the client.

### **Knowledge of the philosophy behind different OD practices**

Philosophy's simplest purpose is to help us live our lives. Evident or not, any OD tool, intervention, technique, approach, system has a philosophy behind it. There is an unstated belief that there is one right way of doing things for the organization to grow and succeed. For example, Future Search talks about 'the whole system in the room'. Appreciative Inquiry believes in 'the act of exploring and discovering those things that give life'.

It is important to scratch under the surface and look at what are the underlying beliefs, assumptions, philosophy any approach has? Does it match with my own assumptions? If not what will be the consequence of using it? Does it match with the belief systems of the organization where I want to use it? If not am I prepared for the resistance I will face from the organization?

### **Knowledge of the current trends in OD**

As in the fashion world we see fads, trends, OD world has its own share of them. Suddenly, we can find that many people are using a particular language, the business newspapers are running articles on particular themes, and consultants are using certain kinds of interventions irrespective of the diagnosis. Being unaware can lead to a belief that this is the only way to do things, or this is the only perspective. This is the biggest pitfall for an OD consultant. This can only get short term gains mostly in terms of a few months of guaranteed income but lead to long term damage to the client system.

On the other hand trends could be also a sign of a movement towards another kind of philosophy which is visible in the way the world is moving. The current move towards well- being, spirituality, a holistic, integrated, continuous view of the world, focus on emotionality, racism, regionalism etc. are some such trends. This is evident in many aspects of how the world is run in general. Obviously OD interventions get impacted by them as well. Again being aware of them and using this awareness as an advantage shows integration of what's happening around and the OD consultant. Then the consultant acts like an open system and allows the client system to dare to act similarly as well.

### **Knowledge of different OD tools and techniques**

OD like any other established profession has many tools and techniques. We choose from a whole range as it suits us, our philosophy, our competence level and our client needs. It is in this context as well that the knowledge of self becomes critical. The few methodologies that I am aware of are Future Search, Appreciative Inquiry, Action Research Model, Six Sigma, 7S model, Group Process Consulting etc. Which of these will work will depend on the situation as well as the person using the methodology. At all times the effectiveness of the tool is a triangular interaction of the situation, person and tool. The situation and tool remaining constant the practicing person's own understanding of the tool in depth create an exponential impact of the tool used.

Given this insight, I would in the future pick a few tools and immerse myself in their philosophy, values, technique, different case studies, apply them and watch the impact, make notes and master it. I believe that this has a greater value than scanning and picking up many different tools and using them indiscriminately.

### **Knowledge of the influence of culture on OD**

I did my certification from US and I have worked in Sweden and India. Through my journey I became keenly aware of the cultural differences between what is considered important in different cultures. This in turn influences the OD interventions that are chosen in the different cultures to tackle an organizational issue.

I give a recent example from my OD course. In my small group we were from America, Germany, and India and we were looking at the same organizational issue. The American considered the unclear vision from the leader to be the issue, the German focused on the stakeholder analysis to find out which person needed to be influenced to get the organization to take the critical decision, and I, the Indian, focused on creating ways to take care of the people through the transition as a way to move the organization to the desired change. In retrospective I can see that we were acting out our cultural values more than looking at the different possibilities that there were in the case.

The American culture of promoting leaders like demi-gods, the German culture of decision by consensus and the Indian culture of community support lead to the individual focus we had. In the situation, not realizing our cultural differences, lead to us competing with each other as each one insisted that their diagnosis was the right one. In retrospect, we could each be right or we could each be wrong. The point is that by not being aware of the influence of OD we were being less than effective leading to the client not receiving full value for their money.

Reading about different cultures, interacting with people from different cultures, noticing the differences are some of the ways we can sensitize ourselves to the influence of cultures on OD.

### **Knowledge of the market**

If one of the objectives is to be able to make a living by doing OD work it is absolutely critical to invest time in knowing the market. There are numerous magazines, internet, newspapers, networks that bombard us with information all the time making the task of gathering the relevant facts both easy and difficult simultaneously. The trick is to find trends and then focusing on what is exciting enough to dig deeper.

Today Globalization, mega- sized corporations, a workforce from different countries, outsourcing, increased instances of mergers and acquisitions, speeding consumerism, people working in different time zones, an increasingly young and vibrant as well as volatile workforce, virtual teams are all leading to organizations and ways of working which are radically different from even 6-7 years back. Any one of these trends can be picked and studied in depth and specializations can be created around them. Some people prefer them and therefore we see whole organizations focused on, for example Mergers and Acquisitions. Some people focus on a few trends and help organizations build structures, visions, values that support the organization to glide through the impact of those trends.

The operative word here is, FOCUS. There is so much happening these days that without focus there is an overwhelming sense of getting drowned. By focusing an

OD consultant can develop and create their own niche with which they can enter the market.

### **Knowledge of OD practitioner networks**

As an external consultant, other consultants in the field form a kind of fraternity. They can serve the purpose of being a sounding board, being a source of information about different opportunities. Sometimes they are just social contact much like office colleagues. Many times there is a need to partner with other OD consultants to do an assignment or there may be a requirement of a shadow consultant.

Forming and maintaining such networks locally, nationally and internationally based on the specific needs the consultant has as a professional as well as a person is essential to the success of the consultant.

### **The Conclusion**

I have gained tremendously during the two year nine month period of acquiring my OD practitioner certificate. It seems that all the knowledge I have from life, got synthesized during this period. I feel richer, I feel complete, and I feel blessed.

In retrospect I see the process as a combination of who I am, what I am, and what standards I set for myself. This together with the right container provided by the timely steps in the OD education process created the magic.

### **The Certificate**

As I said, the certificate is an artifact and I do plan to frame it expensively to adorn the walls of my India based office. It will be difficult to carry them around.

My new integrated 'I', however, is with me all the time.