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Our Journey in the OD Network

A Personal Essay

By Judy Vogel and
David Glaser

As our acknowledgement of the 50th anniversary of the OD Network, we offer this reflection on our experiences in ODN, an important part of our careers and lives since we entered the field of organization development as new internal consultants in the early 1980s. We brought with us the knowledge and skills of our first careers as an educator and early women’s movement leader (Judy); a city planner and men’s movement leader (David); community activists in politics in the early days of the planned city of Columbia, MD (both of us); and also T-group facilitators for the Mid Atlantic Association for Training and Consulting and a little later for NTL Institute of Applied Behavioral Science (NTL). So we knew a lot about human systems, learning, leadership, small groups, and change; however, applying this knowledge and experience to the consulting role presented new and interesting challenges, which have engaged us ever since.

From the beginning, our families didn’t understand our work; they often asked, “Now just exactly what do you do?” or “Do leaders actually pay you to do that?” Despite our repeated efforts to explain, our families never really understood. What they did perceive, however, was our happiness as internal consultants and then later our excitement at launching our consulting business as partners in 1987.

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second, and of great importance also, was satisfying our yearning to be part of an important social movement and activist community of like-minded people. Gradually, we felt connected to a profession that shared a short hand language, like “process” and “human systems,” among so many other specialized terms, and that cared passionately about assisting organizations to thrive through including all people and diverse views. This community provided continuity to and expansion of our intellectual interests and social activism goals so we loved joining in the conversations and debating the challenging realities of being change agents.

Occasionally we observed and experienced cliques, in-group dynamics and competition at ODN events, which left us feeling like outsiders. As new-comers, we had to find our place and, in time, we did. However, for the most part, we were welcomed and offered support and informal mentoring. We believe the predominant norm in the OD field and in ODN specifically is inclusiveness, generosity, and a genuine interest to know and support new-comers. And we have tried to be welcoming to others also.

The Conferences became essential places to learn, to connect, and to be mentored by wonderful role models—many of the field’s elders. We remember especially the sessions offered by Herb Shepard, Jerry Harvey, Bob Tannenbaum, Stan Herman, Juanita Brown, Meg Wheatley, Marv Weisbord, Don Klein, Kaleel Jamison, John Adams, Peter Vaill, Warner Burke, Peter Block, and Edie and Charlie Seashore. They

still stand out from our early years of attendance. In later years we learned with Bob Marshak, Fred Miller, Judith Katz, Sandra Janoff, Bill Bridges, Elsie Y. Cross, David Sibbet, John Scherer and so many more. Many of these thought leaders are now gone; however, they live on through our work today, sitting on our shoulders and whispering encouragement and valuable guidance.

Each provided thoughtful ideas about what we have come to so appreciate as the foundation of our life work—core ideas about organizations and change, leadership and diversity; powerful methods and tools for serving all kinds and sizes of organizations; and inspiring messages of values and philosophy for the possibility of helping organizations to engage their people and become more creative and productive.

These presentations fulfilled Kurt Lewin's insight that "there is nothing as practical as a good theory." Of particular importance for us were the sessions that built our understanding of three concepts. First was Lewin's Action Research Model, the classical OD roadmap for guiding clients' learning about their own circumstances and helping them diagnose, design, and implement changes to achieve their culture and business goals. Building on this method at conference sessions, we explored Social Constructionism—the phenomenon that what people believe to be factual, inevitable reality in social systems is, in fact, co-created by individuals and groups and then adopted as real—and often rigidly defended. This lens enabled our assisting clients to create greater flexibility of thought and thus enhanced the possibility of making desired change. The third important lens for serving our clients was a dialogic perspective (Marshak & Bushe) for facilitating change; it suggested engaging organization members in change approaches that were grounded in dialogue, not diagnosis, using such new methods as Open Space (Owen), Future Search (Weisbord & Janoff), World Café (Brown) and other ways of improving organization effectiveness. These three strategies, and the philosophies on which they were based, provided powerful new approaches to our work.

Regardless of the model or methodology we used, our capacity to serve our clients was strengthened by our exploration of "Use of Self" (Seashore), the powerful shorthand for consciously and skillfully managing the role of consulting, especially the challenge of mindfully relating to the organization system from its margin, which is the inherent position of the internal or external OD consultant.

We participated in sessions called Women in OD and Men in OD where we explored in-depth the unique needs, dilemmas, and experiences of same gender practitioners. Topics back then included men finding and expressing their feelings and fears and learning to support each other; and women finding their voices and being powerful in a business world dominated by men—both of which provided compelling challenges in the 1980s and 1990s. We each deepened our awareness, developed new skills and made friends there that have lasted to this day.

These learning experiences reminded us always that we and our work in client systems were based on our continued personal growth and that we also served a larger world that needed courageous activism for social justice and the protection of the environment. We left each conference re-inspired to get more involved in our community and to challenge our clients to stretch their awareness and efforts as well.

Through those many presentations, break-out groups, role plays, and rich conversations over our coffee cups and wine glasses, we gradually developed a robust sense of our own identities as OD practitioners, as change agents, and as resourceful participants in OD efforts to create strengthened organizations and a more just world. Even as there were many debates and significant differences of view and approach, there was enough glue among us to develop a collective sense of identity within the profession.

We began to perceive ourselves ready to make our own contributions; and we offered workshops for the conferences and articles for ODN's publications that conveyed our own emerging "theory in use." While we were a bit nervous, we were expressing our identities as sufficiently

expert professionals to offer value to our colleagues. Our intent was both to continue to learn and to pay back the enormous benefit that we had received from colleagues earlier.

Our workshops through the years conveyed our developing understandings and models, especially about the challenges and opportunities of the role of consultants. Judy collaborated with Peter Norlin in presenting what became known as The Inner Life of Consulting Series in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Each year we had a great time exploring ideas about the consultant role, as expressed in titles as the following:

- » The Push and Pull of Marginality
- » How Can We Help? Telling Some Truth and Confronting Some Fiction about Consulting in a Helping Relationship
- » Invisible Blueprints: Examining the Impact of Our Families of Origin on Our Work Lives
- » Managing Triangles: The Geometry of Effective Consulting.

Ruth Littlejohn, Peter and Judy offered *Winning and Losing: Managing the Dynamics of Competition While Aspiring to Genuine Partnership*.

David presented a session on Action Research and Mindfulness Meditation, exploring the practical similarities of these powerful change strategies. He led the rollicking and provocative session called *Herb Shepard Meets the Beatles*, which included musical illustrations of Herb's wonderful *ODP* article called *Rules of Thumb for Change Agents*. In these workshops, David applied two of his long-time passions—meditation and music—to the work of OD. He also co-led with Charlie Seashore and Jackie Bearce several of NTL's powerful three-day Human Interaction Labs as part of the pre-conferences, which was a special love for him. T-group learning stands out for both of us as one of the ground-breaking learning structures of the 20th century.

We each wrote for the *OD Practitioner*. With Matt Minahan, Lee Butler and Heather Butler Taylor, Judy wrote "Facilitation 101," which also became a pre-conference workshop. With Peter Norlin, she published "Making 'Housecalls:' Whom Do Our Customers Expect When the

Doorbell Rings?” and “An Inner Blueprint for Successful Partnership Development: Putting a Relationship to Work.” Most recently, Judy’s article “Attracting Great Mentors: Seven Strategies to Cultivate” was published in the ODP.

Judy was also Special Co-Editor with David Jamison for the Fall, 2010 issue of the ODP titled “OD and HR: Today’s Practice and Tomorrow’s Possibilities.” It contained articles that explored the opportunities and dilemmas of the two related fields of service to organizations.

Next as part of a team of editors led by John Vogelsang, Judy helped produce the *Handbook for Strategic HR: Best Practices in Organization Development from the OD Network*, which includes seventy-eight of the top articles from the fifty years of the ODP and which AMACOM published in 2013. It offered a very satisfying opportunity to bring the carefully-chosen classics to a new generation of readers and to honor the writers who had contributed so much to us all.

Thus, we (David and Judy) expressed our desire to share with our colleagues the discoveries that excited us and guided our practices over the many years of our own professional partnership. We hope these were contributions that enriched and invigorated their work and benefitted their clients as well. It has been our intention to repay the huge debt from our early years in ODN, which has been a wonderful community of learners for us and from which we continue to derive great value. We congratulate us all on the remarkable vitality and contributions of the OD Network over these past fascinating fifty years.

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