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Organization Development and Human Resources

Why the Uneasy Alliance?

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Introduction

Today, the relationship of Organization Development (OD) and Human Resources (HR)—as bodies of thought and practice—is that of an "uneasy alliance." There is bickering by practitioners over turf; disagreement as to which is the more strategic, which the more tactical; and disagreement about where and how organizationally they relate to each other—or whether they should at all. Complex definitions abound, terms are used casually and interchangeably, and services are overlapping, if not the same, in the minds of many, providers and clients alike. The arguments are old and they have only seemed to intensify over the years with professionalization and widening interests at stake from all sides. There is confusion all around.

Such confusion might not represent such an important matter worth dwelling on were it not for the ultimate ends affected by the fields—the functioning, effectiveness, viability, and vitality of human enterprises. Hence, much of the continued wrangling we see as a kind of "acting out" in search of an answer that is more satisfying and fundamental—one that could serve as a more reliable guide for reflection and action concerning the people dimension in groups and institutions of all sizes and kinds.

We believe much of the continued discussion of what the relationship of the two fields are or should be can only be a blind alley without first clarifying the essential and natural differences that each

represents. This is the aim of this brief paper, which we intend as a kind of "note on theory." We intend to draw some bold distinctions in the interests of clarity and to help set the stage for further consideration by the community of scholars and practitioners, rather than try to trace out all the nuances of this issue, and risk falling into some of the swirl of confusion that has dominated discussions of this problem to date. We come at this topic as those who have had formal training in organizational behavior, who teach, and who have also served in both internal and external OD, change, and human resources roles, both inside and outside HR organizations.

The Natural Domains of Organization Development and Human Resources

To begin, OD is not HR, and HR is not OD. This seems apparent from the very fact that an uneasy alliance exists between the two and that there is contention over their place and role and relationship to each other. The question is what is their primary, substantive distinction?

There are different ways of course to try and ferret out and describe their differences. One possible way is to start with sets of activities that each claim as their province, listing out various things that are done in their names and seeing what emerges as distinct and what is overlapping. Such an approach would be interesting and have value, and it might be a good way to start for a full-scale treatment of this issue. But, even so, such an approach

would only represent a first step in an analysis that would still leave us needing to distill their essential difference in the first place, as it would only leave us with activity level descriptions, which themselves we believe would be largely tangled, given wide overlaps in practice and disagreements over what belongs where, depending on whom you talked with. Such a method would likely take us back to the confusion from which the discussion began.

A surer path to understand the essential difference between OD and HR is one that seems to us more common sense and intuitive, simply taking a step back and asking, based on the totality of our experience, what do we see that difference to be? Surely, both OD and HR deal with the people dimension in organizations. But what do we see the basic nature of each to be, setting aside for the moment a wide variation in practice by those in either or both camps?

Our answer is this: *OD comes at group and organizational phenomena through a personal and transpersonal lens; HR looks at group and organizational life through a utilitarian lens*. For good or ill, OD deals with the realm of people as persons; HR deals with the realm, quite literally, of people as resources. For OD, *human persons*—their capacity to flourish, contribute, and creatively give of themselves in organizational settings—are the lifeblood of an enterprise and are its alpha and omega. For HR, *human capital* is instrumental to organizational ends—people are seen as means for performance, productivity, and profitability. To be quite simple about it, the former is inherently concerned with dimensions of purpose, motivation, and spirit;[1] the latter's concerns are essentially utilitarian, programmatic, and mechanical.

When we say that OD addresses organizational life from the standpoint of persons and their transpersonal relations, we mean that the integrity and inherent value of the human person—not their value for

some other larger end—is the beginning and end of OD's main concerns. This does not mean that OD does not see the systemic group and organizational contexts in which people act and move and form and express their identities. Indeed, these remain vital concerns and are the basis for OD's understanding of what constitutes real community (e.g., Weisbord, 1987). Rather, OD's central focus is with the living human being—their motivations, purposes, and freedom to think, choose and act using their God-given gifts—so they can contribute their all to the greater good.

When we say that HR is essentially instrumental and utilitarian in its treatment of the people dimension in organizations, we mean that it principally sees people not as ends in themselves, but as means to an end—the larger good of the organizational enterprise. This is not to say HR is not concerned with the satisfaction of individuals, but rather it generally comes at its work and defines as good as that which produces the greatest good for all. That is HR's alpha and omega. Its natural world is that of structure, programs, role definitions, performance, policy and procedure, and inputs and outputs to help assure that good.

These two ways of seeing—visions really—take effect for each camp at each level of human relations—individual, dyad, group, organization, or larger social construct. Yet, the two fields have different underlying assumptions about human beings. We contend that their basic orientations, core ideas, and practices—regardless of how any one practitioner may self-identify—fundamentally differ in the way they see people in organizational settings: as subjects who act, in the case of OD, or as

objects to be managed and led, in the case of HR.

Now, naturally, while there are instances of individual practitioners as well as OD and HR units and departments embodying these clear differences rather purely, there are many more that are combinations of both to greater or lesser degrees. This is not surprising. In line with Durkheim's insights so long ago, both subjective and objective elements are needed in the whole of organizational life, and it makes sense that both approaches

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continue to find a following and meaningful role in organizations, frequently in hybrid forms and initiatives.[2] Leadership development efforts, for example, represent a zone where there must generally be some intersection of both orientations—certain key principles and skills must be assimilated (objective requirements), and a developing leader must find his or her own voice and courage to express it (subjective requirements).

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1. From a helping perspective, Carl Rogers (1961) defines this orientation as one in which one or both parties move towards more appreciation, expression, and functional use of the latent inner resources of the individual. Edgar Schein (2009) extends this perspective.

2. At first glance, Emile Durkheim appears as an unlikely candidate for a discussion on the topic of OD and HR. Yet, when one considers organizations as inherently rooted in human interaction, Durkheim's ideas about social solidarity help clarify the people dimension in organizational life (1947). He emphasized that modern organizations could not be healthy without elements of both mechanical and organic solidarity. Mechanical solidarity (a shared normative order)—akin to the objective elements—was critical at a minimum for maintaining allegiance to contracts, and beyond that, as an enabling factor for emotional support. Organic solidarity, on the other hand—akin to subjective elements—in the form of individual differentiation and integration could then flourish in a safe environment. Argyris (1970) provides a fuller treatment of Durkheim's solidarity concepts applied to this question.

Regardless, such hybrid situations, whatever their type and in the ways they play out, also generally end up reflecting some of the tension we see inherent in the co-existence of the fields. No wonder there is an uneasy alliance between them! In fact, we have seen this tearing—and experienced it ourselves—in the very person of the individual practitioner—given allegiances that are split and, not uncommonly, at odds. We believe this very internal tension is what gives a special resonance to some practitioners for this issue, and, depending on their own personal reconciliation of it, fuels some displaced passion on how they may address this topic more generally. Clearly, there are real organizational implications the distinctions we are making can have for reporting relationships between OD and HR under certain conditions. And there are implications other than structural ones, too. But it makes a world of difference whether those implications are addressed in light of an understanding of the natural differences of the fields and how they might apply best in any given organizational scenario, than answered in any absolute terms by a practitioner continuing to struggle significantly with this issue as a personal matter. It is to some of these other implications that we now turn.

Implications and Discussion

We realize the distinctions we have drawn above are simplified and may not fully account for all of the differences in the way OD and HR are practiced. That is an inevitable limitation in any conceptual schema. Nonetheless, we have found it a helpful way for us to think about the issue of the relationship between the two fields. For our present purposes, we share our thoughts about just a few of the practical implications this formulation has, sketching them below. Our intent, once again, is to be suggestive for continued reflection and consideration of their primary domains and distinctions.

OD, HR, and Reporting Relationships
Whether internal OD capabilities should report to HR is an issue that has

historically been "hot." OD purists have fought this relationship. And on paper it makes a certain sense to resist it. Given the differing orientations that OD and HR have, an HR Department can be a compromising place for OD to be identified with and can dilute its effectiveness. Often, internal OD practitioners will argue (or wish) for a reporting relationship to a senior, if not top, business executive. On the other hand, as a practical matter, if OD practitioners differentiate themselves sufficiently from the balance of the HR function, HR may provide a place more conducive to building trust needed to carry out their work than if OD reported to a line executive, where it might itself be too closely associated with the formal powers that be. To be sure, top-level sponsorship is important for OD to do its work. But where it is housed is another matter. Much depends on context about what would be the best platform for the OD practitioner to develop the kinds of person-to-person relationships central to its mission. It is conceivable that an HR Department could be a quite desirable place for OD to be situated, if headed up by a leader who has an OD orientation. Given our distinctions above, the answer to the age-old question of where OD should report is not automatic, but neither is it wide-open: it turns on where its natural work—given its essential focus on addressing issues from the standpoint of their personal and transpersonal dynamics—can itself best flourish in the organizational environment.

OD, HR, and Performance
Some OD practitioners in efforts to make themselves look relevant cast much of their work in terms of improving performance. For example, executive counseling and coaching, in large measure an offshoot of OD, increasingly presents itself today in performance-based terms to make itself acceptable. We would contend these are not OD's highest points of value. Or, when practitioners work predominantly in this way, they are essentially carrying out functions more natural to HR. This is not simply semantics. The trust needed to create genuine dialogue around a client's true intent and vision and explore what he or

she brings to the table is hampered if the aim is primarily utilitarian. After all, if a client senses he or she is being approached in service of other interests, they will not be as open or willing to intentionally engage in deeper sharing. Performance absolutely does count—and without it no organization would long survive—so the question is: what set of disciplines and activities is best suited to promote it? That, we believe, from a people angle, is the province of HR, not OD. All the various programs, role accountabilities, performance management systems and metrics—all are the province of those trained and focused in these areas. And of course there are hybrid forms appropriate to these aims too, some brands of coaching among them, depending on circumstances. On the other hand, more purely oriented OD does have something vital to say addressing innovation and helping people create new organizational futures. In these instances, spirit, vision, and the willingness to venture down bold new roads are highly relevant and are supported by the natural orientation—and facilitative skill-sets—associated with OD.

OD, HR, and Power
Because it is concerned with the utilitarian, HR is a natural ally of the formal authority in an organization. It is not surprising that HR frequently functions and is seen as the "handmaiden of power" by both executives and many mid-managers in the body of an organization, sometimes, as candid conversations reveal, not fully to be trusted. This is so, perhaps especially so, as HR rises in status in an organization. The issues it deals with may be increasingly strategic, but they are typically associated with carrying out performance-related mandates or other organizational realignments at top management's behest, rather than exploring the creative side of unleashing untapped organizational energies and potential, as is the province of OD. There are exceptions here surely, but these, again, in our experience are typically associated with senior HR executives who have strong OD orientations. Classical OD functions on the other hand are less concerned with the exercise of power than with speaking truth to power—or, more precisely, helping

their clients to do so. This does not mean that OD does not seek influence, but it is of a different sort, seeking to support the empowerment of people with whom they engage, from imaginative executives wrestling with complex stakeholder constraints to front-line workers collaborating on teams for higher levels of impact.

OD, HR, and Trust
The most important pre-condition for OD to operate is the establishment of trust. Intense commitment is required to serve the person in a role, whatever the level he or she may be at. That means really listening, and being present, and attending to them, without other agendas. In our experience, HR's close association with power often creates an alienation of trust that runs counter to the work of OD. Of course, HR certainly needs to be seen as trustworthy by top management and the entire organization insofar as its integrity of operations is concerned, that is, in its fair and even-handed administration of performance related policies and practices. But OD serves a different purpose and requires a different kind of trust. The role of OD in today's environment is to serve as a special kind of partner, assisting leaders at all levels from a deep interpersonal standpoint navigate increasingly complex organizational demands. Moreover, when it is true to its inner calling we believe, OD is also entrusted to serve as a kind of organizational conscience that holds the enterprise in a broader perspective, helping assure its continual renewal in a way that fosters the best to which its people can aspire and contribute.

Concluding Thoughts

Although we have argued above for a relatively simple heuristic distinction between OD and HR, the problem of their relationship in practice is not an easy one to address. This is in part a matter, as we have also alluded to, of varying ways practitioners self-identify, and the disconnect that sometimes exists between the titles and formal camps they are associated with, on the one hand, and their actual orientations and methods of practice, on the other. In any case, reconciling the two fields remains a larger problem for OD than HR. Since it addresses activities and concerns more purely utilitarian, HR is the easier of the two fields to grasp—for its practitioners and for a general audience concerned with speed, results, and measurement—all matters of priority in today's fast-moving, information-saturated organizations. But because, if we are right, OD fundamentally deals with the realm of the personal and transpersonal at work, it eludes quick measurement and objectification—and is at times inimical to such aims. However, just so, OD trades in enduring human dimensions—introspection, affect, and spirit—that we believe must be properly addressed if today's organizations are to prove viable over the long haul and survive the competitive changes of the hour. In the final analysis, the burden of proof remains with OD to make a powerful enough case for its distinctive value and proper role in organizational life. We believe that value is there, and lies in the very heart of its nature. Indeed, the discernment such an effort entails we see as a hallmark of OD in the first place.

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