

What Organisational Development Theory Can Contribute to Our Understanding of Communities of Practice

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Organisational development (OD) is an approach to developing organisations through the application of behavioural science knowledge, practices, and processes. Essentially, OD enables organisations to achieve effectiveness through careful analysis and diagnostic techniques as well as through carefully considered intervention strategies. Although some of its earlier planned change practice was adopted by approaches to quality management and business excellence in the late 1980s, much of this adaptation is generally regarded as overly mechanistic and formulaic. Indeed, as social science disciplines developed, corresponding changes occurred to OD methodology. In this regard, while OD can be regarded as an attempt to improve the total organisational system, it has moved beyond its earlier functionalist and behaviouristic assumptions to embrace critiques of the planned change process. OD should therefore be regarded today as “an evolving mixture of science and art” (Cummings & Huse, 1989, p.1) that integrates strategy, structure, and process in the pursuit of organisational change.

As organisational development matured over the past 20 years, it came to focus increasingly on organisational learning. Its main contribution to organisational learning is recognition that the quality of the diagnosis, interpretive judgments, and the sensitivity of the change agent to the nature of the intervention is much more important than the mechanistic application of planned change programmes. In order to explain this further, it would be useful first to say a few words about communities of practice and then, second, to illustrate some issues linking organisational development to the process of organisational learning.

Communities of practice can be described as informal groups or networks of people who share

similar interests and objectives. The identification and development of tacit and formal knowledge is therefore the central activity of a community of practice. This informality of practice is generated by a group of people who are motivated to acquire and share knowledge in relation to an agreed objective. Once this has been applied to organisations, social networks (and I include virtual networks in this definition), geographical and spatial communities, then we can begin to get a feeling for the types of interactions that are now likely to be generated. This, of course, has increased exponentially with the use of modern communication technology and the World Wide Web, in particular.

While shared experiences and insights into best practice are essential to the activities of a community of practice, it is the desire to share a similar problem focus that brings us close to the heart of organisational development. While we can agree with those authors who argue that a community of practice is a knowledge exchange mechanism through informal learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), this in itself would not make a CoP a satisfactory mechanism for an organisational development intervention because an effective diagnostic framework would require a methodological approach to the identification of an agreed problem. It is in this sense that we need to argue for the application of an OD methodology.

Others (e.g., Boud & Middleton, 2003) have argued that, since communities of practice depend on learning, the outcome of any shared activity must require further skills which include mastery of organisational processes, negotiating the political, and dealing with the atypical (that is, having the flexibility to solve problems without resorting to mechanistic or formulaic approaches). Such arguments, of course, lend further weight to a more disciplined approach to the activities of a community of practice.

ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

While the older definition of organisational development in the late 1960s and 1970s was primarily concerned with planned, organisation-wide change programmes that were managed from the top in order to increase organisational effectiveness and health, by the 1990s, it was possible to identify a different focus in relation to personal development and organisational learning and analyses informed by newer methodological approaches such as symbolic interactionism and discourse analysis. Thus, contemporary OD has developed a mature perspective for managing change involving stakeholders and collaborative action (Grieves, 2003).

A Methodology for Transformation

According to Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002), communities of practice, unlike organisational teams, do not necessarily require a tangible result to their activities. For example, communities of practice may focus on the clarification or the development of knowledge which is intangible and difficult to measure. This is not a totally convincing argument, however, if one is concerned about the dynamics of the CoP. This is because a CoP, like a team, needs to energise, motivate, and build cohesion.

The argument here is that communities of practice need to become more robust by adopting the main ingredients of a contemporary organisational development perspective. These are illustrated in Table 1.

In order to explain the main characteristics of an OD approach, it should be clear that the *methodology* is essentially that of action research which requires the systematic collection of data in relation to organisational problems. The *approach* adopted, although implicit in the CoP idea, needs to recognise the value and importance of the joint diagnostic relationship unfettered by status or functional position. In relation to this, the *interests* of CoP members are essentially pluralistic and should be driven by the members themselves rather than by the activities of a transformational leader. The word

Table 1. Characteristics of organisational development (Modified from Grieves, 2003)

Methodology	Action Research
Approach	Joint diagnostic involving stakeholders
Interests	Pluralist
Development	Personal and organizational learning
Culture	As analytical tool
Values	Promotes humanistic values
Mode of intervention	Process focused

development is also important since a CoP should be essentially concerned with the development of the organisation through its people. As a result, individual and organisational learning characterises the enterprise of a CoP. *Culture* is also central because, as a CoP develops the dynamics and strains of the network need to be made transparent and articulated at various stages of its development from birth to closure. Finally, *values* are critical, and, in this sense, I have to suggest that the adoption of humanistic values implicit in the OD approach become central to the very existence of a CoP.

Contemporary organisational development is of benefit to communities of practice because by adopting a more rigorous approach, communities of practice would provide a dynamic process of modifying group behaviour by defining the nature of the problem (even if this is simply the generation of knowledge) and by clarifying any proposed initiative and *intervention strategy*. Furthermore, in many cases, it will be necessary to identify the critical processes that either inhibit or progress some form of organisational transformation. It is also likely that, in many situations, individual behaviours may need to be made transparent by articulating the dynamics of the group or network because these will impact on organisational outcomes.

The adoption of process consultation requires the relationship with the client system to be clearly defined and articulated. Useful texts on this are provided by Schein (see, for example, 1987, 1988, 1997). A community of practice is required to engage organisational members in a diagnostic relationship which, by implication, means using appropriate methods for data collection. In addition, great care is required with the type of intervention. It is essential that the community of practice and the

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