Chapter 3
Reconsidering Essentials of Organization Development:
An Evidence-Based Change Management Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the findings of two closely related studies about a selection of premises on which some organization development (OD) practices are based. In the first study, 18 taken-for-granted assumptions have been held against the scientific literature using rapid evidence assessment (REA) as a method. In light of the available evidence, some of these assumptions proved to be untenable. In a second study, practitioners were confronted with these assumptions and fed back the assessments. These studies, combined together, show that practitioners are often not aware of scientific findings relevant to their field. On the other hand, despite all the reseach that has been done and published, the scientific literature often does not provide satisfactory and conclusive answers to the questions practitioners grapple with.

INTRODUCTION

Behavior change is at the core of Organization Development (OD). OD can be defined as "a system-wide application and transfer of behavioral science knowledge to the planned development, improvement, and reinforcement of the strategies, structures, and processes that lead to organization effectiveness" (Cummings & Worley, 2015, p. 2). OD integrates hard and soft aspects of change. In other words, it combines the perspectives of strategy-structure-systems and purpose-process-people (Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1996).

In this chapter we reconsider important aspects and interventions of OD by scholarly assessment and an assessment by practitioners. Eighteen popular assumptions regarding behavior change are held against relevant scientific literature. In addition the results are used in a second study in which we confront practitioners with these assessed assumptions. Together the studies validate foundations of OD and change, and flag some common misunderstandings with regard to OD and change.

Managers and consultants fail to recognize opportunities for change and at other times cause mistakes, because they do not know or use the available scientific evidence when implementing change initiatives. They often prefer approaches to change based on more popular and appealing management concepts over less accessible scholarly knowledge. We contend, that many of the themes managers and consultants deem relevant for practice are often underresearched, especially related to methods and contingencies (see also Lewis, Schmisseur, Stephens & Weir, 2006). At the same time, those managers and consultants might not be aware of the increasing amount of relevant research that actually is available and some of the findings that go against the more popular views of what is sound practice. That is worrisome to say the least. But, by making people aware of relevant scientific evidence and by making that evidence more accessible, the profession and the actual practice can be improved substantially. Inherent in Cummings' and Worley's (2015) definition is the need for an evidence-based approach to OD. One might argue that without scientific evidence or knowledge, any attempt to planned change may not be called OD at all. Bridging scientific knowledge and practice is what OD stands for.

Managers and consultants champion goal-oriented, purposeful and efficient change in order to realize economic and social targets. The contexts in which they have to operate are becoming increasingly complex. Their organizations are facing digitalization, globalization, changing laws and regulations, issues like sustainability and compliance, conflicting stakeholder interests and more emancipated customers. This leads to a growing pressure to act and a greater susceptibility to quick fixes. A proper diagnosis of the problem and a complete picture of the specific context in which they have to act are often lacking. Managers learn on the job from the people around them, or by working with consultants. In addition, they look for knowledge offered in management books and, albeit less often, available in the form of scholarly studies. With the aim of working towards a more evidence-based approach to OD and change, the central question we try to answer in this chapter is the following:

How sound are the underlying theories, methods and ideas on which some of the prominent views on change, that managers and consultants adhere to, are based?

To contribute to evidence-based OD and change we tested the prominent views in popular management books and of leading consultancy agencies on their scholarly merits. We also asked approximately three hundred managers and consultants of both public and private organizations in the Netherlands to demonstrate how tenable they think those views are. This chapter provides an abridged report of these two studies. The good news is that, generally speaking, many of the practitioners' views seem to correspond with the available evidence. Through acquired subject knowledge, experience and also intuitively-acquired action knowledge, they know what works and what does not. However, some prominent views appear to be unfounded given the available evidence. Caution is advised in those cases.

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