

members; and a set of structured activities that are the *means* for achieving the values, assumptions, and goals. These activities are what we mean by the word *interventions*.

THINKING ABOUT OD INTERVENTIONS

We said OD is more than reaching into the “kit bag” and pulling out an intervention or two. Let’s explore some of the factors that leaders and practitioners consider as they plan and implement OD.

First, behind every program is an overall game plan or *intervention strategy*. This plan integrates the problem or opportunity to be addressed, the desired outcomes of the program, and the sequencing and timing of the various interventions. Intervention strategies are based on diagnosis and the goals desired by the client system. Let’s say the clients want to redesign the way work is done at a production facility, changing from an assembly-line arrangement of individualized simple tasks to complex tasks performed by self-managed teams. This desired redesign requires diagnosis to determine whether the work is amenable to such a system, to test the employees’ willingness to undertake such a change, to calculate the time and effort required to make the change, and to assess the probable benefits. Sociotechnical systems theory would likely be the guiding model for the program, which would entail dozens of significant changes and different interventions—training, education, parallel structures, employee involvement, modified reward systems and management philosophy, and so forth. A series of activities designed to move the system in step-wise fashion from the current state to a new state would be laid out against a time line of several years. This overall strategy would be the road map for the change program. The key questions are: What are we trying to accomplish? What activities/interventions will help us get there? What is the proper timing and sequencing of the interventions? What have we learned from the diagnosis about readiness to change, barriers and obstacles, key stakeholders, and sources of energy and leadership?

Second, some ways to structure activities to promote learning and change are “better”; and some are “worse.” The following points help practitioners structure activities in “better” ways:

1. Structure the activity to include the relevant people, the people affected by the problem or the opportunity. For example, if the goal is improved team effectiveness, have the whole team engage in the activities. If the goal is improved relations between two separate work groups, have both work groups present. If the goal is to build linkages with some special group, say, the industrial relations people, have them there along with the people from the home group. If the goal is better customer service, include customers in the activity. Pre-planning the group composition is necessary for properly structuring the activity.
2. Structure the activity so that it is (a) problem oriented or opportunity oriented and (b) oriented to the problems and opportunities generated by the clients themselves. Solving problems and capitalizing on opportunities are involving, interesting, and enjoyable tasks for most people, whether due to a desire for competence or mastery (as suggested by White¹), or a desire to achieve (as suggested by McClelland²), especially when the issues have been

3. Structure the activity so that the goal is clear and the way to reach the goal is clear. Few things are as demotivating as not knowing what one is working toward and not knowing how what one is doing contributes to goal attainment. Both these points are part of structuring the activity properly. (Parenthetically, the goals will be important for the individuals if point 2 is followed.)
4. Structure the activity to ensure a high probability of success. Implicit in this point is the warning that the practitioners’ and clients’ expectations should be realistic. But more than that, manageable, attainable objectives once achieved produce feelings of success, competence, and potency for the people involved. This sense of achievement, in turn, raises aspiration levels and feelings of self- and group-worth. The task can still be hard, complicated, taxing—but it should be attainable. And if participants fail to accomplish the goal, the reasons should be examined so this can be avoided in the future.
5. Structure the activity so that it contains both experience-based learning and conceptual learning. New learnings gained through experience become a permanent part of the individual’s repertoire when augmented with conceptual material that puts the experience into a broader framework of theory and behavior. Relating the experience to conceptual models and other experiences helps the learning become integrated for the individual.
6. Structure the climate of the activity so that individuals are “freed up” rather than anxious or defensive. That is, set the climate of interventions so that people expect “to learn together” and “to look at practices in an experimenting way so that we can build better procedures.”
7. Structure the activity so that the participants learn both how to solve a particular problem and “learn how to learn.” Such structure often means scheduling time for reflecting on the activity and teasing out learnings; it may mean devoting as much as half the activity to one focus and half to the other.
8. Structure the activity so that individuals learn about both *task* and *process*. The task is what the group is working on, that is, the stated agenda items. The term *process* refers to *how* the group is working and *what else is going on* as participants work on the task, including the group’s processes and dynamics, individual styles of interacting and behaving, and so on. Learning to be skillful in both of these areas is a powerful asset.
9. Structure the activity so that individuals are engaged as whole persons, not segmented persons. It means calling into play role demands, thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and strivings. Integrating disparate parts of individuals in an organizational world that commonly divides roles, feelings, and thoughts enhances the individual’s ability to learn and grow.

These points developed from practice theory, and implementing these points causes interventions to be more effective.

A third set of considerations concerns choosing and sequencing intervention activities. Michael Beer suggests the following guidelines:

These decision rules can help a change agent focus on the relevant issues in making decisions about how to integrate a variety of interventions. They are rules for managing the implementation process.

1. *Maximize diagnostic data.* In general, interventions that will provide data needed to make subsequent intervention decisions should come first. This is particularly true when change agents do not know much about the situation. Violation of this rule can lead to choosing inappropriate interventions.
2. *Maximize effectiveness.* Interventions should be chosen so that they have the highest probability of being effective.