Papers on Organization Development

Introduction

My early papers on organization development (OD) reflect the issues in the field, as it took shape in the sixties and early seventies. OD had its roots in sensitivity training, and its underlying values were the same as those of T groups: open and honest communication, trust, and power sharing. For the benefit of readers for whom the words, "T group" and "sensitivity training" do not have clear referents, they refer to a form of training that takes place in groups of ten to twelve members, usually meeting for a total of six hours a day, in two hour segments, with a facilitator. The group has no agenda, other than to explore and understand its own processes, nor are structures and procedures imposed by the facilitator. The facilitator intervenes to help the group understand its process, sometimes making interpretations, sometimes suggesting activities the group can undertake to learn more. He or she also endeavors to keep the group's attention focused on the "here and now," the actions, events, and feelings that are occurring in present time within the group.

The T group is designed to frustrate most of the ways people normally structure time and distribute power and influence in task oriented groups and meetings. Strong feelings about the experience and about one another are generated as members endeavor to cope with the ambiguity of the situation, and meet their needs for control, belonging, and positive regard. Group members are encouraged to express their feelings about what is happening in the group, and about one another's behavior. The term, "feedback" was borrowed from the field of electronics as a name for the process of sharing one's perceptions of and reactions to another member's behavior.

The facilitator discourages side trips into the "there and then": intellectual discussions, stories about events and people not present in the group, personal history, etc. It is the strong focus on the "here and now" that distinguishes T groups from encounter groups and therapy groups. If the experience goes well, and the group meets with some success in creating its own norms and making a life for itself, trust and good feeling build between the members. The trust fosters intimacy, deep self disclosure, and increasingly honest and sensitive "feedback."

T group "laboratories" may last a weekend, a week, or even longer. In 1960, when I began working with T groups professionally, the sessions conducted by the National Training Laboratories (NTL) at Bethel, Maine, were three weeks long. Within a decade, the duration of a normal lab had shrunk to a week.

Following a T group experience, members usually report having learned a great deal about the ways in which their interpersonal style and behaviors are perceived by others. They may also say that they have become more observant and aware of the subtleties of group and interpersonal dynamics. The heyday of T groups was during the sixties. By the seventies, many T group trainers were conducting "encounter groups," which were designed to strip participants of their defenses and produce very deep and lasting personal transformation. While I did join encounter groups as a participant, I was not interested in leading them. I believed it was too easy to damage participants psychologically. By the mid seventies, T groups and encounter groups were both on the wane. Their decline may have been helped by the notoriety they acquired through the excesses of some practitioners. There may also have been a diminishing interest in deep personal exploration, along with an increasing availability of alternative therapies and other ways of learning about the self. The NTL Institute continues to offer a diminished schedule of T group laboratories, and the method is still applied in the

training of organization development consultants. Much of what was learned by T group and encounter group practitioners lives on in the technologies of group facilitation, in team development methods, and in new methods of group and individual therapy. For some time it appeared to me that the *art form* of working with group dynamics was dying out, but that now seems to be having something of a renaissance in methods developed for working with whole systems, such as Future Search and the Technologies of Participation developed by the Institute for Cultural Affairs. For those interested in the practical application of these methods, Marvin Weisbord's recent publication is well worth reading (Weisbord, 1993), as is Laura Spencer's useful manual on the ICA approaches (Spencer, 1989).

T groups evoked great missionary zeal among practitioners. As I experienced it, we became a movement dedicated to democratizing and humanizing the work place, first through training leaders in "stranger labs" that mixed people from different organizations, and later through bringing T groups and their variations into organizations. It was evident from the first that in-company sensitivity training could be tricky and delicate. Participants were more defensive and cautious in groups where what they did and said could have consequences for working relationships, and many group members were threatened by power differences within the groups.

I was deeply involved in the application of T groups within organizations, most particularly in a project within Esso Research & Engineering, in which I and a number of NTL Associates trained Esso's internal consultants to conduct T groups. From my work in Esso and elsewhere, I formed the opinion that T groups were not safe interventions within business organizations. Too often, participants were seduced by the trusting atmosphere of the group into unwisely revealing inner thoughts and feelings which later came back to damage work relationships, and sometimes their

careers. Although business organizations today still have strong norms against the expression of feelings at work, the permitted range of emotional behavior was much narrower then. The groups were supposed to be confidential, but either their revelations found their way into performance evaluations, or they were used as ammunition in the political infighting which is endemic in most organizations. By the end of the decade, the use of T groups in organizations was rapidly dying out. Safer variations of the basic method lasted longer, of which the most popular was the Managerial Grid, developed by Robert Blake and his associates. By the mid seventies, sensitivity training had such a bad reputation in business that many OD consultants had learned not to share with prospective clients that they had ever had anything to do with T groups.

As it became clear that conducting sensitivity training with people who work together was a risky and often irresponsible adventure, many of us began to search for safer and more effective ways of fostering openness, trust, cooperation, and power sharing in work groups. My early papers "Choosing the Depth of Organizational Intervention," and "Role Negotiation" were a part of that search, which has continued to this day.

In the late sixties I moved myself and my consulting practice to Europe, where I worked intensively for a while with new plant startup. I did not publish anything on my experiences until 1981, when I wrote "Startup: The Care and Feeding of Infant Systems." I also participated actively during the early seventies in training consultants in the UK, during the high tide of European interest and admiration for US management methods. "Guidelines for an Internal Organization Development Unit" was a contribution to that work. Then, for about a decade from the early seventies to the early eighties I turned my attention from organization development consulting to management education and development. "Personal Power and Influence in Organization Development" was

written during the latter part of that period, as I began to turn back to my earlier

interest in OD. When I returned to consulting in the eighties, the climate for our work

had changed. Under the pressure of global competition, organizations were much more

open to what we had to offer. I wrote "Empowerment in Organizations" during that

period, and followed it with "Managing Transition to a More Responsive Organization:

A Blueprint for Implementing Organization Change." The latter paper reflects the more

expansive spirit of the eighties, when we were being given opportunities to attempt

major changes in values, styles and ways of working together in large systems.

At about the same time, I wrote "Towards the Self Managing Organization," which is

about creating an organization vision and mission statement. In it I make a case for

using the visioning exercise as a transformational experience for the top team, creating a

"crucible" within which are forged the "ties that bind" people to one another and to their

common purpose. In a sense I return to my T group experiences for these ideas, and I

have found the translation productive.

The first paper in this section, "From T-Groups to Organizational Healing: A

Consultant's Journey" was written in 1993. It gives a condensed version of my

professional history and of how I have seen the field of OD develop since its inception

in the sixties. It reflects the philosophical mood that I have been in for several years, as I

survey how our profession has changed and what we have achieved, and consider

where I want to put my own energies during the coming decades. In it I make a case

for our focusing our energies where I see the most urgent need: in bringing about

changes in consciousness in organizations that will support our relating to nature and

to our Planet in ways that are sustainable and harmonious, rather than destructive and

competitive.