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The Global OD Practitioner

Our Learning Edge

By Suzanne M. Zaldivar

Doing OD in our culture-clashing world challenges our sense of ourselves and potentially undermines our values, our worldviews, and our confidence in what works. How do we hone our practice and hold ourselves accountable as global practitioners? How do we bridge vastly different value systems and navigate through the fog of incomplete information coupled with perennial misunderstanding, which are common in cross-cultural work?

This article explores our learning edge as global practitioners, which is essentially how we can remain grounded yet open and compassionate in the midst of turbulence.

We are the Change We Want to See in the World

> **Whoever does not help himself cannot help others.**
> —*Yemeni Prover*b

As OD practitioners we know how to create space—fertile ground for exploration beyond the now that somehow includes the past and the future. We know how to listen to the stories of many, protecting the voices of those previously unheard. We feel deeply the need to celebrate the human spirit, to shout beyond demure convention about the future that is rooted deep in the heart. We are the conveyors of possibility, and the peddlers of difficult conversation.

We have been catalysts of energy, and we have been warriors of healing. Diplomats of difference. Careful listeners. Imaginers of the whole, not just the parts.

We need to be grounded by our roots and soar beyond them. We must embrace theory, and inform the theory and our practice with an expanded world of diverse global experience.

As a profession, we do not own the practice of OD; it is practiced by many who have never taken a class or seminar—community builders, capacity developers, peace-keepers. It is practiced by wise client systems we sometimes stumble upon. Though the profession is young, what we do is not new, but arguably more refined in our multicultural world. We inherit theory from many different ancestral disciplines and continue to be informed by all that affects the human condition. Our profession offers a wisdom gleaned from distinctions earned through sweat, experience, and focused contemplation. We advocate for a conscious and responsible use of the methods because we respect their power. The use of OD—the practice of value-laden, participative, facilitated change that embraces learning as a means to add value—knows no boundaries, except us, the crucial instrument of the practice.

We present a boundary to breakthrough when we, ourselves, get in the way. In our work we can be an obstruction or a conduit; the passageway between the two is paved with awareness, whose biggest gift, in return, is choice. The more aware we are; the more choices we have. The more aware we help our client systems to be, the more choices they have. More consciously than many other professions, we use our awareness to transform ourselves into instruments to bridge paradigms and create dialogue across organizational,

societal, and cultural boundaries. We use awareness of our own experience of the client system as a visceral symptom of the wider dynamics at play. It is a powerful role we play. The burden is on us to wield this power responsibly.

The Paradox of OD Across Cultures

> Q: Who discovered water?
> A: I don't know, but it wasn't a fish.
> —*Proverbial Yiddish Riddle*

As we awaken to our global interconnectivity, the foundations upon which we stand, the lenses we use, the assumptions we make must be routinely questioned. We must assume from the beginning that we do not know, that we will not ever fully understand, and work from there, using theories and models as useful handles, not immovable orthodoxies.

OD is a value-laden methodology whose values can clash with other societal and organizational cultures. For example, I explored the contrast of OD values with the values of Afghanistan and how it impacted the consulting process (2010). Fagenson-Eland, Ensher, and Burke (2004) studied 7 nations in an attempt to understand how cultural values impact the practice of OD in different parts of the world. Vonk (2014) explored how interactive interventions can be adapted across cultures. Our theories contain assumptions which might not be universally held. Large group interventions might not work where people do not feel safe talking openly in settings of mixed status and power. New interest in brain science might be tempered if we consider who is involved in brain studies. Do they include people from around the world, from mixed economic backgrounds, education, languages, or diverse races/ethnicities? Do the studies help or hinder our appreciation of the relevance of culture, context, mindsets, and systems thinking?

Theory as preconception can inform and it can prevent connection. Attached to a need to understand and be right, we undermine our ability to observe and be present. If you are not convinced that theory can get in the way of relationship, try bringing a flipchart and marker to your next romantic dinner to chart the conversation!

How can we broaden our appreciation of what it means to be rigorous that enables us to flexibly navigate across boundaries we are only vaguely aware of? Can we remain open to stories as well as studies? Are we willing to be influenced by that which does not fit our preconceived notions or current models?

Working across cultures is an exercise in humility. Working in a language that is not one's native language gives the visceral experience of incomplete understanding, and the need for keen attention to the human connection beyond the verbal. It invites us to release the need to fully comprehend and widen our embrace to one of deepened presence and appreciation. We release a focus on being right or appearing competent, and draw instead upon what is essential to our practice: self-awareness, presence, and learning about the other.

Self-Awareness at a Broader and Deeper Level

> No one says his own buttermilk is sour. —*Afghan Proverb*

We have blind spots about ourselves which affect how we see clients. While we need to be comfortable with not knowing, we can hone our global practice by being more aware of our filters. The goal is not to be bias free, but bias aware. When working across cultures (and is not every encounter a cross-cultural one?) we can increase our effectiveness by widening the questions we ask ourselves. One useful exercise is exploring our UCL, the Unique Cultural Lens (E. Zaldivar, 2014), which asks us to reflect on nationality, race, ethnicity, education, class, religion, age, ability, gender identity, etc. to bring to consciousness that which informs our mindset. It is only by appreciating our own unique cultural lens that we can be in a position to appreciate a cultural lens different than our own. However, awareness is just the beginning. For us to be accountable as practitioners, we need to let our self-awareness inform how we effectively manage ourselves.

Another means to increase our self-awareness as global practitioners is to reflect on where we might fall on Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman's continuum of cultural sensitivity, from "ethnocentric" to "ethnorelative" (2003) (see *Table 1*). Do we

Table 1. *Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman's Continuum of Cultural Sensitivity*

Ethnocentric			Ethnorelative		
Denial	**Defense**	**Minimization**	**Acceptance**	**Adaptation**	**Integration**
My cultural experience is the only one that is real and valid. There is little to no thought of "other."	"We" are superior and "they" are inferior. One feels threatened and is highly critical of the other culture.	Other cultures are trivialized or romanticized. One tends to deny differences (e.g., "color blind") and only seek similarities.	I accept but may not agree with other cultures. Generally, one is curious and respectful.	I "see" the world though different eyes and make intentional changes in my own behavior and values.	I easily move in and out of different cultural worldviews.

deny difference or embrace it? What is our comfort level for working across cultures? Have we taken advantage of our experiences with those different from us to adopt multiple lenses to perceive the world, or do we use interactions to reinforce our worldview and reject others? To deepen reflection, we can further consider whether we are "theory-centric" or "model-centric" or whether we use a favorite approach without considering its cultural fit.

Given that we are an overtly values-based profession, is it possible to move easily in and out of different cultural worldviews without losing ourselves?

Sawubona – Sikhona

> **The eyes do not see what the mind does not want.**
> —*Indian Proverb*

There is a Zulu greeting, Sawubona "I see you and all of your potential" whose response is "Sikhona," which means "because you see me and all of my potential, I exist in this world and have meaning." It is a lovely phrase—expansive and compassionate. Yet when we encounter people who are truly different (as is the case in cross-cultural work), we are tested in our ability to truly "see" the other.

Our values, which we rely on as anchors and compasses, can easily become swords of judgment and prejudice. Since a cross-cultural experience can be understood as a cross-value experience, then we need to also explore how encountering different values can cause a strong reaction in us, effectively forming trigger points. When we are triggered, science would say that our amygdala is activated, we go into fight/flight/freeze mode, are less in touch with our higher mental functioning, and are less able to perceive. Spiritual traditions would suggest that we are ungrounded and uncentered. Are you a feminist who is working in a high masculine culture? Do you believe in participation, yet need to navigate effectively within the parameters of an authoritarian, hierarchical organization? Do you belong to a nation which shares a painful history with your client's nation?

When do our values then become blinders? Are we unable to witness what we disagree with? Do we only see what is in congruence with our beliefs? If you come from a dominant culture (consider which cultures are dominant around the world, which in turn, silence other worldviews) can you work effectively where you do not belong? Can you create space for a minority worldview that makes you uncomfortable?

Bottom line, how do we hold clients with Carl Rogers' unconditional positive regard when we disagree with them?

If our sensibilities are offended by the culture of our client system (offend—from Latin—"to strike against") to what extent do we contribute to the battle and undermine our ability to be a conduit to wholeness?

Is everything relative, then? Are we to not advocate for our values and for the greater good we hold to be true? How do we manage the paradox of advocacy vs. wholeness? The clue is that it is easier to fight for one's principles than live up to them.

Development Through Expansion

> **Only from the heart can you touch the sky.**
> —*Mawlana Jalal-ud-Din Mohammad Balkhi-Rumi*

Imagine dancing at music rather than with it. The harmonious and discordant music of the human condition invites us not to stand on the outside and act upon it, but to move with it, expanding our sense of what it means to be someone of integrity

and skill. The transformation is not out there. The transformation is us. And our transformation has never been so needed as it is in this time of global culture clash which often leads to violence. OD has never been needed more as a disciplined practice of bridging paradigms and representing all of the voices in the system, not just the loudest.

If we need to hold our theories and models lightly, then what are we left with? Ourselves. And the opportunity before us is to practice our profession with even greater awareness and skill than ever. What is essential is how we develop ourselves

We do clients no favors if our hopes for them prevent us from seeing what is. Working in the world involves bearing witness as much to pain, inequity, brutal history, and ongoing struggle as it means witnessing innovation, healing, growth and efficiency. It requires a wide embrace and a means to stay rooted while being present. How might we get into condition to practice in an expansive way that both nurtures and stretches us?

through expansion, somehow allowing our being to become bigger in order to be able to embrace paradox. And in some way deepening our compassion for the human condition to be able to witness even that which threatens to undermine us.

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How might we get into condition to practice in an expansive way that both nurtures and stretches us?

We can draw inspiration from *agape*, or what the ancient Greeks considered unconditional love, love with no attachments. Like love itself, expansive practice is freely available to all, yet paradoxically presents a high bar in terms of embodiment. Can we remain effective and release our

attachments to outcome, full understanding, agreement, and harmony? Can we practice the values of the profession more than preach them?

This stretch of ourselves is possible if the growth of expansion is coupled with a deepening of centeredness. It is like a tree whose long roots enable it to move, but not break, during a windstorm. How can we ground ourselves enough to not be thrown off by challenging situations, and yet remain open and flexible? Some approaches to grounding might include:

» breathing deeply
» taking time out for reflection
» seeking a reality check with a colleague
» standing or sitting straight while imagining roots growing out of your feet, deep into the earth
» softening your gaze
» humor

Once we are grounded, we are in a better position to stretch and grow in ways that enable us to practice OD in a more expansive way. *Table 2* offers some possibilities of how we can expand our practice, reflecting on both the default and the learning edge of our orientation/mindset. In order to emphasize that there is not a right or wrong, the paradox we need to balance is suggested for each dynamic.

There are likely many more dynamics to consider than are covered in this table. Rather than prescribing a solution, the table offers a template to expand the imagination as well as the possibilities for development. The goal of the table is to help us consider how to build on various dynamics of an effective global OD practice. It also highlights where we might need to manage a paradox versus seek a solution. The ultimate goal for this expansive practice is to:

» deepen our ability to navigate difference;
» increase our ability to embrace paradox;
» lower our defenses so we can remain present and competent;
» strengthen our ability to function in challenging situations;
» enhance our ability to perceive;
» build a tolerance for ambiguity;
» refine our learning agility; and
» broaden compassion.

OD Is Relevant and Needed

Practicing OD in our interconnected world can feel chaotic and destabilizing. If we are open to being influenced by what we experience, it can cause us to question ourselves, our values, and our worldview. Yet our profession contains the essence of what we need to navigate the rough waters of culture clash. Our ability to listen, be empathetic, and open to experimentation allows us to respond with skill rather than shut down or dominate. In fact, there is a certain economy that emerges from the chaos: ignorance invites us to be open to learning, humility invites us to be open to interdependence, and conflicting information invites us to deeper and transcendent discernment.

As we open our embrace to the world, let our focus deepen into the skillful

Table 2. *Development of the Global Practitioner*

| Dynamic | ORIENTATION/MINDSET | | Paradox |
	Default	Learning edge	
Cultural sensitivity	Ethnocentric	Ethnorelative	Belonging vs. growing
Expertise	Shows up in favorite theory/model	Lightly holding theories/models—dropping or adapting them	Discerning vs. learning
Awareness	Self-awareness	Self/cultural awareness plus self-management	Authenticity vs. accountability
Processing	Rational—need to explain everything is central	Holistic—need to explain everything is tempered with willingness to be surprised	Thinking vs. presence
Meaning making	Assumed to be universal & cognitive	Acknowledge that it emerges socially and culturally-in music, dance, story-telling, theater, etc.	Intellectual vs. experience
Inquiry	Studies	Stories	Repeatability vs. co-creation
Communication	Straight talk	Culturally appropriate communication	Transparency vs. respect
Values	Advocating values	Embodying values	Pushing for change vs. being the change
Attitude	Being competent	Being playful	Rigor vs. flexibility
Self-care	Take care of self to manage stress	Be open to growth and discomfort	Grounding vs. expansion

practice of OD, and let us release our grip on the question of whether the profession is relevant. OD is needed in our world today. And the global practice of OD is not a niche; it is who we are.

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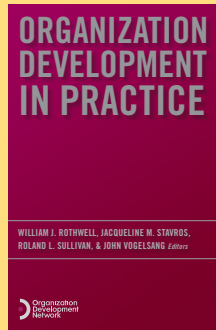
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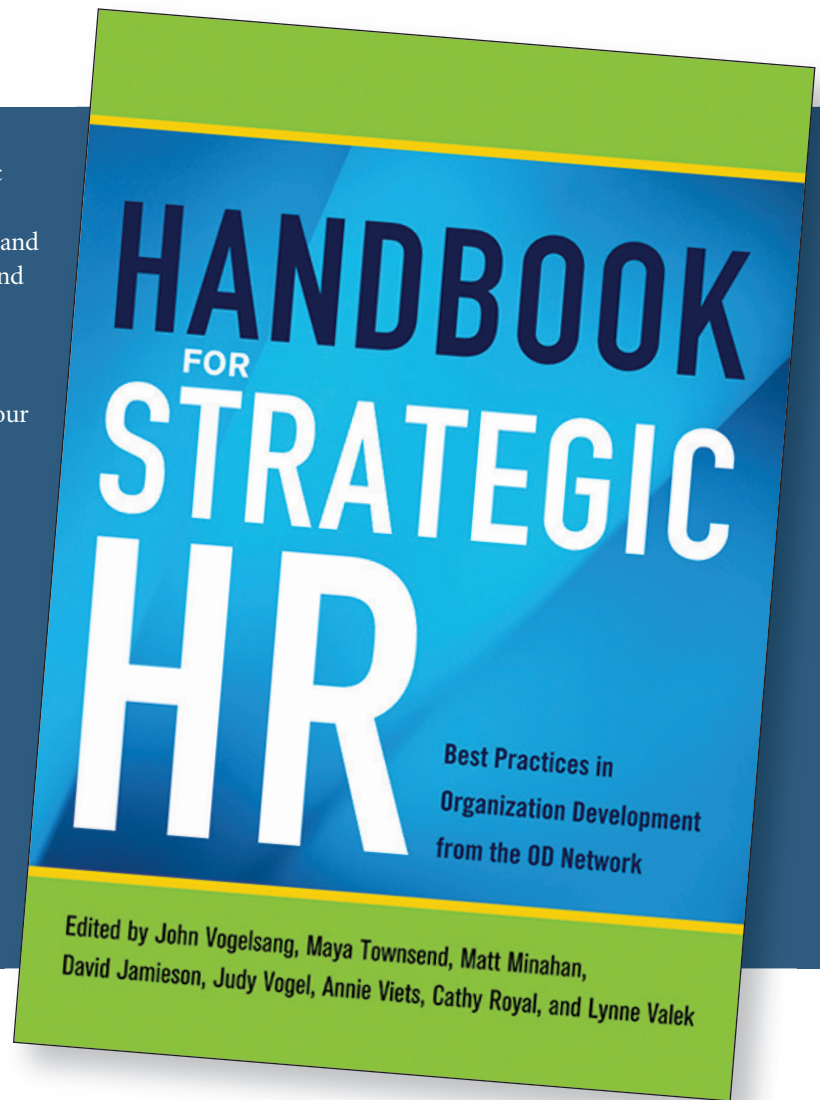### Accelerating Change: New Ways of Thinking about Engaging the Whole System
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