

# OD Consulting – What is it and what impact does it have on the Bottom Line?

**Organisation Development (OD) is an innovative approach to solving organisational problems using the application of the behavioural sciences. As a discipline it evolved in the 70's relying on much of the research in organisational behaviour. OD is very much focused on using applied psychology to resolve key organisational issues arising from strategic dilemmas, failure of leadership, poor cultural design, post acquisition drift, team building, conflict etc.**

Johanna Smith asks Philip Atkinson for the lowdown on OD Consultancy.



## ***Surely, Phil, Organisational Development is just a part of traditional HR work?***

Not at all. It differs radically. HR is usually focused on developing and implementing policies to retain, develop and motivate the people in a business. OD operates at a different level partnering with the top team in business development. OD practitioners work on achieving the effectiveness for the business and take both strategic and tactical issues into account.

## ***So, what are the differences between HR and OD?***

Very big differences in scope. OD people are usually objective and external to the system. They have loyalty to the whole business – not just to the HR function. You can often see the HR people working closely with building the day to day relationships whereas OD is concerned with building a rigorous infrastructure to enable the business to achieve its objectives without a strictly HR only agenda. It's no surprise to find in a large number of organisations that HR is nowhere near the Board – whereas an External OD person may be able to better represent the people and cultural issues.

## ***And what benefits can a client expect in applying external OD?***

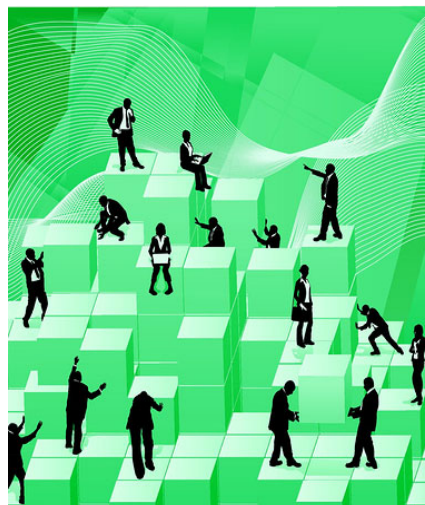
It has tremendous impact for achieving results. It's better than a health check. The analogy would be a company Doctor assessing what's hindering corporate performance. Just suppose, as a business leader that you could rely on one or two people to enter into the business with the express intent of tangibly improving performance; undertake diagnostics to assess long standing acute problems; then implement actions to remove the cause and prevent those problems arising again. Further, any good OD person will put processes and behaviours in place to prevent problems rising again.

What value would that create for the enterprise? What would that objective analysis and resulting implementation be worth to the business?

## ***What are the bigger challenges facing businesses today that can be addressed by OD?***

The general issue is that most organisations could manage to implement change much more effectively in a variety of contexts, from developing and implementing

customer centric strategies across the business, to post acquisition integration; from a failure to demonstrate leadership to expanding business in new geographies; to developing state of the art best practise in strategic thinking and selling to building a matrix culture.



**Change has to be owned by the line. More and more of my time is spent enabling line managers to acquire skills and strategies to become self-reliant in driving change whether it be in process improvement, team diagnostics or culture change.**

## ***Why are these problems being experienced by organisations right now?***

Because the problems weren't dealt with in earlier years. The demographics don't help. Many organisations are experiencing some real problems in recruiting and retaining the best.

I took a senior manager aside last week. He admitted he would recruit someone who was unsuitable for a managerial role stating "It's better to have a pair of arms and legs doing the job 40% right than leaving the vacancy open for six months not having anyone doing the job at all!"

When that's the mentality of senior management you know the rot has set into the business and it needs motivating and performing beyond those low standards.

## ***As a matter of interest just how big an issue is motivation in companies?***

Huge - it pervades some sectors almost entirely. Listen, HR Recruitment businesses have never been busier. I don't mean finding people – but finding people of the right calibre. Motivating people beyond their comfort zones is what should be occupying most managerial time.

## ***In practise, how prevalent is OD in bringing about change?***

It's critical but change has to become a core competence for the business. It's no good grounding the change competency in the HR section however competent and able they are. HR should be creating policy not running around helping introduce this change. They need to step back and support us as they do in driving the capabilities of change into line-management.

## ***What's a typical intervention?***

Typically, is there is a problem that no one has taken ownership to resolve. It's usually a long term issue that has boiled to the top and now putting the organisation at risk. First, it's critical to set up some temporary fixes and then work on a solution to protect the business in the immediate future. I am glad to say more and more business is coming to us from senior people who are looking into the future and predicting where action is best invested. I love working for these clients who are concerned not just with today but also tomorrow.

## ***What do your Clients want?***

They want solutions that work fast. That means that speed is imperative in

implementation. Quick fixes are rejected, and so is the long slow burn to implementation. Change takes as long as the client wants it to take. It's in their hands, and I build up expectations to a realistic level. Usually what holds organisations back from changing fast enough is an inertia enshrined within the attitude of a managerial strata who really should be driving change.

***It sounds like there can be some conflict. Is OD confrontational?***

It doesn't need to be – but some times you have to be assertive and tell people like it is – not how they would prefer to hear it! Most Clients want the pain to go away and prefer the honesty of an external OD person whose results are measured right then and there.

***Who have you worked with?***

A large number of great organisations ranging from General Electric in Plastics and Financial Services, to Charities such as RSPB and Health Care Trusts.

I work in continental Europe and the USA and Canada on M&A and strategic change management activity for several businesses on long term initiatives.

The big name organisations include Dow, Corning, Unisys, BT, Lloyds, VWFS, BT, Mortgage Express, Clydesdale Bank, Scottish Provident, CMG, GE Capital, CNH Global – the list is extensive and the experience is absolutely fantastic.

The scope and the depth of interventions is focused on the 'bottom line through culture change' and we work on the basis of deep rapport with a close client-consultant relationship that you cannot always get with the big boys!

***How did you get into it?***

After working as an Economist and then in HR/OD I was a senior lecturer in organisational psychology – I wrote a lot for Journals and published several books. Those who read the texts were often interested in applying the ideas to their businesses and asked me to start working with them to help improve performance. Besides that, my MSc was in OD.

***What has given you the buzz for your work?***

I love dealing with change. The best thing anyone can say to me is, "We have an issue we are not



**I work in continental Europe and the USA and Canada on M&A and strategic change management activity for several businesses on long term initiatives.**

sure of the answer – could you help us, design and implement a strategy with us?" That's what gets me out of bed in the morning and keeps me stimulated to resolve. There is a great buzz in delivering a solution that impacts an organisation's performance and making people's lives better too.

***What do you get from it?***

Apart from the buzz – doing something I love. I will always do it. I also have built up a long list of clients of whom many have become personal friends. I get to share a deep level of achievement with my clients, of making things better.

***What are the core skills?***

Focus on rapport building with your clients, creating a strong working partnership, always looking beyond the established practise, working beyond the zone of comfort of occasions, and applying a rigorous approach to making sure that change will be implemented and the intended results happen.

***Explain what OD is to you.***

It's simple – it's about three things. It's about focus. You have to know where you are going with the business and the client. It's also about having and giving energy to others. You have to demonstrate energy, energise the client and sell your strategies passionately so that others really appreciate and experience the benefits of what you are partnering them through. You also need alignment. You have to make sure the business is working across the organisation – so you have to know how to install a matrix culture and structure to implement change.

***Why those three things?***

It's no good having lots of strategy without energy – that's being a theoretician. Too much energy and no focus implies being a busy fool. Energy and focus without alignment leads to lack of implementation and a failure to gather momentum and sustain the change.

***What do you do when you're not working with clients?***

Making every attempt I can to invest in my energy levels by maintaining a high level of fitness and spending time with my family and people whose company I enjoy. I love reading and researching. I make every attempt to read as much as I can and ensure I keep on top of research, as well as writing articles and keeping my blog up to date. I'm also a keen mountain biker.

---

**Philip Atkinson** specialises in strategic cultural and behavioural change. For the last twenty years he has been engaged as a consultant supporting companies in strategic development, organisational design, business expansion due diligence, post acquisition integration, quality management and culture change. He regularly presents at conferences and workshop sessions and has written seven books on change management and his articles are regularly published in a number of management journals. He can be contacted on 0131-346-1276 or through his websites at [www.philipatkinsonconsulting.com](http://www.philipatkinsonconsulting.com) or [www.woburnconsulting.com](http://www.woburnconsulting.com) or email at [AtkinsonConsult@aol.com](mailto:AtkinsonConsult@aol.com) or [Phil@woburnconsulting.com](mailto:Phil@woburnconsulting.com)