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# OD is Diversity

## Differences are at the Heart of the Field

By Robert D. Greene and  
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*After meeting with the CEO and the senior management team, Jerry, an OD consultant, designs an off-site to begin a change process for a medium size firm. The off-site proceeds apace until one participant makes a statement about race that some take as charged. A heated exchange between two staff—one black, one white—ensues. Caught off-guard and not sure what to do, Jerry continues with the planned agenda, though the tension remains for the rest of the day.*

It is well understood that demographics in the U.S. are changing rapidly. It is no longer possible to assume that there’s “no diversity” in organizations. Failing to attend to diversity, that is, to note issues related to race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability and other identities can limit the effect of organizational change processes. Practitioners are too often surprised when issues related to diversity arise in assessments, meetings, and other interventions. This is due, in part, to seeing diversity as a separate specialty rather than a fundamental area of competence critical to all dimensions of OD practice.

Many OD practitioners focus on one or a few areas or approaches, such as strategic planning, appreciative inquiry, leadership development, etc. It is, of course, reasonable to focus on what one most enjoys and does well. Diversity is seen as one of these specialties, and many practitioners don’t believe they need skill or awareness if they “don’t do diversity.”

Although we are not proposing

that every OD practitioner needs to be a diversity expert, we believe it’s impossible to implement OD interventions effectively in the 21st century without at least basic awareness and competence in diversity matters. The principles of diversity—broad and meaningful participation by all members of a system in order to maximize available creativity and energy for organizational learning and effectiveness—are fundamental to OD. Diversity requires looking at the effects of any change effort on different subpopulations within the system. Too much is lost if diversity is ignored, and, in fact, it’s possible for an OD practitioner to do harm in a system if diversity is not adequately taken into account.

Rather than a specialty area, we see diversity as, by definition, a fundamental part of OD. Attentiveness to diversity is critical for: (a) taking a systems perspective; (b) using the OD process; and (c) maximizing stakeholder participation.

**(a) Taking a systems perspective.**

Understanding a system in its complexity is aided by recognizing multiple perspectives and the interplay among departments, sub-units, and identity groups. By paying attention to the impact of actions on different populations, we make sure we account for key aspects of the system, and, therefore, create comprehensive and lasting change. For us to help leaders guide change, it’s critical to know if responses due to feeling listened to/ignored or highly motivated/resistant break down along the lines

of identity groups. We therefore need to be “tracking”—noting the different experiences and perspectives of identity subgroups within a system. Attention to diversity encourages us to listen to key stakeholders who might otherwise be ignored in the assessment phase of strategic planning. While those in the majority may be excited by the vision of the future identified through Appreciative Inquiry (AI), others may feel ignored or marginalized (for a discussion of AI and diversity, see Cathy Royal, 2006). For example, unless intentionally engaged, an organizational restructuring may further distance support staff, who in urban areas are often primarily women of color, from program staff, who are more likely to be majority white. Attending to diversity increases the likelihood that a change process will benefit the system as a whole along with its many parts.

Taking a systems perspective also extends to understanding the larger system of which the organization is a part. For example, internal tensions among subgroups may arise in relation to external events. The challenges faced by Muslims in the U.S. in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon come to mind.

**(b) Implementing the OD process from entry through closure.** At each step along the way of the OD process—entry, contracting, data gathering and analysis, feedback, etc.—OD practitioners must remain open to what’s going on in the system from multiple perspectives and identity groups. To be blind to diversity dynamics can mean missing subtle and not-so-subtle forces driving or inhibiting change. How can we do an adequate force-field analysis if we miss important forces? There is a growing literature showing how to utilize OD to conduct diversity work (see for example, Bailey W. Jackson, 2006)—we are making a corollary point: that it is actually impossible to do OD well without attending to diversity.

TABLE 1: What is Gained by Attending to Diversity Throughout the OD Process

Attending to diversity strengthens our OD work. Fundamental information necessary for a successful OD consultation is more readily available at each step of the OD process when we remain aware of diversity. And, of course, much will be overlooked if diversity is not intentionally tracked throughout the process.

- » **Taking a systems perspective**  
Enhanced ability to use multiple perspectives to gain a more complete picture of the organization. Greater ability to observe power in play. Greater attention to the interplay among departments, sub-units, and identity groups within a system.
- » **Enhanced insight/skill in use-of-self and presence**  
Greater self-awareness and increased skill in using oneself as an instrument of change. Better understanding of our presence in groups and the common responses people of different identity groups have to us. Increased ability to read subtle dynamics. Increased authenticity, including with people of identity groups different than our own.
- » **Making stronger connections**  
Enhanced ability to build rapport and trust with diverse constituencies from the first contact.
- » **Improved intervention choices**  
Better awareness of likely consequences of choices, including potentially unintended consequences. Enhanced skill in choosing data gathering and group process methods and interventions that support all groups’ meaningful participation.
- » **Maximizing stakeholder participation**  
Greater ability to create a place to dialogue and to demonstrate the integrity of the process by including often overlooked participants.
- » **Enhanced ability to observe and affect group dynamics**  
Greater sensitivity to the unsaid, covert processes, and the voices that are not speaking up. Reduced likelihood that we will impact the group negatively by working unconsciously from our biases or ignorance.

**(c) Maximizing stakeholder participation.** When the field now called OD was in formation, Kurt Lewin stressed that people commit to what they help create. This insight leads us to develop skills to foster maximum participation. But if participation is to be meaningful, it’s essential to explore who is participating, who is not, and the barriers that prevent some from full inclusion. In fact, it is necessary to watch for *exclusion* so that we and our clients can foster *inclusion*. Having people in attendance at a meeting, workshop, or whole-systems event is a good start. Is there true dialogue that takes a variety of interests into account? For example, are African-American men or people from a certain level in the organization noticeably silent? It’s also important to look at how people from different groups are included *beyond the* meeting, and whether there is broad participation in creating strategy and driving

implementation. We can therefore maximize inclusion by creating space to dialogue and to demonstrate the integrity of the process by including often overlooked participants.

As stated above, diversity is crucial to consider throughout the OD process—from entry through evaluation. Along with cultivation of our use of self as an instrument of change, attending to diversity opens us to tracking data we might otherwise overlook. Upon entering a client system, we can increase rapport and trust with a wide range of individuals by perceiving accurately how people of different demographic groups commonly respond to us. For example, the authors, a black woman and a white man, frequently notice that different groups respond to us differently. Furthermore, we can use how people respond to us as consultants as a guide to how they might respond to each other in the system. Attending to diversity

also effects the choices of interventions we make and helps us more readily recognize the, possibly unintended, consequences of our choices. At each step we are working to build trust, scanning the system, and increasing our and the client’s awareness and options. *Table 1* illustrates some of what is to be gained when diversity is attended to throughout the OD process (and, therefore, potentially lost if diversity is overlooked).

Returning to the vignette mentioned at the beginning of the article, a number of questions come to mind about the consultant’s preparation for the off-site, and the entire change process. What happened during the contracting phase—just what were the expectations shared between consultant and client? How did Jerry gather data and from whom? Who seemed open and who appeared tentative or reserved when interacting with him? Were there indicators of racial tension present that Jerry had failed to pick up? And why did the consultant attempt to maintain the planned agenda when the strong tensions surfaced?

So what is to be done? Practitioners at all levels of experience, whether they have developed skills and tools regarding diversity or not, have options for action at each step of the OD process. A few of the options available are listed in *Table 2*.

### **An Example of Attending to Organizational Diversity**

The vignette presented at the beginning of the article is a composite of situations we have experienced. In contrast, here is an actual case in which the consultant, who is clear that she does not “do diversity,” effectively handled a challenging situation. An organization that promotes healthcare for underserved people embarked on strategic planning with the consultant. In the course of gathering data, the consultant learned that concerns about racial discrimination in hiring, firing, and promotions were at the forefront for many staff. Rather than treat the diversity concerns as “off-topic,” this colleague recognized that unless the diversity issues were addressed, the organization’s

**TABLE 2: Ideas for Action on Diversity Throughout the Organization Development Process**

Regardless of your experience consulting on diversity issues, here is a partial list of ideas for action for developing a diversity lens and improving your work with diverse groups.

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#### **“Pre-Entry” (Continuous Learning)**

- » Build increased self-awareness and skill in diversity by deeply exploring your own beliefs, values, blind spots, and biases. Do this through reading, attending workshops, requesting feedback, exploring your own upbringing and cultural background. Articulate the deepest values that motivate your work.
- » Join in diversity discussions. Purposely join (or create) groups where diversity is an intentional part of the conversation. Request feedback about your presence in groups.

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#### **Entry & Contracting**

- » Notice who is in the room when decisions are made. What is the demographic composition of the client(s)? Noting who is involved with gatekeeping and contracting begins to give clues to power dynamics in the organization.
- » Note the quality of participation in contracting. How do parties converse and negotiate expectations? Who speaks up? Who appears motivated or not to proceed? Note whether the dynamics track by identity groups.

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#### **Data Gathering and Analysis**

- » Identify the demographics of the organization. How are the various groups distributed in the organization, i.e., are women likely to be concentrated in certain functions or levels? Make sure you see and hear any discrepancies in viewpoints from different demographic groups, in addition to views from people in different roles or hierarchical levels.
- » Determine what is rewarded in the organization. What does it take to be successful? Is there an embedded cultural bias, such that some groups are disproportionately more likely to be hired, fired, mentored, and/or promoted?
- » Explore potential concerns of different subgroups that may be interpreted as “resistance.” Be careful not to simply accept one group’s frame of another’s “resistance.”

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#### **Data Feedback**

- » Make sure that the full picture is shared with all. Demonstrate the integrity of the process by including commonly overlooked participants.
- » Tell the truth. Name what you experience. Don’t ignore, brush aside, explain away, or blame.

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#### **Implementation Design**

- » Identify where diversity issues may come up. Consider and plan for potential unintended consequences.
- » Get support or additional resources, perhaps from a shadow consultant, support group, books, etc.

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#### **Implementation**

- » Watch for dynamics in the group related to diversity, and where useful, name what you see.
- » Re-contract and redesign as needed.
- » If you won’t or can’t discuss a diversity issue in the moment it arises, emphasize that the concerns have been heard and negotiate how the issue will be followed up, even if you won’t do the follow-up work.

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#### **Evaluation/Closing**

- » Include diversity as part of the evaluation with the client. Openly discuss the impacts of the consulting project for different identity groups. Consider what has been accomplished and what requires follow-up.
- » Debrief with team members and colleagues to grow and develop as a professional.

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planning efforts would rest on a shaky foundation. At the same time, she did not consider herself skilled enough to address the diversity issues that surfaced. She re-contracted with the client to expand the consulting effort to hire additional resources to address the issues of diversity, which clearly from the initial data gathered were critical to address if the organization was going to be successful in moving forward.

We were then hired to work in tandem with the planning consultant. During our initial conversations with the organization’s leadership, we learned that at a full-staff retreat a few years prior, a heated, racially charged exchange occurred. Diversity was not a planned part of the agenda,

and the facilitator was stymied. Two employees involved in the exchange left the organization shortly after the retreat, sparking numerous questions. Since then, it became clear, many people of color harbored resentment and fear for their jobs (were the retreat antagonists pushed out?) while many white people *walked on eggshells* fearing they would touch off another “explosion.”

We worked to open multiple channels of communication and encourage participation in reviewing policies to break the silence about race and diversity. The exploration led to helping management recognize the staff’s frustrations with the perceived lack of advancement for people of color in the organization. As it happened, standards for advancement and mobility were not clear and paths were not widely known. This murkiness in the process advantaged those who were well-educated and well-connected in the system, who were typically white. A combined staff and management task force researched the options for development and rewards, publicized them, and identified processes for selection. This group also increased awareness among staff on efforts that senior management had been implementing over the past few years to increase advancement opportunities (management had been frustrated that these efforts had not been appreciated). Management and staff also increased their skill in having conversations about their cultural differences that had kept them from these important discussions in the first place.

### Conclusion

In today’s workplace, diversity awareness is a basic competency. As demographics continue to change, diversity becomes ever more important for OD to increase its relevance and effectiveness. We conclude with three points regarding OD practice in the 21st century.

» **Diversity is a basic competency.** While not every OD practitioner needs to focus their practice on diversity, we believe all OD practitioners must be aware of diversity dynamics and

have skills to respond to situations effectively. In short, diversity is a basic component of effective OD. We encourage OD practitioners to intentionally continue their diversity journeys, growing in awareness, skill, and confidence.

» **Diversity is critical if we are to be self-aware as practitioners.** Attention to increasing awareness of presence and use of self are fundamental to skillful practice. If we don’t become aware of how our presence affects how we are perceived by colleagues and clients of different backgrounds, we significantly limit our effectiveness. Without listening to the feedback of people different from ourselves in some respects, we can’t know what we don’t know. And this ignorance is the foundation for acting based on biases and prejudgments, which can do harm.

» **Diversity work connects current OD practice with the roots of the field—social justice, civil rights, and participation.** We are encouraging no less than an exploration of the values underpinning OD. Taking diversity seriously keeps us from offering incomplete analyses and limited solutions. Embracing diversity not only makes our work more effective, it means that we work in congruence with the traditional values of the field.

### References

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