Exploring Your Personal Operating System as an OD Practitioner

How Are You Lifting Up Possibilities in a Perpetually Disrupted World?

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Abstract

OD practitioners guide others through change processes all the time. The OD practitioner is the core for how those processes are introduced to and applied in systems. In this article, we explore the question: As organization development (OD) professionals, what is your personal operating system that guides you to make sense of and respond to others during the times we are living in—that is a world with increased uncertainty and virtual interactions? We define a personal operating system (OS) as the living synthesis of your experiences, assumptions, values, and beliefs about people, teams, organizations, and change (how you think) and habits of practice (how you act). We propose a reconceptualization of Appreciative Inquiry as an intentional way to operate across any OD intervention in a way that aligns with the original humanistic values of OD.

Keywords: OD practitioners, personal operating system, appreciative inquiry, self-as-instrument, humanistic values

Introduction

As organization development (OD) practitioners, one of our primary roles is guiding others through change processes. From individuals to teams and entire organization systems, we invite others to reflect on and act upon their values and guiding assumptions to create new and better ways of operating and outcomes for themselves and others. With our focus on impacting others, how often do we pause to reflect internally on our values and guiding assumptions and how we implement interventions to impact others? In our increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, even as new OD tools and methods emerge, the OD practitioner, as an individual, remains a core determinant for *how* those processes are introduced, applied, and received in systems.

In this article, we explore the overarching question: As OD practitioners, how might we become more aware of and intentionally evolve our personal way of operating so that we can explore, elevate, and extend strengths and create possibilities in the VUCA times in which we are living?

Returning to Our Roots: Valuing and Cultivating Hope in a VUCA World

Early writings by Warren Bennis (1969) highlighted a defining theme he saw in our then-nascent field of OD as becoming an applied behavioral science built upon "a new attitude of optimism or hope" (p. 3). At the time, most early change theories had been grounded in critical research influenced by Weber and Freud. However, OD was a field that advanced a radical-for-its-time idea that "it is possible for the people within an organization collaboratively

to manage the culture of that organization in such a way that the goals and purposes of the organization are attained at the same time that human values of individuals within the organization are furthered" (French & Bell, 1973, p. xiii). As summarized by Cooperrider and Godwin (2011), there were three overarching values that provided a foundation for early OD. These included: 1) *a spirit of inquiry* that countered the traditional advocacy-based approach of organizational change; 2) *a collaborative design approach* that invited participant engagement in the change process, challenging the traditional view that only a few were experts with valuable insights; and 3) *a positive view of humankind* that led to the valuing of human development in organizational work, overturning the mindset that employees were merely cogs in a machine.

Over the years, however, the "positive assumptions inherent in early OD yielded into an array of problem-focused interventions and diagnostic methods of analysis" (Cooperrider & Godwin, 2011, p. 739). Bushe and Marshak (2009) traced the "problematizing" trajectory of classical OD, concluding that, like medicine, much of modern OD had become diagnostic in its approach, focusing almost exclusively on problem-solving by identifying what is wrong and correcting the ills of bureaucracy.

As we now witness an era of transformative and traumatic disruptions throughout all levels of organizational systems, many of our current practices and models are proving ineffective in the face of constant upheavals. If we are to help address issues like systemic inequality, exponentially remote workplaces, and global economic and political instability, our work as OD practitioners must evolve if we are to remain relevant and impactful in today's world. If we are to help organizational systems continually reimagine and reinvent themselves as quickly and often as is needed today, we need to use methods that are not solely rooted in diagnostic frameworks, but ones that also seek to effectively lift up possibilities in new and innovative ways. Perhaps to go forward, we must first look backwards and re-elevate the strengths

and optimism found within the early animating spirit of our field. Maybe as Cooperrider and Godwin (2011) invite, "it is time for the organizational change revolution to surpass the deficit-based detour and come full circle, back to its positive roots" (p. 740). To do this as an OD field, we need to first examine ourselves and our assumptions as individual OD practitioners.

Examining Our Personal Operating System as OD Practitioners

It has long been recognized that OD practitioners are an instrument of change in the work we do. The concept of "use of self" (UoS) has become a popular topic for OD theory and practice alike, with an entire special issue of *Organization Development Review* recently published on the topic (Fall/Spring 2020). Defined as "the conscious use of one's whole being in the intentional execution of one's role for effectiveness in whatever the current situation is presenting" (Jamieson, Auron, & Schechtman, 2010, p. 9), some contend that the body of knowledge around UoS is in many ways still in its infancy even as it grows in popularity (Minahan & Forrester, 2020).

As many have suggested, before we can truly make use of ourselves in our roles as change facilitators, we must know ourselves first. Indeed, one of the most basic competencies of a change leader or OD practitioner has been the notion of "know thyself" before leading others (Eisen, 2010). Awareness of our core values which include how we behave, make decisions, and what we see as defining us as who we are (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006) is key to understanding how we show up and facilitate others. We also hold assumptions about the world and the nature of change which impact how we interact with others. For example, some OD practitioners echo the belief of Kurt Lewin, widely considered a 'founder' of OD, that people are inherently good and deserving of respect, serve as guiding principles for OD practitioners (McGregor, 1960; Scherer, Alban, & Weisbord, 2016). Others hold differing views echoing more closely with McGregor's classic Theory X pessimistic view of people, assuming they are naturally unmotivated

and thus needing stricter oversight and direct management (McGregor, 1960).

Even if we are not conscious of our values and assumptions, every decision and intervention we make as OD practitioners are influenced by them. As Daniel Wood, an executive and leadership coach and behavioral analyst, summarized in his virtual round table "The Senior Leader and The Human Operating System" at the CUNA Councils: "everything you say and do comes from where you are and where you've been" (Plager, 2020, para. 4). Wood's reference to a "human operating system" has been echoed by others, some who have used a parallel phrase we lean into, "personal operating system," as an image or metaphor for helping us understand how our minds and our mental processing influence our behaviors (i.e., Delaney, 2008; Elias 2017).

While the human mind is not synonymous with the hardware and software systems on our technical devices, the metaphor of an operating system does invite us to perhaps reflect on ourselves with new insight. In his classic text, *Images of Organization*, Morgan (1997) reflected on the power of metaphor to inspire and inform our work as organizational theorists. While he acknowledged that no theory or metaphor in and of itself is perfect, "the challenge is to become skilled in the art of using metaphor: to find fresh ways of seeing, understanding, and shaping the situations that we want to organize and manage" (p. 5).

Leaning into the personal operating system metaphor, we can reflect on the similarities between how our technologies rely on operating systems to ensure information and work flows smoothly, coordinating every function of our gadgets and how our brains perform parallel functions for each of us. As we navigate the world around us, continually being bombarded by inputs through our five senses, our minds are constantly at work coordinating our inputs and outputs. Leaning into an operating system (OS) metaphor, we can consider our personal OS as the synthesis of one's personal assumptions, values, and beliefs about others, organizations, and change (how we think) and our habits of practice

Table 1. *aiOS Alignment of Strengths-based and AI Principles*

Strengths-based Principle	AI Principles Alignment	Implications for OD Practitioners
We live in worlds our inquiries create.	• Social Construction • Simultaneity	Be aware of the questions being asked within the system as well as the ones you ask. The ROI on change initiatives is dependent on inquiry into deficiencies or the best of what is and what is possible.
We excel by amplifying strengths	• Positive	Pay attention to framing of your work and if there is negativity bias because excellence is not the opposite of failure.
Strengths do more than perform, they transform	• Anticipatory • Poetic	Help organizations and individuals you work with to deliberately uncover the best of what is and what is possible to create an upward spiral that performs and transforms.
What we appreciate (see as having value) appreciates (increases in value)	• Simultaneity • Poetic • Positivity	Focus your attention on what they want to create more of in the organization, not less of. There are unlimited strengths to be amplified in any system if we choose to seek them out, including, success, vitality, and flourishing.

NOTE: Adapted from Table 6.2: *Principles of Strengths-based Approaches and Implications for Positive OD* (Stavros, Godwin, and Cooperrider, 2016, p. 109)

(how we act). Our personal OS creates the framework for how we take in information from the world around us, process that information, and interact and respond to others and the situations we face. It is our personal OS that impacts how we apply ourselves, as well as our OD methods and tools as change agents with others.

The Self-Aware Personal Operating System + Humanistic OD Values = The aiOS

Unlike our technical devices, however, we bring a unique dimension to our personal OS: self-awareness. As Wood reflects, "(We) can influence the structure and functioning of (our) brain over time" (Plager, 2020, para. 4). In order to influence our personal OS, we must first take notice of it.

In OD, a common way of operating is the Diagnostic-OS. This OS puts a priority on scanning the world around us to notice things that need to be diagnosed and fixed. Much has been written about why the Diagnostic-OS is so prevalent. A popular theory is that our brains are literally hardwired to notice bad things or what's wrong, more so than good things. Called the "negativity bias," research has demonstrated that our brains have a greater sensitivity toward negative information (Vaish, Grossman, & Woodward, 2008). This biological hardwiring is also useful to understand our individual and collective responses in crisis situations like the COVID-19 pandemic.

In situations like these, the headlines of struggle and catastrophe are literally "stickier" in our minds, often overshadowing the headlines of helping and hope that also circulate.

The Diagnostic-OS operates for many of us as a sort of default personal OS, powerfully influencing our minds to detect deficits and to analyze inputs with a bias toward protecting us, from danger rather than propelling us toward possibility. This dynamic perhaps helps to explain some of the "problematizing" trajectory that Bushe and Marshak (2009) traced in our OD history. Yet, dissimilar to our phones and computers, we are not passive recipients of OSs, rather our self-awareness invites us to consciously choose how we interact with the world around us.

While there are perhaps many different ways in which we can choose to interact with the world, one way of operating (by operating we mean how we routinely think, do, and engage) in particular that invites us to return to the roots of our humanistic OD origins, is by intentionally applying an appreciative and inquiry-based personal OS. Grounded in the principles and generative assumptions of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (summarized in *Table 1*), this OS (which we refer to as aiOS) provides an alternative to the default OS that many OD practitioners may operate upon, which may depend much more on problem-focused, diagnostic methods of organizational analysis.

Since its inception as both a theory and practice of inquiry and change "that shifts the perspective of organization development (OD) methods by suggesting that the very act of asking generative questions has profound impact in organizational systems" (Stavros, Godwin, & Cooperrider, 2016, p. 96), AI has been inviting OD practitioners to reflect on their assumptions and interventions into systems. According to Bushe "AI revolutionized the field of organization development and was a precursor to the rise of positive organization studies and the strengths-based movement in American management" (2013, p. 41). In 2017, the OD Network recognized the impact of this approach on the field, awarding David Cooperrider, a founding thought leader and co-creator of AI, the ODN Lifetime Achievement Award. AI is best known as a discovery for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. A foundational thread of the now-emerging fabric of Dialogic OD (Bushe & Marshak, 2016), AI engages those in a dialogue of the best of what is and what is possible.

As we seek to move the field of OD forward in today's chaotic world, where headlines invite us to continually look at all the ills in our social and organizational systems, being aware of the personal way we operate as OD practitioners is imperative. We invite you to think about AI beyond a method for change, and instead as a basis for a way of thinking, being, and doing that

Table 2: *Example aiOS Guiding Questions*

OD Intervention	Appreciative-based OS Guiding Questions
Coaching	When you are at your best, what is happening and what is possible?
Teambuilding	What are the unique strengths of this team when they are performing at its best, and how can they be best leveraged?
Strategic Planning	Strengths: What are we most proud of as an organization? How does that reflect our great strengths? Opportunities: What are possibilities that will delight our customers? Aspirations: What are our dreams, our wishes? What can we be the best at in our world? Results: What are meaningful and measurable results that would indicate we are achieving our dreams?

is your personal OS that brings to life the original core values of OD.

The aiOS starts with the assumption that every system has something that works right- things that give it life when it is working at its best. Research supports that if we want to "accelerate the future we desire, then [we need to] study those times and moments of human flourishing" (Cooperrider, 2020, p.3) in our lives and workplaces because we move in the direction of what we are thinking, saying, asking, and doing with self and others. Furthermore, the aiOS invites us to hold the stance of curiosity and inquiry in all that we do, which translates into the action of intentionally asking questions (inquiry) that add value to others (appreciative), deepen understanding, make room for other perspectives, and inspire new knowledge (Stavros & Torres, 2018). Operating from an aiOS orients us to discover what gives life to the system and purposefully looks for what is true, good, and possible, even in the most trying situations we face.

The aiOS metaphor invites us to move beyond thinking of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a tool that we pull out of our toolbox and use from time to time and instead reconceptualize it as the framework upon which we apply all of our other tools—and specifically how we engage with others. The principles and practices of AI therefore are no longer an application in and of themselves (i.e., something we "do" with clients), rather they become the framing core upon which all other OD interventions

and applications are practiced (i.e., the way we do all things). Table 2 provides examples of how some of our classic OD interventions are framed when they are applied from an aiOS perspective.

How an aiOS Manifests Possibilities in a Disrupted World

The current COVID-19 pandemic impacted world provides a context for how important this perspective-taking is. While there is undoubtedly a myriad of issues to be 'fixed' during a global pandemic, it is also all too easy to become blind to the solutions that are sometimes right in front of us if we intentionally look at situations with a different perspective.

For example, Alain Gauthier, an anesthetist at Perth and Smiths Falls District Hospital in Ontario, Canada who figured out how to work around the shortages of medical equipment such as ventilators. Gauthier became curious and explored, how to safely get more use out of a single ventilator? He did some research to see if anyone else configured a way to use a ventilator more than one person at a time? Through his inquiry, he learned that when short on ventilators for patients, one ventilator at times can be doubled or quadrupled (Payne, 2020). He learned how to do this by searching for examples of where others had successfully expanded the capacity of a single ventilator and discovered videos created by a Detroit doctor that showed how to do it. He looked for a possibility, and he

found it; a habit of practice demonstrated by those operating from an aiOS.

Those who are being and operating from an aiOS default setting are searching for the best in themselves, others, and the world around them. It changes the default diagnostic reaction, which typically asks, *"What is wrong and how do we fix it?"* to ask instead, *"What is good, what is working, how might we create more of it, and what else is possible?"*

Concluding Reflections

While there are many ways to apply OD in the world today, returning to the humanistic values that emboldened our early OD practitioners to create positive change is needed more than ever in our tumultuous world. Organizations today are beleaguered by discourses and dynamics that all too often keep them focused on what is not working or what is not possible. As such, having OD practitioners who help them become strengths-seeking and solutions-oriented sparks the organizational learning and development that is going to be needed to not only survive but thrive in our VUCA world. An aiOS invites us to do just that. Regardless of what guides your thinking or how you operate, the next time you accept an invitation to support an organization through a change process, we invite you to reflect and be aware of your personal way of operating, that is your personal operating system and ask how it is guiding your thinking and work, the way you inquire, assesses, design, and implement OD interventions, and the ultimate outcomes that are realized.

What does your personal OS prioritize you noticing: problems or possibilities?

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