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What Is Gestalt Organization & Systems Development?

All About the O, the S, the D
...and of course, Gestalt

Mary Ann Rainey

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By Mary Ann Rainey Tolbert

THIS THING CALLED OSD is unclear to many people. It puzzles them, including some who have attended OSD programs. They cannot quite get it, beginning with the brand Organization & Systems Development. Is it organization development (OD) and if not, what is it? The truly uninformed looks at OSD practitioners as “odd,” “cultists,” even “outdated” because of the association with Gestalt therapy. The more curious and polite tend to value the distinctiveness of the OSD practitioner. Part of the reaction and response is warranted. Little is written about OSD outside of Gestalt Institute of Cleveland internal publications, documents, and educational materials. This paper attempts to provide some clarity about OSD. It explores the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological roots of OSD and presents a summary of key OSD principles.

The OSD Program is based in Cleveland, Ohio. It is the first training program of its kind to integrate principles of Gestalt, OD, and general systems theory into a coherent curriculum for the development of organizational change consultants, managers, and administrators. Guided by the phenomenological premises of Gestalt theories of learning and perception, OSD places the consultant's awareness at the center of the consulting process. The strong emphasis on use of self suggests that OSD is more a stance than a concrete set of tools and techniques.

The OSD consultant has two goals in mind:

1. To teach the client how to use Gestalt principles to improve its functioning
2. To create a compelling presence that captures the client's interest and excitement in the work.

Enhancing organizational effectiveness is the idea behind OSD. As such, it has much in common with OD, beginning with

the influence of Gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin. Both OD and OSD share a value stance of humanistic change and a concern for creating better organizations by helping people who work in them. Intervening from an OSD perspective falls within the domain of process consultation (Nevis, 1987).

General systems theory supports the OSD consultant in organizing the multiplicity of dynamics in organizations by viewing each human configuration — person, pair, group, region, etc. — as a clearly bounded, self-contained organism that interacts with an external environment.

Gestalt, OD, and general systems theory are distinct in some ways and similar in others. More importantly, they are compatible. With them, OSD stands on a sound body of knowledge with a deep legacy of practical application.

THE BEGINNING

The OSD story is a fascinating one. It is always a privilege to listen to Edwin Nevis talk about how it all started. He speaks with great pride as he recounts the day in the mid 1970s when John Carter and Carolyn Lukensmeyer walked into his office at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland and said, “Let's do something serious about applying Gestalt to organizations” (Nevis, 2004). At the time, Carter and Lukensmeyer, along with Leonard Hirsh, were doctoral students of organizational behavior at Case Western Reserve University. They had developed a passion for Gestalt therapy and had become familiar with the OD consulting work of Nevis and Elaine Kepner who were faculty at GIC. Hirsh was the most visible and vocal advocate for a

Gestalt focused training program. Everyone involved understood that unlike working with individuals, intervening in organizations involved the consideration of a broader scope of social, political, cultural, and economic forces. An approach that integrated Gestalt principles, OD, and general systems theory seemed to be what was needed. The OSD Program filled the bill. The first brochure was distributed in 1977; the first session began in January 1978.

FRITZ PERLS AND GESTALT THERAPY

“Gestalt” is a German term with a loose English translation of “organized whole.” Gestalt psychology was a movement in psychology founded in Germany in 1912 by Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Kohler, and Kurt Koffka. Formed in response to theories of perception that analyzed perception and experience by breaking them into parts, Gestalt psychology explained perception in terms of gestalts. For example, it demonstrated that when an individual sees an image of disconnected parts, there is an attempt to connect the parts and create something complete and whole — say, make it an animal or an object. The same phenomenon occurs when one encounters disconnected dots or lines, even stars in the sky. Gestalt psychologists sought to show that the human mind naturally seeks to perceive things in wholes, not in parts. Gestalt principles would go on to be used in numerous other fields, including learning, aesthetics, and psychotherapy.

Fritz Perls created Gestalt therapy in the 1930s as a protest against psychoanalysis. His experience as a Freudian analyst afforded him the insight and experience to critique and influence the field of psychotherapy. Because Gestalt psychology preceded Gestalt therapy and because of the common name, Gestalt, many assume a strong connection between the two. This is the subject of some debate. According to Smith (1976), Perls drew upon several disciplines — psychoanalysis, Reichian character analysis, existential philosophy, Eastern religion, and Gestalt psychology — as he developed “his” therapy. A lack of consensus exists about the extent to which Gestalt psychology influenced him (Henle, 1961). Enright (1975) argues that Gestalt psychology was the least important theoretical influence on Perls, but possibly the most current.

Perls had more than a passing interest in the studies of perception and learning being conducted by Gestalt psychologists at Berlin University. He credited Gestalt psychology with the concept of holism (Perls, 1969), which is a basic premise of Gestalt therapy. Other major links between Gestalt psychology and Gestalt therapy can be found (Barlow, 1981).

Perls collaborated with Paul Goodman, Laura Perls and Isadore From to build a practice that focused on individual development and the treatment of neurosis (Nevis, 1987). Over time, principles of Gestalt therapy began to be applied to work with couples, families, groups, and eventually organizational consulting.

Key concepts and methods of Gestalt therapy that are central to OSD are:

- The organism as whole
- Presence and use of self
- The unity of organism and environment
- Explication of here-and-now reality
- The dominance of the most urgent need
- The contact boundary as the locus of psychological events
- Aggression as a biological force
- Creative indifference
- The withdrawal into fertile void

KURT LEWIN AND GESTALT PSYCHOLOGY

What goes without debate is the relationship between Gestalt psychology and OSD, though the connection between psychologist Kurt Lewin and Gestalt is seldom acknowledged. In many ways, Kurt Lewin can be regarded as the grand gentleman of OSD. His reach extends across two OSD strands: Gestalt (psychology and therapy) and OD.

While studying at Berlin University between 1924 and 1926, Lewin became intrigued by the emerging Gestalt psychology, most notably, the notion of goal achievement and its impact on the release of tensions. One famous study conducted by protégé Bluma Zeigarnick found that people remembered for a longer period of time the unfinished parts of a task much better than they remembered finished parts. Lewin explained this by saying that psychological tension is retained in the unfinished situation and this causes the task to be remembered. The phenomenon known as the “Zeigarnick Effect” was important to Lewin because it proved his theory of psychodynamics and eventually led to his field theory. As earlier stated, Perls was also impressed with these findings.

Lewin’s popularity grew. He began traveling in Europe and the United States but had to flee Nazi Germany for the United States for good in 1933. By 1940, he was regarded as one of the leading experimental and theoretical psychologists in the country. The scope of his work was vast, ranging from mathematics to social science to leadership and management. It was while leading a conference on racial and religious prejudice in

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Connecticut in 1946 that Lewin discovered the laboratory training or T-group methodology. The process involved feedback and reflection about behavior in groups. The findings led Lewin to a theory of experiential learning and further confirmed the phenomenological perspectives of Gestalt psychology.

A theme that runs through all of Lewin's work is the integration of theory and practice. His studies on authoritarian, democratic, and laissez faire leadership styles seemed to be a personal quest for practical understanding of the psychological dynamics of oppression and freedom (Kolb, 1984). Although Lewin died in 1947, his ideas about education continued to be studied and refined in Bethel, Maine, where the National Training Laboratories would be founded as a tribute to his work.

In summary, principles of OSD from Gestalt psychology and Lewin include but are not limited to:

- Zeigarnik Effect (completion)
- Law of Pragnanz (closure)
- Theory of psychodynamics
- Field theory
- Experiential learning theory
- Action research
- Leadership styles
- Stages of change
- Organization development

ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

Lewin's studies of group dynamics, action research, field theory, and stages of change have earned the most practical acclaim and led many to regard him as the father of OD. Organization development took shape during the sensitivity and T-group movement in the 1960s. It is a process of planned change concerned about both people and organizational needs. Using theories and technologies of sociology, psychology, education, economics, and management, OD attempts to manage or resolve real organizational problems. To its credit, OD has retained the basic values related to human beings, learning, and change that were so dear to Lewin.

Organization development is a component of the underlying process of OSD. When we think of OSD, we naturally think of OD. After all, the three letters "OSD" represent OD with "Systems" in the middle. The founders had OD as a major lens through which they imagined OSD. They were practicing OD and had embraced the values, assumptions, and aspects of OD methodology. However, they did not want to restrict their vision to OD. In fact, the intent was to stretch beyond the organizational boundaries of OD. They were seeking a way to enhance the way individuals intervene in all human systems, whether large or small, whether working with an individual, a couple, a group, an organization, or beyond.

Basic concepts of OD important to OSD:

- Experiential learning
- Laboratory training

- Group process
- Team building
- Organizational culture
- Diversity and multiculturalism
- Participative management

GENERAL SYSTEMS THEORY

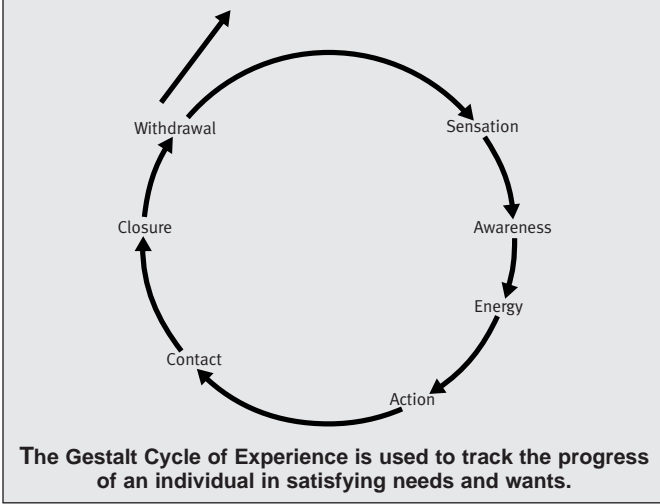
The terms 'system' and 'systems' have been used in this paper. What is meant by system is any autonomous entity that interacts with and is interdependent with its external environment as well as its own subsystem (Carter, 2000). For our purposes, we are speaking of human systems. Any system can be conceptually divided into levels of system. In organizations, levels can be used to describe the organization, a division, a department, or a project group. The CEO or any individual is a level of system with subsystems. Two people can constitute a clearly demarcated level. The importance of this discussion is that general systems theory equipped the organizational consultant with this frame of reference.

As Gestalt therapy was taking root, general systems theory was gaining acceptance. The idea that seemingly disconnected disciplines, including those focused on the study of human behavior, could have something in common was yet another radical movement of the early twentieth century. General systems theory ascended due in part to the erosion of Newtonian physics. It was under the guidance of biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy that a "general systems" theory emerged that linked both hard and soft sciences. This theory sought to describe the complexity of nature and the world by using a common set of characteristics and terms. Instead of reducing an entity to the sum of its parts, it emphasized the relationship among the parts and their connection to the broader environment. A somewhat related notion was emerging in Gestalt circles. General systems theory has had an enormous impact on how we think about organizations. We now recognize that organizations can be seen as "open" systems dependent upon their environment for the satisfaction of various needs.

ORGANIZATION AND SYSTEMS DEVELOPMENT

Organization and Systems Development is a tapestry of Gestalt psychology and therapy, organization development, and general systems theory. These threads inform OSD in different ways yet exist with a degree of harmony. Gestalt psychology provides the knowledge of Gestalt while Gestalt therapy demonstrates ways in which that knowledge can be applied and practiced. Organization development offers a template for applying that knowledge in organizations whose functioning we now better understand because of general systems theory. It is impossible to detail every influence on OSD. Those central to the methodology will be discussed.

Figure 1: THE GESTALT CYCLE OF EXPERIENCE



Organism/Environment Interaction. Concern for the relationship between the organism and environment is basic to Gestalt, OD, and general systems theory. Therefore, it is not surprising that this is a core principle of OSD. In Gestalt, the interplay between organism and environment is driven by the attempt by the organism to satisfy some need or want. Need satisfaction is a process that involves a series of steps as highlighted in the following example:

In the healthy organism, many needs are present at any given time. These needs emerge (**sensation**) from the 'ground' and naturally organize themselves into a hierarchy of importance. The most dominant need develops clarity (**awareness**) and becomes uppermost 'figure.' The organism searches its environment for the object to satisfy the need (**energy**). When the object is found, the organism acts to satisfy the need (**action**). The organism interacts with the object and change occurs (**contact**). Once the need is satisfied (**closure**), the figure diminishes in importance (**withdrawal**) and eventually recedes back into the ground. A state of equilibrium is reached until another figure forms. The energy required for satisfaction of this need is now available to be directed toward the next dominant need (Barlow, 1981).

Cycle of Experience. The process of need fulfillment is depicted in Gestalt as a 'Cycle of Experience' (Figure 1). The Gestalt intervener uses the Cycle to track an individual's movement or non-movement through the steps and heightens awareness about observed behavior.

Throughout organizations, individuals are attempting to satisfy a multiplicity of needs — close a merger, install a new technology system, eat lunch. Numerous Cycles are also at play at various levels of system. It is the job of the OSD consultant to help the

client sort through the maze of competing priorities. The Cycle can be adapted for use in organizations. Although the process of the Cycle is essentially the same for all levels of systems, the activities are different. The steps reflect the degree of complexity at a particular level. The steps involved in the Cycle at the organizational level — **scanning, conceptualization, energy, action, change, closure, and withdrawal** — are consistent with OD survey feedback methodology that relies on data as an energizing force (Nevis, 1987).

Unit of Work. The cycle of experience is a model for tracking naturally occurring, here-and-now phenomena. The OSD model for more strategic, planned change is 'unit of work.' A unit of work is a clearly coherent and bounded experience, process, or event. In an organizational context, unit of work can represent completion of a project, a finished meeting, or the end of a conversation. Even moving from start to finish through the Cycle is a unit of work.

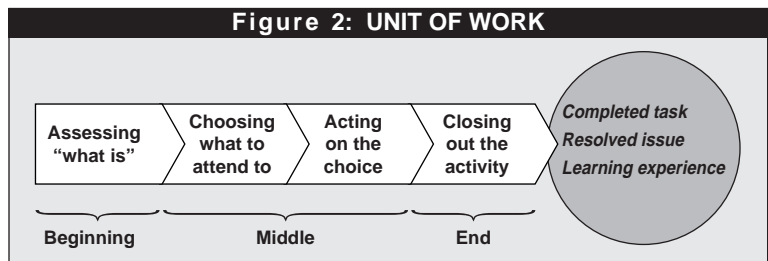
A unit of work proceeds in four steps (Figure 2): 1) assessing what is 2) choosing what to attend to 3) acting on the choice, and 4) closing out the activity. It is a model for designing change initiatives and is similar to planned change models in OD. It involves working with intent, looking at change in its wholeness, and completing tasks. It stems from the work of Gestalt psychologists, particularly regarding the Ziegarnick Effect.

Awareness and Presence. At the core of Perls' transition from psychoanalysis was the value he placed on here-and-now behavior. Working in the here and now is also a primary characteristic of OD. To work in the here and now, one must have an active state of consciousness. In other words, one must be aware. Awareness is the centerpiece of OSD. The OSD mantra could very well be "awareness, awareness, awareness."

Effective use of awareness involves a strong presence on the part of the intervener. Personal, subjective, here-and-now experience is selectively shared in the service of the work. The goal is to make a difference in the client system by providing a presence and teaching the Cycle. Presence compels the intervener to bring herself fully to the consulting process. The enormous emphasis that OSD places on awareness and presence is one element that differentiates OD and OSD with all things equal.

Resistance and the Paradoxical Theory of Change. Yet, with the most engaged and helpful intervener, uninhibited movement through the Cycle is rare. Nevis (1987) assumes that when people say they want to satisfy a need or change in one direction, some part of them, however small, wants to stay the same or move in another direction. Humans have a need to both seek and resist change.

Figure 2: UNIT OF WORK



Gestalt honors this ambivalence as indicative of the existence of multiple realities. In fact, resistance is best understood as energy in multiple directions. One part of the system values and wants to move in this direction while the other part values and wants to move in that direction. Each side experiences the other as resisting, which clearly illustrates that resistance is in the eye of the beholder.

The OSD practitioner is further guided by the paradoxical theory of change (Beisser, 1970). It states that change begins not by attending to the future state of “what might be” but by attending to the present state of “what is.” The point is, change does not occur through an effort to be something else. It begins with acknowledgement of the “status quo.” The theory is paradoxical because it encourages us not to change but to become more fully who we are.

Boundaries. The influence of general systems theory on OSD is evident in a discussion of boundaries. Here we have organism, environment, and subsystems — all defined through the bounding process. The nature of the relationship between the organism and its environment is a condition of boundaries. According to OSD, if effective change is to occur, it must take place at the boundary between the organism and its environment, which is referred to as the “contact boundary.” Intervening from a Gestalt perspective is a very intentional act of disturbing this contact boundary.

Any change made to the boundary or in the bounding process will always provoke resistance. Of all the boundaries to influence, the OSD practitioner must determine the one that holds the greatest potential for learning and growth.

The OSD Consulting Stance. The following summarizes the OSD consulting stance:

- attending, observing, and selectively sharing observations thus establishing a presence
- attending to one’s own experience and selectively sharing this data, thus establishing a presence
- focusing on energy in the client system and the emergence of or lack of themes or issues for which there is energy
- acting to stir the client’s interest to support mobilization of energy so that something happens
- facilitating meaningful contact between members of the client system
- helping the client achieve heightened awareness of its overall process in progressing through the Cycle of Experience
- supporting the completion of units of work, modeling the completion of units of work, and teaching the importance of completing units of work so as to achieve closure of unfinished business.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this article was to create a better under-

standing of OSD by providing an overview of its conceptual, theoretical, and methodological underpinnings. Organization and Systems Development represents a unique blend of principles of Gestalt therapy and psychology, OD, and general systems theory. OSD is practiced in human systems at all levels, in a variety of fields, and across numerous professions, cultures, and countries.

Principles of OSD can be incorporated into any type of intervention, consultation or management style. The Gestalt Institute of Cleveland is a pioneer in the application of Gestalt theory and methodology to the field of OD and consultation. For more than 30 years, professionals have come to Cleveland and its satellite locations (many international) to become better interveners. Hopefully, they will continue to come for 30 years more. ■

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