

Trends We Must Not Ignore

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Gestalt Organization & Systems Development and OD

A Past, Present and Future Perspective

By John D. Carter

The roots of Gestalt Organization & Systems Development (OSD) began in 1968 on the campus of the University of California, Davis. We were involved in a transformational change of the campus, significantly influenced by Master teachers from NTL, Esalen Institute, The Gestalt Institute of Cleveland and the UC Davis Psychology Department. In the 21st century, Gestalt OSD maintains its position as a relevant and uniquely powerful approach in training organizational interveners.

Gestalt OSD is an integrative body of knowledge that includes theory, concepts, methods, tools and techniques. It is an orientation that serves as an internal operating system, and is backed by two fundamental and powerful assumptions:

- 1) The reason one group or organization excels over another, given equitable resources, is the ability or competency of being able to scan one's internal and external environments, to make meaning of the data collected, and to respond appropriately in ways that support reaching agreed-upon, desired outcomes;
- 2) The true worth of interveners is not measured by the set of skills or tools they possess, but by their ability to see themselves clearly in relation to others. Such clarity drives the individual to integrate organizational change knowledge and the synergy of working with others to produce powerful interventions for superior results.

Gestalt OSD deals with individuals'

perceptions and with how we make meaning of data, whether internal (the mental and physical responses taking place within) or external (the people and things in the surrounding environment).

Gestalt OSD interveners assume that any individual is behaving the best she or he can at any given moment in time. The cornerstone of Gestalt OSD is thus *awareness*—awareness of one's and/or one's client's present reality. Attention is focused upon need and the resultant choices that arise. Responsible action is determined through resolving the conflicts created by those potential choices. In gestalt theory this successful conflict resolution is known as good figure/ground formation.

Interveners play an integral role in the change process through their *presence*. They may, for example, consistently stand for certain values or orientations. They selectively share what is observed with the client. Their intention is to set the ground for safe experimentation. This experimentation, by any individual or group, facilitates the possibility of a shift or change. When a shift or change occurs it is a clear indicator that contact has been made. Contact, like the wind or electricity, is not seen directly. When change occurs or when it fails to occur there is an opportunity for learning.

The Gestalt OSD intervener is fortunate to work with wind, the OSD body of knowledge, at their back. Gestalt theory, concepts, and methods are deeply rooted in natural human processes of perception, meaning making, awareness, and change.

Over the past 34 years, the Gestalt OSD faculties have successfully created a gift that once learned keeps giving for a lifetime. Several core Gestalt concepts have proven especially valuable in adapting to OSD work: the Paradoxical Theory of Change, the Cycle of Experience, Unit of Work, boundaries, contact, and resistance.

Gestalt OSD has successfully integrated Gestalt perceptual principles, systems theory/thinking and organization development theory into a coherent and practical body of knowledge. From this three-fold integration are derived Gestalt OSD's significant frames of reference used to enhance one's effectiveness in organizational contexts. Contexts may range from businesses of two or three employees to international corporations with thousands of employees. Organizations may be for-profit or non-profit, privately owned or governmental. What matters most for the interveners involved is their degree of self-awareness and self-mastery. The art lies in how to judiciously use oneself in the service of effecting the desired change at every level of system. OD Consultants, coaches, and other interveners using this body of knowledge become increasingly better able to understand and effectively intervene at all levels of system. Using the Gestalt OSD body of knowledge requires, in effect, the ongoing development of one's use of self.

Over time, organization development (OD) theory and Gestalt OSD have become more aligned. The following definition by Beckhard, published in 1969 stood for nearly two decades as the "standard definition of OD":

Organization Development is an effort (1) planned, (2) organization-wide, and (3) managed from the top, to (4) increase organization effectiveness and health through (5) planned interventions in the organizations "processes," using behavioral-science knowledge.

One notes the absence of a human focus apart from the application of behavioral science precepts. Later descriptions of OD, however, include such goals as "individual development," "viewing the organization as a complex system of systems that exists within

a larger system," and interventions characterized by "inclusive methodologies and approaches" (Minahan, 2004).

Because of its theoretical roots, Gestalt OSD has promoted the central role of the individual in the change process. The stance is one of making contact rather than adjustment. The importance of organizational change as with current OD practices is based primarily on humanistic, optimistic, and democratic values and assumptions. In Gestalt OSD the opposite of these characteristics are also fully embraced as aspects of current reality.

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Gestalt OSD consultants prefer non-expert, non-prescriptive models of practice since these a) imply that people are capable of addressing their own issues, concerns, and problems, and b) focus on developing the competencies and capacities of the organization and its members above all. Rather than identify what is "wrong" with an organizational system, the Gestalt OSD intervener takes an appreciative approach. This is not simply a positive stance. It means focusing on the strength of the system and supporting the individuals involved to play with all fifty-two cards in their deck and to acknowledge the jokers and the wild cards.

The Gestalt principle of systems thinking is a powerful lens. Organizational environments are experiencing volatile local and/or regional economic changes as well as intense global competition for resources, whether in terms of people, capital, information, or physical or natural assets. These current circumstances require organizational changes to be both sustainable in the short-term and viable in the long-term. Early on, Gestalt OSD embraced the fundamental principles of systems thinking in order to meet the shifting market-place demands as well as the shifting cultural viewpoints that called for greater corporate responsibility and accountability. Essentially, systems thinking studies systems from the perspective of the whole system. Systems thinking is a way of helping a person to view systems from a broad perspective that includes seeing overall structures, patterns and cycles in systems, rather than seeing only specific events in the system. This broad view can help you to quickly identify the things that most need attention in the organization and know just where [i.e., at what level] the work needs to take place. Most important is the question of who should do this work. Is this my work? Is this your work? Is this our work together?

In Gestalt OSD, this integrative approach has led to training that emphasizes interconnectedness between levels of organizational system, and enhancing opportunities for contact. Thus there is the possibility of actually assisting individuals and organizations speeding up the process of change.

The question that has never been answered by Gestalt OSD or OD is, "What do we want to advocate?" That is other than the question of "What is OD or Gestalt OSD?" What would support our common ground of Social Responsibility, Holistic Systems Thinking and creating Productive Organizations? Typically, we have answered this question by trying to prove something is different than OD, better than OD, beyond OD, or re-inventing OD. We are all the living OD. We all use the body of knowledge we call OD. The real question is: "How can we promote enduring, daily, inclusive cooperation to build a body of

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knowledge, theory, concept, method, tool and technique called OD?”

A compelling picture: We could support OD professionals and clients, physicians and lawyers, mothers and fathers to become better interveners across multiple levels of system in the organizations and communities where they live by using the body of knowledge we call OD/Gestalt OSD. We would transform humankind and make the world a better place. Our starting point would be our own self-transformation, through self-mastery.

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The Gestalt OSD faculty and the OSD graduates are making a difference in the field of OD through their use and creation of the integrative body of knowledge called Gestalt OSD. This integrative approach has led to training that emphasizes interconnectedness between levels of organizational system, and enhancing opportunities for contact.

In 2009, the Gestalt OSD Center will celebrate thirty-five years of work devoted to the transformation of humankind and the development of the body of knowledge called Gestalt OSD. The body of knowledge has been taught on six continents and 800 plus individuals have completed thirty plus days of training.

Founders of Gestalt Organization & Systems Development training are: John D. Carter, Leonard Hirsch, Elaine Kepner, Carolyn Lukensmeyer, and Edwin C. Nevis.

References

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