

OD IS SIMPLE

By Robert P. Crosby

Six years after the invention of the T-group in 1953, I had my first T-group. The focus was on group process. It was sometimes called Sensitivity Training as in sensitivity to group processes- how decisions are made, who is the most influential, who interrupts whom, who speaks the most, how are conflicts handled, how open are participants about their emotionality, etc. A decade later I attended the first NTL OD intern program in 1965. In the ensuing 12 years the term organization development had become normative.

Group development was simple. You have a group develop by being sensitive to group processes.

The attendees and the three groups at Hartford, Connecticut (let's call them 'cousin' groups) working on fair employment for minorities were all working on the same social issue and interacted with each other all during the year. The workshop was organized by the Interracial Commission of the State of Connecticut. Kurt Lewin realized that if they were going to succeed in their fair employment effort, the participants needed awareness of these group processes. So the next year (unfortunately after the untimely death of Kurt Lewin), the leaders of the three task groups (Ron Lippitt, Ken Benne, and Leland Bradford) began making group process interventions in the midst of the discussions. Thus was born the T-group, short for Basic Skills Training Group.

T-groups then began at Bethel, Maine, but with a significant shift! They now had strangers attending who had different back-home experiences and who weren't working on any particular social issue. The groups gradually became more oriented to personal growth. They focused on the 'here and now' as did the early T-groups, but with a particular disdain for the 'there and then'. At Hartford, the 'there and then' was about what was happening in the community that all participants had some experience with. When the training moved to Bethel and strangers attended, a 'there and then' story was not a shared experience and it took people away from the 'here and now'.

Group development was simple and 'there and then' stories, issues, and problems faced daily were relevant in groups that worked together as they had been in the 'cousin' groups in Hartford.

OD as I learned it in the 60's was simply group development expanded across an organization! Building on the work of Mann and Likert (1952), we cascaded survey feedback from top management to the hourly workers. A simple questionnaire scored by individuals in each 'intact' group (boss and employees) was then fed back to them for problem-solving. As the survey feedback cascaded, systems issues emerged as did intergroup conflicts, interpersonal and/or boss-employee issues. The consultant needed to facilitate the working of these.

A systems issue might be that there is great confusion about roles emerging throughout the plant. There were gaps in engineering at one Nuclear plant where we helped them identify 14 key engineering tasks that nobody had been assigned! Sensing this, we had all the engineers in the plant brought together by the plant manager. They then wrote on newsprint their beliefs about their functions and posted them on the wall. They walked around, discovered gaps and duplications of assignments, usually resolved these by dialogue and, when needed had management there to make decisions.

Survey feedback as we did it included clarity about goals starting with top management. Then each group throughout the organization identified their piece of the pie that was needed to be successfully done to achieve the organizations goals. In the process of doing this bosses and employees spoke directly to each other, not in a pejorative way but, aided by a skilled facilitator in a behaviorally descriptive and non-blaming way. Using and teaching behavior description is a key skill in organization development.

Dr. Fred Fosmire, former Vice President of Organizational and Employee Relations at Weyerhaeuser, writes: “Survey feedback methods, when implemented competently by managers who are receptive to feedback, may be the most powerful way we know to improve organization effectiveness.

...There is no more effective way than survey feedback (turning data into action) to involve people quickly at the key points of data gathering, problem solving, solution recommendation, action, and follow through. Survey feedback, well done, will increase morale, improve work processes, heal broken work relationships, shift culture, and put into action effective , high-performing behaviors more quickly than any other intervention.”

I would add, having facilitated groups where the manager/supervisor was not ‘receptive to feedback’, that the key to success was solid sponsorship by that manager’s immediate boss! When I expected such resistance, I would leverage the boss of that manager or supervisor prior to the event, and ask them to be really clear with their direct report about what they expected. No matter what the CEO or Plant Manager says, managers/employees throughout the organization look to their immediate boss for sponsorship or not.

It was nearly 4 years after my Bethel OD Intern experience until I launched out on my own. I created the Leadership Institute of Spokane (LIOS). My consulting arm today is called Crosby and Associates and is led by sons Gil and Chris. They are doing T-groups and other consultative interventions virtually.

Simple OD. My first OD contract with survey feedback at its core was a men’s clothing store with eight employees. Next came a printing company with 20 employees. Afterwards they reported that they reduced their wasted materials from 11.2% to 1.5% while reducing lost labor due to illness, accidents, and unknown causes from 17.6% to 2.8%. I measured my success by the measurements important to the company.

Then came Arby’s which cut its turnover in half. There instead of a survey, I interviewed all the employees and then fed the data back to them along with their boss, and did the action research steps. Scheduling was difficult in that we never could meet everybody at the same time.

It was another 10 years before I was working with a company of a couple hundred like Easy Loader Boat Trailers. There cascading survey feedback led to results like these:

- ...absenteeism drops 40%,
- ...industrial accidents drop 21%, and
- ...worker’s compensation claims drop 29%,
- ...while sales increased 23%.

The insurance agent for Worker’s Compensation called and asked for a meeting. He asked, “What did you do?” My answer was simple. “We did survey feedback-no slogans- no safety program-simply improve the organization by working with the intact work groups.”

Then came even larger plants such as Carnation potato processing and Carnation tomato processing. One high-tech department of 85 employees in a larger unionized manufacturing plant reduced grievances from 22 to 0.

Later we began to cascade T-groups. A major shift in our use of the T-group was from the stranger groups that had become normative at Bethel to working with intact groups. The 'there and then' was once again relevant! Many 'there and then' illustrations had an immediate passionate response by people and became an issue to be worked. The trainer helped them to work it intertwining 'there and then' illustrations with behavior description and the 'here and now' of how they were working the issue in that immediate moment. They were problem-solving in an action research way guided by a capable trainer.

A great illustration of this was at Davenport, Iowa where Obama visited because of its high productivity. This was after eight years with 1300 employees in intact groups having our business version of the T-group.

So how do you do simple organization development? It doesn't have to include T-groups. It can definitely be survey feedback cascaded as in most of my stories above including Easy Loader. It does take consultants who have the intervention skills as can be learned in a T-group because those skills are the ones also needed to facilitate survey feedback, third-party conflict, and Intergroup conflict.

The T-group seems to add a dimension of culture change that is longer lasting. My work was sustained for, at least, more than a decade after I left PECO Energy. In Alcoa the T-group, which they called Skill group, was not only at the core of our 15-year Corporate Graduate Program, but also core in many of the 15 plants we worked in.

We liked it when a client called survey feedback (process improvement?), or T-groups (Skill groups?) by their preferred name. In an award-winning lean manufacturing plant, the employees called it 'process improvement' and didn't recognize the lean manufacturing name when the award was granted! This avoids employees being for or against a new program coming their way.

George Bergeron, a hard driving Alcoa VP who retired as Executive Vice President of Alcoa wrote recently, "Several years ago our Rigid Packaging operations in Alcoa, Tennessee, and Warwick, Indiana were incurring severe financial losses that threatened their viability. We were successful in achieving a turnaround valued at hundreds of millions of dollars... The underlying fundamental and most significant change was a human intervention: survey feedback, leadership development ala Skill Groups, goal alignment, single point accountability, and crisp performance metrics were the keys to our turnaround... 25 years later both plants are operating successfully including new products and new markets."

Losing our roots in simple OD, all kinds of programs get developed that may be useful but, for me, they are not OD unless they involve the whole organization and include action research towards achieving organization and/or social justice results. Other interventions can be helpful, but OD is comprehensive.

So OD is simple. It is survey feedback, an action research methodology. It is the gathering of data and then feeding that data back to those who generated it. Quoting Dr. Ronald Lippitt, "They who put their pencil to the survey paper should also see and work the data." He called this a "fundamental right".

Those who created the data then are guided to be specific. They go through a problem-solving process which results in recommendations for action. After decisions are made, by when's and single point accountability are mostly volunteered, and follow through dates are made clear. Lack of effective follow through is a systemic pattern that is predictably present in most organizations. The consultant must stay alert to this or there is a high likelihood of failure.

20 years after my OD Intern program I was working with plants of 2000 and again leading with survey feedback. No gimmicks. No slogans. Bergeron's quote above reflects the results. Chapters in my Memoirs tell the story of these "simple" interventions. Yes we had added T-groups, which are profound, but most of the results reported above, such as Easy Loader, had survey feedback alone at their core.

Leonardo da Vinci wrote, "L'architettura è semplice, ma la semplice difficile." "Architecture is simple, but the simple difficult." Likewise OD!

What's difficult in OD is: 1) believing that is it simple and does not need fancy names. 2) Having and helping people use the skills of behavior description, paraphrase, and action research.

When these difficulties are transcended...

OD is simple!

For more information about our Virtual T-group based workshops, and our eleven books between father and sons supporting our OD work, go to CrosbyOD.com.

Chris, as the new president of LIOS plans to reopen the graduate program referenced above with Gilmore Crosby as one of the key faculty.