When practice doesn't match theory, or—how practitioners can fail more successfully

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Abstract

The practice of organization development is fraught with challenges, among them is the likelihood of some degree of failure, or not getting the expected outcomes. Much of our education is built on theories of change in which we apply certain methods to highly motivated clients and improvement unfolds as expected. When events do not change according to plan and explicit agreement, we often attribute blame to ourselves or the client, rather than understand the dynamic landscape in which the organization functions. Failure can be a devastating experience for practitioners or a welcome source of reflection and information in finding our gaps in thinking, training, and client interactions. This article defines failure and its relatively common occurrence, how failure happens, its effects on the change process, and constructive means for responding to it.

Key words: OD practitioners, Od consulting, success and failures of OD interventions

Most OD practitioners are well-steeped in the theory and methods of change and develop the expectation that OD consultation can unfold in an expected manner. Successful case studies, practitioner success stories, and interventions in relatively simple situations tend to reinforce these expectations. However, there are times (sometimes too frequent) when the change situation does not unfold the way we planned, and the change effort fails. Such failure can be disconcerting to practitioners since we tend to blame the client or perhaps ourselves and try to move on without the ensuing embarrassment. An alternate approach to failure is to embrace it and understand how it occurred and what can be learned from it. To paraphrase Lewin, "If you truly want to understand something, try to change it" (Tolman, 1996, p. 31).

Failure can have a lot of different meanings but in OD it usually reflects not performing as expected or not attaining the expected results. Failure is a construct that is used in multiple business contexts: In project management it can mean coming in over budget, beyond the schedule deadline, or under quality requirements. In organizational functioning it may mean market share erosion, persistent low or negative profitability, loss of resources or loss of reputation.

Why people avoid failure

People avoid failure or accept that they have failed at something for a variety of reasons. Foremost among them is that they often believe that it reflects personally on them as a flaw or weakness, and elicits feelings of shame or embarrassment. For inexperienced OD consultants it can challenge their confidence, especially if they have taken on a task that is beyond their training or expertise, or if they have low self-esteem. They may have some perfectionistic tendencies that make most change efforts frustrating since reaching goals can be mitigated by scope creep, unintended consequences, and setting goals too high beyond anyone's control.

By acknowledging and embracing failure a practitioner can more realistically assess what and how it occurred and what they can learn from it. This requires a high degree of self-confidence, curiosity, and ability to convince the client system that they should forego use of blame, and instead seek explanation of the situation and where to go from there.

Success and failure have a neurological aspect underlying our reactions. With success we have the neurotransmitters endorphins, dopamine, and serotonin released in the brain that are experienced positively as reward and satisfaction that reinforce our repeating the behavior. In contrast, failure releases cortisol, a stress hormone that produces the fight-flight response experienced as irritability or anxiety that can lead to avoidance learning of making another mistake. However, reframing mistakes as opportunities to learn can actually increase our learning and resilience if we have the courage to change their meaning. We can learn what does not work, learn about ourselves, and the systems we interact with.

The pervasiveness of failure

Some degree of failure is often more common than success. For example, strategic initiatives in business are reputed to fail between 50-90% (Olson, 2022), project management fails between 50-70% (much like OD), new products fail between 70-90%, and executives fail between 25-39% of the time. Failure rates in OD have historically been estimated at 70% by McKinsey and Co., although a search on the origins of this figure appears to be some rather loose statistics in Hammer and Champy's 1993 popular management book, *Reengineering the Corporation*. Other studies on the industry average of change failure suggest it is likely between 50-70% (Hughes, 2011). A more restrictive definition of failure by a consulting group promotion (Circei, 2023) was proposed at only up to 15%, but such a low rate may have been merely for advertising. The rate of some degree of failure appears to be a significant risk in OD but there is no agreed on definition of failure in OD largely due to different approaches, variable scope of interventions, lack of empirical data, and perhaps minimizing it for promotional purposes.

In any case, failure is the boogeyman for many OD facilitators. The experience of failure can be confusing why the intervention did not work as expected?—how could all those case studies and examples of success be so wrong? Some new practitioners can become discouraged and seek to avoid the embarrassment of a failure, or worse they may attribute blame to

themselves or the client rather than seek to understand how such an outcome occurred. There is some solace in W. Edward Deming's opinion that as much as "95% of variation in performance is more related to how a system is designed" and works rather than being due to personal failures (Scholtes, 1998, p. 296). Yet, understanding how the client system works is a key part of OD—what's missing here? There are possibly two components: First, the identified problem may not be the real problem or it is too narrowly defined; second, failure has not been anticipated and its occurrence and usefulness is often considered the end of the intervention. The first issue of problem definition and complexity is described by Conbere & Swenson (2020), and this paper will focus on the latter issue of how we deal with failure as facilitators.

How failure occurs

Organizations do not exist in isolation; they are a part of a dynamic landscape of relationships both within and without their organizational environment. This ongoing complexity makes long term prediction very unstable, so that an initial diagnosis of the organizational situation may likely change as well as its adaptations in response to these. For example, the author participated in a strategic health plan with a very large health care organization wanting to formulate a decade long strategy for rural health in a state. The task involved identifying current and likely healthcare trends and disruptors, and thereby having a basis for recommending a business strategy. Although the trends and disruptors were easily identified based on literature and empirical data, the client wanted them to be treated as separate trends when in reality they were intricately tied together. In addition, this occurred during mid-COVID when the impact of the impact and ongoing nature of the disease was still unclear, and the challenges of climate change were still being debated in healthcare. As a result, the predictions were very short-lived and costly. What was largely ignored here was the role of systemic complexity (e.g., lots of moving parts) and wanting to focus only on what was simple and clear due to the fear of complexity, lack of certainty, and need for a more dynamic strategy.

Failure, or not meeting expectations, should be among some of the first considerations in change management, not waiting until the end results when it is difficult to correct. There can be several reasons that we may participate in processes that result in some degree of failure.

Client organizations may resort to an OD consultant for several reasons: They may not have the change management expertise, no one in the organization has the time for an exclusive focus on a change effort, they lack tools and methods for change, or they want someone to take the fall if it does not work. Enter the "expert" OD practitioner. The client may place us in the role of "expert" in which we "should know" the answers or solution. We feel pressured by ourself or others to generate solutions—the "quick fix." This pressure can influence us from asking questions and engaging other stakeholders, to quick analyses and recommendations. This is pressure to perform, from ourselves or client to generate answers, especially since the client is paying good money for our experience and solution.

New OD practitioners may hold the naïve belief that clients always want to change, and forget that for every driver for change there are corresponding resistances and barriers to change, often an unconscious one (Swenson, Conbere, & Heorhiadi, 2022). Kurt Lewin (1951) was well aware of this dialectic: He formulated the Force Field Analysis to identify the counter position of these forces in order to identify leverage points for intervention. This is a dynamic tension between the forces, and participants early on may express strong motivation to change, but as time and challenge wear on, they may become more averse to what needs to change. This tension was first identified by Brown (1948) as the "approach-avoidance gradient" that explained that motivation was strong at a distance from a goal, but that resistance increased as the effort to gain it approached—it is hard to change behavior.

OD education and training is replete with scores of OD theories and tools as well as case applications, especially the successful ones. The "right tools" are often thought of as the techniques we have learned to facilitate discussion, awareness, and action. But when they do not work, what next? Rather than rely on techniques that are done "to" a client, it is more useful to do things "with" the client. Approaches such as SEAM and Dialogic OD look to the emerging relationship between the practitioner and client based on ongoing communication that involves deep exploratory and candid dialogue. Tools may be useful as an outgrowth of dialogue, but are not a substitute for it.

New practitioners may overestimate their ability and that of the organization to change because they don't know what they don't know, or that they need to appreciate this distinction. Referred to as Dunning-Kruger Effect (Kruger & Dunning 1999), facilitators and clients become overconfident and ignore what they don't know. Even when they become aware of that limitation due to pending failure, they may become threatened by that recognition and dismiss it or devalue the source of information as a way of moderating cognitive dissonance. Intuition or unconscious processing can be valuable, but usually after a practitioner has extensive experience for the unconscious to hold it as tacit learning. This effect has been found across professions and skills including healthcare, politics, business, and estimates regarding vaccination knowledge during COVID and driving ability (Vandergriendt, 2022).

A final factor in failure is the possibility of unintended consequences. This can occur even when bright, motivated, and well-intentioned clients and facilitators take a too limited view of the problem and solution such that its implementation causes even more problems downstream and over time (Conbere & Swenson, 2021). Such consequences can occur when the problem definition is prematurely defined, diverse stakeholders are not included in the problem definition or scope. Implementation without considering how the change may impact roles and duties, work identity, and available resources can also result in unintended consequences that could have been mitigated by engaging people who are likely affected by the change.

Embracing failure

Recognizing that failure is inherent in the change process and that interventions seldom turn out exactly as planned or even desired is an important awareness. With this recognition there can be no blame (although there certainly is accountability), and more importantly, it is an opportunity to learn from the failure to either correct it or take that learning to the next client system consultation. There are several practices an OD facilitator can develop to embrace failure and thereby grow as a change agent, help the client system set reasonable expectations, and for both to benefit from failure when it occurs.

Humility and humble inquiry (Schein, 2021) as an OD practitioner emphasize listening and asking questions, rather than assuming too much, and avoid taking on the misplaced burden of an "expert" with all the answers. When we take the role of an expert, we set ourselves up to know more about the issues that the client system is actually living. The expectation develops that the consultant can "tell" the client what to do, instead of learning about the system and helping the client do it themselves. By asking questions, especially those that have not been asked before by the client, both consultant and client are mutually learning.

Another aspect of humility is to view oneself as "always a student" or continual learning. As a martial arts master of the author was fond of saying, "a black belt just means that you are a good beginner." Although OD theory has useful content, the process requires years of experience and is never really finished. It is much more like a "craft" such as a potter, artist, and physician, in which one continues to learn throughout life. Anders Ericsson (2006), a Swedish Psychologist and expert on expertise, studied experts in music, medicine, sports, and chess and concluded that it takes about ten years or 10,000 hours to reach the "expert" level. Yet, even experts are humble; perhaps even more so.

When questions are asked, inconsistencies and gaps in knowledge, skills to be learned, and vulnerabilities of the organization and practitioner become clearer. Rather than seeing these as issues to be hidden, these areas need to be strengthened in your facilitation style. Become aware of what you don't know and model the openness and inquiry that the client can also learn.

Cognitive biases are natural, widespread, and number over 180 in one compilation (Benson, 2017). These are short cuts to critical thinking and can lead to focusing on the obvious and missing essential information that can contribute to blind spots and failure. We should be familiar with and alert to them for both ourselves and our clients. Acknowledging them early can make them transparent and open for discussion and mitigation.

Even simple problems are usually embedded in complex landscapes and the subtle, incremental, and unintended drivers of a problem can easily be missed. Using systems thinking to identify, describe and explain the many small and often overlooked factors and connections that can accumulate into a big problem can reduce blind spots and ensure that driving and restraining factors can be included in intervention (Conbere & Swenson, 2019). Especially at the

beginning of a consultation, the client usually provides their definition and analysis of what the problem is, and may even encourage the practitioner to work within that parameter. However, if they have that definition and analysis, how is it that they have not solved it yet? This is a strategic point where creating curiosity and asking questions helps broaden awareness of the constellation of factors that drive the problem, resist change, and provide leverage points for change.

Psychological safety is essential for participants to voice their perceptions of how a problem developed and is expressed, how resistance to change occurs, and willingness to participate in change efforts. Some problems have perpetuated because participants are fearful of adverse reactions, such as ridicule by peers or sanctions by superiors. The facilitator can model asking questions that may not have been asked before as well as openly discuss safety issues with leadership.

Engaging diverse stakeholders helps broaden the definition and understanding of the problem and makes it less likely that they will not join the ranks of the "laggards" (Rogers, 1995) who ignore, resist or undermine change. Furthermore, not all stakeholders are alike and should be engaged differently (Swenson & Conbere, 2021). There is value in appreciating why people resist change and can be positively viewed as an important source of information that should not be dismissed (Kalnbach & Swenson, 2018). Lewin's Force Field Analysis model is often helpful in generating examples of the drivers for change and resistances to change (both individual and systemic). Rather than try to "overcome resistance" (that often drives resistance underground to continue secretly), it stimulates ideas for understanding resistance and finding ways to mitigate it—then change can occur with fewer barriers.

Consulting with colleagues or mentor regarding your questions, challenges, frustrations, and failures can also help by providing broader perspectives and feedback. Solo practitioners have the luxury of deciding which cases they will and will not accept, but also have the curse of not having a sounding board for exploring their impressions of the client dynamics or reservations about the case. Having a close colleague available with whom you can share your most personal thoughts and feelings, doubts and apprehensions, can enable you to deal with them constructively and not have them affect you unconsciously (Swenson, Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2022). Take time and reflect on those conversations.

Conclusion

Not achieving expected outcomes (i.e. "failure") is a natural occurrence in problem solving across many fields including OD. It is biologically, emotionally, and cognitively experienced as stressful and tends to lead to avoidance in examining the situation. Failure can

mistakenly lead to negative attributions to self and others and to blame rather than to use the experience for personal development as a change facilitator.

Practitioners may misunderstand the value of embracing failure due to limited experience, pressure for results, reliance on a narrow approach to OD, taking the role of an "expert," or relying on technique tools rather than engagement dialogue. Finally, humility, openness to feedback, awareness of biases, engaging diverse stakeholders, creating psychological safety, and consulting with others can reframe failure as an unexpected opportunity to learn.

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