



# A JOURNEY TOWARDS OD

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## INTRODUCTION

The first challenge organisation development (OD) practitioners often face is explaining to themselves and others precisely what OD is. Pause for a moment before reading further and imagine yourself with one minute to explain to someone who has never heard of OD, what it is. What would you say? Some people describe OD as a function, some as a process, some as an intervention. Others may compare and contrast it with related disciplines such as leadership, management consultancy or human resources (HR).

In the UK, there is no single agreed definition and no single professional body representing OD, although the Chartered Institute for Personnel & Development (CIPD), Association for Management Education & Development (AMED) and Institute of Training & Occupational Learning (ITOL) all lay some claim to this space. There are unclear and sometimes blurred boundaries with other professions and people enter the OD field from diverse backgrounds.

In light of this, I won't attempt to offer or prescribe a definitive view of OD, not least because some OD colleagues whom I know and respect would disagree with some of the perspectives I will present here. However, I will offer something like a buffet of perspectives, ideas, models etc. that you, the reader, are invited to pick and choose from. I would encourage you to weigh up what you read alongside your own ideas and experiences and wider research in the OD field too.

## FOCUS

I think of OD in its broadest sense as a holistic, humanistic and systemic outlook and approach. The question I hold in the back of my mind is something along the lines of, 'What human related factors are influencing (or have influenced, or are likely to influence) this organisation's potential to be as inspiring and effective as it could be?' Common factors include culture (shared beliefs and behaviours), complexity (diversity and change), capability (abilities and opportunities) and climate (feelings and attitudes).

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Over the years, I've come to believe that how people feel is one of the most significant factors that influences an organisation's success. How people feel impacts on their level of engagement, and engagement in turn influences personal, team and organisational performance. How people feel is influenced by a whole range of factors including confidence in leadership, how well people's aspirations and expectations are fulfilled, how well people work together in teams etc.

I was OD lead in an international non-governmental organisation (INGO). We tested how people were feeling as well as how we were doing organisationally by a variety of means including an annual Best Companies engagement survey and a quarterly pulse check, a mini-survey involving all staff. The results were published openly for all staff to see and leaders committed to specific actions based on what they heard. This provided an organisational insight-feedback-accountability loop with on-going checks on route.

In my broader OD practice, I have been involved in a diverse range of areas and initiatives alongside leaders, HR and other colleagues including: spirituality and values; culture and brand development and integration; leadership and management development; strategy and change leadership; engagement and internal communication; performance management and development; induction and teambuilding; talent and career development; knowledge and information management.

## STRATEGY

A common challenge OD practitioners face is how create and maintain focus on priorities in the midst of multiple, competing opportunities, challenges and demands. In order to help address this, I have created a simple strategy map (Fig 1) which I sometimes use as a conversation-starter with leaders and HR colleagues. It's more indicative than definitive and aims to create a sense of coherence and a basis for collaborating and prioritising. As an overall idea, it proposes that if the lower conditions are fulfilled, the higher outcomes and goal will be achieved.

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Goal	Stakeholder Value – Achieve World Vision Mission		
Outcomes	Talent – the right people on board	Engagement – working meaningfully together	Performance – achieving the right results
Conditions	Clear talent profiles	Inspiring and effective leadership	Clear goals and strategy
	Attractive employer brand	Culture that reflects brand personality	Fit for purpose structure, systems and processes
	Competitive rewards	Effective internal communication	Effective change management
	Effective recruitment	Effective team and inter-team work	Discerning and learning culture
	High quality induction and orientation	Personal and career development	Effective performance management

FIGURE 1

A different way to approach OD is through a more explicit people lens. I have, therefore, developed an additional model (Fig 2) that emphasises that an organisation's effectiveness is influenced by having the right people in place, engaged in the right conversations and doing the right things. It proposes that an important dimension of leadership is to attract, recruit, develop, deploy and retain the right people. The tricky part is that people come in all shapes and sizes, so a leadership challenge is how to enable imperfect people to work together well, in inspiring and effective teams, to achieve the organisation's goals.

The conversations with leaders and HR may go something along the following lines: 'As I look across the organisation, these are the issues that strike me as important. Is that how you see it? From your perspective, which areas are we already doing well in? Where the most important gaps or deficits? As we think forward to the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead, which areas are most likely to prove critical? What could help or hinder us making progress? In light of this, what should we prioritise, start, stop or improve as we move forward?'

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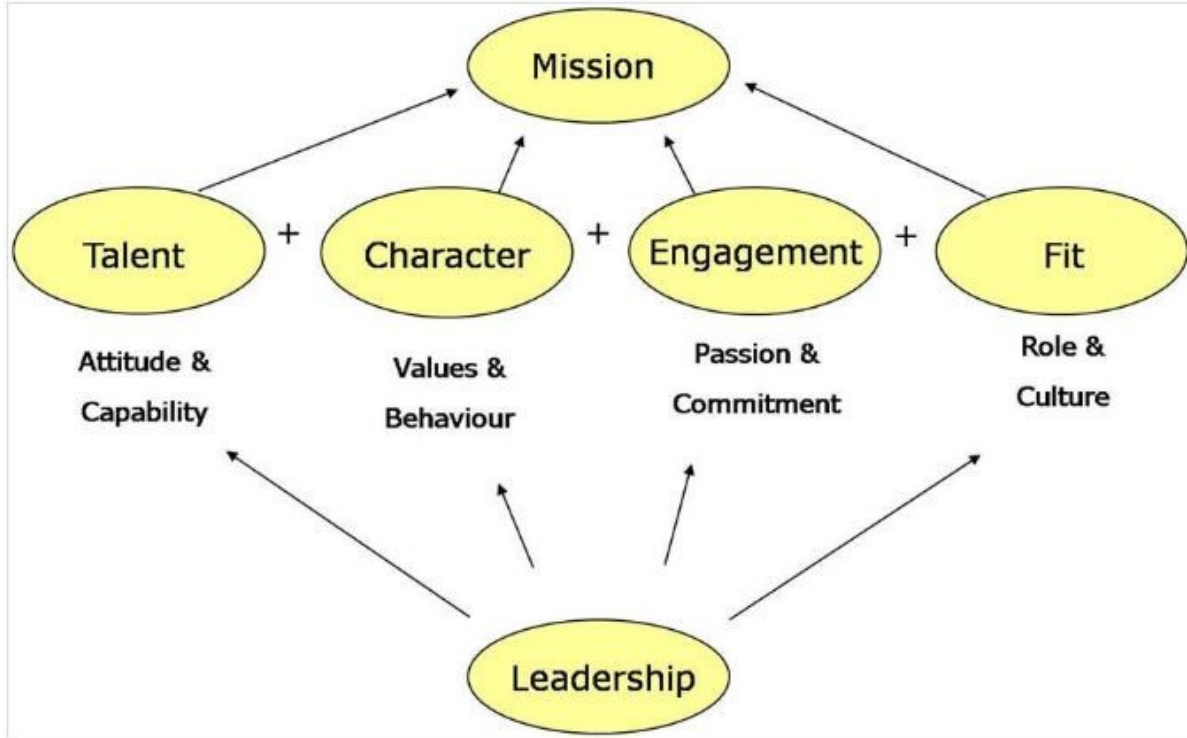


FIGURE 2

So, for instance, it's possible to imagine a person who is very capable but has an unhelpful attitude that undermines his or her and others' performance. It's equally possible to imagine a very capable person who lacks moral character. It's possible to imagine a person who is capable and ethical but who feels bored or disengaged. It's equally possible to imagine a person who would be great in one context or environment, or at one particular time in an organisation's life, but who would be in the wrong role now, or in an organisational culture that conflicts with his or her personal preferences or style.

In light of this, I may pose questions along the following lines: 'What opportunities or challenges will this person face in this role, culture and organisation? What will it take for him or her to be effective? What will it mean to demonstrate the organisation's brand and cultural values in this role? What will good performance actually look like? What potential do we see in this person to fulfil wider roles in the future? What kind of person will succeed in this culture and contribute to it?'



These same considerations can feed into recruitment, talent management, performance and development conversations, aimed at building the organisation and enabling it to achieve its goals through people.

## CULTURE

The cultural piece has to have been one of the most interesting and stimulating piece of OD work I was involved with at the INGO because of its transformational potential. We invited staff across the whole organisation to contribute to a 1-day workshop exploring brand and culture: what it meant to live the brand in practice. 70 staff turned up and, in small groups using an appreciative inquiry, we invited them simply to think back to a day when they had felt really proud to work for the organisation, to discuss what made the greatest difference and then to depict their stories creatively to the wider group.

There was considerable energy in the room as people shared their stories excitedly then played them back to the group using drama, pictures, role play, music and words. The same themes emerged over and over again: 'When we work together, when we are truthful and authentic, when we feel inspired and motivated, when we know we have made a tangible difference for good.'

Importantly, we noticed these themes were interdependent. It was a balance of all areas that would result in high levels of engagement and performance.

For instance, if we focused on relationship ('partners') without a corresponding emphasis on honesty ('truth'), conversations could feel superficial. If we focused on being honest ('truth') without a corresponding emphasis on relationship ('partners'), conversations could be insensitive. If we focused on inspiring people ('passion') without a focus on achieving results ('impact'), we could be ineffective (Fig 3).

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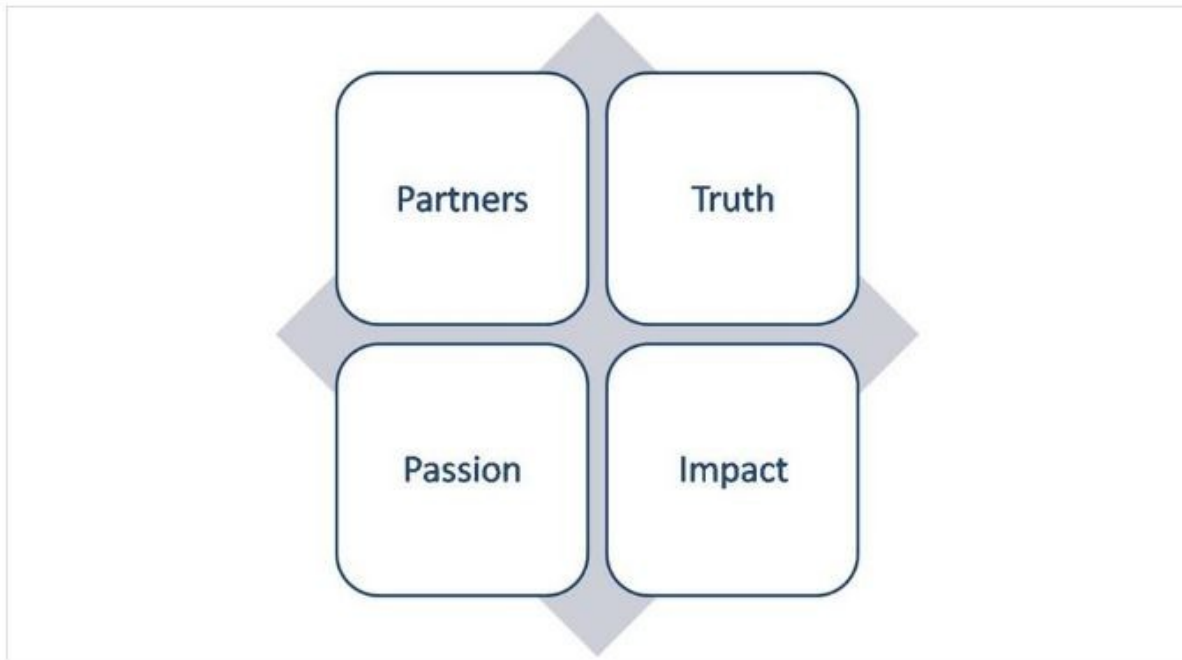


FIGURE 3

We used this conceptual framework for guiding leadership, team meetings, communications etc. For instance, if I needed to address a difficult performance issue, I reminded myself to treat the person with respect and invite honest feedback as well as give it ('partners' + 'truth'); I tried to frame the conversation in such a way that led to the person feeling positively motivated to change and thereby achieve the desired results ('passion' + 'impact'). When we approached corporate all staff meetings, we reminded leaders and other contributors to work collaboratively, be authentic, act creatively and emphasise outcomes.

We referred to this core cultural principle as the 'Spirit of the brand'. We used it at induction to express what we aspired to be more like, more of the time. As part of our talent conversations with leaders during recruitment and succession etc, we used this framework to articulate the kind of organisation we aspired to be; the kind of people we were looking for; the kind of people who would fit culturally and contribute positively within the organisation; the kind of people who were most likely to be successful in our desired cultural environment.

## SUCCESS

So, what kind of qualities or characteristics make OD practitioners successful? The UK's Institute of Employment Studies conducted interesting research in a number of organisations, exploring what different groups (senior leaders, HR, OD practitioners) thought about OD and what their expectations were. They summarised a number of common OD characteristics: working towards organisational effectiveness; an organisation-wide systemic approach; working in partnership with others; combining humanistic and business goals; facilitating and challenging.

In my own experience, three interrelated elements are particularly significant for an OD practitioner's success: person, perspective and practice (Fig 4).

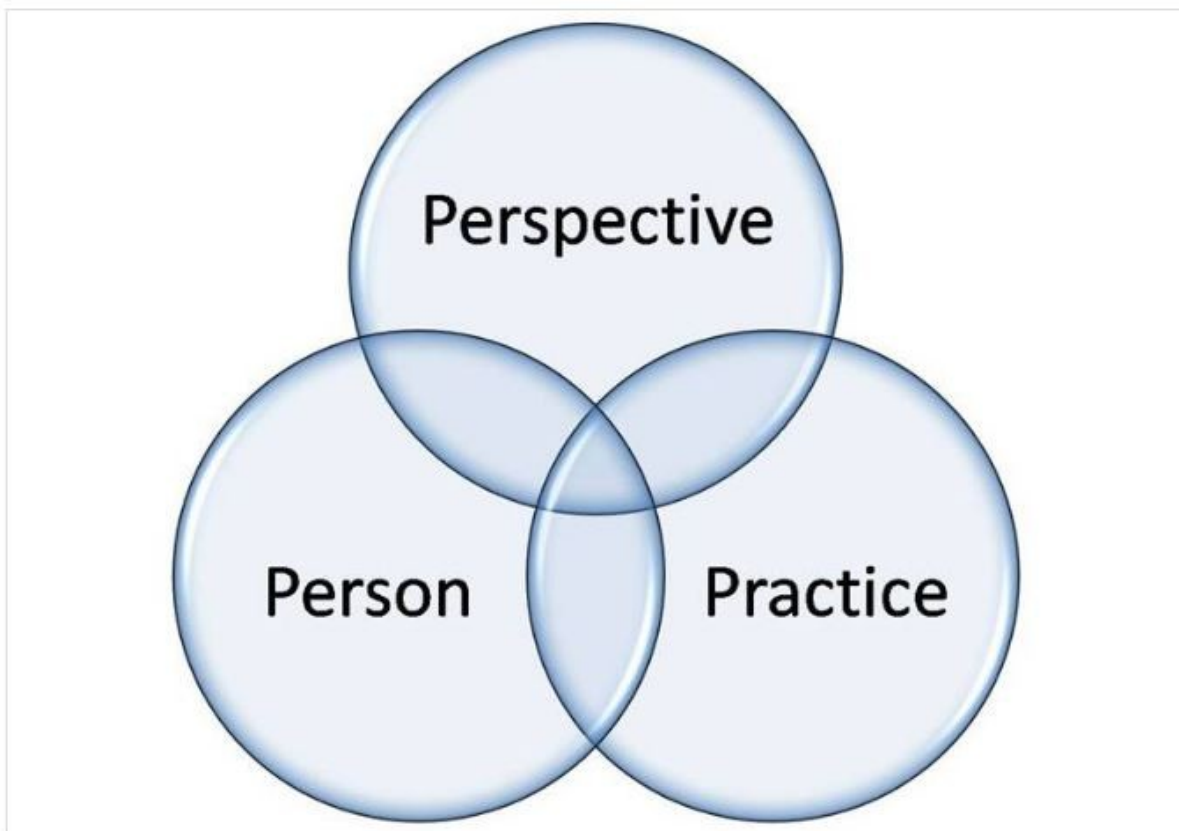


FIGURE 4



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Over and over again I hear people comment on OD's value in terms of the personal qualities displayed by the OD practitioner, e.g. good listener, empathetic, self-aware, insightful, diplomatic, challenging, optimistic, resilient and trustworthy. In the INGO I mentioned above, as a Christian organisation we added ethical, prayerful and discerning to this list. There's something about the person, the presence, the style and character of the OD practitioner that influences people and change. In view of this, I believe personal development is fundamental to professional development.

I also hear people comment on the value and contribution of OD practitioners' perspective, often described as an 'unusual' perspective. My own perspective has been influenced by Christian beliefs and spirituality, social constructionism, systems thinking and various schools of psychology including psychodynamics, social psychology and Gestalt. I formally studied theology and philosophy, then organisational dynamics and culture, then coaching psychology; all of which have had a profound influence on my values, my worldview, how I see organisations and what I believe is significant in OD.

I believe OD practitioners do well to invest in their own professional development through, for instance, studies, research, journals, conferences, interactive-blogging/vlogging and networking. It's about growing in awareness, broadening horizons, keeping ideas up-to-date, drawing on others' thinking and experience, contributing to others' learning in the field. I believe the value we bring to an organisation is expanded or limited by the degree to which we tap into the wider OD arena, thereby enabling the organisation to gain access to that learning in that arena too.

In another international organisation I worked with, I encouraged my OD team colleagues to write journal articles as a method of professional development and sharing ideas with others. I believed that crystallising and articulating their thoughts and ideas in this way would sharpen their thinking, and that receiving feedback from readers would stress test their ideas and that being published would build their professional confidence and credibility. I offered a bottle of champagne to the first team member to be published and I will never forget the bright smile on the L&D officer's face when she received it.

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OD practitioners are also known for skilful practice. If 'person' is about who we are and 'perspective' about how we see the world, 'practice' is about what we do and how we do it. OD practitioners can be seen operating in organisations in a number of different modes and engaged in a variety of tasks, depending on the preferences and expertise of the OD practitioner, the expectations of the client and the needs and opportunities of the specific situation. I will say more about this under 'Modes' below.

## MODES

An OD practitioner operating in, say, 'consultant' mode will need to demonstrate high quality consultancy and coaching skills, e.g. listening, contracting, reflecting back, challenging, reframing, sense-making, summarising. In this mode, the OD practitioner is typically holding up a metaphorical mirror to the client (normally a leader or leadership team), enabling him or her (or them, if a team) grow in self- and organisational awareness, explore options and implications and pursue a course of action that will enhance the person, team or organisation's development.

An OD practitioner operating in, say, 'leadership' mode will need to demonstrate high quality leadership and management skills, e.g. visioning, influencing, strategic thinking, programme management, stakeholder engagement, evaluation. In this mode, the OD practitioner is typically leading a specific OD programme or intervention (e.g. corporate leadership development programme) on behalf of the organisation, aimed at developing the organisation's culture, capacity and capability for the future.

The OD practitioner needs to be able to move back and forth along a spectrum of approaches ranging from directive to non-directive to positive withdrawal, all with the underlying intention of facilitating personal, team and organisation development. Questions I often ask myself are: 'What is going on here? Why are things as they are? What does this client or client system need to move forward? What kind of intervention will facilitate long-term development rather than a short-term fix? What will be the impacts of my intervention, or a decision not to intervene?'

## CONSULTANCY

In one OD consultancy assignment, I was invited to meet with regional leaders in South East Asia to listen to their issues, stories and aspirations and provide guidance on an OD strategy for the future. During these conversations, issues around strategy, structure, culture and capacity emerged as recurring themes. I noticed and fed back the interplay, as I saw it, between these issues and the importance of high quality change leadership to navigate the organisation's way through them. I provided coaching and mentoring on key aspects and, as a result, the client had greater clarity and a roadmap for the way forward.

In light of the demands of this kind of role, and the opportunities to make a real difference if we do it well, I believe OD practitioners can benefit greatly from investing in their own on-going skills development, e.g. through training workshops; mentoring; action-learning; peer coaching. The key is to be open to, and actively to seek, constructive critical feedback from clients and colleagues in order to identify skills strengths and areas for development. This requires humility, courage and a genuine desire to learn and grow.

I once led a new OD team that aspired to develop and establish for itself organisational credibility and influence as an internal learning consultancy. The team had its roots in L&D and recognised that it would need to shift its way of engaging with clients if it was to reshape client expectations as well as its role in the organisation. In order to help achieve this goal, I ran a consultancy modes and skills workshop for the team, followed by monthly peer consultancy sessions, where team members could share experiences of working with clients, receive support and challenge and role-play future scenarios.

The principle here was to shape in the team's own thinking, as well as in that of its clients, a picture of what it would be and do to operate as a learning consultancy rather than as a traditional service provider. If the team members could hold a clear and compelling enough image of learning consultancy in their own imagination, this would influence their intention and way of engaging which would, over time, shape their clients' view of the OD team too.

If, for instance, the team member learned to approach the client with strategic and systemic rather than, say, operational and transactional issues in mind, this would create in the client's mind an image of what type and level of issues to engage with the OD consultant on.

## EVALUATION

The evaluation question assumes the OD practitioner has a vision and view of what he or she would like and can do to add value. The corresponding part of the equation is what clients want from OD - and the tricky part is sometimes navigating and negotiating respective expectations to reach an agreement that feels both fulfilling and worthwhile for all parties involved.

I had one such experience when working as an OD business partner with the leader of a sensitive change process. My expectation was that I would act as consultant-coach mode alongside him, whereas his was that I would lead the change on his behalf. It took some difficult conversations to reach agreement on roles before we could move forward, and I had to learn to hold my nerve to avoid collusion.

Over time, I've developed my own view of what clients typically look for from OD and I've summarised these in Fig 5 below as the basis upon which, implicitly or explicitly, clients are often likely to evaluate our OD value and performance in organisations.

The areas suggested in this model are again indicative rather than definitive and I would encourage you to explore what your own clients might include as corresponding evaluation criteria. I've amplified these criteria in Fig 6 as a mini-survey to discuss with clients and to get their feedback.

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FIGURE 5

Before reading further, you may want to pause for a moment and guess-score in the table below (Fig 6) how your clients would rate your performance as an OD practitioner. You could similarly choose to invite your clients to evaluate your work critically using the same table, or a modified version of it, and to compare notes. I may frame such a conversation along something like the following lines:

'I imagine these are the kinds of things you look for in and from me as an OD practitioner...is that how you see it...is there anything you would change or add? I'm keen to hear your perspective on how well I'm doing in each of these areas...what scores would you give? Which are the areas where I'm doing well and which areas do you believe I should focus on to improve my contribution and value?'

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Quality	Stakeholder Perspective	Rate /10
Ethical	OD models high standards of morality, attitude and behaviour	
Expert	OD demonstrates cutting-edge expertise, thinking and practice	
Engaging	OD understands and engages with the real issues we grapple with	
Effective	OD adds significant value to the goals we hold responsibility for	
Efficient	OD creates efficient solutions to the issues and problems we face	
Enabling	OD empowers us to focus on and achieve the most important things	
Enriching	OD makes this organisation feel inspiring, refreshing and rewarding	

FIGURE 6

I once spoke at an international HR conference in Asia and asked those present how many had a clear view of what their clients expected of or valued in them. No-one raised a hand. Similarly at an HRD conference in the UK, I asked participants how many had a clear strategy map they use with clients to explain their work, test assumptions and prioritise together. Again, no-one raised a hand.

This suggests to me that OD practitioners and those in related fields could benefit from developing an explicit theory of organisational change, articulate that theory in a clear strategy map and work with clients to identify and evaluate their contribution to achieving a desired change.



## DEVELOPMENT

At a personal level, I've identified a number of qualities and capabilities over the years that clients attribute my success or failure to as an OD practitioner and I periodically invite clients to provide me with feedback against them to see how well I'm doing and where I need to improve (Fig 7). This kind of survey is easily developed online, e.g. using a tool like Survey Monkey.

I ask clients to highlight my top 5 strengths and top 3 development priorities and to give me a score out of 10 for how I'm doing overall. This kind of feedback provides me with valuable perspective on my own practice, and a clear focus for my personal and professional development plan.

<b>Achieving</b>	<b>Contracting</b>	<b>Encouraging</b>	<b>Inspiring</b>	<b>Persevering</b>
<b>Advising</b>	<b>Delegating</b>	<b>Facilitating</b>	<b>Integrity</b>	<b>Questioning</b>
<b>Caring</b>	<b>Directing</b>	<b>Influencing</b>	<b>Leading</b>	<b>Reframing</b>
<b>Challenging</b>	<b>Discerning</b>	<b>Informing</b>	<b>Learning</b>	<b>Respecting</b>
<b>Clarifying</b>	<b>Empathising</b>	<b>Initiating</b>	<b>Listening</b>	<b>Responding</b>
<b>Completing</b>	<b>Empowering</b>	<b>Innovating</b>	<b>Negotiating</b>	<b>Supporting</b>

FIGURE 7

## CONCLUSION

This article has explored OD thinking and practice from a range of different perspectives, including the nature of OD as a professional discipline; OD modes of operation; qualities of the OD practitioner; and stakeholder evaluation of OD performance. It has explained that there is no unified definition of OD in the UK, that OD looks different in different situations depending on what is needed, and the personal preferences and outlooks of the OD practitioner and client. It has proposed that OD practitioners would benefit from developing and articulating clearer theories of change, strategies and evaluation criteria to establish greater credibility, influence and effectiveness in the future.

## FURTHER READING

Organisation Development: A Practitioner's Guide for OD and HR

Mee-Jan Cheung-Judge & Linda Holbreche (Kogan Page, 2015)

Making Sense of Organisation Development

(<http://www.roffeypark.com/SiteCollectionDocuments/Research%20Reports/odguide.pdf>)

Organisation Development – What's in a Name?

([http://www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/corpstrtg/orgdevelmt/\\_orgdvwhnm.htm?IsSrchRes=1](http://www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/corpstrtg/orgdevelmt/_orgdvwhnm.htm?IsSrchRes=1))

Perspectives on Organisation Development

(<http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/pubs/summary.php?id=463>)

Towards OD

(<http://www.nick-wright.com/towards-od.html>)

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Nick has a Postgraduate Diploma in Coaching Psychology, a Masters' Degree in Human Resource Development, a Degree in Theology, a Diploma in Pastoral Studies and a Certificate in Supervision and Consultation.

Nick is a Fellow of the UK's Institute of Training and Occupational Learning. If you would like to learn more about Nick and his work, or would be interested to enhance your own OD insights and practice, see:

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Get in touch!

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