

Practicing Organization Development in a VUCA World

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Abstract

In this fast-changing world, the principles and practices of OD can go a long way towards supporting individuals and organizations to thrive, not just survive. Three ways OD practitioners can contribute to building this capacity are explored in this article: cultivating courage, facilitating healthy disagreements, and bringing more of the system together for meaningful engagements.

Keywords: volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, healthy disagreement, whole system

Introduction

In the early 1990s, Management Professor Peter Vaill introduced us to the term “permanent whitewater change”, to signify that we had transitioned from a world of managing changes as they came along, to one where changes were flowing through organisations all the time.

Now there is a new term to describe the environment we live in, compliments of the US military, called VUCA. VUCA stands for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. As OD practitioners you would be familiar with elements of what VUCA looks like in the work you do in supporting organizations.

If the external environment is in such a state, how do we transform ourselves so to be agile enough to respond in these times, and support leaders and organisations to do the same? We need to assess the way we think and consult, to ensure we are aligned with the realities we face.

Two OD thought leaders have challenged us to re-look at development. Bob Marshak (2006), in “Is there a new OD?”, ponders what is different about OD work in a postmodern world. What impact does a socially constructed world have on life in organisations? In the realm of leadership, Warren Bennis (2007) advocates for new models of leadership to be created, ones that better reflect the world we live in. New models and new ways of thinking would provide new methodologies and roadmaps for expanded capacity for future success.

There are many ways we can expand our capacity to serve in VUCA times. In this article we will focus on areas within three levels of the system: individuals who exhibit courage, teams who embrace healthy disagreements, and whole systems that come together for planning and action.

Individuals Being Courageous

Social science experiments, such as ones conducted by Solomon Asch (1951) on conformity and Stanley Milgram (2009) on obedience to authority, have revealed the underlying lateral and hierarchical social pressures that exist in organisations. If we are going to create organizations that are actively engaged in dealing with the challenges we face, we need to make it safe for people to speak up for new possibilities.

Courage starts with us. One metaphor for OD practitioners is that we are the Court Jesters of the old kingdoms, speaking truth to power in ways that helps the royalty get clearer of the impact of their messages and actions. Being courageous doesn't have to be confrontative, as we can do this by pointing out patterns or asking reflective questions. Three questions we can ask before sharing something that requires courage are: 1. Will saying this be helpful?, 2. Am I the right person to say this? ,and 3. Is this the right time to say it?

As an OD practitioner, one of our roles is to make it safe and easy for people to be authentic, to create the opportunity for others to share their concerns and aspirations. This type of sharing can help build trust and commitment within groups. Often people have things they want to say and all they need is permission, so we can see ourselves as permission-givers.

Our goal is to create an environment where courage can show up more consistently, offering processes that invite people to express opinions or admit mistakes, or by helping teams to develop groups norms where openness is expected. When courage shows up in sessions we are part of, it can be helpful to acknowledge the person for being willing to share their opinion, and to acknowledge the group for making it safe for the person to speak out how they feel. This can remind team members that being courageous and authentic is a sign of a healthy team.

Aristotle said that courage is the first virtue...it makes all the other virtues possible. As more people feel safe offering differing opinions, then teams can work on being able to manage disagreements, in service of what is best for the organisation.

Teams Embracing Healthy Disagreements

In times with higher levels of complexity, it is even more important to make sure decisions are made in a rigorous manner. After all, decisions can now create unintended consequences as they ripple through organizations and communities.

A good indicator of the health of any team or organisation is the amount of healthy conflict that occurs in meetings, whether it is a weekly staff meeting or an annual Strategic Planning Retreat. Everyone knows intellectually that disagreements are healthy, but many people and teams are not used to the emotional dimension of people expressing opinions that are different from others.

Patrick Lencioni (2012) explains that healthy conflict in a team creates higher levels of commitment and accountability, and this leads to better collective results. Faster

decision-making may save some time in the short term, but in the long-term it leads to lower levels of commitment and less than robust decisions. So spend the extra time and hear all the opinions. With a little effort, you can tap into what Tom Crum (1998) calls “The Magic of Conflict.”

There is extensive research on what conflict means for any human system. Whether it is a marriage or a management team, the manner in which people disagree is a telling sign of the quality of the relationship(s). Healthy conflict is not personal; it is disagreeing on approaches and strategies. A tip from the John Gottman (2007), who has studied marriages for many decades, is to show some level of agreement and appreciation even when in conflict. After all, it is possible to disagree without being disagreeable.

Once again, managing conflict starts with us. Mee Yan Cheung-Judge (Cheung-Judge & Holbeche, 2011) believes that we can’t take a client anywhere we have not gone ourselves.” So we need to be comfortable with disagreements and healthy conflicts in our lives if we expect to support others to engage in such a way.

In more complex situations, teams are not enough to make informed decisions. A wide range of stakeholders can come together to assess reality, explore possibilities, and determine strategies and plans of action.

Organizations Getting More Voices in the Room

Many of the leaders we support are good at thinking systemically. However, these days having a few people who are systems thinkers may not be enough to create robust strategies and high levels of implementation of plans. After all, there is a limitation to the traditional way of having the leadership team create plans and initiatives and then cascading them down through the organization. After all, people are much more likely to support and feel more ownership with things they have helped to create.

When Barbara Bunker and Billie Alban wrote their landmark book *Large Group Interventions* (1996) they documented 11 processes to bring large groups of people together to do meaningful work. To keep pace with the environment, more processes have been developed to bring the system into the room. In 2007, the *Change Handbook* (Holman, Devane, and Kady) included 61 ways to bring people together. As OD practitioners, it helps if we are familiar with a number of those methods. As Abraham Maslow said, if the only tool we have is a hammer then every challenge will look like a nail. So let’s be sure to have methods to match the situations we are asked to intervene in.

Marv Weisbord and Sandra Janoff (2007) advocate for getting the “whole system in the room”, as they believe it is a high leverage way to build the capability for action.

The framework they use is to have people who have: Authority, Resources, Expertise, Information, and/or a Need, (think customers, clients, etc.). They point out that convening such a group can be change of a high order, and makes possible things that never happened before.

Can you imagine the possibilities if your organization saw more courage being displayed, with teams engaging in healthy robust disagreements, and getting more of the

system together to discuss issues that impact across the system? If so, think about how you can be a catalyst for work at one or more levels of the system.

Now what? Continue to Build your Capacity

Think of yourself as a martial artist; you know most of the moves and now you are working on doing them smoother, faster, and in more complex situations. To summarize, here are some tips on getting your black belt:

Be an enCOURAGER: Role model being open with your sharing, and create an environment for others to share their perceptions of reality and their hopes for the future. Be a permission-giver and validator.

Facilitate Healthy Disagreements: Dialogue skills are crucial when differences arise. Support teams to stay focussed on the issue at hand, to balance advocacy and inquiry, and to look at how the issue is being framed. During or after a healthy conflict, be sure to acknowledge and celebrate that the team has cared enough to disagree openly and skilful enough to disagree in such an agreeable manner.

Bring More Voices in the Room: Bring more people into the planning meetings and sessions you facilitate, and continue to advocate for more stakeholder engagement when you think it would be helpful to get more of the system in the room. Be sure that you have a range of Large Group processes in your toolkit and that you can help design such sessions to meet objectives and outcomes.

Conclusion

As a profession, we are poised to support organisations and people as they navigate through these VUCA times. We have a wide range of useful competencies for these times: understanding systems, change management, design, facilitation, and others. This can be another golden era for our field. Let's continue to expand our capacities, and support our clients and organisations to be healthy, effective, and resilient in the midst of changes in their external environment.

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