

OD Network 2003 Conference

October 12 - 17, 2003

Portland, Oregon

Matt Minahan, Ed.D., keeps us up to date on Conference happenings.

Day 1: Sunday, October 12

It felt like I arrived here at the OD Network Conference in Portland about two hours before we actually touched down . . . when there was just enough of a break in the clouds for the Grand Tetons to jut their raggedy cliffs skyward . . . then about an hour later, with the mercurial Mt. Hood dominating the clouds roiling around its base . . . sun bathed and snow covered!

Talk about Sustainability! All of that beauty and power, on dramatic public view, for centuries and centuries on end . . . taking from the environment, and giving back to it in reciprocity.

By the time we arrived, the cloudy Friday Portland morning had yielded to a gorgeous, sunny 60 degree day, which encouraged me to stop, after a sustainable subway ride into town from the airport, and eat a delightful lunch outside on the plaza at Pioneer Square.

Fittingly, my first encounters at the Portland Hilton were warm hugs from Mila Baker, chair of the OD Network Board of Directors, and Elena Feliz, a former member of the board and colleague on the conference planning committee.

We didn't linger, because I was anxious to get to my preconference workshop, Improv Culture, with three members of On Your Feet, and let me tell you, we certainly were! We worked together on "forms," not games or exercises, such as Word-at-a-Time, Yes-And, Orchestrated Story, Bunny/Bunny, and What Are You Doing, which is particularly good for groups in need of a good "brain scrub!"

All demanded concentration and creativity, and all were great fun, with lots of application to our work in organizations. And, let me compliment and thank the three members of On Your Feet who volunteered their time, energy, and knowledge today: Julie Huffaker, Gary Hirsch, and Brad Robertson. Their web site <http://www.oyf.com> feels just like their session -- quirky, fun, and vital, with lots of links to other great resources, too!

We had our first pre conference lunch on Saturday, with about 150 people attending 16 pre conference workshops. John Carter is leading a team delivering a Gestalt workshop which people are buzzing about. Marilyn Blair (yes, our OD Practitioner editor) is leading an Action Research program that had people asking great questions over lunch today. Fellow NTL members Barbara Brewer, Steve Jones and David Glaser are staffing the 2 and 1/2 day HI lab for OD practitioners again this year.

LOTS of people and lots of great stuff, and the conference hasn't even started! More pre-confs and the opening gathering Sunday, Dexter Dunphy on Sustainable Organizations on Monday morning, John Adams chairs a panel of Oregon businesses committed to sustainability on Tuesday, and then Roosevelt Thomas is our closing keynoter on Wednesday.

I also want to acknowledge the Planning Committee that selected the theme, reviewed all of the proposals, and organized the content of the conference: Billie Alban, Delorese Ambrose, Paul Cadario, Jackie Eder Van-Hook, Elena Feliz, Matt Griffin, John McCall, Mike Mitchell, Jo Sanzgeri, Rand Schenk, and Mark Story. My special thanks to Stephanie Jo Gomez, who co chaired the committee with me, and who has been a great partner and collaborator in this!

If you're thinking about coming, stop. Don't think about it. Just do it ;-}

More tomorrow.

Peace, friends. Matt

Day 2: Monday, October 13

Sunday is always my favorite day at ODN conferences, because that's when the majority of people arrive, check in to the hotel, and then enter the conference experience.

This year, we had about 150 people for pre conferences on Fri and Sat, and we added another 250 or so today, with another 100 or so due tomorrow. The registration table was busy all day and the buzz around the place was great!

People had great things to say about the Strategy Out of Chaos session done by Rob Wetzels and Jaap Peters from the Netherlands. I ran into folks all day who were talking about Managing the Paradoxes of Organizational Learning with Marilyn Laiken and several others, too.

We had about 125 mentors and mentees connect and get off to a great start mentoring under the steady hand of Denny Gallagher, for the third year in a row, in the Dick Beckhard Mentoring Session. (BTW, Frances Baldwin and Cynthia Haddock are working with Denny and Mark Storey on collecting stories of mentoring across the network for possible publication next year!)

The OD Network's Annual Meeting was this afternoon, in which we learned that membership grew rapidly in the late 1990s, from 3500 to about 4200, and has been bouncing around 4100 or so since then. Our budget shortfall this year will be much smaller than the previous two years due to revenue increases and

aggressive cost containment. Mila Baker, Board president, explicitly thanked the Board for making in-kind contributions to the operation of the network, and cited that as a significant contribution to the improved budget outlook.

We had a wonderful conversation, initiated by a new draft of the OD Network Mission statement, about the focus of the network and its work. Many members pleaded for an activist orientation, saying the Network should be advocating for social change, the end of oppression, and for racial diversity, and the meeting ended with several small groups, mostly clustered around current and board members continuing the conversation about the nature of OD Network and what our focus should be.

And, as if that weren't a full enough day, our opening ceremony was dramatic and powerful. Sam Dunlap of the Rock Creek Band indigenous peoples read us a wonderful poem that began: "Welcome to Portland, Oregon, the Crown Jewel of the Pacific Northwest at the confluence of the Mighty Willamette and Columbia Rivers. Here we sleep and rise under the rich legacy of our first nation ancestors. Who were your people? How were you connected to the past? What are the ways you connect to the Natural Laws?"

He organized us into groups by the years we graduated from high school, and then by our sun signs. He then called all of the grandmothers and grandfathers to chairs set in the middle of the room. An older woman wearing native clothing, named Louise Billy, also of the Rock Creek Band of Goldendale, WA, joined the circle in her wheel chair, followed by her daughter and translator, Ella Jean Jim, also of the Rock Creek Band. They spoke of Mother Earth as the source of life, completely captivating the whole room full of people gathered around.

It was a powerful, and centering end to a day full of sweet of connections and new relationships.

We get underway with a keynote on Sustainable Organizations with Distinguished Professor Dexter Dunphy at 8:30 on Monday morning, and there's still time for you to decide that this is the year that you're going to come.

More tomorrow. G'night.

Peace to all. Matt

Day 3: Tuesday, October 14

What a great way to open a conference on Sustainable Organizations! I've got some good notes on Dexter Dunphy's opening keynote, but before he started, the Network gave its three annual awards.

Billie Alban presented the Life Achievement Award to Warner Burke, the first director of the OD Network, almost 40 years ago (more on that next year!) He began his remarks by telling us how much better dressed we were than the handful of people who attended the first OD Network conference. He added that OD remains a values-based practice that should not be confused with change management.

I had the privilege of presenting the Outstanding Service to the Network Award to Marti Kaplan. I enlisted some help from Chrissa Merron and Robin Reid, and the 3 of us described Marti's tireless work on 3 annual conferences, in rebuilding 2 regional networks, as a member of board, as a listservant for our Godparents email list, and as the mother of our Job Exchange. We estimated that Marti helped 5,000 find jobs between 1986 when she started the JE with 41 jobs that year and this past year, when there were over 400 jobs advertised. And it looks like she's still not done. Marti is thinking about launching a new OD Network regional in Buffalo.

The third award was presented by Amy Herman, the Executive Director of the OD Network to the Omaha regional network for its steadfast work and growth in an environment that has not been traditionally friendly to our field!

Then we were off in high gear. Dexter Dunphy, Distinguished Professor, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia has been writing about sustainability in organizations for years. He said that we're beginning a third wave of organizations, which will be values driven, responsive to the emerging shift in global values, and will include corporate citizenship and sustainability as part of their core business strategies.

He said there are 6 categories of organizations around sustainability: rejection, non responsiveness, compliance, efficiency, strategic proactivity, and the sustainable corporation, with several examples along the way, including how Nike had moved from rejection and non responsiveness toward proactivity and sustainability. (Nike, BTW, is one of the corporate sponsors for our conference, which never would have happened in previous years, as Dexter pointed out.)

He challenged us to commit to sustainability as nothing less than the reconstruction of every day life and reality by discovering and living the future right now in the present, through a grounded spirituality. What a great challenge to our field as we look into our second 40 years!

Over lunch, a lot of mentoring conversations occurred, as well as a working session on the Principles of Our Practice, which Mary Eggers facilitated masterfully, as another step in the Network's articulation of the values and principles that ground our work.

Lots of concurrent sessions this afternoon, followed by the affinity groups in late afternoon. I convened the Men in OD session each year here, and, as in the past, it was a rich and touching conversation among men about being men in a field that emphasizes our feminine selves in t work. The Kaleel Jamieson Consulting Group very generously underwrote the Persons of Color affinity group meeting on Sunday afternoon, so that the participants would have the fee for a one day pre conference session waived. Thanks, Fred Miller and Corey Jamieson and KJCG!

This evening, Dick Axelrod and Billie Alban hosted a panel called "Listening to Our Customers," using a great participative large scale design which began with a raggedy open as everyone assembled from dinner and beyond. It was a wonderful window into how 5 important corporate clients are handling organizational change and other human systems issues in these difficult economic times, and then we were asked to discuss the implications for the field of OD.

A wonderfully exhausting day. Tired feet and legs from standing and talking. Tired buns from sitting in sessions. I'm beat.

Peace, friends.

Matt

Day 4: Wednesday, October 15

The mountains on the west side of Portland are the harbingers of the day's weather, I've decided, after 4 days of observation and, ahem, no background in meteorology.

With the mountains swirling in fog early this morning, the rest of Portland was cloudy and cool. By mid day, the fog was gone from the mountains, and the sun was ablaze in an azure sky. And as I write now, there are clouds gathering behind the mountains which presage some rough weather later in the day.

When our conference planning committee first came here to Portland 18 months ago, we wanted a conference that brought our field to Portland, and that brought the heart of the Northwest to our field. And, this morning's plenary was all about that.

Rand Schenk, an internal OD consultant at Intel and a member of our planning committee, brought together a great panel of people who've actually been working on sustainability from here in the Northwest, from Norm Thompson, OMSI, and Oregon Office of Community and Economic Development.

When Rand introduced the panel chair, old friend and wise man John Adams, he reminded us that John keynoted our 93 conference in San Francisco on the topic of Sustainability 10 long years before we've reawakened to it anew. (I still remember the chart that John used, predicting -- accurately, unfortunately -- the shocking increase of third world debt. The presence of a class of 3rd graders in the room as stakeholders in our better future, and bouncing beach balls of the globe all around the ballroom made it memorable! What a great event it was, and John's presence here brings all of that back for those of us who were there!) John's book on Sustainability "Thinking Today As If Tomorrow Matters" has been one of the really hot sellers at our book table here at the conference.

John identified 4 critical success factors for sustainability: visible senior leaders and stakeholders, versatility (appropriate flexibility) of mental models in use, a critical mass of like-minded thinkers, and strong links to the organization's performance management system.

Then each of the panelists spoke about their own successes and lessons learned -- and some real failures, too -- in working toward more sustainability in their own organizations. We did some table work to synthesize the messages of the 5 speakers, developed questions that the panel addressed, and then each table developed scenarios for a future, sustainable world that were shared. What a great design for passing along serious, important cases and lessons learned regarding a cutting edge area of our field!

There are 13 concurrent sessions booked this afternoon, followed by a video called The Future of OD that was recorded at a gathering of OD professionals this past summer.

The OD Network Board will host a reception for Warner Burke, the Lifetime Achievement Award, and then the real fun begins this evening at the gala! In addition to the food and late night dancing, the members of On Your Feet, a Portland-based improv group, have been around the conference and they'll have some entertainment at the gala.

I'm gonna be out and about in the town later today and will pass along a few observations tomorrow.

Peace, all. Matt

Day 5: Thursday, October 16

The word that's buzzing around the conference today is "flower geezer."

More on that in a bit, but before I get down to business, I found a few hours to get out of the hotel and into Portland. What a neat town! Like all older cities that had a manufacturing and industrial base (St. Louis also comes to mind), Portland is struggling with how to make good use of old factory and warehouse buildings, particularly now in the northwest section of the city.

The Pearl district is undergoing a huge change, with restaurant and art galleries on blocks and blocks of 1st and 2nd Avenues, right off of the Willamette River water front. Some friends and I got out to the New Chinese Gardens on 2nd Street, right on the edge of Chinatown for a delightful tour and some wonderful victuals, including choice of about 20 different teas!

And of course, no visit to Portland is complete without a visit to Powell's Books. What a huge place! Seems like there must be 20 or 30 different sections of the store, and what strikes me is how old and unfashionable some of them are. There are no quartz lights, no bright colors, no open and airy floor plans. This is a good, old fashioned, dusty book store with high shelves and step stools and old books. Lots of stuff that you'll never find at Borders! Old poetry collections, and histories, and lots of sociology books, and tons of literature books. In fact, there are books about books about literature! Not to be missed!

Our final day of the official conference began with the introduction of the Planning Committee for the 04 Conference in Puerto Rico. Amy Herman shared the s**t out of me when me included my name instead of Matt Griffin's on the Puerto Rico committee. Having just finished working on my second conference planning committee for Portland, I was afraid I was doomed to ODN Ground Hog Day! Fortunately, Amy was set straight and Matt Griffin was identified -- though 04 in PR will be his second in row, having contributed mightily to our Portland Planners this year.

This morning's keynote was challenging, captivating, and very motivating. Dr. Roosevelt Thomas, of the American Institute for Managing Diversity showed an animated film about a giraffe who had built a house that was perfectly fit for giraffes, both in terms of size and layout. When the giraffe's home based business took off, he needed to hire a reliable associate, and he remembered that an elephant friend of his had worked with him on a project to build an outdoor playground. So, the giraffe invited the elephant to the house, but had to knock down the front door to get the elephant in. By the end of the film, the elephant had knocked down walls and doors in the giraffe's house. The moral of the allegory was that the organizational structures that we create for our own preferences and needs limit the ways that we can accommodate people with other needs and that, in order for our organizations to respond to the

business needs of the 21st century, we need to ensure that our structures truly accommodate people of different sizes, styles, needs, and colors. Lots of great questions from the floor, too. The positive feedback on Roosevelt's session has been universal, from people of color and not, from people in the diversity business and not, from newcomers to the field and not.

Too many tough choices among this afternoon's sessions. I chose David Sibbet's session, but with an agreement to swap notes with people in several other sessions because I couldn't be in all the places I wanted. David introduced us to his Stages of Organization Model. Like the Team Performance Model (Drexler/Sibbet), this one is rooted in the systems thinking work of Arthur M. Young, from *The Reflexive System*. The model is simple and makes perfect sense, and it's density makes my brain hurt! Just great! What a real content workout, with lots of opportunities for dialogue and interaction, too. Three resources, if you'd like more: www.grove.com, www.arthuryoung.com, and <http://www.odnetwork.org/events/conferences/conf2003/followup/410W.pdf>

There's one more day here, with about 10 post conference sessions starting on Thursday. A few final thoughts and observations tomorrow.

Peace, all. Matt

Oh, right. Flower geezer. Our gala last night included some wonderful, creative stuff from On Your Feet, the local improv group that did one of our pre confs. Flower geezers are those of us who grew up in the "flower child" generation, who haven't let go of those ideals, and are now well into our geezerhoods! What a kick!

Day 6: Friday, October 17

Did you even see "Pippin?" The play ends with a single light bulb on a bare stage -- a stark and empty contrast to the action and energy of the play. Well, that's what this day feels like at the conference. The book table is gone, the vendor and sponsor tables are gone, and there is no sign of the conference registration table, which had been the center of gravity for 500+ people for 6 days. In fact, another group began arriving last night, invading the very space that has been so pivotal for our own temporary learning community.

Still, though, some signs of life, with more than 100 people around for the post conference workshops. It looks like the Whole Scale Systems session with Steve Cady and Sylvia Chase, and the Moving from HR to OD session with Barbara Bunker and Billie Alban are big draws. And, with presenters of that caliber, what else would you expect?

We had a fabulous corps of sponsors for this conference -- the largest anyone can remember. Our Gold Sponsors were Fielding Graduate Institute and Nike. Our Silver Sponsors were Benedictine University, Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, NTL Institute, Lakeshore Publishers, Peak Insight LLC, and Pfizer. Our Bronze sponsors were Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, Plus Delta Consulting LLC, and Power and Systems Inc. Our Program-Related sponsors were Kaleel Jamieson Consulting Group and Pepperdine University. And, our Foundation Sponsors were The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Knowledge Works Foundation. Many, many thanks for your support of our conference.

In order to pull this off, many, many thanks are due to the Program Committee, including Billie Alban, Delorese Ambrose, Paul Cadario, Jackie Eder-Van Hook, Elena Feliz, Stephanie Jo Gomez, Matt Griffin, John McCall, Matt Minahan (who?), Mike Mitchell, Jo Sanzgiri, Rand Schenk, and Mark Storey. We selected the theme, developed the selection criteria, wrote the RFP, managed the proposal reading process, selected the presenters, and recruited the keynoters. And, I think we did a pretty darned good job, too. And most of the 500 guests at our little party seemed to think so as well!

Our local Portland Planning Committee did a wonderful job -- thanks to you all -- for arranging the opening and gala and liaison to the local business community as well!

However, for as much work as we did, the heavy lifting on this conference was done by Pat Yankus, with a huge assist from Linda Taylor, of the OD Network. Together, they managed all of the logistics and scheduling dilemmas of the conference, keeping the Program Committee from eating its young, working closely with the hotel and AV providers to make sure that each session got the number and type of flipcharts, markers, AV equipment, and chair-and-table set up. Not that we OD types are hard to please or anything! ;-} Maggie Hoyer, the Associate Executive Director of the Network, and Mirlande Parker, Beverly Burton, and Pat's sister Nan were everywhere, fighting fires and resolving issues most of the time before anyone ever knew there was a problem. A deep appreciative bow to you all!

Finally, a word of thanks to Amy Herman, the Executive Director of the OD Network. Amy was able to oversee the whole event, attend every social obligation, talk with old timers and new comers, and see every inning of the Yankees/Red Sox series. She would only have been happier had the Yanks won the pennant in 5!

Amy announced at the Annual Meeting of the Network that she is taking a health-related leave of absence. We will miss you while you're gone, Amy, and we wish you good health, a speedy recovery, and rapid return to your desk in South Orange, NJ.

I hope you've enjoyed these missives, and will take to heart the invitation to join us next year for the Network's 40th Anniversary in Puerto Rico!

Namaste! Matt

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