“In the past most clients may have called for a brief diversity training, or, perhaps, suggestions on how to build a culture of inclusion; now many are asking how they can build organizations that address bias and structural racism. These clients understand they are asking for longer term work that will examine deep-seated issues in their internal and external practices.”

OD is Diversity

Differences are at the Heart of the Field

By Robert D. Greene and Heather Berthoud

After meeting with the top executive and the senior management team, Jerry, an OD consultant, designs an off-site to begin a change process for a medium size organization. The off-site proceeds apace until one participant makes a statement about race that some take as charged. A heated exchange between two staff—one black, one white—ensues. Caught off-guard and not sure what to do, Jerry continues with the planned agenda, though the tension remains for the rest of the day.

The US Department of Justice issued a report in March, 2015, showing the practices of the police and courts of Ferguson, MO, predictably and disproportionately affected the Black population as the outcome of a pattern of civil rights violations.

The impact of historical national policies and the impact of internalized bias are receiving increased coverage in everything from criminal justice to unemployment, housing, healthcare, and technology. It is vital to recognize these dynamics in our OD work also. In the past most clients may have called for a brief diversity training, or, perhaps, suggestions on how to build a culture of inclusion; now many are asking how they can build organizations that address unconscious bias and structural racism. These clients understand they are asking for longer term work that will examine deep-seated issues in their internal and external practices.

This article presents a case for diversity being fundamental to OD and offers ways to foster a diversity lens and improve consultants’ work with diverse groups.

It is well understood that demographics in the US are changing rapidly. It is no longer possible to assume that there is “no diversity” in organizations. And with the national discourse becoming more influenced by concepts of implicit bias (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013) and structural racism, it is increasingly difficult for organizations and practitioners to escape their own participation in the larger societal dynamic. Failing to attend to diversity, that is, to fail to note issues related to race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, physical disability, and other identities and the relative power assigned to them socially and institutionally can limit the impact of organizational change processes. Practitioners are too often “surprised” when issues related to diversity arise in assessments, meetings, and other interventions. This is due, in part, to seeing diversity as a separate specialty rather than a fundamental area of competence critical to all dimensions of OD practice.

Many OD practitioners focus on one or a few areas or approaches, such as strategic planning, appreciative inquiry, leadership

1. This is a revised and updated version of an article that appeared in the OD Practitioner, 39(2).

2. The word diversity, once favored, is often replaced by several others expressions—diversity and inclusion, cultural competence, equity, multiculturalism, pluralism, and more—as practitioners grapple with how to name process, structure, practice, outcome, and description in a single term. In this article we use diversity though we acknowledge it, like all other terms, is limited.
development, etc. It is, of course, reasonable to focus on what one most enjoys and does well. Diversity is seen as one of these specialties, and many practitioners do not believe they need skill or awareness if they “don’t do diversity.”

Although we are not proposing that every OD practitioner needs to be a diversity “expert,” we believe it is impossible to implement OD interventions effectively in the 21st century without at least basic awareness and competence in diversity matters. The principles of diversity—broad and meaningful participation by all members of a system in order to maximize available creativity and energy for organizational learning and effectiveness—are fundamental to OD. Meaningful participation is constrained or augmented by internalized and expressed biases and power differentials. Diversity requires looking at the impacts of any change effort on different subpopulations within the system. Too much is lost if diversity is ignored, and, in fact, it’s possible for an OD practitioner to do harm in a system if diversity is not adequately taken into account.

The principles of diversity—broad and meaningful participation by all members of a system in order to maximize available creativity and energy for organizational learning and effectiveness—are fundamental to OD. Meaningful participation is constrained or augmented by internalized and expressed biases and power differentials. Diversity requires looking at the impacts of any change effort on different subpopulations within the system. Too much is lost if diversity is ignored, and, in fact, it’s possible for an OD practitioner to do harm in a system if diversity is not adequately taken into account.

Rather than a specialty area, we see diversity as, by definition, a fundamental part of OD. Attentiveness to diversity is critical for: taking a systems perspective, using the OD process, and maximizing stakeholder participation.

**Taking a systems perspective.** Understanding a system in its complexity is aided by recognizing multiple perspectives and the interplay among departments, sub-units, and identity groups. By paying attention to the impact of actions on different populations, we make sure we account for key aspects of the system, and, therefore, support comprehensive and lasting change. For us to help leaders guide change, it is critical to know if responses due to feeling listened to/ignored or highly motivated/resistant break down along the lines of identity groups. We therefore need to be “tracking”—noting the different experiences and perspectives of identity subgroups within a system. Attention to diversity encourages us to listen to key stakeholders who might otherwise be ignored in the assessment phase of an engagement. While those in the majority may be excited by the “preferred future” identified through Appreciative Inquiry, others may feel ignored or marginalized (for a discussion of AI and diversity, see Royal, 2006). For example, unless intentionally engaged, an organizational restructuring may further distance support staff, who in urban areas are often primarily women of color, from program staff, who are more likely to be majority White. Attending to diversity increases the likelihood that a change process will benefit the system as a whole along with its many parts. In one organization, solutions for how to address tensions between different ethnic and racial constituencies was a conundrum until the organization engaged staff from those same constituencies as content experts rather than just implementers of strategy they were alienated from.

Taking a systems perspective also extends to understanding the larger system of which the organization is a part. For example, internal tensions among subgroups may arise as a result of external events. The challenges faced by Muslims in the US in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon can all-too-easily become workplace suspicion or hostility. Ignoring the larger context readily leads to a feeling of isolation for those in the minority. In one organization, the lone Person of Color on the management team found herself feeling isolated when no one in the office mentioned recent killings of unarmed Black people. Similarly, silence on the legalization of gay marriage left one staff member of another organization wondering whether she was seen and valued.

**Implementing the OD process from entry through closure.** At each step along the way of the OD process—entry, contracting, data gathering, and analysis, etc.—OD practitioners must remain open to what is going on in the system from multiple perspectives and identity groups. To be blind to diversity dynamics can mean missing subtle and not-so-subtle forces driving or inhibiting change. How can we do an adequate force-field analysis if we miss important forces? There is a growing literature showing how to utilize OD to conduct diversity work (see for example, Bailey W. Jackson, 2006)—we are making a corollary point: that it is actually impossible to do OD well without attending to diversity.

**Maximizing stakeholder participation.** When the field now called OD was in formation, Kurt Lewin stressed that people commit to what they help create. This insight leads us to develop skills to foster maximum participation. But if participation is to be meaningful, it is essential to explore who is participating, who is not, and the barriers that prevent some from full inclusion. In fact, it is necessary to watch for exclusion so that we and our clients can foster inclusion. Having people in attendance at a meeting, workshop,

Table 1. What is Gained by Attending to Diversity Throughout the OD Process

Attending to diversity strengthens our OD work. Fundamental information necessary for a successful OD consultation is more readily available at each step of the OD process when we remain aware of diversity. And, of course, much will be overlooked if diversity is not intentionally tracked throughout the process.

- **Taking a systems perspective.**
  Enhanced ability to use multiple perspectives to gain a more complete picture of the organization. Greater ability to observe power in play. Greater attention to the interplay among departments, sub-units, and identity groups within a system.

- **Enhanced insight/skill in use-of-self and presence.**
  Greater self-awareness and increased skill in using oneself as an instrument of change. Better understanding of our presence in groups and the common responses people of different identity groups have to us. Increased ability to read subtle dynamics. Increased authenticity, including with people of identity groups different from our own.

- **Making stronger connections.**
  Enhanced ability to build rapport and trust with diverse constituencies from first contact.

- **Improved intervention choices.**
  Better awareness of likely consequences of choices, including potentially unintended consequences. Enhanced skill in choosing data gathering and group process methods and interventions that support all groups’ meaningful participation.

- **Maximizing stakeholder participation.**
  Greater ability to create a place to dialogue and to demonstrate the integrity of the process by including often overlooked participants.

- **Enhanced ability to observe and affect group dynamics.**
  Greater sensitivity to the unsaid, covert processes, and the voices not speaking up. Reduced likelihood that we will impact the group negatively by working unconsciously from our biases or ignorance.
a number of questions come to mind about the consultant’s preparation for the off-site and the entire change process. What happened during the contracting phase? What were the expectations shared between consultant and client? How did Jerry gather data and from whom? Who seemed open and who appeared tentative or reserved when interacting with him? Were there indicators of racial tension present that Jerry had failed to pick up on? And why did the consultant attempt to maintain the planned agenda when the strong tensions surfaced?

So what is to be done? Practitioners at all levels of experience, whether they have developed skills and tools regarding diversity or not, have options for action at each step of the OD process. A few of the options available are listed in Table 2.

An Example of Attending to Organizational Diversity

The first vignette presented at the beginning of the article is a composite of situations we have experienced. In contrast, here is an actual case in which the consultant, who is clear that she does not “do diversity,” effectively handled a challenging situation. An organization that promotes

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Table 2. Ideas for Action on Diversity Throughout the Organization Development Process

Regardless of your experience consulting on diversity issues, here is a partial list of ideas for action for developing a diversity lens and improving your work with diverse groups.

**“Pre-Entry” (Continuous Learning)**

- Build increased self-awareness and skill in diversity by deeply exploring your own beliefs, values, blind spots, and biases. Do this through reading, attending workshops, requesting feedback, exploring your own upbringing and cultural background. Articulate the deepest values that motivate your work.
- Join in diversity discussions. Purposely join (or create) groups where diversity is an intentional part of the conversation. Request feedback about your presence in groups.

**Entry and Contracting**

- Notice who is in the room when decisions are made. What is the demographic composition of the client(s)? Noting who is involved with gatekeeping and contracting begins to give clues to power dynamics in the organization.
- Note the quality of participation in contracting. How do parties converse and negotiate expectations? Who speaks up? Who appears motivated, or not, to proceed? Note whether the dynamics track by identity groups.

**Data Gathering and Analysis**

- Identify the demographics of the organization. How are the various groups distributed in the organization, e.g., are women likely to be concentrated in certain functions or levels? Be sure to see and hear any discrepancies in viewpoints from different demographic groups, in addition to views from people in different roles or hierarchical levels.
- Determine what is rewarded in the organization. What does it take to be successful? Is there an embedded cultural bias, such that some groups are disproportionately more likely to be hired, fired, mentored, and/or promoted?
- Explore potential concerns of different subgroups that may be interpreted as “resistance.” Be careful not to simply accept one group’s frame of another’s “resistance.”

**Data Feedback**

- Make sure that the full picture is shared with all. Demonstrate the integrity of the process by including commonly overlooked participants.
- Tell the truth. Name what you experience. Do not ignore, brush aside, explain away, or blame.

**Implementation Design**

- Identify where diversity issues may come up. Consider and plan for potential unintended consequences.
- Get support or additional resources, perhaps from a shadow consultant, support group, books, etc.

**Implementation**

- Watch for dynamics in the group related to diversity, and where useful, name what you see.
- Re-contract and redesign as needed.
- If you will not or cannot discuss a diversity issue in the moment it arises, emphasize that the concerns have been heard and negotiate how the issue will be followed up, even if you will not be doing the follow-up work.

**Evaluation/Closing**

- Include diversity as part of the evaluation with the client. Openly discuss the impacts of the consulting project for different identity groups. Consider what has been accomplished and what requires follow-up.
- Debrief with team members and colleagues to grow and develop as a professional.
healthcare for underserved people embarked on strategic planning with the consultant. In the course of gathering data, the consultant learned that concerns about racial discrimination in hiring, firing, and promotions were at the forefront for many staff. Rather than treat the diversity concerns as “off-topic,” the consultant recognized that unless the diversity issues were addressed, the organization’s planning efforts would rest on a shaky foundation. At the same time, she did not consider herself skilled enough to address the diversity issues that surfaced. She re-contracted with the client to expand the consulting effort to hire additional resources to address the issues of diversity, which clearly from the initial data gathered were critical to dealing with if the organization was going to be successful in moving forward.

We were then hired to work in tandem with the planning consultant. During our initial conversations with the organization’s leadership, we learned that at a full-staff retreat a few years prior, a heated, racially-charged, exchange occurred. Diversity was not a planned part of the agenda, and the facilitator was stymied. Two employees involved in the exchange left the organization shortly after the retreat, sparking numerous questions. Since then, it became clear, many People of Color harbored resentment and fear for their jobs (were the retreat antagonists pushed out?) while many White people “walked on eggshells” fearing they would touch off another “explosion.”

We worked to open multiple channels of communication and encourage participation in reviewing policies to break the silence about race and diversity. The exploration led to helping management recognize the staff’s frustrations with the perceived lack of advancement for People of Color in the organization. As it happened, standards for advancement and mobility were not clear and paths were not widely known. This murkiness in the process advantaged those who were well-educated and/OR well-connected in the system, who were typically White. A combined staff and management task force researched the options for development and rewards, publicized them, and identified processes for selection. This group also increased awareness among staff on efforts that senior management had been implementing over the past few years to increase advancement opportunities (management had been frustrated that these efforts had not been appreciated). Management and staff also increased their skill in having conversations about their cultural differences that had kept them from these important discussions in the first place. Not surprisingly, they were also more able to address issues of difference not only in their workplace but in their work. They began to have color-cognizant conversations, and as Foley and Buckley (2014) describe, were, therefore, more able to address their own needs and those of their clients.

**Concluding Points**

In today’s workplace, diversity awareness is a basic competency. As demographics continue to change, diversity becomes ever more important for OD to increase its relevance and effectiveness. We conclude with three points regarding OD practice in the 21st century.

**Diversity is a basic competency.** While not every OD practitioner needs to focus their practice on diversity, we believe all OD practitioners must be aware of diversity dynamics and have skills to respond to situations effectively. In short, diversity is a basic component of effective OD. We encourage OD practitioners to intentionally continue their diversity journeys, growing in awareness, skill, and confidence.

**Diversity is critical if we are to be self-aware as practitioners.** Attention to increasing awareness of presence and use of-self are fundamental to skillful practice. If we do not become aware of how our presence affects how we are perceived by colleagues and clients of different back-
References


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(continued next page)
Guidelines for Authors (contd.)

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