

“Rather than fear the current climate, culture backlash, we are in, it is time to boldly move forward with change interventions that unleash the power that differences bring.”

Our View from a Combined 100 Years in the Field... What’s on the Horizon

Transformational Organizational Change

By Frederick A. Miller
and Judith H. Katz

Abstract

Transforming organizational cultures that unleash people’s ability to exercise agency, feel included and work for all has been a multi-decade endeavor for change agents. In this article the authors share their perspectives of a combined 100 years of work as organization development practitioners and discuss some of the key issues that must be addressed to continue to support the creation of organizations that enable all people to do their best work and achieve higher organizational performance and additionally what is needed as we look ahead. They discuss the need for organizations to create a culture of individual and team agency as a key element in the journey of organizational transformation and workplaces that work for all.

Keywords: OD Intervention Strategies; Transformational Change; Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; Culture Change; Agency in Organizations

We are fortunate that as practitioners in the field of OD for over 50 years each we have been able to see the field and the issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging and total systems change transform some organizations and evolve to meet present day challenges. Being on this journey of transformation since the 1960’s, we have been a part of much change and have had the privilege of influencing the field, many organizations, and tens of thousands of people. We have learned much, seen much change and know there is so much more work to be done to realize the vision of justice, equality, and organizations where *all* people, are seen and valued, able to do their best work to contribute to the organization, and have individual and team agency at work.

Over these decades we have witnessed several critical junctures in terms of the work of creating organizations that leverage the differences that people bring, and

their skill sets and talents in a culture that is inclusive.

In this article we discuss the incredible shifts we have experienced on the road to a better and healthier society and organizations. We also identify some of the key issues we must face today if we are to continue the journey to inclusion and a better work experience for all, as well as some of the traps that keep us stuck or limited in making change, and most importantly, we discuss what we see as the next steps in the journey of human and organization change.

Looking Back

Having been practitioners for five decades, respectively, we have seen enormous changes in how the field of organization development (OD) and organizations have addressed issues of differences and inclusion. Both of us came to the field of OD

out of a commitment to organization systems and societal change. We were shaped by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's and saw the field of OD as a vehicle for societal and organizational change. In 1978, Kaleel Jamison (who founded our firm in 1970) wrote one of the first articles to bring together OD and issues of diversity in her groundbreaking article "Affirmative Action as a Springboard for Total Systems Change." She wrote about the need for total systems change to create organizations that embraced and leveraged differences and for organizations to experience difference as an asset rather than a deficit which was the norm at that time.

In the 1990's the Hudson Institute's report discussed research on changing demographic trends highlighting the shift in demographics that was coming and how organizations and the society were not prepared for it and needed to change (Johnston et al, 1987). This, along with new legislation and discrimination lawsuits, created a business case for organizations to seriously address issues of diversity including internal discrimination and avoiding the costly revolving door. It was also a time when the conversation regarding differences expanded beyond a focus primarily on race and gender to include other dimensions of difference such as nationality, veterans, disability, LGBTQ, and other differences that make a difference (Miller & Katz, 2013).

Over these decades we have seen many shifts: from black women and men and other people of color previously related to mostly menial jobs to moving through the ranks of organizations to become CEO's; the invisibility of people who are gay, lesbian or transgender shifting to efforts to acknowledge and support people who identify as LGBTQIA along with allies; as well as a few accommodations to now seeing organizations seeking to hire people with disabilities and finding that those accommodations not only support individuals with a disability but often the population at large. No longer is there a need to convince most organizations, and most senior leaders, that greater diversity of background, experience and thought is needed. The challenge today is how best to create an

environment in which that talent can fully contribute and grow (Katz & Miller, 2018).

Today's Reality

As we think about the current reality, it is easy to get dismayed and pessimistic about issues of social justice and leveraging differences as we are experiencing culture backlash. Polarization, push back, and roll back of efforts is becoming commonplace. Politically in the United States, aggressive efforts are rolling back laws that were hard won and, in some states progressive laws are being replaced with laws that are counter to the hopes and goals of the Civil Rights Movement. It can feel defeating as organizations are pulling back on some of their efforts and toning down their overt signs of support for diversity, equity, and inclusion in fear of being labeled a "woke" organization (Murray & Gordon, 2024). However, many organizations nonetheless are continuing to focus on how to inspire, include, and empower employees and to ensure that the organization has the diverse talent it needs for organizational success even if they are not telegraphing those efforts broadly (Murray & Gordon, 2024).

As change agents, it is important to remember that we have been here before and to not get disheartened. Below we have identified some of the key elements that OD Practitioners need to keep in mind to continue the trajectory of creating work experiences that value differences, create a sense of belonging, and enable all people to do their best work.

1. Understand the past and cycles of change.

When Judith was teaching at the University of Oklahoma in the 1970's Gloria Steinem came to speak on behalf of the Equal Rights Amendment (which still has not been passed in the United States). She remarked, "I never thought I would be fighting for issues of equality now and I have come to realize that this work is all part of a thin red line through history that I and others are a part of." As Gloria Steinem pointed out, we must be able to see our work in terms

of the cycles of change which always has times of retrenchment. We are currently experiencing the reaction to the beginning of the Third Reconstruction (which followed the death of George Floyd) (Katz & Miller, 2021) in which there were commitments to address racism and other issues in many organizations. Now in the aftermath of gains that were made we are seeing a backing away from those commitments in many organizations—some because the initial commitment was performative and without much substance, in other organizations out of fear of being labeled and trying to avoid a political confrontation from those that see these efforts as going too far.

As OD consultants we must understand the ebbs and flow of change which is critical for perspective and perseverance.

2. Don't get stuck in your methodologies, paradigms, or frameworks.

One of the great OD practitioners and influencers, Herb Shepard (1975) wrote a pivotal article about "Rules for Change Agents" in which he reminds us of several key tenets for practitioners: one being to start where the system is; and another, to light many fires. These tenets apply today as well. We need to be able to truly understand where an organization is in its journey to create a more inclusive culture that leverages differences and to meet the organization where it is—not where we would like it to be. As the world and our organizations are changing, we need to change with them.

As OD practitioners this includes our ability to pivot, flex, and adapt to the current reality of our clients and most importantly, not to fall in love with our methodologies or approaches; to understand that there is not one road to change.

3. Expect resistance.

Given the current climate, it's easy to feel that there are more restraining than driving forces for change (Lewin, 1951). Resistance is a part of the change process (Katz, 1992). It will be there—the challenge for OD practitioners is to understand why

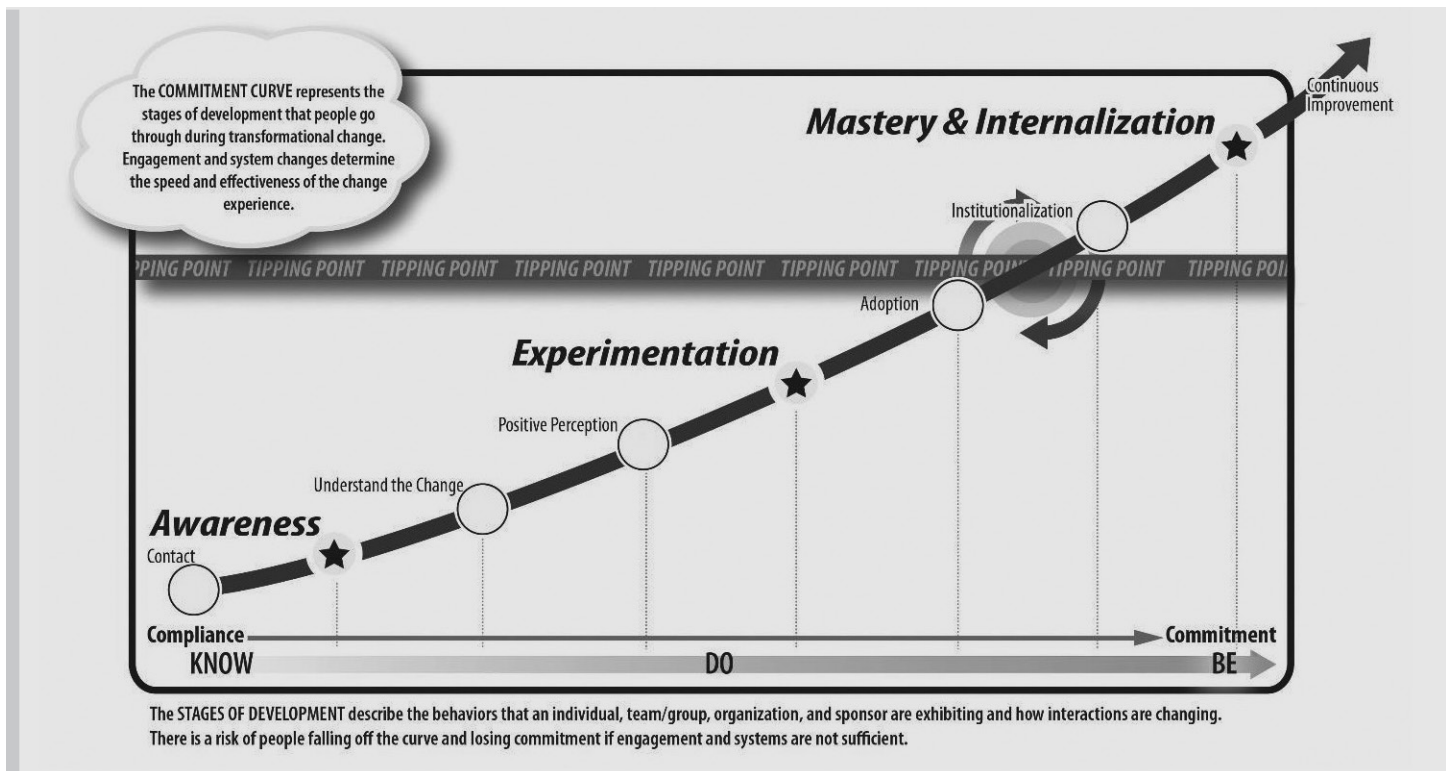


Figure 1. The Commitment Curve

that resistance is there and to find creative ways to address it. Deep listening to the concerns of those who are “resisting” through a Dialogic OD process (Bushe & Marshak, 2015) can open strategies for how to address it and move people to join the effort. We have found that often if we label people as “resistant” that we cut off our ability to be creative in how we engage with their concerns or reluctance.

Recognize that resistance is a part of the change process and don't fear it, rather look for it, learn from it, and engage it.

4. Find the seeds of change—they are there.

While social media and the discourse today is on retrenchment, many organizations are quietly continuing their efforts. Rather than focus on the barriers and the limitations it is even more important to focus on where there are opportunities and progress. We see it in our clients every day—where leaders understand that having a workforce in which differences are valued and in which all people can do their best work is critical to individual, pair, team, and organization success. Rather than backing away from systems change, these organizations are continuing to make the

system and interaction changes that are needed for individual, pair, team, and organizational betterment.

We must keep an optimistic bias and seek out areas of opportunity—finding the self-interest for change at every level of system.

5. Measure what matters.

Making sure efforts are tied directly to the organization’s mission, vision, and strategies gives it sustainability. It also removes it from being an effort that is optional to one that is mission critical. In addition, focusing on outcomes related to the measures that matter for the organization also creates a direct linkage to organizational and individual performance (Katz & Miller, 2017). For example, in one global manufacturing organization the inclusion effort focused on issues of quality, safety, and time to market. Inclusion was the means, the HOW (Katz & Miller, 2009), to achieve higher performance as opposed to an effort unto itself. It was connected to lean six sigma work to ensure that people were having the right first-time interactions and eliminating waste in their processes and decision making.

Measuring the progress of change is essential. One such tool, The Commitment

Curve (Connor, 1995) (see Figure 1) enables OD practitioners and leaders to monitor the progress of the culture change effort. It charts people’s behaviors along the path to new practices and ways of operating in stages from: awareness to understanding; experimentation; adoption; and, mastery and internalization.

Ensure change efforts are tied to accomplishing key organizational performance metrics and that the effort is a means to higher individual and organizational performance rather than seen as a “nice to have” or a social program unrelated to the goals and purpose of the organization.

Today and on the Horizon: The Workforce is Rapidly Changing

As much as leaders are trying to have people fully return to the office, hybrid work is here to stay. Generative AI and robots are and will at an even more rapid pace change how work is done and how people interface. In some cases, eliminating jobs and roles and in other cases, enhancing and creating new jobs. The 40-hour work week is on its way out and shift work is moving to a more compressed workday and shifts, so people have more time away from work. People are seeking more

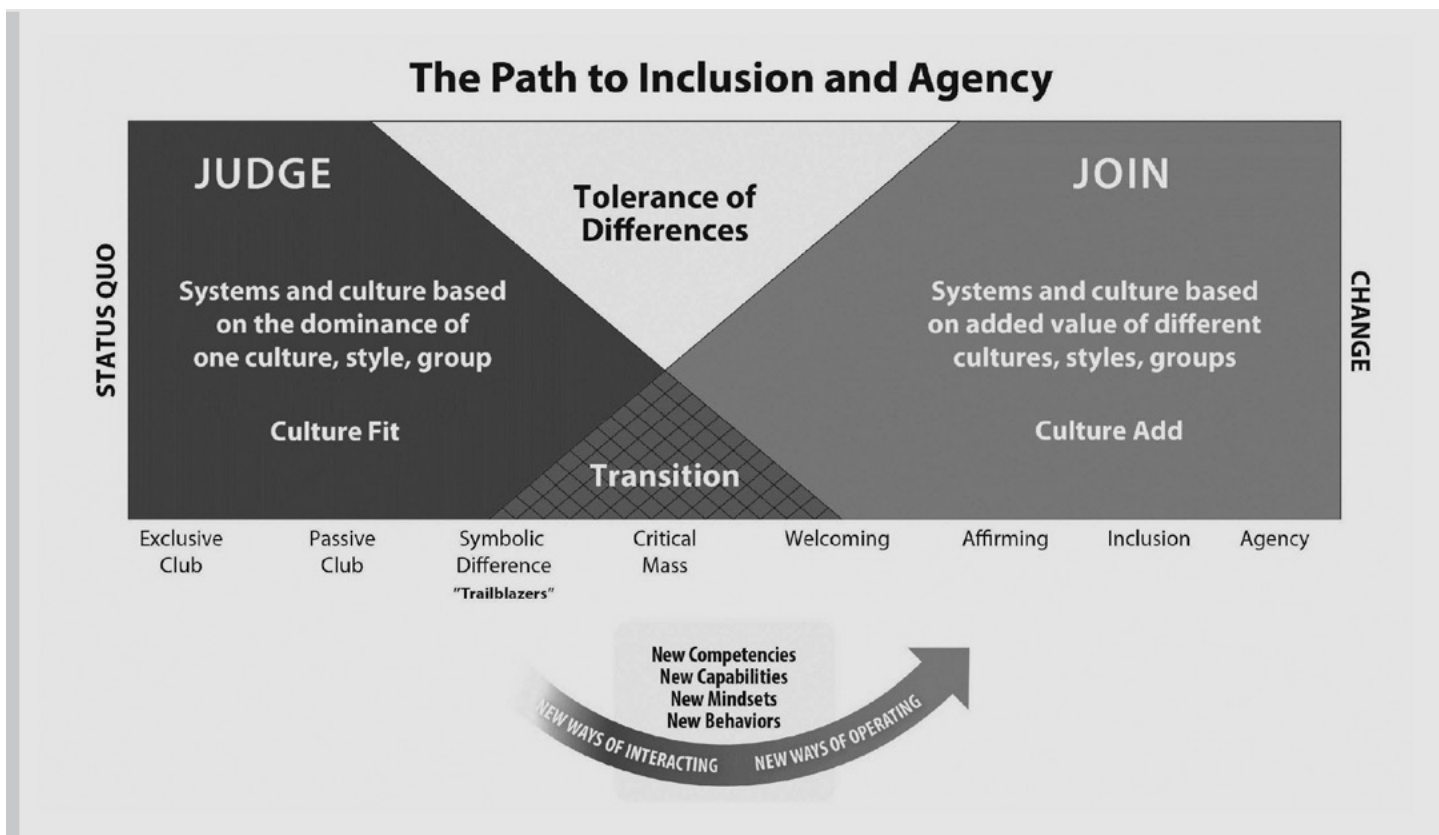


Figure 2. The Path to Inclusion and Agency

growth opportunities and choice over when and how they work and redefining what a career is (Miller & Katz, 2023b). These trends, and more, are reshaping how and where people work, the role of organizations, and the speed at which they must adapt. Herein lies a great opportunity for OD practitioners to align these trends with needed organizational changes in how leaders lead, how managers manage, how people interact, and how organizations operate. This will be seen as one of the periods of the greatest organization changes. At the heart of all these changes is the need to value the differences that people bring, gain value from those differences, and to create organization cultures in which people and the organization flourish.

Evolving Frameworks to Address Today's and Tomorrow's Challenges

Identifying frameworks that guide your understanding of change and how organizations develop to create culture change is fundamental to every change agent and change process (Gilpin-Jackson, 2018). For us, the Path to Inclusion model (see

Figure 2) is a helpful framework to diagnose what is needed on the journey to organization change. Originally developed by Jackson & Holvino (1988) as the Multicultural Organization Development Model, we have continued to evolve the model as a way to diagnose and intervene in organizations as they move along the path to create organizations that enable everyone to do their best work and in which differences in skills, perspectives, and background are utilized as an asset for higher individual, pair, team, and organization performance. In thinking about the current reality and the aftermath of the pandemic we have continued to evolve the model in response to what we are seeing individuals and organizations needing today and how the future shapes our change efforts (Miller & Katz, 2023a).

Agency: The Next Step on the Path and an Equity Centered Future

We continue to think about what is next on this journey to create organizations that work for ALL people and build a community of effort that is mutually supportive of each other for higher individual, pair,

team and organization performance. We see agency as what is needed to meet those needs (Miller & Katz, 2023a; 2024a; 2024b). (see Figure 2). If we are to have people-centered organizations, we need to have organizations in which people can exercise their agency. Agency is: *Ensuring all people, of all roles, levels, tenure and identities have the power, influence, and voice to make choices and decisions related to their jobs and the betterment of the organization* (Miller & Katz, 2025).

Agency is built upon a foundation of inclusion and interaction safety (Miller & Katz, 2018) (the kind of supportive and liberating safety that enables people to speak up, share half-baked ideas, think big, take risks, and accomplish spectacular feats) which enables everyone to contribute as a vital part of the organization's operations, flow, and success. As we explored the concept of agency related to inclusion and organizational transformation, we asked ChatGPT (Open AI, 2023), what is the connection between inclusion and agency? Its response was as follows: "Inclusion refers to the act of making sure that all members of a group are included and have equal access to opportunities and resources.

Agency refers to the ability of individuals and groups to make their own choices and decisions and to take action to achieve their goals.” Together inclusion and agency will lead to higher performing organizations, where everyone can fully participate and have a say in shaping their lives.

When there is agency in an organization, people not only have a sense of belonging as an individual, they also have a greater sense of ownership for their area of responsibility and for the success of the overall organization. They feel responsible and empowered to call out behaviors,

When there is agency in an organization, people not only have a sense of belonging as an individual, they also have a greater sense of ownership for their area of responsibility and for the success of the overall organization. They feel responsible and empowered to call out behaviors, actions, and decisions that are not aligned with the mission, vision, and values of the organization. They feel the freedom to do their jobs effectively and to have the work-life-me blend that works for them.

actions, and decisions that are not aligned with the mission, vision, and values of the organization. They feel the freedom to do their jobs effectively and to have the work-life-me blend that works for them. When agency is unleashed as a cultural norm people at all levels and all roles not only feel included and valued for their differences and similarities but also can make decisions and influence the organization. They are full members who can contribute all their talents and not sit on the sidelines.

The notion of agency builds upon the understanding that Verna Myers (Cho, 2016) has described regarding diversity and inclusion:

*Diversity means that you are invited to the party,
whereas
Inclusion means that you are invited to dance.*

As we have thought about agency in light of the above, we see *Agency as co-creating*

the party itself, having the freedom to contribute wisdom based on knowledge and experience, and the authority to act, i.e., deciding on the venue, guests, food, drinks, playlist, and when to end the dance.

Agency moves inclusion one step further with a focus on both the independence of the individual and the need for interdependence with others to accomplish goals. With agency comes ownership and responsibility. You no longer feel like a guest at the party or the organization or feel like the help, laboring away at someone else’s direction.

Conclusion: It is Time to Accept the Inclusion of Human Differences

There is no reason to debate the value added of differences. It has been proven repeatedly that the circumstances of change and challenges we are experiencing as human beings requires the diversity of thinking that comes when a range of people with different experiences and points of view mix it up and come up with something no single person or monocultural group could develop. Rather than fear the current climate of culture backlash we are in, it is time to boldly move forward with change interventions that unleash the power that differences bring. It will take our own creativity, strategic thinking, and willingness as OD practitioners to step up! We must change our approaches where needed but not our goals—making organizations places in which all people can exercise their talents, agency, know-how and thrive.

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Judith H. Katz has distinguished herself as a thought leader, practitioner, and strategist. She is the recipient of the OD Network Lifetime Achievement award and one of 40 Pioneers of Diversity. With Fred, she has co-created many key concepts in Organization Development to create inclusive collaborative workplaces and achieve higher organizational performance, such as Interaction Safety and Conscious Actions for Inclusion. Her groundbreaking book, *White Awareness: Handbook for Anti-Racism Training* (1978), was the first systematic training program to address racism from a white perspective. Judith served on the boards of NTL Institute, Social Venture Network and the Fielding Graduate University Board where she is an Emerit member. She can be reached at JudithKatz@kjcg.com.

For more than fifty years, Fred and Judith have been working individually and together on organization and cultural transformation to create more inclusive and higher performing workplaces. The Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group was started in 1970 and Judith joined the firm in 1985. KJCG was named one of *Consulting* magazine's Seven Small Jewels. Judith and Fred have partnered with Fortune 100 and other companies, universities, governmental agencies, municipalities, and nonprofit organizations to create organizations in which the level of interaction safety elevates the quality of interactions, leverages people's differences, and transforms workplaces into growth and learning environments where all people's talents are unleashed, results are accelerated, and productivity soars. Their partnership is proof that teamwork and collaboration do create breakthroughs.

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