

# You as the ultimate tool

## Some thoughts from Rick James<sup>1</sup>

We love tools in OD. People are always asking for frameworks, exercises and processes to use. Up to a point this is great. We need to have these, but we can easily become too focused on the particular tools and lose sight of what really matters. Ultimately the main element you bring into any OD process is yourself. A facilitator has to listen, analyse, challenge, confront, inspire, energise, and instil hope. How much you are able to catalyse change depends mostly on how much the organisation trusts you. People will respond first and foremost to who you are - your character. As Walter Wright says: 'Who we are shapes everything we do and everyone we touch (2004:4)'. This is the same for internal change agents, leaders and external consultants. Perhaps we would make more of a difference if we focused more on making ourselves 'fit for purpose' by working on ourselves. This means:

Who we are shapes everything we do and everyone we touch

1. Knowing ourselves
2. Being open to our own learning
3. Cultivating character, especially humility

## Know yourself

A good facilitator is highly self-aware. We are all different. We each have different preferences, personalities and experiences and biases. We cannot help bring these into any change process. Without realising it, facilitators' personal views influence a change process that purports to be objective and logical. We interpret all the data we gather through our own experience. I learnt this the hard way a while back:

"This is appalling work! Did you really spend eight days working on this? What personal agenda do you have? Why on earth were you commenting on strategic issues? We are not accepting this. Please rewrite it!" This was how the international Director of a large Christian relief responded to one of my early OD reports. It proved a formative learning experience for me in many ways. I realised that I had allowed the strong personal opinion that I brought into the consultancy influence the way I did the data gathering and presented my findings.

It is often more difficult to work well as facilitator with organisations you know well. Our pre-understanding of a situation means we can bring a strong opinion about the issues and solutions even before we start. We pre-judge and are therefore prejudiced. Our own motives influence the work. However open we claim to be, we may hear loudly anything that confirms our opinion and filter out the anything that contradicts what we think. This undermines our ability to really listen and facilitate well.

We also need to be aware of our own strengths and weaknesses. To the extent that we understand our weaknesses, we can mitigate and manage them (and in the best cases turn them into opportunities for learning). Some of us prefer playing a more 'expert' role giving recommendations to clients; others, by personality type, prefer to let clients themselves decide. Some of us are more

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comfortable managing conflict than others. Some are able to tolerate ambiguity; others need to know the answer. We bring different strengths to different stages of the OD process. I know I prefer going down the curve than coming up the other side. I have to work hard with myself not to skip over the nuts and bolts of the planning stage, and to keep my interest and engagement during implementation.

## **Be open to learning**

To be a good change agent we need to develop organisational understanding and facilitation skills. Being familiar with organisation theory – how organisations behave and change, is obviously a good starting point. We need to know about OD, leadership and tools for data gathering. But the ability to read an organisation, to discern what is really going on below the water-line is something that only develops over time and with systematic practice. The more experience we have of organisations, the more raw material we have to work with. We can hone this knowledge into understanding by regular reflection, consciously trying to learn from positive and negative experiences. Strong analytical skills well used, in time produce wisdom.

We need good listening skills to collect quality data. We need the ability to observe and listen to the problems of the client. Unless we are able to withhold our judgement and listen actively, we will leap to unsubstantiated conclusions. We need to have an empathy and sensitivity to see the world from the client's eyes. But also maintain a broader perspective of what is happening in the environment.

A good facilitator is socially and politically aware. In the development sector, they are often working cross-culturally. They need to have good inter-personal skills to build up trusting relationships. That trust has to be earned. They also need to be sensitive to internal power dynamics and relationships. They also need to be aware of their own power in a process. They may need to have the political skills to create the acceptance and commitment to move the change forward.

Change agents obviously need to be adept at facilitating group processes and exercises. They need to be comfortable in working with emotion and be able to manage conflict situations. They need to be able to accurately assess how much they can open up 'cans of worms' within a particular process, so as not to leave the organisation without worms crawling about everywhere.

The main asset is that a good facilitator wants to learn and improve. They are curious and continuous learners, looking to develop new skills and styles. They are fascinated by learning from experience. As Peter Block says:

Our ability to facilitate the learning of others is absolutely dependent on our willingness to make our own actions a legitimate source of inquiry. Our need for privacy and our fear of the personal are the primary reasons why organisational change is more rhetoric than reality. Real change comes from our willingness to own our own vulnerability, confess our failures and acknowledge that many of our stories do not have a happy ending (Block 1995 in Harrison R A Consultant's Journey)

To improve our future practice we must reflect on our past work. Yet so often OD facilitators get caught up with the next assignment or internal change agents move onto other things. The learnings from the OD experience remain vague, undigested and personal. One key to improving our facilitation is to regularly reflect on our current OD experiences. People have found it helpful to start a journal or a folder where for every OD intervention or facilitation experience they jot down:

What happened?

How do I feel about this?

What do I think about this?

What have I learned from this?

What actions will I take as a result of my lessons learned?

## Cultivate character

Character is what really matters in a change agent. The commercial sector already realises this. William O'Brian the CEO of Hannover Insurance Company said: 'The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervenor'. This means that as 'intervenor' we have to pay attention to our interior condition, our characters, if we are to be effective. As Max De Pree says: 'What we do in life will always be a consequence of who we are' (Wright 2004: xi).

'The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervenor'.

I find this profoundly challenging. It forces me to realise that I cannot divorce my professional life from my spiritual life. I bring my character (which D.L. Moody says is 'what you are in the dark') into the client. I know that as an OD consultant I often have the privilege of being invited into the guts of an organisation. We get special access. We get to ask questions no-one else can. We are given time that no-one else is. I get asked to facilitate processes that deal with the very identity of the client. Yet with such privilege comes responsibility. Decisions that are made affect people's jobs, their lives and their own sense of identity. We have to tread softly on peoples' lives. We are responsible for bringing the best of ourselves to our work.

In my OD work I believe that bringing the best means cultivating spiritual virtues such as:

- *Humility* to look to God's power, to value others' contributions, to genuinely listen, to be honest with myself, to own my weaknesses and to continuously learn
- *Compassion* for the client, not ignorant of their weaknesses, but being merciful. It means overcoming my adverse reactions to their bad behaviour to earnestly desire the best for them - injecting hope that they can change
- *Patience* to put up with a different pace and standards of a client
- *Determination* to produce work of the highest standards and to follow-through rigorously
- *Generosity* in setting fee rates and time commitments within family boundaries. It is also about being generous in my relationships and my approach.
- *Self-control* to be a careful steward of my time and client resources
- *Honesty* to make sure feedback, reports and writings are full of grace and truth.

It is incredibly important for us as consultants to work hard on our own character; to keep ourselves spiritually fit. This may be more about humility, acknowledging failure, than pretending we can attain holiness. The poet, T.S. Eliot wrote 'The only wisdom we can hope to achieve is the wisdom of humility' (Little Gidding). We would do well to remember that change is God's process not ours. In our own strength we cannot change people. Only God can change human hearts. We have to let go of our expertise. Sometimes we have to feel completely out of our depth before we really give up and trust God. In every intervention I need to be ready to let go of what I know, what I want and what I desire as well as what I am confident about, so that God can work.

Being your own best tool is about bringing your whole self to the work – including your faith. Integrating the spiritual in OD work is not about a tool to use or an authority to possess. Spirit is something you yield to, you surrender to. We can only be truly humble when we recognise who we are before God and surrender to his leading, rather than depending on our God-given abilities.