

# Challenging Organisations and Society

reflective hybrids®

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**Layout:** [www.kronsteiner-lohmer.at](http://www.kronsteiner-lohmer.at)

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*Anne Litwin*

## **Creating Inclusive Organizations: The OD Consultant as Guerilla Change Agent**

### **Abstract**

The goals of Organization Development (OD) are traditionally described as helping organizations plan and implement change (Cummings & Worley, 2005). There are times, however, when clients do not know, or do not want to know, that their system needs to adapt and change. The purpose of this article is to share a case where the author and her colleague used guerilla approaches, defined as activities developed to produce both unstated as well as stated outcomes, as positive deviance. Positive deviance is defined on the website for the Positive Deviance Initiative (2014) as an approach that “invites the community to identify and optimize existing, sustainable solutions” for social change – in this case, for the purpose of creating a more inclusive environment for women in an aeronautics engineering company. I will share suggestions for ways the reader can facilitate similar interventions to create positive, sustainable change.

Keywords: Positive Deviance, Gendered Organizations, Gender Differences, Sustainable Change

### **1. Introduction**

I believe we all bring our histories to our work as consultants and do our best work when we are tapping into our values and passions. I have been a feminist for over 40 years, and, as a feminist, I am committed to making women’s lives better in my work as a consultant, researcher, author, political activist and life-long change agent. My OD practice has been primarily about creating more inclusive organizations for everyone by creating organizational cultures that value diversity across many dimensions, including gender, race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality and global regional

differences. I work as a coach, trainer and consultant to develop the capacity of individuals and systems to value differences. And the sweet spot for me – where my passion lies – is to focus on gender.

As a political activist in the anti-war and women's movements in the 1970's, I went to graduate school in community psychology to learn the theory that would ground my work as a community organizer and change agent. I studied the work of Saul Alinsky (1971, p. 11), who taught me that the role of the change agent is to believe in people, meet them where they are and then “organize them so that they will have the power and opportunity to” attain equity and fairness in their community. It took many more years before I discovered the field of organization development and realized that organizations are also communities where change is needed.

## 2. Case Study

### 2.1. The Problem

It is well documented that companies find it difficult to retain women and groom them to become senior leaders (HBR, 2013). Often they even find it difficult to retain women hired in at a senior level – and they don't know why. The business implications of not retaining talented women for both the present and the future are myriad. Some examples include:

- Costs associated with voluntary turnover are between 150% and 200% of salary plus benefits (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004);
- More women than men are receiving university degrees, so organizations will not be prepared for the future if they are not grooming women, as well as men, for leadership (US Council on Women and Girls, 2011); and
- Stock prices of businesses that have women in corporate leadership roles tend to be higher than those of their counterparts (McKinsey, 2008).

Scholars have established that most organizations are gendered (Acker, 1990). The gendered workplace is one where patterns of advantage and disadvantage between female and male, feminine and masculine are structured into the very fabric of the way the institution functions. In other words, as described by Fletcher (2004), masculine norms of behavior, or masculine workplace values, are privileged or rewarded, while feminine norms are devalued or discouraged. The result is that women do not feel they can be successful in gendered workplaces, so they leave – often to start their own businesses. This is what was happening in the organization that is our case study. They had an inkling that something was wrong, but no clear understanding of why women were leaving. But the door of curiosity cracked open just enough for us to come in as consultants and help them begin to see what was wrong and what needed to change – almost in spite of themselves.

## **2.2 The Situation**

I met Marjorie at a public leadership workshop when I was on staff and she was a participant. During a break we chatted and she shared that she had worked for the same engineering company for 25 years. She was very frustrated with trying unsuccessfully to change the company culture to be more supportive of women, and she asked about my work. We talked. About five years later, she called me to say that she had decided to take her last best shot, before she retired, at making the organization a better place for women to work. This medium-sized aeronautics engineering firm had a few women in professional and technical roles, but not many. The number of women in middle-management roles could be counted on two hands and turnover was high. There were no women in senior management.

It seems that the second woman ever recruited as a senior manager in Marjorie's company had just announced that she was leaving for a better opportunity after only two years in place, leaving the senior team, and the next level down, composed of all white men once again. Marjorie had pounced on the announced departure to get the CEO to agree to meet with me to consider doing

some gender awareness training. The CEO was hesitant to “open this can of worms.” The organization had no history of doing any diversity training or culture change work. It seemed like a long shot, and I did not feel very hopeful, but I went to meet the CEO with Marjorie. He, very reluctantly, agreed to fund and support a pilot gender awareness workshop called “Women and Men Working Together”.

In the meantime, a male colleague, Tom Finn, with whom I often do gender workshops and I decided to write a proposal, unsolicited by the client, for a culture change intervention. We felt strongly that just throwing one workshop at a system wasn’t likely to change anything, and we felt it was worth trying to educate our client about the most effective way to really make change. In our proposal we explained that awareness workshops were not always the best way to begin a culture change initiative. We recommended running focus groups to gather stories and collect some data to assess the extent of the problem. We suggested that a Steering Committee be formed to review policies and procedures and organizational statistics. These steps would lay a solid foundation for beginning the change work on gender – but our suggestions were stonewalled. I remember feeling defeated and disappointed because I doubted that one workshop would accomplish anything. I don’t think they even read our wonderful proposal.

The CEO approved only one pilot workshop, and only because Marjorie had pushed hard and put her 30 years of loyalty on the line with him. The door was only open this crack, so Tom and I decided to follow Alinsky’s (1971) teaching and meet the client where they were. The workshop was our container for a shot at organizing and empowering them to take charge of making change in their system. We decided to squeeze through that crack with the intention of doing as much as we could to bring in data to inform their reflection on long-term sustainable change.

We pushed Marjorie for a three-day workshop, which was unusually long for this system where training was not valued, and we worked with her to get the right people to attend. One of the biggest challenges was finding enough

women to give voice to women's experiences in the presence of senior men. There were so few professional and technical women in the organization, and very few at the managerial level. We had one chance to get their experiences voiced and the structural problems exposed so that the pilot workshop participants, who included some leaders, might see the systemic reasons why women were leaving and begin to create solutions together that they could implement after we were long gone as consultants.

As OD consultants, Tom and I agree that we want our work in organizations to result in healthier and more inclusive systems. We set out to design a three-day workshop in two segments – two days, a four-week interval, followed by a one-day workshop to reinforce the learning. On the surface, the objectives of the workshop were fairly standard for a diversity-awareness workshop, but in addition to the stated objectives, we agreed that there was no chance for sustainable change unless we had as our unstated goal to raise awareness of some systemic patterns in the organization that made the culture unwelcoming to women. We knew that this probably fell into the “can of worms” concerns of the CEO, but we felt we had to try to stay true to our personal and professional values about creating positive change. We decided that we would design the activities of the workshop to attempt to produce this unstated outcome of raising systemic awareness, along with our stated goals – our guerilla approach to creating sustainable change with one pilot workshop.

### **2.3 Theoretical Grounding for the Intervention**

I reflected on what I knew about System Theory, Liberation Education, Transformational Learning Theory (TLT) and Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) to guide our design work. Scholars such as Capra (1996) help us understand organizations as living systems that interact with their environments and evolve through learning from this interaction. Facilitating system change, then, includes opening feedback loops that will bring in data about the environment to help organizations adapt and change for sustainability.

It is also not easy for people to let go of their frames of reference and be open to new ones, which is what diversity and inclusion work requires to be successful. One of the early influences on me as a political activist was the work of Paolo Freire (1970), a social activist in Brazil. He called his approach to change “liberation education,” and said that “growth and change come from both reflection and action” – or what he called praxis. (p.5) His change methodology focused on people discussing their current reality in small groups to gain perspective about the impacts on them of the larger social forces. Morrow and Torres (2002, p. 29) note that Freire seems to draw on the theories of both Hegel and Mead in acknowledging that the key to the theory of praxis is, “found in the dialogic learning process.” In other words, reflection that takes place in a group, or dialogic settings is what brings about broadening of perspectives.

Mezirow (2000, p. 7)) was the first to try to define Transformational Learning Theory (TLT), which he describes as, “the process by which we transform taken-for-granted frames of reference.” He references Friere and encourages reflective discourse as an important process, but notes that transformational learning can also occur individually, rather than as part of discourse, when something like a “disorienting dilemma” occurs.

Jordan (2010) explains Relational Cultural Theory, which talks about the importance of growth-fostering relationships for individual change. When people can share their own stories, hear the stories of others’ experiences, show mutual empathy through listening and inquiry and acknowledgement, and offer support and encouragement through mutual coaching, they are more open to changing their perspectives and behaviors to be more inclusive.

Our challenge, then, was to create a workshop design that opened systemic feedback loops, built in individual reflection, dialogic learning processes, or group reflections, and possibilities for disorienting dilemmas to occur for at least some of the participants during the first two days. We also wanted to strengthen growth-fostering relationships within the group through teaching skills for, and practicing, mutual empathy and mutual coaching. I felt we

really needed five days to accomplish so much, and worried that we would have to push the participants so hard that the workshop could backfire and do more harm than good. But two days for the initial work was all we had. At least the break between the two segments would be an opportunity for praxis, as described by Friere (1970), as the participants would have time to take action on their reflections and commitments from the workshop.

#### **2.4 Description of the Intervention Plus Positive Deviance**

We began the pilot workshop with standard climate-setting activities such as introductions and group development of norms, or behavioral guidelines for the workshop. The first disorienting dilemma occurred for some as soon as the workshop began and I spoke as the workshop leader instead of Tom. Tom and I always work to consciously model cross-gender partnership dynamics, and to counter-balance the marginalization of women by positioning me as the leader, with my branding on all our materials. The next disorienting dilemma may have come for others as we handed out the workbooks at the beginning of the session. One of the male participants looked at the title of the workshop printed on the cover of the workbook and said, with a hint of irritation, “you are trying to mess with our minds already!” The title of the workshop was, “Women and Men in the Workplace,” and the fact that the word “women” came first, instead of saying, “men and women,” was disorienting for him and others. I affirmed his observation as intentional and confirmed that one goal of the workshop was to become aware of unconscious assumptions and patterns of thought that were gender related.

The activities on the first day were focused on raising awareness of early learnings about gender, societal trends related to gender with business implications, a humorous video on gender style differences and an activity on identifying the value-added and dysfunctional stuff that each gender brings to the workplace. While individual and dialogic reflection methods were used in every activity, two of the activities on this first day on early learnings

and value-added behaviors were done in same-gender groups before a whole group dialogue occurred.

Holding two same-gender group meetings on this first day was a form of positive deviance needed because we were not able to collect focus group data before the workshop. We did not have stories from women and men that could surface systemic gender-related patterns. Focus groups are set up to create safe spaces where employees meet with others who share their experiences so that information can come out that may not be known about the system. We needed the awareness-raising activities in the workshop to have this additional possible outcome of creating safe space for stories to emerge, particularly from the women, about their gender-based experiences and for gender dynamics to emerge from both groups. Because there were so few women in technical, professional and managerial roles, and they were dispersed around the company, often as the only woman in their area, we knew the women were not connected to each other. They had no opportunity to share their stories, discover commonalities and develop shared voice. Without these stories, the organization had little chance of seeing the patterns of differential impact on women of current policies and practices that probably existed. Our positive deviance was intended to create the conditions where the women could build trust and growth-fostering relationships and begin to share their stories and discover commonalities – before the second day of the workshop, where the stories would be needed.

Another purpose of the same-gender groups on the first day was to allow for gender dynamics to emerge. Tom and I knew from many previous gender workshops that when given the same task and then separated, the women would probably do the assigned task together, in a serious manner, while listening to each other and taking turns. We knew the men would probably barely do the task while joking and teasing each other, and threatening to leave each out on a limb alone if the truth came out about what they were saying about the women during their small group time. As we predicted, the usual dynamics occurred and became rich fodder for the large group dialogue about gender differences when they were revealed. Opportunities for

cross-gender communication practice abounded. These differences also became a disorienting dilemma for some participants.

On the second day of the workshop, we continued the whole group dialogue about the material surfaced during the first day, while practicing cross-gender communication skills. We added a segment on insider/outsider dynamics using a simulation. Our positive deviance, or guerilla approach, came in full force at three points during the last half of this day. The first point was when we asked for stories, previously identified in the same-gender groups the day before, to be shared and documented as examples of insider/outsider dynamics. As the stories came out, from both women and men, I could see the blood draining from the faces of the three senior HR leaders in the room as the systemic issues started to become clear – definitely a disorienting moment for them. In that moment I said to myself, “Yes! They see the ways that policies and practices, unconsciously put in place in a piecemeal fashion over many years, or reflecting the unconscious bias of a gendered organizational culture that devalues feminine leadership styles, are negatively impacting women and some men.” I whispered to Tom, “Bingo! Now things can never go back to the way they were.” In some cases, the policies, especially around family leave and part-time work, were being implemented in ways that were not legal – for example, several women shared that they had been required to work full-time hours for part-time pay after maternity leaves in order to keep their jobs, which they had never shared with anyone.

As for ways in which the gendered organizational culture devalued feminine leadership styles, one example came from a female participant in the workshop who was a team leader. She shared that while her teams results for the year were excellent, she had recently been given a mediocre evaluation because her manager told her that she “coddled” her team and wasted time asking for their input. He told her she would not be promoted unless she could show she was using a directive leadership style. She was using feminine workplace values of collaboration and team focus (see Table 1), described by Dr. Joyce Fletcher (2004). In gendered organizations, feminine workplace values are not rewarded and are often discouraged, while masculine values

are rewarded as “the right way” to be, as was the case for this participant. As the participants, women and men, told their stories in the context of the workshop, more disorienting moments occurred as people heard things that surprised them and the group began to engage in dialogue about what needed to change.

**Table 1: Masculine/Feminine Workplace Values**

Masculine Workplace Values	Feminine Workplace Values
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Task focus</li> <li>• Isolation/autonomy</li> <li>• Independence</li> <li>• Competition – individualistic competitive achievement</li> <li>• Hierarchical authority</li> <li>• Rational engagement is valued (focus on task, logic, and the bottom line – leave personal matters at the door)</li> <li>• Leadership style is directive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community/team focus</li> <li>• Connection</li> <li>• Interdependence</li> <li>• Mutuality – success achieved through collaboration</li> <li>• Collectivity/flat structure</li> <li>• Emotional engagement is valued (notice body language and process, encourage relationships, share feelings and personal information, show empathy)</li> <li>• Leadership style is supportive</li> </ul>

\* Adapted from the work of Joyce Fletcher (2004), *Relational Theory in the Workplace*. In Jordan, J., Walker, M., Harling, L.M. (Eds.). *The complexity of connection: Writings from the Stone Center’s Jean Baker Miller Training Institute*. New York: Guilford Press. (p. 270-298).

A second point of positive deviance came into play at the close of the second day when participants were asked to brainstorm, using an Open Space design,

all the ways that gender differences could be acknowledged and rewarded in any of the following workplace activities at the company:

- Meetings
- Coaching
- Strategic Planning
- Recruiting and Hiring
- Mentoring/Sponsorship
- Project Planning
- Team Development
- Rewards and Recognition
- Performance Appraisal
- Conflicts/Turf Battles
- Retention

Many creative recommendations emerged for changes in policies, practices and reward systems. As the final activity, we asked small action groups to form and commit to working on one of the recommended changes as their action homework. Upon their return in a month for the third day of the workshop, they were expected to report on what they had accomplished. This was the third guerilla component for positive deviance initiated at the end of the workshop as these action teams did go out and start enthusiastically pushing for change.

### **3. Conclusion**

#### **3.1 Impacts from the Intervention**

Some policies changed almost immediately after the pilot workshop, especially regarding part-time work and parental leave. Significant changes in other policies and practices did occur over the next two years because one of the outcomes of the pilot workshop was a clear recommendation from the participants for more workshops. We were able to take variations of the design to several layers of the organization to raise awareness and generate recommendations for changes in policies and practices.

Practices began to change as awareness was raised among a critical mass of employees. In addition to more workshops, employees took the initiative to create a Women's Leadership Program within the company, a Women's

Mentoring Program, and they brought in Coaching Skills training. Accountability teams were spontaneously formed by the CEO at the end of the workshop for his top 3 layers of leadership. These accountability teams read a book entitled, *Are You Clueless* by my colleague, Tom Finn (2007), and held each other accountable for changing their behaviors to be more inclusive (and less clueless). The teams had to report quarterly, for a year, to the senior leadership on changes they had made during the previous quarter as individual leaders. Tom and I began to hear stories, especially from the women, about significant changes in informal practices that reflected a valuing of feminine leadership styles. In addition, the numbers of women in the management ranks, as well as in the technical and professional ranks, increased significantly over the next two or three years. We felt that we had, indeed, been catalysts for sustainable positive change.

### **3.2. Suggestions for Practitioners**

As OD practitioners, we should always be clear about our values and do our best to live by them. I always promise only what I can deliver, and to deliver what I feel will make a difference for sustainable change for individuals and/or systems. When a client does not want to do what it takes to create sustainable change, I have to decide whether I can find a way to bring her data that will help her see what the system needs, while also delivering what I have promised, or whether I should decline the work. I do not want to waste my precious life force doing work that doesn't make a difference, or that, in fact, might make things worse.

In the case presented here, Tom and I felt that we could promise to deliver a gender awareness workshop and, using guerilla approaches, or positive deviance, we also had a chance to create sustainable change. There are no guarantees. It might not have worked – but it did.

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“Flow beyond Systems” is understood as the creative force of new realities for organizations and society through each of us. The lively nexus between the worlds of organised systems and individual development is our focus. The way we lead and organise ourselves is reflected by what our organisations have become – socially, in relation to the world, and also in relation to us as individuals in this society. Freedom does not pre-exist in the organised community but is constructed there, as the common space to which its equal members bring their own uniqueness and create something of lasting value such as an organisation or larger organized structures. Isn't this a call for delightful development!?!

Reaching beyond is neither a result of will power, nor of mental excellence alone, nor can it be made to happen. This undertaking largely depends on our ability to intentionally bring our somatic intelligence to the creation of new larger structures.

The COS-Conference is a platform offering cutting edge methodology for the mastery of transforming collective realities through the power of our individual dreams. Our development faces challenges – and in return poses a challenge to organizations & society. We only grow together, step by step, by facilitating the interplay between individuals and existing organizations and the organizational realities that are waiting to be created.

According to the COS-Philosophy, the COS-Conference is a co-creative space for development, transformation, guiding transitions and inspiration. We invite you to join and contribute to a delightful development!

More information: [www.cos-journal.com](http://www.cos-journal.com)

## Join COS, a Home for Reflective Hybrids

The future is an unknown garment that invites us to weave our lives into it. How these garments will fit, cover, colour, connect and suit us lies in our (collective) hands. Many garments from the past have become too tight, too grey, too something...and the call for new shapes and textures is acknowledged by many. Yet changing clothes leaves one naked, half dressed in between. Let's connect in this creative, vulnerable space and cut, weave and stitch together.

Our target group is reflective hybrids – leaders, scientists, consultants, and researchers from all over the world who dare to be and act complex. Multi-layered topics require multidimensional approaches that are, on the one hand, interdisciplinary and, on the other hand, linked to theory and practice, making the various truths and perspectives mutually useful.

If you feel you are a reflective hybrid you are very welcome to join our COS movement, for instance by:

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