

# Making Organization Development a Profession: 50 Years of Trying

Glenn H. Varney, PhD  
Bowling Green State University

---



**Dr. Varney** is best known for his pioneering work in designing and implementing one of the first master degree programs in organization development in the U.S. He was a member of the group of academics who founded the OD&C Division of the Academy of Management in 1971. He has published books and numerous articles on the subject of change. Dr. Varney's academic career followed an 18-year career in industry. Most recently he and coauthors James McFillen and Scott Janoch authored a book on change leadership entitled *Grasp the Situation: Lessons Learned in Change Leadership*. This groundbreaking book is based on an article published in the Journal of Change Management entitled *Organizational Diagnosis: An Evidence Based Approach* by McFillen, O'Neil, Varney, and Balzer.

**Author's  
Contact Information:**

**Glenn H. Varney, PhD**

**Email:** [gvarney@bgsu.edu](mailto:gvarney@bgsu.edu)

## Abstract

This is a report on the unsuccessful 50-year effort to establish the field of Organization Development (OD) as a profession. The efforts by each of the three founding organizations (AOM-OD&C, ODN & ISODC) to establish OD as a profession is compared against the characteristics of a profession to determine the extent to which each organization has succeeded in advancing OD as a profession. Organization Development is far from achieving the status of a profession and suffers as a result. OD practitioners have no accountability except to their clients and no standards of performance against which to be assessed except the expectations of their clients. Overall, the practitioners and academics involved with the field of OD have a long and difficult road ahead if they seek to make OD a profession.

*Keywords:* OD failing, change agents, OD not professional, OD founders, only hope is ISODC

Between 1968 and 1974, three organizations were established in the name of Organization Development (OD). Their expressed purpose was to help organizations manage the change that was resulting from major shifts occurring in U.S. society. The massive changes taking place during the Vietnam War period were causing upheaval in our society, which scared organizations and their members. These early pioneers set out to create a profession that served the needs of organizations to adjust to and ease the impact of the massive changes taking place. They aimed to help people adapt and thereby have more fulfilling lives. The hope was that this plan would result in more effective and livable organizations.

Organization Development has not reached the level of a profession after fifty years of talking about it and debating profession status. In reality, OD today is a freewheeling field in which consultants and change agents are not held accountable to any professional standards, and client organizations seldom see success in their change initiatives. Seventy percent of change projects are estimated either to fail or only partially meet the project goals (Varney, 2017). Therefore, this paper is written to reopen the topic of Organization Development as a profession. If there were ever a need for professional guidance to help organizations change, it surely is today.

The arguments for reopening this discussion are presented in three parts. The first section discusses the criteria that a field must meet to be called a profession. The second section reviews the history of the OD field to examine the intent of and progress made by the founders. The third section examines the professional status of Organization Development today. The final section draws conclusions and makes recommendations for the future.

The original three founding organizations are the subject of this study:

1. Organization Development and Change Division of the Academy of Management (OD&C).
2. Organization Development Network (ODN).
3. The International Society for Organization Development and Change (ISODC), originally the Organization Development

Institute (ODI).

### **Criteria to Qualify as a Profession**

There are many fields that are labeled professions, such as Dentistry, Nursing, Stockbrokers, CPAs, etc. To carry the label of profession, an occupational field must meet the following criteria:

- Define the occupational field and its associated body of knowledge.
- Provide uniform qualifying educational programs and performance certification.
- Have stated practice standards (ethics and performance).
- Conduct and disseminate research and knowledge through professional journals.
- Have formal study and practice procedures.
- Be governed by a professional society.

A Google search reveals that there are many references to “professional” organizations in Organization Development; however, there are no accepted and uniform statements.

The following sections describe the extent to which the three founding organizations in the early days of Organizational Development (0-30 years) had progressed toward professional status.

### **The OD&C Division of the AOM**

- 1) Definition and Body of Knowledge  
Careful review of each document published by the OD&C Division suggest the founders were thinking about OD as a profession. They defined the profession as follows:

“Organization Development is the art of improving an organization’s problem solving and renewal processes in order to make a more effective organization” (McNamara, 2005).

Subsequently, there were many definitions of OD, including: Organization Development is to an organization as a physician is to the human body. No common body of knowledge was described except for the *OD Bibliography* in the late 1990s. Several attempts have been made to define a common body of knowledge for OD. The most notable was presented at the OD&C Division

(AOM) meeting in 1995. No action was taken to make it official.

2) **Qualifying Educational Programs and Certification**

Three Master level degree programs were established in the early 1970s (Case Western Reserve University, Bowling Green State University, and Pepperdine University). By the mid-1970s, Benedictine University had installed a Masters and PhD program in OD. By 2001, there were three OD designated PhD programs, fourteen Masters in OD, and approximately twelve graduate programs with partial designation of OD.

3) The early founders of OD established an ethical code for the field in 1972-73 ("Front Matter," 1972). There were no certifications or enforcement processes established. Research reveals little attempt to establish a certification process except for the Association of Applied Behavioral and Social Scientists, which had certified 250 practitioners by 1986 (1986 Directory). This organization is no longer in existence.

4) The OD&C Division of AOM, made up largely of academic/practitioners, provided research, theories, and models for the field and published in the Journal of Applied Behavioral Science (JABS) and the Academy of Management Journal. There was general agreement that "Action Research" and the "Change Process" were the accepted methods for making organizational change.

5) There were no commonly accepted societies for the field. The three competing organizations for profession status were (are) AOM-OD&C Division, Organization Development Network, and the Organization Development Institute (IDODC).

In 2003 the OD&C Division of the Academy of Management in their "Division Report" stated:

"The Division (OD&C) encourages efforts that creates and disseminates knowledge and extends the practice of constructive Change Management and Organization Development." Further, the report mentioned "topic areas including, change processes, change agents, interventions, role of change agents, and OD theory and practice" (AOM, 2003). There was no reference to Organization Development as a

profession.

**Organization Development Institute (Now ISODC)**

In 1968 Don Cole single handedly started forming an organization dedicated to making OD a profession. By the mid-70s he had formed the Organization Development Institute (ODI) and was well on his way to creating the components which he believed would qualify a person to be called a "competent practitioner." He proposed that by meeting specific requirements, a person could be designated, by ODI, as having "professional status" (In 2010 the ODI Registry listed just over 200 registered professionals).

Here is a summary of ODIs registered "professional status" requirements:

1. There was no clearly defined body of knowledge, or agreed to definition of OD and no OD bibliographies acknowledged.
2. There was a "qualifying educational program accrediting academic programs in OD/OB."
3. There were practice standards, including a Code of Ethics, a list of competencies (defined in 2007), and a certification process (which required completion of five courses). The competencies were self-assessed.
4. The "Refereed" Organization Development Journal (ODJ) was in place, designed to report "research and information regarding the field."
5. Study and practice processes were not defined, although the ODI Code of Ethics in some cases was mentioned.
6. Don Cole claimed to be the "Professional Society" for the OD field based on the following:
  - a. Code of Ethics
  - b. Providing a "unique body of knowledge."
  - c. Applying a "mentoring process" for new entrants into the field.
  - d. OD educational programs, "review and accreditation."
  - e. Offering an "award system" for notable achievements in the field.

Don Cole died in 2013 and subsequently a group of ODI members reorganized ODI into The

International Society for Organization Development and Change (ISODC).

### **The Organization Development Network (ODN)**

The Organization Development Network (ODN) was officially founded in 1974, and the following Advisory Board was appointed in 1976: Billie Alban, Carrigan Stoker, Susan Eiechorn, Stan Herman, Tony Petrella (Executive Director) (“Member Search”).

The only early documentation in an official ODN publication that hinted they were thinking about Organization Development as a profession is due to their vision and strategic direction: “The OD Network leads the Organization Development field and its practitioners in creating effective human organizations in an inclusive world community. In realizing this vision, the OD Network will take action as the

- CONNECTOR of diverse groups for the enhancement and improvement of OD.
- ADVOCATE in establishing principles of practice and competencies for OD practitioners.
- PROVIDER of value-added services and on-going education and development that enhances the ability and expand the capacity of OD practitioners to do their work.
- CHAMPION of a perspective that fosters OD practitioners’ understanding and respect of differences and similarities throughout the world” (“Organization Development Network”).

In 2003 - 2004, ODN reported a membership of about 300.

Although we found no “official” professional statement published by ODN, their website posted the following:

### **History of Organization Development**

Starting in the early 1980s, Bill Gellermann and Mark Frankel spearheaded a global effort to develop and disseminate a statement of values and ethics in organization and human systems development. It was a highly inclusive process that gained widespread support (over 600 people from 25 countries) and is still the most used and

referenced values and ethics work in our field. Their efforts established the Clearinghouse for Information on Values and Ethics in Organization and Human System Development; they also developed “working documents” on a Statement of Values and Ethics and an Organization and Human Systems Development Credo, a comprehensive bibliography, Values and Ethics by Professionals in Organization and Human Systems Development: An Annotated Bibliography and a published book, Values and Ethics in Organization and Human Systems Development (Jossey-Bass, 1990).

This statement refers to the following elements of a profession: 1) “Values,” 2) “Ethics” and 3) “Comprehensive Annotated Bibliography.” Note: this “Credo” is adopted by ODN but prepared by the Clearinghouse on Values and Ethics in Organization and Human Systems Development (“History of Organization Development”).

The next section describes the current status of OD as a profession for each of the three subject organizations.

### **The OD&C Division of AOM**

It appears that from the beginning in 1971, the OD&C Division of the AOM intended eventually to make Organization Development a profession. The founders defined the field as “The Study of Human Systems and Organization Change,” which focused on improving organization performance through improving human organizations. They defined the Body of Knowledge based on practice, ethics, standards, published research in the field. They also designed and applied a common change processes and there were numerous graduate programs in OD at the time. However, there is no evidence that the programs were designed based on a common body of knowledge. Lastly, there was one attempt at certification that failed. It would seem that the OD&C Division was on a track for creating Organization Development as a profession; however, there is little evidence today of even coming close to their original goals.

Today (2017), the OD&C Division describes it’s “domain” as follows:

- “Empirical research & practical application.”
- “Processes and outcomes at the individual group & organizational level.”
- “Different forms and types of change.”

- “Responses of people to change.”
- “Methods to address values such as justice, dignity, integrity, etc.” (“Academy of Management”).

The OD&C Division Conference request for submission for the 2017 listed topics such as “Community engaged with change and changing our repertoire of theory and practice.” Examples of actual presented topics include: “Exercises for Teaching or Consulting on Organizational Change,” “Becoming Scholars and Scholars Practicing in OD&C,” and “Transform Theory and Research into Practice” (“Academy of Management”). No references to Organization Development as a profession could be found in any of the current descriptive material for the OD&C Division.

### **The International Society for Organization Development and Change (ISODC)**

The following mission statement for ISODC notes their plans for the field of OD to become a “highly respected profession”: The mission of the ISODC is to continue, update, and expand upon the work formerly started by the Organization Development Institute whose mission was to build the field of O.D. into a highly respected profession. This includes:

- Recognizing O.D. Professionals with the designation of Registered Organization Development Consultants (RODC) who meet the requirements.
- Updating the international O.D. Code of Ethics which is accepted and used by major O.D. organizations in the world.
- Continuing the development of the high-quality collaborative O.D. Journal for O.D. Professionals.
- Identifying those academic Institutions which provide excellent Organization Development (and closely aligned) programs.
- Developing an outline of the knowledge and skill necessary for competence in O.D.
- Establishing connections with various organizations worldwide which represent O.D. Professionals.

ISODC shows signs of professionalizing OD as outlined in their “Mission” statement with the “Code of Ethics” and “Statement of Beliefs,”

and their Organization Development Journal. It is unclear what other actions are planned for advancing the Organization Development to a profession (ISODC).

### **Organization Development Network (ODN)**

The following is the only current reference that could be found regarding moving ODN to profession status: “OD Network Vision and Strategic Direction – Practice and Values, Ethics and Competencies.”

ODN has been through several reorganizations during the past few years, and their current publication references the following regarding Organization Development as a profession. Today, ODN has a Statement of Values and Ethics including Integrity, Collaboration, Inclusive, impactful, bold, audacious, and fun. They furthermore state:

We, as OD Practitioners, make evidence-based decisions grounded in research in behavioral science; we practice OD within organizations in order to improve an organization’s sustained effectiveness and health; and we make an impact by introducing solutions and interventions that impact an organization’s strategic objectives and bottom line. (OD for Impact, 2016)

Here is how ODN defines OD:

“What is Organization Development? One classic definition of organization development comes from Richard Beckhard’s 1969 *Organization Development: Strategies and Models*:

Organization Development is an effort that is:

- Planned
- Organization-wide
- Managed from the top
- Increases Organization effectiveness and health
- Through planned interventions in the organization’s “processes,” using behavioral-science knowledge (ODN for Impact, 2016).

ODN is currently in the early stages of creating a global standard for OD competencies including professional certification entitled: *This is What it Means to be a Qualified OD Practitioner*.

Overall, it appears that ODN is on a track

for becoming a recognized professional society for Organization Development. One notable exception may be the ODN's Journal, *The Organization Development Practitioner*, which appears weak on reporting "Research and Knowledge."

### **Conclusion**

The field of OD is far from achieving the status of a profession and suffers as a result. OD practitioners have no accountability except to their clients, and no standards of performance against which to be assessed except the expectations of their clients. Members of a profession have the same obligations to their clients, but they additionally have another set of obligations to their profession through professional boards of practice. The practitioners and academics involved with the field of OD have a long and difficult road ahead if they seek the credibility of organization development as a profession.

### **Recommendations**

The three founding organizations should consider appointing representatives from each of their organizations to convene a panel that would collaboratively consider a path to be taken that would move the field of Organization Development forward to becoming a profession.

### **My Personal View**

The three founding organizations of OD came close to failing during the 2008 – 2009 recession.

ODN faltered and was saved by paid professionals. Furthermore, the founders of ODI and AOM-OD&C were passing away. The result was a loss of leadership and sense of direction. The three organizations reinvented themselves minus the idea of becoming a profession. My purpose in writing this article is to rekindle the vision of Organization Development as a Profession. I hope that ISODC members and others will read this and take an interest in restoring the drive to become a profession.

- Glenn H. Varney, PhD



## References

- 1986 Directory of Certified Practitioners. *An Association Of Applied Behavioral and Social Scientists Certified Consultants International*. Brentwood, Tennessee, 1986.
- Academy of Management Division & Interest Group Domain Statements. (n.d.). *Academy of Management*. Retrieved from <http://aom.org/Divisions-and-Interest-Groups/Academy-of-Management-Division-Interest-Group-Domain-Statements.aspx>
- Beckhard, R. (1972). *Organization development: Strategies and models*. Reading, MA,: Addison-Wesley.
- Divisions & Interest Groups of the Academy of Management. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://aom.org/DIG/>
- Front Matter. (1972). *The Academy of Management Journal*, 15(3), 249-366. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/254851>
- History of Organization Development (n.d.). *Organization Development Network*. Retrieved from <http://www.odnetwork.org/?page=HistoryofOrgDev>
- International Society for Organization Development and Change. (n.d.). Retrieved April 28, 2018, from <https://isodc.org/page-1763457>
- McNamara, C. (n.d.). *Some "Definitions" of Organization Development (OD)*. Retrieved April 17, 2018, from <https://managementhelp.org/organizationdevelopment/od-defined.htm>
- Member Search. (n.d.). Retrieved April 21, 2018, from <http://www.odnetwork.org/search/>
- Organization Development Network. (n.d.). *Adapt Knowledge*. Retrieved from <https://adaptknowledge.com/partners/organization-development-network/>
- OD for Impact (2016). Retrieved April 28, 2018, from <http://www.odnetwork.org/page/17JunNNImpact/OD-for-Impact.htm>
- Varney, Glenn. Change Your Change Process And Make Change Work. *Organization Development Journal*, 35(1), 25-33.

