

## Reflections on the Field of OD Change, and My Path

By Linda Ackerman Anderson

I have been practicing OD and change leadership since 1976, nearly 34 years. I love this field, and I love the people it attracts. My partner, Dean Anderson, and I co-founded Being First, Inc.—the name reinforced by this field’s legitimacy of addressing the whole human *being* as well as organizational effectiveness. Over the years, I have travelled the highs and the lows of doing this work both as an internal consultant and since 1981, as an external. I have worked mostly in large organizations in the private sector, public sector, and non-profits.

My focus has been on transformational change, mostly large-scale enterprise-wide change. I have celebrated successes, learned from some very challenging failures, and committed myself—heart and soul—to helping organization leaders understand and master what it takes to lead their organizations through the tumultuous journey of transformation in ways that their people stay engaged, grow in the process, and deliver real results. My way of working has spanned being the “up-to-the eyeballs” hands-on change consultant, trainer and mentor to consultants and change leaders, prolific writer about leading change with my co-author, Dean, and I now enjoy being strategic advisors to senior leaders and consultants on their strategies for transformational change.

From this vantage point, I have three perceptions about the field I wish to share with my colleagues. These perceptions are my wishes for strengthening and rebuilding our OD field.

First, I believe that a large majority of OD practitioners today spend their time on work that focuses either on pieces of the organization, on HR-related processes or training, or on the “nuts and bolts” of OD, but not what I would call strategic change consulting. By “nuts and bolts,” I mean team building, meeting planning, assessments that may or may not lead to real change and problem solving. All of this work is valuable in and of itself, and well within the repertoire of the standard OD practitioner. What is missing is more attention to the system *as a whole*, and to focusing our practices on large-scale change. Bias acknowledged, this is where I have spent my own career. In 30 years teaching change consultants to succeed at large-scale change work, I find the skills and understanding of what this takes needs much more attention. There are way too few consultants truly gifted and experienced in doing this work. Those that I have encountered have been joyful relationships, but there are not nearly enough of them to do what our organizations require today. This concerns me deeply. Who is going to help lead myriad changes prompted by today’s economic, technological, political, and ecological challenges?

I realize that many OD consultants join OD departments that are not designed or chartered to do major change work. I realize that there are so many other HR processes and needs that are the focus of these groups’ work—talent management, performance management, training and development, employee relations, and so on. This is all good work and requires good design and execution; it is just not large-scale transformation. Part of this pattern is that I don’t believe that OD practitioners have positioned themselves to do the large-scale change consulting that is desperately needed in organizations today.

**My first wish for our field is that we need to formally strengthen our capability to work on large systems change.** Our organizations are in desperate need, and the services of project management and change management, used vastly more than OD in major change, are not adequate to the task of transformation. They are helpful, but without the skills and mindset of OD, they fall short.

OD needs to step up to this challenge, and our schools need to do their part to prepare consultants to do it well. So, how do we develop practitioners—up to and past their Masters degrees—to have the courage to think systemically and to consult systemically on transformational change? There is an enormous theory base that today’s degrees provide, and I believe it needs to be expanded and refocused to catch up with the times. Academic OD programs ought to be leading the way, preparing students to take on large-scale changes while they are in graduate school. We also need some mechanism like a professional Community of Practice to help practitioners learn from each other as they consult on major changes.

If people are committed to consulting on the complex issues our organizations are wrestling with, they need to be savvy about the terrain. Is the complexity of change a reason to avoid it? Is the lack of positioning or focus the block? I don’t want to think so. I want there to be more of us that choose to take on this crucial challenge and find the ways to master and deliver on it. So, my first wish for our field is that we need to formally strengthen our capability to work on large systems change.

**My second wish is that OD consultants rebrand themselves, and in doing so, be better positioned to do systemic change work—and be known for it. OD doesn’t now, and never has, made a good case for itself and the value we provide to our clients.** The field has struggled for several decades to define itself, and to be used in substantial ways by our clients. What does the term “Organization Development” mean to our clients? What services

does it speak to that they would immediately understand? What results does it deliver? I call myself a strategic change consultant, a name that business leaders hear as “direct support for our most important change efforts.” Most of what I do is consult on the creation and execution of transformation change strategy, so the link to strategy is two-fold: developing change strategies for the strategic changes required for business success. My clients have an easier time understanding that. I set up my work, whenever possible, to partner with all of the internal change resources the organization has, including OD, but also project managers, change managers, quality improvement consultants, communication and engagement specialists, and so on. All of these services may be needed to support transformational change.

Back to the OD dilemma: It's not enough to say that we do process consulting, organizational assessments, and team building. I ask, for what purpose do we do these things? I ask, what value do we add in ways that today's hard-pressed, economically challenged organizations can understand and actively request? How do we offer services that would get us invited to the executive table because we have value to add that is clearly understood by executives? The words “organization development” don't say that. We need to look at how we language our work and ourselves and, and for ways that truly catalyze large-scale changes in our organizations. We are much too focused on process; our services are processes...building teams, assessing issues, solving problems, facilitating meetings, etc. What are the results of these services? In my work with internal OD groups engaged in rebranding themselves, I encourage them to define everything they offer in terms of the results it produces. Results will get the attention of the leaders we want to support. What is different because we have done our work? What leverage has our work created...so that it lasts beyond the interventions we offer? Have we left the path better than we found it, and people recognizably better able to change themselves and their organizations once we leave the scene? I want us to think more about leverage, as well as more about results. I want us to rebrand ourselves in these terms. I am not attached to OD as a label for this field, even though at heart, I depend deeply on my OD skills. So, my second wish for the field is that OD consultants rebrand themselves, and in doing so, be better positioned to do the systemic change work—and be known for it.

**My third wish for the field is that we recommit ourselves to our personal development—not as a nice thing to do for ourselves, but because we need to be able to master our own internal states in order to lead others in transformational change.** Transformational change demands change in mindset, behavior, relationships and culture—all very personal work. If we have lingering or unconscious issues that are triggered by the personal challenges of the transformational journey, we will not be clear advisors; in fact, we will get in the way of what needs to happen. To do the personal work well with our clients, we need to have done it well on ourselves. Practitioners are focused more on the busy work that the organization needs to have done, but this is not necessarily work that requires personal awareness or change. It is not the inner work that will enable the transformation to occur, and last. We must have lived and learned enough personal change that we have the confidence to address the real human changes required at the executive level, management level, organization-wide, and with individuals engaged in the change.

In the early days, we had a profound commitment to growing ourselves from the inside out, being models of personal change, of conscious awareness—being first. For about the last decade or so, my experience says that consultants now focus more on technique and less on the process of making deep, personal, transformational change. This is a serious limitation to our ability to successfully consult on strategic changes. If we cannot find access to this internal work with our clients, we cannot provide the full roster of guidance that transformation requires. The absence of conscious awareness in leaders has a devastating effect on results, as well as on the process. So we need to bring our own ever-deepening consciousness to our work. That will take more investment in relevant personal growth. We must be able to have the intimate conversations about personal change with leaders and executives because we have been down this road ourselves. This is one reason why OD adds so much value to the ranks of project management and change management when engaged in transformational change—we are vehicles of transformation at a Being level. Thus, my third wish for the field is that we recommit ourselves to our personal development—not as a nice thing to do for ourselves, but because we need to be able to master our own internal states in order to lead transformational change.

### **Reflections on My Own Career**

At this point in my career, I am fully engaged in reflecting on my life and work. I am coming to terms with what I have accomplished, and what I have not. I'm also thinking about my legacy, and ask myself regularly, have I made a difference? What difference does making a difference make? There is a great discussion going on between my ego and my Being.

I struggle with this every day. I've been developing The Change Leader's Roadmap model for almost 30 years and know it inside and out, and it takes enormous energy at times for me to stay focused and engaged. I am challenged to stay creative and energized in working with what I know which is a very powerful and complex model, but which I also know already offers more than most people have the space to learn. This is truly my life's work, and, as a last stage of my career, I want to hand it off to others who can make it happen in organizations. I want it to be used

directly by organizations committed to making a better world, whether that is in the “green” explosion, the sustainability movement, healthcare, or any other organizations contributing to social change.

More often than not, I don’t feel I’ve done this enough. But, how do you know when enough is enough? How do you know when it is time to move on? How do you confidently say “enough” to your life’s work? There have been times in my practice when I struggled with clients, or worked with an executive team where I couldn’t find the humanity in it, and I just wanted to be someplace else that was life-giving.

These are my moments of existential doubt. I acknowledge having them. I struggle with them. Sometimes I succeed in keeping them in focus, and sometimes they take hold of me in ugly ways. When this happens, and I become aware of it, I deal with it by witnessing what I am allowing to happen to myself, where I’m focusing, and I turn into my desire to be of greater service. Managing this struggle in myself is managing my ego. I recognize the struggle as an ego drive. I recognize the desire to do more, give more, be of greater value as an ego drive. At this age, I am in deep relationship with bringing my Being into my work and my world. It is not easy, but it is essential to my life experience.

When I am most distracted by my desire to move on in my life, I ask myself, “If I’m not passionate about what I’m doing, what would I be passionate about? What would unleash my spirit?” Focusing on social change is one answer. This past spring provided me another. I was not feeling inspired by my work or myself, and came through the internal debate with a commitment to spend the summer writing a book that I began sixteen years ago, and put down in honor of my change leadership work, consulting practice, and young daughter. Making the decision to write was a fight between my overly responsible self trying to sustain a consulting business and support my staff and colleagues, versus my internal Being. This time, my Being won. I spent the summer blissfully writing.

The book is about how I, as a professional woman, have grown up as a person and a consultant, and also had a marriage and family. For me, this writing has been about telling the truth of my experiences. It is raw and honest, and I committed myself to telling it like it really was for me, instead of making it—and me—about “looking good.” I found the writing process to be deeply renewing. I look forward to completing the book and publishing it in support of others who are on a similar journey.

Even in this struggle to find what is next for me, I always come back to the place of deep gratitude I have for my many years as a consultant, and for the friends and relationships, and the confidence I have gained through my connection with the OD field. In many ways, I grew up in this field. It has nurtured me, challenged me, built my character and shaped my life. I am grateful, and in that gratitude, I want the field to be more of what I know is possible. I hope that the three wishes I described above touch you, and mobilize your own choices and passion to help the people of our organizations and communities to live and contribute in ways that make the world a better place to be.

### **About the Author**

**Linda Ackerman Anderson, MA** is Vice president and Co-Founder of Being First, Inc. She brings more than 30 years experience to her work in Conscious Transformation. Throughout her career she has created the 9– phase model: The Change Leader’s Roadmap; co-written two best selling books in the Practicing Organization Development series: Beyond Change Management and The Change Leader’s Roadmap. Linda has also written numerous guidebooks, tools, resources and over 50 articles. She earned her Master’s degree from Columbia University’s Teaching College. Linda can be reached at: [Lindasaa@BeingFirst.com](mailto:Lindasaa@BeingFirst.com)