1   The Cat in the Hat Breaks Through: Reflections on OD's Past, Present, and Future

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ABSTRACT

This paper contains several thoughts I have been wanting to express for some time. Reading Frederick Taylor I found the right framework, the "Gresham's Law" of organizational life— that technological values tend to drive out social values in the workplace. OD practice evolved from the tension between democracy and science in the workplace. However, OD'ers are just as seducible as industrial engineers by technology's siren songs. I believe we can't resolve our dilemmas with fancier techniques and novel skills. To be a whole practice we need to reaffirm the values of the pioneers of action research, socio-technical systems, and survey feedback—who believed in more open systems and societies, and a democratic approach to work life. Social change is sweeping the world. We will have to rethink every form of work—just as Taylor and his disciples did—and the *way* we do it, as much as *what* we do, will be the measure of our success.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Marvin R. Weisbord has been an organization development consultant since 1969. He is the Senior Vice President with Block-Petrella-Weisbord, working mainly on the reorganization and redesign of work in large systems. Mr. Weisbord is a member of the NTL Institute and Certified Consultants International and has staffed many consultant training workshops in the United

States and abroad. For six years he was an associate editor of the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science,* and has written widely on the theory and practice of organization development, and is the author of *Organizational Diagnosis: A Workbook of Theory and Practice.*

A few years ago I was asked to participate in a Delphi study of OD's future, which included questions on what skills would be needed. I found my mind reeling when I learned that my colleagues and I had brainstormed 150 skills, finally boiling the list down to fifty "Ideal Core Skills" and thirty-four "Advanced Skills for Future OD Practitioners."[1] The final list included such "skills" as management policy and strategy, transorganization theory, job measurement, operations research, marketing, accounting, systems engineering, cultural anthropology, finance, and hypnosis. In case you're beginning to feel obsolete, there are also old friends like power, conflict, leadership, and active listening.

Whenever I come across one of these all-inclusive OD future scans, I think of a story I used to read my kids when all of us were a lot younger. It's Dr. Suess' wonder fable, *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back.* Let me give you a brief synopsis.

Two small children are left alone by their mother to shovel snow. They are visited by a mischievous cat in a high top hat, who enters the house uninvited, takes a bath, and leaves a "pink cat ring" in the tub. The kids order him to clean it up. No sweat, says the cat, grabbing their mother's best dress and swiping the spot away. Clean tub. Messy dress. Don't worry, says the cat: to takes spots off a dress you hit it against a wall. Deftly he transfers the spots to the wall. Next he demonstrates that shoes take spots off walls, rugs take spots off shoes, and that to take spots off rugs you need exactly the right bed. (This is called having an intervention for every contingency.)

Gleefully, he slaps the rug on "dad's bed." Suddenly, the cat looks crestfallen. Dad's bed, he admits, "is not the right kind." He needs *help* to clean this bed. He lifts his hat and reveals Little Cat A, who has under his hat B, who has under his hat C. They proceed to chase the spot all over the house, pursued by the frantic children. Finally, they chase the red stuff outside. Now the house is clean but the environment—oops, I mean the yard—is a mess.

The cats grow more determined. Each in turn removes a hat, revealing an alphabet of tinier and tinier cats. They attack the red snow spots with popguns, lawnmowers, rakes, shovels—spreading it further and wider until the whole yard becomes a red blob. The cat goes at last to his tiniest helper, Little Cat Z. This last is too small to see, but in his hat he has a substance called "Voom." Voom, we learn, "is so hard to get, you never saw anything like it I bet." He instructs Z (Theory Z?) to unleash the Voom.

The Voom goes VOOOOOMMMMM!

The red spots disappear in a swirling vortex. The yard is restored, better in fact because the walk has been neatly cleared from street to front door. "If you ever have spots now and then," says the cat magnanimously, "I will be very happy to come here again." The awestruck children, mouths open, watch silently as the cat walks away. The narrator says,

> Now, don't ask me what Voom is,
> I never will know.
> But, boy! Let me tell you
> It *does* clean up snow![2]

That, roughly speaking, is what much of our literature says is the definition of Organization Development. Whenever I read about some wonderful new OD technology, or about the 84 skills we're all going to need in the future (a proposition so preposterous I shudder at my own complicity in advancing it), I'm reminded of the Cat in the Hat. Which brings me to the theme of this essay. What I want to discuss here is a kind of "Gresham's Law" of organizational life—the way technological values tend to drive out social values in the workplace.

OD folks are not exempt from this law either. Our favorite conferences focus on new technologies, and you can go through a lot of case studies and symposiums at the OD Network, lapping up new ways to collect data, new techniques for unleashing the right side of the brain, and new strategies for holding hands with those whose hands hold the levers of power, without ever running into those few values which all of our magic methodologies were supposed in the first place to support. There is a tension everywhere between technology and democracy, between technical and social values. And the VOOM game, even if your racket is behavioral science, rather than the old-fashioned kind, is terribly seductive.

To make the point, I want to speculate about an aspect of OD that has excited me for nearly twenty years—the design of work and, more importantly, the processes by which we organize and reorganize it. Our successes and failures hinge largely, I think, on the redistribution of labor and rewards in organizations, for it is the division of labor and reward which influences the normative behavior we seek to change or preserve. I want to look at work redesign—past, present, and future. So climb into the time machine with me, and let's start this trip by leaping back to the turn of the century—no airplanes, no cars to speak of, no radio or TV, no Pac-Man, and certainly no OD.

We find ourselves well into the industrial revolution, and we are witnessing a major breakthrough in the performance of work. The setting is the factory, where our ancestors, at least some of ours, are busy remaking society with the tools of—quaint phrase now—"the machine age." The innovator's name is Frederick Taylor. He is creating the field of industrial engineering—harnessing science to productivity without reference to democracy, an American value which will be a long time influencing American industry. Taylor is systematically investigating the one best way, consistent with human capability, to do everything—from drilling holes to shoveling sand.

We don't talk much about Taylor in OD circles, except to strike terror into the hearts of small children and human resource managers. I became interested in him as a result of some work my company has been doing with Bethlehem Steel Corporation—where some of Taylor's early experiments, in the most effective way to load pig iron, were conducted starting about 1899.[3]

Few people are neutral about Taylor. He has been written about as an agent of the devil, hell-bent to turn workers into machines,[4] while Peter Drucker has argued that Taylor, among all his contemporaries, truly deserved the title "humanist."[5] From my own perspective, I think he held a number of assumptions and values widely shared in the OD world. Indeed, though we may be loathe to admit it, I imagine we inherited some of our cherished practices directly from him. Taylor believed, for example, that productivity is closely related to clear tasks and clear goals. He believed that the performance of work should be based on scientific principles derived from firsthand study of human nature and human motivation. He also believed in matching the person to the job—the more complex the task, the more skilled the person required.

He encouraged worker suggestions. He was opposed to dictatorial behavior. Taylor believed in letting knowledge, proof, and facts—not the authority or prejudices of the boss—determine the best way to do work.[6] In this he would be echoed a quarter century later by an early humanizer of work, the great teacher Mary Parker Follett, whose concept of the "law of the situation" would later influence many people in our field, notably Rensis Likert.[7]

Taylor, like many of us, saw worker restriction of output (employees deliberately holding back ideas, skills, and energy) as a consequence of poor management, not worker inferiority. He believed in having workers trained by experts thoroughly familiar with the job, rather than throwing them into the water to see whether they sink or swim. He advocated standardized tools and equipment to match human capability. Today we call that *ergonomics,* and it's an important factor in the electronic office. He believed in giving people feedback on their performance, a central tenet of quality circles and all systems of participative mangement.

Taylor believed, as do many of us, that labor strife was not inevitable—an extraordinary view in light of the violent, bitter, sometimes murderous relations between employers and employees eighty years ago. He argued that raising output and cutting costs would make possible higher wages, a view embodied in labor/management cooperation in many industries.

He thought the most important motivator was money, certainly true in the factories of his day, and still true for many people on the lower rungs of the economic ladder—a conclusion Abraham Maslow would applaud.

In short, Taylor sought humane and sensible antidotes to the degradation of work which, like smog and pollution, was an early by-product of the industrial revolution. He did not impose that revolution, with its machine pacing and assembly lines, any more than OD consultants are imposing the current one, with its banks of computer terminals and communications links.

We were not, as some romantics would have it, a society of innocent artisans before Taylor. We were a society of growing inequity, sweatshops, brutal work-

ing conditions; and he wanted, with all the tools of science and engineering then available, to do something about that. One of his contemporary champions was attorney Louis Brandeis, a social activist and later Supreme Court Justice, who coined the term *scientific management* to lend respectability to Taylor's work.

Taylor also had many ideas that don't stand up so well to modern scrutiny. He had an extremely narrow view of human capability. While his schemes always included a chance for workers to earn more money, he held firmly to the principle that management, not the workers, had to structure every task, based on systematic study by trained engineers—the people with the stopwatches. Worker suggestions, yes; problem solving, no. That was for experts only.

Taylor also advocated individual work. He opposed group tasks and group incentives. He broke jobs into their smallest feasible components, arguing that the greater the specialization, the shorter the learning time to achieve competence and skill. He had no concept of the power of interdependence, mutual problem solving, joint decision making. These matters would not become the subject of systematic research for many more decades.

We know enough now to realize that, even at his worst, Taylor was not all wrong. After all, it's we OD consultants who run around insisting that not *all* tasks require participation, that the fastest way to solve some problems is to find the expert. (*We* call that "using everybody's resources.") Of course, we also recognize the peculiar and unpredictable synergy among well-motivated workers. We know now that performance will never be a wholly rational process.

In retrospect, Taylor was a Paul Bunyan of the left brain, an apostle of closed-system methods before open systems were understood. He was right for his time, though, and he devised a powerful prescription for improving work. Peter Drucker credits Taylor with having as much influence on the modern world as Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. Taylorism endures wherever repetitive work is performed.

Many of Taylor's descendents, of course, picked up on his technologies without internalizing his values. So Taylorism has become synonymous with speedups, employer insensitivity, and people turned into robots. I think it's more accurate to view Taylor as the true founder of the QWL movement—the first person in history to make a systematic attempt to improve both output and worklife in factories.

Now, let's leapfrog our time machine a half century, over the roaring twenties, the Great Depression, and the terrible war in which we endeavored to make not just the workplace but the whole world safe for democracy by using the tools of science. We are about to witness the birth of OD as a quasi-legitimate profession.

Our practice has been influenced by three streams of work which date from the 1940s and 1950s. One stream began after World War II in the coal mines of North West Durham, in the United Kingdom. There a group from Tavistock Institute, Eric Trist is one you probably know, began to investigate the connections between the division of labor, the equipment, and the social systems of coal miners, seeking an optimum balance that would produce the most coal and the most human satisfaction out of the same mine at the same time. They replaced

Taylor's closed-system work loop with a richer, more complete vision that went beyond economic need to the social functions of work. They came to call this approach "joint optimization"—the balancing of social and technical systems.[8]

A second stream flowed from the work of some visionary educational psychologists, led by the late Kurt Lewin. Starting in the 1930s, Lewin evolved a theory that when people participate in a study of their own behavior they are more likely to accept and act on the results. He named the method *action research*. In 1946 the state of Connecticut's Interracial Commission sponsored a conference built on this method. The question they were asking—we still are—is what sort of leadership is required to improve intergroup and race relations. They discovered, quite by accident, that people nearly always—in the words of my colleague Jim Maselko—attend "the same different meeting together." They found that group members had wholly different perceptions of training sessions from what staff had. You may say, "So what else is new?" I can only tell you that in the mid-1940s trading these perceptions—processing the meeting—provided a level of energy, excitement, and learning heretofore unavailable in more traditional seminars.[9] I'm describing, of course, the discovery of the T-group, which led to the founding of NTL Institute, and spawned a vast social technology of experiential learning.

Finally, we come to the invention of survey data feedback by Floyd Mann and others at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research in the 1950s.[10] This technique, coupled to the late Rensis Likert's prescription for high performance, which he called "System 4,"[11] provided us at once with a new measurement tool, an action research method, and a process for inducing dissonance into a whole social system, causing its members to want to change it.

If we add to these Chris Argyris's powerful theory of intervention—valid data, free choice, commitment to act[12]—which was an outgrowth of the T-growth movement, I think we have the major foundations of current OD practice.

Notice, however, how quickly, when we think about these breakthroughs, the first thing that's likely to pop into our minds is technology—how to do it. This way of thinking comes so naturally to me—so much am I a child of my time—that I must stop and remind myself that the people who created our field were driven by a passionate belief in open societies, and more rational and decent relationships across lines of color, class, nationality, hierarchy, and status. They saw their new social technologies as ways to implement this belief, to join science and democracy, task and process, productivity and participation in ways no one had ever done before.

How easy it is in the age of micro-chips to become so hung up on newness in the pursuit of "desired end states" and "ideal future scenarios" that we lose touch both with our human limitations and the source of our formidable power. That power lies in our values, not our methods, in the marriage of democracy and science, and not in science, behavioral or any other kind, alone.

While many organizations struggle toward greater openness and participation—Bethlehem Steel is only one of dozens we could name—the OD profession seems to me bogged down in a mire of conflicting theories, methods, endless "discoveries" of new aspects of the human condition, new variables to work on,

and new techniques by which to work them. In that respect, we're not so different from Taylor's other descendents, the industrial engineers. We too risk cutting ourselves off from our roots—important values that nourish our practice. Neither personal growth on one hand, nor productivity improvement on the other, makes sense to me without the mediating values of more open systems and more self-governance in the workplace.

The world is changing around us, and we have been for some time, I think, caught up in a very grandiose VOOM game, imagining that, if only we can combine all 84 basic and advanced skills, we will be able, simply by lifting our hats, to clean up snow. That kind of thinking is the problem, not the solution.

Today we know a great deal more about social systems than Taylor did, and a great deal more about the care and feeding of the human psyche—the complex subject of motivation. At the same time, we and our clients face all over again every dilemma of work, the workplace, and job design that faced Taylor and his contemporaries in the heyday of the first industrial revolution a century ago.

More, we are facing these problems not just on the factory floor, but in staff conference rooms and executive suites, too. Of course, the problem is not specialization this time. We solved that one brilliantly. We have specialists for anything you can name. Now the problem is cooperation, integration, and wholeness. Figuring out how to live with specialization, recognizing that whatever expertise we have is quite useless unless others can access it, is *the* dilemma of working life in our time.

To appreciate this, let me accelerate our time machine just a little way into the future to get a look at where we're heading before coming back to where we are. John Naisbitt, who forecasts the future by describing what's happening now, spots 10 "megatrends" which are remaking our world.[13] I want to highlight a few which already are affecting OD.

First, the United States is changing over from an industrial to an information-based society. Only 13% of us work in factories now in the U.S., while 60% produce or process information. It's as if, in the single global economy toward which we're moving, the United States is becoming the data-processing department, and the Far East is taking over manufacturing. (Of course, we should expect some interdepartmental squabbles.)

For every "high-tech" development, says Naisbitt, we develop a "high-touch" response—the hospice movement, for example—in reaction to complex life-support machinery that can prolong life past the point worth living. Or, to take a more mundane example, the preference of many people who *could* work at home on computer terminals, for a central office where they can use the terminals *and* can see others face-to-face.

Organizations are decentralizing everywhere. Consumers demand more choice and workers more influence on the workplace. We are moving from hierarchies to networks. "The computer is smashing the Soviet pyramid," writes one business editor of this trend, "and the same thing is happening in the U.S. corporation. . . . the way people are managed in organizations will never be the same."[14]

Well it doesn't take a three-day lab in values clarification to see that a great deal of the workworld will move, is moving, in directions members of this

profession have espoused for some time—toward decentralization, greater openness, more influence, freer expression, freer choice. "Democracy," Warren Bennis, one of our elder statespersons, wrote prophetically nearly twenty years ago, "becomes a functional necessity whenever a social system is competing for survival under conditions of chronic change."[15] Democratic values are never secure. They must be fought for over and over again. What is striking to me is that today, true to Bennis's prophecy, we are joined in the battle by the steel and auto industries and large corporations in many fields.

However, the road to good intentions, as my old friend Milton Mayer used to say, is paved with hell. We have a lot to learn about the linkage of democracy and technology in the workplace. Let us program our time machine for a soft landing in the here-and-now in Anywhere, U.S.A.

The office of the "future," we learn, has arrived already. The computer terminal, hooked up to a telephone, and interconnected to the photocopier, becomes the locus of much repetitive and potentially stressful work. While robots take over factories, we are left with perplexing questions about how to organize medical care, education, government services, software companies, research laboratories. We have many questions Taylor never asked and were he alive could not answer, though perhaps he would appreciate action research as an elegant way to answer them.

While new models abound (even, many claim, whole new paradigms), old ways of working are going to take a long time to unlearn. For Taylorism—at least its organizational partner, bureaucracy—has been carried far beyond the factory floor. In many places it persists as functional management that pits department against department, specialist against specialist, and adds layers of coordinators and assistants who fight to maintain control, pulled one way by the advance of knowledge, another by the changing whims of the customer.

Technical staff—in computers, maintenance, finance, engineering, personnel, planning, public relations, you name it, even organization development—have in many places become, sometimes willingly, sometimes unwittingly, a lot like Taylor's pig iron haulers, repeating the same techniques over and over again, having little influence on the overall course of events, knowing little about how what they do fits with what other people do, and even less about their organization's central purposes. Their biggest frustration is their inability to get other people to adapt their state-of-the-art solutions to old problems or new ones.

There's no end of work for an energetic organization developer. Creating flatter organizations is taking enormous human toll and taxing our ingenuity to the limit. Union workers, for example, are finding—once they start participating more fully in management—that work rules, job categories, incentive schemes fought for at a thousand bargaining tables make no sense anymore and will have to be revised. That is a very hard pill to swallow.

The trauma is worse for supervisors and middle managers. In more participative systems, there are fewer chances for status and advancement than there used to be. In business school, people learn how to rise to the top, and suddenly, we have fewer tops. In many industries we are facing a revision of manager expectations like nothing that has happened before. One company I know cut

fourteen levels of management to seven overnight. They count on worker partici- pation to take up the slack. As people at the bottom assume more responsibility, Taylor's managers and experts, the ones who used to make all the decisions, have a lot less direct control. There will be fewer managers, and they will have more to do. They won't be moving in nine months or a year to the next rung on the ladder. They may stay at the same level for years.

As we learn to manage all this, I believe we will make enormous contribu- tions to the quality of worklife. Many people will find their work more interest- ing, more whole. Workers and managers will become more firmly connected to one another, more cognizant of their mutual stake in success and more equitably rewarded for their contributions. They will commit to purposes anchored more securely in customer need. Capable people will have jobs worthy of their talents, instead of middle-manager positions so dull and alienating that you can't blame them for chasing the next promotion.

However, with fewer upward career paths, we may have to think about managerial work the way we think about innovative factories. There, people are paid for the number of skills they acquire, not for what they happen to be doing today. A management career may consist of lateral movements—across func- tional specialties—instead of up the hierarchy. People will have to develop what my colleague Aubrey Cramer calls "horizontal ambition." The Japanese have something roughly akin to this and we will imitate them not because they are so successful, but because there are so few alternatives.

In the nonindustrial world we have hardly scratched the surface of potential new ways for working. The modern hospital is a hotbed of super-specialization which, even some doctors realize, will only be cured by more democracy, not more science. The need to link government more firmly to its customers— citizens and taxpayers—is enormous and growing.

Where does this leave OD? We have a tremendous lot to work on, and the only thing we bring to the party that the other specialties don't is a commitment to democratic processes for achieving desired results.

Do we wish to become one more narrow Taylor speciality, competing for attention among all the other specialties? Or will we establish a legitimate humane and sensible "third voice," supporting with our skills and ingenuity those clients who *know* that working *with* other people, face-to-face, is the only way to stop moving the mess from one place to another, the only way out of the VOOM game, the only way to make technology serve us instead of the other way around? Science begets more science; and science, we have learned, will never be enough. Our ability to *use* what we know for social good is strongly limited by our capability to trust others, which can only be developed by facing them.

My summary is brief. Our strength—the power of OD—will never be in knowing the answers, but only in showing people a practical way to find them. The antidote for technological excess is not more technique. It's more open systems, more participation, more democracy. Frederick Taylor had no way of knowing this. We do. It doesn't require eighty-four specialties to act on our

knowledge. The basic OD skills, as Larry Porter pointed out recently, are few in number and easy to learn.[16] They are generalist skills. If we haven't learned them in two or three years of practice, going to more labs won't help. What we need most right now is an appreciation of our heritage and the courage of our convictions.

The dictionary definition of *breakthrough* is "a new, superior level of performance." The world of work is ready for a merger of technology and democracy.

My question is, are we?

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For my wife, Anna, and our new son, Ryan

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