

PERSPECTIVE

Should we be masters or slaves of OD tools?

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Should we be masters or slaves of OD tools?

It is all too common to hear organizational development technocrats complain about a lack of respect and recognition from their internal clients. To add insult to injury, however, these OD specialists often find line management resisting the systems that they have developed. Performance management is a classic example. Most managers hate the process, complain it doesn't deliver and say it's too painful to use.

Before blaming line managers, OD technocrats should look into their own mindset by reflecting on a fundamental question: Should management be master or slave of tools?

OD professionals are not different from their counterparts in other support functions such as IT or finance. They are proud of the systems they design. As a result, they fall in love with their creations. This drives a mindset that says — albeit most often unconsciously — “you are the slave of my tools.”

How does it feel like to deal with someone with such a mindset? An example outside the business world might help illustrate.

My wife is an avid gardener. A few years ago, I bought her a top-of-the-line pruner for Christmas. When spring came, she engaged as usual in the frenetic rejuvenation of our garden. One day, I noticed she was using her old pruner. I was miffed. From the extensive research I had done before purchasing the tool, I knew it was among the very best on the market.

Assuming she had forgotten about it, I brought the device to her and said, “Use this one, it's the best.” She thanked me, took the tool and simply laid it on the ground while continuing her task with the other pruner. A little annoyed, I insisted. It was now her turn to become frustrated. I backed off and walked away.

Later that evening, I noticed she was using the famous pruner. Pleased but confused, I inquired why she didn't use it before. She said it was an

amazing pruner, but explained the old one was better suited to the particular shrub she was pruning. Plain and simple. She was trying to get a job done. I had acted as a typical technocrat — enamoured with the “perfect” tool I provided and incapable of understanding why she would shunt it.

Tools are a means to an end. Their purpose is to serve users, not the other way around.

Let's move back to the business world. The slave-of-my-tools mindset often drives a lose-lose scenario between HR and line management. This was the case at a large service organization in the midst of an M&A integration. We were helping a business unit tackle a series of challenges: major customer dissatisfaction, an array of operational issues, merged teams that were highly confused, demotivated and unproductive, and a culture that hindered the execution of the new strategy.

Clearly, these issues had a lot to do with the people side of the business. Yet, the executives — who spoke very negatively about their HR colleagues — refused to involve the OD function. Their reaction was the product of years of program-pushing on the part of HR.

Nevertheless, we met with the OD folks to see whether we could leverage some of their programs. To our surprise, the OD department had developed a very decent performance management framework. Its key features included: goal setting clearly linked to the company's balanced scorecard, promotion of an ongoing collaboration between management and employees throughout the performance cycle, and a great approach to assessing, leveraging and developing both technical and soft competencies. The OD group noted most divisions had aggressively pushed back various attempts to roll out the system.

We proposed a deal to HR. “We will try to get the division to see the value of your system. However, we need something from you — carte blanche to adapt the system. Of course, we will respect the overall philosophy, but we need to tailor it to their needs, as necessary.”

In other words, OD was asked for a master-of-the-tools mindset. Having given up on the business unit, they readily accepted the proposition.

Working with line management, we developed and executed a plan to tackle the division's top business issues. The adapted version of the previously shunted performance management system became instrumental to the division's turnaround. HR was surprised, but pleased to finally see its tool being adopted — albeit not in its purest form. Armed with this success story, HR then demonstrated to other divisions the tangible business value of its system. As for line management, they got what they wanted all along: to be the master of their management tools.

What is the morale of the story?

For OD professionals: when line management resists your systems, ask yourself whether you are falling prey of the slave-of-my-tools mindset. Remember that the only purpose of a system is to serve the business. It's better to have a tweaked system that is used and adds value, rather than a rigid one that frustrates a few slaves and gathers dust on everyone else's shelves. Build tools in tight collaboration with internal clients, focusing on business considerations and keeping adaptability in mind. Above all, don't become an HR policy wonk, out of touch with the real world in which line management operates.

But what if, despite having the prerogative to be a master of his tools, a manager still doesn't see value in your flexible, business-driven OD system? You are then probably dealing with a bad manager who doesn't get the soft side. It's time to work on improving or removing the manager.

For line managers: don't become slaves of the organization's OD systems. If you don't see value, challenge HR. Listen to what they have to say, as you might be missing something. If you see some merit, explain your concerns to HR and work with them in adapting the tools to your needs. If HR doesn't make sense or rigidly refuses to adapt the tool, then move on or seek

outside help. After all, you have more important things to do, like a business to run.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Edmond is internationally recognized as an expert in the field of change and transition management. For close to 20 years, he has helped organizations on both sides of the Atlantic successfully adapt to change, first as executive and now as advisor. He is the creator of the ORCHANGO Change Management System™ and ORCHANGO Learn-and-Execute System™.

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