

A F I E L D E S S A Y · G O O D W O R K C O L L E C T I V E · 2 0 2 6

OD Is the *Elephant*

*On the Interconnectedness of a Fragmented Field
— and the Possibility of Collective Power*

Organization Development · Change Management · Coaching · HR · L&D · Facilitation · Strategy

The Parable of the Elephant

There is an ancient story — told first in Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain texts as far back as 500 BCE, and retold ever since because it refuses to stop being true — about six blind men who encounter an elephant for the first time.

The first man touches the broad, flat side: *"An elephant is like a wall."* The second grasps the tusk: *"No. An elephant is like a spear."* The third takes hold of the trunk: *"You are both wrong. An elephant is like a snake."* The fourth wraps his arms around a leg: *"Clearly, an elephant is like a tree."* The fifth brushes the wide ear: *"It is like a fan."* The sixth seizes the swinging tail: *"An elephant is very like a rope."*

Then they argue. Loudly. Each certain. Each partly right. All of them wrong — not because they are dishonest, but because each has only touched the part directly in front of them, and mistaken that part for the whole.

"Each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong."

— John Godfrey Saxe, 1872

Now consider our field.

Change management practitioners are holding the tusk — structured, sharp, pointed at adoption and ROI. HR professionals are pressed against the side — solid, policy-shaped, compliance-textured. Coaches are working the trunk — flexible, individual, responsive. L&D specialists are at the leg — grounded, load-bearing, built for sustained weight. Facilitators are at the ear — wide, attuned, moving with every shift in air. And OD practitioners — we are somewhere in the middle, trying to describe the whole animal to people who are absolutely certain we are describing it wrong.

The elephant is the organization. Every one of these disciplines is touching a real part of it. The tragedy is not that they each have a partial view. The tragedy is that they have stopped trying to find out what the others are touching — and started building entire professional associations, credentialing bodies, and conference ecosystems around their portion of the hide.

Organization Development was always meant to hold the whole animal in mind. Rooted in Kurt Lewin's action research tradition, expanded by NTL's laboratory education movement, and deepened by Beckhard, Schein, and Wheatley, OD has always carried a systemic, humanistic mandate: **to help organizations become more effective and more human at the same time.**

"We've allowed OD to become a set of discrete disciplines that solve for certain problems, instead of using OD to determine what problems should be solved, by whom and to what end."

— Jerry Talley

This is not a critique of the adjacent fields. **I/O psychology** brings rigorous empirical methods. **Change management** brings structured implementation discipline. **L&D** has built remarkable infrastructure for scalable learning. **Executive coaching** creates the individual transformation organizational change ultimately requires. These are instruments in the same orchestra — each touching a real part of the animal. The question is: who is responsible for knowing the whole elephant?

PART TWO

What Each Field Brings

The table below maps the major disciplines across primary unit of focus, values orientation, and relationship to systems-level change.

Field	Primary Focus	Values Anchor	Systems Reach
Organization Development	Whole system	Humanistic, democratic, liberation	Whole system
Change Management	Project / initiative	Adoption, ROI, risk mitigation	Initiative-wide
Executive Coaching	Individual leader	Leader effectiveness, growth	Ripples up/down
HR / People Ops	Workforce systems	Compliance, workforce efficiency	Structural
Talent Dev / L&D	Individual & team capability	Performance, skill building	Capability-wide
I/O Psychology	Individual & org behavior	Scientific rigor, dual focus	Research-grounded
Facilitation	Groups & meetings	Inclusion, emergence, voice	Group to system
Org Design	Structure & systems	Efficiency, alignment, adaptability	Structural whole
Team Development	Team	Trust, effectiveness, psych safety	Team to org

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION LANDSCAPE

Who Holds the Flag for Each Domain

These organizations shape credentialing, community, and field identity — and are potential partners in a collective agenda.

GLOBAL OD ORGANIZATIONS

ODN	Organization Development Network <i>Values-based OD practice; whole system; humanistic tradition</i>
NTL	NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science <i>T-groups, experiential learning, human dynamics since 1947; selective membership</i>
IODA	International Organization Development Association <i>Global network in 50+ countries; best practice sharing for practitioners & academics</i>
ISODC	International Society for Organization Development and Change <i>Publishes the OD Journal; annual global conferences; practitioner-scholar bridge</i>
ODF	Organization Design Forum <i>Specialized focus on org design within the OD ecosystem</i>

REGIONAL OD NETWORKS

ODN Europe / EODF	European OD Network + European Organisation Design Forum <i>Europe's primary OD community and org design network</i>
AODN	Asia Organization Development Network <i>Pan-Asian OD community; includes ODN Japan chapter</i>
Africa OD	Africa Institute of OD · Zambia OD Network <i>Ghana-based institute; growing African OD scholarship and practice</i>
ODA	Organisation Development Australia <i>Australian OD practitioner community and professional development</i>

ALLIED PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

SIOP	Society for Industrial & Organizational Psychology <i>Premier I/O psychology membership; research, psychometrics, selection science</i>
ATD	Association for Talent Development <i>World's largest L&D; association; formerly ASTD; training and instructional design</i>
AOM/ODC	Academy of Management — OD & Change Division <i>Scholar-practitioner research; ODC division is the OD-aligned home within AOM</i>
ISPI	International Society for Performance Improvement <i>Performance and productivity improvement; adjacent to L&D; and OD</i>
ACMP	Association of Change Management Professionals <i>Change management certification; CCMP credential; growing global reach</i>
SHRM	Society for Human Resource Management <i>Largest HR association globally; compliance, people ops, workforce policy</i>
ICF	International Coaching Federation <i>Global coaching credentialing; PCC, MCC, ACC levels</i>
IAF	International Association of Facilitators <i>Facilitation competencies; CPF credential; process arts</i>

The Turbulence Argument — Why Now

We are not in ordinary times. The organizations we serve are navigating simultaneous disruptions — AI transformation, political turbulence, climate urgency, workforce expectation shifts, erosion of institutional trust, and the ongoing reckoning with structural inequity. No single practitioner, and no single field, is equipped to hold all of that.

The Collective Impact framework argues that large-scale social change requires broad cross-sector coordination, not the isolated intervention of individual organizations. When ACMP practitioners are implementing change while ODN practitioners are redesigning culture while ICF coaches are working with the same leaders — but none of them are talking to each other — the result is fragmented, siloed intervention that doesn't stick.

Imagine instead a model in which OD serves as the integrating backbone — not to subordinate the other fields, but to provide the **common agenda, shared values, and systems view** that connects their efforts. Someone has to be responsible for the whole elephant, and OD is best positioned to hold that role — if it chooses to.

"What would it look like if SHRM, ATD, ACMP, ICF, and ODN shared a common commitment to organizations being more just, more adaptive, and more human — and then let each association do its work inside that shared container?"

That's not a merger. It's a coalition. And OD knows how to build coalitions — that's literally in the methodology. Large group interventions. Future Search. Open Space. Appreciative Inquiry. The field invented the technology of collective sense-making. The question is whether it will use those tools on itself.

A PROPOSED ARCHITECTURE

What Coalition Could Look Like

Shared Commitments	Mutually Reinforcing Roles
• Organizations as <i>living systems</i> , not machines	OD: Whole-system integration, values container, diagnosis
• Human dignity as a non-negotiable design criterion	Change Mgmt: Implementation sequencing and adoption
• Equity and justice integrated into every intervention	Coaching: Leader transformation and embodiment
• Long-term health over short-term efficiency	L&D: Capability building and knowledge transfer
• Practitioners who are themselves developing	HR: Policy alignment and structural support
• Open-source knowledge across association boundaries	Facilitation: Collective process and emergence

• **Organizations as leverage points** for shifting social ills — racism, gender violence, homophobia, ableism — that enter through the door every day

I/O Psych: Research grounding and measurement

• **Harm reduction as a practice standard:** naming and interrupting damage, not just optimizing function

The Invitation

What if the professional associations stopped competing for practitioner membership and started co-designing the conditions for organizational transformation? OD has the values, the methods, and the relational capacity to lead that work. The question — always the question — is whether we have the courage to practice what we facilitate.

IN SUMMARY

OD as Verb, Not Noun

Perhaps the most important reframe is this: OD is not a job title, a certification, or even a methodology. **OD is a commitment.** It is the commitment to approaching organizations as whole, living systems that contain people who deserve to work in dignity, purpose, and cooperation.

When a change manager asks 'How will this change actually land for the people affected?' — that is OD. When an HR director insists that a new performance system be built *with* employees rather than *for* them — that is OD. When a coach helps a leader see the system they're part of rather than just their own psychology — that is OD. OD is not what you do. It is **how** you do everything else.

And that is precisely what makes it the elephant — the whole animal that contains every part — and precisely why, in a time of turbulence, the field has never been more necessary.

THE OD EQUATION

A Formal Definition of What We Mean

When any discipline is applied with intention to improve how we work together in systems, it becomes OD — or at minimum, that discipline in service to OD.

ORGANIZATION

Work ⊗ Systems

What we do together to achieve what we cannot do alone

DEVELOPMENT

Δ(outcomes + sustainability)

Improvement over time in results and resilience

T H E R E F O R E

OD = (Any Art ∨ Science)
→ [Work ⊗ Systems]
× Development

Where → means "applied with intention to improve"

Any discipline in service to this intention becomes OD:

Psychology · Anthropology · Design · Engineering · Music · Ecology · Medicine · **any art or science** →

The World Is on Fire.

We Already Know How Systems Work.

Political systems are fracturing. Institutions are losing legitimacy. Trust is eroding at a pace that outstrips our capacity to rebuild it. Climate, inequality, technological disruption, and democratic backsliding are not separate crises. They are **one systemic crisis** — expressing itself in thousands of organizations simultaneously.

And here is the painful irony: **we know how systems work.** That's our job. OD practitioners, change makers, coaches, facilitators, HR leaders, learning professionals — collectively, we hold more insight into organizational behavior, human dynamics, and systems change than almost any other professional community on earth.

The question that demands an answer — urgently, in this moment — is whether we will use that knowledge on ourselves. Can we change our own systems to better serve the whole world?

OD OUT LOUD 2026	<i>October 25–28 · Overland Park Convention Center, Kansas City</i>
Five Global Hubs	Southern Africa, India, S. America & Caribbean, Europe, US/Canada — regional practitioners lead regional sessions
Keynote Speakers	Lovette Jallow · Daniela Papi-Thornton · Dr. Kathleen Allen — voices that challenge, not comfort
Dojos + Open-Space Labs	20 co-created, open-source sessions. Every idea generated belongs to the field, CC BY 4.0
Equitable by Design	50% regional revenue-share. Sliding scale pricing. The Global South is not a satellite.
Global OD Leaders Panel	Stephen Reid · Dr. Justine Chinoperekweyi · Joanna Prieto · Dr. Niru Kumar · Cristina De Armas Pedraza
Special Session: Peter Block	An extended conversation on community, accountability, and why the way we structure help prevents transformation

01

Examine

Honest reckoning with where OD is

02

Co-Create

Building together across five continents

03

Impact

Grounding insight in practice

04

Liberate

Committing to a different way of practicing

"What we achieve in cooperation, we cannot do alone." That is not just an organizational principle. It is the argument for a field finally willing to act like one.

Register: goodworkcollective.net · bit.ly/4aC0xRU