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THE SIX TRAPS OF GLOBAL ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

By Robert I. Tobin

Introduction

"What's different about global organization development," is usually the first question that I'm asked when I tell people that my work is based in Tokyo and Bangkok. I'd like to reply, "OD is the same everywhere." But I can't. "Be prepared," I say, "to work in a very different way."

Global organization development requires a set of unique personal and professional skills--hyper-sensitivity to others, ability to bring diverse groups of people together, courage and risk-taking, negotiation and mediation skills, deep cultural knowledge, and strength in mobilizing networks of community resources.

The organization development consultants who succeed in working outside of North America also have many of the same skills as effective expatriate managers and executives. They are flexible, culturally sensitive, comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity, and are aware of the impact of their work on the local country and the entire organization.

During the past twelve years, I have worked with more than 65 organization development projects outside of the United States. The clients were global corporations--usually with headquarters in the United States, Japan, or Europe. Most projects focused on a client's operations in one country or region, while others were part of a large global change effort. They were usually well-planned and, to the extent that I could judge, well intentioned. Some succeeded--resulted in a desired change for the organization and the people working there; some did not fare well--they were stopped in the process of getting started or they did not deliver results for the client organization.

The projects that did not produce lasting change, as well as those that were abandoned, were victims of at least one of six traps in thinking or design. Like a trap for a mouse, the six traps of Global Organization Development are well camouflaged and appealing. They also can be damaging, costly, and even fatal to a change effort.

In this article, I will describe the six most common traps so that you and your clients can avoid them.

Trap 1: The Trap of Headquarters Planning

Too often, the efforts to develop global teams, global initiatives, global projects etc. are started and planned at headquarters. The leaders of an organization may reason that "this program has been successful here in Boston, or London, so let's roll it out all over the world."

The problems with this approach are immediately clear to any organization development consultant who recognizes that a key ingredient in successful projects is the involvement of people at many levels and many locations. Yet, the leaders of global organization development efforts can too easily forget what they know about involvement and change. Convenience, accessibility and costs are the usual reasons given for planning at headquarters. The thinking goes something like this:

"The clients are here, the programs and the technology are here. It's expensive to bring other people in, and there's a need to get something started quickly. So we'll plan something at headquarters and then bring it out into the field."

The results can be disastrous. Here is one example of a project planned only at headquarters that resulted in large expenses and negative impact. A global planning team identified a new approach to marketing and sales that was successful in the U.S. With the support of the Marketing VP, the global planning team decided this new program, dubbed Marketing Excellence, would be adopted as a global standard. The global planning team was comprised of staff from various departments but only the United States.

A world tour was scheduled for seven locations in Europe and Asia where the new approach, would be introduced. The involvement of local staff was limited to scheduling and translation of some materials. After the Marketing Excellence program was presented to 65 participants in Seoul, the program was stopped. Participants complained that they could not see any value in shifting to a marketing focus. After all, they had been successful selling and marketing based on relationships. They wanted to be involved in the planning and implementation of the program and they were not. Result: Program cancelled, money spent, hopefully some lessons learned.



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It is not that the members of the global planning team were insensitive, cultural barbarians. They took what looked to them like the most sensible, expedient approach, but it was flawed. They may have reasoned that it would be expensive, and take longer if staff was brought in from other countries. They may have also been unwilling to start the process of video and conference calls. They may also have been satisfied that they were pleasing the headquarter-based change leader. In their perspective, the resources that they needed were at headquarters. However, they failed to recognize that they also needed the involvement of resources in the field.

There are several ways of avoiding this trap. The simplest improvement is to bring in people from other countries to be part of the global planning teams. However, this does not do enough to address the concerns of local staff and create a successful program.

It is far better to have global planning teams that are based in the field--not at headquarters--and headed by overseas, local staff. Headquarters staff or consultants do not provide direction to these teams. Instead, they provide support to the teams that work across product lines and country borders.

At a recent meeting in Hong Kong, I witnessed one of these decentralized global planning teams in action. Human resource and organization development executives from more than twenty countries reviewed some of the most successful programs in their countries and their client areas. The group was not limited to English speakers, and several interpreters helped with explanations and translations.

Staff from headquarters who attended this meeting were not there to "sell programs from headquarters." They listened and asked questions. They provided endorsement and encouragement to local human resources staff, and they helped identify ways that local programs could be adopted and adapted in other countries.

Trap Two: The Trap of Minimizing Cultural Influences

Global organizations have learned from experience that a "one-size fits all" approach for global policies and programs simply does not work. In foreign countries, the food is different, the art is different, the way of doing business is different. Why shouldn't OD be different?

Organization development consultants recognize the importance of developing an approach that will fit and not offend local cultures. However, when it comes time for project implementation, there is often a race with the clock coupled with concerns over budget. The net result is that cultural considerations suffer.

Involvement of local resources and decentralization of the global planning teams, as discussed in the first trap, do help in raising and addressing cultural concerns. However, all OD consultants must recognize that culture has an impact on every aspect of OD. Global organization development requires: a willingness to acknowledge and suspend our own cultural norms, a major effort in attempting to understand the local culture; and being diligent in using culture as one of the ways of interpreting behavior.

Even in those situations where all involved recognize that global programs require localization, consultants unconsciously use their own cultural frames of reference and icons to the detriment of the local program.

An example from a recent meeting with an U.S.-based consumer goods manufacturer's human resources director in Tokyo provides an example. He was thrilled about a change program that relied heavily on the imagery in Alice In Wonderland. He ordered books for corporate staff and invited the consultants to Japan to deliver a program. The human resources director and the consultants did not recognize that Alice in Wonderland is not a well-known story in Japan. The program sponsors thought that the Japanese staff could easily understand the story, but Alice in Wonderland had no meaning for the local staff. Besides, the child-like story and the use of icons that were alien to their culture offended them.

Lack of attention to cultural rituals, discomfort with discussion of topics such as religion and family, and very different notions of formality and status are other cultural aspects that will impact a change program.

The leaders of another global project designed to develop a more active learning environment for a food service organization sought to understand and raise cultural issues in all discussions. They customized the program in every country and used local trainers and consultants for implementation. The global planning and implementation team had members from several organizational levels and countries, held many conference calls to talk about the plan. They also gave local staff an opportunity to review what had been implemented in other countries, and got the help of local resources in modifying the program to specific



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cultures. Program planners attempted to find out the kind of discussions that would be likely and what questions might be raised and asked. The program resulted in increased per-store sales, higher levels of employee retention and reduced recruiting costs.

Attention to cultural differences requires local involvement, tenacity in incorporating cultural issues and customization of a program to fit the local culture. Big marketers like Nestle's and Pepsi Cola know the importance of cultural differences in marketing. Nestle's lotus and red bean yogurt is successful in Thailand, and Pepsi has modified product size, offerings and advertising throughout Asia. Organization development efforts merit the same degree of customization.

Trap 3. The Trap of Country-By Country Project Launch

Like each of the traps discussed here, country by country launch and start-up looks like a logical and sensible way of proceeding in global organization development. It appears as if implementing projects this way can address cultural concerns, and break the project into manageable segments. However, when implementation begins at the country level, there are often huge obstacles and mountains of resistance that must be addressed.

In each country, organization development projects encounter different states of readiness, and new cultures which will require program modification. Certainly, earlier involvement and effective partnering with representatives in each country can help with launch and implementation. However, local staff may align themselves in resistance along well-established organizational patterns.

One way to avoid this trap is to launch projects on a regional basis-preferably along business product lines. This changes the context for all country's representatives, provides a specific business focus to the change effort, enables participants to learn from each other, and generally involves a wider cross-section of people.

It might seem that launching a project on a regional basis with multi-country groups would be more difficult than working with groups from one country. However, it is often easier. There is no dominant group, and fewer constraints from existing relationships. The regional executives and product line leaders can tie the change program in with specific business goals and objectives.

Regional implementation of change can also create a high level of excitement--exchanging knowledge among peers, learning across borders, and meeting new people who have grappled with similar problems and challenges. When people leave their familiar surroundings and relationships, change can happen more easily. The cultural issues which are so important are often addressed by each country's team. They, rather than the organization development consultants, take what they learned at the regional level and modify it on their own.

Regional programs take more planning (which is usually a positive factor) and expenses (to cover travel expenses for participants), but the impact is likely to be greater.

In a recent project for an electronics company, project staff were sent from headquarters to explain a new financial reporting system that would be implemented separately in four different countries. In the first two countries, resistance was strong. In the words of the project manager, the "troops were well-prepared to protest," and several managers had mobilized their people to resist the change from headquarters.

Earlier involvement of a wider cross-section of people could have helped, but it was too late to think about what should have been done. Rather than continuing country by country, the project team decided to change the implementation model to a regional one. At a central location, they brought people together from the two countries that had not been visited together with representatives from other countries.

The walls of resistance that the project teams had encountered in each country did not exist at the regional meeting. Representatives from the various countries, with different views and experiences, were able to address the concerns raised by other participants.

4. The Trap of Orthodoxy

As a field, organization development relies heavily on social science action research techniques with a focus on integrity, authenticity, and values. Organization development consultants need not abandon their approaches when they board the plane to go to another country. However, flexibility is an important ingredient in working overseas. Strictness about definitions of organization development and methodology may result in stalled projects and frustration for the client and consultant.



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Clients may be intrigued by specific methodologies, but their number one interest is in results. There is often pressure to accomplish objectives very quickly due to the high travel and expense costs of using consultants overseas. This often means taking on new roles and working with clients in different ways than in North America. Organization development consultants who see themselves primarily as facilitators may find that additional skills, such as being a catalyst, mediator, resource locator, and bridge are most in demand.

A human resources director in Bangkok explained how a strict adherence to a specific approach worked to the detriment of the project and consultant. The project looked simple enough for the consultant sent from Chicago. She was to review the data from an employee survey; participate in a series of meetings where the results would be presented; and work with client groups in developing and implementing recommendations for improvement.

The consultant reviewed the data, scheduled a series of presentations, and met first with the local General Manager to go over the findings. The General Manager didn't like the results, cancelled public reporting of the findings and asked the consultant for a series of recommendations to implement.

The consultant had expected adherence to the schedule for full disclosure and reporting. She accused the General Manager of trying to control the entire process and explained that full disclosure of the results was promised to the survey participants. She told him that he must agree to public reporting.

The next day, the General Manager's secretary called the consultant to arrange her return to Chicago the following day. She was sent for two months but returned in a week. Once she returned, she talked about how the General Manager did not understand organization development. She also accused the General Manager of sabotaging the project.

The consultant's insistence on a certain way of working procedures resulted in her being removed from the project and replaced with a local consultant. In this situation, she had very little capacity to influence. She left feeling proud that she stuck to her values, but she and the client may both have lost in this situation.

When I first arrived in Japan, several clients I spoke with in Osaka and Tokyo were not interested in action research. Instead, they were interested in having someone who would talk with their workers and managers. The expatriate executives could not understand local workers, did not have the time to listen to them, or were too isolated from workers to ever communicate with them. They wanted someone who would talk to staff, and find out more about their thinking, and listen to their concerns about change.

I initially voiced my worries about how the data would be used, the lack of structure to the project. I asked the clients why they didn't go out and talk with workers. I wondered about the clients' commitment. I would attempt to convince the client of a structured project—with more time, more resources, more involvement and more formality.

The client would object—the project would never get started or would be conducted by someone else who would work in a more accommodating way.

When I realized that a certain degree of flexibility on my part would get projects off the ground, I was able to develop a clearer understanding of what the client wanted and needed. I was then able to develop services that met those needs.

5. The Trap of Being Focused on Only Sessions

Organization development consultants give considerable focus to planning the sessions at a work-site or conference. Here again, it seems logical: The trip is expensive, and the consultant is being paid for the sessions. It is during the sessions, some may believe, that the real work happens. The temptation is to fill up the hours with sessions. This is a mistake. The real work and results may come from informal meetings, face-to-face conversations, and social events.

Too often the consultant goes overseas, does his or her work in the sessions, then goes back to the hotel early and skips the socializing that happens after the sessions. After all, the consultant is tired, jet-lagged, and must get ready for the next day. When the project is completed, the organization development consultant flies home. This focus on sessions only and the rush to return home (to a familiar environment) robs the consultant of opportunities to have a greater impact.

The sessions should be seen as only a starting point. The change and connection inside heads and hearts often happens in the hallways, in the restaurants, in the bars, and around the pool. The same planning that goes into sessions should be given to the



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non-work hours, non-session time, with substantial time for one-to-one discussions and informal and formal social events. The organization development consultant can also have one-to-one conversations with staff who did not attend the sessions but whose support is needed for the success of a program.

Global organization development can not be restricted to normal working hours. Successful global consultants know that what happens during the after-hours, lunches and parties is as important as what happens during the sessions.

At a recent Organization Development Network Conference, one presenter described a client's attempts to speed up the software development process of their partners in Japan. Headquarters development teams visited and explained rationally what needed to be done in a series of sessions. However, it was during dinners and drinking sessions that the defenses between the teams was reduced and the Japanese developers were able to understand the needs of headquarters and commit to a faster schedule.

The consultant who spends time on site before the program begins-and then stays around at night and after the official program has been completed will be viewed positively by the client groups and will have greater success and impact. There will be dinners, socializing and conversations and a chance for participants to answer one of their biggest questions: What kind of person is the consultant who is working with us?

Some people working overseas like to brag that they never encounter culture shock. I would argue that this may indicate too much distance from the host culture and the client groups. A dose of culture shock goes a long way in developing compassion and understanding.

Trap 6. The Trap of Focusing Only on Process

I am always a bit surprised when I meet organizational development consultants who have worked outside of the United States and tell me that they focused on process and made no modification in their approach for culture. It seems that organization development consultants do not tell me this out of disrespect for local cultures, but out of pride in their well-developed process skill set. Some tell me that they focused on process and relied on the local client representative for cultural insights and industry knowledge.

There are at least two flaws with this approach. First, the processes of change and working with groups are different in other cultures. This includes how people view change and the verbal and non-verbal cues that individuals use in discussions. Even the most sensitive consultant who focuses on the processes they know will misdirect and misinterpret much of the process unless they are familiar with cultural issues.

Second, when the consultant uses his or her process skills as the starting point, it puts too much focus on the consultant rather than putting the focus with the client where it belongs. Instead of focusing on utilizing process skills, the more effective consultant will focus on the group to learn the special processes of change in another culture.

One university colleague in Bangkok, Thailand is particularly effective in working with groups throughout Asia because she spends time understanding the process of change in countries where she works. She studies the culture, learns at least a few words in the language used, learns about her client's business, and understands the competitive environment for her clients. When she partners with local consultant, the partnership is based on three platforms: (1) her understanding of how her process skills will have to be modified in another culture; (2) her knowledge of the culture and elementary language knowledge; and (3) her understanding of her client's business.

Her local partners enjoy working with her because they can connect with her in these ways. Too often local consultants complain that they are marginalized in the roles of cultural and business informant. Most would prefer to be involved in process as well.

Successful internal consultants in any country know that the way they develop credibility with their clients is to know their client's business concerns. The best global organization development consultants must know the business challenges of their clients, and learn about the culture where they work.

Clients and consultants need a common language. When the consultant brings process skills that the client can not understand and only the client representatives has cultural and business knowledge, the chance for connections are not likely to be deep.



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The best preparation for an overseas assignment should include learning about a foreign culture, and the client's business. The clients will recognize that you are someone who has made an investment in working with them.

As reported in Business Week, when Microsoft's Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer went on a world tour to strengthen Microsoft's businesses overseas, they didn't watch the movies or sleep on the plane. Instead, they read books and magazines about every country they would visit. They learned some words in the local language and developed an understanding of specific cultures. They connected with local people by listening and developing an understanding of the local culture and business practices.

Gates' and Ballmers' approach is one I recommend to all global organization development consultants. You may be hired for your expertise in process skills, but you will be re-hired when you know your client's culture and business.

Concluding Remarks and Suggested Resources

There are many temptations to think of work overseas as "the same as in the U.S. and Canada." This, I believe, is a mistake that can have negative consequences for organization development consultants and their clients.

There are hidden traps of thought and action that damage the impact of global organization development efforts. This article has discussed six of these traps and has offered suggestions on how clients and consultants can avoid them.

If you would like to do additional reading, I recommend starting with the following books.

Friedman, Thomas L. *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. New York: Random House, 2000.

Osland, Joyce Sautters. *The Adventures of Working Abroad: Hero Tales from the Global Frontier*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995.

Storti, Craig. *The Art of Crossing Cultures*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 1990.

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