OD-HRD Interventions for Creating A Learning Organization: My Experiences and Reflections as A Change-Agent

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1. Introduction:

Organizations operate in changing environments and learn by interacting with their environments by observing the results of their actions. Learning at the organizational level should include both the adoptive and innovative responses to their environment (Hedberg, 1981). Organizations, which do not learn, may not cope with the changes in their environment and will find it difficult to survive and grow. In fact, the purpose of learning is to improve performance and to master the environment (Katona, 1940 quoted in Hedberg, 1981). Globalization and liberalization of Indian economy has led to Indian business environment becoming more turbulent and uncertain However, the Indian organizations such as Infosys, ICICI Bank, Tata Steel and Bharat Forge that have superior learning processes have not only grown very fast in India but have also captured the world market.

Watkins and Golembiewski (1995) argue that organization development philosophy, and tools and techniques are in congruence with the conceptualization of creating learning organization. Watkins and Marsick (1993, quoted in Watkins and Golembiewski, 1995), define "the learning organization as one that learns continuously and transform itself. Learning takes place in individuals, teams, the organizations, and even the communities with which the organizations interacts… Learning results in changes in knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors. Learning also enhances organizational capacity for innovation and growth. The learning Organization has embedded systems or mechanisms to capture and share learning". Based on this definition, they argue that OD for creating a learning organization requires a shift from focus on change to learning and change. Organizational level learning systems facilitate knowledge generation, knowledge sharing and empowerment for transformation on a continuous basis.

It is in this context that we describe and examine some of the OD and learning interventions that we have been using as an internal and external change-agent for the last twenty years. We describe following four interventions which we have intensively used to help individuals, teams and organizations to learn and behave differently which can enhances their effectiveness and facilitate them to adopt and be innovative in context of the environment:

- Transfer of learning from classroom to work situations
- Development-cum-assessment center as a part of nurturing leadership learning process
- Image sharing process to enhance awareness about the context and behavior of virtual team members
- Building A model for organization-wide training effectiveness

In the next four sections, we describe each of these four interventions and analyze these interventions in terms of how they facilitate learning, behavioral change and performance improvement.

2. Interventions for Transfer of Learning from Classroom to Work Situation [1]

During 1988, on a British Council Scholarship, I got an opportunity to attend a twelve-week training programme, "Sharing British Training Experiences" conducted by Industrial Training Systems, UK. As a part of the programme, I got exposed to the concept of 'Learning Diary', 'Learning Review' and 'Action-Planning'. As a participant in the programme, I had experienced that 'Learning Diary' and 'Learning Review' are excellent mechanism to consolidate one's learning from a programme. I had also prepared an action-plan as a part of the programme. After coming back from UK, I was able to successfully implement my action-plan.

The above experience resulted in our management academy adopting the mechanism of 'Learning Diary', 'Learning Review' and 'Action-Planning'. Prior to the introduction of these mechanisms, we have been conducting a 'Diagnostics' exercise for all long duration programmes on the first day of the programme. The Diagnostics exercise was modified and is incorporated along with the above three mechanisms.

Diagnostics

As a part of the diagnostics, the participants are encouraged to get in touch with their learning need. In a short-session, we usually spend the first 10-15 minutes to help participants get in touch with what they already know about the subject and what else they would like to know. In long duration programme coordinated by us, the participants are asked to spend about forty-five minutes to answer the following three questions:

- In my opinion, what are the organization's expectations from me as a professional manager?
- What difficulties do I face in meeting these expectations?
- What do I look forward to learn in this programme to over come the above-mentioned difficulties in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes?

Subsequently, the participants are distributed in 4-5 groups consisting of about five members per group. In small groups, the participants are expected to share their individual responses and develop a common group response. After the small group discussion, the groups share their concerns as well as learning needs with the whole group.

Diagnostics facilitates the participants to think through their roles, responsibilities and organization's expectations from them at the beginning of the training programme. The participants get in touch with their learning needs and become active seekers of the knowledge.

Learning Diary

After creating awareness about the problems and challenges in the work setting of the participants through the Diagnostics, the participants are made aware that they are the only one in the class who are aware of their work-context and they only can change the situation and work on the problems and challenges after the programme. But for that to happen, they must empower themselves with contextual and relevant learning. For acquiring relevant and contextual learning, they must visit their work situations as often as possible during the programme, discuss their problems in the class and more importantly capture their learning on a regular basis in their ‘learning diary’. ‘Learning Diary’ format includes the topic covered, significant learning points, and how one proposes to use the learning in one’s work setting.

We brief the participants about how to write learning diary and suggest to them that they should not try to summarize what was taught by the faculty in the learning diary. The participants should recapitulate what is that they have learnt from a session. They are advised that they should write their diary in first person, starting sentences with ‘I’. This facilitates the participants to keep the focus on self and how they can transfer learning from the classroom setting to the respective work situations. The participants are encouraged that they should invest about 30-40 minutes per day writing their learning. It is emphasized that some time they might experience difficulty getting in touch with their learning and would feel uncomfortable capturing their learning. It is highlighted to them that the discomfort may be because of the reluctance to change at the level of self and hence they must learn to live with it for a while. We emphasize time and again that the most important document they would carry along with them back home, would be their learning diary. The time spent in writing learning diary, would help them to ensure that the time and money spent in attending the programme, become an investment and which would keep giving them returns in future.

During the subsequent days of the programme, the first thing in the class, I ask the participants whether they have written the learning diary for the previous day. Typically, many of the participants would not have written the diary. Without getting annoyed about not writing the learning diary, I provide about twenty minutes to write their learning diary. After every body completes capturing their learning, I ask few participants on voluntary basis to share their ‘Learning Diary’ with the class. It helps the faculty to get feedback whether the participants have understood correctly the concept of ‘Learning Diary’. It also facilitates to revise the significant learning from the previous day. Most importantly, it institutionalizes learning diary as an important and integral part of the learning process in the programme.

Learning Review

In the programme of more than one-week duration, at the end of each week, participants in small groups carry out a ‘Learning Review’. The participants, who had worked together during ‘Diagnostics’ exercise, again work together for ‘Learning Review’. During the review, each member of the small group shares one’s learning from the sessions conducted and how one proposes to implement them in one’s respective work setting. The group summarizes the learning and how it can be used back home in the work situations. The participants are encouraged to examine whether some of the issues identified by them as part of the diagnostics have been answered or not. The process of learning review and diagnostics facilitate the small groups to experience the processes of team learning (Senge, 1990).

Action Plan

The ‘Diagnostics’, ‘Learning Diary’ and ‘Learning Review’ become the basis for the participants to prepare an action-plan to be implemented back home. The participants are given following briefing for the preparation of their action-plan:

a) Please read through your “Diagnostics” exercise and ‘Learning Diary’ before starting work on your ‘Action-Plan’.
b) Your ‘Action-Plan’ should necessarily be in your area of responsibility and should improve your own and your team’s performance and effectiveness.
c) Your ‘Action-Plan’ should be well thought out and a feasible one, not requiring resources beyond your reach. Secondly it should not depend upon excessive assistance from others. In case it does, the difficulties involved must be foreseen and action plan in terms of activities to remove obstacles must be fully worked out.
d) Your ‘Action-Plan’ should be specific and should result in bringing about change. You should be able to evaluate the impact of your ‘Action-Plan’ on pre-post basis either quantitatively or qualitatively.
e) Your ‘Action-Plan’ should be time bound.
f) Please remember it is your ‘Action-Plan’ and you have complete freedom to decide what you want to plan and do.

As a part of the action-plan, the participants specify objectives to be achieved, activities required to achieve a given objective, criteria to assess achievements and expected date of completion. After being back to their respective work places, participants are expected to share their action-plans with their superiors and after getting their consent, start implementing them. After completion of the action-plans, the participants make a presentation to the senior executives of the company.

Learning Diary and Action-Planning in the Process of Planned change

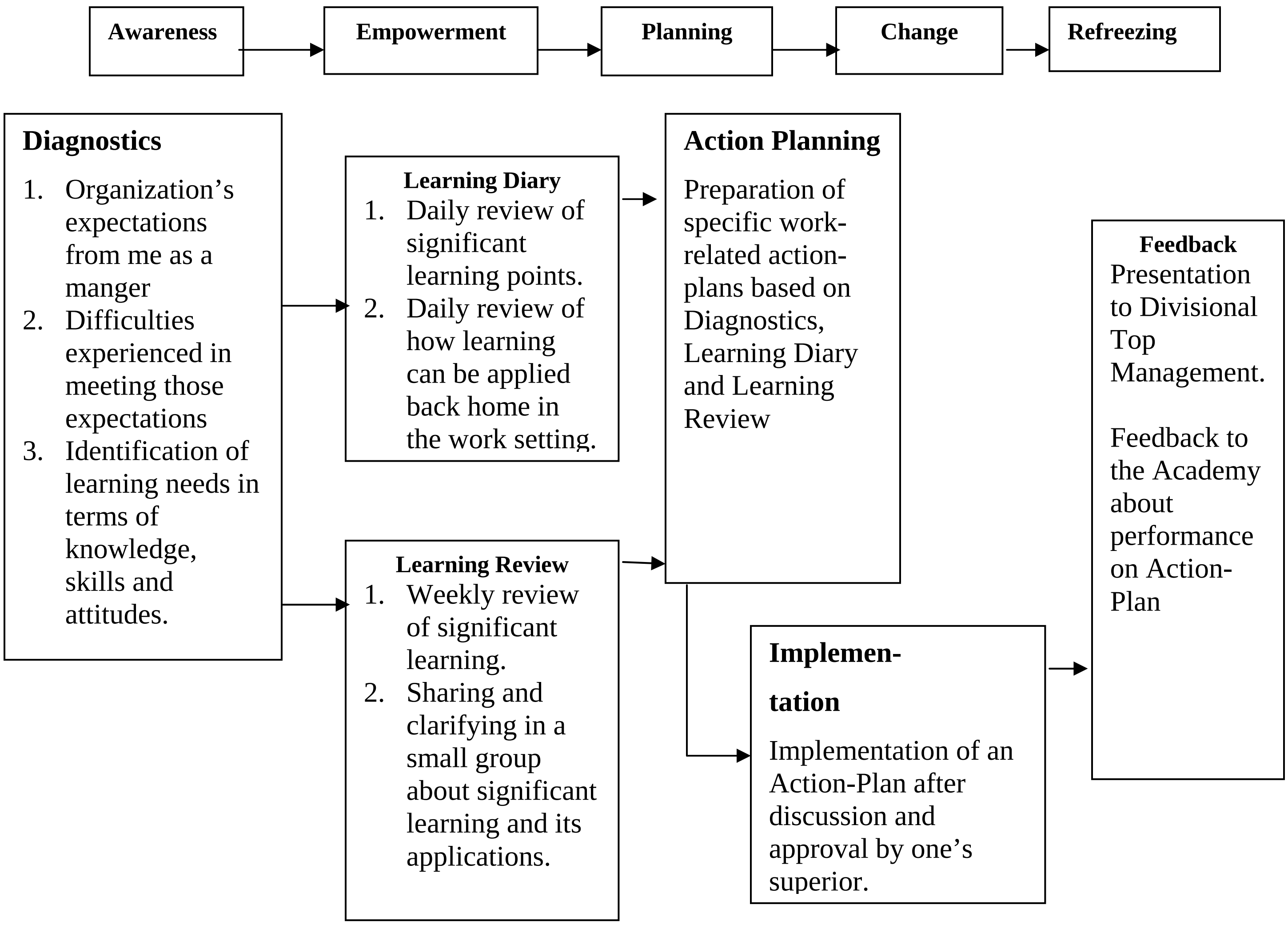
The classical model of planned change suggested by Kurt Lewin (1947) has three stages, namely, unfreezing, change, refreezing. In the present study, the model of planned change has been extended to 5 stages as given below:

1. Awareness about the need for and direction of change.
2. Empowering for change through learning relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes.
3. Planning for change.
4. Implementation of change.
5. Refreezing of change.

The four mechanisms, namely, 'Diagnostics', 'Leaning Diary', 'Learning Review', and 'Action-Planning' described in this paper, can be conceptualized as initial 3 stages of process of planned change as depicted in Figure-1. The 'Diagnostics' exercise makes the participants aware about the need for and direction of change with respect to their role responsibilities. In addition, the participants also become aware about their learning needs in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes. The ' Learning Diary' and 'Learning Review' exercises empower the participants to plan and manage the change. In this model of change, empowering through learning takes precedence over planning for change. The 'Action-Planning' exercise focuses on planning for change. Participants, as a part of the exercise, plan for objectives, activities and time period for a planned change in their respective area of influence. While these three stages of planned change get completed in a classroom, the remaining two stages are carried out in the work situation of a participant. The process meets the requirement of a learning organization as suggested by Watkins and Golembiewski (1995) in terms of helping the participants to learn and plan and implement change.

Figure-1

A Model of Planned Change for Transfer of Learning



3. Development-cum-Assessment Center:

An organization that aspire to grow much faster as compared to other organizations in the environment usually rely on superior learning processes to help the organization to acquire new competencies and capabilities. In addition, a fast growing organization needs to ensure that people at the first level itself learn superior leadership competencies and handle leadership challenges early in the career. HR systems and processes should be used to help employees experience fairness, growth and credibility for the top management and HR department; and in turn it helps in attracting and retaining talent (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1998). Development and assessment centers are powerful mechanisms to help people experience these processes in an organization.

Development and assessment centers being highly resource intensive are more often used for senior level executives. A pharmaceutical organization, a subsidiary of a multinational corporation has been losing market share for few years. In the year 2002, it got a new chief executive, internally promoted and posted from another location. He realized the need for capturing the lost market share and developed a new strategy. As a part of the new strategy, it planned to substantially enhance its presence in the market and increase the manpower at the first level, namely, at the level of marketing executives. This in turn led to substantial increase in the fresh induction at the entry level. During the first year itself the impact was felt and the company recaptured its market share in many of its territories. For sustaining the strategy of intensive presence in the market, it was realized that people need to be groomed to handle higher responsibilities. Secondly, the organization wanted to meet the growth aspiration of the employees and at the same time give them a sense of fairness and growth. Accordingly, the organization decided to conduct development-cum-assessment center for the first-line marketing executives as well as for middle level managers in collaboration with IIM Bangalore. The performance in the existing role was used as a criterion for deciding eligibility to participate in the development center. Identification of an individual to participate in development-cum-assessment center (DCAC) was considered by the participants as recognition of their existing competencies and performance. Thus the participants attended development centers with a positive frame of mind that enhanced their energy to learn from different interventions in the development center.

Role-analysis questionnaire and repertory grid method were used to define the competencies required for the two levels, namely, business manager and regional manager for which the assessment centers were designed. Managing Director, Director (Sales), Head of HR and learning managers actively participated in designing in-basket exercise, coaching situations and situations for handling problem and important customers along with IIM B faculty. In addition, they have been equal partners for conducting the development-cum-assessment centers. This has been helpful in showing the commitment of the top management to the organizational learning and development processes in the organization. As a part of the development process, all the participants are given detailed feedback by Managing Director, Director (Sales) and the faculty on their behavior and performance in the development center. Many of those who could not get promoted first time, got promoted in the subsequent development centers. However, no concessions were made for the people appearing second time in an assessment center.

Thus the process gives a very clear message to all the employees that organization wants to be fair to them, provides them equal opportunities for growth and, values their growth and development at the highest level. While the assessment center is used for making promotion decisions, it has also become a part of annual learning system for high performers. The feedback from the organization suggests that the intervention has led to reduction in attrition. Bartlett and Ghoshal (1998) argue that a learning organization after recruiting talent should develop systems and processes to retain talent. In addition, analysis of assessment center data at aggregate level facilitates analyzing the group strength and learning needs at the team level. The analysis of data from assessment centers of marketing executives as well as business managers suggested that organization was weak in conceptual and analytical skills and need to acquire these competencies. The findings are used by the organization to develop organization-wide plans to acquire these competencies.

Thus a development center combines at least three elements of a learning organization, namely, personal mastery, mental models and team learning from the five disciplines of learning organization as suggested by Senge (1990). It helps the participants to acquire personal mastery by becoming aware of one's strengths and development needs in context of their growth plans and the roles they aspire to play. It helps them to change their mental model by making them realize that they cannot equate their success in the current role with the readiness to get promoted in the new role. Awareness of one's limitations may cause pain to an individual but it also facilitates accepting the reality and changes one's mental models. Finally, it facilitates the team to learn together about each other as well as about the competencies required for the new role.

4. Image Sharing

Image sharing is a powerful OD technique [(2)]. The intervention is similar to organizational mirroring discussed in OD literature (Fordyce & Weil, 1971). It is premised that behaviour of a person or a group is a function of one's understanding of one's role. When two or more groups of people work with each other, based on their experiences of each other, they develop images about each other. While some aspects of the images may be positive, many aspects of the images may not be desirable. By helping organizational groups to learn about the images that exist about them within the organization and its environment, they can be motivated to change their behaviour and to redefine those images. The intervention usually requires a day and is most effective when the teams, which interact with each other on a regular basis, participate in this OD intervention.

Recently, I used it to create awareness in a group of software professional about the conflicts and causes of those conflicts amongst onsite and offshore team members who are essentially part of the same team and work for common customers. All the members were participants of a part-time executive MBA programme (PGSEM Programme at IIM Bangalore). All the participants belonged to software industry and used to work for different organizations. Most of them were part of onsite-offshore teams and many of them had worked onsite. Those who had extensive and recent experience of working onsite were asked to be part of the onsite team and others became part of offshore team. In each team, we had approximately 30-35 participants. Each team was told to come prepared with the answer to the following three questions:

1. What we think about ourselves?
2. What we think about the other group?
3. What we think the other group thinks of us?

In the class, each group, namely, onsite and offshore team answered each of the above three questions with about 8-10 adjectives. Table-1 describes what onsite and offshore team think about them. The adjectives in this table are self-perception of both the teams and it consists of mostly positive adjectives. Table-2 describes what offshore team thinks of onsite team and what onsite team thinks offshore team thinks about them. Two interesting aspects are noticed about these two lists. Firstly, though these two lists of adjectives about onsite team were prepared by two different teams, namely, offshore team and onsite team; they have lot of common adjectives. Secondly, many of these adjectives can be considered as negative. Thus, it emerges that there are lot of negative images which exists about onsite team and which are pervasive across offshore as well as onsite team. Similarly, Table-3 depicts what onsite team thinks of offshore team and what offshore team thinks onsite team thinks about it. In the Table-3 like in Table-2, the lists prepared by onsite and offshore teams, have lot of common adjectives describing offshore team and most of these adjectives are negative.

Both the team looking at the commonality of the lists describing themselves, firstly got amused, laughed at it and then reflected over it for a while. We provided time to each time to clarify the images as depicted by other team. After the clarification stage, we suggested that both the teams may like to examine whether the negative images that exist about them, were real and if so then what they could do to remove those negative images about themselves. After deliberation for about 45 minutes, both the team developed action-plans, which would help them to remove many of the negative images that exist about them across the organization.

Awareness of the reality and space for confronting the reality that is not very pleasant activates an individual or/and a team to think through what they could do to change the reality. Image sharing as a technique has the power to help members of interdependent teams to confront the reality and then helps them to plan to change the reality. The intervention facilitates collection of contextual data (images) in real time and then empowers the team members to act on that data which facilitates learning (Watkins & Golembiewski, 1995). The process further facilitates learning and change through dialogue with in a team as well as with other teams by helping them to examine the existing mental models and then understanding the causal reasons for those mental models. The intervention combines the process of dialogue for organizational learning and culture change as suggested by Schein (1993) and double loop learning of understanding the cause and effect relationships to create change (Argyris, 1977). We have extensively used this intervention with team members who work with each other on a regular basis. However, in this case, we have used this OD intervention to create awareness about the onsite team members and their challenges even when they were not present. Recently, we used the intervention to create awareness amongst service owners belonging to a telecommunication company about the business process vendors who belonged to another organizations about the problems and challenges being experienced by them in the relationship.

Image Sharing and Role Negotiation between Onsite and Offshore Team in an Executive Part-time PGSEM Programme

Table-1: What we think about ourselves?

Onsite Team	Offshore Team
1. Close to customers, Understanding customer markets.	Hard working
2. Drives business	Process oriented
3. Knows the product	Safeguard company’s interests
4. On firing line	Low customer interaction opportunities
5. Accountability higher	Less rewards
6. Ambassador of company, culture	Good project managers
7. Out of site, out of mind	Constrained environment
8. Sandwiched, acting like a customer	More flexible with time/work
9. Isolated	

10. Chosen ones	
11. Don’t tell them everything to offshore team	
12. Don’t know the offshore reality	

Table-2: What offshore team thinks of onsite team and what onsite team thinks offshore team thinks about onsite team?

What offshore team thinks about onsite team	**What onsite team thinks offsite team thinks about them**
1. Easy time	1. Bossy
2. No Process orientation	2. Act like a customer
3. Customer oriented/ think they are client	3. On vacation
4. Get lot of recognition	4. Overpaid
5. Not considerate	5. Unreachable
6. Glorified postman	6. Don’t appreciate constraints of offsite
7. Always complaining/Low on appreciation	7. Irresponsible, Unresponsive
	8. Lime light, Jazzy job
	9. Represent us and our concerns

Table-3: What onsite team thinks of offshore team and what offshore team thinks onsite team thinks of offshore team?

What onsite thinks of offshore team	**What offshore team thinks onsite team thinks about them**
1. Operating in the comfort zone	1.We don’t know anything
2. Do not know the real situation	2. Not quality conscious
3. Too “Techy”, lack of business acumen	3. Low customer orientation
4. Do not appreciate language/cultural difficulties	4. Slow to react
5. Not getting proper support	5. Over emphasis on process
6. Inefficient	6. Poor communicators
7.Response time not in concurrence with commitment	7. Have all the resources
8. Can fall back on them	8. Better internal visibility
9. Provides support on technical issues.	

Table-4: Action-Plan by onsite and offshore teams to improve their images vis-à-vis each other

Onsite Team	Offshore Team
1. Communicate better • Give context/Big picture of tasks. • Acknowledge contribution by offshore team more often. • Tell them how we are representing them.	1. Communicate- difficulties and constraints. 2. Respect the onsite team for being business for the organization,
2. Role swapping	3. Job rotation
3. Make offshore strength visible and customer (Also highlight individual achievement to upper management	4. Set mutually agreed slab
4.Be more available/more accommodating of time differences.	5. Review the commitments
	6. Joint project reviews
	7. Business training by onsite team to offshore members

5. Building a Model for Evaluating Training Effectiveness

Training is one of the powerful interventions for organizational learning. However, for training to facilitate learning, it needs to cater to the needs of the organization as well as the needs of individuals attending a training programme. It should have the commitment and support of top management and active involvement of the middle management. Individuals participating in a training programme should have the desire and ability to experiment and have self-confident. They also need to believe that they have a powerful role to perform. Further the organization should provide discretionary time for implementing learning. Organizational level factors that facilitate learning and change are opportunity and empowerment for change and systems and critical mass for implementing change plans (Agrawal, 1996).

A public-sector enterprise had signed a memorandum of understanding with its ministry that it would develop a model for evaluating training effectiveness. IIM Bangalore received a request for conducting a consultancy to develop a model for evaluating training effectiveness. Based on our knowledge of making training effective, we followed the following process for building the model:

Table-5: List of Activities for Building A Model For Evaluating Training Effectiveness

Sl. No.	Activity	Action-By
1.	Discussion of the approach for consultancy	Change Agent
2.	Creation of Corporate HR Steering Committee	Chairman
3.	Defining the organizational learning priorities Defining the broad programme objectives and contents of the training programme.	Corporate HR Steering Committee
4.	Identifying the project topics to be handled as a part of the training programme. Identification of Champions for project work.	Corporate HR Steering committee
5.	Identification of participants for the programme.	Corporate HR Steering Committee
6.	Conduct of half-day organizational and role diagnostics workshops at two plants and corporate office for the participants who were nominated to participate in the programme.	Plant level HR Steering Committee
7.	Conduct of 6-8 weekly one-day project meetings before the start of the programme.	Project Champion Change Agent
8.	Conduct of half-day project management workshops for the participants.	Change-Agent
9.	Conduct of training programme	IIM Bangalore
10.	Conduct of an experiment to capture learning from the programme (Pre-Test, Post-Test Experiment) and its relevance.	Change-Agent
11.	Visit to other organizations for benchmarking and learning related to project work.	Plant level HR Steering Committee Head of Corporate HR
12.	Finalization of Project Work	Project Champion External Change Agent Head of Corporate HR
13.	Presentation of the Training Evaluation Model to Board Members.	Change-Agent

The feedback from the organization suggests that they are satisfied with the emerging model for evaluating training effectiveness. The oral and written feed back from the participants suggested that the programme was a success. The pre- and post-programme data analysis revealed that learning was significant and relevant as perceived by the participants. The project work is relevant and applicable for the organization. Organization is working towards implementing projects. The regression data suggested that relevance and utility had significant impact on the amount of learning from the programme. Thus based on a number of qualitative as well as quantitative criteria, it is observed that it was a successful intervention. The following learning emerges from this change initiative:

- Identification of project sponsor.
- Shared-ownership of change project at multiple levels during different phases of a change project.
- Involvement of people responsible for change implementation.
- Empowerment for change.
- Share the responsibility of guiding the change project with internal change agent.
- Systematic planning for change using project management framework
- Developing mechanisms to assess the impact of change.

Conclusion: OD interventions have been in existence for almost last fifty years. The stated philosophy and purpose of OD interventions have been to facilitate organization wide planned change. Evaluation studies of OD interventions suggest about their success. Integrating it with the concepts of creating learning organizations enhances the understanding of linkages between OD interventions and their role in enhancing individual, group and organizational learning and change management. Watkins and Golembiewski (1995) have argued that for OD to facilitate learning organization, change-agents should ensure that everybody is trained in OD.

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Note:

1. The section on “Interventions for Transfer of Learning” substantially draws from the paper “Innovations in Transfer of Learning from Classroom to Work Situation”, **Indian Journal of Training and Development,** Vol. XXI, No. 5-6, Sep-Dec, 1991. The paper was awarded the Best Paper Award by ISTD.

2. The author had the privilege of learning the intervention under the guidance of Prof. Udai Pareek.

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