

OD Interventions Enabling a Journey from “Start-up” to “Scale-up”

By

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Abstract

This paper reviews the Organization Development (OD) intervention, outcomes and learnings for ‘National University Students’ Skill Development’ (NUSSD), currently on a transformation journey from a start-up culture to a culture supporting rapid scaling-up with improved performance.

NUSSD runs a skill development program aiming to improve employability of socially and economically disadvantaged college students.

The OD Intervention methodology was woven around the Action Research Model, and the diagnostics were based on Weisbord Framework. The data and information, both quantitative and qualitative, were sourced through available data and through extensive interactions using various tools and techniques.

The outcome of the above intervention led to NUSSD 2.0, through reworking its strategy, reviewing its structure, reworking goals and leadership development (coaching abilities etc.,).

Individual learning as an OD practitioner included identifying the real client/influencer, facilitation challenges and qualitative data analytics. Some innovative tools and techniques such as creative interactions (imaging) with students, qualitative data analytics using word cloud, etc., were used.

In conclusion, the experience was unique due to the integration of context, leadership, goals/purpose and structures and systems, enabled through a facilitative OD process including interactive co-diagnostics, iterative co-generation of insights and action plans.

1.0 Introduction

Start-ups have entrepreneurial passion, energy, talent, big dreams and a go-getter attitude. Every successful organization today was a start-up yesterday. But not all failures come to the fore. For every successful Facebook there are many failed Orkuts; for every successful Google, there are many failed Yahoo search engines, and for every successful Harvard/IIM today, there are many failed institutions.

Start-ups are organizations, which like natural organisms, need to evolve and grow. The pace could vary, but being static is akin to inviting death. This is where “scaling-up” becomes key. The movement from start-up to a scaling-up organization can be painful in many ways, and thus Organization Development Interventions during this journey prove helpful. However, there are

significant challenges due to business and cultural context, leadership maturity issues (nurturing the baby-mindset), process/system averseness and managerial competency levels.

This experiential study (project with NUSSD) brings out the following viewpoints from an OD practitioner's perspective:

- In a start-up to scale-up journey, the OD intervention to help change the senior leadership (founder /director) mindset from “Do it Myself” to a “Systems Mindset” through **the integration of the organization's purpose, business, context (culture and legacy), leadership, structures and systems, network stakeholders and their impact is critical**
- Knowing “Who” is the real influencer is also imperative

1.1 About NUSSD

NUSSD runs a skill development program woven with academic graduation, sponsored by Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). It aims *“to improve the employability of rural and urban, socially and economically disadvantaged college students by imparting management, soft skills and skill-linked domain courses with fieldwork and internship programs”*.

NUSSD was initiated in 2013, in collaboration with the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Government of India (GOI) and the National Skill Development Agency. The program has been recognized as a “Skill Development Best Practice” by the UN steering committee on Children and Youth. The NUSSD Program completed Phase I with a pilot test in 34 colleges spread across 9 states including Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. The program is currently in the next phase of expansion across more states to cover 120 colleges in Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand and the North East. The NUSSD Program is managed by a dedicated team of 40 experts in TISS who facilitate training partnerships with universities, funding partnerships with corporate houses, course development in collaboration with premier institutes, “Train the Trainer” programs and student placements.

The program has been successful in certifying over 4200 students in the pilot phase and has currently over 16,000 students enrolled. The program has also trained over 1300 teachers, conducted over 50 workshops and placed over 450 students across states of Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Gujarat.

The workforce consists of 40 people who are on payroll and contract. Program Officers and the more senior staff are directly on the rolls and trainers/facilitators are on contract. The organization structure (a mix of centralized and decentralized – largely centralized) is led by the Director (Strategic Operations) & COO (Daily Operations) with Centralized Functional Leads (Operations,

Placement, Career Development, Technology, Media and PR), State-Level Program Managers (program implementation across various colleges - administrative), Program Officers (at college level – administrative and course implementation) and Trainers (conducting Programs in colleges). Decision making is centralized with day-to-day transactional decisions being made by the NUSSD Director. During my first meeting with him, the Director had to handle multiple phone calls discussing transactional issues, which helped me gain valuable insights into the functioning of the organization.

The NUSSD Program is currently in its 2nd phase and is being implemented in 4 states with the support of corporates like J P Morgan Chase Foundation and HDFC Bank as funding partners. According to a study on skill development in India conducted by National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), 1 million people join the workforce every month and over 12 million per year. These workers are categorized as highly skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled, with majority falling into the unskilled category.

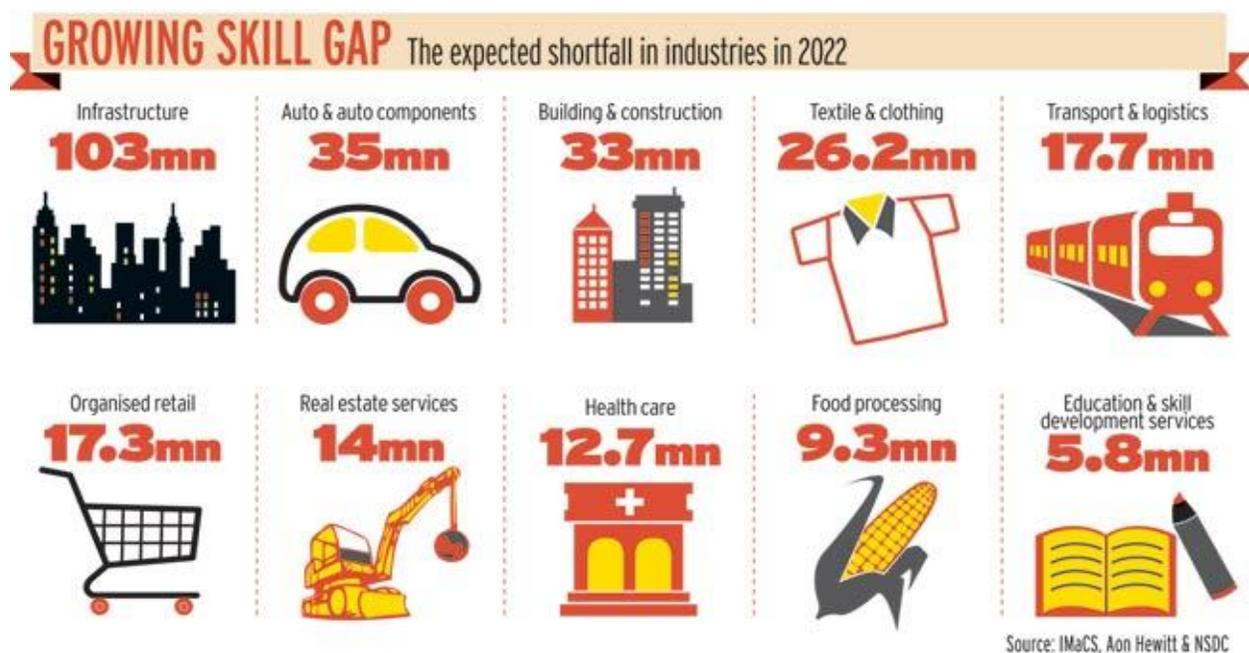


Figure 1 – Skill gap in various Industries by 2022

Thus, addressing this issue of employability skill gap assumes utmost significance in enabling us to tap into India’s demographic dividend. And it is here that NUSSD plays the key role of skill development, distinctly different from the many others through leveraging existing infrastructure, building a network with corporates/industry and creating a sustainable cycle through an interactive network loop of students, academicians, industry trainers, local communities and community projects.

1.2 NUSSD Project Objective

The pilot projects created a positive buzz and there has been a huge spurt in demand from various state governments to roll out this program in their jurisdiction. Driven by the need for scaling-up, the senior leadership at NUSSD commissioned a project whose objective in-line with organization purpose was to “Enable NUSSD, a network dependent organization, to transform itself from a start-up culture to a culture supporting and sustaining rapid scaling-up with effective performance (mindset change from “start-up” to “scale-up”)”.

1.3 Initial Hypotheses

High degree of centralized control coupled with the pace of organization growth causes anxiety and leads to fire-fighting situations for the leadership team; a clear trait of an organization facing challenges on its scale-up journey.

2.0 Methodology

The OD Intervention was based on the Action Research Model that included problem perception, data collection and co-analysis, developing insights, joint action planning, changes and re-assessment of the same to understand the changed state of the organization.

To get the project off the ground, NUSSD appointed locational single point of contact (SPOC) for data and information collection, logistics co-ordination, interaction set up etc. There were many rounds of initial discussions with the leadership to understand the scope and sampling plan, and to enable co-creation of scope, sampling plan and deliverables.

2.1 Scope and Sample Plan

NUSSD began its work with colleges in Maharashtra. In other states such as Gujarat and Rajasthan, the program is still at a nascent stage. So, Maharashtra was the natural choice for the study, as it enabled interaction with stakeholders who have experienced the entire program.

The student segment in Maharashtra was classified into Urban-Rich, Urban-Poor, Rural-Rich and Rural-Poor. The team decided to focus on areas covering the Urban-Poor and the Rural-Poor as the other two segments had the resources and opportunities to manage on their own. Given the segmentation insight, 3 colleges were short-listed from Chembur, and 1 in Ambed, (50 kilometers off Aurangabad). Chembur has one of the largest immigrant slums in Mumbai.

The scope of this intervention covered 4 colleges (3 urban and 1 rural college - sampling plan based on statistical relevance and NUSSD inputs) implementing the NUSSD Program and included the respective stakeholders – college principals, teachers, students, funding partners, employers, NUSSD Employees etc. These colleges were chosen in alignment with the segmentation representation and as these were the first few colleges completing the program, ensuring program experience levels were a lot higher.

Sample sizes of students were a key consideration as students were the most important stakeholders. In every college, we decided to pick 3 to 4 groups of students each (ensuring a good mix of gender) from the second year and the final year. This meant we had 6 to 8 groups of students in each college and thus around 24 to 32 group interactions. We also planned some interactions with students who had graduated.

Given the project objective of enabling NUSSD to scale-up, it was imperative to understand the stakeholder alignment with this objective. Since this is an organization which thrives on network (funding partners, colleges, outsourced trainers/facilitators etc.), the relevance of stakeholders, their influence and alignment seemed extremely important.

2.2 Deliverables

The deliverables of the project included - Diagnostic Recommendations to help transition from a start-up to a rapid scaling-up of the organization and undertake interventions post diagnostics supporting organization scale-up.

While finalizing the deliverables, I reflected on whether I had captured the mutual expectations (issues/symptoms, methodology, reporting findings etc.), time, resources (time and commitment from various stakeholders), and some basic ground rules (confidentiality, termination). Multiple mutual discussions enabled us to get aligned.

2.3 Diagnostics

2.3.1 Diagnostic Framework Selection

For Diagnostics, there were 3 frameworks which held my attention, namely, Weisbord Six Box Model, Mckinsey 7S and Baldrige Performance Excellence Model. They stood out in terms of a balance between transactional and transformational change, hard and soft elements including both formal and informal aspects of each of these elements.

Weisbord Six Box framework included transactional (rewards, helpful mechanisms, structure) and transformational (purpose, leadership, relationships) elements, while the McKinsey 7S framework included hard elements (skills, staff, style) and soft elements (shared values, systems, strategy, structure).

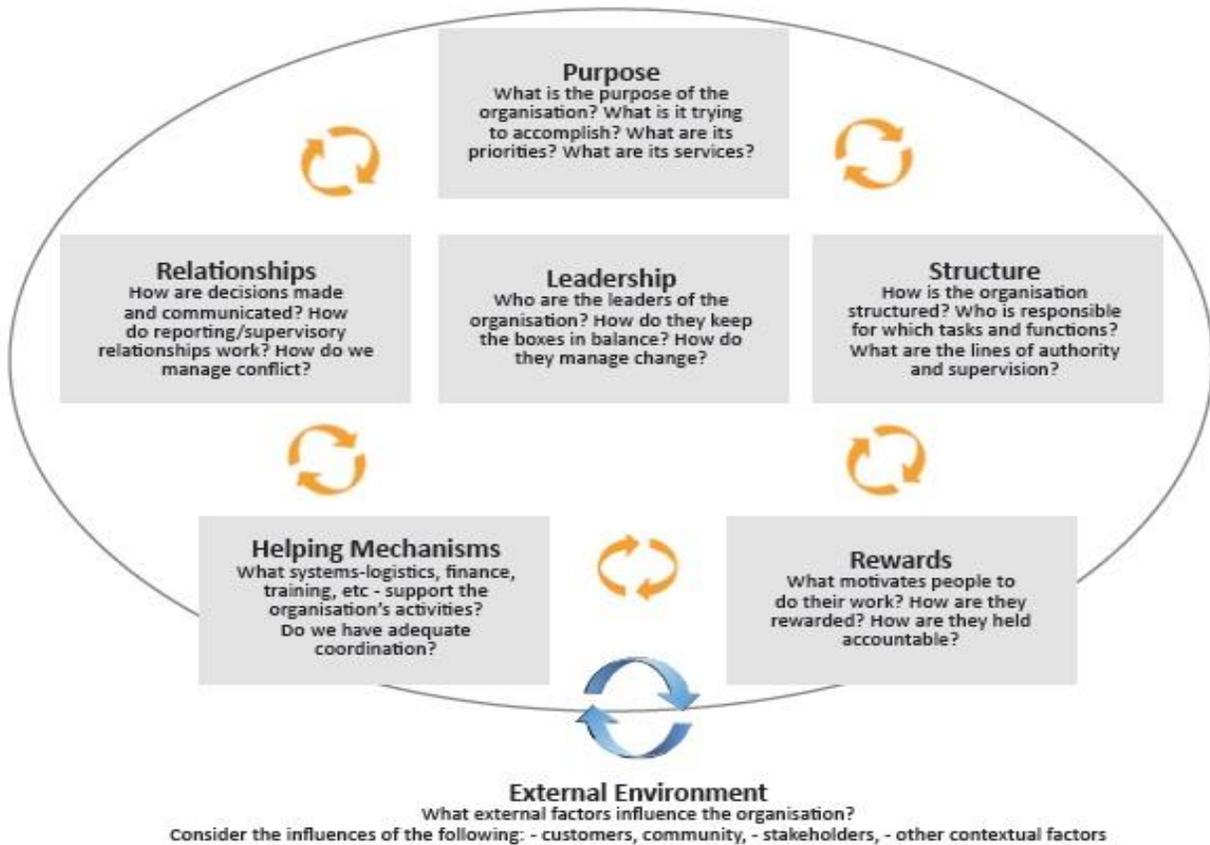
Given the fact that the Weisbord framework focused on the leadership and purpose elements significantly, it seemed to be a preferred model for this exercise, as these are elements which essentially drive OD. I have been using the Baldrige Model for various corporate projects and therefore decided to deploy the Weisbord Framework for this project (driven by an interest to learn/practise something new – my unconscious bias at play).

While there is enough advisory literature on how to scale-up, there is not much data on how organizations grow, especially in the early stages. Based on my experience of driving over 30 business assessments for large and small (start-up organizations) organizations and literature scan, I have cited below some characteristics based on Weisbord Framework for both “Start-up” and “Medium to Large (Scaled-up)” Organizations.

- **Purpose** – In Start-ups, the organization “Purpose” is leader driven or founder driven, while in medium to large organizations, the purpose is “leadership” (collective) driven
- **Leadership** – Leadership is solely provided by the Start-up founder as compared to collective/delegated/empowered leadership (CEO, Board, Leadership across Organization levels) in medium and large organizations

Figure 2 – Weisbord Framework

- **Relationships** –Centralized decision making is the norm in Start-ups, and the founder is the arbiter for conflict management. In medium to large organizations, it eventually moves from centralized to decentralized/empowered decision-making and builds systems for conflict resolution (complex organization dynamics)
- **Structure** - Authority is centered around the founder in start-ups with multi role-tasking as and when required. The goals are founder-driven, and there is less focus on formalized structure. However, in medium to large organizations, roles and tasks are well defined with clear responsibility and accountability. Empowerment is provided through delegation of authority (Schedule of Authority).



- **Rewards** – In Start-ups, motivation occurs only if naturally aligned to the founder’s passion; financial rewards if well-funded; accountability as perceived by the founder. In medium to large organizations, motivation is through brand association, individual growth (career, knowledge etc.), diverse opportunities and financial rewards. But there is pressure to stand out in the crowd – individual performance is the focus.
- **Helping Mechanisms** - Organization pivots around the founder and his/her passion. Domain Expertise and founder passion alignment are valued. As organizations scale-up to become medium to large organizations, we are likely to see them aligned and integrated through processes and systems. “System” mindset and a very competitive environment is seen within the organization.
- **External Environment** - Influenced by founders’ experiences with various stakeholders (customers, financiers etc..), founder passion holds supreme and stakeholder interests must align with it (depends on funding position). However, as organizations scale up, the ability to soak in multiple views (stakeholder voices being represented) improves and brings in challenges to balance stakeholder needs

Based on the above analysis, some of the key insights are around – leader/founder driven to leadership driven culture, centralized decision making to structured delegation of authority and leader directing (“Do it Myself”) to Empowerment /Facilitation (“System Mindset”).

2.3.2 Data and Information - Primary and Secondary

Secondary data around students' enrollment, students drop-out and colleges was readily available from NUSSD. Primary data collection was through interactions with various stakeholders and through guided questionnaires, co-created with NUSSD for interaction with students, principal, funding partners, employers and college facilitators.

The Weisbord elements and the philosophy of “flowing and engaging conversations” were the cornerstone for building the guiding questionnaires. The biggest challenge was in preparing for the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with the students. It was critical to engage the students to seek their opinion and remove bias if any.

Therefore, we (NUSSD nominated SPOC for this college and I) started working on the creative FGD concept whereby the students would be asked a set of questions and they would respond in any form (text, pictures and drawing) they were comfortable with, and present it to the other groups.

We decided to pilot this solution towards student engagement in one college and observe the results. I was both anxious (dealing with young undergraduate students) as well as excited about the new experience. To my surprise, the results were delightful.

Activity in Pictures



Figure 3 – Students Voice Expression in the Focus Group Discussion

This was my first interaction with the students and it was a memorable experience. The aspirations, the straightforward feedback and candidness of the students blew me away. Shabana, who has a speech impairment spoke the most in her group. She aspired to open her own beauty parlor. Her confidence to speak in front of her fellow students gave me a peek into New India. She attributed her confidence to the personality development programs at NUSSD.

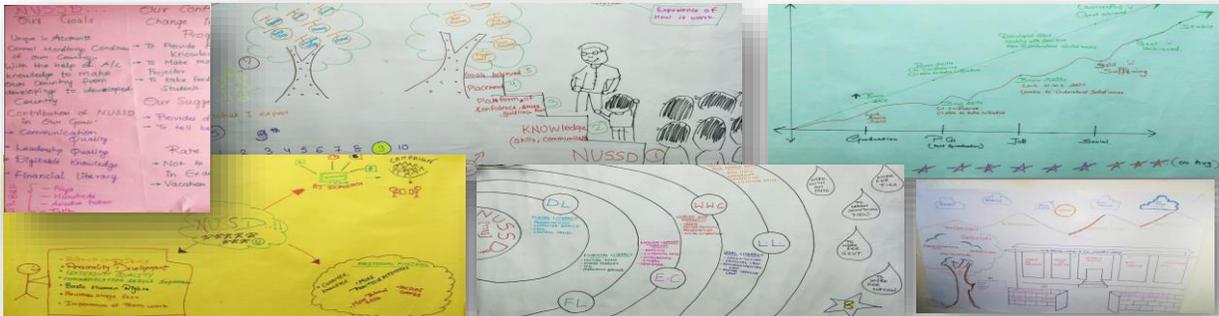


Figure 4 – Students Voice Expression in the Focus Group Discussion

Given their socio-economic background, the students dared to dream big. The girls in the group were more open towards new entrepreneurship opportunities, while the boys were looking at safer opportunities like employment. This was probably due to parental pressure to start earning and supporting the family.

Similarly, the interactions with the principal (patriarchal leadership in many cases), facilitators and trainers (passion to bring about a change in the lives of the under-privileged students), funding agencies (view through the Corporate Social Responsibility – CSR lens) – impact of every rupee spent - revealed interesting insights.

Interaction with the Director, NUSSD was a pleasure. He considered this project his baby and was energetic and passionate. His emotions were palpable. He shared his experiences, the pain and success stories during the initial pilot programs and added that his attachment has only grown stronger. But he seemed to realize that this success brings a new predicament – he openly asked me - “How do I move from here?” For an OD facilitator, it cannot get better than this! A leader who expresses willingness to hear you out. It reminded me of a poem by Daisy Rinehart –

The Call of the open Sea

*I'm tired of sailing my little boat
 Far inside of the harbor bar;
 I want to be out where the big ships float —
 Out on the deep where the Great Ones are! ...*

The collaborative diagnostics revealed various recommendations in the areas of capacity and capability building for trainers and facilitators, student entrepreneurship development (village level), strategic focus areas (*rural areas – Program highly valued in rural areas as compared to urban areas due to lack of opportunities*), student employment (career counselling and placement centers) and quality curriculum experiential enhancement (practical domain-industry tie-ups).

After the workshop, there was an interesting turn of events. I was invited to present the findings of the above diagnostics and action plans to the Director, TISS. He offered his valuable inputs into this exercise. As an OD professional, it gave me an insight into “who the real influencer was”. To ensure that the actions are implemented, and desired results are achieved, key issues related to leadership needed to be discussed and worked upon.

In start-ups, the leader is continuously in a “**Do-it-Myself**” mode, and thus to scale-up, leadership (leaders across structure) must move towards a more “**facilitative, empowering and collaborative**” approach.

My views resonated with the senior team. Based on the outcomes of the workshop and discussions with the senior team and the Director at TISS, the following actions, were discussed in line with creating a **facilitative, empowering and collaborative approach** (this was in addition to the actions emanating from the stakeholder feedback). It was decided to be implemented at NUSSD.

- **Build listening & coaching capability among senior leaders** (effective employee conversations, positive body language, quality of time spent with employees, seeking two-way feedback, getting trained for coaching abilities) to help build second line of leadership
- **Set up an inspiring performance management system** (sharp vision/mission/values, clear roles and responsibilities, aligning career aspirations, performance feedback, quality conversations, mentoring, learning and development alignment, reward and recognition) **to align and integrate employee and organizational purpose & goals**
- **Create systems for sharing and cross learning through peer-to-peer cross functional networks** (to help retain a sense of inclusion during scale-up)

Thus, a **clear shift towards a “system” mindset** to bring in a “**facilitative, collaborative and empowering**” approach for scaling up is important.

Also, as an OD practitioner, it is imperative to know “**who the real influencer is**” to achieve the desired change. The realization dawned upon me when I met the Director, TISS. Perceived influencer vs the real influencer is an important challenge to be mitigated for a sustainable OD project.

3.0 Key Interventions in the Project

The first intervention in the exercise was to have a NUSSD nominated Single Point of Contact (SPOC) for each location (apart from logistics help), to ensure that local contextual inputs could be tapped into. The SPOCs were used as sounding boards to receive feedback from and to validate my thoughts etc. This exercise proved helpful on many occasions (information of local demography of students, college reputation, views of teachers about the program, difficulties faced by facilitators, issues related to NUSSD facilitation etc.,).

The second intervention was the creative “Focus Group Discussion” (FGD) with Students. This helped engage the students, and allowed them to openly and creatively express their thoughts. The exercise was well appreciated by the NUSSD team.

NUSSD has started deployment of this FGD approach to other colleges (not covered in pilot). This replication will help NUSSD in getting feedback in a structured manner across many colleges and ensuring that the students are engaged with the program.

The third intervention was the workshop for NUSSD leadership team for collaborative data analysis, generation of themes/insights and planning way forward. This helped in getting their buy-in for creating the implementation plan.

The fourth and the most critical intervention was meeting the “real influencer” which helped the project come out with insightful findings leading to an effective sustainable change.

4.0 Intervention Outcomes

The outcome of the above intervention led to “NUSSD 2.0” through reworking on its strategy, reviewing its structure, re-working goals linked to sustainable development goals (SDG) and leadership development (performance management system, listening and coaching abilities).

The organization has formulated various processes through co-development and is developing the capability of measurement systems, data collection and analysis. The senior leadership has put in place a “Delegation of Authority” tied to the organization structure.

NUSSD has now begun venturing into other states and has built newer programs for various segments. Most of these are linked to entrepreneurship, thus creating a strong momentum towards the organization's goal- to help the unskilled develop essential skills to ensure employability.

5.0 Learnings

5.1 Learnings as an OD Facilitator

This project was an amazing experience. Firstly, I stepped outside the corporate world (my comfort zone) to do an OD intervention for a social start-up. The learning from “the goal of every organization is to make money” to “the goal of the organization is to enable people to earn money”, was a paradigm shift.

Learnings as an OD practitioner included:

- **Identifying the real influencer** – There are many influencers in an organization and thus as an OD facilitator it is imperative to identify the real influencer (in this project, it was the TISS Director). Conversations with senior leadership helps in understanding their source of influence. The outcome of the intervention could be merely tactical if the “real” influencer is not in the loop and thus one could miss out on the key leadership, strategic and cultural issues.
- **Knowing the Start-up founder** – Start-up founders have great ideas, talent, technology know-how, and even funds in some cases, but flounder to develop an organization to support the idea execution. The “Do it Myself” approach or inability to let go of the baby, (emotional attachment), acts as a hindrance to scale-up. As an OD facilitator, it is essential to understand this and thus the intervention should start right from the founder/leader. In this project, the “real influencer” not only helped in leadership coaching and development but also contributed to building a second line of leadership. It also helped create an effective buy-in for change.
- **Art of Facilitation:** Getting people to open-up is always a challenge and thus the art of facilitation is important. In this project, it was a challenge as the students had a very short attention span. We used creative image-based discussions to facilitate the program.
- **Qualitative Data Analytics:** It is relatively easy to analyze quantitative data given the availability of vast number of tools and techniques. But analyzing qualitative data (conversation notes, qualitative feedback from a large sample) is always a challenge. Word Cloud technique coupled with thematic interpretation made the task easier. Thus, as an OD

facilitator, we must work on our analytical skills (both qualitative – big data and quantitative -small data) from time to time.

- **Understanding “Holistic” Purpose of the Organization:** As an OD facilitator one can get lost in the minutiae based on conversations/surveys and so on. However, keeping the holistic purpose of the organization, including the context, helps one focus on the relevant data and information for analysis (and separate it from the “Noise” data). This means, as an OD facilitator, one needs to have the ability to see the “BIG” picture and thus the ability to understand the delicate integration of organization’s purpose, business, context (culture, legacy), leadership, structures and systems, network stakeholders and their impact.

To put the above learnings to practice, an OD practitioner, needs to

Stay abreast of macro changes and their impact - The volatility in the external environment is high and thus while connecting the “BIG” picture (integration of organization’s purpose, business, context - culture, legacy, leadership, structures and systems, network stakeholders), it is important that an OD practitioner ought to continuously stay abreast of macro changes (economic, technological, regulatory, social, political etc..) in line with the organization context, as these changes can impact the micro level details too. For example: One of the important voices of the students in Banking/Finance segment was about job placement. Given the current environment trends (automation, technology, Banks’ Non-Performing Assets, stress etc..), it made sense to focus on entrepreneurship which may help create jobs. One of the solutions co-generated was entrepreneurship – program, funding, skill development in line with entrepreneurship. Our ability to make strategic sense is important towards understanding the “BIG” picture.

- **Creatively holding attention** - Attention spans are getting shorter (Bollywood movies which were well over 3hrs have shrunk considerably!). We need to use creative methodologies (ability to converse, articulate, preparation) to get the insights we desire to achieve under the constraint of shorter attention spans. For example: Instead of just conversations with students, I encouraged them to express their thoughts on a canvas followed by conversations. This approach was interesting and yielded results. The ability as an OD practitioner to hold the attention of the stakeholders is critical to derive the right insights.
- **Comfort with analytics tools and techniques:** Keeping one’s knowledge up-to-date about new analytical tools and techniques, specifically given the technology trends and

availability of abundant social-media data is essential. For example: To understand one's influencing ability, one could scan through social media (LinkedIn, Twitter) profiles, and use it as one source of input data. Similarly, new qualitative analytics tools can be used such as Word Cloud, Key Word analytics etc.

6.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the uniqueness of the above experience was:

- Integration of context, leadership, goals, structures and systems, through a facilitative OD process including interactive co-diagnostics, iterative co-generation of insights and action plans.
- Unravelling the “real influencer” to help create a buy-in for change.
- Understanding the challenges of leadership mindset change from “Do-it-Myself” to “system mindset” through its start-up to scale-up journey
- Understanding myself as an OD facilitator – strengths, weaknesses, competencies and biases.

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