

# **WHAT UNIVERSITIES CAN LEARN FROM BUSINESSES: A CRITICAL RESEARCH STUDY OF ADAPTING CORPORATE ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT APPROACH IN UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Universities are facing dramatic changes in their environment, affecting their strategic competitive positions and organizational effectiveness. High education is a big business, but the business approach to strategic planning and organizational development in a university environment is still rarely used. Change management and organizational interventions are among best corporate practices in addressing external and internal strategic and organizational needs. Is it possible effectively using adapted corporate approaches for strategy-driven organizational development in universities? What are factual and perceived key problems and what are key success factors? What are result's logic, time-frame, and expected benefits? This critical research study is based on 128 structured interviews, followed by open question interviews and employees' anonymous evaluations in five comprehensive organizational development projects in one university. The projects are focused on clusters of centralized business and financial services at a state-supported mid-size northwest university. This study is highlighting a successfully adapted model and a structured implementation framework for organizational development in a specific university environment. The purpose of the study is to help understand and sharing challenges and practitioners' experience answering the overarching question: How to make organizational development project in university work?*

**JEL:** L22, M19

**KEYWORDS:** Organizational Development, University Environment, Change Management, Strategic Planning, Organizational Interventions, Business Development, Results Logic, Implementation Framework

## **INTRODUCTION**

**H**igh education becomes a big and global business, with growing competitive pressures from the game-changing factors. Competitive battles are emerging in the high education diversified markets, increasing needs for strategy-driven organizational development (OD). However, business approach and criteria in planning and implementing strategic and organizational changes in a university environment are still rarely used. Change management and organizational interventions are theoretically well founded, and OD techniques are already being used widely in business corporations. Addressing changes in universities is still on a mostly theoretical level, analyzing "Why?" and "What?" issues, but with very few studies focused on the generic question: How to make organizational development project in university work? In the last decade, there is an effort among a growing number of universities to address strategic and operational business challenges in a more effective way (Starr, 2014, Wells, 2012). Despite an academic and tradition based culture, more and more universities are trying to overcome typically "glacial" approach in comparison to fast and substantial changes in the business world. The search for new OD approach and practices in high education is primarily conducted in universities with advanced Human

Resources Management (HRM) capacities and functions (Rutgers, 2012). Accordingly, research questions emerged. What are best corporate practices in addressing external and internal strategic and organizational needs and challenges? Is it possible to use adapted corporate models and business approach for strategic-driven organizational development in universities? What are factual and perceived key problems and what are key success factors? Are there adapted models and a structured framework for organization development in universities? What are result's logic and expected benefits? Those are issues receiving increasing attention from both practitioners and researchers – and this is the topic of this paper.

Relatively little is known about universities using organizational development in a comprehensive way, for strategy-driven changes. There is very few published research of specific attempts to adapt corporate techniques for the university. Rare OD case studies (Latta, 2006, Torraco, 2005) are helping to gain initial insights into practical initiation and implementation problems. In practice, simply visiting universities' websites across the country, the primary conclusion is that organizational development is still mostly reduced to the professional training program and coordinating external consulting services. This is especially case analyzing mid-size public and state-supported universities. However, in the last several years, there is a growing number of universities assigning a more strategic role to their Human Resources departments. The approach is focused on adding OD as an advanced HRM function (for example, Rutgers University, 2012). It is easier to state this as a strategic intention then implementing an effective change.

The purpose of this qualitative case study, combined with collected empiric data, is to indicate factors that contributed to OD project's initiations, implementations, and results logic. The presented OD model is developed adapting the theoretical foundation and proven corporate practices, aligned with the specific setting and influential factors in a university environment. The paper is focused on providing the OD model overview and highlighting the practical implementation framework that may be adapted for use in other university environments for effective organizational development projects and interventions.

The remainder of this document includes four sections: a) a literature review, b) methodology and data, c) results and discussions, and d) concluding comments. The literature review is reflecting the multifaceted structure of OD as a concept and practice. There is a myriad of references related to OD and its various topics, including implementation experience in the corporate world. However, there are very few references available addressing OD at universities. Methodology section is addressing the OD projects' key phases and steps, with the OD implementation model, extensive interviews' approach, and data summarizing the most important topics and perception gaps affecting the OD goals and priorities. Results and discussion section is focused on types and levels of results and benefits in various OD projects' phases. One of the most valuable results is the OD Strategy map, a single-page view of the logic of the OD projects, with strategic initiatives and their critical success factors in four main perspectives: (1) faculty and staff, (2) work processes, (3) students and (4) stakeholders. Concluding comments are focused on the complex nature of the OD projects results' logic: from inputs, personal, team and organizational unit level's outputs, to the outcomes and an overarching long-term impact.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The organization development (OD) is an applied behavioral discipline. This is OD's theoretical foundation. Professional implementation of OD may simply be described as a methodology or technique used to affect change in an organization or section of an organization, with the overall goal of improving the organization's effectiveness. OD evolved through few strong research and practice waves (1950-ties, the seventies, 1990-ties, and in the last decade). OD focus changed by time, but the main driving force remained: an economic environment where the goal was to improve business efficiency and management. Behavioral science knowledge and practices (as a foundation of applied OD), incorporate concepts such as leadership, group dynamics and teamwork, work design and approaches such as strategy, organization design and international relations (Cummings and Worley, 1997). Since OD has a multifaceted structure,

and a reach applied history in the corporate world, there are myriad of theoretical references. However, there is no consensus on an overarching definition of OD. A literature review on the topic “organizational development in universities,” reveals emphases on generic approaches, reflecting on theoretical foundations and implementation in the corporate environment (Scott, 2013). The related subtopics (organizational change, change management, organizational effectiveness, etc.) in a university environment are also not significantly addressed by researchers so far. Some relatively recent studies are focused on the OD development and changes in high education (Allen, 2013, Sheets, 2012, Ashraf, 2011, Kumar 2008), cases in Europe (Nyhagen, 2013, Diefenbach, 2008) and Australia (Bordia, 2011).

The case studies analyzing OD and change in a university environment are very rare. Torraco (2005) and his team analyzed OD implementations in five universities, in various phases of building OD capacities and practices. Among universities with advanced OD positioning and published reports is Center for Organizational Development and Leadership at Rutgers University (2012). Strategic planning at university adapting corporate planning techniques is a foundation for strategic-driven OD interventions using corporate best practices. Such research studies are also relatively rare, even some research and cases are dating from 80-ies (Kotler, 1981, Aggarwal, 1987, Barker, 1997, Antipova, 2014, Johnsen, 2015).

The literature on applied OD and change approach in the business world is a long list of books and research studies addressing OD principles, practices, perspectives, processes, and performances (for example, Johns, 2014, Delprino 2013, Lewis, 2013, McLean, 2005, Walsh, 2004). In the recent years, OD pays much more attention to the larger environment in which the business operates and aims at helping businesses accomplish their strategic objectives. Some researchers and practitioners were focused on applied OD as a part of an advanced Human Resource (HR) Management, publishing handbooks for strategic HR and best practices in OD (Vogelsang, 2012, Cheung-Judge, 2011). In addition, many consulting companies published their own practitioners’ guides for OD. Among topics related to OD, there are also many books and research reports focused on leadership and leading change (Kotter, 1996), leadership teams and team building, as well as achieving “organizational health” (Lencioni, 2012). In summary, there are numerous research reports and books about OD theoretical aspects, and case studies and guides about applied OD practices in the corporate world. However, OD in high education has a modest number of research and studies mostly focused on theoretical aspects, with very few case studies of OD models and implementation practices in a university environment.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The objective of organization development (OD) is to improve the organization’s capacity to handle internal and external functioning and relationship, improving group dynamics, organization's structure, and effective and collaborative management of organizational culture. Accordingly, the methodology used in related OD projects and in this research study is aligned with the purpose and objective of OD concept and expected results. The OD projects analyzed in this study were initiated in 2013 at one Northwestern university, in the part that has the functions closest to the standard business practices. Five OD projects were focused on clusters of centralized business and financial services at this state-supported mid-size university. In initiating and conducting those complex OD projects, the goal was to reach higher results than with previous OD attempts, this time using and adopting proven best practices from the corporate environment. This critical research study is based on 128 structured interviews, followed by open questions interviews and employees’ anonymous evaluations in five comprehensive organizational development projects. The name of the university and its units is intentionally anonymous. The study is an overview of an adapted OD model, highlighting implementation framework for OD projects in a specific university environment. The OD projects are initiated and implemented in three phases, with the steps presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Organizational Development Project Phases and Steps

| <b>Phase I: General Preparation Activities</b>                   |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| Step   | Task   | Activities  |
| 1.   | Introducing OD to the university leadership team           | Through tailored presentations, meetings, and brief workshops, led by HR department and an assistant director for OD, OD methods and techniques were introduced to the university's top officials (vice presidents, provost, deans, and directors).   |
| 2.   | Initial priorities for organizational development projects | The university leadership team, based on strategic goals and various performance analyzes, suggested which organizational units should be priorities for organizational comprehensive assessments and adequate organizational interventions.  |
| 3.   | “Buy-in” process on the organizational unit level          | The “buy-in” process involved the management team in the chosen organizational unit. Meetings and presentations were focused on initial assessments, and explaining characteristics and dynamics of OD projects’ framework, process, specific goals, roles, and implementation steps, expected change management challenges and OD benefits, as well as a project’s suggested timeline. |
| <b>Phase II: OD Project Realization Steps</b>                    |  |   |
| 4.   | In-depth presentations to all managers and supervisors.    | Presentation (one or more, if there are various work shifts) explained OD needs and assessments process, OD interventions planning, implementation steps, expected results, and benefits. The important element was emphasizing a transparent approach to reviews and reports, with feedback and follow-up mechanism. Presentations were open to all employees.                         |
| 5.   | Communicating plans and schedules                          | All employees in the unit are informed about planned organizational development project and related steps and schedules.  |
| 6.   | Confidential interviews                                    | Structured one-on-one interviews, confidential, followed by open questions individual sessions.   |
| 7.   | Interviews’ results and findings summary presentation      | After all interviews’ results are systemized and analyzed, all employees are invited to the project presentation. The unit’s core management team received just a brief summary prior the presentation.   |
| 8.   | Initial action plans and OD Team                           | After the presentation of project’s finding suggested OD interventions and an initial action plan, employees were invited to form an OD Team. This team did not have top managers in it, and it was empowered to contribute to the project related overall coordination and communication.  |
| <b>Phase III: OD Continuous Support, Feedback, and Follow-up</b> |  |   |
| 9.   | Project’s first evaluation.                                | After the anonymous project evaluation from all employees, the ownership of the OD project is transferred to the organizational unit’s OD team, with continuous monitoring and support from OD specialist, including team-building activities, OD-specific problem-solving assistance, etc.   |
| 10.  | Interim reports, follow up, and continuous support         | Follow-up is scheduled and aligned with the OD interventions' steps and phases, and related interim reports. Continuous project and change management support included additional OD/HR services such as coaching, communication, team building workshops, and professional soft skills training, as well as assisted interpersonal conflict resolutions as needed.                     |

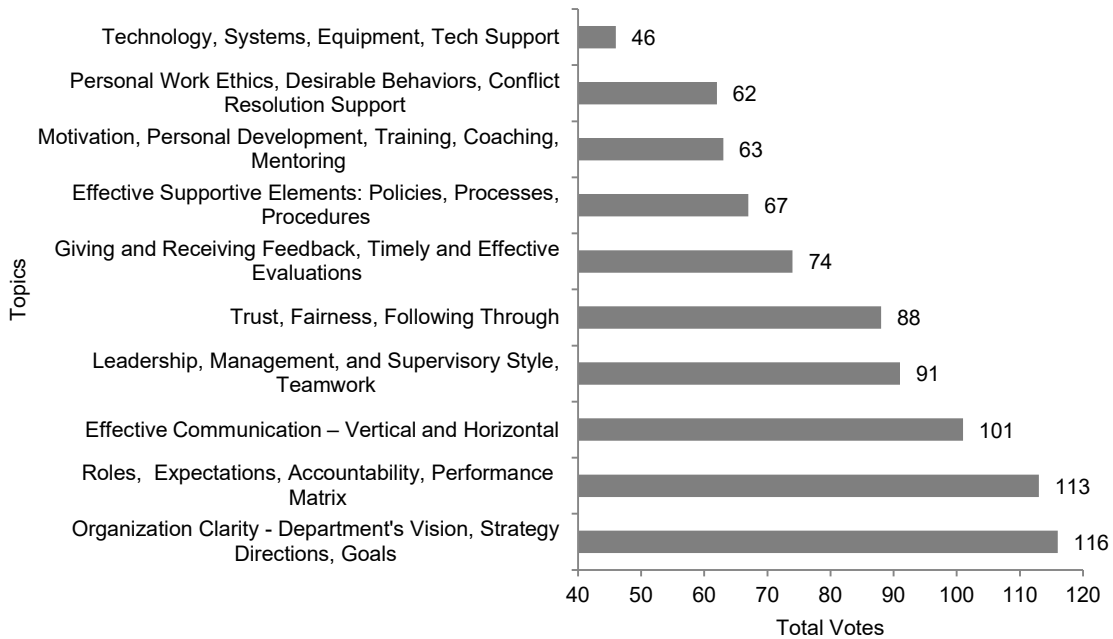
*This table shows organizational development project initiation, planning, and realization in 2013, through three phases and 10 major steps.*

Following its strategic plan, the university leadership decided actively addressing the critical elements of the overall organizational effectiveness in business, financial and other services supporting the core function – education. In 2013, Human Resources (HR) department was reorganized and staffed to accept the strategic role as a strategic driving force and functional center for Organizational Development and Professional Development in this university. In comparison to some OD activities performed in previous years with mostly external support (consulting, experts), this time, OD was based on a full-time internal capacity, providing in-house expertise and continuous support for OD projects.

Interviews’ data are collected in 2013 and analyzed using content analysis utilizing rank scores. The most often-cited problems, challenges, and expectations raised by interviewees are summarized and grouped under 10 categories. The descriptive statistical method is used. Those data are used to fine tune project’s priorities and steps. Accordingly, the methodology comprises quantitative and qualitative elements.

Interviews identified trends and insights of the organizational culture, leadership and management styles, communication issues, and what employees perceive as critical factors for organizational development. Coding answers, using pattern recognition, and descriptive statistic methods, the most frequent answers are systemized. Figure 1 presents the topics with the highest numbers of total votes. One of the essential elements of OD projects and critical research study is the perception of team effectiveness. In the corporate world, research shows (Rosen, 2007) that CEOs misperceive their top teams’ performance, thinking that things were going better (33-47%) than the non-CEOs did. This study reveals that perception gap at analyzed university is even significantly bigger.

Figure 1: The Most Important Topics from 128 Interviews



*This figure shows the 10 category of topics with the highest numbers of total votes grouped and summarized from 128 structured interviews and followed open question and deeper confidential discussion about what employees' perceive as critical factors for organizational development.*

Figure 2 presents the team effectiveness perception gap between what employees think and what management and supervisors think.

Figure 2: Team Effectiveness Perception Gap



*This figure shows the perception gap about team effectiveness at the analyzed university. As the rating scores summarized from all interviews shows, the unit's management thinks that things were going much better than employees did.*

The response to the call for interviews was overwhelming. After initial hesitations, when the entire OD projects concepts, goals, and general framework was explained in the preparation phase, the remaining question was about confidentiality. The OD leader / change agent earned trust being transparent, professionally highly respectable and honest. The confidentiality is emphasized as one of the major tools

in OD projects, and cannot be compromised – otherwise, the change agent will be incapable of continuing with further projects. The number of employees per organizational units and the response rate is presented in Table 2.

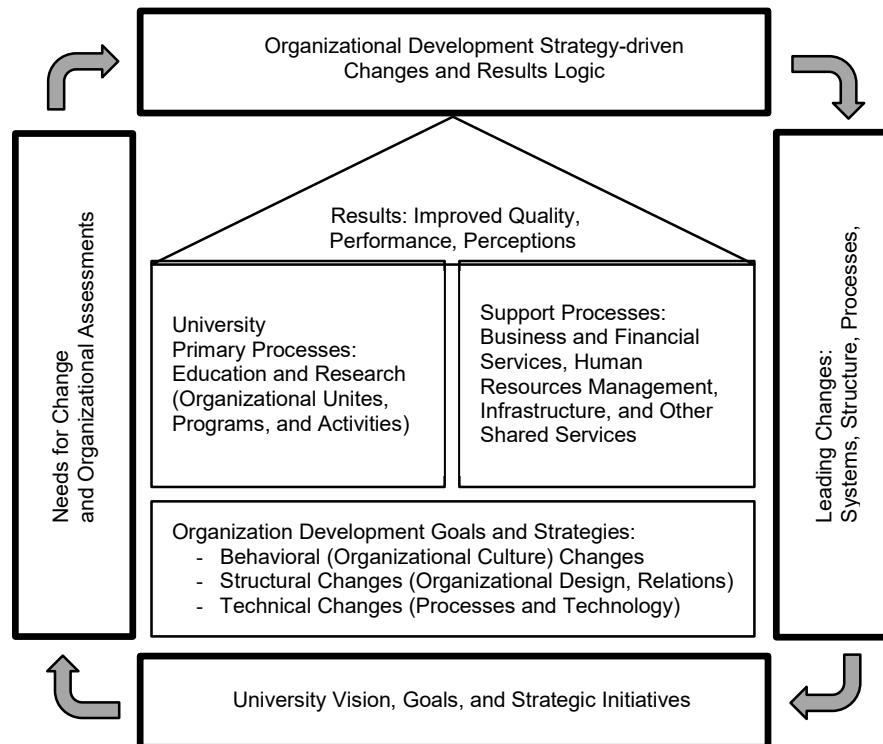
Table 2: the Number of Managers and Employees Interviewed in 2013, and the Response Rate

|               | Org. Unit 1 | Org. Unit 2 | Org. Unit 3 | Org. Unit 4 | Org. Unit 5 | Total |
|---------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------|
| Managers      | 3           | 4           | 3           | 2           | 1           | 13    |
| Interviews    | 3           | 3           | 3           | 2           | 1           | 12    |
| Response Rate | 100%        | 75%         | 100%        | 100%        | 100%        | 92%   |
| Employees     | 26          | 38          | 27          | 25          | 14          | 130   |
| Interviews    | 22          | 34          | 24          | 23          | 12          | 115   |
| Response Rate | 85%         | 89%         | 89%         | 92%         | 86%         | 88%   |

*This table shows a number of managers and other employees in the organizational units where OD projects were implemented. Interviews are conducted during the calendar year 2013. The response rate among managers is very high, 100% in four units, and 75% in one unit (total 12 from 13 managers responded, i.e. 92% response rate). The respond rate among employees is 88%, i.e. 115 from 130 employees were interviewed. Those who did not respond were mostly people that were just hired and few part-time or temp employees at the entry level job positions.*

Data collected through extensive interviews and cooperation with units’ employees, management, and upper-level leadership provided insights and priorities to determine, in the first place, behavioral changes. The aims were organizational culture changes as enablers for further functional and structural changes. Those OD goals were projected into planned organizational interventions and change management plan. After data were collected and analyzed during the OD projects' preparation, the OD team (OD leader and the unit’s management) developed and presented the initial OD Model. Figure 3 presents the structural elements of the OD model adapted for implementation in the specific university environment setup.

Figure 3: Organizational Development Model in University

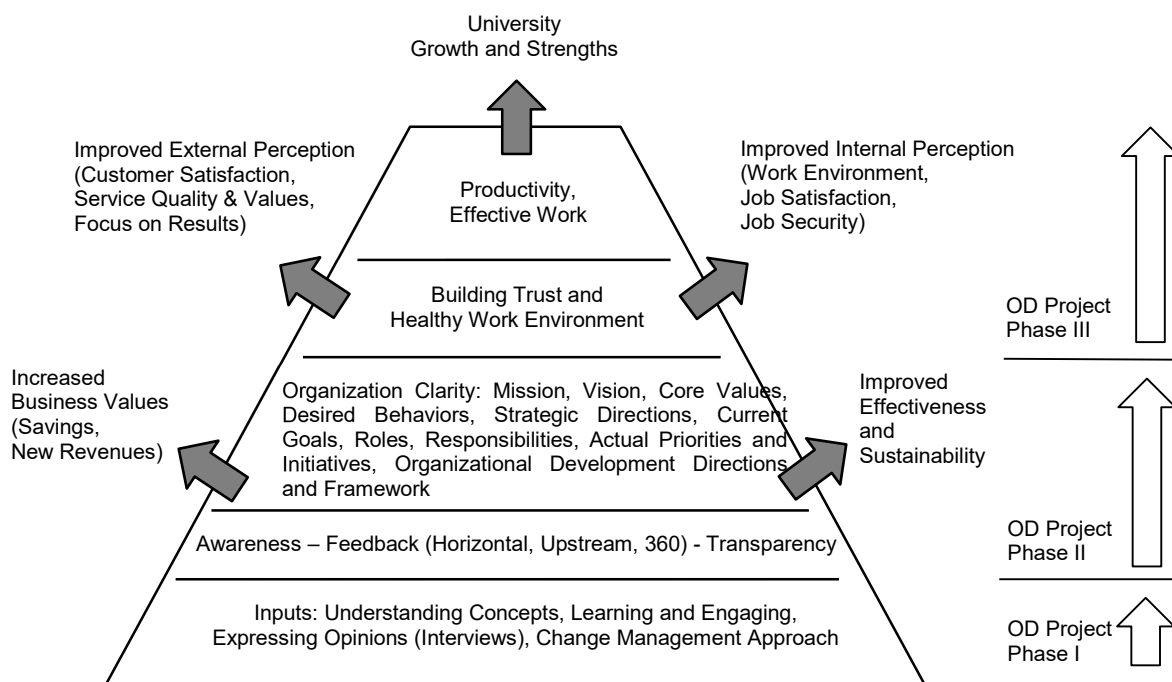


*This figure shows the main structural elements of the initial OD model adapted for implementation in the specific university environment setup. The starting point is the university vision and strategy, projected to specific OD goals and interventions in core (educational) areas and support processes. Results are achieved through the OD interventions, leading and evaluating changes through the assessment-changes-feedback loop.*

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The organization development (OD) projects' expected results were based on projected immediate and long-term effects and benefits. After introducing OD concept, and enabling all employees and management to express their perceptions and expectations, the first and almost immediate result was achieved transparency related to OD projects. Some of the business, financial and infrastructural services at this university have over 100 million dollars annual business values (contracting, purchasing, financial aids, campus safety, and other shared services). When in the early stage of the OD project improved efficiency by 1% was documented, it created a strong positive attitude: "We are one million team." From there, increased motivation and behavioral acceptance of changes become strong success factors. OD projects were accepted by most employees and managers. In the process, there were some personal changes too: new talents were discovered and promoted, while some employees, supervisors, and managers faced a last chance to improve their behaviors and skills. The next and very important result was increased awareness about actual and expected OD effectiveness. Figure 4 presents those basic and following layers of OD projects' expected results and effects.

Figure 4: Organizational Development Expected Results and Effects

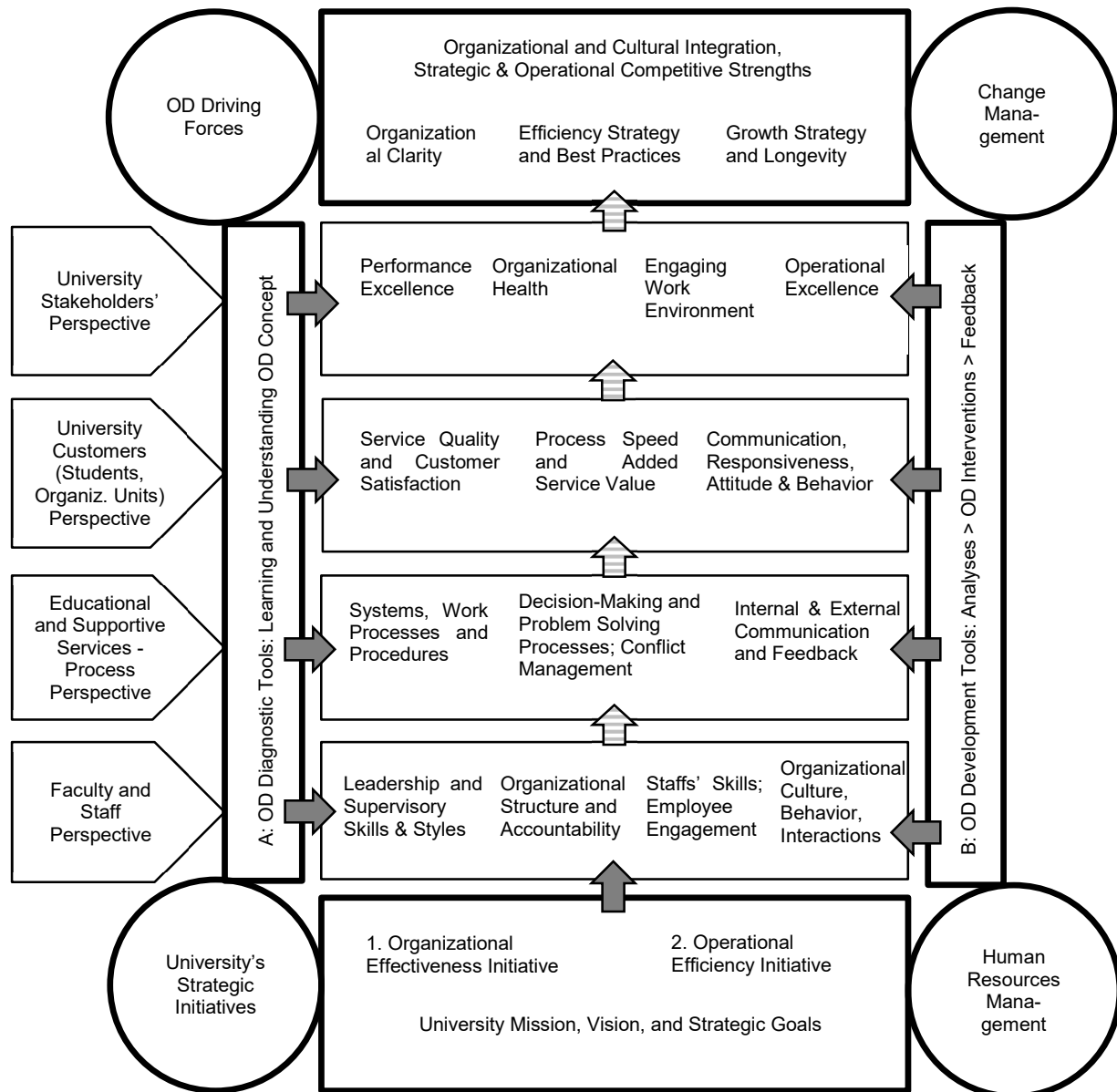


*This figure shows layers of OD projects' expected results and effects. The inputs by itself were important starting results: introduced OD concept, conducted extensive interviews, and presented OD findings and initial OD interventions plan. This was followed by very important results: increased awareness about OD needs, expected changes and benefits. The next results' level was achieving an organizational clarity, which led to improved teamwork and organizational efficiency. This positively affected both external customers (core educational departments, students) and internally interrelated services. Job satisfaction and productivity increased, supporting strategic goals and strengthening the university.*

In further developing OD model and making its implementation successful, two strategies well used in the corporate world were adapted. First, OD model was built introducing strategy maps and performance measurement. Second, Results-based Management was used as the foundation for the results' logic model. Strategy maps were introduced in 2004 by Kaplan & Norton (Kaplan, 2004), as further development of their performance measurement system "Balanced Scorecard" (1992) and its transformation to a strategic management system ("The Strategy-Focused Organization," Kaplan and Norton, 2001). Strategy maps become used as a strategy development tool in performance management too (Armitage, 2006), and greatly

helped in describing and communicating the strategy among management teams and employees. In OD projects analyzed by this study, the strategy map approach was used to describe the logic of the OD strategy, showing the critical objectives for the four main perspectives: people (faculty and staff), process (work processes, decision-making processes), customers (students, and other organizational units at the university), and financial perspective/stakeholders perspective, customized for the university environment. OD projects were realized through a set of action programs (strategic initiatives). Figure 5 presents the strategy map concept implemented in OD development at a case university, with combined and integrated critical activities, objectives and targets for each of four identified perspectives.

Figure 5: Organizational Development Strategy Map, Strategic Initiatives, and Critical Success Factors



This figure shows how the strategy map approach provides a single-page view of the logic of the OD strategy and projects. The map is visualizing the critical objectives for the four main perspectives: people, processes, customers, and financial results customized to the university environment. This model describes how two strategic OD initiatives are realized through a set of action programs, enabling, combining, and integrating critical activities, and their results. This map also helped to plan, assign, and use related resources: people, funding, and time.

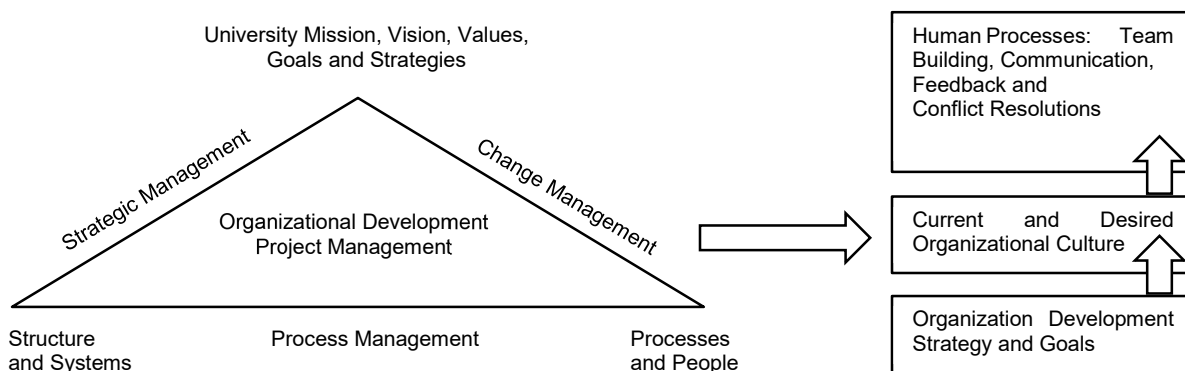


This OD strategy map helped to communicate OD strategy and projects, and their critical activities, objectives, and targets. It provides an overview of OD activities that contribute to people’s learning and growth, improve core and support processes at university, what is critical for customers (students, and other organizational units), and what the ultimate OD objectives from stakeholders’ perspective are.

**CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

The purpose of the study is to help to understand and sharing challenges and practitioners’ experience answering the question: How to make organizational development (OD) project in university work? Universities are facing dramatic changes in their environment, affecting their strategic competitive positions and organizational effectiveness. High education is a big business, but proven and efficient business approach to strategic planning and organizational development in a university environment is still rarely used. University leadership and OD practitioners are asking: Is it possible effectively using adapted corporate approaches for strategy-driven organizational development in universities? What are factual and perceived key problems and what are key success factors? What are result's logic, time-frame, and expected benefits? This critical research study is answering those questions highlighting elements of a successfully adapted model. It presents an overview of the implementation framework for OD focused on clusters of centralized business and financial services at a state-supported mid-size northwest university. Initiating and implementing organizational development projects, and maintaining achieved changes and results in various levels, is a complex undertaking. Figure 6 presents the interrelations among key OD dimensions (structure, process, people), and specialized management practices utilized to achieve strategic-driven organizational changes.

Figure 6: The Complex Nature of OD Projects



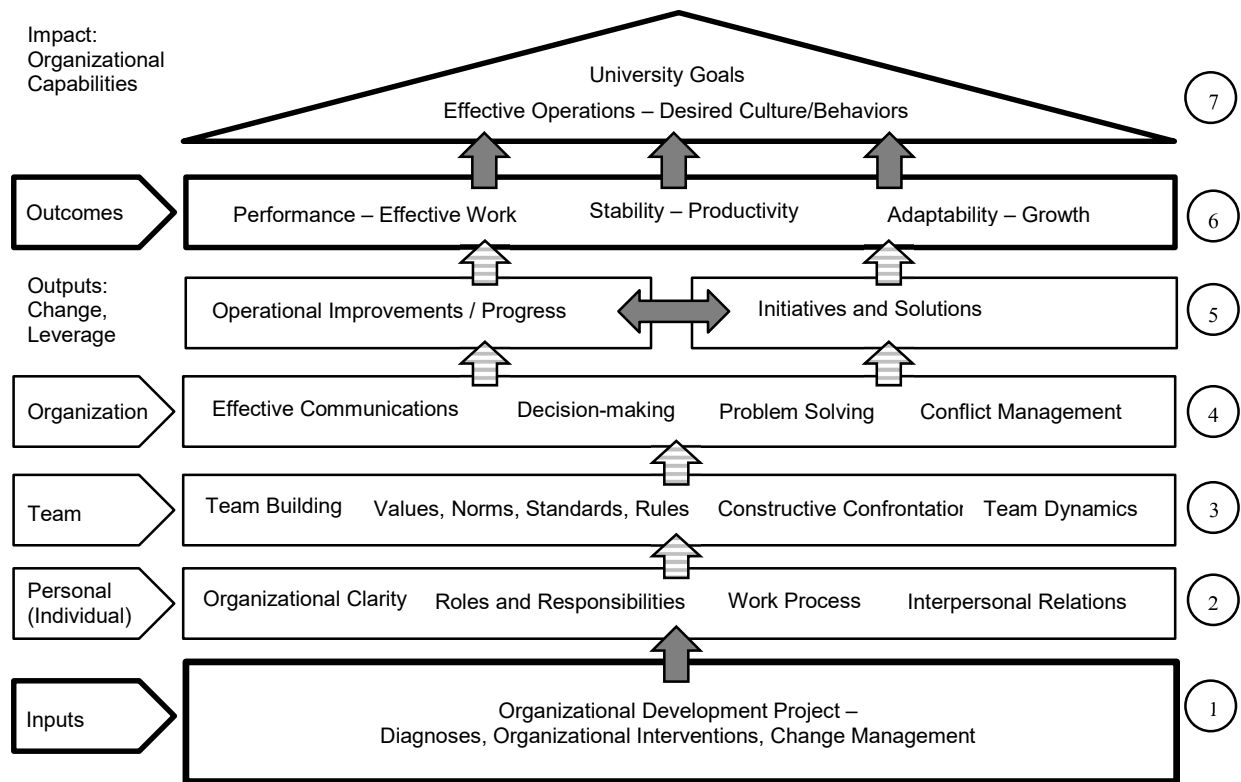
*This figure shows OD projects’ complex nature and implementation’s dimensions. OD projects involve strategic management, change, and process management, as well as project management techniques and skills. An integrated approach, based on the proven business practices, is primarily aiming to the human, behavioral side of OD projects. Improving communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution became driving forces in enabling human resources to develop desired OD changes, especially building desired organizational culture. Those “soft” changes are fundamental success factors in developing the “hard” OD dimensions: organizational structure, technical systems, and work processes.*

The OD projects initiations came from the university leadership. However, the power that launched OD projects on the path of success came from the employees: in the first critical step, they expressed their opinions through confidential interviews and comprehensive communication about OD strategic initiatives, goals, and expected effects. The second vital step was sharing unbiased and transparent results, building trusts and increasing awareness about OD needs and priorities. The tipping point in efforts to initiate OD projects was “what-if” question, addressing the negative consequences of not changing critical elements in organizational cultures, structure, and processes, based on the university vision and strategy.

Interviews identified topics that employees perceived as critical factors for organizational development. Effective communication was essential in trust building and clarifying organizational needs and goals. After

analyzing topics emphasized in 128 interviews, Pareto distribution approach (80/20) was used to identify the list of topics with the highest priority. Their improvements should resolve the most important problems and produce valuable and timely effects at various levels (individual, team, organizational units, the entire university). This approach defined the OD strategy and projects' targets, and it was agreed through the bottom-up process. The next step was focused on OD projects and expected results. The results-based management approach (United Nation Development Program, 2010) provided a tool to map expected results' logic, through the value chain: inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impact. Figure 7 presents the "results house" developed using expected results at various levels, from personal to the organizational unit, and based on the value chain from immediate OD outcomes to the long-term impact.

Figure 7: Organizational Development Project Results Logic



*This figure shows the value chain, starting from OD project's inputs and the immediate / short-term outputs at personal, team, and organization unit's level. Leveraging those outputs, OD projects are providing three main outcomes: increased performance (effective work), stability through productivity, and organizational adaptability for changes and growth. This should, on a mid-term to long-term basis, impact organizational capability at university, enabling effective operations and desired organizational culture at university – increasing competitiveness and growth.*

In conclusion, this study confirmed that universities can successfully adapt and use proven business methods in strategy-driven organizational development. Leadership support, internal change agent with related business, OD, and change management experience, and an effective communication are among the key success factors. The first results are increased awareness about OD needs at personal, team, and organizational unit levels. The next overarching results are steps towards organizational clarity. Those are priorities in OD and planning and implementing organizational interventions. The study's results are implying needs and benefits for further research, and initiating OD projects at other universities.

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

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