

# A Scientific Model for Grassroots O.D.

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## Abstract

The biggest challenge for most Organizational Development (O.D.) cultural change initiatives is to get large numbers of people to quickly and completely embrace a desired change. Grassroots O.D. engages many people quickly while still supporting executive initiatives. By integrating research on positive deviance, fair process, neuroscience and mass customization into a practical methodology, a grassroots approach to O.D. can change organizations' cultures faster, more predictably and more completely than was previously thought possible.



## Introduction

The single biggest challenge for most Organizational Development (O.D.) cultural change initiatives is to get large numbers of people to quickly and completely embrace a desired change. In order to make a real cultural change in an organization, many people must simultaneously make a conscious decision to change their attitudes, behaviors, roles and business processes, all of which can be extremely uncomfortable and disruptive. O.D. that emerges naturally from an organization, that is, from its "grassroots," engaging many people quickly and spontaneously, is vastly more powerful and effective at creating organizational cultural change than changes that are driven either by executives or outside consultants.

This article presents a proven, scientific methodology for making O.D. for organizational cultural change look, feel and become grassroots, even while it is directly supporting executive strategies. By integrating research on positive deviance, fair process, neuroscience and mass



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customization into a practical methodology, this approach changes organizations' cultures faster, more predictably and more completely than was previously thought possible. It has created great success in organizations as diverse as high tech manufacturers, fast food restaurant chains, and construction companies. It has been successfully applied internationally in Japan, China, South America, the UK and the US.

### Executives' Role in O.D.

Historically, O.D. has relied heavily on powerful executives to drive cultural change. This is a subtle trap that undermines O.D. success. In most cases, reliance on executives to aggressively support O.D. has produced, at best, disappointing results. Why do O.D. practitioners place, or more correctly "misplace," so much credence in executives?

First, most corporate models are based on older industrial and military paradigms that give, at least in theory, substantial decision-making powers to the people at the top of the organizational pyramid. The very nature of a classic organizational chart tends to create a presumption of formal power for the executives. We naturally believe that this formal power is the primary requirement for successful O.D. because it has been espoused by business schools and reinforced by the statements and attitudes of these same executives.

Second, there is a strong expectation that a charismatic executive will solve all organizational problems (Collins, 2001). People such as Lee Iacoca and Jack Welch are lionized for their leadership (while the Ken Lays of the world are quickly forgotten). Our leaders are expected to be visible and bold, striding vigorously across the organizational landscape, making fast, strong decisions that mobilize people and markets. They are expected

to be similarly decisive and effective at driving cultural change in their organizations.

Even though these images drive a lot of O.D. thinking, the reality is much more complex. In the vast majority of organizations, organizational power and decision-making is more distributed than is implied by these images. In particular, many people in an organization can block an O.D. effort and few, if any, can really mandate a change. It is rare for organizational leaders to simply mandate a change without considerable organizational discussion and participation. Conversely, small local initiatives can gain popularity and spread naturally across an organization, even when executives oppose the changes.

The reality of executives and O.D. is:

- Clear, specific executive support is very important for starting an O.D. initiative because it usually drives short-term allocation of the resources required both for the planning and initial launch of the effort
- Executive support alone is rarely sufficient to drive sustained change because it usually isn't specific enough (e.g. executives rarely "walk-the-talk") and it often doesn't last long enough to produce meaningful results

In short, executive support typically helps initiate an O.D. effort, but does little to actually change an organization over the long term.

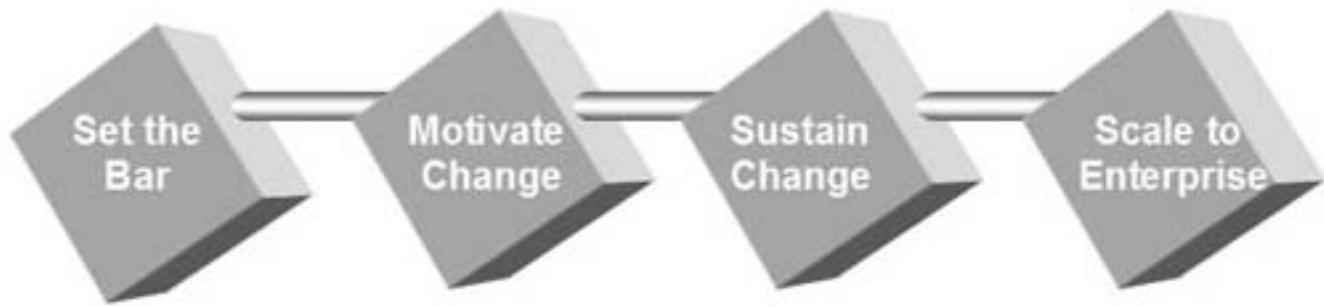
### **The Need for Grassroots O.D.**

Can anyone – O.D. consultant, executive, HR professional – change an "organization?" This may seem like an odd question, but the answer is, surprisingly "No," at least not directly. New organization charts can be developed along with new job descriptions, but organizations are usually quite resistant to change, particularly if the change is to its culture.

Cultural change in an organization is the sum of changes made by each individual. To create meaningful cultural change, the change agent has to change individual behaviors and values one person at a time. Thus, to be effective, O.D. needs to focus on the ways in which individuals change.

The challenge is to change sufficient numbers of people fast enough and completely enough to transform the character of the organization. While it is possible to guide a given individual to change using traditional processes and techniques, these approaches have not been effective at transforming large groups. As an illustration of this problem, one might consider the following questions:

- What is the sustained impact of a PowerPoint presentation (one of the primary techniques of large scale O.D.)? Answer: Near zero
- What is the sustained impact of an executive video talking about the desired change (another favored approach)? Answer: Again, near zero
- What is the sustained impact of a 1-2 day training course (the most common approach to change)? Answer: more than the first two but not really that great. (If this seems hard to believe, the following example might illustrate the point. Have you ever been to training class where you thought the instructor was great, loved the content and were completely committed to using the new material, only to forget most of the material within a few weeks? One company calls this "airport amnesia" where the learner loses most of what was learned by the time she hits the airport to fly home from the class.)
- What is the sustained impact of mentoring systems in support of a change? Answer: again, usually not very much. (Mentoring systems can be powerful and effective but most so-called mentors don't know how to mentor and don't take the time to mentor so they aren't usually very effective.)



**Figure 1:** A Grassroots O.D. Model

O.D. for cultural change must be grassroots in order to be effective, but the usual means of trying to transform the individuals in an organization, and therefore the organization itself, are too slow and just aren't very effective.

### **A Scientific Model for Grassroots O.D.**

Recent advances in four distinct areas of research (positive deviance (Pascale and Sternin, 2005), fair process (Kim and Mauborgne, 2003), neuroscience (Rock and Schwartz, 2006; Schwartz and Begley, 2002) and mass customization (Pine, 1993). can be combined to efficiently and completely address the grassroots O.D. cultural change challenge. This new science takes the initial executive commitment and, in just a few weeks, converts it into a energized, grassroots movement for cultural change.

The science has led to the creation of a four-part model of organizational change (Figure 1) that is simple to understand and effective.

The steps in the model are:

- **Set-the-Bar** – Based on research about positive deviance (Pascale and Sternin, 2005), the first component of a grassroots change model is to develop a clear, comprehensive picture of the desired outcome of the O.D. effort by leveraging the wisdom of the

positive deviants, who are the most consistently and systematically successful people in the organization. These positive deviants are the high performing individuals who often are the natural leaders of grassroots O.D. because they already have and use many of the desired outcomes of the O.D. work.

- **Motivate Individual Change** – Based on research about fair process (Kim and Mauborgne, 2003), and neuroscience studies of positive visualization and affirmation (Rock and Schwartz, 2006; Schwartz and Begley, 2002), each person participating in a cultural change is motivated to embrace the culture modeled by the positive deviants.
- **Sustain the Change** – Based on the neuroscience principle of “neurons that fire together wire together, (Schwartz and Begley, 2002)” each person practices the new attitudes and behaviors enough to cause them to become a natural part of everyday life.
- **Scale to Enterprise** – Based on the science of mass customization (Pine, 1993), an organization drives enough individual change to reach a critical mass of change causing the organization as a whole to transform.

## **Set-the-Bar: Positive Deviants and Grassroots O.D.**

It may seem contradictory to include a significant goal-focused component in a grassroots O.D. model since “grassroots” implies a change process that is very decentralized, without specific ends in mind, and without formal leadership and therefore seems antithetical to goal-driven change. However, having a clear picture of the desired outcome is important to any successful O.D. effort including one that is grassroots-driven. The difference is that, in grassroots O.D., the desired outcomes emerge from the organization’s existing natural leaders without relying on executive power.

### ***Positive Deviants Lead Grassroots O.D.***

In grassroots O.D., people who are highly respected throughout the organization define the desired outcome, not management. Such respect comes when individuals, often called “positive deviants” (Pascale and Sternin, 2005), demonstrate excellence in a given domain through commitments and actions that are both visionary and practical. Positive deviants tend to think and act well in advance of where the organization wants to go (Seidman and McCauley, 2008), and are already practicing many of the attitudes, behaviors, and business processes these functions want to achieve as a result of the cultural change initiative.

More specifically, positive deviants tend to be highly respected leaders of grassroots O.D. for several specific reasons:

- They are passionately motivated by a powerful social or moral purpose. As such, they are typically seen as operating for the greater good of the organization and are rarely viewed as selfish or inward-focused.

- They are extremely innovative while at the same time creating practical solutions. They are seen as having a positive, “can do” attitude and consistently develop “out-of-the-box” ideas that make perfect sense to the people performing the work.
- They are self-confident and tend to concentrate on empowering others to succeed. They rarely take credit themselves for their achievements, but rather chalk up successes to a group effort.

As a result, when positive deviants speak, others tend to listen and when they act, others tend to follow.

Identifying an organization’s positive deviants is usually straightforward. Key managers are asked to identify the people they most respect for their ability to function in a way that is consistent with the O.D. initiative. Various managers in an organization can be asked this same question and, nearly invariably, they will name the same small group of people. The people they name are always the positive deviants, and therefore always the leaders of grassroots change.

### ***Characteristics of Positive Deviants***

While all change efforts require clear goals to be successful, the process for establishing the goal of a grassroots O.D. effort is quite different from and far more comprehensive than a typical management-led O.D. effort. The desired outcomes of a grassroots O.D. effort are gathered directly from an organization’s positive deviants and reflect their underlying values, organization, risk management and resource utilization.

More specifically, positive deviants always organize their attitudes, cognitive processes and behavioral patterns into four domains (Figure 2). Each domain plays an important role in driving grassroots O.D..



**Figure 2:** Structure of Positive Deviant Wisdom

First, and most importantly, positive deviants love their work. This passion derives from their personal commitment to achieving a higher social or moral goal. For example, positive deviant restaurant managers in a fast food chain saw “speed of service” as their ability to create a little relaxation time for their customers (i.e. they were focused on the social good of making peoples’ lives better by giving them extra time in their day). Other restaurant managers, saw “speed of service” as driving more sales. The positive deviants focused on creating a social good while the others focused on more tactical and limited goals.

Thus, after identifying the positive deviants, the first element in creating a successful grassroots O.D. effort is identifying the social good that drives it. Later, this social good becomes the foundation for the grassroots change because it motivates others to embrace the change.

The second way that positive deviants set-the-bar is through their efficiencies at executing business processes. Positive deviants are better organized

and more efficient than others at working toward the greater social good. Positive deviants organize their work into major phases, which they define in considerable detail with a set of underlying principles, things to avoid and the specific work required to achieve the objective. As such, positive deviants define the norms of efficiency for the O.D. results because they usually know how to behave in the new way already, thereby creating a clear understanding and example for others of what is possible for effective performance.

The third way that positive deviants set the bar for grassroots O.D. is with their risk identification and management. Positive deviants are very skilled at identifying and responding to risks. Positive deviant risk management capabilities are almost instantaneous and contribute to their efficiency because they are so effective at avoiding problem areas. (Gladwell, 2005, describes similar capabilities.) Consequently, fewer things disrupt the O.D. initiative.

Finally, positive deviants are more efficient users of supporting resources than others. During a

change, they can point to specific resources (manuals, training, etc.) that have the highest value for people. For example, positive deviants in a manufacturing company identified the one module out of a three-week course that was the foundation for learning a new set of skills in support of a significant organizational change. The rest of the three-week course was irrelevant to the change, but this one module was crucial. As a result, the training was refocused to teach people the material contained in this single module rather than teach them the entire course.

In summary, positive deviants have a comprehensive understanding of the desired outcome of a change, and most of what is required to achieve the change. They are highly respected by the organization and so wield a significant amount of influence that they can use to encourage and guide people through the desired change.

### ***Gathering Positive Deviant Wisdom***

However, positive deviants are not always conscious of the things they know. This is particularly true when the change is toward something that is so far-reaching that it is thought to be outside of the organization's current experience. How then can an organization set-the-bar for an O.D. intervention when the positive deviants don't know what they know?

A specialized interviewing technique called "Wisdom Discovery" can be used to gather the positive deviant "wisdom" quickly and effectively, even when individual positive deviants have only a portion of the required expertise.

In Wisdom Discovery, a group of 6-8 positive deviants are interviewed as part of a 3-day workshop about their perspectives on the desired change. Among other things, they are asked:

- What is the social and moral objective of the change?
- How would they organize themselves and others to achieve the change?
- What are the key principles required to achieve the change?
- What are the tasks required to make and sustain the change?
- Who is involved with the change and what is their role?
- What are the risks to the change?

As a result of answering these questions, the organization leverages its most respected people to create a remarkably comprehensive view of the goals of the change and how to achieve those goals. Although these goals evolve during the deployment of a change, they serve as a starter kit for the desired change that aligns with the executive view while maintaining grassroots credibility.

Even if there is tremendous uncertainty and many unknowns, leveraging the positive deviants is the best approach to set-the-bar for an organizational cultural change.

### **Motivating Change: Fair Process and Neuroscience Motivates People**

Grassroots change suggests strong internal motivation to change, which has been difficult to systematically generate using traditional approaches. Traditionally, O.D. efforts to motivate change have relied on various tangible incentives to create motivation for change, including bonuses, recognition programs, and sometimes even penalties for non-compliance. However, external incentives are generally inconsistent with grass roots change.

Fortunately, recent scientific advances enable an organization to systematically and proactively create internal motivation. Two areas of science

are critical: the theory of fair process (Kim and Mauborgne, 2003) and neuroscience advances in positive visualization, also known as “self-directed neuroplasticity” (Schwartz and Begley, 2002).

In simple terms, the research on fair process suggests that if, during the change process, people perceive they are being treated in a way that increases their dignity and personal sense of honor, their natural resistance is overcome and they embrace the change. Conversely, if people perceive that the change process somehow diminishes or marginalizes them, natural resistance becomes more intense and they reject the change. It is critical that any change be introduced to each individual in a way that is consistent with fair process.

In grassroots O.D., fair process is achieved efforts by providing each individual with an opportunity to interact with the positive deviant content, particularly the social and moral imperative. Participants read the content out loud, discuss it with a colleague and re-write it in their own words. During this process, participants lean forward in their chair, focus their eyes more sharply and breathe faster, all of which indicates intense engagement. They also say things like: “I never thought of the change this way, but this is a great way to move ahead.” This level of motivation is initially visible in a few minutes and can be converted with regularity into a longer-term impact in as little as 75 minutes.

What is happening to make this motivation so visible? Research on neuroscience suggests that these reactions are similar to the reactions people experience during positive visualization (Rock and Schwartz, 2006). By reading powerful social or moral statements that are in the first person, participants place themselves in these statements, picturing themselves using the same approach as

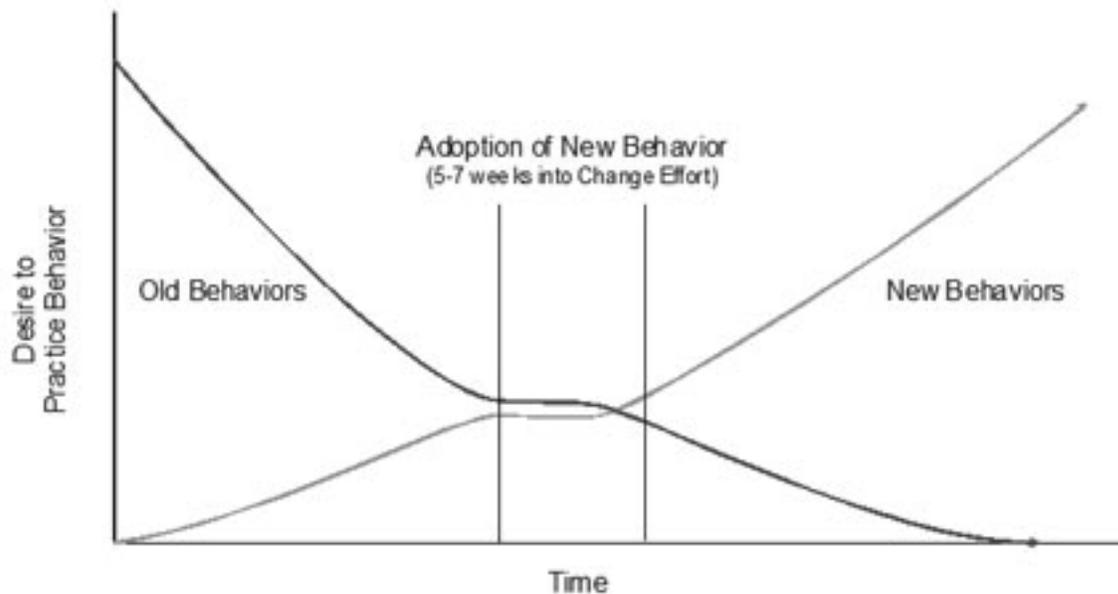
the positive deviants to make the change. For example, people will read: “I am a great restaurant manager because I ensure that my team understands the extraordinary value we provide to our customers with great food and excellent service” and see themselves as great restaurant managers. Such positive visualization substitutes the positive deviant imagery for their own and appears to drive a release of neurotransmitters that create a feeling of well-being, lowering resistance to change and accelerating learning of the new ideas.

### **Sustaining the Change: Neuroscience Sustains Grassroots O.D.**

Sustaining change long enough to transform the organization is perhaps the single biggest challenge to any O.D. effort. Examples of change initiatives that started strongly and generated initial excitement only to disappear a few weeks later are plentiful. O.D. initiatives are too often described as “fad of the week” or “ignore it long enough and it will go away.” In order to create true change, grassroots O.D. initiatives must last long enough to reach a “tipping point.” (Gladwell, 2000)

Other areas of neuroscience provide an approach that has shown consistent success. The foundation of neuroscience is a simple phrase: Neurons that fire together wire together. In order to get neurons to fire together so they will wire into the new patterns required for the change, each individual must consciously practice the new thought and behavioral patterns.

Creating the right type of practice is something of an art. The best way to practice a new behavior is to continue the current activities (i.e. there is no attempt to make an abrupt change) but accompany this work with specific exercises designed to stimulate an awareness of why an activity is per-



**Figure 3.** Tension Between New and Old Behavior

formed as it is and why a change in the behavior would be beneficial. As awareness of the reasons for the current work increases, ideas and exercises about how to do the work differently are gradually introduced. Before people are even completely aware of the change, they are actually practicing the new attitudes and behaviors, and, as the practice intensifies they easily slide into the new way. As one person stated, “When I first started this project, I thought it was a useless set of tasks. Then, I gradually realized that these tasks were teaching me to think differently. Later, I realized that my new thinking was my new job and, without me ever realizing it, I was doing my new job. I changed completely and I loved it.”

There is, however, a caveat on how this process occurs which has the potential to completely stop grassroots O.D. Consistently, at about the sixth week of this transition, there is sudden and considerable resistance to moving forward. At this point, people seem to feel substantial tension between the new patterns, which are not yet established, and the old patterns, which are still

strong (Figure 3). People often say things like, “This is too hard” or “I don’t have time to learn this.” However, systematic management follow-up and support that drives continued practice of the new attitudes and behavior causes this tension to disappear after about 10 additional days of practice because the added practice establishes the dominance of the new patterns. It appears that the negative feelings are similar to the false signals from the brain that occur during episodes of obsessive-compulsive disorder and, if ignored, soon are gone (Schwartz and Begley, 2002). In fact, the transition is so complete, that people deny they ever functioned any other way.

Thus, by appropriate practice, almost anyone can learn a new set of values, attitudes and behaviors to the point that they think they have always performed in the current state. Once this happens, a sustained change has occurred for that individual.

### **Scaling the Change: Mass Customization Enables Scaling**

Up to this point the focus has been on changing the attitudes and behaviors of individuals. As indicated earlier, changing individuals is the foundation of changing the organization's culture. This is all well and good, but now, how do you scale this change for organizations with hundreds, even thousands of people? After all, O.D. is all about organizational change, not just individual change.

Organizational momentum is critical to grassroots O.D. Each participant in the change needs to feel that the organization is fully behind the initiative. The motivating and sustaining processes discussed above must impact enough people fast enough to create a "buzz" about the change within the organization. People need to feel that they must join the process immediately or risk suffering the consequences of being left behind.

No doubt that scaling a change is a significant challenge. Fortunately, this problem can be addressed by using a technique called "mass customization," which was originally developed for manufacturing (Pine, 1993). The premise of mass customization is that the central organization driving a change must have all of economies of scale, consistent quality and repeatable standards of mass production, while allowing each individual to adapt the program to their unique needs, without undermining the intent of the program.

The key to mass customization in grassroots O.D. resides in the underlying principles identified by the positive deviants. By focusing on the principles, instead of just the operational tactics, each person can simultaneously adhere to the core principles while adapting them to their unique situation. It is this balance that creates the sense of fair process. People are being asked to stretch, but in ways that honor their ability to succeed.

Thus, particularly when guided by software that is designed specifically to support grassroots O.D., large numbers of people can be motivated to engage with and sustain the change with minimal central direction and control. The change is centrally driven but gives the participants a sense of ownership. When enough people perceive the change this way and are functioning in the new mode, comprehensive grassroots O.D. has been established and the entire organization is rapidly and systematically transformed.

### **Assessments and Grassroots O.D.**

You may have noticed that assessments have not been mentioned. In this model, there is no assessment of current state.

Assessments, while providing some useful information on the organization, tend to focus people on what is currently being done wrong. Recall the neuroscience finding that "neurons that fire together wire together." Because assessments' usually focus, at least in part, on what an organization is doing wrong, assessments drive attention toward reflection on undesirable behavior, thereby reinforcing the very behaviors O.D. is trying to change. Assessments may actually inhibit O.D.

In contrast, scientifically based grassroots O.D. focuses on achieving socially and morally important goals as defined by the organization's positive deviants. It is positive, forward-looking and remarkably innovative. By framing everything positively and focusing on the processes leading to the desired end result, an organizational transformation can be effected more quickly and with far less disruption than traditional methods.

### **Summary**

Since 1996, a grassroots organizational cultural change approach has been used to guide many organizations in different industries, countries and cultures through a wide variety of O.D. initiatives, with equally effective results. Grassroots O.D. is a powerful extension of the O.D. field.

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