

THE FIRST OD ELF

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Many of us who have devoted our time and efforts over the years to the development of human resources are familiar with Elfin Technology, a human relations theory first formulated and made explicit only recently by Dr. Herbert A. Shepard.

I have been exploring this approach a little further and in perspective I see Gordon Lippitt as the Master Elf of Organization Development. Elves, you will remember, operate intuitively. Their deeds have their bases in their vision. Gordon Lippitt, like J.F.K. and Martin Luther King, is a man who had a dream. In his dream, he had a vision of an organization permeated by the unswerving conviction that the needs of the individuals within that organization are compatible with its goals.

Recognizing that personal growth is the optimum result of human life, Gordon saw the mission of those destined to help the organization as one of loving and nurturing the individuals within it in such a way as to insure their personal growth to enable them to fulfill their needs. This in turn would enable each person to contribute to the achievement of the organization's goals while reaching his or her own goals. Establishing and sharing values would result in both improvement of the individual and improvement, or development, of the organization, that is, organization development.

That was the dream of the Master Elf. All of us have learned and share his values - have ourselves been improved or developed under this tutelage. We have been enlightened by his vision, have adopted his mission, share his goals. We have learned to appreciate Elfinism. We have learned to recognize elves. We have to some extent become elves.

I am not sure that our Master Elf would care to have me try to establish him as the first person to define or practice Organization Development. But, I am convinced that the first OD practitioner was indeed a practicing Elfin technologist. In fact, he was an elf himself. (Let me

apologize for the seeming contradiction, for you will remember the derivations of the word - that “elf” is “self” without the “s”, which thus eliminates such terms as self-doubt, self-image, or self-consciousness. I should also mention that for the sake of non-elfin type consistency, I shall refer to the original OD elf as “him”, but there is no hard data to indicate the sex of this elf.)

In any case, I believe we can assume that the original OD elf was devoted to the betterment of institutions. Here is how I image that first effort progressing.

The First OD Elf Arrives

I picture the OD elf entering the institution that is in trouble, alone at first, armed only with his six principles - his beliefs in synergy and the advantages of working with other elves, his versatility, his ability to maintain invisibility, his bag of multiple strategies, and his illusions. These, you will remember, are the six main principles of Elfin Technology.

How did our original OD elf go about his task of influencing that problem-ridden organization? Of course, he saw his first objective as getting a bead on what the key problem might be. What he did not do, I am sure, was to go directly to the CEO and ask, “Say, what goes here, man? what’s the trouble? What are you folks doing wrong? And who’s the culprit?” That OD elf was no trouble shooter. Rapid action for expediency’s sake would have no appeal for an OD elf. His capacity for work would have exceeded whatever time he needed to do his job well.

At first he probably remained invisible. Calling on his principle of versatility and his life-loving energy, and with the goal of establishing a synergistic relationship, no doubt he quietly and patiently began to seek out other elves within the organization, confident that surely some existed. For every organization is full of them. Most elves, however, operate from the invisible position.

No serious elf, of course, would ever work alone. Elves recognize the value of combining their mental energies to work, achieve goals, and complete a task. Working together, elves generate that unique mental energy that exceeds the sum of the parts. That is synergy. It has often been expressed as “one plus one is greater than two.” Elves know that work relationships among human beings can be more than additive. We know the APC pill for most people is more

effective in relieving headaches than aspirin, phenetocin, and caffeine taken separately. And so with working elves.

Not having to face any single important matter immediately, the OD elf would have let his frivolous and fun-loving nature show through, as he sought to make friends among members of the organization. Being versatile, he probably even donned his costumes - a clown suite at one point, a severely conservative three-piece business suit complete with gold watch and chain at another.

Elves and Half Orcs

In Elfin mythology, elves are endowed by the Creator to work toward a valuable future for others. In contrast to elves are Hobgoblins and Half Orcs who can do both good and evil, or Goblins, who can only do evil. While the OD elf soon began to track down a few elves, he must have met up with some Hobgoblins or Half Orcs too, for they also exist in every organization. And most Half Orcs, you will remember, tend to be horrid but are not necessarily stupid or incapable. The OD elf must have had several confrontations with Half Orcs, both individually and occasionally in groups. Eventually, however, he would find at least a handful of fellow elves among members of the organization. And as they began to trust him and take him into their confidence, he must have begun to get a feel of the organization's problems.

The OD elf would have remained invisible to the Half Orcs. If any did see him, they probably reported it to each other and ganged up on him. "The top guy has brought that S.O.B. in to spy on us," they probably complained, not realizing that the elf had discarded his costume of the fun loving and playful companion and was at the time invisible and could overhear their complaints.

Now, what the particular problems were in that first organization to practice OD is lost in the mist of OD history. We believe, however, that we can safely assume that one of them was the ever-pervasive common problem of communication. How did the OD elf perceive that one?

Communication Among Elves and Half Orcs

We know that elves can speak both English and “Elvien,” the helping languages, but only to people they are helping. Elvien reflects a loving and caring attitude, and is used for the quiet and respectful exchange of questions and answers to increase understanding. Elves know that speaking to humans in a manner that conveys regard for others as worthwhile persons is returned in kind. Elves know that kindness is contagious - that it winds along like a country stream in summertime, flowing merrily sideways and downwards through an organization. And its path of transmittal is along the riverbed of open communications.

Of course, there would have been the Half Orcs to contend with, those who loudly proclaimed that there was a better way, cutting off any elf in the middle of a sentence. They would deride new approaches suggested by elves, or offer proof of why such ideas would not work in the organization and were therefore of no value. Some Half Orcs are negative. Other Half Orcs would remain silent altogether, stonily registering “no comment” to the concepts being communicated among the elves. The OD elf would have gained the distinct impression that some of the Half Orcs were not even listening.

In all probability, literally weeks went by as the OD elf listened respectfully while the organization groups with whom he worked revealed the existence of a myriad of problems, such as high turnover of personnel, employee resistance to change, inadequate coaching, poor support, inadequate safety policies, lack of training. Elves and Half Orcs alike would have cited such organization problems as planning and organizing, directing, coordinating and controlling as the issues to be faced by the management and supervisors.

From the view of the OD elf, the organization’s “problems” seemed to be “symptoms,” each important in itself, but less important than an overall key problem, the real trouble. What was that key issue? Why were these humans skirting the issue? How could the elves among them serve to start the organization moving in the right direction?

The OD elf had reached the point of putting on his training costume. Except for occasional forays and interventions, he had remained mostly invisible, slipping into costume only occasionally. He probably started by reviewing his notes to test for himself (or him-elf) the

attitudes he had heard expressed on a few of these problems either by his newly found elfin friends or by those he had by now identified as Half Orcs.

Absenteeism and Tardiness

The elves had said:

A human being should be able to approach work with joy. (Elfs are idealistic.) Why are our people reluctant to get here on time and get started? How can we make this place such that an employee wants to get to work on time?

The Half Orcs had said:

We pay these people for an eight-hour day, and it starts at 8:00 a.m. It's up to the supervisors to enforce the rules, or quit. Any employee who cannot abide by the rules should be terminated. We should issue a notice to that effect immediately. One Half Orc said: "Count me out. I'll take my people to lunch and talk to them about how the company feels."

Goal Setting

The elves had said:

We need to work individually with our people in exploring the goals of the organization, then work with them to set goals that will contribute to the organization's goals, yet at the same time provide for their individual growth.

The Half Orcs had said:

Start at the top. Require top management to set goals; then move down to the lower levels, who should be instructed to make their goals to support top management's; get all goals at all levels tied together. We have to state the result we want and tie it in to money, time saved, etc.

One Half Orc had said:

My employees like me. They'll go in the direction I'm going. They don't need goals.

Planning

The elves had said:

Good planning provides opportunities for creativity, for stimulation of thinking, for considering outcomes of activities, for individual development, for participation and increased exchange of ideas, for better understanding of thinking about the organization, for visualizing a valuable future for the organization.

The Half Orcs had said:

You have to decide beforehand what the group should accomplish and how to do so - that's when the planning comes in. Planning is beneficial as a communication device and provides written records of intentions, commitments, agreements and as a basis for exacting accountability.

Discipline

The elves had said:

I try to find out what the person was thinking about when the rule was broken - find out: "Is there a problem in that person's life, was it carelessness or neglect, and how can this, the OD elf must have decided to remain invisible a little longer, planning the first OD strategy of many yet to come.

The Elfin Dilemma

A major reason that an OD elf has to change costumes often and retreat into invisibility from time to time is to avoid precipitating a win-lose situation. The last thing the OD elf wants to do is to marshall the energies of elves, then dissipate their energies in a confrontation with a group of Half Orcs. For Half Orcs can band together quickly in a very effective way to offset the effects of any others whom they perceive as attacking them or even as silent critics. Resulting win-lose confrontations can be devastating to an organization, as well all well know. Their results can be felt for years and years. Win-lose confrontations are what organization myths are made of.

So the OD elf could not risk being seen as a leader of a group that seemingly opposed Half Orc philosophy or policy. Nor could he be seen as "siding" with those who actually shared his elfin ideals and outlook. Our OD elf knew this basic truth. He had thought through all of these problems before he risked making a move.

The Big Elfin Intervention

The OD elf judged it to be the right time to make a major intervention move. Now this original OD elf may not have even thought of this move as “intervention” much less named it such. You must remember, he had nothing to go by - no lists of OD steps as gathered from the literature (none had as yet been developed); no learning from discussions with OD peers (neither he nor his peers knew they were emerging OD practitioners); no benchmarks for testing an organization’s health (who can test what has not yet been to exist?) But knowingly or not, and regardless of we work together to prevent a repetition?” - “How can we best plan to insure success?”

The Half Orcs had said:

Fair but firm is our policy. We don’t want to be unfair, but you’ve got to let them know who the boss is. You have to throw the book at them.

Performance Appraisal

The elves had said:

It’s a matter for everyday attention, and it starts from the first day. Remember the Fox and the Crane. The crane got the shallow dish and had as much trouble getting a drink as the fox did from the tall beaker. I see superior performance from all my people once they find their particular niches. I figure my job is matchmaker, teacher-mentor, coach, and support person.

The Half Orcs had said:

Even if they are pretty darn good, you can’t rate them superior all the way down the line. You have to give them a couple of “less than satisfactory” ratings so they’ll have something to strive for.

One Half Orc said:

I don’t do it. I know my people, they know what I want. I don’t believe in Performance Appraisals.

These are but samples of the issues noted by the OD elf. As he revised his notes, the OD elf would have clearly observed the contrast between elfin and Half Orc attitudes and styles. And that very contrast would have posed a dilemma.

If we were unable to name the day Rome wasn't built in, we are equally at a loss to state when the OD elf began to see some results of his work or state precisely how long it took to realize progress. Surely time flew. Certainly the group would become hung up on various small points as the OD elf continued to throw out on the table the issues he had recorded, the inconsistencies he had identified, the dilemmas he had so painstakingly delineated. And throughout, he felt the strong influence of the attitudes of those group members whom he had identified earlier as elves. Without being able to name it, he recognized Elfin Technology at work. This was synergy, another term not yet used but a clearly emerging phenomenon. Everyone involved seemed to reflect the new energy that was building up, even after the first few problems posed were examined in this way and group agreement was reached on the basis of fact, not emotion.

Meanwhile, the OD elf kept working like a shuttle, back and forth, first visible then invisible, weaving between the attitudinal woof and the informational warp of the organization fabric. He too shared the excitement of the progress of the group. Now they were even identifying their own differences of attitude and opinion and the discrepancies in their own statements, expecting to find favorable solutions to long-term problems - confident in their newly found ability to talk out their differences on the basis of exploring for fact. With every step forward, the OD elf must have experienced an exhilaration as expectations for even greater progress took over.

Expectations Under Elfin Technology

The original OD elf must have found the results achieved by this synergistic group far superior to what he had originally expected. But this should have come as no surprise. Some recent behavioral science findings (and elves have probably known this all along) concern the power of human expectations.

Has this ever happened to you? Someone you revered gave you the idea that he or she expected something from you that you were not sure you could provide. But you did. Even now, you wonder how you achieved that result. In fact, it was better than you would have

dreamed you could have accomplished, and you are pretty sure that you could not do as well if called upon today.

Schools and industries are studying the effects of expectations. Experiments so far show that people who are told they are superior in some way or other becomes superior in that way. When expectations of high performance are communicated to the performer, the performance exceeds the expectations.

Of course, the OD elf must have known this all along. It was one of his most effective tools in creating synergy.

This is the way I imagine the first OD approach. No doubt you can fill in much from your own perspective about what the first OD elf must have initiated or recognized, created or accomplished. I'll leave your version up to your own imagination. For imagination is still a main requirement of today's OD practitioners. How to refer to OD's key ingredient - mere kindness, the Golden Rule, the Christian-Judeo ethic - is immaterial. The first OD elf - and I'll leave it up to you to decide whether he was the Master Elf himself, a predecessor or a follower - certainly recognized this all important ingredient, and so do we as does Elfin Technology.