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# Organizational Change through Powerful Micro-Level Interventions

## The Cape Cod Model

By Edwin C. Nevis, Joseph Melnick and Sonia March Nevis

Organization development is the practice of building effectiveness of groups or aggregates of people engaged in joint effort. By definition, it is a macro-level enterprise that is designed to impact significant numbers of people, including the entire organization. Yet, while the goal of an intervention may be to change the organization as a whole, most of an OD practitioner's work is with a smaller number of people who carry accountability for organizational effectiveness or who are driving a change process.

Even in large group interventions, the entire firm is seldom, if ever, available to the practitioner. The same is true of leaders of the organization at all levels; they work through small numbers of people to affect the behavior of the many.[1]

From this perspective, one can see OD as the practice of high impact micro-level interventions in the service of broad scale (macro level) performance improvement.

This paper presents a brief introduction to the Cape Cod Model, a Gestalt-oriented, skill-based approach that serves this purpose. The concepts and skills involved in the model are applicable to third party intervention, coaching, team-building, leadership development, and strategic advising. The origins of the Model go back to work done in the 1960s and 1970s by Sonia March Nevis in the area of couple and family therapy, and that has been refined since then with colleagues through 40 years of study, consultation, teaching to organization consultants and psychotherapists, and to work with executives in leadership development (Melnick & Nevis, 2005A; Melnick & Nevis, 1999).

Essentially, the Model has two major components: the general stance and behavior of the intervener, and an action sequence guideline. Stance encompasses the underlying assumptions of the intervener, and provides an orientation toward what to observe and how to make useful comments. Action Sequence lays out a step-by-step locus of intervention that we have found to be very useful. Aspects of each are as follows:

**Stance of the Intervener:**

» Optimistic View of Human Capability
» Observe with "Soft Eyes": Relaxed Waiting
» Focus on the System vs. the Individual
» Encourage an Experimental Attitude
» Use and Model Bold Behavior
» Teach Leaders to Teach Their Group

**Action Sequence Guideline:**

» Build Trust By Being a Supportive Listener
» Introduce Rules for Self-Organizing Systems
» Focus First on Strengths of the System
» Relate Developmental Needs to Strengths
» "Try-Out" Practice By Client System
» Connect Intimate and Strategic Behavior

*1. I once asked my MIT colleague, Dick Beckhard, to describe his work in large system change (which is how he classified his work). In only a few, rare instances covering many consulting cases, did he work with more than 25 people at any time. [ECN]*

As with most process consultation models, the fundamental initial step is to begin to establish trust. This is supported by a stance of optimism, which the intervener tries to impart to the client system. We truly believe that, at a given moment, people are doing the best that they know how to do, and we try to convey this in our general stance. This is done in part by starting to point out strengths (what the system does well) before dealing with deficiencies or underdeveloped skills. Interveners are encouraged to be bold in their interventions, and to support intimate connection (bonding) among client members, as well as to make strategic comments. Two other aspects that distinguish the approach from traditional process consultation are the providing of "rules" for client group members, and the focus in hierarchical groups on supporting the leader by teaching him or her to teach these "rules" to group members. Each of these aspects is discussed in detail below.

## Model in Action

We use this model in teaching consultants how to have more impact in consulting and coaching, in group applications such as team building and family therapy, and with executives in leadership development programs:

### 1. For use by consultants in working with peer dyad and peer groups:

The first task of the consultant is to begin the process of establishing trust. In order to create trust, the consultant needs to be able to listen without moving to quick interventions or solutions.

We tell clients at the outset that they should begin to engage each other, and that we will say something from time to time, or that we will respond to their request to hear something from us. Because there is often pressure for quick intervention, the consultant needs to spend time explaining the rationale for this stance. Clients must understand that the consultant can be most effective observing how the group functions and feeding back to the group as useful data exactly what they hear and see and feel. Because this way of working is different than many of their past experiences with consultants, it is here that objections and challenges occur. Skillfully responding fully to these challenges is an important and essential first step in the building of trust.

During this stage the consultant accumulates data as to how people are relating to each other and to you. The way data is collected is different than in many consulting methods. We use "soft eyes," which means hearing and seeing what is happening, as opposed to actively looking for something á la Sherlock Holmes. This involves the ability to focus on the interactional process of the work team rather than on individuals, and on the process rather than the content being discussed.

Seeing a team or group of individuals through a "soft" lens involves a stance of relaxed waiting, since the consultant needs to be able to see a pattern of interaction emerge more than one time. Relaxed waiting involves an ability to psychologically remove oneself from the ongoing discourse. As the consultant relaxes into a receptive stance, he or she looks for patterns of what people do well. Our first interventions are those that heighten the awareness of the clients as to their **competence**. In this regard, it is important to note that we distinguish between facilitator comments and facilitator **interventions.** An intervention is a stronger, more potent statement than ordinary exchange and serves to draw attention to a specific behavior. Since most of our training has been to look for deficiencies, skill in intervening around what the client does well is surprisingly difficult to learn. It is not about noticing what is wrong and positively reframing it. It is actually seeing and hearing competent behavior. Just as organizations are not aware of their breadth of competencies and may have to be convinced of its value, the same is true of the consultants.

This feedback is not about flattery or positive judgments. We do not say, "You are doing a good job," or "You are a wonderful team." We point to very specific, identifiable behaviors. To do this, the consultant must have accumulated enough data from what has happened so that their clients recognize what is being identified. The data that we are interested in is descriptive, not interpretive. For example, we might comment on how well they listen to each other, and how they do not interrupt someone who is speaking. Or we might say: "I notice that members of the group ask questions of each other and listen to the answers."

This is another place where objections often appear, as many people are suspicious of positive feedback. Rather than generating active objections, feedback on competence is often dismissed with a shrug of the shoulder. Thus, it is important to report examples to support the observation. One might say, "Everyone is interested in what is going on. I surmise this because you have all asked at least one question. Also, notice how you are all leaning forward with interest now."

Often, the understanding and acceptance of a group's competence is enough to free up energy and increase its functioning. Once some strength of the group has been identified, the consultant can begin to look for data regarding some of the less developed skills of the group. Again the consultant must have the courage to sit back and wait until a pattern emerges. This pattern is often connected to the polarity of the well-developed competencies that have already been noted. For example, if everyone is leaning in and highly active in a discussion, the opposite may be true; no one is leaning back and disengaging in order to get a larger or different perspective.

Thus, the next task is to help the group members to identify their developmental challenges. In order for the feedback regarding the less developed to "stick," it needs to be tied to the competencies of the group. For example, "We notice that you continue to do a great job of supporting each other, but, we know that there is a downside or cost embedded in every competence. In this case, we notice that you do not disagree with each other. Movement to quick agreement may result in not seeing different perspectives."

If they can easily make the shift to what is less developed, we move to the fourth task, devising a vehicle for them to practice until the skill becomes habitual. We call this a "let's try this" intervention. It draws upon the basic Gestalt concept of providing a "safe emergency" for learning. In shaping these pilot exercises we are influenced by Vigotsky's concept of *the zone of proximal development,* which looks for the very next step that a learner can take as a feasible stretch, with the help of a teacher (Vigotsky, 1978). If this stretch is too difficult, we continue by engaging them in a discussion about their "objections" to considering the experiment, scaling it back to a more manageable level.

We generally end all sessions with clients by asking them to articulate what they got out of the session and what they consider to be the very next best, "doable" step. Their meaning-making statements contain awareness of actions to be taken to maintain their momentum and learning. In situations where we have repeated contacts with clients we are a bit less formal in following the sequence, but we remain highly attuned to what the group does well and continually make interventions which focus on their strengths. We have found that, where groups are having great difficulty in functioning well, comments about what they do well are highly motivating for them to continue trying to go further. In this regard, the Cape Cod Model stands aligned with Appreciative Inquiry.

Perhaps the most frequent use of the Model in peer-group settings is in third-party intervention. Whether it is two people or two groups who need to work together better or reduce troublesome differences, the approach is particularly appropriate. Imagine the impact on two parties that come together to deal with their differences when they are helped to see what they do well together before you address their difficulties. An example of this is a case in which one of us was asked to work with two Vice Presidents who needed to work closely together but were feuding with each other in a big way. We did a preliminary session with each to obtain agreement to meet. They began the session by expressing their irritation, even anger, with each other. We said next to nothing, allowing the complaining to go on for a while. We eventually intervened to state that they seemed to have accomplished a great deal over the years in which they worked together even though they were angry at each other. This statement stopped them in their tracks and lowered the intensity of their exchange considerably. With some encouragement to continue to look at how they had done that, they found something positive to say to each other. We then helped them to look at what produced their anger and uncovered that they did not listen well to each other. They discussed this for a while and moved into a much lighter mood, ending the session with laughter and an agreement to do better in listening to each other.

Another example of the effective use of this approach is with professional partnerships or voluntary association Boards such as the OD Network and related organizations. One of us did a several-session piece of work with the nine division heads of a major community service organization who were depressed and who reluctantly agreed to hold these sessions (which were encouraged by the CEO of the organization). We began by saying very little and listened to them interact. After a while two positive things emerged which we shared: the first was that, despite their depression they had come to our Center for the meeting ( a three-hour trip); the second was that they were actually putting out energy to get something out of the meeting. After allowing them to discuss this for a while and to let them get into ideas of what to do about what was depressing them, we noticed that they seemed to have good ideas about what to do but were unskilled in knowing how to integrate individual energy into group action. In effect, they needed to develop more skill in cooperating for the advantage of all. In subsequent sessions the work was devoted to moving from awareness of the problem to discussion of actions that they could take to improve the situation. At the end of the sessions the group had renewed energy and enhanced appreciation of each other as work partners.

**2. For use in teaching consultants to work with hierarchical groups or in leadership development work, we make some adjustments:**

In leadership programs, and in working with hierarchical teams, we teach leaders simultaneously how to be effective leaders and how to help followers become an effective self-organized group. The main thrust of the work in these settings is to support and strengthen the leader's ability to lead the group. We do this through teaching the leader to make the interventions that a Cape Cod Model consultant might make, and to be responsible for teaching followers to make the same observations and interventions. As teachers or facilitators, we mainly make comments to the leader and expect the leader to use these inputs in crafting his or her leadership behavior. We do not make comments to the group without the verbal or nonverbal consent of the leader.

In both peer and hierarchical settings we provide all members with a set of "rules" for effective groups.[2] In leaderless or self-organizing groups we ask members to remind each other to pay attention to the "rules. However, in groups with a leader we focus on teaching the leader to use these rules." In both instances our expectation is that group members will gradually learn to use these rules. Some of the "rules" for each person to follow, and the leader to pay attention to, are:

» Scan the entire group at regular intervals.
» In a pair or in a group speak approximately 1/N times, where N = the number of people present.
» Ask at least one question of a specific other person, using their name, and listen for an answer. Notice whether you get one.
» Respond when a question is asked of you.
» In speaking, segue from what has been said just before you speak.

*2. The concept of Rules for self-organizing systems is borrowed from the work on complex self-organizing systems at the Santa Fe Institute (Waldrop, 1992). They analyzed how birds organized for flight, and called computer-generated results rules for boids.*

» “Pull out” of the energy of the group once or twice to take in the big picture.
» Be willing to influence and be influenced.
» Be aware of the available time and help summarize an ending.

In one application of the Model with a senior leader and her staff at the Treasury Department of South Africa the group started by expressing their frustration and their “tiredness” about bringing about change in the Treasury Department.
In watching them interact we saw how well the leader worked to protect her staff from difficulties and how well she supported them—and how much the group appreciated this. When this competence was pointed out, the group became involved in a discussion of what the team did well and became highly energized about how they could support the leader in developing a new approach to influencing the Ministry to change. They then looked at what was blocking them from being more influential and realized that they had more power than they were using. They followed this by developing a couple of change scenarios. The experience of watching this group come alive after getting in touch with their strength early in the session—in the midst of their frustration about their perceived limited accomplishment—was thrilling to see. As a footnote, this group has done so well that it has been made the major governmental implementation arm for all aid projects in local South African provinces.

In our Center’s Leadership Development program (an open enrollment, “stranger” program) during an intensive practicum in leading a group, one of us worked with a woman executive who came to see the competence of her caring, supportive manner as both a true strength and a limiting factor. We worked with her to look at how she limited the demands she put upon others, and how she did not give full voice to what she wanted or expected from others. By first helping her to get a thorough look at what she did well we were able to get her interested in looking at her undeveloped side as a “commander.”

## Contrast with Traditional Process Consultation

The approach varies somewhat from traditional process consultation models in the following ways:
» Our interventions are mostly designed to encourage specific people to direct statements and questions to other specific people.
» Interveners are encouraged to be brief but **bold** in their interventions. We are likely to be a bit more direct and strong in our interventions than traditional process consultants. Examples of boldness are:
  • **When you make an intervention stay with it until you get a clear response.**
  • **Speak what others avoid saying; identify the “elephant in the room.”**
  • **Share your experience as you take in the group.**
  • **Use rich language, such as metaphors.**
» We intervene on the strategic level as well as the intimate (bonding) level; we give advice at times.
» In working with hierarchical groups in team-building (such as a general manager and her staff) our focus is on teaching the leader how to lead the group. We make no interventions directly to the group without the verbal or nonverbal consent of the leader.

## Conclusion: Our Underlying Principles

In applying the Model we are guided by the following orienting principles:
» Our stance is one of optimism. We assume that people are doing the best they can at any given time.
» Interventions should be practical and readily perceived as useful by people. We concentrate on helping clients find the *very next specific step* that they can take to be more effective.
» Influence is directed toward enhancing awareness of how people relate to each other, recognizing the process of a relationship or a group, and one’s contribution to that process.
» Sharing our experience while working with clients is an important ingredient in heightening their awareness of their system and its patterns of behavior.
» Issues such as power and resistance to change are best understood as occurring in relationship, as opposed to being attributes of individuals.
» To be influential requires developing awareness of one’s own patterns of relating, so that you can use your self as an instrument of change.
» We appreciate the validity of multiple realities and teach people how to welcome ifferences and to minimize conflict.
» Whether a group’s functioning is based on mutuality (peer relationships) or organized around hierarchical differences, there is a flow of power that is crucial to perceive.
» Behavior can either be strategic, meant to achieve a goal, or intimate, intended to enhance bonding among people (Nevis, Backman, & Nevis, 2003).
» People are encouraged to design and utilize experiments in new behavior (Melnick & Nevis, 2005B).
» Skill emerges from detailed observation, on-going practice and feedback from a supportive learning community.

We have been applying these principles in the teaching of this Model to consultants and executives since 1975. Strategy-oriented and technical specialty consultants have found that integrating work at the micro-level enhances acceptance of their ideas by clients. It is a major part of our Center’s leadership development program. Executives find it a powerful perspective for revising the way in which they conduct meetings and carry out difficult conversations. We are continually encouraged by how well action-oriented, macro-focused leaders can see the value of a micro-level approach in support of enhanced organizational effectiveness.

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