BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGISTS AND ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT CONSULTANTS

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ABSTRACT: This article describes the similarities between the Organization Development (OD) process and the counseling process, as well as common traits among OD practitioners and Counseling Psychologists. It is directed to educators as well as business people. Since “people skills” have been identified as the key skill in successful OD interventions, it is posited that Counseling Psychologists are in a position to expand their roles by offering a fresh, if not unique, perspective to organizations. Suggestions are made for Counseling Psychologists to translate their skills to an organizational setting. Implications for counselor training programs, along with recommendations for a programmatic needs review are presented.

This article summarizes the applicability of the Counseling Psychology profession to Organization Development interventions and discusses recommendations for counselor training.

More than ever before, organizations significantly influence the lives of individuals. As a consequence, increasing attention is being directed toward organizational dynamics as we attempt to understand, predict, and control the effects organizations have upon our lives. Concomitant with these efforts, several professions have emerged to apply their skills and interventions to organization-wide concerns. This article addresses the application of one of these professions, Counseling Psychology, to the arena of organizational life.

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In the past, counseling psychologists have been utilized in a variety of settings such as clinics, hospitals, and educational institutions. Their influence in business and industry, however, has been relatively minor. A survey conducted by Toomer, Stern, and Cirillo (1980) revealed that fewer than three percent of counseling psychologists consider industry/business to be their primary work setting. Furthermore, efforts of counseling psychologists in these settings have been limited to traditional mental health interventions (e.g., individual counseling, group counseling); very often they are referred to as the “company shrink.” Ridley and Hellervik (1983, p.53) explain how such labels have perhaps subtly hindered the development of counseling psychology in business and industry:

... the phrase “talk with a consultant” connotes discussion by a client with an individual of circumscribed expertise where the client is fully functioning, strong, and being served by the consultant. The phrase “talk with a counselor” connotes discussion by a client with an individual of fundamental and all-pervasive wisdom where the client is self-doubting, weak, and inept.

Toomer (1983) provides an excellent review of the counseling psychologist’s potential functions in business and industry. Table 1 provides a summary of these various roles the psychologist might assume within organizations. Most of these roles, however, represent micro level interventions; they are limited to singular sectors of the organization. Businesses often hire counseling psychologists (as they do physicians) for singular purposes—to staff Employee Assistance Programs or to provide a support function to the medical department. Although few counseling psychologists interact on a system-wide, macro level, the stage is set for increased intervention as organizations become more attuned to the skills of counseling psychologists transferable to the business setting.

Leonard (1977) outlines three factors that will likely stimulate expansion of the counseling psychologist’s role into that of an Organization Development (OD) consultant:

1. work in individual and group counseling has virtually no impact on the needs of the hundreds of people for whom the counselor might be responsible;
2. they see the effects of a disintegrating system on the people in the organization and realize the futility of working with individuals or even groups for system-wide problems; and
3. they are asked to address system versus individual problems.

For clarification, our definition of an OD consultant is an organization change agent using behavioral science theory, research, and technol-