This chapter focuses exclusively on OD practitioners and what message they can take home from my findings in neglected organizations. I will present eight lessons that should be taken into account when trying to redress neglect in the workplace. The first six lessons apply to both internal and external change agents (Sections 8.1 through 8.6). Then I offer some advice for external consultants in particular (Section 8.7). Section 8.8 contains some pointers OD professionals can use to assess whether they are suitable for the job of change agent in a neglected organization. Finally, Section 8.9 discusses the interaction between internal change agent and external consultant. The key to this interaction is the role the OD consultant plays toward the manager leading the recovery. The external consultant acts as a sounding board, encouraging the change agent to maintain a healthy distance and keep things in perspective amid backstabbing, resistance, and subversion.

8.1 Personal experience and tested solutions

The first lesson is to question your own unconscious assumptions. Over the course of time, OD professionals develop their own favorite ‘theories in use’ (Argyris and Schön, 1974), based on their personal experience. These solutions have proven their worth in OD processes in a variety of organizations and are based on implicit assumptions about how organizations work and how employees behave. Yet, when there is neglect in the workplace, nothing is self-evident and reality persistently defies standard solutions. This is why it is important to question the assumptions underlying your favorite ‘theories in use.’ Ask yourself what effect those interventions would have in the neglected workplace. Think about the conditions your favorite OD theory assumes are present in the organization. One helpful hint is to think about how patterns can be
8.2 Match expectations with what the organization can handle

OD professionals usually have their own normative notions on how organizations can be changed. De Caluwé and Vermaak’s five-paradigms theory on change typified by colors (Boonstra, 2004) is a well-known example of a popular OD concept made explicit. It proposes five change ‘paradigms’ that are each assigned a color. The green-print change strategy, as it is called, is based on learning and developing. This strategy is bound to fail in a neglected organization, as its employees would not be willing to reflect and learn; doing so would threaten their sense of survival. De Caluwé and Vermaak’s red-print strategy (based on bartering) would be experienced as extremely unsafe in neglected organizations due to the blurred line between work relationships and private life. The white-print strategy, based on discovering patterns, would be perceived as more of the same laissez-faire leadership; in other words, ‘management is leaving staff in the lurch again.’ The yellow change strategy, based on influence and power, would only reinforce the idea that power relations will never change and management is not to be trusted; at the same time, this strategy would give employees of a neglected organization an opportunity to prove their expertise at evading punishment and sanctions. De Caluwé and Vermaak’s blue strategy of planned change would have some effect in neglected organizations, since it would create clarity. However, as this strategy would fail to deal with the real issues underlying the neglect, the changes would not take hold. Everyone would do as they were told, but this compliance would only be for appearance’s sake.

When there is neglect in the workplace, organization development is still possible. It is essential, however, to gear expectations to what such an organization can handle. Often, this is considerably less than what OD professionals tend to assume. ‘Problems are always worse than you think’ is a valuable lesson I learned from my time at GVB, and one that turned out to be true for every other project in a neglected organization since. If OD professionals set their expectations too high, people in the neglected organization will perceive this as an attempt to expose their incompetence. OD professionals will fall into this trap time and again, even when they know the concept of neglect in the workplace both in theory and in practice.