



INTRODUCTION

Organization design is a field that is concerned with both theory and practice. The theme of the Organizational Design Community's 2013 annual conference – Making Organization Design Knowledge Actionable – was chosen, however, to recognize that theory and practice do not always come together successfully. The researcher-practitioner “gap” is still a problem in our field, and organization design will not be able to realize its full potential until this gap is closed. ODC viewed its 2013 conference as an opportunity to bring together a group of individuals who are interested in making organization design knowledge actionable and to engage in a focused dialogue. The results of the annual conference are the articles published in this Special Issue.

Today, four groups interact with the field of organization design, each with a different interest. *Line managers* may not even be aware of the field's formal existence, but all are making organization design decisions on a regular basis. They must figure out how to spur growth, drive innovation, become more customer-centric, reduce costs, be more flexible – in short, they must design organizations to accomplish these goals and tasks. As more line managers become aware of the field and appreciate the value of applying a disciplined thought process to design challenges, they will be looking for tested frameworks and approaches that will improve the generation and selection of choices and speed the change process.

Internal professionals, typically human resource or organization development staff working inside large companies or institutions, are looking for tools and methods to help their line clients make better design decisions. Many HR professionals are seeking to add organization design expertise to their personal and departmental toolkits, and HR leaders are trying to build internal capability in order to reduce reliance on external consultants. Internal professionals want proven methodologies that can be applied consistently across the organization, and they want results that are seen as valuable by their business leaders.

Academics, from their base in universities, move the field forward by doing research that seeks to understand how organizations behave. Their research both describes and explains organizational behavior, but most academics do not get involved with designing and changing organizations. Their job is to observe organizations and build theoretical models of how they work.

Consultants, whether solo practitioners or as a member of one of the large professional services firms, try to turn research knowledge and insights into frameworks and tools that have practical use. Some consultants also do “clinical” or “armchair” research based on their or their firm's experience. The best consultants are those who understand the academic research and can translate it into terms that are understandable to practitioners.

While these four groups are all involved in the organizational design and change process, each group focuses on only a portion of the total process. Academics and consultants are typically the providers of organization design theory and tools. Line managers and internal practitioners can be thought of as the consumers of their outputs. The conference organizers attempted to enhance the dialogue across the different groups by incorporating three main elements into the program.

1. *Thoughtful participants*. The conference attendees were members of the Organizational Design Community, and all of them share an interest in the topic of organization design. But in addition to ODC members, the organizing committee invited several thoughtful academics and practitioners to attend. Understanding and changing large, complex organizations is a considerable challenge, and the organizers wanted the discussions to be as rich and productive as possible.

2. *A living case*. The inspirational and ideational phases of the design process can be somewhat abstract. Ultimately, however, chosen designs must be implemented. In order to see the full design process on display, the organizers chose to have a real organization as the

focus of discussion. Ascension Health is the largest not-for-profit provider of healthcare in the United States, and it is currently undergoing a complex reorganization to come into better alignment with the future healthcare market and regulatory environment. It was an ideal case for the participants to discuss.

3. *Commentators with different perspectives.* Four individuals with different perspectives were invited to comment on the Ascension Health case. Their perceptive and insightful commentaries not only examine the design/change process used by Ascension Health but also suggest alternative perspectives and missing elements. Together, the living case and the commentaries provide an excellent exploration of the dynamic process of organization design.

As editors of the Special Issue, we are very pleased with this set of five articles on making organization design knowledge actionable. Designing and changing organizations is difficult work, and we believe that there are many valuable ideas in these articles that are worth considering.

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