

## What Kind of OD Practitioner Are You?

A few years back I had occasion to post to an OD discussion list a framework for categorizing four basic kinds of OD practitioners. The framework, a 2 x 2 matrix, arrays hard vs. soft OD against the locus of the practice, that is, internal or external. This produces the grid shown below. More recently, I crafted another visual titled “The OD Practitioner Grid.” It has stirred up quite a discussion. So, I have added it to this paper. First, the original visual shown below is reviewed and then I cover the OD Practitioner Grid.

“Soft” OD refers to the classic tools: teambuilding, group facilitation, conflict management, etc.

“Hard” OD refers to the socio-technical stream of OD, including organizational design, process design and improvement, work design and redesign, and large-scale change management.

Internal OD practitioners are typically found in one of three areas: as part of Training & Development; as a stand-alone OD unit; and as an Organizational Effectiveness unit. In the first two cases, the OD is typically of the “soft” variety (SI). OE units are typically practicing “hard” OD (HI).

External OD practitioners fall into two groups as well: those practicing “soft” OD (SE) and those practicing “hard” OD (HE).

It’s my guess that whether internal or external, those practicing “hard” OD find more favor with senior execs and other managers focused on measurably and often tangibly improving performance, whether of people, processes or the bottom line. Moreover, I’d also guess that HE OD consultants are probably the best paid.

It’s been my observation that SI OD practitioners typically find themselves in supporting roles of limited influence and, in some cases, they have been there primarily for show, so an exec can

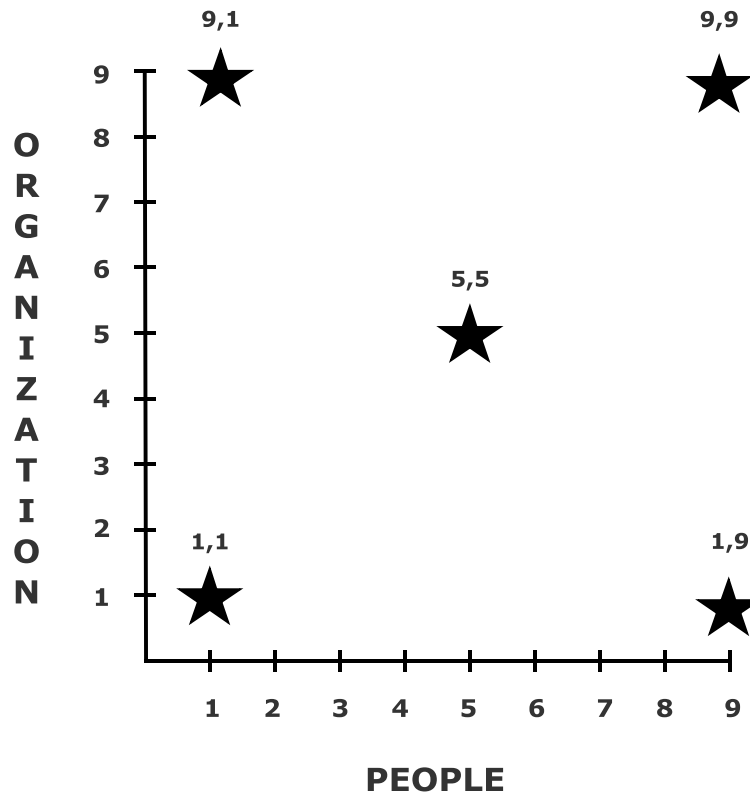
|                  |             | Locus of Practice |                 |
|------------------|-------------|-------------------|-----------------|
|                  |             | <i>Internal</i>   | <i>External</i> |
| Kind of Practice | <i>Soft</i> | SI                | SE              |
|                  | <i>Hard</i> | HI                | HE              |

**Figure 1 - OD Typology Grid**

say, “Yeah, we have an OD unit.” SE practitioners are still in vogue and on occasion work in the rarified atmosphere of the executive suite but these are few and far between.

In short, the field of OD is marked by two splits: one between the kind of practice and one between the locus of the practice.

There is another distinction to be made; that between OD practitioners who focus on people and those who focus on the organization. This yields a grid reminiscent of the Blake-Mouton Managerial Grid (see Figure 2).



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Figure 2 – The OD Practitioner Grid

The stars in the diagram above represent various kinds or styles of OD practitioners. Note that all are stars; no one kind of OD practitioner is suggested to be better or worse than another. The location of the stars indicates the amount and mix of OD work that focuses on **People** (individuals, groups and teams) and the kind that focuses on **Organization** (structure, systems and processes). The 1,1 practitioner does a little bit of both. The 9,1 practitioner does a lot of work focused on the organization but not a lot focused primarily on people. The 1,9 practitioner does a lot of OD work focused on people but not a lot that focuses on the organization itself. The 5,5 practitioner does a moderate amount of both and the 9,9 practitioner does a great deal of both kinds of OD work. Many practitioners could be plotted in various places on the grid depending on the work they’re doing at the time. Some might show up in the same place most of the time. Here are some questions to ask yourself about the location of your star:

- What kind of OD work do you do most of the time?
- What kind is called for by the current situation?
- What kind of OD work are you asked to do?
- What kind of OD work are you really good at?
- What kind of OD work do you want to do?
- What kind of OD work do you get paid to do?
- Where on the grid are you most comfortable?
- Where on the grid are you the least comfortable?
- If you're part of an OD team, where do the other stars go?

We can blend the two grids and come up with a composite typology. For example, a 9,1 could be an internal or an external and focused on hard or soft OD. Lots of possibilities exist.

What kind of OD practitioner are you?

### **About the Author**

Fred Nickols, CPT is a performance improvement professional and the managing partner of Distance Consulting LLC. He is a former Navy technician who was also trained as an internal OD consultant, an instructor and a programmed instruction writer. Fred took up a second career in the private sector as a consultant and executive. He is a long-time member of ISPI and a frequent contributor to its various publications. He can be contacted via email at [fred@nickols.us](mailto:fred@nickols.us) or on his web site at [www.nickols.us](http://www.nickols.us).