

Student practitioners, as novice OD professionals, face a daunting developmental gap between their own entry-level theory knowledge, practice skills, and client experience and the professional mastery of their faculty mentors and other master practitioners whom they encounter in the literature or at workshops and conferences. As a Masters student struggling to ingest our profession's learnings in preparation for my first field project, I felt nearly overwhelmed both by the content load of theory and skills and by a sense of responsibility to my clients and profession to be skillful and effective with these "tools." I coined a phrase at the time to describe my experience: *foie gras* learning. I also discovered a disabling perceptual pitfall during my client interactions, by way of repeatedly falling into it. All too conscious of my own limitations as a novice I would and do, from time to time, disregard the alarm bells in my gut imploring me to speak or act and instead choose to quietly observe group dynamics, struggling to discern what *should* be said or done: What would Shepard, Block, or Weisbord do here? The psychology involved is complex but certainly includes a desire to preserve my client's confidence in the process and in me, to avoid losing face, and to allay my fear of not knowing.

The following is a good example of those times when my fear of not acting masterfully has had the self-fulfilling effect of rendering me terribly ineffective. Recently I was completely blindsided by the behavior of a client manager just after the close of a work session in which we were action planning around a theme of "empowerment." The session had been especially energizing and productive and a lot of positive feedback had been expressed during the session evaluation. As we began to pull down chart paper off the walls of our rented room, however, our client manager, showing a side of her we'd never before seen, suddenly turned on one of the group members and dressed him down in front of the still seated group for something he'd shared in his check-in. I was mortified to think

that months of work might be coming undone and I wanted to melt into the wall as I asked myself, what's going on here, the session's already over, am I supposed to step into to this? My partner managed to halt the lambasting, but as we moved into a de-briefing session with the manager we found ourselves stammering and conjecturing as to why that group member might have acted as he did and how the manager might approach him differently in the future. Neither of us simply spoke to how her actions had made us feel or to our fears that they might adversely impact the other group members and the project outcomes. I didn't want to derail the project or harm our coaching relationship by addressing something I didn't yet understand.

### ***The Anxiety of Learning***

In a recent *Harvard Business Review* interview (Coutu, 2002), Edgar Schein attributes such behavior to the anxiety of learning. In its two forms, *learning anxiety* and *survival anxiety*, the anxiety of learning both inhibits and is a necessary catalyst of all transformational learning (Coutu, 2002). My moments of consulting paralysis (not to mention preparing this paper for peer review) highlight the experience of learning anxiety (the inhibitor) where, Schein (Coutu, 2002) explains, we are “afraid to try something new for fear that it will be too difficult, that we will look stupid in the attempt, or that we will have to part from old habits that have worked for us in the past” (p. 103). It's worth noting that this parallels the experience of our clients and is often a source of their resistance to moving forward (Block, 2000).

### ***Reframing the Novice***

Curiously, what for me feels like my novice's professional handicap – the acute sense of not knowing, the vulnerability and fear of failure – enables me in a very tangible way when working with a client to “start where the system is” (Shepard, 1975). When I

don't know what to say or do and don't want to make a mistake or look stupid, *that* can often be precisely the thing to say. Being a transparent novice provides my clients much needed psychological safety around *their* learning anxiety.

Mid-way through the data gathering stage of the project referenced above, I had occasion to interview a particularly combative supervisor. He'd been named in several previous interviews as having a very negative impact on the operational effectiveness of the organization. I wanted to get his side of the story but I was concerned that I not ask leading questions or break confidentiality with the previous interviews by disclosing information I had gathered. As we began the interview the supervisor made it clear that he supported this project but that he was very concerned that his statements would be too easily identified or be directly reported to the client manager. I reaffirmed our contract on confidentiality and started asking some rather elementary questions, which he indicated with mild disgust involved information that by then I already should have known. I soon realized I was play-acting the role of ignorant researcher, albeit in the service of the principle of confidentiality, and it felt disingenuous. So I stopped the interview and told him just that. He immediately warmed to me, thanked me for confirming his suspicions of my play-acting, and declared that his trust in me and in my commitment to confidentiality had just grown immensely. He went on to provide me with the most illuminating insights into the client system of anyone in the group.

As a novice consultant what I lack in skills and experience I more than amply make up for, consequently, in survival anxiety – “the horrible realization that in order to make it, you're going to have to change” (Coutu, 2002, p. 104) – and this condition provides: a keen desire and readiness to learn (fast!), intense curiosity, a reliance on inquiry, an openness to possibilities, and an awareness of my limitations. Notably, these

characteristics could as easily describe the ideal OD client. Likewise, I would suggest that these characteristics embody the essential nature of the master practitioner.

### ***“Novice Mind”***

I have been blessed with the opportunity to work closely with faculty mentors who are unquestionably master practitioners. Their styles are quite different but they each share common traits. Their heads are filled with all manner of theory and experience and yet, fundamentally, *they keep a novice mind* (Beak, 2002) – alive with the unquenchable spark of curiosity and tempered with a humility born of uncertainty, vulnerability, and a healthy sense of personal limitations. They are, essentially, highly skilled novices.

One of my mentors, a systems inquiry specialist, likens the diagnostic work of OD consulting to working his grandmother’s jigsaw puzzles laid out at holiday family gatherings. In turns, different people would sit and puzzle over pieces and in time the picture would emerge. I worked closely with him recently as my field project supervisor and found that his novice mind is always clearly written all over his face in childlike expressions. With furrowed brow or wide eyes or a sideways grin his sense of wonder, curiosity, and puzzlement are highly contagious. He is never so enthused about the last answer as he is about the *next question*.

Having observed this I realize that my status as a novice consultant is not, in fact, a point of departure for much needed professional development, but rather an *essential state of being* for me throughout all stages of my practice mastery. Seen in this context, novice and master are no longer polar opposites. The goal of all of my future consulting work, all of my learning, is to become through the continued acquisition of theory, skills, and experience more adept, more consistent, and more skillful at being what I already am, a wide-eyed learner.

Thus, professional mastery is not the outcome of a long developmental path but a way of being. It includes the acquisition of expertise but it is primarily a way of looking at our world, our work, and, perhaps most importantly, our clients. To the extent that we can celebrate, cherish, and hone our “essential novice” we will both sustain and manage in ourselves the anxiety concomitant with the work of genuine learners. Doing so we can truly meet our clients where they are and help them, through modeling, coaching, and, above all, co-learning, to make productive use of *their* learning anxiety. Our learning process is our greatest contribution to our clients (Eisen, 2002). By keeping a novice mind we enable them to become learners.

### References

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