

# **Dr. Marshak Interview Transcript**

INTERVIEWER: How long have you been with the MSOD program?

SUBJECT: I've been with the program since the pre-planning of it in 1979 and the launch of it in 1980. So that's like 35 or 36 years.

INTERVIEWER: When you grew up, you didn't want to be an OD professional. How did you get to the point where OD became your field?

SUBJECT: When I was growing up, I had no idea who I wanted to be. When I went to college, I had no idea who I wanted to be. When I started grad school, I had no idea who I wanted to be until I started taking some courses in organization theory and behavior with Morley Segal, who was a professor at American University.

And somehow that appealed to me. And I kept taking courses and courses, which became courses in organization development. And I sort of drifted into it and found a natural fit for me. And so that was the beginning of, I guess, who I am and where I am.

INTERVIEWER: So organization development is not a term that most people are familiar with. Can you explain that transition from those original courses you took-- how organization development evolved?

SUBJECT: Well, for me, the evolution was a shift across some fields of ideas, the kinds of things you learn in grad school. So there's a field called "organization theory," which sort of covers the literature and ideas about what are organizations and how do they operate in the world and how are they structured and their strategies. There is another field called "organization behavior" that has to do with how people behave in organizations, like leadership and conflict and small group dynamics.

Organization development draws on both of those. But it also draws on ideas about how to get change in human systems. And it's based on a collaborative approach to change and a participative approach to change. And so when you put them together with that orientation to change and that orientation to working with organizations, it draws on them.

And of course, early on in my graduate education after I got my master's, I went to work for the US government. And I had a job as a management analyst.

So I was then working on problems in organizations more from an expert consulting mode, drawing on what I had learned, and began using more participative approaches that were part of organization development. And they worked highly successful. Eventually I left working in the government and became a consultant on my own. But that was part of the growth process.

INTERVIEWER: You've been here for more than three decades. And you were around when the program took shape. There is a very famous story that people like to tell about how that program took shape.

SUBJECT: Well, the one that everybody hears about is the time that Morley Segal, who was my professor and who was really the mainspring behind the founding of the program at American University. Morley Segal was in Omaha, Nebraska doing a consulting work with Edie Seashore, who at the time was president of NTL Institute.

And Morley had been bringing in as adjunct professors people from NTL Institute to teach courses in organization behavior and OD and change. And I took many of those courses. That was part of my graduate education. And the two of them began talking about, wouldn't it be amazing if they could somehow create a graduate program in organization development that brought together the best of the University and the best of NTL?

NTL is an organization at the time that had been thinking about for several decades that they'd like to have a university. And they were never able to do it on their own. And so that was appealing to them. And for Morley, he wanted to have something where academics was not just theory and lectures, but was experiential in process.

So they worked in their collective systems at AU and at NTL. And of course, it helped that Edie was president of NTL and miraculously got permission to do a joint program that came out of the famous over a cup of coffee in the snow storm in Omaha inventing the program.

Later, Don Zauderer, who was a professor at AU, and Cornelia Eschborn, who was on the staff at NTL, were the people who actually did the nuts and bolts of the planning and pulled together the faculty. That's when I got involved as an adjunct faculty member. And they were the ones that actually did the specifics. Cornelia liked what she developed so much that she became a participant in the second cohort that went through the system.

INTERVIEWER: What was the structure of the program like when it began?

SUBJECT: When the program began, what Morley was remarkable at doing was he could get things started that no one thought was possible. They thought it was completely impossible to do what he was doing. And Morley's phrase was always, in essence, good enough is good enough, meaning if he could get it off the ground and get it established, we could.

So the original program-- the degree that people got was not a degree in organization development. It was a master's of public administration because Morley was in the School of Public Affairs and in the Department of Public Administration. So it was a master's of public administration.

The original courses were-- Morley went through with Don Zauderer and Cornelia Eschborn and picked six courses that were being taught in the School of Public Administration that they thought would be somewhat related to OD. And so there were things like finance for non-financial managers, politics of administration, legal issues in administration, statistics, courses like that. People find it hard to believe that those were actually the original courses.

The other half of the courses came from NTL Institute. And they were based on workshops and organization development that NTL was offering to the public. But they were modified to become academically based-- and so the theories behind them and the books behind them.

So the original program had six courses from NTL, six from American University. And over time, many of those courses began to shift. A lot of the American University-specific courses disappeared. And other courses came in that were more consistent.

And after about 30 cohorts, the degree became a master's in organization development. And people who had gotten a master in public administration could petition to have their degree changed. But that was one of the most significant changes over time. Faculty has changed. I'm the last of the original faculty. So we've all changed, and I've aged quite a bit since when we started out.

Some courses have changed. The world has changed. Topics that are very much of interest now were not even topics that were written about back then. You have to remember that when the program started, computers had not been invented, or at least personal computers. So the whole notion of the global world that we're in today, topics like organization culture in organization development, things like appreciative inquiry as an approach to change-- they had not been invented yet.

INTERVIEWER: So the structure of the program shifted. Was the program always a weekend cohort-based program?

SUBJECT: It was invented as a weekend program. And at the time, that was very unusual and was a competitive edge. There were very few programs in master's in organization development at the time, none that were in affiliation with NTL, which was the leading place for OD at the time. And they weren't on weekends either. The intention was to try and create something where busy professionals could come on the weekends and do the coursework and whatever.

I would also say that even though there have been any number of changes in aspects of the program, I think the essence of the program and its values and what it was trying to do has really never changed. It's always been the notion of somehow an integration of people developing themselves-- we call it "use of self"-- as well as learning key ideas and theories in the program, so both the academic world and the world of applied practice.

That integration and partnership between the university and NTL was always part of it. The focus on creating the best possible learning environment for students to learn from their own experience and doing things, as well as from their professors, and not just listen to lectures-- that was always part of it. The sense of the value of students, the responsibility of the faculty to try and create an environment conducive to student learning was always part of it. Things like that have always been part of the program.

The specifics of what people learn have changed-- some. But I think the basic and the spirit of the program has always been the same. And it's partly what makes it a distinctive place and why

people like me hang around for as many years as we have-- because we want to teach in a place like this.

INTERVIEWER: So you've touched on a couple of these already. But let's go back to some of the unique qualities of the MSOD program as it is now. It has an international residency. It's known for its use of self. You touched on use of self. Can you describe what the use of self experience was and what it is?

SUBJECT: In the field of organization development, there has always been the notion that you are your most important instrument of change, your physical presence. You're dealing with people in very complex systems. You're dealing with leaders. You're dealing in situations of ambiguity and conflict, how you comport yourself, your ability to not have your hot buttons pressed, your ability to be a vital presence with people who might be many years older than you with a different experience and who may want to challenge you.

So what you bring in terms of what you stand for your value base and your own alignment with what needs to be done becomes very important. So that was always an aspect of the program. And it runs through every single course in the philosophy of it.

But there is a specific course that has had different names over time. It's the use of self course-- it's had official other kinds of names-- where people are asked to look very closely at their own assumptions about things, how they relate to other people, how they deal with conflict, how people project onto them, ideas because of who they are.

Somebody may not understand that because they are 6 foot 5 and weigh 250 pounds that people might be intimidated by them, because they don't see themselves as intimidating. And they have to learn that that's part of who they are and how to handle that in terms of being with people. So it's a very intensive course about the theories about interpersonal competence, about a professional's presence, and very much about who I am in terms of my ability to bring my best self to what I do and how I do it.

INTERVIEWER: So we're not the only organization development degree in the country, clearly. What sets us these days apart from other organization development degree programs?

SUBJECT: One of the things that is true for this program-- and as I think about other programs that I'm aware around the country, I think we're the only one. One, there's an orientation that's very much focused on your ability to impact systems. So there's a more personal power orientation than in some of the other programs.

But I think what really sets us apart is our faculty are all adjunct professors, meaning they are not full-time academics, people who have had or have full-time consulting work. But we also have doctorates in various fields. And we've taught academically.

So we bring both the importance of theory and what's going on in the world of recent developments, but also an understanding of practice in the classroom. So students get that mix.

And people only teach one course. So for as many courses as we have, people will have that many different instructors. So they get to see a diversity of faculty.

We have diversity in terms of who we are and in our gender and races and backgrounds and experiences. I think that's one of the great strengths of the program-- is the diversity of the faculty itself. But they all bring experience, and they all bring academic backgrounds.

INTERVIEWER: What are the most notable changes you've noticed over the last several years?

SUBJECT: I think there have been a number of very important changes. And I think they come in a couple different categories. In terms of the curriculum, the curriculum has changed as the field of OD has shifted in terms of the kinds of interventions and kind of work that people do. And we've kept up with that and shifted with that to some degree.

We've added a very important course that was not part of the curriculum in the original program. And that is an international residency, where the participants in the degree program do actual consultations to real clients in overseas locations, right now in South Africa and in Amsterdam. And that has proven to be a very powerful experience because, of course, it's also preceded by a course in cultural competence in trying to work on some things. And I think that's a very important addition to the program and makes a very important distinction for our students.

I would also say our students have somewhat shifted. They've gotten-- at least in my eyes-- younger. In the original program, people were more in their 40s. And many of them had been working in OD-type jobs for 10 years. And they came because they had the practice. They wanted the theory.

Now we have younger people who come, and they want both the theory and the practice. And so just my own perspective in terms of the generational differences, which I think adds something to the flavor of what we do and how we do it.

And of course, there is the shift in about the relationship with NTL ended. NTL was moving in some different directions. And it was time for that to end. That had been together for a long time.

And that was part of the origins of the program. And it certainly put its imprint into the program. And much of that only continues now as a standalone American University program and is, in many ways, continuing the heritage of what was there.

And I should also mention Morley Segal, who is one of the founders, is no longer alive. And Edie Seashore, who was one of the founders, is no longer alive. And there is kind of a different orientation when the people who founded a program are still around and teaching in it and when they are people that we love and remember but they're no longer here with us.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you.