

Conducting Change Projects in the United Nations and Related Intergovernmental Organizations characterized by Porrous Boundary Phenomena:¹

How could change efforts be supported by Chaos and Complexity Theory?

**Raymond Saner & Lichia Yiu, CSEND
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Abstract:

The United Nations have been criticised for inefficiency and ineffectiveness by the US government and other OECD countries. Substantial literature exists on Organization Development (OD) interventions in private and public enterprises and in the field of public administration, but little documentation exists on OD interventions in the UN system. Practitioners working within the UN system encounter difficulties because of the ill-defined organisational structures, multiple political interferences, cross-cultural value differences and management practices best described as “Porrous Boundaries”.

Chaos and complexity theory might help deepen the understanding of change consultants working in organisations characterized by porrous boundaries. In addition, chaos theory concepts might support the development of new diagnostic and intervention instruments applicable to porrous boundary phenomenon. The authors would welcome comments and suggestions which facilitate application of chaos and complexity theory to working as OD consultants within a context of porrous boundaries as exemplified by UN Agencies.

Introduction

Organisation Development (OD) is an established socio-technical method with a long history of field application in the private and public sectors of Western economies, dating back to the early fifties and Kurt Lewin.

A substantive literature exists on OD interventions in private and public enterprises as well as in the field of public administration, little work has been documented regarding OD projects in international organisations in general and in the UN system in particular.

¹ Exerpt based on paper presented at annual meeting of American Society of Public Administration titled “Political Dimensions of OD Interventions in UN Agencies: The Implications of “Porrous Boundaries”, San Francisco, 1993.

Closing the gap, this presentation draws on two case studies of OD consulting projects in UN specialised Agencies. The two cases illustrate the particular difficulties of conducting OD in such a highly politicised environment where porous organisational boundaries pose a formidable challenge to OD specialists.

IMPORTANCE OF WELL FUNCTIONING UN AGENCIES FOR WORD COMMUNITY

In this world of growing conflicts, few people question the need for a strong rôle of the United Nations (UN) however many express their wish to see the UN and its specialised Agencies improve their management effectiveness and efficiency.

While acknowledging the rôle the UN is and will be playing in many parts of the world, criticism and concerns nevertheless have been expressed in various influential publications against perceived shortcomings of the current UN leadership. For instance, criticism was raised concerning the rôle of the UN Secretary General Dr. Boutros-Ghali (Economist, August 8th, 1992) or in regard to UN Agencies said to be ineffective due to a lack of reform of their swollen bureaucracies (Time, 3 February, 1992) or considered slow in responding to the needs in the field (Financial Times, 6 September, 1992).

SIZE & SCOPE OF THE UNITED NATIONS & ITS AGENCIES

The UN is the best known international organisation. Its system is also the largest, most diversified and most complex, counting 159 member states in 1991. The 15 UN organizations applying a common system of salaries and pensions (excl.WB.IDA.IFC and IMF) employed in 1991 some 50,000 people assigned to over 140 countries, working at some 600 different places throughout the world and using six major official languages (Slater, 1992).

52 % of UN staff are working for the UN secretariat and its programmes. The remaining 48 % are employed by the 15 specialized or related agencies such as the ILO, FAO, UNESCO, UNIDO, WHO, World Bank, IDA, IFC, IMF, ICAO, UPU, ITU, WMO, IMCO, WIPO and IFAD. These Agencies report annually to the Economic and Social Council in New York. The IAEA, established in 1957, reports annually to the General Assembly and when appropriate to the Security Council (e.g. after Gulf War) and the Economic and Social Council. The GATT is a multilateral treaty laying down trade rules accepted by its member states with a secretariat in Geneva, which helps organise occasional new trade negotiations (e.g. the current Uruguay Round).

These intergovernmental Agencies are separate, autonomous organisations related to the UN by special agreements. They collaborate with the UN and with each other through the coordinating machinery of the UN Economic and Social Council. Their secretariats, composed of international staff representing over 160 different nationalities, work under the direction of the executive head of the respective agencies. Their functions are to provide either a forum for negotiations and decisions (e.g. international conventions regarding trade, labour, human rights etc.) or specific services (e.g. health, institution building, agricultural development etc.).

ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT CHARACTERISED BY MULTIPLE LAYERS OF POLITICAL INFLUENCE CREATING EFFECT OF "POROUS BOUNDARIES"

Public management and public organisations are characterised by distinct features. The most commonly known aspects have been summarized by Rainey (1991) namely: reliance on governmental appropriations for financial resources, presence of intensive formal legal constraints, presence of intensive external political influences and greater goal ambiguity, multiplicity and conflict.

The UN system has to function within similar characteristics. Each specialised UN Agency has its own decision making body involving a multitude of governments and related constituencies, which together approve annual budgets and influence the major directions of the Agencies' programmes and activities. Hence, the decision-making process can be very complex and presents in itself major obstacles regarding clarity of purpose, effectiveness and efficiency of management and unity of staff (Sochor, 1989).

Continuous external pressures combined with complex decision-making processes weaken organisational boundaries and open the UN Agencies to the power plays of multiple external and internal constituencies.

Power plays an important rôle in the total management process of the UN system. It cannot be overlooked and needs to be understood in its complexity. The factor of political power in private sector organisations has been studied and analysed by management scholars, e.g. Jeffrey Pfeffer (1981), and especially by Henry Mintzberg (1984), who developed a typology of configurations of organisational power and proposed one possible relationship between external and internal coalitions, which the author considers fits best the context of the UN system^{***}. He very concisely stated:

"A divided external coalition encourages the rise of politicised internal coalition, and vice versa".

The board members of UN Agencies, namely the various member governments, have been and continue to be divided over general as well as particular issues. The most apparent divisions occurred during the cold war period. The current divisions center on the North-South divide, trade block conflicts, and on particular issue by issue conflicts, whatever is at stake at the particular moment for the governments concerned.

Pressures are exerted by member governments on leading heads of UN Agencies and vice versa. The respective director generals use their political weapons to counterattack real or perceived threats to their power. An example of such manoeuvres is given by De Cooker (1990), who citing various secondary sources reports that:

*** The other three configurations are:

- a) A dominated external coalition encourages the rise of a bureaucratic internal coalition.
- b) A personalised, ideologic, professional, or bureaucratic internal coalition encourages the rise of a passive external coalition.
- c) Other combinations of the coalitions, as well as nondominant mixtures of the internal forms of influence, encourage moderate or intense levels of conflict in an organisation.

"Mr. Saoma, the head of FAO is accused of having politized and mismanaged his organization, of practicing coercive and terrorist tactics and to run a reign of terror in the secretariat... In addition to the US, the UK, Australia and Canada have suspended further payments to the organization pending budget reforms. These countries are applying financial blackmail to the organisation, in order to obtain the right to approve or veto its budget level..."

This continuous building and shifting of coalitions weakens the decision-making process of UN Agencies and causes negative consequences in regard to staff cohesion and internal functioning. UN Agencies' external and internal boundaries remain weak, porous and continuously open to manipulations by multiple interest groups and stake holders.

Building on Rainey, Sochov and Mintzberg, the author proposes the following definition of "Porous Boundaries":

Definition of "Porous Boundaries"

Stake holders:	Multitude of actors, e.g. governments, NGO's, inter-governmental institutions, who compete over use of financial and human resources of the organisation.
Leadership:	Elected or reinstated by members of governing body through process of bargaining and coalition building. Elected leadership enjoying relative autonomy during times of power parity in between budget cycles.
Goals:	Negotiated compromises often remaining ambiguous in order to satisfy the needs and objectives of the stake holders.
Financial Resources:	Result of bargaining process, often approved, rejected, altered or amended on a yearly basis.
Human Resources:	Recruitment based on official or unofficial quota system. Standards adjusted to accommodate divergent competence levels of international staff.
Organisation:	Hierarchical, dominance of legal and bureaucratic measures as a defense against shifting alliances and external pressures.
Culture:	Traditional, non-innovative, defensive, security-minded, clanism combined with idealism resulting in frequent power fights.

POTENTIAL CONFLICT REGARDING LOYALTY OF UN AGENCY STAFF

The tendency towards external and internal coalition building is further heightened by the multi-national and multi-cultural composition of the UN staff, who represent a rich linguistic, national,

religious and cultural mixture. This build-in diversity can create insecurities in regard to staff loyalty which in turn can further increase the likelihood of conflict and coalition building. Under ideal circumstances, those working for the bureaucracy should be politically neutral, recruited on the basis of merit, and subject to uniform standards regarding conditions of employment, but in reality the international civil servants are subject, like their national counterparts, to the political conditions of their environment (Jordan, 1991).

The conflict regarding loyalty is built into the system by two articles of the UN Charter which can lead to possible tension and conflict. Article 100 reminds international servants not to seek nor receive instructions from any government or other authorities external to the UN organisation. It also reminds member states not to influence the staff and to respect the international character of their work and responsibility. Article 101 on the other hand, while not putting into question Article 100, asks for due geographical distribution of the UN staff. Both articles have been actively resisted at times by main member states for different reasons****.

The result of these continuous changes in its external environment combined with possible reactive or even proactive shiftiness of its internal environment makes UN Agencies an especially difficult if not challenging place for leadership and management control. Any OD intervention in such a volatile environment have to face so many forms of open and subtle resistances. Failure is common, small successes give raise to a consultant's celebration but overall the task of conducting OD intervention in UN Agencies can best be characterised as "Sisyphian".

LIMITED THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE IMPACT OF THE "POROUS BOUNDARY" FACTOR ON OD WORK IN UN AGENCIES.

A major contributing factor to the politicised environment are the multiple stake holders, who constantly vie for power and directly influence the UN Agencies mandate and at times intervene in their day to day functioning. How to understand and work within a context of multiple stake holders is of paramount importance. Useful comparative information and insights have been summarized and described by Derick Brinkerhof and James Gage (1992) in regard to the understanding of the rôle of multiple stake holders in development projects.

UN Agencies are also subject to extensive interference by external stake holders, but in contrast to development projects in developing countries, the UN Agencies' stake holders are mostly governments of developing and developed countries alike. This particular "cocktail" of stake holders presents a unique situation requiring special analytical attention to the resulting loose or "porous organisational boundaries" which make any change effort so tentative if not impossible.

Organisation Development (OD), or simply change projects, conducted in such a complex and shifting environment are difficult to design and even more difficult to implement successfully. The relevant fields of knowledge offer little guidance in regard to change projects in such complex and highly politicised environment. Recent developments in the field of large system change (Pettigrew, Ferlie, McKee, 1992; and Mohrman, Mohrman, Ledford, Cummings, et al,

**** For instance, based on President Truman's Executive Order 10,422 of 1952, US citizens used to have to obtain full field security investigations before being "cleared" for work in the UN organisations. This political control has since then been abolished.

1991) are helpful but not instructive enough since most of their theoretical concepts apply to large sized private sector companies who certainly face complexity also, but are not to the same extent subject to the instability of their external and internal environments.

In contrast to the private sector, OD projects in the public sector are faced with more bureaucracy and more entrenched behavioural patterns and values which present special obstacles to change efforts. McConkie (1985) quoting Golembiewski (1969) for instance states that:

"...the nature of the public institutional environment clearly places some constraints on achieving OD objectives. The public sector is webbed by multiple access to multiple authoritative decision makers, a phenomena designed to ensure that public business gets looked at from a variety of perspectives..."

Aspects of the "porous boundary" factor have been described by David Brown (1983) whose work in the development field offers excellent insights and suggestions on how to resolve conflict at organisational interfaces e.g. between communities or between external stake holders and organisational actors. What is missing is a closer look at change processes within the specific context of UN Agencies.

INTERNAL "POROUS BOUNDARY"

A main contributing factor to porous boundary phenomena is the way power is distributed within the UN Agencies. In contrast to private and public sector enterprises, power in UN Agencies are characterised by a particular fuzzyness which makes it difficult for the leadership as well as OD consultants to effect sustainable change. What follows is a comparison of concepts of power developed by Tushman and Nadler with the reality of UN Agencies. Tushman and Nadler (1982), defined political power in organisations as consisting of the following subfactors:

- a) Reward power,
- b) Coercive power,
- c) Legitimate power,
- d) Referent power,
- e) Expert power,
- f) Control over critical resources power,
- g) Avoiding routinization power,
- h) Access to powerful others power,
- i) Assessed stature and gaining visibility power,
- j) Group support power, and
- k) Exchange as a source of power (trading favors).

Applying these factors of power to Un Agencies, the following observations could be made:

I. REWARD POWER

Salary and bonus systems are tightly set by UN bureaucratic rule, hence reward power is limited.

II. COERCIVE POWER

Dismissing staff in UN Agencies is very difficult if not impossible. Staff are very well protected by International Civil Service rules and heads of UN Agencies cannot easily draw on this power factor.

III. LEGITIMATE, REFERENT & EXPERT POWER

Legitimate, Referent & Expert Power depends on the reputation and track record of the respective leader of a UN Agency. For instance, if the leader of a UN Agency has many years of successful management of a commercial organisation, expected reputation power might be high. However, UN staff might not accept transfer of reputational power from non-UN based experience to UN organizations thinking that the two worlds are too different to enable transfer of management know-how. In fact, staff resistance to such "transplants" from the private sector might increase due to ideological differences. A new leader without track record of successful leadership, whether at private, public or UN organisation, would also limit reputational power due to perception of the new leader as being without many years of successful "survival" at top leadership position.

IV. CONTROL OVER RESOURCES

Since many of the UN staff are mostly of traditional clerical and commercial background, few opportunities are available to change jobs within a UN Agency. At the same time, jobs are strictly codified and promotions based on rather rigid personnel rules. Hence, bypassing personnel bureaucracies is not easy and control over human resources limited which in turn limits the extent of discretionary power of leadership at UN Agencies

V. AVOIDING "ROUTINIZATION" POWER

Routinization leaves a manager with less power. Hence, leaders of UN Agencies have routinely tried to restructure their respective organizations with limited effect. Inertia built into the system does not allow for radical change, except at the very top (e.g. Cabinet level and top leadership functions).

VI. ACCESS TO POWERFUL OTHERS POWER

Leaders of UN Agencies have various degrees of access to external decision makers with different degrees of effectiveness depending on the power of the external source of influence. However, since the UN system is based on multilateral membership and multinational funding, no single external government can be used for internal power tactics. In fact, other countries will do the best to neutralize external influences if seen as being too dominant.

VII. ASSESSED STATURE & GAINING VISIBILITY & GROUP SUPPORT POWER

Stature of leaders of UN Agencies are based on perception of their ability to ensure survival of the organisation and success in reducing organisational uncertainties especially in regarding to

continued funding and positive coverage by the media. Charisma of leadership plays a role here but the effect of such charisma might be muted due to the multi-cultural make up of the staff. For instance, what is charismatic in one country might be seen as dictatorial in another.

VIII. EXCHANGE AS A SOURCE OF POWER (TRADING FAVORS)

This source of power certainly exists within the UN system. However, the strength of such power is based on the accumulation of previous "credits" with important others or organizations. Without already existing "credits" nor access to credible power basis, a leader of a UN Agency has nothing to offer and hence his ability to receive favors is limited especially at the beginning of a new leader's tenure.

EXTERNAL "PORROUS BOUNDARY"

"Open systems must maintain favorable transactions of input and output with the environment in order to survive over time" writes David Nadler (1982). What is true for private sector companies also applies for UN Agencies. The difference being that instead of an environment of clients and suppliers, the UN Agencies' environment mostly consists of government and non-governmental institutions. Hence, abilities to relate to different, at times opposing, governments is crucial for this power source to be useful to a leader of a UN Agency.

POSSIBLE STRUCTURAL & FUNCTIONAL SOLUTIONS TO "PORROUS BOUNDARY" PHENOMENA: ADJUSTING OD APPROACH TO THE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE OF UN AGENCIES

When envisaging OD interventions in UN Agencies the practitioner might want to limit the impact of the "porrous boundary" phenomena by adjusting his OD approach to the organisational culture of UN Agencies. The following considerations might be useful.

Conventional OD theory and practice has been considered as being influenced by humanistic psychology and corresponding value preferences emphasizing participatory, trusting and more egalitarian approaches to interpersonal communications.

It has also been reported that because of this humanistic value preference, OD inevitably is limited in its application when faced with environments which favour more traditional, hierarchical, and secretive value orientation (Hodgetts, Luthans, 1991). These three features are also part of most UN Agencies' organisational environments.

As a way of clarifying the possible value gap between conventional OD and national culture, Johnson and Golembiewski (1992) summarized Jaeger's (1986) conceptualization of Hofstede's (1980) four value dimensions (namely Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Masculinity versus Femininity and Individualism vs. Collectivism) and accordingly categorised traditional OD value orientation as follows:

HOFSTEDES' FOUR CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

Power Distance	Uncertainty Avoidance	Masculinity - Femininity	Individualism - Collectivism
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Low PD is associated with social egalitarianism and as PD increases, status inequality and distance in social relationships also increase.	Low UA is associated with tolerance of ambiguity and minimized structuring of relationships; high UA leads to elaboration of rules and structures.	Masculinity stresses results and the importance of material things, while femininity stresses the importance of feelings and relationships.	Individualism stresses and tolerates individual uniqueness, while collectivism defines individuals through their social, group characteristics.
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JAEGER'S CHARACTERISATION OF OD VALUES

Power Distance	Uncertainty Avoidance	Masculinity	Individualism
PD is low. This means that OD values are associated with status equality and the minimization of social differences.	UA is low. OD values stress tolerance of ambiguity and minimize elaborate structuring of relationships.	Masculinity is low. Results and things are less associated with OD values than is the feminine stress on feelings and relationships.	Individualism is medium. Jaeger concludes that OD values are inconsistent with both extremes of the Individualism-Collectivism scale. On the one hand, OD stresses and tolerates individual differences, while on the other it facilitates collaboration and teamwork.

Comparing the two profile, the reader can easily see that the OD orientation does not fit with the dominant values of UN Agencies' organisational culture which in general consists of :

- a) High Power Distance (strong hierarchical-power based on authority and less on professional competence-expertise power),
- b) High Uncertainty Avoidance (bureaucratic rituals and procedures as means of protecting oneself against continuous political influencing typical of "porous boundary" phenomena,
- c) Masculinity (acquisition and hoarding of information (immaterial things) and careful handling of feelings which are seen to be too problematic in the context of the UN's multi-culturalist environment where the potential for possible multiple misunderstandings and conflicts in human relations is high,
- d) More collectivist (group affiliation based on common nationality, religion, language, gender), is important for a staff's survival especially in the context of politicised UN Agencies

where coalition building is a permanent feature of decision making. Even though many UN Agency staff also act very individualistically; however they would rarely risk full isolation. Instead they tend to keep coalition linkages alive along common group bonds in order to guarantee their political survival in this highly volatile and politicised environment.

A similar potential conflict exists in developing countries whenever a donor country conducts an OD intervention in a recipient country of the Southern hemisphere. However, research results of OD practice in developing countries seem to suggest that OD success is actually higher in situations when the value distance between humanistic OD and the client's traditional value orientation is actually high and not low (Johnson, Golembiewski, 1992).

The situation in UN Agencies is often characterised by an equally high value difference but the results of OD projects in UN Agencies seem to indicate failure rather than success for humanistic OD interventions. The prevalent value distance between OD consultants and the UN Agency clients, the authors report, actually increases the likelihood of protracted resistance and possible failure.

The reason for this seeming contradiction might lie in the underestimating of the power factor of OD projects in developing countries. The OD practitioner working in the South is supported by institutional power (donor country guarantees budget, resources, governmental influence), hence any reported acceptance of egalitarian OD techniques should be seen in the context of power asymmetry between "northern" consultant (high power) and "southern" client (low power). The beneficiary is in need, hence dependent, hence has low power and is therefore most of the time willing, out of necessity, to drop his insistence for respect to his own high power needs (high power distance) typical of most developing country cultures.

Client organisations within the UN system are not comparable to developing country governments and institutions. Most UN Agencies hold more institutional power than the OD consultants bring to the job.

When planning for OD intervention in a UN Agency, the authors hence suggest that the concerned consultants adjust their practice to the environmental constraints and understand that their approach needs to reflect and project high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, medium collectivism and masculinity.

Matching their OD design to the constraints of the UN Agencies' cultural environment might guarantee higher success rates since such a congruent approach might limit resistance and prevent the emergence of the "porous boundary" phenomena. How to match OD technology to the UN Agencies four value orientations is presented below.

HIGH POWER DISTANCE

The highly political nature of public administration in general and UN Agencies in particular makes OD interventions much more political as has been already noted elsewhere (Kempf, 1987).

Consequently, OD practitioners working in the UN system should spend time building support, seeking consensus and "lobbying" across functional lines. The organisational culture of UN Agencies is more oriented towards distributive than integrative bargaining tactics. Hence solution

generation takes more time and more political skills are needed than is normally required in the private sector.

Carefully building a power base within the UN Agency can be useful for the OD practitioner. This means acting more like a politician than a professional expert whose traditional private sector rôle concentrates more on linear approaches and simple cause-effect reasoning rather than on circular processes, and multi-causal thinking.

Since the top managers of UN Agencies are astute politicians, the OD consultants might better start with middle management, create necessary coalitions and consensus based on a list of alternative solutions and then work upwards towards top management for final decision making.

Careful and detailed force field analyses on a continuous basis will help the OD practitioner clarify the political forces and identify possible resistances to the solutions proposed. Political will needs to be continuously tested and mobilized. In general it might be useful to know how to distinguish between conventional management behaviour and theatrical staging and acting (Jacobsson, 1992, Vail, 1990). Many deeds and words are comparable to double talk, hence there exists a need to decipher statements and to separate actual from intended message, theatrical gesture from intended action.

AVOIDANCE OF UNCERTAINTY

Most UN Agencies do not have a functioning performance appraisal system nor any career plan or merit system. Depending on power shifts, managers are reassigned to posts without necessarily possessing the required professional expertise. On the other hand, UN Agencies cannot easily dismiss their staff. Hence there exists a strong conflict between relative job security and a sense of insecurity based on persistent uncertainty regarding job posting and career prospects. Both factors combined encourage patronage which in turn is reinforced by the multicultural divisions within the staff of UN Agencies which in turn reinforces "patronage-tribalism".

OD interventions which focus on raising awareness regarding interpersonal conflicts and encouraging managers to "own their unwanted behaviours" (Nevis, 1987) might be less appropriate in such a politicised environment.

Instead, structural interventions focusing on policy, rules, regulations as for instance reorganising work flows, installing new reporting lines, or redirecting communication flows might be less threatening, more impersonal, less likely to be seen as "ethnically-biased", and therefore more acceptable to UN Agency staff.

COLLECTIVISM

Due to the need for survival in a politicised environment, most UN Agency staff develop strong affiliations based on common background (e.g. ethnicity, religion, language, nationality) and based on mutual exchange of favors and support.

OD consultants should be mindful of such webs of coalition linkages and mutual indebtedness and not fall into the trap of trusting an OD intervention solely into the hands of one or two individual staff members however competent and motivated they might appear.

Based on the fragile and complex political environment, UN Agencies cannot develop an organisational culture solely based on professionalism. Most officials are generalists who by definition do not enjoy expertise power but instead are competent in regard to the understanding and use of institutional and personal power.

Since most of the clientele is politically literate, OD practitioners might at times have to use go-betweens or third parties who can either mediate conflicts and offer useful information which the consultants might not be able to gather by themselves directly.

MASCULINITY

Being embedded in a politicised and calculating client system, OD practitioners might have to take more initiative, float initial proposals and at times advocate solutions.

Relationship oriented OD approaches (femininity) are not sufficient by themselves, and the corresponding rôle of facilitator or catalyst is mostly inappropriate since it easily leads to a situation where Pandora boxes are opened which are difficult to close later on.

Instead, it could be useful to be more directive and to "sell" specific solutions or to help create coalitions in support of specific solutions.

This in turn requires a more active rôle of the OD consultant consisting for instance of writing and editing of draft documents rather than adopting a more conventional rôle of a neutral, non-partisan, non-initiating facilitator.

CONCLUSIONS

UN Agencies are needed and so is the United National system. While this is obvious to most people, fewer people agree on what these agencies should do and how they should be organised and managed.

Due to the multiple stake holders involved, the organisational environment of UN Agencies is and will be politicised for the foreseeable future. Hence, the "porous boundary" phenomena described above will survive for a long time.

As mandates and tasks of the UN system increases almost day by day, the need for efficient and effective management and organisation is of paramount importance to all parties involved.

Improving existing and future UN Agencies' performance will require OD interventions for a long time to come. In order to secure success for all parties involved, the main points of this article should be considered and change strategies and tactics should be designed which can successfully overcome the UN system's "porous boundary" phenomena.

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