Unintended Consequences of Optimism, Collaboration, and Inquiry: A Career Legacy Interview with Therese F. Yaeger

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript is part of a series of articles (Femi-Jegede, Swearingen, Stivers & Schultz, 2021; Gerhardt & Peluchette, 2014; Peluchette & Gerhardt, 2015; Schultz & Thompson, 2017; Schultz & Westlin, 2025; Thompson, 2015) that explore the contributions of notable management educators and leadership researchers in the Midwestern United States. The Midwest Academy of Management (MWAOM) recognizes distinguished scholars in leadership, management, organizational development, strategy, and entrepreneurship annually with their Distinguished Scholar Award. This recognition provides an opportunity to acknowledge senior scholar accomplishments. The series of papers provides an archive of insights, reflections, and professional legacy details of awardees. The 2024 Midwest Distinguished Scholar was awarded to Dr. Therese F. Yaeger. Throughout Dr. Yaeger's career, she has leveraged practitioner proficiencies into engaged teaching, backed by research aimed at educating the next generation of OD leaders. Yaeger's life-long accomplishments are inspiring.

KEYWORDS

Organization development, consulting, mentoring, collaboration

Introduction

Therese F. Yaeger (Ph.D., Benedictine University) is Professor Emerita and former Associate Director of the Organization Development Ph.D. and the Master of Science (M.S.) in Management and Organizational Behavior programs at Benedictine University. She is a Past Chairperson of the Academy of Management (AoM) Management Consulting Division and served on the Executive Board of the Southwest Academy of Management. She was President and on the board of the Midwest Academy of Management (2007-11). Dr. Yaeger has contributed significantly to the understanding of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, et al., 1999; Cooperrider, et al., 2001; Cooperrider, et al., 2005; Yaeger, et al., 2005), Global Consulting Efforts (Sorensen, et al., 2011; Yaeger, et al., 2006), Organization Development and Change (Head, et al., 2007; Johnson, et al., 2013*;* Yaeger, & Sorensen, 2009) and Motivation Theory discourse (Sorensen & Yaeger, 2015; Yaeger & Sorensen, 2023). Her work has received numerous AoM best paper awards (Coleman, et al., 2016; Ivory, et al., 2017; Newman, et al., 2014; Reidl, et al., 2020; Thanetsunthorn, et al., 2015). She has over 100 publications, yet more notably, she was the co-recipient (with Peter Sorensen) of the 2023 Pasmore-Woodman Award at the Academy of Management annual meeting.

Congratulations on being named the 2024 Midwest Academy of Management Distinguished Scholar. What or who motivated you to study Organizational Development (OD)?

Before my MS degree in OB/OD, I didn't even know what OD was, or what I wanted to do. I was in corporate America and doing very well. But in my past work life, I remember a consultant who met with my team and told us *we would do things differently now.* He said, *we are going to this and this, and that.* I knew at that moment his plan wasn't going to work. At break time, we met at the proverbial water cooler and agreed that

we needed to get this consultant out of our office. We felt like we were being dictated to, and we knew that change wasn't going to happen. This autocratic, top-down approach to change reinforced my belief in the importance of including people in change efforts. Now, you asked the question, what motivated me to study Organization Development (OD), but at that time, I didn't know there was such a field as OD. I lived through many organizational change challenges before I knew about the formal discipline of organization development. I knew there had got to be a better way of moving forward. It was then that I thought, I had to understand organizational change better. And so, I began by starting in the master's program at Benedictine University. In Peter's OD course, I got an introduction to how organizations could handle change better by involving organizational members. Then, the story just unfolds. I began as a part-time Graduate Assistant in the OB program, and I was one of six graduate assistants at the time working in Peter's department. I was preparing papers for publication for him and other faculty for the National Academy. A lot was going on, but when I finished my master's degree, it was Peter who suggested I apply to the doctoral program.

That's how I came into the field of organization development, and I knew I was learning in the right place. Wanting to better understand organizational change and starting in Benedictine's MSMOB program was my first *unintended consequence* in academia.

When you said it was Peter who suggested that you earn your doctorate, it gave me chills because you have had a career-long partnership with Peter. Would you be willing to just share how that began and what that partnership has given you?

Peter got approval (through numerous committees) to start a doctoral program at Benedictine University (called Illinois Benedictine College until 1996). But after approval, his colleagues said, *Peter, you can't do it alone*. And he said, *You're right, but Therese could help make this happen*. They knew I had corporate experience, and a background in start-ups, which helped, as the students were primarily corporate executives. So, I became a good liaison between the school and the students, and I think it worked out well.

Working, and ultimately researching with, Peter Sorensen was another unintended consequence. Never say never.

However, I never planned on being in higher education as a long-term career because I didn't like the slower pace of academia. I finished my degree and later went to Motorola, but I continued to publish and teach for Benedictine.

Now Peter's commitment to students is something I witnessed and appreciated, along with his willingness and patience for adult learners. He kept finding opportunities for student publications, and as more opportunities arose from more dissertations, together we gained efficiencies at various stages of the publication process. Along with students, we became accustomed to challenging each other's ideas and we would make our points, but it was merely a level of reassurance and respect we developed for each other.

As you think back over your career, will you share any anchoring moments that impacted you?

The biggest impact for me was having good mentors, and that is evident in my work with Peter Sorensen. Also, publications created anchoring moments for me. One of the first visiting faculty in Benedictine's doctoral program was David Cooperrider, and David was relentless in capturing publication opportunities for all. There's a story there. David was a master's student of Peter in the 1970s, and from Peter to David to me is three different generations of OD knowledge. David Cooperrider and Tom Head were on my dissertation committee, and because of them, I had a positive experience undertaking doctoral research.

During my time as a doctoral student, there was growing traction in the new field of appreciative inquiry, so after some publications with David, Peter and I suggested that we get some foundational articles printed in a book. That was 1998, and the first AI book was published in 1999, and the world of appreciative inquiry took off, with two expanded editions after that (Cooperrider, et al., 1999; Cooperrider, et al., 2001; Cooperrider, et al., 2005).

Another anchoring moment was when I realized that Douglas McGregor's theory X and Y had not been reevaluated in 50 years (McGregor, 1960). So, I put together a panel for the Academy of Management in 2007 which resulted in tremendous interest (Schein, et al., 2007). I had no idea that revisiting McGregor's *The Human Side of Enterprise* would turn into a *Journal of Management History* Guest Editor opportunity

(Yaeger, 2011). From there more opportunities arose; and more unintended consequences. Also, I was conducting interviews for the *Organization Development Journal*, and many cases for *OD Practitioners* with Sorensen and Homer Johnson, a colleague at Loyola. Homer said *Let's get a book of cases out*. So, we compiled 10 years of OD case studies that we published in the *OD Practitioner*, and we created a case book that is widely used today (Johnson, et al., 2013).

Another outcome involving McGregor's Theory X and Y occurred five years after the *Journal of Management History* publication. Because Peter Sorensen and I had just published a McGregor piece in Oxford Press (Sorensen & Yaeger, 2015), in 2017, Sorensen and I was invited to write Douglas McGregor's biography for *The Palgrave Handbook of Organizational Change Thinkers* which involved biographies of 87 of the top change thinkers of the last century (Szabla, et al., 2017). Unbeknownst to us, someone also nominated me, Peter Sorensen, and my Benedictine colleague Ram Tenkasi to be among the biographies in *The Palgrave Handbook of Organizational Change Thinkers* book (Sanders et al, 2017/2021; Narel (2017/2021); Sorensen & Yaeger, 2017/2021; Yaeger, 2017/2021). That was humbling, but another anchoring moment.

Recently, I was delighted when Donald Anderson included my profile in his OD textbook (Anderson, 2020). But when I saw the other OD profiles that were included, namely, Edgar Schein, Warner Burke, and Peter Block -- I was intimidated. This OD Profile is another unintended consequence of continued publications.

What has impacted your career most?

OD is a relatively young field, which makes publishing in OD exciting, so publishing was most impactful for my academic career. I think revisiting McGregor's work – that there is a Theory Y that we should be exploring but can't deny Theory X – has impacted my thinking. So I would say, Douglas McGregor's work had a significant impact on my career, along with Cooperrider's Appreciative Inquiry.

Throughout your career, what was the best career advice you received?

My dissertation committee, Tom Head and David Cooperrider, got me out of my comfort zone. They pushed me. David knew I wanted to study global consulting and the people who had experienced OD change efforts. I loved what was happening in the world of Organization Development using appreciative inquiry. So in the late 1990s, I was with Peter and David at the University of Chicago when Dave asked me when I was going to start interviewing global consultants for my dissertation. I said, *Oh in the next couple of weeks* and he said, *No, Therese you're going to start now*. I went into full panic mode. I said, *NO*, but 'Coop' insisted that I get started. So, I learned to say *yes*, even when I wasn't truly comfortable.

Remember when you're not ready, and you say to someone, *I'm not ready to do that right now*, but you just need someone to push you. That was exactly what David did to me. He said, *Now is the time to start. I have time. You have time, and you have a tape recorder, don't you?* Cooperrider made me get out of my comfort zone. He made me stretch and get uncomfortable. Then, my data collection started rolling at full speed.

So, for me, learning to get out of your comfort zone was good advice. I look at professors who have done little research for decades. I think we have to nudge those people to get them out of their comfort zone. The minute you feel work is mundane, or the minute you think the textbook is boring, it's time to shake things up. Also, you need to publish. Organization Development greats such as Edgar Schein, Micheal Beer, and all the OD scholars at MIT and Harvard didn't become famous sitting in their offices. They became famous by publishing, and by getting their ideas out there. Publishing was good advice.

In your opinion, what is the most pressing OD challenge today?

Good OD work is challenging and takes time. As an OD consultant, getting called into an organization, only to find out what the client wants is to get their change effort done quickly. I always have to say, *it takes time,* but clients want a fast magic wand. Organizational change efforts sometimes experience a valley of despair, where issues might get worse before they get better. So that's a pressing challenge.

Differently, OD has untapped opportunities in information technology, and there are successful organizations undertaking change implementation without using OD terminology, so I think there could be a better union there. At the Academy of Management, there are approximately 24 divisions, and OD is one of the larger

divisions. Everybody understands change management, and we need to ensure OD continues to contribute good research.

Looking at practitioners and academics, what do you think is the biggest misunderstanding from each group?

This is a granular question, fraught with different answers. For practitioners, change is difficult, and implementing positive change interventions takes time. For academics, the OD classroom should be experiential and collaborative, not passive. Academics have to understand it is application *and* theory. Perhaps theory can be covered for half of the class, but an OD application has to be *felt* and *experienced* by a student through a group exercise or intervention.

Do you have any unanswered research questions?

Because OD is a relatively young field, opportunities abound. For example, COVID changed so much, and dissertations are now coming out on virtual OD consulting. COVID created the need for more virtual work in OD, and I think there's a niche there for more research. Also, there are unanswered questions about the intersection between change and technology implementation, using various organization development interventions.

Your research has been part of your teaching and your advising. In what ways have you leveraged all of that to help reach your students?

I make it a point to continue researching. When I taught a research methods course, often it was before I traveled to the Midwest Academy conference to present. In class, I would present what I was planning to present at the conference. So, I would ask students to think like they were in the audience. It was so fun to see students feel like they're given a voice *to evaluate my research!* It ignites them and it is empowering for students to take an active role. They will provide suggestions, saying things like, *You need a chart to go explain that better*. I just love to see students take charge of what they think is important. I love when I see those students who are usually passive come alive because I am ingratiating myself to them, and they feel empowered to provide feedback.

You've inspired so many doctoral students. Where do you draw inspiration from?

No, students inspire me! I see students when they have had the mental light bulb go off and I take delight in seeing that happen. I see students, and dissertations, as a gift. I learn with them; things that I would not have learned had I not been on those committees.   Most of my publications are with students. Rarely do I publish solo, and when I do, I don't enjoy it as much because I don't feel nudged, and I miss collaborating. I typically don't work on a dissertation unless I feel there is a contribution for publication. When students are uncomfortable, I tell them to start by presenting their earliest thinking at the Midwest Academy conference. Then, students gain confidence and create a publishable paper. I had a student tell me, *Now I get it. I get it,* as an IT student/executive was too focused on the hardware/software at his company, and lost sight of his employees and why they were leaving his organization. As his mental lightbulb went off, I knew something positive happened. So, students are a gift. I want to help them learn and be successful, and for them to enjoy what they do.

Aside from Benedictine, my husband and I have four adult daughters and four granddaughters. These women inspire me. There isn't enough representation of women within OD (as indicated in T*he Palgrave Handbook of Organizational Change Thinkers*), and these female change thinkers have motivated me to encourage more women into the OD arena.

Do you have any closing thoughts to share?

I cannot believe I spent 30 years at Benedictine but it is because of the students. I was that person who believed I would be there for 3 years, in and out, and onto the next corporate job. But my heart is at Benedictine. I enjoy the people and the culture. My degrees are from there; my family's been there. I value the Benedictine atmosphere and what I gained from the doctoral students at Benedictine University.

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