CEOs reported in IBM’s 2010 study that their biggest challenge was dealing with the complexity arising from the multiple interconnections and increasing interdependency prevalent in today’s business world (Palmisano, 2010). This is particularly the case for organizations driving a sustainable development agenda or seeking to solve wicked or challenging social issues. These types of initiatives represent an evolutionary change for organizational structures. In this environment, organizations need to go beyond their isolated boundaries and hierarchical structures and move towards models that facilitate broader engagement with multiple stakeholders across disciplines, industries, and sectors. As organizations embark on building these crucial relationships, it becomes understandable why many are faced with overwhelming complexity and unchartered challenges in pursuit of financial, social, and environmental goals for triple bottom line accountability.

Metrics of accountability for organizations with broader, sustainable perspectives also need the ability to embrace cultural differences, thus adding another dimension of organizational performance and complexity. The four dimensions: financial, social, environmental, and culture represent a quadruple bottom line measuring an organization’s holistic impact.

This reality of increasing complexity combined with the critical need for collaboration across organizations, sectors, and communities, creates great opportunities as well as challenges for the field of organization development and for those of us who are passionate about helping create positive change in the world. This article provides an overview of the important role of Inter-organizational Networks (ION), discusses what they are and how they are working, and provides OD consultants with new perspectives on how to bring their knowledge and skills forward to support this work.

**Inter-organizational Networks**

In the era of sustainable development and environmental concerns, many organizations are adopting network structures as the means for improving performance. Dale Ainsworth, a managing partner with Valley Vision, a civic and social organization, believes that, “when faced with large-scale, complex problems, multiple organizations and institutions must join together to form a ‘meta-organization’ capable of developing the large-scale solutions needed to solve complex problems.” Valley Vision in Sacramento, CA (www.valleyvision.org), is an interesting Inter-organization Network that is supporting ION development. You might say it is a prototype of an organization that recognizes that sustainability work requires the collaboration of many who bring different knowledge and skills to meet complex challenges.

It is becoming evident that no single agency, organization, or sector can solve the types of problems (i.e., poverty, global warming, greenhouse gases, education, and healthcare reform) we are facing and that the organizational structure model of inter-organizational configurations or
networks will be an important governance model now and in the future. IONs take advantage of a broader set of resources and increased capacity necessary to help solve some of the more wicked problems facing businesses and societies. Increasingly networks are being seen as enabling structures creating greater opportunities for advanced innovative, improved service delivery, distributed risks, and shared accountability.

In addition, an inherent aspect of these shifts is a broadening of the context towards a whole systems perspective where all key stakeholders are engaged in understanding the whole and in co-creating a sustainable solution. Initially, and then throughout the development stages of the network, those who are leading or engaged in the networks work to find collaborators critical to the solution and identify and break down barriers that impede their participation in the network. Developing these skills is particularly important when dealing with wicked problems where multiple stakeholder groups need to be engaged to work an acceptable solution.

There are multiple reasons for establishing a network, and the reasons can influence how the network is formulated and functions. For example, some networks form to achieve a specific purpose and then disband such as the America’s Cup event where CEO Craig Thompson reports “by partnering with the community, we will not only create a once-in-a-lifetime experience for America’s Cup fans, but we will create a lasting legacy for the City and residents” (as cited in People Plan, May 2011). While the purpose of the America’s Cup ION is single-focused and short-lived, its design philosophy emphasizes sustainable principles that serve to both fund and accelerate projects with lasting benefits for the Bay area. Other networks form to share knowledge such as the Gulf of Mexico Research Institute, a partnership between BP and the Gulf of Mexico Alliance, which is chartered to prompt and manage research on the impact of the Deepwater Horizon 2010 oil spill. The business world is also engaging in IONs to improve supply chain performance and profitability. Empowering local communities has been a deep commitment for Starbucks. By supporting improvements in farming practices and choosing only ethical sourced suppliers, which promotes fair trade, the corporation has embraced the quadruple bottom line metrics of accountability.

**Evolving Organizations into IONs**

While networks are viewed as a better way to address complex issues and address sustainable development, they can be challenging to establish, tenuous to sustain functionality, and are dependent on whether the actors involved can effectively join forces with clear intentions to collaborate. CEOs recognize the value of network structures to achieve quadruple bottom line results, yet in the IBM study they disclose that their organizations lack sufficient capability and competencies to effectively catalyze the relationships necessary to be effective in this type of environment. To build capacity, organizations will need to support learning and development of their workforce to effectively engage in relationship building, cross-cultural communications, information sharing, and coordination of tasks. Specifically, infrastructures and competencies will need to support initiatives such as developing a shared vision, building trusting relationships, balancing power and authority, creating participatory leadership, identifying collaborative action plans, clearly defining roles within the network, and measuring joint success.

These factors represent a fundamental shift in structure relative to traditional organizations, which have been challenged to create cultures of collaboration. They challenge our basic assumptions about command and control leadership, authority and power, competition, and privilege. What is needed is a greater understanding of the interrelated nature of our organizational systems and a deep commitment to doing what is needed to support sustainable communities locally and globally. More and more we will see cross sector collaborations, especially across public and private organizations where partnering in networks yields sustainable results. The unbelievable development that has taken place in China in the last 20 years has largely been possible due to government and private industry collaboration.

Creating an environment for collaboration and promoting collaborative behaviors are essential steps for supporting network participants. While these concepts are not new to the business world, they are fairly new to the public arena and represent a significant opportunity for OD professionals. As a consequence of the growing importance of IONs and the demand for sustainable development, OD professionals are wise to focus their skills and attention towards understanding inter-organizational network structures and how they can support their success.

Working in and through networks necessitates the use of technology to support effective virtual work. Fast Company blogger Daniel Rasmus, a visionary trends author, points to a relationship between IONs and virtual collaboration. His predictions include: “...the shifting model of global work and growing disparities between skills and talent supply suggest that organizations will need to consider how people working under different models collaborate and integrate ongoing, consistent, and meaningful value” (Rasmus, 2011, p. 3). We must ask ourselves if we are ready to fully support the emergence of this virtual collaborative work.

**Virtual Collaboration within IONs**

Virtual collaboration, accomplished through the use of technology, enables collaboration that supports an organization’s commitment to profitable yet sustainable business practices. Through the use of rapidly evolving voice and video technologies, IONs can work across boundaries of time, space, disciplines, and cultures while reducing expenditures of time, travel and energy. The requirements for successful face-to-face collaboration also hold true for collaboration in virtual environments. Relationship-building and trust are key and need to be as present in virtual environments as in face-to-face environments. And while many in the field of OD are using technology, there is still a great need to bring new knowledge, skills, and values to
improve virtual work. The authors of this paper have let go of the assumption that working virtually is necessarily inferior to working face-to-face. And while we cherish those times when we can work together in each other’s presence, we do not rely on that presence. The ability to work collaboratively at a distance offers some of the same complexities as working collaboratively face-to-face. In many ways it takes greater presence and attention to relationships.

Understanding the interrelatedness of organizational systems and the complexities involved is important for OD practitioners to offer valuable assistance to IONs, both those working face-to-face and those transitioning to virtual collaborative structures. Work across organizations is often cross-cultural work, as the IONS that come together to support a common purpose often have very different cultures, values, governance structures, and practices. As OD practitioners develop the skills to work in these complex environments, they can contribute to increased inter-organizational network functionality and nurture the thinking out of which system-wide, eco-friendly practices develop.

An important service OD professionals can offer is to facilitate the development of the skills unique to initiating and maintaining sustainable relationships in virtual environments.

Msanjilla, and Afsarmanesh (2009) refer to organizations that provide this service as “...virtual breeding organizations...” (p. 4758). These professionals prepare organizations for active participation in successful, sustainable virtual collaboratives by introducing them to essential virtual collaboration competencies such as:

- Maintaining common operating and sharing principles,
- Providing interoperable infrastructure
- Facilitating common understanding with a maintained ontology
- Providing common definition of value systems and performance metrics
- Supporting the rational assessment of trust levels

An important addition to this list and one which OD practitioners are particularly equipped to mediate and provide is processes and tools for inevitable, inter-organizational disagreements.

The OD Practitioner as Bridge from Intra-to Inter-organizational Collaboration

Sustainability can be considered from a number of perspectives. Considerations of ecological sustainability include the ways agencies use energy in the workplace and the ways workers use energy to transport themselves to and from the workplace and to work sites. There is also the issue of network sustainability in terms of strategies stakeholders use to maintain the social capital that supports and nurtures a successful virtual collaborative culture.

In South Carolina at the state level, two human service network stakeholder agencies have responded to calls for cost-cutting and eco-sustainability by investing in HD video conferencing technology and the supporting infrastructure and staff training. This strategy drastically reduced their travel spending and energy footprint while increasing information sharing and knowledge management across the state networks and the time providers spend serving clients. Although they are a step in the direction of eco-sustainability, these virtual interactions are primarily within individual network stakeholder agencies, however, they are creating the groundwork, the supporting structures to support inter-organizational work as it develops. The groundwork being created for these virtual sessions have the potential to be collaborative and interactive, yet, they are typically still primarily used for intra-organizational training and information sharing purposes. Still, for a systems thinker, they hold the promise of broader possibilities. We hope OD practitioners can see these possibilities and guide organizations in their develop toward the ability to work in IONS. The skill-set of OD professionals are valuable here, guiding human service organizations through the transition from the traditional reliance solely on face-to-face or didactic virtual interactions with stakeholders and clients to interactions that utilize thoughtfully planned, interactive, multimedia, video communication experiences.

The professional human services community of a small South Carolina county has developed a number of ION collaboratives to enhance the quality of services available to its citizens. The inter-organizational human service networks are highly functional, but rely largely on face-to-face and some teleconferencing communications. The county has reduced spending while building capacity for improved service provision through cost sharing and inter-organizational case management. These outcomes are the result of the trust and social capital developed among network stakeholders through many years of inter-organization network activity and successful collaborative interaction.

The high levels of social capital the group has developed over the years suggest the potential of a way to address issues connecting all four dimensions (financial, social, environmental, and cultural) of a quadruple bottom line throughout the local network of human service agencies. We can ask, “How can the work of this human service agency network be supported by business, education, and government?” Access to other important stakeholders could make a real difference in moving beyond providing services to individuals and families, to creating sustainable communities which are linked through a larger common purpose and supported in realizing that purpose through virtual communication technology and infrastructure. Here again are opportunities for OD practitioners attuned to quadruple bottom line metrics to help coordinate the intention of a professional community to collaborate toward whole-system sustainability.

A Sustainable Community in Development – Cleveland ION

The formation of an ION in response to a perceived local or regional need can occur quite rapidly when change leaders leverage a pre-scheduled conference or similar event as an occasion to engage their professional networks around a common agenda and open new possibilities for collaborative problem-solving. The newly formed Cleveland Educators for a Sustainable Future provides a case in point.
During the Fall of 2010, Peter Whitehouse, a neurologist and co-founder of The Intergenerational School (TIS), a Cleveland K-8 urban charter school, had been attending monthly meetings of a book discussion group organized by his personal friend Roger Saillant, Former VP of Ford Motor Company and current Director of the Fowler Center for Sustainable Values at the Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University. The two friends shared an interest in education and its relationship to ecological sustainability, and participated in a book group where they had been discussing The Necessary Revolution, by Peter Senge (2010), a longtime friend of Saillant.

In January of 2011, Whitehouse was engaged in planning the Schools That Can (STC) annual conference, to be hosted in Cleveland. STC is a national organization of high performing urban schools, dedicated to providing a forum for sharing innovative practices in k-12 education. The STC membership consists of independent, charter, parochial and public schools which, upon application, are accepted into the organization based on a demonstrated high level of performance and track record of successful innovation.

The discussions between Whitehouse and Saillant centered on a mutually perceived opportunity to leverage resources for K-12 sustainability education within the context of two related initiatives; one national and the other regional. The first of these complementary initiatives is the national Educational Partnership of the Society for Organizational Learning (the SoL Ed Partnership), launched by Peter Senge in collaboration with Jamie Cloud, a national consultant on sustainability education and co-founder of the Cloud Institute. The second initiative, entitled GreenCityBlueLake, was launched in 2009 by Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson as a ten (10) year regional sustainability effort in contemplation of the upcoming 50-year anniversary of the burning Cuyahoga River, the 1969 event that catalyzed a national environmental movement. Although this latter effort had stimulated some discussion regarding the role of educational reform in fostering regional sustainability, Whitehouse, Saillant, and others decided that the level of attention given to sustainability as a guiding principle and organizing theme for educators was inadequate. They queried whether a scaled-up inter-organizational effort grounded in systems thinking might enable Cleveland educators to replicate the kinds of successes, in terms of assessed educational outcomes, that had been demonstrated in recent years by members of the SoL Ed Partnership.

As a member of the organizing committee for the 2011 STC Conference in Cleveland, Whitehouse arranged to have Cloud serve as the keynote speaker and facilitator of a workshop on best practices in sustainability education (http://www.cloudinstitute.org/partners). The choice of Cloud as speaker and guest facilitator would set the stage for using the STC conference as a possible leverage point for bringing whole system educational reform to Cleveland. This event fostered the birth of an ION.

In January 2011, Whitehouse and one of the authors traveled to Tucson at the invitation of the Waters Foundation, an educational partnership with a focus on capacity building for teaching systems thinking in the schools. The purpose of this visit was to tour innovative schools in three separate districts, and to share what they had learned with their associates back in Cleveland (http://www.watersfoundation.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=k12.vision).

Equipped with knowledge and inspiration derived from Tucson, Whitehouse invited Cloud to visit Cleveland in early March (two months ahead of the scheduled STC conference), and utilized her visit as an occasion to organize an invitation-only meeting of representatives of area schools and supporting organizations, including educational directors of the Nature Center at Shaker Lakes and the Cleveland Botanical Garden, to begin a discussion around a common agenda and strategy for making sustainability a cornerstone of a capacity building effort in support of Cleveland area schools, aligned with the principles and values reflected in the broader GreenCityBlueLake initiative. This initial meeting was well attended and produced a consensus around the goal of creating a culture of learning that would encompass Cleveland area schools and affiliated organizations. The basic intent would be to improve educational quality based on systems thinking principles.

A low turnout at a second meeting signaled that the group may have not succeeded in establishing a clear mandate for itself, or in producing a clear set of understandings regarding their core mission as an inter-organizational network. The question of inter-organizational leadership also remained unresolved. However, notwithstanding these concerns, the members of the group agreed to each assume a proactive role in making further contacts with individuals and organizations within each of their professional networks, and in the process compile information about existing inter-organizational relationships relevant to various aspects of sustainability education that can serve as the basis for creating a baseline system map. The members of the group acknowledged that participants varied widely in their levels of background knowledge regarding systems thinking principles, and they responded by organizing an impromptu “systems thinking 101” workshop as a way of generating common understandings regarding the principles and concepts guiding their work.

In short order, the group, now identifying itself as Cleveland Educators for a Sustainable Future, organized a larger group of about forty (40) individuals to meet with Senge, taking advantage of the fact that he already had plans to visit Cleveland in early May. Many of the participants at the meeting with Senge also attended the Schools that Can Conference a week later. At this point, considerable momentum had been built around the idea of sending a delegation from Cleveland to attend Camp Snowball intensive near Tucson in July 2011, and several members of CESF volunteered to draft a formal proposal for private funding assistance to pay for their attendance, based on the express commitment to follow up with their respective organizations to disseminate the knowledge gained, and continue building inter-organizational capacity for learning, innovating and sharing best practices in sustainability education Cleveland K-12 schools.
The above Cleveland example demonstrates how a small group of individuals can initiate a process of system-wide capacity building by utilizing their existing professional networks, enlisting the aid of one or more consultants, and by leveraging events such as conferences related to their topic of interest to generate momentum in support of a common agenda for change.

Summary

As the world shrinks, our OD tool-kits must evolve to embrace new ways of developing and sustaining organizations as separate entities and as networks and communities. Large multinational corporations such as IBM and S.C. Johnson spur innovation through collaboration with thinkers across the globe. Communities like Cleveland, networks of social service organizations, project oriented networks such as the one described for America’s Cup, and many others across the US and around the world are working in IONS to create sustainable approaches that will replace those developed for the 20th century. There is no question that these many efforts can benefit from what those in our field can offer. The question is whether our field is ready to support this work. This is Whole Systems Change work that evolved from the work of Kathy Dannemiller. Steve Cady, who worked closely with Dannemiller for many years, is evolving it into a methodology for working with sustainable communities, as are others who recognize the critical need.

The where, how, and with whom of work in organizations is rapidly evolving and we have the exciting challenge of evolving along with it. As we embrace a whole systems perspective on sustainability, we can see the many challenges and opportunities it presents. Yet, we must ask ourselves what competencies do we need for this whole systems change work? What mental models do we need to challenge to move into this new world? What skills are needed to help organizations collaborate and to maximize their ability to work effectively as virtual organizations?

We believe that this work is critically important to maintaining the relevancy of the field of OD and that we must prepare ourselves and those entering the field to see and understand organizations as interrelated systems and to develop our competencies to work collaboratively, to focus both on complex problem solving and appreciate inquiry, to develop a cultural lens and become proficient at working cross-culturally, and to bring dialogue and inquiry to mediate difference that often shows up as conflict. These are just a few of the competencies needed. The more we engage in this work, the more we will learn what we need. Our ability to partner with colleagues with other expertise will be important. Working with sustainability has shown us how the different, yet similar purpose and processes of social activism can marry well with OD practice to expand our ability to do this work. Partnering with others across fields provides an opportunity to challenge our mental models and expand our horizons. It also helps us learn to work in ways that we will be supporting others in doing so.

As our OD toolkits expand to serve emerging organizational formulations, structures, and processes that support greater sustainability, we must be alert to emergent opportunities that call for our particular expertise in supporting the development of organizational growth, health, safety, and sustainability. How are you preparing yourself and supporting others in moving into this new world of OD work?

References
