

## **How to engage defensive organizational gaps to restore adaptive coping**

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An organization always needs to have a fit with its environment to be effective (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967) and nowadays needs to have an agile capability to create new fits when the environment is changing in fast, unpredictable and complex ways (xx). However defensive gaps may impede this capability. A defensive gap is a gap between groups at different hierarchical levels in an organization, where each group is avoiding collaboration with the other group for defensive reasons, complaining about the gap while blaming the other group for its existence and at the same time maintaining the gap for its defensive functionality. This gap can exist between top management and shop floor, but also between top management and middle managers, between middle managers and shop floor, and supervisory board and the board of management. In most cases defensive gaps are contagious and poison the interaction between multiple levels at the same time.

We describe a solution for dealing with defensive gaps that we developed from the perspective of organization development. It is a triple jump type of intervention: hop, step and jump. Hop is the contracting, step is executing the assignment according to the contract and jump is confronting the real issues that have been avoided by groups at two or more levels. In this approach the critical essence of OD-work is to redesign the planned intervention at the moment one of the groups is courageous enough to open its defenses and start working on the real problem situation. In our experience higher-level groups do the hopping, while lower-level groups do the jumping.

We used action research as the methodology for developing and researching this solution for a period of 15-year (2002-2017) numerous assignments in diverse organizations like

industry, municipal health care, and higher education and telephone services. We started with the methods of survey feedback and large group intervention between 1996 and 2001 but discovered in 2002 that despite all the rigor, elegance and interactivity of these methods the real issues were not and could not be addressed with these highly reputed OD-methods. When we somehow disbelieving started to accept the evidence, we slowly and at first very ineffectively started to experiment with new approaches and from this emerged the triple jump approach. We report this finding as a multiple case study. First we present the case that shows the deceptive fallacy of the concept of bringing the whole system in the room (Weisbord, 1987) and of the large group methods to do this (Bunker & Alban, 1997). Then we present the case in which the hop, step and jump approach emerged for the first time. Finally we present two cases that tested and refined this approach.

The contribution of this paper is (1) the identification of defensive organizational gaps; (2) the triple jump approach as a potential effective intervention for engaging this gap; and (3) an exemplary process of how OD-practitioners can reflect on their practice in a way that transcends the existing frames of their professional field. The unique feature of this study is that while several longitudinal studies of OD work in one company are available (Brown & Jaques, 1965, Schuiling, 2014, Worley et al, 2015), this is the first longitudinal study of a changing consultancy practice across organizations in diverse branches.