Organizational development (OD) helps people and organizations work through change in a deliberate way. It can address leadership, communication, team practices, culture, and the systems that shape how decisions get made. The underlying methods may look similar in a nonprofit and a company, but the goals, constraints, and measures of progress often differ.

For nonprofits, OD may help connect a mission to reliable programs, healthy teams, and accountable use of resources. In companies, it may help align people and operations with business priorities while supporting performance and adaptability. In both settings, the work is more than announcing a new strategy: it involves understanding how the organization functions and helping people make change practical.

For working adults considering a change effort, a useful starting point is simple: identify the problem people experience in their day-to-day work before choosing a solution.

What organizational development means

Organizational development is a planned, people-centered approach to improving how an organization functions. It draws on behavioral and social sciences, systems thinking, leadership practice, and methods for assessing change. An OD practitioner might help a team diagnose a communication breakdown, guide leaders through a restructuring, or build a process for learning from program results.

OD is related to change management, but the terms are not identical. Change management often focuses on helping people adopt a specific change—such as a new technology or workflow. OD may take a broader view, examining the culture, relationships, decision-making structures, and leadership behaviors that affect whether a change can succeed and endure.

Neither approach guarantees a particular result. The fielding.edu work depends on context, participation, leadership choices, and whether the organization tracks what happens after a change is introduced.

A grounded takeaway for practitioners

Before launching a workshop or training, ask what needs to improve, who is affected, and what evidence would show progress. Those questions keep OD connected to real work rather than activity for its own sake.

OD in nonprofits: connecting mission to operations

Nonprofits often have to balance a clear public purpose with limited capacity, multiple funding requirements, and varied expectations from communities, staff, volunteers, boards, and funders. OD in nonprofits can help an organization make those demands more manageable without treating its mission as a slogan.



For example, a nonprofit that expands a youth program may need to clarify who makes decisions, how local partners contribute, and how staff share information across sites. A development team may need a more consistent way to communicate program needs to funders. A board and executive director may need to define their respective roles before a strategic plan can be put into practice.

In each case, OD can support the conditions for effective work: clearer roles, better coordination, stronger feedback loops, and leadership practices that make room for community knowledge. It can also help teams notice when a well-intended process is creating extra burden for the people the organization aims to serve.

Youth-led activism and the work of scaling

Youth-led activism offers a useful example of why organizational structure matters. A local campaign may begin with young people organizing around an issue they know firsthand. If the effort attracts attention or grows into programs in multiple regions, the group faces new questions: How will youth continue to shape decisions? What practices can be adapted across locations, and what should remain locally determined? How will adult allies support the work without taking control?

OD can help a group address those questions as it grows—from informal organizing to a network of partners or a global program. That might mean creating youth advisory structures with defined authority, documenting practices that can travel between sites, and setting safeguards for participation. Scaling should not mean copying one community's approach everywhere. It should mean building enough shared structure to coordinate while respecting local context.

For working adults supporting youth-led efforts, the practical lesson is to make decision rights explicit. Invite young people to shape the design, not only to endorse decisions already made.

OD in corporate settings: aligning people and performance

OD in corporate settings is often connected to business strategy, organizational effectiveness, and the ability to adapt. A company might use OD when it combines departments, changes its operating model, develops managers, or tries to improve collaboration across functions. Pretty simple.. The work can include interviews, team assessments, facilitated planning, leadership coaching, and follow-up measures.

Consider a company introducing a new customer service system. The technical installation is only one part of the change. Employees may need to learn new tasks, managers may need to revise schedules, and leaders may need to address concerns about workload or customer experience. Change management across sectors shares this basic challenge: people experience change through their roles, routines, and relationships, not through a project plan alone.

Corporate OD may also focus on culture. If a company says it values collaboration but rewards only individual results, the stated value and the operating system are misaligned. An OD process can help leaders examine those tensions and decide what to change in goals, incentives, meeting practices, or decision-making.

A grounded takeaway for managers

When introducing a new process, track both adoption and effects. For instance, measure whether employees use the system and whether response times or customer feedback change. Usage alone shows activity; it does not prove that the change improved the work.

What differs—and what carries across sectors

The core OD questions are often shared: What is happening now? Who is affected? What needs to change? How will the organization know? But the answers may be different in a nonprofit and a company.

Consideration Nonprofits Companies Primary purpose Advance a mission or serve a community, often alongside funder and public-accountability commitments. Meet business objectives, which may include customer value, revenue, service quality, or long-term viability. Key stakeholders Participants, communities, staff, volunteers, boards, funders, and partner organizations. Employees, customers, leaders, owners or shareholders, suppliers, and regulators. Common pressure points Capacity, funding cycles, community trust, staff retention, and coordination across partners. Competition, restructuring, technology adoption, productivity, and coordination across business units. Useful evidence Program reach, participant experience, service quality, equity, and progress toward mission outcomes. Adoption, quality, customer experience, retention, cost, and progress toward strategic objectives.

These are tendencies, not fixed rules. Nonprofits may earn revenue and use business measures; companies may pursue public-benefit goals and track social outcomes. The purpose of the table is to help practitioners choose measures that fit the organization’s actual responsibilities.

Measuring social impact and organizational change

Measurable social impact metrics help nonprofits understand whether programs are reaching people and contributing to intended outcomes. A useful measurement plan distinguishes among inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. Staff hours are an input; workshops delivered are an activity; attendance is an output; a change in participants’ knowledge or access to services may be an outcome.

For a youth program, for example, a team could track the number of young people who participate, how many return, whether participants report having a meaningful role in decisions, and whether they can demonstrate a skill the program aims to build. Longer-term measures may be important, but they require careful interpretation: many influences outside the program can affect a participant’s path.

Companies can also measure social effects, while both sectors can track internal indicators such as staff turnover, role clarity, decision time, or employee confidence in a new process. A metric should connect to a

question leaders can act on. If a number rises or falls, the team should know what it means and what response is possible.

Build a measurement loop

1. **Set a clear aim.** Describe the change the organization wants to see, for whom, and by when.
2. **Choose a small set of indicators.** Pair an outcome measure with information about participation, quality, or experience.
3. **Gather context.** Use interviews, observations, or open-ended feedback to understand what the numbers may miss.
4. **Review and adapt.** Share findings with the people affected and decide what to keep, revise, or stop.

For busy teams, the takeaway is to measure fewer things well rather than collect a long list that no one has time to interpret.

Purpose-driven leadership and the human side of change

Purpose-driven leadership is not limited to communicating an inspiring mission. It shows up in choices: whose input counts, how trade-offs are explained, whether staff have the capacity to do the work, and whether leaders respond when evidence challenges their assumptions.

That matters across sectors. A nonprofit leader may need to explain why a program is changing while maintaining trust with participants. A corporate leader may need to acknowledge the workload a restructuring creates and offer employees a meaningful way to raise concerns. In both cases, people are more likely to engage when they understand the reason for change and can see how their feedback is used.

OD can provide a structure for that engagement. It may include listening sessions, transparent decision processes, leadership development, and regular checks on implementation. None of these replaces difficult decisions; they help organizations make decisions with a clearer understanding of their effects.

Organizational development and change as a doctoral field

For professionals seeking deeper study, organizational development and change is also a doctoral field. Doctoral work can examine how organizations function, how people experience change, and how evidence can inform leadership practice. Students may bring questions from nonprofits, companies, public agencies, or community organizations into their research, connecting theory with problems they encounter at work.

Fielding Graduate University’s School of Leadership Studies includes Organizational Development and Change as a doctoral program category. People exploring this area can use that kind of program information to learn how advanced study approaches leadership, organizational systems, and change. Prospective students should check current program materials for the exact degree structure, admissions requirements, curriculum, and available formats.



Doctoral study is not a substitute for practical experience. It can, however, give working professionals a disciplined way to investigate a recurring organizational challenge, assess evidence, and develop approaches grounded in research rather than assumption.

Sharing ideas and learning across sectors

OD knowledge often travels through professional conversations as well as formal study. A university, nonprofit, or leadership team might share interviews or discussions as audio programming and make them available through Apple Podcasts or iHeartRadio syndication. Those channels can help practitioners find conversations about leadership, program growth, or organizational change while commuting or between meetings.

Listening is a starting point, not a method by itself. A practical way to use a podcast episode is to bring one question back to a team discussion: What does this idea look like in our setting, and what would we need to learn before trying it?

Choosing an OD approach that fits

Whether the setting is a nonprofit, a company, or a partnership between them, useful OD begins with the organization's actual challenge. A nonprofit scaling a youth-led initiative may need governance and local adaptation. A company adopting new technology may need manager support and workflow redesign. Both need leaders who listen, a way to test assumptions, and measures that indicate whether the change is helping.

- Define the problem in observable terms, not only as a broad wish to "improve culture."
- Involve the people who will experience the change, including those who may have less formal authority.
- Choose measures that reflect the organization's purpose and responsibilities.
- Revisit the plan as evidence and circumstances change.

That is the common ground in change management across sectors: make the purpose clear, treat people as participants in the work, and use evidence to decide what comes next.