CULTURAL RESEARCH IN HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

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Summary

Culture, as a construct, helps us make sense of organizational behavior. Its makeup consists of various levels of inter-related values and beliefs, each driving or reacting to the other in a variety of circumstances resulting in norms for acceptable and unacceptable behavior. These values and beliefs instilled since childhood have only recently become a focus within the HRD field where research highlighted in this paper attempts to explain culture's role in defining the field and profession of HRD in three arenas: within the organization, as an occupational culture and cross-culturally. This paper includes excerpts from three studies conducted in the United States, Germany, and Cote d'Ivoire. These studies utilized storytelling methodology to uncover the values and be iefs behind the role of HRD and the way employees and their organizations accomplish work. As a result, this paper provides evidence that societal or national culture may have the most powerful effect on how employees perceive training, career, and organizational development interventions and may often serve as a barrier to change efforts. In addition, occupational and organizational cultures often pursue counter-productive goals resulting in conflict and ineffectiveness. The challenge for HRD practitioners lies in the adaptation of these cultures and their subsequent sub-

cultures to new ways of how to perceive the work we do while overcoming our own ethnocentricity.

1. Introduction

Organizations contain a host of cultural beliefs, which prescribe norms for appropriate and inappropriate behavior. As a construct, one of the most well known definitions is by Hofstede (1980) who defined culture as "the collective programming of the mind (p. 13)." That is, a manifestation of the value systems of various groups which is able to sustain itself over long periods of time. These values and beliefs instilled since childhood are further developed, at minimum, through experiences in the society in which the individual lives, the organization in which the individual works and the professional affiliations in which the individual belongs.

While anthropologists, educators, and management scholars have long seen a connection between culture, learning, and work behavior, human resource development (HRD) scholars have only recently focused on this construct. Cultural research has advanced the field by describing, for example:

- The role of culture on HRD's strategic influence within organizations (Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1995),
- The profession's belief systems as an occupational culture (Hansen, Kahnweiler, & Wilensky, 1994), and
- Variance in how HRD is perceived and implemented cross-culturally (Hansen & Brooks, 1994; Peterson, 1997) and in specific national cases (Hansen, 1995; Hansen & Headley, 1998)

Today, we see cultural research in HRD as a topic of particular interest, in large part, due to the role it plays in an organization's agility, flexibility and it's ability to rebound. The speed at which organizations must address change is continually increasing as we enter an age of integrated global markets, increased technology and *online* instantaneous access to information. In recent years, terms such as organizational learning have entered the management lexicon as companies try to maintain the learning curve now linked to organizational survival and productivity. Knowing that these issues are culturally driven and subject to variance in belief systems is key to this body of research.

2. Theoretical Framework

In the work environment, when beliefs are shared by members of the same culture or subculture, they become a kind of code for organizational "meaning-making" which can influence, for example, ways to resolve conflict, the information needed for sound decision making, the criteria for promotion, and the appropriate level of assertiveness. Culture can create a sense of solidarity in both a territorial and spiritual sense. Members of a given culture tend to see themselves as separate and unique. Cultures lend themselves to ethnocentricity and therefore tend to see themselves as superior to others. Meanwhile, cultural solidarity is emphasized and increased when individuals from one culture come in contact with those of another. What occurs is a tendency to protect and

defend one's cultural identity as a way of maintaining the integrity and relative importance of its beliefs and values.

Management scholars first differentiated culture from climate studies (Pettigrew, 1979) by applying the methods and questions used by anthropologists to a corporate setting. Early studies sought cultural formulas that would lead to increased productivity. Such inquiry caught the popular attention of the practitioner community (i.e., Ouchi, 1981; Peters & Waterman, 1982) as American companies sought ways to make their organizations more efficient in the wake of new and unanticipated Asian competition. In recent years, generalized solutions have been rejected in favor of cultural uniqueness and attention has shifted to the specific alignment of worker beliefs, which can be fragmented by a host of cultural frames. In the work place, of particular importance, are organizational, occupational and socio-cultural differences.

2.1 The Role of Culture and HRD in Organizations

Organizational, occupational and socio-cultural (national) membership tends to influence work cultures and their developmental needs more than other belief frames. Within an organization, Schein's (1985; 1990) work on the power of leader-founders to shape work cultures is one of the most influential in understanding the roots of a company's assumptions. Later study by Hansen and Kahnweiler (1997) confirmed this premise by suggesting that leaders-founders maintain their cultural power by unconsciously reproducing themselves through hiring and promotional practices that favor like-minded people.

Kopleman's culture and climate model (1990) is a helpful tool for illustrating the power of culture on an organization and how this influence shapes the role and the strategic importance of HRD. This model assumes a socio-cultural influence which permeates all levels of the organization, in particular those of the leader founder. These values and beliefs influence the HRD practices of the organization. These practices will, in turn, influence the climate of the organization or the ''sense of imperative'' in which employees view their work. The resulting climate is transformed into salient organizational behaviors via cognitive (i.e. motivation) and affective (i.e. job satisfaction) states. Kopleman suggested that attachment, performance and citizenship-related behaviors manifest themselves in absenteeism, turnover, perceived understanding of an employee's role and corresponding responsibilities in the organization, as well as the ability to foster congeniality, compromise, teamwork, moral support, etc. These behaviors and their manifestations are the core of many HRD theories and models concerned with invoking change.

2.2 The Role of Culture and HRD as a Profession

Large and complex organizations additionally contain a number of subcultures that can possess contrary assumptions. Of particular note are those beliefs that are shaped by the nature of one's one work. It has been posited that occupational beliefs and biases can diffuse organizational synergy and often compete against management-driven cultures for members' minds and hearts. This line of research assumes that a competitive undercurrent can block work productivity and diminish the strategic role of an

occupation whose values and expectations appear to clash with those of the dominant culture. Of interest to this article are findings that suggest that HRD professionals in the United States constitute an occupational culture (Hansen, Kahnweiler & Wilensky, 1994) and that their assumptions often clash with those of top leadership (Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1995).

The following are belief statements about American HRD functions from Hansen, Kahnweiler and Wilensky's study. These findings are consistent with research sponsored by the American Society of Training and Development that was designed to identify competencies for the field (McLagan, 1983; 1989). Note that the following statements do not necessarily offer information about how HRD is currently practiced in organizations. They describe, instead, what American practitioners *believe to be true* about the purpose and goals of their field.

> ***Training*** *should* permit individual learners to grow and develop beyond the present needs of his or her job. In addition to task-related material, trainees *should* learn about such skills as communication, team building, strategic planning and participative management.
>
> ***Career development*** *should* include committed, systematic, professional advising, career planning, career paths, developmental appraisal systems, and results tracking. Career planning *should* reflect an integration of individual and business goals.
>
> ***Organizational Development*** *should* permit individuals and their organizations to move towards more collaborative, developmental, flexible, delayed, customer-focused cultures. It *should* enhance communication, work structures, and processes.

2.3 Culture and the Role of HRD Internationally

Business cultures are additionally influenced by the societies in which they reside. In fact, societal culture may be where the largest difference in the values and beliefs of cross-cultural organizations reside. Globalization has brought this issue to the forefront. As more and more companies crossed national boundaries, scholars began to question the relative importance of socio-cultural (national and regional) and organizational frames. In a landmark study (1980), Hofstede found that work behavior was more a factor of the local national culture than the parent organization. These data. indicated that work beliefs are shaped during childhood and are determined at a very young age. The depth of this early orientation remains relatively constant and more powerful than the temporal effect of organizational affiliation. The comparative weight of occupational beliefs tends to fall in the middle as they are mostly shaped by educational experience and relatively influenced by the investment made in prior training.

HRD principles and models were first developed in the West, most specifically, the United States. Born out of a highly individualistic culture, American developed HRD models require the legitimacy of individual thought and development. This does not mean that group efforts are devalued. Rather, this means that the individual is not culturally subordinate to the group in his right to creativity contribute and learn. Symbolically, independence is culturally protected through clearly stated through job

descriptions, promotional criteria, career paths, training objectives, etc. In contrast, this orientation presents a formidable challenge to the practice of HRD as an instrument of modernity in collective cultures where fierce loyalty to tribal bonds can lead to internal organizational rivalry, subjective decision-making, and the diffusion of synergetic change efforts.

The moderating effects of national culture are generally recognized as significant in HRD (Hansen & Brooks, 1994; Peterson, 1997). It is interesting to note that Hansen and Brooks found no common cross-cultural definition of HRD. The following examples are from their review of over 100 studies:

- National culture influenced the quantity, duration, type of employees and skills to be acquired. One such example concerned models for management education. While the European model focuses on engineering and the applied sciences, American models (MBA) promote more generalized management skills.
- National culture clearly dictated the purpose training was perceived to have. For example, in the US, training was conducted to enhance job performance, in Germany training was to further one's technical skills and in Japan training was conducted as part of a commitment to continual learning and perfection.

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