

HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

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Summary

The chapter begins with an outline of the challenges facing HRD efforts in the new millennium and briefly reviews its historical development and continual effort to define itself. Three perspectives are delineated that form the new context of HRD; these are the current focus on being customer-centered, the need for imaginative leadership and the supreme value of human beings. The concept of ‘activity’ is explored and taxonomy is suggested to help understand HRD. ‘Activity’ is conceptualized as an integrated set of actions that vary by level, function and time frame. The level of activity is distinguished by a focus on individual, group, society and the world community while the twin functions highlighted are change or learning and a people-centered focal point. The time frame of HRD activities carries from immediate, quick fixes to days, months and years.

The business context of HRD activities is analyzed and a dual theory is suggested using the twin metaphors of ‘machine’ and ‘ecology’. The impact on HRD activities of these two extreme contexts is analyzed. Both positions are posited as two ends of a continuum and in reality a business context may share characteristics from both rather than existing simply under one paradigm. Whatever the business context HRD will have its challenges specific to the dominant culture. However HRD activities also strive to achieve certain constancies for people such as a balance in work, living and learning regardless of the business pressures and procedures entrenched within that environment. The skills required by HRD professionals will vary to a certain extent based on the demands of the work and living environments.

HRD activities are discussed as three broad and diverse functions, training, development and education. Each function has a specific focus and position within the overarching goal of enhancing people’s capacity to achieve the results they desire in life. Traditionally each function has had a particular role within the life span of individuals. For example children are given an ‘education’ within the formal schooling system; this means they are being prepared for life. They then go on to university or college and continue their education mixed in with ‘training’ for a particular job or profession. If they leave school and get a job they may undergo ‘training’ especially if they enter an apprenticeship. ‘Development’ activities have been regarded as those that assist a person to broaden their skills for some future work. These strict interpretations are challenged especially the notions of training and development for a future role. Many professions require their members to develop themselves continually in order to keep abreast of change and to keep their skilled finely sharpened. Failure to meet requirements for ongoing professional development may lead to exclusion from the profession.

The role of HRD activities for organizational growth is amplified and linked to a key focus of HRD, performance enhancement. The importance of aligning HRD activities with organizational business plan and goals is discussed. A simple plan for designing HRD activities is presented as well as some thoughts on future trends and the critical role of HRD for building sustainable communities.

1. Introduction

Human Resource Development (HRD) in its own pursuit of improving performance and enhancing the capacity of people has and will continue to face many challenges. In the modern global digitally connected economy, the capacity to renew and regenerate human effort and potential takes on new dimensions. Never before in human history has there been such a widespread need to remain up to date and employable, while also helping people to improve their quality of life.

For those who miss out from HRD assistance there is an ever-widening gap between those who have the skills and ‘know how’ and those who do not. As a consequence HRD is a key player in helping reduce this inequality. At enterprise or organizational level in addition to confronting the gap between the have and have-nots, other issues also need attention; these include competitiveness, sustainability, social responsibility and the building of customer and community responsiveness.

HRD is an emerging discipline and therefore still prone to changes in vocabulary and frameworks. The term HRD is something of a recent phenomenon dating back from its emergence in the USA in the 1970's. It is quite likely in the years ahead that the phrase HRD may disappear entirely and be replaced with some other container term. For some, discarding the HRD phrase cannot come soon enough, as many people find the term 'Human Resources' demeaning particularly as it fails to capture the uniqueness and the sacred qualities of a person. The word 'resource' can create an impression of exploitation and dispensability rather than one of high respect and engagement. Similarly, related fields such as Organizational Development and Total Quality Management are suffering re-labeling and questioning. At the same time there is a rapid growth in other terms and functions such as Manager Intellectual Capital and Communication Managers. There has been a doubling of new positions for Chief Knowledge Officers in 1999 within Fortune 500 companies.

Such blurring and relabeling may on the surface signal the death of the term HRD but it is our view that this transition is a re-invention rather than eradication. What is more important is that HRD or whatever legacy it leaves paves the way for a level of thinking and code of practice that enhances performance and stimulates greater enlightenment and meaning in people's lives. In order to meet these challenges individuals, teams, Organizations and nations alike need to jointly take a pro-active and rigorous approach to get the very best out of its people. This is not unlike a gardener who plants a seed in the garden; nothing will grow unless the right environment is nurtured. Similarly, people in whatever capacity full-time employee, part-time, telecommuting and unemployed, programs and initiatives need to be an active participant in taking primary responsibility for their learning and discovery over time.

Not surprising the field of HRD has undergone its own upheaval and change in order to meet the frenetic and limitless array of demands existing in today's world. Some of these changes include: adapting to the shifting demographics and expectations of a global economy, emergence of high profile interest groups and shifts in values to such issues of community, environmental and customer responsiveness, unprecedented advances in technology and communication including the internet and optic fibers, a strident focus on economic rationalism and backlash of greater corporate responsibility to green reporting and/or ethical investment.

The playing field in which HRD is being staged has had the rules changed many times, with different degrees of responsibilities being shared out. In the period after WWII, activities such as training and development were more commonly coordinated by a centralized function but in recent times such services are now being devolved much more to line managers and to a wider audience including self managed teams and to individuals themselves. In fact HRD as a function is something of the past. It is increasingly seen as a way of thinking where each worker, manager or professional is seen as a deliverer of HRD services in how they live their daily lives. The fact is in the world of virtual teams, ever changing workplace structures comprising of seamless, boundaryless and interconnection cannot wait for a centralized HRD function to deliver the right training and innovation on time. The old centralized way is just too slow and unresponsive. Modern day HRD needs to be immediate and customer driven. Where full time HRD professionals do exist they must see themselves as enablers and facilitators of workplace change, while also being better a custodian for improved organizational

performance and a disciple and caretaker for the importance of preserving human spirit and dignity in every activity being undertaken.

Patricia McLagan an international HRD expert and Professor of HRD at Rand Afrikaans University, Johannesburg, South Africa, in the preface to Sofo's 1999 book, has stated that over the past 50 years the field of Human Resource Development has been organizing itself – trying to find an identity. It has found a home in often-peculiar places. In organizations it's often been a step-sister (or brother) function, staffed by people with good heart and skills, but providing a dead end career in sales, technical areas, administration, the training organization. In universities, there's been an ongoing battle about where to house HRD. Is it a business school discipline? Is it education? How about Industrial Relations? Or the Communication Department? Maybe in Agricultural Extension? Or, let's put it in Industrial Psychology? In Sociology? Most recently, breakthroughs in the new physics and the new biology tell us that the basic structure of complex problems is at the borderline between chaos and order. Does this mean that HRD should be part of a hard sciences program?

What does all this mean for human resource development (HRD)? The truth is, human resource development is interdisciplinary. And this places major pressures on HRD practitioners and professionals to be able to think and act from a broader point of view. She goes on to say that in a fast-moving, global, knowledge-based world, yesterday's workplace expert isn't necessarily today's best teacher. And, the paradigm has shifted, with "teaching," management, and industrial relations blending together in a great development soup.

The HRD professional finds him or herself facilitating a great learning system that includes many traditional and non-traditional teachers and learners. It includes learning as we go in any setting, as well as (less dominantly) learning in a classroom. It focuses on learning for personal, organizational, and national reasons. Certainly, workplace learning is becoming both more conscious and more ubiquitous. Could it be any other way in the age of the Internet, the global economy, the virtual organization and the virtual employee?

McLagan stresses that HRD is more than training. It takes research, evaluation, marketing, change management, needs analysis, design, development, assessment, facilitation, coaching, and excellent management to deliberately accelerate learning in all its forms.

For HRD to meet its new role as a way of thinking a number of perspectives must be embraced.

1.1 HRD identifies what is important in life and work

For many HRD is a luxury and a nice to do activity, it is not seen as helping them cope with busy, stressful and demanding pressures of living. As a consequence, the benefits of HRD must be tailored and packaged in such a way that it addresses the needs of the customer. Outcomes must be articulated to help people understand that their life will be so much easier if they are prepared to review past habits, learn and re-invent themselves. To do this requires tolerance, partnership and adaptability.

1.2 HRD focuses on imaginative leadership

Professionals of HRD must make it their business to understand the business of whatever they do. Leadership is required to lift the profile of HRD from one of purely training to one, which expands imagination, lifts human energy and expands intellectual capital. There is no good doing piecemeal activities, HRD must be firmly placed in the DNA of the modern workplace and worker.

1.3 HRD promotes constancy in valuing human beings

If HRD or whatever label it becomes does not take a strong leadership role in shaping how life and work is done, it may well disappear into the abyss. To avoid this HRD must see itself quite differently than what it did in the past. There needs to be less emphasis on inputs such as what training we are conducting to outputs where people are helped to build a better life and future. In a world where the price of people's contributions is constantly being measured and exploited, the values of HRD must never fall into the realm of devaluing and demeaning human ingenuity. As an age old Buddhist saying goes, 'The price of gold goes up and down but the nature of gold remains the same'

Organizations who wish to thrive in these ebullient conditions must anticipate and respond in a vigilant fashion. Organizations need not only use their strengths and capabilities they must be prepared to unlearn outdated behaviors that are no longer helpful. Many organizations are uncomfortable with rapid change and strive to maintain a stable environment to ensure security for employees and to focus on achieving fixed outcomes. One consequence is inertia, inflexibility and ignorance.

The life of an organization is like the life, which is generated from a seed first, planted in garden. In order for it to become a healthy plant, it needs to re-organize, and re-order itself so that it can survive and thrive. The capacity to succeed in whatever capacity requires that people be able to cope and adapt to infinite number of scenarios and realities, ranging from periods of stability to those interrupted with chaotic change. For many, life is like one huge white water experience and in order to remain afloat and enjoy experience you must be able to remain calm and focused in what you are doing.

No organization can ignore its place within the global system. In today's world a change in one place anywhere will almost typically result in a cause or effect elsewhere. There is a blurring of distinctions between the global and local markets, between the public and private sectors and between international and national policies and other policy areas. For example educational policy is extolled as a kind of economic policy, in everyone's attempt to be more internationally competitive and creditable, with doctrines like being a Knowledge Nation and being a 'Clever' Country becoming increasingly prevalent. As Tony Blair, the Prime Minister of UK said in 1999, 'The modern world is swept by change ...our success depends on how well we exploit our most valuable assets: our knowledge, skills and creativity'

In order to meet these expectations, education and training are a public responsibility yet increasingly the burden has been shifted to the private sector to provide these services. This blurring of distinctions related to who is responsible for a learning society

has lead to a poor coordination of a nation's and even the world's learning efforts. This has resulted in quandary of whose responsibility is HRD in the first place? This increased ambiguity is demanding that both governments and companies across national boundaries think together and respond strategically. The term 'HRD activities' almost implies an aimless or seamless web of diversion. HRD activities can be planned or unplanned, tied to current or future organizational need or be simply a pastime; they can have accountabilities attached to them or just be for their own sake. The organizers of HRD activities may care about the outcomes or they may just hope for the best. Participants of HRD activities may attend out of interest hoping to obtain an edge or they may simply see it as a way of avoiding their other responsibilities. In times of plenty HRD activities may increase but during lean times it may be one of the first things to be slashed from the budget. As a consequence HRD at times may appear beautifully focused and productive while on other occasions nothing eventuates at all, leaving individual, communities and people with disadvantages are left high and dry in how they are benefiting and being treated. Some people may feel confident they can meet this challenge by taking active responsibility while others may feel powerless and helpless in what they can do. This again links back to one of our earlier points, that HRD has a grave responsibility in decreasing the gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots'. Ultimately, if HRD cannot influence the silent majority central belief that they can learn and make a worthwhile contribution the issue of essential activities of HRD becomes a rather theoretical or irrelevant proposition.

This chapter will now describe some of the patterns of behavior that contribute to the development of people in the workplace.

2. What are HRD activities?

In reality, any activity is more than a single action. It requires a combination and integrated use of different thoughts, feelings and behaviors. An activity will require people to make efforts that show their personal, team, organizational and/or community commitment, whether it is displayed by setting up a procedure, following a process, creating new ground or drawing on past wisdom, HRD activity is diverse and widespread and includes many patterns of practices, efforts, interactions, requirements, responsibilities and responses.

An activity can vary by level, by function and by time frame. HRD activities are developed to deal with the learning and development needs of people in whatever area they are performing. Typically individuals, groups and teams perform these activities. However, given economic and social reform agendas of society and the massive interconnection of worldwide conglomerates such as Microsoft and GE, HRD is increasingly being framed within community, regional and international perspectives.

In the attempt of HRD to be outcomes focused, HRD is increasingly becoming more concerned with learning results and competency enhancement. Widespread non-targeted education and development is becoming rare, as decision making authorities in corporate, government and universities expect to see some deliverable consequence of their investment. Similarly, the more enlightened self-directed learner is expecting a return for their investment as well. Function of HRD activities refers to what type of learning is being focused on. Learning can be relatively simple, such as memorization

of facts, or it may involve the acquiring of new habits and skills. Learning can also be complex by requiring behavioral change and thinking and acting in new ways requiring people to reframe their mindset, sharing tacit knowledge and transforming their perspectives and capabilities Learning can occur in a flash or the activities may be designed over months or years.

All HRD activities whatever their level, function or time frame have at least two things in common. First, HRD activities are all directed towards learning and change even though there is tremendous variety in what is learned or what might be changed. HRD activities should also comprise a disciplined effort to produce important change and learning that are shaping and guiding what and why an organization is doing. Second, HRD activities are directed at people, either individuals or groups of different size ranging from small teams to national and global audiences.

Activities can be coherent and consistent across levels; functions and time or they can be tailored to fit an almost infinite variety of contexts. Different contexts may differ by level, function and time frame. HRD activities can be both deliberate and spontaneous. In both cases such activities will always result in a mix of what was intended and what was not intended even when spontaneity is not the main guiding force. HRD activities in fact are learning strategies that emerge purposefully or spontaneously and always result in either explicit or observable discovery to a very implicit, tacit and/or introspective learning outcome.

HRD activities are directed to the various consequences and idiosyncrasies of business and community activities by varying there style and form accordingly. The alignment to the personality, dynamics and infrastructure of how work is organized is particularly important. In order for HRD to survive it must mirror and work with the assumptions of people whether it is in the context of a small business, a large organization or as a nation. Imposition of an HRD philosophy will rarely work unless people have a shared world of significance of why such an approach is necessary.

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