Why Humanistic Approaches in HRD Won't Work

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Humanism has long been considered a cherished worldview underpinning human resource development. As such, it occupies a privileged status within the field, and in the main, its central tenets have gone unchallenged, despite massive changes in the economic, sociological, and technological structure of work and society. This article challenges the preeminence of humanism and argues that the rhetoric of humanistic approaches is not matched by organizational actions of compressed career progression pathways, tight budgetary constraints, and a market-driven economic philosophy.

In recent years, we have been subjected to a vast range of articles advancing a humanistic value-based approach to human resource development (HRD). This weight of evidence supposedly signals a transition to a more employee-centered form of management practice. The perceived effectiveness of this approach to HRD rests on the assumption that meeting job-related personal needs will lead to employees' moving from job compliance to job commitment. Employees are encouraged to develop personal relationships with the organization, and the message delivered from the upper echelons is that their contributions to the organization are recognized, valued and rewarded.

Aktouf (1992) maintains that humanistic approaches can effectively transform the passive-obedient Taylorist employee into an active-cooperative one. There is some evidence to support the economics of this position. In a seminal study, Huselid (1995) empirically identifies an organization's culture as exhibiting a significant impact on a firm's long-term economic performance; Schuster (1998) finds that employee-centered management practices have the potential to create significant improvements in organizational performance; and in an analysis of Fortune's "100 Best Companies to Work for in America," Fulmer, Gerhart, and Scott (2003) present further evidence of links between

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positive employee relations and performance as measured by accounting and market data.

Notwithstanding the perceived benefits of humanistic approaches, this article argues that humanistic approaches are fundamentally misguided because they fail to fully grasp, take account of, or make explicit the core principles that continue to underpin the capitalist enterprise. Humanism does not change the fundamental laws of economics. We examine some of the key assumptions underpinning humanistic approaches and touch on some of the ethical obligations suggested for HRD practitioners.

Core Assumptions of Humanistic Approaches

Without question, human resources are a key element in the operation of organizational systems and are central to organizational effectiveness (Kruger, 1998). The transition from rigid bureaucratic structures to more flexible adaptive organizations has been accompanied by some shift in management styles from hierarchical traditions to more human relations–oriented expertise (Henderson, 1996). Humanistic approaches in HRD trace their roots to the field of humanistic psychology, particularly the work of Carl Rogers and the early human relations school, emphasizing the importance of self-esteem and self-development to employee workplace performance (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Addesso 1996). Such approaches are grounded in the belief that employees are the true source of added value and that there exists an implicit reciprocal relationship between employee and organization: that employees agree to invest their time and effort to further organizational goals in exchange for organizational commitment to treating them equitably with both recognition and respect. Korsgaard (1996), for example, maintains that the normative humanistic stance of an individual obligates others to adopt a similar stance. Similarly, Harvey (2001) argues that normative theories invoke an obligation to attend to the well-being and welfare of community members. It is therefore not surprising that recent approaches to humanistic management focus on building a community of persons embedded in an organizational culture that fosters the requisite character (Mele, 2003). The literature maintains that such approaches must take into account human needs, motivations, and the well-being of individuals.

Swanson and Holton (2001) argue that humanism is absolutely central to the HRD field with its core emphasis on the inner motivation of employees to develop themselves. Kramlinger and Huberty (1990) argue that the core assumption underpinning the humanistic approach is that learning occurs primarily through reflection on personal experience. They list the techniques of inductive discussion using the Socratic method, action planning, self-assessment, and guided reflection as forming the essence of a people-centered approach to HRD. Oh, what a beautiful world!

The Real Nature of Organizations in Liberal Capitalist Society

Humanistic approaches promote a caring, considerate image of organizations amenable to employee concerns. By adopting developmental language, emphasis is placed on employee self-actualization and development, primarily for the individual's benefit (Guest, 1999). However, this person-centered view of HRD generally fails to make explicit the instrumental objective of increasing shareholder returns, profit, market share, and, dare we say it, maximizing employee productivity at minimum cost. Direct, indirect, and opportunity costs are incurred by all organizations in conducting HRD activities. Return on investment is a key concern for those charged with budget creation. In short, humanist approaches may mislead employees, and perhaps HRD professionals, by fostering the illusion that the needs of employees and organizations are always mutually inclusive. In an increasingly individualized and brutally competitive business world, a massive gulf exists between the potential of the humanistic "mutual gains enterprise" (Kochan & Osterman, 1994) and the mercenary "individualised corporation" (Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1998), many of which will never make it to the Fortune Best 100.

For today's educated workforce, in the developed world at least, it has become a case of substituting the old battle for decent working conditions and wages with the call for stimulating work and the opportunity to participate in and design their own destinies. The self-organizing-development aspect of HRD would appear to provide this substitute and explains, if in part, the appeal of humanistic approaches.

Many powerful forces influence an organization's ability to compete effectively; globalization, changes in political and geopolitical relationships, economic restructuring, and the transforming technologies of the information age are the principal forces shaping the modern business landscape (Wilson, 2000). Organizations are becoming leaner and meaner (Burke & Nelson, 1998), with the preferred tools of choice more often than not being downsizing, layoffs, outsourcing, plant closures, or relocations (Burke, 2002; Gowing, Kraft, & Quick, 1998). Stein (2001) notes that downsizing often fails to deliver on the vast expectations made of it and that it frequently results in reduced levels of productivity, trust, and morale among surviving employees. Uchitelle and Kleinfeld (1996) maintain that the social contract between employers and employees has effectively been cancelled, and a huge literature has emerged on the changing nature of the psychological contract. This poses some serious questions regarding the supposed morality of humanistic approaches that offer employees the illusion of security and certainty in rapidly changing, unpredictable economic circumstances. Consequently, it is arguable that while humanistic approaches might appear to yield favorable results in the short run, they are probably doomed in the long run.

Ethics and the Organization

The dominance of humanistic approaches and the image that they present a softer, more responsive form of management contribute to the popular misconception that these approaches, by their nature, necessarily entail a relinquishing of managerial control. In reality, humanistic approaches are indicative of a modern, sophisticated, latently strategic approach to people management, designed to elicit proactive, self-motivated employee behavior. Alvesson and Deetz (1996, p. 192) argue that "objects of management control are decreasingly labor power and behavior and increasingly the mindpower and subjectivities of employees"—knowledge and intellectual capital. Weick (1979) argues that managerial work can be viewed as managing myths, images, symbols, and labels in a meaningful way to reinforce employees' understanding of organizational priorities. The role of the media in advancing the humanist agenda has also come under scrutiny. Deetz and McKinley (2000) argue that the acceptance and acquiescence by employees of corporate values is indicative of a broader media-constructed reality that is supportive of the values of corporate leaders. They argue that this reality facilitates a hegemonic ideology whereby the content of media outlets can be used to shape individual values and set the public agenda. Favorable portrayals of corporations in the media help in promoting both unitarist strategies and humanistic approaches in HRD, both of which exclude, conceal, or downplay any adverse social consequences of corporate activity.

On the surface, the adoption of humanistic approaches by organizations supports the view that organizations have a social agenda as well as an economic one. They present to employees the ethos and ideals of a nonprofit organization where individuals work together for the unitarist "good of all." Wilson (2000) argues that if the corporation is a social as distinct from a purely economic institution, then corporations should operate in a way that expresses not just economic values such as efficiency, productivity, economic value, and improved standards of material living, but a broader range of social values that reflect the prevailing societal ethos. While this is admirable, we may suggest that Wilson is somewhat lost in the humanistic forest here. The real test of the morality of an act is the intrinsic value of the results (Kagan, 1998), and there is as yet no ethical rug (Swanson, 2001) under which all the anomalies of the humanistic illusion can be swept. Outhwaite (1994) notes Kunneman's (1991) argument that recent moves toward workplace democracy may be something of a unitarist illusion. Similarly, O'Donnell (1999) exposes the myth of workplace democracy, stating:

> The role of communicative processes in formal organisations can . . . be analysed more closely if one represents the formal, juridically structured

> framework of enterprises and state bureaucracies as a container into which communicative processes are squeezed in and dammed up. As soon as these threaten to become dysfunctional for the goals of the organisation, sanctions that are not communicatively criticisable can be brought into play [p. 258].

Conclusion

The rhetoric of humanistic approaches to HRD, which espouses developmental ideals and supportive organizational structures focused on employee self-actualization, is not matched by organizational actions of compressed career progression pathways, tight budgetary constraints, and a market-driven economic philosophy.

There exists a real danger that HRD interventions will be co-opted by HR practitioners as effective tools in promoting unitarist ideologies in organizations, to the medium-term detriment of employees. The intrinsic demands of the performance paradigm are not compatible with humanistic approaches in HRD (Swanson & Holton, 2001). Professionals in HRD are not in the business of marketing illusions, and a modicum of realism is far better, and ethically superior, for both sides.

Gabriel (2001) suggests that there is a crisis in humanistic thinking, that there has been a floundering of critical imagination, and that modern theories do not strive to change the world or even to understand it but increasingly seek to deconstruct it, accepting without challenge the hegemonic agenda. Jeffcutt (1998, p. 107) notes, however, that "critical dialogue between the rationalist conventions of critical theory and the relativist subversions of poststructuralism describes a complex territory that is both ragged and contradictory." Humanistic approaches, however, which exist in this complex, ragged, and contradictory territory, continue to be too uncritically taken for granted by far too many theorists and practitioners. They do not tell the full story. HRD needs to be told explicitly as it is; the crisis for HRD is that it is not.

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