

## HRD: A three-legged stool, an octopus, or a centipede?

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As I write this editorial, I am sitting in a hotel room in Dublin, Ireland, at the conclusion of the twenty-seventh conference of the International Federation of Training and Development Organizations. This afternoon, my wife and I took a tour of the famous St. Patrick's Cathedral. There, the tour guide told us about the origin of the Irish saying, 'Chancing your arm'. As the story goes, two families, both members of St. Patrick's Cathedral in 1492 (an amazing coincidence for those of us who are US Americans), were feuding, which had led to blows and threatened assault by sword. One family ran to the church and locked themselves inside for sanctuary. The head of the family came to his senses and realized how foolish the feud was. He tried to persuade the other family to enter the church in peace, but they would have none of it. So he ordered his family to take their swords and cut a large rectangle out of the centre of the cathedral gate door. He then stuck his arm through, recognizing that it would either be cut off with a sword or accepted in a handshake of reconciliation, as intended. The reconciliation was accepted. By 'chancing his arm', the feud was ended.

In this editorial, I am going to 'chance my arm'. My colleague and friend, Dick Swanson, is well known, at least in some circles, for his visual model of Human Resource Development as a three-legged stool. According to Dick, the three legs that provide the foundations for HRD—Economics, Psychology and Systems Theory—rest on a rug of integrity (Swanson, 1995).

On many occasions, I have suggested to Dick that this is a simplistic and inadequate model for portraying the foundations of HRD. This past April, our department at the University of Minnesota did a one-day series of presentations by faculty, alumni and current students. Dick and I were teamed for a presentation on 'The Future of HRD'. In that presentation, Dick again put forward his three-legged model. I suggested, in response, that a centipede might make a better model as it suggests almost limitless sources of input into the complexity that I understand HRD to be. Dick quickly 'squashed' my centipede, arguing that so many foundations would be unmanageable in developing and describing a unifying theory for HRD—though why a unifying theory is needed is not all that clear to me. Our Asian students, particularly, were quite taken aback to see these two major professors disagreeing so openly and publicly. Nevertheless, they quickly realized that we were having fun and, at the same time, helping them to see (and us to remember) that we are still struggling with definitional issues related to HRD.

So I've been searching for a new model and would like to offer for consideration the octopus. I'm not sure that eight tentacles are enough to represent the foundations of HRD—but it's certainly more manageable than the 100-legged centipede and more representative of the complexity of HRD than a three-legged stool. There are other advantages to such a model. An animate depiction implies initiative, assertiveness and action, whereas an inanimate object is passive, lifeless and inactive. An octopus can protect itself by dispensing a shield of 'ink'. It is also strong, crushing its food for nutrients. When a tentacle is damaged or destroyed, it can regenerate itself, just as HRD must be constantly re-forming itself and, indeed, perhaps adding new foundations. Not many years ago, for example, systems theory would have been seen as a foundation of HRD, yet it's difficult to think of HRD today without systems theory. So we must also hold out the possibility of other foundations emerging; chaos theory, for example, may well be developing as a basic foundation of HRD.

Dick's response to criticisms of his three-legged stool is to challenge the critic to suggest foundations that are missing. That is challenging. I agree with Dick as to the importance of integrity to the field but rather than a rug I would put it at the core of the model—the body of the octopus itself. Further, I don't quarrel with any of the three foundations Dick offers. But I do argue that they are not enough.

What would I add? Dick's definition of HRD (see Swanson, 1995) includes organization development (OD). Almost every definition of OD (see Rothwell et al, 1995, among others) includes the phrase 'based on the behavioural sciences'. Very few people would agree that there are only two or three behavioural sciences. Certainly, with OD's emphasis on organizational cultural change, one would have to include ANTHROPOLOGY as a foundation of HRD. All of the team building and small group decision-making activities draw on group dynamics, reflective of the field of SOCIOLOGY, and SPEECH COMMUNICATIONS is important in describing communication systems, an essential component in doing OD. While perhaps a bigger stretch at the IFTDO conference we heard arguments for the contributions of

philosophy and literature to HRD (Cooley, 1998), music (O'Suilleabhain, 1998), technology (Masie, 1998), sports (Findlater & O'Leary, 1998), evaluation (Tolbert et al, 1998), and many others.

I can already hear the question, 'So what are the eight tentacles that are foundational to HRD?' And my first response is, 'I don't know!' Not knowing is why we have continuous scholarship and learning. Not knowing is why we have professional journals and conferences. Not knowing is why we continue to be curious and to ask professional questions.

Dalton (1998) reported on the characteristics of six managers who had been identified from a group of sixty high potential managers—the only ones to succeed in accomplishing mutually identified achievement goals set a year earlier. These managers were identified as Active Learners. Among their characteristics were curiosity (always asking questions), constantly looking for answers (recognizing that there was no 'one best way'), preferring complexity to simplicity, and being comfortable with ambiguity. These also seem to be characteristics needed by successful HRD professionals.

Is the octopus the right model for HRD? Probably not, but my argument here has been that it moves us in the right direction. I hope my arm is grasped and not cut off so we can continue to dialogue and create many options for conceptualizing HRD.

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