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Human Resource Development as an Occupational Culture Through Organizational Stories

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This study investigated HRD as an occupational culture. Cultural patterns were derived from the analysis of subject-generated stories of workplace experiences. Data were collected from HRD professionals employed by Fortune 500 companies. Exploratory findings suggest that HRD is a cultural entity that is more concerned with employee development and work autonomy than with overall business agendas.

The study of cultural patterns allows us to understand the ideologies, beliefs, values, and norms that drive corporate behavior. Attempts to describe shared belief systems have traditionally focused on the role of the company's founding father in defining fairly stable parameters (Schein, 1985, 1990). However, organizations can also be viewed as dynamic entities whose norms and values are created through the social interactions of their members (Smircich, 1985). This model represents an evolving definition of organizational culture that depicts it as both interactive and multidimensional. We believe that the model can reveal underlying conditions for work behavior.

Corporations are composed of many subcultures that represent differences in values, meanings, and thinking patterns. Examples include perceptual differences about ways to resolve conflict effectively, the information needed for sound decision making, the structure of motivational reward systems, timeliness, and the appropriate level of assertiveness. When beliefs are shared by members of the same culture or subculture, they become a kind of code of organizational meaning-making—a means to decipher and distinguish the acceptable from the unacceptable and the effective from the ineffective.

The most extensive form of subcultural patterning is linked to the kind of work people do. Occupational cultures can be "imported," since their ideas

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and ideals typically originate outside the organization. Examples of imported cultures include accounting, public relations, legal affairs, and research and development (R&D). These functions often compete against management-driven cultures for members' minds and hearts (Trice and Beyer, 1993). A competitive undercurrent can cause communication problems and block work productivity. This can diminish the strategic role of an occupation whose values and perceptions appear to clash with those of the dominant culture. Moreover, incongruence can lead to communication breakdowns and discord. Confusing signals among different organizational subcultures ultimately decrease motivation, hinder working relationships, and interfere with the acceptance of change interventions. Tangible examples include an inability to obtain required resources, lack of access to critical information, and rejection of proposals.

This article reports the first of a series of qualitative studies on human resource professionals as an occupational culture. As an emerging profession, HRD plays strategic roles in employee development and organization development that affect virtually all facets of an organization. HRD practitioners are expected to promote and improve effective communication among various subcultures. It seems critical to have an enhanced understanding of HRD's cultural perceptions if the profession is to effectively assume the above roles. Increasing familiarity with their own culture would help HRD professionals to be more appreciative of the similarities and differences between it and the cultures of its many constituents.

This investigation was based on the assumption that HRD practitioners constitute an occupational culture. Our purpose was threefold: (1) to determine the existence of a consistent belief system that would identify HRD practitioners as a cultural entity, (2) to identify and describe these cultural patterns and expectations for organizational behavior, and (3) to decipher the underlying and often unconscious attributional biases that frame and filter HRD belief systems. For the purposes of this study, the HRD cultural affiliation is defined as personnel who contribute to individual and organizational effectiveness through training, organization development, and career development efforts.

A key facet of the study's methodology was the subject's creation of a story that illustrated deeply held and often unconscious beliefs. Heroes, villains, main and supporting characters, plot development, and turning points in stories have been found to influence perceptions of whether methods of conflict resolution are positive or negative (Hansen and Kahnweiler, 1993). Story-line components can thus serve as vehicles to bring to the surface the storyteller's value systems and expectations for interpersonal behavior.

The remainder of this article begins with a delineation of the study's theoretical framework. Then descriptions of the methodology and key findings are presented. A discussion of emergent themes and implications for theory development follow.

Theoretical Framework

This study drew on theoretical and empirical literatures in three distinct yet interrelated domains: occupational cultures, meaning-making, and organizational storytelling. A review of these three frameworks follows.

Occupational Cultures. Occupational cultures form around the belief that members have the exclusive right to perform a given set of interrelated tasks. The conditions necessary for subculture development are social interaction, shared experiences, and similar personal characteristics (Trice and Beyer, 1993). Member-controlled training and professional associations help to systematize the work and foster bonding through technical and emotional support.

Research in occupational cultures is diverse and ranges from shipyard workers (Green, 1965; Mars, 1979) to cocktail waitresses (Spradely, 1979). Overall, the findings indicate that members of an occupational subculture develop a similar worldview and act as a reference group through self-definitions, common and unusual emotional demands, a failure to socially distinguish work from nonwork, and a belief that their self-image is enhanced by their work (Salaman, 1974; Trice and Beyer, 1993; Van Maanen and Barley, 1984). These characteristics are intensified for professional groups that conflict with "occupational outsiders," especially those in authority positions.

Meaning-Making. All cultures operate from cognitive models created by belief systems that filter expectations for appropriate and inappropriate behavior—that is, a kind of meaning-making. Anthropologists have traditionally felt that cognition and communication patterns are culturally influenced. The term *schemata* has been used to describe a cultural difference in perception and suggests the existence of a framework or coding system for recognizing and understanding experiences (Dougherty, 1985; Geertz, 1973; Hamill, 1990; Hansen and Kahnweiler, 1993; James, James, and Ashe, 1990; Rice, 1980). These explanations suggest the possibility that internal expectations can cause a reinterpretation of stimuli that are considered culturally foreign.

Perception colors how we interact with others. It also influences how we approach and resolve interpersonal conflicts (Sillars, 1980). Attribution theory attempts to explain the causes of these conflicts. Attributional biases are a combination of both rational and nonrational processes. For example, experience can cause people to imagine the existence of relationship problems when none are actually present, while they ignore the conflicts that do exist. Clearly, preconceptions affect the selective encoding and memory of our behavior.

HRD specialists, like members of many other occupational subcultures, often remain culturally outside of the organizational mainstream. Research in cross-cultural negotiation reveals that people tend to rationalize differently with members of their own culture than they do with foreigners (Adler and Graham, 1989). In fact, research suggests that cross-cultural differences reinforce and even enhance a person's initial beliefs (Adler, 1986). Likewise, it is the differences between individuals that dominate relationships as people attempt to explain and defend their beliefs. While this process may reinforce professional identity, it may be counterproductive for an occupation's status or for improving organizational productivity.

Storytelling. Stories act as a kind of cultural code. In corporate contexts, they help employees to make sense of their workplace and their reasons for working (O'Reilly, 1989). Stories are derived from shared norms, values, and belief systems. Deal and Kennedy (1982) refer to this shared perspective as "the way we do things around here." The analysis of stories has gained increasing credibility among researchers of organizational culture (Martin, 1982; Schein, 1985; Wilkins, 1978; Wilkins and Martin, 1979).

The ontological perspective of reality as a social construction permits researchers to study the behavioral and cultural forces that shape an organization's sense of "meaning." This view of science comes from the emic tradition, the analysis of subject expression that is typically found in ethnographic research (Pike, 1967). Stories are thus defined as socially constructed accounts of past events that encode culture and are therefore important to members of an organization (Feldman, 1990).

Stories are seldom factual. Instead, they reflect what people believe should be true. For example, contradiction and exaggeration in employees' accounts of the way a founder's stroke provoked organizational discord and chaos were uncovered by Feldman (1990). The "coloring" of actual events reflected a deeper belief that emphasized the founder's role and responsibility for company problems and his corresponding control of his direct reports.

The underlying themes of stories are revealing when we consider what we unconsciously choose to remember and tell (Schrank, 1990). More than most other data collection methods, stories allow researchers to examine perceptions that are often filtered, denied, or not in the subjects' consciousness. Thus, thematic consistency in story elements such as heroes can act as cultural models, revealing much of what occupational cultures believe should be organizationally true. These illustrations emphasize the importance of understanding cultural norms *as the informants convey them* rather than imposing an external standard to understand or analyze them.

Methodology

This section contains descriptions of who the subjects were, where they worked, the questions asked of them, and how their responses were tabulated and analyzed. Included are details of the procedure used to elicit organizational stories.

Setting and Subjects. Our theory-driven sample (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) consisted of twenty-nine HRD professionals (fifteen females and fourteen males), employed in fifteen large organizations. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), "Theoretical samples are driven by the inquiry's purpose and are judged on the basis of how widely and diversely the analyst chose his groups for saturating categories he wished to develop" (p. 62). Theoretically, we wanted to study the nature of belief systems and to assess consistency within each group across industry lines. We also wanted to study the importance of positioning among HRD professionals. As relatively few HRD specialists (37 percent of our sample) operate at the executive level, it was important to contrast the beliefs of these highly placed individuals with those of the majority of HRD professionals, who work as internal consultants or as project managers in entry- to midlevel managerial positions. We deliberately collected data in organizations with a minimum of ten thousand local employees because HRD departments in larger companies are characteristically more developed and execute broader functional responsibilities. Moreover, HRD specialists in executive positions are typically found only in larger organizations. Delta Air Lines, the Coca-Cola Company, Marriott Corporation, Equifax, and Xerox Corporation are examples of companies from which participants were selected. These companies allowed us to reveal their participation in our study in order to illustrate the size, technology, market position, reputation, and contextual variety of the subjects.

Focus Questions. HRD is an emerging field and few empirical studies have focused on it as a cultural entity (Marsick, 1990). A comprehensive search of numerous data bases yielded no empirical evidence on HRD belief systems. This gap in the literature highlighted the need to examine the following focus questions: (1) What are our preconceptions for causality (cause-and-effect expectations)? In particular, what are the perceived roles that HRD attributes to itself and to others? (2) What resources are required to carry out these roles? (3) What are the perceived positive and negative forces (people and/or situations) in relation to important goals? (4) What are acceptable conflict-resolution methods? (5) What underlying organizational lessons or morals are implied in stories told by HRD professionals? (6) As an occupational culture, are HRD's expectations for organizational behavior internally consistent? (7) Are some beliefs stronger than others? and (8) Does diversity in HRD professionals' backgrounds (for example, in gender, formal training, organizational rank, or industry type) parallel a difference in their belief systems?

Data Collection and Analysis. Procedurally, subjects were asked to tell a story about any event portraying any cast of characters that could have occurred in their organization within the last six months. Stories were recorded verbatim. An interview protocol was used to elicit detail about heroes, villains and other supporting characters, plot, turning points, endings, and morals. The procedure was first piloted with members drawn from the subject group and then refined, based on the results of the pilot study.

Efforts to ensure internal validity and counter researcher bias involved the triangulation of data through multiple sources and methods (Tammivaara and Enright, 1986). We additionally included the use of multiple analysts (Foreman, 1948), member checks, peer critiques, and multiple data sources for story interpretation (Guba and Lincoln, 1981). Data sources included the transcribed story narratives, semistructured interview data, and field observations by the lead author. All data were independently reviewed by the research team, which included the authors and three graduate students who are schooled in the study's methodology and theoretical framework. A fellow colleague critiqued research plans and emerging data. Emergent findings were also reviewed by colleagues from five other universities as part of a research colloquium. Ongoing findings and interpretations were additionally verified by a representative subject and nonsubject.

An additional feature of our methodology was the use of imagery to assist subjects in creating stories (Hansen and Kahnweiler, 1993). We assume that individuals tend to visualize when they recount past experiences. In turn, the choice and sequence of images are symbolic, are rule-governed, and visually represent cultural requirements for meaning and order (Edgerton, 1977; Howell, 1978; Salomon, 1979; Worth and Adair, 1972). There is some precedence for the use of visuals in organizations. Organizational psychologists have used the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) to study managers' motivational patterns (Kolb, Rubin, and McIntyre, 1983). The TAT asks subjects to tell a story for one visual at a time. Our approach differed in that visuals were an optional tool to facilitate the storytelling. This gave subjects the opportunity to use more than one visual to tell a story.

To facilitate such visualizations, twelve randomly ordered line drawings depicting typical corporate work scenes were presented as part of the interview protocol. Displayed were portraits of people working together, alone, and in meetings with and without leaders. Also included were individual images of an older and a younger person in different emotional states—neutral, happy, and sad. Subjects were asked to select and sequence any number of sketches that best supported the visual flow of their story. A visual could be used twice. In telling a story, subjects linked the plot to what they saw occurring in each image they chose.

Key Findings

We developed a classification system to code and examine stories for psychological characteristics and content themes (Marshall and Rossman, 1989; Spradely, 1979). Conclusions were also sorted by demographic variables for gender, years in business or HRD, types of formal training, position and exact responsibilities, company size, and type of industry.

Psychological Characteristics. The analysis of shared psychological characteristics was initially linked to dimensions of intra- and interpersonal dynamics as depicted by Sillars (1980). This aspect of story analysis is unique. Our examination of story components allowed us to develop a kind of psychological profile for an occupational culture. An understanding of shared psychological expectations for the following intra- and interpersonal issues can shed much light on the causes of relationship problems.