Critically Strategic HRD: Possibility or Pipe Dream?

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Abstract: This paper examines the strategic and critical paradigms of HRD theoretically, philosophically, conceptually, and practically. Recommendations for integrating the two paradigms are provided.

A company's competitive advantage comes from its ability to use its tangible and intangible resources to develop distinctive core competencies--durable and inimitable strengths and capabilities superior to those of its competitors (Hunger & Wheelen, 2003). While products and services can quickly become obsolete, be easily replicated, or be produced for less, "the quality of an organization's talent, its passion and commitment, is nearly impossible to replicate" (Wellins, Bernthal, & Phelps, 2005, p. 3). De Geus (1988) predicted that in a global market, perhaps the only competitive advantage an organization might have would be its ability to learn faster than the competition. Human resource management professionals are charged with recruiting and placing the right people with the right skills, knowledge, and attitudes into the right jobs; human resource development professionals are charged with facilitating individual and organizational learning and development for current and future organizational success. Employees' value to the organization resides in the "uniqueness and the value of their capabilities and skills" (Garavan, 2007, p. 11) and the organization's ability to develop and use those capabilities and skills strategically for economic gain.

Paradigms are "accepted examples of actual scientific practice … [that] provide models from which spring particular coherent traditions of scientific research" (Kuhn, 1996, p. 10). Strategic HRD has been defined as the "creation of a learning culture, within which a range of training, development and learning strategies both respond to corporate strategy and … help to shape and influence it … meeting the organization's existing needs … [while] helping the organization change and develop … thrive and grow" (McCracken & Wallace, 2000, p. 288). The critical paradigm has emerged in response to HRD's focus on performance improvement and its failure to adequately consider how power and emotions affect learning (Rigg, Stewart, & Trehan, 2007). Critical HRD scholars view organizational practices that use "human learning … [and] even human hearts and, increasingly, souls … as raw capital to be harnessed for organizational gain" (Fenwick, 2005, p. 226) as exploitive, dehumanizing, and disempowering.

While practitioners outside of the scholarly community have embraced the strategic paradigm, the critical paradigm remains relatively unexplored in practice. The average practitioner is likely oblivious to ongoing debates about what HRD's purpose should be, whose interests it should serve, or even what critical HRD represents. Furthermore, the grim and cynical picture painted of HRD practice would most likely not entice practitioners to embrace this paradigm. If practitioners believe they are helping employers and employees survive by growing people to grow the business, how then can we get them to embrace a paradigm that views what they do as exploitive, dehumanizing, and disempowering? As Hatcher (2006) observed, "we

must approach critical HRD with some vigilance … lest we alienate the majority by pressing uncommon points of views on others" but also ensure "that 'silenced' voices outside the mainstream are heard" (pp. 105-106).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the strategic and critical HRD literature to determine if common ground exists to create a critically strategic HRD. More specifically: 1) Can a more humane, democratic, and socially responsible HRD (Hatcher, 2007) meeting both individual and organizational needs be created? 2) What would critically strategic HRD practice look like? A literature review was conducted to compare the strategic and critical views towards HRD practice, organizational roles, culture, knowledge, and learning. Business- and education-related databases were searched, including ABI Inform Global, Emerald Full Text, JSTOR, and the Google Scholar search engine. Additionally, books on strategic HRD, critical HRD, and critical management studies (CMS) were reviewed as well as annual proceedings from the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) conference, the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) conference, and the Critical Management Studies (CMS) conference.

Theories and Philosophies Shaping the Strategic and Critical Paradigms

Strategic HRD is informed by "economic, psychological, and systems theories … [and] learning, change, and organizational theory" (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000, p. 79). Critical HRD is informed by critical theory (Valentin, 2006), CMS (Bierema & Fenwick, 2005; Fenwick, 2004), critical social theory (Bierema & Fenwick, 2005), and critical pedagogy (Fenwick, 2004). Philosophically, HRD has different orientations creating dialectical tensions (O'Donnell, McGuire, & Cross, 2006) within the field. Humanism (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000; Swanson & Holton, 2001), behaviorism (Swanson & Holton, 2001; Yang, 2004), and human capitalism (Yang, 2004) are foundational to HRD and to the strategic paradigm (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000). Originating in adult education, humanism views HRD's role as enhancing human growth and developing human potential (Yang, 2004). Behaviorism views HRD's role as facilitating behavioral changes in employees to improve individual and organizational performance (Yang, 2004). "Human capitalism assumes that the purpose of learning and any other HRD interventions is for increasing return on investment and it argues for the rights of the sponsoring organizations" (Yang, 2004, p. 138).

In contrast to the strategic paradigm, radicalism, originating in adult education (Yang, 2004), is foundational to the critical paradigm. "Radicalism assumes that most social and institutional efforts of organized learning tend to reinforce and perpetuate the status quo…that the existing capitalist system tends to privilege only a few, not all, members of a society" (p. 138). The critical HRD paradigm, therefore, exposes the contradictory nature of strategic HRD practice cloaked in humanistic language that promotes the value of employees (McGuire, Cross, & O'Donnell, 2005) but is **"**dominated by a masculinist rationality that uses masculine traits of objectivity, aggressiveness, and performance in the service of management and powerful shareholders" (Bierema & Storberg-Walker, 2007, ¶3). Additionally, critical HRD "[challenges] 'rational' organizational practices … replacing them with more democratic and emancipatory practices … recognizing the messiness, complexities, and irrationality…of organizational practices" (Sambrook, 2007, p. 30).

Concepts Shaping the Strategic and Critical Paradigms

The philosophical differences between the strategic and critical HRD paradigms are best illustrated by looking at how each conceptualizes organizations, culture, organizational roles, HRD's purpose, knowledge, and learning.

The Strategic Paradigm

Within the strategic paradigm, employees (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000; Luthans & Youssef, 2004; Valentin, 2006), tacit knowledge (Luthans & Youssef, 2004), culture (Barney, 1986; Fiol, 1991), and learning (De Geus, 1988) are valued for their instrumentality as potential sources of competitive advantage. People provide the human, social, and psychological capital (Luthans & Youssef, 2004) needed for organizational survival in a highly competitive, global market. Culture is foundational to organizational life, creating a unique organizational identity and shared meaning among employees (Diamond, 1991). Culture defines "how work is done, how decisions are made, how social interactions are structured, and how people communicate" (Schein, 1992; as cited in Gilley & Gilley, 2003, p. 181).

Organizational effectiveness, the ability to achieve both strategic and operational goals (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000), is usually portrayed in financial terms such as return-on-investment or return-on-equity. HRD's purpose is to improve performance (Swanson & Holton, 2001) and drive business results (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000) by developing people for economic gain (Rigg, Stewart, & Trehan, 2007; Torraco & Swanson, 1995). The practitioner becomes a strategic partner with management (Garavan, 2007; Gilley & Maycunich, 2000), facilitating organizational change, learning, and performance (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000) through learning initiatives aligned with organizational strategy, goals, and objectives (Garavan, 2007). Employee expertise is used to shape business strategy and support strategy implementation (Garavan, 2007; McCracken & Wallace, 2000; Torraco & Swanson, 1995). Practitioners help management identify organizational competencies, analyze performance gaps, and then close those gaps through focused learning interventions (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000; Swanson & Holton, 2001).

The responsibility for learning no longer resides solely within the HRD function but is shared throughout the organization (Garavan, 2007; Gilley & Maycunich, 2000; McCracken & Wallace, 2000). Employees at all organizational levels are expected to self-develop to remain competitive within and outside of the organization. Managers become performance coaches, learning facilitators, and change agents at the unit/departmental level, while HRD practitioners coach managers on these roles and become performance consultants, organizational learning facilitators, and organizational change agents (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000). The goal is to create a culture of continuous learning to sustain the organization in both the short- and long-term.

The Critical Paradigm

While the strategic paradigm espouses that people are an organization's greatest asset, organizational practices still speak to a machine metaphor based on scientific management principles (Garavan, Heraty, & Barnicle, 1999). Within the critical HRD paradigm, organizations are "contested terrains of relations and knowledges, concealed by unitarist illusions of homogeneous identities, alignment between worker/manager interests, and false naturalization of imperatives such as globalization, competition, and performativity" (Bierema & Fenwick, 2005, p. 576). Culture is a socially and politically constructed means of managerial control (Ogbor, 2001), shaping employee identity by telling employees how to think, feel, and behave (Wilmott, 1993). "In critical organization theory, cultural authority is seen as totalitarian oppression, suffocating its central goals of individual empowerment and democratic process" (Feldman, 1997, p. 939). Employees become self-disciplining and willingly comply with oppressive

organizational practices (Deetz, 1992) not fully realizing that they are consenting to their own oppression (Brookfield, 2005).

Management is "a social construction … located in history, with political and cultural motives" (Valentin, 2006) that holds the power. The HRD practitioner mediates between different power interests within the organization (Vince, 2005), analyzing organizational uses of power and control and examining taken-for-granted assumptions within which organizational issues are situated (Trehan, Rigg, & Stewart, 2007). A key purpose then of critical HRD is to reform "both workplace organizations and development practices directed towards individuals and groups … [through] practices that expose and challenge prevailing economic ideologies and power relations constituting organizational structures of inequity" (Fenwick, 2005, p. 229). Critical HRD, therefore, seeks to develop both individuals' and organizations' capacity for critical reflection and to facilitate double-loop learning that "enables workers to identify, question, and change the assumptions underlying workplace organization and patterns of interaction" (Van Woerkom, 2004, p. 184). Through this process, employees are empowered to challenge the status quo, expose contradictory organizational practices, and bring sensitive issues to the table (Van Woerkom, 2004). In this context, learning and knowledge are valued for their ability to transform both individuals and organizations..

Implications for Adult Education, Workforce Development, and HRD

The strategic and critical paradigms present opposing views that if taken to the extreme can become unhealthy with negative repercussions. Organizations and employees need each other to survive. Organizations that treat people instrumentally with little consideration for the social, political, and emotional aspects of working and learning will eventually alienate the very people they need to survive. Likewise, putting employee interests ahead of organizational interests can also lead to organizational demise. Merely being humane and democratic does not ensure survival in today's competitive market. Integrating the critical and the strategic paradigms, however, might provide the best of both worlds. The strategic paradigm can keep practitioners focused on strategic priorities and better ensure that learning initiatives produce desired business results. The critical paradigm can help them examine overt and covert aspects of organizational and managerial power and politics and expose saying/doing gaps that decrease morale and stifle creativity needed for organizations and employees to continuously learn, change, and grow.

Introducing the critical perspective into the organization can facilitate the process of creating a more democratic, socially responsible, and humane workplace (Hatcher, 2007). It can take employee empowerment to a new level, one that allows employees to not only participate in business-related decisions and process improvements but also in decisions involving their livelihoods. By participating more fully in organizational decisions, employees will feel more in control of their destinies and be better equipped to deal with continuous change. One way practitioners may be able to introduce the critical paradigm into practice might be to become tempered radicals. Tempered radicals are employees who live between conformity and rebellion. Their power resides in their not having completely assimilated into the dominant organizational culture (Meyerson, 2001). As the "outsiders within" (p. 17), they quietly engage with organizational power and politics, and use it strategically to bring about both individual and organizational change. In the process, they empower themselves as well as others.

The fact that HRD has been able to survive the subtle and dramatic paradigm shifts that have shaped the field and its practice attests to its resiliency. Up until now, however, the field

seems to have been engaging in adaptive or survival learning and not the generative or transformative learning needed to create a secure identity in the midst of change. A few years ago in a class, a student mentioned that her manager wanted her to become more aware of organizational politics. The student was very alarmed by that statement. But the reality is that if HRD practitioners don't listen to the political discourse and engage with it, nothing will change.

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