WHY HUMANISTIC APPROACHES IN HRD WON’T WORK

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Abstract
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 brief 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.

Key words humanism, HRD, training

INTRODUCTION

In recent years we have been subjected to a vast range of articles advancing a humanistic value-based approach to 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 both recognized and valued.

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. Huselid (1995) empirically identifies an organization’s culture as exhibiting a significant impact on a firm’s long-term economic performance and ultimately as a crucial factor in determining its success or failure. Schuster (1998: 9) found that employee-centered management practices have the potential to create significant improvements in organizational performance.

Notwithstanding the perceived benefits of humanistic approaches, this paper argues that humanistic approaches are fundamentally misguided as they fail to fully grasp or take account of the core principles that continue to underpin extant modes of capitalist production. Humanism does not change the laws of economics. We examine some of the key assumptions underpinning humanistic approaches and we touch on some of the ethical obligations of the postmodern capitalist organization and their HRD practitioners. In doing so, we seek merely to open up some critical space.

**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 a shift in management styles from an emphasis on hierarchic tradition to human relations expertise (Henderson 1996: 14). Humanistic approaches in HRD trace their roots to the field of humanistic psychology and the work of Carl Rogers emphasizing the importance of self-esteem and self-development to employee workplace performance (Knowles et al. 1998; Addesso 1996). Humanistic approaches in HRD are grounded in the belief that employees are the true source of added value in an
organization and that there exists an implicit reciprocation of values on behalf of employees and the organization—namely that employees agree to invest their time and effort to further organizational goals and in exchange that the organization commits to treating them equitably and with respect. Korsgaard (1996: 132), for example, maintains that the normative humanistic stance of an individual obligates others to adopt a similar stance. Likewise, Harvey (2001) argues that normative theories invoke an obligation to attend to the well-being and welfare of members of the community. It is, therefore, not surprising that recent approaches to humanistic management focus in 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.

Humanism has made a significant contribution to the development of theory and practice in HRD. Swanson and Holton (2001: 155) 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 TRUE NATURE OF ORGANIZATIONS IN A CAPITALIST SOCIETY

Humanistic approaches promote a caring considerate image of organizations amenable to employee concerns. By adopting developmental language, they place emphasis on employee self-actualisation and purport to provide training, primarily for the individual’s benefit (Guest 1999). However, this person-centered view of HRD overlooks the instrumental objective of increasing shareholder returns, profit, market share and, dare we say it, maximizing employee productivity at the least cost. Direct, indirect and opportunity costs are incurred by organizations when conducting HRD activities. Return on investment is a key concern for those charged with budget creation. In short, humanist approaches mislead employees and perhaps HRD professionals by fostering the illusion that the needs of employees and organizations are mutually inclusive. In an increasingly
individualised and brutally competitive business world a massive gulf exists between the potential of the humanistic ‘mutual gains enterprise’ (Kochan and Osterman, 1994) and the mercenary ‘individualised corporation’ (Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1998).

For today’s educated and enlightened 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. Individualization, however, has its downside. Beck (1987) argues that the labour market has now become the driving force behind the individualization of people’s lives. This is mediated through the interlinked processes of increasing levels of education, mobility and globalised competition. If we are presently witnessing ‘a relentlessly progressing and collectively experienced process of individualization and atomization in post-traditional societies’ as Beck (1994: 348) contends, then it follows that employees are actually forced to look to themselves in protecting their market positions—note the transition from job-for-life to “employability”, no matter how cosy the humanistic culture, as one illustrative example here (O’Donnell, 1999).

In the modern world, many powerful forces influence an organization’s ability to compete effectively. Wilson (2000: 18) argues that 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. A direct consequence of these forces is that organizations are becoming leaner and meaner (Burke and Nelson 1998). To achieve this status, the preferred tools of choice have more often than not been downsizing, layoffs, plant closures or relocations (Burke 2002; Gowing et al. 1998). Stein (2001: 7) highlights the unpleasant consequences associated with the modern trends of downsizing and organizational restructuring. Stein cites Cameron (1994) who found 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 amongst surviving employees. Uchitelle and Kleinfeld (1996) maintain that the social contract between employers and employees has effectively been cancelled. 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 doomed in the long run, plagued by an inability to accede simultaneously both to the demands of employees and to the requirements of competing aggressively in the marketplace. When the crisis hits the rhetoric of humanistic approaches is quickly replaced with the reality of short-term pragmatism, lay-offs, and relocation.

Cultural evolution in the business environment affects what is perceived to be acceptable or unacceptable business activities and management principles (Svensson and Wood 2003). The dynamic and turbulent business world of the twenty first century has much in common with that of the nineteenth century that influenced Marx—the difference is merely one of degree. The question now becomes: how ethical is the rationale behind humanistic HRD strategies presently dominant in many organizations?

**ETHICS AND THE ORGANIZATION**

The dominance of humanistic approaches and the image that they present of a softer more responsive form of management contributes to the popular misconception that these approaches, of 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: 192) argue that “objects of management control are decreasingly labor power and behavior and increasingly the mindpower and subjectivities of employees”—intellectual capital, in other words. Such language plays an important role in promoting the humanist agenda. 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.

Humanistic approaches are increasingly closely identified with an organization’s
unitarist ideology. Sometimes dubbed “enlightened managerialism”, it employs strategies
which attempt to mitigate the conflictual aspects of the employment relationship, while
coincidentally emphasizing the co-operative aspects (D’Art and Turner 2003). A Marxist
perspective on this phenomenon identifies humanistic approaches as subtle manipulative
tools in the hands of self-interested capitalist owners. The basic Marxist viewpoint is that
employees and capitalist owners have divergent interests, work is a two-way if very one-
sided exchange of value. So, are humanistic approaches ethically appropriate? As Aktout
(1992) put it: “How can management pretend where there are convergent interests and
objectives in the firm, that there can be a consensus?”

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 not-for-profit organization where
individuals work together for the unitarist “good of all”. Wilson (2000: 37) 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. He maintains that
corporations should adopt values such as freedom, the dignity of the person, equality,
pluralism, justice and the rule of law. Whilst admirable, we may suggest that Wilson is
somewhat lost in the humanistic forest here. The true test of the morality of an act is the
intrinsic value of the results (Kagan 1998: 29) and there is as yet no “ethical rug”
(Swanson 2001) under which all the anomalies of the humanistic illusion can be swept.
Outhwaite (1994: 118) notes Kunneman’s (1991: 212) argument that recent moves
towards workplace democracy may be something of an unitarist illusion:

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. (O'Donnell, 1999, p. 258)

**CONCLUSIONS**

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 and Holton 2001: 156). 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, 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. Jeffercutt (1998: 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 as it is—the crisis for HRD is that it is not.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


