

Swanson, R.A. (1990). HRD paranormal interventions. Human Resource Development Quarterly, 1 (3), 207-208.

HRD Paranormal Interventions

Business and industry leaders have been accused of lusting after the quick fix, and the human resource development (HRD) profession has been right there and ready to help them find it. "Pssst—hey boss—you want half a brain or a whole brain? You name it, I'll get it for you." Given the large changes facing most organizations and the stress their leaders face, the means to the ends are widely varied and opportunities abound.

As a scientific community, HRD scholars have watched in amazement as unsubstantiated claims about HRD have been waved before decision makers; we have, for the most part, looked away. Many of the claims from HRD marketeers are paranormal, meaning that they are not within the range of normal experience or are not scientifically explainable phenomena.

The time has arrived for HRD scholars to start turning their heads away from unsubstantiated claims by providers of HRD interventions. We need to start asking several direct questions of those who present paranormal claims and report our findings to the profession. The questions we should ask include:

- What was the problem?
- Precisely what was the intervention?
- What was the research or evaluation method?
- How reliable and valid were the measures?
- What is the evidence?
- What do we now know and not know?

Clearly, this is annoying and unfriendly work; it saps off energy from a scholar's primary research agenda. Still, it needs to be done. For several years now, I have written to those claiming paranormal results from HRD interventions. I have never received a substantive answer. I confess that I have not followed up on my inquiries nor have I reported them, in any meaningful way, to the profession.

The field of psychology has a group called the International Scientific Committee for the Investigation of the Claims of the Paranormal. A recent news report describes a Professor Biederman boarding the *Maid of the Mist*, a Niagara Falls tour boat, and traveling to the point below the falls where he would surely be killed if a psychic's prediction of the collapse of the

falls came true. The time of the predicted collapse came and went, Professor Biederman returned to the University of Minnesota, and the psychic is reported to have left in tears (Van Beusekom, 1990).

Unlike the tearful psychic in this report, many of the HRD "psychics" are smiling all the way to the bank as they move on to their next client or fad. Also, unlike the Niagara Falls psychic, most brokers of the paranormal do not predict precise and confirmable results. The HRD marketeers of *precise* paranormal results should be reduced to tears if they do not deliver, and elevated to new heights if they do. The HRD marketeers of *vague* paranormal results should be wedged into a more scientific mode or out of the business altogether. The adoption of these measures would improve the theory and practice of HRD.

Human Resource Development Quarterly (HRDQ) supports inquiry aimed at disclosing the irresponsible practices and programs in the profession. The refereed articles, the reviews of books and media, and the open forum section of *HRDQ* invite this level of inquiry and dialogue. One example is the book *Enhancing Human Performance* (Druckman and Swets, 1988) and the review of that book that appeared in the last issue of *HRDQ* (Johnson, 1990). The "New Age" HRD methods reviewed in the book did not fare very well in terms of the paranormal claims they generally make. There was also a conclusion that many of the methods are possibly as effective as other generally accepted interventions. The research from the original study and the review by Johnson should be widely distributed. I invite such inquiry to be submitted to *HRDQ*.

The popular movie *Ghostbusters* presents a more playful version of a strategy to the present task. The Ghostbusters did serious work, used their scientific tools, and never appeared to take themselves too seriously. Whatever the demeanor of the investigator, the problems of poor practice, unethical practice, and undisciplined practice are a concern to the HRD scholarly community and should not be ignored.

RICHARD A. SWANSON
EDITOR



References

- Druckman, D., & Swets, J. A. (Eds.). (1988). *Enhancing human performance: Issues, theories, and techniques*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Johnson, S. J. (1990). [Review of *Enhancing human performance: Issues, theories, and techniques*]. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 1(2), 202-206.
- Van Beusekom, M. (1990, February 12). U professor investigates psychic claims and paranormal phenomena. *The Minnesota Daily*, pp. 1, 8.