

Swanson, R. A. (1992). Lost culture, lost expertise. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 3 (1), 1-2.

Lost Culture, Lost Expertise

I live in two professional worlds, one academic and the other business. On most days this condition is both a joy and a privilege. On some days the contradictions between them nearly immobilize my spirit.

This double life has me defending and criticizing both worlds from one occasion to another. In the end, I am generally judged as being too academic for the private sector or not scholarly enough for the university. That is one of the small prices paid for trying to straddle these two worlds.

A factor weighing on me in recent years is that universities are adopting the worn-out private sector model of the "professionally managed company." Besides sounding terrible, this model of efficiency (not effectiveness and quality improvement)—via top-down management and authoritarian values, and backed up by outdated MBO logic—is exactly what enlightened firms are trying to cast off.

Simply stated, universities have been aggressively adopting theories, values, systems, and procedures that the private sector has found unworkable. Those who live in the academic world can feel their spirits being extinguished when universities embrace this rejected model.

Though there are a number of angles one could take on this, much of what is going on in universities is of interest only to academicians. I believe, however, that there are a few *universal* tragedies in the drama. "Lost Culture, Lost Expertise" is the one I want to address.

My major hypothesis is that universities, more than any other organization, have understood the significance and maintained the culture of intrinsic motivation. Another hypothesis is that universities have lost or are about to lose their expertise in the area of intrinsic motivation.

The visual metaphor of the professor in an elbow-patched jacket engaged in an intense dialectic with learners is powerful. The image of purpose, joy, excellence (not competition), and obliviousness to extrinsic rewards of money and fame is inviting. These people are on a journey. The elbow patches are a simple solution to a minor problem. A Brooks Brothers suit? Why would anyone want one when you can wear jeans, an open shirt, and that broken-in jacket? What does the suit have to do with the journey? More important, just how was the university conducting itself to bring about and support this metaphorical scene in the first place?

My own life experiences, the rejection of much of my traditional industrial psychology training, and listening to and reading *No Contest* by Alfie Kohn (1986) have led me to the conclusion that competition as we know it in our culture does not work. Furthermore, competition driven by extrinsic

rewards is in direct conflict with our best theory and research, which tells us that competition destroys intrinsic motivation in people and lowers their performance.

Thus, managers engaged in rating and ranking employees and giving them fuzzy slippers as prizes for doing what they want them to do is ignorant beyond belief. I have designed at least one such appraisal system (Swanson and Sisson, 1971), but more recently I participated in a symposium to look deeper into the fallacies of these hideous models (McLean, Damme, and Swanson, 1990). There are quite a few firms, and at least one here in Minnesota, that are still getting rich by selling companies the “competition-for-extrinsic-rewards” scheme. These business incentive companies sell schemes that reward employees with bonus gifts and prizes for doing their job well. (Guess who sells you both the scheme and the prizes?) If the “toaster-for-your-soul” companies want to go head to head on the research results of intrinsic versus extrinsic rewards, we will give them space here in *HRDQ*. (If their studies are based on simple treatments of “abuse + toaster” versus “abuse + no toaster,” we probably will not be interested. After all, even I am likely to go for the toaster one time!)

Who, then, understands intrinsic motivation? I believe that universities, more than any other organization in our nation’s history, have understood the power of intrinsic motivation—the releasing of human potential and expertise. If not lost already, universities are losing their mastery of intrinsic motivation. In response, and in order to develop a deeper understanding of empowerment, trust, dignity, and excellence, and of how they are connected, qualitative researchers need to study universities that have not lost their expertise in the intrinsic motivation arena. They may also need to study universities that have already lost their expertise in order to reconstruct the organizational threats to intrinsically motivated workers.

If the culture and expertise of intrinsic motivation are not learned from universities before they disappear, it may take twenty years of business trial and error, ten years of denial from universities, and ten more years of university research before it is again understood. Will someone grasp the moment?

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References

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