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Pick a System, Any System

Whenever I can, I try to make the case for systems theory, economic theory, and psychological theory as the theoretical foundations of human resource development (HRD). Metaphorically, I view them as a three-legged stool and see much of the ineffectiveness in HRD as a result of missing legs.

I am also attracted to the tension between HRD theory and practice. Together these concepts create the possibility of two HRD three-legged stools, one for theory and one for practice. Some might argue for one stool with peppermint-twist theory-practice legs, or for some other version.

Questions about the value of unused theoretical knowledge as well as unused practical knowledge become important. Benjamin Franklin (speaking through his folksy persona Richard Saunders, or Poor Richard) described a man "so learned, that he could name horse in nine languages. So ignorant, that he bought a cow to ride on."

The systems theory-practice dimension is on my mind because of a recent personal experience. I led a group to Japan for the purpose of studying quality improvement, organization development, and training theories and practices in Japanese businesses and industries. We saw and learned more than we expected. One of the main lessons from the trip was a systems theory-practice observation. Although we did not witness much theory during our Japanese study trip, we did see systems adopted, installed, and worked to a level of tenacity and resolve that we rarely see in the United States. We also saw results from what I believed to be average systems that were selected and operated at the practical level and without much conscious theory.

The refrain, "pick a system, any system," went through my mind. I worry when I hear HRD leaders in some American firms talk systems theory as I glance over their shoulders, only to realize that they could not punch their way *into* the bag of a systems practitioner. The lack of HRD systems follow-through in American business and industry is horrendous. I held this thought about the poor state of systems practice against the issues of not defining a problem accurately, not making a responsible decision in relation to a problem, and not following through on decisions, and I began to shake my head. An average system—committed to and tenaciously applied over time—is a very powerful thing. Much more powerful than a brilliant system without commitment or follow-through.

Important and profound knowledge is not necessarily theoretical. For example, it is profound to say that you should not exceed sixty miles per hour as you take the eastbound Seventh Street exit off Route 94 here in St. Paul. I am quite sure that if I had ever ignored that little bit of information,

I would not be alive today. That bit of information can be handled in a totally atheoretical manner and still be classified as profound knowledge. Concurrently, most of you would readily acknowledge that theoretical physics could do a great deal to explain the dynamics of the Seventh Street exit.

Is this an argument against systems theory? Certainly not. Systems theory is very important, and I believe our nation is very inventive when it comes to creating new and theoretically sound systems. Getting the commitment and follow-through, the grisly parts of the formula, is another thing. Systems practice is a subject about which we can learn a thing or two. Maybe we can start by stealing a phrase that has been bandied about for a few years—*profound knowledge* (Deming, 1990).

Systems practice can be profound without being theory based, and over time, as profound practice is studied and fully understood, it has the potential of becoming sound theory. For example, Deming's four practitioner seminars during 1950–1951 in Japan were absorbed by Japanese practitioners, and in 1952 the Japanese quickly went beyond those practical teachings to learn from Joseph Juran and their own excellent practitioners (J. Noguchi, Director, Union of Japanese Scientists and Engineers, personal communication, March 27, 1992). Today the profound practices of continuous quality improvement are being studied by scholars in anticipation of the emergence of profound theory. It may be that as excellent practices are studied they will merge with the work of the excellent theorists into a holistic model of theory and practice that will serve the fields of leadership, management, and human resource development. I hope so.

We have had very few distinguished practitioners powerful enough to press the organizational commitments of tenacity and resolve required to install appropriate systems and to work those systems. Systems practice is hard work, and leaders and scholars need to value it more than they do at present. Theorists need to get closer to the messy problems HRD practitioners face in day-to-day operations. Practitioners need to ask tougher and more disciplined questions ("Why, how, and how do you know?") of their HRD efforts.

As you might expect, HRD theory outstrips HRD practice. That is a desirable state and is not a problem. Nonsystematic and out-of-control HRD systems in organizations are the problem. Practitioners need to pick a system, any reasonable system, and follow through with it. The disturbing lesson from our visit to Japan is that our superficial attention to theory outstrips our substantive attention to practice. We are much too comfortable with this distortion. Our HRD systems practices bag is short on tenacity and resolve. And, as Poor Richard said, "An empty bag cannot stand upright."

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Reference

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