

# Avoiding Malpractice in HRD . . . Five Imperatives for HRD Professionals in Organizations

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*Human resource development (HRD) practitioners are increasingly being called upon to become more evidence-based in their approaches. This article urges HRD professionals to practice five imperatives in order to ensure ongoing competence. These imperatives include practicing conscious competence, asking for the evidence and research base for solutions, researching strategic HRD issues, partnering with researchers, and staying current in the field.*

**Keywords:** *scholar-practitioner; evidence-based practice; research-to-practice*

## The Danger of Malpractice

Dateline: Cityscene, USA. Earlier today, a powerful group of ANYCorp shareholders filed suit against company management claiming that dividends were being negatively impacted by substantial misappropriation of funds on training programs that were not having impact. Through spokesperson Michael Tort, shareholders claimed that ANYCorp spent \$14.6 million over the last three years on management training and development with little results. “We’re not looking for a formal ROI,” said Mr. Tort, “but the shareholders contend—and rightfully so—that leaders in the HRD organization should have known that the structure of the program was unproven, and they should have taken greater care before investing that kind of money.” ANYCorp was not prepared to comment at this time.

Okay, so I made that up . . . but it is estimated that over \$100 billion is invested in training and development every year (Ketter, 2006), and shareholders and customers expect the money to be wisely invested. As professionals, we should be confident that there is evidence to support the likelihood that these investments will show results. Our business leader peers should be able to count on us to do

the appropriate due diligence, as should our shareholders and customers. In fact, isn't this part of the expertise we bring to the table? If we don't have this expertise, what value are we adding?

The last several years have seen a substantial rise in discussion about the link (or lack thereof) between research and practice (Holton, 2004; Short, 2006a; Yorks, 2005) and the definition of a scholar-practitioner (Ruana, 1999; Short, 2006b). The idea that professional practice should be evidence based is gaining momentum in a range of fields (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Short, Keefer, & Stone, 2006). In regard to the field of management, Blood (2006) sums up the problem by saying, "Much of the knowledge taught does not make its way out of the classroom and much of the knowledge discovered does not make its way beyond the handful of academics who share the same research interests" (p. 210), and he echoes the sentiments of many writers in our own field (Short, 2006a). To try to build the link, a group of researchers and theorists in human resource development (HRD) have been working to define what it means to be a professional who actively connects research and practice. Short (2006b) named the following broad actions as definitive for a scholar-practitioner: grounding practice in research and theory, championing research and theory in the workplace, conducting and disseminating research (partnering with academics), and acting as a bridge between research and practice.

These discussions have raised the bar for what it means to be an evidence-based practitioner, but frankly, many well-intentioned, highly regarded HRD professionals are hard pressed to reach it considering the time and resource constraints they work under, not to mention the lack of real demand for (and sometimes outright disdain for) this evidence from clients and senior management sponsors. Failure to consider the research doesn't constitute legal malpractice—I use the term loosely rather than in the legal sense—but practice without regard to what we, as HRD professionals, have learned about effective and ineffective HRD work does compromise our value to organizations. Although we have not adopted a set of standards of practice in our field, we do have a solid base of research and theory that can and should be used to guide our work.

This article articulates specific actions that each of us should take to ensure that our work is well supported by the full knowledge base of our profession—the theories and research results that inform the nature and structure of effective HRD interventions.

How do HRD professionals avoid "malpractice"? These are the five imperatives:

1. Practice conscious competence.
2. Consistently ask for evidence and theoretical bases for suggested solutions.
3. Proactively and deeply research your company's strategic HRD issues.
4. Partner with researchers to learn more about your strategic issues.
5. Stay current in the field.

## Imperative One: Practice Conscious Competence

Conscious competence is one of the steps toward expert status in a learning stages model originally defined by Gordon Training International (Chapman). The model explains that growth from novice to expert requires individuals to move from unconscious incompetence, to conscious incompetence, to conscious competence, to unconscious competence. The last phase, unconscious competence, is the mark of a true expert, one who can rely on schemas and scripts developed over time and effortlessly use them in analysis of problems, decision making, and practice.

Unfortunately, there is a fine line between unconscious competence and unconscious incompetence. It is easy to slip into acting contrary to the best research we have simply because we are unaware that new research is available to shift our thinking. It is also easy to misapply theories and ideas if we are not careful to think through the given situation and the theory's boundaries and limitations. Practicing conscious competence, even after we become highly experienced, can help to ensure we don't unknowingly slip into incompetence.

Ruana (1999) articulates a continuum that describes the theoretical orientations of active professionals in terms of their reliance on theory and research in everyday practice. The continuum identifies the orientations as *atheoretical practitioners*, *practitioners*, *reflective practitioners*, and *scholarly practitioners*. Atheoretical practitioners have little grounding in theory, whereas practitioners ground their work in the underpinning body of knowledge and keep themselves up to date. Reflective practitioners add the critical reflection component to their work, constantly looking for ways to improve their practice. Scholarly practitioners use the body of knowledge, critically reflect on their work, and contribute to the advancement of the profession through research and publication. Practicing conscious competence will continually nudge you toward the right of that scale, which Ruana describes as key to the integrity of our profession. The farther to the right you are on the scale, the more likely you are to be providing highly effective HRD advice, services, and interventions. Even if you don't aspire to the scholarly-practitioner orientation, your clients will be well served as you continue to ground your practice in well-considered theory and relevant research.

If you manage HRD professionals, you will do them a service if you coach them to think this way. Help them to be more conscious of the ideas that underlie their approaches and recommendations. Ask them to articulate their assumptions and explain how they are applying theories and models that form the backdrop for their recommendations. Ask whether research continues to support the theories, or if newer research findings are shifting in some way.

## **Imperative Two: Consistently Ask for Evidence and Theoretical Bases for Suggested Solutions**

When should you ask for evidence? Consider these examples: You are looking to initiate an assessment center to aid in crafting accelerated development plans that will improve your company's leadership bench strength and are considering several proposals. Or you want to improve customer service in your organization and are reviewing a vendor-produced program you may want to install as part of the strategy. Or your senior designer suggests a multifaceted learning solution for a business client's need. Without exploring the theoretical and research base of these proposals, how do you know that your approval of (and investment in) these kinds of initiatives will have the desired effect?

Evidence-based practice is one of the buzzwords of the day (Holton, 2004; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Short et al., 2006; Thomas, 2006). A number of writers have shown that even widely embraced practices are sometimes built on shaky ground and may in fact run contrary to the best available evidence (Denrell, 2005; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Rynes, Brown, & Colbert, 2002). HRD practitioners are too often criticized for promoting fads rather than ensuring results. It would be prudent for decision makers to ask the hard questions to ascertain whether programs under consideration have some kind of evidence to back them up.

After asking for evidence, you must decide whether the evidence you are given is reliable. That is, you need to become a good consumer of research, able to read it and to evaluate it. Developing a working knowledge of research methods and statistical analysis will help you to distinguish strong research evidence from weak. The best evidence comes from rigorous research, which is most reliable when it is peer-reviewed, replicated, has no conflict of interest for sponsor, has strong research design and data analysis methods, and is clear about limitations (Locke, Silverman, & Spirduso, 2004, p. 57).

However, acceptable evidence also includes practitioners' documentation of their experiences as well as the judgments of knowledgeable practitioners based on the theoretical underpinnings of the field, their own experiences, and the context of the situation at hand (as compared with research or case study contexts) (Thomas, 2006). If you're looking at best practice or case study evidence, the trick is to examine whether the conditions that were important contributors to success in the case situation are present in your own. Clark (2005) refers to these as the "active ingredients," and notes that determining those active ingredients is a key task for strong HRD practitioners. Pfeffer & Sutton (2006) also suggests pilot tests (with thorough results measurements) as a means of gathering evidence before making a more substantial commitment to a program.

Concurrent with your own conscious competence, get in the habit of searching out the assumptions and theories that underpin the work that vendors, consultants, and your own team are proposing. Ask for evidence—academic research or measured results with other organizations or in pilot

tests—that the programs work. Be wary if results are primarily anecdotal. Elwood Holton issued this challenge in 2004: “It is way past time to raise the bar and demand that practices in HRD be evidence-based. If they are not, they either need to be studied to establish the evidence, or discarded. The leadership and responsibility for achieving an evidence-based HRD profession rests equally on practitioners and researchers” (Holton, 2004, p.188).

### **Imperative Three: Actively and Deeply Research Your Company’s Strategic HRD Issues**

I can already hear harried professionals scoffing at the notion that there’s time to practice conscious competence or to delve into underlying theories. Regardless of whether you deliberately consider research in day-to-day work, you should surely adapt the practice of deeply researching strategic issues. You see them coming a mile away: for example, you know that this year’s learning strategies will focus on e-learning, career development, informal learning, building leadership bench strength, or any one of a hundred business issues that are already the subject of research. Spend some time reviewing research on the subject as well as case studies of others’ strategies, successes, and failures. Be the best kind of HRD leader by steering your organization toward programs that will have the desired impact.

A word of caution: Conducting a Google search and a review of popular press articles and best-selling advice books is frequently not the best research strategy. Discussions with practitioners (Ruana, 1999; Stone, Keefer, & Hatcher, 2006) reveal that their “research” often does not delve deeply enough to uncover the best evidence. When you read articles, Web sites, and best-sellers, remember the second imperative and look for references that indicate how the ideas were developed. Read the appendix section to note the research base of the ideas, and pay careful attention to how the authors arrived at conclusions.

Better yet, use academic databases to find literature reviews and meta-reviews about your topic. These articles review and summarize large bodies of literature, and they can give you a jump-start in analyzing the body of work in a topic area as well as point you to studies that may be more targeted to your particular interests. Because they cover a lot of ground, literature reviews are among the most commonly used types of research.

I probably don’t need to give this hint to any experienced professional, but once you have completed your research, translate it to business language before you use it to try to get others excited about your ideas. You can attribute your sources and still adapt the language to fit your organization. A key role of the scholar-practitioner is to translate research into practice—to be able to cull through academic jargon to tease out the essential elements that will make your programs successful. Clark (2005) suggests that this is an important research-to-practice cycle, wherein researchers conduct the descriptive and

predictive research needed to develop and lab-test theories, and practitioners make the translation to practice and test the ideas in organizational contexts.

### **Imperative Four: Partner with Researchers to Learn More about Your Strategic Issues**

One way to research your strategic issues is to partner with academics or practitioner-funded research organizations. They can help you decipher applicable research and to set up programs in your organization that may be rigorously evaluated for impact in both the short and long term. Many academic researchers would welcome the opportunity to work with practitioner partners on these kinds of projects (Jacobs, 1999; Tyler, 2006). You can find the researchers who are interested in your strategic topics through a search of the academic databases.

Even if you are not intending to conduct an academic-type study, people with a research background (who may be employees in your own organizations) can be important partners in evaluating current data to define improvement goals or in creating pilot processes that adequately evaluate the impact of new strategies. Many organizations, for example, have six-sigma or related programs that train employees in rigorous statistical techniques. These can be excellent advisers as you engage in strategically important initiatives for your organization.

Another option is to belong to practitioner-funded research organizations. The Learning and Development Roundtable, Corporate Leadership Council, Conference Board, American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), and similar organizations may have already done relevant research and will be interested in hearing your needs if you are a member. All of these organizations poll member companies to determine strategic issues and design and conduct research to answer strategic questions. Although the research is not always peer-reviewed, it is rigorously conducted.

### **Imperative Five: Stay Current in the Field**

A 2002 study of human resource professionals demonstrated that the subjects were often unaware of what has been learned through research (Rynes et al., 2002). The charge that HRD practitioners may be too influenced by unsubstantiated fads is partly drawn from too many examples of HRD practitioners recommending programs that have been shown to have a negative impact or that the practitioners should have known would not work effectively in their organizations. The only counter to that possibility is for HRD practitioners to stay current in the field.

Over the last several years, for example, plenty of interesting findings have been published in Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD)-sponsored and other academically based journals. One of my own areas of interest is in developmental relationships (mentoring, peer relationships), and

recent work has helped to characterize relationships and to define the ways that individuals learn in this context (Hezlett, 2005; Koopmans, Doombos, & van Eekelen, 2006; Reddy, D'Abate, & Tannenbaum, 2006; Rock & Garavan, 2006). Perhaps you are more interested in international issues—two major summaries of the literature on cross-cultural training have been published (Littrell & Salas, 2005; Littrell, Salas, Hess, Parley, & Riedel, 2006) along with a study of international reactions to diversity training (Halladay & Quinones, 2005). In addition, an issue of *Advances in Developing Human Resources* has been dedicated to describing the learning orientations of a range of cultural and religious groups worldwide (McLean & Johansen, 2006). On another front, the popular press has been writing about women choosing to leave the traditional workforce, and two academic articles shed light on the dynamics at play in that flight (Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005).

Staying current in the field takes commitment. Subscribe to the major publications of our field, and skim them as you have time. Visit a local academic library every few months if you prefer not to pay the subscription fees. Attend professional conferences, especially the AHRD conference, and go to research forums like those offered by the Learning and Development Roundtable and Conference Board. Once you become active in these organizations, you may be able to influence the academic community to both research topics that will be useful to you and write in ways that don't require so much translation. Get to know researchers who are working in areas of interest to you. In your own circle of influence, start a reading group that will allow you to divide and conquer so that you may stay on top of current research.

Think about it: you wouldn't want to rely on a lawyer, an accountant, or a doctor who wasn't up to date on the latest changes in the field. Our clients expect no less of us.

## A Final Note

Dateline: Cityscene, USA. BIGCorp, Cityscene's most visible corporate citizen, is riding high this year, with a list of awards and recognitions that make it the envy of the downtown community. Having made several "best" lists in business publications and won awards in the IT and training fields, its stock price soared another 10% this week on positive news about new investments and strong dividend returns. Carlene Osgood, BIGCorp's CEO, was quick to praise the company's employees as the secret to their success. "Our HRD organization has helped us to develop an employee base that is ready and able to keep this company moving forward," she said. "They've helped us to find the right combination of programs and activities that produce both a satisfied workforce and a productive one. We couldn't move ahead this rapidly without that base."

Corny? Yes. Possible? You tell me. These kinds of results can only be achieved if we base our practice on solid theoretical foundations—a knowledge base built from research, a knowledge base we can influence if we partner with academic researchers to explore the burning HRD questions in the business community.

The Scholar-Practitioner Committee of AHRD continues to explore the ways that we can build a link between research and day-to-day practice. The strategy for building the bridge impacts both sides of the researcher-practitioner divide. The bridge requires academics to reach out to practitioners in defining questions that need research and also to write with practitioner needs in mind. And it requires practitioners to seek out and use the knowledge and theories developed through research in their strategies and interventions. A Scholar-Practitioner Committee workshop at the 2006 AHRD conference explored and documented exactly how real people are engaging in this kind of bridge building from a practical point of view. We hope that future articles will share that workshop's outcomes and perhaps provide additional imperatives or action steps for all of us who work in the field of human resource development. The AHRD Scholar-Practitioner Committee welcomes additional input and participation to help move this agenda forward.

Frankly, if HRD practitioners want to be of significant value to our organizations, we have to know what we are talking about. This article suggests five specific imperatives that can ensure we have the knowledge base and evidence we need to be competent in our field. It takes commitment, but that commitment will help promote the kind of employee growth and development and organizational results that will make us proud to be part of this field.

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