

Does HRD Mean Business?

The answer to that question depends on who you ask. The planners of ASTD's 1985 annual conference believe that it does. They chose the phrase as their theme. A number of writers, theorists and practitioners, some of whose work appears in this issue of the Journal, would answer yes unhesitatingly. They believe that human resource development is connected in theory and in practice to the strategic management of American corporations. According to these people, HRD deserves and enjoys high priority in business organizations because it contributes visibly and demonstrably to the bottom line.

However, there is an equally vociferous group who think that HRD is unconnected to strategic management. They see it as a support function used mainly to provide job-specific skills. Their viewpoint is worth examining because it stems from fundamental assumptions about the purpose of HRD. It forces one to ask whether HRD is a field that doesn't know its true master—the business organization.

Business organizations exist to produce a product or a service at a profit without specific regard for the members of the organization. They exist to serve the economy. They do not exist for the purpose of individual development.

HRD, on the other hand, claims to exist for the goals of the institution *and* the individual, which some people argue, should be more synchronous. HRD follows the paradigm of education, which serves at least three masters. Education serves the economy in that it prepares people to work, but it also serves two other masters—culture and polity. It prepares individuals to be independent members of a culture that values free-standing individualism and a political system that values participation.

In taking on the paradigms of education, HRD makes itself an outsider in the organization. It sets opposing systems against each other—one serving the economy and one serving individuals.

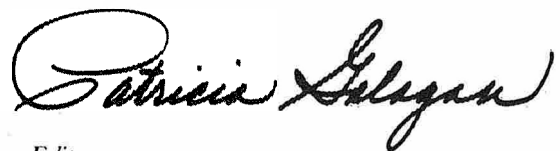
This is not the helpless stalemate it might sound, according to some observers of the two systems. Managers and CEOs are interested in the efficient allocation of human resources to achieve the strategic goals of the organization. But this is not the same as developing individuals, and the difference is subtle but very important.

When managers look down into the organization, they see a new function arising—human resource management. Those who understand it see the relationship of human capital to reducing prices and improving quality. They understand that team productivity is a powerful lever for maintaining the nation's competitive advantage.

It's high time for that kind of perception, you might say. Who is not tired of hearing critics and skeptics charge the human resource field with being too soft and too irrelevant? But who can argue that the purpose of an economic institution should be to satisfy personal needs for autonomy and inner growth?

This is not to say that these needs should be ignored or do not contribute to team productivity. It is to say that if the human resource profession is to thrive and to make the mark it talks so often of making, it must identify more closely with the purposes of the business institutions it serves. It needs to stop taking an outsider's position.

Admittedly, it is a long step from the theorist who appreciates the concept of human capital applied to business institutions down to the line manager who must translate that intangible into action. He or she must manage better educated workers with much more discretion over their jobs than ever before and a commitment to work that may be very hard to control. But it is the line manager, who must manage the unruly flesh and blood component in the business equation, to whom human resource management does indeed mean business.



Editor