

Today's "Gurus": Rethinking the Obsolete

Times have changed, and so have a lot of the people and ideas that trainers turn to when they want current thought on human resource development.

By ROBERT BOVE

The "self-actualizers" of the 1970s ultimately prepared themselves to perform well in the sacrosanct corridors of the marketplace, instead of in the inner realms of peace and harmony suggested by the rhetoric of those freewheeling times. It was in those years of macrobiotic cooking, yoga, Zen philosophy, and split-brain pseudoscience that a number of human resource development theorists, many of them still prominent, were labeled HRD "gurus". For better or worse, the term stuck: for better, because these seminal thinkers truly facilitate the facilitators; for worse, because the higher performance for which they successfully train people just as easily can be applied to good ends as bad.

Now, we're well into an era that applies moral weight to the bottom line. The problem of using the guru label, with all its spiritual connotations, is that freeing human potential carries no moral baggage. Being a high performer in an amoral marketplace might fatten the performer's wallet but it shouldn't be confused with being a high-minded performer. Conversely, success in business automatically does not mean a failure of ethics. Norman Douglas, associate professor of economics and finance at the University of Bridgeport,

Connecticut, recently made the point in the *New York Times* that "all markets are amoral, and one cannot speak of the morals of the marketplace." The market, as Douglas emphasizes, is nothing more and nothing less than "a tool of efficiency."

Training people to be more efficient workers, when the firms that employ them operate in the marketplace, is serious business but has nothing to do with the moral enlightenment implied in the term *guru*. Fortunately, the most listened-to HRD theorists lack an evangelical bent and refrain from introducing distracting, if fashionable, content into their arguments on how to increase productivity through better use of human resources.

form at their best that go beyond the hoary refrain, "Do this or you're fired." People, these experts learned early on, need something more than fear to keep them working successfully over long periods of time. Put simply, their HRD knowledge has become common knowledge in business circles.

The profession as career

The belief that workers perform better when their careers are "on track" has been one of the mainstays of HRD theory. Recent arguments for career development have taken the approach that the visibility and usefulness of an employee have everything to do with individual and

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But why no more HRD gurus? Ironically, their disappearance resulted from the success they had in getting wide circulation for their ideas. Bennis, Knowles, Moulton, and Lippitt, to name a few, were writing and lecturing before human resource development became an acronym and, with few exceptions, continue to do so. And, without exception, they outlined ways to help workers per-

organization success. This sounds like common sense now, but 20 years ago it would have been difficult to find an HRD-oriented book that expounded such a theory—and sold well to a broad audience.

Popularizing ideas once textbook-bound dovetails neatly with what HRD has become: what you learn in the workplace after you've been to school. Try to imagine a *1000 Things You Never Learned in Business*

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School on the bestseller racks in 1964. In it, William N. Yeomans, who heads training and development for J.C. Penney's, crosses the line, like many of today's leading HRD experts, from what was once narrow HRD theory into a realm of mass concern: personal skills everyone needs to get ahead on the job.

Lest it be implied here that today's HRD experts have abandoned one of their oldest tools—the list—herewith is included the list of *practical* suggestions Yeomans makes to prod your boss into helping you obtain the skills needed to get ahead:

- "Write out the specific kinds of support you would like and what the success of your project would do to make the boss look good.

- "Outline your project and ask the boss for support. Just asking for assistance will make the boss feel important and make him or her like your projects better.

- "Cover in detail what you'd like the boss to do.

- "Show what the boss' help could do to improve your performance and how it would make him or her look like a star.

- "Make it clear you are asking for help, not trying to shove off work on the boss. You still will do the job. You will even do

edge. In this context, HRD experts savvy enough to exploit the situation are exerting influence far beyond the confines of yesterday's training classes.

Raising executive eyebrows

Twenty years ago, the idea of a large company hiring a vice president to oversee an HRD *division* had not yet come. Such a position is no longer the exception. One reason is that executives are now predisposed to at least listen to arguments with a decidedly HRD flavor. When the books of theorists like Warren Bennis and Rosabeth Moss Kanter, for example, began appearing on executives' coffee tables, the seeds were sown. This era's widely perceived management crisis served as the catalyst to get those ideas put into practice at all levels of the modern organization.

Top-notch executive recruiters now look for prospects with "people skills," in addition to business acumen, to fill high-level corporate vacancies. That Alan Cox, Chicago-based executive recruiter, columnist, and author, sounds like an HRD theorist shows just how far the field's theories have been absorbed into mainstream business thinking. In *The Mak-*

these attributes are now being cultivated well above the levels where trainers have so long plied their wares.

If something is everywhere, is it not also nowhere?

Developing leaders through HRD principles has become the hot new topic in the field. Geoffrey M. Bellman's *The Quest for Staff Leadership* came to mind when Julie O'Mara, president of O'Mara & Associates in Castro Valley, California, was trying to identify today's HRD gurus. But she was speaking of a topic—not a personality. Although she quickly identified Warren Bennis and the work of Pat McLagan, O'Mara soon ran into difficulty: "There are so many people that have something really sound and important to say. It's not like there are three or four who you can say are the only ones there. There's just so many people who have the right ideas worth listening to and following."

This is an interesting point because it raises the question of whether HRD has gained so much currency that it is in a very different place in this society than where it was when it began, the province of a few thinkers and a number of trainers. "In the training and development field," O'Mara points out, "there are a lot of names, a lot of people doing fine work, people who we should pay attention to. It's certainly not the reverse: that there aren't any."

O'Mara is optimistic about the HRD field since it has grown to such a size; avoiding the appearance of playing favorites is not the cause of her hesitation to name names. What clearly has happened is that the dividing line between HRD and business practice has been blurred, perhaps forever. The question of who are the leading HRD thinkers now becomes one of degree. From business-college textbook writers to popular futurologists, everyone these days has something to say about human resource development.

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most of what you're asking the boss to help with if he or she will give you suggestions and clear the way for you.

- "Involve the boss on an ongoing base in your work. Give the boss updates; ask for advice and suggestions even when you don't need them. The more ideas the boss contributes to your work, the more ownership he or she will feel.

- "Use the boss' ego to help you. Make it clear you feel the boss has such status and power in the organization that he or she can get things done that you never could in a million years. Even if that's not true."

The point of including the above list is that, while there is nothing new about its emphasis on interpersonal skills, there is a new demand for the kind of information it contains—HRD information. The title of Yeomans' book gives away the reason for the increased demand: business schools last year graduated approximately 60,000 MBAs. The "small things" that cannot be taught in schools—the skills that HRD has long emphasized—are now desired by an increasingly crowded pool of new managers in search of the competitive

ing of the Achiever—How to Win Distinction in Your Company, Cox enumerates the qualities that humanize leaders, a prerequisite for executives who need to play from strength in a democratic society suspicious of strong leaders. He sees the highest leadership attributes as other-centeredness, courage, judiciousness, and resourcefulness.

In the first category, Cox identifies "five thought-and-action patterns [that] go into the making of the other-centered executive: (1) warmth; (2) the willingness and ability to listen; (3) an encouraging nature; (4) the disposition to think positively; and (5) the eagerness to share self, time, and information with each other." Among the behaviors he identifies in the second category, courage, is "growing stronger by being vulnerable." To become more vulnerable, he suggests brainstorming with associates, apologizing when in the wrong, welcoming new ideas, and being sensitive without being thin-skinned. Anyone who has been around trainers for even a short time has heard several or all of the above suggestions. But