"AS MORE PEOPLE FOCUS ON RESEARCH AS AN ACTIVITY AREA OF HRD, LET US ESTABLISH THE MECHANISMS SO THAT RESEARCHER AND PRACTITIONER ARE WORKING TOGETHER TO CONTINUALLY IMPROVE THE AREA OF HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT."

RESEARCH: AN HRD ACTIVITY AREA

BY LEONARD NADLER

Some readers may wonder why previous models of "what human resource developers do" have not included *research* as either a major role or even a subrole. If models reflect actual activity in the field, it would be difficult to find many human resource developers who devote any significant amount of time to research. The reasons are many but probably the most outstanding is that few employing organizations have been willing to pay for such an activity!

As our field emerges into more professionalism, and is subjected to closer scrutiny, it is inevitable that research will emerge as at least a subrole, if not a role. At present, it certainly is an activity area which should be identified and recognized.

"If HRD people are to do research, they need competencies, some of which are outside the usual functional areas of HRD people."

Research Is Not Evaluation

To explore this activity, we must first distinguish between research and evaluation. *They are not the same!* Confusion has led some people to use the label "evaluative research" or just to combine "research and evaluation." Not only does this avoid making the important and necessary distinction, it also blurs both areas and gets the least out of each.

Every learning experience should be evaluated. However, not every learning experience needs to be researched. Figure 1 (p. 62) provides a comparison, obviously a bit simplified, as it is not the purpose of this article to discuss the two areas. The comparison is necessary if we are to focus on research activities of human resource developers.

Evaluation has the purpose of finding out if learning took place . . . what happened as part of the learning program. Essentially, did the learner learn, and if so, what? Research endeavors to explore why learning took place, or why certain behavior occurred.

Evaluation is measured against the learning objectives determined and stated before the learning program began. Research can have many hypotheses, or predictions, as to what will or will not happen. Research can go far beyond the learning situation to explore factors *outside* of the learning situation, which may have impacted upon the learner and the situation. Research can also be done, as will be shown later, outside of the learning situation and perhaps have nothing to do with a particular learning situation.

Evaluation uses the actual learn-

ing situation as the approach to determine what happened. Re-

part of the total situation or probe it in depth.

Strategies of evaluation and research appear similar and this has contributed to the confusion. Both use some form of data-gathering though research must be more rigidly controlled. Both tend to use statistics to gather and report data.

Evaluation is designed to improve the program which has been evaluated. One must be careful not to use the evaluation of one program to predict results in other situations. Research can be more varied, but with specific controls it can lead to important generalizations for our field. Evaluation should be used immediately, while research can produce the basis for long-range actions. Some research (longitudinal) may take place over a long period of time and have to account for factors other than those which could be evaluated as part of the learning program.

Given the distinction, we can now proceed to examine research as an activity area of human resource developers.

Needed Areas of Research

Research takes time, careful preparation and design, and yet may show little observable benefit to the organization. This has tended to preclude organizations from utilizing financial and physical resources on this activity. Considering the vast amounts of money being spent on human resources development it is surprising that so little is done in the way of research. One explanation is that much of the research used in the field of HRD comes from other disciplines. As we are dealing with a complex subject (human beings), it is to be expected that we can benefit from the research done by many fields, but this should not be an excuse for doing too little of our own research.

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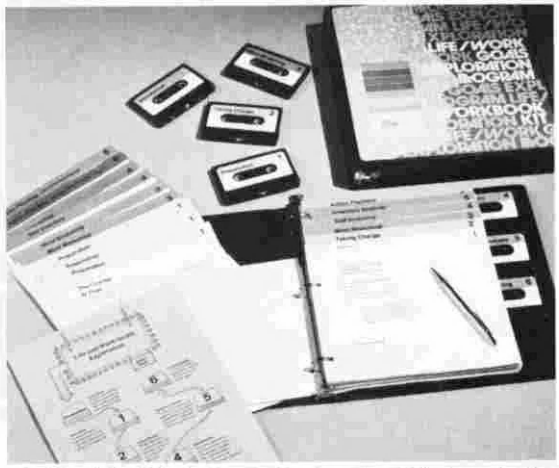

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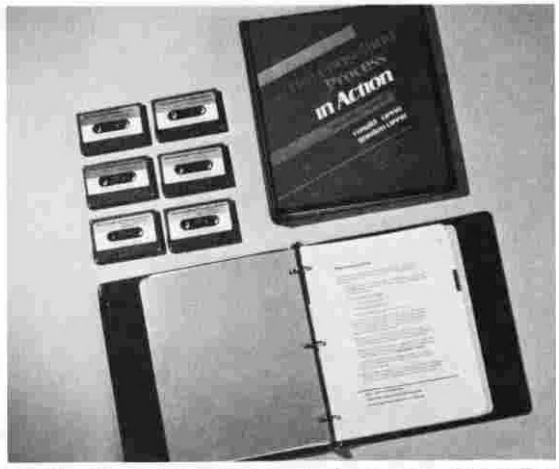

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areas of research in HRD. The list does not represent a hierarchy nor is it meant to be comprehensive. We could use a research study to identify the needed research! This list, however, can help to indicate why research in HRD is so necessary at this time.

• *Learning Strategies:* The core of the field of HRD is in learning. There have been some good studies related to adult learning which are reported from time to time in *Adult Education.* As a consulting editor for the past several years, I have read many manuscripts reporting research which were submitted for publication. It is unfortunate that the lack of quality did not permit publication of more of them.

A major area of concern is which learning strategies are "better." Of course, a research study sets up specific criteria so that comparisons can be made. There are some sporadic studies but an insufficient number to enable us to make any real distinctions. Some of the studies have produced results which conflict with other studies. This generally indicates the need for more research.

HRD practitioners need some help and guidance in identifying and selecting appropriate learning strategies. Research can be very helpful here and can contribute to more effective learning programs.

• *Success and Failure:* Evaluation can tell us whether a program succeeded or failed. We need research to tell us why. If the program has succeeded, we cannot just congratulate ourselves and go on to the next program. We need to identify *why* the program succeeded so we can use this data for producting additional successful programs.

If a program has failed, the identification of the causes can sometimes be researched so that the same mistakes will not be made again. Research after the program has concluded may not provide all the data we want, but it can indicate areas to consider for future programs.

Figure 1.

Purpose	EVALUATION What?	RESEARCH Why?
Focus	Learning Objectives	Hypotheses
Approach	Actual Situation	Experimental
Strategies	Data-gathering	Data-gathering
Utilization	To improve program	Varied
	Immediate	Long Range

• *Transfer to the Job — Loss of Learning:* This is not a new phenomenon, as Thorndike identified this over 50 years ago and called it "Transfer of Training (Learning)". It is the loss when going from the learning situation to the point of application. In HRD it is the job.

We have attempted to compensate for this loss by putting training physically as close to the job as possible. Other attempts have been by the use of organization development, one part of which recognizes that new (learned) behavior may not be usable if the situation does not allow for it. So, perhaps there are times when we have to focus on changing the work situation. Despite present efforts, the loss through transfer is still one of the significant problems which could benefit from research.

• *HRD Staffing and Organizational Placement:* What kinds of people should be in an HRD unit and where should it be in the organization? The latter part of the question is usually handled pragmatically, based on power. Many organizational problems are handled in this manner. Would it not be possible, through research, to establish some criteria which would help management make this decision?

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ed, due in part to the lack of a sufficient number of universities offering professional preparation (degrees) in HRD. As a result, HRD people come from a wide range of academic backgrounds which produces confusion and ambiguity. This is exacerbated by the combination within the same unit of various categories of people. Building on the work of the sociologist Gouldner (locals and cosmopolitans), I have evolved a model showing the categories of people in HRD. Though it has been substantiated by work in several organizations, it has not been adequately researched. Good studies in this area would be valuable to management as well as HRD people.

We do have research, going back over 25 years, about what is now referred to as the roles of the human resource developer. At least 25 different studies have been identified, related to this area of research. Rather than additional research here, we need to implement the utilization of this research.

• *Attitudes Toward HRD:* What does management think of HRD? A study by Ruth Salinger of the U.S. Civil Service Commission (*Disincentives to Training*) identified 11 different reasons why managers thought negatively about HRD. We need more studies like this in a variety of settings so we can identify the nature of the problem. We are still far from it. We still hear HRD people talk about "selling management" rather than identifying management needs for which HRD is an appropriate response. We need research which can help us identify the blocks, and to experiment with possible approaches.

HRD People Need Competencies

Even the brief list above indicates that if HRD people are to do research, they need competencies, some of which are outside the usual functional areas of HRD people. There are many fields that use researchers, and rather than develop a list of competencies which would duplicate this, let us

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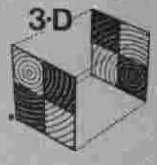

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borrow from them. After this is done, we can identify some competencies which are special to the HRD field.

Without going into detail, the basic competencies needed are:

1. *Develop research designs:* There are many different kinds of research, and a wide variety of design possibilities. The HRD researcher should be able to identify the various kinds of designs and select those most appropriate for the particular area to be studied. This would include hypothecated and nonhypothecated studies, descriptive research, and experimental designs.

2. *To design and validate data-gathering instruments and procedures:* If the data are to be meaningful and useful, careful design of the data-gathering is crucial. Frequently, there is only one opportunity to gather data from a respondent group. After the first contact, to go back again can contaminate the data. Therefore, it requires time and careful professional preparation to design the appropriate procedures and instruments.

3. *To conduct a research study:* This takes time and often requires that the researcher be able to keep from becoming emotionally involved with the topic and/or the subjects. This is not always possible but is essential. There is a balance between enthusiasm and involvement and a good researcher must be able to identify and maintain that balance.

4. *Statistics:* It is almost impossible to do research without some competence in quantification. For larger groups of respondents, or for some sophisticated statistical manipulations, the researcher must work with the computer and know different packages or programs.

Not all human behavior can be or need be quantified. The researcher must have enough competency in statistics to know when this approach is appropriate and if so, what kinds of statistical treatment will be most helpful to the research project and to any ultimate user.

All of these competencies are important, and not generally found in HRD practitioners at this time. As stated earlier, it is not required that all HRD people have these competencies, but if they are to do research, they need at least the basic competencies.

Research Resources

Not every organization can afford researchers of any kind, and it is even less probable that they will have HRD researchers. There are organizations that have researchers in various fields, usually technical or engineering. Other organizations may have market researchers. Some of their resources could be utilized on HRD, but they may not have the background or interest to become involved in some of the needed areas of research indicated earlier.

Universities have research as one of their significant if not major functions. Particularly, if there are doctoral programs, the required dissertation is almost always a research exercise. At The George Washington University, where we have a doctoral program in HRD, students are encouraged to research practical problems in their work situation, or other work situations.

It is possible for organizations to contract externally for HRD researchers who can conduct internal research. (Unfortunately, such contractors are referred to as consultants which confuses the focus, as consultants are a different group with other competencies.) As more organizations indicate a willingness to pay for research, more people will enter the field and we will accumulate an important and significant body of knowledge.

The Future

We can expect to see research as an increasingly important activity area in HRD. Questions which have generally been ignored must be answered if organizations are to make the most effective use of their human resources, and the HRD function.

With increased interest in HRD, and the growth of academic programs in HRD (rather than as a two-course adjunct to something else), more people will become interested in conducting and utilizing research. Learning from other fields, let us anticipate the usual problem of the gap between research and practice. As more people focus on research as an activity area of HRD, let us establish the mechanisms so that researcher and practitioner are working together to continually improve the area of human resource development.

Dr. Leonard Nadler is professor of Adult Education and Human Resource Development, School of Education, The George Washington University in Washington, DC. He also provides consultation to various companies and agencies in the areas of individual and organizational change. He was the Chairman of the Design Committee for the 1978 conference of the International Federation of Training and Development Organizations, which was cosponsored by ASTD. He has published a variety of articles in professional magazines. In 1977 he received the Gordon M. Bliss Award from ASTD for his contributions to the profession. He is the coauthor, with his wife, of *The Conference Book.*

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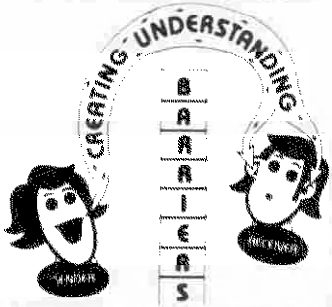

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