Self-Destructive HRD

Today's organizations are tyrannized—and undermined—by that sacred child of the HRD priesthood: the self.

By DAVID FORREST

The other day something struck me as emblematic of a dangerous theme in organizational life. In a department planning meeting of several fairly high-level trainers, someone suggested that work done by individual members as instructional developers or project leaders be submitted to critical analysis in a peer review by the whole group. The idea was that some benefit might be derived from that sort of critique. The work itself might be improved, somebody might learn something they could use in their own work, or the integrity of the group might be bolstered.

Two members of the group objected strenuously, said that the process would be "destructive and uncomfortable" for a lot of people and, further, that the idea filled some "inner need" of the person making the suggestion and, by implication, not much else. The person making the original suggestion bristled at this pretension to knowing his inner motivation and heatedly countered that it was the essence of professionalism to submit one's work to peer review and evaluation. To refuse to do so, he said, was "bush league." I agreed with him, but I don't think the rest of the group did.

This little skirmish was the essence of a larger battle that has been going on forever and everywhere. Anyone in HRD will recognize it as the conflicting imperatives of Theory X and Theory Y and the multitude of derivatives and clones found under other names. At the level revealed above, it is the rational claims of the general good are pitted against personal privacy and security. On other levels, sociologists recognize it as Instrumentalism and Expressivism,

David Forrest is a sociologist currently working for a high-tech corporation in a group dedicated to the exploration, adaptation and mobilization of new training technology.

psychologists as Freud's fundamental human needs for work and love, and philosophers as the Apollonian and the Dionysian themes in Western thought. A reasonable theory of cultural evolution can be constructed by tracing the dialectical interplay of these two themes in intellectual history.

These notions are, of course, ostensibly rational constructs, but they sometimes lose their rational grounding, take on ideological character and provide, as happened in the case above, legitimacy for political conflict. We in the HRD establishment have been operating in a mode that emphasizes the expressive, supportive, humanistic, egalitarian, participative, subjective and consensual. This orientation, for all its admitted value, has acquired decadent manifestation in organizational life and should be questioned fundamentally. Basically, the issue emerges as a psychologized vision of reality pitted against a sociologized one: man

> **We don't need training in listening any more than the Scarecrow needed the Wizard to give him a brain**

as driven by needs installed by life experience and operating from within vs. man as a rational and moral being; the human group as the consequence of the infinitely complex interplay of personal motivations vs. the human group as the consequence of shared values and definitions of reality; human behavior explained as the objectification of subjective motivation vs. human behavior explained as the natural derivative of the society. Any thinking person immediately will see that man can be understood from both perspectives. Not everyone will see that

HRD has grown up under the intellectual hegemony of the former and that it's time for a basic reorientation.

The psychologized vision

Most HRD people would not have much trouble with the claim that psychology is *the* science of behavior. Psychologists frequently credit their craft with an almost cosmic pretension, and general and expert publics alike seldom give any argument. And, because so many HRD people got their undergraduate training in psychology, the psychological vision acquires an easy transparency in the HRD context; we scarcely know it's there any more than a fish knows it's in water. The psychological construct forms a diffuse and pervasive background against which nearly all of organizational life is understood.

The legitimacy of that construct is reinforced by the fact that psychological notions, usually but not always in debased or simplistic form, constitute major axes around which the public at large understands social reality. Facile psychologizing can be heard at any party, on any park bench or in any parked car. Thus, it's no wonder that the psychologized vision is never seriously challenged, either for its inherent limitations or in terms of its legitimate alternatives (to the eternal despair of anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and economists everywhere).

In the hands of the lumpenintelligensia that serves as a sort of HRD priesthood, psychology is the basis for a secular religion of behavior used to legitimate specious training and to establish political and intellectual hegemony for some at the expense of others.

There can be no doubt that the psychologized vision is sacred to much of the HRD profession. It's the product they traffic in. Let's take a look at some

53

of the ad copy and the headlines of the articles that have appeared in the *Journal*.

- "A Warm, Human Approach to Increasing Productivity..."
- "...productivity through greater understanding of human nature."
- "We want...the applicant to feel good about us...."
- "We Attitudes Win Championships"
- "Time Out for Stress Management Training"
- "It gives you a good feeling to have the power to create."
- "...introduce[s]...managers and trainees to new work attitudes...*painlessly*, sparking their interest and staying on their minds."
- "Releasing Problem Solving Energies[:]...explains how such techniques can clear your mind and free your imagination...."

We could go on with this, but it's too easy. Try it yourself. Leaf through the ads and articles of any journals and trades that go to the HRD establishment, and through many that don't. Watch for these themes as implicit assumptions in the psychologized vision of reality:

- Reality is that which is subjectively experienced as real. The significant aspect of anything is its effect upon the individual psyche.
- If the effect of a thing is to cause psychic tension or any kind of emotional discomfort beyond the most minimal, that thing is illegitimate.
- The human personality is under constant threat from forces outside it that are

sometimes too intelligent or are dangerously close to humility and are thus ideologically unreliable.) Productive behavior depends upon the acquisition of arcane understandings that can be revealed only through contact—whenever possible mercenary—with the ordained stewards of those understandings.

- The progress of the "behavioral sciences" is inexorable and accelerated. You are unlikely to keep up. Should you threaten to catch up, we will define what we gave you before as passé and give you something new. Should we run out of new stuff, which is not very likely, we will change the name of something we have already promoted to you as "the answer," and which we have displaced with some new "answer," and then give it to you again.
- People are all about the same. Any differences we think we see in their abilities are illusory or are the consequences of some advantage of training they have had. Therefore, anyone can be as good as anyone else if they have the right training. Differences in performance are not attributable to differences in character, talent, personality, fundamental belief system or values. They are all skill differences, and that's where we come in again, and again and again.
- There are several criteria available for determining whether anything is good, true or valid: New ideas and techniques are better than those that are old. Those that are consonant with the most stridently advanced, politically popular and social-

and momentum of the HRD enterprise.

Now, you may not see much wrong with these notions, or you may think that they don't really have much practical or pernicious effect. That wouldn't be too surprising since, taken together, they form a kind of self-validating crackpot realism that is tough to cut through. But let's hack at them anyway, using a few familiar cases.

The false symmetry of problems and solutions

This unstated notion is the core idea in the HRD ethos: For every feature of organizational life that can be isolated as a problem, there is a practical and technical solution that not only *can* be applied but *must* be applied. Like many elements of crackpot realism, this idea contains an element of truth. Certainly it is true that serious problems should be attacked with efficient and vigorous efforts directed toward their solutions, but the unfettered optimism that gives this idea its energy leads to serious error. First, it is essentially negative in its focus beause it suggests that success lies in the solution of problems rather than in the pursuit of opportunity, merit or virtue. It fails to recognize that in a healthy organization the natural wit and good will of the people on whom the problems bear will either neutralize the problems' effects or undermine their basis in such a way that they will soon go away.

Second, it is not at all clear that the installation of a new technique and the associated agency or new department needed to administer it ever solved a problem. It seems just as reasonable to suggest that the opposite happens. Solutions tend to perpetuate problems to the extent that, as the problem tends to evaporate through the natural course of things, the agency charged with its solution goes to desperate and often effective lengths to prove that the problem is still there.

Third, problems tend to be defined in terms that are consonant with the means available for their solution. Trainers see problems in terms of training solutions; other professionals see them in their particular terms. Thus, reality is transformed in a way that force-fits it to means available for its perception.

The facts about problems and their solutions are these: Like illness, most problems will go away by themselves. Problems that are vulnerable to technical solution are usually local rather than systemic and, thus, are frequently not

---

We have taken illusory and narcotic comfort in pseudo religions like quality circle programs

---

not only illegitimate but also cruel and savage. These forces constitute not only a threat of trauma but, in a less extreme form, constraints on human performance that if removed would permit the personality to emerge into a rapture of efficiency and productivity. The individual is good; the society is bad.

- People are incapable of spontaneously and independently inventing even the tiniest quantum of rational behavior in their own behalf. They do not learn from experience; they learn form experts with B.A. degrees in psychology, sometimes M.A.'s, but seldom from Ph.D.'s unless in educational psychology. (Those with Ph.D.'s in other areas of psychology are

ly orthodox are better than those that are not. Those that are derived from the prevailing distortion or misapplication of some psychological or sociological principle are better than those that are not. If it feels good to practically everybody involved, and if everyone or almost everyone endorses it, then it is good. Wait! One more: If it's Japanese, it's good.

These somewhat exaggerated typifications of the implicit beliefs in HRD culture are not meant to be taken too literally or too strictly. Neither is it suggested that they operate everywhere in the same degree, nor that they are unalloyed with other beliefs. However, they do provide the intellectual ballast

very serious. The agency charged with the solution of a problem has the greatest stake in its continuation. The best attack on a problem is to surround and overwhelm it with quality. Not every perceivable problem has to be solved; many can be tolerated. Some solutions cost more than the problem that inspired them. So, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

The fallacy of the team

There can be no doubt that work in complex organizations gets done through the concerted energies of many people. But the derivatives of this inarguable platitude, many of which are taken as virtual gospel by HRD people, are dangerous. First, it suggests that everybody has something useful to contribute to the effort, that everybody has an opinion worthy of respect and that everybody should be able to effect the work. Clearly this is egalitarianism gone mad. The fact is that some people in any organization, by virtue of any number of unattractive reasons, have relatively little to contribute. Despite good faith efforts, the democratization of education and training has not yielded the democratization of ability. In fact, it appears that the very laudable impulse to educate everyone has widened the range of distribution of ability by giving the talented yet another means by which their talent can win for them an advantage over the less talented.

Ability remains persistently and immutably tied to sheer talent and therefore remains distributed along an ever widening distribution curve. This is an uncomfortable turn of events for educational egalitarians. Organization politics and values make it difficult to permit events in organizational life to reflect the influence of education and training as it works its way with talent. There can be no doubt that it is humane, even noble, to involve everyone in the work of the organization and to take deliberate, even forced or artificial pains to see that it happens. It is probably also true that the weaker members and the stronger ones both benefit from such efforts. And the organization benefits as a consequence.

But taken too far, such a policy has unbearable costs. The quality of training and education becomes debased when it provides inflated credentials to everyone. The more talented people become demoralized as policy drifts toward mere majoritarianism. Creativity is undermined when the creative are seen as marginal types whose ideas are defined as no more

than bizarre and impractical. Projects lose their shape and unique focus as they drift under the peculiar interests of sincere but misguided people.

Clearly, everyone has a right to try to influence events, even a duty to do so. But just as clearly, not everyone automatically has a right to effect the course of organizational life. That must be won through the quality of one's ideas.

Emerald City University

Training sometimes seems like a world of fantasy. There seems to be no limit on what can be considered real and legitimate subject matter for a training effort. There's quite a bit of crazy training going around. "Listening" is an especially goofy one. If you want part of your credentials to come from the University of Emerald City, Oz, you certainly have to take a course in listening. The idea behind this one is that people don't listen

very well. Listening is understood to be a trainable skill, and once defined as such can there be any doubt that all of us can be better listeners?

There's an astonishing amount of literature in support of this listening thing, some of it by big-time smart guys like Mortimer Adler. But there's a problem with it. The more you look at it, the more listening as a discrete skill gets dissolved into other notions until finally it goes away. First, there is the ritual surrounding of the subject with specious and misleading quantification. We are told that we spend about half of our communication time listening. That, of course, is a sure sign that listening is real and that it matters. Then, we are told that listening is not "hearing." Most people guess this ahead of time (bet you did, too). Then, we learn that listening is a complex skill made up of many difficult components and that we can't take our ability in any of them for granted.

By this time some people are getting uneasy; they are beginning to doubt their listening ability in a serious way. Listening is, we are told, actually "sensing, interpreting, evaluating and responding." Many people get lost in the subtlety of this definition. They think that "sensing, interpreting, evaluating and responding"

are sensing, interpreting, evaluating and responding—not listening.

It's good to have that cleared up, but by now many people are quite certain that they need help with listening. Who wouldn't? Next we are given real tips on how to become good listeners: Listen for ideas, not facts; listen optimistically; don't jump to conclusions; concentrate; exercise your mind; nod your head from time to time to indicate that you have understood; work at listening; hold your emotions in check.

All this is elaborated endlessly. Many people have trouble with the last caveat on emotions. It's very difficult to hold one's emotions in check when hearing... uh, ... listening to ... no, sensing, interpreting, evaluating and responding to this kind of thing.

This kind of silliness is a natural consequence of the psycholgized vision of reality. It is possible only when the

Facile psychologizing can be heard at any party, on any park bench, or in any parked car. It's no wonder that the psychologized vision of reality is never seriously challenged

modalities through which the world is understood are altered in a fundamental way. There is no such thing as listening by itself. There must be some objective evidence of listening such as responding, for example. We have become so used to the idea that the private, subjective experience has an objective reality that we don't even remark on it any more. The problem is that this kind of trip down the intellectual Yellow Brick Road is misleading. It suggests that we can get basic and important abilities like interpreting and evaluating, or any other ability essential to proficiency, by taking a course in some narrow and easily packaged pseudo skill like listening. We cannot. We are competent to the extent that we draw upon the best of the deep and general culture that has been instilled in us over many years. We don't need training in listening any more than the Scarecrow needed the Wizard to give him a brain. And to suggest otherwise is wasteful of energy and hope at best.

National redemption through superficial uplift

The American character derives from two fundamental themes. One is the essential religiosity in the American consciousness; the other is the abiding belief

in the power of human effort to bend the world to human purpose. Americans order their place in the world around the idea that their natures have been forged out of experiences which give them a special capacity to absorb adversity and to mold out of it a transcendent good fortune. We take this as clear evidence that we have a special relationship to the bright spirits of national destiny. No matter what, we can tough it out. The latter theme in the American ethos emerges out of our astonishing ability to create the technology that creates the world. In an important sense the world of today is for better or worse a world made by Americans. Over the last 50 years, Americans have had good reason to think of themselves as masters of technology and of themselves.

Recently, however, we have been rocked by the realization that perhaps we are not as good as we thought we were. An exotic eastern culture—Japan—has overcome conventional and nuclear holocaust, an adversity the horror of which we can only guess, and applied technology so efficiently and creatively that they successfully can challenge U.S. pretensions.

By now, the rationalizations have all been made and answered. The truth asserts itself with irresistible force: Japan may be better than the U.S. in just those ways that we admire the most and in which we thought we had a virtual monopoly. We have come, finally, to doubt ourselves in fundamental ways. We are experiencing no less than a major crisis of spirit.

The response has been pathetic and tragic. We have taken illusory and narcotic comfort in pseudo religions like quality circle programs. In them we are separated from the real, messy, imperative world of the work place and set off into little chapels of analysis where we recite a catechism of statistical incantations and a litany of analytic dogma administered by a pantheon of facilitators, leaders and steerers presided over by the supreme facilitators upstairs we call top management. And this is supposed to lead us out of the dark valley of shoddy goods and into the bright light of quality!

It's no wonder that this kind of solution appeals to us. It answers marvelously the basic themes in the American consciousness. It promises redemption from the sin of having fallen from competitive grace on international markets and, in so doing, it seems to affirm that we are a good and moral people. By providing us

with an absurdly elaborate technology of analysis, quality circles let us operate through a modality which we believe, with somewhat diminished conviction to be sure, is at the center of our special talents. Our faith in technology is so nearly absolute that we tend to think that its routine application must necessarily yield fortunate results.

Quality circles also resonate exquisitely with the trendier themes in American life. Our simplistic liberationism and our recently cultivated taste for communitarionism and revelation are satisfied nicely by a circle of well meaning people sitting around endlessly applauding each other's efforts. It really does give one a good feeling, a real sense of potency and effect. And, when doubts are raised about the ultimate benefits of this approach, someone suggests that this is good in itself, that it draws people together, that it sends them out again with renewed dedication.

The quality of training and education becomes debased when it provides inflated credentials to everyone. The more talented become demoralized as policy drifts toward mere majoritarianism

---

Perhaps it does for a time. But that is not what it's for. It's for making high quality goods that are competitive with the best in the world—not for temporary spiritual uplift. To suggest otherwise is cruel and, ultimately debilitates the spirit.

In another period of national doubt we had a quality movement similar to this one. It was called "Zero Defects." It didn't work. It didn't work because it failed to make people see that quality does not derive from the application of false science administered through self-serving bureaucracies in HRD establishments, but rather through national dedication to something other than narrow self-interest. As currently practiced, quality circles are a meager substitute.

Leadership theory as ideological imperialism

For at least 50 years, training establishments have been burdened by a persistent problem. In spite of the dedication of vast academic and practical resources, no satisfactory general theory

of leadership has emerged. Special scientific insights into the relationships between leadership, followership, productivity and the quality of modern work life are claimed, but leaders are confused by the babble of theoretical obscurantism offered by the numberless gurus of the art of being boss.

Leaders have had their confidence undermined by the multitude of visions that seem to indict their deepest managerial instincts. The modern leader is endowed with a limitless treasury of leadership theory and training but remains intellectually impoverished. And for good reason. Most of the glittering theoretical gems are paste and the shining gold promises of new and better ways to manage are too often just tin plate.

More than any other area in which the HRD establishment claims special understanding, leadership theory and training has become detached from a grounding in how the world actually operates. It is now little more than a frantic wind vane trimming desperately to prevailing ideologies.

It began with the worthy attempt to liberate the worker from egregious savagery and random exploitation by the late 19th century owner/entrepreneur. To free the worker-owner relationship from its moral groundings, the notion emerged that the practice of leadership was an independent capacity which was not tied importantly to any features of the relationship between the leader and the led. Instead, leaders were not owners but technical specialists whose specialty was leadership itself. Thus spawned was the notion that if you could lead one group you could lead another. It was asserted that effective leadership meant commanding technical abilities peculiar to management itself: planning, controlling and the like. Thus, management thought was encrypted within the walls of the academy, losing forever its status as an intuitive and public art. Leadership gave way to the formal profession of management with its codified orthodoxies, and a concomitant profession emerged dedicated to broadcasting those orthodoxies.

This new vision of management reflected the modernism, cold technique and rationality that was to save the world in the early 20th century. But in time this became too abstract and distant from people. After all, it was people who were being led, not things. People had emotions, and motivational appeals could be made to them if the logic of those motivations was systematically analyzed,

understood and represented to whomever might benefit from such knowledge. So the ideology of modernism and technique was applied to performance and ultimately yielded a science of behavior. This in turn led indirectly to a science of human performance that could be readily understood as a kind of debased Skinnerianism. The human group was seen as a flock of pigeons whose individual "behaviors" were to be shaped through the deliberate manipulation of reward. Now the organically related response of the group to the work itself was atomized into a set of parallel but essentially unrelated responses to the manager and the rewards he controlled.

Then another theme in the psychologized vision came into play. We were attending to the human psyche, to be sure, but in too unresolved a fashion. It was noted that people's responses to manipulated conditions varied enormously, and the Skinnerian formula was not sensitive enough to individual differences. The democratization of the burgeoning new psychotherapeutic theories and techniques showed us that people were profoundly different in their motivations and in those annoying and troublesome eccentricities that managers found so undermining of productivity and docility.

We were given the manager as counselor. The subordinate was to be counseled away from deviance at certain critical moments in his work career. The most ceremonial of these was the formal performance review wherein the subordinate was cut off from his peers and told that he is doing well but, in light of the interpretation of reality legislated upon him by his superior, not quite well enough. Nor is it likely that he ever will be okay, since reality is in the hands of the superior, its terms changing according to the superior's purpose, design and needs. This sort of counseling session has nothing to do with pay increases. The only available reward is a clean bill of psychic health and a greater share of more challenging, demanding and thus more desirable work assignments or promotions. All this for the psychologically fit.

But it didn't work out that way. The very terms and structure of the interaction doomed the subordinate to perpetual shame and anxiety, and burdened him with a nagging sense that he would never be quite well, never quite good enough. And what was left of group cohesiveness suffered to the extent that virtue was seen as individual virtue, merit as a zero sum matter. There are, after all, only so many

good projects and promotions to go around.

The problem became how to reconstruct the group, how to reconstitute the team. And management theory, with its historical focus on the individual, was without answers. Some relief was provided by the partial installation of a kind of schizy humanism that derived from social and philosophical movements of the 1960s under gurus Abraham Maslow, Douglas McGregor and others. But the HRD establishment applied these ideas as psychological theories and failed to acknowledge their equivocal empirical basis, thus undermining their essentially moral character and energy. But the stunningly simplistic theme lingers on.

The theme takes form as a despairing reaction to install, by default, management by consensus: That is good which is consonant with prevailing group norms. This is a kind of managerial throwing up of the hands, an abdication to radical egalitarianism legitimated by an encounter-group, flower-child mentality that asserts the automatic wisdom of the human personality as it plays out its purpose against the background of work. In a context of extreme self-interest and self-absorption, such a mentality is dangerous. It replaces the old savagery of the 19th century business barons with the brutality of the late 20th century mob. Work is reduced to the simplism of human relations skills and the perverting banalities of other-directedness. Quality and excellence are overwhelmed by salesmanship and group think.

Guided by the HRD enterprise, management theory continues to adapt the prevailing ideologies. In the process subordinates and superordinates alike are trained away from the capacity to develop worthy goals—goals that can draw them all together above narrow self-interest and integrate them into organically constituted and effective teams.

The limits of the subjective

Grounding action in the facts of organizational life is the basis for rational behavior and for productivity. But we are in trouble. People in organizational life no longer think or believe a thing to be true. They "feel" it to be true. One can argue the legitimacy of thoughts and beliefs, but not of feelings; they are inviolate. Or worse, no matter how clearly and unambiguously one develops an argument or states an assertion about objective reality, it is now virtually certain that those who disagree with the assertion will

preface an outragious and easily indictable caricature of it with the remark "What I hear you saying is..." You fill in the distortion yourself. Thus, reality is fragmented and distributed among the private selves of the group, forever protected from objective analysis and evaluation.

Objective analysis and evaluation are casualties of Lasch's Culture of Narcissism.[1] As the desperate and fractured self falls into compulsive attempts at validation, rational process gives way to subjective experience. The public self, that aspect of being out of which organizational life must be made, increasingly yields to the fetishism of self-aggrandizement masquerading as self-realization. Gradually, the private self acquires exclusive leverage over the terms within which reality is understood, undermining common understandings, shared experience and the rational basis for behavior.

Even Maslow, that most committed of all guardians of the precious and tender self knew that there were limits:

"I think the way I would sum up some of my uneasiness about the management and leadership literature and my fear of a new kind of piety and dogma would be to shift the center of attention...to the objective requirements of the particular situation or problem. The [emphasis] should be on facts, knowledge and skill rather than on communication, democracy, human relations and good feeling. There ought to be a bowing to the authority of the facts."[2]

It is the plain ol' kick-'em-around facts that matter, finally. They have an authority to which we can all subordinate ourselves without the slightest loss of human dignity. And a courageous response to facts and their implications will let us all find and amplify the best that is in us. Through the earnest, rational, objective and even selfless engagement of each new challenge, we can recreate ourselves as worthy individuals in productive organizations dedicated to useful work.

References

1. Lasch, C. (1978). *The culture of narcissism*. New York: Warner Books.
2. Maslow, A.H. (1970). The superior person. In W.G. Bennis (Ed.), *American Bureaucracy*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction.