Learning from Non-School Staff Development Activities

Leonard Nadler

"Human resource development" is a term commonly used to describe the learning programs provided by business, industry, or government for employees and non-employees. The specifics of this approach may have implications for education as well.

School systems are presently devoting a larger portion of their financial resources to staff development than at any time in the past. There are many reasons for this, and it is important for each school system to identify why it is moving in this direction.

In the non-school areas (business, industry, government), "staff development" has been active and ongoing for many years, having received its biggest impetus during World War II. Today, the professional organization, American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), numbers over 10,000 people engaged in this work. There are probably another 30,000 who are not members. All together, they have budgets in the billions, though specific statistics are not available.

To understand and learn from the non-school area, it is necessary to learn a new vocabulary; the non-school domain communicates concepts and practices that are probably not familiar to public school personnel. It is also important to recognize that the emphasis is on adult learning, which is somewhat different from the learning we provide for children.

Concepts

There is no agreement on terminology in the non-school area, but in the past few years a term has emerged that is gaining common usage. This is "human resource development" (HRD), which signifies all the learning programs provided by an organization for both its employees and non-employees. (In this article we will focus on employee HRD.)

Organizations provide essentially three different kinds of learning experiences, those that are:

1. Related to the current job;
2. Related to a future, identified job; and
3. Related to the future of the organization, the society, and the individual.

It is important to keep this distinction in mind. Hopefully, the reader will accept the following labels, at least for this article, so we can be specific:

- Current job = Training
- Future job = Education
- The future = Development

As indicated in the earlier reference to ASTD, many organizations have a specific person or unit with HRD responsibility. This is evidence of the organization’s commitment to developing its human resources. It also means

that the function is not haphazard or performed when somebody receives a stimulating notice from a college or university. Rather, there is a unit within the organization that is constantly trying to improve individual performance through appropriate learning experiences.

This unit should be located as close to managerial decision making as possible. In a school situation, this would mean that the unit should be in the office of the superintendent, or should report directly to this official. To submerge it in the personnel office or at some lower level deprives the HRD unit of the possibility of responding to management decisions.

"To understand and learn from the non-school area, it is necessary to learn a new vocabulary; the non-school domain communicates concepts and practices that are probably not familiar to public school personnel. It is also important to recognize that the emphasis is on adult learning, which is somewhat different from the learning we provide for children."

Content

When it is suggested that an HRD need exists, the first reaction of the HRD specialist is to identify and clarify the need. There may be a need, but it may best be satisfied by something other than a learning experience. Sometimes job redesign may be more appropriate. At other times, changes in organizational patterns or practices may meet the need. It may be preferable to reassign some individuals rather than to provide HRD.

HRD programs are based on a needs assessment. Training programs (remember the distinction made earlier?) arise when there is a variation between what the employee is expected to do on the job, and the actual job performance. All training must start with the expectations of job performance (quality and quantity standards) that are generally agreed upon. There are times when the HRD person must function as a counselor to determine if the employee and supervisor both concur in the performance standards.

If so, then it is possible to determine the needs and provide the appropriate learning experience.

Since the goal of training is improved job performance, the results of training should be discernible on the job. Evaluation of the experience should be in observable job behavior.

Some training programs are difficult to evaluate. Organizations accept the need for supervisory training, though they have found it difficult to evaluate. Likewise, training programs dealing with equal employment are offered, though evaluation is elusive. To the degree possible, organizations try to focus on training programs that will show results. The content for education programs—for a future job—is determined by what the individual is expected to do on the new job. In this case, the content should relate to the new job behaviors; the organization does not expect to see any change in present job behavior. Of course, any new learning can influence present behavior, but this is not the objective.

Organizations have done much less with development. This is a high-risk learning experience in that the HRD person has difficulty showing how development contributes to either individuals or organizations who have realized that it is necessary to provide learning experiences that go beyond the present job, or the future, identifiable job.

In one sense, this is not too different from what happens in the nation's classrooms. Students are provided with learning experiences to make them better at their present jobs (for example, study skills), to prepare them for future jobs (for example, college entrance, or a vocational position), and for the future (for example, some liberal arts content). The difference is that, in HRD programs, the emphasis is on one of these goals rather than all three combined in the same program. This encourages clarification, by all concerned, of the specific behaviors expected from each learning program.

In HRD, content arises from the needs of the learner, not from a previously prepared curriculum into which the learner must fit. This makes HRD expensive, for curriculum development is a constant and ongoing process. Even while an HRD program is in progress, there can be changes in the curriculum through negotiations and mutual goal setting.
Delivery Systems

HRD programs conducted by organizations utilize a wide variety of resources. There may be people on the HRD staff who conduct courses as well as design them. The HRD unit may administer and contract for outside resources. It may rely on packages from commercial sources or contract for special programs. The HRD unit may combine all of the above, depending upon its own internal resources, budget availability, and the needs of the learners.

For the most part, programs do not function on a semester basis. Some large corporations that have HRD centers do function like colleges (for example, Xerox at Leesburg, Virginia; U.S. Postal Service; General Electric at Croton-on-Hudson; McDonald's Hamburger University at several sites). Most HRD programs start when there is an identified need, and end at a predetermined time. The length of the program is variable, as well as the time of day.

There is a variety of ways to bring the learning and the learner together. In the modular learning program, for example, the total program is divided into several modules that may be taken in any sequence. Some modules are designed for individual self-learning, while others require small groups. Not every subject matter lends itself to the modular format, however.

There are external programs in which learners are sent to sites away from their usual work sites, perhaps to cities or countries where other parts of the organization are located. External programs might include public seminars conducted by a wide variety of organizations or attendance at a college or university.

Most HRD programs are internal in that the learning is provided within the physical facility. It is essentially classroom learning, with some very sophisticated learning environments specially constructed to meet the physical, social, and psychological needs of the adult learner.

Job rotation is one type of HRD program particularly useful for education programs. A weakness of this approach, however, is that learning objectives are generally not as specific as they should be, so that the emphasis is on producing rather than on learning. However, when used appropriately, job rotation is extremely valuable to help employees learn about other jobs for which they may wish to prepare.

Public seminars have been mentioned earlier, but they are used so frequently that they deserve additional comment. Providing HRD is an economic role of society. The need is so general that there are many significant organizations that provide a wide variety of programs for anybody who wishes to register. They are different from colleges in that they do not offer credit, although the Continuing Education Unit has emerged to compensate for this. There are also other efforts to recognize non-collegiate learning experiences (sponsored by the American Council on Education). However, the major thrust of the public seminars is not credit, but learning. The seminars are highly competitive, and those that do not satisfy the needs of the learners usually do not continue. A limitation of any public seminar, however, is that it may include learners who wish to embrace all three areas (training, education, and development) and may thus leave some individuals with their objectives unmet.

Individual resource people (sometimes erroneously called consultants) are used to conduct specific kinds of learning experiences. These are individuals who have an earned reputation for presenting particular material or concepts. Some organizations do pride themselves on their use of outstanding people. But, it is too easy to fall into the trap of having had Dr. X present his program, whether needed or not. In contrast, the HRD unit identifies the need and then searches for the appropriate resource person who can help meet the identified need.

"Staff development is too tame a word for the excitement and possibility of developing human resources. There is no reason that school organizations cannot emulate and perhaps surpass what has been done in non-school organizations to develop the human resources of all employees at all levels."

203
Exchange programs for learning have proven woefully inadequate. The prime example is the Vocational Education Act of 1968, which provided funds for exchanging personnel between industry and the public schools so that both groups could learn. It was under-utilized and has disappeared.

There is a naive belief that non-school organizations have utilized unique strategies not available or used in school systems. In both school and non-school communities, however, one can find VTR (Video Tape Recordings), CCTV (Closed Circuit Television), teaching machines, programmed instruction materials, and other teaching aids. The difference may be that in the school system, these are used for the learner, and staff members are not considered learners!

What Can Be Learned from the Non-School Environment?

To summarize, the non-school experience in HRD shows that:

1. Learning should be based on identified needs.
2. The HRD unit should have obvious and concrete managerial support.
3. There should be an HRD unit or person (as a major responsibility).
4. Objectives should be clarified: Is it training, education, or development that is needed?
5. Content should be related to the needs of the learner, not the availability of outside resources.
6. Classroom learning is only one strategy—there are others which are readily available.

The Growing Edge

The picture would not be complete if some reference were not made to some of the other movements that impact on HRD.

For years, there has been something called organization development (OD). Despite the confusion of definitions, the term is used here to identify the problems of individuals and organizations. There are times, it has been found, when providing a learning program for an individual was frustrating to the learner rather than beneficial. The individual learned the new behavior, but then was not allowed to practice it upon returning to the job. This gave rise to the need for “changing organizations.” Actually, organizations are artificial devices, the essence of which is people. OD attempted to provide learning experiences for all of those who were concerned with changes. The focus was on change, and the way it could be brought about by providing a variety of learning experiences for the many individuals who needed to be involved.

In more recent times (the last two years), there has been a movement growing out of OD that speaks of improving the quality of work life. Some improvement is beyond HRD (things like salary, fringe benefits, job redesign), but there are many aspects of work life that can be improved through appropriate learning experiences. This is a new movement that should be watched.

In trying to find out what benefits HRD returns to the organization, as well as to the individual, exploration is proceeding in human resource accounting. The accounting societies are taking a penetrating look at the HRD activity that has been evolving for about ten years. They are on the threshold of some breakthroughs, as evidenced by their own recognition of the need to redefine their terms. As they do this, HRD may become more involved in the budgeting process.

Above all, HRD is concerned with releasing human potential. Staff development is too tame a word for the excitement and possibility of developing human resources. There is no reason that school organizations cannot emulate and perhaps surpass what has been done in non-school organizations to develop the human resources of all employees at all levels.

Leonard Nadler is Professor of Education, George Washington University, Washington, D.C.