

Perspectives on Theory

Defining Intergalactic Human Resource Development (IHRD)

RICHARD A. SWANSON

The University of Texas at Tyler

ABSTRACT *This satirical essay questions both the rigor and relevance of the practice of promoting definitions that simply reflect an area of interest with HRD. The discipline of HRD needs clear and concise overarching definitions that work everywhere.*

KEY WORDS: Definition of HRD, National HRD, HRD policy

Remember when developing a refined definition of human resource development (HRD) was important? My long-standing definition is that *HRD is a process for developing and unleashing human expertise through training and development and organization development for the purpose of improving performance.*

Recently some have been calling for a ‘unique national definition of HRD.’ Not to be outdone, let’s up the bar by advancing the need for *Intergalactic HRD*. I’m serious!

I used to think that HRD simply existed in a host system was understood – like Swanson Hardware, Starbucks, General Electric, Texas or Singapore. I used to think that describing HRD as a process with specified realms of activity and a dependent variable was enough. Apparently, I was mistaken.

So, perhaps we need a whole bunch of HRD definitions. One for every specific system:

- Swanson Hardware HRD
- Starbucks HRD
- General Electric HRD
- Texas HRD
- Korea HRD
- etc.

Or, we need one definition for each sector in which specific systems fall:

- Small Business HRD
- Corporate HRD
- Durable Goods HRD
- Consumable Goods HRD
- Non-Profit HRD
- Government Agency HRD
- National HRD
- Continent HRD
- Earth HRD
- Galaxy HRD
- Intergalactic HRD

It seems like the proponents of the idea for having all these definitions believe this effort will lend precision and clarity to the HRD discipline. I have deep reservations. Just to let you know, I think this definitional expansion movement started this way: It is rooted in the cultural backlash to the Miss Universe Contest. You may not be aware that up to this time, all winners of the Miss Universe Contest have come from Earth. This disturbing realization throughout the Universe has billowed over into other realms, including HRD. The backlash demand has been for more definitions for everything.

Specifically, people with a national HRD perspective do not think my HRD definition is adequate. Likewise, I am sure that fast-food serving specialists feel the same. My solution is simple, and it allows for the creation of as many HRD definitions as one can conjure up. Just add the host system you are referring to the front and the ending of my definition to present your unique perspective. Thus:

- *Swanson Hardware HRD* is a process for developing and unleashing human expertise through training and development and organization development for the purpose of improving performance in Swanson Hardware.
- *South Korean HRD* is a process for developing and unleashing human expertise through training and development and organization development for the purpose of improving performance in *South Korea*.
- *Intergalactic HRD* is a process for developing and unleashing human expertise through training and development and organization development for the purpose of improving performance throughout the galaxies.

Some readers may have doubts about the viability of *Intergalactic HRD*. I can understand. As a host system is a bit out of reach (pun intended). *Singapore HRD*, on the other hand, as an authoritarian island nation (Meadows, 2004), effectively articulates and manages *Singapore HRD*. In comparison, *United States of America HRD* is not even on the map as a unified policy-driven system. It is much too diverse. In some way, HRD in the USA is like the galaxies with all their components and their moving magnetic relationships. HRD in the USA is not as easily comprehended as the training of cooks for McDonalds or Singapore HRD.

Centrally controlled HRD policy and practice is a phenomenon that deserves continued debate and study. It is not a definitional problem. The size and complexity of HRD's host system, and the changing environment in which it functions, presents pressing and important challenges. I have worked in multiple divisions of Fortune 50 corporations with HRD in each division having almost totally independent HRD policies and procedures: one seemingly being from Venus and the other from Mars. Quite frankly, I did not have enough understanding to say that this condition was good or bad. Scholars should seriously study HRD system policy relationships to determine effects and this would mean going beyond superficial case study reports and conclusions.

My closing point is simply that we need a clear and concise definition of HRD that works *everywhere*. I have offered one such option: HRD is a process for developing and unleashing human expertise through training and development and organization development for the purpose of improving performance. Feel free to customize it a bit for political or marketing purposes. My latest thought is to consider Intergalactic HRD.

References

- McLean, G. N. (2006) National human resource development: A focused study in transitioning societies in a developing world, *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, pp. 3–11.
- Meadows, D. (2004) *Singapore Leads the Good Life under a Benevolent Dictator* (Hartland, VT: Sustainability Institute).
- Swanson, R. A. (2005) The discipline of human resource development, in: R. A. Swanson and E. F. Holton (Ed.) *Foundations of Human Resource Development* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler).

Author Information

Richard A. Swanson is Distinguished Research Professor of Human Resource Development and the Sam Lindsey Chair at The University of Texas at Tyler. He is an internationally recognized authority on organizational change, the strategic roles of human resource development, adult learning, and the development of human expertise. Email: raswanson@qwest.net