

Swanson, R. A. (1990). Counter-top theory. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 1 (4), 319-320.

Countertop Theory

I have known Bill since kindergarten. I like him a lot. He's a school principal in my New Jersey hometown, and I'm a university professor in Minnesota. We live 1,300 miles apart during the school year and about 150 feet apart during the summer months on Lake Erie, in Ohio.

Bill and I don't talk much about our work. We have other, more important things to talk about when we're together: his kids and my kids, his 1934 Studebaker and my 1933 Ford, his sailboat and my sailboat, his woodworking projects and my woodworking projects. Today Bill helped me put laminate on the countertops of two kitchen cabinets I just made. Actually, I helped Bill. He has become more skilled at woodworking than I have over the years, and this is my public acknowledgment of the fact.

As we were finishing the countertop, Bill looked up at me and said, "This must help you with your job." I knew that he was talking about our shop work, that he meant the dreaming, the planning, the tools and materials, the orderliness, the completion of the job, the cleanup, and the satisfaction that comes at the end.

He commented on the other administrators who surround him in his work environment. Clearly, those colleagues aren't woodworkers. He didn't have to fill in all the details. The story was all too familiar: people with theory but no know-how; people with know-how but no theory; people who had no clear purpose other than to "go to work," with or without a plan; people who lacked an adequate set of intellectual tools or the necessary resources for the job; people who were not patient enough to take one step at a time or stay with the job to the end; people who could not acknowledge the expertise of others and become their joyful servants when appropriate.

This leads to my "countertop theory" and its rival, the "under the countertop theory." One is about self-discipline; the other is not.

Countertop Theory

1. What's it supposed to do?
2. Where's your plan?
3. What materials, tools, and assistance will you need?
4. Are you going to stick with the job until it's done?
5. Are you going to clean up after the job?

Under the Countertop Theory

1. We'll figure that out later.
2. We're short on time.
3. We'll find them when we need them.
4. I have to go now.
5. Somebody else made that mess.

I see people in the workplace, at the highest levels, applying the under the countertop theory—trying to bully, fake, and cajole their way into performance. At times it wears my spirit down. That is when I retreat to clean my workshop. Once my workshop is cleaned up, I feel together again, enveloped by the artifacts of expertise. The orderliness allows me to reemerge into the soup of life with a new sense of confidence and competence.

The under the countertop “theorists” who work in the human resource development profession have unfortunately learned the art of being comfortable with problems that remain ill defined and with weak methods of doing their work. Even more amazing is that organizations tolerate this level of performance. Maybe we can rid ourselves of these and other undisciplined behaviors by applying the five key questions of the countertop theory. For example, seriously asking and answering the question “What’s this HRD program supposed to do?” could yield invaluable information for decision making.

The sink cabinets are now installed in the kitchens of a double cottage built by C. W. Taneyhill in 1880. From what I have read about Taneyhill, I think he would understand the countertop theories. The cabinet plan and materials list has been filed, the tools are back on the tool board, and Bill has swept the floor. The smell of yellow pine from the cabinets still lingers in my mind, and I have already walked back once to look at the finished cabinets. I’m pleased.

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EDITOR



Editor’s Note: The Feature article for this issue and the invited response initiate a debate on the study of organization-culture through rhetoric, metaphor, and climate surveys. After reading Shapiro and Schall’s “Rhetorical Rules and Organization-Cultures” and Sashkin’s “Why Rhetorical Rules Are Weak Levers for Culture Change,” readers are encouraged to continue this debate with contributions to the Forum section of *HRDQ*.