

The witch doctor's pharmacist

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Courage is the quality of being fearless or brave. The Human Resource Development (HRD) profession rarely uses the word courage. When the HRD vocabulary does get impassioned, it most often describes HRD as a mediator of the battles of others – such as interpersonal conflict or work group conflict.

It is time for HRD to move beyond being a referee and to get into the centre of the action – to start being a source of core decisions affecting organizations and, yes, to act with courage. For example, HRD should have been there in the beginning informing upper management that re-engineering, as proposed by Hammer and Champy (1993), was theoretically and functionally unsound. Without development of human resources in the formula, re-engineering has been shown to be a short-term tool for survival and/or greed. There was no need to wait for the re-engineering blood-letting to figure this out.

Micklethwait and Wooldridge, staff editors of *The Economist*, have written a book entitled *The Witch Doctors: Making Sense of the Management Gurus*. To them, it is unacceptable to ask company managers to throw their body and soul into atheoretical fads such as 're-engineering', 'the search for excellence', '360-degree assessment' or 'chaos'. It will take courage for HRD to stop being the *pharmacist* for the *management witch doctors* it is regularly asked to support. Instead of filling the prescriptions of *management witch doctors*, HRD professionals should advocate theoretically sound practices related to developing and/or unleashing human expertise in organizations for the purpose of improving performance.

There is no need to be timid about sound theory. 'The fruits of research are principles and theories that, when applied, work time and time again' (Swanson and Holton 1997: xiii). The unfortunate thing is that while it is important to pursue new ideas, new ideas do not necessarily result in improvements or deep understanding. For example, Peters and Waterman published *In Search of Excellence* in 1982. They identified forty-three excellent companies and purported to cull the sources of their success. A short five years after the publication of the book, over 60 per cent were no longer excellent companies. Without pause, Peters was on to his next atheoretical hypothesis – a witch doctor *crème de la crème*.

'The real problem with management theory is that it is pulling institutions and individuals in conflicting directions' (Micklethwait and Wooldridge,

1996: 15). A systemic problem arises when untested and atheoretical ideas that contradict each other keep rolling out. Distinguishing between espoused theory and research-based theory is critical. Espoused theories are essentially hypotheses – not theories. All too often management witch doctors promote their espoused hypotheses as being ‘truth’ with the backing of their own practical experience. Note that the bestselling Hammer and Champy (1993) re-engineering book does not cite a single piece of literature, let alone any systematic studies. Again, this level of thinking is a basis for a good hypothesis, but not a sound theory. HRD should not be an unquestioning partner in mindlessly implementing such ideas. For example, should HRD have become the pharmacist for the re-engineering witch doctors? Charles Handy (1994) captures a piece of the resistance theory HRD should have exhibited: ‘the trouble with reengineering when it is done badly – which it mostly is – is that it leaves people shattered, even the people left behind’.

A sound theory simply explains what a phenomenon is and how it works (Torraco 1997: 115). Unfortunately, most of the atheoretical ideas being promoted by management witch doctors cannot meet the sound theory test. This does not mean that HRD should not entertain these ideas or the next wave of new ideas. It does mean that HRD has an obligation to understand its own theory and to critique and/or modify new ideas for the purpose of improvement, not just change for the sake of change. This takes courage.

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