

Evaluation, a State of Mind

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The problem and the solution. Many human resource development professionals do not have a predisposition toward measurement and evaluation. The overall state of measurement and evaluation practices in the profession is dismal. As an effort to clarify these conditions, this article explores the proposition that evaluation is not so much a purposeful process as it is a state of mind from both researcher and practitioner perspectives.

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The goal of this issue of *ADHR* is to advance the theory and practice of measurement and evaluation in human resource development (HRD). This topic is of high interest to those having a predisposition toward evaluation. But, what about those who do not share this view? The purpose here is to recognize the fact that many in the HRD profession do not have a predisposition toward measurement and evaluation (Swanson, 2001). This fact needs to be considered as part of the effort of advancing the profession. For those wanting to advance the profession, it is useful to explore the proposition that evaluation isn't so much a purposeful process as it is a state of mind.

The importance of considering this proposition is supported by the actual state of evaluation practice and evaluation theory in HRD. There are brilliant examples of measurement and evaluation theory, tools, and practices in HRD. Many are discussed in this issue. Even so, the overall state of measurement and evaluation practices in HRD is dismal ("Training Falling Down on the Job," 1997). Studies of actual practices clearly show that the HRD profession does not take measurement and evaluation seriously (Bassi, Gallagher, & Schroer, 1996). For many HRD professionals, measurement and evaluation is not a core professional area of expertise (Holton, 2004).

In contrast to the low levels of evaluation practices in the profession, HRD scholars and consultants continue to barrage the profession with their latest jargon-filled evaluation models and procedures in an attempt to remedy the deficiencies in practice. One possible consequence of the numerous

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measurement and evaluation options is the creation of confusion among practitioners that perpetuates the gap between theory and practice. The irony is that most of these publication efforts are intended to close the gap. The following discussion is an effort to further explore the state of mind of those who are not inclined toward measurement and evaluation.

No Effort at Discrimination Equals No Evaluation

Discrimination is not a derogatory term. By this quip, the negative connotations of the word *discrimination* are raised with implications of bias and unfairness. The fact of the matter is that intelligent and fully functioning adults discriminate all the time. They make judgments based on the information provided and the surrounding circumstances. For example, the discriminating wine buyer, the discriminating parent, and the discriminating taxi driver are good things. To discriminate is “to make a clear distinction; to make sensible decisions; judge wisely” (*American Heritage College Dictionary*, 2002, p. 405).

A fundamental purpose of evaluation is to make valid discriminations—to make sensible decisions and to judge wisely. Evaluation does not start with the assumption that individuals, phenomena, and systems are equal before, during, or after an intervention. Within any effort to discriminate, it is hypothetically possible to find out that all (people, goods, or services) have failed or that all have excelled. It is more likely that there will be a range of quantity and quality of the results. Good evaluation should accurately measure these differences and, thus, make valid discriminations. Any assessment that yields little or no discrimination is suspect.

Once again, the core proposition being explored here is that evaluation isn't so much a purposeful process as it is a state of mind. Thus, given a state of mind among many HRD professionals that discrimination is bad, that any attempt at discriminating will be less than perfect, or that it takes too much courage to stand behind an evaluation that discriminates, HRD professionals will ignore or undermine evaluation efforts. Facing the reality that there is a high resistance among many in the profession to judge people and programs is critical for shaping action plans that are aimed at improving measurement and evaluation practices in HRD.

The Reality of No Evaluation

I have heard many HRD professionals say that they do not believe in evaluation or that evaluation is so difficult that they just cannot get it done in their fast-paced and complex organization. There seem to be two underlying thoughts in these statements. One is a fundamental disbelief in evaluation and the other is a reaction to certain types of evaluation.

HRD programs function within a larger context of a host organization or society. The reality is that decision makers in the host organizations make evaluation decisions as to the value of all initiatives on a regular basis. They evaluate HRD—with or without evaluation input from the HRD professionals. There is no such thing as no evaluation. To not believe in evaluation is irrational.

HRD evaluation scholars and professional organizations have not adequately helped advance the theory and practice of HRD evaluation. After all these years, there should be elegant HRD evaluation theories, models, and tools mastered by practitioners and researchers. There are not. Furthermore, with no signs of remorse, the woefully flawed 4-level training evaluation model has been touted for 40 years by the largest practitioner organization (Holton, 1997). At the other end of the spectrum, evaluation experts continue to proliferate pseudo theories, models, and tools that tend to put their evaluation work in the center of the universe. They do this without grasping the reality that HRD is not even at the center of the organizational universe, let alone the evaluation subprocess being at the center. The essential question from the host organization of HRD remains: Where is the proof of the results and the added value?

Once again, the core proposition being explored here is that evaluation isn't so much a purposeful process as it is a state of mind. Thus, given a state of mind among many HRD professionals that evaluation is too difficult, that participant reaction sheets are enough, or that no evaluation is better than a bad evaluation, HRD professionals will ignore or undermine evaluation efforts. Decisions will be made by organizational decision makers as to the results and added value gained from their investments in HRD. Without sound measurement and evaluation input from HRD professionals, managerial evaluations will likely be knee-jerk evaluations.

Preoccupation With Fairness

The HRD profession has a preoccupation with fairness and, yet, does little about it. The preoccupation with fairness has a major effect on the core proposition being explored—that evaluation isn't so much a purposeful process as it is a state of mind. A preoccupation with fairness at a micro level gets parties self-absorbed and paralyzed. Life is not always fair. Sometimes we get more than we deserve and sometimes we get less than we deserve. It is likely for most people that it averages out.

In worrying excessively about fairness related to individual measures, many HRD professionals respond by not evaluating at all. As a result of not being able to come to grips with fundamental validity issues, they try to absolve themselves from their professional duty to evaluate. Based on their preoccupation with measurement fairness, they do not want to be agents of

unfairness. The end result is that people and programs achieving excellence do not get recognized. Is that fair? People who accomplish little receive the same acknowledgment as the high achievers. Is that fair? Expensive programs that have not delivered meaningful results to the host organization continue to be offered. Is that fair? Programs that have in fact made important positive contributions to the organization are not assessed and the results are not known. Is that fair? The chaos caused by not evaluating creates more unfairness than the unfairness caused by less-than-perfect measurement and evaluation efforts.

Again, the core proposition being explored here is that evaluation isn't so much a purposeful process as it is a state of mind. Thus, given a state of mind among many HRD professionals that they should never be unfair or that any evaluation attempt will result in some unfairness, HRD evaluation will be ignored or undermined.

Practitioner and Researcher Motivations

The HRD profession continues to sort out the issues of research, theory, and practice and there is still a great deal of work to do. A good HRD scholar has every right to pursue research questions that are of no interest to HRD practitioners. In doing so, scholars may use measurements and evaluations that have little or no utility to HRD practitioners. Even when scholars collect data from actual practice to pursue their research, the measurement and evaluation questions they pursue will probably not match measurement and evaluation questions of practice.

The following propositions highlight the source of many of the disconnects between researchers and practitioners:

- "Measurement and Evaluation for Research" is not the same as "Measurement and Evaluation for Practice."
- "Theory of Evaluation" is not the same as "Theory of HRD Evaluation."
- "Evaluation Research" is not the same as "Research on HRD Evaluation."
- "Research on HRD Evaluation" is not the same as "Research for HRD Evaluation."

Each of the components in the propositions above asks different specific questions that demand different measures and evaluation standards. Sorting out these research and practice differences is critical to advancing the maturity of the HRD profession within the realms of measurement and evaluation.

Once again, the core proposition being explored here is that evaluation isn't so much a purposeful process as it is a state of mind. Thus, given two

states of mind—the practitioner and the researcher—the disconnect between the two can be large. HRD researchers are motivated to generate new understandings and explanations, whereas HRD practitioners are motivated to ensure process and outcomes. Attempts at evaluation using the methods and measures aimed at the wrong questions will result in resistance—HRD professionals will ignore or undermine evaluation efforts.

Altering the State of Mind

Spend some time studying how organizations function and you will see evaluation throughout. All kinds of organizations—private sector, public sector, for profit, not-for-profit, big, and small—evaluate. As I once wrote, “Everything important in business is evaluated” (Swanson, 1989). Yet, when it comes to the evaluation of investments in HRD, HRD professionals are often minor players in evaluating their own programs and function. The reality is that the evaluation movement took off decades ago and the HRD profession has not kept up with evaluation practices in core organizational processes and functions.

I think it is time for those who have a pro-measurement and evaluation state of mind to prevail in HRD professional practice. Furthermore, HRD evaluations should consistently be submitted to the leaders and decision makers of their host organizations. To start, the leaders and decision makers within host organizations should be informed of HRD’s altered state of mind around evaluation and of pro-evaluation policies within HRD. I suggest the following two basic policies:

1. *No planned evaluation, no approval.* If there is no planned systematic evaluation as part of a proposed HRD program, the program should not be approved.
2. *No evaluation report, no continued approval.* If there is no execution of systematic evaluation and no reporting of the evaluation results, there should be no continued approval of the program.

With these two policies on the table, the state of mind will change almost overnight.

I worked with a Fortune 50 corporation to help carry out the two evaluation policies noted above. Vivid in my mind are the actual behaviors of the managers enrolled in management development programs both before and after a serious commitment to measurement and evaluation was made by the HRD department. Prior to the HRD department’s transformation, trainees rated the course and instructor instead of the trainer rating the trainees’ knowledge and expertise. Significant numbers of participants came to class late, left to make phone calls, read the *Wall Street Journal*, and critiqued the training experience during the process. Then the HRD department got serious about measurement and evaluation and they (a) verified essential con-

tent, (b) stopped using participant rating sheets, (c) measured participant knowledge and expertise, (d) evaluated the data against established standards, and (e) sent the results back to the participants' managers.

Respect for HRD catapulted among corporate decision makers, management trainees, and the HRD professionals themselves. The increased learning and respect was a direct result of the HRD department's commitment to measurement and evaluation. It took an altered state of mind among the HRD professionals to quickly get to this new level of professionalism.

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