

## THE THREE LAWS OF HRD

BY SUGATO LAHIRY



A few years ago I formulated three laws of human resources development, modeled after Isaac Asimov's three laws of robotics:

**Law No. 1.** HRD managers must not make any real impact on the organization, nor, through misguided zeal, influence any major decision that contradicts time-honored practices.

**Law NO.2.** HRD managers must always preach the latest fad and unfaithfully dish out theoretical mysto (which nobody understands in any case) that supports what has already been decided by top management, provided that the latest fad does not conflict with the first law.

**Law NO.3.** HRD managers must conduct training programs, workshops and conferences, and occasionally lead task forces to enthrall people and to project a progressive company image, provided these activities do not conflict with either the first or the second law.

The three laws perhaps imply that HRD practitioners fail to initiate changes because of organizational resistance. Resistance to change is indeed a powerful force that pulls organizations toward business as usual and the status quo. But that doesn't absolve HRD professionals of their share of responsibility. On the contrary, they are responsible to a large extent for this state of affairs. Let me present my case against the HRD community.

Organizations are ultimately concerned with the bottom line. Practices like just-in-time manufacturing take hold because they drastically reduce inventory cost and improve the bottom line. In sharp contrast, we HRD people often talk of intangible benefits that our interventions bring to organizations.

We fail to see that intangible benefits are all right when the financial going is good. When the going gets tough, first to go are the intangibles. The present business reality is eerily close to a Dar-

winian scenario: Corporations know they have to run faster and better than the rest to survive. No wonder nobody much cares for purveyors of intangibles.

It's not that we lack ways to produce tangible benefits. Performance technology equips us to bring about performance improvements that can be directly correlated with improvements in the bottom line. Yet huge sums are expended by corporations on training without ever testing the assumption that a particular investment will, in fact, bring about performance improvements. No one knows better than the HRD professionals who are called upon to make or buy training that training cannot solve problems or improve performance when other parts of the organizational infrastructure (for example, the incentive system) are inadequate to support performance.

It is often not easy to evaluate training's impact on a business's financial performance, and not all organizations can commit sufficient resources to demonstrate that a training program improved business results. But at least we could ask line managers to show that the cost of nonperformance is higher than the cost of training before we agree to an instructional program.

Another major area of concern is the way we practice our craft. Thomas F. Gilbert, one of the founding fathers of the performance-technology field, summarized the following characteristics of science:

- Science has a clear subject matter.
- Science simplifies.
- Science depends on observation, not hearsay.
- Science is guided by evidence.
- Science is grounded in measurement.
- Science is careful of its language.

The present-day practices of HRD in many organizations fail to meet any of those characteristics. Instead, our practices are often characterized by eclectic imprecision, unhealthy armchair hypothesizing, and an abundance of un-

substantiated claims. All of which does little to endear HRD managers to hard-nosed, results-driven business executives.

We do little to separate the fad from the fundamental. Whenever a new fad catches on, we are there to help the organizations we serve, embrace the new wonder cure. Take, for instance, business-process reengineering. Many organizations are signing up for reengineering, although total quality management -the last panacea- has yet to surpass its half-life. As a matter of fact, many organizations concurrently embrace both.

Now take a closer look at the two approaches: TQM, particularly the *kaizen* philosophy, advocates small, incremental improvements on a continuous basis. Reengineering forbids them and requires dramatic improvements. Aren't the two strategies a little at odds?

Of course, neither TQM nor reengineering falls directly under the domain of HRD. But we do help organizations execute these strategies by creating the HR alignment for TQM or analyzing organizational preparedness for reengineering. Surely we could point out the contradictions inherent in embracing both approaches simultaneously.

Until we change the way we practice our craft, I fear we will continue to follow the three laws of HRD and continue to live up to our reputations as corporate pipsqueaks.

**Sugato Lahiry.**

### TRAINING

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