HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT MASTERS DEGREE PROGRAM: ACTION LEARNING THAT ENHANCE THE CREDIBILITY AND INFLUENCE OF STRATEGIC HR PRACTITIONER

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Abstract- This paper identifies key steps in developing successful graduate program utilizing action learning. Action learning helps to “blur” the lines between academe and the profession of HR. This paper discusses key components of action learning as they relate to the HR graduate program and the development of those students into strategic thinkers and practitioners.

Key words- Human Resource Development (HRD), Action Learning, Strategic Human Resources

The Human Resource Development (HRD) masters program of study is designed principally for human resource (HR) practitioners who want to enhance their credibility and influence in their organizations. The HRD programs are usually project based, problem focused, practically applied, and theory to practice oriented.

There are several unique characteristics of successful HRD programs. First, the HRD program may consists of approximately 36 credit hours and leads to a masters degree and may be completed in as little as six (6) semesters by taking two courses per semester. Second, graduate students take classes at the at locations near population and business centers and students participate in a cohort, which is a model where students take all of their classes together during the entire academic program. Third, the program is designed to enable students (HR Practitioners) to acquire the knowledge and skills of a change agent. Accordingly, students do not take traditional HR classes such as compensation, benefits, recruiting and selection but rather take courses such as performance management, management consulting, change facilitation, intervention strategies, organizational development, performance consulting, human resource development, and power, politics, and influence in organizations. Fourth, the strategic objective of the HRD program is to create critical thinking skills that enable graduate students the ability to address any performance problem or organizational breakdown. To achieve this result, HRD faculty use action learning principles to produce functional and engaging learning communities where learning is enhanced producing double-looped learning opportunities (Argyris and Schon, 1996). Fifth, graduate students complete a comprehensive case study project, known as the capstone project, designed to address a current performance problem or organizational breakdown in the student’s organization using a structured, comprehensive, and complete ten-step consultative process model. Accordingly, the final six classes of the program are designed to allow students to successfully complete this project. The capstone project is completed under their advisor’s supervision during their second year of the program.

Action Learning Principles

HRD programs have adopted action learning principles to develop learning communities, which enhance double-loop learning opportunities. Argyris and Schon (1996) contend that double-loop learning enables students to examine their assumption, thus, allowing them to explore possibilities. It focuses on the way learning and perceiving, which are influenced by an individual’s personal context, values, goals, and experiences (Gilley and Gilley, 2000, 83).

Marquardt (1996, 38) suggests that "double-loop learning is more in-depth and involves questioning all things related to leaning and why errors and success occur in the first place… Double-loop learning looks at deeper organizational norms and structures.”

Marquardt (1999) describes action learning as “both a process and a powerful program that involves a small group of people solving real problems while at the same time focusing on what
they are learning and how their learning can benefit each group member and the organization as a whole (4).” Action learning enables HRD students to effectively learn, and to simultaneously handle difficult, real-life situations. By questioning existing knowledge and reflecting on actions engaged in during and after problem solving, individuals, teams, and organizations begin to learn and think critically, and thus, are better able to respond to change.

**Components of Action Learning**

According to Marquardt (1999), action learning programs derive their power and benefits from six interactive and interdependent components: a problem, the group, the questioning and reflection process, the resolution to take action, the commitment to learning, and the facilitator. Further, action learning built upon the entire learning cycle, which includes:

- learning and creating knowledge through concrete experience,
- observing and identifying the problem,
- reflecting on this experience,
- experimenting, analyzing and forming generalizations from experiments,
- planning solutions,
- testing the implications of the generalizations in new experiences, and
- beginning the process again.

**Assumptions of Action Learning**

Action learning is based on two fundamental assumptions. First, each learner is responsible and accountable for his/her own learning and development, and ultimately, that of the team. When confronted by the unfamiliar and unique situation and circumstances, learners rely on past experiences to shed light on possible approaches, formulate concepts in different ways, and seek new information relevant to the current problem (Marquardt, 1999).

**Principles of Action Learning**

According to Marquardt (1999, 40-46), action leaning is based on the following principles:

- Learning is increased when people reflect on what they experience.
- People become immobilized and not seek their own solutions when by relying solely on experts.
- When people are able to question the assumptions on which actions are based, they learn critical thinking skills.
- People learn best when they receive accurate feedback from others.
- The result of a person’s problem-solving actions provides constructive insight.
- The greatest learning occurs when people work on unfamiliar problems in unfamiliar settings.
- Action learning is most effective when the learners are examining the organizational system as a whole.

Each of these critical principles are integrated throughout the entire curriculum, which enhance learning and application.

**Outcome of the HRD Program**

Although these are several contributing factors, many HR departments suffer from a poor image because organizational leaders, managers, and employees do not view HR departments and their practitioners as vital, contributing members of the organization. Some HR practitioners and departments fail to be perceived as valuable because their efforts are not linked to the organization’s strategic business goals. Others HR practitioners and departments falter because they do not properly communicate the value and benefits of their interventions and initiatives to decision-makers within the organization. When such circumstances exist, HR practitioners are unable to help improve the organization’s performance, quality, efficiency, or productivity, or help it accomplish its strategic goals and objectives (Gilley and Gilley, 2003). In other words, the HR department and its practitioners lack credibility, which has a devastating impact on its effectiveness and influence within the organizations.

To address this dilemma, HR practitioners need to understand what distinguishes “activity oriented HR from strategic HR.” Activity oriented HR practitioners focus their efforts on the
management of compensation and benefits programs, payroll systems, and staffing and selection programs without efforts to integrate or link them to the organization’s strategic business goals and objectives. They view training as an isolated event and as a fix-it strategy. Further, they believe training must be an enjoyable activity with little focus on transferring learning to the job (Gilley and Hoekstra, 2003). Finally, activity-oriented practitioners utilize a cost-based budget where the organization provides revenue to support HR activities without expecting them to enhance the organization’s strategic goals and objectives.

Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) refer to activity oriented HR as transactional HR. Strategic HR is based on a philosophy of making a difference in organizations through value-added applications, partnerships, interventions, and initiatives (Gilley and Gilley, 2000). Strategic HR is results oriented and its practitioners believe that HR must be linked to the critical business issues of an organization (Anderson and Anderson, 2001). Strategic HR departments and their practitioners use a revenue based budget approach designed to general value-added results useful in achieving the organization’s strategic business goals and objectives. They help design and implement human performance system and performance management system that are essential in achieving desired business results. Strategic HR departments and their practitioners form business partnerships and utilize performance consulting to produce performance results (Anderson and Anderson, 2001). Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) refer to strategic HR as transformational HR.

Conclusion

In summary, HRD programs need to be focused on helping their students develop an understanding of strategic HR principles and practices in order to acquire the competencies needed to enhance their credibility in their organizations. This is realized when students possess the capacity to function as change agents in their respective organizations. The HRD program may produces these outcomes by using an action learning principles to produce learning communities.

References


