Keywords: strategic partner, model, survey, validation

Abstract
This paper identifies processes for validating the Systems Model of Strategic Human Resource Development currently under review. The Survey of Strategic Human Resource Development is being developed to operationalize the model. Identified here are the processes used to validate the survey and the model. Sample questions from each section of the survey are included. The model and survey offer upper level HRD professionals a theoretical foundation for their work, together with a set of specific and measurable goals and objectives for expanding their role to become strategic partners in the organization or, if they already are, to maintain that position. Foundational to that notion of HRD as a strategic partner is the assumption that the development of human resources can, indeed, lead to a competitive advantage for the organization.
Throughout the last decade and beyond, there have been multiple calls for Human Resource Development (HRD) leaders to become more strategic. These calls have come from scholars (Garavan, 1991, 2007; Kearns, 2004; Peterson, 2006; Pfeffer, 1998; Torraco & Swanson, 1996; Ulrich, 1998; 2007), as well as practitioners (Becker, Huselid, & Ulrich, 2001; Holbeche, 1999; Mercer, 2003; Wright, 1999). The most frequently offered rationale for HRD becoming more strategic is to advance the field. Advancement of the field would occur when HRD is perceived as moving beyond being mere information-givers at the operational day-to-day level to contributing input to formulate as well as implement plans (Torraco & Swanson, 1996)—that is, HRD would be recognized as being a full strategic partner. The implication is that by leveraging the human resources of the organization from a more strategic vantage point, greater organization-wide performance would accrue.

The problem is that there is confusion over specifically what HRD should be or do to achieve and then sustain its full leadership potential as a strategic partner. This problem is multifaceted. First, there is lack of clarity as to whom the call to be strategic is directed—CLOs, Executive Vice-Presidents of HR, Vice-Presidents, Directors (in other words, upper level HRD leaders), to HRD unit leaders, or to the department or administrative unit as a whole. Second, there is lack of clarity about what strategic HRD even means. For example, it has been characterized as a proactive and system-wide intervention (McCracken & Wallace, 2000), the strategic management of training, development, and management education interventions (Garavan, 1991), and even building learning capacity (Watkins & Marsick, 1999). Third, so many dimensions of strategic HRD have been identified that it is difficult to sort out what the key dimensions are. Fourth, there has been no effort to identify specific objectives and then determine the extent to which achievement of those objectives actually leads to HRD being perceived as a strategic partner in the organization. Fifth, the extent to which it matters whether or not HRD is considered a full strategic partner has not been addressed. Finally, an empirically testable systemic framework that pulls together the wide variety of strategic imperatives has only recently been identified (Peterson, under review).

**Purpose of the Paper and Research Questions**

The purpose of this paper is to identify the process and outcome to date of operationalizing and validating this new model, the *Systems Model of Strategic HRD* (Peterson, under review). The model is an empirically testable and manageable systems model aimed at upper-level HRD leaders. The model hypothesizes the various goals and objectives HRD might achieve to earn a reputation for being strategic. By identifying and operationalizing these essential systems elements, a framework is provided to identify what it means for HRD to be strategic and how HRD upper-level leaders might guide and then sustain their team toward realizing the full leadership potential of the HRD unit—toward becoming a strategic business partner.

Therefore, the research questions are as follows: What type of survey might be constructed to operationalize and test the *Systems Model of Strategic HRD*? What items comprising the survey would best represent the goals and objectives identified in the model? How might this survey and model be validated?
The theoretical foundation for developing the model is identified. The model is presented, in which the various strategic goals are identified, along with the objectives needed to achieve each goal. Examples of items included in the survey instrument and plans for testing the model are offered. Included in the discussion are implications for Human Resource Development researchers and practitioners.

**Theoretical Foundation**

Prior to presenting the theoretical model, several key definitions are offered. Strategic human resource development is defined here as the pro-active, long-term, mission-related leadership of human resource initiatives at the individual and organizational levels designed to achieve bottom-line organizational goals leading to a sustainable competitive advantage. A systems model, by definition, is one in which inputs, processes, outputs, and feedback comprise a relationship such that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts; for example, each part impacts and is impacted by every other part of the whole (Kauffman, 1980; Senge, 2006). In addition, systems function both within an external environment as well as the internal environment in which they exist.

The **Systems Model of Strategic HRD**, presented in Figure 1, provides the theoretical foundation on which the survey is based. As can be seen, the economic, regulatory, competitive, international, cultural, and political domains comprise the external environment. However, the focus of the model is on the internal environment—that of any organization, private or public, large or small, and of any type (e.g., retail, service, manufacturing). Each element of the model is systemically linked through feedback mechanisms. The implied theory is that of any systems model: the inputs, in this case, Organizational Dimensions and HRD Capacity, impact and are impacted by the Processes, in this case, four HRD Goals and twelve Objectives, which impact and are impacted by the Outcome, which in this case is HRD as a Strategic Partner. For a system to be an open system, feedback is essential. In this model, each element is systemically linked through feedback mechanisms. Operational definitions for each construct of the model (and, therefore, the survey) are provided offered.

**Organizational Dimensions** refer to the extent to which top management facilitates or impedes a strategic culture. Culture has been described as a complex web of norms, values, assumptions, attitudes, and perceptions that are reinforced through socialization, training, rewards, and sanctions (Lytle, Brett, Barsness, Tinsely, & Janssens, 1995). Three constructs comprise Organizational Dimensions. An organizational **Culture of Learning** exists when systematic, sustained, and continuous opportunities are provided for employees to acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes, or values that ultimately lead to improved performance individually or collectively. An organizational **Commitment to Improving Performance** exists when some formal evaluative architecture is in place to enforce or reinforce performance standards leading to an organizational consequence (reward or sanction). An organizational **Capacity for Strategic Engagement** exists when the organization demonstrates a readiness for learning and is comfortable with HRD assuming strategic leadership roles.

**HRD Capacity** refers to the extent to which the HRD operating unit possesses the expertise necessary to be perceived as strategic partners. There are four key dimensions of that expertise. **Alignment with the Organizational Mission and Strategy** exists when the HRD unit has its own
internal strategic vision/mission (core purpose and desired future), consistent with that of the organization thereby being positioned to circumvent organizational nearsightedness and focus on achieving a long-term plan for high rate growth and performance to sustain a substantial competitive advantage through people. Leadership and Professionalism within the HRD unit exists when they provide evidence of proficiency in performing traditional HRD functions—training and development, organization development, and career development; the HRD team must possess stellar credentials and potential for benefiting from high-level skill development. HRD must possess Business Acumen, evident when they are proficient at gathering organizational metrics in order to design, develop, implement, and evaluate programs that contribute to business goals and organizational competitiveness by being conversant with line managers regarding such line functions and responsibilities as customer/client satisfaction, marketing initiatives, and financial results. Having a Strategic Perspective requires thinking in a long-term time-frame and performing in ways that contribute to competitive advantage for the organization.

The model and survey identify Strategic HRD Goals and Objectives. Operational definitions are as follows.

**Goal: To forge strategic relationships.** Three objectives toward developing strategic relationships are to create alliances, build trust, and lead transitions. To *Create Alliances* means
to collaborate with top managers, line managers, and HRM to achieve mutually beneficial purposes and interests. To *Build Trust* means to espouse values and take actions with honesty, integrity, and reliability, building confidence throughout the organization. To *Lead Transitions* means to connect organizational cultures, people, and systems resulting from internal reorganization or mergers and acquisitions.

**Goal: To align systems and processes.** Three highly overlapping objectives toward aligning systems and processes are to construct systems architecture, gather organizational metrics, and benchmark. To *Construct Systems Architecture* means to create maps depicting relationships between departments, allowing managers to more clearly understand the systemic behavior of the organization, identify and correct gaps, and evaluate alternative system structures and flows. This architecture aligns the overall business strategy and makes explicit how people create value and how to measure that value-creation. To *Gather Organizational Metrics* means to identify those vital few measurables that have the most impact on overall organizational performance over time. To *Benchmark* means to create a process for comparing aspects of the organization’s business practices to the best practices of other exemplary organizations, and business metrics prior to and after HRD initiatives to improve speed, efficiency, quality, or cost (i.e., to maximize the bottom-line impact).

**Goal: To create a high-performance work system and culture.** Four objectives toward creating a high-performance work system and culture are to develop performance standards, lead knowledge creation and sharing, foster open communications, and promote a continuous learning culture. To *Develop Performance Standards* is closely related to gathering organizational metrics, but is focused at the individual level. It means developing or supporting existing performance appraisal processes for all employees at all levels and training managers to know how to (a) adhere to the model, holding employees accountable for the performance standards set, and (b) obtain prior agreement as to the standards and expected high-performance objectives. To *Lead Knowledge Creation and Sharing* means to develop formal and informal, face-to-face opportunities for individuals to share their expertise and be rewarded for doing so. Knowledge is not information; knowledge is what talented people do with the information they have. To *Foster Open Communications* means not only modeling but helping the organization to speak compellingly with one clear and honest voice, and openly sharing information and knowledge throughout the organization. To *Promote a Continuous Learning Culture* means, having first ascertained that top management supports such a culture (see Organizational Capacity above), to nurture and develop, design, and implement programs for the personal and professional development of employees throughout the organization.

**Goal: To develop a system of accountability.** Two objectives toward developing a system of accountability are to measure HRD performance and facilitate strategic measurement processes. To *Measure HRD Performance* means creating an evaluation system for the HRD unit that is not only focused on short-term financial results, efficiency-based benchmarks, and cost control, but also one that is more proactively focused on long-term business performance based on the organization’s marketing structure (e.g., market share), financial structure (e.g., profit, gross margin, ROI, owner’s equity), and financial reports (e.g., income statements, balance sheets). To *Facilitate Strategic Measurement Processes* means, having first gathered key business metrics that are critically linked to competitive advantage and having created a system for benchmarking, to develop, design, and implement programs to measure results, analyze and report data, and
identify potential correlations between individual performance measures and those key business indicators.

The hypothesized outcome of these efforts is HRD as a Strategic Partner. This construct is defined here as a role in which HRD is perceived as an ally in shaping business strategy and achieving business results.

Method

Having developed operational definitions for each construct in the model, a first draft of a survey, the Survey of Strategic Human Resource Development, has been developed. The survey will be validated in four stages: (a) participants at the 9th International Conference on Human Resource Development: Research and Practice Across Europe will be invited to join voluntarily other HRD professionals as members of a panel of experts and provide feedback on the survey; (b) the survey will be refined based on that feedback; (c) other HRD researchers and practitioners will be invited to join the original panel of experts to further validate the refined instrument; and (d) the refined survey will be pilot tested. Factor analysis based on the results of the pilot test should yield a reduction in the number of items and a clarification of the constructs proposed.

The panel of experts will be asked to identify (a) which questions they think should be deleted, (b) which questions need clarification, and (c) what questions might be added. Since the model is a systems model, in which each part influences and is influenced by every other part, the potential for overlap is high, as can be seen in the operational definitions. The full survey includes 65 items. The survey is constructed such that responses will be based on a five-point Likert-type scale in which 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree. Below are sample items purported to represent each construct in the model.

Section I. Organizational Dimensions
A. Culture of learning
   1. My organization provides opportunities for organizational members to learn.
   2. My organization provides opportunities to promote inquiry and dialogue.
B. Commitment to improving performance
   1. My organization has processes in place for evaluating employee performance.
C. Capacity for strategic engagement
   1. My organization demonstrates a readiness or learning.
   2. My organization already perceives HRD as a strategic partner.

Section II. HRD Capacity
A. Alignment with the organizational mission and strategy
   1. HRD has a vision/mission that is aligned with that of the organization.
   2. HRD communicates its vision/mission throughout the organization.
B. Leadership and professionalism
   1. HRD is proficient at performing traditional functions (e.g., training, OD).
   2. HRD models on-going professional development within the HRD unit.
C. Business acumen
   1. HRD team members understand the marketing function of the organization.
2. HRD speaks the language of line managers regarding organizational metrics (e.g., profit, ROI).

D. Strategic perspective
1. HRD consistently identifies processes that have long-term impact in the organization.
2. HRD initiatives reflect understanding of competitive advantage.

Section III. Strategic HRD Goals and Objectives:

Goal 1: Forge strategic relationships
A. Create alliances
1. HRD forms relationships with internal partners (line managers) to identify those line managers’ business goals.
2. HRD forms relationships with HRM to identify HRM goals and to identify opportunities for collaboration.

B. Build trust
1. HRD takes core values of the organization into account when developing interventions.
2. HRD champions individual as well as organizational development.

C. Lead transitions
1. HRD plays a vital role in planning for major external transitions, such as mergers and acquisitions.
2. HRD plays a vital role in helping employees manage internal transitions resulting from organizational change.

Goal 2: Align systems and processes
A. Construct systems architecture
1. HRD effectively depicts how departments throughout the organization are related.
2. HRD effectively assists line managers in communicating to team members how their jobs are related to organizational goals.

B. Gather organizational metrics
1. HRD assists organizational members to determine what data (organizational metrics) are needed to measure whether organizational goals are being met.
2. HRD assists organizational members to systematically gather data (organizational metrics).

C. Benchmark
1. HRD compares organizational processes to best practices within the industry.
2. HRD plans interventions to align organizational processes with best practices in the industry.

Goal 3: Create a high-performance work system and culture
A. Develop performance standards
1. HRD understands how high level performance is defined at all levels of the organization.
2. HRD assists managers in identifying objectives that lead to high-performance.

B. Lead knowledge creation and sharing
1. HRD develops processes to maximize knowledge creation and sharing.
2. HRD trains managers to utilize processes to maximize knowledge creation and sharing.

C. Foster open communications
1. HRD models open communication in its dealings with employees.
2. HRD implements processes to produce open communication throughout the organization.

D. Promote a continuous learning culture
   1. HRD models aspects of a continuous learning culture within the HRD unit.
   2. HRD shows the organization how to tie reward systems to continuous learning of employees.

Goal 4: Develop a system of accountability
   A. Measure HRD performance
      1. HRD has developed an evaluation system for its own performance in view of the overall financial structure of the organization.
      2. HRD evaluates its initiatives based on bottom-line organizational goals.
   B. Facilitate strategic measurement processes
      1. HRD coordinates with line managers to identify key measures of competitive advantage for the organization.
      2. HRD is aware of the key business metrics of the organization.

Section IV. HRD as a Strategic Partner
   1. I participate fully in strategic planning sessions.
   2. Executive level managers perceive me as a strategic partner.
   3. Line managers acknowledge my expertise in helping them achieve their unit objectives.
   4. The top management of the organization would agree that the HRD initiatives that come out of my unit contribute to achieving bottom-line results.
   5. The top management of the organization would agree that I am proficient at leading organization-wide change.

Discussion

HRD has consistently been challenged to deliver value in its day-to-day practices primarily through training and development and organization development; yet the mandate to be more strategic (i.e., to have a long-term impact) has been heard. The survey discussed in this paper is one attempt to ascertain to what extent the model and the theory inherently represented by the model are even valid. Perhaps an even more important question, if HRD becomes or already is recognized as a strategic partner with a seat at the strategic planning table, is to determine what competitive bottom-line difference that would make.

Although this survey on strategic leadership is still very much a work in progress, there are a variety of current implications for HRD practice. First, HRD might consider seizing all opportunities to provide evidence that investing in human capital enhances the value of the organization through increased leadership capacity, shared responsibility for continuous organizational improvement and renewal, and capability for change even in the short term. In other words, it seems imperative that HRD evaluates its initiatives. Secondly, there is no time like the present for HRD professionals to plan and implement superior strategy to develop human expertise at all levels, increase the knowledge and skill capacity of the organization, build collaborative structures that empower and motivate employees, allow employees to think and act discretionarily and responsively, and encourage employees to pursue the organizational mission and vision. In other words, it seems imperative that HRD models professionalism.
There are also implications for research. The model is presented here identifying specific goals and objectives for HRD to consider; sample items that comprise a survey purported to operationalize the model are identified. Although, as noted above, plans to pilot test this survey are underway, there is no reason to wait for the findings of that pilot test to be reported. Throughout this validation process, interested researchers are invited to offer constructive criticism to improve, validate, or refute the model presented here in order to design the most effective empirical study possible. Indeed, researchers, particularly those who join the panel of experts, are invited to engage in research to test the model and survey either individually or collaboratively. All are invited to create their own approach toward validating the model and creating their own survey to empirically test the extent to which HRD has a strategic image, performs as a strategic partner, and has a strategic impact.

Conclusions

The overall purpose of this inquiry has been to provide a theoretical foundation for expanding the role of HRD and to construct a survey to operationalize that model, offering a set of specific and measurable goals and objectives. Hypothetically, achieving these goals and objectives could advance HRD toward strategic business partnership in the organization.

As HRD continues to build capacity, its reputation as a capable ally in achieving business results, as a systems architect, as a trusted champion of high-performance, as a developer of human expertise, as a leader of change—all with strategically measurable outcomes—provide an opportunity to provide evidence of how development of an organization’s human resources might lead to individual growth and competitive advantage for the organization.

References


