

A Conceptual Framework of Integrative Inquiry

Creating Inclusive and Equitable Workplace Cultures

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Originally published October 2018. Last edited January 2024.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines traditional and critical theories of human resource development and creates a conceptual framework that applies foundational principles of CHR D (Critical Human Resources Development) to traditional HR D (Human Resources Development) models of training and assessment. It builds upon recent studies on psychological safety, organizational development, and diversity, equity, and inclusion. The resulting framework introduces 5 core characteristics of work cultures that acknowledge both corporate interests and the critical values and ethics of human development to create a practical path for building an optimal work environment that is both inclusive and equitable.

TRANSFORMING HR DEVELOPMENT

Human resource development (HRD) is a broad and relatively new branch of the much broader field of human resource studies. As early as the mid 20th century, researchers began to expand the concept of human resources beyond employee policies and management to explore best practices for cultivating effective organizational culture and for developing employee's work-related abilities (Swanson and Holton, 2001). The most widely-known framework of human resource development today comes from McLagen (1989) who maintained that HRD was comprised of three domains: training and development, organization development, and career development.¹

The theory of critical human resource development (CHRD) added two important concepts to the discussion around human resource development in response to traditional HRD models: the impact of power and power dynamics in development work, and the need to be inclusive and iterative in shaping and informing organizational culture, benefiting people in practice not just in theory (Fenwick, 2014). This approach emerged from applying critical pedagogy and theory to professional development models (Bierema and Callahan, 2014).

The primary distinction between the two theories is that HRD focuses on company outcomes and benefits whereas CHRD focuses on individual human outcomes. This paper aims to create a framework that applies foundational principles of CHRD to traditional HRD models of training and assessment. The framework articulates a three-pronged strategy to implement change around five characteristics of organizational culture and corresponding leadership competencies that address both corporate interests and the critical values to create a practical path to implementation for organizations.

¹ There is contention as to whether or not Organization Development (OD) is its own field or a subset of HRD (Egan, 2002). This paper aligns with scholarship that frames OD as a domain within HRD.

DEFINING THE WORK

Critical Human Resource Development (CHRD) is defined in this paper as *the process of facilitating change at individual, group, and system levels in ways that optimize human interest, organization advancement, and social impact*. (Bierema and Callahan, 2014).

In this framework, CHRD is viewed as a comprehensive educational strategy intended to change the **culture**² and **structure**³ of organizations so that they can better:

- Ensure engagement, satisfaction, health and well-being of all employees
- Facilitate learning, growth, and development for organization and employees
- Align company mission, values, and policies in socially responsible ways
- Strengthen and address system and process improvement
- Initiate and manage change to further DEI efforts

(Bennis, 1969; Egan, 2002).

Whether critical or traditional, human resource development is a process that is complex, iterative, and longitudinal; since there are always new ways to improve, learning becomes cyclical rather than linear.⁴ Results are achieved as a part of an evolving project instead of in a series of one-hour trainings over employee lunch breaks.

This field consists more of a lens or approach, a theoretical model of looking at an organization and addressing needs that arise through specific, targeted efforts instead of a distinct project that can be “completed”. The lens allows companies to customize and evolve the work as it arises, from training and coaching individuals to the creation or redesign of new policies and procedures, to long-term mindset and behavioral shifts at all levels of the organization.

CORPORATE BENEFITS & IMPACT OF CULTURE WORK

Traditional HRD models frequently frame human development as a company commodity and a means to maximize profit, adopting the language of "human capital theory" (Nafuko, 2004). This results in strategies for improvement being structured primarily for cost-benefit analysis. CHRD theorists argue that the value of education, learning and development are not limited to commodification and financial gains and rightfully point out that there is value in human growth and satisfaction that is immeasurable by those indicators. That said, there are clear financial and pragmatic advantages for businesses that invest in HRD and it is important to acknowledge the ways in which HRD directly benefits the bottom line for businesses.

In our framework, we agree that all forms of human resource development can and should:

Produce Measurable Data. HRD is systems and process-focused, built upon decades of theory and research in the behavioral sciences (Egan, 2002). Companies that engage in long-term development work have data to better able assess and modify strategies to deepen impact around company wide goals and initiatives.

² Organizational culture: The values, beliefs, and behaviors that create the social and psychological environment of an organization.

³ Organizational Structure: The typically hierarchical arrangement of lines of authority, communications, rights and duties of an organization. Organizational structure determines how the roles, power and responsibilities are assigned, controlled, and coordinated, and how information flows between the different levels of management.

⁴ Bruner (1960) described all learning as a spiral, a process by which as we learn and develop particular skills in one area, we open new opportunities to explore subjects in more depth. We are essentially never done learning. (Harden and Stamper, 1999).

Increase Employee Interest, Engagement, & Retention. Optimizing work culture not only attracts employees to your business,⁵ it keeps employees engaged, committed and passionate about their work, which in turn decreases turnover.⁶ Engaged employees are dedicated to the company mission, work harder and longer to help it succeed, and are the foundation of healthy thriving company cultures (Habib et al, 2014).

Impact Profitability, Productivity and Sustainability. Research has shown that effective HR development enhances a business' profitability,⁷ sustainability and market competitiveness and overall increases team effectiveness, productivity, and quality (Egan, 2002). Companies that provide comprehensive training and professional development opportunities have 218% higher income per employee and enjoy a 24% higher profit margin than companies without formalized training (ASTD, 2000).

Prepare Companies for the Demands of the Future. HRD helps companies evolve and integrate innovations necessary to ensure a competitive advantage. Organizations that embrace diversity, a growth mindset, and commitment to change and learning report the most long term success and adaptability (Habib et al, 2014). They become innovators at the forefront of their industry.

CHRD PRINCIPLES OF PRACTICE

That said, the ethics-driven, humanistic approach of CHRD better fits the worldview of the 86% of young professionals who value seeing companies they work for behave in a socially responsible way.⁸ CHRD believes in the inherent value of improving work environments and opportunities for all employees. The framework outlined in this paper assumes the inherent values of:

Diversity | that companies can and should actively seek diverse perspectives in their positions and in decision-making.

Equity | that companies should ensure that employees from all backgrounds are able to access opportunities and thrive within the organization and that policies and practices are not barriers to success for any.

Inclusion | that companies do best when employees feel seen, heard, and valued and when employee wellbeing is just as important and productivity and company goals.

Self-Awareness | the continuous commitment to self-learning and growth, observation, and reflection is paramount to improvement, engagement, and authentic change.

Transparency | companies should behave in ways that align with their espoused values, goals, and commitments and employees should trust what they are told and be able to access information to assess this.

Agency | the intention to support everyone in an organization to increase their individual level of autonomy to operate at the height of their expertise and skill.

Collaboration | the trust that people will support those things for which they have had a hand in shaping, that humans seek out connection with one another, and that highly effective teams have interdependent roles.

⁵ 78% of Millennials see workplace quality as important when choosing an employer (CBRE) Traits looked for in employers: treat employees fairly (73.1%), corporate social responsibility (46.6%), brand image (39.5%) (NSHSS)

⁶ 46% of HR pros say retention is their greatest concern, followed by employee engagement at 36% (SHRM) Highly engaged business units realize a 41% reduction in absenteeism and a 17% increase in productivity. (Gallup)

⁷ Disengaged employees cost organizations between \$450 and \$550 billion annually. (HBR)

⁸ 86% of young professionals say it's important that the company they work for behaves in a socially responsible way (Nielsen)

(Mclean, 2005)

These values enhance corporate bottom-lines but are not driven by them; work cultures that embrace these values when designing comprehensive HRD plans should see increase in efficiency, productivity, employee engagement and retainment, and longterm growth and sustainability⁹.

ATTRIBUTES OF CULTURE

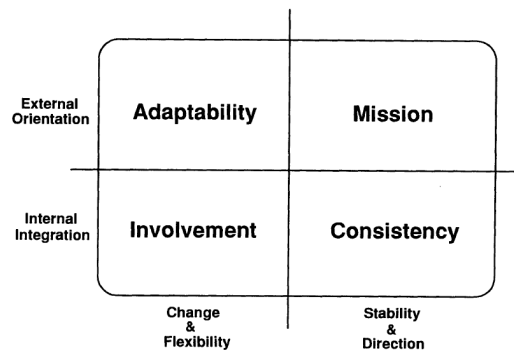
Researchers over the past decades have studied what makes effective teams and optimal work environments (Mickan and Rodger, 2000; Tarricone and Luca, 2002). In his article on organization culture and effectiveness, Denison (1995) found four culture qualities that showed the highest impact for companies with regards to success: he discovered that high levels of employee involvement and adaptability were strong predictors of company growth; and that clear direction and structural consistency were strong predictors of profit¹⁰. All four characteristics were found to be important indicators of employee engagement and healthy work cultures.

Denison was focused on effectiveness from a corporate viewpoint; the research predominantly discussed culture through the lens of organizational growth and profit. Yet their articulation of the tension between the skills and values needed for change and flexibility as opposed to those that lead to stability and direction are quite relevant when we add in contemporary discussions about the need for diversity, equity, and inclusion in organizational leadership.

Diverse perspectives in decision making increase organization's ability to innovate and create new solutions quickly, making them more adaptable to sudden changes in the marketplace, and more likely to adapt and evolve with the times. It is, however, somewhat harder to achieve cohesion and shared vision in these spaces, at least without intentional planning and collaborative leadership. Given the increased need for flexibility, change, and innovation across sectors and industries, as was clearly demonstrated with the Covid-19 pandemic beginning in 2020, diversity cannot be ignored and must be at the heart of strategic planning in order to better adapt to future circumstances.

Yet diversity alone is insufficient to achieve adaptable and innovative work environments. Diverse perspectives must be brought authentically into decision-making processes, which requires more than simply hiring people who have different backgrounds and experiences. Organizations must ensure that their work environments are inclusive and equitable so that people from all backgrounds thrive and therefore perform at their best. Promotion and retention of a diverse team is a much more accurate predictor of equitable and inclusive cultures and policies than static demographic statistics.

Figure 2 Theoretical Model of Culture Traits



Denison, D. and Mishra, A. Organizational Culture and Effectiveness. *Organizational Science*. Vol. 6, No.2 1995

⁹ 54% of employees say a strong sense of community (great coworkers, celebrating milestones, a common mission) kept them at a company longer than was in their best interest ([Gusto](#)) Companies with engaged employees, outperform those without by 202%. ([officevibe](#)) 76% of employees don't trust bosses who fail to share company data ([GeckoBoard](#)) 75% of employees would stay longer at an organization that listens to and addresses their concerns ([Ultimate Software](#))

¹⁰ The majority of research and statistics cited in this paper are related to US-based companies and employees.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Concurrent with the recent work on organizational development is the growing body of study around psychological safety. Edmonson () defined this as a perception that a group or environment is "safe to take interpersonal risks." Clark () further outlined psychological safety as a linear process by which teams can acquire and build psychological safety, moving from inclusion safety to contributor safety, followed by growth safety and then challenger safety. Their research connects individual perceptions of safety with tangible team outcomes, impacting error rates, turnover, burnout, and efficiency.

FIVE CHARACTERISTICS

Adapting Denison’s findings with additional research on organizational culture and employee engagement¹¹ (Bennis, 1969; Maylett, 2014) and infusing contemporary critical theory (Bierema and Callahan, 2014) and psychological safety (Clark, 2020), we have identified five key characteristics of work culture that when present ensure that workplaces are more equitable and inclusive. Rather than argue that these built linearly, we have found in our decade of work across sectors and industries, that each is a separate domain which can be developed independent of the others. However, all five are necessary to ensure an optimal work environment.

	Organizational attributes	Employee attributes	Psychological Safety developed
Belonging	The organization values employee wellbeing alongside output, productivity, or efficiency, taking time to acknowledge and invest in their team.	Employees have high levels of trust, strong relationships, active involvement, and a sense of community.	Inclusion Safety: belonging, rapport, caring (people care about my wellbeing)
Purpose	The organization creates a compelling vision, values, and goals that are widely understood, co-created, and agreed upon by employees.	Employees are able to see clear purpose, meaning, and impact of their efforts and feel able to contribute to that vision.	Contributor Safety: sharing & collaborating (my perspective/ opinion is valued)
Growth	The organization is able to effectively adapt and change and has a fierce commitment to learning and growth.	Employees have opportunities to develop professionally, to give and receive feedback and seek help when needed.	Learner Safety: vulnerability, growth, support (I can ask questions and admit mistakes)
Process	The organization has clear, transparent communication with its team, and aligns procedures and policies with company values.	Employees have a strong sense of responsibility, accountability, and clarity within the organization.	Transparency Safety: candor, openness, truth (I trust that others are honest and that information is available and accurate).
Agency	The organization supports employee leadership and creates more opportunities for distributive power.	Employees feel some level of autonomy and choice, and feel that they can fight for change when things aren't right.	Challenger Safety: calling in, critiquing, questioning (I can raise concerns, advocate for change, and disagree with others)

¹¹ Other frameworks influencing this model: Maylett (2014) defines the 5 keys of employee engagement as Meaning, Autonomy, Growth, Impact, and Connection. Bierema and Callahan (2014) identify 4 domains of CHRD as Relating, Learning, Changing, and Organizing. Clark (2020) defines 4 stages of psychological safety: inclusion, learner, contributor, challenger

Optimal work cultures create teams that are innovative, engaged, stable, and effective. They address business success as well as employee wellbeing. All five characteristics are designed with an equity lens, and efforts to increase each aspect will reinforce Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) goals and initiatives. When our teams perform in these ways, they are becoming environments where policies, practices, and behaviors can be addressed with compassion and candor and problems are tackled directly and openly.

It is common to find that one organization may have higher reports of some characteristics than others. It is also worth noting that these five aspects may have different significance, priority, or interpretation depending on an individual's culture or background as well the corporate country of operation or ownership. They are also heavily influenced by sector and profession.¹² For example, this model acknowledges that not every business can or should become a "flat"(non-hierarchical) company; however, any organization is capable and can see benefits from strategically creating more opportunity for distributive power models and shared responsibility within their teams.

When examining a given work culture we are looking to understand each of these domains in three ways. First, we examine the explicit policies that exist and whether they help encourage or discourage this domain from developing in the workplace. Institutional systems have a direct impact on whether cultures see these characteristics as priorities. Second, we explore what practices are in place on teams themselves and whether they align with and support this domain or not. This is particularly important when looking at leadership styles and informal structures that can often impact culture more significantly than written policies. Lastly, we take into account employee perspective when it comes to each domain; we know that how people perceive their workplace culture is a significant factor in their engagement and retention.

LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

Critical Consciousness

Paulo Freire's (1970) development of the term conscientização introduced the notion of praxis to push individuals to move from awareness into action. In order for leaders to make the changes needed to develop the five characteristics of inclusive and equitable work cultures, they need to develop the following skills.

Awareness | understand the ways in which we are all impacted by and directly impact the world around us.

Communication | engage others in discussion and dialogue to open up opportunities for change, innovation, and collaboration.

Action | improve behaviors in concrete and tangible ways through taking deliberate action and calling one another in around areas of opportunity.

Policy & Practice | identify, address, and advocate for changes at the institutional/organizational level to create policies and practices that further equity and inclusion for all.

System & Culture | acknowledge the implicit ways our society reinforces particular values and behaviors and articulate a response that is inclusive of diverse perspectives.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

¹² While not taking a strictly moral relativist standpoint, this paper argues that certain values may have different meaning or application depending on context. That said, this framework acknowledges and creates space for those differences, and is based on the underlying belief that the 5 aspects outlined here enable any community to better realize the goals it sets for itself.

The five aspects of optimal organizational culture provide a framework that can be applied to HRD processes within any organization. Through a three-pronged strategic approach targeting leadership, team, and organizational development, these traits can be infused at every level of an organization, impacting individual, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural change.

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