Organization Development Practitioners

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Global Consciousness of Human Resource Development and Organization Development Practitioners

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Abstract: *This study describes changes in human consciousness, characterized by a move to holistic thinking informed by ecology, social justice, and spirituality, and were people-centered and purpose-driven.*

Walsh (1988) suggests that human beings are in the midst of a difficult and crucial stage of evolving to a new state of consciousness, meaning the complex attitudes, beliefs, and sensitivities that influence the way we construct meaning from experience. We are moving away from a prevalent industrial/scientific paradigm that has dominated many of our ideas and philosophies, ways of doing business, social structures, values, and ways of living. The existing paradigm, characterized by materialism, competition, and individualism, is losing its cultural legitimacy in light of overwhelming evidence of environmental degradation, displacement and exploitation of people, species extermination, and the disassociation of people from the community and earth that sustains them (Capra, 1996; Daloz et al, 1996; Elgin & LeDrew, 1997; Harman & Porter, 1997; Henderson, 1996; Kegan, 1994; Korten, 1999; Lifton, 1993; Maynard & Mehrtens, 1993; Ornstein, 1991; Walsh, 1988; Wheatley, 1994). The emerging sense of what some are calling *global consciousness* offers the ability to understand the connections between seemingly unrelated problems and issues, such as environmental degradation, the increasing poverty and displacement of people around the world, alongside increasing wealth for a few, backlash against immigration and minority rights, increasing fundamentalism, and many other ills visible today. This global consciousness is characterized by 1) a more inclusive worldview and the formation of allegiances beyond the local, 2) an awareness of the interdependence among humans and between humankind and the earth, 3) an ability to cope comfortably with ambiguity, and 4) a valuing of complexity and diversity. Those who write on the subject are calling for changes in the way we think, the way we relate to the rest of the world, and the way we identify with all of humanity.

It is important to differentiate between the global economy and global consciousness because the existing economic and emerging holistic paradigms of globalism differ in their essential goals. At the heart of the eco-nomic and holistic paradigms are different worldviews. While business ruthlessly in search of profit has been responsible for many of our social and environmental problems (Hawken, 1993; Henderson, 1996; Korten, 1995), there is some evidence that changes of consciousness in society are being mirrored within the business world. Concern for environmental sustainability, citizen participation, and social justice is replacing a preoccupation with individualism, competitiveness and consumerism. Business, arguably the dominant institution in our present society, has the resources, mobility, and power to dramatically affect the lives of people worldwide, for good or ill. Some evidence exists that suggests that businesses are expressing more interest and commitment to social responsibility and what might be called a global consciousness.

Human resource development (HRD), the education and training arms of the business world, is a potential leader in the dispersion of global consciousness. While originally recognized as the purveyor of classroom-based training, HRD has come to be responsible for organizational learning and development. HRD practitioners influence many people within the organization in which they work, and even the goals of the organization itself. Yet, little appears to be known about the global consciousness of HRD and OD practitioners or their attempts to embody it in their practice. To date, "there does not appear to be any scientific effort to identify HRD practitioners who are either on the edge of a new paradigm or creating it as they work. If there are such individuals, and the law of averages would support the belief that there must be, what is different about what they do?" (Willis, 1991, p. 63). Accordingly, this study described the characteristics of HRD/OD practitioners who subscribe to global consciousness.

Methodology

A phenomenological approach was selected from among the various traditions of qualitative inquiry. How people make sense of their experience to create a

worldview and the structures of consciousness in human experiences are of central interest in a phenomenological study. In order to conduct the study, a purposeful sample was selected. For the purpose of identifying potential participants, some work activities were identified as manifestations of global consciousness in action, including support for and involvement in participative forms of management, systems thinking, spirituality in the workplace, corporate social responsibility, environmental sustainability, and/or social justice. Participants were employed in human resource development, either directly by an organization or serving as a consultant. They are responsible for training, staff development, organization development, and general HRD functions. Intensive, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 individuals. These individuals represented a diversity of types of HRD and OD practice, backgrounds, and geographical location.

Findings

Several major characteristics of global consciousness were described by the research participants, the most important of which seemed to be holistic thinking informed by ecology, social justice, systems thinking, global awareness, and, for some, global transformation. The research participants also presented themselves as being people-centered and purpose-driven.

Holistic Thinking

The human resource development practitioners I spoke to portrayed global consciousness as a holistic way of thinking. Holistic thinking includes the properties of being informed by ecology, social justice, systems thinking, and global awareness, as well as consciousness of impending global transformation. In addition to holistic thinking, global consciousness is characterized by being people-centered and purpose-driven.

Informed by ecology. Some of the research participants referred to biological processes and ecology as a principle that informed their thinking. Ron epitomized this idea. In addition to being responsible to shareholders and to the people who were its employees, Ron asserted that the corporation has the obligation to "look at the earth from space and say, 'Am I doing anything to damage or how can I do my work while doing the least damage or no damage and maybe the enhancement of the globe?' which is the only thing we've got."

Holistic thinking seems to be connected to an awareness of the processes of life and affected the metaphors people used to describe their understandings of organizational life. Several research participants contrasted their organic models with traditional organizations based on images of machines. They critiqued the deficiencies of outdated, traditional models of structuring organizations and rejected the use of mechanical analogies for large organizations. John suggested that "We most often think of them as mechanisms, and as a kind of boxes and lines and wheels meshing and those kinds of images." When I asked if he was drawing a parallel to ecology, John told me he felt he offered clients a new perspective:

a more organic perspective is useful. It's useful to think of organizations as organs and having organs and related to, wonderful, funky, wet words like orgy and orgasms and organs and all of that, organisms, all that stuff that is so life filled and vital and mucky and swampy and fertile. It's really useful for us to think in those really fertile terms.

Informed by social justice. Practitioners were informed both by ecology and by a concern for social justice. Speaking of the corporation's relationship to the community in which it was situated, Marina believes that corporations have a "responsibility to support the community in whatever ways it can." As she works for a manufacturing and distributing firm that is located in a primarily black district, Marjorie had particular reason to be aware of both environmental and social concerns, in fact she saw them as intertwined. She was cognizant of environmental racism and felt that her firm was successful in avoiding activities that would designate the black community where they were located for disproportionate pollution or inequity in hiring, in comparison to well-to-do, primarily white communities.

Informed by systems thinking. Taking a broader perspective that utilized systems thinking was important to the research participants in their understanding of both the organizations and the culture they are part of. Many research participants draw on systems thinking in their practice; some spoke of it as basic to their work, and others indicated that it permeated their practice. Some even described using concepts drawn from advanced scientific research such as chaos and complexity theory. According to the research participants, an integral part of utilizing systems thinking in their work involves taking an unbiased view and being non-judgmental. What is unique about their thinking is that they focus on the relationships between interdependent, interacting elements within a whole system rather than on individ-

ual, independent parts of that system.

Describing his approach as akin to Buddhist philosophy, Dan defines general systems thinking as "all things are things in themselves, but they are also parts of others and nothing exists in and of itself." According to systems theory, Dan feels it is important to "define the boundaries of what you want to look into," but he avoids using systems terminology with managers because it sounds too abstract. Instead, "you just say what's going on here is both the cause and effect of a lot of things that are going on in your environment." Depicting science as responsible for changing our conceptions of the way life is organized, Kim asserted that she was thinking beyond systems thinking to "chaos theory and the new sciences and more additive, synergistic views of life." She connects quantum physics and even some of the explorations "on the edge of that" to Taoistic views which look at the flow of life. Kim dismissed mechanistic models as reductionistic and having little value. "Somehow we have to create more fractal-like organizations."

Informed by global awareness. Yet another characteristic of holistic thinking is a global view of culture. Many participants indicated that cognizance of global connections informed their work and led them to become more holistic thinkers. This was partly a result of international travel and the challenges posed by forming effective relationships with colleagues in other countries. During the time he was employed by a multinational company, Dan described "working worldwide in a lot of cultures" for seven years. He could think of horror stories, times of "doing things I thought were absolutely right and only years later realizing that I was busy stuffing my foot in my mouth within that particular culture." From this experience, he believed he had developed a better feel for cultural differences and recounted an example of correcting a younger, less experienced colleague who said to him, "Oh, you'd be surprised, Dan. Singapore is a very modern city." His reply was that he didn't care what the buildings, buses, or trolley cars looked like, "those people, those families are very different than we are . . . you cannot assume that just because they look outwardly like us that they have the same values and speak the same language. They don't." Even when speaking in English, words such as leadership and teams take on different meanings and "you've got to be very, very careful about that. I think international HRD is a very exciting field. I think it would be very interesting to go into, but keep in mind – don't dabble in it."

Even though she had global clients with projects all over the world, Jane told me she finds developing relationships with overseas clients difficult. She described experiencing a "profound humbling" because "I've come to realize how little I've known about other cultures in a way that's helped me do more than stereotype them." It takes so long to learn enough to understand about the "clues we missed." Her travels inspired Marina in "looking at the interconnectivity of everything that happened and how it impacts, you know those things that come before and after and I think from a global perspective . . . that's a very difficult thing to do." Marina asserted her experiences had taught her there was a connectedness.

Awareness of global transformation. Some research participants had a sense of emerging global transformation. Marjorie liked my description of global consciousness, but to her it entailed "shifting from individualism really to thinking as part of the whole." Learning to understand the process "by which people transform themselves and the world and their local conditions" was important to Jeff. It informed his work and studies. Dan described himself as "very involved" with global consciousness, but he doesn't "believe it's widespread." While he might be reading "David Bohm or Fritjof Capra," many of his colleagues "are still reading competitive things. However, when he looks outside the business sector, Dan perceives more interest in global consciousness. Most people are becoming aware that the world is a larger place, but to "talk about interconnectedness . . . of our social energy" represents a flight of fancy for many of his colleagues in the business world. Despite the doubts he expressed, Dan has adopted the idea of a global culture posited by Elise Boulding "as my own personal catechism."

Jane differentiated between her concern for ecology and the planet and "global consciousness, the emerging spirit that I do believe is a global one, I believe that when you think about the events in chaos theory that we can't deny that we are, that there is an evolution, a progression, there's something going on around the world that engages our experience in larger ways that any of us probably imagine at this moment." She couldn't tell me exactly what this new vision looked like or where it came from, but was absolutely certain that it existed.

People-Centered

Many of the HRD practitioners I spoke to expressed respect for people and their potential. They believed that

people had the knowledge, capabilities, and skills to make a valuable contribution in their work settings. They also trusted in and valued the goodness of the people with whom they worked. Believing in the value of people led Marjorie to characterize the role of HRD as one of the champions for people in the organization. "I think the finance person has their filter on dollars . . . the marketing person's filter is always that of what's going to be good for the brand image. And I think that the HR person's filter is on people." Her perspective differs from her peers in that they focus more on the business side of the equation, while she is more concerned with "what makes sense for the universe and for what will happen for longer than the next quarter." When asked what beliefs inform her practice, Carol responded thoughtfully: "I guess first and foremost is that people in business know everything they need to know to make the business better." Although employees understand the business, they might not always understand the process of change. She utilized a collaborative model of consulting so that she could unite people's knowledge of the business setting with her knowledge of change processes to create a better situation. Rather than referring to the values that drove her consulting business, Jane chose to reveal what guides her practice by telling me that she feels that "people were all in a state of becoming" and that a great service that HRD can provide is to help people free their own spirit.

Purpose-Driven
Several people described experiencing a sense of purpose and even a sense of obligation or mission about their work. This resulted in feeling called upon to make a contribution to people and society, taking responsibility to make changes, utilizing their skills in community service, and making sacrifices in order to remain true to their purpose. Sometimes the research participants connected it directly to their spirituality. For some, this sense of purpose leads to activism and community service especially in regard to environmental and social issues. This service is not limited to their work lives; even in community work, their same skills of teaching and learning were often used. This sense of purpose is so strong that several participants chose to sacrifice some financial remuneration either as a consequence of working less so they can devote more time to community service, or by leaving the corporate sector and instead working with nonprofit agencies. Glen negotiated with his company so that he could perform pro bono work for community organizations on company time. He asked for this time rather than receive a raise or bonus.

Karen made what she describes as a tough values choice not to continue working for Fortune 100 companies despite the financial consequences for a single woman contemplating retirement. Instead, she chose to take a job with a well-known charitable organization. After a few years she left to accept her current position with a nonprofit association for rural cooperative agencies. She describes her work as a chance to educate people about cooperative values. Community service was also important to Lynn who uses her facilitation skills with cancer support groups, women's shelters, and women's groups in her local community in addition to her job in a nearby city hospital. None of this was paid work, rather it was an expression of her convictions regarding social justice. "Being more conscious of what you are here to do" was Lynn's way of expressing what she felt was her lifework, to help people grow and develop. She also believed that if she helps to develop herself, it would spread to others, "world peace starts here type of thing, then it is a ripple effect."

Implications
What this study demonstrates about the implementation of global consciousness is that the practitioners who participated in my study held people as their central concern. They tried to create meaningful work environments by creating participatory structures, nourishing collaboration, and making room for spirituality. Dissemination of these findings could bring attention to issues important to global consciousness. Discussion of ecology, social justice, systems thinking, internationalism, spirituality, values, and even changes in human consciousness, need to be better integrated in the HRD literature and curriculum. Innovative definitions indicate that the focus of HRD should be on supporting people's learning and development and creating the conditions and structures in the social setting that foster this. Bierema (1996) advises us that "adult educators and human resource developers are uniquely equipped to research, design, and implement new models of workplace development with the individual and learning as top priorities (p. 227). Discussion of new roles for business emphasize purpose, human relationships, values, and spirituality. Kahnweiler and Otte (1997) articulate a need for HRD to develop greater maturity. A foundation of personal and professional values would undergird this.

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