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Shaping Self-Disciplined Workers: A Study of Silent Power in HRD

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Abstract: The intent of this case study was to examine power theories in a singular HRD context in such a way that problematizes the consequences of power.

Purpose and Rationale: Looking at a specific set of circumstances in a detailed fashion is one way to attempt to understand how theory relates to everyday life. Studying a situation in the framework of theories of power and from a critical pedagogical perspective is, in addition, an opportunity to explore issues involved in the benefits and purposes of education. As with most forms of education, the existence and consequences of power are seldom analyzed or even acknowledged by Human Resource Development (HRD) professionals. This study examined the many forms of power converging around the specific HRD functions of training and development thus allowing the researchers an opportunity to explore and expose the existence and ramifications of power. Due to length constraints we chose to highlight the case, leaving deeper theoretical discussions for the presentation.

Theoretical Framework: Theoretically, the issue of social control in corporations, institutions, and bureaucracies is necessary to understand the power and control inherent in HRD training programs. Control is viewed as functions or processes that help to align individual/employee actions with the interests of the employing organization. This control is often accomplished through bureaucratic mechanisms, Human Resource Management (HRM) in particular, where employees are selected, appraised and trained. Organizations lay claim not just to physical or bodily motions and intellectual contributions, but also to emotions and behavior (Clegg, 1979; Hardy & Clegg, 1996; Mumby, 1988).

Individual power relations are, as Clegg (1979) explained, "only the visible tip of a structure of control, hegemony, rule and domination which maintains its effectiveness not so much through overt action, as through its ability to appear to be the natural convention. It is only when control slips, assumptions fail, routines lapse and 'problems' appear that the overt exercise of power is necessary. And that is exerted in an attempt to reassert control" (p. 147). This is why organizations endorse allegedly democratic practices such as shared decision making and participatory management. Participatory management from this neo-Marxist perspective is geared toward changing the surface structure of power schemes between management and labor while the underlying structure remains intact. A secondary theoretical standpoint revolves around Foucault's (1979) notion of a "technology of the self"--a means by which people create a self in order to master it. This mastery then becomes regulatory via self-control. In complementary fashion, discourses of institutions and of HRD see themselves as neutral, immune, and

disconnected from power. However, educational sites including the workplace are regulated through discursive practices. In this way, educational practice in the form of training and development substantiates, certifies and makes concrete this normalization.

Research Design: The case of Stewart and his organization stands alone as an "event" which tells a story and is also a way to test theories and create knowledge about specific issues. By "story" we mean creating a narrative profile that stems from feminists' concern that researchers address the reader directly and thereby forge a connection to the people being studied (Stake, 1994). Stake (1994) viewed the outcomes of examining a specific case or set of circumstances as having intrinsic, instrumental and/or collective value. He referred to these two outcomes as intrinsic and instrumental. Case studies typically explore one or more dominating questions and their formats give writers and researchers the opportunity to connect complex life situations to theoretical positions. In joining academic and theoretical issues with complex situations existing in practice, case studies can link the abstract with the concrete experience. In other words, we can learn about power and power theory from studying a single case, involving Stewart and the situation he found himself in within his organization. The following narrative provides an opportunity to define elements of different sources of power in the workplace and shows how they were used and deployed. Data were gathered through interviews, document analysis, and participant observation. Data were coded and themes identified by the researchers with subsequent member checking.

The Case of Stewart: Stewart had worked for eight years as a networking and micro-computer specialist in a department of about 60 people. Stewart had sole responsibility for maintaining the hardware and networking software for this large group, participated in several inter-departmental and organization-wide committees, and was a Total Quality Management (TQM) team facilitator. One of his TQM teams had been charged with making recommendations for staff recognition and rewards. The department had high visibility dealing daily with its customers on very complicated issues and procedures. The perception outside the organization was that customer service was not the best it could be. Many workers within the department felt it was a high-stress environment with serious morale problems, hence the team addressing recognition and rewards. In addition to his role as team leader and technology expert, Stewart often voiced his own concerns to his supervisor and his directors about the problems faced by the department. He also passed along general comments made by other staff who frequently confided in him. Stewart did have some personal discord with office leadership along with the problems he perceived to be common across the department. Over the years he had been promised, among other things, a new office, a leadership role, promotion opportunities, and salary increases. These items not only failed to materialize but many of the changes in the office that did occur were in direct conflict with the recommendations of Stewart's recognition and rewards TQM team. Consequently, although he enjoyed his work, Stewart and many of his co-workers believed office processes exhibited little of the democratic and participatory characteristics that were openly espoused at staff meetings and through the rhetoric of departmental leadership.

As part of ongoing staff development activities, departmental staff were asked to attend a customer service workshop arranged through the organization's HRD group. The training was designed specifically for the department. The only outsider present was the instructor. Early in the training session, Stewart asked the instructor to clarify the specific purpose of the program

because the impression he and other staff members had was that it would be a "hands on" workshop about customer service. Instead, the training was geared toward changing the climate of existing workplaces. During the program a video was shown that addressed, among other things, questions of trust among staff, leadership, and management, exposing for analysis the idea that in many organizations employee trust of management and leadership could be an issue. The instructor asked the participants to outline what they felt were important points in the video segment and no one responded. Eventually Stewart pointed out that his notes indicated one of the basic issues raised by the video was trust, and that because of his previous interactions with departmental leadership he understood why trust was included as a topic. He then matter-of-factly stated that he personally was unable to trust departmental management. Stewart then moved on to other items on his outline.

A few days after the workshop, Stewart was called into his supervisor's office and given a memo titled "Behavioral Turnaround." In the memo, and in the meeting with his supervisor, Stewart was told that his behavior had been atrocious and had incited others to be negative. He was told to immediately get rid of his negative attitude, interact positively with all staff members, and openly support office leadership. In addition, Stewart was no longer extended the "trusted privilege" of participating in external endeavors where positive representation of the department was paramount. He was told it was unacceptable in a public group to make the kind of statement he had made and that his comments were completely out of line and served no constructive purpose. Finally, the memo stated that behaviors and attitudes exhibiting anything less than talking positively about and to management and providing "cheerleading" in support of management would result in termination proceedings. Stewart asked his supervisor to clarify the standards of performance to which he was required to adhere but failed to obtain specifics. Stewart then asked what measures would be used to evaluate his performance - or non-performance - and the response was that his supervisor "would know."

Stewart immediately called the HRD instructor to apologize for his "atrocious behavior." The instructor, however, was unable to identify which of the participants in the workshop he was, indicating that he could not recall or distinguish Stewart from other participants. The instructor did remember that during the session several individuals had expressed concerns and frustrations with their work environment. Stewart then reviewed his copy of HRM Policies and Procedures and determined that he could file a grievance based on the way the situation had been handled and the ambiguous criteria contained in the document. After filing a grievance, the "Behavioral Turnaround" memo was torn up.

Several days later, Stewart was again called into a meeting with his supervisor and the director of the department. This time he was presented with another memo describing his negative and generally unsupportive attitude. This memo discussed his failure to project a positive image within the department and delineated standards of performance, stating that correcting his behavior was his responsibility. The points made in the earlier memo were reiterated. Also, the second memo prescribed attendance at the next available HRD course on Inter-group Relations and Assertiveness. Stewart was given six months to change his behavior or the termination process would be finalized.

Analysis: Many forms of power converged around the specific HRD functions of training and development allowing an opportunity to expose and explore their ramifications. This situation developed out of an HRD program. One of the outcomes was required attendance at an additional HRD course. The training spoke strongly to the idea of organizational forms of ideological, hegemonic and discursive powers, essentially silent kinds of power, shaping self-disciplined workers who control not only minds and bodies, but also their hearts and souls. The incident resulted in coercive and disciplinary powers, "louder" forms of power, being invoked by management through HRM and HRD.

The case of Stewart makes explicit bureaucratic means of control and ideologies of management because these mechanisms were deployed when departmental leadership was crippled by "quiet" forms of institutional power relations gone awry. When psychological self-monitoring power fails, other kinds of power may be activated (Fiske, 1993). In an intimidating manner, the department used HRD, and then HRM processes and procedures to re-apply rigorous and aggressive control measures not dependent upon quieter hegemonic forms such as loyalty and self-discipline. The department decided to institute these measures in order to recover its prior organizational reality which up until that point had sustained particular political objectives and secured specific employee identities. One intent of the HRD courses offered to Stewart and his department was to constitute the subject by inculcating staff with appropriate rules, habits and clear ideas of expected norms. Through workplace education this inculcation could occur with various degrees of individual engagement and participation. However, for Stewart the status of the individual and the human right to express individuality, to have agency, and all that constitutes agency was erased as part of these re-application processes. Although it was risky for management to reveal its power in this way, it was done in order to publicly show that unity of departmental leadership and departmental employees was in everyone's best interests.

When the department failed to quietly and properly inculcate organizational norms and values into Stewart, it resorted to intimidation through disciplinary and coercive power. In spite of the "empowering efforts" of HRD programs and management ideology "many employees feel not empowered, but intimidated. Fear is the bluntest of management tools" (For now, p. 13). Similar to Foucault's notion of the Panopticon as a symbol of surveillance, Stewart needed to behave as though he were being watched at all times. Threatened with dismissal Stewart was required to submit himself for "correction" through more training and development. Stewart's reaction to this type of power had been minimal resistance rather than violence or the debilitating effects of despair and apathy which often stem from what Fiske (1993) called "imperializing gone too far" (p. 142). In Stewart's small acts of resistance he was attempting to create a "locale," a bottom-up localizing power contesting management's "imperializing power". Usually management and institutional leadership, with the help of training and development, effectively marginalized resistant and oppositional knowledge. In this case, Stewart's management, through HRD and HRM policies and procedures, effectively stopped him from producing a locale by positioning him in their workplace system of relations. Stewart became the unnormalized "other" who now lived under constant monitoring and threat and who needed to be resocialized before being reinserted into the system of norms. In Stewart's case he was not the typical stationed

body, but rather a stationed heart and soul whose ill-managed emotions had to be more finely tuned. And in Stewart's situation, even though severe punishment was involved, the department also adhered to the "principle of correct training rather than that of vengeful punishment" (Fiske, 1993, p.73) by requiring even more training and development.

Stewart's situation paralleled Hochschild's (1983) research on the "managed heart" where organizational forms of power resulted in not just expectations of physical and mental work, but also of "emotional labor." This sort of labor, demanding a coordination of mind and feeling, "draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality" (p. 7). Stewart was expected and in fact was forced to accept leadership's statements and directions without question and without comment. Any disagreement had to be suppressed with predefined behavior in evidence at all times. The boundaries of control were enlarged so that heart and spirit were involved in an obvious and public form. Stewart's values were to be *inculcated* in order that body and soul could be viewed as departmental commodities existing as means to reach instrumental institutional missions and goals.

Similar to the fake smiles and accommodating demeanor of many customer service employees, Stewart's feelings and expressions were outlined and monitored by his supervisor. This commanding of feelings and emotions was a blatant example of controlling culture through asking for and actually enforcing a theatric performance. Power of this kind obviously stifles creativity and energy, turning enthusiastic and sincere employees into malleable robots. In contrast to creating an atmosphere of productivity, quality, and teamwork, it may actually endanger the performance of an organization by silencing employee critique, recommendations, or comments about institutional issues and problems. Mumby succinctly described how ideological power plays out when he said "power operates ideologically when it is used to impose a certain form of organizational rationality on members, while simultaneously restricting the articulation of contradictory or competing rationales" (1988, p. 51).

Conclusion: The story of Stewart presented the opportunity to focus attention on the role of HRD as a source of power and control not only of mind and body, but of heart and soul as well. Not surprisingly, because of education's overall lack of power analyses the instructor in Stewart's first class found the outcomes to be rare and unusual. What was even more rare and unusual, however, was the nearly complete exposure of many aspects of power and power differentials. What often happens in corporate training is participants are silenced, sometimes out of an instinct for job and self-preservation and sometimes by already being socialized according to the institution's ideology, discourse, and hegemony. The HRD training received by Stewart and his co-workers presented and supported the organization and managerial points of view - in this case the goal was to adjust and alter the work environment of Stewart's department. When Stewart did not articulate the corporate ideology in the first HRD class, his supervisors took the actions they felt were necessary to avoid further damage to the people and structures around him. Part of Stewart's "punishment" was to be returned to HRD classes for sessions on assertiveness and inter-group communication. The quieter forms of institutional power having failed, punishment by continuing education exemplified how much management counted on HRD

experts and professionals to act as therapists, re-socializing deviant individuals into the objective reality of a symbolic organizational universe. Education, because of its humanistic stance, would benefit from understanding Marshall's observation about power being exercised in a search of controllable and governable people. Marshall wrote "if it is more humane, it is more subtle; if it is less overt and involves less violence to bring power into play, it may be more dangerous because of its insidious silence" (Marshall, 1989, p. 109). In other words, what appears to be relatively safe and peaceful as long as conformance and compliance or even silence are in evidence changes in the presence of vocal resistance. At that point, and Stewart's situation was a good example, acquiescence can be commanded.

Institutions depend on emotional control and the socializing effects of myths and symbols to inscribe organizational identification. This in turn facilitates decision making because only one decision or a range of decisions is rational and consistent with corporate ideology. In its espousal of departmental values and ideals, the organization had no tolerance for employees going outside the boundaries by questioning its ideology. In their response, departmental management reacted in a totalitarian manner very much in tune with Peters and Waterman's (1982) exhortation to "buy in or get out." Giddens' (1981) analysis of human agency is helpful here. He referred to a "dialectic of control" which offered some form of choice through the interaction of power and agency. However, an agent such as Stewart, who could have no opinions whatsoever was "no longer an agent" (p. 63). The erasure of his human agency canceled any possibility of the transformative effects of education and of creating an organization that was both democratic and productive (Kincheloe, 1995).

HRD runs the "company school," a creation similar to other central knowledge and power systems such as the military and public schools (Fiske, 1993). Given Stewart's experience it is clear that HRD professionals need to ask why the institutions within which they work and make their living offer courses with objectives such as identifying and reducing resistance to change, developing strategies for coping with change, using productivity standards to emphasize strong employee skills in self-management, presenting a professional and authoritative image, defining behaviors that enhance personal presence, elevating the concept of work to the higher plane of service, integrating habits of personal effectiveness and expectations, adapting to customer needs, becoming exceptional, avoiding burnout, and motivating and empowering employees for success. Some of the salient questions for HRD to consider are who really benefits from attendance at these courses? What are the multiple purposes of training? Who is making progress? Why is productivity important? And what are all the possible consequences, good and bad, of training and development?

HRD professionals would benefit from an understanding of critical pedagogy because training and development venues are cultural spaces where agency and subjectivity are produced. In education, and in a democratic workplace, learners and workers are aware of how they negotiate agency in terms of the official company line and the dialectic of empowerment and domination. Power, when related to cultural and political authority (including training), grounds and defines what people "see" as logical, objective, and

rational. Power and expertise also determine what schools and the workplace euphemistically label a good or cooperative attitude. "For the workplace to be genuinely democratized, it must demand an arrangement that guarantees workers' voices will be heard and that shields them from the capricious exercise of management prerogative. If this is not the case, employees will not possess the freedom to speak their minds for fear of reprisal" (Kincheloe, 1995, p. 67).

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