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Historical Antecedents Shaping The Terms Of Performance And Learning And Their Relationship In Human Resource Development: An Exploratory Study

John A. Henschke EdD
Lindenwood University, jahenschke@gmail.com

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Academy of Human Resource Development
P.O. Box 25113
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(225) 334 1875 (fax)
office@ahrd.org

Historical Antecedents Shaping The Terms Of Performance And Learning And Their Relationship In Human Resource Development: An Exploratory Study

John A. Henschke
University of Missouri-St. Louis

This study explores the gap that exists in the Human Resources Development (HRD) Field regarding whether its key ingredient is either "performance" or "learning." It investigates through ancient and modern lexical, dictionary and common use sources how the meanings of these two and other related terms evolved historically and how their meanings are interpreted. The results indicate that the two distinct terms together and their relationship within the HRD context are key to HRD.

Keywords: Performance, Learning, Human Resource Development Key

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to address a gap that exists in the Human Resources Development (HRD) Field regarding its perceived key ingredient as being either performance or learning (Watkins & Marsick, 1995; Swanson, 1995). Focus will be placed on understanding how the meanings of these and some other key HRD terms have evolved historically, how their meanings are interpreted, and how they relate to each other. This study suggests that probing into some of the historical background of the terms "learning" and "performance," as well as some other related terms, which have similar meanings to these two, and their mutual relationships, could help to deepen understanding of the HRD Field as well as clarify the discussion and use of these terms in the HRD Literature.

Problem Statement and Theoretical Framework

Performance has become a "byword" in the lexicon of HRD. Performance has been hailed as the key ingredient to HRD (Swanson, 1995). Improved performance has also been hailed as being the purpose of HRD (Lynham & Swanson, 1997; Swanson & Arnold, 1997), and the outcome of HRD (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998). The design of performance has been acclaimed as the means for HRD making corporate organizational success happen (Taylor & Felton, 1993). Performance has also been included in various current HRD definitions (Swanson, 1995; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998). Knowles, Holton & Swanson, (1998) define it as the organizational system outputs that have value to the customer in the form of productivity attributable to the organization, work process, and/or individual contributor level. It is the means to measure organizational goals which include rate of return, cycle time, and quality of output. It is further defined structurally (Swanson, 1995; Arnold & Swanson, 1996) as having: variables such as mission/goal, system design, capacity, motivation, and expertise; and levels such as organization, process, and individual. Ruona & Lyford-Nojuma (1997) support this structural definition of performance with references from thirty different research studies. Nevertheless, Lynham & Swanson (1997) do not indicate how performance is developed, nor how one becomes prepared for performance in HRD.

Watkins & Marsick (1995), on the other hand, make a strong argument for learning as the key ingredient in HRD. Although they do not mention the word "performance," they express a vision for HRD and its definition as the field of study and practice which is responsible for the fostering of a long term, work-related capacity at the individual, group and organizational levels. As such, it includes -- but is not limited to -- training, career development, and organizational development. Hatcher, Hinton and Swartz (1995) emphasize the importance of continuous learning in preparing people to go into and remain in the HRD Field. In making the case for learning being the key ingredient of HRD, Watkins & Marsick (1995) do not emphasize just individual learning. They propose that a unique niche for HRD that is distinctive is the concept of the learning organization -- one that brings together two major components: learning, and the workplace context in which learning occurs. Delors (1997) argues that one of the pillars of the heartbeat of the twenty-first century society is learning to do/perform a job of work. Belanger (1997) proposes that learning take place continuously not only on the individual level, but also on the institutional/organizational level and the systemic level. Knowles (1989) expressed how he would like to be helped in his learning by a human resource developer in the twenty-first century. This certainly implies that lifelong

learning is and will continue to be a central component of life and work. This has led Watkins & Marsick (1995) to propose the learning organization as central to the HRD function. There are strong arguments on both sides of this discussion for the key ingredient in HRD to be performance as well as learning.

Research Questions

In order to understand the discussion more fully, the nature of the separation between learning and performance in HRD parlance, and to explore the possibility of closing the gap between the two terms (and other related terms), the following questions may be appropriate to further guide this study: how have the meanings of key HRD terms evolved historically? and, how are their meanings interpreted?

Methodology

An investigation was conducted into how the words "performance" and "learning" evolved historically in the HRD literature, especially in the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) Research Conference Proceedings and related literature in the HRD Field. In addition, an inquiry was conducted into the words "performance," "learning," (and any other related terms such as doing, teach, guiding, instructing, leading, training, learning organization, hearkening, wisdom, and modeling), as defined by English language dictionaries (Webster, 1828; Russell et. al., 1939), and the historic standard lexicons of the ancient Greek and Hebrew languages (Thayer, 1979, 1981; Brown et. al., 1979; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). One of the reasons these two ancient languages were chosen is that Hebrew has remained virtually unchanged for more than twenty centuries, and the Greek (Koine) referred to is a translation from the ancient Hebrew. Another reason is that the author has language background in both Hebrew and Greek, and has interest in this kind of study. After the data obtained from the dictionaries and lexicons were analyzed, the data are presented and outlined in accordance with the definitions of the various words and their relationships (or lack of it) with the "performance" and "learning" terms and definitions within the Field of HRD.

Historical Background

Pace et. al. (1991) trace the history of HRD efforts through four eras: employee skillfulness--to 1800; employee efficiency--1800/1920; employee satisfaction--1920/1945; and, employee enhancement--1945/present. Nadler & Nadler (1990) suggest that the history of HRD (under a variety of names) dates back to the dawn of recorded history when the first caveman took his son aside and taught him how to tie a sharpened piece of obsidian to a piece of straight wood to make a spear. However, it was not until the 1940s, that he thinks there was sufficient concern to produce written material directly related to the HRD Field. However, Houle (1992) discovered evidence that somewhat earlier, Peffer (1932) concluded that programs of the HRD sort in industry and commerce were the largest component of adult education at that time, and that Rowden (1937) assessed the educational work in trade associations for their own staffs and those of their member agencies. In addition, Henschke (1991) observed that prior to the 1940s, Lindeman (1938) laid the initial foundation for HRD professional competency development. Furthermore, Nadler & Nadler (1990) provide a sketchy history of the emergence and development of HRD. They suggest that among the predecessor terms to HRD were training, vocational education, apprenticeship, sensitivity training, applied behavioral science, and organization development. The HRD term was first introduced to the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) in Miami in 1969.

Since 1970, a definition of HRD has been in print. There are four presented here which find some acceptance in the Field. Nadler & Nadler (1989) defined it this way, "HRD is organized learning experience provided by employers within a specified period of time to bring about the possibility of performance improvement and/or personal growth." Nadler & Nadler (1990) kept their definition almost unchanged, "HRD is defined as organized learning experiences in a definite time period to increase the possibility of improving job performance growth." Pace, et. al., (1991), define HRD as "the integration of individual development, career development, and organization development roles to achieve maximum productivity, quality, opportunity, and fulfillment for organization members as they work to accomplish the goals of the organization." Marquardt (1993) presents the definition given by the ASTD, "HRD is the integrated use of training and development (planned learning) organization development, and career development to improve individual, group, and organizational effectiveness." All of these definitions have "learning" as a central component. Two of them also have "performance" as a central component. The third one focuses on "accomplishing the organization's goals," which could imply the necessity of both performance or learning, without mentioning either. The fourth one has "planned learning" but does not have

“performance,” although it includes effectiveness, which could and most likely does mean the same thing as “performance” in this context.

As time moved on, the HRD Field began to grow and develop. By 1942, the many active local state organizations involved in job related skill development, came together to form the American Society of Training Directors (ASTD -- in its first form) (Nadler & Nadler, 1990). Training and/or learning was the focus of their efforts, and these terms were used interchangeably, with training being the term most often used. Some years later the ASTD changed its name to the American Society for Training and Development, but kept the same acronym. Beginning in 1938 and continuing through 1989, twenty-seven HRD Competency studies were conducted to continue clarifying the competencies necessary for professionals to learn in order to perform the HRD function (Henschke, 1991). ASTD was centrally involved in conducting five of these studies in 1959, 1974, 1978, 1983, and 1989. There was an active University HRD Professors' group, which met annually in conjunction with the ASTD conference, concerned with the learning aspects of developing competencies. They became involved in the development of the 1989 ASTD competency study. Subsequent to that study being completed, those professors focused their 1990 conference in Orlando, Florida, on developing *The Academic Guide* for using the 1989 competency study in university academic programs. This guide was published by ASTD, and the definition of competency included in it is: Competency is a cluster of knowledges, understandings, skills, attitudes, values, and interests that are necessary for the performance of a function -- in this case it would be the human resource developer function (Henschke, 1991). Thus, both “learning” and “performance” were included in the definition. This group of professors was the nucleus of the group that in 1993 launched The Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD).

Taylor & Felton (1993) in their HRD book entitled *Performance by Design* emphasize the centrality of learning in designing performance within sociotechnical systems, underscoring the fact that performance is a dynamic process and not a static one. Thus it may be conjectured that whether one is just entering the HRD Field or is a veteran in it, learning is always a central component (while not the only one) of improving our performance in the work/corporate/organizational context; and one is continuously progressing, improving, and seeking to arrive, but never quite arriving at the finish line, even of performance. Almost without exception, it could be done better.

The gap and separation between performance and learning seems to come into the most pronounced visibility in the Field at the 1995 AHRD Conference in St. Louis, Missouri. At the opening town meeting, Watkins stated the case for learning being the key to HRD, and Swanson stated the case for performance being the key to HRD. On the one hand, the Watkins & Marsick (1995) paper presses for a focus on not only individual learning, but also a focus on a learning organization with the essential elements of: increasing the overall learning threshold; assessing and enhancing current capacity for learning; creating an ongoing adaptive capacity by embedding systematic linkages between needs, work and rewards; and, building autonomy and empowerment, “space of free movement.” On the other hand, the Swanson (1995) paper vies for a focus almost exclusively on performance, with his perspective on learning being only one of the components leading to expertise; expertise being only one of the components of worthy performance on the individual, process, and organizational levels.

At the AHRD Conferences subsequent to that debate by Watkins and Swanson, additional viewpoints have been expressed. Various researchers provide evidence of training (which some may possibly view this term as synonymous with learning -- though others may doubt it) as contributory toward: solving organizational performance problems (Palmer & Crepas, 1998); improving performance in a car rental company (Sleezer, Hixon, Green & Mudgett, 1997), high performance within an organizational system (Bassi & Van Buren, 1997). Training is also mentioned as one of twenty-one ingredients of effective team performance (Struemer, Hendreks & Vermeulen, 1998). Others also assert that there is a close link between learning and performance in HRD. Leimbach & Baldwin (1997) claimed that learning research definitely is one ingredient in performance research within the HRD value chain, but make a weak case by suggesting that very little research has been conducted on learning. Swanson & Arnold (1997) seek to emphasize the importance of adult learning and its relationship to performance, but weaken their argument by diagramming Adult Education (AE) and HRD as being discrete entities within an organizational and environmental context, with AE being in the larger environment but almost totally removed from the organization, and HRD being totally in the organization which is set within the larger environment. Van Zoligen & Nifhof (1998) strongly support the inseparable connection between the process of lifelong learning and performance, expressing the view that the key qualifications for performance are acquired through lifelong learning. Pace, Smith & Mills (1991) use the terms training, development and learning interchangeably to describe a crucial element and tool needed in HRD for integrating individual development (with workers performance of current jobs more effectively), career development (with workers assuming a variety of different jobs in the organization), and organization development (with workers moving into jobs yet to be identified and defined), to achieve maximum productivity, quality, opportunity, and fulfillment for organization members as they work to accomplish the goals of the organization.

Holton (1998), in a recent attempt to link learning and performance in HRD, says that performance is a multidimensional and poorly defined construct. Adapting Swanson's (1995) three levels of performance -- organization, process, individual -- Holton (1998) identifies four domains of performance as mission, process, critical performance subsystems, and individual. He makes an attempt at a strong case for adult learning, setting the stage for a closer alliance between performance and learning. He moves forward to craft a definition and connection between the two for the future. With today's changing world of technological innovation, volatile national economies, roller coaster stock markets, the daily birth and death of numerous business organizations, and corporate "right-sizings," lifelong learning appears to be a crucial necessity. More importantly, the need for lifelong learning is especially true for everyone, everywhere if human resources are to perform effectively, now and in the future.

Sources and Roots of Terms

For some of the words which are included for analysis, there are numerous Hebrew and/or Greek words which are equivalent to the English words. For instance, performance has eight equivalent Hebrew words and there are seven in Greek. Learning has seven Hebrew and five Greek equivalent words. Other words would have similar numbers. Hence, to keep this paper from expanding beyond the eight page scope allowed here, only the most appropriate Hebrew and Greek words will be selected for inclusion. Now, to the selected words from Hebrew, Koine Greek, and Webster's original English Dictionary, which include: performance, do, learning, teach, instruct, guide, lead, train, learning organization, hearken wisdom and model. The definition of the term "learning organization" will only be garnered from the HRD literature since it has no antecedents as a term combined of two other words.

Performance

The Hebrew word is "asah." This root means to do a work, labor, toil, make, create, construct, build, accomplish, earn, procure, prepare, sacrifice. It has the connotation of ethical obligation. I deals with refinements fashioning the object created. Another Hebrew word is "pala." This means remarkable, surpassing, extraordinary, distinguished, and singular in causing wonderful things to happen. A final Hebrew word is "shalam." The principal meaning is completion, fulfillment, wholeness in which relationships are restored. (Brown, et. al., 1979; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). The Greek word is "poieo." The word means quality, to make, to endow a person with a certain quality. It is fashioning and bringing forth something which, when produced has an independent existence of its own. Another Greek word is "teleo." It means to bring anything to perfection or to its destined goal, to carry it through. (Thayer, 1979, 1981; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). The English word "performance" means execution, completion, fulfillment, or carrying out of any work or undertaking (Webster, 1828; Russell, et. al., 1939).

Do

The Hebrew word is "hayah." It means to come to pass, to be done, to turn out, to happen, to be finished in a dynamic sense, not a static one (Brown, et. al., 1979; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). The Greek word is "energeo." It means to be active and energetic, to effect, prove oneself strong (Thayer, 1979, 1981; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). The English word "do" means to perform, to execute, to carry into effect, to exert labor or power upon, to bring anything to the state desired or to completion, to bring to pass (Webster, 1828; Russell, et. al., 1939).

Learning

The Hebrew word is "lamadh." It has the idea of learning, studying, becoming accustomed to, exercised in, instructing, training, educating, practicing, being taught and trained. This one Hebrew word had wrapped up in it what it took two Greek words to express: "manthano," to learn, and "didasko," to teach. Another Hebrew word is "alaph," which means being accustomed to something or having close association with an object; hence, the idea of learning from association. A final Hebrew word is "leqach," which has the meaning of persuasiveness in a good sense (Zodhiates, 1984, 1990; Brown, et. al., 1979). The Greek word is "manthano," meaning to endeavor, desire, seek to learn, experience, or bring to experience. Another Greek word is "gramma," meaning learning and knowledge gained from books and writings (Thayer, 1979, 1981; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). The English word "learning," means to acquire knowledge of something before unknown; in popular use, learn has both senses to teach and to learn (Webster, 1828); to acquire information concerning, by instruction, by study, by observation, by experience, or in any other way; formerly, it meant to teach--but this use is now obsolete among careful writers and speakers (Russell, et. al., 1939. In one HRD definition, "learning is a shift of mind, and is what goes on inside learners as they undertake to gain or acquire new knowledge, understanding, skill, attitudes, values, and interests."

The “what goes on” could be described as: perceiving--sensing and feeling concrete reality, thinking or reasoning abstractly; and internalizing or processing-- making it a part of oneself by actively jumping in and trying it, or reflecting on and watching what’s happening, so the HRD professional, whom it would be safe to assume is an adult learner, would have going on inside of her/him the perceiving and internalizing of new knowledges, understandings, skills, attitudes, values, and interests (Henschke, 1995).

Teach

The Hebrew word is “yarah.” It has the idea of shooting arrows, pouring rain, casting, laying a foundation, erecting, establishing, irrigating and giving water, putting out words, the connotation of aiming for something (Brown, et. al., 1979; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). The Greek word is “didasko,” having inherent in it the calculation of the increase of understanding of the pupil (Gthayer, 1979, 1981; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). The English word “teach,” means to communicate to another the knowledge of that of which he was before ignorant (Webster, 1828; Russell, et. al., 1939).

Instruct

The Hebrew word is “sakhal,” with the idea of showing oneself attentive to, understand, consider, circumspect, desirable to look upon, cause to make wise, to have intellectual comprehension, insight, expertise and skill, knowing the reason for something (Brown, et. al., 1979; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). The Greek word “matheteuo,” means not only to learn but to become attached to ones teacher and to become his follower (a disciple) in teaching and conduct (Thayer, 1979, 1981; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). The English word “instruct,” is to inform the mind, to impart knowledge to one who is destitute of it (Webster, 1828; Russell, et. al., 1939).

Guide

The Hebrew word is “yaats.” It has the idea of counseling together, consulting with one another, to devise, decide, plan, propose, and advise, to exchange counsel as a king with his advisors (Brown, et. al., 1979; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). The Greek word “kateuthuno,” means to make straight, direct, remove the hindrances to coming to one (Thayer, 1979, 1981; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). The English word “guide,” means one who leads another in his way or course, who goes before or accompanies to point out the way (Webster, 1828; Russell, et. al., 1939).

Lead

The Hebrew word is “nachah.” It has the notion of guiding, going in the direction of, turning eyes toward, bringing, just as the pillars of cloud and fire indicated the way to go for the Children of Israel, treating kindly, moving on a path to benefit (Brown, et. al., 1979; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). The Greek word is “ago,” meaning to bring, carry, to bring gently and without violence (Thayer, 1979, 1981; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). The english word “lead,” often includes the sense of drawing as well as directing (Webster, 1828; Russell, et. al., 1939).

Train

The Hebrew word is “chanakh,” meaning to initiate, to dedicate, consecrate, to inaugurate (Brown, et. al., 1979; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). There is no Koine Greek word for “train.” The English word “train,” is to draw along from act to act by persuasion or promise, with discipline, exercise, and formed by practice (Webster, 1828; Russell, et. al., 1939).

Learning Organization

The HRD literature defines this as “one that learns continuously and transforms itself. This means learning: takes place in individuals, teams, organizations and society; is a continuous, strategically used process--integrated with, and running parallel to, work; results in changes in knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors; enhances organizational capacity for innovation and growth; and has embedded systems to capture and share the learning” (Henschke, 1995).

Hearken

The Hebrew word is “shama,” meaning to hear with undivided listening attention and obedience (Brown, et. al., 1979; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). The Greek word is “adouo,” meaning to hear with the ear of the mind effectually, or so as to perform or grant what is spoken (Theyer, 1979, 1981; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). The English word “hearken,” is to attend to what is uttered, as to words of advise or admonition (Webster, 1828; Russell, et. al., 1939).

Wisdom

The Hebrew word is "chokhmah." It is intelligence, experience, insight, prudence and judgment in a positive sense (Brown, et. al., 1979). The Greek word is "sophia." It means one knows how to regulate ones relationship to goodness and circumstances (Thayer, 1979, 1981; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). The English word "wisdom," means the right use or exercise of knowledge; the choice of laudable ends, and of the best means to accomplish them (Webster, 1828; Russell, et. al., 1939).

Example/Way/Model

The Hebrew word is "derekh." It means a going, way, journey, walk, road, manner, path, way of life. It refers to the actions and behavior of humans. The word is used to denote some wonderful things which leave no trace that is externally visible to the physical eye, but are as they are because of their nature. The wonderful things are: the way of an eagle in the air, the way of a serpent upon a rock, the way of a ship in the heart of the sea, and the way of a man with a maid. Looking to the heavens, one cannot say that an eagle has passed there. Looking to the rock, one cannot say that a serpent has wound its way around it. Looking to the high sea, one cannot say that a ship has been steered through it. Looking to the maid, one cannot say that a man has had sexual intercourse with her (Brown, et. al., 1979; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). The Greek word "tupos," carries with it the idea of a constituent element of a model of some current reality, or that which is yet to be developed, a pattern to be imitated or copied (Thayer, 1979, 1981; Zodhiates, 1984, 1990). The English work "example," means pattern, a copy, a model, a way of very comprehensive signification, which is proposed or proper to be imitated (Webster, 1828; Russell, et. al., 1939). In one HRD definition it means "walking the talk," not a mentality of "do as I say, not as I do," but with the notion that "if we model the thing we are talking about, we will get it right yet" (Henschke, 1998b).

Results, Conclusions, and Limitations

On the one hand, as one looks at the words presented, the first two words -- performance and do -- are synonyms. In HRD, they carry the importance of accomplishing the things crucial to the organization levels of organization, process, and individual; and the organization outcomes and drivers performance domains within the mission, process, critical performance systems, and individual. However, it seems that one does not become able to perform at any level of competence or within any context without some process of learning taking place to prepare the person for performing within the organization's levels and domains to accomplish the organizations goals, and even the mechanical aspects of the organization to perform.

On the other hand, the subsequent ten words -- learning, teach, instruct, guide, lead, train, learning organization, hearken, wisdom, and model -- have somewhat synonymous definitions. In HRD, they carry their meaning not in a vacuum, but only in relationship to preparing people through learning processes, as well as the mechanical aspects (which are also implemented by people), to learn, not for their own individual purposes, but to learn in order to perform the purposes of the organization. It seems that the two groups of terms, although separate and distinct, in the HRD context they are both key ingredients.

Moreover, the English word combination -- example/way/model -- which is encompassed in the Hebrew word "derekh," and the Greek word "tupos," offer an additional insight into the nature of the four wonderful things which are reflected in the use of the Hebrew word. It appears that "learning" and "performance" in this setting are two sides of the same coin. It is the worthy performance of the eagle to fly in the air, but it does not come by that automatically; and the young eagle needs to learn to fly and to be taught by parent or more experienced eagles to fly, which is the nature of eagles. It is the worthy performance of the serpent to wind its way around a rock, but it does not come by that automatically; and the young serpent needs to learn to wind and to be taught by parent or more experienced serpents to wind, which is the nature of serpents. It is the worthy performance of a ship to pass through the sea, and it does not do that automatically; but comes by that when it has a rudder giving it direction and a captain who has learned and been taught by veteran captains what one does to guide a ship successfully through the heart of the sea. Finally, it is the worthy performance/way of a man with a maid to have sexual intercourse with her, and he does not come by that automatically; but he must grow mature enough biologically, and learn and be taught by parents, others more experienced, written materials and/or trial and error to accomplish that successfully.

Consequently, it seems that we can conclude that the terms "performance" and "learning" and the related terms from Hebrew, Koine Greek, English, and HRD sources are all mixed together in this comprehensive term -- example/way/model. This term has a much broader definition and meaning than any one of the terms separately, and may give coherence to the overall importance of both ingredients, performance and learning, as being key ingredients within HRD.

One limitation of research into this area is that it has practical validity only for those who acknowledge that word definitions and meanings, from both ancient and modern sources, are important sources of data for shaping the HRD Field, and helpful in sculpting its future course of action in accomplishing the purpose of HRD within organizations. Another limitation is that the value of this research will partially be determined by the extent to which further studies in the future are conducted in this area of inquiry.

How This Research Contributes to New Knowledge in HRD

This research contributes to insight that “performance” and “learning” are not mutually exclusive terms as had been implied or espoused in some of the literature cited within this paper, and some quarters of the HRD Field and the AHRD. This research further contributes the idea that the two terms are both complementary parts of a comprehensive whole perspective which gives direction to and drives the HRD Field. In addition, this research could provide for the HRD Field a much richer, fuller, and deeper understanding of the meaning and importance of HRD as a worthwhile scientific endeavor. Finally, those who have found themselves on either side of this discussion up until now, may be able to join forces and unite their energies in a new way for collaborative efforts to mutually benefit the AHRD, the HRD Field and the constituencies served by HRD.

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