

**HRD professional partnerships: case
study examples of collaborative
partnership-research and evidence
based practice**

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the concept of HRD Professional Partnership research and its value to HRD practitioners who seek to become evidence-based in their professional practice. Three replica studies of managerial and leadership effectiveness carried out in two UK public sector organizations and one UK private sector company, are described. How the research has been applied within these respective organizations, and disseminated in order to inform the HRD profession, is also described and discussed.

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HRD professional partnerships: case study examples of collaborative partnership-research and evidence based practice

Introduction

Considerable concerns have been expressed regarding the lack of relevance and utility of most management research (Academy of Management, 2000; Ghoshal, 2005; Hambrick, 1994), and regarding the 'academy-industry/research-practice' gap existing in the field of business and management (Adler, Stani & Styhre, 2004; Starkey & Tempest, 2004). Yet such gaps do not exist in medicine, pharmacy, engineering and other professional fields where much of the research carried out in universities is done in collaboration with organisations, and is perceived by practitioners as having direct relevance and utility for informing and shaping their 'evidence-based' professional practice (Starkey & Tempest, 2004). Indeed, within the medical and healthcare professions evidence-based practice has become part of the language of practitioners, managers, policy makers and researchers in health services throughout the world, and has spread into other fields with the establishment of initiatives in social care, criminal justice and education (Bury & Mead, 1998; Walshe & Rundell, 2001). Should this trend continue into most other professional fields, including management, then as Hamlin and Cooper (2006) claim, most HRD practitioners will also have to adopt evidence based approaches to practice.

Background and significance

Just as there have been calls in recent years for evidence-based management (Axelsson, 1998; Brewerton & Millward, 2001; Stewart, 1998), there have also been calls for research-informed and evidence-based HRD (Hamlin, 2002a; Holton, 2004; Leimbach & Baldwin, 1997; Russ Eft, Preskill & Sleezer, 1997; Swanson, 1997). However, HRD practitioners will not be able to respond to these calls without an adequate body of generalised and/or organisation-specific 'best evidence' derived from good research. Unfortunately, as Hamlin and Stewart (1998) and Hamlin (2002a) suggest, the HRD field lacks a sound and sufficient base of relevant and usable empirical research to support the concept of evidence-based HRD practice. Similarly, there is also a lack of good theory and generalised empirical evidence to support the concept of evidence-based management and leadership (Avolio, Bass & Jung, 1999; Axelsson, 1998; House & Aditya, 1997; Kim & Yukl, 1995). Indeed, Ghoshal (2005 p.76) is highly critical of much academic research related to business and management which he argues "has had some very significant and negative influences on the practice of management".

Towards evidence-based practice through HRD professional partnership research

Despite the various calls for evidence-based HRD, only limited progress has been made in this direction. Never the less, the experience of the author suggests an effective way forward is for HRD practitioners to engage with organisationally-based, practice grounded HRD Professional Partnership research of the kind defined by Jacobs (1997) and advocated by Hamlin (2001; 2002a). In this type of research, universities and organizations engage in a collaborative partnership wherein HRD scholars and HRD practitioners jointly conduct programs of collaborative research, but do so with their own mutually exclusive yet complementary goals. Maintaining the integrity of both sets of goals for the common good is considered important. Thus, there is a dual goal to improve the organisation through the application of academically rigorous applied research, whilst at the same time advancing the HRD field of unique knowledge. The research can be either practice-grounded internal research, or relevant external research that can be generalised and applied within the organisation. Sufficient time is allowed for the undertaking of the research in order to ensure appropriate academic rigor and robustness, and within timescales that are realistic for timely and optimal utilisation of the research findings by the organisation. Such academic rigor is considered vital for the

effectiveness and credibility of HRD Professional Partnership research, not only in terms of protecting the people who are subjects of the inquiry, but also to ensure data is not compromised by possible pressures from managers who want 'quick fix' results. Bending to this type of pressure can lead to the premature application of the early research findings, which might contaminate the ultimate end results of the study. To date, only a few case histories of this type of 'professional-partnership' research have been reported in the literature. These include, for example, those of Holton, Redmann, Edwards and Fairchild (1998) and Ruona and Short (2000) in the USA, and Hamlin, Reidy and Stewart (1998), Hamlin (2002b), and Hamlin and Cooper (2005) in the UK.

In light of the above background and brief theoretical context, this paper has two aims. Firstly to illustrate the concept of HRD Professional Partnership research, and secondly to provide case study examples of how the results of such research can readily be used by practitioners to inform and shape evidence-based management and HRD practice. The significance of these aims can be summarised by the following questions that this author believes should be of interest to and addressed by HRD scholars as well as HRD practitioners:

1. How might the concept of 'partnership-research' as defined by Jacobs (1997) become a common place practical reality in the field of HRD study and practice?
2. How might the results of such research be applied by practitioners in support of evidence-based HRD practice?
3. What insights can be gained by HRD practitioners and HRD scholars from the limited number of case study examples of HRD Professional Partnership research currently to be found in the HRD literature?

Methodology: empirical research studies

Three illustrative case study examples of practice grounded HRD Professional Partnership research, carried out in the UK public and private sectors by the author acting as an HRD scholar in partnership with three respective HRD practitioners, have been selected to provide the base data for this paper. These include the Hamlin, Reidy and Stewart (1998) study of managerial and leadership effectiveness that was conducted within the Anglia Region of HM Customs and Excise (Anglia HMCE) a then part of a major department of the British Civil Service, the Hamlin and Cooper (2005) replica study that was carried out in a specialist hospital of the British National Health Service, namely the Birmingham Women's Healthcare NHS Trust (BWHCT), plus the Hamlin and Bassi (2006) study that replicated the 'BWHCT' research. This latter study took place within a UK private sector company that provides professional services to both national and international client organisations through various divisions situated within the UK and other countries around the globe. For the purpose of anonymity the company is referred to as either ABC (UK) Ltd or 'ABC'. This UK based organisation is a major subsidiary of a very large international Group plc company, several of whose other subsidiary companies provide similar professional services to a wide range of local, national, multinational and global client organisations. We refer to this parent company as either XYZ Group plc or 'XYZ'. The remainder of this section describes the common research design deployed for these three replica HRD Professional Partnership research studies.

Research methods used for the three previous 'partnership-research' case studies

Adopting a social constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, the research design of each study comprised three stages in common. The aim of Stage 1 was to collect from a wide range of people within the respective case study organisations, concrete examples of observed 'effective' and 'least effective/ineffective' management and managerial leadership behaviour, as exhibited by middle and front line managers and managerial leaders in these organisations. The method used was the Critical Incident Technique of Flanagan (1954), as applied by Latham and Wexley (1981) and Hamlin (1988). Using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and content analysis (Flick, 2002) methods, the aim of Stage 2 was to reduce the large number of obtained CIs to a smaller number of discrete behavioural statements (items), each comprising at least three CIs of virtually the same or very similar meaning. Stage 3 was concerned with reducing and classifying the Stage 2 items into behavioural

categories and criteria of managerial and leadership effectiveness, using either factor analysis (Comrey, 1973; Field, 2000) or the 'retranslation procedure' of Smith and Kendall (1963). The common aim was for these criteria then to be used to develop 'bespoke' management competency frameworks for internal application within the respective organisations. To ensure external validity of the research outcomes in terms of their credibility, trustworthiness and reliability, a form of 'investigator triangulation' was applied for Stages 2 & 3. This involved the HRD practitioner and the HRD scholar, with another co-researcher in some instances, working initially independently of each other but then jointly (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe, 1991). Where minor discrepancies and inconsistencies arose in their respective analyses of the data, these were resolved through joint critical examination and discussion to reach a consensus. A significant feature of the common research design was the academic goal of the HRD scholar to contribute to the creation of an emergent body of generalized knowledge relating to the issue of managerial and leadership effectiveness. To ensure consistency in the application of the research process common to each study, the research was conducted under the guidance of the HRD scholar who, being the same person in each case, was able to exercise the type of central control advised by Avolio, Bass and Jung (1999) for replica studies. Full details of the respective theoretical contexts, specific research methods used, the results, and the discussions relating to each of these empirical studies can be found through the cited references.

Methodology: research-to-practice

This section illustrates how the results of the 'Anglia HMCE', 'BWHCT' and 'ABC' professional-partnership research studies were used to guide practice design within these three respective organisations. In line with the mutually exclusive yet complementary goals of the HRD practitioner/scholar partners in each partnership, it also describes how the research, and the application of the results, have been and are being disseminated to inform the HRD profession.

Anglia HMCE professional partnership

There were two HRD practitioners in this partnership, namely Dick Shepherd who was the Executive Head of the Anglia Region of HM Customs and Excise, and his Research Officer/OD Consultant, Margaret Reidy. The two of them jointly used the 'Anglia HMCE' research over a number of years to inform and shape a range of HRD interventions designed to impact the management culture in support of strategic organisational change. Soon after his appointment as Executive Head, Dick Shepherd concluded the traditional 'command and control' style of management of the British Civil Service needed to change. His organisation required a new cultural infra-structure, one comprising characteristics such as flexibility, risk taking, enterprise, innovation and change that would enable it to cope more efficiently and effectively with the various 'top down' change programs likely to be imposed by the HMCE Board, but also those he wished to initiate himself. Although his change program initiatives were in the main successful in terms of the desired improvement in organisational structure, systems and procedures, the desired changes in the management culture were only partially achieved. Whereas some managers embraced and exhibited behaviours indicative of enlightened management values consistent with the requirements of the changing organization, a large proportion continued to exhibit the characteristic behaviours of a traditional 'rigid' bureaucracy. Although he was generally aware of the effective and ineffective managerial behaviours exhibited by his managers, he felt he had insufficient specific knowledge to be certain about those that were strategic to success or failure, and which, therefore, needed either to be encouraged and promoted or discouraged and eliminated. He required some means of determining with greater insight and clarity of understanding those particular managerial behaviours that were most effective, and conversely those that were least effective or ineffective for managing successfully within what had become an organisational environment of constant change and uncertainty. Consequently, he commissioned Margaret Reidy to carry out an in-depth empirical research study into the criteria of managerial and leadership effectiveness, in collaboration with an external HRD scholar (Bob Hamlin) who had a proven track record of success in this field of research.

The outcomes resulting from this program of 'professional-partnership' research were then used as a basis for developing several organizational development (OD) and management development (MD) initiatives. In the first instance an OD instrument was created from the critical incidents (CIs) obtained by the Stage 1 research. This was used by Dick Shepherd at his annual management conference to help get his managers discuss and confront various persistent managerial behaviours associated with the traditional 'command and control' style of management that the research had revealed were inappropriate for managing effectively in the new emergent 'flexible' bureaucracy. Over 800 CIs were subjectively classified and clustered into eight categories, each comprising examples of effective and ineffective managerial behaviour. The OD instrument so constructed was used in syndicate workshops involving sixteen groups of managers. Each group was given one category to consider in depth, and tasked to identify ways of increasing the effective and eliminating the ineffective managerial behaviours. All syndicate groups produced a wide range of ideas for change and improvement that were presented to the conference in plenary session. This approach elicited questions and led to intense debate on the floor of the conference. Managers felt secure because their identities had been rigorously protected during the CIT phase of the research. They also knew that to be included in the instrument every behavioural statement (item) had to have had as a foundation at least three CIs. Therefore, this anonymity assured the managers that no item could be attributed to any one person. This encouraged and enabled many to speak out freely, and to admit in open forum the problems of managerial and leadership effectiveness that did exist. As a direct outcome managers were inspired to initiate a diverse range of other OD and MD interventions based on the research findings.

The Stage 2 & 3 managerial/leadership effectiveness research findings were used to develop five 'self-analysis framework tools' to help bring about further change in the management culture of the organization, and to support people through the change process. These focused upon the behavioural competencies of 'active supportive leadership', 'empowerment', 'training and development', 'mentoring', and 'coaching'. By employing the concept of self-analysis, managers and team leaders were invited to gauge their own managerial/leadership styles against the behaviours comprising the framework tools. A 'leadership tool' was also created and used as a supplementary document within the existing 360-degree performance appraisal system. This enabled managers to obtain feedback from their peers and/or team members without the risk of compromising their positions within the organisation. Another development was the use of the 'self-analysis framework tools' as diagnostic and developmental instruments for a series of OD workshops designed to address various problem issues revealed by the managerial effectiveness research. These workshops focused on such issues as 'consultation and communication', 'gradism', 'cooperation within and across teams', 'corporate awareness', and 'parochialism'. All of the initiatives were highly successful in engaging the active interest and commitment of individuals to organizational change, particularly to the changes in management style and culture that Dick Shepherd considered essential for the future. The use of research-informed and evidence-based OD and MD for the purpose of bringing about organisational change was found to be particularly powerful, with the perceived benefits and value being centred around the academic rigor and credentials of the internal research effort, the strict codes of anonymity and confidentiality that were applied, the sense of ownership of the data, and its relevance and practical utility within the organisation. The work has been disseminated nationally and internationally in peer reviewed academic journals including *Strategic Change* (Hamlin & Reidy, 1997), the *Journal of Applied Management Studies* (Hamlin, Reidy & Stewart, 1997), *HRDI* (Hamlin, Reidy & Stewart, 1998) and *Management Development Forum* (Hamlin, Reidy & Stewart, 1999). Additionally, it has been disseminated widely in the world of practice through four British government sponsored public service publications targeted at top management and professional practitioners working in all parts of Central Government, Transport, Local Government and the Regions of the UK, and also the European Union (see for example: Reidy & Hamlin, 2003a; 2003b). More recently, the American Society of Training and Development (ASTD) has recognised the work as a good example of partnership research by awarding its 2005 ASTD Excellence in Research-to-Practice Award to the two main partners in the 'Anglia HMCE' professional partnership (see: Hamlin & Reidy, 2005).

BWHCT professional partnership

The 'BWHCT' Professional Partnership research has been used by the organisation to bring about significant strategic change in line with a national requirement to secure step changes in productivity improvement. This requirement, as set out in the British government's 'NHS Plan' (DoH, 2000) and associated 'HR in the NHS Plan' (DoH, 2002), calls for a radical change in the prevailing and predominant NHS style of management, from traditional bureaucratic command, control and coercion to the more participative 'new management paradigm' style of inclusion, involvement, empowerment, and openness. This requirement posed a huge challenge to the senior management team of 'BWHCT', including David Cooper, Deputy Director of Human Resources who became the HRD practitioner partner in the 'BWHCT' Professional Partnership research program. The initial question facing him was how best to equip managers with the necessary 'change management' skills and competencies to enable them to effectively address the implications of the government's agenda, in particular the changes required to the way staff and resources were to be managed in the future, and the need to help them develop a more appropriate style of management. The obstacle he faced was the great difficulty of managers being released to undertake conventional time consuming off-the-job management development, particularly at a time of unprecedented levels of internal organisational change and external pressure to achieve performance targets set by the government, and the need to ensure the services to patients were carried out without damaging the quality of patient care. The first stage in his strategy for bringing about the desired changes was the creation of a 'behavioural competency framework' derived from the criteria of managerial and leadership effectiveness that had been identified through the 'BWHCT' Professional Partnership research. The second stage was then to use this framework to inform and shape the proposed HRD intervention strategy which had two strands, an OD strand and an MD strand. For the OD strand, the framework was used as a tool for holding up a 'mirror' to the organisation through a series of OD workshops designed for the 'BWHCT' directorate and localised groups of departmental managers respectively. The first workshop was held for the directors and senior management team with the aim of reflecting back to them the research findings, and thereby securing their 'buy-in' to the proposed management culture change strategy. The new competency framework, which comprised both the 'positive' and 'negative' manager and managerial leader behaviours associated with effective and ineffective management within BWHCT, was used to provoke thought and dialogue. In particular, the aim was to get these managers to discuss and confront those persistent behaviours that the research suggested were no longer appropriate for managing effectively in the changing context of the organisation. As a result of this OD workshop it was possible to redefine with a high degree of clarity and precision the required changes in the management culture, namely those positive (effective) manager and managerial leader behaviours that were to be valued, encouraged and developed, and those negative (ineffective) behaviours that needed to be curtailed and eliminated. At the time of writing this paper, a series of similar yet somewhat different OD workshops were being planned for the departmental managers, as well as a series of 'cascade' OD workshops based on action learning. The latter were planned to be facilitated by the department managers for their respective middle and junior managers. Using the competency framework as a 'benchmark', the aim was to get them to reflect critically upon their own management style and behaviour and that of their colleague managers, identify concrete examples of effective and least effective manager and managerial leader behaviour observed in their part of the organisation, and then to consider ways of changing and improving the situation as required. For the MD strand, David Cooper has used the insights gained from the early OD workshops to inform and shape a redesign of the formal 'BWHCT' Management Development Programme. In future, this will be based essentially upon the results of the managerial and leadership effectiveness research and the newly devised 'behavioural competency framework'. Several diagnostic tools to identify gaps in the management skills and competencies of individual managers are also to be developed, and various strategies formulated to create 'bespoke' management development programs and 'self help' learning and development initiatives. The results of the 'BWHCT' partnership-research have been shared with HR/OD colleagues in other NHS Trust hospitals situated in the same region of the UK. Consideration is also being given to pursuing the potential for sharing more HR/OD intelligence, and possibly developing shared management development programmes. Details of the 'BWHCT' Professional Partnership research and how it has been applied so far have been disseminated to the HRD profession

through a conference paper presented at the 2005 AHRD International Research Conference (Hamlin & Cooper, 2005).

ABC professional partnership

Nirmal Bassi, Senior Human Resources Executive at ABC (UK) Ltd was the HRD practitioner partner in this HRD Professional Partnership. In April 2004, a new division of 'ABC' called 'DEF' was created to provide operational services not only to 'ABC', but also to other subsidiary companies of XYZ Group plc working in the same field. Also in April 2004, a major restructuring of the 'ABC' client services unit was initiated to reflect an increased focus on improving business development and fostering greater relationships with existing clients. Both changes posed an immense cultural adjustment for all concerned. The challenge for 'ABC' was how to ensure its well defined management culture was maintained during the change process, and how to encourage and help the 'DEF' newcomers to embrace and adapt to this culture. Hence, it was decided to conduct a program of HRD Professional Partnership research in order to understand the 'ABC' management culture in much greater depth, by identifying those managerial behaviours deemed most or least effective in motivating and retaining staff and for achieving high organisational efficiency and performance. The rich source of 'best evidence' resulting from this program of 'partnership-research' was used initially by Nirmal Bassi to help inform and shape the development of the 'ABC' global management competencies framework, and to contribute to a review and revision of the company's core management training and development programs. Furthermore, the research data is currently being and/or is planned to be used shortly to inform the management recruitment strategy, prioritise the business training and development strategy, develop a series of OD workshops designed to help further embed and nurture the 'ABC' management culture within the newly assimilated 'DEF' business unit, and to identify and provide bespoke HRD interventions focusing on units, departments or managers in need of specific development. Furthermore, his experience of engaging in 'partnership-research' and evidence-based HRD practice has been shared with other HRD professionals through a joint conference paper presented at this year's AHRD International Research Conference (Hamlin & Bassi, 2006).

Results: outcomes and implications

The three case studies described above clearly illustrate how HRD Professional Partnership research can become a practical reality in both public and private sector organisations, at least in the UK. They also illustrate in varying degrees how the results from such research have been applied by the respective HRD practitioners, in conjunction with their own senior management.

As can be deduced from the 'Anglia HMCE' and 'BWHCT' studies described, the research results have been and are being used to bring about strategic change through evidence-based OD and HRD interventions. All three case study organisations have used the 'partnership-research' to inform and shape other types of HRD initiatives, including the design of new or revised management and leadership development programs. As already mentioned, in the case of ABC (UK) Ltd, the results of its 'partnership-research' are likely also to be used to inform and shape HRM as well as HRD policies and practices. Additionally, the three case studies illustrate how academically rigorous 'partnership-research' of the kind advocated by Jacobs(1997) and Hamlin (2002a) can produce results worthy of presentation at AHRD and UFHRD research conferences, and of being published in both HRD, HRM and management oriented peer reviewed journals. The described evidence-based and research-informed HRD interventions and initiatives undertaken in 'Anglia HMCE', 'BWHCT' and 'ABC' demonstrate the particular organizational benefits to be derived from organisationally-based and practice-grounded HRD Professional Partnership research. In all three organisations, line managers and staff alike tended immediately to perceive the relevance and utility of the research, and were very willing to give time to and participate in the research. Furthermore, because the research findings were based upon data they had helped provide, they were very receptive and responsive to the various research-informed HRD, OD and MD initiatives and interventions. (see for example: Hamlin & Reidy, 2005).

Another important outcome from these three replica HRD Professional Partnership research studies has been the fact that the findings have been found to be highly generalised to each other (Hamlin & Bassi, 2006). An earlier comparative study of the 'Anglia HMCE' findings against the findings from two other replica research studies carried out in a different NHS Trust hospital and a range of UK secondary schools respectively, has resulted in the development of a 'generic' model of managerial and leadership effectiveness (Hamlin, 2004). In combination, the results of these various 'partnership-research' studies have added significantly to the developing body of generalised 'best evidence' relating to managerial and leadership effectiveness. Consequently, they have the potential for wider application by other HRD practitioners working in other public and private sector organisations. A significant conclusion to be drawn from the outcomes of the present study is the fact that the dual goal of HRD Professional Partnership research, which is to improve the organisation whilst at the same time contributing to the advancement of HRD knowledge, can be achieved. This has important implications for all HRD professionals because, as demonstrated, HRD Professional Partnership research can simultaneously offer win:win opportunities and benefits to both HRD practitioners and HRD scholars.

Next steps

As can be deduced, the three HRD Professional Partnership research studies and 'research-to-practice' examples described in this paper hold several insights and next step lessons for HRD practitioners who wish to build evidence-based approaches into their professional practice, and also for HRD scholars who wish to generate knowledge that has relevance and practical utility for improving HRD and management practice. Trainers, developers and OD consultants need increasingly to value research as an essential tool of the HRD practitioner, and to become highly skilled as reflective research-informed and/or evidence-based HRD professionals. To this end, this author suggests many more practitioners need to gain experience of actively engaging in academic research at the postgraduate masters level, or even at doctoral level, so as to hone up their critical thinking and research skills for everyday professional practice. Furthermore, they should actively seek out HRD and/or management scholars working in local universities who are known to be concerned about the continuing 'academy-industry/research-practice' gap in the respective fields of management and HRD, and invite them to engage in collaborative research as advocated by Adler, Shani and Styhre (2004). For maximum relevance and utility the research should preferably be organisationally based, practice grounded, and conducted within an HRD Professional Partnership arrangement. However, as Starkey and Tempest (2004) and Ghoshal (2005) argue, this means more management (and HRD) scholars need increasingly to become interested in studying the 'how' rather than the 'what' of management (and HRD), and more committed to improving management (and HRD) practice through the generation of generalised knowledge that clearly has relevance and utility as well as academic credentials. One step in this direction would be to actively seek out evidence-based HRD practitioners working in local organisations, and to explore with them the possibilities of setting up programs of collaborative research that adhere to the principles of the HRD Professional Partnership concept. Another step forward would be for more HRD scholars interested in research topics such as, for example, managerial and leadership effectiveness, to carry our replica studies in a range of different organisational and cultural settings. The aim would be to produce if possible bodies of empirical evidence that might help demonstrate, for example, the existence of generic and near universal/universal manager and managerial leader behaviours which, in this case, would lend additional support to writers such as Bass (1997); Bennis (1999), House and Aditya (1997) and Thompson, Stuart and Lindsay (1996) who believe in universalistic models of management and leadership.

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