TRAINING, EDUCATION, DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

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Abstract

There is much confusion surrounding the terms 'training', 'education', 'development' and 'learning,' to the point where they are often used interchangeably. In the context of human resource development, however, it is often necessary to define and delineate each of these in order to clarify the associated activities and desired outcomes within an organisation. This paper examines the issue in depth by outlining some of the traditional definitions of these terms and their implications for human resource development, ultimately demonstrating how they are best viewed as interconnected, if separate. Employee training, in particular, is associated with on-the-job skills acquired for a particular role, while education is seen as relating to a more formal academic background. In increasingly complex organisations, it may be argued that aspects of each are necessary to ensure full employee potential.

Keywords: Training, Education, Development, Learning, HRD

Introduction

'Until very recently the concept of 'learning' has not really entered into this field of debate, training and development were seen as things that happened in organizations whereas learning appeared to be more formal and was linked to education be it school, college or university'

(Kitson, 2003)

The terms training, education, development and learning may often be used interchangeably, but they can have very different, if overlapping, meanings in different contexts. In terms of human resource development, it is often necessary to define and delineate these in a bid to clarify the associated activities and desired outcomes within an organisation. Employee training, in particular, is associated with on-the-job skills acquired for a particular role, while education is seen as relating to a more formal academic background. However, in increasingly complex organisations, it may be argued that aspects of each are necessary to ensure full employee potential. In this paper, I will outline some of the traditional definitions of these terms and their implications for human resource development, and demonstrate how they are best viewed as interconnected.

Training

The benefits of employee training are numerous and widely documented (Wilson, 1999; Jensen, 2001; Sommerville, 2007), with organisations as well as workers reaping the rewards in terms of improved employee skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours (Treven, 2003) and results like enhanced staff performance (Brown, 1994), job satisfaction, productivity and profitability (Hughey and Mussnug, 1997).

Training has been defined in various ways, including the following:

'A planned process to modify attitude, knowledge or skill behaviour through a learning experience to achieve effective performance in any activity or range of activities. Its purpose, in the work situation, is to develop the abilities of the individual and to satisfy current and future manpower needs of the organisation'

(Manpower Services Commission (MSC), U.K., 1981: 62);

'Training endeavours to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to perform job-related tasks. It aims to improve job performance in a direct way'

(Truelove, 1992: 273)

'Training is characterised as an instructor-led, content-based intervention leading to desired changes in behaviour'

(Sloman, 2005: 2)

Opinions differ as to whether a 'changes of attitude' should be included in the definition of training. Wills (1994:10) argues against such a definition, both because attitudes are notoriously difficult to quantify, and because training alone, he argues, is

insufficient to bring about major long-term changes in attitude. Instead, he defines training as 'the transfer of defined and measurable knowledge or skills'. Hare, Similarly, McLeod and King (1996: 25) state that training is 'any activity or course, either formal or informal (e.g. on-the-job) which has helped you to acquire the knowledge and skills to do your job.'

Ideally, training is best supplemented with practical, hands-on experience (Hughey and Mussnug, 1997). As Overman (1994: 62) observes, 'what people hear they forget, what they see they remember, what they do they understand.' Likewise, Hughey and Mussnug (1997: 53) note that 'most employees simply do not learn very well when they are 'talked to'. They need to be more actively involved in the learning experience.'

Education, on the other hand, is usually more broadly defined as a more general, less specialized or hands-on approach to enhancing knowledge. The Manpower Services Commission (1981: 17, which was superceded by the now-defunct Training Commission, U.K.) defined education as follows:

'Activities which aim at developing the knowledge, skills, moral values and understanding required in all aspects of life rather than knowledge and skill relating to only a limited field of activity.'

Learning and Development

Learning, in contrast to training, is generally defined more holistically, as a process that encompasses training as well as education (Jensen, 2001). According to Sloman (2005: 2), learning can be described as 'a self-directed, work-based process leading to increased adaptive capacity.' This process—an ongoing, lifelong journey that may not always be clearly planned or even intentional—can be considered the heart of human resource development (Garavan, Heraty, and Barnicle, 1999). As Mumford (1995:13) observes, this process includes the acquisition of skills as well as insights or factual knowledge, and is at play whenever

'people can demonstrate that they know something that they did not know before (insights and realizations as well as facts) and/or when they do something they could not do before (skills)'

(Mumford, 1995: 13)

As for development, Gansberghe (2003) uses the following definition in the glossary of HRM and HRD:

'a long-term process designed to enhance potential and effectiveness. It is also defined as the growth or realisation of a person's ability, through learning, often from planned study and experience.'

Development can encompass a wide range of activities, including coaching and more formal educational commitments and experiences, and is generally used to encompass a wider scope than 'learning' or 'training'—which may, in fact, be included in the concept of development (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), 2007).

The term 'development' in this sense is fairly recent, having appeared around the 1950s (Herr, 2001) and gradually coming to mean essentially the same thing as 'training'—with which it can even be used synonymously, according to such authorities as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2007). Kitson (2003), on the other hand, argues that this conflation of training and development is confusing and inappropriate. Instead, he distinguishes 'training' by defining it as 'a learning activity that is designed for immediate impact, for the job or role that one does at present.' Development, on the other hand, is 'a learning activity that is designed for future impact, for a role or job one will do in the future.' In both cases, this suggests, 'learning' is the broader umbrella term under which both training and development are best understood.

Disentangling the terminology

Scholars like Kitson (2003) have noted that there is a great deal of confusion between these words, with researchers and human resource specialists alike often at a loss to differentiate between them effectively, resulting in their being used basically as synonyms. According to Garavan (1997), however, 'learning' is better seen as the overarching concept under which formal 'education' and 'training' take place, with 'development' as the resulting outcome of these pursuits. In his research exploring the often-fluid distinctions between these terms, both in theory and practice, he observes:

'Training for instance, can be associated with 'learning by doing' whereas education is more synonymous with 'learning by thinking'; development involves learning thinking, doing and feeling…absolutist definitions are not really helpful in understanding the role of training, development, education and learning in the

context of human resource management/development but in practice such distinctions have occurred and still do occur.'

(Garavan, 1997: 42)

As far as employee development, meanwhile, education is generally seen as a much broader term than training (Davidson and Marco, 1999). According to Hughey and Mussnug (1997), training can be distinguished from education as an activity normally associated, in organizational terms, with enhanced quality and increased profits. Unlike education, which is predominantly concerned with the acquisition of 'knowledge' in a classroom setting (Hughey and Mussnug, 1997), the 'learning-by-doing' element of training is normally presumed to lead to specific, concrete results, financial and otherwise, by enhancing specific kinds of skills. At the same time, Hughey and Mussnug (1997) posit that thinking itself is a skill, arguably the most valuable of all, since it equips employees to critically engage with their surroundings, solve problems and make decisions. In a similar vein, Lippert, Granger and Case (2007) argue that education is concerned with diagnosing problems, whereas training seeks ways to resolve them.

In general, Kitson (2003) is right to point out that 'the concepts of development, training, education and learning all manage to overlap meanings and purposes and are often interchangeable.' Nevertheless, it is useful to consider the work of Garavan (1997), which reviews the history and scholarly definitions of all four terms in order to better understand their roles in human resource management. As noted above, he concludes that 'learning' is best seen as an umbrella term encompassing training, education and development, all of which tend ultimately to be defined on the ground, in practical rather than theoretical terms.

Conclusion

While the concepts of training, education, development and learning can be difficult to disentangle, it is useful, from an organisational perspective, to develop precise—and separate— definitions, in order to better understand the specific, concrete challenges and outcomes associated with each type of activity. Though their meanings are closely interrelated, it can be misleading to simply use these terms synonymously, as is often done. In the field of human resources, where the immense benefits of appropriate employee training, education, development and/or learning are widely recognized, working towards more precise definitions can help to clarify the

issues at stake, empowering individuals and organisations to achieve their objectives using the most appropriate strategies available.

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