Abstract

The profile of scholarly practice has been growing over the last two decades, and practitioners in many fields are exhorted by the academic community to become more evidence-based and theoretically savvy in their everyday work. At the same time, business leaders often show little tolerance for theory-based reasoning or for decision processes that require time to review or conduct research. Practitioners are somewhat caught in the middle of those two perspectives, and business pressures often win out over scholarly ambitions.

In this article, an analysis of the scholarly practice literature in HRD is combined with an interpretation of business-oriented practice literature themes to craft a set of recommendations for how practitioners might employ both scholarly practice behaviors and a business mindset to increase their success and impact in organizations. A model for SMART Practice – an approach to practice that is Scholarly, Macro, Aligned, Realistic, and Tested – is proposed.
A Case for SMART Practice

It has been asserted that individuals who are scholar-practitioners are simply more effective than their non-scholarly peers (Hamlin, 2007; Holton, 2004; Short & Shindell, 2009). It is equally asserted that the best human resource development (HRD) professionals are business-oriented (Bingham, 2009; Wick, Pollock, & Jefferson, 2006).

Unfortunately, these two perspectives are too often seen as incompatible with one another; scholarly practitioners are told to keep their academic theories to themselves and often feel that in the extreme pace of day-to-day work, they hardly have time (or support) to explore the specific theory and research that might prove helpful (Short, 2006). All the while, it is that very theory and research base that provides the foundation for the expertise practitioners need to be effective in their roles. It’s something of a dilemma. And yet, many successful HRD leaders have shown that scholarly practice and business savvy are not opposites. There are techniques and practices that practitioners can implement that help them to blend the two perspectives in a powerful way that allows them to successfully craft highly impactful programs.

In this article, I offer a model for SMART Practice that provides guidance for everyday scholarly practice. It can be described as an initial attempt to combine scholarly practice and a business mindset while we continue to explore the relative impact of a variety of scholarly practice behaviors. SMART Practice, as described, is Scholarly, Macro, Aligned, Realistic, and Tested. The techniques of SMART Practice are, appropriately, drawn from the literature.

As we educate practitioners, then, we can use the SMART Practice model to give them guidance on how to carry forward their academic background to enrich their practice without coming across to their business peers as being out of touch with the reality of business demands.

Foundations of SMART Practice

The SMART Practice model is based on research that has uncovered the nature of scholarly practice and on years of thought-leader essays about applying theory and research to practice. It draws as well on perspectives in the practitioner literature base that privilege the business context and look warily on recommendations than might be ivory-tower. Two sections below summarize the work that informs the SMART Practice model. The first focuses on the scholarly practice literature, and the second brings in the business mindset taken from practice-based references.

Scholarly Practice

Discussions regarding the application of theory and research to practice have been ongoing in the field for nearly two decades (Short, 2006). Practitioner organizations like ASTD sponsor research publications and intermittently conduct their own research, and the Academy of HRD was founded explicitly to provide a professional home for those academics who teach and conduct research in the field. A scholar-practitioner committee, now a special interest group, was established within AHRD to raise the profile of discussions about what it means to be dedicated to ensuring the application of theory and research in the field.

Over time, these efforts have coalesced into a movement to promote scholarly practice – to support practitioners who find benefit in applying theory and research to day-to-day practice and to support academics who desire that their research benefit the practice of the profession.

The HRD field is not alone in its desire to forge better linkages between research and practice. A similar movement is afoot (and in some cases even more long-lived) in medicine, education, psychology, and other fields (American Psychiatric Association, 2005; Short, Keefer, & Stone, 2006; Wasserman & Kram, 2009). Of special interest to this discussion is the conversation around evidence-based management practices, since many HRD professionals are managers as well. In the Academy of Management, there have also been calls to improve the way leaders are educated in management schools (Rousseau, 2006; Rousseau & McCarthy, 2007; Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001).
Advocates seek to ensure that management practices taught are supported by evidence. As well, they want to be sure managers are better trained and equipped to practice evidence-based management after graduation (Graen, 2009; Rousseau, 2007).

The discussions along these lines have now progressed beyond exhortation into clear strategies for scholarly practice and evidence-based practice (two perspectives on the same plane). This section will summarize key behaviors for the scholar-practitioner.

**Definition of the Scholar-Practitioner**

Definitions of scholar-practitioner tend to define the role by what people who claim that identity do. For example, the latest definition from the Academy of HRD is this:

> “HRD scholar-practitioners operate as a bridge between HRD research and HRD practice to improve the understanding and practice of HRD. They ground their practice in research and theory, they are champions of research and theory in the workplace and in professional associations, they conduct research, and they disseminate findings from their own research and practice. In doing these, they are partners with academics and practitioners alike” (Short & Shindell, 2009, p. 478)

“Scholar-practitioner” is sometimes conceived as an adjective-noun pair, thereby focusing on people who practice in a specific way. But academics who are strong advocates for putting research into practice also identify themselves as scholar-practitioners. Practitioners, of course, can operate in any field – academics are practitioners in the realm of teaching, conducting research, and writing as well as in the arenas of consulting work they may do. In the field of HRD, practitioners may be engaged in learning and development, organization design, career development, leadership development, process improvement, change management, and a myriad of other professional practice areas. This paper addresses the scholar-practitioner role as it is played by HRD practitioners in business contexts.

**Behaviors Engendered by Scholar-Practitioners**

Advocates of scholarly practice have dedicated entire articles to describing the ways that practitioners use theory and research in their practice, and the behaviors can be categorized in five general areas:

*Grounding practice in theory and research.* Scholarly practitioners have mastered the body of knowledge in their areas of expertise (Ruona & Gilley, 2009), and they continue to keep their knowledge fresh with ongoing reading of the literature. As part of their ongoing study of the field, they attend to critiques as well as mainstream dialogues (Bierema, 2009). Scholarly practitioners use the frameworks derived from the body of knowledge to guide their practice, often without having to think too much about it. Throughout a typical engagement, scholarly practitioners repeatedly return to the theoretical and research base to define problems, frame assessments and diagnoses, make sense of findings, and document outcomes (Tenkasi & Hay, 2004). Practitioners are advised to develop a personal theory of practice (Jarvis, 1999b) that is based on scholarly work, case study reports, and personal experience. Generalized habits of a scholarly mind are also important to practice, and expert practitioners employ well-developed skills in reflection, critical thinking, theory-building, and problem resolution (Kormanik, Lehner, & Winnick, 2009; Ruona & Gilley, 2009).

*Taking an evidence-based approach to practice.* An evidence-based approach to practice is defined by an "unrelenting commitment to gather facts and information necessary to make informed and intelligent decisions" (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006, p. 14) and "conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the development of individuals, groups, and organizations" (Hamlin, 2007). Scholarly practitioners ask to see the evidence supporting recommended strategies, and they rigorously evaluate the strength of that evidence in making decisions. Evidence can be drawn from a variety of sources (Thomas, 2006). While the most credible evidence is from scholarly research, it is also possible to use evidence from experience within communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and from a specific context (internal pilot testing). Where no evidence is available or where the evidence is weak, scholarly practitioners ensure that the approach is pilot-tested or intensely monitored so that they can validate the approach in their own
organizations (Rousseau, 2006). These behaviors require a scholarly practitioner to be able to read and understand research reports, and to critically evaluate research designs and conclusions.

Researching and translating specific areas of the literature to inform new practices.
A key characteristic of scholarly practice is that recommendations are based on a thorough review of relevant theory and research. Practitioners have been urged to conduct a scan of the literature as part of their consulting process (Lombardozi, 2007; Lombardozi & Tyler, 2010). Recommendations are deeply enriched when the wisdom of the scholarly crowd is applied, and without this step, practitioners run the risk of adopting fad practices that have already been proven wrong (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Rynes, Brown, & Colbert, 2002). An important part of the process of turning research into practice is to identify the “active ingredients” (Clark, 2005) – the key elements that drive success of a particular approach, or the set of elements common in many successful approaches. In order to be effective in this role, practitioners need to be both explorers and translators. They need to be willing to go to the “edge” (Hagel, Seely Brown, & Davison, 2010) where new ideas are being born, and they need to develop skill at bringing these ideas into practice (Tyler, 2009). The translating and customizing role is one of the most critical (Kormanik, et al., 2009; Short & Shindell, 2009). New ideas are more accepted and better applied when academic jargon and heady leading edge thinking is put into terms that are relatable for sponsors and colleagues who have a more practical and tactical perspective.

Conducting research.
Many scholar-practitioners conduct their own research, both formally and informally. Frequently, they partner with academic colleagues in this endeavor, thereby benefitting both their organizations and the field as a whole (Hamlin, 2007). Some approaches to research definition and design advocate a strong practice-oriented perspective (Tyler, 2006; Van de Ven, 2007), and these may be the most useful models for scholar-practitioner research. Often, the scholar-practitioner research is more local, using the tools of six sigma rather than academic models for research (Clark, 2005; Rousseau, 2006), or they may use action research modes of inquiry (Jarvis, 1999a). To contribute to the advancement of the field, it is important that scholar-practitioners publish their research.

Participating in scholarly conversations.
In engaging in scholarly practice, practitioners enter a cycle of consuming and producing knowledge, and they advance the practice when they engage with colleagues (both academic and practice-oriented) to continuously improve practice (Wasserman & Kram, 2009). Scholar-practitioners are most successful – and most effective at impacting practice – when they live in the “borderlands” (Tyler, 2009) or “edge” (Hagel, et al., 2010) – those dialog spaces where academic and practice-based thinkers congregate. Practitioners with a scholarly perspective often publish their own case studies and literature reviews, and they participate in academic conferences in their areas of interest. They also actively advocate for specific research topics that industry research organizations and academic colleagues might engage. Most importantly, scholar-practitioners actively participate in conversations (Huff, 2008) that advance the field.

Skills Necessary for Scholarly Practice

In addition to the work that has been done to define what scholar-practitioners do, researchers have also explored the skills necessary to be effective in the role (Kormanik, et al., 2009). In a competency model development process, those who identify themselves as scholar-practitioners have selected the following competencies as among the most important:

- **Role competence**, which includes functional/technical skills and intellectual horsepower along with creativity, problem solving skills, decision making skills, and the ability to deal with ambiguity.

- **Business sense**, which encompasses general business acumen along with organizational agility, strategic agility, and political savvy.

- **Communication and influence skills**, including interpersonal savvy, written communication, listening, and presentation skills.
- **Credibility and trustworthiness**, which requires strong ethics and values along with having integrity and engendering trust.

**Theorized Impact of Scholarly Practice Behaviors on Practitioner Effectiveness**

While there is consensus on the list of scholarly practice behaviors, what is unclear is the combination or depth of behaviors that launch good practitioners and academics into the realm of scholarly practice. We have also not yet deeply studied the relationship between scholarly practice and the overall success of individual practitioners, although we often speculate that there is a positive relationship between the two (see figure 1).

In promoting scholarly practice, we need to be clearer about describing baseline behaviors versus exceptional behaviors. Do specific elements of scholarly practice differentiate star practitioners and improve overall effectiveness? Or, like a crystal, is it true that the more facets of scholarly practice demonstrated, the more dazzling the performance of the practitioner? Ironically, that evidence remains to be seen. In the absence of evidence, however, many academically-trained practitioners strongly believe that their practice is enriched by their understanding of theory and research, even if they don’t all agree on exactly what qualifies as scholarly practice.

Ruona and Gilley (2009) have conceptualized a continuum of practice (from atheoretical practitioner, to practitioner, to reflective practitioner, and finally, to the scholarly practitioner), and they, too, theorize that the scholarly practitioner will be more successful and impactful. In their model, atheoretical practitioners have little grounding in theory, whereas practitioners ground their work in the underpinning body of knowledge and keep themselves up to date. Reflective practitioners add the critical reflection component to their work, constantly looking for ways to improve their practice. Scholarly practitioners use the body of knowledge, critically reflect on their work, and contribute to the advancement of the profession through research and publication. Despite these descriptions, the categories overlap a bit so the lines remain fuzzy. The model differs slightly from other writings about what it means to be a scholar-practitioner (for example, some would characterize the reflective practitioner as a scholar-practitioner).

Even if we define categories on a continuum of scholarly practice, there are examples of practitioner success or lack thereof that are not explained by depth of scholarly practice. For example, it’s possible that practitioners who lack even a baseline understanding of theory and research can be successful, although these maverick practitioners are likely few. In other scenarios, we see practitioners with deep background and solid scholar-practitioner behaviors who do not enjoy success in business environments.

My own experience tells me that those outside-the-curve examples may be partially explained by the degree to which scholarly HRD practice is combined with a business mindset. The next section summarizes key practices from varied literature streams that inform the practice of HRD in organizations from a business-oriented perspective.

**Business Mindset**

In the practitioner literature, HRD leaders are frequently advised to subscribe to a performance paradigm. That is, they are urged to keep business performance as the “finish line” (Wick, et al., 2006) and to assist managers in identifying and strengthening performance supports and diagnosing and minimizing performance barriers (Gilbert, 1996; Robinson & Robinson, 1995; Rummler & Brache, 1995).

There are those who caution against this paradigm (Bierema, 2009), but they are far outnumbered by those who want HRD leaders to focus on business results. Professionals who see flaws in the emphasis on performance outcomes can still channel the power of having a clear performance goal to support the positive results of individual and group learning. It is difficult in a business environment to ignore the performance paradigm.
For those who embrace scholarly practice, the performance paradigm provides both guidance and challenge. The performance technology literature offers many models for achieving, sustaining, and improving performance in organizations (Gilbert, 1996; Robinson & Robinson, 1995; Rummler & Brache, 1995; Van Tiem, Moseley, & Dessinger, 2004). (Ironically, cultivating a business mindset can be assisted by studying theories, albeit the broad, practice-based theories that are represented in practitioner-oriented literature.) These models demonstrate that performance is achieved within a complex system in which HRD practices are one factor impacting outcomes. That suggests that successful HRD practitioners will be those who know how to work that system.

In addition, the literature of the HRD field (including both scholarly references and practice-oriented writings) provides many excellent systems frameworks that trace the line from planning, to intervention, to outcomes. Change models, transfer of learning models, and other theoretical frameworks provide clarity of approach, but many business leaders claim that they are too structured and academic for fast-paced business environments (Hammonds, 2005; Zemke & Rossett, 2002). Expert practitioners know how to situationally adjust approaches, but newer practitioners try to follow these complex processes to the letter, which can seem over-engineered to business leaders who want to move quickly and simply.

To be successful in practicing HRD in a business environment, then, practitioners must understand the system nature of HRD practices, and they need to develop expert levels of practice that allow them to make good judgment calls regarding what is applicable and realistic.

**HRD System Frameworks**

Models of human performance and organization development (Cummings & Worley, 2005; Rummler & Brache, 1995; Van Tiem, et al., 2004) describe a system with a complex interplay of factors. Aspects of the system include performer capability and motivation, goals and expectations, work flow and business systems, task support, performance resources and tools, supervisory practices, team dynamics, and incentives and rewards. These models also recommend deliberate alignment of the various levels in an organization – the organization’s structure and culture, its work systems and processes, and the roles and tasks assigned at the individual level. Many HRD efforts are launched or aligned in support of sustaining and improving performance (Gilley & Maycunich, 2000). Major initiatives likely involve leaders working on various aspects of the system, and ensuring that each project attunes to and integrates with the dynamics of the whole system is critical (Rummler & Brache, 1995).

A closer look at learning and development models specifically reveals the systems nature of the environments that best support learning and application of learning. These models suggest that learning and development programs have greater impact when they are multi-faceted (Bersin & Associates, 2008; CLC Learning and Development, 2003; Lombardozzi, 2008; Wick, et al., 2006), and that application is more likely to occur when there is support embedded throughout the system, from peers, trainers, supervisors, and organizational programs (Burke & Hutchins, 2008; Holton, Bates, & Ruona, 2000). More important, practitioners need to ensure that there is nothing in the environment surrounding the learner that actively works against learning application and desired performance.

Strategies to improve the performance system inevitably involve change, and learning itself is often defined in terms of change. Change models, too, invariably recommend alignment of relevant factors in support of the desired change (Cummings & Worley, 2005; Gilley & Maycunich, 2000). A critical factor highlighted in these models is the need to mobilize the commitment of key stakeholders.

Across all these models, alignment of efforts and broad-based buy-in emerge as prerequisites for success. Practitioners are challenged to collaborate across organizational lines, develop cross-functional relationships, and influence goal-setting and initiative characteristics beyond their own span of control.

**Business Environment Factors**

The kind of alignment and cross-functional collaboration described above requires HRD practitioners to have a full understanding of how business operates. Practitioners are exhorted to know the business issues facing their firms or their clients’ firms, and to build their general business knowledge (Bingham). Without that understanding, practitioners risk their credibility and their ability to communicate with and influence business leaders.
In addition, practitioners who work in a business environment, whether as external consultants or internal experts, are both advised and pressured to adjust textbook approaches to facilitate speedy response (Rossett, 2009; Wick, et al., 2006). This involves applying expert-level judgment to crafting approaches that follow recommended frameworks, but not necessarily slavishly so. To make these choices, practitioners must fully understand the reasoning that supports the approach, and the way each facet contributes to the success of the whole.

The twenty-first century workplace holds the additional challenge that models of practice are often more emergent than proven and packaged. Of necessity, practitioners are inventing ways of practicing in the field (Hagel, et al., 2010; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Practicing in this environment draws from the intelligence of the past as well as the edge-thinkers who are foreseeing the future. Success in this environment, therefore, also relies on building a web of relationships as well as recognizing and accounting for all of the parts of the system.

**Translating Business Mindset to SMART Practice**

Business mindset modifies scholarly practice. The factors discussed here – operational considerations, the need for alignment, the desire for quick response, and changing business environments often conspire to make absolute adherence to theoretical models both impractical and unwise. The trick is to maintain the overall integrity of the approach and to rigorously monitor outcomes.

Here are some of the actions that successful HRD practitioners take when wearing their business leader hats:

*Ensuring integration of HR and business initiatives.*
Business-oriented HRD practitioners have their finger on the pulse of the entire organization, and they develop an understanding of the whole system that leads to performance and desired outcomes. They have a broad understanding of HR management as well, and they align efforts across a variety of practice areas by maintaining contacts and developing joint initiatives.

*Keeping an eye on performance outcomes.*
HRD practitioners with a business mindset define the business metrics that their initiatives are intended to impact and monitor those closely. Even if it is difficult to claim a cause-and-effect relationship, they demonstrate a concern for achieving desired changes in these outcomes, and they carefully consider whether adjustments in their efforts can better support the desired changes.

*Testing and monitoring results of initiatives.*
In addition to the business outcomes, successful HRD practitioners set up systems to monitor their own projects’ outcomes, both during roll-out and implementation stages and once a project is complete. These systems are designed to monitor indicators of success, both to give evidence that the project is accomplishing its goals and to provide warning if the initiative isn’t meeting the mark. Often, projects are tested using a pilot design in order to provide the business case for a larger scale implementation.

*Balancing elegance and speed.*
Business leaders understand that perfection is seldom possible, and they learn to make well-reasoned judgments about how to adjust approaches to make them more efficient or more quickly implemented without risking the desired impact too much.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The material above summarizes a long list of recommendations for practice, coming at the practitioner from a number of angles. What is needed is a more concise set of practices that are realistically implementable. Research on learning and change management (Heath & Heath, 2010) would also advise that we make the list easy to remember and very specific about what should be done. If we want to see these practices come alive, we also need to be concerned about the practitioner’s motivation to adopt them, which can come from their sense of professional identity (Wenger, 1998).
AHRD has provided conference workshops specifically to that end, and some graduate programs in HRD specifically teach processes and skills of scholarly practice. We have defined the necessary actions and skills, and we can strengthen how much practice students get as part of their education.

To advance that effort, I offer a model for SMART Practice that I humbly envision as appealing and actionable. While practitioners may shy away from the label “scholar-practitioner,” I imagine that it would be important for them to be “smart” in their everyday practice – a label which connotes being educated and savvy. The SMART Practice model provides advice that will allow them to practice in an educated and savvy way. Using this model, we can begin to educate HRD practitioners on the nuances of scholarly practice.

The next section of this article is a lengthy recommendation for practice written directly to practitioners in a way that I hope will provide practical advice on being a smart, savvy, scholarly practitioner.

The SMART Practice Model

Let’s be plain – we want a seat at the table. Whether we are HRD leaders or front-line practitioners of an HRD practice area, we want to be able to do more than execute orders – we want to apply our expertise to make a positive difference in the outcomes our organization produces.

As HRD practitioners, we firmly believe that we have a unique perspective to contribute to the conversations around how the organizations we serve can succeed, and how employees at all levels can best be enabled to be part of that success. We have expertise that is needed at the strategic level and at the execution level. Of course, wanting a seat at the table isn’t enough. We earn that seat by developing that expertise and then being smart about how and where we apply it.

SMART Practice earns us the right to engage human resource development tools and tactics in a strategic way. SMART Practice is Scholarly, Macro, Aligned, Realistic, and Tested as described below.

Scholarly Practice

To strive for scholarly practice is to ensure that we are offering expertise rather than fads. As professionals, we ground our work in a specific body of knowledge and in a repertoire of validated practices. They say that professional accomplishments and breakthroughs are often achieved by “standing on the shoulders of giants” – by applying and expanding on the work of great thinkers and researchers who have provided solid foundations.

Our field has developed a rich array of theories that describe and explain many aspects of learning, performance, change, and organizational success. Being scholarly means we seek out other thinkers and listen to the ways they explain the world. We read research and case studies and interpret their implications for our specific approaches. We will have more confidence in our recommendations if they are born from theory and research in our field, and we will be better able to articulate our reasoning and to suggest tweaks or alternatives if original recommendations prove unworkable.

Being scholarly also requires that we translate our frameworks and practices into language that our clients can relate to, just as good lawyers or doctors might do in a professional situation that requires their deep expertise. To be effective, we avoid overwhelming our partners with academic jargon and lists of citations, reserving those details for conversations with peers and those most interested in learning more.

Gaining and maintaining that scholarly background requires commitment. A solid place to start is with a graduate degree in our field – that gives us a structured introduction to the body of knowledge and to standard practices. In this rapidly changing world, however, that accomplishment will not carry us for long. We need to remain connected to the fresh research in our field by reading research journals, attending academic conferences, developing contacts with relevant researchers, and deliberately searching for up-to-date research and theory related to our pressing problems. This aspect of being scholarly is clearly linked with macro practice as well (described in next section).
Scholarly practice in action.

Here are the imperatives for scholarly practice:

- **Develop and apply key guidelines for your practice based on theory and research.**
  Work with colleagues to summarize exactly what you believe about how the world works in your arena of professional practice. As you work your projects, check yourself against these guidelines to ensure you are practicing in alignment with your key beliefs. (It’s amazing how often we stray from these when excited about a cool idea or pressed by circumstances.) Keep a collection of favorite models that you can reference when thinking about issues.

- **Use specific theory and research to frame the approach you take to your key initiatives.**
  When your business planning activities or day-to-day radar provides indication that a specific type of intervention is needed or a simmering issue will be raised to your list of initiatives, start studying it from an academic point of view. Look first for literature reviews or edited books that collate articles on the subject. Search academic databases or practitioner research forums for relevant, recent research and case studies. Scan practitioner databases for practice trends and look into the evidence that these practices might be useful in your situation. Ask for this background from the project leaders and vendors who are making recommendations for solutions. Then – most importantly - apply your in-depth understanding of related theory and research to frame your recommendations.

- **Translate research and theory into relatable terms for colleagues and business leaders.**
  Interpret theoretical models and research results to apply to specific situations. Reword ideas into terms that others can more readily understand rather than relying on the jargon terms that describe these ideas to other experts. At the same time, be careful to retain as much of the nuance of complex models as possible so that key recommendations are not oversimplified or misinterpreted or misapplied in implementation stages. Apply strong communication and influence skills in bringing HRD theoretical frameworks into business conversations.

Macro Practice

SMART Practice can never be tunnel-visioned. To be SMART, we must practice from a macro view of the world. The best practitioners incorporate strategies for consistently checking out the broader landscape.

One macro view allows us to take in our company’s or client’s business environment. To be effective in our consulting role, we need to develop an understanding of the competitive landscape and learn to monitor the environmental factors that will impact our organization’s business outlook.

A second macro view shows us the picture of what’s happening across our own profession. We look for trends, new practices, and peer concerns and ask ourselves if these are things that we should be examining or influencing in our own environments. We also use our theoretical and research mindset to evaluate the basis and staying power of trends and practices. We pay special attention to the longer term views, looking for changes and innovations that we should have on our own radar screens on our company’s or client’s behalf.

A last macro view is internal but still sweeping. Our overall effectiveness is impacted by the degree to which we are aware of and able to account for organizationally driven goals, initiatives, and changes. We often add value by pointing out problematic overlaps and interdependencies as well as by noticing opportunities.

Macro practice might be conceived as a day-to-day sensing practice. It’s about keeping our senses tuned for shifts in the winds and storms brewing as well as for the good weather that may allow for experimentation and for rapid acceleration of current strategies.

Macro practice in action.

Imperatives for macro practice:

- **Regularly conduct environmental scans to monitor business news and trends.**
Read industry reports and journals, as well as competitive analyses. Set up RSS feeds for industry news. Take advantage of internal opportunities such as sales conferences and annual reports to learn more. Exchange news with colleagues who share your interests. In this way, develop an understanding of the current landscape that can inform your own decision making and recommendations.

- Actively engage with the academic and professional community to keep your knowledge fresh.

Find a way to be linked into current theory and research in the arenas that you practice in most often. Apply scholarly criteria to differentiate well-grounded ideas and fads. Identify a list of journals in your field, and make a point to review them for articles and research studies of interest. Identify thought leaders who write regularly, present at conferences, or who blog or tweet professionally, and make a point to follow them. Tune into critiques as well; listen for those who are cautioning about theory and critiquing the research. Exchange ideas with peers. Better still, partner with researchers to advance our thinking; that way, you will really be on the cutting edge.

- Monitor the pulse of the organization.

Develop mutually beneficial relationships with professionals in HR and in key business areas who may be outside of your day-to-day contacts, and keep each other informed of initiatives and business indicators. Identify and take advantage of routine sources of information to learn about initiatives and business goals (e.g. dashboards, internal communications, divisional meetings).

**Aligned Practice**

A frequent source of frustration in organizations is the discovery that projects are either working at cross-purposes or duplicating efforts – both of which can be avoided if we pay special attention to alignment. It is often important to establish a clear line of sight between HRD initiatives and the achievement of core business goals or employee’s personal development goals.

SMART Practice is aligned when we take a systems view of how organizations and individuals get things done. From an organizational point of view, we need to understand how various HR and corporate practices and programs can support one another, and work to ensure that they share common goals. Our efforts can be amplified exponentially by alignment of forces toward the same ends. By the same token, efforts can be tripped up by dividing the organization’s attention or – worse – inadvertently attempting to achieve opposing goals simultaneously.

Individuals are more productive when the demands for their attention are focused in the same general direction. Having too many foci can feel choppy and can drag out progress towards goals so that it feels like no progress at all. Aligning the varied programs and initiatives provides synergy that can create its own energy.

That said, there are times when HRD professionals need to walk out of step with their colleagues in order to give voice to ideas and to advocate for causes that are not yet popular. Over time, alignment with other systems can be cultivated, but sometimes those initial steps are taken quite alone. This is a judgment call that is worth mentioning even though it’s a bit out of scope of what we are discussing here.

**Aligned practice in action.**

These are our imperatives for aligned practice:

- Apply the HRD/HRM models that align multiple practices and approaches.

Explore organizational design, organizational learning, performance technology, and other system models that represent the alignment and interaction of a variety of practices. Identify or adapt a model that best describes how the forces work in your organization, and use that model to guide your thinking on what to align and how to ensure that alignment. Conduct a risk assessment to look for barriers and supports and ensure that barriers to learning and performance are removed or mitigated.
SMART Practice

- **Collaborate with other leaders to align forces in the desired direction.**

  Reach out to your colleagues to suggest parallel initiatives that insure the success of overall goals. Co-sponsor or co-create multifaceted projects that address key business challenges or initiatives. Use tools and techniques from other practice areas to support your approach. Identify those initiatives and projects that impact your efforts or that will potentially be impacted by what you may recommend. Initiate discussions that allow you to account for these interactions in your recommendations.

- **Align with driving goals already in place.**

  Ensure that your initiatives support key business goals or align with employees’ development goals. Piggy-back off the momentum already being generated by these goals and show how your HRD initiative supports their achievement.

Realistic Practice

Those who cringe at the thought of being scholarly will likely applaud the advice to be realistic. We have to customize approaches and adopt theories in ways that are workable for the contexts, opportunities, and problems that we face in organizations. Practices need to be adapted to circumstances.

In evaluating the potential of particular approaches that have been successful in other organizations, we need to explore whether the circumstances that made the approach work in the cited organization are present in our own. If not, we may need to mitigate for that difference. There may also be peculiarities in our own organizations that warrant adjustments in approach. Adopting practices from other organizations is seldom a matter of creating an exact copy.

Even when adjustments aren’t required due to circumstances, we often can’t apply practices in textbook fashion. Our organizations sometimes rightly value speed over elegance, and are sometimes willing to compromise effectiveness for cost and time savings. (80% effective and ready this week may be better than 100% effective and ready next month.) It’s our job to ensure that decision makers understand the compromises being made and risks they expose.

In order to be effective at making adjustments for the sake of a more realistic, less resource-intensive or better priced solution, it is critical that we ourselves understand how our approaches work so that we don’t unbalance their theoretical structure completely. Like playing the game Jenga, we have to know which pieces can be removed without making the whole tower fall down. We have to know how to shore up weak points created by necessary restructuring.

**Realistic practice in action.**

These imperatives for realistic practice will help us stay grounded:

- **Identify and protect the “key ingredients” of the models you are implementing.**

  Study practices with an eye towards identifying what really makes them work. Take special care to examine the culture of the organizations that have garnered positive impact from the approaches, and explore the similarities and differences with your own. Get a handle on the variables that matter and consider how to mitigate risks associated with necessary adjustments.

- **Routinely review to identify what works and doesn’t (and why) in your organization.**

  Make a study of knowing the characteristics and quirks of your own organization in terms of the things that drive success and the issues that are associated with stumbles or failures.

- **Enlist support for your initiatives from influential people at all levels.**

  Identify the key decision makers and influencers, and the people who know your organization really well. Involve these folks in discussions that shape your proposals and give them previews of recommendations to line up support.
Tested Practice

No matter how scholarly or evidence-based your planned approaches, it’s important to test them in your own environment. We often make enough adjustments on a “proven” practice that it’s possible we’ve compromised its effectiveness. Every organization has its own quirks which may impact how an approach plays out. In our rapidly changing world, it’s also likely that we’ll actually be inventing a practice for our particular situation.

For these reasons, SMART practitioners develop skill in pilot testing our approaches and monitoring outcomes during and after implementation. While we may avoid complicated control study approaches to evaluating our efforts, we devise rigorous formative and summative plans that monitor what’s working and what isn’t and allow us to catch unintended consequences as early as possible. We use a combination of hard and soft measures; metrics get the attention of business leaders, and qualitative data helps capture reasons and nuances that the numbers can’t show.

Tested practice in action.

Here are the imperatives to ensure your practices are well tested:

- **Demand evidence that an approach will work before a full deployment.**
  Ask vendors and employees for the evidence that a particular solution is likely to achieve desired outcomes. Pay careful attention to the particular factors that made the approach successful elsewhere, and the ways that the approach is being customized for your organization. Pilot test the approach and collect hard data to demonstrate that expected outcomes are achieved.

- **Conduct a formative evaluation to examine results and make course corrections.**
  Sanity-check your recommendations with others who can help to imagine possible outcomes and improve the approach. Craft and implement a measurement plan that includes both hard and soft indicators of progress toward intended outcomes. Deploy in stages if possible so that adjustments are easier to make. Prepare partners for the possibility of mid-course corrections.

- **Monitor the organization for expected and unexpected outcomes and impacts.**
  Conduct ongoing evaluation to ensure the practice is continuing to achieve desired results. Identify areas at risk and monitor activities and measures that would indicate the approach is going wrong.

SMART Practice in Action

Embracing and enacting the SMART imperatives described above will help to ensure your effectiveness in the practice of HRD. SMART Practice calls on you to actively apply your academic knowledge and your experience-based know-how. Adapting scholar-practitioner behaviors mitigates the risk of endorsing fads and disproven practices, and adapting a business mindset mitigates the risk of being seen as ivory-towerish and out of step with business realities.

SMART practitioners embody both professional expertise and business savvy, and in so doing, they command attention when they join a table of business leaders. You won’t just be “at the table,” you can be actively contributing to the success of your organization.

Recommendations for the Academic Community

The review of the literature that informed the above recommendations for practice also exposed some areas in need of further theorizing and research. Additional research would help us to make a case for scholarly practice as well as to further define exactly which of the many activities described have the most impact on success in the practice domain. There is also a need to collate effective approaches for developing “SMART” practitioners while they are engaged in graduate work in our field or in other professional development arenas.

Here are some of the studies that would be most useful:
A study to test the link between scholarly practice behaviors, competencies, and business-oriented behaviors and success or degree of impact in an organization. We might use performance quartiling as a means of identifying the most and least successful practitioners (as defined by organizations) and look for correlations with specific behaviors, especially the scholarly practice behaviors. We need to demonstrate that scholarly practice leads to better impact to counterbalance those who scoff at that notion.

Additional work to define types of practitioners along a scholarly practice continuum (building from Roana and Gilley (2010)) and to create a self-assessment or 360 assessment that would help practitioners to identify where they fall and the behaviors that would bring them closer to the type of practitioner they want to be.

Research on the kinds of activities we can incorporate into graduate programs that would more likely lead to continuation of scholarly practice beyond the graduate school window. How can we best promote continued scholarly practice during the education of professionals in the field? And how can we invite into scholarly practice those who do not pursue graduate work in the field? Work in this arena might begin with a comprehensive literature review that examines what we already know (or think) about how to educate scholar-practitioners.

Those of us who advocate for scholarly practice need to listen closely to the arguments and concerns of those who see scholarly practice as more of an exception for specific roles, practices, and situations. We should continue to combine our energies to create a robust community of practitioners and academics who actively work to inject solid theory and research-based recommendations into the everyday practice of HRD domains.

References


