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From imparting knowledge to building bridges

Posted By On In Edition 2,Feature Topic,Transfer 2025 | [No Comments](#)



HR development: a systemic sounding board

HR development is at a crossroads – or perhaps more accurately, it is confronted with the conflicting demands of overlapping change processes. At the same time as organizations grapple with growing requirements in relation to innovation, adaptability and retaining skilled workers, a profound cultural change is also underway. It is no longer enough to deliver the “right” skills at the “right” time in the “right” place. That’s the Taylorist approach to HR development – functional, efficient and predictable. But today’s and tomorrow’s HR development is different. It is becoming more like a resonance chamber where individual potential, organizational objectives and social values converge, interact and, if all goes well, develop productively. Steinbeis expert Professor Dr. habil. Gernot Barth discusses how this change can be successfully realized.

HR development isn’t just an instrumental subdomain of human resource management – it is a hub of cultural negotiation and strategic self-understanding. Instead of “What can we teach our employees?”, the question should be “How can we create spaces that enable learning, growth and self-efficacy?”. And “How can the organization and the individual develop mutually in a dialogue-based, self-directed process?”. This shift in mindset has implications for people, structures and attitudes. It requires us to understand HR development as a cultural practice rather than a service.

The shift from a training to a development mindset

Traditional HR development takes a linear approach. A skills gap is identified, a measure is planned and implemented, and its effectiveness is evaluated. This method works as long as the objectives stay the same, the requirements are predictable and learning is understood as an input-output system. But these conditions are occurring less and less frequently. Markets keep changing rapidly, roles within organizations are more fluid, and employees have more diverse

biographical and cultural backgrounds. According to Gernot Barth, “Increasingly, people want a sense of purpose, participation and authenticity. Learning is no longer linear – it is situational, social and purposeful.

To move to the next level in HR development, it is therefore necessary to stop simply devising “upskilling measures” and start understanding HR development as a catalyst of development. Rather than matching skills to short-term needs, the goal should be long-term adaptability – to change, complexity and ambiguity. This calls for changes to the methods used in HR development. Seminars and training courses alone are no longer enough – what is needed is a learning landscape where coaching, peer-to-peer advice, hybrid learning, spaces for reflection and implicit experiential learning all coexist on an equal footing. We need feedback cultures that offer certainty in uncertain times. And we need managers who are prepared to ask rather than act like they know it all.

Personal responsibility is key

Personal responsibility is a fundamental principle of modern HR development. If you’re serious about development, responsibility for it should go where it belongs – to the individual. Rather than overworking individuals in a failing system, personal responsibility means enabling agency through transparency, participation and allowing people to make their own choices. The role of HR development isn’t to “make people better”, but to invite them to take responsibility for their own effectiveness within the system – in terms of their knowledge, relationships and impact.

Steinbeis expert Barth sums up this approach: “In this context, mediation professionals talk about empowerment through structure. It’s about creating spaces where people feel confident enough to take responsibility – for themselves and for others. This is as much a political question as a pedagogical one. Who is allowed to develop themselves, and how are they allowed to do so? Who decides what the learning needs are? Which resources are allocated to different actions?”

The concept is illustrated by a project involving a modular management development program that the Steinbeis Consulting Center for Mediation of Business carried out at Mercer Stendal GmbH. Rather than just discussing personal responsibility, the project actually integrated it into the business’s structures. The program comprised six modules that built on each other. Managers worked on their own understanding of management, reflected on their personal strengths and developed practical actions, while always trying to strike a balance between organizational expectations and their personal effectiveness. Individual coaching and supervision was particularly helpful in creating a learning space that aimed at getting people to reflect on their own position and actively shape their role as managers rather than at promoting conformity.

As well as being pedagogically sound, a modern understanding of HR development must thus also be power-conscious and justice-oriented. After all, development doesn’t exist in a vacuum – it is always embedded in a context of organizational interests, social positioning and economic conditions.

The role of HR development in learning organizations

In organizations that see themselves as learning systems, the HR development function must also view itself as a learning system. In other words, HR development should not be static, it should be iterative, reflective and adaptable. This means we need to redefine the function of HR development managers. Rather than being there to impart knowledge or manage programs, their role is to support processes, build bridges and facilitate learning cultures. Their job is not to provide answers, but to ask questions. What does this system need to stay alive? Which structures are holding back development? How can learning be institutionally enabled without being standardized?

On the other hand, HR development must also avoid falling into the trap of blind enthusiasm for agility and self-organization. It needs to reflect critically about the limits of new ways of organizing and about who benefits from them – and who doesn't. Reflection and the ability to draw this kind of distinction are key skill requirements for "even-handed HR development".

HR development as a hub of cultural change

By now, it should be clear that HR development is more than just continuing professional development. It is a space for dialogue, self-understanding and cultural navigation. As well as boosting an organization's efficiency, it also strengthens its resilience, innovation performance and humanity.

It is thus simultaneously both an expression of organizational culture and the engine that drives its development. By consciously managing this relationship, we can make HR development even more effective at driving both individual and collective development. To sum it up in a single sentence, modern HR development is no longer just a means of filling skills gaps – it is the practice of learning to ask questions that we never dared ask before.

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