A human resources development professional’s framework for competencies during COVID-19 and unrest

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Abstract
The purpose of this article is to explore the competencies required and exhibited by human resource development (HRD) professionals during a crisis. Keeping the current COVID-19 pandemic in the foreground, we examined the industrial, change management, and crisis management literature to illustrate how HRD professionals successfully helped their organizations overcome organizational challenges imposed by the pandemic. We propose some essential competencies that HRD professionals, as change agents, need to support organizations to survive a crisis in the long term. At the core of our model is learning, unlearning, and relearning. HRD professionals can develop the core competencies in conjunction with essential competencies such as flexibility, agility, thoughtfulness, effective communication, critical thinking, and creativity. Through our conceptual competency model, we propose that HRD can prepare its professionals holistically to support leaders and employees during a crisis.

KEYWORDS
change management, competency model, COVID-19, crisis management

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the workplace irreversibly by bringing about uncertainties and unexpected changes for both employees and the organization. The uncertainties threatened business continuity due to an imbalance in the organizational finances, which led to organizational restructuring and changed priorities. As a result, employees faced uncertainties concerning their continued employment with the organization, affecting their well-being and mental health (Barhate et al., 2021). Organizations thus engaged in sensemaking to understand the uncertainties, the pandemic’s impact on the organization and employees and then develop and apply necessary solutions (Kniffin et al., 2021). To meet the rapidly changing organizational needs and ensure employee safety, organizations had no choice but to rapidly evolve and adapt to the changes forced by the pandemic (Barhate et al., 2021; Dirani et al., 2020).

When describing COVID-19’s impact, Mani and Mishra (2020) stated, “the pace of change has caught everyone unaware” (p. 1), which contrasts with the reactions to other past organizational crises. In the past, organizations were more focused on recuperating their bottom line. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, business continuity or financial health did not solely dictate organizational priorities, but they included employee well-being and sustainable crisis and change management (Dirani et al., 2020). There is now an observable change in the way people interact and learn in the organization, leading to a dynamic work environment (Watkins & Marsick, 2021). Unlearning existing practices and relearning pandemic responsive practices helped organizations manage change rapidly and overcome uncertainties (Fernandes & Gattolin, 2021; Watkins & Marsick, 2021).
In the past, crisis management studies have undermined human resource development (HRD) professionals’ role during a crisis (Zulkarnaini et al., 2019). However, this article argues that HRD professionals contributed to managing the COVID-19 crisis by exhibiting specialized competencies gained via intentional learning, unlearning, and relearning activities. After reviewing the academic and industrial literature on HRD professional’s exceptional contribution to the COVID-19 crisis management, we propose a competency framework that can help build HRD professional’s capacities to manage any future crises via intentional learning, unlearning, and relearning activities (Fernandes & Gattolin, 2021; Watkins & Marsick, 2021). In the following sections, we will discuss HRD professional’s competencies using the past and present crisis management events to support the competency framework proposed in this article.

Organizational culture and change during a crisis

The COVID-19 crisis has brought about a forced transformation in the workplace, prompting most organizations to change or alter their working environment policies (Meister, 2020). For example, employees now work virtually instead of the physical work site. We believe that organizations anticipate the following changes in the organization, and HRD professionals must make strategic plans to address them, especially with remote work becoming the new normal. For example, employees must overcome challenges such as distance between co-workers, resource access, maintain communication, perform multiple responsibilities, manage technology fatigue, and manage customer expectations.

In the past, organizations have undergone crises such as (a) product failure, (b) technology crisis, (c) malevolence, (d) change crisis, and (e) natural crisis. Crisis in any form can disrupt organizational activities by threatening business continuity and market value, and organizations react by adapting and embracing change to save costs and minimize the impact on employees (Sarkar & Osiyevskyy, 2018). Furthermore, if they do not, they face extinction. For example, Kodak could not keep up with technological advances and eventually filed for bankruptcy after over 100 years in business (Sarkar & Osiyevskyy, 2018). During the COVID-19 crisis, over 70 large corporations have filed for bankruptcy in the United States alone (Tucker, 2020).

A learning mindset enables organizations to understand the crisis better and manage factors responsible for the success (Brockner & James, 2008). HRD professionals must learn from past crises to better respond to future crises and establish sustainable change (Wooten & James, 2008). An unlearning mindset allows organizations to discontinue harmful activities to the crisis management efforts and shift their focus to experiment on other activities that might work better (Brockner & James, 2008). Thus, learning new things and unlearning old routines impact successful change processes (Wang, 2008). In Figure 1, we propose that learning, unlearning, and relearning are central to HRD professional’s competencies during crisis management.
HRD professionals as change agents

According to Ulrich (1998), HRD functions are fundamental to achieve organizational excellence, and HRD professionals need to “become a partner in strategy execution and be held responsible for designing the organizational architecture” (p. 127). However, even though effective HRD initiatives could support sustainable strategic interventions, over the years, HRD professionals have experienced resistance from leaders who do not view HRD’s role to have a strategic impact on achieving organizational goals (Alagaraja & Egan, 2013).

At the onset of COVID-19, employees reported that their main concern was managing health and well-being, remote work, job continuity, and mental health (Bersin, 2020). Employees indicated that timely support through positive reinforcement, recognition, timely and transparent communication, and overall psychological safety helped dissipate their concerns (Dirani et al., 2020). Organizations worldwide have appreciated HRD professional’s resilience and creativity to assist leaders and manage change (Joo et al., 2013).

As essential mediators between leaders and employees regarding impending changes in the organization, HRD professionals need to educate leaders on the challenges faced by employees during their transition in the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, employees need to understand the leader’s vision for upcoming organizational change. Learning thus becomes essential, with new organizational behavior required to establish the leader’s change vision and a new organizational culture (Brockner & James, 2008).

Continuous learning, unlearning, and relearning are important tenets in crisis management (Wang, 2008). Learning and unlearning promote a change mindset that accepts new ideas, eases the organizational change process bringing leaders and employees on board with the change vision (Wang, 2008). To successfully bridge the change process, HRD professionals thus need specific competencies. In the section below, we propose a basic competency model that may assist HRD professionals in assisting organizational change during a crisis.

CONCEPTUAL HRD COMPETENCY MODEL

Organizations have changed during the COVID-19 crisis at a rapid pace, making it difficult for organizations to manage change due to the fast-paced change in the external environment. However, it is crucial for change agents within the organizational system to develop a capacity for change to enable organizations to prevail in the changing environment (Meyer & Stensaker, 2006). Past academic research attests to the importance for organizations to “develop their capacity for rapid adaptation, flexibility, and innovation” and for practitioners to develop their change capabilities (Meyer & Stensaker, 2006, p. 218). We propose some essential competencies that HRD professionals, as change agents, need to support organizations to survive a crisis in the long term. The most important consideration for organizations right now is their employees’ well-being. Thus, HRD professionals need to exhibit thoughtfulness to build resilience among employees to overcome their challenges (Wicker, 2021).

Keeping the COVID-19 crisis in the foreground, we base our HRD competency model on COVID-19-related industrial reports, change literature, and crisis management literature. We have identified some key HR professional competencies to build a sustainable organizational culture. For example, Karman (2020) proposed that flexibility and agility were associated with an organization’s resilience. In the current COVID-19 crisis, resilience is the most critical survival tool. Figure 1 demonstrates learning-, unlearning-, and relearning-based framework to assist HRD practitioners during a crisis to foster change. In the following sections, we will examine each HRD competency and its impact on change management caused by a crisis.

Learning, unlearning, and relearning

According to Wang (2008), “managing a crisis is a process of managing change that involves learning, unlearning, and relearning at the individual, group, and organizational levels” (p. 435). Unfortunately, many organizations assume that the crises may not have a deleterious impact on the organization, which leads them to continue working without taking prompt actions when necessary. This reality needs unlearning to occur as the first step in crisis management. Thus, unlearning is forgetting the main ideas, invalidating past plans, and embracing change with new ideas (Wang, 2008).

Tsang and Zahra (2008) argued that unlearning is an essential condition in a successful environmental change process. Organizations adopt different strategies for unlearning practices. Wang (2008) stated that “unlearning tends to take place more easily in crises where organizational decision-makers are forced to reexamine and reestablish value and belief systems, as well as to realign organizational strategies that they might avoid under
other circumstances” (p. 436). Past change models promote learning at macro and micro levels for organizational change (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). The unlearning process eventually leads to relearning within an organization. Unlearning helps promote organizational learning and enhance organizational performance (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Once organizational systems unlearn a process, a strategic corresponding relearning enables employees to achieve goals quicker during a crisis. The time required to relearn may be lesser than the time taken to learn the job initially (Ginzburg & Dar-El, 2000). The HRD professional’s responsibility is to assist the organizational system with the necessary resources to create a stress-free relearning process.

The learning, unlearning, and relearning cycle is thus at the core of our conceptual framework for organizations to ensure that required skills remain current and relevant with the changes. Employers have had to adapt to the new norms in society with workplace uncertainties caused by the COVID-19 crisis in the current situation. Adapting to the new norm is beneficial for organizational survival and employee well-being (Barhate & Hirudayaraj, 2021). Organizations and employees discontinued processes they used during the pre-COVID-19 era to adapt to the changing external environment. To successfully foster the learning, unlearning, and relearning competencies, HRD professionals must build other supporting competencies such as flexibility, agility, thoughtfulness, effective communication, critical thinking, and creativity.

**Flexibility**

The pandemic has brought to light many fault lines within processes in the organization, and in some cases, there are new fault lines that have appeared. HRD professionals have identified these and engage in building new organizational policies and processes that promote a flexible culture, such as flexibility in work schedule, location, and attire (O’Keefe, 2020). In addition, organizations have shifted their focus to bolster productivity and respect employees’ work-life balance needs (Dirani et al., 2020). For instance, multi-national organizations such as Accenture have announced using an analytics-based virtual platform to ensure continued employment through remote working (Accenture, 2020).

**Agility**

Traditionally, researchers define agility as the ability to move rapidly and accurately (Sheppard & Young, 2006). Based on the definition, some might find agility similar to flexibility, but we assert that it is different. Agile professionals are inclusive and democratic, focusing on developing employees’ capacities, competencies, and capabilities. An agile HRD professional as a leader in the organization promptly handles the changing environments and controls complexity with high adaptability (Joiner, 2019). HRD professionals enabled their employees’ agility during COVID-19 by helping them visualize new normalcy and developing a flexible mindset (Wicker, 2021).

**Thoughtfulness**

While organizations expect managers to make evidence-based decisions, it is critical to apply thoughtfulness when making organizational decisions by considering their impact on stakeholders (Wensley, 2013). For example, organizations adopted different strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic to support employees working in a virtual environment (Feldman, 2021). Organizations implemented thoughtful policies and procedures, which met employee’s unique needs (Feldman, 2021). Thoughtful HRD professionals are concerned with keeping the organization on a proposed trajectory; thus, they provide containment and advice to their employees and lead others to be more thoughtful (Dirani et al., 2020). Companies, such as Microsoft and Starbucks, are exhibiting thoughtfulness by keeping employees’ well-being at the forefront by compensating hourly workers for days missed due to illness and are including mental health benefits for family members (Meister, 2020).

**Effective communication**

Effective communication assists with transparency and optimism, fostering trust and encouraging employees to share knowledge, which in turn builds a sense of community (Alizadeh et al., 2020). An essential part of effective
communication is to support employee well-being, especially during the pandemic. Crisis communication plays an essential role in crisis management, referring to the direct and frequent communication with employees regarding the current business state (Dirani et al., 2020). In a crisis, the need for effective communication becomes essential (Wicker, 2021), and HRD professionals need to exhibit this competency in being compassionate and person-centered communication channels between employees and leaders to maintain trust and establish sustainable change.

**Critical thinking**

While research in the HRD field mainly focuses on learning and performance domains, “critical thinking in HRD offers a radical alternative to mainstream thinking about developing people in the workplace” (Elliott & Turnbull, 2005, p. 2). Critical thinking typically involves identifying the assumptions and biases while interpreting data (Terenzini et al., 1995). Critical thinking allows crisis responders to view the situation objectively and keep an open mind during the decision-making process (Terenzini et al., 1995). HRD professionals demonstrated this competency during COVID-19 by staying free from assumptions identifying the central issues.

**Creativity**

“Creativity enhances thinking about, planning for, and responding to crises” (Pearson & Sommer, 2011, p. 29). Creativity assists an organization “survive, adapt, and gain a competitive advantage” (p. 391) by unleashing the various employee skills (Joo et al., 2013) and redesigning the existing processes as they are vital to ensure that change is sustained even after a crisis (Wicker, 2021). HRD professionals need to understand their stakeholders when developing new programs that can be sustained in the future. These new programs require creativity or the ability to think outside the typical framework (Cosby, 2014).

**DISCUSSION**

For decades, catastrophic events have manipulated organizational culture, leaving organizations struggling to keep up with the changing workplace environments. Today, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a change in organizational culture that has affected employees working from home or office, with stress and emotions affecting employee’s well-being, which can negatively impact the organizational culture and community (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Therefore, HRD professionals’ function as change agents in the current pandemic builds a solid foundation for adaptability during a crisis. Furthermore, implementing the conceptual framework helps increase sustainability amid chaos and turbulent change, where employees will depend on HRD professionals to change the workplace environment. Organizations portray resilience to overcome a crisis through a complex interaction between several competencies that include “signal detection, preparation and prevention, damage control and containment, business recovery, and reflection and learning” (Wooten & James, 2008, p. 352).

HRD professionals must assist leaders in implementing proactive measures to overcome a crisis. However, each crisis is unique, and although preparation can keep leaders informed and updated, each situation requires a specific combination of competencies and responses. Learning, thus, becomes a critical competency that ensures that HRD professionals stay flexible, adaptable, thoughtful, communicative, adept to critical thinking, and creative in their pursuit to assist the leadership and employees.

The proposed framework keeps learning, unlearning, and relearning at its core, thus invoking HRD’s learning paradigm. Employees expect organizational policies to shape their work culture, embrace employee well-being, and support their needs. Hence, if these needs are, there may be long-term consequences on the organization’s continuity and reputation (Wooten & James, 2008). For example, Microsoft is currently leading the world in establishing a new normal into the company’s culture with their “Guide to Working from Home COVID-19” (Meister, 2020). Managing the large-scale and fast-paced change brought about by COVID-19, we believe that all HR activities must ensure organizational productivity, quality, and innovation.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.
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**How to cite this article:** Gunasekara, N., Barhate, B., Alizadeh, A., & Capuchino, R. G. (2022). A human resources development professional's framework for competencies during COVID-19 and unrest. *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development, 34*(2), 37–43. https://doi.org/10.1002/nha3.20350