

Models in HR

Secrets of Human Capital Management, May 2006

In this article, David Creelman discuss why the HR Models don't make sense for engineers, scientists and accounting professionals, for whom a model have to be precise, not only "useful".

David Creelman

The models we use in HR are different from those we use in science. HR professionals should understand the differences.

In the hard sciences like biochemistry and material science, models are detailed and very specific. Biochemists know the Krebs cycle which describes how citric acid is processed in the body—it involves seven very specific chemical reactions. Material scientists know about Gibbs free energy and that granules in a material grow in a way to keep it at a minimum—this involves complex but precise mathematical equations.

The models we use in human resources typically don't work that way. We rely on a collection of simple and imprecise models. Whereas a biochemist can say the Krebs cycle is "true"; an HR manager can only say that their models are "useful." The models material scientists use can be as complex as they need to be to describe reality; HR managers almost always find that even moderately complex models are not helpful. A typical HR model is the Boudreau/Ramstad notion that HR has evolved from Control, to Services, to Decision Support. It is simple and helpful, but it won't impress an engineer.

Another difference is that in science we usually only use one model in a given situation. If we want to understand how hydrogen bonds to oxygen we

always use the model of electron sharing. HR professionals often use two quite different models at the same time. Asked to explain the reason for an acquisition, HR might describe it in terms of strategy (e.g. maximizing profit, an economic model). A moment later they may go on to say a certain VP was behind the move to further their career ambitions (e.g. maximizing power, a political model). People trained in the hard sciences or disciplines like accounting will be inclined to ask "Well, which model is right: economics or politics?" The answer is that neither model is entirely correct on its own, but each view provides insights that may be helpful. Notice that word "helpful"—HR models are not about truth, they are about helping us get things done.

The mistake we can make in HR is trying to use models that mimic the form of the models used in the hard sciences. You often see things like $M = E \times S$ (Motivation = Effort x Skill). This is useful if it is not taken too seriously, but when I see things like this I worry that HR managers are fooling themselves. I worry that they are implying that their ideas have the same precision as mathematics. Motivation, effort and skill are all vague, imprecise concepts. As long as one understands that we are not really talking about mathematics then $M = E \times S$ can be a useful shorthand. But you know someone is going down the wrong path when they start trying to improve the equation and it begins to look like

www.terraforum.com.br



$M = (E+A) \times (S+B)/C$. Sciences can use this kind of complicated equation because it is precise, but in HR it is nonsense and turns a simple helpful idea about motivation into something unusable.

HR's imprecise models are not inferior to science's precise models. The methods that work so well in physics are completely worthless in running a training program or leading a change management effort. We use multiple, vague, simple models because those are the best tools for getting things done.

People trained in science, engineering, and accounting sometimes have a hard time understanding HR models. They have been trained to think a certain way (indoctrinated is probably the better word) and find it hard to accept that the sort of tools that work so well in their profession are useless in the world of people management.

It is true that there are some aspects of HR that can be treated mathematically. But those exceptions only prove the rule that most of the time in HR we cannot have this kind of precision.

We must develop excellence at developing, using and explaining the kind of simple models that work in people management and we must love our tools the way an engineer loves theirs.

www.terraforum.com.br



David Creelman is CEO of Creelman Research providing writing, research and commentary on human capital management.

He works with a variety of academics, think tanks, consultancies and HR vendors in the US, Japan, Canada and China.

Mr. Creelman can be reached at creelmanresearch@gmail.com

A EMPRESA

A TerraForum Consultores é uma empresa de consultoria e treinamento em Gestão do Conhecimento (GC) e Tecnologia da Informação. Os clientes da empresa são, em sua maioria, grandes e médias organizações dos setores público, privado e terceiro setor. A empresa atua em todo o Brasil e também no exterior, tendo escritórios em São Paulo, Brasília e Ottawa no Canadá. É dirigida pelo Dr. José Cláudio Terra, pioneiro e maior referência em Gestão do Conhecimento no país. Além disso, conta com uma equipe especializada e internacional de consultores.

ARTIGOS RELACIONADOS

Is Brazilian Management The New Model
Dangerous Ideas

PUBLICAÇÕES TERRAFORUM

Winning at Collaboration Commerce

Gestão do Conhecimento e E-learning na Prática

Portais Corporativos, a Revolução na Gestão do Conhecimento

Gestão do Conhecimento - O Grande Desafio Empresarial

Gestão do Conhecimento em Pequenas e Médias Empresas

Realizing the Promise of Corporate Portals: Leveraging Knowledge for Business Success

Gestão de Empresas na Era do Conhecimento