

Final Word: A Rejoinder

C. W. Von Bergen, Barlow Soper, Gary T. Rosenthal,
Lamar V. Wilkinson

In her reply to our article Karen Watkins raises a number of interesting points to which we would like to respond. We appreciate her careful review. However, several of Watkins's criticisms go beyond the scope of our article. For example, we are aware that some mainstream learning methods have not been shown to be effective yet continue to be used. We actively chose not to address this in the same context as those practices of interest to us, as noted in our paper. We felt a need to focus our article to a greater extent than Watkins might have preferred. This focus showed itself in other ways as well, most notably in our choice of a criterion of technique effectiveness and the method of choice in delineating effectiveness. As most HRD professionals recognize, training outcomes have been historically classified into four broad categories (Kirkpatrick, 1983): *reactions* (what trainees' think of the program, the trainers, the facilities, and so on); *learning* (the extent to which trainees are knowledgeable about the principles, facts, and techniques presented in the program); *behavior* (to what extent trainees' behavior changes on the job as a result of the training); and *results* (the benefit or payoff the training has in such areas as productivity improvement, turnover, reduction of accidents, and so on). Although some HRD personnel may wish to focus their efforts on determining how satisfied trainees are with a meditation program, for example, we feel that most HRD professionals are interested in measures of results, which are the bottom line of training success (Cascio, 1995). Thus, we chose to emphasize this criterion. We have no argument with taking a broader point of view in defining effectiveness. Indeed, behavioral science has been immersed in the criterion issue for decades. Yet the approach we took is valid and is readily understandable to decision makers, many of whom are looking for something to help them spend their dollars wisely.

Similarly, Watkins would like a more qualitative slant to our review. We concur with a desire for such studies as an adjunct to an experimental approach, but we do not see them as a replacement for experimentation. Adding additional implements to a toolbox does not make the others already there any less useful. By necessity, we reviewed the literature extant. Because we do not yet have final experimental results on a given question does not

necessarily mean that the research methodology is at fault. It means that the relevant research may be difficult to design and carry out, but that does not excuse us from pursuing it. Thomas Edison is said to have tried ten thousand substances before discovering that tungsten worked well for lightbulb filaments. Can we expect working with people to be any easier going? For example, in the field of counseling research, some have said we should abandon an empirical/experimental approach to learning which interventions work best, with which clients, under which conditions, when applied by which people, because of the great number of variables and the complexity of the issues. Nevertheless, as is the case with science, the slow game of knowledge accumulation is carried on by those of us who realize that few questions are resolved by one study, no matter the methodology.

As with any review of an issue, we would hope that our paper would raise questions, as it has with Watkins. However, we do not think it realistic to expect the authors of a review to anticipate all of them and address them adequately in a brief presentation. For example, Watkins wonders about our not addressing why people want to or choose to believe in or seek easy, exciting, and new ways of dealing with their world. This is neither a new question nor one limited to HRD or behavioral sciences. Extensive works already address this issue from many different perspectives, ranging from philosophy and religion to psychology, sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines.

Watkins questions our claiming caveat emptor in the conclusion. People and organizations cannot wait for science, by whatever means, to supply final answers to tough questions before acting. Uncertainty is a fact of life. Because we live with uncertainty we must be cautious, especially when evaluating extravagant claims of any sort in any life domain.

Finally, as Watkins suggests, we agree that HRD professionals may find themselves in court defending their practices. Who is to say what future litigation might find an organization defending its training programs against a complainant who believes that he or she was denied a promotion because that training program failed to develop him or her properly for higher-level positions? No profession is safe in an increasingly litigious society. If it happens, we suspect there will be a clamor for evidence to support the effectiveness of whatever procedures, practices, or programs were used. Evidence, which works best in these instances, will probably focus on behavioral criteria (since the law examines behavior and not thoughts or feelings) that will be experimentally derived. In fact, perhaps the seemingly tongue-in-cheek suggestion that HRD personnel carry malpractice insurance is not a bad idea.

We are not arguing against creative, nontraditional, alternative, unconventional, or New Age approaches to training (or to medicine or any other area) but are calling for more rigorous evaluation procedures to examine the proclaimed effectiveness of HRD interventions. We applaud individuals for looking at phenomena from nontraditional perspectives, but we believe HRD personnel must subject these ideas, techniques, and programs to a rigorous

evaluation process to determine their merits. We believe that the scientific method and experimental research provide such an approach even though it is slow and cumbersome; it is not perfect by any means, but it works. We have only to look around us to see that that is so.

References

- Cascio, W. F. (1995). *Managing human resources: Productivity, quality of work life, profits*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Kirkpatrick, D. L. (1983). Four steps to measuring training effectiveness. *Personnel Administrator*, 28, 19-25.

C. W. Von Bergen is associate professor, Department of Management and Marketing, Southeastern Oklahoma State University, Durant.

Barlow Soper is professor, Department of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences, Louisiana Tech University, Ruston.

Gary T. Rosenthal is associate professor, Department of Psychology and Counselor Education, Nicholls State University, Thibodaux, Louisiana.

Lamar V. Wilkinson is associate professor of education, Department of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences, Louisiana Tech University, Ruston.

