The Generous Spirit of the Peer Review Process: Perspectives and Insights from the *HRDQ* Editorial Team on Providing High Quality Reviews

Andrea D. Ellinger, Valerie Anderson, Claire Gubbins, Mary Lynn Lunn, Kim F. Nimon, Maura Sheehan & Jon M. Werner

Are you inclined to ‘agree,’ ‘unavailable,’ or do you ‘decline’ when you receive a personal review invitation from *Human Resource Development Quarterly (HRDQ)*? We sincerely hope that you will accept our invitations to perform reviews when we reach out to personally solicit your expertise. However, we do acknowledge that many reviewers immediately decline, note their lack of availability, or send us emails acknowledging the personal and professional commitments that preclude them from contributing to the journal in the capacity of a reviewer. We fully appreciate that many potential reviewers are being overly burdened with a high volume of review requests from many different journals, and that, at times, declining reviews may be necessary, particularly if declining is better than not delivering (Trevino, 2008). We realize that challenging work and unanticipated life event issues may present themselves, or that conflicts of interest might arise regarding author identity, or that performing a review by a specified due date may simply not be possible.

Yet, the high quality of the manuscripts that we publish in *HRDQ* is largely contingent upon the high quality and timeliness of the peer review process. Therefore, we collectively decided to develop this editorial on performing high quality reviews, because, in our varied roles, many of us often have the task of reading the majority of the manuscripts that are sent out for review, reading all of the feedback provided by the reviewers who are invited to review a specific manuscript, as well as synthesizing the reviewer and editorial feedback in the process of

preparing decision letters. We observe first hand those reviewers who consistently develop high quality reviews, but we also see areas where improvements can be made in further developing reviewer capacity. Additionally, we, like Trevino (2008, p. 8) also agree that “peer review is an essential professional value and a duty to the profession” and would like to underscore the importance of this value and professional responsibility. Further, we believe that performing high quality reviews reflects a generous collegial spirit and is a form of “paying it forward.”

We encourage scholars to embrace the professional responsibility of serving as a reviewer and generously sharing time and expertise because reviewing can be a highly beneficial learning experience, can expose reviewers to new literature, references, data collection and analysis approaches, and can stimulate ideas for future research (Trevino, 2008). Further, reviewers who consistently perform high quality and timely reviews are often invited to serve on editorial boards. In turn authors benefit from the generosity of reviewers when they receive high quality reviews, and ultimately the journal benefits through this process by publishing contributions that are deemed meaningful and influential in advancing the scholarship in the field of HRD. As Trevino (2008, p. 9) notes, “we’re all busy, and it’s easy to focus on ourselves and our many time commitments. But if we widen the lens to take consequences of others into account, the decision to review is quite straightforward.”

To this end, this editorial features some of our individual perspectives on what constitutes good reviewing and developing a high quality review. In other instances, we focus on aspects of the review process that are often overlooked or neglected by reviewers. There is no shortage of literature on the topic of reviewing, and our insights echo and reaffirm many of those that have been previously published in other journals. However, our insights are offered to new reviewers, experienced reviewers, and even authors, who may find some of these thoughts beneficial when

considering how their manuscripts will be carefully and thoughtfully examined by our team. Such insights may also be informative when authors are preparing a high quality manuscript for submission. We also provide a number of helpful references in the spirit of enhancing the generosity of the peer review process. We begin by sharing some holistic perspectives offered by Andrea D. Ellinger, Valerie Anderson and Jon M. Werner regarding what qualities constitute a high quality review for *HRDQ*. We then include very specific points about aspects of manuscripts that reviewers should attend to, points and observations offered by Claire Gubbins and Mary Lynn Lunn. We then present some “point by point” articulations from Kim F. Nimon and Maura Sheehan that may be helpful for reviewing quantitative articles. Next, we offer some sources that may be useful for ensuring that qualitative manuscripts have been carefully examined. We conclude with some overall thoughts about the peer review process.

For **Andrea D. Ellinger**, a high quality manuscript is akin to a well told story about a phenomenon of interest, why it is important, what compelling gap exists about the phenomenon that requires research to be conducted, and why conducting the research will make a meaningful contribution to the field of HRD and to existing scholarship. The elements associated with a solid story line include a comprehensive review of the literature to establish the ‘legal case’ for the study, a theoretical and/or conceptual underpinning that provides a foundation for the study, a detailed design section that provides the complete ‘recipe’ regarding the design of the study, the sample, the data collections approaches, the analysis approaches, and a clear and logical presentation of the study’s findings (Ellinger & Yang, 2011). Equally important is a discussion, situated within the existing literature that helps readers to better understand and assess the study’s contributions. Lastly, a high quality manuscript will address limitations, and offer implications for practice, theory, and future research. For reviewers, thoroughly reading the

story, and then offering comprehensive, thoughtful, helpful and timely feedback from the title page, through the abstract, throughout the varied sections of the manuscript is critical using a tone and tenor that is collegial. Most importantly, specifically offering suggestions and identifying how authors can address problematic issues (if such problems are not fatal flaws that prevent publication) often results in a high quality review that effectively assists in the disposition of a manuscript by the editorial team.

Valerie Anderson shares the following three qualities she believes constitute a great review for *HRDQ*: *balance critique with developmental intent, be open to difference, and provide feedback on a 'top to bottom' basis*. The metaphor of a 'gatekeeper' is frequently used with regard to the peer review process to ensure the robust quality of contributions that 'make it through' to a journal. This implies authority and power-relationships with which we are not comfortable. For us, the peer review process is precisely that – reviewers and authors are indeed peers (Miller, 2006). Most scholars who submit their work to a peer reviewed journal will have more than one experience of critique that was overly harsh. Our vision for *HRDQ* is that a high quality review will balance critique with developmental intent such that those who submit manuscripts to us will feel that they have received constructive, respectful and developmental feedback even if our decision is ultimately to reject the manuscript.

Further, in a multidisciplinary field like HRD, interesting research questions and insights often arise with relevance to a diverse range of scholarly fields such as: Adult Education; Human Resource Management; Leadership; Management and Organisation Studies; and Applied Psychology. As a result, manuscripts will be submitted to us that reflect a range of paradigms that (we hope) will address important, if unexpected, questions and be expressed through interesting, if unexpected research methods and writing. Therefore, at *HRDQ* we are committed

to minimising the negative effects of methodological bias (Rynes, 2006). A great reviewer, in our view, is open to difference and able to consider the potential contribution to the field that may be offered by the authors of the manuscript they are reviewing, even if it does not reflect the ‘mainstream’ of his/her own background. A great review will provide a fair, objective, and careful opinion and a recommendation about the merits and weaknesses of a manuscript. The development of a robust and extensive review for *HRDQ* means that, once we receive thoughtful opinions then our editorial decisions can be carefully discussed and made within our editorial team.

Lastly, research into the peer review process consistently highlights the issue of reviewer ‘dissensus’ with regard to the recommendations that are made about the future trajectory of a manuscript (Rynes, 2006). However, if reviewers provide constructive feedback on the whole of the paper, it is likely that the editors and, more importantly the authors, will see how some consensus is evident in reader reactions to what has been written. For a research based journal like *HRDQ*, the issues of methodology, data presentation and analysis will be central. Reviewers therefore should carefully consider these issues when evaluating a manuscript. However, other important areas for providing feedback relate to a reviewer’s perspectives about: the expressed clarity of the purpose and focus of the paper; the meaningfulness of the study’s contribution to HRD (beyond the assertion that ‘the relationship between these variables has so far never been tested’); the extent to which the manuscript is grounded in contemporary and relevant literature pertaining to HRD; and, the convincing line of argument presented in the manuscript. In essence, are the points developed in a logical way and is evidence evaluated in an effective way?

Jon M. Werner stresses four main points that he associates with a high quality review: a good review for *HRDQ* will be *honest*, *respectful*, and *developmental*. It will also be *timely*.

Honesty means being willing to take a long enough look at a manuscript to find both positives and negatives, but then also to make practical recommendations concerning what the author(s) could do to address any concerns or issues raised. Honesty also means being willing to tell the truth to the author(s) when the reviewer thinks that a manuscript should be rejected. It is not helpful to recommend to the editorial team that a manuscript be rejected, and then not provide enough indication as to why in one's comments to the author(s)!

As for respect, in academia, we could do with more individuals living out the adage, "do to others as you would wish they would do to you." This is especially important with double-blind reviewing, as it can be tempting to denigrate a work that seems to be poorly-conceived or carried out. Using a respectful tone in giving feedback, especially when it is critical, is vital. No one submits a manuscript hoping for a rejection letter, or even an offer of a major revision. However, getting such a letter, along with respectful treatment by both editors and reviewers, makes it a lot easier to move forward in a constructive manner.

Third, anyone reading this editorial should take it as a given that a good review will be developmental. After all, isn't this central to the field of human resource development? Here at the longest-running academic journal devoted to human resource development, everyone involved should strive in all that we do to give feedback that is constructive, and that shows ways to address the topics raised. If an honest critique is necessary (as often it is), then do so, but in a way that shows possible ways forward – even if not for this journal.

A final point that we value from reviewers is to be quick (enough). A one-month window to review should be manageable in most cases, and if it is not, please let the managing editor know immediately. We all value timely feedback, and this editorial team is working hard

to deliver on this commitment. Honest, respectful, developmental, and quick (enough) – that makes for a strong review for *HRDQ*.

In terms of specific aspects of manuscripts that reviewers should attend to when performing a high quality review, **Claire Gubbins** indicates that *clarity of terms* and *contextual contribution* are important considerations. One of the most critical components of a paper in terms of its readability for audiences who may or may not be knowledgeable about the topic is the clarity of the terms, definitions, concepts or variables that are used within a manuscript. A lack of related definitions, descriptions or explanations or alternatively conceptual confusion or overlap across the terms, concepts or variables in use, may seriously hinder the author(s)' efforts to illuminate the contribution of the paper as the reader struggles to identify or understand the basic components of the paper. A good review should consider whether all relevant terms, concepts or variables are completely, consistently, and concisely defined or explained and that there is conceptual clarity across competing or similar concepts. On a slightly different but related note, a good review should also examine whether the definitions in use for each and all concepts mirror the measures used in any empirical study concerned with the same concepts. A good reviewer should pay attention to 'clarity of terms' as though s/he were not an expert on the topic of the paper. As author(s) are often so heavily immersed in the topic of their article by the submission stage, it is possible that they fail to identify with the need to explicitly define terms and concepts. By providing authors with advice on this issue, a good reviewer enables authors to make explicit their now tacit understandings of these terms and concepts and thus enhance the readability of the article.

Academic publications are often critiqued for being of limited value other than permitting academic 'navel gazing' or for producing valuable research which is not read, used or translated

for non-academic use such as informing industry practice or government policy. Some of these criticisms can be addressed in the implications for practice section of a paper, though this assumes a reader progresses through to the end of the paper. Thus, with regard to contextual contribution, positioning a contextual underpinning to the objectives of a paper at the front end of the manuscript often generates early interest and encourages a full reading of the paper. This is what is referred to as the 'sales pitch' for academics and non-academics and encourages broader interest in the article and its objectives and faster recognition as to the merits of the objectives in themselves and in a broader context.

The introductory section of an article will usually state the objective(s) of the article. However, what is sometimes lacking in submissions or which may be hidden in the body of the article, is a discussion as to why such objectives are interesting, important, and unique or valuable both in general terms and for the HRD domain. By this, Claire is not referring to simply the theoretical or empirical contribution of the paper. Here, she is referring to broader contextual arguments, such as social, economic or international, as to why the contribution is interesting or important beyond the immediate objective(s) of the paper. This is the 'so what' factor or 'sales pitch' for the merits of the paper and its objectives. In cases where the 'so what' factor is evident from discussion in the body of the article, a good review should provide guidance or suggestions to the authors about how to bring this contextual discussion to the front of the paper and thus illuminate why the objectives are interesting or important from the outset. In cases where the 'so what' factor is not evident from a full read of the paper, then the challenge for the reviewers is more significant. In this case, a good review should firstly give consideration as to whether the paper makes a theoretical and/or empirical contribution. Further to this, a good review will provide guidance to authors about possible broader contextual arguments as to why their

contribution is interesting or important beyond the immediate objectives of the paper. For example, are there economic, social, technological, political, environmental, legal, local or international concerns to which the topic of article pertains? This contextual discussion and any arguments presented should be reinforced with reference to appropriate journal publications, policy documents or reports.

For **Mary Lynn Lunn**, two of the critical elements that garner her attention when reviewing a manuscript are: 1) the significance of the contribution to the HRD field, and 2) the extent to which the results of the study support the conclusions that the authors have made. In terms of significance, an important study addresses a question that begs to be answered. Publishable research provides a meaningful contribution to the development of theory (Kilduff, 2007; Sutton & Staw, 1995). *HRDQ* reviewers have the responsibility of assessing whether a manuscript makes a significant contribution to a given theoretical construct and whether it is relevant to the field of HRD and to the journal's mission. Another point to assess is whether the authors are contributing to the academic conversation on the construct being studied (Carpenter, 2009) by citing and discussing related publications by other HRD scholars. Additionally, as reviewers we should also ensure that manuscripts provide clear and useful implications for HRD practitioners (Doh, 2010; Lynham, 2002). Editors commonly site significance as the reason an article is accepted by a journal (Brown, 2012). Academic work should move us forward in better understanding of the world around us, not retrace old byways that do not advance the journey.

Furthermore, the results section of a paper should review the findings from the study. Results should be stated plainly, without bias, and should be well illustrated by figures, tables, or charts following APA style that advance comprehension for the reader (Holton & Burnett, 2005). The authors should then provide a discussion of why the results are important and should draw

conclusions that answer the question posed in the introduction (Geletkanycz & Tepper, 2012; Rocco, 2010). Logic should be linear and clear. The conclusions should flow naturally from the results and discussion in a manner that allows the reader to anticipate the end. There should be no “plot twists” in the story that leave the reader baffled by the ending. This may happen sometimes as researchers, passionate about a particular set of ideas or theory, jump to conclusions that are not supported by the results obtained. Conclusions should be supported by the results presented and should answer, either positively or negatively, the research questions or hypotheses proposed in the introduction to the work (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Zhang & Shaw, 2012). The discussion of the results and the conclusions drawn by authors are some of the many important aspects of a manuscript that reviewers need to assess.

In terms of providing a useful checklist that might be helpful when performing a review of a manuscript that reports the finding of an empirical study based on quantitative methods, **Kim Nimon** thinks it is helpful to consider if the manuscript:

1. Provides sufficient background for readers who may be unfamiliar with the topic.
2. Indicates why the study should be conducted now for a defined population.
3. Synthesizes relevant literature including limitations.
4. Uses theory to establish directional hypotheses.
5. Is transparent in describing the methodology employed and supports decisions made in research design, sample selection, data collection, and data analysis with citations to contemporary literature.
6. Complies with standards (e.g., AERA, 2006; Nimon, 2011) for reporting the results of quantitative studies including reporting of sample demographics, response rate, how missing data were handled, statistical assumptions (see Nimon, 2012), descriptive statistics including

correlation or covariance matrices (see Zientek & Thompson, 2009) effect sizes and exact *p*-values for inferential tests (see Olejnick & Algina, 2000), as well as supplementary analyses to fully interpret results (see Nathans, Oswald, & Nimon, 2012 for multiple regression).

7. Avoids common mistakes in quantitative studies including analyzing nested data with ordinary least squares (OLS) regression techniques (see Osborne, 2000), interpreting standardized regression weights as measures of relationship in the presence of multiple predictors and multicollinearity (see Courville & Thompson, 2001), transforming continuous data to categorical data (see Thompson, 1988), and employing univariate analyses in the presence of multiple outcomes variables (see Thompson, 1999).
8. Presents the results within the context of the limitations of the study.
9. Relates the results to empirical and theoretical literature.
10. Discusses what the findings mean for research, practice, and theory.

Similarly, for **Maura Sheehan**, the following questions may serve as a check-list for reviewing the Methods section of a quantitative paper. She suggests that reviewers consider the following issues:

1. *What sampling strategy was used?* Probability or non-probability sampling? The former is preferable. This type of sample can generate more accurate and generalisable results, but will usually take more time and will have higher costs. Further, is the sampling strategy appropriate and justified, especially when non-probability sampling is used? If non-probability sampling is used, the sampling strategy should be specified (see Davis, 1996): 1. Judgment; 2. Quota; 3. Convenience; or 4. Snowball. The limitations of the sampling strategy should be acknowledged, at least in the limitations discussion.

2. *The Population.* Is the population carefully defined? Authors often do not specify what the relevant population was. At the micro level, it should be clear whether the target population was, for example, the entire workforce within an organization or all senior managers within an organization. At the macro level, was the target population all firms within a specific industry, all firms within a certain size range, or all firms within a certain region of the study country?
3. *Response Rate.* Is the response rate clearly stated? Is there: (a) response bias and/or (b) non-response bias? These are two different concepts (see Cascio, 2012 for detail); the author should reflect on whether either, or both, appears to be present and how any such bias may affect their results. Again, this may need to be addressed in the limitations discussion.
4. *Other issues to Consider:*
 - A standard table indicating the means, standard deviations and inter-correlations among study variables should always be presented before the regression results are reported. If correlations are very high, it is likely there is multicollinearity in the data which will then contribute to high R squares, etc. This may need to be recognized as a limitation of the analysis.
 - A high Cronbach alpha is often treated as “the holy grail” in terms of justifying the use of scales and indices but alpha has its limitations. While it is a good measure of error variance, its value may vary depending on the number of items in the scale (more items generally imply higher estimates) and dimensionality (if the scale is measuring more than one underlying construct, alpha will tend to be lower) (see Cascio, 2012 for further

detail). Reviewers should just be careful to check if these factors may be present and are therefore potentially distorting the reported alphas.

- If the data are from one respondent – single source – it is possible that there is common method bias (CMB) (see Wall et. al 2004 for a detailed discussion). The chance of a “halo” effect is likely to be higher when the respondent is asked about performance issues – e.g., the effectiveness of HRD interventions of employee or organizational performance, for example. The potential for CMB should be acknowledged as a limitation.
- If the data are cross-sectional, the author must acknowledge that no inferences about the causality of the relationships examined can be made, which is, of course a limitation but also a source of future research.

Although these checklists provided by **Kim** and **Maura** are more specifically focused on issues that reviewers should attend to for quantitative studies, many of the ideas related to authors providing the background for the study, a comprehensive literature review, elaborated details regarding the study design, the sample of the study, the data collections methods, and approaches to analysis are equally applicable for assessing qualitative and mixed methods contributions. It is also essential to consider issues of rigor and robustness when reviewing a qualitative or mixed method study. Furthermore, the presentation of the findings, the discussion of the findings as related to existing literature, limitations, and implications for practice, theory and future research are essential aspects that need to be considered when assessing such contributions. In terms of ensuring that qualitative manuscripts are evaluated comprehensively, Crescentini and Mainardi (2009, p. 431) offer “ideas and suggestions to avoid some typical problems of qualitative articles.” We also encourage reviewers to read Rocco’s (2010) *HRDI*

contribution regarding the criteria for evaluating qualitative studies. We also refer readers to her *HRDQ* Forum piece in (2003) and to Tracy's (2010) article.

Other excellent resources include Sullivan, Baruch, and Schepmyer (2010) who offer reviewing guidelines from various well-known academic journals. An *HRDQ* Forum piece (Winn, 2008) is also available with guidelines on conducting a thoughtful and thorough review. However, we contend that experienced reviewers strike the appropriate balance between a thorough review and a focused review. Often, the most effective reviewers provide feedback on the key issues that can most significantly move a manuscript toward publication (Lepak, 2009).

In closing, we hope that our perspectives offer valuable insights about how to enhance the peer review process and provide timely, high quality reviews for *HRDQ*. Further we hope that we have stimulated the desire to "pay it forward" by embracing the responsibility of being a reviewer who is generous, developmental, honest, open, considerate, thorough, and timely. It is our hope that, through this review process, authors who submit their work for review at *HRDQ* will not emerge feeling angry and intimidated or, alternatively arrogant (Fitzpatrick, 2010; Starbuck, 2003); but, instead that authors will feel that they have received a constructive and respectful review.

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