

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

PROPOSAL FOR DISSERTATION

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION IN ADULT EDUCATION AND
HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

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I propose to the Major Professor and to the Committee Members a study of the following topic to be conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Adult Education and Human Resource Development: **LIVING ON BOTH SIDES OF THE FENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS AS DOWNSIZING SURVIVORS AND STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT FACILITATORS**

Background to the Study

When organizations downsize, human resource development (HRD) professionals may be among the first to learn of the decision. As part of an organization's human resources (HR) function, HRD professionals represent a layer between senior and executive management and front line managers and supervisors. Managers, supervisors, and front-line employees often turn to their HRD functions in times of organizational stress for support and direction.

Organizations expect HRD professionals to help facilitate recovery processes following downsizing so that the organization can quickly move forward. During change events, like downsizing, however, HRD professionals may find themselves cast into the dual role of change recipient (i.e., survivors) and change agent (i.e., strategic HRD facilitators). As change agents and change recipients, however, HRD professionals must work through their own downsizing survivor syndromes while helping others do the same. Yet they often do not have anyone to whom they can turn to help them cope with their own reactions to change and loss.

Studies have been done on the emotional and psychological impact of downsizing on victims and survivors (see Appelbaum & Donia, 2001; Devine, Reay, Stainton, & Collins-Nakai, 2003; Mirabal & DeYoung, 2005). Studies have also been done on managers', supervisors', and HR professionals' experiences as downsizing agents delivering termination notices (see Clair, DuFresne, Jackson, & Ladge, 2006; Molinsky & Margolis, 2006; Parker & McKinley, 2008). However, I was unable to find studies that focused specifically on HRD professionals' experiences as downsizing survivors and strategic HRD (SHRD) facilitators (i.e., organizational change, organizational learning, and organizational performance – Gilley & Maycunich, 2000) within the context of downsizing.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how HRD professionals describe the experience of surviving downsizing and facilitating strategic human resource development (SHRD) before, during, and/or after downsizing. The primary research question is

as follows: How do HRD professionals perceive the experience of surviving downsizing and facilitating SHRD before, during, and/or after downsizing? Secondary questions include the following:

1. How do HRD professionals' perceptions of their survivor experiences influence their abilities to facilitate SHRD before, during, and/or after downsizing?
2. How do HRD professionals' perceptions of the social exchange relationship between employer and employee influence their own survivor experiences?
3. How do HRD professionals' perceptions of the social exchange relationship between employer and employee influence how they facilitate SHRD before, during, and/or after downsizing?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was derived from concepts and theories related to strategic HRD. Concepts include strategic HRD and the resource-based view of the firm. Theories include social exchange theory and psychological contract theory, which focus on the nature of the employment relationship and what happens when an employee perceives that obligations within that relationship have been breached or violated.

Phenomenological Method and Procedures

My study will engage participants in the processes of reflecting on and recollecting their experiences as downsizing survivors and strategic HRD facilitators and sharing their perceptions of this experience. This inquiry aligns with the phenomenological research method. Some key characteristics of phenomenological research include the following. Phenomenology (1) "does not seek to predict or to determine causal relationships" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105); (b) describes meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences with respect to a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007); and (c) focuses on perceptions as the primary source of knowledge (Moustakas, 1994).

Using a screening questionnaire and criterion sampling (Patton, 2002), 15 participants will be selected to participate in this study. Participants must have (a) experienced downsizing while employed in an SHRD-related role; (b) survived downsizing, and (c) been involved in processes related to downsizing before, during, and/or after the event. If I am unable to find the requisite number of participants on my own, I will ask the participants to identify others who might also qualify to participate in this study. This is known as snowball sampling (Patton, 2002).

Data will be collected, analyzed, and synthesized using Creswell's (2007) simplified version of Moustakas's (1994) Modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data. First I will interview myself, a phenomenological process known as epoché, to fully illuminate my own experiences with the phenomenon. This information will then be bracketed for the study's duration so that I can see the phenomenon with a fresh perspective through participants' experiences. Next, I will interview the participants. Participants will be asked to sign an Informed Consent document before the interview. Interviews will be conducted one-to-one, will last between 60-90 minutes, will be digitally recorded, and will then be transcribed by an independent transcriptionist. I will, however, review all transcriptions to ensure that information was transcribed accurately. Participants will also be asked to review their respective transcripts, a credibility strategy known as member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Significant statements in each transcript will be identified and listed, a phenomenological process known as horizontalization (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Significant statements will be clustered into meaning units or themes. Common themes across transcripts will be identified and composite textural, composite structural, and composite textural/structural description of their experiences will be created. The composite textural description will describe what participants' experienced. The composite structural description will describe how (i.e., the setting/context) participants experienced the phenomenon. The composite textural/structural description of the phenomenon will capture the "what" and the "how" of their experiences with the phenomenon.

Integrity Measures

Four criteria will be used to establish the trustworthiness of the study's process and product: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability. Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings are believable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Three strategies will be used to enhance the study's credibility: (a) conducting member checks, (b) conducting peer reviews, (c) engaging in epoché, and (d) maintaining a reflective journal. Transferability is the extent to which another person can conclude that the findings might apply to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, transferability will be enhanced by providing rich, thick description (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Associates, 2002) that enhances the researcher's ability to "transport readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences" (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). Thick description will be provided through the structural and textural descriptions that of participants' experiences with the phenomenon.

Dependability refers to the extent to which others can replicate the research process, while confirmability refers to the extent to which others can confirm or authenticate the study's results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002). Throughout this study, I will create an audit trail by providing detailed descriptions of processes used to collect data, derive themes, and make decisions. Confirmability will be verified through an external auditor. This person will be a doctoral candidate who has not been involved in this study, whose role will be to audit all processes used to arrive at the final results.

Significance

This study will be significant both in its potential contributions to HRD practice and to the knowledge base. From a practice perspective, it may provide insights to organizations on the personal and professional challenges associated with the roles HRD professionals assume related to downsizing events. Additionally, it may help organizations determine how to better prepare, equip, and support their HRD professionals during times of organizational stress so that they, in turn, can more effectively facilitate SHRD before, during, and/or after downsizing.

For a research perspective, it will extend research on downsizing/layoff agents by illuminating the experiences of a group of employees--HRD professionals--whose experiences as survivors and SHRD facilitators before, during, and/or after downsizing events have not been specifically studied.

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