ASSESSING HUMAN RESOURCE PRACTICES ALIGNMENT:
A CASE STUDY

HERBERT G. HENEMAN III AND ANTHONY T. MILANOWSKI

Research has established the link between HR practices and organizational performance, suggesting that the HR system has great strategic potential to drive organizational effectiveness. To capitalize on this potential, the organization must design and deliver HR practices that focus on necessary employee performance competencies, creating an HR system with vertical and horizontal alignment around those competencies. Doing this requires that the organization first assess how its HR practices are currently aligned and then develop ideas for improving HR practice that will be alignment enhancing. We call this diagnostic process Human Resource Alignment (HRA) assessment. We describe an HRA assessment process we developed and applied in a large public school district for the key job of teacher. The assessment was based on the district’s formal teacher performance competency model used, and was conducted by a group of human resources and instructional job experts from the district. These experts rated the degree of vertical and horizontal alignment and then developed suggestions for HR practice changes that would improve alignment. After describing the process and results, we present a series of lessons learned and directions for future research. © 2011 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Keywords: strategic human resource management, human resource alignment assessment

Introduction

Strategic human resource management (hereafter strategic HRM) theory centers on a basic premise that HR practices have the potential to make direct, bottom-line contributions to organizational effectiveness. This is a radical departure from more traditional viewpoints in which HR practices are seen as transactional, administrative, and legalistic routines. Considerable research supports the hypothesized link between HR practices (and the total HR system) and various indicators of organizational effectiveness, confirming the strategic potential of HR practices and the HR system as a whole (Gerhart, 2007; Wright, Gardner, Moynihan, & Allen, 2005).

Strategic HRM theory uses the concept of HR alignment as the bridge between HR practices (and the HR system) and organizational...
effectiveness to posit the underlying mechanism by which HR practices can realize their strategic potential. Two types of HR alignment are thought necessary for strategic impact, namely, vertical alignment and horizontal alignment (Delery, 1998; Gerhart, 2007; Wright & Snell, 1998). These have also been referred to as external fit and internal fit, respectively.

Numerous general definitions of vertical and horizontal alignment have been advanced (e.g., Delery, 1998; Gerhart, 2007; Huselid, Becker, & Beatty, 2005; Wright & Snell, 1998). Vertical alignment represents the degree to which HR practices (and the collective HR system) specifically focus on identified strategic organizational objectives. Such HR practices are designed to make strategic impact. Horizontal alignment of HR practices is the degree to which the practices work together in a mutually supportive and reinforcing way. Horizontally aligned HR practices potentially create an HR system with a strategic impact that is greater than the sum of the individual HR practice impacts.

Strategic HRM theory has suggested additional conceptual refinements to both vertical and horizontal alignment. For vertical alignment, a major refinement has been to provide a behavioral explanation for how HR practices can have strategic impacts (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Wright & McMahen, 1992). Specifically, HR practices work through employees’ performance competencies (and their underlying knowledge, skills, and abilities) to bring about strategic impact. As succinctly suggested by Huselid et al. (2005) “the characteristics of the HR management system that really drive value are the extent to which they are delivering competencies that are the basis for the performance behaviors required to execute strategy” (p. 138). In turn, to create vertical HR alignment, the HR practices must be performance competency based.

That is, the desired performance competencies must be embedded within the actual content of HR practices (such as having training program content that centers on improving the performance competencies necessary for successful job performance). Without such competency content, HR practices lose their potential for strategic impact.

The concept of horizontal alignment has been sharpened to suggest four types of horizontal fit or alignment (Kepes & Delery, 2007). The first type is intra-HR system fit, the fit between HR policies, practices, and processes. The second type of horizontal fit is inter-HR activity areas fit, such as between selection and training. This is the type of fit used in the present case study. It could be assessed, for example, whether two HR practices support one another in driving a competency focus (e.g., does the performance management system require managers to provide specific feedback about competency strengths and weaknesses and are training and development opportunities in place that will allow employees to improve on competency weaknesses?). Intra-HR activity area fit, the third type of fit, falls within the HR activity fit between components of a single HR activity area, such as the fit between base pay and bonus pay systems. Finally, HR system fit is the degree to which separate HR architectures for separate jobs or job groupings mesh to support the overall HR strategy.

Strategic HRM theory also calls for more emphasis on implementing and executing strategy (Becker & Huselid, 2006; Lengnick-Hall, Lengnick-Hall, Andrade, & Drake, 2009). This is because strategic HRM research has neglected studying the actual conduct of strategic HRM within organizations. One important need is for greater understanding of how organizations can or do operationalize strategic HRM into aligned HR practices. As Lengnick-Hall et al. (2009) noted, “a better understanding, through perhaps some qualitative research of just how organizations link HR systems to strategies would be invaluable. Breakthroughs in this area will likely result from direct contact with organizations rather than studying existing literature” (p. 81).

Another strategic HRM refinement is the suggestion that the HR “architecture” be differentiated. The HR architecture comprises HR practices and required competencies (Becker & Huselid, 2006). Because different jobs or groups of jobs will likely require different sets of competencies, it logically fol-
ows that different (i.e., differentiated) HR systems may be necessary across these jobs, even though the systems may share some common elements (e.g., technology). It is particularly important to create separate HR systems for key jobs, particularly those that have critical strategic importance because employees fulfilling these roles directly implement the organization’s strategy (Becker & Huselid, 2006).

To create an aligned HR system, the organization must first diagnose the current state of HR alignment. From a behavioral strategic HRM perspective, such a diagnosis will help the organization determine the degree to which HR practices are (1) aligned to the performance competencies that drive attainment of strategic objectives and (2) aligned to one another. We call this diagnostic process Human Resource Alignment (HRA) assessment. Surprisingly, given the centrality of HR alignment in strategic HRM theory, only a few attempts have been reported to conduct such an assessment. We turn to a brief description and critique of those efforts.

**Previous Work**

Schneider et al. (2003) elicited employees’ perceptions of the service culture in a small bank to infer what HR practices were aligned to the service culture. During focus groups with managers and employees, each group was first asked the general question, “Please describe the climate or culture of the bank, especially the role of service in it.” Follow-up questions probed deeper into more specific examples of supportive HR practices. Several highly aligned HR practices emerged from analyzing the responses: training and development, teamwork, goals and rewards, and staffing. Content analysis of the responses revealed perceptions of generally high vertical alignment of the HR practices to the service strategy.

Boon, Boselie, Paauwe, and DenHartog (2007) posited three dimensions for vertical alignment and three for horizontal. The vertical alignment dimensions were (1) HR strategy–HR practice content link, (2) role of HR in formulating strategy, and (3) implementing HR strategy. The horizontal alignment dimensions were (1) strength of interaction among HR practices, (2) aligning dominant goals with the HR system, and (3) degree of consistency of HR practices for different employee groups. Based on these sub-dimensions, Boon et al. (2007) conducted case studies of HR practice content and HR alignment in two large retailing organizations. Interviews and document analysis were used to gather the data. A rating (averaged across multiple raters) of overall HR practice alignment was created for each of the dimensions of vertical and horizontal alignment. There were rating differences between dimensions and organizations, providing support for the three hypothesized dimensions of both vertical and horizontal alignment.

Finally, Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) reported a detailed HRA assessment process they used at a unit of Motorola. During a two-day workshop, organization members first identified environmental trends and indicators of competitive advantage at the strategic level. They then identified “cultural capabilities” (e.g., high-performance accountability, passion, collaboration) needed to support the indicators of competitive advantage. This was followed by developing “behavioral scenario building” to derive specific, observable behaviors (i.e., performance competencies) that illustrated each cultural capability. Attendees were then given a listing of HR practice areas without any accompanying practice descriptions. They rated each HR practice area in terms of (1) its alignment with cultural capability now and (2) the impact the practice could have if it were fully aligned to cultural capability. The two ratings were multiplied to provide an
index of which HR practice alignment changes would yield the highest payoff. Finally, attendees discussed possible HR practice changes, summarized possible improvements, and developed brief implementation plans.

All three of these studies explored the concept of HR alignment within actual organizational settings. Despite different purposes and methodologies, the results of all three were viewed as supporting attempts to operationalize and assess HR practice alignment. Each concluded it was methodologically possible to conduct an HRA assessment that would provide meaningful information about the actual alignment of HR practices within the organization.

We share this view, though we believe that additional studies are needed using a more refined, in-depth, and complete HRA assessment process. We therefore describe the process we used, and the lessons we learned, to provide organizations with additional guidance in conducting HRA assessments.

Case Study of Human Resource Alignment Assessment Process

This study is HR practice and practitioner focused, though it draws from strategic HRM theory. We develop, field test, and evaluate an in-depth HRA assessment.

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Background

The Site

Our case study took place in a large, southwestern school district where we had previously conducted research projects on human resource issues pertaining to teachers and principals. The district has 62,500 students (45% minority) and 92 schools, approximately 4,000 certified teaching staff, and 300 administrators. The district is headed by a superintendent, to whom an assistant superintendent for Human Resources, and two assistant superintendents for instruction (one for elementary and one for middle and high schools) report.

In previous research (Heneman & Milanowski, 2004), we identified eight major HR practice areas relevant to teachers. These areas are: recruitment, selection, induction (onboarding), mentoring, professional development, compensation, performance management, and instructional leadership. Four of these were administered by the district’s central HR department (recruitment, selection, compensation, performance management). The other four were the responsibility of units within the district office that oversee instruction. For all areas, our focus was on HR practices administered from the district level, excluding practices primarily implemented at the school level. (These were, however, influenced by district policy and practice.)
Two areas that might be considered within the HR practice domain were excluded: labor relations and work design. Because the labor agreement for teachers covered all eight of the HR practice areas, including labor relations as a separate area would have confused the HRA assessment process. With respect to job design, school districts generally do not consider this an HR function. Further, the district had already decided that the teacher competency model (described below) represented the design of the teacher’s job.

Several years before the HRA assessment, the district had adopted a new teacher evaluation system based on a teacher performance competency model from C. Danielson’s book, *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching* (1996, 2007). The Framework for Teaching had not only become the foundation of the teacher evaluation system in the case district, but began to permeate the culture and language of the district. It was also partially incorporated into district HR practices, especially induction, mentoring, and professional development. The district was receptive to the authors’ suggestions of designing and conducting an experimental HRA assessment based on the Framework for Teaching. They recognized the potential strategic value of the assessment in identifying HR practice changes that would support the performance competencies they had already adopted. The district did not, however, make any up-front commitment to act on the assessment’s results or to implement HR practice changes.

**The HRA Assessment Process Map**

We developed an HRA assessment process map to guide the study (Figure 1). Our description of the HRA assessment study that follows describes each of these steps.

**The HRA Assessment Study**

**Step One: Choose Key Job(s)**

We decided to focus on a single key job, that of K-12 teacher, for several reasons. First, the overriding strategic objectives of the district pertained to improving student achievement. Research has shown that teacher effectiveness is the most important driver of student achievement that a school district can influence directly (Brophy, 1986; Goldhaber & Anthony, 2003; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Odden, Borman, & Fermanich, 2004). Second, the district had established performance competencies for this job that for the most part were unique to it. Third, teachers are by far the largest occupational group in the district, with their salaries and benefits making up about 65% of the operating budget. Finally, because of these considerations, the district was interested in moving toward a more differentiated HR system (Becker & Huselid, 2006; Cantrell, 2007) specifically for teachers.

**Step Two: Choose the Study Group**

We decided to include staff from both outside and inside the HR department in the HRA assessment study group because other central instructional units were responsible for some HR practice areas. This provided expertise across all the HR practice areas and allowed us to include a broader range of stakeholders to achieve buy-in for recommended changes to HR practices. The HRA assessment study group was kept small to facilitate meeting schedules, sharpen group discussion, and allow for relatively short (two-hour maximum) meetings. The study group included the assistant superintendent for Human Resources, the manager of Employment, the manager of Labor Relations, the director of K-6 Professional Development, the manager of Teacher Induction and Mentoring, a middle school principal, and the president of the teachers’ association (included because of
the long-standing collaborative relationship between the district and the association). Study group members were knowledgeable about the teacher performance competency model (described later) and one or more of the eight HR practice areas in the district; four had two or more years of previous teaching experience or experience supervising teachers in the district. The authors facilitated the study group.

**Step Three: Review the HRA Assessment Concepts and Process**

In the first study group meeting, we explained the general purpose of the study, outlined the roles of the study group members, and established timelines and meeting times and dates. We then presented the concepts of teacher performance competencies (using the Framework for Teaching), vertical alignment, and horizontal

![Diagram of Human Resource Alignment Assessment Process Map](image-url)
alignment. Vertical alignment was described as having competencies embedded in the content of the HR practices and communicated as such to teachers and others. Horizontal alignment was described as having HR practices that work together and support one another, illustrated with pairs of HR practices such as selection and professional development. Practical examples of both types of alignment were presented verbally and discussed.

**Step Four: Consider the Performance Competency Model**

The district’s teacher performance competency model already in use, based on the Framework for Teaching, was the model under consideration as the basis for the HRA assessment. The Framework for Teaching (Danielson, 1996, 2007) identifies the behavioral domain of classroom instruction at the K-12 level and is applicable across subject areas and grades. It attempts to portray effective practices in behavioral (task) terms and contains standards for effectiveness accompanied by behavioral rating scales. Danielson (1996, 2007) encouraged others to modify the Framework for Teaching to fit local contexts. In this case, the district had completed such modifications.

The Framework for Teaching partitions teaching into four domains: (1) planning and preparation, (2) the classroom environment, (3) instruction, and (4) professional responsibilities. Each domain has more specific performance components and then elements nested within those components. Each element also describes four performance levels or rubrics, similar in format to a behaviorally anchored rating scale. The domains and components of the district’s performance competency model, based on the Framework for Teaching, are shown in Table I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Components</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Planning and Preparation | 1a: Demonstrating Knowledge of Content and Pedagogy  
  1b: Demonstrating Knowledge of Students  
  1c: Setting Instructional Outcomes  
  1d: Demonstrating Knowledge of Resources  
  1e: Designing Coherent Instruction  
  1f: Designing Student Assessments |
| 2. The Classroom Environment | 2a: Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport  
  2b: Establishing a Culture for Learning  
  2c: Managing Classroom Procedures  
  2d: Managing Student Behavior  
  2e: Organizing Physical Space |
| 3. Instruction | 3a: Communicating with Students  
  3b: Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques  
  3c: Engaging Students in Learning  
  3d: Using Assessment in Instruction  
  3e: Demonstrating Flexibility and Responsiveness  
  3f: Using Student Assessment Data |
| 4. Professional Responsibilities | 4a: Reflecting on Teaching  
  4b: Maintaining Accurate Records  
  4c: Communicating with Families  
  4d: Participating in a Professional Community  
  4e: Growing and Developing Professionally  
  4f: Showing Professionalism |

*Note: Adapted from the Framework for Teaching (Danielson, 1996)*
A desirable requirement for using any performance competency model is that it possesses supportive validity evidence. Both content and predictive validity evidence support the Framework for Teaching. The Framework’s developer reported substantial research activity involved in mapping the content domain of effective teaching practice, including the domains, components, and elements (Danielson, 1996, 2007). Some evidence also indicates that assessments of teachers on these competencies are significant predictors of the achievement of their students. Elementary and middle school teachers in three settings (including the district of the current study) whose performance was rated higher on the performance competencies had higher average student achievement in reading and mathematics (Milanowski, Kimball, & Odden, 2005). The competency model could thus also be said to have “strategic validity” (Huselid et al., 2005, p. 908). There has been widespread interest in the Framework from school districts throughout the country, and it is our sense that more than 200 school districts have adopted it.

**Step Five: Review and Approve the Performance Competency Model**

We proposed to the study group that the existing competency model based on the Framework for Teaching be used in the HRA assessment process. We discussed the numerous advantages of using a model already in place and embedded within the language and practices of the district, the favorable validity evidence for the current model, and the workload required to develop a new model (which would likely overlap considerably with the current model). The study group then formally approved using the current competency model.

**Step Six: Write HR Practice Descriptions**

In previous research (Heneman & Milanowski, 2004), we had identified the eight major HR practice areas for teachers: recruitment, selection, induction, mentoring, professional development, performance management, compensation, and instructional leadership and more specific components within each. Table II contains the eight HR practice areas and their 21 components, along with brief examples illustrating how the performance competencies could be embedded within them.

The study group members agreed to use the typology shown in Table II. Accordingly, we then wrote descriptions of the district’s HR practices at the central (as opposed to the school) level, focusing on practices pertaining to the competency model. The intent was to capture how (if at all) the performance competencies were embedded in the district’s HR practices. For example, for recruitment we developed descriptions of the districts’ practices with respect to applicant pools (applicant sources such as teacher education programs, the district website, job fairs, employee referrals, and internal transfers) and the degree to which applicants received training in, or information about, the performance competencies. Much of the information needed to prepare the descriptions was readily available.
from sources such as HR policy and procedure documents, the district website, the professional development course catalog, and the teachers’ labor agreement. We also interviewed HR and instructional staff.

**Step Seven: Review and Approve the Descriptions**

Study group members reviewed the draft descriptions of the HR practices and sug-

### Table II: HR Practices for Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HR Practice Areas and Components</th>
<th>Examples of Vertical Alignment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recruitment</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicant Pools</td>
<td>• Identifying sources of applicants likely to have the desired competencies.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>• Communicating to applicants about desired competencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selection</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certification</td>
<td>• Judging whether state certification provides evidence of competency attainment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment Standards</td>
<td>• Evaluating applicants’ competencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Setting the minimum level of the competencies required for hiring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Induction</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-service</td>
<td>• Efforts to inform new hires about competencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-the-job</td>
<td>• Training programs focused on the competencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mentoring</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Participants</td>
<td>• Having mentors focus coaching on the competencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Choosing mentors based on their own competency level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional Development</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Teacher Planning</td>
<td>• Focusing on activities to develop competency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Assisting teachers in identifying and choosing activities related to the competencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Compensation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base Pay</td>
<td>• Starting pay and pay progression sufficient to attract and retain teachers with the competencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variable Pay</td>
<td>• Awarding bonuses for attaining competency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring Packages</td>
<td>• Differentiating starting compensation based on competency level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Performance Management</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Appraisal</td>
<td>• Assessing the competency levels teachers exhibit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal Setting</td>
<td>• Setting goals for improvement in terms of the competencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback &amp; Coaching</td>
<td>• Assisting teachers in improving on competency areas in which they are deficient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remediation</td>
<td>• Taking steps toward improving performance or dismissing teachers who do not exhibit the competencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instructional Leaders</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection</td>
<td>• Choosing leaders based on their ability to assess competencies and coach their development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>• Making efforts to develop leaders’ ability to assess and coach the competencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Management</td>
<td>• Holding leaders accountable for being effective performance managers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: *The term “competency” refers to the behaviorally defined teaching competencies identified by the district.*
gested modifications. Rewrites were completed and final drafts were submitted to the study group for approval. Descriptions for each of the eight HR practice areas were about one to two single-spaced pages and were used as a source of information when the study group members made their HRA assessments. For example, the final description for mentoring is shown in Figure 2. It illustrates an HR practice area that had strong vertical alignment with the performance competencies.

**Step Eight: Make HRA Assessments**

The study group created separate assessments for vertical and horizontal alignment. Alignment ratings were made and ideas for alignment improvement were developed.

### Vertical Alignment

A rating scale was constructed to measure the degree of alignment between each of the 21 HR practice components shown in Table II and each of the four domains of the teacher performance competency model. To keep the rating task simple, a 4-point rating scale was used. Figure 3 illustrates an example of the rating scale for the mentoring HR practice area.

Vertical alignment assessments occurred during four, two-hour meetings. Each study group member received a graphic representation of HR alignment, the teacher performance competency model (Table I), a description of the HR practices for each component of an HR practice area (such as illustrated in Figure 2), and the rating scale for each area (such as illustrated in Figure 3).

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**Mentoring**

The district’s mentoring program is housed within the Professional Development Division, along with the induction program. Both programs are headed by a coordinator who was previously an elementary principal in the district and had in-depth experience with the teacher performance competencies. All new teachers must participate in both the mentoring and induction programs, unless exempted from doing so by their principal.

**Content**

The mentoring program pairs a trained teacher mentor with a novice teacher at the school site. The program supports beginning teachers in their professional development, helping them to plan, teach, reflect, and assess their own performance and that of their students. The mentor helps the mentee learn and improve on the teacher performance competencies by helping the mentee implement the professional goals established through the teacher performance evaluation process. Throughout the year the mentor helps the mentee meet the expectations of the competencies. The mentor models, coaches, and collaborates with the novice teacher to help the novice meet his or her professional competency goals.

Expectations for the mentee include meeting weekly with the mentor about lesson plans, assessments, classroom management, and instruction; scheduling professional leave to observe classroom teaching of mentors and other teachers; scheduling at least two episodes for the mentor to collect observation data and give feedback; attend Mentor Teacher Program seminars and workshops; and communicate with the principal and program coordinator as needed.

**Participants**

The mentees are primarily novice teachers; veteran new hires also participate unless exempted by their principal. The mentors are teachers who have three years of successful teaching experience (as measured by the performance evaluation system based on the competencies), completed special mentoring training (which includes specific information about how to mentor and coach a teacher around the teacher performance competencies), and received recommendations from three colleagues and their principal. Mentors do not evaluate teachers in a formal sense. They continue to take classes, such as the Mentor Development seminar.
Members reviewed all the materials, questions were discussed, and each rater then independently made initial ratings for each HR practice component. For example, for mentoring, separate ratings were made for “content” and for “participants.” Raters then shared their ratings and the reasons behind them. After discussion, re-ratings were again completed independently, although changes in ratings were not required.

To summarize the final ratings, average ratings for each HR practice area and component were computed. For simplicity and ease of understanding these computations, it was assumed that all HR practice areas and their components had equal weights and that the rating scales were approximately interval in nature. (These assumptions were also made for the horizontal alignment ratings.) To aid interpretation, averages were transformed into percent alignment results. This was done by taking a given average, dividing it by the highest possible rating scale value, and multiplying by 100. For example, an average rating

**FIGURE 3.** Vertical alignment rating form
ing of 1.5 on a 1–4 rating scale would translate into a vertical alignment of 37% (1.5/4 \times 100 = 37\%). The vertical alignment rating results are shown in Table III. Vertical alignment ranged from 25% (for both components of compensation) to 100% (for the performance management component “teacher evaluation”). High vertical alignment was also found for all of the induction and mentoring components. Other examples of low vertical alignment include the two recruitment components (“applicant pools” and “information”) and two of the instructional leader components (“selection” and “performance management”).

After reviewing the final ratings for each HR practice area, study group members briefly brainstormed possible ideas to improve vertical HR alignment. We did not participate in these discussions, but recorded the ideas to create a suggestion list. A total of 34 suggestions were made. The suggestion list and the vertical alignment rating results served as key inputs for developing specific

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HR Areas &amp; Components</th>
<th>Average Rating (1–4 Scale)</th>
<th>Percent Vertical Alignment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicant Pools</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licensure</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring Standards</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Induction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-service</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-the-job</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Planning</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring Package</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base Pay</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variable Pay</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Evaluation</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback/Coaching</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remediation</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Management</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Average</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
recommendations for vertical alignment improvement (Step 9).

Horizontal Alignment

We used the inter-HR activity approach (Kepes & Delery, 2007), which involves rating two HR practices at a time in terms of how well they support and reinforce one another. The study group members reported that considering all pair-wise combinations of the 21 HR practice components within the eight HR areas would be too confusing and time consuming. We therefore decided to obtain ratings of just the 28 pairs of HR practice areas as a whole. The study group members told us, however, that this scale format was vague, confusing, and called for more precision in rating than they were comfortable with. Further, a visual review of the ratings suggested low inter-rater agreement. This scale, therefore, was replaced by the 5-point rating scale, shown in Figure 4, with which study group members rated how well two practices were “working together to support the competencies.”

The horizontal alignment ratings were made in a separate meeting after all the vertical alignment ratings were completed. Members were given the teacher performance competency model, descriptions of all the HR practices, and the horizontal alignment rating scale. As before, ratings were completed independently. Due to time constraints, the process of discussing and re-rating the horizontal alignments was not possible. Average and percent horizontal alignment data were calculated. Results were: recruitment, 53%; selection, 53%; induction, 65%; mentoring, 70%; professional development, 53%; compensation, 40%; performance management, 53%; and leaders, 45%. The overall (average) alignment was 54%.

After reviewing the ratings, study group members discussed ways to improve horizontal alignment. Unlike the discussions for vertical alignment, this proved difficult because members (1) were still “fuzzy” on the precise meaning of horizontal alignment; (2) thought that suggesting alignment improvements for each of the 28 pairs of HR practices would be confusing and time consuming; and (3) argued that horizontal alignment would improve as an outgrowth of improving vertical alignment. Separate suggestions for horizontal alignment improvement were thus not made.

Step Nine: Develop Recommendations for Improving Alignment

A separate study group meeting focused on developing recommendations for improving vertical HR alignment. To aid the discussion, members were provided with the final rating results and the list of 34 suggestions for improving vertical alignment.

The suggestions were discussed for clarity of understanding and to solicit additional suggestions (none were offered). The group then collectively rated each suggestion on the basis of two criteria: (1) degree of likely impact on teacher performance competency if adopted (high, medium, low) and (2) time frame for action (do now, do within a year, study further). The time frame for action criterion implicitly included considerations such as cost and implementation difficulty. Each suggestion was considered a possible recommendation from the study group.

Seven examples of the study group’s recommendations, all viewed as high potential impact, but varying in the time frame for action, are shown in Table IV. The highest priority ‘recommendations called for the district superintendent to begin immediately leading the district’s top management in improving their collective performance management. This broad recommendation resulted from discussions during which study group members pointed to major deficiencies in the practice of performance management by top manage-
Horizontal Alignment Rating Scale

Horizontal alignment refers to the degree to which the district’s HR practices are internally consistent and mutually reinforcing. It relates to the question “Are HRM programs working together to support the same competencies?” (i.e., components of the four domains of the teacher evaluation system: planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities).

Examples of horizontal alignment include:

- Starting pay high enough to recruit candidates with the needed competencies
- Induction programs providing information about the performance expectations to which new hires will be held
- Professional development programs that cover areas in need of improvement as documented by performance evaluation

For each pair of practices shown below, please rate the degree to which you believe the two are aligned.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair 1</th>
<th>Teacher Recruitment: Finding qualified external and internal applicants; informing applicants about the teacher standards.</th>
<th>Teacher Selection: Assessing candidates’ qualifications relative to the teacher standards; hiring committee interviews and evaluations of applicants.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not aligned</td>
<td>Highly Aligned</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair 2</th>
<th>Teacher Recruitment: Finding qualified external and internal applicants; informing applicants about the teacher standards.</th>
<th>Teacher Induction: Jump Start for Success; New Teacher Academy; pre-observation meeting of principal with new teacher.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not aligned</td>
<td>Highly Aligned</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair 3</th>
<th>Teacher Recruitment: Finding qualified external and internal applicants; informing applicants about the teacher standards.</th>
<th>Teacher Mentoring: New district mentor program, school-based mentors, selecting/training mentors; one-on-one work with new teachers.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not aligned</td>
<td>Highly Aligned</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 4.** Horizontal HR alignment rating form
developing a standard interview with questions based on the competencies, auditing professional development programs approved by the district for competency coverage, and improving the feedback principals give teachers about their competencies. The goal for each change was to embed more deeply the performance competencies in actual HR practice.

The final category of recommendations called for additional study of two complex issues that required bargaining with the teachers’ association: (1) lengthening new teachers’ probationary period to allow the teachers’ classroom performance to be assessed more thoroughly prior to the tenure decision, and (2) giving salary increases only for district-approved coursework relevant to the teacher performance competency model.

The study group believed that lack of staff expertise, time, and budget constraints prevented the district from moving forward with all the 34 recommendations concurrently. As its final recommendations, the group chose the 22 recommendations considered to have the highest potential impact, including all those shown in Table IV.

### Table IV: Examples of HR Practice Change Recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact/Timeline</th>
<th>Suggestion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| I. High Potential Impact—Begin Implementation Now | 1. Have superintendent lead top management in being more proactive in performance management and accountable for effective performance management (HR area—Instructional Leaders)  
2. Inform job applicants about the teacher performance competency model on the website and during site (school) visits (HR area—Recruitment) |
| II. High Potential Impact—Implement Within One year | 3. Develop standard interview questions/answer rubrics based on the teacher performance competency model (HR area—Selection)  
4. Evaluate current professional development and in-service courses in terms of their content relevance to the teacher performance competency model (HR area—Professional Development)  
5. Provide teachers with more feedback (both written and oral) from their teacher evaluations relative to the teacher performance competency model (HR area—Performance Management) |
| III. High Potential Impact—Study Further | 6. Lengthen the probationary period from one to two years (HR area—Performance Management)  
7. Provide movement on the salary schedule only for approved coursework that is relevant to the teacher performance competency model (HR area—Compensation) |

**Step Ten: Develop the Final Report**

The authors developed a draft of a final report for the study group, which reviewed the report and suggested changes. The final report included an executive summary, a brief description and illustration of HR practice alignment to teacher performance competencies, a synopsis of the eight HR practice areas, descriptions of the HRA assessment process and rating results, and the 22 changes. The report recommended that the 22 high-impact changes be pursued immediately, and that the study group be continued to provide guidance and follow through on the changes. The report was presented to the district Board of Trustees (school board), which approved both recommendations.

**Lessons Learned**

The overall lesson learned from this case is that the HRA assessment process worked reasonably well in the case of vertical, but not horizontal, alignment. With vertical
alignment, study group members grasped the concept, worked through the assessment process without problems, produced reliable assessment ratings (discussed later), and generated a large number of recommendations to improve vertical alignment. Their recommendations, as noted, were approved by the district’s Board of Trustees. Members reported that the process was a novel and eye-opening exercise that drove home the need for greater cross-fertilization between the district’s HR and instructional silos to design and manage HR practices related to the teacher performance competency model. Members also learned that the HRA assessment is not for the faint of heart. It requires a commitment to large-scale assessment and change in HR practices and the total HR system.

As facilitators, we found that using the teacher performance competency model as the criterion for assessing HR practices was invaluable. It framed, focused, and shaped all discussions of HR practices, the assessment ratings, and the suggestions for changes in HR practices. The model also provided an anchor for the study group, creating a common purpose, language, and understanding.

There was, however, a downside to the singular focus on teacher performance competencies that surfaced as study group members discussed possible HR practice changes. With the tight focus, we ignored other potentially important criteria for gauging HR practice alignment, such as transactional efficiency, HR process improvement, reducing costs, and improving service speed and quality. When such criteria arose during discussions, we simply had to direct study group members to the performance competency model, explaining that these criteria might be important, but they were not the focus of our attention. This suggests that using multiple criteria could result in an HRA assessment process that unfolds into an even more transformative one.

Another important lesson we learned concerned the reliability of the assessment ratings, because low reliability would seriously question the meaning and usefulness of the process and results. We learned that vertical alignment could be rated reliably, while horizontal alignment could not. We learned this by calculating the percentage agreement among study group members’ ratings, using 75% agreement as the acceptable threshold (Heneman & Judge, 2009). For vertical alignment, we found an average of 68% agreement across the HR practice areas in the initial ratings, and this increased to a more acceptable 77.3% agreement for the final ratings. Unfortunately, the average agreement for the horizontal alignment ratings was only 54.2%. It seems likely that the acceptable reliability for the vertical alignment ratings aided study group members in identifying and agreeing on their suggestions for HR practice changes.

The low reliability for horizontal alignment likely reflects an underlying difficulty in conceptualizing and measuring it. To introduce horizontal alignment to the study group, we defined it in general terms as having HR practices that are mutually supportive and reinforcing. We verbally illustrated this with several examples of horizontal alignment between pairs of HR practices (e.g., select for certain competencies and develop other competencies). This conceptualization was carried on to the rating scale, where study group members were given three more examples of horizontal alignment between HR practice pairs. This was followed by rating each of 28 HR practice pairs in terms of how well they were “working together to support the same competencies” (see Figure 4). Unfortunately, this combined definition-measurement approach was insufficient to produce acceptable reliability. We will provide some suggestions for how future research might proceed toward assessing horizontal alignment better.
In a post-exercise discussion with the study group, members pointed to several features of the process that they found essential or very helpful. These features included the competency model as the alignment criterion, the HR practice descriptions with the embedded information about competency usage, the initial rating-discussion-final rating format, several relatively short meetings, and using the percent alignment score for interpreting rating results.

Another lesson learned based on discussions with the study group was that the members remained skeptical that their vertical alignment recommendations would be acted upon and implemented, even if they received Board approval. Unfortunately, our study was not funded to follow up on the recommendations and their implementation fate. Such implementation skepticism itself, however, could be an important problem for HRA assessment that must be addressed early and directly. The process will be very anemic if participants do not believe that their recommended HR practice changes that support strategic objectives will be implemented.

Finally, following through on recommendations may well require individuals with special competencies to design, implement, and manage the HR practice changes (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). Such competencies may be lacking in current HR and other staff. Thus, some combination of training/replacing staff, along with importing temporary talent, may be necessary.

**Directions for Future Research**

Based on the lessons learned and Human Resource Management reviewers’ comments, we offer several possibilities for future research. Our results for horizontal alignment indicate further work on this concept and process is needed. The following suggestions may be helpful. First, we should continue to view horizontal alignment as “HR practices working together to affect performance competencies.” Assessing the horizontal alignment of HR practices that lack (or have unknown) vertical alignment to competencies seems strategically questionable and lacks practical utility for an organization. Second, to date, horizontal alignment has only been presented in broad, generic terms (Chadwick, 2010). The commonly used broad examples are positive synergy and negative synergy, which refer to HR practice interactions that help or hinder effectiveness, respectively, beyond the stand-alone effects of each practice (Chadwick, 2010; Kepes & Delery, 2007). We used this conception to guide our study. Given the results, there appears to be a need to sharpen the meaning and measurement of horizontal alignment.

Along these lines, we offer two more specific examples of horizontal alignment to stimulate work in this direction. The examples are competency communication flows and use of cross-practice teams. Competency-focused HR practices require information about individual employee competencies that can be shared and used across HR practices, such as those found in a talent management system. This allows for focused and tailor-made actions for each individual. For example, a new hire’s competency scores determined during selection could be provided to training staff to develop a specific set of training actions focused on specific competency deficiencies that were identified at time of hire. Hiring bonuses might also be targeted to the competency proficiency levels of new hires. Finally, assessing competency during performance appraisal might serve as input to develop a set of planned mentoring activities for the employee. In the case of using cross-practice teams, there is a need for HR (and other) staff to work together formally to design and implement mechanisms that will facilitate horizontal alignment between HR practice areas. Such activities may eliminate HR practice silos and foster synergies between HR practices. If an organizationally meaningful set of horizontal alignment actions (such as these two ex-
amples) could be identified, those could then serve as the primary basis for experimenting with new ways to examine horizontal alignment during the HRA assessment process.

Turning to vertical alignment, the extensive HR practice descriptions contained embedded competency information, providing concrete guidance for rating. Four-point rating scales and simple combining/averaging scores were used as a matter of convention and study group acceptance. Future research might investigate whether more or fewer scale points are needed to capture the true amount of alignment variation and to improve the alignment ratings’ reliability. Also, alternative ways of combining scores, such as differential weighting, might be examined to determine if they lead to a more organizationally useful sense of alignment or to different HR practice changes. Finally, it might be useful to use rating scales that allow for negative (and positive) alignment ratings to allow for perceived negative alignment.

As facilitators, we wrote the HR practice descriptions, possibly resulting in demand effects. That is, this process may have slanted the descriptions in ways that favored the competency model and yielded high vertical alignment ratings as a result. Because there were large differences in vertical alignment scores across the HR practice areas, however, it seems likely that little slanting occurred. Future research might look at ways to control for slanting. One way would be to use arm’s-length, disinterested people to generate the HR practice descriptions and others to do the assessment ratings. Another method would be to simply use the organization’s existing HR practice descriptions. This would require, however, that the competency usage information be present in the descriptions and that the descriptions not be onerously long and complex.

The HR practice descriptions we used were of intended HR practice, as opposed to actual or perceived practice. Actual practice might deviate from intended practice for many reasons, including lack of resources or poor implementation. Perceived practice by job incumbents might differ from intended practice due to incumbents’ lack of HR practice knowledge or personal experience. These alternative views of HR practice could be incorporated into separate sets of HR practice descriptions, followed by designing and conducting an HRA assessment process for each set of descriptions. This would help determine if the assessment rating characteristics and suggestions for HR practice change vary according to whether intended, enacted, or perceived HR practice descriptions were used.

The intended HR practices we used were described and assessed at the central level of the district, rather than in individual organizational units (i.e., schools). It is very possible that intended practices are not fully carried out and that other HR practices beyond those described are used at the unit level. This suggests a need to experiment with conducting the HRA assessment at the unit level and the central level, determining points of both intersection and divergence of HR alignment, and developing a more robust set of HR practice changes.

Research might also look at the process by which HR practice change suggestions are generated. The number and quality of suggestions might be compared across different processes, such as (1) study group members generate suggestions without assistance, as in the present study; (2) facilitators take an active role in suggesting changes to study group members for them to consider; and (3) study group members are first presented with descriptions of evidence-based or “best” practice examples to stimulate their thinking.

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The composition and tasks of the study group might also be examined. Does the study group need to have both HR and non-HR representation? While we used both to gain HR practice expertise across the HR practice areas and to secure buy-in, perhaps using just HR staff is sufficient. Or, what might happen if there was combined representation to generate and approve HR practice descriptions and then just HR staff performed the alignment ratings and generated ideas for HR practice improvement? These questions warrant additional research.

Related to this is whether it is desirable to use outside experts to help generate improvement suggestions. Research suggests
that HR practitioners lack knowledge about evidence-based effective HR practices (Rynes, Colbert, & Brown, 2002); therefore, it would be interesting to see whether a group of HR researchers would outperform an organization’s HR and non-HR staff in the number and quality of suggestions generated.

A final direction for future research is to consider all of the above issues in the context of an HRA assessment process for multiple, unrelated jobs or related jobs within a job family. We had the good fortune to focus on a single key job with a known and validated performance competency model. With multiple jobs, all facets of the process are likely to be affected. For example, there may need to be a job-spanning competency model (Heneman & Judge, 2009) with more generic competencies. Such a model may affect the types of HR practice descriptions written or used, the reliability of the vertical alignment ratings, and the number and types of suggestions for improving HR practice. Alternatively, we may learn that organizations conclude that HRA assessment for multiple jobs is too complex to undertake, and that an HRA assessment for single, key jobs only, which leads to a differentiated HR system, makes benefit/cost sense.

We conclude by extrapolating to the frequently noted HR research-practice gap and suggestions for closing it (Rynes, 2007). We highlight two suggestions. One is for researchers to “pursue explicit interactions with practitioners while designing their studies, interpreting their results, suggesting implications, and testing findings for credibility and usefulness (Rynes, 2007, p. 1046). Another suggestion is for researchers to use more qualitative methodologies because these are “more likely to provide the kinds of rich stories and pose the dilemmas with which practitioners resonate, thus increasing the likelihood that our research will be seen as relevant to them” (Rynes, 2007, p. 1048). We believe this case study is consistent with these recommendations, and we encourage others to explore HRA assessment topics using blended methodologies with high practitioner involvement.

Acknowledgments

The research reported in this paper was supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Society for Human Resource Management Foundation. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the view of the Carnegie Corporation, the Society for Human Resource Management Foundation, the institutional partners of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, or the Wisconsin Center for Education Research. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2008 Academy of Management annual meeting in Anaheim, California. We thank Human Resource Management’s Associate Editor Kevin Carlson and three anonymous reviewers for the many ideas and comments that improved this paper.

HERBERT G. HENEMAN III is the Dickson-Bascom professor (emeritus) in Management and Human Resources and a senior research associate with the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison. For the past decade, his research has focused on strategic human resource management and performance pay in K-12 public schools. Herb is a fellow of the Academy of Management and received its HR Division Career Achievement Award.

ANTHONY T. MILANOWSKI is an assistant scientist with the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison. He has been researching human resource issues in education since 1997, coordinating studies of teacher and principal performance appraisal, costs of turnover, and the use of hiring incentives. Before joining the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he worked as a human resource management professional for 16 years.
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