

Goldstein Sees a Bright Future for Organizational Psychology

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“I was always interested in people. I think I could have been a clinical psychologist who talks to people about their problems and tries to help them. But at some point, I shifted toward understanding people’s backgrounds and issues, so I ended up in industrial organizational psychology. I always had a bent towards working with people, trying to understand and help them.”

That’s the way Dr. Harold Goldstein explains how he became the psychologist he is today. A native of Columbus, Ohio, Goldstein got his bachelor’s degree in psychology from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, his master’s and doctoral degrees in industrial/organizational psychology from the University of Maryland at College Park, and today he is a professor of psychology in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College/CUNY.

Many large organizations today, whether private or public, have full-time staff who specialize in psychology. The idea is for the organization to have psychologists who provide assistance in understanding human behavior in the workplace, while studying the driving principles of individual, group, and organizational behavior and applying this knowledge to problems at work.

Despite the obvious importance of this work, sometimes the leaders of those organizations do not fully understand the role that psychologists play. “I think that’s been one of the most difficult things,” says Goldstein. “It’s not just that they do not understand what we do, but that they do not value what we do.”

Goldstein believes there has been a change over the last five to ten years. “We are trying to show the value of people to organizations. I think they listen more, they realize that the people make the place the way it is, that they’re a source of competitive advantage which is not easily duplicated. Sometimes you don’t like to talk about people that way, but it’s also a form of praise for what people can do for an organization.”

One wonders whether, in a more mechanized, more streamlined world, there is a push for fewer



Dr. Goldstein at his office.

Photo by Gulinoz Javodova

human beings at some organizations, and whether the leaders of those organizations see less value in human capital. “I think you still need to deal with human capital, and I also have faith that human beings always adapt. Whatever changes have occurred, we’ve adapted to be useful, helpful, progressive, and we’ve come up with creative solutions to problems,” he explains.

Goldstein thinks that, despite all the talk about artificial intelligence, humans still bring emotion and intellect to the decision-making process. “Sometimes we talk about removing emotion from our decisions, but I think that’s what makes us human, to have that emotion there. Maybe that’s a piece of unique value that we will always bring to the table.”

In addition to working with corporations, Goldstein has worked with law enforcement organizations, which have been criticized for decades over their handling of certain kinds of situations and certain demographic areas. So

how difficult is it to change the nature of police departments when it comes to dealing with the general public?

Goldstein responds: “I think it is difficult. It has to start with the leaders, it requires them to change their ideas, and then it filters downwards. They are the architects of the organization, and I think that is key. We can focus on the wide range of skills you need—not just the ability to use force, not just your intellect, but also your emotional intelligence and your ability to diffuse conflict, so that an event doesn’t turn negative. To the extent that we build tests that select those kinds of individuals, I think organizations will reflect those changes as well.”

One of the main tasks of organizational psychologists is to talk constantly to the people in an organization, so they can feel the pulse of these people that they’re dealing with. But it’s more complicated than it seems. “When we go in and speak to people, we acknowledge that they’re

putting themselves at risk, and we try to talk about what we do. We try to talk about the ethics of our field and to communicate that we’re going to be careful with the information they give us. We always say that if they don’t feel comfortable saying something, then they shouldn’t. I think the more we speak with them, the more relaxed they get. A lot of the ones that have long tenure say, ‘I don’t care who knows, I’m willing to tell you these things.’ If you build the right kind of relationship with them, I think they are pretty open with us. We try to feed it back at a level where a person can’t be pinpointed.”

Another major issue many organizations deal with today is the issue of diversity. “I’ve dealt with Financial Services and IT, where they aren’t retaining women and minorities” explains Goldstein. “A lot of times we’re able to make a lot of progress with who is coming in, then we turn around and see that people are going out the other side. We have to look at the whole system. If you are bringing in people who are diverse, you need to worry about whether they’re going to feel comfortable there.”

Interestingly enough, most institutions of higher education lack appropriate staff in the role of organizational psychologist. “Most organizations don’t put human capital high up when it comes to making strategic decisions. Sometimes, if you look at what we do, you would say we should be advising, but maybe we haven’t made the case. I think we need to continue to do a good job at explaining the importance of what we contribute and increase our influence in that way,” Goldstein explains.

And what do his students think about this? “When people graduate from our master’s or doctoral program and go into higher levels within an organization, they remember what it is that they bring with them. One thing that we always try to push in our classes is to show what can be done, like ‘Here’s another example.’ And I think that does help with the process.”

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