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J. Richard Hackman (1940-2013)

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J. Richard Hackman (1940-2013)

When J. Richard Hackman died in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on January 8, 2013, psychology lost a giant. Six and a half feet tall, with an outsize personality to match, Richard was the leading scholar in two distinct areas: work design and team effectiveness. In both domains, his work is foundational. Throughout his career, Richard applied rigorous methods to problems of great social importance, tirelessly championing multi-level analyses of problems that matter. His impact on our field has been immense.

Among the first things Richard always said about himself was that he was from the Midwest. He was born on June 14, 1940, and raised in Virginia, Illinois, by his parents, Helen and John Hackman. Helen was a devoted teacher, and her son followed in her footsteps. His childhood years were a happy time in which he developed his lifelong love of fly fishing and the Bighorn Mountains of Wyoming. He married Judith Dozier in 1962 and they raised two daughters, Julia Beth and Laura. His values of love, service, and generosity were evident in his scholarly work and in how he invested in people, especially his students.

Richard began studying the impact of work design on motivation at a time when decades of "scientific management" had had the widespread impact of reducing jobs to a few minimum repeatable steps, requiring little knowledge or skill, and experienced as stultifying and dehumanizing by the people doing them. While many scholars focused on pay and rewards, Richard turned his attention to the work itself, asking: What are the qualities of jobs that make them inherently meaningful, motivating through a sense of accomplishment? His theory (with Greg Oldham) of job characteristics, and his evidence about how one could redesign and enrich jobs, made it possible for workers not only to

perform well but also to develop and make meaningful contributions through their work. Richard's research changed the face of work design in countless industries, from service and manufacturing jobs, to education, health care, and the performing arts.

Richard also rescued the field of groups research from a state of stagnation. In the 1980s, our understanding of team performance focused on group process losses: the failure of group ideation practices like brainstorming; polarization in group decision making; and Groupthink. These well-known phenomena characterized groups performing disastrously, especially compared to nominal groups whose members never interacted with each other. Suspecting that there was more to the story, Richard studied teams engaged in the real-time performance of work with no opportunities for "do-overs" – teams that had to get it right in the moment, such as cockpit crews flying aircraft or musical ensembles in live performances. Richard revitalized teams research with his insights into the conditions under which effective collective work processes emerge. His focus on context was a fundamental insight into both how to understand complex social systems like groups and how to facilitate their effectiveness. Richard's model has informed the design of countless task-performing teams, from cockpit crews and chamber orchestras, to teams leading organizations, performing surgeries, and gathering intelligence – all performing work that matters, in real time.

Although embarrassed by awards, Richard received many of them, including the Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award from Division 14 of the American Psychological Association (APA), the Group Psychologist of the Year award from APA's Group Dynamics Division, the Distinguished Scholar Award from the Academy of

Management (AOM), the AOM Organizational Behavior Division Lifetime Achievement Award, the AOM Terry Book Award, and the AOM Distinguished Educator Award.

Notoriously solitary, Richard was vastly more attracted to studying groups than to joining them, but he embodied the principles he had discovered. He was a master at creating a well-functioning group. Appropriately named "Groups Group," Richard's regular gathering of faculty and doctoral students from many Boston-area universities raised the rigor and impact of teams research, expanding his training of scholars well beyond the doctoral students he personally advised. He even (rarely) joined groups led by others. A trombonist, he was an enthusiastic participant in Harvard's "Trombone Day" extravaganza.

A teacher noted for his breadth, passion, and humor, Richard had an enduring impact on generations of doctoral students. Recent advisees remarked that "This man treated you, an unproven student, as a peer"; "From our first meeting to our last, Richard always made me feel *interesting*," and "His curiosity and passion for research were contagious." In the words of another, "his feedback was like gold," marked by "brevity and brutal honesty," but – once a paper hit its mark – "he would be so enthusiastic and congratulatory." To work with Richard required one to stretch the limits of one's capabilities and to keep up with a very fast ride. An early advisee, now quite eminent in the field, said that, "even though he is no longer with us, in my mind, doing work that pleases Richard, that he would find logical, well-written, evidence-based, and useful, is my personal definition of excellence. In my heart, Richard remains the only one I am really writing for."

Years ago, when one of us was taking a campus walk with Richard and complained that she couldn't see the lovely garden he admired as he peered over a high wall, he immediately lifted her up so that she could see, too. For decades to come, our field will be uplifted by Richard's example, to better see how we can all strive for excellence in research, teaching, and impact on the world.

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