

# Theory Building in Applied Research

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*How to move from observation to concept to theory — and how to tell which one you're actually doing. Curated from the HRD and leadership methodology literature.*

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### First: is it a concept, a model, or a theory?

A frequent reviewer critique is that an article claims "theory" while delivering a concept or model. Locate your contribution before you write it.

Output	What it does	Anchor reference
Concept	Names and defines a phenomenon	Lee (2025)
Model	Specifies relationships among concepts	Rocco, Plakhotnik, & Silberman (2022)
Mid-range theory	Explains <i>how/why</i> within a bounded domain	Seo, Noh, & Ardichvili (2019)
Grand theory	Broad, cross-domain explanation	Lee (2025)

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### Core reading list (annotated)

#### What counts as theory

- **Lee (2025)** — "*So what is theory?*" — a 4-outcome continuum (concept → model → mid-range → grand). The orienting piece.
- **Seo, Noh, & Ardichvili (2019)** — HRD theory maturity assessed across 668 articles; where the field's theories actually sit.
- **Rocco, Plakhotnik, & Silberman (2022)** — distinguishing **conceptual** from **theory** articles (focus, goals, approaches).

#### Building and tracing theory

- **Turner et al. (2018)** — the **theoretical literature review**: tracing a theory's life cycle through its verified and falsified propositions.
- **Jabarkhail (2023)** — theorizing HRD practices in extended/non-traditional contexts.
- **Kuchinke (2023)** — a three-criteria framework for selecting the supporting literature that anchors a theoretical argument.

#### Actionable & computational theory (from leadership methodology)

- **Dietz (2026)** — the **actionable-theory typology** (Manipulate / Select / Observe); three construct flaws; how to build *manipulable* causes.
  - **Kuljanin et al. (2024)** — **computational process theories**: formalizing generative mechanisms as executable code, vs. narrative construct theories.
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## A practical sequence

1. **Locate** your contribution on the concept→theory continuum (Lee 2025).
2. **Check the genre** — are you writing conceptual or theory? (Rocco et al. 2022).
3. **Trace the lineage** — what's verified/falsified already? (Turner et al. 2018).
4. **Make it actionable** — can the causes be manipulated or selected? (Dietz 2026).

Sources: HRDR "Research Methodology and Theory Building" cluster; Leadership "Causal Inference & Methodology" cluster.

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