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ABSTRACT

The article will address competence, its' diffusion, application, and the consequence of this application within the field of Human Resource Management (HRM). The concept competence-in-practice will be presented and in conclusion the article will consider implications and possibilities of competence-in-practice as an alternative approach to Competence Development within Human Resource Management.

COMPETENCE, COMPETENCE, COMPETENCE AND COMPETENCE

Competence is a concept within Human Resource Management, which enjoys great attention. No business, public or private, can disengage itself when the discussion falls on competence. By far the most businesses work actively with competence and competence development, as a necessary and important initiative in the demand for continual development and improvement of competitive ability. As an indicator of the importance ascribed to competence, the companies participating in the Danish part of the Cranet-study (1) point to competence development as the second most important challenge in 2003. (Rogachewska, Larsen and Znaider: 2003).

Competence shows its' face in many different disguises and shadows. Social competence, literacy competence, learning competence, communication competence, self-leadership competence, democratic competence, nature and environmental competence, cultural competence, intercultural competence, creative and innovative competence, bodily competence and health competence are, for example, the headings for the chapters in the National Competence Accounting's release on key competences in 2002. (Danish Ministry of education: 2002) Before these competence terms, wherein some very clearly are new creations (i.e. literacy competence and health competence) appears. Team competence, emotional competence, personal competence, professional competence, and relational competence are also, to name a few well known competency categories.

It is not surprising if one as business leader, HR professional, or as an ordinary employee (or Researcher in the field of HRM), once in a while looks with wonder at the raving competence universe, where apparently finding a new prefix one can insert before the competence word is all that is required. What about, for example, *openness* competence, *loyalty* competence, *transcendental* competence, *competitive* competence – or maybe *bureaucratic* competence, *rule* competence or *manipulatory* competence. Perhaps the last three can be difficult to immediately connect with a common sense understanding of competence, but why is that? Doesn't one have a need for employees having a certain competence to hold their own in a business that for good reasons can be bureaucratically built up? Is it not also important to know and be able to handle the rules? As a leader isn't it smart to be able to get one's will without needing to give direct orders?

The point is not that there is a need for more new competence prefixes, which can in this way exhaustively describe the competent and the competent's nature. The point is that it is difficult to work with something theoretically, methodologically and practically – in this case competence – if it can mean literally anything.

This paper will reflect on the concept of competence by asking what problems working with competence is meant to actually solve, which problems the work creates, and if the way in which one works with it is consistent with the intentions that one has. Finally the conception of competence as competence-in-practice will be presented and discussed as an alternative.

HOW IS COMPETENCE APPROACHED IN HRM?

If one approaches the questions raised above from the field of HRM, development of competence can be seen as the central way whereby the HR function proves its' usefulness for business, when it here, more or less goal directed, ensures that the business always has the right resources at hand (Ulrich: 1997; chapter 1). Development of competence is a central way of securing 'the right' resources, whether this is achieved through training and education, through selection or through recruiting new competence. The concept of competence within HRM is seen as necessary in order to secure business' survival and competitiveness. Through development of competence the business is developed – and in this way concepts such as the learning business, the learning organization, and lifelong learning receive great attention (Spencer and Spencer: 1993, Nordhaug: 1993a, Ulrich: 1997, Larsen: 1998).

In the Cranet-E study 1999 it is emphasized: *"competence development has become a natural and immutable part of the HRM function's work."* On the one hand, *"the organization secures itself – ideally seen – by continually offering employees courses and other educational and learning possibilities, so that it has a competent and engaged workforce which is ready to meet new technological and organizational change. Competence development functions both as a means of retaining employees and a way in which the organization secures itself the contribution of employee's key competences, which have a value for the organization (internal employability)."* On the other hand *"the employees secure themselves – ideally seen – through competence development, their own functional competence and chance; not simply in the relevant organization, but – if the competence development is not too specific, narrow, and tailor-made for the organization – on the work market generally (external employability)"* (Rogaczewska, Larsen and Skovbroe: 1999; 61). Development of competence has, as mentioned later in the Cranet E report 1999, in this way a *utility value* in the relationship between employee and organization, and becomes a part of a set of new terms of interexchange between the parties.

In brief one can say that there in HRM literature can be identified three major points of departure for this modelling/ obtaining of competence:

The Resource perspective
The Job perspective
The Relational perspective

At its' most fundamental, competence is in the three perspectives seen as a resource which shall be modelled and/ or obtained, and competence development concerns how this can thus be achieved. *The Resource oriented* approach takes its' point of departure in the employee, and hence represents an individual approach to HRM, focusing on the necessary attributes the worker must be have in order to carry out the work effectively. The Resource perspective underlines the relation between the individual's understanding of the work and their physical and (in some cases also) psychological abilities/skills, and development typically occurs through HRM techniques as recruiting and education, as well as the improvement of the immediate work context. This perspective is by far the most prevailing in the literature on competence and competence development. Basically the Resource perspective is building on an economic position inspired by

resource-based theory (Wernerfelt: 1984) and where human capital is the central point of interest (Nordhaug: 1993a, Drejer: 2001, Saa-Perez and García-Falcón: 2002, Kamoche: 1996).

The job perspective is tied to the activity of job-analysis, and the point of departure is the identification of the central attributes which are necessary to complete specific work activities, followed by identification of development areas which can be job (re) designing) (Sandberg: 1994, Söderström: 1990, Spencer and Spencer: 1993). Here the focus is on the organization – more precisely the job - as the unchanging and central factor. The developmental initiative from this perspective will take its' point of departure in business strategy, vision, development, and economy (Söderström: 1990; 47). Even though the resource perspective and the job perspective are commencing to work with competence from two completely different points of view, the way of conceptualising competence as abilities, knowledge and skills of an employee are basically identical.

Finally the relational approach is characterised by pointing to the relation between individual and job with the intention of rising above the limitations, which the two other perspectives have when they are used on their own. The relational point of departure can be said to depart from the understanding of mutuality mentioned above as central to HRM in general (Bramming and Larsen: 2000, Söderström: 1990, Sandberg: 1994). The relational perspective can be subdivided into a more symbolic or etnomethological approach (Jensen and Prahl: 2000, Sandberg: 1994), and a firm perspective. Firms are in this perspective seen as *'repositories of partly tacit and socially produced and reproduced organisation and production knowledge'* (Foss: 1996; 9). And the firm perspective takes its' point of departure in firm specific knowledge and routines. In this way the symbolic approach is leaning more towards the resource perspective in its focus on the individual as special point of interest, while the firm approach is leaning more towards the job perspective in its focus on the organisation as the analytical level. In general the relational perspective is pointing towards developmental activities such as learning environment, cognitive development processes, culture, and systems of norms. One can say of all three approaches that differing conceptualizations of the relationship between the individual and the organization are involved, where this relationship to a greater or lesser degree is conceptualized as a mutually reciprocal relationship, where individual and organization are assumed to influence each other (Blyton and Turnbull: 1992, Beardwell and Holden: 1999, Bramming and Larsen: 1995, Legge: 1989, Larsen: 1997, Larsen, 1998 and Storey: 1995).

Today, an important emphasis within the HRM concept is that "*the mutual influence and dependence between the individual and organizational levels are thought into the concrete HRM practice*" (Larsen: 1999; 19). One can therefore say that the relational perspective is the one, which immediately seems to be closest to the ideal for HRM, and HRM practice is the place where this ideal seeks to be realized. Generally, HRM practice is understood as the attraction, retention, development, and phasing out of human resources, which again is realized in such differing HRM techniques as recruiting, tests, evaluation (assessment) – here appraisal interviews – competence development, career development, and senior policies. For businesses, HRM practice becomes the means through which organization and employees are united in the aim to secure the organization's competitive ability. It is through HRM techniques that employees are attracted to the business, retained, developed, and phased out.

The competence evaluation is continually carried out in all parts of this HRM chain (attraction, retention, development, and phasing out). Different forms of tests and evaluations are typically performed: applicants are tested, assessments are made, employees are evaluated, development interviews are conducted, phasing out interviews are made, etc. According to the Cranet study 2003 between 67% and 83 % of the companies in the study are evaluating employees on a regular basis. Mutual influence and dependency becomes an ideal, which is not applied in

reality in test situations, in that the test to a high degree focuses upon the employee alone and not on for instance system factors influencing performance. This conclusion however is a bit tricky. When referring to the Cranet study the participating companies are asked first if they are evaluating management, professionals, technical administrative personnel and blue-collar workers. Secondly they are asked who is conducting the evaluation, and last what the evaluation is used for. To this one can say, that all the questions are more or less forcing an individualistic perspective on the responders, as the categories are biased that way. On the other hand there seems to be a surprising conformity in answers, as for example 83% announces, that the evaluation is used to map training and learning needs. This again may be the case because of the prevailing evaluation system in Denmark: the developmental appraisal interview, which is conducted precisely with that aim. However a strong focus on the individual cannot be denied.

On the other hand the focus on mutual influence and dependence means, according to the prevailing HRM literature mentioned above, that one in the realization of HRM practice must take into account that it is in the context – the actual work situation and under the actual work conditions – that it is determined what it means to be good or bad employees, it is not simply about employees who, independent of the context, can be described as good or bad. This is an important point, which ideally seen means that it is possible for HRM to move away from an otherwise somewhat reductionist, instrumentalist HRM understanding, where the person is converted into an object for development and discipline, where behaviour is categorized in positive types, and where the context in which the action is given meaning is not considered (Townley: 1994, Steyaert: 1997, Steyaert & Janssens: 1999, Keenoy & Anthony: 1992).

To sum up, there can be identified a tension in the conceptualisation of competence in HRM. On the one hand there is a strong emphasis on the importance of a relational understanding - in competence thinking as well as HRM-thinking in general. On the other hand the practices and techniques used have a bias towards emphasizing the individual and modelling the individual to fit business needs. As such one can question whether the techniques and methods are functioning according to the intention and what the consequences are, when the ideal of mutual dependency in fact is turned to a strong focus on business needs translated into individual skills, knowledge and abilities; that is a dualistic understanding of individual and organisation.

WHY IS COMPETENCE A PROBLEMATIC CONCEPT?

The ideal for competence development aims, as described above, to a great degree at overcoming different sorts of problems by, for example, singularly focusing upon either the individual or work (organization). This raises the question whether the ideal in fact becomes the one carried out in a concrete practice (HRM literature, practices, or techniques).

Let us therefore look more closely at how the way in which one approaches the competence concept has consequences for how competence development is conducted. First the intention of working with a mutual dependency relationship between employee and organization becomes a question of individual development of personal resources of the employee. Below will follow a discussion on how the competence concept to a high degree becomes a singularly positively laded concept, which it is difficult to establish an oppositional position to. This, it is argued, has the effect that the employees are caught in a vicious competence development circle where it becomes more important to be able to speak of competence than to be able to do something (competent).

One can say that in the literature on competence there is a general agreement that competence has to do with the abilities, skills, knowledge, and possibly opinions of the employee,

which lead to the excellent performance (Nordhaug: 1993a, Boyatzis: 1982, Woodruffe: 1992, Spencer and Spencer: 1993, Illeris: 1995). Such an understanding of competence means that exactly the abilities, skills, knowledge, and possibly opinions become the interesting objects of development when one will work with competence development. One can believe that it is somewhat strange that the same definition of competence is apparently valid no matter which point of departure one uses to look at competence. But there is apparent agreement that no matter what perspective, competence is a resource, which is closely bound to the individual. In the prevailing competence literature, the pinpointing of which abilities, skills, etc., contribute to the excellent performance normally occurs via different forms or assessments of best practice. (Spencer and Spencer: 1993, Woodruffe: 1992, Cardy and Dobbins: 1993) This can involve market evaluations or different forms of tests or assessments. Assessments are, in a Danish context, normally carried out through appraisal interviews, or in the more advanced case, via specific assessment centers.

Applicants to positions are often tested via psychological tests. According to the Cranet study especially in the higher-level jobs tests are used as to assist in recruiting processes. In Denmark 54% of management level jobs are tested and 33% of technicians/professionals are tested. (Rogachewska, Larsen and Znaider: 2003). Tests seemingly point at clear and undisputed results and conclusions. Those who score high on selected criteria are good, and those who score low are bad. In appraisal interviews one evaluates employees from a number of criteria and key words, and the employees are graded or assessed on whether they fit the criteria or key words. That which determines that the test or appraisal interview gets a positive meaning however, is whether those who interpret the test or carry out the interview are competent to relate the test results or the key words to the actual relationship between the individual and organization, and the way this plays out (Danish Association of Psychologists: 1998, Danish Psychological Publication: 2004, Kahlke and Schmidt: 2002). The test or interview's points of evaluation do not in themselves tell how they are carried out or should be handled.

HRM practice and HRM techniques contain considerations and recommendations of how an appraisal interview should be handled, and how test results should be interpreted and dealt with. But theories, which specifically seek to understand what happens in practice when employees meet organizational, should assess employees against different measuring points. When competence is evaluated by assessing the individual's attibutes– for example through an appraisal interview – the evaluation does not happen with the point of departure in mutual dependence. To the contrary, competence is evaluated with the point of departure in *either* the demand work sets *or* the attributes one believes are relevant.

The consideration is thus not of reciprocity and dependence, but of a dualism where the employees as well as the organization must be conceptualized as finished entities each on their own. The consideration is not of the person in the organization but of the employee who is employed in the organization. It is not the test or the evaluation in itself that is problematic, but it is problematic that competence evaluation is applied as if it were an objective and context free evaluation.

Townley's studies of competence development show in this way that in competence development we are basically considering tools, which discipline employees to discipline themselves (Townley: 1994). Descriptions of the desired competent behaviour, where one type of behaviour is put forth as singularly positive, reduces what is possible competent behaviour, and one becomes blind to the possibility that, for example, "the competence of goal-directedness" can have positive and negative associations depending on the context.

If one looks more closely at the formulation of the role of competence development in relation to HRM, competence is seen as something employees shall *be attributed*, and competence is accepted as that which secures internal as well as external organizational *employability*.

Competence becomes in this way a resource borne by the individual which can be useful to the business (internal employability), and a resource borne by the individual which can be applied by the individual to the external work market (external employability). And competence development happens through " . . . *continually offering employees courses and other educational and learning possibilities"*(Rogachewska, Larsen and Skovbro: 1999; 61).

Competence becomes an asset, which can be traded with in organizations and on the work market. The organization can use "competent" as a predicate for the good employee, while the employees can use "competent" as a predicate for their own attractiveness for the internal as well as the external work market. The relationship between business and employees becomes hereby reduced to addressing how the employee can participate in the business' goal realization through their individual resources (competences). The figure below presents the differing approaches to competence showing the methods of evaluation, development methods, etc., which immediately correspond with the approach.

Table 1. The connection between approaches to competence, evaluation forms, development forms and development objects

Approaches to Competence	Competence is Evaluated Through	Competence Development Happens Through	Point of Departure for the Development is	Development objects
Resource	• Tests • Assessments • Appraisal interviews	• Courses • Education • Personal /profess-sional develop-ment	• Abilities • Skills • Customers • Opinions	Individual's abilities, skills, etc.
Job	• Job analysis • Time studies	• Job redesign	• Strategy • Vision • Economy	Individual's abilities, skills, etc., so that they fit the job that is arranged in relation to strategy, etc
Relation	• Observational studies	• Job rotation • On the job training • Neighbour training	• Norms • Values • Culture • Cognitive develop-ment process • Learning possibili-ties	Individual's abilities, skills, but especially opinions so that there is created agreement or development towards the ideal.

That which in this connection is problematic is the insistence upon competence as an individual resource, and thus something, which follows the one. This leads to a somewhat simplified representation of organizational competence, which becomes an aggregation of the individual's competencies at the organizational level – which again means that it is the individuals who possess the competences (Nordhaug: 1993a). That is to say that one imagines the phenomenon competence as something the individuals carry around within themselves. As HRM is a leadership discipline, the wish is to be able to control these resources within the individuals to the good of the business. This is a problem when one in this way quantifies a phenomenon that of course is found in individuals, and begins to treat it *as though* it were independent of the individuals. But competence cannot be seen as independent of the individual, when one has determined that it "lives" in individuals . . . and individuals operate in a work context. The perspectives on competence allow that one "on paper" can estimate forth to get an account of which competences one has available, when they are presented as statements as abilities, skills, etc. But the perspectives offer no information about how proclaimed most important – the mutual dependence – is realized.

In this connection it can be difficult to imagine that a person in all seriousness would say: "competence development, no thanks – I'm competent enough," or "no, where I work they do not have any use for competent employees in the future." Such statements would right away lead to the person being judged incompetent, unwilling to change, burned out, or afraid of change. But this also means that we are dealing with a concept, which in fact is meaningless, because a sensible oppositional position cannot be found that one can take up. The word competence is connected with something positive and the rhetorics of competence are found in a logic where change is confused with tempo and restructuring of psychological and physical units. This has the regrettable consequence that it can be even harder for an employee to present only moderately critical questions towards a suggested competence developing activity without it having possibly serious consequences for the employee's continued internal employability. This means that critical potential is excluded beforehand, with the consequence that development, which oversteps the existing frames for development practice, is largely impossible. Development becomes a question of bending competences in degrees – which can be observed in the great energy that is exerted in finding new prefixes to the word competence. Development does not become a question of what competent actually could be and mean. This means that the prevailing modes of conceptualising competence is working from a competence vocabulary limited by the understanding, that competence is *a something* to be found inside individuals. Point of departure for this paper is, that this conceptualisation is 1) made from a rationalistic position in the philosophy of science and 2) is only one possible way in many to conceptualise competence.

From the prevailing position – and especially the resource perspective – a strong focus on the individual is limiting the theoretical construction, because the individual alone becomes the 'holder' of competence. When competence is something 'carried' by an individual, the individual becomes the immediate context for competences, because the competences are conceptualised as inside the individual. This again will mean, that the individual is the structure around which competences are functioning. If competences therefore are not developed as whished for, as quickly as wanted etc. this is translated into 'structural' barriers for competence development. Examples of this can be 'fear of change' or 'resistance to development'. The theoretical conceptualisation cannot deal with 'man' as a whole, thinking and reflecting being, and the conceptualisation cannot deal with how the 'man' as a whole is handling shifting competence demands and relations to colleagues, work, structures and goals. Paradoxically focussing on the individual is granting structure supreme power. It is from structural arguments (needs of the business), that competence demands are initiated. Competence becomes like resources blocks for management to build with,

and even though the theoretical conceptualisations are pointing at the impossibility of separating competences like that. Even if it is argued that competences are not to be 'found' separated like resources in individuals, the competence vocabulary cannot handle relations, because the individual is turned in to the immediate context of the essentialistic competences.

From a relational point of view this places the individual in a relation, where it becomes the individual's ('man') problem to stand forth as competent and ready for development. The reason for this is in part that competence is understood as the individual's resources, and in part that the general pressure towards development turns the will to development in itself into a competence. To say what one cannot is a competence in itself, when one oneself is able to indicate the way for one's development (Mogensen: 2000). It becomes a far greater sin not to be able to explicate one's competences and incompetences (there therefore aren't incompetences, but focus areas for improvement). In this way the control and leadership of competence is moved to the individual's inner being, which thereby is made into an object for control (Faubion: 2000, Foucault: 1997a; 1997b; 2000). The employee can be judged on the background of feeling "wrong" (not enough commitment, for example), and not being able to say what they can do. But it is a known fact that it can be impossible to explain what one can do if one can do it extremely well. For, when one can do something well one's ability is incorporated, intuitive, and not immediately available for our language (Bourdieu: 1997, Dreyfus & Dreyfus: 1999).

The point is of course that the term competence in itself as a concept is neutral. Competence is not in itself pointing at something, which is good regardless of context. One can also learn and be good at things we, for example, from an ethical perspective consider to be bad. For example, one can learn to submit oneself to a tyrannical leader or one can be fantastically good to do things one must distance oneself from – for example there can be found accomplished and less accomplished torturers or burglars. Competence in itself is not a guarantee for the good, and one thereby stands with a completely new point of departure for one's competence development activities.

COMPETENCE-IN-PRACTICE: A WAY OUT

From the discussion of competence above we can see a way out of the individual based and rationalistic way to approach competence. One can argue that competence is not something in itself and not something that should be sought within individuals. Competence is, it will be argued here, an *evaluation*, which is emerging in a concrete practice and therefore always already exists within the organization (Bramming: 2001, Bramming and Frandsen: 2003). As it is known from theories on social and situated learning, any practice will constantly evaluate how the same practice should be practiced, and the prevailing practice is practiced because the social processes are differentiating pragmatically between what is contextually deemed 'good' and 'bad' actions (Wenger: 1998, Lave and Wenger: 1991, Nielsen and Kvale: 1999, Bramming: 2001). Every practice therefore will act on the basis of an embodied understanding of competence. When for example the instructor stands in the classroom there is a continual evaluation of whether that which is carried out is fitting to the given situation. A lecture can be evaluated as good or bad by the present audience, the lecturer evaluates the whole time what he should say, if it is now said in the right way, etc. An otherwise fantastic lecture on deferred taxes in external accounting will not be at all able to be evaluated competent if it is carried out standing in the middle of a stadium during a football game. Competence does not come to be expressed absolute as if in a vacuum, but always relative in relation to a given practice.

When I introduce here the concept competence-in-practice as an embodied evaluation in practice it is first and foremost to create a concept that takes its' point of departure in the mutual

dependence and influence between individual and organization. When one for example is an employee in a specific business, there are definite frames and possibilities for being competent, which are unique to the concrete practice with the actual employees. This means that focus should not be on *either* the individual *or* the employee, when one wants to find out what is competent in the concrete practice – one must focus on the individual in the organization in action: therefore the words competence-in-practice – with hyphens.

If competence-in-practice does not focus on the individual or the organization, what does it focus upon? This is very simple. It focuses upon what is evaluated as competent – on the evaluation in itself in practice. This means that with competence-in-practice one, so to speak goes downtown with an empty shopping bag. We have beforehand the notion that competence is only expressed in a concrete practice, and that we can observe competence as an evaluation in this practice. But we don't know what the organizational practice in the transferred meaning "fills in the shopping bag." It can be anything. Competence-in-practice is in this way a concept which is addressed from an epistemological perspective, as it is focussed upon *how* competence is getting to mean something, and not from an ontological perspective, where the point of departure would be to figure out, *what* competence means (Bramming: 2004 (forthcoming), Andersen: 1999)

Competence-in-practice is in this way a radically different way to think about competence. In the first place competence-in-practice does not make people or things or organizations objects of the analytic or of development. And the reason *not* making people or things objects for direct development or control is that competence is an expression for a concrete evaluation of practice. What is competent is therefore only competent in a specific organizational work context, because evaluations are always specific to one's practice. This means, for example, that in a competence development project in a given business it would be completely fruitless to define competence as if it had a real content independent of the actual context. As will be illustrated in the next section, the consequence of competence-in-practice is that one seeks what the existing practice *already* evaluates as competent or competence.

Competence-in-practice is sharply focussing on the evaluation of competence, which opens the possibility of different evaluations. From the point of view of competence in practice, what is evaluated competent is contingent – i.e. it could always be different. This means that the object of development is not in the first place the individual, but the current evaluation. Competence is not, as we saw before, conceptualised as something that should be added to an organizational practice, but is conceptualised as the outcome of an organizational practice, where evaluation of actions, relations and communications as competent or not are a way of being in the world, and not something superimposed in specific circumstances. Competence is not conceptualised an input, but an output. In the prevailing competence thinking the definition of the competent is partly generic and general, partly tied to the organization and/or people, and partly the input for the work with competence development. The possibility for development is therefore radically different for competence-in-practice then in prevalent competence developmental methods. Competence is that which comes out of the practice and competence is always in the practice, but is not, in the point of departure, value-laden.

COMPETENCE AS EVALUATION IN PRACTICE

As stated above the judging of something as competent is not something the individual has within, but a judgement over what constitutes good organizational practice. When one tries to find out what can be competent, one must therefore focus on a concrete practice. What is wholly concrete and in practice stands forth as the good way, is set forth as the good example, referred to as the "way in which we do things." This does not mean that the concrete practice

necessarily needs to have the competence word stapled upon it, but that one looks at how the practice itself judges good and bad, relevant and irrelevant. A person – for example – is *attributed* competence if what the person does is evaluated competent in the context they do it in. This attribution process can just as well be observed in the between-the-lines, the in-betweens and in the taken for grantedness as in explicit expressions of competence. Actually the explicit expressions of what is and is not competence might not be in agreement with the way practice can be observed to judge competence, because these explicit statements might be aimed at a communication with other practices (for instance management) than the observed one.

In the competence-in-practice observation it would in this way only be competent to know something about winding long fibres or making a financial account, if this knowledge is observed in the organizational practice and at the same time is recognized as a competence in this practice. A person can only be *termed or judged* competent if that which the person does is evaluated competent in the context they do it in (Bramming: 2001, Bramming and Frandsen: 2003). That is to say that the communication which is about competence can relate a person, an opinion, or an action which is carried out, to the term *competent* or another expression for goodness.

That which is concretely evaluated in a specific organizational practice can be anything that in the organizational practice is recognized as valuable in practice.

ABILITY AND COMPETENCE

When one works with competence-in-practice, it becomes clear that there are, in fact, differing forms of evaluation. On the one hand, one is dealing with evaluations, which refer to communication about competence similar to the ways of speaking of competence, which we find within the HRM field. This is a basically linguistic way to look at competence. On the other hand, competence-in-practice also has to do with evaluations of how one in fact is good at something in concrete practice in a more bodily way. We can say that competence-in-practice has to do with both (linguistic) competence evaluations and (embodied) ability evaluations. Let's try to delve deeper into these two things:

Ability means that one can do things. And these things one can do and one does without reflecting over every single step in the operation. That which one can do is incorporated and gives the possibility for non-reflexive judgement in a given situation. The able interaction with the world is, just as something is evaluated as competent explicitly, an expression of an evaluation. One can attach oneself to the possibility of making ability evaluations as ways of being in the world, which order and order themselves over time, and over time, become embodied. Over time it becomes evident to meet the outstretched hand by reaching out a hand oneself. In this way our evaluations of what one should do turns into a sort of evaluation based habit – into dispositions, through which the practice evaluates what is good and what is bad (Bramming: 2001, Bourdieu: 1987). That is to say, that one can see how competence-in-practice is evaluated by observing what is attributed value or recognized as valuable and thereby as important. One can do this because the evaluation of competence-in-practice is carried out through differentiating operations in practice: in practice it is always evaluated whether something is just as that one knows, or different from it (Bramming: 2001, Bramming and Frandsen: 2003). One always evaluates from an always-existing ability, which is acquired in a practice. The point of departure here is that there will always be abilities which one can have a wish to control or wishes were different. There occurs in this way a displacement from a question of "which" competence that is lacking, to *how* competence already is possible and thereby how it can be possible in another way. The object of control is shifting from control of content to control of framework.

A diploma can be an example of competence communication and can mark a linguistic connection to competence – a *proof* of competence. In contrast, concrete experience will be judged as competence in that it refers to an able relationship to a practice. In the theoretical frame of competence-in-practice, there is no reason why these should be connected: I.e. that the diploma is pointing towards actual competence. Competence-in-practice makes it possible to see this splitting of or duality in the competence judgement in practice. This does not mean that the splitting we can see is something, which shall be corrected: so that the diploma paper says exactly what ability is in practice. It means that competence and ability communication are two completely different things.

Communication about competence is something completely different than communication of ability – just as experience and diplomas are pointing towards two widely different modes about something basically different (Foucault: 1999). We can believe that the diploma says something about ability – about one's experiences – but as we determined earlier, competence-in-practice is something wholly specific for the prevailing practice, and competence is a predicate which does not refer to ability itself. One can well say: when Mr. Hansen in the reception *quickly* answers the telephone and *"smiles in his voice"* it is, for example, customer service competence. And we thereby say that in the very concrete practice the words customer service competence point at the behaviour Mr. Hansen exhibits when he does something specific. This does not make the words customer service to become that ability which Mr. Hansen demonstrates. Customer service competence lives in a competence communication universe where it is meaningful, and the exercise of getting the competence word with diverse prefixes to point to one's own behaviour is competence communication. The concrete ability, which is lived out in a concrete practice, is something else, bodily bound.

One can in a competence evaluation – for example an employment interview –– certainly take experience as evidence for competence, or examination papers as proof of ability. But fundamentally seen, the two things as mentioned have nothing to do with each other – they don't represent each other. Competence communication attaches itself to the event where it is observed, is the organizational practice's evaluation of itself in competence terms. Ability communication ties itself to the event where that which is observed are the organizational practice's evaluations in ability terms.

The below example from Sunhill municipality can further illustrate the dynamic in and difference between ability and competence evaluations.

Bent and Ivan from Sunhill municipality are both involved in the municipality's newly started competence unit. Bent and Ivan make a deal to meet with the technical department; Their point of departure is, that it is there that there really is a need and room for competence development. They come to the meeting with a philosophy that they can now help the technical department to improve. Unfortunately the meeting does not go completely as expected.

The employees in the technical department become almost angry and believe that the competence development activity is a sort of rationalization or effectiveness exercise that will end as "a report on the municipality director's table." Understanding that the competence development activity had the intention to find out what errors and deficiencies the technical department suffered from, so that firings could be implemented. Bent and Ivan experience major resistance, and they tell later at a course evaluation meeting that they were very surprised how competence development ever could become a report on the municipality director's table, when they themselves metaphorically put thought that they were coming to a tea party and were the ones bringing the cake.

What Bent and Ivan really wanted was to implement competence development, taking the point of departure in the concrete and actual practice, from the idea that competence already

existed in the technical department and that the technical department was already developing. Reflecting on the situation, they decided, that this philosophy wasn't clearly communicated to the technical department. They therefore decided to have a new meeting arranged, in agreement that their approach this time should take its' point of departure in a curiosity for what was actually done in the technical department (which they in fact did not know in the competence unit). It is then revealed that the technical department saw itself as very busy, and didn't believe that they could either afford or find the time to go to courses for competence development. In the technical department, consultants were used for development tasks, and it had an overall quite big budget for consultants. They had thus enough to do with taking care of the ordinary operations and routine tasks. Bent and Ivan asked therefore if the technical department could not use consultants for routine tasks and do the development tasks themselves – and in this way in part develop work areas, and in part keep the new knowledge in the department.

Apart from the unorthodox ending this example shows a not unusual situation in relation to competence developing activities in organizations.

The technical department differentiates in the example between operations (routine) and development tasks, where it is the operational which is clearly marked by the technical department as central: the technical department judges that the operational tasks are primary and that it is in the solving of these tasks competence is evaluated in relation to the technical department: that which in the technical department's observation of itself – in a natural and self-evident way – is desirable and necessary in the specific practice, is to focus on the daily routines and operations.

The technical department does not speak of what they do or can do as competence. The communication revealing the competence-in-practice is ability communication. As the example demonstrates, the judgement is upon which work tasks are central and one must carry out oneself (operational) and which work tasks one must get expert help for from the outside (development tasks). In this way it can be observed that ability in the technological department, by the technical department, is understood in relation to operational tasks.

There is a difference in what is regarded as central in ability communication and competence communication. In ability communication it is the things in the concrete practice, which are central. That is to say that competence is evaluated in and by the organizational practice. For competence communication the *thing outside* of the practice is central, when we see it from the technical department's perspective. That is to say that competence in the organizational practice is evaluated relative to criteria outside the concrete organizational practice. These two evaluations in competence and ability communication happen at the same time, do not exclude each other, and need not be in agreement.

The technical department communicates in competence communication, that the understanding they themselves have of what is competence development, and the understanding they attribute Bent, Ivan, and the municipality director, is that one shall be removed from the operation (the central) and follow courses (which they don't believe to have time for or be able to afford). Competence communication refers of course to something other than the practice - things which are *outside*. In this way it becomes very clear that that which in the technical department is observed as ability, is not the same as that which is observed as competence. It therefore will also be completely fruitless – according to the technical department – to 'make competence development', when it refers to something else than that which one observes as the central for the effective performance of daily activities.

Bent and Ivan seek in the second round to attach themselves to the technical department's ability communication – and not their competence communication. They take their point of departure in observing competence, which attaches itself to the practice (inside) and opens

up in this way for new possibilities of action for development in practice. When Bent and Ivan take the point of departure in the technical department's ability communication, instead of attaching to competence communication, the whole basis for being able to work with competence development in Sunhill's technical department is changed.

In competence communication it can be observed that competence development is reserved to address something *outside* of the technical department's practice, which is not related to the concrete practice, for example external courses. Because of this demarcation of something *outside* the actual practice, the reference is to competence communication. In competence communication in the example of Sunhill municipality is recognised as marking the *outside* category while ability communication in the example marking the *inside* category. That which in competence communication is called competence (courses, etc., in the example from Sunhill) cannot be reduced or elevated to that which in the example is designated by the category 'daily routines and operations'.

CONCLUSION: THE CONSEQUENCE OF COMPETENCE-IN-PRACTICE FOR HR PRACTICE

> "You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life." -- Albert Camus

When one in ordinary organizational practice attaches different concepts of competence to specific actions, opinions, or persons, it is the concrete connection that delimits what and how subsequently can be competence developed. If competence for example is designated as something one lacks, something which is acquired via courses, and something that is expensive and takes time, it gives a very clear framework for what competence development can be: in fact a very expensive injection of objective knowledge to individuals via course activity. There is in this way an evident connection between that which is made competence, and what competence development thus can be. At the same time it becomes unclear what is the object of control because of the indirect connection between behaviours and abilities, skills, etc. Competence-in-practice has the logical consequence that competence is not something to be looked for outside the concrete practice and afterwards add to this practice. There can already be found great quantities of ability in the same practice, but the problem is then not at lack of ability, but a different opinion of what should be considered ability and be judged competent. This means that the HR practice we shall introduce does not involve injecting and inserting something new, but controlling the way competence already comes into being.

When we use the concept competence-in-practice it is not competence that is made object of development practice and realization it self. This can be formulated very simply in an extension of the citation above: if the world is always competent, it is not meaningful to say that we shall introduce competence (it is already there). There will certainly always only be talk of another sort of competence than that which is already there. In this way it is meaningful to ask *how* competence can be grasped and controlled. In its' furthest reaching consequence this way of reformulating the foundation of Human Resource Management – and more specifically competence and competence *development* – as it is a rejection of great parts of the literature in the area as well as the basis for the main part of Human Resource Management practice. As these have exactly as a goal to *introduce* and induce competence as new items into an existing practice.

NOTES

(1) The Cranet study (1991, 1992, 1995, 1999, and 2003) is an international research project, which maps Human Resource Management politics and practice in several countries over a longer period of time. The Cranet-project was in 1988 initiated and coordinated by the Cranfield School of Management and the project started in 1990 with questionnaires in 5 countries, and is now conducted in 34 primarily European countries. This paper will primarily be drawing on the results from the Danish studies conducted in 1999 and 2003. In the study conducted in 2003 several countries outside of Europe was included in the study, and the study changed it name from Cranet-E (for Europe) to plainly 'the Cranet study'.

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