

Working Paper

No. 2004.14

Pia Bramming

Can HRM Make a Difference?

INSTITUT FOR ORGANISATION OG ARBEJDS SOCIOLOGI

Handelshøjskolen i København

Solbjerg Plads 3

2000 Frederiksberg

Tlf: 38 15 28 15

Fax: 38 15 28 28

Can HRM Make a Difference?

By Pia Bramming, Ph.d, Assistant Professor,

Abstract

This article is about how a constructivist observation of development within Human Resource Management (HRM) opens the possibility for communicating about development in the language of possibility, seen in contrast to a language of deficiency. HRM is discussed as a paradoxical development concept, where the paradoxical consists in that when one focuses upon a proactive development ideal from a linear development understanding, one develops regressively, directly counter to one's intentions. In this article two observation dimensions are developed, as well as two dimensions of how to cope with development on the background of the constructivist observation.

In the press, in studies and research, the IT branch is presented as a turbulent one, where new developments must nearly stand in line. We are concerned that qualified and competent IT professionals are a scarce resource, are difficult to recruit, and difficult to maintain. We tear our hair over the recognition that the future recruiting base will become even smaller, and prepare ourselves to battle over the scarce resources. And these future workers – born in the years in which fewer babies are born, the @-generation – are made into the object of studies which are designed to reveal how they feel, think, and approach the world. The studies find that these young people make demands on **businesses**, are independent, individualistic, antiauthoritarian, free from conventions, team oriented, innovative and demanding.ⁱ In relation to businesses this is realized as a need to be able to cope with a still larger employee complexity, which again is realized in a demand and a need for more order, more planning, more strategic leadership – more Human Resource Management (HRM).^{ii iii}

The Paradox

That which jumps out at one is the paradoxical in our wish for the ability to cope with an enlarging employee complexity through more order, planning, and strategic management! Why is the

response to the statement: “we wish the ability to cope with an increasing employee complexity,” not that we must have a broader framework? The studies clearly show that especially the young (but certainly also the older) don’t wish to be perceived as “goods to be sold by the yard” but as “unique,” and therefore the logical question one must pose as HRM theoretician or practitioner should not simply be *shall* there be more leadership, but to a higher degree, *what* sort of leadership.

The challenge the current book takes up, is what HRM can contribute concerning the small and medium sized IT businesses. In this article I take as a starting point the paradox which is presented above, which I will discuss with the point of departure in HRM as a paradoxical concept of development in itself. The aim with this discussion is to close in on a way in which one can *observe* the control of development. The result of the discussion is a number of tentative *strategies for coping* with development for small and medium sized IT businesses.

We Create Our Own Problems – Deficiency versus Possibility

When I use the concept “observe” in the above passages it should be understood in that the way in which we form our outlook determines what we see. This might be explained in simple terms with the old saying, “to the one who has a hammer, all things are nails,” which in this context means that we have a propensity to solve our problems with the “tools” we already have, and that these tools accordingly make us see all problems in the same way. We become, so to speak, bounded by our own ideas of what is naturally connected – and if we have only a hammer as a tool, one might make the attempt to hammer a screw into the wall. To continue with the tool metaphor, the intention with this article is to look once more at the hammer, which is called HRM, as a development tool, and speculate upon what implementation possibilities this tool has, when we try to look at that which we see as problems (nails), and solutions (hammers) as things which we ourselves *make into* problems and solutions.^{iv}

To use observation in this way is a constructivist move. The constructivist point is that when we communicate about or observe something, we create in this communication both that which we communicate about, as well as ourselves as observers in this process. This shall be understood in that when one as above speaks of coping with an increased employee complexity through more control, the content is constructed in a particular way in and by the way one communicates about it. This particular way does not appear as a construction, but is experienced as a matter of course –

concrete and immediate. It appears as a completely self-evident problem identification and solution model, that we, when IT professionals are a scarce resource which are fought for, must find out how we can attract them and how we, through our recruiting practice, can uncover who are the most suitable. This is naturally a real problem, which in itself raises many other problems. For example, that our measuring tools are not always equally reliable, or that we exactly through studies of the “@ generation” found that it is not a homogenous group, which can be recruited en masse. The point with this constructivist observation is not to say that problems are not problems and that one cannot solve them. The point is that we, in the manner in which we speak of problems and solutions, construct a relation – *which we could also construct in another way*. We limit our possible actions by not questioning 1) whether the way of seeing the problem and solution is as evident as it seems 2) how the manner in which we speak of them effects our own possibilities to act. By communicating in the particular way one does – that one speaks of *scarce resources, a struggle* – we place the business in a quite definitive position and at the same time create particular possibilities for action. The problem/solution relationship is created through the way that we agree on how to talk about the situation which itself is submitted to a societal, structural problematic that entails that we must prepare to *fight for scarce resources* in and by the way one communicates about it. Our observation becomes one where we focus on an external structure we think effects us in a particular way, and where the actors we want to address in our communication can be signified in particular ways. The constructivist point is that we instead of looking at these factors as something external, shall look at them as something which exist already within the business. That the boundary between the world outside and the business is something which we create ourselves. One can set up this problem as the difference between a *language of deficiency* and a *language of possibilities*. In a language of deficiency we will formulate the problem/solution relationship thus; “The future’s employees are self-driven, individualistic, and demanding, therefore we must have more management.” We lack something which we do not have. In a language of possibilities we can formulate the same relation in the following fashion; “The future’s employees are independent, we must therefore have *less* leadership/management – but how?”

If we reverse our view, the problem of the “scarce resources” could just as well be formulated as a problem of employee retention, which we can formulate in the terms of possibility as; “Our employees are in demand and knowledgeable – how can we use and develop this knowledge?”

In the construction “more worker complexity shall be coped with through greater control,” the workers – the “@ generation” – are made into objects which the ambition is to control, and in this objectification *they* become something to be coped with. When those who observe are HRM practitioners or theoreticians, the practice of coping is inscribed into a HRM practice, and we therefore create that which must be coped with in a particular way, to be able to cope with it. When I write above that we create our own problems, I would not thereby postulate that it, for example, cannot be a problem, that one lacks 600.000 IT professionals in EU.^v I would simply guide attention to the fruitful in addressing the ways in which we speak of this problem, because we can therefore see that we often grasp the solution as “after the available nails principle” and not from a reflected observation of what it is we in our communication make into problem and solution. A way to grasp this relationship can be that we become attentive to whether we formulate ourselves in a language of deficiency – where the problems are something externally given – or formulate ourselves in a language of possibilities, where the problems and solutions are something we create ourselves.

HRM – A Paradoxical Development Concept?

HRM can be viewed, overall, as a development concept, which has the intention of making it possible for business to improve its’ results through the way in which it copes with employees. The ideal is that the organization copes with employees in such a way that it continually renews itself, so that it doesn’t merely reactively adapt to its’ own surroundings, but proactively masters them. The progressive development ideal is expressed in HRM thought on learning and learning processes and the general focus on “the learning organization,” “learning to learn,” and thoughts on action-learning. In this ideal, the HRM practitioner’s role becomes that of delivering possibilities for development – framework within which development can take place. This ideal was already put forth by Miles in 1965, where the leader’s task within the at that point completely new HRM, according to Miles, ought to be to create an environment where all resources in the department were exploited. The credo which became emphasized as central for HRM was that a still higher degree of self-leadership and self-control leads to better decisions and efficiency. This progressive development ideal has the mutual influence and dependence^{vi} between *individual and organization* as the object to be developed, where the attention should be aimed towards *processes* between the single persons and possibilities for development and performance, which are given in and of the context. “. . . HRM speaks of a contextually laid and facilitated process of (individual and

organizational) learning.^{vii} This is to say that the framework and possibilities for development are the logical focus for HRM in theory as well as in practice.

HRM focuses not only on proactive development, but also takes charge of an adaptive development task. There are people to be employed, trained, be paid salary to, phased out, and retired. When the development ideal shall be set into action – be operationalized – it takes place through a number of HRM techniques and tools. These HRM techniques base themselves in opposition to the ideal of a development (control) thinking. We imagine that we can fix the future with our view, and that we from this can make a retrospective adaptation “... *where the specific development initiative represents a picture of the future that when it is brought into the relevant organization, meets the existing as a rigid form that shall be formed, folded, and pushed into place. When this becomes the condition in the field, there arises a constructed, local confrontation in the organization between two apparent orders: the order which is already understood to exist, and the new order, which the development initiative represents.*^{viii}” When IT-businesses see their future (even more) effected by a deficient recruiting base, studies are initiated of how these future employees, the scarce resource, look, think, and feel. One can hereafter formulate the existing business as one perceives and interprets it, in a way which is thought to speak to these @ people and their need and attempt to restructure the business in this picture. One is therefore surprised that the people who are already in the business don't grasp this development picture in a way that is prepared for and willing to change– they don't fit into the brave new business, or don't *react* to the business' development initiative in the expected way. Not at all to speak of the despondency which occurs, when the expected reaction from the attractive group (the @-generation), is absent. Whether it is the existing employees or the group one wishes to attract, the tendency is to make both the responsibility for the development and for the eventual fiasco to a person problem. It becomes the single individual that becomes the development project – and not the relationship between individual and organization that was specifically the focus for the proactive development ideal. The old employees are not prepared for change or flexible enough, they are resistant to change, block learning, and have a wealth of experience within the organization, just to name some of the most popular explanatory models. The young are viewed as so pampered and demanding, that it is frightening. One can expose the employees one has to diverse healing HRM techniques; appraisal interviews, competence development, abrupt firings, etc. The employees one was not able to attract (enough) of, one perhaps did not understand completely correctly, so we must once more seek to uncover

what they *really* think, feel and need. The point is that we, instead of focusing on process, the organisation/individual relationship, and framework and possibilities, focus on uncovering and measuring the individual as a development project, and the results and barriers. The process thought is made into a question about the single employee’s learning process and measured in relation to previously defined and imagined results, whereby the possibility for a proactive development process is effectively hindered because we present a picture of how the future hangs together, as we fundamentally construct it from our (overall delimited) knowledge of the way things are today.

The point with this discussion is to make probable that HRM as concept is stretched between a regressive development thought and a progressive development ideal.

Table 1. HRM as a Paradoxical Development Concept.

Progressive Development Ideal	Regressive Development Thinking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus and attention on process thinking. • The organization/individual relationship as development project. • Results and barriers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus and attention on uncovering and measuring. • The individual as development project. • Results and barriers.

The progressive development ideal assumes that the world, people, and the business are always changing and are under continual development – and that this development, to be development, cannot be controlled or predicted, it is a process. The regressive development thought attempts to set this development in a fast framework, and from predictions of the future to implement a linear development, which has a beginning and a fixed presentation of the result. What this division makes possible is the establishment of a basis for our being able to make precise, 1) which forms of development are possible and in goal terms desirable, to define a clear measure of success 2) which forms of development where the determination of the relevant /applicable result and framework are part of the development 3) to make clear which HRM techniques and tools^{ix} are relevant/applicable for the differing goals.

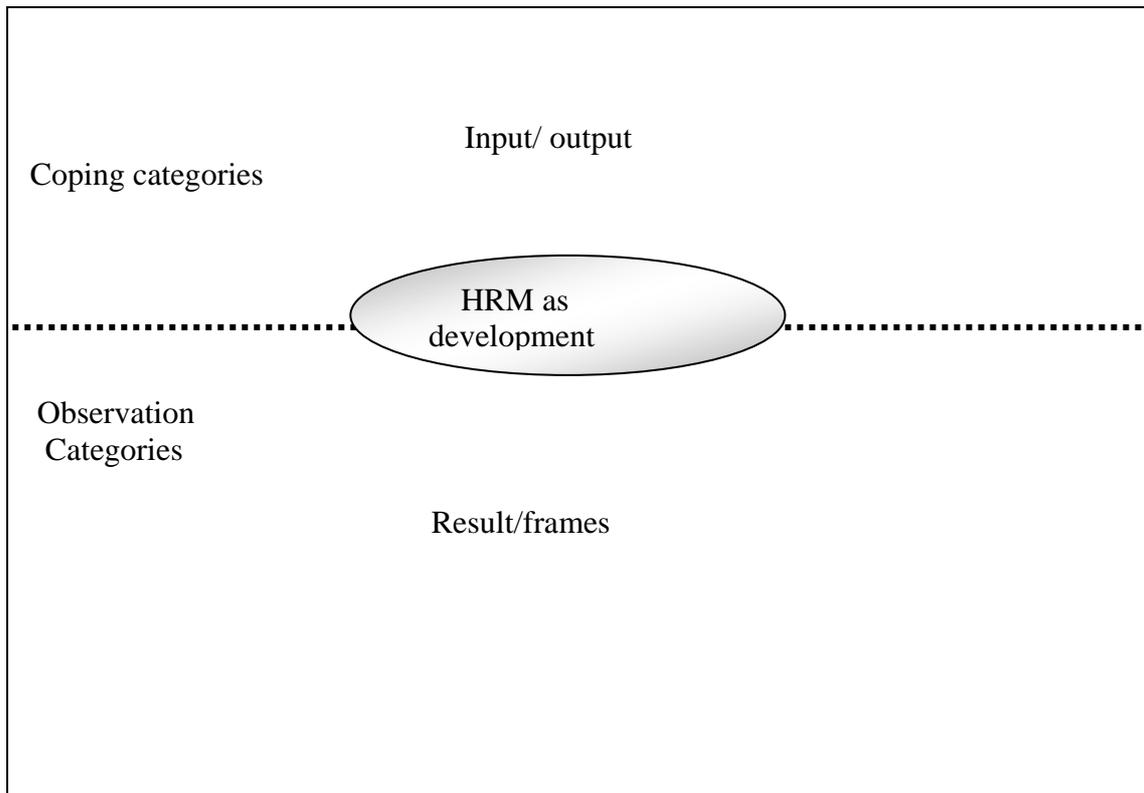
The concern which arises upon this background is to find a solution to the question of which dimensions are meaningful from which to observe possible HRM techniques, if the purpose is to initiate a progressive or regressive development.

A Model for Observation of Control of Progressive and Regressive Development.

In the previous section I have discussed HRM as a paradoxical development concept, and I have done this from two fields of tension; deficiency/possibility, progressive/regressive. The discussion shows that when one focuses upon the one side of the tension field – progressivity- paradoxically enough, (communication) is made regressive.

The constructivist observation makes it possible to see that development construction rests upon presumptions of development as something linear. When we observe development from this perspective all development must necessarily be regressive. The fields of tension progressive/regressive and deficiency/possibility let us see that there is something we cannot see, and are in this way a reflexive observational category. These reflexive, constructivist fields of tension make it possible to construct meaningful fields of tension that on an operational level can be used as a diagnostic tool for businesses which work with development.

Figure 1. HRM as Development – an Observational Model



From the discussion above we can infer that the regressive development on an operational level is characterized by the focus being on that which is added to the situation. That is to say that that which we make an object for our considerations is how we by influencing the input to the development situation can control the development. For example, we focus on *what* characterizes the @-generation, the flexible employee, or the competent IT-employee. Our control possibilities are given by this, because we, if we define the competent IT-worker as a person who knows four different programming languages and in general is willing to work with others and result oriented, will focus on developing or affecting the person with this as a resulting goal. We make the individual to a development project and control by the result. We have in this way a category of observation, *input* (that we make an object for leadership ambition) and a coping category, the *result* (that we control by). Alternatively we can cope with the input through the category *framework*. That we make to an object for the control ambition, happens as a result of an input observation. That is to say that we beforehand define what shall be achieved. For example, we

order a study of employee well-being from a consultancy bureau – but we do not interfere in how it is carried out. We outsource. The result is set in both cases as a measuring point a priori for the activity we initiate. This because we in the input dimension see development from a linear, regressive thought. We have, for example, beforehand determined that we wish our employees to be flexible, we have prepared ourselves for what this entails, and we will measure to what degree this is the case with the different employees. If we control using a framework from an input observation, it is with the same linear idea of development.

The opposition to input is naturally output, but as output shall communicate with our ideas about progressive development, the understanding of output is that which happens when individuals and organizations meet. That is to say that the relationship individual/organization as development project is seen as a process. The object for development is the development process in itself from an assumption that it gives results; we just don't precisely know which. We focus upon *how* the development becomes possible – not *what* development is. That is to say that we have an observing category; *output* (that we make to an object for control ambition), and a coping category; the *framework* (that we control by). The coping category can in this case also be the result, but just as the framework control corresponding to the input dimension assumed another character, so does the end result control under the output dimension assume another character. We can have an idea that a certain process will lead to the results we wish. We set stake in the output observation where the coping dimension is the result, the frames a priori, so that they function as an end result. In the output dimension, where the coping dimension is the framework, the framework and measuring point are set in the process.

We can use the field of tension input/output to observe operational development initiative from where input/output signifies *that way* in which we observe the development – whether development is something which happens when we influence the input or if this happens in the process as output. The coping dimension's result/framework is the field of tension within which development can be coped with when the observation is input/output. The manner in which the result or framework control is expressed is dependent upon which observation is applied. In this way result control from an output perspective becomes more process oriented, and framework control from an input perspective becomes oriented towards a particular result.

Let us try to illustrate this in an application of observation and coping categories confronted with concrete HRM techniques. The chosen techniques in the figure have in common that they are actual HRM methods one employs in connection with control of development.

Figure 2: Observation Dimensions and Coping Categories for Development Exemplified Through Concrete HRM Techniques.

Output

Input

<p>Neighbour Training Framework set beforehand. Measure point set in the process. Result control. Need defined by neighbour.</p>	<p>Self-controlled Groups Framework developed in the process. Measuring point set in the process. Framework steering. Need defined in the process.</p>
<p>Appraisal Interviews Result set beforehand. Measure point set a priori. Result control. Need defined via tasks.</p>	<p>Outsourcing The result ordered from outside. Measuring point set a priori. Framework control. Need defined via strategy and market.</p>

Result

Framework

Input/result: In the bottom left corner I have placed appraisal interviews as an example of an HRM technique where the idea of the result is set beforehand – we judge/evaluate employees on certain points, preferably in relation to a specific task. These points are set beforehand and a good result is determined by the degree of agreement between the a priori measuring point and the concrete result

(whether the employee lives up to the evaluation point). The measuring points, the development need, are decided with the point of departure in the tasks that shall be solved.

Input/framework: The lower right corner is exemplified by “outsourcing.” That which characterises outsourcing is that we, for example, order a study of “well-being at the workplace” with a consultancy bureau. The measuring point is set a priori, but the way in which it is ordered is a complex task, in that the measuring point is formulated in general terms – as a framework. Development need is decided from a formulation of market and strategy needs.

Output/Result: The higher left corner can be exemplified with “neighbour training.” In this case the basic observation is a non-linear, process-based understanding of development. The need for development is defined as that between the neighbour and that which shall be trained, and development’s result is preconceived. The result being that one shall be reasonably able to do that which the neighbour can. The development itself is coped with through the framework of a learning process.

Output/framework: The higher right corner is exemplified with “self-managing groups.” That which in an output observation characterizes self-managing groups is that framework as well as the measuring point is developed in the process. It is not an issue of a development from point a to point b, but of a continuous development process, wherein need as well as the framework control form itself are developed and defined in and through the process.

Does HRM Then Make a Difference?

I started this article by asking if HRM makes a difference. This is, seen in the light of the article’s approach, where I reflect over different fields of tension and their significance for the observation of development, a play on words. The question is whether it makes a difference to observe HRM from these fields of tension. On this premise, HRM makes a difference, if the model is capable of facilitating that HRM practitioners can observe and cope with their own practice in new ways.

The model offers two observation categories and two coping dimensions for development. These observation categories and coping dimensions are developed on the background of a constructivist observation of how we through communication create certain problem/solution relations. That is to

say that these relations in a constructivist observation are seen as constructions. Through the constructivist observation it becomes possible for us to observe the problem/solution relations we otherwise take as a matter of course, in a concrete and immediate fashion. By doing this, we make it possible to formulate more coping possibilities, rather than being locked into the concrete relation we previously took for given. In this way the constructivist observation realized in the model can contribute to giving HRM's proactive development ideal a greater possibility for unfolding. This demands of the observer, practitioner or theoretician, that one questions the lineal presentation of time, and the idea that the ways in which we speak of problems and solutions are nature-given and finite. By doing this, we can see that we, by holding fast to a linear development concept, make development to a retrospective operation. By changing our view we stand with the possibility to choose and to create new ways to initiate development which are in agreement with that we would like to accomplish.

Literature:

Brewster, Chris & Henrik Holt Larsen (eds) (2000), *Human Resource Management in Northern Europe – Trends Dilemmas and Strategy*, Malden, USA: Blackwell Business

Cappelli, P. (2000), *Is there a shortage of information technology workers? A report to McKinsey and Company for the "War for technical talent" project*. Wharton: Wharton University.

Dansk Industri (1999), *Få fat I de unge. 32 gode ideer til rekruttering af unge i samarbejde med uddannelsesinstitutionerne*. København: Dansk Industri.

Frandsen, Christine M., (2001), *Om at iagttage – et studie i ordensskabelse*, under udgivelse.

Johnson, M. (2000), *Winning the people wars. Talent and the battle for human capital*. London: Pearson.

Larsen, Henrik Holt (red), (2001), *Noget for noget? Rekruttering og fastholdelse af unge højtuddannede*, København: Berlingske Annoncecenter

Lindholm, Michael (2001), Foredrag ved konference om humankapital i den ny økonomi. Danish Trade and Service, 18.1.

Miles, Raymond E. (1965), Human Relations or Human Resources? *Harvard Business Review*, July – Aug. side 148-163

Robbins, Stephen P. (1987), *Organizational Theory. Structure, design, and applications*, Englewood Cliffs, USA: Prentice-Hall International Editions, 2nd edition

Rogaczewska, Anna Pratzia, Henrik Holt Larsen og Carsten Skovbro (red), (1999), *Cranet-E undersøgelsen 1999. HRM i danske virksomheder på tærsklen til et nyt årtusinde*, København: Dansk Management Forum og Handelshøjskolen i København.

Schein, Edgar H. (1988), *Organizational Psychology*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 3rd edition.

Simonsen, B. & Katznelson (2000), Unges arbejdsbegreb. *Arbejdsliv*, 2, 4: 9-28.

ⁱ See fx. Capelli (2000), Johnson (2000), Rogaczewska, Larsen and Skovbro (1999), Lindholm (2001), Dansk Industri (1999), Simonsen & Katznelson (2000)

ⁱⁱ Rogaczewska, Larsen and Skovbro (1999), Larsen (red.) (2001).

ⁱⁱⁱ. When I in this article use the concepts "leadership" and "control" I mean the phenomenon that we through different tools attempt to cope an organisational practice in a concrete direction. I don't wish to discuss or take as my point leadership or control as theoretical phenomena, but simply to look at the ambition we in business have to be able to control and predict behaviour in relationship to our production (broadly understood). Tools can in this connection be: recruiting, employee development talks, maintenance techniques, career development, competence development, senior solutions, socialization programs, salary systems, leader development, etc. In short, the HRM-techniques, which are employed in businesses whether they are called HRM-techniques or not

^{iv} This way of seeing the world – as observer and through observation is constructivist. I will in this article argue for why such a constructivist view is central, but I will not get into constructivism or in a theoretical way deepen my knowledge theoretical position. Those interested can refer to Christine M. Frandsen's wonderful article on the subject; Frandsen, Christine M., (2001), Om at iagttage – et studie i ordensskabelse, under udgivelse.

^v Larsen (2001), page 8

^{vi} Se f.eks. Rogaczewska, Larsen og Skovbro (1999)

^{vii} Brewster, Chris & Henrik Holt Larsen (eds) (2000)

^{viii} Frandsen (2001), page 9

^{ix} I employ in the article the characterizations "techniques" and "tools" in a very broad way. The characterizations cover the methods one in prevalent HRM-practice and theory employ when one shall cope with diverse problems.