

Development of Collective Management Competencies: an analysis of the group process

Abstract:

The aim of this study, undertaken in a large industrial company in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, is to analyze the possibilities for, and limitations of, the development of collective management competencies within group processes.

We consider this to be a key area in the development of contemporary organizations, and the experience of participating in a management team as essential to building individual and collective management competencies. However, despite the “modernist” tone of many commentators on the subject, hierarchical systems of management still predominate in practice. This makes it difficult to establish interdependent relationships between different hierarchical levels, and encourages the preservation of a culture of non-sharing of power and of information, especially within decision-making processes.

Directors, managers, and supervisors of the company concerned took part in this study. The data collected in discussion groups and through personal interviews were qualitatively analyzed by integrating relevant extracts within a systematic transcription.

Our preliminary findings indicate the following critical factors in the building of collective corporate competence:

1) The lower the *level of clarity concerning the leadership role*, the greater a) the attention to operational issues (and the less time available for managing people), b) the lack of clarity of aims and objectives, c) misunderstandings concerning friendship-related issues, and d) the difficulty of dealing with emotional aspects.

2) The greater the *hierarchical barriers*, the lower a) the capacity for assuming responsibilities, b) the level of sharing decisions (and the greater the fear of sharing power and information), c) the degree of shared vision, and the greater d) the difficulty in seeking help when needed, which is associated with feelings of vulnerability and the tendency to avoid conflict (and consequently put forward less ideas and suggestions).

Keywords: collective management competencies - group process

1 – Introduction

Organizations have an urgent need to develop competitive differences and more and better products, using less resources and with a leaner and more competent staff. Those in managerial roles bear the brunt of the impact of the pressure for results. Experts in Business Administration recommend that enterprises organize themselves according to the complexity of the tasks to be carried out in the form of an emerging paradigm, and adopt Management by Competencies as an organizational model. “This involves responsible and recognized *savoir-faire*, which entails mobilization and integration, and the transfer of the knowledge, resources and capabilities which add economic value to the organization, together with social value for the individual” (Fleury and Fleury, 2001, p.21).

The concept of competence is relevant to human resource management practices, and for clarifying the relationship between company strategy, organizational competencies, human competencies and, more specifically, managerial competencies.

Very frequently, when organizations are identifying necessary managerial competencies, they are faced with a large number of characteristics, most of which are highly subjective. However, it is important to stress that managerial competencies cannot be limited to an ideal profile of the manager required which is based on a list of such characteristics. These must be derived from a shared vision of competencies which are transformed into complementary and well-articulated management practices, and which are based on an understanding of the real organizational context surrounding them. Viewed from this perspective, the focus is not on the definition of the characteristics of competencies (concepts), but on the application of these competencies

(practices), stressing contextual and relational aspects (interaction) in the conceptualization of the notion of competency (Sandberg, 1996 and 2000; Boterf, 2003; Bitencourt, 2004).

Although organizations invest in programs of management development, these are given to groups of managers with the aim of broadening their individual competencies, and not of developing the potential of these competencies within a collective context. In everyday organizational practice, a large number of management problems are associated with a) incompatibilities in the decision-making process which involve different hierarchical levels; b) lack of communication between peers who hold positions of leadership in interdependent areas or sectors; and c) competition (both explicit and implicit) between managers, with the objective of increasing their individual formal and informal power.

On the one hand, all programs of management training emphasize factors such as teamwork, interpersonal relations, corporate vision, power-sharing, life-long learning, and so on. This approach is based on the discussion of situations in which leaders should transfer, facilitate or apply their acquired knowledge to their team of subordinates. On the other hand, there is a tendency to neglect the fact that these leaders are themselves part of teams (in the case of managers, teams comprising their peers), and are participants in decision-making processes involving different hierarchical levels which should operate on the basis of synergy and interdependence.

Sandberg (2000) claims that the development and maintenance of distinctive competencies can be defined in terms of the development of a *shared vision* of the meaning of work, thus “making sense” of it and paving the way for a new form of awareness of working relations. For Boterf (2003) an organization should be viewed as a “system of competencies”, i.e. a *network of competencies* in terms of the articulation of the different levels and organizational directives.

Thus the development of competencies involves a change in the structure and in the meaning of working practices. The *process* of training and the development of competencies is a tacit dimension which is embedded within its context, and which is based on the experience of workers and the perception they have of this experience. It is this which generates the meaning of work, a determining factor in the consolidation of competencies.

Taking the interpersonal relations between groups as a starting-point, Moscivici (1995) emphasizes the following as key competencies: empathy, openness to feedback, tolerance of frustration, capacity for cooperation, ability to build networks of relationships, flexibility in group relations, *inter alia*.

As regards intersubjectivity, Morin (1996), using the expressions “all-inclusive” or “collective” subjectivity, stresses three associated subjective principles. The first two, which are inseparable, are the principles of inclusion and exclusion, which allow us to “integrate within our subjectivity other differentials of ourselves, other subjects” (p.51), and to integrate our personal subjectivity into a collective “we” subjectivity. The combination of these two principles does not, however, occur without some oscillation between selfish and selfless actions, between feelings of isolation and belonging. The third principle is derived from that of inclusion, and is that of intercommunication. This can also oscillate between being extremely communicative and being extremely uncommunicative.

Being flexible and being able to establish networks of relationships, for example, are not characteristics which are developed only by access to information, since in themselves they do not cause changes in attitude. To acquire these characteristics, it is necessary to interact with both the subjective and intersubjective dimensions.

In the light of the above, collective management competence can be seen as a set of emerging capabilities within a group of managers operating in a determined organizational context. These capabilities make it possible to obtain better results in the work process: for example, in how decisions are made, in how the actions of managers are aligned with organizational strategy, and so on. Although this competence is an important source of the articulation of individual competencies within the group, its scope is not restricted to this area alone. It is, fundamentally, the expression of the synergy and interdependence of “the parts of the whole”. Within these parts, we must consider certain tangible aspects, such as the design of a process, its infrastructure, and the management model used. We must also take into account the characteristics of the organizational climate and culture, the level of interpersonal relations, and the complementarity and potentialization of individual competencies in the context where they occur.

From this perspective, the group process is viewed as a means of transformation, where the constant action of perceiving the other person, of differentiating oneself from and identifying oneself with one's peers, of speaking or remaining silent, and of using various forms of language to express one's ideas, facilitates the growth of individuals and of the collective environment in which they interact.

In summary, the central issue of this investigation is as follows: What are the possibilities and the limitations for building collective management competencies through group processes, bearing in mind the subjectivity and intersubjectivity of the participants?

2 – Methodology

This study uses a qualitative methodology, and has adopted a case study strategy which takes into account both qualitative and quantitative data. By integrating the two types of data, we have been able to identify both specific and common competencies within the scope of the study. This has been reinforced by the interdisciplinary techniques used to collect and analyze the data. There is a consequent focus on the complexity and process-orientated nature of the research, which is a key feature of the use of the Dialog Model as a methodological approach (Minayo and Deslandes, 2002).

The unit of research analysis is a large company operating in the metallurgical sector, located in the region of the Vale dos Sinos. The participants are the managers of the company: 3 top executives, 15 middle managers, and 32 supervisors and operational team leaders.

Data were first collected by means of a questionnaire concerning group emotional competencies (Closs, 2004). In the next phase, a discussion group was held in which the managers were shown the results of the questionnaires, thus stimulating an exchange of views of their experiences as a group. The managers also discussed their perceptions of leadership competencies, and the repercussions of these in relation to the subjectivity and intersubjectivity encountered during the process of building collective management competencies. The discussion was recorded and transcribed to produce data for a qualitative analysis of the text and for a systemic map. This was constructed through a process of transcription into systemic language, using the text analysis as a starting point. By means of systemic language, which is "one of the instruments used to put systemic ideas into practice" (Andrade, et al, 2006, p.56), it is possible to read, conceptualize, and communicate the complexity of situations. In systemic transcription, the collected data are integrated and the variables which suggest relations of cause and effect are abstracted. They are then validated by means of the theoretical referent in an attempt to find a non-linear logic of comprehension of the issues investigated in the study (Senge, 1999).

In the third phase, the researchers presented the results of the discussion group, which had been drawn together in a systemic map describing the perception of collective competence of the managers concerned. It is worth noting that the aim of this procedure was to give external and internal validation to the information produced by the group of managers at each stage of the research. Thus the aim of the data which emerged from the group discussions was to ensure theoretical comprehension of the empirical material (external validation), and in the presentation of the results of the discussion group it was possible to recommence the discussion, which created a process of systemic recurrence (internal validation). For Morin (2002), the principle of the recursive circuit implies the idea of regulation, auto-production, and auto-organization, within which processes or relations follow an unpredictable path, even though they may possess parameters which are defined by goals, deadlines or indicators which interact simultaneously and define the course of the action taken.

3 – Discussion of the Results

The *group process*, i.e. the trajectory followed by the group and its transformations in each meeting, is considered to be the result of this research. As we move between the objectivity and subjectivity of the research process, we present below the results which we consider to be most germane to the aim of this study of the development of collective management competencies.

In the second meeting with the group of managers, the results of the data collected from the questionnaires were presented in the form of graphs, with scores from 1 to 5 on the Likert scale for

each competency evaluated by the research instrument used. The results in terms of the averages of the nine competencies investigated are:

Competence	Score
1 – Interpersonal understanding	4,58
2 – Confrontation of group members who break the rules	4,19
3 – Attentiveness to other group members	4,71
4 – Personal evaluation of the team	4,31
5 – Creation of resources for dealing with emotion	3,88
6 – Creation of a positive working environment	4,61
7 – Proactive problem-solving	4,31
8 – Organizational understanding	4,23
9 – Creation of relationships outside the workplace	4,88

This discussion group lasted four hours. After the full results of the questionnaire had been presented, the participants were divided into smaller groups in order to discuss them. The aim of this exercise was to understand the characteristics of this group of managers on the basis of their perception of the results derived from the analysis of the questionnaires. Following this exchange of opinions in smaller groups (which were formed at random), the managers then discussed their findings as one large group.

We observed that, on receiving the results of the questionnaires, the participants began to share their views of how this “snapshot” of the group’s emotional competencies had emerged and was expressed in day-to-day working life, thus revealing a number of salient features concerning management practice within the company.

A critical factor which emerged from the discussion group was the perception that leadership roles were unclear. One of the consequences of this is that the actions of leaders tend to concentrate more on operational aspects (controlling of tasks, for example) than on personnel management. In connection with this, it was found that it was difficult to define responsibilities, as well as limits of autonomy and powers of decision-making, since these aspects had not been sufficiently clarified by the company.

We also observed that the managers agreed that *“the real function or role of each manager and each leader was still unclear”*. In other words, lines of communication between levels of responsibility and competency should be clarified, and there is a need for further attention to the collective competence of the management group *“[...] so that we are more concerned about each other, [...] and can help each other more”*.

The need to establish better interpersonal relations through mutual help and support in everyday situations shows that there is a demand in this group of managers for the development of collective strategies for the learning of leadership competencies linked to the subjective and intersubjective development of the persons working in the organization (Goleman, Boyatzis, McKee, 2002).

The difficulty in understanding the leadership role was a frequently recurring aspect in the declarations of the group throughout the meeting. This is illustrated in the following discourse:

We will not be able to understand instantly our role and all its intricacies, all the information, and all the messages which are being transmitted (...). Some people will be able to understand their role more rapidly, others more slowly (...).

The lack of clarity concerning the role and functions of leadership is associated with emotion, as we observed in the group discussion. In line with this, the competency which achieved the lowest score was “creation of resources for dealing with emotion”.

Initially, this difficulty was expressed by the group as a phrase which provoked a great deal of laughter: *“Emotion is effete!”* But the laughter died down when a member of the group said, *“We don’t know how to deal with emotion. We think it’s something effete! But that’s because we still don’t know how to deal with it”*. As the discussion continued, it became evident how difficult it was for the managers to recognize their subordinates (and themselves, in the position of leaders) as individuals, and not just as workers who have tasks to carry out. The participants pointed out that

there was not enough time to discuss the feelings and frustrations of their subordinates during the working day, and that this is also not possible during meetings:

The bosses don't give their subordinates time to stop and think and talk about things. They just ignore the problem!

Sometimes we see that a person is down, but we don't try to find out what's wrong with them.

The fragments of discourse quoted above demonstrate an inability to carry out what Davel and Vergara (2001) call "management of people guided by subjectivity", where one of the necessary prerequisites is the emotional capacity to express and respect that co-workers may also express emotions in their day-to-day work.

Reflections concerning the existing hierarchy of the organization and the different areas of power within each level also emerged. However, the following observation was made in a lighthearted way: "*So when we talk about the pyramid, or any other situation, there are those who are bosses, and those who think they are bosses, right!*" Here the hierarchy is viewed as an impediment to the construction of collective competence, since there is a feeling that, faced with the "pyramid", people tend to be more reluctant to speak up and ask for help, preferring to find their own solutions or even conceal the problem concerned.

On the other hand, the group referred to the *Open Door Policy*, and admitted that there was a positive change which had gradually been taking place in the company in recent years. Prior to this, there was little access to information, since "*there were doors to all the rooms, all the rooms were closed, and it was completely different – not just the environment, but the emotional side of things*". During the discussion, participants questioned how far the leaders were really "*open-minded*", and ready to listen and give support. In response, one of the directors said that the question was not whether "*the door is open*" but whether people would be prepared to swallow their pride and "*go through the door which is open*".

Such questioning relates to the fact that changes in organizational practice, though they may derive from the objective communication of a new company directive, need to be introduced with a mid to long-term perspective, in order that they can become part of the organization's culture, and be manifested as shared values in the organization's behavior. For Morgan (1996), "culture" refers to the process of construction of the reality which allows people to see and understand events, actions, objects, expressions, and individual situations in different ways, while providing the bases which make a person's behavior sensitive and meaningful. Thus the culture of an organization is the reflection of the social systems of knowledge, ideology, values, laws, and everyday rituals.

According to these notions, we can understand that it is not enough to remove walls and open doors. It is necessary to build a shared vision during the process of change of culture, and to develop the capacity for participation, openness and feedback so that official policy is seen as effective practice. The distance between what is offered and what is put into effect impacts principally on what is being proposed.

The empirical material and the ideas of the authors mentioned above suggest different variables which may have a more decisive effect on whether there is a greater or lesser degree of openness to allowing subjective issues to play a larger part in everyday working life. This does not mean, however, that the process can be reduced to a single variable. It is necessary to pay attention to individual contributions, to company policy and practice, and to the culture which is also influenced by the society the company is part of. In addition, attention must be paid to the findings of systemic thought, to the multicausal notion in the understanding of an effect, and to the definition of interventions within this reality.

As regards the group's understanding of the nature of collective managerial competence within the company, there are obvious feelings of solidarity: a shared collective goal ("*we're all rooting for the same team*"); a group capacity for taking coherent decisions with a single focus; the quest for results which benefit the whole company, and not just individual departments. As well as the above factors, the following statement by one member was especially well-received by the group as a whole:

(...) there is no mathematical formula (to define collective competence), there is just a person (...) who is doing a good job and you try to follow the step of this person, follow their steps. And the company also needs to show us where it wants to get to.

This statement found an echo in the group, probably because it expressed in a nutshell their overall impressions and feelings. The explanation of collective competence using a soccer analogy was also well-received, as it stressed the importance of the group's exploiting the talents of each member in order to "*score goals*" because "*we don't have eleven Ronaldinho Gaúcho on our team!*" Articulation, synergy, and interdependence are all present in this metaphor concerning collective competence. This empirical data suggests an alignment with Boterf (2003), in the sense that it maintains that collective competence is of a systemic nature.

As regards the building of collective competence, all the managers agreed that "*it exists in certain areas, but not everywhere*", since it still needs to be understood that "*the team is not just my department*". In other words, the awareness of what constitutes collective competence is developing quite rapidly, whereas the manifestation of this cognitive awareness in terms of capabilities and attitudes is advancing more slowly. It was also pointed out that it is necessary to work collectively in this endeavor, to break with the tendency to "*find someone to blame*" and "*to say it was your neighbor's fault*", and to involve everyone in solving problems. We observed in these declarations that there is an understanding that errors are systemic, i.e. the errors are in the network and only appear here or there.

The "*lack of attitude*" of the leaders (manifested as "fear") is another difficulty to be faced in the construction of collective competence. The group said they were afraid of: expressing ideas which were "different"; dealing with confrontation; sharing power and information; asking for help; asking questions (in meetings, for example) when they didn't understand something. The fear of putting themselves on the line was associated with the difficulties involved in breaking through hierarchical barriers. According to a number of middle management participants, this was one of the factors limiting the effectiveness of the open door policy: "*The layers exist, and the difficulty is for people to cross over to the other layers*". One senior manager questioned to what extent people wanted to "*flatten the pyramid*", that is, to put themselves on the line and assume wider responsibilities.

The difficulty of leaders in reconciling operational tasks with personnel management was reiterated as one of the group's chief problems:

What is difficult to put into practice is the "operational solution" (in inverted commas!) and its influence on people. We know that, in reality, this is very difficult in our day-to-day work (...).

We observed a desire and a consciousness among the leaders of the need to be managers of people: supervising, evaluating, giving feedback, i.e. involving and developing their co-workers, and creating favorable conditions for the building of social capital (Fukuyama, 2000; Capra, 2002). Nevertheless, as Capra (2002) affirms, the pressure to achieve results, the concern with increasing production in the face of global competition, and the presence of market turbulence demand ever more rapid structural changes. These factors are in addition to constantly increasing working hours and a demand for permanent availability (twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, on-line). All these combined create a situation which is both stressful and unhealthy, and which leads to a lowering of the creative potential of individuals and of groups, thus limiting their capacity for innovation and problem-solving, and consequently their competitiveness.

The lack of available time for dealing with subjectivity makes it recurrently difficult to give feedback, to deal with feelings, and to understand affective issues in professional practice. Because of this, it is necessary to invest time, for example, in sharing coherent observations concerning the role of managers. In other words, it is possible to give an interpretative focus to the building of competencies (Sandberg, 1996 and 2000; Boterf, 2003), via which the attributes of competence must have their meaning constructed and shared by the group as a whole.

With regard to the building of collective management competencies, there is a manifest reluctance on the part of senior management to give up when faced with the possible problems outlined above. The groups which have been set up to try and solve these problems (Kaizen, PDCA, CCQ) are universally considered to be units within which the lessons drawn from collective work can be

observed “*in practice*”. Perceived improvements resulting from these findings include increased levels of respect between colleagues, and a growth in the exchange of positive and negative feedback:

Of all the areas considered, feedback was the one in which very little was happening, either positive or negative. Now this is happening, and I think it has brought great results for all of us.

It is interesting to note that factors such as lessons and improvements are essentially close to the difficulties we have identified: interpersonal relations versus difficulty in dealing with emotions; integration, transparency, circulation of information, and exchange of feedback versus hierarchical barriers, difficulty in giving and receiving feedback, lack of clarity of managerial roles. This leads us to reflect that raising awareness of these difficulties within a complex perspective takes us back, paradoxically, to the lessons learnt in relation to the same, and this can produce gradual improvements in everyday management practice.

Conclusion

In order to identify and target leadership competencies within an organization, it is necessary to bear in mind that there is an intersubjective field which runs through the role of leadership played out in the collective space where management is undertaken. However, in terms of organizational logic, the increased demands of the market require greater concentration on production, and on attention to the objective criteria of new certification. As a result of this, it is difficult to find enough time to deal with with subjective and intersubjective factors. Within this reality, the subjects are other individuals who are seen as objects forced to produce more in order to meet targets and deadlines. As Morin (2002) points out, “objectivity can only come from a subject”, i.e. the two dimensions of objectivity and subjectivity are inseparable. But Morin also reminds us that human beings “are unfortunately able to stop seeing the subjectivity of other human beings, and begin to consider them merely as objects” (Morin, 2002, p.80).

When we systemically draw together the data collected from the group of managers, we observe that there a number of critical factors related to the formation of collective competence within the company where they work: a) *The lack of clarity of leadership roles*, and the continuation of the discussion concerning these roles in forums restricted to each hierarchical level, seems to bear out *the difficulty of managers in dealing with emotions*. This segmented discussion may represent an alternative for tackling the issue within the organization, thus avoiding the difficulties inherent to what is a more complex and intersubjective process which involves simultaneously senior managers, middle managers, and operational supervisors; b) *The open door policy*, which sets out to engender a more transparent organizational environment and greater flexibility within the hierarchy, is still a work in progress; sometimes there is more openness, at others the *hierarchical barriers* of the organization are preserved. These barriers are systemically related to: a lower capacity for assuming responsibilities; less sharing of decisions, power, and information; less shared vision; and a greater difficulty in speaking up and asking for help.

During the group process, we noted that insecurity in dealing with paradoxes, and being faced with the impossibility of achieving a “synthesis” and an objective response which would point to the “right” solution to everyday problems, are indicators of the group’s development. Within the group, as the leaders exchange views and share experiences, they recognize and discuss their different ways of thinking and acting. It is through these interpersonal relations that lessons are learned, thus building and consolidating resources for the development of collective management competencies.

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