

## Staffing by Explicit References

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**Abstract:** To use explicit references in planning and assessment has specific advantages. It is a way of controlling the entirety of overviews and it helps co-operation and participation in complex bureaucracies. It is a way of organizing setting priorities so that the alternatives eliminated become visible.

In a recent study for the Swedish defence a series of references were applied for the composition of different competences in urgent staffing missions: James Miller (1978), de Raadt (2000), Elliot Jacques (1996), Eric Albert (2005), Marion Saumonneau (2006) and of course the HR-XML. We made taxonomy for the competences required but we also found that an iterative procedure with more than one taxonomy would be a preferable method.

**Keywords:** Competence, staffing, templates, systems science

### 1. Innovative Management Practice

I perceive innovative management practice as a kind of procedure where thinking is joined with action and communication. Most innovation comes from thinking but not all. You discover when you do. You have good and bad surprises. You have the devil in the details someone said. I had my latest surprise when I used James Miller's input-output model to classify competences. The model did not work as it had done many times before and as the client had expected. We should not have been surprised though. Philosophers like Bordieu (1992) and Luhman (2003) are clear enough about the limitations of simple branching taxonomies. Anyhow after a brute effort trying to specify in James Miller's framework we tried a multi perspective methodology.

But was this *innovative practice*? Surely it was not the kind of brilliant solution or combination that is the mirage of Edward de Bono (1973), of Martin Gardner (1970) or of the charming French Eureka (1979). In my project it was rather a *take care of ex post* and it came by work, not by brilliant thinking. But there was innovation also. It came from Brussels and it was founded on a new vision of the world. Defence and diplomacy had to be integrated for new security policies. Europe integrates. Sweden no longer has got any problematic borders. Precaution became pro-action and the latter consists in launching troop when Brussels calls. Moreover we do not know many weeks in advance which troops are to be sent. Sweden does not send trained battalions. It sends trained people who are to be selected and put together according to specific needs expressed each time by the European Commission and the Swedish Government

There is innovation on two levels: in the general world-view and in each call from Brussels. And each time it is urgent. So structures and routines for the nation who responds must be prepared. Participating countries are not given many weeks for recruitment and training. Here, if ever, we see that innovation is not just the idea. My project had a very small role in making Brussels innovations real but I felt that we were doing innovative management *practice*.

### 2. The mission and its context

My project, as many others, started with a precise question: "Make us a taxonomy for competences!" Thinking about Jean Louis le Moigne's projectivity concept (1995) I asked about uses and contexts for this taxonomy: It should be there for a sequence of functions:

Recruitment, formation, staffing, reorganization, action, follow-up.

These functions in their turn are composed of the following activities:

Requirements specifications, their translation into formal criteria, shaping and update of databases, matching persons with jobs, negotiations and employment decisions.

Our linguistic taxonomic efforts had a major focus of translating Brussel requirements into troop requirements. The subsequent matching of individual requirements into database and search engine language was another issue with some commitments already done. A soft-ware, Match-IT, could search in many ways including by free text.

### 3. The project

The client's earlier established requirements specification for competences, including a use of the well established HR-XML structure, survived a matching with the systems model of James Miller. That model then became a framework for a taxonomy of all the competences needed. However, further testing of our a priori requirements with other models showed that lots of psychological qualities were missing. This subsequent testing led to substantial amendments of the Military HQ's language for personnel specifications. More general human qualities were added in a vein of Peter Senge, Eric Albert and Marion Saumonneau.

The subsequent matchings also led us to a revised methodology. We came to question the idea of one single taxonomy as a language for competencies. We started instead the design of a multi perspective procedure. It could start with any kind of a pragmatic or theoretical setting, but it must continue and be modified by theories from systems science and from the human sciences. It is likely that we will end up with a very flexible methodology neither stating a fixed taxonomy nor a fixed sequence of perspectives. The latter could be chosen according to the intentions of the troop to be designed. If a troop is to have qualified coordinating roles for example, the taxonomy of Elliot Jacques would be useful. For many military missions it might be enough to run two perspectives, a professional/technical one and another more psychological one.

The amendments of the old menu of competencies came as no surprise to my client, but he was pleased to have explicit suggestions of perspectives and of a method. Those will be brought forward to a handbook for staffing in international missions. In this way our project conforms to the general HQ rule that flexibility shall be designed by *Network Centric Enabling Services*.

As a menu of guiding perspectives we first suggested James Miller and Stafford Beer (1974) who design coherent structures of connected flows and transformations. John P van Gigch (2003) also offered this kind of organic coherence, but in a metaphysic world view. He sees and draws the process of building knowledge.

The organic flow models guarantee a certain completion in the overview, but the level of abstraction is not really convenient for our staffing work. Something generic, more scholarly and more generic is needed as a complement. So, Albert, Jacques and Saumonneau were tested. Other authorities were discussed but not explicitly used. You may find this discussion in the complete consultancy report (in Swedish) by the web link [www.agrell.info](http://www.agrell.info). However, most of all the non-organic models offer a pragmatic rather than a systemic overview, which is less easy to pin-point and explain to partners and stakeholders in the personnel management process.

So what is new enough for a scientific audience in this paper?

- We have a Cartesian (1637) explicitation of a competence management process.
- We have gathered a set of relevant systems structures for competence descriptions in personnel management.
- We have made an experiment in using systems structures to test and supplement an older view on competences. This experiment initiated amendments. The experiment is then suggested as an archetype for a regular procedure mixing intuition and patterns. This procedure is a specification of the principle of multiple perspectives, which too often is expressed only as a pious wish.
- We see that you discover by known patterns, not only by experience, intuition and pragmatics,
- We offer a philosophy about using patterns for discovery, co-operation and democracy.

### 4. A client's reaction

There was complete agreement about a need to improve the existing conceptual framework for personnel requirements specifications. We also had a common hesitation over whether the need for multiple perspectives could be reduced to just one or two taxonomies.

My immediate client was pleased to apply systems thinking both as patterns and as something to relate to in different ways. This general enthusiasm spread over into recommendations for the military academy's attention to modelling and systems science.

Another interesting reaction was the willingness to discuss different taxonomies. Abstractions of that kind are not always so popular in spite of all management science recommendations to bring problems to generic levels. It remains to be seen however how willing the real hands on personnel managers are to discuss their basic assumptions in this way. The latter will also have the question about how to handle the necessary multiple perspectives: in one, two or more iterations. The goal is to agree, write and teach a handbook of personnel management.

How to learn, develop and teach abilities of crisis management will be developed in other projects in collaboration with civilian authorities and research establishments. The projects multi-perspective view on competence will be used in those. My client is pleased that the project is presented at the ESTIA and he encourages me to listen carefully to critics and comments.

## 5. A discussion

Jean-Michel Larrasquet (2007) writes about *prison langagière* and *illusion ontologique* quoting Michel Foucault. These expressions describe accurately the state of affairs before our project started and they also say that care must be taken not to go into another linguistic prison by producing a ukase and by having it transmitted through the military hierarchy. So three things may seem impossible: to keep an obsolete view of competence, to impose a conceptual framework on the real personnel managers and to discuss abstractions such as world views beyond their feelings of relevance. The abstract dialogues are not so easy in real management though authorities like Checkland (1985) and Larrasquet (and myself) plead for it. The imposition by the hierarchy is not as easy as it used to be, not even in a military organization. However, an agreed need for computer support in the new situation of world security and preparedness for rapid reaction may still make a conceptual change possible.

My client was a group of planners from the central headquarters. They were not the ones to really do the staffing job in the future and we had surprising difficulties to capture the latter into our project. One of my major tasks, I found, was to persuade my client that those have to be involved even before any conceptual taxonomy or main line of staffing method could be settled. This does not mean that we should strive for a pure consensus procedure and product. That would have been to return to an earlier state already falsified and rejected. Our systems and science results really had to be transmitted into practice – to conform to Brussel's new urgencies and to assure a modern competence profile including human qualities for our troops. We must launch a new conceptual worldview of competences and we must be prepared to modify by dialogue. We must also discuss the concrete method of introducing new relevant perspectives into the language of requirements specification.

What I am less willing to question is the need for explicit transparent structures both for the views on the concept of competence and for the steps in the personnel employment procedure. I see the following reasons:

- To have an overview of a kind that can be defended and explained to others,
- To be able to approach an exhaustive completeness by the use of a series of explainable patterns,
- To enable better presentations to partners and politicians
- To open up to criticism and further developments by transparency and traceability,
- To help setting priorities and to enable the demonstration of both accepted and discarded options,
- To reduce lobbyism and local logics to defendable roles,

- To make consensus procedures honest with responsible world views and defensible foci,
- To make defensible links in a chain of requirements specifications containing both human and computerized nodes,
- To make comparisons fair,
- To capture the relevant competences,

So far this is for staffing procedures, but I have also earlier experience with this kind of explicitation. It works sometimes and sometimes not. From a method's development point of view I think it is important now to describe situations to see how they differ and to see their specific methodological requirements.

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