

BETWEEN INSTITUTIONAL EXPECTATIONS AND LIVED PRACTICES: EMPLOYEE REPRESENTATIONS OF MANAGERIAL ROLES IN A BELGIAN CONSULTING FIRM*

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Abstract

This article examines how employees construct, assess, and interpret the figure of the “good manager” in an organizational setting where managerial expectations are formalized through an internal competency framework. Adopting a constructivist perspective rooted in structuration theory, this study focuses on the perceived misalignment between institutional norms and employee representations. Based on thirteen semi-structured interviews with employees in a Belgian consulting firm and an inductive analysis inspired by grounded theory, the findings highlight three ideal-typical figures: the structuring manager, the coach-like manager, and the facilitating manager. The results also reveal critical tensions, particularly concerning insufficient feedback, the taboo of upward feedback, and a prioritization of business objectives over human concerns. These tensions are interpreted as consequences of a managerial framework that remains abstract and incomplete, failing to adequately address well-being, relational reciprocity, and the recognition of interpersonal qualities.

Keywords: *managerial roles, competency frameworks, employee perceptions, organizational norms, managerial bricolage, employee well-being*

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, “managers are confronted with the increasing complexity of organisations, activities and social relations” (Bonnet and Bonnet, 2007, p. 248) and the question of management has become a central issue for the sustainability and development of companies. Many academic and professional works have tried to define what a “good manager” should be and to identify the skills considered essential for team engagement, mobilisation and performance (Harding et al., 2014). For example, managerial frameworks such as the one used in the firm studied here highlight “leadership” qualities such as the ability to inspire or influence.

However, this idealised figure has been criticised. Many researchers question the limits of this normative construction and underline the recurring gap between prescribed skills and the managerial practices actually observed in the field. The work of Mintzberg (1973) already helped challenge the traditional image of a rational and planning manager by

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showing a type of work that is fragmented, informal and constantly adjusted. In the same way, Giddens' structuration theory (1984) invites us to see management as a socially constructed reality, emerging from the interaction between institutional rules and the concrete actions of actors.

In this context, it becomes necessary to shift the focus and to understand management by analysing how employees build, assess and above all interpret the managerial figures they are confronted with. Throughout this research, a constructivist approach is adopted. Social structures do not exist before individuals, they are constantly reproduced or transformed through their practices. From this point of view, we focus on the way employees in a Belgian consulting firm build their own image of the "good manager" and on the way this image resonates, or on the contrary comes into conflict, with the practices observed in their daily work.

The organisation studied, formalises its managerial expectations through an internal framework called "*Talent Standards*". This framework lists fifteen competencies grouped into three main dimensions, leadership capacities, professional capacities and technical capacities. What matters here, however, is to observe how employees, through their daily interactions, validate, question or challenge these normative standards and to identify the perceived gaps between institutional expectations and concrete managerial experiences.

This research is guided by the following central question, *how do employees build an image of the "good manager" and how does this image come into conflict, or not, with the practices observed in their daily work?* To explore this question, we adopt an inductive methodology based on semi structured interviews and on an analysis inspired by grounded theory (Lejeune, 2019).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Organisations now operate in an unstable environment, where uncertainty, structural changes and competitive pressure are reshaping expectations toward managers (Heyden et al., 2015). Managers are expected to meet strategic, human, operational and emotional demands at the same time (Mintzberg, 1973), which leads to an accumulation of expectations. As a result, a lasting tension appears between the managerial ideal promoted in institutional discourse and the lived reality of management in everyday work.

This tension can be expressed in a clear way. On the one hand, the organisation defines a set of behaviours, attitudes and qualities expected from the "good manager". On the other hand, subordinates experience daily interactions and behaviours that often move away from this ideal norm (Frenkel et al., 2013; Nielsen and Yarker, 2023). This gap is central and shows the difference between the prescribed image and actual practices. A purely objectivist reading of managerial skills is therefore not enough. The issue is not only to describe what managers do but also to understand how their figure is perceived, built, interpreted and evaluated by employees.

Contemporary expectations and their normative effects can then be analysed. Current demands are not only descriptive, they also have a prescriptive dimension and impose norms of behaviour and attitudes that shape managerial practices (Bonnet and Bonnet, 2007). These prescriptions help build a normative framework that can guide managerial behaviour toward certain expectations, without reflecting the real complexity of professional situations. At the same time, real management is marked by fragmented time, multiple tasks and the tension between what is prescribed and what is actually done. Faced

with complexity and contradictions, managers do not simply undergo constraints in a passive way. They develop discreet adjustments and become “*experts in bricolage*” (Bonnet and Bonnet, 2007, p. 260).

Finally, from a constructivist point of view, the image of the “good manager” cannot be seen as a fixed or universal framework. It results from a dynamic process of co-construction in which employees play a central role (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Bonnet and Bonnet, 2007; Watson, 2008). This construction develops through interactions, internal discourses and shared interpretations. It also involves collective mechanisms of sense making.

In short, in order to answer the central question of this research, the literature leads to five main findings. First, the image of the “good manager” is a social construction influenced by normative discourses that change over time. Second, frameworks such as “*Talent Standards*” set ideal expectations that may be far from the reality of the field. Third, this gap can create tensions. Fourth, employees take part in defining the managerial role through their experiences and perceptions. Fifth, the way a manager is perceived influences engagement, well-being and the work climate. Thus, these theoretical contributions form the core of the analytical framework used in the empirical study carried out in the firm.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The initial intention was to study managerial practices in the firm by directly interviewing “*Managers and Up*” profiles, including managers, directors and partners. However, this project faced access difficulties, such as overloaded schedules and time constraints, which made the number of possible interviews too limited. After discussion with the supervisor, the focus of the fieldwork shifted toward employees and their perceptions of management. In fact, they are the ones who experience the effects of managerial practices on a daily basis, whether they undergo them, interpret them, agree with them or resist them. Their testimonies provide direct access to the gap between official discourse and lived realities. This change also reflects an epistemological shift. The objective was no longer to model “good practices” but to understand representations of the managerial role in a specific environment.

The research was carried out during a final internship in the Human Capital department of the firm. The fieldwork was later extended to a few members from another related team. The sample was defined with a target of ten to fifteen interviews which was considered ambitious in this context. Thanks to constant follow up, thirteen semi-structured interviews were finally conducted over a period of two months. This allowed us to reach a reasonable level of data to support our analysis, despite strong availability constraints.

It is important to note that the figure of the “manager” mentioned by employees does not necessarily refer to one single person or to one fixed hierarchical role. In the firm’s matrix structure, employees work on several projects at the same time, with different points of reference depending on the assignment. As a result, “managers” are often described as project leaders or project contacts, which leads to the coexistence of several managerial figures.

The analysis followed an inductive approach inspired by the principles of grounded theory in a pragmatic version (Lejeune, 2019). The aim was not to test a hypothesis but to make structures of meaning emerge from the interviews. Once transcribed, the interviews were coded in several stages. First, a first round of coding (open coding) was used to identify

key elements such as expectations, implicit criticism, emotions and dissonances. Then, a second round of coding (axial coding) was used to group together converging themes. Finally, a third round of coding (selective coding) was used to refine the analysis and identify the main interpretive lines. A reflexive posture was also adopted, especially regarding the position of the researcher as an intern, the relationship with participants and the context in which the interviews took place. The analysis therefore offers a situated and argued reading of rich and sensitive material.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. *Talent Standards* in the firm: the organisational norm and its practical status

The results section aims to understand how employees build the image of the “good manager” from their lived experience and how this image confronts the practices they observe and the institutional norms promoted by the organisation. Before looking in detail at these perceptions, the study first recalls how the organisation itself defines the figure of the “good manager”. It does so through an internal framework called “*Talent Standards*”, which structures the expected skills around three main categories, leadership, professionalism and technical expertise.

The internal framework can be summarised through the following dimensions:

Table 1. Managerial competency framework

Category	Main competencies
Leadership capacities	Inspiring, creating goals, encouraging agility, developing diverse capabilities, influencing, collaborating, delivering value, developing the business
Professional capacities	Analytical thinking, effective communication, engagement management, change management, quality and risk management, business excellence, strategic thinking and problem solving, use of technologies
Technical capacities	Providing core offer expertise, implementing the transformation plan, implementing the strategic vision of the organisation

This normative framework, presented as common to managers, is then examined in the light of the empirical gaps observed in the field. One important point also appears. In practice, some employees see *Talent Standards* mainly as a tool used in promotion processes rather than as an operational guide for everyday work. As one interview extract shows,

“For me, they only take the Talent Standards into account for your promotion [...] But for the rest, what the Talent Standards say has no importance.” (Interview 1, Consultant.)

This perception supports the central argument of the article. The norm (in this case the *Talent Standards*) does exist and officially structures expectations but its appropriation and its translation into lived experience appear to be problematic.

4.2. Ideal figures of the “good manager”: what employees expect

Three complementary figures emerge from the interviews, the structuring manager, the human manager (or coach) and the facilitating manager.

4.2.1. The structuring manager: clarifies, organises and protects

This first ideal reflects an expectation of structure, anticipation and clear task distribution. The structuring manager defines roles, organises time, makes objectives explicit, filters external pressure and provides a sense of security while coordinating the team.

One employee explains this expectation:

“[Like] it’s someone, for example, who will like really create the folders in Teams to really say OK, here we put this, here we put that. [...] To do a backward planning, to know OK this week we will do this, this week we will do that, if at that moment we are late it will impact that. And it’s someone who will have the structure in mind.” (Interview 4, Business Analyst.)

Another testimony highlights the importance of coordination:

“Someone [a good manager] who keeps the plan in advance and who involves the stakeholders but also the team members from the beginning of the project [...] who really coordinates the projects and assigns the right tasks to the right people.” (Interview 11, Consultant.)

4.2.2. The human manager (or coach): listens, supports and helps people grow

Beyond structure, employees also expect a human dimension. The good manager listens, understands and supports. This posture is often described as a coach or a mentor.

One employee describes it as follows:

“It’s someone who will really guide you in your career, give you the right directions for your career, it’s less linked to the project but it’s more really linked to your development, almost personal or professional.” (Interview 2, Senior Consultant.)

This figure is also linked to small daily gestures of recognition:

“For me it’s important to have someone who is still like someone who knows how to have fun, who knows, like, you [...] when you go into the call, there is like “how are you?” [...]” (Interview 3, Business Analyst.)

An important point appears here. This human support is expected but it faces a strong performance oriented norm, as shown in the following extract:

“These are environments that are extremely structured, extremely compliant and extremely results-driven. It has to be fast, it has to be good [...] Managers have to sell projects, you have to report [financially], you have to staff juniors, that is, that’s really what they look at during the talent review.” (Interview 2, Senior Consultant.)

4.2.3. The facilitating manager: trusts, empowers and provides security

The third figure is that of a facilitating manager, who gives a framework and then steps back, trusting employees' abilities. The autonomy given becomes a source of motivation and a sign of recognition.

One employee explains this balance:

"So someone who helps you have a structure [...] an overview of what you do but while leaving you the possibility to explore on your side without feeling micro-managed [...] I had one [manager] who was extremely micro-management [...] for me it's a mix between being able to give you freedom, to trust you, to let you do your work [...] it really doesn't make you want and so I find it very demotivating." (Interview 3, Business Analyst.)

Thus, other testimonies confirm that autonomy does not mean being left alone but rather having freedom within a clear and secure initial framework.

4.3. Lived tensions: effects of what is missing from the norm (Talent Standards)

The reading adopted here follows a reflexive perspective. Each tension is analysed through three main questions, what is missing, what does it produce and what does it say about the system. Four major tensions are developed, the lack of feedback, the impossibility of criticising one's manager, frustrations around promotions and the case of project T.

4.3.1. Tension 1: managerial feedback seen as insufficient and disconnected and the loss of trust in "snapshots"

The expectations of structure, listening and trust come up against the absence of relevant feedback, which is experienced as relational silence and as a disqualification of the formal tool called "snapshots".

One consultant describes the uncertainty created by the lack of response:

"It's true that when you send messages or when you don't have an answer or when you send your emails and you don't have an answer, well it's difficult for you [...] you don't know if what you did was good or not." (Interview 7, Consultant.)

One employee also criticises the official tool:

"What I miss a bit [...] And then you see like what is the point? It's the snapshot, because actually it's very good, it's very nice. [...] We are evaluated on a deliverable but we don't have a discussion after, we don't have feedback. [...] And no explanation was given." (Interview 5, Consultant.)

4.3.2. Tension 2: the impossibility of criticising one's manager, a silent taboo and the issue of upward feedback

Upward criticism is seen as risky in an organisation where hierarchy remains strong.

One employee sums it up very clearly:

“She, I would not like to work with her and I would never dare tell her the truth to her face.” (Interview 13, Senior Consultant.)

Another comparison with another entity of the group makes the criticism even more explicit:

“In other Big Four companies [...] for example [this firm in Nederland], they give a 360 degree feedback. So, a junior gives his opinion to his manager. But with us, it is not a good practice [...] We don’t do it [...] The only way to receive feedback is from top to bottom, from manager to junior, from top to bottom. But it is never the opposite so we pretend that managers and senior leaders are perfect.” (Interview 1, Consultant.)

4.3.3. Tension 3: “business” before “people”, frustrations around promotions

Even if the managerial ideal values human qualities, these dimensions seem to become invisible in promotion processes.

One employee asks:

“Why do you improve yourself as a human if it is not valued? Like you take care of your team, you train them, you listen to them [...] but in the end, it is the one who sells the most who gets promoted.” (Interview 6, Consultant.)

The lack of clarity in the fast track promotion process also increases frustration and weakens trust.

4.3.4. Tension 4: the case of project T, a concrete example of systemic tensions

Project T brings together overload, lack of structure, hierarchical disconnection and institutional blindness to weak warning signs.

One extract shows the failure of listening:

“[...] I was never listened to or taken seriously. [...] two people [...] ended up in burnout.” (Interview 12, Consultant.)

Beyond these lived tensions, the analysis shows that they do not come only from individual behaviours. They are also rooted in a normative framework that is supposed to structure and guide expected practices, namely *Talent Standards*. When confronted with the field, this norm is described as being out of step, especially because it prescribes behaviours without taking into account dilemmas, emotions, loyalty conflicts and human arbitrations.

In this logic, one extract states:

“For me, they only take the Talent Standards into account for your promotion. [...] But for the rest, what the Talent Standards say has no importance.” (Interview 1, Consultant.)

Above all, *Talent Standards* seem to ignore three major shortcomings identified in the interviews. The first is well-being and protection, which can be seen as the neglect of care.

The second is relational reciprocity, which can be seen as the neglect of upward feedback. The third is the recognition of interpersonal qualities, which appears as a blind spot in promotion logics.

In fact, these blind spots help explain the lived tensions. What is missing in daily practices is also what the norm struggles to name, support and recognise.

4.4. Discussion: norm, co-construction and “managerial bricolage”

The results invite us to rethink managerial norms by looking at the conditions under which they exist. A norm only becomes structuring if it is collectively appropriated and embodied in practices. From a structuration perspective (Giddens, 1984), a managerial framework, no matter how well designed, only has a real impact if it is understood, used and recognised in daily interactions. However, the field shows a lack of practical anchoring of *Talent Standards*. Some employees are not very familiar with them, others describe them as disconnected and their limited presence in the interviews suggests that they shape representations more than actual practices. This situation creates uncertainty about what it really means to “manage well” and leaves room for implicit references built on a case by case basis.

In this context, the figure of the “good manager” appears as an unstable social construction, shaped at the intersection of institutional norms and situated practices. The process of co-construction is limited by the absence of a shared framework, such as a clear and reflexive reference, spaces for dialogue, or collective feedback. As a result, each person builds their own idea of the “good manager” based on partial references, more rooted in lived experience than in clearly defined norms. This instability weakens mutual recognition and makes it difficult to stabilise a shared understanding of the managerial role.

Finally, the study highlights the central role of “managerial bricolage”. In the complexity of everyday organisational life, the role of the manager can not be reduced to the simple application of formal standards. Managerial action relies on empirical adjustments, often invisible, which are necessary to deal with local constraints, urgency and conflicting expectations. The manager therefore becomes a mediator of meaning rather than a simple relay of the norm, someone who is able to interpret, contextualise and adapt general guidelines to make them understandable and workable in daily situations. An important implication is to recognise this adjustment work as a core managerial competence instead of leaving it at the margins of formal recognition systems.

From a methodological perspective, this research is based on thirteen semi-structured interviews conducted with non-managerial employees in a single field. Managers were not directly interviewed and the results therefore reflect a bottom up view of the managerial role. In addition, strong availability constraints within the firm influenced the data collection process. As one situation illustrates: *“in this firm everyone is very kind but no one really has time.”*

5. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to answer the following question, *how do employees build an image of the “good manager” and how does this image come into conflict, or not, with the practices they observe in their daily work.* By adopting a constructivist perspective, the research

highlights the gap between normative managerial frameworks and the lived representations of management in a specific organisational context.

The findings show the coexistence of three ideal figures of the “good manager”, the structuring manager, the human (or coach) like manager and the facilitating manager. These figures are rooted in situated expectations and shaped by everyday professional experience.

These figures often come into tension with formal organisational standards, which are seen as abstract, not sufficiently embodied or difficult to reach. The answer to the research question can be expressed as follows. Employees build their image of the “good manager” through their daily interactions, their relational needs and their relationship to recognition. This process can be understood as a form of situated interpretation. When observed managerial practices are seen as disconnected, too normative or not adapted to concrete situations, a conflict appears. This conflict reveals a gap at both symbolic and identity levels, and shows the difficulty of stabilising a shared figure of the manager.

From an organisational point of view, the study underlines the risk of a disembodied form of management, perceived as rigid and overly normative, which can lead to a loss of meaning and weaken hierarchical relationships. On the other hand, practices of adjustment and managerial bricolage show that employees do not passively accept norms, but actively take part in reshaping them in their daily work.

Finally, our research has several limitations. It is based on a single field, it reflects a bottom-up perspective since managers were not directly interviewed and it was influenced by contextual constraints during data collection.

IZMEĐU INSTITUCIONALNIH OČEKIVANJA I SVAKODNEVNE PRAKSE: PERCEPCIJE ZAPOSLENIH O MENADŽERSKIM ULOGAMA U BELGIJSKOJ KONSULTANTSKOJ KOMPANIJU

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Izvod

Ovaj rad ispituje način na koji zaposleni doživljavaju, procenjuju i tumače ulogu „dobrog menadžera“ u organizacionom okruženju u kojem su očekivanja od menadžera formalizovana kroz interni model kompetencija. Polazeći od konstruktivističke perspektive zasnovane na teoriji strukturalizacije, istraživanje je usmereno na sagledavanje uočenog nesklada između institucionalnih normi i percepcija zaposlenih o ulozi menadžera. Empirijska analiza zasniva se na trinaest polustrukturaliziranih intervju sa zaposlenima u belgijskoj konsultantskoj kompaniji, dok je obrada podataka sprovedena primenom induktivnog pristupa utemeljenog na metodologiji utemeljene teorije. Rezultati istraživanja identifikuju tri idealna tipa menadžera: menadžera koji usmerava i strukturira rad, menadžera u ulozi mentora i menadžera koji podstiče saradnju i pruža podršku. Nalazi istraživanja ukazuju i na postojanje značajnih izazova koji se prvenstveno odnose na nedovoljno pružanje povratnih informacija, izostanak kulture davanja povratnih informacija nadređenima, kao i stavljanje poslovnih ciljeva ispred potreba zaposlenih. Ovi izazovi tumače se kao posledica menadžerskog okvira koji ostaje nedovoljno precizno definisan i razrađen, jer u dovoljnoj meri ne obuhvata pitanja dobrobiti zaposlenih, međusobnog poverenja i saradnje, kao ni značaj interpersonalnih veština.

Ključne reči: menadžerske uloge, okviri kompetencija, percepcije zaposlenih, organizacione norme, menadžerska improvizacija, dobrobit zaposlenih

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