



Baltic Journal of Management

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Tanya Bondarouk Anna Bos-Nehles Xanthe Hesselink, (2016), "Understanding the congruence of HRM frames in a healthcare organization", *Baltic Journal of Management*, Vol. 11 Iss 1 pp. 2 - 20

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/BJM-02-2015-0035>

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Understanding the congruence of HRM frames in a healthcare organization

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify the differences and similarities in the HRM frames of middle-level managers and HR professionals, and to uncover the roots and contents of (dis) agreements in the HRM frames among HR professionals and middle-level managers.

Design/methodology/approach – An explorative case study performed in a Dutch homecare organization explored the reasons for the different roots and dynamics of the cognitive frames of HR professionals and middle-level managers.

Findings – The research shows that these differences originate in the lack of clarity concerning the experienced philosophy and goals of HRM, leading to different client foci, in the inertia- and intuition-based execution of HRM practices and in the seemingly large distance between central and local HRM administrative functions. The alignment of HRM frames developed from being congruent in the HRM vision towards incongruence in daily HRM execution.

Originality/value – This research confirms that HR professionals and middle-level managers have different HRM frames that encompass knowledge, assumptions and expectations. Congruent thinking by both social groups can lead to a better HRM system and to changes in HRM processes, enabling easier progress.

Keywords Human resource management, Qualitative research, Managers, Management challenges

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Since Bowen and Ostroff (2004) introduced their concept of HRM strength, researchers have increasingly been focusing on the process of HRM practices and how these can successfully be implemented. For implementation of HRM systems to be successful, it is argued that HRM needs to send unambiguous messages to the various organizational social groups, resulting in a collective sense of what is expected (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004; Gilbert *et al.*, 2011; Wright and Nishii, 2013). There is growing recognition in the managerial literature that ultimately it is the actors' perceptions of organizational processes, filtered through existing mental frames, which form the basis for the collective sense of organizational issues (Goodhew *et al.*, 2005).

The formation of a collective sense has been reflected in the research on shared frames, which has shown that it is beneficial if stakeholder groups have similar, or congruent, frames (Kaplan, 2008). Recently, researchers have been applying the concept of shared frames to explore the concept of the HRM process. For example,

The authors would like to express gratitude to the HR Director of Medicare, H. van Leeuwen and to the HR specialist of Medicare M. Bomans for their leadership, commitment and help during the empirical phase of this research.



Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013) postulate that the quality of HRM depends on the combination and integration of a range of perceptions concerning HRM during its implementation process. We go a step further and claim that the differences between the HRM perceptions of line managers and HR professionals play a crucial role in HRM implementation.

We know that compared to HR managers, line managers rate HRM effectiveness as lower and experience most of the HRM functional areas as less effective (Mitsubishi *et al.*, 2000), indicating that HR managers overestimate their own performance by holding “overly rosy” views about the HRM effectiveness (Chen *et al.*, 2011, p. 1716). Maxwell and Wright found differences between the perspectives of line managers and HR specialists regarding the understanding and ownership of the organization’s HR strategy, line manager involvement in and rankings of HRM practices, HR specialists’ support of line managers, barriers to line managers’ involvement in HRM practices and the competence of line managers in HRM practices. The result of these perceptual discrepancies about the effectiveness of HRM may result in line managers doubting the value of HRM practices and failing the implementation of these practices (Chen *et al.*, 2011) but may even have negative consequences for the performance of organizations (Gilbert, 2000; Kearns, 2004). This was indeed supported, showing that only perceptual convergence is related to great business performance and that a discrepancy in perceived HRM effectiveness between HR managers and line managers leads to limited future firm performance (Chen *et al.*, 2011).

The extant knowledge on (shared) frames suggests that it is the perceptions of HR professionals and middle-level managers that influence their actions and attitudes in response to changes in HRM processes (Hodgkinson and Sparrow, 2002). Social cognitive theorists have shown that shared frames leads to better organizational performance (Reger and Huff, 1993), increased organizational effectiveness (Kaše *et al.*, 2009) and more successful implementation of HRM changes and innovations. In contrast, incongruent frames lead to different understandings and conflicting interpretations expressed in process loss and misaligned expectations, contradictory actions, resistance and scepticism (Orlikowski and Gash, 1994). Thus, congruent HRM frames can overcome difficulties in implementing HRM practices and change processes are then expected to progress more smoothly.

It is widely acknowledged that HR professionals and middle-level managers have different perceptions of HRM systems (Gilbert *et al.*, 2011; Wright and Nishii, 2013). However, we are still challenged to understand what leads to these differences and their extent. Adding to the knowledge of the reasons for differences in social groups’ perceptions of HRM systems will potentially enhance the success of HRM.

In response, this study aims to identify the differences and similarities in the HRM frames of middle-level managers and HR professionals, and to uncover the roots and contents of (dis)agreements in the HRM frames among HR professionals and middle-level managers. To meet the goal of the paper, we conducted a field research with semi-structured interviews with line managers and HR professionals, and analysed HR policy documents, – in the homecare Dutch organization. By means of open coding, the analysis has revealed four HRM frames categories relevant for understanding the implementation of HRM.

Understanding different interpretations of HRM

Cognitive frames are seen as the individual perceptions that people use to organize and interpret their environment. They use frames to make sense of changes and develop

new interpretations that inform their behaviour in response (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Balogun and Johnson, 2004). Frames are described as “a repertoire of tacit knowledge that is used to impose structure upon, and impart meaning to, otherwise ambiguous social and situational information to facilitate understanding” (Gioia, 1986, p. 56). Thus, frames are always interpretive, flexible and context specific (Lin and Silva, 2005; Orlikowski and Gash, 1994). Research in managerial cognition has suggested that cognitive frames are the means by which managers sort through strategic ambiguities (Kaplan, 2008).

Researchers have proposed the notion of group-level frames, also called shared frames (Bartunek and Moch, 1994). Individuals share frames through interaction and/or negotiation if some cognitive elements (assumptions, knowledge and expectations) are similar. Different stakeholders may have non-aligned frames and thus perceive similar messages differently.

Shared frames have been shown to stem from education, work experience, interactions within relevant social groups (Orlikowski and Gash, 1994), prior life experiences and knowledge and the present context of a worker’s job roles (Gallivan, 2001), career histories, responsibilities and context, including firm and industry (Kaplan, 2008). Factors related to nationality, language, roles and historical developments (Yoshioka *et al.*, 2002) and to organizational or industry levels (Hodgkinson and Johnson, 1994) have also been shown to contribute to differences in frames.

We apply the notion of frames to the HRM field as an understanding of the different perceptions of the various actors is required to steer HRM implementation. In this paper, we view HRM frames as “a subset of cognitive frames that people use to understand HRM in organizations” in studying the relationship between the congruence of the HRM frames of middle-level managers and HR professionals in using and implementing HRM practices.

To reflect on the alignment of interpretations, we build on the concept of the congruence of HRM frames and view this as correspondence or harmony in thoughts about HRM. This involves sharing similar expectations, knowledge or assumptions concerning the HRM system and changes in HRM processes across different social groups.

Aligning HRM frames does not imply that they become duplicates but that they express similarity in content. Frames will be congruent if, for example, they reflect similar expectations or ideas about the role of HRM in the organization, the purpose behind new HRM transformations, HRM practices in the organizational reality or the type of HRM support offered (Bondarouk and Ruël, 2009, p. 7).

The importance of congruent HRM frames

An overview of the influence of the congruence of frames between organizational members is shown in Table I, which shows empirical examples demonstrating that congruence can have positive influences on organizational outcomes, whereas incongruence can have negative effects.

Research has demonstrated that incongruities can be present in HR and middle managers’ perceptions of HRM effectiveness (Chen *et al.*, 2011). Chen *et al.* (2011) found that line managers perceived HR effectiveness and future organization performance to be higher when they enjoyed close collaborative working styles and consensual views with HR managers. A literature study on incongruence and organizational behaviour showed that fundamental discrepancies in the contents of the mental models of key stakeholder groups led to a potentially serious state of affairs in which key parties operate based on fundamentally different frames of reference. A study of frames in the information technology sector found that differences between groups’ frames could

Influence of congruent frames	Influence of incongruent frames
Improved team processes and performance (DeChurch and Mesmer-Magnus, 2010; Gibson <i>et al.</i> , 2009; Mathieu <i>et al.</i> , 2000)	Defers decision making (Kaplan, 2008)
Increased team effectiveness (Okhuysen and Eisenhardt, 2002; Rentsch and Klimoski, 2001)	Misaligned expectations, contradictory actions, resistance and scepticism (Orlikowski and Gash, 1994)
Richer understanding and greater knowledge-sharing between different occupational groups (Bechky, 2003)	Different understandings and conflict situations (Bechky, 2003; Davidson, 2002; Kaplan, 2008; Lin and Silva, 2005; Sonnenberg <i>et al.</i> , 2014; Yoshioka <i>et al.</i> , 2002)
Collective efficacy (Gibson, 2001)	Greater process loss and ineffective team processes due to more difficulties in decision making and communication (Mathieu <i>et al.</i> , 2000)
Better organizational performance (Reger and Huff, 1993)	Lowers commitment to a project (Davidson, 2002)
Better organizational effectiveness (Kaše <i>et al.</i> , 2009)	Renders communication problematic between different groups (Gallivan, 2001)
Mutual agreement on the effectiveness of HRM practices between HR and line managers leading to more powerful communication	Decreases team performance (Gibson <i>et al.</i> , 2009)
Enhanced group member satisfaction (Park, 2008)	Negative attitudes towards an organizational change (Barrett, 1999)
Better implementation of HRM innovation and changes	
More positive perceptions in groups regarding decision outcomes (fewer problems with implementing decisions and higher levels of satisfaction with decision outcomes) (Mohammed and Ringseis, 2001)	
Better responsiveness by HR departments to internal customer demands (Mitsuhashi <i>et al.</i> , 2000)	
Employees' engagement with an organization (Billsberry <i>et al.</i> , 2005)	

Table I.
Influence of (in)
congruent frames: an
overview of
empirical studies
(random order)

inhibit effective deployment of a technology, leading to misaligned expectations, contradictory actions, resistance and skepticism. Kaše *et al.* (2009) conducted survey research in four heterogeneous Slovenian companies and found that organizational effectiveness was better when there was greater social interplay and shared cognitions among organizational members. Other studies have shown that congruent frames lead to improved team processes and performance (DeChurch and Mesmer-Magnus, 2010; Mathieu *et al.*, 2000; Gibson *et al.*, 2009), increased team effectiveness (Okhuysen and Eisenhardt, 2002; Rentsch and Klimoski, 2001), greater knowledge-sharing (Bechky, 2003), collective efficacy (Gibson, 2001), greater group member satisfaction (Park, 2008) and better organizational performance (Reger and Huff, 1993). According to Mohammed and Ringseis (2001), the group decision-making process is smoother when groups share cognitions because there are more positive interpretations and thus greater satisfaction. Another study showed that congruent thinking and a more unified relationship between line managers and HR specialists leads to a better HRM system in an organization, and that if HRM frames differ significantly between HR specialists and line managers then the intended outcomes of implementing an HRM innovation are not achieved.

Incongruent frames, on the other hand, slow the decision-making process (Kaplan, 2008), lead to different understandings and conflicting interpretation (Bechky, 2003; Kaplan, 2008; Lin and Silva, 2005; Davidson, 2002; Yoshioka *et al.*, 2002), reduce commitment to a project (Davidson, 2002), render communication problematic between different social groups (Gallivan, 2001) and lower team performance (Gibson *et al.*, 2009). Mathieu *et al.* (2000) investigated the relationship between shared mental models and a team's processes and performance by setting up an experiment involving 56 undergraduate students of Pennsylvania State University and found that non-shared mental models resulted in greater process loss and ineffective team processes due to the resulting difficulties in decision making and communication. Conversely, if teams share an understanding, they can quickly adapt in dynamic environments and be successful (Mathieu *et al.*, 2000, p. 274).

Based on all this earlier research, we assume that, if HRM frames are congruent, difficulties in implementing HRM practices and change processes will be easier to overcome and progress easier. Understanding what leads to differences in the cognitive processes of HR professionals and of middle managers can boost understanding of how they respond, act and make decisions during changes in HRM processes, and management can then use instruments to steer the processes.

HRM responsibilities of HR professionals and middle-level managers

The devolution literature shows that HR professionals devolve most of their HR responsibilities to the line and that line managers "have the lion's share of HR responsibilities" for day-to-day tasks in such areas as recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal, rewards and dismissal. Other responsibilities of line managers are exercising workplace discipline, workplace bullying (Woodrow and Guest, 2014), leadership (Gilbert *et al.*, 2011), change management and working with e-HRM applications and self-service facilities (Bondarouk and Ruël, 2009). HR professionals, on the other hand, focus on managing administrative and legislative issues, compliance with employment regulations and setting guidelines how to implement HR practices. In international organizations the role of HR professionals also entails implementing common global standards and shaping these standards according to the local, legislative context.

Research findings show that involving managers in the implementation of the HRM system can lead to enhancing employees' affective commitment (Gilbert *et al.*, 2011), increasing workers' perceptions of effective people management and even covering shortcomings in HRM policies and management decisions (Maertz *et al.*, 2007). Kuvaas *et al.* (2014) in their field study into perceptions of line managers, found that the relationship between line managers' perceptions of enabling HR practices and HRM "soft" outcomes (e.g. employees' intrinsic motivation, affective organizational commitment) was mediated by employees' perceived supervisor support. At the same time, it has been revealed that not all managers give priority to high-quality HRM implementation (Guest and King, 2004; Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007) as managers may not implement HRM practices in the way intended by HR professionals (Khilji and Wang, 2006) and may decide to leave some (issues of) HRM practices untouched (Woodrow and Guest, 2014). While line managers became operationally responsible for the execution of HR practices, HR professionals focus more on strategic issues by integrating HR and business strategies (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013). Although both actors still play an important role in the HRM implementation, as shown in the model of HRM implementation by

Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013), and the process model of SHRM by Wright and Nishii (2013), HR professionals become responsible for designing and introducing the best possible intended HRM strategy for an organization whereas line managers will actually implement these practices at the operational level and get the main responsibility for the quality of the implementation. Gilbert *et al.* (2011, p. 1631) talk about the “distinct, independent role” of line managers and HR managers in the implementation of HRM.

The different responsibilities of HR and line managers in the implementation of HRM policies and practices may result in different perceptions about HRM effectiveness because of the use of different criteria to judge HRM effectiveness (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013). Bondarouk *et al.* compared the frames of HR managers and line managers in judging HR innovation and found that both actors understood and expected different things regarding HR innovations. It is reported that line managers perceive frustrations about too rigid standardized one-size-fits-all HRM systems and that a rigid application of formal procedure does not provide the flexibility required to implement HRM practices in the work context. These discrepancies in perceptions about HRM effectiveness may have serious consequences for the implementation of HRM policies and practices at the operational level. A collaboration between HR professionals and line managers in a partnership (Whittaker and Marchington, 2003) might be a solution for an effective implementation of HRM as both actors play an active role in the implementation (Gilbert *et al.*, 2011). To achieve such collaboration the alignment of perceptions and interpretations of HRM systems between these two groups becomes important.

Methods

Our study into HRM frames was carried out in a Dutch homecare organization, referred to in this paper as Medicare. The company operates in the public sector but is a for-profit organization. We selected a healthcare organization following the purposive sampling technique. Managerialism in the healthcare sector and effective control of health professionals have been increasing during the past decade. Nowadays market mechanisms play a significant role and professional medical firms have been benefiting from economies of scale. As early as three decades ago, Hasenfeld (1983) pointed out that healthcare organizations were characterized by ambiguous, vague and conflicting goals and tasks, turbulent environments, inconsistent technology, weak and multiple hierarchical structures and a lack of internal coordination. All of these lead to significant problems, resulting in the occurrence of heterogeneous groups and ambiguous and conflicting policy rules. The healthcare sector has been branded over the past decade by increasing cooperation between professional organizations brought about by mergers and expansions and the most important challenge has become the aging population and the rapid growth in chronic (co)morbidity (Van Weel *et al.*, 2012). A consequence of this drift is rapidly increasing costs, resulting in the need to reorganize in a more efficient way (Van Weel *et al.*, 2012, p. 14).

By selecting a healthcare organization, we therefore expected ongoing and turbulent managerial changes. With more than 20,000 workers spread over 56 establishments, Medicare stated its aim as being to improve the personal well-being of older and needy people, allowing them to live independently for as long as possible. The company was established in 2002 by nurses who were convinced that homecare could be organized better and more efficiently by putting the client and the caregiver at the centre and building the care around this. In 2007, it was taken over by a large Dutch professional services firm. Medicare provides services to people who need long-term care, such as elderly or disabled people, and to people who need daily household support.

To explore how the HRM system is organized and perceived, we applied the ideas of Orlikowski and Gash (1994) and identified three frame domains:

- (1) vision of the HRM system, which refers to beliefs about HRM in five to ten years' time;
- (2) HRM philosophy, which refers to members' views on why their organization implemented the specific HRM system; and
- (3) execution and processes, which refer to the organization's members' understandings of how HR is used daily and its consequences.

Data collection and analysis

Given that frames are implicit, we chose to employ an explorative study to uncover the underlying values and beliefs concerning HRM and the different understandings and interpretations of HR professionals and middle-level managers. Data were collected using document analysis and semi-structured interviews. We reviewed 25 documents, amounting to more than 300 pages of policy-related text: these included newsletters, annual reports, forms specifying function descriptions and consultation structures, recruitment and selection policies and also confidential documents, including the HR director's presentation to HR professionals and line managers. The organization documents provided a general background about the HRM policies, and expected responsibilities of managers and HR professionals. Mostly, the intended HR was explored by organization documentation analysis and the perceived by interviewing respondents of the two different social groups. This combination of research instruments gave us the opportunity to explore how and why the intended system was perceived and executed differently by the social groups.

Eight unstructured in-depth interviews were held with members of the two groups:

- (1) four Medicare HR professionals from different districts who were perceived by the organization as offering support and advice to the middle-level managers through selected activities and translating the expressed needs into services; and
- (2) four business unit managers from corresponding areas of the country who were involved in and formally responsible for executing HRM activities at the district level (middle-level managers).

To reveal the different perceptions of both groups in different areas, each manager was matched with the corresponding HR professional. During the in-depth conversations, amounting to 22 hours, general responsibilities, activities and the backgrounds of the professional workers were discussed. We used the "mirroring" interviewing technique of Myers and Newman (2007), simultaneously listening and constructing follow-up statements or questions. All conversations were recorded and transcribed to capture the interpretations of various HR actors. Member checks through e-mail correspondence were performed in which the transcripts were discussed with the respondents. It has increased the trustworthiness of the data collected to secure correct understanding of the perceptions about the HRM as expressed by interviewees.

The first step in the analysis was to read the transcripts, glean information about the company to develop a better understanding of the complex context of Medicare. The second step was sense-making of the data using open coding processes. Categorization involved breaking down the three frame domains into categories by reducing long statements into simple (sub-)categories (Kvale, 1996). All interviews were

coded for each category of perceptions and behaviours towards the HRM system. The analysis was separately performed by three researchers to discover themes and issues to eventually capture differences, similarities and the origins of HRM frames. The third step consisted of discussion rounds among all the researchers involved. When 95 per cent agreement was reached, we reanalysed the interviews. The fourth step consisted of refining the analysis by making adjustments and adding more detailed information. To reconstruct the perspectives of the different social groups in a constant way next sequence was followed: comparison within a single interview, between interviews within the same group, interviews from different groups, comparison in pairs at the level of the couple and comparing couples all following four criteria which are description, aim, important questions and results (Boeije, 2002, p. 395). Like this, common statements were found and could be distinguished into different categories that pointed HR perceptions in a clear and consistent way. Feedback rounds and discussions with our supervisor and second reader were held about the chosen themes to control the interview analysis and increase internal validity and trustworthiness.

We then set out to reconstruct the perspectives of the two social groups consistently in terms of four criteria: description, aim, important questions and results (Boeije, 2002).

Findings

Medicare's core activities are household care in intra- and extra-mural settings. Specifically, these include domestic help, nursing and care at clients' homes, assisting people who help others, and offering assistance with requesting care. Although spread across the Netherlands, the company tries to ensure a strong local focus:

We believe care should be organized around your corner. That is the reason why Medicare has a finely meshed network of local establishments. This situation is created to combine the best characteristics of being a large organization with staying small (Medicare documents).

The company employs 115 care coordinators, 14 local managers and 130 office workers who provide support functions. Medicare has grown extensively over a few years through mergers and acquisitions. In 2009, the company had a net turnover of approximately €150 million and employed 6,000 employees, whereas by 2012, the net turnover had doubled and it had more than 20,000 employees (Medicare documents). The company is facing important challenges: politically driven budget cuts in the medical homecare sector and political pressure for a cumulative role for market mechanisms in the healthcare sector (Medicare documents).

The HRM system at Medicare

Medicare's rapid growth may have complicated HRM execution and potentially led to greater financial complexity in the organization of HRM: HRM has had to adjust to different environments, contexts, differences between districts and governmental regulations. During the period of expansive growth, most of the HR professionals worked at the headquarters, but this is changing due to the new localization policy. HRM is still centralized, but with several districts now sharing an HR professional who reports to the HR director. The HRM vision of Medicare is described as follows:

The HR function contributes to the results of Medicare by performing top-quality HR processes in an efficient way and controlling HR costs. In this way, Medicare can, at any time, deploy the right number of qualified and motivated workers. Line management is responsible for HR and is supported and given optimal advice by the HR function (Medicare documents).

As such, HRM is strengthening its position within the organization. Providing advice and supporting managers is becoming the core work of HR advisors, who are expected to partner the middle management.

HR professionals and middle-level managers at Medicare

A detailed functional description shows that business unit managers lead a group of 10-25 care coordinators covering 3-10 establishments and indirectly provide leadership to approximately 2,500 employees. These managers are anticipated to take responsibility for HRM tasks: for the deployment, performance and development of organizational members. They contribute to the realization of company policies and advise top management regarding long-term provision of strategy. They are also expected to implement HRM policies and practices at the business unit level and to ensure compliance with relevant laws and rules, achieve a high service quality in a district and look after client and employee satisfaction.

HR professionals are expected to develop towards being sparring partners, to discuss with business unit managers issues such as dismissals and absenteeism and guarantee appropriate support and service. HR professionals are seen as responsible for the design and execution of personnel policies and are expected to contribute to the realization of organizational goals. They support and give advice to middle-level management in the areas of HRM and social legislation. They are also viewed as responsible for the application of HRM practices in areas such as sick leave and reintegration. Apart from their expected role as a sparring partner for the business unit manager, they are also assumed to react proactively on everyday issues. The business units at Medicare are divided up among these HR professionals, most of whom are responsible for two business units. It is important that the HR professionals are service and output oriented and that they have knowledge of labour law and change processes (Medicare documents).

Analysis of HRM frames

In the past, the HR function at Medicare was focused on centralization rather than organizing responsibilities locally. The HR director presented a new vision, including a transition towards a strategic role for HRM and the structural decentralization of the function.

Vision. Although the HR professionals all perceived the new HR vision consistently, they had a somewhat broad picture of it and saw different aspects as important. Some did not describe the new vision in detail, considering it confidential. Overall, they all expressed the view that it was introduced to professionalize the HRM system and to optimize care delivery:

Professionalization is needed to ensure the continuity of the organization because we need to be more decisive; especially if the political margins are very small. HR plays a very important role in this to keep Medicare viable (HR professional-4).

Professionalization was mostly perceived as involving the creation of a strategic HRM system that worked proactively rather than reactively in order to reduce mistakes. Finding new ways to reduce costs and building procedures and policies were seen as important. Most of the HR professionals focused on their new role as sparring partners, taking on a supportive and facilitative role to improve efficiency and securing a stronger position for themselves in Medicare.

Developing strategic staff planning and increasing employee flexibility were perceived as key points. Most of the HR professionals working with services related to

the daily medical care of patients focused on the need to professionalize HRM, whereas HR professionals dealing with household services for patients focused more on cost reduction. The HR professionals believed that both types of services needed to merge in anticipation of political developments. To achieve this, some HR professionals focused on expanding expertise, while others focused more on creating a more efficient HR organization. The perceived vision was largely in line with the organization's documents and policies.

Business unit managers also perceived the new HRM vision as an expansion, incorporating a new role for them as sparring partners. They emphasized that the middle-level managers should be at the heart of the system and that HRM should adopt a facilitative and supportive role. Professionalization of the HRM system should occur, but keeping the operation central: "The central office, likewise the HR department, should ensure that we can perform our work optimally. Unfortunately this element is missing sometimes" (Manager-1).

Business unit managers agreed that HR professionals were already working in a more proactive way, but considered that this could still be improved. The distance in HRM administration between central and local offices was seen as disrupting the HRM processes:

Personally, I think it should be clearer who is performing what in HRM. If the new IT system malfunctions, HRM is one large mass. Who I need to go to is unclear, and when I call I have the feeling that I am just another number. This is not part of the facilitating role (Manager-3).

They sensed why the HRM transition was needed – to create a better connection between HRM and the managers and a closer working relationship between the decentralized operations and the head office centrally facilitating managers.

According to the business unit managers, not only needed the flexibility of the workers to increase, but the employees also needed to be equipped so that they could deliver new ways of care. HRM should anticipate the future to a greater extent and should perform more active benchmarking.

Business unit managers thought that HRM should find a balance between policies and what is possible in reality and should not focus too much on creating processes and procedures but look more for practical possibilities: "The goal is to keep the operation running. There are rules for this, but processes cannot be an end in themselves. Sometimes these dominate, and then we fail to achieve our objectives" (Manager-1).

The views of the HR professionals and the middle-level managers as to why the new HRM vision was being introduced were largely congruent. Both viewed it as important because of the uncertain developments the organization was facing and considered that it would help ensure the continuity of Medicare's performance. They also shared a similar opinion concerning the expected role of HR professionals as sparring partners, but the business unit managers saw themselves as having a more central role. They also interpreted this as a response to their request for HRM to fulfil a more valuable supporting and facilitating role and highlighted the importance of client and worker satisfaction. According to the business unit managers, HRM should not focus overly on creating processes and procedures, but look more for practical opportunities and anticipate the future. Both groups expressed similar expectations concerning the HRM transition, but with some differences due to their distinct reference points. We conclude that the HRM frames in terms of vision were congruent among HR professionals and middle-level managers, although both groups left space for the HRM vision being more concrete.

The HRM philosophy. The HR professionals' understandings of the HRM philosophy were restricted to HRM practices following rules of collective labour agreements. Ideas and directions could be described, but no clear goals of the HRM system could be suggested by the HR professionals:

Cuts, awareness of costs, and playing the business role are concrete things at the moment. However, this is not concretized in smaller goals. One concrete goal is to reduce permanent contracts as much as possible before December 2014. There is no crystallized HR policy. This could be more professional and better since other organizations already do this (HR professional-4).

In broad terms, the goals of the HRM system as understood by the business unit managers were to be more present locally and cooperate with the workforce, to anticipate the future, to put the basics in order, to create a more flexible pool of workers and to develop innovative projects in delivering new ways of care.

The business unit managers viewed introducing self-managing teams as an important goal. HR professionals focused more on formal matters, such as implementing and evaluating teams. Following new legal requirements, both groups agreed on the need to create a consistent and more structured form of job evaluation. HR professionals also sensed a need to focus more on constructing uniform policies and procedures. Receiving more management information and with more advanced content was viewed as an important goal to adjust and control the HRM system. For business unit managers acting in response to the needs of the primary processes was most important.

Both social groups thought that most of the HRM practices followed rules related to the collective labour agreement and the law, with cost reduction at the heart of the system. Ideas and directions could be described by both groups, but neither could provide concrete examples of HRM system goals. For the HR professionals, the HRM philosophy seemed to focus more on their role between the various establishments and the management and in building policies. Business unit managers focused more on serving workers and clients, for example by implementing self-managing teams. We call these frames corresponding. We assume that this correspondence needs to be accepted and that to become sparring partners, HR professionals need to undertake efforts to team up with business unit managers.

Execution and processes. The HR professionals observed that there was, as yet, no crystallized HRM policy – including one governing daily practices – and that the new vision was in its start-up phase: “Given the extensive growth, HRM has grown with it in a way in which little attention has been paid to aspects such as evaluation mechanisms” (HR professional-3).

Function descriptions are available, but there are no clear selection criteria for caregivers in lower positions in the organization. One HR professional mentioned that they selected people for the daily care functions on the basis of their own feelings, and that business unit managers were selected because they were independent, possessing computer skills and having a good appearance. Individual rewards were only distributed informally because of cost reductions and an inflexible collective labour agreement. Only business unit managers received rewards linked to performance.

Business unit managers experienced a large distance between the central office and the local offices in terms of HRM administration. Both HR professionals and middle-level managers perceived employee involvement to be important but in practice, employees – especially those responsible for daily care – had little influence.

Both groups viewed the daily execution as located in the decentralized offices, with final responsibility for HRM tasks resting with the managers. Business unit managers also acknowledged that more should be done on a daily basis with the views and advice coming from the decentralized offices. Based on these impressions, we see the HRM frames as incongruent in that both groups gave different interpretations of daily HRM execution.

Table II summarizes the findings concerning the congruency of HRM frames between HR professionals and middle managers at Medicare.

Reasons for the HRM frames differences

After identification of the differences and similarities in the HRM frames of middle-level managers and HR professionals, we proceeded to analyse the reasons for those differences. While some of the reasons found for the incongruence in HRM frames between both groups reflect the existing literature, our research provides an interesting addition. In terms of supportive evidence, we confirm that different expectations, functions and backgrounds play a role in the differences in HRM frames (Orlikowski and Gash, 1994; Lin and Silva, 2005; Kaplan, 2008). We also confirm that different functions are associated with incongruent frames (Orlikowski and Gash, 1994). Here, HR professionals are more focused on policy building and administrative tasks, whereas middle-level managers are more concerned with daily execution.

Our research adds the further finding that a lack of clarity in the philosophy and goals of HRM may lead to differences in HRM frames (Table III). Middle-level managers mostly saw the new HRM philosophy as a “dot on the distant horizon” with no clear steps on how to get there. Surprisingly, neither could the HR professionals clearly formulate how the HRM system was organized and its specific goals. The new HRM vision had been introduced, but middle-level managers perceived it as vague and broad and thus had no idea of how to implement it. A lack of clarity in the organization of the HRM system and in communication between both actors was also shown to be a cause of the differences in HRM frames. It is arguably this lack of a clear perception of the HRM philosophy that leads to HRM practices being executed intuitively. Middle-level managers perceiving the new vision as somewhat broad and unclear may result in resistance to change in HRM. The HR actors have grown accustomed to doing what they have always done and this case study suggests that inertia- and intuition-based HRM execution may lead to incongruent understandings of changes in the HRM process. Further, middle-level managers sensed a difference between HRM administration carried out in the central office and in local establishments. Our research shows that this perceived distance could also be a cause of the different HRM frames. Finally, our analysis convinced us that HR professionals – although authoring many HR policy documents – mainly undertook the unidirectional approach in implementing those policies and HR practices. They seemed to lack openness and readiness for a feedback provided by managers, and seemed to be satisfied with their own not-so-concrete reflections on how the HR practices landed at the real life work floor[1].

Discussion

It is important that middle-level managers and HR professionals together build an HRM system that supports and encourages the desired customer-oriented behaviours of the frontline employees through consistent, clear and accurate HRM systems. We applied the concept of shared HRM frames and assumed that to maintain the quality of care principles, it was important that the HRM frames of both HR professionals and middle-level managers working at Medicare

HR professionals	Middle-level managers
<p><i>Vision of the HRM system – CONGRUENT</i> Internally consistent. Not fully in line with organization's documents and policies: limited guarantee of quality and correct employment practices mentioned</p>	<p>Internally consistent and similar to the organization's documents and policies with minor deviations</p>
<p><i>Vision of what the HRM system was to achieve</i> Expanding the role of sparring partners to fulfil a facilitative and supportive role Improving efficiency by focusing on the cost side Professionalization of the HRM system Decentralization of the HRM system Expanding expertise, mainly in response to future political developments Developing HRM as a shared service centre Switching from a reactive towards a proactive working style to reduce mistakes and optimize care delivery</p>	<p>Expanding their role as sparring partners The management is to be the heart of the system and HRM should take a facilitative and supportive role Professionalization of the HRM system while putting the operation at the centre Moving towards the merging of services to satisfy the clients and the workers HRM should anticipate the future more, e.g. the dynamics in the labour market HRM should not focus too greatly on creating procedures but look more for practical possibilities in implementation HRM should develop innovative projects in delivering care so as to remain a market leader</p>
<p><i>They sensed the HR transition was needed</i> Achieving a stronger position for the organization given the uncertain developments facing Medicare Improving the value of HRM and ensure its continuation Improving the connection between HR and managers and develop a closer working relationship between the decentralized office and the head office Improving efficiency</p>	<p>Obtaining a balance between developments in the field and anticipate the future to a greater extent Establishing a better connection between HR and managers and a closer working relationship between the decentralized office and the head office Concretizing the vision including the steps to achieve it: vision is somewhat unclear, too broad and extensive</p>
<p><i>HRM philosophy – CORRESPONDENCE</i> Internally consistent, but some issues differed between the two types of homecare. Most HR practices follow the collective labour agreement and the law with cost reduction at the heart of the system. Ideas and directions could be described but not the goals of the HRM system with any clarity</p>	
<p><i>The HRM philosophy was perceived as needing</i> To be more locally present To create and build uniform policies/procedures To expand worker flexibility To evaluate, adjust and implement self-managing teams To receive more management information earlier to adjust and control the HRM system To provide underlying principles for compensating business unit managers To create a consistent and more structured job evaluation system</p>	<p>To be more locally present To make processes clearer To expand worker flexibility To give responsibility lower down in the organization To reduce administrative tasks for personnel To increase employee satisfaction To motivate business unit managers to meet goals through compensation To create a consistent and more structured job evaluation system</p>

Table II.
Congruencies in HRM frames of HR professionals and middle managers at Medicare

(continued)

HR professionals	Middle-level managers
To find new ways to reduce costs by minimizing permanent contracts and travelling expenses, boost awareness of planning, reduce sick leave	To find new ways to reduce costs by minimizing permanent contracts, reducing travelling expenses and reducing sick leave
To provide a better fit between tasks and the qualifications of workers	To provide opportunities for training in line with legal requirements
To deploy the right person in the right job with the right qualities	To provide opportunities for training higher up in the organization but only if it adds value to Medicare
To maintain unity in recruitment activities	To encourage a through flow of personnel between both types of services and equip workers to deliver new ways of care – to reduce recruitment costs
To offer (un)solicited advice to management and colleagues	To get personnel to accept their own share of responsibility
To provide opportunities for training that fit with the needs of Medicare	To concretize the HRM steps needed to reach the broad point on the horizon
To create strategic staffing planning	

Execution and processes – INCONGRUENT

Daily practices were viewed as follows

Recruitment carried out in different ways depending on function: through own pool, recruiter or Facebook, with final responsibility in the line with the care coordinator	Recruitment in different ways by one recruiter, through Zorgplein, own network and Medicare website
Recruiter assists in filling difficult vacancies and ensuring consistency	Employees selected based on independence, digital skills and good appearance
Master classes given for care coordinators	Recruiter assists with filling difficult vacancies
No permanent contracts and min/max contracts for flexibility	Master classes given for care coordinators
No structural job evaluation conversation	More flexible workers, less fixed contracts
A social code of conduct	No broad employee participation: employees have little input but those higher up in the organization greater input
No performance-related reward for employees, although a system is present linked to results for business unit managers	Informal compensation, such as compliments, although for business unit managers there is a system linked to results
Minimal employee participation, but some influence through works council	A lot asked of business unit managers, but more could be done with daily practices
Participation of business unit managers through meetings, but influence should be greater because of their close link with the field	Sometimes unclear where to go with a specific HRM problem
HR managers as advisors but decisions are made by director	Pilot self-managing teams – introduction of a “directing district nurse”
HRM is expanding expertise in strategic HRM and change management through education	

Table II.

were congruent. We anticipated that the HRM frames of these two groups would be different due to differences in their responsibilities, backgrounds and job functions. However, we aimed to uncover the roots and contents of those differences and similarities.

From the content point of view, we have identified three domains of HRM frames: vision of the HRM system, HRM philosophy, and execution and HRM processes.

Our research has shown that both social groups could accurately formulate the new HRM vision and why the transition was needed, albeit with different emphases. However, at the level of the HRM philosophy, hardly any concrete goals could be formulated by

Table III.
Reasons for the
differences in HRM
frames at Medicare

	References/new to research
Differences in functions, expectations and backgrounds	Kaplan (2008), Orlikowski and Gash (1994) and Lin and Silva (2005)
Different functions leading to different main foci of performance	Orlikowski and Gash (1994)
Different client focus	New
Lack of clarity about the HRM goals	New
Unclear internal HRM communications	New
Inertia and intuition-based HRM execution	New
Perceived distance in HRM administration between the central and local HRM functions	New

either group. The daily execution of HRM tasks was inertia- and intuition- based with no clear HRM guidelines. The main concern of the middle-level managers was that the HR department would focus too greatly on money-driven motives and end up building policies and procedures that could reduce the effectiveness of the line. We acknowledge that we may have left the reader with not enough evidence to support our interpretations. At the same time, the methodological thoroughness we applied in the analysis of the interviews and comments, allowed us draw our conclusions.

While both groups aligned their interpretations regarding the ideas and intentions of the HRM system, they strongly diverged at the level of its everyday execution. Although they agreed on how HRM systems should look, they kept to their own routines when it came to operational HRM issues. Implementing HRM practices seemed to be dominated by existing traditions, which we called inertia-based practices, supported by intuitive actions.

Practical implications

This research has highlighted the need to construct a comprehensive HRM system that is linked to the goals identified and their daily execution. When the vision is too broad and is not properly translated into concrete action points or key performance indicators, middle-level managers fall back into their old routines and do what they think should be done to run the business. Although both HR professionals and middle-line managers agreed on the sparring partner role of HR professionals, the two social groups held somewhat varying ideas on how this looked in practice. We call on organizations to stimulate discussions at an early stage between HR professionals and middle-level managers concerning unaligned frames. Both need to agree on clear steps towards HRM implementation, taking the cognitive frames of both social groups into consideration and agreeing on what can be achieved. The healthcare sector is in a constant state of change and thus congruent thinking among HR actors, especially during a change in the HRM process, will eventually lead to a more successful HRM system.

Research implications

For future research, it is important to acknowledge that HR professionals and middle-level managers always express different interpretations about HRM. To understand and perhaps reduce the gap, it might be interesting to direct future research efforts to exploring the process mechanisms of possible differences, when and why such differences become extreme and risky and when they are harmless and even

helpful. Another lesson is that creating and communicating clear short-term goals within a HRM transformation is important, not only to ensure uniform perceptions among employees, but also to enhance a clear understanding of the HRM system between the HR actors. When HRM frames are aligned, the various HR actors are likely to act in line, improving goal attainment and smoothing progress in changing HRM processes. A third lesson is that within this process, having HR professionals acting as sparring partners to the management is very important in terms of their key role in communicating changes to the HRM system, discussing changes and asking critical questions. Further research could be undertaken to investigate how awareness of the importance of the HRM frames of an organization's members could be extended. Given the dynamic nature of HRM frames, new research could also investigate how the differences in HRM frames change during an HR transformation process.

Conclusions

Our study has added to the existing research and to understanding of the roles of HR professionals and middle-level management within the HRM system, taking intended, actual and perceived HR practices into consideration. In practical terms, we have provided explanations for managers concerning why HRM messages are perceived differently by HR professionals and middle-level managers and how they may be able to overcome these different viewpoints. Our findings confirm the view that differences in HRM frames originate in differences in functions, backgrounds and expectations. The main contribution of this paper is the added finding that HRM frame differences also originate in the lack of clarity regarding HRM philosophy and goals. Here, the different functions lead to a different client focus, inertia and intuition-based execution of HRM practices and a seemingly large distance between the central and local HR functions in HRM administration. HR professionals and middle-level managers may have different understandings of the HRM system because the underlying philosophy is not clear and messages are not clearly sent. This research has shown that early communication and comprehensive discussion of information regarding the HRM system and changes to it are important in enhancing such understanding. As sparring partners of the middle-level managers, HR professionals are taking on an advisory and supportive role, but they should also attempt to create a shared understanding as this is expected to deliver a more successful HRM system.

Note

1. The authors would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this valuable observation and idea.

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