Perfection of Meritocracy or Ritual of Bureaucracy? – HRM in a Management Consultancy Firm

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Abstract
The paper addresses HRM systems and practices in a large multinational management consultancy company. The company invests a lot of resources in HRM tasks, and is frequently praised by employees for its accomplishments in hiring, developing and promotion in practice. HRM as a belief system and as practices then do not harmonize particularly well. The paper critically interprets the meaning and the functions of the HRM system and the beliefs supporting it. The paper suggests a re-interpretation of HRM systems and practices based on a cultural-symbolic perspective. It points at a) the limits and shortcomings of HRM systems in terms of rationality, b) the significance of organizational symbolism in accounting for the role of HRM systems and practices – symbolizing rationality and commitment to people improvement as well as a highly competent work force and c) the various effects of these systems and practices on employee compliance.

Introduction
It is common for people with an interest in people issues in business to emphasize the crucial significance of personnel – or human resources to use the nowadays most common label. Many researchers and practitioners stress the human resources and partly overlapping elements such as corporate culture, knowledge and core competence, as universally significant (Pfeffer, 1994; Tichy et al, 1982). This claim can with greater confidence than in any other sector be made about what can be referred to as the knowledge-intensive sectors. The importance of the personnel – the organizational members – in knowledge-intensive firms is a widely emphasized. Since most, if not all, knowledge-intensive firms lack assets, others than the competences and capabilities of the work force, the personnel are truly these companies most important resource. Predictably, knowledge-intensive companies stress the importance of securing loyalty and commitment (Alvesson, 1995, 2000; Hedberg, 1990; Löwendahl, 1997; Sveiby & Risling, 1986).

Today, most thinking in this matter tends to be subsumed under the HRM label, where the abbreviation HRM stand for human resource management. Human resource management is a loose concept that signifies a highly diverse set of frameworks, ideas, concepts, and practices. HRM focuses on what broadly can be described as the human side of enterprise: recruitment, training, staffing, career planning and development, compensation, and labour relations (Steffy &
Grimes, 1992). Most HRM thinking emanates from a managerial perspective and most, but not all, takes this perspective for granted. The common denominator lies in the object of study, rather than in theoretical elaboration, or methodological consistency. Many HRM authors argue that human resource management is a core strategic activity, in fact as important as developing mission and strategy, and designing organizational strategy (e.g. Tichy et al, 1992:47). According to Tichy et al, human resource management consists of four key activities – selection, appraisal, rewards and development – that typically follows a cycle, the so-called “human resource cycle”.

Other HRM authors, with a normative rather than rationalist interest, also or instead emphasise organizational culture and managerial philosophies as important tools for creating commitment among organizational members, which along with competence, cost effectiveness and congruence being the key watchwords for managing human resources (Beer et al, 1984).

HRM is less of a particular well developed theoretical framework as a claim about changing corporate practices in dealing with personnel issues. It is not entirely clear if, and if so, to what extent, HRM represents something new and radically different (Legge, 1995). The real difference between HRM and PM is ”not what it is but who is saying it”, according to Fowler (1987, in Legge 1995). There seems to be some indications on a shift in orientation (Storey, 2001).

Although HRM as a theoretical construct may be problematic – there is little of HRM theory (Schneider, 1999) – the label seems to have catch on in practice. Most organizations today claim to have human resource departments and human resources manager, thus implying that the human resources somehow is managed.

We will investigate a case of a set of HRM practices that can be said to extremely ambitious and of key significance for the success of a company. In this paper we will take a close look at the HRM system at a very large international consultancy firm. This firm claims to have and use a very rational and ambitious HRM system in which people are assessed, developed and screened out so that a highly competent, motivated and wellfunctioning work force is accomplished. Promotion decisions during certain intervals is important here, as is more frequently carried out assessments of performances and development needs in connection to project work as well as various devices for developing people. People praise this system, for its usefulness for junior personnel and for its capacity to deliver an effective work force, where hierarchical position and competence is an almost perfect match.

However, a closer look indicates plenty of deviations from the ideal. Even though people stress a positive view on the company’s systems and performances in terms of HRM many also express contradictory opinions and evaluations of HRM practices. The paper will point at a number of cracks in the HRM machinery, cracks indicating tendencies to breakdowns in trust and credentials, that do not lead to such consequences due to various efforts to prevent the cracks from fully materializing in people’s talk and consciousness. Consequently, the paper critically interprets the meaning and the functions of the HRM system and the beliefs supporting it. These concern a) identity-constructing functions building up self-confidence and feelings of belonging to an elite; b) the faith and pride in the company facilitated by the symbolism of the HRM systems and practices; and c) the usefulness of an ambitious HRM system in signalling to the external world the rationality of the company and the high quality of the personnel indicated by its quality-securing set of practices for processing and assessing the personnel. The value of the personnel on the consultancy service as well as the labour market is thus increased. It is argued that different actors develop different myth-preserving logics and tactics, contingent upon position and overview.
The paper has two ambitions. The first is to investigate and through light on HRM in an organization where the reasons for putting a lot of effort into optimizing the competence of the personnel in recruitment, assessment, development and promotion are exceptionally strong. The difficulties of optimization or even accomplishing a high level of rationality is explored. The second objective is to suggest a symbolic understanding of the workings of the HRM systems and practices. This follows fairly closely the empirical material, but should be of more general relevance for the understanding of HRM in an organization theory context. The symbolism of HRM means that it is not the functional efficiency as much as what the structures and practices symbolize in terms of the ability and competence development of the personnel, the company’s qualities viz. the client and the labour market, etc. that become significant.

**HRM and people processing**

Legge (1995) claims that HRM is in many ways a recycled version of traditional personnel management, but with emphasis on different aspects: “the rhetoric … of HRM seeks to secure new meanings and emphases compared to the normative personnel management models” (Legge 1995:37). According to Legge, the rhetoric presents HRM as:

- aimed at managers and core workers, rather than a work-force collective
- connecting personnel issues with business strategy and bottom-line results
- focusing management on cultural and symbolic means of persuasion

Drawing mainly on the work of Foucault, Townley (1993) argues that HRM practices provide certainty and closure to the relation between employers and employees. In Foucauldian terms, HRM operates as a particular field of power-knowledge, disciplining and normalizing the employer-employee relationship. As Townley put it:

“By presenting HRM as a process of power-knowledge. I am redirecting interest from the truth or falsity of discourse towards its functioning. The type of questions that are prompted in research relate to the production of knowledge and its effects. In particular, research moves away from the notion of practice as a technicist construct.” (Townley 1993:537-538)

Recruitment, assessment and selection are typically viewed from two radically different point of view: the scientific selection perspective and the social process perspective (Iles & Salaman 1995) The scientific selection perspective strongly dominates the HRM literature (Steffy & Grimes 1992, Iles & Salaman 1995). It is based on the idea that recruitment, assessment and development deals with people that have stable sets of skills and capacities, and that these characteristics are possible to objectively investigate and measure, thus making so called job performance prediction possible (Iles & Salaman 1995:219). Viewed as social process recruitment, assessment, and selection practices constitute and co-create the individual:

"One form of this social process approach simply notes the interplay between selection events, candidates’ feelings and responses, and organizational outcomes, emphasizing the mutual adjustments and ‘negotiations’ that occur. But a more interesting and radical form sees the candidate and the selection decision as in various ways constructed by the process of selection and measurement. Thus assessment centres could be seen not as discovering potential, but as defining and constructing it (Iles & Salaman 1995:206, emphasis in original)
In this paper we will look at recruitment, assessment, and selection from a social process perspective. In this sense, we will take an interest in both the anatomy of the HRM system in our case and its outcomes, in terms of conduct and frames of references.

**An interpretive-cultural approach**

This paper adopts an interpretive line of inquiry. Our approach is thus not functionalistic – we have now intentions to primarily contribute to improved ways of dealing with personnel issues through offering improved techniques and we do not address HRM in any objectivist sense. Our version of interpretive research draws upon a cultural understanding of organizations (e.g. Alvesson, 2001a; Brown, 1995; Frost et al, 1985; Kunda, 1992; Smircich, 1983a). This does not necessarily presuppose or target "corporate cultures" in the sense of unitary and unique set of meanings, values and symbolism corresponding to companies, but takes an interest in the level of meaning in organizations shared by smaller or larger groups and the significance of symbolism for how people communicate and make sense of their shared worlds (Smircich, 1983a, b).

We use the term 'organizational culture' as a concept for a way of thinking which takes a serious interest in cultural and symbolic phenomena. This term directs the spotlight in a particular direction rather than is intended to mirror a concrete reality for possible study. We agree with Frost et al.'s (1985: 17) 'definition' of organizational culture: 'Talking about organizational culture seems to mean talking about the importance for people of symbolism - of rituals, myths, stories and legends - and about the interpretation of events, ideas, and experiences that are influenced and shaped by the groups within which they live.' We will also, however, take organizational culture to include values and assumptions about social reality, but for us values are less central and less useful than meanings and symbolism in cultural analysis. This position is in line with the view broadly shared by many modern anthropologists (especially Geertz, 1973). Culture is then understood to be a system of common symbols and meanings. It provides 'the shared rules governing cognitive and affective aspects of membership in an organization, and the means whereby they are shaped and expressed' (Kunda, 1992:8). Culture is not primarily 'inside' people's heads, but somewhere 'between' the heads of a group of people where symbols and meanings are publicly expressed, e.g. in work group interactions, in board meetings, in formal procedures but also in material objects.

Culture then is central in governing the understanding of behavior, social events, institutions and processes. Culture is the setting in which these phenomena become comprehensible and meaningful. A symbol can be defined as an object – a word or statement, a kind of action, a procedure or a material phenomenon – that stands ambiguously for something else and/or something more than the object itself (Cohen, 1974). A symbol is rich in meaning – it condensates a more complex set of meanings in a particular object and thus communicates meaning in an economic way. Occasionally, the complexity of a symbol and the meaning it expresses calls for considerable interpretation and deciphering. People have private symbols, but in an organizational context it is collective symbolism that is of most interest. Sperber (cited by Gusfield & Michalowicz, 1984: 421) interprets as symbolic 'all activity where the means put into play seem to be clearly disproportionate to the explicit or implicit end . . . that is, all activity whose rationale escapes me'. As Gusfield and Michalowicz note, what is symbolic for one person may be non- symbolic for another. Still, we think it is wise...
to use 'symbol' as a conceptual tool for making sense of the hidden or latent meanings of an object.

The Case

Excellence is a large consulting company and employing over 25,000 people worldwide. We focus on the Scandinavian subsidiary that employs approximately 700 people, but this follows the same overall philosophy and procedures as other subsidiaries. Excellence conducts management consultancy (broadly defined). They target large organizations as customers. The company has double-digit growth in sales, and has been growing at that rate for some time. Below we will specify the parts of Excellence’s HRM system – recruitment, career structure, appraisal and evaluation systems, and development.

Recruitment: selectivity and standardization

Almost everybody working at Excellence has an academic degree. Consultants are mainly recruited directly from the larger Swedish Universities. Degrees in business administration or engineering are mandatory. Excellence attempts to profile itself as an elitist, demanding but richly rewarding place to work. Judging from polls among Swedish business administration and engineering students, the students seem to have got the message and also decided to approve: Excellence consistently ranks high in polls over most attractive employer.

Excellence is growing rapidly. It also has a rather high employee turnover, something it shares with almost everybody else in this business sector. Taken together, this means that recruitment and retention are crucial areas for Excellence. The recruitment process is, as a consequence of the large number of recruitments every year, elaborate, time-consuming and, involves to one degree or another, more or less everybody at Excellence. All employees, and even partners, are expected to take part in various recruitment efforts, such as presenting the company at Universities, interviewing job seekers, and generally looking out for people to hire. The HR department administers recruitment, but consultants decide upon who will be employed. The recruitment process is organized around two basic elements: screening and interviewing. Screening consists mainly of an evaluation of candidates' qualifications. Interviewing is a somewhat more elaborate process where candidates are invited to Excellence headquarters in Stockholm and interviewed twice: once by HR personnel and once by senior consultants. The HR department has a goal of not taking longer than two weeks from first interview to final decision. Our informants indicate that they seem to meet that standard at the moment.

Excellence claims that they recruit the “best people”. They can probably mobilize back up for that claim, at least in the Scandinavian context. However, not all organizational members are convinced that Excellence is capable to keep the “best people” and that they loose a large proportion of the most competent personnel.

There is a general feeling that the standardized methodology and work procedures, and the standardized career paths stifle creativity and make promotion a matter of seniority rather than qualification. Excellence are currently attempting to counter this tendency. For example, they are conducting general revision of the career opportunities and career paths. They attempt to cut down on the time that it takes to make partner. They are developing schemes for profit-sharing. Finally, they are also attempting to find ways to channel entrepreneurial
urges among organizational members within the firm, rather than leaving them no space for such activities and, thus, passively forcing them to quit.

**Promotion and career structure**

The Firm is generally understood to be a career company. Initial advancement is expected to be swift for the individual. There are four basic levels: analyst, consultant, manager and partner. New personnel typically start as analysts. Exceptions are made for so-called “experienced hires”, employees with work experience prior their employment at Excellence, that theoretically can enter at any level. In practice, most, if not all, experienced hires enter at the consultant level. Their experience often facilitate career advancement, but some of our informants have hinted that lacking the ‘normal’ path of socialization may slow career advancement for experienced hires. Employees are expected to advance within 12-18 months as analyst and within 2-4 years as consultants. They then become “managers”, i.e. they get this title and gradually are functioning as project managers. After the manager level, advancement becomes more difficult. After 3-6 years as managers people are either put on “the partner track” or not. Far from everybody on the track do become partners. This means that only a very careful chosen few of all that starts as junior members of the firm ever makes it to the partner level. Many leave entirely based on their own choice. Those not being promoted are expected to leave the company in due course and almost everybody do. The company then works on an up-or-out-system.

**Appraisal and evaluation systems**

The employees at Excellence are under constant performance evaluation. Sometimes people in the company talk about a “feedback culture”, but evaluation and feedback is fairly strictly formalized. Evaluation is organized in two main processes. First, employees are evaluated in relation to their individual development. This process is labeled c-mapping and is carried out three to four times every year. The employee’s nearest boss, usually the project leader of the project where the employee currently works, here primarily evaluates the employee. Employees are expected to propel this process themselves to a high degree. They are expected to articulate new targets for development, after they have received the feedback from the project leader. The feedback, on the other hand, is expected to be constructive and to help the employee to identify strengths and weaknesses. The general idea is that everybody should be evaluated in similar ways and according to similar criteria. Thus, there are several tools available – policy documents, forms, and standardized software – to ensure that everybody is treated in a fair and unbiased way.

You have the c-maps, which is our tool for formal feedback. Ideally you start by determining the criteria, together with your project leader. And there are five common criterias, such as creating trust, adding value, and so on. And then you typically have more specific criteria. Am I a better programmer than expected? Am I better on communicating than expected? There are standard levels. And thats well-defined in the tool, how an analyst is expected to perform, a consultant and so on. And then you pick three or four criterias and then you set the expectations: in three months you should have done this and this. And the the project leader writes a brief summary after the three months, with your contribution. Typically it also includes comments on your strengths and weaknesses. This is put together into a file that is send to HR and stored there. And then you have the annual review, counselling, where your development plan is developed and evaluated.

(Consultant)
Second, employees are ranked by their superiors in a process labeled banding. Banding occurs once a year. The employee is ranked in category 1, 2 or 3. Band 1 is reserved for top performers. Category 2 is regarded as acceptable performance. Band 3 is a warning signal, that you are an under-achiever and need to get your act together. Banding is important because it directly influence compensation: salary influences, career development and perks. The idea is that banding is linked to c-map information. Several good c-maps accumulate into a good (category 1) banding. As we will discuss later on, the picture is murkier and more ambiguous in practice. The banding procedure is secretive: only the employee and his or her superiors knows about one’s banding. Employees are actively discouraged to discuss their banding with each other.

**Development**

The people at Excellence have fully embraced the rather modern idea that knowledge is scarce, important and business critical. Thus, they invest a lot of money, time and other resources in the development of the individual.

First, newcomers start with a three week long introduction program which typically include a trip to the US for a week at the corporate training facility and later follows other forms of training.

Second, Excellence have put much effort in developing a sophisticated system for knowledge management. Apart from the databases and websites, the knowledge management systems at Excellence is organized around so-called competence groups and knowledge champions. A competence group is roughly a group of consultants, organized around a theme (for example ecommerce or performance management), that gathers regularly and exchanges knowledge and experiences about the theme. Each consultant is encouraged to take part in at least one of them (it is possible, even common, to participate in several competence groups). Competence groups make sure that the information and the cases in the databases are updated. Knowledge champions are people who are designated to systematize the knowledge yielded in projects.

Third, junior consultants are always paired with a senior consultant, who operates is his or her counsellor – which is also the official title. The idea is that senior consultants shall operate as mentors and help junior consultants in their development. According to our informants, the counsellor is primarily important in making sense of the intricacies of internal politics at Excellence. In particular, the counsellor is important in the banding process since the counsellor speaks for the consultant under evaluation in the process. The counsellor is also important since he or she provides a way to shelter from exploitation from over-ambitious project managers, and also to communicate to the higher echelons of the company hierarchy.

Fourth, knowledge- and information-sharing activities occur continuously at Excellence. There are seminars, work-shops, information meetings, and so on almost 24/7. Internal speakers, external speakers, customers, vendors, university professors, think-tank analysts participate regularly: everything one can image in our information-soaked era. Employees are expected to participate, and they do so willingly, since the traffic of knowledge and information emphasizes and underscores an important assumption about working at Excellence – that this is a place for those that value competence and has high ambitions.
The fifth and most important ingredient is project manpower planning taking the developmental aspect into account. When staffing projects, the individual's development situation is carefully considered: getting juniors to work with different project managers, taking new and more demanding roles, getting options to work with things they are not that good with, etc.

A system that works – members' perception of the HRM system

The general perception among organizational members at Excellence is that the HRM system delivers. In particular, two aspects are highlighted. First, there is a widespread belief that the corporate system for selection, promotion and ranking is reliable and that the resulting hierarchy expresses valid differences in technical and managerial competence. Second, it is commonly thought that the HRM system is successful in developing individuals, something that is believed to be validated by the fact that employment at Excellence makes individuals more attractive in the labor market. In other words, HRM practices and supporting cultural orientations means quality assurance through a) effective sorting mechanisms in recruitment and promotion and b) effective people improvement.

Hierarchy and differentiation as mirrors of competence and meritocracy

The hierarchy at Excellence, which is fairly elaborate to begin with, is typically further elaborated to include many years the individuals have served at their present level. This practice is generally perceived to map competences and capacities accurately. The elaborated formal differentiation system is seen as mirror the actual competence of the employees.

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It should be emphasized that hierarchy is not valued for its own sake. The authoritarian aspects inherent in hierarchical arrangements is typically considered with suspicion, and several of our informants voiced concern over the hierarchy's stifling effect on creativity. However, hierarchy is valued at Excellence because people get promoted not because they have been working for a certain number of years at the firm, but because they are ready to take the responsibility. The reason why it works at Excellence is because people get promoted not because they have been working for a certain number of years at the firm, but because they are ready to take the responsibility.

M2 means a manager being on her or his second year on this level, while C1 is a consultant on his or her first year with this title. The labels are believed to be accurate indications of the competence of the persons. M2 should deal with an M2's stuff, or possibly an M3's, and a C1 should deal with a C1's stuff, or possibly a C2's stuff. With the things they can do, as far as competence goes, they can move down the scale too far. And concerning competence, it is a waste of resources to move them too far up the scale. The reason why it works at Excellence is because people get promoted not because they have been working for a certain number of years at the firm, but because they are ready to take the responsibility. The reason why it works at Excellence is because people get promoted not because they have been working for a certain number of years at the firm, but because they are ready to take the responsibility.
well ordered and possible differentiate along hierarchical lines, or that the assessments and formal differentiation structures exhibit a high degree of rationality in dealing with these capacities.

The HRM system as quality proof of the personnel

Several of our informants pointed out, when asked why they have applied for work at Excellence, that they believed that it would make them more attractive at the labor market and that it, at least, would look good on their CV’s to have worked at Excellence. Many, in particular at higher hierarchical levels, credited the HRM system for a very good reputation of the personnel on the labor market.

Then we have that one, at least that is what we say to explain it to ourselves, our reputation is very good concerning our employees. If you have five years at Excellence on your CV, then they don’t care to look at your degree etc. They practically don’t care to look at anything at all, they just say: “Okay, here is the job if you want it”. They know that the quality of the people we hired is assured, and that we have trained and developed them. This makes our employees very attractive to everything from head-hunters or ex-employees to, well, other consultancy firms too, that know us quite well. (manager)

One interviewee compares Excellence with another, medium-sized consultancy firm he worked for earlier, and emphasizes the superiority of the former in its people development and screening process, resulting in a very fine match between level and capacity of people.

At Administrative Consulting, there is a hierarchy as such, but there older people, so to speak, could be in the middle of the pyramid. And there was also people who advanced in the organization, but who lacked the respect and the knowledge that they should have. So already by that time, some of the credibility of this project organization was damaged, even if there were attempts, during my time there, to professionalize this approach. There were a couple of seniors who didn’t perform very well. These people don’t exist at Excellence, or at least they are extremely rare, they just don’t stay. There is an “up-or-out”-system. It is not brutal. People are not sacked because they fail in a project. But over a longer period, in one way or another, these people disappear. (partner)

To sum up: Excellence's HRM system is based on elite confirmation: a strong brand name and broad recognition of belonging to 'the best and the brightest'. The idea of an elite is justified and reinforced through up-market recruitment, relatively long periods of training, good options for competence development, cooperation with bright people, high wages and career prospects (either within or outside the company), and, perhaps most important, careful screening procedures in recruitment and promotion. In addition, the fact that even the most junior consultant sometimes works not very far from the client’s top management team.

Some HRM problems at Excellence

As a direct consequence of the practice of primarily recruiting people directly from university, a large proportion of the work force works as underlings, with little individual responsibility and discretion. This discrepancy is to a large extent managed through complementary HRM practices. The young and inexperienced people who forms the bulk of the large-scale projects are typically willing to subordinate themselves to the systems and structures of the work methodology. The degree of compliance called for is related to the initial uncertainty felt by newcomers. The recruitment of very young and talented people is related to hierarchy and career steps. The intake of young consultants call for relatively well structured project management and the monitoring of more qualified people, i.e. strongly
asymmetrical relations. Thus, a vital motive for starting and continuing working for Excellence is the career opportunities.

The HRM system at Excellence operates in a manner that provides some instant gratification for often hard, routine, and repetitive work sometimes carried out in a highly formatted way and with few degrees of freedom. However, it promises stronger rewards in due course, with a promise that eventually, if you as a member work hard enough, is smart enough, and don’t make peers, superiors or customers uncomfortable, will be gratified lavishly later on: both in terms of material compensation and personal autonomy. The elite image, the campus atmosphere, and the relatively high salaries are some important ways Excellence furnish instant gratification, that in many ways offers a taste of what might come. The relatively transparent career structure provides a predictable path for the individual, which makes it possible for he or she to create checks and balances: hard work and subordination now, windfall, status and autonomy later. The constant evaluation offers possibilities for gauging how well one is doing, both for the company and for the individual. Competence groups and training programs allows for corrective action, thus making it possible for individuals to reframe their positions when evaluations are bad or career advancement has hit a speed-bump.

Still, working at Excellence, at least on the junior levels, calls for quite a lot of subordination and willingness to accept long working hours and to work in a fairly hierarchical structure, in which a lot of systems regulate how things should be done. According to some interviewees this leads to a somewhat negative selectivity in terms of who stays in the company.

“If one is expressing the ambition that the company will hire the best people, take them in and put them in a box telling them to do so and so. Then it is not the best people sitting in the box, but the most adaptable people.” (ex-employee)

A significant problem for Excellence is to be able to attract and retain sufficient number of good people. The retention problem escalates on a hot labour market, in which the experienced personnel are very attractive. The instrumental motives which one has relied upon may then make people inclined to go for attractive offers - in terms of financial compensation - from others. This is not necessarily only a matter of instrumental motives. As wage and other forms of compensation is seen as closely related to status and worth, willingness to go for the highest income may be a tactic of confirming and strengthening one's selfunderstanding as belonging to the elite. The HRM procedures of Excellence then makes people focused on external confirmation of one’s value – to a high degree shown through wages – and then the symbolism of the pay level become heightened, leading to a motivational logic around wage maximization, undermining corporate loyalty and intrinsic motivation (Alvesson, 2000).

System failures? – cracks and discrepancies in the HRM system

HRM practices at Excellence can be characterized as follows: modern, coherent, ubiquitous, sophisticated, and – in many ways – all-embracing. The ambitions are high and a substantial amount of resources are put into managing it. They are present in most work situations. As an individual, you are frequently evaluated and asked to evaluate other people. You are expected to help out in recruiting new people: making interviews and
participating in company-sponsored events at business schools and universities. You are typically engaged in one, two, or even three competence groups, either as an organizer or as a participant. If you are a manager or more, you are also likely to operate as a counsellor. If you are less elevated and more junior, you are on the receiving end of the counselor-counselee relationship. Wherever you are and whatever you do at Excellence, you are engaged in HRM practices or operating in their close vicinity.

The HRM practices at Excellence may appear to be consistent and build into an integrated framework. However, a closer look reveals several "cracks" here defined as perceived discrepancies and inconsistencies in the machinery that potentially threat its credibility, effectiveness and legitimacy. A crack is a deviation from the ideal of a robust and reliable system that is half-consciously noted and call for repairment work. Repairment work may address problems of the system and aim to improve it. But arguably this is frequently difficult when it comes to ambiguous phenomena as people processing. Repairment may also concern the symbolic sphere – the development of meanings and lines of thinking which save people from taking the cracks fully seriously. In this section we will decribe and elaborate upon four deviations, possibly leading to cracks. Two concern process, i.e. how elements in the HRM system work. The other two relate to outcomes, i.e. perceptions related to how the company at the end of the day deliver what is promised in terms of optimal HR products, i.e. right people on the right positions.

Process crack 1: Feedback systems unreliable in delivery

HRM practices at Excellence is replete with feedback mechanism, to the extent that it might be appropriate to talk about a 'cult of feedback'. Organizational members are actively encouraged to give and seek feedback in all situations. Typically, organizational members praises the feedback system, although often in a convoluted way and not without reservations:

"It’s very formalized. Every project feeds a feed-back database consisting of 20-25 preformed criteria, where you are graded based on hierarchical level, summarized in strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations which is supposed to followed by a discussion. This is done after the project is concluded, about six weeks after. But you need feed-back and guidance during the whole process. On the whole, I think that there is a balance between pointing out when it is not quite good and encouraging when you are doing well.” (Johan, Consultant)

Interestingly, the highly formalized character of the feedback seems to devalue its effects. Several of our informants indicated that although they believed that feedback is important, and that they though that Excellence excelled in providing formalized feedback, the validity of the feedback system was questionable. "We are to cautious”, one senior manager said.

Another crack in the system is evident in the way the appapraisal and evaluation procedures actually work. According to the norm, c-maps are written and performed by project managers. However, we found that in practice almost all organizational members write their c-maps themselves.

"I wrote my own c-map again at the Dairy-project. I even wrote the evaluation, both contribution and summary. Then the project manager edited it somewhat. It is not supposed to work this way, but it does.” (consultant)

That consultants write their own evaluations, at least as drafts, seems to be a common practice. In one of our observations the project leader casually told the project members that he wanted them to produce drafts for their own c-maps. The request was produced in
an undramatic way, almost as an afterthought. It was received as trivial and as an everyday thing. Nobody hinted anything that resembled surprise or protest. However undramatic as a practice, the shift from being evaluated by another and evaluating oneself have subtle and important consequences. It turns what is supposed to be an evaluation of performance into an exercise in articulating self-knowledge. Furthermore, this exercise is produced in a specific context and with particular linguistic resources at hand: c-maps invites, or even forces, the organizational members at Excellence to articulate self-knowledge in the corporate language.

One problem – and a reason for the delegation of the work with the c-maps to the individuals that these are about – is that the HRM practices are time consuming. Frequently project managers feel that they don’t have the time to spend the several hours that may be needed to make the c-map feedback system work. The feedback system is thus all the time competing with other tasks and requirements and depending on project managers devoting sufficient time to it. At least occasionally, it is carried out in a ritualistic way as a part of the administrative machinery.

Process crack 2: the promotion system

The so-called banding are another example on how practice deviate form the norm. On an ideological level banding appears to be a textbook case of examination, where the banding process is a simple additive process of putting together evaluations carried out under the period, in particular the relevant c-maps. In the banding, all project managers of relevance should, in principle, participate. The idea is that the decision should be as objective as possible. As these people have written, or at least edited and put their own evaluations on the c-maps one should anticipate coherence between c-maps and banding.

However, a closer look at the process reveals a somewhat different dynamics. For example, banding and c-maps are in practice sometimes relatively uncoupled events, where c-maps have little direct impact on the banding process.

“I was surprised when I become involved in the banding process, that c-maps meant so little. I though they were important but it was evident that other aspects mattered more. In practice, it is recommendations and comments from project managers that decide. As a freshman, you think that c-maps is the thing. A couple of good c-maps become a good banding. But there is no clear connection between c-maps and your banding. Rather, your banding depends on what project managers thinks about you. (Holm)

Banding as a process is hidden and kept secret for the person who is evaluated. However, the person under evaluation is capable, through his or her counsellor, to exert a certain amount of influence over the banding process. In practice, the person under evaluation is expected to provide input to the process: to suggest the persons most able to pass judgment on his or her efforts, and – through the counsellor who will speaks for him or her – raise objections about person that might pass perceived unfair judgments.

“Everybody is told to name and contact the persons who have relevant input for ones banding. If you have a feeling that things may go wrong anyway, you still have an opportunity to influence the process through your counselor” (manager)

The discrepancies between the prescribed formal procedure and the ways the various evaluation practices loosely connect to each other may be seen as a typical example of how organizations work and that not much attention should be paid to it. Observation of some degree of inconsistency is not a sufficient starting point for an interesting study. It is, of course, difficult to assess But given the strong claims of the company and the personnel
about the level of ambition as well as success in dealing with HRM issues, we think reactions such as those of the interviewees cited above are worth consideration.

**Process and outcome cracks**

So far, we have described some observations and reported experiences around how HRM systems are practiced. What does this say about the outcomes? Inconsistencies and deviations in the performance of practices do not necessarily lead to problems in the outcomes of the handling of personnel issues. Even if assessments in the context of feedback provision and the communication of feedback in formal situations like the c-map evaluations are not working according to the book, the company may still, in a variety of informal ways, be good in providing feedback. Formal procedures may symbolize a corporate commitment to feedback giving and be a reinforcing mechanism of a feedback culture, that does the trick in a variety of ways, including in more informal, everyday work life situations. Promotion decisions may be done in a as far as possible rational way, even if there is no close connection or consistency with other parts of the HRM system.

Non-optimal functioning of formal procedures may therefore not entirely predict outcomes, and frequently organizational culture may compensate for the shortcomings of formal systems, guiding informal ways of thinking, acting and getting things straight. In addition, the cracks mentioned only indicate that intended procedures do not work fully, but it is difficult to assess how strong is the discrepancy between plan and actual practice. We therefore address also outcomes of HRM issues, in terms of 1) whether Excellence is a highly effective feedback machinery and 2) the company, at the end of the day, is experienced as promoting the right people and getting the best to senior positions.

**Outcome crack 1: Clients better in delivering feedback than Excellence?**

Without denying the performances of Excellence is providing feedback, it is worth noting that several people, when not asked to focus on HRM issues, but talk more generally about experiences in their work, emphasize the client as an even more significant provider of feedback than one’s colleagues and superiors:

"The client means a lot. Because that’s where you get your pats in the back. You rarely get that from co-workers. … You have to ask to get it. But the client is very good at providing feedback. You don’t even need to hear them say it. You can feel it." (Consultant)

It is worth to point out that the informer in the quotation above previously in the interview had stressed that she thought that the feed-back system was one one of the most attractive features at Excellence. However, as is clearly expressed in the quotation, the feedback mechanisms – as complete, or excessive, as they seems to be – fails to provide sufficient "real" feedback.

**Outcome crack 2: Mysteries of promotion**

According to our informants at junior levels, it is sometimes difficult to see a pattern or specific criteria that apply for promotion to the partner level. This perception is presumably not shared by senior people and may reflect limited insights of those not having the entire picture of people’s qualifications, but the point of interest in this paper is this perception
about the uncertainty of the promotion process among at least a proportion of the people in
the company.

There is even a widespread opinion that the meritocratic character of the promotion
structure is nullified, due to the lack of fast advancement above the consultant level. Several
of our informants claim, for example, that they didn’t think that it was the best people who
made it to the partnership level:

"There is a lot of people here who is extremely good and work like dogs. But they leave the firm.
Those who are considered to be the best people here, they won’t stay until they become partners"
(manager)

Thus, the promotion procedures at the higher level of the company is both is perceived as
mysterious and, to some degree, spurious. They are considered mysterious since less senior
people sometimes have difficulties in finding a pattern in who will be promoted and who will
not. They are considered spurious since they will not include the best people anyway, since
they have left the company long before they qualify for promotion to the partner level.

Many people express some scepticism to the competence of at least a proportion of the
partner group. One would anticipate that an effective system would in particular be reliable
in the screening of the people that become partners – these are the people that have passed
all the people processing improvement interventions (including all the feedback) and all the
quality tests and assessments during more than ten years of employment. If people
perceive that more than an odd exception of those belonging to this exclusive top group do
not belong to the very best, then some doubt of the effectiveness of the HRM system may
be an effect.

Contradictions: the highly rational HRM machinery or ... something else

The combination of these cracks, raise rather strong doubts whether the employees of the
company generally perceive its HRM practices and accomplishments as that rational and
effective. In some cases, people that emphasize the quality checks and guarantees and the
usefulness of the promotion- and level-based categorizations of people may well, when
asked about the quality of the personnel, have strong reservations of the outcome of all this
and express rather contradictory meanings and assessments of the company from a HR
point of view:

"There are several persons here that I think was a mistake to hire. They don’t add value neither for
Excellence, nor for the client. If I left Excellence, and would have chosen ten person to ask them to join
me, I wouldn’t just say "OK, line them up". I would have been very selective, that’s for sure." (manager)

The same interviewee also, like many others, express strong reservations of the competence of
some of the partners. He thus during the interview expresses very strong faith in the finetuned
hierarchical differentiation system and its capacity to reflect competence and doubt whether this
has lead to a labour force of generally high reliability and value.

Other people praise the company for its effective feedback practices, but then indicate that there
is a shortage of feedback and that clients are better in providing this than Excellence, as noted
above in the discussion of outcome cracks.
One can see a dualism here. When talking about employment and the company in abstract terms, it’s feedback system is praised, but when getting into work and practice, there is a feeling of slow and little feedback from colleagues and superiors, while the client is superior here.

Again, this does not mean that Excellence is failing – ”client-orientation” may mean that the feedback from the client, especially if it is positive – carries heavy weight. But the feeling that there is rather little and slow feedback within the company is worth noting, as a contrast to the positive view of the company in this respect on an abstract level.

We add a final example of a self-contradictory – or at least incoherent – account on HRM practices. The interviewee, a senior manager, claims that hierarchy works very well because it mirrors competence. He starts by claiming almost perfect correspondance, but then modifies this picture.

The reason that Excellence works is because people get promoted, not because they have been here a couple of years but because they are ready to handle the responsibility. They have the experience, they have the competence. And that often create respect among subordinates…/… Previsely seniority was a governing factor for promotion. Now maturity is even more important when there are more differentiated career paths. (partner)

The interviewer says that the reason why it has worked and works today is something that one perhaps did not do previously but has done increasingly and will do even more in the future. The statement as a whole partly undermines the claims about competence behind the decisive factor behind promotion. Most of those promoted up to the present has been done so in the past, perhaps the recent past, but still the past and the workings of the company is an affect of previous HRM practices, where ”seniority was a stronger governing factor”.

These examples highlight the incoherences and contradictions of the meanings ascribed to the company’s HRM systems and policies on a general level and the specific practices they seem to observe or experience closer to actual operations. These incoherences and contradictions can thus be located not just to different groups but also to specific people. As they are fairly broadly shared, we can talk of cultural manifestations rather than single, isolated individual perceptions and sense-making processes.

**Competence based ranking and promotion vs. other logics**

Many of deviations from prescribed procedures and inability to deliver all the promises of feedback provision, people improvement and highly rational and fair screening and promotion decisions do not come as a surprise for any, but the most naïve believer in the perfections of management rationality. In an complex, ambiguous world calling for pragmatic behaviour, it makes sense that banding and promotion may be loosely coupled to earlier feedback and these may sometimes triggered by other considerations than development and competence.

One reason for this is the difficulties in achieving any high level of rationality in people issues: it is difficult to provide rich feedback due to the careful monitoring, excellent judgement, language skills and time that this call for. It is also difficult to assess people and their potentials.
Other reasons concern other considerations than competence and competence assessments as important ingredients in significant HR decision situations: the need to reward people for their efforts and to give them a good rating so that they feel encouraged to continue in the company.

Suddenly I had my own little group. So I became a project leader of a project within the project. It was enormously exciting and stimulating. I was partly conducting operational work for the client, partly still working as a consultant and thus expected to deliver manuals, sales forecasts, and so on. You work 200 %, which have been a bit exhausting. It has payed off. I was promoted to consultant in less than 16 months, which is considered early. I have really received recognition for my hard work (consultant)

Retention issues also influence rankings and promotions. These are to some extent used to encourage valuable employees to stay. During a period the labour market was very hot, and during that time some people were promoted earlier than was common in the past.

The conventional idea that time spent means an increase in competence also seem to enter as a strong 'rationality-surrogate'. In the absence of exact measures, this expectation probably affect decision-making, at least in situations that are not clear-cut.

Interpretation

The great majority of the personnel strongly emphasize the company’s capacity to attract, recruit, develop and evaluate qualified personnel. Differentiation and hierarchy is strongly emphasized in promotion steps, titles, the kind of work tasks and superior/subordinate relationships people are located in. There are claims of almost perfect meritocracy and of a dense and rationalized network of effective cultivating of excellence. A vital element here is feedback. At our first meeting with the company representatives, they emphasized the “feedback culture” of the organization.

A closer look reveals many rusty parts in this machinery. Quality checks of the outcomes are less than reassuring all the time. The human products coming out of the production process are sometimes not seen as up to standards. The HR operators often is less committed to carefully scrutinize how the machinery operates and unwilling to take the consequences of their experiences of how things work when assessing the company and its qualities as a whole as a screening and people processing apparatus guaranteeing a highly qualified workforce.

There are several interesting questions to raise here: How to evaluate Excellence in terms of HRM practices? Is the company performing far from “excellence” to such an extent that its image appears to be badly supported by substance? Or would it be unfair to claim this? Why do a number of people hold up the view of the company as close to perfect as an apparatus capable of gathering, improving excellent HR products sorting away those that are not – despite frequent instances of deviations from this? Why this compartmentalized consciousness?

One reason is that the company, after all, is fairly successful in attracting, selecting and keeping people that are perceived as contributing to the effective production of fairly reliable solutions for clients. So may be the case irrespective of how well the HRM functions. One senior manager, in responding on a direct interviewee question, said that it is not difficult to select those graduates suitable for the employment, mainly based on their characters, and the large majority, perhaps about 95 %, of these are eventually promoted to managers, i.e. if they stay in the company. As
with all empirical material, we can’t take this at face value, but note a discrepancy between a
highly sophisticated and ambitious HRM system that far from fully work according to what is
promised and corporate practices that seem to be broadly perceived as successful despite
deviations from the system. What role does HRM play in the management of the company and
for its result, i.e. in addition to having some (moderate?) effects on HR issues in a more
substantive sense of securing and increasing competence?

One of the most widely cited texts in organization studies claim that organizations develop formal
structures for ceremonial reasons in order to adapt to the expectations to comply with
institutionalized myths (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). For this reason – and not for efficiency
concerns – organizations develop structures such as those associated with HRM. Meyer &
Rowan emphasize the external side of organizations – legitimacy in relationship to various
external groups is a key driving force behind the adoption of the ceremonial structures.
Productivity is accomplished irrespective of these structures – indeed even despite these.
Organizations work due to the uncoupling of the ceremonial structures from efficiency-facilitating
arrangements.

In the case of Excellence, the HRM structures and practices go far beyond the requirement to
follow broadly shared myths in order to attain legitimacy. Most people in the company would
suggest that HRM guarantees high competence and strong performances. But there are, as we
have seen, good reasons to take another path in interpreting what this is all about that resembles
the point made by (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The HRM arrangements can be seen as formal
structures somewhat loosely coupled to substantive matters, but as carriers of ”myths” about the
company’s competence-guaranteeing qualities. The HRM structures signal to external and
internal audiences that this company knows what it is doing and that the personnel that is
promoted are thoroughly bona fide. Why buy its services? Why try to get a job and continue in
this company? Because the high level of competence that the company develops, maintains and
then offers. But how can we know this in advance? The massive HRM arrangements indicate
that so is the case. These function as ”rationality-surrogates” (Alvesson, 2001b) and comprise a
vital part of what impress the input (labour) as well as output (client) markets.

Why do not people see through the problems of delivering HRM practices and outcomes
according to the ideals? On this we can only speculate – it would be to ask to much to expect
empirical inquiry to sort such tricky issues out. Three speculations are worth mentioning:

One option is that they to some extent do, but realize too late. The ambitious HRM
arrangements are highly visible already in recruitment situations and especially salient during
the first time in the company. When people gradually find out of all the imperfections, they are
less dependent on/bother about it. After a number of years in the company, they feel a certain
self-confidence and status and thus independence of the quality-ensuring and enhancing
capacities of HRM. Against this speaks the observations that also senior managers exhibit
contradictory opinions about the reliability of the HRM practices.

Employees have a strong incentive to nurture and protect the myth. The value of the
company’s services and of the individuals if they seek other jobs on the labour market are
dependent on the credibility of the company to dispose of a highly qualified work force, and
this would an interest in communicating a strong and positive image of the company’s
management of personnel issues. Self-interest and image management would then account for
positive views of how the HRM issues are managed at Excellence. Against this interpretation we would claim that such image management talk is not predominant in most of the interviewees. All the statements include deviations from the ideal would indicate that the image management explanations does not tell the entire story.

We think that these points are relevant, but also that there is no single explanation of or way to understand non-trivial phenomena. We think that organizational participants on the whole strongly believe in the value of the HRM apparatus – at least at many occasions – and that experiences of the practices do not significantly undermine this faith. They have reasons to do so partly because of the persuasiveness of all the talk and all the arrangements associated with assessments, feedback, promotion and people development.

There are good reasons to emphasize the symbolism of the systems and procedures. The intensity of HRM activities do not necessarily deliver the goods in any rational sense: a highly competent workforce. But all the systems, procedures, acts and talk about feedback, assessments, the frequent promotions, finetuned hierarchical differentiation system, and the people improvement activities seen as closely related to these – education, selfimprovement efforts - signal the presence of an impressive apparatus for the screening of highly competent people, the improvement of them and the re-screening of them at frequent points at their careers. HRM symbolizes people development and proofs on competence.

HRM systems and practices can be seen as powerful input to what Broms & Gahmberg (1983) refer to as auto-communication. In their analysis primary targeting strategic management the communacation of plans and strategies do not necessarily communicate anything instrumental, but circulate messages organizational people themselves. The senders are then the same group as the receivers. Something similar can be said about the HRM system at Excellence. It signals to all involved – and as said above the entire organization is fairly heavily involved in various HRM activities – the heavy commitmment to and signs on an organization capable of accomplishing meritocracy. The HRM structures and practices thus legitimize hierarchy. Why should one obey superiors, why should one do certain tasks and not others? Because a lot of brainpower has been invested in building systems that make it possible to decide the competence of people and because an enormous amount of energy go into activities making these systems work. The HRM apparatus then functions as a source of the communication of the multitude of messages telling people that they live in an organizational world where the formal systems guarantee the competence of people and that they should adapt to their relative positions, that the system is fair and that it is the abilities and efforts of the employees that account for their successes or lack thereof. HRM systems then symbolize a kind of rationality which makes compliance the only reasonable response. As informants have said, there is no acceptance within the company – neither among senior actors or among one’s peer group – for claims that the company is to blame for problems. Nobody denies that in a particular assignenment or in a specific banding/ranking situation, people may be unlucky, but as a whole the company and the way it is managing its human resources guarantees fairness and rationality. A problem or a misfit in one assignenment can be corrected in the next one – and it is partly up to the individual to use all the feedback, the councilor, the assignenment possibilities and the educational options to get the career straight.
The various elements of the HRM – through the frequency, intensity and visibility – fulfill important symbolic functions. They symbolize

- the rationality and the fairness of the company
- the company as an effective people improvement environment
- the organizational structure and hierarchy as an expression of meritocracy and makes compliance highly reasonable
- the competence and development of the personnel, making being an organizational member a sure sign of competence and being a senior member a sign of even much higher competence, as a consequence of strong people development and screening measures.

The company – like HRM in general and the contemporary Western world at large – is characterized by assumptions about knowledge solving problems and producing certainty. The work world and the humans populating it can be made the targets of the rational ranking, ordering and classification (Foucault, 1980; Townley, 1994). Most likely there are great variations among companies and different people in such beliefs. Excellence is in this sense extremely rationalistic. But the individuals recruited have generally been very positively evaluated by various people-sorting assessment apparatuses – if not, they had never been employed by Excellence – and are therefore more inclined to believe in such apparatuses. Among corporate members there is a strong basic faith in a world capable of giving valuable feedback and thus confirming one’s worth. Being a member of this company do confirm one’s value. Being employed and promoted by this company symbolizes something special:

“...They work for a company with a good reputation. It feels a bit posh to work for Big Consulting. Eventually, one develops a magnificent narcissist disorder, and thinks that one is a very good person in other areas, and I think that is a satisfying feeling for younger people. “I am successful”. And the people we recruit have always wanted to be successful. They have always been dependent on strokes from the environment. And they get the strokes here. They have been A-kids since birth. (manager)

We are in no way claiming that the selfunderstanding of the people in Excellence – to the extent that this citation says something about it – is wrong or misleading. If pressed, we would probably agree that the company employs able students and have far less imperfect systems and practices for dealing with their personnel in terms of development and promotion than most other organizations. But we are claiming that there are considerable ambiguity in assessments and improvements of people – in this company as well as others (Alvesson, 2001b). The basis for employment at Excellence is primarily characters from the university degree and we can’t say that this tell the whole story about a person’s competence or potential – the fact that a person is employed by the company is no certain proof that he or she belongs to the best. That most persons that stay are promoted to the level of manager, does not necessarily means a guarantee of their abilities. Ambiguity is thus a significant feature – and it is important to consider how ambiguity is coped with (Alvesson, 2001b). Symbols are vital in this respect.

**Conclusion**

Based on this study we arrive at three conclusions. These concern a) the limits and shortcomings of HRM systems in terms of rationality, b) the significance of organizational symbolism in accounting for the role of HRM systems and practices – symbolizing rationality and commitment.
to people improvement as well as a highly competent work force and c) the various effects of these systems and practices on employee compliance.

HRM practices such as assessment, feedback provision, development and promotion are highly difficult themes. We have conducted a careful investigation of a very large company that i) has exceptionally strong reasons to give high priority to effective HRM, ii) does invest a lot of resources – technocratic as well as time and energy of personnel in HRM tasks, and iii) frequently is praised by employees on different levels for its accomplishments. Despite these unusually strong indications on effective HRM, doubts can be raised about the success in this respect. There are strong imperfections – perceived deviations from the ideals – around the processes of feedback giving and promotions. Also in assessments of the outcomes of the HRM work, claim to have realized the ideal to a high degree do seem to be contradicted by the experiences of people.

The strong indications of the difficulties of the HRM systems and practices to deliver all the prescribed ingredients and outcomes motivate that we consider an alternative logic than the rationalistic-functionalistic one in order to understand what goes on. If there is a lot of ambiguity and inconsistency involved, why do not people at Excellence acknowledge that it is difficult to assess what people actually are doing and to provide fair and precise feedback, that ranking and promotion decisions are tricky and that a lot of pragmatic considerations except “competence” matter – such as the need to compensate for hard work or minimize the risk that people are leaving? As people take seriously the finetuned hierarchy and assumes that it almost perfectly reflects real competence, they clearly do not acknowledge these difficulties.

Interestingly, one of Excellences most ubiquitous HRM practices – the c-map – is, although on the surface appearing to be almost a caricature on the examination, in practice been transformed to operate in a distinctively confessional mode. C-maps are expected to be conducted by managers but, as noted above, almost all organizational members write their c-maps themselves,. Thus, what appears to be an examination is to a large extent converted into a confession. Confessions are, as stated above, powerful tools that provide a mean for the individual to generate self-knowledge, articulate self-definitions, and ultimately to engineer the self. As Townley points out:

“Part of the value of the confession is that it produces information that becomes part of the individual’s self-understanding. It is also important to notice that these practices shade into other practices based not merely on accessing individuals, but allowing or training individuals to access themselves”

(Townley 1993:536)

As noted above C-maps is constructed in a way that makes organizational members at Excellence to engage in an exercise to articulate self-knowledge in the corporate language. Since c-maps also includes assessments of strengths, weaknesses, and desired development, organizational members are not only asked to confess who they are, but also who they want to be: they are asked to articulate a desired future and potential self. Accordingly, corporate influence is subtly extended to available forms of self-expression and –definition.

Ironically, what appears to be cracks in the system can be interpreted as side-effects of a particular system of governmentality: side-effects that enhance rather than decrease the degree of control provide through the system. Although banding and c-maps deviate from the norm, they still take part in providing governmentality – here in the form of participating in the production of
the professional consultant subjectivity. In this way the system may be effective in producing personnel, despite the deviations from intentions.

The procedures around c-maps and rankings may, despite the best of intentions, be arbitrary and at random or suffer from the lack of time and interest of superiors to devote sufficient attention to them, but the ritualistic qualities expressing certain assumptions, values and meanings are, apparently, convincing. Producing a career map, going through all the issues, getting the feedback from the superior, direct attention at imperfections and strong sides of the subject, and indicate areas and paths of improvement. Not that good on programming, communication or leadership? Take a course or try to get a new assignments were this can be practised! Not only the detailed list of issues to consider and the criteria for getting the verdicts “need improvement”, “average” and “superior”, but also the large amount of people improvement options circling around in the company strongly communicates cultural meanings such as that: a) people need feedback (in a systematic-procedural form, delivered by a superior), b) a lot of feedback is provided, c) the company values this heavily, d) there are wealth of options that can be used to improve, and e) people can improve in this company. The bombardment of this kind of organizational symbolism – closely resembling but strongly heightening meritocratic beliefs common in society but in particular the people in this company (and to some extent the industry at large) – lead to a particular kind of mentality. Radical questioning – even in the face of contradictory experiences – is then not an option. At least not an easy one. The amount of symbolism counteracts the tendencies to strong doubt.

The impact of the HRM systems and practices is not necessarily only or even mainly about making people with potential, but imperfect in various ways, taking the straightest path to perfection, carefully monitoring them and through a sophisticated surveillance system locating them exactly where they are at a specific time on this journey. The impact may be as much in terms of affecting motivation and accomplishing compliance. Competence is vague and hard to assess. The same goes for motivation, but interviewee reporting and also our direct observations indicate very long working weeks, 60-70 hours is not uncommon. The HRM systems provide a fairly strong sense of fairness, of a trustworthy exchange relationship. Assessment and promotion depend on people’s capacity and in particular their efforts to improve themselves. There is little space for people to rationalize failures. The elaborated HRM systems make you get what you deserve, it is assumed. Your place in the hierarchy is a reflection of your competence, nothing else. You get as far as your abilities and efforts allow you. In other companies promotion is depending on seniority, limited options (there is perhaps only one managerial job in a particular department or function), laissez-fair, etc, but in Excellence it is different. All this means that people connect their selfesteem and ambitions closely to the HRM systems and the organizational hierarchy. They are more inclined to accept hierarchy and comply with it than in situations where it is not made credible by the HRM apparatus and the meritocratic ideology it simultaneously draws upon and reinforces. The HRM systems and practices then are vital for accomplishing a highly committed and compliant work force. Excellence may or may be not effective in producing a high level of competence. The company is definitely able to produce a compliant and highly motivated personnel. This is, as we have seen, not necessarily an effect of the HRM system to function according to the plan – in a rational and objective way. Through symbolizing meritocracy and encouraging a workplace culture in which the belief and value placed on meritocracy is heavily pronounced, the HRM systems and practices may well be a strong element behind the success of the company on the labour as well as client markets.
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