

# MANAGERIAL COMPETENCE MANAGEMENT – THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING CONTRIBUTION

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## Session I-3

### Abstract

This paper emphasizes the contribution of organizational learning theory in order to develop managerial competencies. In other words, organizational learning theory has been used as the basis to develop a proposal that managerial competences are developed through informal practices combined with an articulated development strategy.

The method applied is an exploratory case study developed in 3 companies in Brazil and 3 in Australia. These companies belong to different industry sectors: metal-mechanic, communication, steel, manufacturing, construction and electricity. The research is developed based on three phases called: the notion of competence, the competence building, and the application of competence. For each phase, a group of managers were interviewed through in depth interviews.

The results indicate that organization learning theory represents a potential contribution, for the managerial competencies development, based on three main elements: interactive and collective approach, process vision and best practices at work.

**Keywords:** competence management, organizational learning, informal practices.

# Managerial Competence Management - the Organizational Learning Contribution

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## 1 Introduction

The literature points out that to have a better response to competitive needs, companies reach for more effective participation from their employees. However, this participation implies better conditions of work, training and development and, especially a new way of thinking about people within an organization. In short, companies need to rethink their human resources and the development of their competencies.

However, experience shows that managerial competence development still focus on an individual approach based exclusively on some training and courses which bring some difficulties to companies in order to make individual competence become organizational competence. This basically is due to the lack of a collective approach, continuous development and best practices at work.

This paper seeks to launch a new proposal to develop competences based on the contribution of organizational learning theory. In brief, organizational learning stimulates interaction between people, process vision and pragmatic matter, which seem to be the main difficulty faced by companies in order to develop their competencies.

This article is structured as follows: firstly, competence management is presented, based on the main concepts and approaches related to the notion of competences; secondly, organizational learning is discussed regarding some implications inherent in this approach as well as reflections on their meaning; thirdly, it attempts to integrate approaches related to competence management and to organizational learning, highlighting a few elements that can give support to competence development based on the limitations and/or needs presented by competence management. Next, describing the method, presenting the research stages and finally presenting the conclusions.

## **2 Competence Management**

Several competence concepts may be found in literature. In this paper, the emphasis is on managerial development, therefore organizational or essential competence concepts will not be discussed.

There are several approaches concerning managerial competences, among which are the American, Latin American, French and Australian ones. Each one brings about a different conception of competencies. In general, the American contribution is based on a functionalist vision of competencies. The Latin American emphasizes the competence at work based on the operational approach. The French group brings a social approach integrating education and work. The Australian experience points out the importance of government participation in the process of creating and developing competencies. Although it is not possible to classify all the authors in these presented categories there are some common aspects that are presented as follows. Therefore, the main aspects involved in competence management are related to:

1. Development of concepts, skills and attitudes (formation) – Boyatzis (1982), Parry (1996), Boog (1999), Becker (2001), Spencer and Spencer (1993), Hipólito (2000), Dutra et al (1998), Sandberg (1996);
2. Capability (aptitude) – Moscovici (1994), Ruas (1999), Dutra et al (1998), Zarifian (2001);

3. Work Practices, ability to mobilize resources, which distinguishes it from the concept of potential (action) - Sparrow and Bognanno (1994), Ruas (1999), Moscovici (1994), Boterf (1997), Perrenoud (1998), Fleury and Fleury (2000), Davis (2000), Zarifian (2001);
4. Combination of resources (mobilization) – Boterf (1997);
5. Search for better performances (results) – Boyatzis (1982), Sparrow and Bognanno (1994), Parry (1996), Becker et al (2001), Spencer and Spencer (1993), Ruas (1999), Fleury and Fleury (2000), Hipólito (2000), Dutra et al (1998), Davis (2000), Zarifian (2001);
6. Permanent questioning (dynamic perspective) – Hipólito (2000);
7. Individual learning process in which the higher responsibility should be attributed to the individual him/herself – Bruce (1996);
8. Relationship to other people (interaction) – Sandberg (1996).

Based on the constructs presented above, it is possible to sustain the need for building a more relational concept of competence management, highlighting holistic and contextual aspects. Therefore, it is pointed in Boterf's approach (based on mobilization) and in Sandberg's (based on interaction) aimed at a more dynamic and contextual proposal.

Sandberg and Boterf's contribution is not solely focused on the definition of competence attributes (concepts) but also on their application (practices). Therefore, Sandberg's work (1996) criticizes the traditional concept of competence as a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes, that is, attribute acquisition (rationalist approach). "Through competence analysis, I became progressively more convinced that essential aspects of human competence could not be reduced to a list of attributes externally related to work" (Sandberg, 1996:20). To the author, competence development must be seen as based on organizational practices, focusing its analysis on the enrichment of experiences (interpretive approach). "More specifically, we point out that competence development involves change in the structure and meaning of work practices" (Sandberg and Dall'Alba, 1996: 411). The issue then falls not only on what constitutes competences, but also on how they are developed.

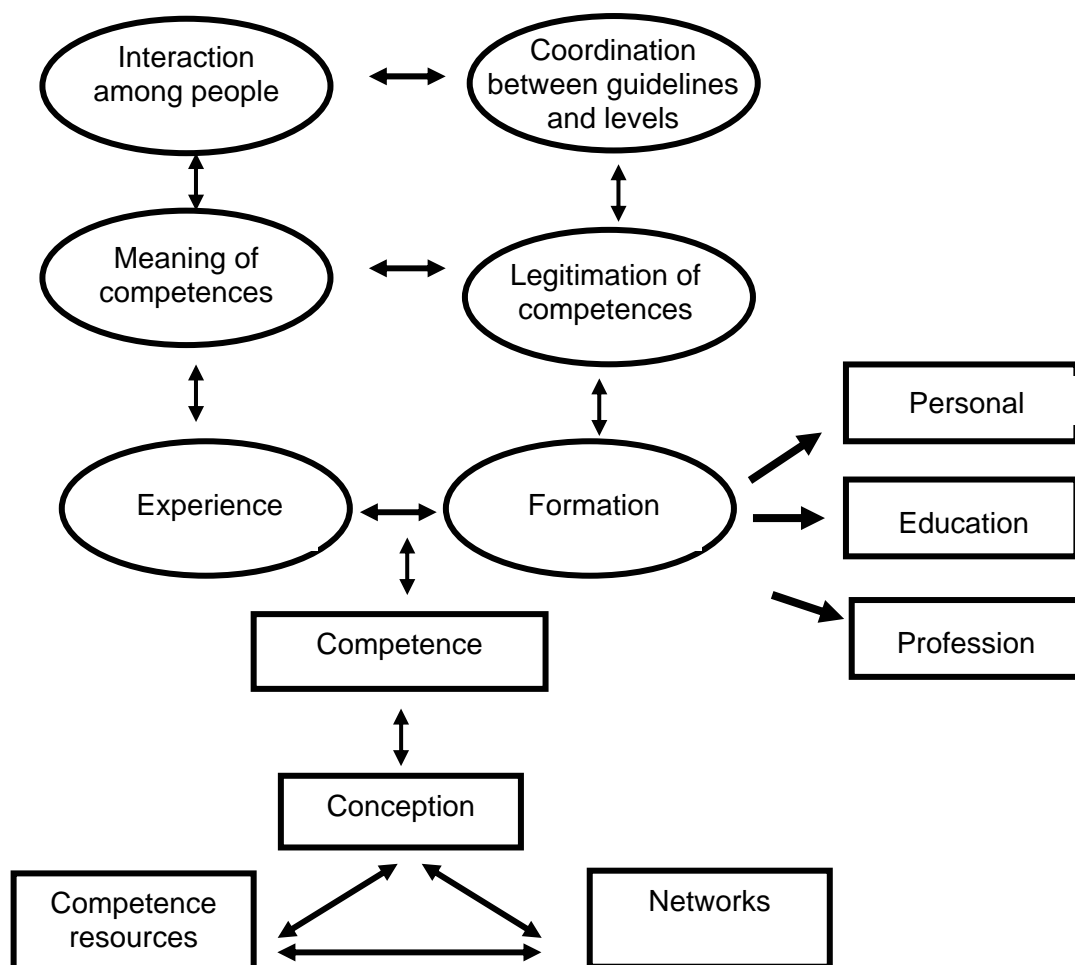
In sum, Sandberg (2000) proposes, "understanding the meaning of work" as the first stage for defining competence. To the author, "the development of that set of knowledge and skills involves changes in understanding about work. Therefore, for the

definition of the competence view, it starts from the understanding or the way managers see competences (way of seeing)".

It is possible to approach the issue as "shared vision on competences" – a later analysis and construction stage, suggesting a more unified work. In this context, competences are developed through people's interaction at the work environment.

Additionally, Boterf (1997) locates competence based upon three main axes, which include personal formation (biography, socializing), educational formation and, professional experience. The author underscores the accountability and legitimacy constructing of the notion of competences. Responsibility implies the mastery of the job and possible involvement in the activity, while legitimacy is linked to superiors, peers and subordinates recognizing their ability to act and respond to emerging situations (Ruas, 2000).

Sandberg (1996) and Boterf's (1997) proposals point out important aspects that contribute to the reflection upon the subject and are presented below (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1** Analysis of competences based on Sandberg (1996) and Boterf (1997).

According to fig.1, the interactions between people, meaning of competence and experience are the focus of Sandberg's approach (1996).

Still, Boterf (1997) stresses articulation, legitimisation and formation.

Therefore, the approaches are complementary, as follows:

- People's interaction allows a better articulation between guidelines and organizational levels;
- Identifying the meaning of the competence allows its legitimisation;
- Experience is directly related to background, which implies personal, educational and professional view.

Therefore, competence might be explained based on its conception, networks and resources.

### **3 Organizational Learning**

Besides the vast and growing literature on organizational learning, there is great disagreement as to what learning means and how it happens. According to Dodgson (1993: 376-377), "economists tend to view learning either as simple quantifiable improvement in activities or as some form of abstract and vaguely defined positive outcome". The emphasis, for that group, falls on result quantification. For managers, however, learning can be seen as a basis for "sustainable competitive advantage", and literature approaches the subject as an effective innovative strategy. Psychologists, in turn, see learning through the process, that is, "the way organizations build and organize their knowledge and their routines, observing their activities and organizational culture as well as adapting and developing organizational efficacy through improvement of skills on the workforce". It is believed that an integration of those two interdisciplinary views would be an interesting approach.

Organizational learning is related to "how" learning takes place at the organization, that is, the skills and knowledge construction and use (process perspective). Some basic points regarding the concept of organizational learning are presented below:

- Process (in terms of continuity);
- Change (based on attitude change);
- Group (focusing on what is collective);
- Creation and reflection (from the innovation and awareness-raising viewpoint);

- Action (ownership and dissemination of knowledge, with pragmatic view as a reference).

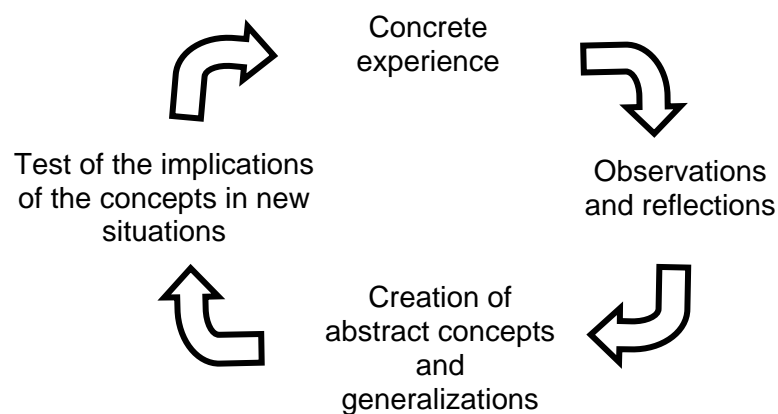
Within the learning context, it should point to the need for sharing insights, knowledge, beliefs and goals in order for the collective aspect to prevail and the organization to learn, that is, for the company to build its own reality and memory that will be the basis of future learning. At that moment, individual learning turns into collective learning and individual knowledge is incorporated into organizational practices.

#### 4 Organizational Learning and Competence Development

Organizational learning may be seen as an alternative response to the challenges faced by businesses, in order to develop an ongoing learning ability from organizational experiences and translate that knowledge into practices that contribute to a better performance, making the company more competitive. Therefore, organizational learning has the basic premise of permanently developing strategies and proceedings in order to reach better results, it counts on people's effective participation in the process of acquisition and dissemination of knowledge, which directly relates to competence development.

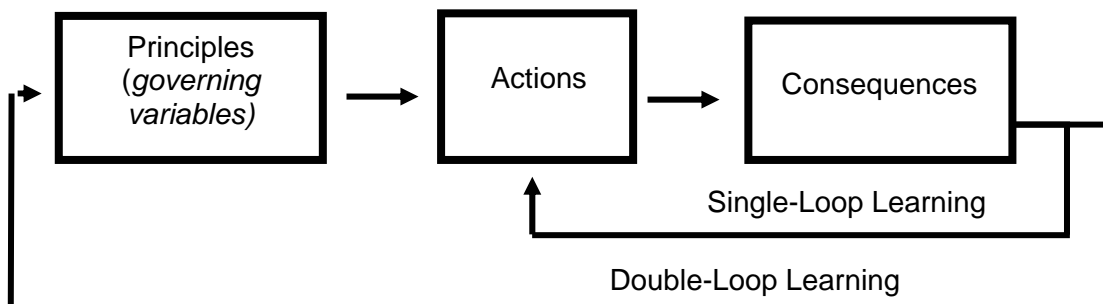
Besides the "complicity" existing between both approaches, that relationship has not been made clear enough. This section will include some works developed by organizational learning researchers (Kolb, Argyris, Senge, Sitkin and Leonard-Barton), within the managerial competence development approach. The questions presented are a personal construction, aimed at contributing to the discussion and not to its end.

David Kolb's (1971) approach is focused on the Experiential Learning Cycle (see Fig. 2) This study presents the process view regarding learning and competence creation, highlighting the importance of action and reflection in an ongoing process aimed at balancing actions and abstractions shown in the cycle.



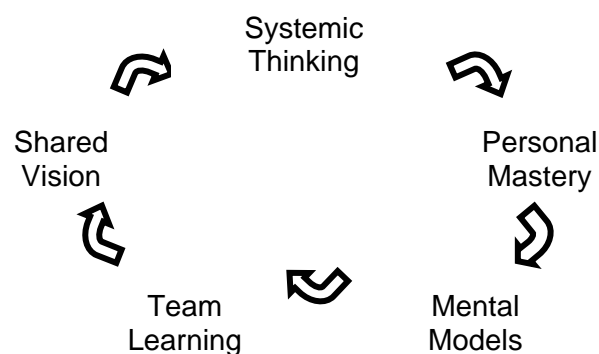
**Fig. 2** Experiential Learning Model (adapted from Kolb, 1971)

Argyris (1992), in turn, puts forward the debate on the gap between exposed theory and in use theory (discourse and practice). The need to consider competences as practices seen in the work environment is then verified, which distinguishes it from potential development. Argyris also points to the importance of (re)thinking the process of competence development based on mistakes, thus allowing double loop learning<sup>ii</sup> (see Fig. 3), avoiding the development of skilled incompetence<sup>iii</sup>.



**Fig. 3** Single and Double-Loop Learning (adapted from Argyris, 1992)

Senge (1990), based on the development of Five Disciplines, indirectly approaches the issue of competence. Personal Mastery may thus be interpreted as the need to develop people based self-knowledge, that is, self-development. Mental Models are related to reflection-in-action, in which usual practices at work are challenged, seeking to add value to the company's activities based on a more critical and creative stance. Team Learning restores the importance of interaction as a process of developing collective and individual competences as well as a Common or Shared Vision. It also points to the need to elaborate on each organization's specificities, and shows the narrowness of the view that sees competence as a list of attributes. Systemic Thinking, in its turn, highlights the importance of the process view as opposed to the event-centred view based on formal training sections for development and formation of managers.





**Fig. 4** The Five Disciplines (adapted from Senge, 1990)

There is also the need to balance individual and collective practices as well as formal and informal ones, in order to develop the organization and its managerial competences. According to Leonard-Barton (1995), competence must be seen as a system. It is very difficult to think of individual competences since individuals are in a permanent relational process (mutual interplay).

The author also stresses that formal and informal procedures are crucial for that human interaction and serve as a basis for building competences. According to Sitkin (2000), the most effective organizations shown in the literature are those that integrate formal and informal control practices.

Finally, it is also important to say that organizational learning presents three perspectives that may contribute to competence management.

1 – Social Perspective - It regards whole formation, in which experiences during personal and professional life courses represent a potential opportunity for learning how to learn. In other words, through the diversity of experiences, it is possible to see the enactment and/or solution of problems based on one's background.

2 – Dynamic Perspective – Oriented towards permanent development, it illustrates the importance of the view of the process and the construction of new situations that promote creation and use of new competences.

3 – Strategic Perspective – It underlines the importance of coordinating the company's guidelines and the strategic view on competence management aimed at the systematisation of more effective practices.

## 5 Methods

The research is based on the qualitative method, with exploratory character and developed through case studies, with three main stages as following.

**Table 1** Research Stages

First stage: THE NOTION OF COMPETENCE

- Literature review – stresses the development of managerial competences and principles, concepts and practices of organizational learning. It aims at building the research's theoretical design.

- First exploratory stage – visits to three Brazilian organizations belonging to the metal-mechanic, communications and steel industries. It is directed towards complementing

the theoretical reference and contributing to the research's construct. The aim is to investigate how companies deal with the issue of competence. The results show an individual approach (focus on competence attributes based on the person) expressed on organizational practices. It notes that those companies will be investigated again in the third stage of the research.

- Five interviews were carried out with people from strategic and human resources areas at the companies MECANICA, COMUNICA and METAL.

Second stage: Identifying forms of COMPETENCE BUILDING

- Construction of analysis units and research categories.

- Development of the theoretical/practical construct, relating organizational learning principles and managerial competence development.

- Construction and validation of data collection tools.

- Field research: advanced exploratory stage – investigation in three Australian companies belonging to the manufacturing, construction and electricity industries, attempting to develop and deepen the construct made in earlier stages. In this moment, it seeks to verify the collective character given to competences and organizational learning.

- Thirteen interviews were carried out with people from the administration, strategic, human resources and communication areas at the companies called METAL, MANUFAT, and CONSTRUC.

Third stage: identifying the ways to APPLY THE NOTION OF COMPETENCE

- At this point, it also notes the need to know the perception of managers (executives) about competence management as well as formal and informal practices of organizational learning involved in the process (the view of managers as clients of the three Brazilian companies). It attempts to identify experiences by those managers that were meaningful to the process of formation and development of their competences.

Three interviews were carried out with people from the human resources area, as well as 16 interviews with a group of managers.

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed without naming the respondents, which provides more room for criticism. The three research stages totalled forty-two hours of recordings and 491 pages of transcription.

The basic question that guides the study refers to which organizational learning elements (concepts, principles, practices) might contribute to the development of managerial competences, adding value to the activities developed in the businesses investigated, and how those elements are developed (or not).

It notes that the three stages previously described refer to the very maturing and formatting of the research based on the researchers' exploratory findings. Therefore, the emphasis was first on the individual level, followed by the collective one. There was finally the need to verify the consideration of the manager as a client of the process and not only the view of the organization as a generator of strategies and practices directed to competence development and organizational learning.

## **6 Stage I – Initial Exploratory Stage at the Brazilian Companies**

The research's initial exploratory stage is aimed at mapping the organizational efforts seen in three companies from the southern Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul in order to manage competences. The focus in this first stage is on the notion of competence, that is, it questions how do the investigated companies deal with the issue of competence?

The Brazilian companies investigated are called by names that identify them only with their respective industries: MECANICA, COMUNICA, METAL.

### **6.1 Managerial Competences**

The Brazilian companies investigated show awareness of the importance and need to develop managerial competences. However, the processes observed are still under construction. That is not to say that there is a final model for competence development. There is a believe in the dynamic perspective of that construction, a common aspect between competence development and organizational learning (process).

The presence of a specific typology for dealing with managerial competence was observed in each organization investigated (shown in table 2).

Managerial competence is somewhat related to the company's business. That is, it goes from the analysis of core competences to managerial competences. The difficulty resides in articulating the strategic level with the practices level and not in defining the necessary attributes for each of those levels.

Managerial competence is still seen based on a previously established ideal profile. It notes that there is a tendency to built ambitious competence attributes, whether for its reach, abstraction and/or diversity (complexity). The emphasis is individual, which makes it difficult to build collective competences.

There is concern over diminishing or terminating the gaps between current and desired managerial profile, which is done through a competence or performance evaluation.

Those evaluations are still being applied but it is not possible to accurately measure results yet. However, that evaluation has both quantitative and qualitative character and is not linked to any sort of financial reward.

**Table 2** Managerial Competences: Units of analysis and categories

MANAGERIAL COMPETENCES			
Unit of analysis	Categories of analysis		
Competence attributes	Knowledge Skill Attitude	Basic Distinguishing Strategic	Technical Human Conceptual
Selection	Current Profile Desired Profile		
Development (desired profile)	Formal training Informal training		
Evaluation	Indicators Rewards People involved		

## 6.2 Organizational Learning

Organizational Learning practices are in their initial stages and need to be further developed and systematized in order to generate results in the organizations.

The main learning elements and practices are presented in the following table.

**Table 3** Organizational Learning Situations

Organizational Learning	
Unit of Analysis	Categories of Analysis
Principles	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reflection-in-action – it seeks leverage in terms of results and new ideas based on work environment experience. Based on creative tension, it promotes ongoing improvement. Example: Simultaneous engineering (MECANICA).</li> <li>2. Shared vision – bringing people closer, which favours group learning as the basis for building a common object. Example: Matrix structure and participatory management (METAL).</li> <li>3. Learning how to learn – it seeks to apply new knowledge and</li> </ol>

	<p>experiences to different situations, based on systemic view development and double loop learning. Example: multidisciplinary groups (MECANICA).</p> <p>4. Ongoing development – it is aimed at permanently improving the company's processes, tasks, formation and results. Example: feedback (MECANICA).</p> <p>5. Systematization of processes – it refers to the incorporation of knowledge and practices to the organization. Therefore, it builds organizational memory. Example: reengineering (METAL), simultaneous engineering (MECANICA).</p>
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## 7 Stage II – Advanced Exploratory Stage in Australian Companies

The advanced exploratory stage is aimed at mapping the effort by three Australian companies towards developing managerial competences and examining the role of organizational learning in that context. This second stage of the research is focused on competence building, that is, on collective aspects and not only the formation and development of individual competences. The guiding question for this stage is: how have companies dealt with the issue of competences and what is the role of organizational learning in that context?

The Australian companies are named MANUFAT, CONSTRUC and ELETRIC. As in the first phase of this research, these names indicate the industrial sector and not the real names of these companies.

### 7.1 Managerial Competences

It is important to note that in 1992 the Australian government started a program known as Task Force, in order to:

1. Develop a positive culture through education and training;
2. Encourage vocational education and training, and to offer support to companies;
3. Develop diversity-oriented talents;
4. Reach best practices in management and development;
5. Reform managers' education.

The program was based on the belief that “good managers are the key for a better competitive economy and better organizational results” (Karpin, 1995: 4).

The government initiative to encourage managerial training and development has significantly contributed to the construction of a managerial profile oriented towards the gaps observed before, reported as significant in this area: entrepreneurship, global orientation, soft skills, strategic skills and managerial development, which guaranteed the strengthening of a general profile of the Australian managers.

The CEO role has proven to be crucial for orienting competence development processes and practices in the three companies investigated. Therefore, that person's profile and beliefs directly influence whether or not competence programs are developed in those companies.

Companies' structure and size directly influence competence management practices. To illustrate, at MANUFAT, since it is a lean company in terms of structure and people, managerial development practices are informal, that is, there is no formal program. CONSTRUCT and ELETRIC, in turn, have not only formal programs, but also very advanced practices, being possible to identify several formal strategies.

Competence evaluation is not related to financial aspects. Companies offer such rewards based on the organization's results. The idea is that people should pursue their development not because of a better salary or financial rewards, but for the awareness of the importance and need for permanent education oriented towards self-development.

Some practices stood out for the strengthening of managerial competences: partnership with universities, communication, teamwork, and interpersonal relationship. Thus, the notion of competence for those companies is related to education and action.

## **7.2 Organizational Learning**

As for the organizational learning elements, it notes that the Australian companies are concerned with strengthening those experiences, and CONSTRUC and ELETRIC are even recognized as Learning Organizations. There is an obsession for control and formal processes in the Australian companies' environment, which seems to be the main difference between Brazilian and Australian management practices. In other words, Brazilian companies have an informal structure, which makes it difficult to strengthen practices and control, while the Australian ones present difficulties in establishing more informal practices, not helping people to be closer to each other at work.

The following table summarizes relevant learning practices seen at MANUFAT, CONSTRUC and ELETRIC.

**Table 4** Summary of Advanced Exploratory Stage

Company Observations	MANUFAT	CONSTRUC	ELETRIC
Learning practices	Partnerships with universities Dialogue To be/ to follow examples Meetings Teamwork To develop brain and heart	Monitoring by mentors Partnerships with universities On-the-job training Teamwork Communication	Partnerships with universities Workshops and meetings Project teams Communication and dissemination of knowledge through intranet usage Speakers' club to encourage appropriate behaviour
Positive aspects	Competence development based on communication and learning at the work environment	Program based on national competence standards Company: training organization Distance learning Articulation of competence with strategy to develop personnel Recruiting and selection Audit evaluation Training and development	Reflection-in-action encouraged by audits Tacit knowledge transferred through integrated projects and teamwork Creative tension to stimulate more reflection instead of immediate problem-solving Valuing of ethical aspects to deal with people's dilemmas and emotions

Organizational Learning principles that stood out were observed and exemplified, mainly from the ELETRIC experience.

1. Shared vision – pursuing commitment based on understanding and meaning. Examples: Teamwork (MANUFAT) and project teams (ELETRIC).
2. Systemic thinking – it is necessary to articulate the company's strategies, processes and programs. Examples: Ethical issues (ELETRIC); focus on global aspects (CONSTRUCT); national competence standards (CONSTRUCT and ELETRIC).
3. Creative tension – incentive to reflect-in-action and to pursue more reflective and meaningful solutions. Examples: “To develop brain and heart” (MANUFAT); monitoring by mentors (CONSTRUC).
4. Ongoing improvement – policy to encourage internal development of strategies, programs and processes. Examples: self-development (MANUFAT); TQM (CONSTRUC); development plan (ELETRIC); Individual Progress Review (ELETRIC).
5. Process systematization – need for knowledge and experience ownership based on formalizing and maturing programs, processes and practices. Examples: partnerships with universities (MANUFAT, CONSTRUC and ELETRIC); Intranet (CONSTRUC and ELETRIC); National Competence Development Program.

## **8 Stage III – Competence Application Stage – the Brazilian Managers' Statement**

This stage is aimed at identifying learning experiences considered significant by the group of Brazilian managers interviewed, and which contributed to develop their competences.

Regarding these learning situations, practices go beyond organizational limits, that is, they include family, experience in other organizations, significant experiences related to personal life that end up influencing professional life and educational history. It is important to stress that the most significant situations raised by managers are not related to formal practices and structured efforts regarding the competence development program at the companies. That reality seems to be very serious if it considers the effort and investment of companies in their respective competence development programs and the lack of acknowledgement of those practices by managers.

At organizational level, following the idea of informal practices, the role of managers seems to be relevant in encouraging competence development in their work groups or even as a model or profile to be followed.



In sum, the most significant experiences pointed at by the 16 managers are related to: self-development; interpersonal relationship; challenges; social satisfaction (social responsibility); leadership model-oriented experience; everyday practices; experience abroad; the role of university; management systems and projects that encourage process view and multifunctional team; the importance of family.

The issues stress the importance of (re)thinking competences based on three axes put forward by Boterf (1997): formation by the person, educational background and professional experience, that is, the view of the human being as a whole.

## 9 Conclusions

This study focuses on managerial competence management based on its development, monitoring and evaluation (stressing the dynamic aspect), attempting to identify organizational learning elements (concepts, principles and practices) in order to offer a potential contribution to the subject.

Competence management in Brazilian companies is at an initial stage, characterized by reflection upon selection and focus on competence attributes. The Australian companies, in turn, are at a more advanced stage, marked by competence strengthening. The issues raised are related to the articulation between competence management and organizational strategies.

Organizational learning has a potential contribution to competence management, whether through the elements presented in Section 4 or through situations experienced by the interviewed managers and seen as significant. The latter captures the importance of informal practices as well as experiences involving other environments and not only the organizational one. Therefore, the following points are highlighted:

- Reflections that focus on collective aspects based on interaction between people;
- Process vision, characterized by ongoing development;
- Best work practices, stressing competence in action and experiential learning.

Organizational learning somehow brings back key issues to be (re) thought in order to minimize the difficulties in coordinating the organizational setting. Therefore, it is suggested reflections on:

- The gap between individual and collective competence development – the difficulty in articulating individual experiences and learning within the organizational setting in order to promote collective competences;
- The resistance to see competences not as isolated events or programs, but as an articulated strategy towards developing people and the organization;
- The excessive concern with the generation of an attribute list, evaluation tools and complex methodologies focusing on the product (analysis tool) and missing the importance of the process (articulated competence development based on the several organizational programs and strategies).

Based on that research, it is suggested a new concept of competence, which would be able to include:

- Self-development;
- Practices towards the company's external environment (socializing);
- Self-actualisation.

Therefore, competences is understand as the ongoing and articulated process of construction and development of knowledge, skills and attitudes, in which individuals are responsible for building and strengthening their competences (self-development), based on interaction with other people at work, within family and/or social groups (broadened scope), in the light of the improvement of his qualification, thus being able to add value to the activities of the organization, of society and his own (self-actualisation).

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<sup>i</sup> Personal contact established in August the 28th, 2000, at the University of Queensland, Australia.

<sup>ii</sup> Double loop learning happens by questioning differences that change the natural orientation of the action (governing variable). It happens when it searches for the cause that generates the problems and not for the treatment to those problems.

<sup>iii</sup> Skilled incompetence is established when people are skilled at something and they act automatically, without questioning what they do, or why they do it. They simply believe that is right, without paying attention to actions.