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Getting the HR Message Across: The Linkage between Line – HR Consensus and "Commitment Strength" among Hospital Employees[**]

Related to the theoretical work of Bowen and Ostroff (2004; also Ostroff/Bowen 2000), this article focuses on the features of an HRM system that help or constrain organizations to get their HR message across. At a department-level of analysis, we focus on the consensus between line managers and decentralized HR professionals on the human resource practices in place and on the either strategic or operational role of the HR function in the process of the management of employees. Stating that an organization's HR policies are transmitted by decentralized line and HR managers, it is proposed that the more line and HR executives agree on the status of their relationship and the HR practices in place, the less employees vary in their affective attitudes of commitment to the organization. Central to this article is the "strength" of affective organizational commitment among unit-members in a sample of 671 employees from 66 hospital departments drawn from four Dutch hospitals. Multi-level analyses indicate that consensus between HR professionals and line managers on HR practices (career opportunities, appraisal criteria) and on HR's role is positively related to the commitment strength within a department. It is concluded that the collectivity of employee commitment to the organization is partly a function of department-level HR process indicators. Research limitations and implications for HR practitioners are discussed.

Key words: **Line Manager-HR Professional Consensus, HR Practices, HR Roles, Employee Commitment, Climate Strenght, Hospital Departments**

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Introduction

Puzzling questions regarding the dynamics between HRM and organizational performance outcomes have generated various conceptual models on the HR– organizational performance link (Guest 1997; Becker et al. 1997; Wright/Snell 1998; Ostroff/Bowen 2000; Wright/Nishii 2004). The overall assumption these conceptual models contain is that a combination of HR practices, influences employee skills, attitudes and behaviour and in turn affects the overall business performance (Delery 1998). The last decade, particular research interest in *high commitment* models of HRM depicted that a bundle of HR practices focusing on employee commitment to the organization ultimately would contribute to organizational effectiveness, through the added value of dedicated employees working harder, smarter and sharing the objectives of the organization (Arthur 1992; Guest 2002; Edwards/Wright 2001).

Hence, this basic assumption underlying high commitment models of HRM has received much research attention and the scholars that empirically tested the direct relationship between commitment-oriented HR practices and affective organizational commitment (for example Benkhoff 1997; Agarwala 2003; Godard 2001; Guest 1999; Whitener 2001; Ramsey et al. 2000) reveal an overall positive relation between 'best' HR practices (e.g., career opportunities, selective hiring, performance appraisals, participation in decision-making) and affective organizational commitment. In all of the studies, affective organizational commitment defined as the degree of an employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization (Allen/Meyer 1990) is treated as a necessary individual employee attribute that is expected to be crucial to the organization's success.

However, as much of the strategic HR research views the individual employee's commitment to the organization as a key resource to develop, recent theoretical developments focus more explicitly on the value of creating "strong" organizational climates (Bowen/Ostroff 2004; Neal/West/Patterson 2005; Ferris et al. 1998) or internal social structures (Davis/Evans 2005) as one of HRM's key resource for organizational effectiveness. A main difference is that the high commitment models suggest a direct relationship between individual employee reactions such as an employee's commitment to the organization in exchange for certain HRM investments (Whitener 2001) whereas organizational climate models suggest that HR practices influences a process of organizational sense-making (Weick 1995) by which "group members collectively understand and share their experiences of organizational events" (Parker et al. 2003: 391).

Therefore, the shared values and beliefs among employees are important properties of a social collective with a shared mental model in which individuals have similar perceptions of the work environment, compatible performance expectations and attitudes/beliefs that are used to coordinate behaviour (Davis/Evans 2005).

Recently, Bowen and Ostroff (2004) applied collective constructs like organizational climate and shared mental models to new theoretical stances towards the relationship between HRM interventions and organizational effectiveness. They theorize that HRM systems affect business performance through eliciting a 'strong situation' (Mischel 1977) in which employees share the same ideas, beliefs attitudes, and objectives that reinforces each other's work effectiveness (Ostroff/Bowen 2000;

Guzzo/Noonan 1994; Davis/Evans 2005). In this view, the effectiveness of an organization or lower-level department is enhanced through the efficiency as a function of employees sharing similar goal perceptions and attitudes that stimulates the likelihood of effective interaction and reduces interpersonal conflict and stress (Bliese/Halverson 1998).

Within this theoretical framework, the focal construct of this paper is the shared commitment towards the organization among employees of the same department. We expect that the member's similar degree of identification and dedication to the organization and organizational goals is an important antecedent of department and consequently organizational efficiency. However, little research so far, has empirically investigated the features of an HRM system that affects the shared attitudes of employees.

Consequently, the goal of this study was to make an empirical contribution to a part of the conceptual model of Ostroff and Bowen (2000; Bowen/Ostroff 2004) in which we frame the HR process at a department-level of analysis. Related to the organizational climate literature, we use the term '*commitment strength*' to refer to degree of shared affective organizational commitment within a department: the less department members differ in their affective commitment to the organization, the stronger the commitment strength.

Related to the work of Bowen and Ostroff (2004: 204), we define the HRM system itself not so much in terms of content (e.g., a specific set of HRM practices) but rather in terms of the HRM process (the features of an HRM system that support to get the HR message across to employees that allow them to understand the desired and appropriate responses and form a collective sense of what is expected). Among other features, Bowen and Ostroff (2004) describe two features of the HRM system that are considered important in clearly transmitting the HR message to employees. More specifically, we focus on the aspects of HRM that relate to the relationship between line mangers and HR professionals, as these can be considered to be the front-line transmitters of organizational HR policies (Purcell et al., 2005). These features are *the agreement on the HR message among HR principals* (line managers and HR professionals) and the *legitimacy of the HR message*

Taken together, this research examines whether these two features of an HRM system affect the degree of shared organizational commitment (*commitment strength)* among employees within a department. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework underlying this study.

Figure 1:
Conceptual framework
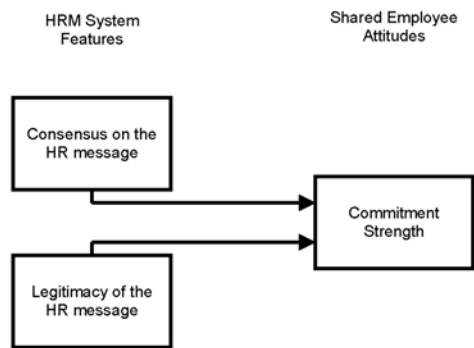
Theoretical background

Bowen and Ostroff (2004; Ostroff/Bowen 2000) provide a detailed theoretical framework for linkages between HRM systems, attitudes and organizational performance. Based on the attribution theory (Kelley 1967; 1973), Bowen and Ostroff (2004) propose that when the HRM system is perceived as high in distinctiveness, consistency and consensus, it will create a strong organizational climate. Related to the climate literature, they define a strong organizational climate as a *shared* perception of what the organization communicates through its practices, policies, procedures, routines, and rewards (e.g., James/Jones 1974; Schneider 1990). The outcome is a workforce with for instance shared attitudes (e.g. affective organizational commitment) and/or collective behavioural patterns (e.g. organizational citizenship behaviour, safe working practice or customer friendliness).

In the following, we elaborate on the theoretical features of the HRM process that supports the shaping of shared employee perceptions, attitudes and behaviours in the workplace.

Framing the HRM process

In applying Ostroff and Bowen's theoretical principles to an organizational setting, it is of importance to frame the HRM process through which HRM systems affect collective employee attitudes. To do so, we framed the HRM process by three components (HR practices, HR roles and level of analysis) that served as the guiding logic underlying our research.

HR practices: HRM systems are often described as a bundle of HRM practices such as selective hiring practices, pay for performance practices, training and development programs, broad job descriptions and the like. Research on HRM systems assume an underlying logic of the content of a high use of these practices that result in either high-commitment or high-performance HRM systems or – when used minimally – a more restrictive, Tayloristic variant referring to control-oriented HRM systems (Arthur 1992). An overview by Boselie, Dietz and Boon (2005) of ten years of empirical HRM studies reveal the dominance of the content approach to HRM that focuses on the presence of HR practices in relation to organizational effectiveness. In the process of HRM, HR practices contain the message the organizations wishes to send out to its employees as they serve as communication mechanisms signalling employees what to expect from the organization and what is expected from them (Whitener 2001).

HR roles: A less explored component of the HRM process is the functional role of HR professionals in the execution of the HRM process. The discussion on the administrative/operational role versus the tactical/strategic role of HR professionals in organization is, however, prominent (Ulrich 1997; Pasmore 1999).

Functional roles of HR professionals are central to Ulrich's (1997) widely-known framework in which he distinguishes four roles for HR: two operational HR roles (administrative expert and employee champion) and two strategic HR roles (strategic partner and change agent). In short, these four HR roles refer to the activities of HR with regard to the implementation and guidance of HR procedures (administrative ex-

pert), the direct concern for employee citizenship, motivation and well-being within the organization (employee champion), the direct advisor to line-management in the support of making long term strategic decisions (strategic partner), and the facilitation of change processes within the organization (change agent).

The significance of these functional HR roles relates to the tendency of organizations to decentralize HRM responsibilities to front-line managers and HR professionals in order to respond effectively to (business) unit challenges (Ulrich 1997). The consequence for the HRM process is that the functional relationship and clarity on the role of the HR professional and the (front) line manager is key to the actual transmission of the HR message to employees. Research by Truss (2001) indicated that line managers play a 'buffering' role as it comes to the communication of organizational HR policies and principles. Purcell et al. (2005: 19) argues that this phenomenon 'is often responsible for the difference between espoused HR policies and their enactment, and thus the experience of HRM processes as perceived by employees'. In sum, HR practices contain the message and HR roles that determine who (line manager or HR professional) takes responsibility for the transmission of the HR message. Therefore, HR roles are considered to be a key component of the HRM process through which employee attitudes and behaviour are affected.

Level of analysis: Both HR practices and HR roles are of importance in the process of transmitting the HR message, which – because of the intermediating role of decentralized HR professionals and (first) line managers – can differ within an organization and between organizational units or work groups. In the process of translating organizational goals into HR policies and practices, much of the impact of HRM on employee attitudes and behaviour relies on line manager action and support (Purcell et al. 2005). Both in carrying out certain HR practices and the division of tasks and responsibilities translated into HR roles, the process of HRM is considered to be a (department/team/business-unit/work-unit) level activity (Wright et al. 2003). Of course this also depends on the type of organizational structure and size. Wright et al. (2003) state that, given the potential for huge variations in HR practices across (business) units and sites, the potential for gaining accurate, valid and useful measures of HR practices was quite low at a corporate or organizational level of analysis. With regard to employee attitudes towards the organization, it can be argued that employees perceive actions of line management as actions of the organization itself (Eisenberger/Huntington/Hutchinson/Sowa 1986).

Hence, organizational HR goals like employee commitment towards the organization are affected by unit-level HRM processes. This because the makers of daily HR decisions which personify the organization in employee eyes are situated within lower level work units – in our research labelled as (hospital) departments.

Features of the HRM system and commitment strength

The framing of the HRM process in terms of HR practices, HR roles at a department level of analysis serves as the guiding logic underlying hypotheses on the effect of the HRM system on 'commitment strength' in hospital departments.

Consensus on the HR message: One of the theoretical features of an HRM system as described by Bowen and Ostroff (2004; Ostroff/Bowen 2000) that intensifies the

communication of the HR message is the agreement or *consensus among principal HR decision makers* on the HR message. This refers to a situation in which employees view message senders strongly agreeing among each other on the message being sent out through HR practices (see also Guzzo/Noonan 1994). The smaller the gap between HR professionals' and line managers' perception of the implementation and execution of HR practices, the less ambiguous the message.

For example, when the HR department communicates that there is a range of possibilities for employees to train and develop themselves while line managers are not aware of these possibilities, they probably will not discuss them with employees on a regular basis. Employees on the other hand, will perceive that these opportunities *are out there* while being *out of reach*.

Therefore, consensus among principal decision makers on what the means and goals of HRM are prevents employees from experiencing a mixed understanding of the HR message of the organization and the appropriate attitudes and behaviours the organization expects from them.

Similarly, Bowen and Ostroff (2004: 212) state that: '[…] disagreement among decision makers is likely to produce poor consistency in delivering practices; thus, different employees will experience different event-consequence relationships. Overall, then, agreement among top decision makers can help foster greater consensus among employees, since it allows for more visible, relevant, and consistent messages to be conveyed to employees.

In addition, research on the communication of the psychological contract learns that a lack of clear management communication is "likely to lead to incongruence between employer and employee perceptions of obligations – one of the causes of contract breach" (Guest/Conway 2002: 25). In a situation in which employer and employees lack a clear perception of the employment relationship and the reciprocal promises and obligations implied in that relationship, employee feelings of trust, fairness and identification with the organization could be negatively affected (e.g. Benkhoff 1997; Smidts/Pruyn/Van Riel 2001; Guest/Conway 2002).

Smidts et al. (2001) examined the impact of the adequacy of information about an employee's personal role and organizational matters on the employee's identification with the organization. Their results show that a positive communication climate, existing of the employee's experience of openness and trust in the information, perceived participation in decision-making and the feeling of being taken seriously by management, positively links to the degree that employees report organizational identification. The extent to which there is consensus between principal HR decision makers on HR practices being deployed is likely to be key to the clarity and adequacy of the HR message which gives rise to a positive communication climate that affects a shared sense of organizational commitment within a department. Hence, the first hypothesis reads:

Hypothesis 1:   The consensus on the HR message *(= HR – Line consensus on the content of HR practices)* is positively related to the commitment strength within a department.

Legitimacy of the HR message: The second feature of the HRM system that relates to the centrality of line managers and HR professionals in getting the HR message across is what Bowen and Ostroff (2004) term *legitimacy of authority.* Specifically, this aspect refers to the importance of "communicator credibility" in the process of getting the HR message across. As principal HR decision-makers are often jointly involved in carrying out HR practices, it is crucial to the effect of these practices that employees perceive an "authority situation" in which the division of HR tasks and responsibilities is clear to employees.

Although, Ostroff & Bowen (2004) claim that the legitimacy or credibility of the HR message is enhanced when the 'HRM function is perceived as a high-status, high-credibility function and activity' (p: 209), it is often claimed that HRM responsibilities should be carried out by first-line management to adequately respond to team-specific challenges and problems (Ulrich, 1997). Conversely, Bowen, and Ostroff's example of HRM gaining legitimacy through investments in the HRM function, or perhaps by placing the director of HRM in a high-level managerial position, does *not* guarantee that line-managers will *not* by-pass higher-level HR management policies.

In practice, the shift from HR responsibilities from the HR professional to the first-line manager (with the HR professional in the role of business partner) has become central to the much of the thinking on the design of an effective HR function (e.g Ulrich 1997). From this perspective, it is more likely that the legitimacy of the HR message will increase with a clear division of HR responsibilities towards either the first-line manager or the decentralized HR professional. Therefore, it is expected that employees who perceive a situation in which it is not clear who is in charge of HR matters have a less collective understanding of whose HR message should be considered as credible and legitimate. For HRM to have a clear source of communication, the agreement on the role of the HR professional in his/her functional relationship with line management　is considered to create more legitimacy of authority, which supports organizations in getting the HR message across.

Research shows that consensus on HR's role in the HRM process is, however, not common practice. In a Dutch sample, Biemans (1999) showed that the perception of line managers and HR professionals on their strategic activities and status are seldom alike. HR professionals tend to overrate, whereas line managers tend to underrate the strategic role of HR within the organization. Similar results were found in studies by Sanders and Van der Ven (2004) in another Dutch sample, by Wright et al. (1998) in an US sample, by Mitsuhashi et al. (2000) in a Chinese sample and by Boselie/Paauwe (2005) in a European sample. Hence, unclarity in the mutual understanding between HR and line managers of their role in the HRM process is expected to blur the communication of the HR message. In turn, employees perceive less legitimacy of authority, which endangers the shared perception, and reactions of employees to the message that the organization puts out. Stated positively, the second hypothesis reads:

Hypothesis 2:　　The legitimacy of the HR message *(= HR – Line consensus on HR's functional role)* is positively related to the commitment strength within a department.

Methods

Sample and design

With a two-step stratified sampling approach (fixed sample of departments drawn from four large Dutch hospitals, with a random sample of employees within departments) we used data from 671 employees (66% response), 66 line managers (97 % response) and 32 HR professionals (100 % response). Departments were classified within four areas: clinical (cardiology, intensive care, internal medicine, child department, orthopaedics, and surgery), out-patients (surgery, cardiology, neurology, and kidney dialysis), support staff (kitchen, door and gatekeepers, financial administration, and warehouse), and medical support staff (laboratories, physiotherapy, dietetics, and pharmacy). The final dataset included 66 departments with an average of 10 employees per department. The subjects were 509 female (76%) and 162 male employees, 30 female (46%) and 36 male line managers, and 20 female (63%) and 12 male HR consultants. The mean age of the employees was 38.9 (SD=10.9).

All data were collected by means of questionnaires. To estimate the degree of commitment strength, employees were asked to fill out questions about their individual affective commitment to the organization. Both line managers and decentralized HR professionals were asked to fill out identical questions about the HR practices for their department(s) within their range of responsibility. Because most HR professionals connect with multiple departments within one hospital, they filled out the questionnaire for each department they are responsible for. Also, both line managers and HR professionals were asked to fill out questions about their perception of the current role of the HR function, based on the role framework of Ulrich (1997).

Measures

Commitment strength was measured through the affective commitment scale by Allen and Meyer (1990). The affective commitment scale consists of five items with anchors 1 = totally disagree to 5 = totally agree (Cronbach α = .83). Sample items are: "This organization means a lot to me" and "I feel at home in this organization". To measure the degree of commitment strength, for each of the 66 departments, we took the inversed standard deviation of organizational affective commitment scores of the individual employees within that department. Therefore, the commitment strength can be interpreted as a measure of agreement; the more the employees report similar levels of organizational affective commitment; the more commitment strength within a department. In their overview of measures to measure (dis)similarity in attitudes and behaviour (within-unit variance), Lindell and Brandt (2000) address the use of the standard deviation (SD) in contrast to the interrater reliability index (Rwg; James et al. 1993). On the basis of arguments made by Schmidt and Hunter (1989), and Lindell and Brandt (2000), the use of SD is justified if it is to assess relationships of shared attitudes with antecedents and outcomes. In addition, also Schneider et al. (2002) conceptualized shared employee perceptions (of organizational climate) as the (inversed) standard deviation of employee perceptions of a service climate.

Consensus on the HR message: For this study we identified five commitment-oriented HR practices which are common to a majority of studies on HRM (Delery/Doty

1996; Tsui/Wang 2002; Boselie et al. 2005), including 1) *career opportunities* (e.g., "In this organization employees have clear career paths"), 2) *possibilities for training and education* (e.g., "In general employees have multiple possibilities for training and education"), 3) *appraisal criteria* (e.g., "Employee appraisals are based on objective, quantifiable results"), 4) *appraisal outcomes* (e.g. "Employee appraisals are tied to contract prolongation and salary increase"), 5) *clarity of job descriptions* (e.g., "Job descriptions contain all tasks that need to be performed by employees"). Line managers and HR professionals were asked to what extent these practices were executed on the hospital's department-level using a 5-point scale (1=totally disagree, 5=totally agree). Each HR practices were measured with three items; the reliability of the five scales was sufficient: Cronbach α varied between .66 (career opportunities) and .74 (appraisal outcomes).

Originally, we also included HR scales for measuring the extent of *participation in decision-making* and *flexible pay arrangements*. In the questionnaire for both line management and HR professionals we addressed identical items concerning these practices. However, reliability tests of the items of the proposed scales revealed that identical constructed HR scales for line managers and HR professionals had considerable different reliabilities. Where HR professional data on the HR scales *participation in decision-making* and *flexible pay arrangements* yielded moderate internal reliabilities (α >.67), the same scale construction of item scores in the line management data yielded low internal reliabilities (α < .47). To maintain comparability of the measures of HR practices, we excluded the two HR practices from further analyses practices form further analyses.

For the measurement of the extent to which both parties perceive a similar content of HR practices, we calculated straightforward absolute deviance scores of the mean scores on the HR practices. Then we calculated the inversed deviance scores. Therefore, high scores on consensus refer to a high agreement on the HR message among line managers and HR professionals (scale means and standard deviations are depicted in Table 1).

Legitimacy of the HR message: To measure the legitimacy of the HR message, line managers and HR professionals in the different departments were asked about their perception of the role of the HRM function. This was done by means of the *strategic partner* (e.g., "HRM ensures that goals are achieved"), *change agent* (e.g., "HRM can adapt to changes in the environment"), *administrative expert* (e.g., "HRM supervises the implementation of administrative tasks") and *employee champion* (e.g., "HRM takes care of the personal needs of the employees") roles of Ulrich (1997). The four scales using a 5-point scale (1=totally disagree, 5=totally agree) were constructed by Sanders and Van der Ven (2004) and consist each of five items: Cronbach α varied between .82 (change agent) and .89 (employee champion).

Because of the high intercorrelations between the four roles we distinguish, based on a second order factor analysis, between two new scales: the operational HR role (administrative expert and employee champion) and the strategic HR role (strategic partner and change agent). The reliability of the scales, assessed by Cronbach's alpha, ranged from .87 (strategic HR role HR professionals) to .91 (strategic HR role line management).

Here, in the same way as the consensus for the HR practices, we calculated for the two HR roles the inversed absolute deviance score between what line management and HR professionals perceive to be their operational/strategic HR role. Therefore, the smaller deviance between HR and line scores the higher the legitimacy of authority (scale means and standard deviations are depicted in Table 2).

Control variables: To control for organizational and department characteristics we chose to control for the hospital the examined departments belong to. Also we included both the average employee age (in years) and average employee educational level (1 = low; 6 = high) of each of the 66 departments.

Analytical procedure

The dataset consists of departments nested in hospitals, including scores from department-level line mangers, HR professionals and aggregated scores from employees within the department. This means that the data can be conceptualized at two levels (department and hospital). Level 1 captures the information of the departments in each hospital, and level 2 captures the variability between hospitals. In such situations, it is appropriate to use a hierarchical 2-level modelling approach that simultaneously models effects at the within- and between hospital-level (Raudenbush/Bryk 2002). Because the hospital level is only included to control for differences between hospitals, there is no need to calculate ICC1 and ICC2. All independent variables are taken into account as variables at the lowest level; in this case: department level. In the multi-level analysis besides the consensus on HR practices between line managers and HR professionals the perceptions of the line managers and HR professionals on the HR practices and HR roles are taken into account.

Because the variance in the average employee age (in years) and average educational level is hardly related to commitment strength (respectively B = .007 and B = -.02), these variables are not taken into account in the analyses.

Results

Correlations

Correlations between study variables are reported in Table 1 and 2. In accordance with our theoretical framework, commitment strength is positively related to consensus on career opportunities (r = .29, p < .05). No other relationships with commitment strength were found neither with consensus between policy makers, nor with the perception of HR professionals or line managers on other HR practices and roles.

High correlations between different HR practices and HR roles for line managers and HR professionals are found. Both for line managers and HR professionals the perception of career opportunities and training and education is related (r = .54, p<.01; and r = .43, p<.01 respectively). On the contrary, we did not found the same relations between the perceptions of the other HR practices. Also, the perceptions of the HR roles were related. Especially, high correlations were found between the strategic and the operational role for line managers (r = .53, p<.01) and HR professionals (r = .73, p<.01).

However, correlations between the consensus between HR professionals and line managers for the different HR practices and the HR roles are acceptable to take them into one analysis.

Table 1: Means, standard deviations and correlations of commitment strength and (consensus on) HR practices (n=66)

Variables	M	St D	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Commitment strength	.61	.16															
2. HR career opportunity	2.61	.77	.03														
3. LM career opportunity	2.55	.67	.10	-.15													
4. HR training and education	2.79	.60	.23	.43**	.03												
5. LM training and education	2.91	.57	.11	-.13	.54**	.16											
6. HR appraisal criteria	2.60	.67	.07	-.14	.20	-.01	.01										
7. LM appraisal criteria	2.58	.66	.14	-.15	.24	-.06	.07	.16									
8. HR appraisal outcomes	2.78	.74	.08	.13	.32**	.09	.21	.19	.40**								
9. LM appraisal outcomes	3.06	.86	.18	.54**	-.04	.51**	.06	-.17	-.17	.20							
10. HR job descriptiveness	3.70	.72	.04	-.08	-.11	-.13	-.07	-.01	-.04	-.10	.01						
11. LM job descriptiveness	3.66	.77	.24	.04	.12	.06	.04	-.11	.12	.21	.06	-.10					
12. Consensus on career opportunity	.85	.68	.29*	.23	.10	.12	-.08	.08	-.07	.01	-.09	-.31**	-.42**				
13. Consensus on training & education	.62	.46	.01	-.10	-.11	-.04	-.25*	.19	-.06	-.37**	.02	.17	.07	-.01			
14. Consensus on appraisal criteria	.70	.51	.03	.18	-.09	-.15	-.14	-.12	.03	.10	-.09	.08	.21	.16	-.06		
15. Consensus on appraisal outcomes	.82	.63	.02	-.15	.07	-.26*	-.20	.08	-.05	-.09	-.06	.05	.07	-.16	.35**	-.07	
16. Consensus on job descriptiveness	.78	.72	.20	.22	-.10	-.18	-.35**	.33**	.09	.08	-.20	.01	-.06	.17	.07	.38**	.25**

* = p <.05 ; ** p < .01 / HR= rating by HR professionals, LM= rating by line managers

Table 2:   Means, standard deviations and correlations of HR roles (n=66)

Variables	M	St. D	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Commitment strength	.61	.16						
2. HR Strategic role	3.46	.59	.03					
3. LM Strategic role	3.30	.63	-.23	.15				
4. HR Operational role	3.15	.69	-.21	.53**	.27*			
5. LM Operational role	3.19	.62	-.24	.30*	.73**	.36**		
6. Consensus on Strategic role	.66	.45	.02	-.02	-.45**	-.20	-.22	
7. Consensus on Operational role	.57	.48	.05	-.08	-.02	-.35**	.01	.28*

* = p <.05 ; ** p < .01 / HR= rating by HR professionals, LM= rating by line managers

Consensus on the HR message and commitment strength

Hypothesis 1 predicted a positive relationship between consensus on HR practices among department HR principals and commitment strength. Table 3 presents the results of multi-level analyses. For line managers we found a relationship between tying (developmental) rewards to appraisal outcomes and the clarity of job descriptiveness on one hand and commitment strength on the other hand, meaning the more line managers perceive these practices to be explicitly present, the less commitment strength within the departments. For HR professionals a negative relationship between training and education and commitment strength is found: the more HR professionals perceive the training and education possibilities to be explicit, the less commitment strength within the departments.

Other than the separate actor-effects, related to the first hypothesis we found that more consensus between HR professionals and line managers on the explicitness of both career opportunity (B = .60, p<.01) and the appraisal criteria in place (B = .12, p<.05) leads to more commitment strength within the departments. For consensus on possibilities for training and education, appraisal outcomes, and comprehensiveness of job descriptions no significant effect was found. Noteworthy is the observation that for different HR practices, both single ratings of HR practices and ratings of consensus between line managers and HR professionals have differential effects on commitment strength. This means that we can only confirm H1 for consensus among line managers and HR professionals on the level of career opportunities and the appraisal criteria in place (Table 3).

Legitimacy of the HR message on commitment strength

In Table 4 the results for the HR roles are given. For both line managers and HR professionals no effects of the operational and strategic HR role on commitment strength were found (operational HR role B = -.03 and B = .02, ns. and strategic HR role: B = -.02, and B = .04, ns). In hypothesis 2 it was predicted that the more consensus HR professionals and line managers have on the shape of their professional role, the higher the department-level commitment. The results in Table 4 show that a positive effect was found for consensus on the operational HR role (B = .10, p<.05) and a positive effect was found for consensus on the strategic HR role (B = .42, p < .01). This means that we can confirm hypothesis 2.

Table 3:   The effect of HR practices on department-level commitment strength (multi level analysis)

Variables	Line managers (LM)	HR professional (HR)	Consensus (LM and HR)
Department level			
Career opportunity	-.15	.07	.60**
Training and education	-.03	-.86**	.04
Appraisal criteria	.19	.25	.12*
Appraisal outcomes	-.23*	.32	.001
Job descriptiveness	-.42**	.26	.05
Constant	.61**	.55**	.46**
Variance between hospitals	.01	.01	.01
Variance within hospitals	.25	.27	.21
Model fit	53.57**	54.66**	52.95**

* = p <.05 ; ** p < .01 / HR= rating by HR professionals, LM= rating by line managers

Table 4:   The effect of HR roles on department-level commitment strength (multi level analysis)

Variables	Line managers	HR professional	Consensus LM and HR
Department level			
Operational HR role	-.03	.02	.10*
Strategic HR role	-.02	.04	.42**
Constant	.72**	.46**	.57**
Variance between hospitals	.01	.01	.01
Variance within hospitals	.19	.20	.19
Model fit	64.96**	61.12**	57.35**

* = p <.05 ; ** p < .01 / HR= rating by HR professionals, LM= rating by line managers

Summary and discussion

The goal of this study was to make an empirical contribution to a part of the conceptual model of Ostroff and Bowen (2000; Bowen/Ostroff 2004) in which the HR process is framed at a department level of analysis. Other than the writings on content models such as high commitment, high involvement or high performance HR systems, we tried to empirically capture process-features of an HR system in which the consensus among principal HR actors (line managers and HR professionals) on HR message and the legitimacy of the message is regarded key to effectiveness of HRM (Bowen et al. 2004; Ostroff et al. 2000; Wright et al. 1998; Mitsuhashi et al. 2000; Boselie et al. 2005).

In line with other conceptual models that recently have surfaced (Wright/Nishii, 2004), the increasing interest in HR research including multiple actors (e.g., line managers, HR professionals, worker representatives, employees) involved in the process of

HRM at multiple levels (e.g., organizational, departmental, individual) levels is addressed in this research.

In our study we tested the proposition that the more line managers and HR professionals (both involved in the execution of HRM at the department-level) agree on the content of HR practices and the professional role of HR function, the more department members' share a similar degree of affective commitment to the organization. Shared attitudes among department-members are regarded as a psychological department-level construct that is an important though often neglected issue in explaining HR effectiveness. Related to the organizational climate strength literature (Lindell/Brandt 2000; Schneider et al. 2002) a strong organizational climate (as opposed to idiosyncratic employee climate perceptions) would evoke less variability in employee responses in the daily work situation. In the case of commitment strength, a department consisting of members whose affective attitudes are alike could cause less conflict and stress among employees (Bliese/Halverson 1998) when, for example, the organization requests flexibility of the department members in times of organizational or operational transformation or a short-term production increase. The actual performance effects of a strong interpersonal work climate based on affective commitment are however beyond the scope of this article. Instead we examined the determinants of commitment strength within 66 hospital departments in four large Dutch teaching hospitals.

Our results partially support the idea that HR- Line consensus on the HR message and legitimacy of the message explain a proportion in the variability of the department level commitment strength construct. We found that Line – HR consensus on career opportunity and on the performance based-criteria of job appraisals for employees are positively related to commitment strength.   Furthermore, we found that consensus on both the operational and the strategic HR role is positively related to commitment strength within a department. For consensus on possibilities for training and education, appraisal outcomes, and comprehensiveness of job descriptions, no significant effects were found.

A possible explanation for the significant and non-significant effects could be the nature of HR practice itself. The significant practices explicitly focus on the opportunity and expectations towards the *individual* employment relationship with department members. Career possibilities aim at the individual's chances for internal promotion and the appraisal criteria aim at the communication of expectations to employees. Practices concerning training, job descriptions concern the operational aspects of the job and concern the department as a whole. Therefore, a lack of consensus on the latter practices will not affect variability in employee attitudinal reactions as the whole group is affected by consensus or dissensus among line managers and HR professionals (although it could affect the average levels of affective commitment in the department).

However, lack of consensus on career opportunity and appraisal criteria could evoke mixed messages on the long-term promises made to an *individual* employee and the criteria on which an individual's performance is based.

From the psychological contract literature (e.g. Rousseau 1995; Morrisson/Robinson 1997; Guest/Conway 2002) we already know that inadequacy of communication is likely to lead to incongruence between employer and individual employee perceptions of expectations and obligations, and reduced levels of individual commitment. Taken a step further in our direction, our results indicate the importance of consensus on HR practices that relate to the individual's employment relationship. Weaknesses in department level employee commitment are therefore more related to these practices, rather than the practices that relate to the functional maintenance (job design/ description, training) of the work process.

Limitations and recommendations

Although the research design and dataset were considered to match the research goal, there, naturally, are some limitations to our study.

First, our translation of Bowen & Ostroff's (2004) theoretical features of a HRM system that supports a clear communication of the HR message into useful and valid empirical constructs is still very explorative. The danger that complex phenomena such as 'consensus' or 'strength' are difficult to operationalize is an issue that gets more and more attention by researchers. More validation of new constructs at multiple levels, but also among multiple actors is needed to facilitate empirical tests of complex theoretical frameworks that fit contemporary HR models (see Chan 1998).

Second, although we used the preferred multi-actor data to assess the consensus between policy makers, i.c. line- and HR managers, no measurement was used to measure the perception of the employees concerning the consensus between line and HR managers. This holds to the view that people's behavior is not simply determined by 'actual' environmental factors but is mediated by their cognitive response to their environment (Fiske/Taylor 1984). Instead of using more actual measurements of consensus, both between policy makers, and among employees within a subunit, it is maybe more reliable to assess the perception of the employees concerning the different forms of consensus.

Third, our research does not take into account the actual level of affective commitment of employees in the departments. As we only focus on the similarity among levels of affective commitment within departments, it is not to conclude that consensus on the HR message and the legitimacy of the HR message actually leads to a shared sense of *high* affective commitment. Statistically, both indicators can correlate positively and negatively, which means that high commitment strength can indicate consistent low and high levels of affective commitment. Although it fits the process thinking on what determines the communication of HRM, it ignores whether the content of HR message as such is beneficial to the affective organizational commitment of employees. Future research should address both HR content and HR process theories in order to complete the picture on how HRM affects (collective) employee attitudes.

Finally, it should be noted that we used cross-sectional data rather than longitudinal data, which warns to be cautious with assumptions of causality.

Nevertheless, our research suggests that two features of a 'strong' HRM system as proposed by Ostroff and Bowen (2000) are distinctive constructs in relationship to

the strength of affective commitment within work-units. At a department level of analysis, multiple source data indeed show significant relationships between line and HR consensus on HR practices and the HR role and employee commitment strength.

A next step for academics would be to examine the effect of the strength of (interpersonal) climates on objective department-level performance and well-being outcomes. This would shed more light on one of the darker corners of the black box between the HR function, HR practices and its subsequent outcomes.

HR professionals and line managers who deal with the execution of HRM processes are advised to be aware of the importance of the mutual understanding of the HRM practices and their professional relationship and roles. The idea that HR policies are as effective as the line manager who behaves in accordance with them (Benkhoff 1997), also urges HR policymakers to carefully monitor the HR processes and actors lower down the organization's hierarchy.

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