

# Competence Management in the German Armed Forces – Situations of uncertainty as an opportunity for the development of officers' competencies

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## **Introductory remarks**

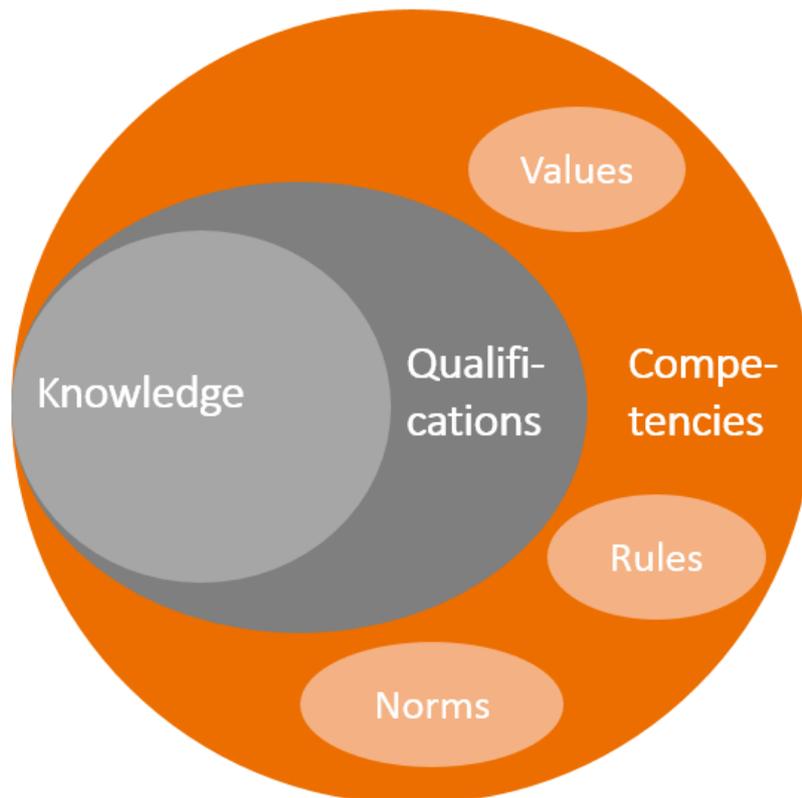
Since the end of the 'Cold War', the tasks of the German Armed Forces (in German called "Bundeswehr") have changed significantly. In addition to the mandate from the national defense, foreign missions within the framework of UN mandates were also carried out. Some of these military missions focus on humanitarian aid, others are real combat missions with the use of weapons. For the German Armed Forces as a whole, but also for the officers involved, these missions present great challenges. They struggle with an unfamiliar environment and make far-reaching decisions in sometimes confusing and unpredictable situations. Also situations of "usual service", such as hierarchical advancement and new positions associated with increasingly demanding management tasks, are challenging for officers in many respects. From the perspective of competence research, military missions and new types of management tasks are situations in which competencies typically develop in a particularly sustainable manner (Briscoe & Hall, 1999; Rost, 2014). Competences cannot simply be transferred from one person to another, as is the case with knowledge. However, organizations can promote the development of competencies if they enable their employees to independently find solutions in new situations that challenge existing patterns of thought and action and temporarily lead to insecurity (instability) of the person. However, such situations of uncertainty should be accompanied by offers of support from the organization, such as coaching (Heyse & Erpenbeck, 2009).

This paper analyses to what extent military training situations and deployment situations are suitable for the development of competencies. To this end, a qualitative study in the German Armed Forces is investigating to what extent the participants in training and deployment situations are experiencing feelings of insecurity and to what extent these situations can be in retrospect identified as triggers for development of competencies.

From the results, possible courses of action for the competence management of the Federal Armed Forces are derived.

## **What are Competencies?**

Competencies enable a person to perform well in a variety of work situations and thus adapt quickly to their environment (Boyatzis, 2008; Spencer & Spencer, 2008). Due to the increasing dynamic of change in the environment and the resulting pressure for change in organizations, the importance of such capabilities is increasing (Hafkesbrink, Bachem, & Kulenovic, 2012; Renzl, Rost, & Kaschube, 2013a; Rost, 2014; Sprafke, 2016). These capabilities are based on knowledge and skills. However, we only speak of competence when knowledge and skills are not only enriched with values, rules and norms, but are also linked to emotions and motivations that have been internalized (Fig. 1). They make up for the lack of information – especially in new situations – and enable rapid action even under uncertainty. Competencies thus correspond to the ability to organize oneself in new, complex situations: You are able to set yourself goals and determine the path to achieving them autonomously (Heyse & Erpenbeck, 2009).



*Figure 1: Competencies by Heyse and Erpenbeck (2009)*

Competence research usually distinguishes between specialist and methodological competence as well as social and personal competence (Katz, 1974; Kauffeld, Frieling, & Grote, 2002). For a group of managers, there are a number of differentiated competency models that make it possible to classify this group in relation to their behavior towards other people, their expertise, their methodological knowledge and their self-management skills (Bartram, 2005; Briscoe & Hall, 1999; Tett, Guterman, Bleier, & Murphy, 2000). In German competence research, Heyse and Erpenbeck (2009) differentiate between social competencies (for dealing with others, e.g. communication and team skills), personal competencies (dealing with oneself) and technical and methodological competencies (application of knowledge and dealing with methods and objects). These are enhanced by activity and action competencies. If these exist in form of energy, initiative, mobility or optimism, the competencies of the other three competence classes can actually unfold. The four competence classes comprise a total of 16 individual competences, which are described by means of typical behavioral patterns (behavioral anchors) (Heyse & Erpenbeck, 2009). This model thus provides a comprehensive description of competencies that can be used as a basis for the competence management of companies.

The learning and change researchers Douglas T. Hall and Jon Briscoe (1999) supplement this with the concept of meta-competency. They understand meta-competency as an individual's ability to develop their own competencies independently. Accordingly, an individual needs the ability to identify knowledge and competence gaps autonomously (self-awareness) and must be able to close these independently using new learning paths and techniques (adaptability) (Briscoe & Hall, 1999; Dimitrova, 2009).

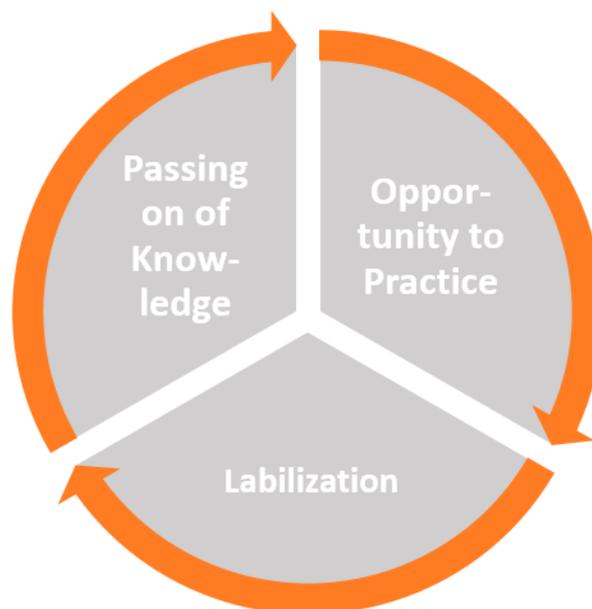
In organizational practice, competency models serve, for example, as a basis for requirement profiles in personnel recruitment, as a basis for personnel appraisal and personnel development (Campion et al., 2011).

## Development of Competencies

Competent personnel is the basis for efficient organizations. In the curricula of educational institutions and personnel departments of companies, the development of competencies is therefore increasingly in the foreground. However, competencies cannot be taught in a classical classroom, but develop primarily through action and workplace experience (Heyse & Erpenbeck, 2009).

In order to understand the conditions necessary for the development of competencies, one has to analyze the components of a competency such as knowledge, skills, values, emotions and motivation. Knowledge can be taught in classical educational settings and skills can be trained (Heyse & Erpenbeck, 2009). Values and norms develop in the process of socialization, first in the family, later at school, in universities and in the business context. Motivation in the work context arises in particular from a demanding and meaningful task and through feedback (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). The ability to use knowledge, skills, values and norms combined with emotions and motivation in a new situation can only be acquired by the person acting autonomously (Heyse & Erpenbeck, 2009; Rost & Steiner, 2016). Organizations can therefore support a person in their competence development in acquiring knowledge and skills, promote a value-creating corporate culture and offer challenging tasks for employees in their daily work. However, employees must be open to take the "risk" of developing their skills (Renzi, Rost, & Kaschube, 2013b; Rost & Steiner, 2016).

The German competence researchers Volker Heyse and John Erpenbeck summarize the possibilities of an organization to support the competence development of employees in their ELT-axiom (Fig. 2). E is for Enabling, L for Labilization and T for Transfer (Heyse & Erpenbeck, 2009).



*Figure 2: The ELT-axiom of competence development (Heyse and Erpenbeck, 2009)*

"Transfer" is firmly anchored in the personnel development of companies and non-profit organizations such as the Bundeswehr. Courses, training and qualification programs enable the acquisition of know-how, methods and rules of conduct. This is often done in off-the-job settings. In addition, job-related knowledge and skills can be acquired in learning environments within the organization ("near the job") (Bühner, 2005).

The topic of "Enabling" was introduced into human resources management as part of the Human Relations movement. Existing patterns of thinking and routines are to be broken up and

new patterns of action created through a variety of on-the-job learning opportunities such as job rotation, job enrichment and job enlargement (Bühner 2005) or through regular assignments abroad in career plans (Rost, 2014, 2016).

However, the 'passing on' of knowledge and skills and a certain scope for action in everyday professional life often do not seem to be sufficient for changing rigid behavioral patterns of people in adulthood. Trying out new behaviors often seems inefficient at first and the results are not satisfactory. Learning something new is always connected with effort. A high degree of motivation is necessary to ensure that people are nevertheless prepared to embrace new ideas and throw old routines overboard. However, what motivates people to change habits that have been established over years? If a new challenge cannot be mastered with the previous competencies, it is inevitable to search for and implement new solutions. The stress associated with this uncertainty and the fear of not being up to a challenge cause emotional labilization (L), which motivates to develop new competencies. This is in line with the findings of the self-efficacy theory of Bandura (1977). The implicit message of transferring challenging tasks conveys a high degree of self-efficacy, i.e. the confidence to be able to master the difficult task. According to Bandura, mild physiological feedback ("emotional arousal") such as palpitations, for example, helps to increase self-confidence and motivation.

### **Emotional Labilization as a precondition for competence development**

Emotional labilization thus promotes the appropriation of values and norms by individuals and occurs in particular in problem situations which one has to face but which cannot be mastered routinely. These situations cause emotional tension and stress. Once the situation has been successfully mastered – according to self-evaluation or external assessment – the now emotionally anchored situation evaluation is stored together with the memory of the concrete solution strategies and actions. This acquired competence can be recalled in other situations. Emotional labilization is therefore essential for competence development (Heyse & Erpenbeck, 2009).

For the German Armed Forces in particular, the emotionally demanding and challenging situations that often occur in the field of daily military service offer the opportunity not only to interpret them as a burden, but also to use them as a special opportunity for officers to develop their skills.

Stress-triggering situations in the military context are traditionally the extreme strains caused by fights, armed conflicts and demanding leadership tasks. Since the end of the Cold War and with the increase in, peacekeeping and humanitarian missions, German soldiers face new challenges. According to Bartone (2006), the following six psychological stress dimensions characterize modern military missions:

- **Isolation** means, for example, stress due to dealing with a foreign culture, or due to newly assembled units and unknown colleagues.
- **Ambiguity** causes stress, e.g. due to unclear or changing mission objectives, unclear rules of engagement, role ambiguity or ambiguous management structures.
- **Powerlessness** is perceived as stress when, for example, no influence can be exerted on logistics or replenishment processes or when guidelines prevent being able to help.
- **Alienation** triggers stress if, for example, the goal of an assignment is not fully understood or is not seen as meaningful or the purpose of one's own tasks is not seen.
- **Dangers**, especially the threat to one's own life or physical integrity from fighting, but also accidents, naturally lead to extreme stress.

- **A high workload** due to numerous, longer assignments and overtime before, during and after assignments.

### **Competence orientation in the military context**

In recent years, the development of mission-oriented competencies in the military field has focused in particular on intercultural competence (Caligiuri, Noe, Nolan, Ryan, & Drasgow, 2011; Selmeski, 2007). The question how appropriate training courses should be structured or what suitable assessments could look like was examined (Brenneman, Klafehn, Burrus, Roberts, & Kochert, 2016; Moenning et al., 2016). Further focal points are military-cultural competence (Meyer & Brim, 2016; Meyer, Hall-Clark, Hamaoka, & Peterson, 2015; Stewart, 2012) and the development and evaluation of resilience (Griffith & West, 2013; Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011).

Internationally, many nations have developed competency models for specific fields of the military. Tian, Miao, Xu, and Yang (2009), based on a systematic literature analysis and expert interviews, selected eleven elements (including devotion, interpersonal relationships, written and oral communication, emotional stability) that cover and validate the competency model for leadership for Chinese cadets. Above all, devotion is an essential component of the competence model of the Chinese cadets, because this means not only diligence or effort, but also loyalty to the nation and the military without expecting reward or profit. The Readiness Estimate and Deployability Index was developed for American nurses to ensure that they can cope with medical emergencies in the field (Rivers, Wertenberger, & Lindgren, 2006). In this case, the classical skills acquired in everyday clinical practice (e.g. recognizing the different types of shock conditions or treating smaller wounds) are not sufficient. Nurses who go into military service must be able to treat gunshot wounds, internalize evacuation procedures and have trained survival skills (e.g. reading a compass, defense tactics, handling firearms). A similar list of competencies for military surgical teams in Great Britain can be found in the study by Ramasamy et al. (2010).

The Royal Navy uses four so-called Supra-competencies (conceive, align, interact and create conditions for success), for which the study by Young and Dulewicz (2009) provides findings. These competencies are mainly used for executive selection, training and development. A further example by Campbell et al. (1990) describes the performance model for American soldiers entering the military. This consists of five dimensions and includes general soldier skills, core technical skills (e.g. navigating with a military map or wearing protective masks), effort and leadership (e.g. persevering in dangerous situations or supporting comrades), personal discipline (e.g. showing integrity or observing military traditions) as well as physical fitness and military behavior.

### **Competence orientation of the German Armed Forces**

German officers must be able to act in a wide variety of missions around the world and to act with confidence. This focus on deployment is reflected in the competence model of the German Armed Forces.

On October 27<sup>th</sup> 2016, the competence model was put into effect by the Human Resources Department of the Federal Ministry of Defense (Fig. 3). This model consists of five basic competencies (self-, methodological, social, technical, leadership and management competencies), which are divided into sub-competencies. The Competence to act is central, because it is determined by the sum of the basic competencies. With the help of this model, the

personnel requirements of the German Armed Forces in both, the civilian and the military sector, are to be better recorded and the potential of the employees is to be optimally exploited. It serves as the basis for the dialogue of all stakeholders, e.g. managers, human resources management, training and development.



*Figure 3: The German Armed Forces' competence model*

The diversity and often unpredictability of the requirements in missions calls for competence-oriented training and development that is explicitly focused on mastering unknown challenges.

One example of its implementation is a three-month training course for future staff officers, which is being newly developed in line with the principle of competence orientation. For this purpose, a competence profile for staff officers was developed on the basis of the Armed Forces' competence model and fields of action were defined on the basis of future professional tasks. Learning objectives were derived from this and formulated (e.g. "The course participants apply the procedures of staff work in their daily work in a practical and situational manner"). These competences should then be acquired in appropriate learning situations (Simberg, 2017).

The work of an officer is associated with enormous demands on professional-methodical and social-communicative skills and requires a high degree of physical and psychological resilience. Officers must grasp complex situations under time pressure, make quick and appropriate decisions, communicate convincingly and act effectively and responsibly. They must be empathic and have a high degree of team spirit, yet they have to set clear limits and be able to deal with conflicts and criticism. Without the willingness to reflect on one's own actions, to learn from them and to change, it will hardly be possible to meet these requirements.

## **The Study**

An explorative qualitative study with officers of the German Armed Forces investigated to what extent challenging and unsettling situations (e.g. on the deployment or in new management positions) contribute to the development of competencies and what role emotional lability plays in this. An instrument developed by Rost (2014) and Rost and Steiner (2016) was adapted for the interviews on the above situations.

In expert interviews, four experts were questioned about competence-oriented training in the German Armed Forces and six officers about their learning experiences and their personal competence development in the Bundeswehr. Three of the experts were also officers or former officers. Using the Critical Incidents Technique (Flanagan, 1954; McClelland, 1998), officers of various ranks were interviewed in problem-oriented interviews (Witzel & Reiter, 2012) on situations that contribute in particular to competence development in the process of work ("Enabling"). All interviews were scientifically transcribed and analyzed (Mayring, 2010).

Especially in qualitative research projects, the scope of the survey is subject to critical discussion, although Yin (2013) points out that it depends on the assessment of the researchers. For us, the expected information quality was the decisive criterion for the selection of six officers for the interviews. A colonel, a colonel (in the general staff), a lieutenant colonel, a commander-in-chief, a major and a captain took part in the survey. All of them had detailed knowledge and experience of military operations so that they were able to provide a wide range of information on all issues. The selection of interview partners reflected a broad spread of professional experience and hierarchical levels.

## **Findings**

### *The officers' understanding of their competencies*

The respondents' answers on their personal understanding of competence show that the intersection with scientific models is quite large. The colonel sees competencies as "a mixture of character and social skills, talents and specialist knowledge" and the captain as "being able to solve tasks on their own in complex situations, even if unforeseen problems arise". The commander is not only concerned with implementation, but also with thinking ahead and anticipating possible steps, because for him a competence is "the ability to intellectually grasp and evaluate facts connected with the task and the willingness to put these findings into practice autonomously". Together with the definitions of the other respondents, it can be summarized that an officer is considered competent if he has the ability (personally, socially, professionally) and motivation to cope autonomously with complex tasks and unforeseen problems.

### *The most important competencies from the officers' point of view*

The competency model is based on five basic competencies. Respondents highlighted some key points – a summary can be found in Table 1.

Above all, the importance of social, leadership and management skills increases in the course of a career and hierarchical advancement, because "I can't really train these skills, they have to develop and I have to discover talents" (Colonel). In other words, "if these [areas of competence] (...) completely fail, the others can be awesome, and no progress is apparent. To put it bluntly: "If everything else fails and these are really good, I get the rest under control by training" (Colonel).

Table 1: *The most important competencies from the officers' point of view*

| Competency                           | Important Characteristics  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Personal Competency                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educating yourself</li> <li>• Integrity</li> <li>• Strength of character</li> <li>• Humanity</li> <li>• Decency</li> <li>• Flexibility</li> </ul>                         |
| Method competency                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyzing and solving problems</li> <li>• Organizational talent</li> <li>• Pedagogical skills</li> </ul>  |
| Specialist competency                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific professional competencies</li> </ul>   |
| Social competency                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empathy</li> <li>• Caring for others</li> <li>• Respect for others</li> <li>• Comradeship</li> <li>• Ability to work in a team</li> <li>• Communication skills</li> </ul> |
| Leadership and management competency | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to motivate</li> <li>• Strategic thinking</li> <li>• Decision-making skills</li> </ul>  |

*Measures for competence development in the German Armed Forces*

In total, the experts and officers interviewed address five different competence development measures of the Bundeswehr, each with its own focus:

(1) The aim of university studies is to cope with complex situations and to quickly analyze, systematize and prioritize given facts, so that analytical thinking in particular is developed here.

(2) The various training courses primarily promote the expertise of the officers and offer them the possibility of (informal) peer coaching. Courses not only create a good professional basis but also support a fruitful exchange with other participants. However, these courses are often perceived as unrealistic, for example, "it is always very difficult to reflect leadership responsibility in a course because one always has such an artificial situation (...) one is only among officer candidates. And this is completely diametrical to what it usually looks like in the troops or in the battalion" (Major).

(3) Troop exercises and simulated stress situations are perceived differently from training courses: From the point of view of the interviewees, these offer a wide range of learning fields, and competencies in the areas of project management and leadership are trained here.

(4) Ideally, these competencies are then consolidated on the job through early, gradual introduction to increasingly demanding management tasks and the mastering of real challenges.

(5) The deployment is characterized by the fact that both, technical competences and competences in the field of people management, are developed at an extremely rapid pace due to the stress situation. This is also confirmed by the commander interviewed: "People who have made a great contribution have developed extremely quickly, you can really see changes in development in a four-week cycle".

### *Do new leadership situations have a labilizing effect?*

A larger management margin, more responsibility, demanding management tasks such as assessment interviews, as well as big differences in age and experience compared to subordinates are perceived as burdensome in new management situations. As an example, the description of an interviewed colonel in the general staff can serve: "I just left university, 23 years old (...) and then after only two weeks my superior was absent and I was the superior of 180 people for one year (...). You are there and say: "Good day, soldiers" and 180 throats shout: "Good day, Lieutenant." Now you're learning very quickly. These leadership experiences are forming. This is a very, very important phase, where a lot can also be damaged. This is a very sensitive phase (...). An organization like the Bundeswehr must be aware that these people must be mentored and positively developed so that they neither are broken nor become arrogant high-flyers".

According to the respondents, such situations always have to be dealt with "in deficit", because it is impossible to impart comprehensive and complete knowledge in courses or exercises for every potential situation and task. However, if an officer has sufficient professional competence and receives on-site support (e.g. from experienced non-commissioned officers) it is precisely these unpredictabilities that offer an enormous growth potential for the individual in the eyes of those questioned. Here social, leadership and self-competencies can be developed that can be used universally and for a long time. The Lieutenant Colonel i. G. sums up this unique opportunity: "We make the greatest leaps when we act". For this reason, the focus of the competence model is on the competence to act, in particular on the ability to deal with other persons or subjects in a self-organized manner in a manner that is humane, strong in character and flexible.

### *Deployment as a labilizing situation?*

During the missions, respondents were confronted with completely new challenges that cannot be simulated in exercises and training courses. Officers can make many new experiences in a very short time and are exposed to many different situations. "Nowhere else is so much demanded of you – psychically, stress, everything related to it – as in the field" (Colonel). The pressure is high and there are no alternative options (e.g. waiting or delegating tasks). In addition, assignments are characterized by long work phases and therefore only little time is available for relaxation phases. The captain of the frigate describes it as follows: "Within three months (...) I was not on board for only three days. That was the day of arrival, the day of departure and the day before the day of departure. (...). And that's when I realized you can't relax at all." Here too, officers cannot be prepared in advance for every eventuality and every situation. Within the scope of an assignment, not only specific situational expertise will be developed, but also the ability to motivate oneself and others in stressful situations. It became clear that deployments are perceived as positive stress. The scope for action is greater than in normal operation and there are many opportunities to grow in one's own leadership role. Nevertheless, respondents agreed that missions shall not be seen as the last stage of officer training. Rather, a high level of competence should already be available in all required areas before deployment, so that the challenging situations can be mastered and the competences can be developed further on their own (Kayes et al., 2017).

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The study confirms that challenging situations shall not primarily be interpreted as stressful, but rather offer many opportunities for competence development. They are unavoidable in military missions and should therefore be used more consciously for competence development, since without the imposition of uncertainty or loss of stability, competence development can hardly take place. Stress-triggering situations can also be interpreted as development opportunities in the military context. A prerequisite for the fact that stressful situations do not have a "damaging" effect but lead to personal growth is the informal and formal support in sense making. If it is possible to convey a positive sense of the stressful events (sense giving), stress-inducing experiences and experiences can be classified by those affected as important learning and life experiences. For this positive kind of coping to succeed, it plays an important role how the superior or experienced subordinate accompanies the new situation and steers the understanding of events in a constructive direction (Bartone, 2006; Deirdre P. Dixon, Weeks, Boland, & Perelli, 2016).

This study also shows that the competency model of the German Armed Forces is well suited to covering the competency requirements described by the officers questioned in the study (Deirdre Painter Dixon, 2014; Deirdre P. Dixon et al., 2016).

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