

Role Allocation and Strategic Change: Comparative Study of Competencies of Austrian and Slovak Managers

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Abstract

In management literature top managers are often mentioned as key factor of successful change management. In practice, we often find them more hindering than helpful. This article has a closer look at the competencies of top managers to answer the question of their positive or negative influx on change management processes. Based on a cluster analysis according to Tanimoto, the data of 275 German speaking and 100 managers from Slovakia show that top management in Austria and upper managers in Slovakia are completely unwilling to change their behavior. So, they can never be seen as role models for change managers. Also the upper management does not foster change according to theoretical approaches. Only the middle and operative management behaves according to literature. Thus, we definitely have to question the different hierarchical roles of managers within the change process and rethink current change management concepts. If top and upper managers don't seem to be interested in initiating change, we will have to have a closer look at bottom up processes – as it is already known from the IT perspective.

Keywords: *change management, competency management, hierarchy, implicit leadership theories*

JEL Classification: M12, M19

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Introduction

Authors of textbooks for strategic management (e.g. De Witt and Meyer, 2010; Müller-Stewens and Lechner, 2011) and change management (e.g. Krüger, 2000; Kotter, 2001) always highlight the important function of top and upper management. They should be willing and able to change – not only the company but also themselves. This need is especially urgent in the current time of the economic crisis and depression spread literally worldwide.

Detailed work on individual competency management (e.g., Probst et al., 2000; Sarges, 2002; Erpenbeck and von Rosenstiel, 2003) primarily emphasizes the fact that competencies are strongly oriented towards the future. This enables a person to tackle upcoming challenges, whose nature cannot be predicted or determined, in a self-organized manner. Thus, discussions regarding competencies are of importance whenever strategic personnel planning and development take centre stage in times of great uncertainty.

As we know from psychology and ourselves this assumption has one weakness: most of us only change our behavior, if we are forced to. So why should managers – especially top managers – be interested in change? This leads us to the following research question: Do managers really contribute to change processes and if so, in which way?

1. Competency Management

Competency management represents a holistic field of research, ranging from strategic to organizational to individual competencies (for a more detailed overview see Mühlbacher, 2007). The following focuses on the definition of individual competency and the historical development of competency classes, both of which are needed to answer our research question. Due to the limited space of this article, a number of interesting aspects will have to be omitted here and left to future research.

The definition of competency changes with each theory used, i.e., it has a fixed meaning only within the specific construct of a particular competency theory. Competencies in a narrow sense are the dispositions of self-organized actions. As they are internal, unobservable dispositions, competencies are always subjective characteristics, attributed on the basis of problem and solution orientation, by informing a person of an objective – without a specific solution – and then measuring the degree to which the objective was achieved. Competency is defined here as accomplishing or even exceeding a set objective. The most important objectives of professional competency development are the establishment

and promotion of professional action competency. Here, the integration of cognitive, emotional-motivational, volitional and social aspects of human behaviour in work situations is the main focus of interest (Erpenbeck and von Rosenstiel, 2003).

New strategic approaches show the need for the adaptation of management competencies based on an increase of speed and complexity in the organizational environment and – vice versa – a lack of flexibility and innovation within organizations. This also requires a change in perspective within competency management. Both the current requirements and the competencies necessary in the future have to become the focal point of the analysis and must be seen as a strategic competitive advantage for the company (De Witt and Meyer, 2010). From this point of view, the role of managers and their specific competencies at first remains unanswered. Only the answer to this question, however, makes it possible to improve the effectiveness of change management processes in organizations.

1.1. Classes of Competencies

An early differentiation of competencies was made by Jacobs, who distinguishes between “hard and soft competencies”. Hard competencies refer, for example, to analytical and organizational capabilities, while creativity and sensitivity are soft competencies. From this, Jacobs develops the argument that hard competencies result in observable behaviour, with the invisible, but dominant soft competencies underlying them. The principles of this conviction, though conceivable, are difficult to prove and thus, this conception has been classified as an artificial differentiation with low explanatory potential in the theoretical discussion (see Mühlbacher, 2007).

In order to avoid this criticism, a categorization of the knowledge, capabilities, properties, and abilities required has prevailed, first consisting of three – still without the category of self- and personal competency (Sloane 1998) – and later four areas of competency, which meets both the theoretical and pragmatic requirements. A clearer description of the historic development can be found in Mühlbacher (2007).

All these categorizations have been reworked accordingly. In newer classifications, for instance, functional and methodological competencies are combined, because of their proximity and the desired generation of a general competency model, which separates self-dispositive actions from personal dispositions and introduces the new class, i.e., that of leadership competency. As a result, the following five classes of competencies can be distinguished (Kasper, Mühlbacher and von Rosenstiel, 2005):

- self-dispositive competencies, which represent the self-organized use of one's own resources (time, know-how etc.);
- methodological competencies, comprising all analytical and solution-oriented behaviours;
- social-communicative competencies, covering the area of social interaction (excluding leadership);
- leadership competencies, including the full range of leadership, motivation and personnel development;
- personal competencies, mainly manifesting themselves in extraordinary personality traits.

Based on this classification, the empirical data are coded and then, in a second step, analyzed with regard to the influence of the external and the internal environment, in order to answer our research question.

1.2. From General Categorization to Individual Attribution of Competency

One of the most discussed research topics in social sciences is without a doubt leadership (DeRue et al., 2011). Many researchers have noted that there is no consistently agreed-upon definition of "leadership", and no clear understanding of the boundaries of this important topic. Some of them defined leaderships in terms of individual traits, leader behavior, interaction patterns, role relationships, follower perceptions, influence over followers, influence on task goals, and influence on organizational culture (Dickson, Den Hartog and Mitchelson, 2003).

In a social influence process of implicit leadership theories, a leader and a follower are involved (Foti, Knee Jr. and Backert, 2008). Employees develop schemas about leadership, characteristics of leaders and appropriate behaviors of leaders and followers, built up over time and experience (Nye, 2002). They interpret and understand observed leader behaviors through the so-called role schemas (i.e., normative expectations). So, followers categorize a leadership style and compare their attributes with the attributes of the "prototypical leader" within their schema. For a consideration of being a leader it is important that a follower's attributes match between leader prototype (Javidan et al., 2010). Thus, schema-driven categorization is an important factor of the attribution of meaning to individuals' behaviors. Thereby, leaders have to consider that differences in individual schemas and implicit leadership theories may result in different perceptions of the same behaviors (Shamir et al., 1998). DeRue et al. (2011) argued that leadership effectiveness can be influenced by leader traits through attributions that followers make about the leader and perceived identification and similarity with the leader. Furthermore, we have to consider that interactions between leaders and followers in the workplace can be influenced by the implicit leadership

theories. It often happens that the expectation and perceptions of the leader and the follower completely differ from each other (Keller, 2003). This would be the worst-case-scenario for any change process in organizations because of different aims and behavioral processes within a company.

The beliefs, assumptions, and expectations held about the behaviour of leaders and what is expected of them plays a significant role in an individual's implicit leadership theory (Felfe and Schyns, 2010). "Several factors are important to the leadership perception process – specifically, the cognitive knowledge structures of followers, the context in which leader behaviors are embedded, and multiple pieces of information occurring simultaneously and over time." (Foti, Knee Jr. and Backert, 2008, p. 178) Antonakis, Avolio and Sivasubramaniam (2003) argued that leadership perceptions may not be reality but the attributions enable them to evaluate and distinguish leaders from non-leaders and also effective from non-effective leaders. Settings that are not similar could require different leader behaviors across a diverse set of contexts, such as national culture, hierarchical leader level, and environmental characteristics (e.g. dynamic vs. stable).

Epitropaki and Martin (2005, p. 660) suggested that "organizational members, through socialization and past experiences with leaders, develop ILTs, that is, cognitive structures or prototypes specifying the traits and abilities that characterize an ideal business leader". We notice that the context that followers observe can constrain the types of behavior that may be attributed prototypically effective (Lord and Emrich, 2001). Current research in the field of implicit leadership theories has shown that leaders should focus on motivation of their followers by shaping their identities. Collinson (2006) pointed out the complexity of the leaders' impact on follower identities. Followers also relate their expectations about leader behaviour and characteristics as their required level of competency and motivation. So if the managers do not really show willingness to change, this will soon be perceived and copied by the followers.

But attributions to leaders are culturally endorsed and are not necessarily of a static nature (Festing and Maletzky, 2011). Chong and Thomas (1997, p. 279) argued that "in a cross-cultural situation, leaders and followers may be guided by different leadership prototypes. As a result, the meaning of a leader's behavior may be ambiguous, since the interpretations made by followers may not match the leader's intention. Similarly, culturally different followers may perceive different levels of leadership from the same leader, because the different prototypes guiding their expectations". The reviewed literature indicates that culture is dynamic (House et al., 2002; Holmberg and Åkerblom, 2006; Festing and Maletzky, 2011). Therefore, it is suggested focusing on appropriate cross-cultural adjustments in intercultural processes (Festing and Maletzky, 2011). The national

diversity is a substantial influence of a person's ethnic identity and can be defined as the distribution and number of team members' national backgrounds and it reflects the trend toward globalization (Dahlin, Weingart and Hinds, 2005). In addition, the ethnic identity of leaders and followers are further important factors and can influence the effective interaction between groups – especially in an intercultural setting like our research is focused on.

Consequently, studies of *implicit leadership theories* (ILT)¹ contents have practical implications for understanding the image that leaders must project to gain social influence. Thus, they increase their impact on followers (Lord and Emrich, 2001). An important influence of a leader perception is the degree of fit between the leader's behaviors and their own implicit leadership theory which is the basis for the labeling of individuals at the same time (Holmberg and Åkerblom, 2006).

At the same time, we note that leaders' performance expectations are influenced by their implicit theories about workers. Moreover, research has shown that leaders also develop different follower-schemas. Similarly, different contexts influence followers' follower-schemas (Shondrick and Lord, 2010; Sy, 2010). Thus, we indicate current developments in the field of *implicit followership theories* (IFT)² that can be defined as “individuals' personal assumptions about the traits and behaviors that characterize followers” (Sy, 2010, p. 73). In this context, we can summarize that the reliance on “implicit theories of leadership and followership not only creates a belief about whether a person is a leader or follower but also prompts the granting of a leader identity to individuals who match their implicit theory” (DeRue and Ashford, 2010, p. 637).

In this paper, we want to highlight two different examples of implicit leadership theories. Konst, Vonk and van der Vlist (1999) conducted a study that addressed spontaneous inferences about causes and consequences of performance-related behavior of leaders and followers. A total of 164 members of a semi-governmental organization in the Netherlands participated in this study. The informants were leaders and subordinates. Participants had to fill out a questionnaire consisting of two parts. First, they completed behavioral descriptions of leaders and followers, whereas the second part was about organization culture and benefit for the organization (Konst, Vonk and van der Vlist, 1999).

Konst, Vonk and van der Vlist found out that “the tendency to look for causal explanations is stronger for behavior of leaders than for behavior of subordinates

¹ *Implicit leadership theories* are defined as individual's personal assumptions about the traits and behaviors that characterize leaders.

² *Implicit followership theories* are defined as individual's personal assumptions about the traits and behaviors that characterize followers.

in organizational hierarchies” (Konst, Vonk and van der Vlist, 1999, p. 268). The label “leader” activates a role schema of a person associated with power. Thus, “observers are more motivated to control and predict behavior of leaders than of subordinates: behaviors of leaders, both positive and negative, induced more causal attributions than behavior of subordinates” (Konst, Vonk and van der Vlist, 1999, p. 268). In this study, the followers were not dependent on the leaders. Hence, Konst, Vonk and van der Vlist underlined that mere position labels initiate differential evaluations of a person’s competency, as well as differential control motivation. Moreover, they found out that leaders were seen as persons who affect their environment. In addition, the study showed that subordinates were more strongly motivated to control and predict their environments by means of causal analysis and observing and interpreting effects of others’ behavior. So, this leads to the argument that leaders more often act and decide on their own initiative, while followers were assumed as more sensitive to environmental or behavioral changes induced by others, such as leaders (Konst, Vonk and van der Vlist, 1999).

The study also showed significant differences of attributions for negative-related behavior between leaders and followers. Leaders related this behavior more frequently to dispositional causes, and also mentioned less dispositional causes for positive behavior. Some researches indicated many leaders refer poor performance of followers to causes, such as lack of effort or lack of ability, and also assess this output negatively of the competency of employees. Also, subordinates tend to more situational attributions and expectations for negative performance-related behavior than leaders (Konst, Vonk and van der Vlist, 1999).

Konst, Vonk and van der Vlist (1999) identified significant consequences for organizations. The possibility that leaders are less motivated to interpret the behavior of their followers accordingly could lead to more stereotyping and other failings. Thus, negative interpretation of followers’ behaviour could also result in less support, coaching, and other missing.

Another example and recent development of implicit leadership theories is a study by Schyns and Schilling (2011, p. 144): “The attributes named should be evaluated concerning their effectiveness to examine if our participants’ image of leaders in general is that of an effective leader or an ineffective leader.” A total of 76 informants participated in this study that was also conducted in the Netherlands. The respondents were asked to name six attributes of leaders in general. They also had to rate these characteristics and the effectiveness of leaders (Schyns and Schilling, 2011).

The analysis showed interesting results concerning the effectiveness of leader attributes. 225 statements were regarded as effective, 119 statements were

categorized as ineffective, whereas 5 statements were not clearly labeled as either effective or ineffective. As a result, Schyns and Schilling argued that implicit leadership theories consist of both effective and ineffective attributes.

The study illustrated the assumption that favorable characteristics reflected in implicit leadership theories were effective and unfavorable characteristics were ineffective could not be upheld completely. The authors also argued that the results showed a necessity of distinguishing thoroughly between implicit leadership theories concerning leaders in general, effective, and positive leaders. Moreover, they assume that “people with a more ineffective image of leaders may view their actual leaders in a more negative light and may rate them more negatively” (Schyns and Schilling, 2011, p. 147).

The reason for illustrating the concept of implicit leadership theories is the usefulness for understanding, viewing, and interpreting of attributions and perceptions about leaders (Pekerti and Sendjaya, 2010). The two theories we illustrated focus on a bottom-up-view and concentrate on the attributions and interpretations of leader behavior. We assume that the expectations and attributions of followers influence the decision-making of leaders. Implicit leadership theories recognize leadership as a socially constructed concept with a focus on filtering, interpreting, and acting upon in different ways. ILTs are also influenced by different perspectives and situations (Pekerti and Sendjaya, 2010; Ferenčíková and Chovanec, 2008). Following these examples, our research primarily focuses on implicit leadership theories and its influence on the managerial willingness of change in organizations.

2. Empirical Analysis

For this analysis we used the answers of 275 German-speaking and 100 Slovak managers from all hierarchical levels and from different industries. Questionnaires were collected from 275 alumnis from the Post Graduate Management Executive MBA of the WU University of Economics and Business, Vienna, Austria and 100 managers from Bratislava, Slovakia (data collected randomly by the students of the Master class International Business at the Economic University of Bratislava and Master class International Management, School of Management Bratislava) in 2010 and 2011. Each sample consist of approx. one third top, upper and middle managers and is reflecting the industrial context of Vienna and Bratislava.

The core of the questionnaire focused on two open questions on management competencies deemed necessary at present and in the future, which were also rated by the managers from 0% to 100%. The answers of the open questions were coded according to the category scheme of Mühlbacher (2007). In a second step, these competencies were clustered into the above mentioned classes of

competencies. The results were analyzed with SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) using cluster analysis according to Tanimoto. So we were able to analyze the relations between the hierarchical level of managers and their individual willingness to change – as the classes of competence were further divided in increasing, stable and decreasing meaning, based on the different ratings between management competencies deemed necessary at present and in the future, or in other words – their implicit leadership theories.

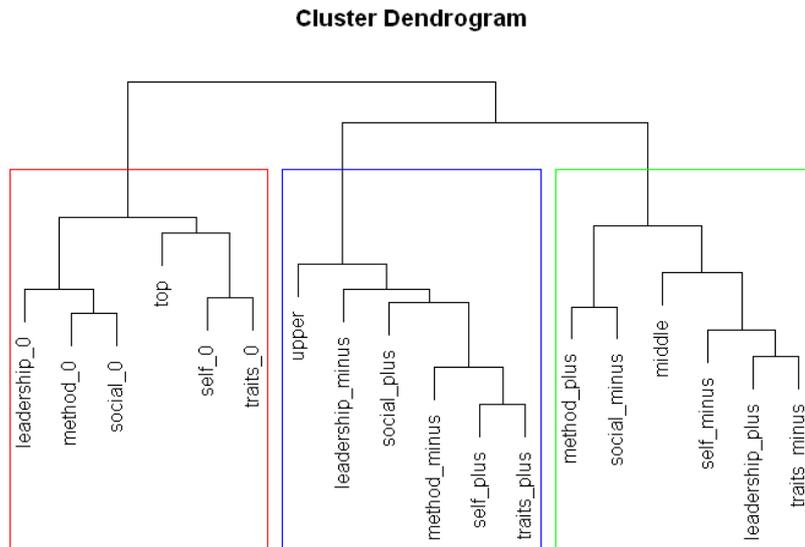
To perform this cluster analysis, the variables describing the expected changes of the competency levels were coded as different binary variables, namely dummy variables for positive and negative changes and for no changes at all. Also the variables for the hierarchy level were recoded as binary variables.

Cluster analysis summarizes different methods to group various elements such that the resulting classes' members are as similar as possible, whereas between the different classes there should not be much similarity. We used the so called Tanimoto distance to determine the similarity of two objects. This proximity measure is well suited for binary variables, where the existence of an attribute has a different information value than the non-existence. The Tanimoto distance between two objects is defined as the ratio of the number of joint characteristics and the number of characteristics, which at least one of the objects possesses.

As a clustering algorithm, we employed the complete linkage method after checking the data set for outliers using the single linkage method. The complete linkage algorithm starts with computing the pairwise distance (or proximity) of all objects and combines the two nearest objects to a group. The distance between the new group and the other objects is calculated as the largest distance between the newly clustered elements and the other objects (furthest-neighbour principle). Afterwards, the next two nearest objects are combined, and so on.

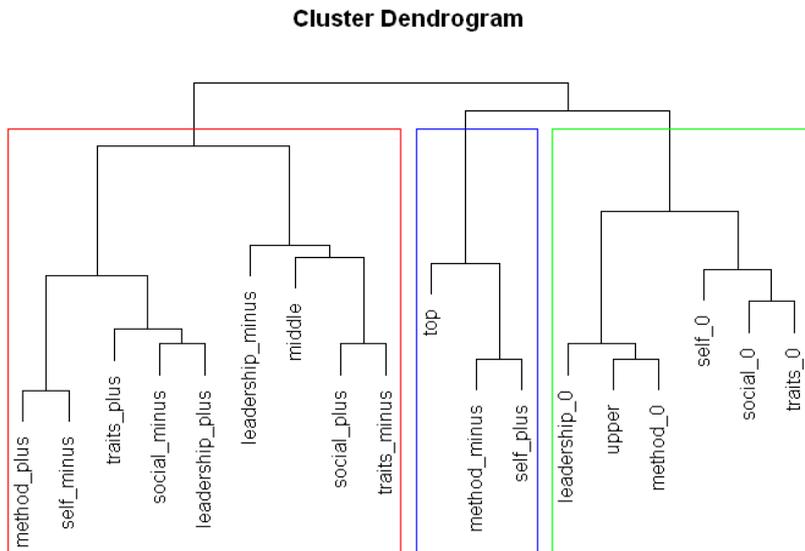
Figure 1 represents the three – completely different – competency profiles of top, upper and middle management levels of Austrian managers. At each branch of the tree, the hierarchical level and the expected change in managements behavior is represented. The analysis illustrates that the top management does not show any willingness to change by focusing on a completely stable management behavior and no change of any of the classes of competencies. All stable (= 0) dummy variables belong to this branch of the cluster dendrogram. The upper management reduces – in contrary to theoretical assumptions – leadership and methodological competencies and shows an increase in social-communicative, self-dispositive and personal competencies. Only the middle management behaves according to literature and this in total contrast to the upper management.

Figure 1
Cluster Analysis (Tanimoto) – Austria



Source: Own research and calculations.

Figure 2
Cluster Analysis (Tanimoto) – Slovakia



Source: Own research and calculations.

Figure 2 has to be interpreted accordingly to Figure 1. It, displays quite different results for Slovakia. Here, the top management reduces their methodological competency and increase self-dispositive competencies. Instead of the Austrian top management, it is the upper management that does not show any willingness to change. The middle management mainly focus on social-communicative competencies and reduces leadership skills and the influence of personal traits.

3. Discussion

In our study, we identify an important difference between our samples of German-speaking and Slovak managers. We show that the Slovak top management reduces their methodological competency and increases self-dispositive competencies. A key finding is the fact that the upper management in Slovakia does not show any willingness to change. In Austria, it is the top management that indicates a similar behavior. We argue that the upper management in Slovakia does not see any reason and potential for a change. They try to achieve the goals set by the top management, boards or owners. It is important to note that their well-paid remuneration normally depends on their performance and the achievement of objectives. Implementing a change is not a top priority for the upper management. In the conditions of Slovak economy, changes are expected to come either from top management, owners or foreign headquarters. Therefore, we have to add that external factors and influences, such as a financial crisis, might force organizations to initiate a change process.

The resistance of the top management to change in Austria may be driven by their relative success and relatively stable conditions of the Austrian economy – the Austrian economy belongs to the most successful in Europe and the need for change may not be seen as urgent in Austria than in Slovakia. We also assume that in Austria there is a higher share of local owners among top managers compared to Slovakia: as we already suggest, foreign owners have the tendency to push local top management into change process given their expectations and this pressure may be lower in Austria given the different ownership structure of the economy and existence of more stable and strong local businesses.

Concerning the reduction of methodological competencies by the Slovak top management, we propose a possible threat to the future of the companies: as suggested, during the crisis, the “steering wheel” is frequently taken by foreign headquarters or owners and there is not enough space for “independence” of the top management. In terms of the increase of self-dispositive competencies, we argue that the top management needs to work on itself in order to stay “competitive”. While the first tendency is negative, the second one can be

evaluated as the positive one. The closer look at these two competencies also shows us another similarity between Slovak top management and Austrian upper management.

Furthermore, our results show that the middle and operative management in Slovakia concentrate on social-communication skills. We suggest they need to communicate goals, measures and rules to the employees. Especially during the crisis, all austerity measures, cost cuts, and lay-offs are communicated by the middle and operative management. Due to the growing responsibility of this line of management, leadership skills and personal traits are not anticipated and thus, these abilities are reduced. The middle management in Slovakia is definitely not a change agent compared to the situation in Austria.

Our results also illustrate some tension between top and upper management. Some reasons lead to the implication of age differences. In Slovakia, we have noticed that members of top management teams are in many cases younger than members of the upper management teams (given the role of expatriates) what is not so widely common in Austria. We argue that this is a possible reason for the differences between top and upper management in Austria and Slovakia. Of course, in this case, a deeper analysis and further research is called forth.

To conclude, we assume that the differences between Austrian and Slovak managers are the results of the different development stage of the economies, differences in the ownership structure of the companies, role of expatriates and in the age structure of managers.

Conclusion

These results of our study make the current state of the art doubtful and offer an opportunity for provoking argumentation. Are middle and operative managers the real drivers of change in organizations? This is more than possible from the perspective of self-psychology – as already mentioned. On the one hand success is hindering change. So why should top or upper managers being interested in change? This might only lead to a loss of power or status.

Even though there are differences between Austrian and Slovak managers, we can state that middle and operative managers are much more engaged in current (operative) problems, their career orientation is still high, they have to face a severe competition concerning possible promotions, and change might improve their professional situation. So, we have to regard this group as real change engines within the companies. Regarding implicit leadership theories, we highlight the position of middle and operative managers who are more sensitive and opened for change processes than the top management.

From the development of information and communication infrastructures within corporations, we have learned that IT specialists have been the driving forces of this change. They have increased methodological knowledge and leadership talent to convince colleagues and superiors to take over new solutions. The upper management is too much engaged with relationship management techniques to foster their careers. Therefore, they have to increase social, self-dispositive and personal competencies. And, last but not least, top managers only try to defend their position. Referring to the implicit leadership theories, we underline that the top management often tries to gain social influence to increase their impact on followers (Lord and Emrich, 2001). We also emphasize the challenge that leaders who do not behave as expected and attributed by their followers might be viewed and rated negatively by the subordinates (Konst, Vonk and van der Vlist, 1999). As we can learn from the global financial crisis, top managers tended to reduce communication within their companies and started to rely on external consultants and build so called value chains that were anchored outside their companies. Financial transactions become more important than operative excellence (e.g. Porsche) or their interest focused on modern art. Most of the financial institutions, now bankrupt, left huge art collections. So, it might not be the top management, who rule change within companies.

Therefore, our results indicate that if the change process is vital for the survival and success of the companies, much more attention should be devoted to the selection of the right candidates for the top and upper positions given their competences and willingness to lead the change in their organizations. Of course, our research offers only a glimpse of reality. Therefore, next steps have to be done to verify these first results in order to try to find further answers based on a more qualitative approach.

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