

UNDERSTANDING WOMEN MANAGERS' COMPETENCE ACQUISITION

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**DEDICATION**

To the loving memory of my father, **Silas Tan Kim Tho**

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Fiat Voluntas Tua ... Secundum Verbum Tuum - Helen Tan S. H.

## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the process of competence acquisition of women managers in Malaysia. Even though women form a huge pool of talent at the workplace, they are underrepresented at the upper management levels. Therefore, it is critical to understand how women in management acquire competence at work since the lack of understanding of acquisition process hinders women managers' competency development. The research employed qualitative multiple-case studies using grounded theory approach against the backdrop of feminist principles. Data were gathered using semi-structured in-depth interviews by incorporating critical incidents and behavioural events techniques, followed by written exercises at the end of the interviews. Fifteen women managers from three work sectors namely, the public sector, private sector and government-linked companies were interviewed. Subsequently the data were analysed using grounded theory approach to identify the broad themes. A key finding is that women managers acquire competence using various informal learning strategies and the process of competence acquisition is affected by individual differences, local social context, organisational culture, work-life balance, coping strategies as well as leadership and management styles. The differences and variations in the individual understanding of competence were also discovered. Competence is understood as the dynamic and contextually-bounded holistic capabilities comprising versatile knowledge, management of extraordinary skills and positive behavioural traits which enable a person to deliver effective performance. Theoretically, the research contributes towards the development of two models of competence acquisition. Practically, the research highlights the competence content of successful women managers that further provides insight into how competence is acquired at the workplace. These are imperative to improve the performance of a woman manager. Methodologically, the research illustrates the effective combination of grounded theory and feminist underlying principles within the context of multiple-case studies of women managers from different work sectors. Recommendations for future research are identified namely, to conduct comparative studies of women managers' competence acquisition process of different nations and investigate the contextual factors' influences on competence acquisition using quantitative approach.

## ABSTRAK

Kajian ini menyelidiki proses pemerolehan kompetensi pengurus-pengurus wanita di Malaysia. Walaupun wanita membentuk sumber bakat yang besar di tempat kerja, namun mereka kurang diwakili di peringkat pengurusan atasan. Maka, adalah kritikal untuk memahami bagaimana wanita dalam pengurusan memperoleh kompetensi di tempat kerja kerana kurangnya pemahaman tentang proses pemerolehan akan menyulitkan pembangunan kompetensi para pengurus wanita. Penyelidikan ini menggunakan kajian pelbagai kes secara kualitatif yang menggunakan pendekatan teori *grounded* berlatarbelakangkan prinsip feminis. Data dikumpul menggunakan kaedah temu bual separa berstruktur mendalam dengan menerapkan teknik insiden-insiden kritikal dan teknik peristiwa yang melibatkan tingkah laku, dan diikuti dengan aktiviti menulis pada akhir sesi temu bual. Seramai lima belas orang pengurus wanita dari tiga sektor kerja, iaitu sektor awam, sektor swasta dan syarikat berkaitan kerajaan telah ditemu bual. Seterusnya data dianalisa menggunakan pendekatan teori *grounded* untuk mengenal pasti tema-tema utama. Hasil kajian yang utama ialah pengurus-pengurus wanita memperoleh kompetensi dengan menggunakan pelbagai strategi pembelajaran tidak formal dan proses pemerolehan kompetensi ini dipengaruhi oleh perbezaan individu, konteks sosial tempatan, budaya organisasi, keseimbangan kehidupan berkerjaya, strategi menghadapi persoalan serta gaya kepimpinan dan pengurusan. Perbezaan dan variasi di dalam pemahaman individu tentang kompetensi juga ditemui. Kompetensi difahami sebagai suatu kemampuan dinamik dan holistik dalam konteks terikat, yakni terdiri daripada pengetahuan serba boleh, pengurusan kemahiran luar biasa dan sifat tingkah laku positif yang membolehkan seseorang menghasilkan prestasi kerja yang efektif. Secara teori, penyelidikan ini menyumbang kepada pembinaan dua model pemerolehan kompetensi. Secara praktikalnya, penyelidikan ini mengutarakan kandungan kompetensi para pengurus wanita yang berjaya sekaligus memberikan pemahaman terhadap bagaimana kompetensi dapat diperolehi di tempat kerja. Pengetahuan ini penting untuk memperbaiki prestasi seorang pengurus wanita. Dari sudut metodologi pula, kajian ini menunjukkan keberkesanan gabungan teori *grounded* dan prinsip feminis di dalam konteks kajian pelbagai kes para pengurus wanita dari pelbagai sektor kerja. Cadangan penyelidikan untuk masa hadapan dikenal pasti iaitu membuat kajian perbandingan proses pemerolehan kompetensi pengurus wanita dari berlainan negara dan menyelidik pengaruh faktor-faktor konteks terhadap pemerolehan kompetensi menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BEI	-	Behavioural Event Interview
CACA	-	Chartered Association of Certified Accountants
CAQDAS	-	Computer-assisted Qualitative Data Analysis
CEO	-	Chief Executive Officer
CFO	-	Chief Financial Officer
CII	-	Critical Incident Interview
CIO	-	Chief Information Officer Competencies
CTO	-	Chief Technology officer
ECS-I	-	Emotional, Cognitive, Social Intelligence
GLCs	-	Government-linked Companies
GT	-	Grounded Theory
IIAM	-	Institute of Internal Auditors Malaysia
MAICSA	-	The Malaysian Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators
MIA	-	Malaysian Institute of Accountants
NIEW	-	Institute for the Empowerment of Women
SME	-	Small and Medium Sized Enterprises Software

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

Galvanizing highly competent individuals to help fulfill organisations' quest for success is one of the top priorities of every enterprise. The Hay Group (2003) likened the importance of competence to performance, to that of DNAs to people as it points to something exemplary that particular individuals possess. However, competence is an elusive concept that still warrants for our further understanding (Boyatzis, 2008). One of the contributing factors to the theoretical shortcoming in the understanding of the concept is the lack of its conceptualisation from an individual perspective (Boyatzis, 2009). Consequently, this shortcoming becomes an impediment to the development of managerial competence necessary for effective performance (Winterton, 2009). This thesis aimed to explore the process of women managers' competence acquisition within Malaysia work sector environments. This chapter begins with an introduction of the chapter and followed by an overview of the sections. Next, the background of the problem and the problem statement are presented. The chapter continues with the discussion on the purpose of the study, research questions and objectives. A brief discussion on literature review is done, followed by the discussion on the significance of the research and its scope. The operational definitions are explained. Chapter one ends with the explanation of the entire content of the thesis.

## 1.2 Background of the Research

The concept of competence has been systematically used to determine effective performance in the field of management ever since the idea was first expounded by David McClelland in 1973. However, Winterton (2009) argued that the concept remains elusive to our understanding due to several factors, namely the different approaches to understanding competence (Boyatzis, 2008, 2009; Winterton, 2009), tensions between formal and informal learning from the perspective of competence acquisition, conflict between the national and global competence framework (Gonczi, 2006) and finally, epistemological tensions associated with the dominant and context-free rationalistic positivist paradigm of inquiry within competency literature (Sandberg, 2000; Garavan and McGuire, 2001; Garavan *et al.*, 2012).

The concept of human competence implies that competence is embedded within the person where its construct and manifestations are contextually-bound within the individual, organisational and social contexts. Seminal scholars in this area define competence as sets of behaviors that lead to superior job performance (see McClelland, 1973; Boyatzis, 1982; Schroeder, 1989; Spencer and Spencer, 1993). Therefore, competence has been predominantly explained from the behaviorist approach. Scholars like Goleman (2006) and Boyatzis (2008, 2009) viewed competence as a behavioural approach to cognitive, emotional and social intelligence primarily because the concept focused largely on the role of behaviors.

The underlying importance of understanding how managers acquire their competences hinges upon the fact that managers are one of the most prized assets within organisations (Sheehan, 2012; Garavan *et al.*, 2012). Amidst the fast changing business landscape, the pressing need to sustain organisational competitiveness warrants for a deeper understanding of the concept of competence and the process of competence acquisition from the perspective of managers. According to Mintzberg (2004), competent managers are neither born nor graduated from management schools. Becoming a competent manager involves a gradual process where an ongoing transformation of identity takes place within work



environment. As such, managers are conceptualised as social learners (Hill, 2004) and that their learning largely take place within work context via informal learning (Eraut, 2007; Cheetham and Chivers, 2005; Marsick and Watkins, 1990, 1997; Marsick *et al.*, 2008; Chivers, 2011).

Competence development of women managers has become a national agenda in Malaysia as the nation seeks to increase the women's talent pool to improve boardroom diversity. Based on the report from International Labor Office (ILO) Statistical Database on employment by occupation: managers in June 2014, Malaysia ranked 79 out of 126 countries with 21.5% of women managers. In Malaysia, according to the Statistics Department in 2014, women make up 53.6 per cent of the labor force participation rate (LFPR) and the ratio of female to male university graduates 60:40. In 2011, the Malaysian government announced the 30% women on board representation requirement by year 2016 for Corporate Malaysia policy. In 2006, NAM (non-aligned movement) Institute for the Empowerment of Women (NIEW) was established under Malaysia's Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and had been tasked with the training women to become competent directors. NIEW put in place the Women Directors' Programme where qualified participants who passed the online assessment would undergo training for three modules of technical knowledge and soft skills. The participants attended mock board meetings and scrutinised hypothetical case studies during the training sessions. At the end of the session, the participants received report on where they "did right or wrong" (The Edge Malaysia, 2013, pg. S10). From the outset, the nature and conduct of the said training closely resembles graduate MBA programmes.

Leading management scholars such as Mintzberg (2004), Boyatzis (2008, 2009) and Marsick (2009) had questioned the benefits of training managers using standardized training systems outside real work context due to the underlying assumption that managers are social learners. Moreover, different industries and sectors present different work context and culture. In short, one-size-fits-all formal training program to develop managers' skill and competence would inevitably create

a typical “honeymoon effect” where improvement following the program is short-lived (Boyatzis, 2008, 2009).

At the moment, Malaysia lacks the proper actionable framework that can support government’s boardroom diversity policy (see Omar and Davidson, 2004; Ismail and Ibrahim, 2008; Nasrudin and Hsia, 2008; Abdullah *et al.*, 2008; Zainal Abidin *et al.*, 2009). This study was initiated against the growing need to harness the talent of women managers whose number gets smaller as they move up the management ladder (World Economic Forum, 2013; World Bank, 2012; The Edge Malaysia, 2013) with the view to increase gender diversity.

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

There is an unquestionable consensus on the importance and relevance of competence to the performance of individuals and organisations since David McClelland (1973) first started the notion of competence as performance differentiator forty two years ago. Yet, the concept remains elusive as the previous research could not achieve consensus on the conceptualisation of competence and competence acquisition (Sandberg, 2000; Garavan and McGuire, 2001; Boyatzis, 2008, 2009; Winterton, 2009; Garavan *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, the exploration of individual competence and competence acquisition must be done within specific context by employing the appropriate methodology as well as instrument to elicit information surrounding the complex process of competence acquisition.

Competence-based research has been predominantly conducted from the behavioural perspective which largely focuses on the generation of lists of behaviors associated with effective performance (Garavan and McGuire, 2001). As such, the exploration of the concept of competence relies on the quantitative method and scholars attribute heavy positivist leanings as the main reason behind the lack of success in describing the process of competence acquisition (see Boyatzis, 1982; Schroeder, 1989; Spencer and Spencer, 1993; Dulewicz and Herbert, 1999).

In addition, competence acquisition is frequently analysed under the informal learning theories within the domain of management studies. The most closely related study to competence acquisition is skill acquisition (Dreyfus, 1986, 2008) where skill and knowledge acquisitions were depicted as series of linear progression from the level of novice right up to the level of being competent. However, competence acquisition is far from static and linear. It is a dynamic process resulted from the interactions of ongoing social processes and collective actions within the organizational and social settings, including family and society. Several studies attempted to prove that competence can be developed in adulthood but did not address the question of how these competencies are actually acquired at the workplace (Boyatzis, 2008; Boyatzis and Saatcioglu, 2008; Dreyfus, 2008; Leonard, 2008; Wheeler, 2008; Rhee, 2008; Boyatzis and Ratti, 2009; Ryan *et al.*, 2009; Young and Dulewicz, 2009; Chivers, 2011; Emmerling and Boyatzis, 2012). Hopkins and Bilimoria (2008) attempted to include gender analysis into their study by comparing the list of competencies exhibited by male and female managers but did not investigate the process of competence acquisition by respective gender. The abovementioned studies bore testimony to the inadequacy of positivist leanings in addressing some theoretical shortcomings that could illuminate understanding of the process of competence acquisition (Boyatzis, 2009; Garavan *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, there is a need to explore competence acquisition using specific approach like the grounded theory (GT) as it addresses questions about gradual processes that exist in everyday-world situation.

This research specifically focus on women managers for the following reasons: firstly, that women make up more than half the workforce in most countries and gender gap has shrunk significantly (World Bank, 2012); secondly, the proven track records that women's participation in senior management level has positive correlation with better firms' financial performance (Catalyst 2012); thirdly, the tendency of women managers to experience barriers in career progression to senior management positions (O'Neil *et al.*, 2008; McGregor, 2010; Broadbridge and Simpson, 2011); and finally, little is known about how women managers develop their competences (Hopkins and Bilimoria, 2008; Chen *et al.*, 2012 and Chen and

Doherty, 2013). Since the focus of this study is women managers, the incorporation of feminist perspective was deemed necessary in order to enhance the inquiry and understanding on women's experiences.

In conclusion, the research problem revolves around the challenges in acquiring and managing competence, which is caused by the ambiguities surrounding the concept of competence and the process of competence acquisition which resides in the individual and is contextually-bounded. How do women managers acquire competence within Malaysian work context?

#### **1.4 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to gain further understanding on how women managers acquire competence within the Malaysian work sector environments so that learning environment and the process of competence acquisition can be better facilitated and supported.

##### **1.4.1 Research Questions**

Based on the problem statement and purpose of the study described in the previous sections, the following research questions guide this study:

Research question 1: What do women managers understand about the concept of competence?

Research question 2: How do women managers acquire competence?

Research question 3: What are the issues associated with women managers' competence acquisition at work?

Research question 4: How can the learning environment be improved so that women managers can acquire competence at work continuously?

### **1.4.2 Research Objectives**

Based on the research questions outlined in the previous section, five research objectives are formulated:

Research objective 1: To take forward a deeper understanding of the concept of competence;

Research objective 2: To investigate issues relating to the process of acquiring competence by drawing on the experiences of women managers;

Research objective 3: To describe what is tending to facilitate and impede women managers' competence acquisition;

Research objective 4: To suggest improvements that can be made to the current organisational programs related to competence acquisition;

Research objective 5: To build a model that represents the process of women managers' competence acquisition.

## **1.5 Literature Review**

The literature review of this study which can be found in chapter two has been arranged into eleven distinct but inter-correlated sections. The first section provides the overview of the literature review. Sections two until four introduce and examine the concept of competence, research trends and approaches on competence and the nature of managerial competence. Section five until six discuss competence acquisition, managerial learning and the theories surrounding informal learning. Section seven until eight focus on women managers and the several research

approaches to studying women in management. Here the contextual aspects that play significant roles in shaping women's experiences are examined. Section nine discusses the formulation of the proposed model of women managers' competence acquisition. Section ten explores briefly the appropriate epistemological, analytical and methodological approaches to exploring women's experiences whereas section eleven summarises and concludes the literature review.

## **1.6 Conceptual Framework and Operational Definitions of the Research**

The initial conceptual framework for this study relied on the following assumptions:

- 1) Competence is an underlying characteristic of a person. Some elements are identifiable as they are manifested through the person's behaviors but some are deeply rooted and internal to the individual. The externalization of competence is through decisions made and actions performed by women managers in particular situations.
- 2) Competence acquisition and development is continuous, gradual and non-linear in nature.
- 3) Managers are social learners and therefore, the framework suggests that competence acquisition is done by way of informal and implicit learning within work context. Therefore, the study is placed in the theoretical domain of social learning.
- 4) Women lives are influenced by the subtle interdependence of individual, organisational and societal contexts. Therefore, the understanding of competence from women managers' perspective is contextually-bound.

Further discussion on the conceptual framework can be found in chapter two. The following are the operational definitions used throughout this research:

- 1) **Competence:** The dynamic and contextually-bounded holistic capabilities comprising of versatile knowledge, management of extraordinary skills and positive behavioral traits which enable the person to deliver effective performance. *Competences* are the plural form of competence.
- 2) **Competence Acquisition:** To come to have as new or added versatile knowledge, management of extraordinary skills and positive behavioral traits by sustained effort mainly via informal learning.
- 3) **Coping strategies:** Strategies for managing emotions and embracing positive attitude in order to better cope with personal and work challenges.
- 4) **Local social context:** Contextual conditions influenced by ethnicity, socio-political condition, religion beliefs and family upbringing.

## 1.7 Scope of the Research

The scope of competence and competence acquisition in this research is within the management domain with specific focus on managerial competence from individual perspective. It does not include organisational competence. The subject domain is restricted to women managers within Malaysian work context represented by three main work sector environments in Malaysia, namely, the GLCs (government-linked companies), the public and private sectors. The unit of analysis of this research is competence acquisition of women managers within the above context.

## 1.8 Significance of the Research

This study contributed to three areas of social science namely, the theory, practice and methodology. The concept of competence has always been associated with successful performance of individuals which enable organisational effectiveness to be achieved. Thus, in relation to the theoretical contribution, this study developed two models of women managers' competence acquisition. The models incorporated

themes related to women managers' conditions in terms of their individual differences, informal learning strategies, coping strategies and leadership styles. In addition, the models also included the contextual conditions affecting women namely, the local social context, organizational culture and work life balance. The models are comprehensive as they integrate the dynamic process of competence acquisition with individual conditions and other contextual factors such as family, organisational and social contexts.

Practically, this study contributes towards a clearer understanding of the type of management competencies required within the Malaysian work sector environments. Having insights into competence and competence acquisition are imperative in order to provide the much needed understanding on workplace informal learning so that women managers' learning can be properly facilitated. In addition, a better understanding of the concept would lead to better management of competence development which then would improve the effectiveness of women managers and eventually increase organisational effectiveness as a whole.

Methodologically, the research contributes towards theory building process by using grounded theory (GT) approach in multiple-case studies on women in management and therefore, incorporates feminist principles as the backdrop of the inquiry well within the interpretative tradition. Feminist principles help to facilitate a faithful presentation of the participants' voices. The research used semi-structured in-depth interviews and written exercises to elicit information from women managers. The reliability and accuracy of this study was achieved by seeking an independent review to ensure an accepted level of coding chance agreement using coefficient Kappa. The Kappa value yielded 92-percent of agreement, signifying high agreement of coding (refer section 7.3). Within-case and cross-case analysis with multiple-case studies design were performed to assist in theory building process.



## **1.9 The Structure of the Thesis**

This doctoral thesis is organised in eight chapters and it presents the development of this research which spanned three years. Each chapter is presented in a linear progression. However, the development of these chapters is far from linear as the work done in order to complete this thesis requires frequent going back and forth between the eight chapters. Even though these eight chapters are inter-related, as much as possible, each chapter is prepared in such a way that it stands on its own without losing the core essence of the whole thesis. Nevertheless, the best approach to appreciate this research is to read the thesis in its entirety.

Chapter one introduces the overview of the research problem and areas of concern beginning with the description of the background of the study. The chapter then proceeds with the problem statement followed by the formulation of the research questions and research objectives which would guide this study. Then, the conceptual framework and operational definitions are added. The scope of study is clarified, followed by the significance of research which highlights three areas of research contributions, namely theoretical, practical and methodological contributions. The chapter ends with an overview of the thesis structure.

Chapter two discusses the literature related to competence and women in management. The discussion begins with the conceptualisation of competence and the predominant research approaches used in competence-based research. To position the discussion within the dimension of individual competence, the chapter proceeds to describe managerial competence as the behavioural approach to cognitive, emotional and social intelligence. Competence acquisition is reviewed from the perspective of informal learning theory. The chapter discusses the new proposed model for women managers' competence acquisition. The final summary of the literature review concludes chapter two.

Chapter three explains the research methodology used in this research. The discussion begins with the research paradigms and goes on to discuss the research

approaches used in this study. Next, the discussion turns into the research tools and data analysis employed by this study. Data collection methods which include in-depth interviews, research diary writings and written exercises are described. The qualitative content analysis and the overarching GT approach are discussed in detail in this chapter. The chapter ends with discussions on data management, GT coding procedures and finally concludes with the summary of chapter three.

Chapter four discusses the pilot case study and its *modus operandi*. This chapter begins with the *modus operandi* and then proceeds with the presentation and discussion of the pilot findings. The emerging main issues are then discussed in detail. Reflections and lesson learnt on the conduct of data collection and analysis are discussed. A section on feedback is dedicated to discuss decisions made on selecting the appropriate research method for the major subsequent work. Finally, the chapter ends with discussion on issues and questions to be addressed for later major work.

Chapter five discusses the *modus operandi* and main findings from the major work conducted for this research. It begins with the description of the *modus operandi* which consists of the identification of cases, selection of participants, conduct of research interviews and documentation of field notes. This chapter describes the GT approach of analysing data. The procedure of generating concepts and categories is presented in order to illuminate understanding on how the analysis finally arrives at the findings. The chapter ends with the elaboration of GT findings and concludes with the summary of chapter five.

Chapter six describes the findings and data analysis of the written exercises using GT approach. This chapter commences with a discussion on the questions asked of the participants during the written exercise. The findings from written exercises are duly presented and discussed. The chapter concludes with the summary and conclusion of chapter six.

Chapter seven presents the key findings of this research. The summary of findings from the in-depth interviews and written exercises are presented. These findings are compared for differences and similarities. Literature comparison for the purpose of verifying the findings is outlined. Next, discussions on contribution to the knowledge and implication of the study are presented. Finally, the chapter ends with the description of the newly developed model.

Chapter eight concludes the research by dealing with the overall conclusions of the study and recommendations. The chapter also discusses the general research contributions and the implications of the study. A review of the research process is described via reflections on the research conducted. Further research considerations and recommendations of the study are also included in this final chapter. Finally, chapter eight ends with final comments on this doctoral thesis.

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