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The Seven Competences of a Sustainable Professional: The *RESFIA+D* Model for Human Resource Management (HRM), Education and Training

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Abstract

Companies, governments and other organizations are essential for sustainable development. Their behavior, however, is always shaped by individual professionals. So, the competences of those professionals—actually of all professionals in whatever function or level—are quintessential for sustainable development.

The present chapter focuses on the competences of professionals toward sustainability. Several models for such competences have been designed over the last decades. One of them, the *RESFIA+D* model, has been operationalized as a management tool. It can be used by companies in relation to their long-term strategy and their human resource management policy; by individual professionals as a tool for their personal development and career planning; and by universities and vocational schools to (re)design the graduate profiles or competence profiles, and hence the curricula.

In this chapter, first the notions of ‘competence’ and ‘sustainably competent professional’ will be described. An overview will be presented for a number of competence models, after which the *RESFIA+D* model will be introduced. On top of the set of competences in this model, a series of different levels of competence will be defined, after which procedures will be offered that enable companies, professionals, and universities to apply the *RESFIA+D* model.

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Next, some practical case studies of the application of *RESFIA+D* will be described. Finally, the chapter discusses the concept of ‘completeness’ in relation to a set of competences, focusing on *RESFIA+D*.

In several places in this chapter, competences will be illustrated with stories from real professionals, exhibiting excellent behavior in relation to those competences. These stories are an illustration of the key thesis of the chapter: *Everybody, in whatever profession, has the ability to contribute to sustainability.*

Keywords: *RESFIA+D*, professional, sustainability, education, curriculum, human resource management, personal development, career planning, strategy.

1.1 Introduction

Millions of companies and other organizations—NGO’s, schools and universities, government departments, hospitals, etc.—are taking sustainable development seriously. Much has been invested in efforts to save nature and the environment, to increase social cohesion in communities and cities, to combat poverty, hunger and child labor, and to enhance corporate social responsibility (CSR). Both multinational companies and SMEs are involved—although even more of them still lag behind.

Many authors writing about sustainable entrepreneurship and CSR focus on the behavior of companies and organizations *as a whole*. Although this is no doubt highly important, most of them seem to underestimate the fact that the behavior of companies ultimately always is the result of the behavior of *individuals*.

Some of these influential individuals are easy to recognize. They are the CEO’s of the company, the board and the deans of the university or the hospital, the politicians within a municipality or a country: those with the top responsibilities. But other persons have an influence on the policy and the actions as well. Actually, each and every member of an organization is relevant for what the organization does and how it does it: the employees in a factory, the civil servants in a government department, the teachers and the students in a school or university, the doctors, the nurses and even the janitors in a hospital.

The consequence of this is that the competences of each of those professionals are relevant for the behavior and the rate of success of an organization. More specifically, if an organization strives to operate sustainably and societally responsibly, then the question is essential whether its staff members can be considered to be *sustainably competent professionals*.

The present chapter will discuss the concepts of ‘competence’, of ‘sustainable development’, and of the ‘sustainably competent professional’. In order to do this, a model for sustainability competences will be used that was developed in the last decade in the Netherlands, called *RESFIA+D*. This model is being used in a number of organizations as a tool for human resource management (HRM) and for personal development, and in universities and schools for the (re)development of curricula of study programs (at the bachelor or master level) with the aim to integrate sustainable development into their education.

In order to illustrate this *RESFIA+D* model, a book was written by the author of the present chapter, Roorda [1]. In this book, cases describe about the professionals in a wide range of companies and other organizations, in which these professionals describe their personal actions within their jobs that are excellent examples of the various competences of *RESFIA+D*.

The book was published in 2015 in the Dutch language. At the same time, projects have started with the aim to publish the book in other languages, e.g., English, in which the Dutch cases are to be replaced by cases of professionals in the countries where these editions will be published.

Before going into the theoretical discussions about competences, the opening case of the Dutch edition of this book is shown below in Section 1.1.1.

1.1.1 A Case Study

Vita van der Heide, age 27, is a sustainability hero: what she has achieved is impressive.

Since a few years, Vita is working as a beginning nurse in a large and modern hospital in the south of our country. In the years that she worked there, gradually she started to realize that in her hospital hardly ever any cases of child abuse were reported. At first, she was ok with that; it gave her the impression that child abuse did not occur a lot in the city she lived and worked in. But over the years, she started to find it more and more peculiar, as in other hospitals, even those in the same region cases of child abuse were reported regularly. Those cases concerned physical or mental violence, or negligence,

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or even sexual abuse, in many cases by the own parents. It was hardly credible that, in the vicinity of the hospital Vita was working for, the number of child abuses really was considerably lower than in the rest of the country. There had to be another explanation! Apparently, the hospital staff was less successful in recognizing the cases of abuse. Or might the colleagues have other reasons not to report?

Whatever the reason, it was quite serious: when children arrive in a hospital after having been abused heavily, it may be literally a matter of life and death that the medical staff does more than just bind up the wounds and dress the broken bones in plaster. If that is all the caretakers do, and they simply send the little patients back home, they fail dramatically.

Vita initiated talks about the problem with her colleagues, such as those at the emergency unit: naturally, they were the most important ones to recognize injuries and bruises, for example on the head, the arms or the genitals, as a case of child abuse. Most doctors and nurses were not worried, however. What you don't see, you don't know! Besides from the discussions Vita had with them, it became clear that many doctors and nurses found it all too much hassle, even one singular report of child abuse caused a mountain of work. Others told her that, now and then, they had indeed noticed signs of child abuse, but they had no idea about how or where to report this. In some discussions even fear showed up: what if, after an accused father filed a complaint against the informant, he would even await him or her outside the hospital?

Nevertheless, some of Vita's colleagues—a few doctors, a hospital psychologist and some nurses—agreed with Vita: this was not all right. A working group was formed. They investigated how other hospitals dealt with this kind of situations. They designed a training program for their own colleagues. How do you recognize child abuse? In which cases are broken arms, bruises, burning wounds, scars or injured genitals indications of abuse? How can you see through stories such as 'Yes, she fell down the stairs!' What do you do when you suspect child abuse? All such issues were adopted in the training program.

Meetings with the hospital board were held to design a clear route for reporting. A standard report form was introduced, which had been in use in other hospitals for this purpose for several years.

The working group worked hard to disseminate the news about the reporting procedure and its relevance. Resistance came from many doctors and nurses. But the group persevered, supported by the hospital board. More and more colleagues grew enthusiastic. Now, a few years later, several cases of child abuse are reported weekly. Thanks to this, every year at least a hundred

children are saved from a violent home situation, and in a number of cases from death.

1.1.1.1 Real professionals and their competences

What Vita has done is impressive. She was a young woman, pretty much at the start of her professional career. She did not have a managerial task; she was just one of those thousands of nurses in this huge hospital. But, she minded what she saw—or rather: what she did *not* see. And that was not all. As she thought that something was wrong, she started an initiative. She did not rest until, in spite of all kinds of resistance, she found allies with whom she took up the glove together.

This first example wonderfully proves that everybody, in whatever profession, is able to do something really relevant. Vita got something in motion in the interest of *people*. Others have, thanks to their profession, been able to act for *nature* or for the environment. All of these people prove their genuine professionalism: men or women who do more than they ought to do based on their job description. Just because they themselves think they should.

They all contribute, each in their own way, to sustainable development. They show one or more extraordinary *competences*: skills that make them excellent professionals.

Vita proved to possess several of those competences when she struggled for the stakes of injured children.

One such competence was: she listened to the voice of her consciousness. She did not uncritically do the tasks that had been ordered by her superiors. She thought for herself about her job and her working environment, and she took the initiative because she thought she ought to. This is an excellent example of a competence that is described in *RESFIA+D* as:

Employ his or her Conscience as the Ultimate Yardstick.

In the *RESFIA+D* model, this competence is explained as follows: ‘You exhibit exemplary behavior and leadership thanks to your openly conscious approach.’ This is exactly what Vita did: although she did not have a management position, she established leadership by first getting a small group on her side, next the hospital board and finally a large majority of the entire staff.

Another competence Vita showed was:

Personal Responsibility.

She did not hide herself behind her formal job description or behind the assignments and opinions of her superiors. She felt a personal involvement of what was going on in ‘her’ hospital. There, too, she proved herself an excellent professional.

1.1.1.2 Competences for sustainability

The competence ‘responsibility’ is described in *RESFIA+D* as: ‘Based on your personal responsibility you work continuously on the improvement of your activities, thus contributing to sustainable development.’

Perhaps it surprises the reader to see here the term ‘sustainable development’ Does combating child abuse have anything to do with sustainable development? Sure! To be precise with what is described as ‘social sustainability’. Besides that there is ‘ecological sustainability’, aiming at nature and the environment, and ‘economic sustainability’, dealing with economic stability, sustainability of companies, and prosperity of people and communities. Together they form the well-known triangle ‘people’, ‘planet’ and ‘profit’.

Vita is a sustainability hero. She illustrates how someone in an ‘ordinary’ profession, in an ‘ordinary’ position in a random organization, can play a special role for the sake of our society. Her example proves that *everybody* can do that. On the condition that he or she really wants it, and keeps the eyes wide open to see what can be done.

Everybody, in whatever profession, has the ability to contribute to sustainability.

1.1.1.3 The civilian, the consumer and the professional

The reader may be familiar with it. Various sources—e.g., books and presentations—make a distinction between two kinds of roles of individuals: the *citizen* and the *consumer*. This idea can be recognized easily. Thinking as a citizen about responsible behavior, one may think 65 mph on a highway is a pretty fair speed, and healthy food is important. But when the same person is in a car, it feels good to drive much faster, and in a supermarket those nice and shiny, sweet or spicy snacks are more attractive. But maybe the reader’s mind is stronger than average.

Every moment again it is a consideration: the sensible citizen versus the tempting consumer. Actually, both have opportunities to act sustainably: the citizen by voting conscientiously, participate in discussions or support societal organizations; the consumer by carefully using light and water, buying fair trade products and sustainable fish and wood, and never more than needed. Many excellent books and websites on such topics have been launched.

But there is a third role: the *professional*. Together, the citizen, the consumer and the professional form a kind of triangle representing the three main roles of human beings within their lives.

The present chapter focuses on the third role: the professional.

1.2 The Sustainably Competent Professional

1.2.1 Professional Competences

The concept of ‘competence’, acquired as a result of educational or other learning processes and experiences, has been defined many times, and not all definitions are in agreement with each other. Many definitions refer mainly to the behavior of the professional or to the results of such behavior. An example from Nedermeijer and Pilot [2] is as follows:

“A competence is the ability of an individual to show adequate behavior and therefore to act excellently, e.g., as a researcher or a professional. The individual characteristics of the student are essential. Competences are combinations of (core professional) skills, knowledge, attitudes, standards and values. One student may be just as able as another, but personal characteristics like courage, perseverance and motivation determine which student is better suited for a certain function.”

Other definitions put less emphasis on behavior, but instead directly describe competences as sets of skills, knowledge, etc.

A ‘competence profile’, i.e., a full set of competences, can be described using so-called ‘critical professional situations’, i.e., situations in which someone is confronted with a professional problem or dilemma which is exemplary for the profession [3]. Essential for such a situation description is: (i) a context in which it is located; (ii) a kind of role or function that the professional fulfils, or a kind of result that has to be reached; (iii) the specific tools that are needed: i.e., not only physical tools (like a hammer), but also knowledge, skills, attitude. These concepts may be illustrated with the example of some competences of a plumber.

1.2.2 The Competent Plumber

A competence: what is it, really? Or, to put it in another way, what is a competent professional?

About these two questions, complex theories have been formulated, based on thorough scientific studies. But, it does not have to be that difficult. Actually it is very simple:

A competent professional is someone you will ask again to do a job for you.

Because he or she recently did it in a way that you liked.

In order to imagine how someone like that will act, it may be smart to start in a not too complicated way. No abstract kind of profession that cannot be grasped easily. Instead, in the present section a professional will be followed who has a clearly visible task in a well-known private environment.

For a starting point: please, imagine a dramatic situation in someone's own house, a small catastrophe. What has happened? The son of the family, 3 years old, has—just for fun—been hanging from the bathroom sink, which has broken entirely off the wall and is lying on the floor. The boy is all right, but less so is the bathroom. The water pipe has broken into pieces, and at present the house possesses a beautiful fountain, right where the family has always *not* dreamt of having one. The water is gushing out! It has already flooded the bathroom floor and the landing, and it has just started to waterfall down the stairs toward the hall and living room. What about the father of the family—what does he do? He can think of just one thing to do, and so he does: he panics!

“Call the plumber . . .,” he sighs. Ten minutes later the plumber arrives. So now, what can you expect him to do, as a competent professional?

The first thing he does is that he eliminates the immediate cause, making sure it does not get any worse. That is to say: find the main cock of the waterworks in the house and turn it off. And he definitely should not ask daddy where this main cock is, as Daddy is panicking right now, all of a sudden he doesn't know anything anymore. So the good man has to know, all by his own, where the biggest chance is he will find the main cock: that is, under the doormat behind the front door. Without hesitation, he lifts the mat from its place, removes the wooden panel and turns off the main cock. Well, that's something.

The second thing he does is: calm Dad down, so he can contribute something useful. So the plumber addresses him and tells him things like: “Look, it isn't really that bad. It's clean water after all, we will make it all right. Now if you could fetch a couple of buckets and some towels, I will . . .” etc. It is good he does that, Papa's mind clears just a little and his senses return to him.

Only when this has been done, the plumber will go upstairs, equipped with the necessary tools, where he will start with the things you would expect primarily from a person like him. So he will plumb, or whatever it may be called and start repairing the water pipe and the sink.