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Establishing credibility in the HRM-line manager relationship:

Towards a better understanding of fundamental collaboration

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Abstract

Title	Establishing credibility in the HRM-line manager relationship: towards a better understanding of fundamental collaboration
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Course	BUSN49, Degree Project in Master's Programme Managing People, Knowledge and Change, Business Administration, 15 ECTS
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Purpose	The purpose of this research is to understand ways in which the relationship between HRM and line management could better be understood to develop credibility of the HRM function in line management's eyes, who are deemed as crucial HRM collaborators.
Methodology	The research is a single case study of qualitative character consisting of ten in-depth semi-structured interviews, conducted virtually through Teams. This, conducted in light of interpretative methodology in the domain of symbolic interactionism, while adopting an abductive approach.
Theoretical Perspectives	The main concepts behind this research stem from credibility theory, theories of intent, and HRM theory through the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm. Although HRM theory is perhaps theoretically less complex, the lens through which HRM is perceived remains important throughout this research. These theories are supported by concepts connected to credibility in the HRM-relationship building process.
Contributions	This research contributes to literature concerning relationship-building between line management and HRM, taking into consideration the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm. In addition, this research hopes to contribute to the credibility conversation surrounding HRM.
Keywords	Credibility, HRM Competence, Line Management-HRM Relationship, Intentionality

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In addition, we would like to thank Velki, the case organization that participated in this study, for their cooperation. As a result of their shared insights, resources, and time, we have gained a deeper understanding of the topic and been able to enrich the knowledge around our research topic.. In order for this study to succeed and be relevant, their contributions have been invaluable.

Last but not least, we would like to thank all participants for sharing valuable perspectives and experiences during interviews. Without their willingness to contribute, this study would not have been possible. The time and openness they have given to this research has greatly enriched its findings.

We sincerely hope that you will find our study engaging and enlightening. Your enjoyment and the discovery of new insights are our utmost goals in sharing this research with you!

Enjoy reading!

Mariellen Vänskä & Dino Salić
Lund, May 19th 2023

Table of Contents

1. Introduction **7**

1.1 Background 7

1.2 The Case at Hand 8

1.3 Purpose and Research Question 9

1.4 Research Outline 10

2. Literature Review **11**

2.1 Literature Review Aim 11

2.1.1 Theoretical Conceptualizations 11

2.2 The Challenge of the HRM-Line Manager Relationship 13

2.3 Credibility 14

2.3.1 Credibility as a HRM Competence 15

2.3.2 Intention as a Function of Credibility 16

2.4 'Line Management' and 'Middle Management' 17

2.5 Summary of Theoretical Concepts 18

3. Methodology **19**

3.1 Philosophical Grounding 19

3.2 Research Approach 20

3.2.1 Background of the Case Organization 21

3.3 Data Collection 22

3.3.1 Sample 22

3.3.2 Semi-structured Interviews 23

3.4 Data Analysis 25

3.5 Reflexivity and Ethical Principles 26

3.6 Limitations and Critique of the Study 28

4. Empirical Findings and Analysis **30**
4.1 The Birth of HRM at Velki: “What are they doing in HR?” 30
4.1.1 The Current Status of the HRM-Middle Manager Relationship 32
4.2 Building Credibility - “I want them to trust me” 34
4.2.1 Understanding HRM Competence at Velki through Middle Manager Ideals 38
4.2.2 Communicating HRM Intent 42
4.3 Exploring a Split in Interests in the HRM-Middle Manager Relationship 45
4.4 Summary of Empirical Findings and Analysis 49
5. Discussion **50**
5.1 What does HRM do? - A Relationship of Credibility through Understanding 50
5.1.1 A Relationship of ‘Actual’ Value 51
5.1.2 Intentional Relationships at the basis of Creating Credibility 52
5.2 Credibility and Time 53
5.2.1 Credibility and Competence 55
6. Conclusion **56**
6.1 Empirical Findings 56
6.2 Theoretical Contribution 58
6.3 Limitations 60
6.4 Future Research 61
6.5 Practical Implications 62
References **64**
Appendix **69**
Appendix A - List of Interviewees 69
Appendix B - Interview Guide 70

1. Introduction

The introduction chapter presents a brief background outlining the interest of this research, an outlining of the case at hand, as well as the eventual development of the research question. The chapter concludes with a research outline, describing the content of the research paper.

1.1 Background

'What does Human Resource Management (HRM) even do?'. While receiving this question may be unfamiliar for some, for HRM, it can be a rather common occurrence. The exploration of this question began in the 1980s, after which its ongoing contextualization has sought to assign meaning to the function (Legge, 1995). And… the search continues. Previously recognized as 'personnel management', HRM sought to change the personnel rhetoric from representing employee compliance to representing employee commitment. The value of this initiative was deemed as a *"competitive advantage"* amongst an increasingly globalized economy, where organizations desperately searched for ways to stand out in their operations (Legge, 1995, p. 76; Guest, 1987).

Legge (1995) suggests that: *"it* [HRM] *should be understood as a cultural construction comprised of a series of metaphors redefining the meaning of work and the way individual employees relate to their employers"* (p.84). Since the dawn of HRM, the function has been recognized as a function focused on the value-adding activity of building relationships between employees and their employers. While this serves as some kind of definition for the role, it is nonetheless loaded with ambiguity (Legge, 1995). This, unfortunately, often puts the credibility of the function into question (Legge 1995; Ulrich, 1998).

Line managers have been seen as some of the main critiques of the HRM function. Whittaker and Marchington (2003, p. 248), for example, note that: *"many of the criticisms concerning the lack of contribution by HR specialists to organizational performance have come from line* *managers.”*. At the same time, the HRM-line manager relationship has consistently been raised to be of organizational significance (e.g., Gratton, 1994; Guest, 1997; Ulrich, 1998). The relationship thus seems like a walking contradiction. A continued discussion of this relationship is thus desperately needed, considering its potential organizational weight, but simultaneous challenges. This will also be discussed in light of the recent emergence of HRM, and the consideration of time in the credibility-building process.

To provide better insight into understanding this relationship, we explore the meaning of credibility related to the line manager-HRM relationship. To begin, it should be noted that the terms ‘trust’ and ‘credibility’ are often used synonymously (e.g., Ganesan & Hess, 1997). Allen (1953) goes further to suggest that trust is the precursor for the realization of credibility. We thus propose the following definition for credibility in relation to this research: *trust, built over time*. Competence and intention further bring themselves into the discussion of this research, as they are fundamentally connected to credibility. Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953, p. 35) suggest this by dividing credibility into three parts: one’s *“expertness”* (here, competence), one's *“trustworthiness”,* and one's *“intentions.”*

As stated by one of the interviewed HR Managers: *“I want them* [line management] *to trust me”*. This research hopes to bring to light how this relationship of credibility can be achieved, or at least, the tools which we need to better understand it.

1.2 The Case at Hand

The case explored in this research is a multinational construction organization, referred to by the pseudonym Velki. The construction field is considered a field to be “rich” and “distinctive” in its nature (Wilkinson, Johnstone, and Townsend (2012, p. 507). The consideration of the line manager-HRM relationship in this context is considered especially interesting, especially in light of the direct employee-involvement of line management on ‘the field’, where the physical disconnect from HRM may further increase a so-called *“credibility-gap”* (Legge, 1995, p. 9).

Moreover, the establishment of the HRM department in the organization is also relatively recent, considering that the first HRM employee was recruited in 2017. This provides an additional layer for the exploration of credibility, especially as it relates to time.

It should also be noted that instead of 'line management' this research will use 'middle management' in the empirical analysis. The task of middle management is described by Harding, Lee, and Ford (2014, p. 1214) in the following way: *"middle managers are responsible for implementing senior management strategies, and exercise control over junior staff"*. Essentially, the decision for mixed use of these two terms is essentially rooted in terminology widely available in literature (line management) versus company-specific terminology (middle management). These terms have also been used synonymously in previous research (e.g., McConville, 2006). Hence, we 'warn' the reader that the majority of the literature review handles the term 'line management', as well as the discussion, while the empirical component primarily uses the term 'middle management.'

1.3 Purpose and Research Question

As mentioned at the beginning, the interest of this study stems from the question: 'What does HR even do?', furthermore: 'Why is HRM still struggling to prove itself?'

Brandl, Keegan & Kozica, 2022 suggest that a large component of the credibility issues HRM is having is in their struggle to implement desired initiatives. A partial solution to solve the 'implementation problem' is to improve the collaborative relationship between HRM and line management (Ulrich, 1998). For the realization of this relationship, line management must determine the role of HRM to be credible and valuable to their work. This is often not the case (Legge, 1995). This presents the troublesome issue at the core of this study, which is the credibility of the HRM department in the eyes of line management, how this relationship can be achieved, how HRM can achieve 'credibility competence', and what HRM's intention is in all of this.

On the basis of this problematization, the research question is deemed as follows:

> *How is the credibility of a line manager-HRM relationship established in a multinational construction organization?*

1.4 Research Outline

The research is outlined in this section, which describes the structure of each chapter. **Chapter 2** begins with a literature review, which is followed by the presentation of relevant theories that can be applied to analyze the empirical data, so as to enable the development of an answer to the research question. The methodology of the research is discussed in **Chapter 3**, including how the data was collected and analyzed and how it was used in the study. Furthermore, the chapter emphasizes the significance of reflexivity and adherence to ethical principles throughout the study, concluding with a reflection on the critique and limitations of the research. **Chapter 4** portrays the empirical findings and analysis to shed light on the views of HRM and line managers within the case organization, exploring their relationship dynamics, the establishment of credibility through understanding and communication, and the inherent split interest between them. In **Chapter 5**, the discussion revolves around the interpretation and connection of empirical findings to the theoretical framework, where credibility of the line manager-HRM relationship is evaluated through conceptualizations of personal credibility, competence, and intention. In **Chapter 6**, a comprehensive summary of the key findings and theoretical contributions are presented. Moreover, the chapter conducts a critical analysis of the study's limitations, explores prospects for future research, and emphasizes the practical implications of the findings and their relevance in practical settings.

2. Literature Review

The literature review discusses the overarching theoretical frameworks at the basis of determining the concepts relevant to the research. These concepts are as follows: the relationship between line management and HRM, credibility, credibility as an HRM competence, and intention as a function of credibility.

2.1 Literature Review Aim

To carefully examine appropriate, available, and relevant literature on HRM credibility, credibility as an HRM competence, HRM-line management relationship, and intent, the literature review seeks to respond to these questions:

1. What theoretical concepts are relevant here?
2. What challenges are influencing the line manager-HRM relationship?
3. What is credibility?
4. What does competence have to do with credibility?
5. What does intent have to do with credibility?
6. A note on the differences between line management and middle management, and the justification of the mixed use of these in this research

2.1.1 Theoretical Conceptualizations

The main theories leading up to the determination of concepts central to the discussion of this research are focused around theoretical frameworks of credibility, theories of intent, and HRM theory. Although HRM theory is rather lighter in its philosophical stance, it is still important in establishing the lens through which HRM is perceived throughout this research, namely, the research-based view of the firm (RBV).

The specific credibility theories considered in this research are related to sociological understandings of credibility. Credibility is fundamentally socially integrated, and thus significant in the consideration of the relationship dynamics explored in this research. The central theories of credibility discussed here are that of source credibility theory (SCT) and social judgment theory (SJT). Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953) suggest that source credibility is determined in relation to *"perceptions of the communicator's credibility, including beliefs about his knowledge, intelligence, and sincerity" (p. 20)*. In the context of this research, this theory is relevant in its relation to the discussion of credibility as an HRM competence, as perceived by line management. SJT, on the other hand, claims that to fully understand behavior, there should be an aim to also understand "*those aspects of the environment that the organism is perceiving and to which it is responding in order to attain its goals"* (Doherty and Kruz, 1996, p. 122). This is especially relevant in how HRM responds to the needs of employees versus those of top management, and where HRM's intent ultimately lies in the development of the line manager-HRM relationship. SJT is also relevant from the perspective of the line manager, weighing the HRM initiatives which it chooses or chooses not to implement. This theory also alludes to the theory of intent central here, the theory of planned behavior (TPB). TPB notes that: *"planned behavior, perceived behavioral control, together with behavioral intention, can be used directly to predict behavioral achievement"* (Ajzen, 1991, p. 184). This theory goes further to support the idea that HRM can be selective about the intentions (or aspects of the environment) which it responds to, influencing the outcome of internally-defined relationships.

Alongside these rather complex sociological theories now presented simply in relation to this research, the topic of HRM is discussed from a resource-based view (RBV). This theoretical framework has gained popularity in recent years, and goes on to suggest that the internal resources of the firm are seen as the main drivers of competitive advantage (Dunford, Snell & Wright, 2001). As line management has direct responsibility in concretizing HR initiatives at the employee base, the true way to reach a status of RBV is related to the capacity for relationship between HRM and line management. The important task of line management in the realization of access to resources is further noted by Likert (1961, p. 113), referring to levels of middle management as the 'linking pins' within the organization.

These theories will come together to formulate the basis of understanding empirical phenomena determined as a result of this research, together with relevant concepts explored in the literature review.

2.2 The Challenge of the HRM-Line Manager Relationship

“Assumptions are the termites of relationships.” -Henry Winkler

This chapter discusses the importance of the line manager-HRM relationship and realities which challenge its existence. As with presumably any research concerned with concepts built over time, the sources of literature here often date back to original HRM literature (e.g., Guest, 1987; Legge, 1995; Torrington & Hall, 1987; Storey, 1992) related to the discussion of the HRM-line manager relationship. More recent sources are brought in to note the ongoing relevance of the discussion, which still has not achieved a final conclusion.

Relationships of credibility are also influenced by line management’s perceived need for a relationship with HRM. Here, it may be considered again that HRM is a phenomenon which is relatively recent, even more so within the case organization explored in this study. In smaller organizations, line management often adapts responsibilities of HRM, and HRM only enters the picture once operations have expanded to some level where this function is deemed necessary. Ulrich, Younger, and Brockbank (2008) note this by saying that up until the point that an organization reaches an employee headcount of 50-75, a full-time HR professional is hardly needed. They continue that *“a line manager can usually handle required basic HR activities”* (p. 831). Gilbert, De Winne, and Sels (2015, p. 606) support this by stating that *“line managers are responsible for a substantial amount of HR tasks.”* This can mean that in growing organizations, the function of HRM is hardly needed until a point where many personal relationships have already been determined. In essence, HRM at its point of entrance may be considered an ‘intruder.’

Further, the establishment of a relationship with HRM requires line manager commitment. Guest (1987, p. 23) suggests that a ‘wise’ human resources manager thus approaches the relationship *“with caution.”* This cautionary approach is essential in establishing credibility to surmount challenges of HRM being seen merely as inventors of *“time-consuming activities”* (Torrington &

Hall, 1987, p. 19). Additionally, line management is likely already aware of a lot of HRM's knowledge, and this should not go demeaned in the process of establishing a relationship. In fact, line management often hopes to adapt more flexibility and responsibility in managing their own resources, hoping that HRM would function mainly as a support for their activities (Storey, 1992).

Parker, Hawes, Lumb, and McCarthy (1971, p. 23) highlight the importance of HRM as a supporting function, noting: *"the management of employees is the responsibility of line management; the role of personnel specialists is to advise and assist line management in the exercise of that responsibility and to provide requisite supporting services."* HRM, in essence, is a support system for line management, enabling them to do the 'real' people management duties effectively. While this may challenge some present presumptions of HRM as the 'people' function, it is important to note the near-impossibility for HRM to manage all of the resources in the organization.

The recent emergence of HRM often disrupts the existing relationship frameworks in an organization, especially considering the existing deep involvement which line management has with their employee base. An essential component of the HRM-line manager relationship is thus to understand, fundamentally, what the relationship is about, and why it is deemed necessary. Schwandt (1999, p. 452) would explain understanding as essential to *"make something of"* something. Whatever their current preoccupations, HRM and line management need to *"make something of"* their relationship to grasp an understanding of how they can work together to create the basis for interactions which can truly transform organizational performance - the aspect of support being central to this discussion.

2.3 Credibility

"If there's anything I hate is someone who questions my credit." -Mike Todd

This chapter begins with a brief exploration of the concepts of 'trust' and 'credibility', which are often used synonymously (e.g., Ganesan & Hess, 1997). Hovland and Weiss (1951) suggest that trust is the precursor for the realization of credibility. In essence, trust must be established for one to consider something or someone as credible. These two concepts, as presented, are fundamentally related. In fact, this research considers credibility as *trust built over time*. Lewis and Weigert (1985, p. 967) also refer to *"trust as a social reality",* characterizing trust as an element for the maintenance of social order.

Hovland and Weiss (1951-1952, p. 635) note the lack of research regarding the *"attitude of the audience toward the communicator".* They further go to note that one is more likely to consider a source credible if it is delivered by a person of *"high prestige"* (p. 635). There thus needs to be a better understanding of how attitudes towards HRM are developed, and how these attitudes influence elements of credibility.

Credibility in the HRM context can be made possible when *"HR professionals do what they promise, build personal relationships of trust, and can be relied on"* (Ulrich, 2016, p. 161). Ulrich (2016) also alludes to time in the development of credibility relationships, as trust makes itself apparent through *"personal relationships that endure"* (p. 161). The function of credibility in HRM, through these conceptualizations, is largely personal, and involved with time, or repeated acts which prove credibility. Furthermore, line management should consider HRM as a *"high-prestige"* source, where their opinions are valued sufficiently to accept them into daily action. The *"social reality"* between HRM and line management should be characterized by a relationship of credibility, enhancing the possibility of HRM to *"unleash HR's full potential"* (Ulrich, 1998, p. 134).

2.3.1 Credibility as a HRM Competence

"Whenever you are asked if you can do a job, tell 'em, 'Certainly I can!' Then get busy and find out how to do it." -Theodore Roosevelt

In the HRM context, credibility, as described by Dave Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank, and Mike Ulrich (2012, p. 2) is characterized as the extent to which one delivers on promises, builds personal relationships of trust, and *"can be relied on to meet commitments".* The fulfillment of these credibility criteria are the basis for creating an HR professional who is a *"credible activist"* (Ulrich 2016, p. 2; Ulrich, Brockbank, Johnson & Younger, 2007, p. 6). This research explores how the status of this very activist can be achieved in the line manager-HRM relationship.

The importance of HR being a "*credible activist"* is weighted to such an extent that it is listed as a *"competency domain"* (Ulrich, 2016, p. 1) for HR. On HR competency, Ulrich (1997, p. 314) goes on to state that measuring HR competence is centered around four main categories: *"knowledge of business, knowledge of HR, knowledge of change/process, and* ***personal credibility****".* With the exception of one of these categories, *personal credibility*, HR competence is measured through knowledge of *something*. This brings interest to the topic of credibility in its less knowledge-based nature, and its consideration as an HRM competence. For example, it might be considered whether this competence can really be 'proven' or 'trained', or whether the only way to achieve this is to focus on the development of interpersonal relationships.

The credibility of HRM in the eyes of line management is challenged constantly. Some comments made by line management towards HR in Legge's (1995, p. 9) empirical findings challenge HR in the following statements: *"unaware of business reality", "turn line managers against them by late,"* and *"being only reactive."* Some of these statements present the extremity of the lack of credibility in this relationship. Specifically the statement *"unaware of business reality"* suggests that HRM is disconnected from the everyday realities of the organization, and thus finds it challenging to 'prove' themselves.

Moreover, the fact is that line management already handles a lot of HR responsibilities. McConville (2006) speaks about this as the devolvement of HR responsibilities to line management. He notes that *"if human resource management is to be truly integrated at a strategic level, then the middle line managers must be able to take ownership of decisions that they must implement"* (p. 651). That means that for the carrying out of HRM initiatives, there is a necessity for line management to 'believe' in the messages which HRM is trying to carry out.

2.3.2 Intention as a Function of Credibility

"Intention is paramount" -Arno Burnier

This chapter discusses the definition of intention, its nature and connection to action. In the context of this research, this is especially relevant considering the intention of HRM in organizational settings to perform certain duties, and how this may influence the relationship of credibility with line management.

Bratman (1984, *p.404*) characterizes intent as the more-than-desire to do something, "*tied both to intentional action and coor-dinating plans".* Malle and Knobe (1997, p. 108) go further to separate concepts of intention and desire, determining that: "*intentions always have as their object an action, whereas desires can take any outcome as their object (even impossible states of the world)."* This, meaning that intention is rooted in some hopefully realized outcome, while desires can be rooted in reality or non-reality. According to Bratman (1984) and others (e.g. Malle & Knobe, 1997;); intentions, thus, are fundamentally related to action.

In the HRM-line manager relationship, the intentions of HRM thus characterize, to some level, those behaviors which will be brought to life. A lack of discussion of these intentions may further expand the gap between HRM and line management's understanding of one another. Gratton (1994, p. 55) expresses this by saying that *"frequently they [HRM] are surprised to discover that their own visions of the future are not shared by colleagues in other functions"* Without a communication of intent, then, these 'visions' may remain largely up for interpretation, thus causing potential issues of the role of HR in relationship to line management.

In modern terms, it might be said that intention is an action-item towards an action. Gollwitzer (1993, p. 147) characterizes this by suggesting that *"forming intentions is functional",* meaning there is a purpose for intention. The recognition of these functional intentions is highlighted by Nishii, Lepak, and Schneider (2008), noting that HR practices are evaluated by employees in the light of their underlying motives. Those motives are here noted as intents. If, then, a line manager feels that the underlying motives are for example "*cost reduction"* or *"exploiting employees"*, a weight of negativity is placed on attitudes of employees (p. 527). The nature of motives seriously shapes impressions of credibility and trust towards HRM.

2.4 'Line Management' and 'Middle Management'

The introduction of this research suggested the use of both the terminology 'line management', as well as 'middle management.' Although this research uses the term 'line manager', which appears more frequently in classic HRM literature, there may be some confusion on how this exactly differs from 'middle management'. Legge (1995) explains the role of line managers as those non-specialists taking on general management tasks. Storey (1992) also differentiates between first-line managers and senior line managers, or even middle-level line management. *Line management* is thus a wide concept, which essentially includes everyone from top management to the employee base. The task of middle management is described by Harding, Lee, and Ford (2014, p. 1214) in the following way: *"middle managers are responsible for implementing senior management strategies, and exercise control over junior staff"*. In essence, both line managers and middle management are those who have subordinates from the employee base reporting to them.

Although it would be more simplistic to use one term throughout the research to provide cohesiveness to the research, it is simply true that 'line management' is a more prevalently used word in literature, while middle management was the used term within the organization, which translated to the use of this term in the empirical findings. Occasionally, the empirical results also present the use of the term 'superiors'. We consider both 'line management' and 'superiors' as 'middle management', again defining this as any manager with direct subordinates working in the field. McConville (2006), for example, uses the terms of 'line management' and 'middle management' synonymously. Further suggestions to this will be explored in the suggestions for future research.

2.5 Summary of Theoretical Concepts

The literature review aims to examine relevant literature on HRM credibility, credibility as an HRM competence, HRM-line management relationship, and intent. It addresses theoretical concepts related to credibility, including source credibility theory (SCT) and social judgment theory (SJT). The resource-based view is also discussed as a framework for understanding HRM. The challenges influencing the line manager-HRM relationship are explored, including the perception of HRM as an intruder and the need for line manager commitment. Credibility is discussed as a concept related to trust, and the importance of personal relationships and time in building credibility in HRM is highlighted. Credibility is also considered as an HRM competence, with the emphasis on delivering promises, building trust, and being reliable. The role of intention in credibility is discussed, emphasizing the connection between intention and action. Lastly, the differences between line management and middle management are addressed, and the intended use of these terms throughout the study.

3. Methodology

The methodology chapter will clarify how the work process has been carried out by laying out the philosophical grounding along with the selected research approach. The approach to data collection and its analysis will further be discussed.

3.1 Philosophical Grounding

This study aims to deepen the understanding of the relationship of credibility between line management and HRM. The main philosophical framework used at the basis of building this understanding is that of symbolic interactionism (SI). SI finds its roots in Immanuel Kant's philosophies of interpretivism, but perhaps the most relevant SI contributions in light of this research are those of Mead (Prasad, 2018). Mead's (1934, 1977, cited in Prasad, 2018) contributions are of particular interest, considering his focus on *"the understanding of self and its implications for meaningful social action."* Prasad (2018) goes further to explain that SI assumes that individuals "*self-images influence the process by which people assign meaning to objects and events, and mediate their eventual choices of meaningful action*" (p.22). This implies that an individual's self-image can have a significant impact on their behavior and action, adjusting their behavior based on which parts of themselves they prioritize in a given social context.

As this research focuses on relationships, *"meaningful social action"* and *"choices of meaningful action"* are of the essence. This term "*meaningful"* arises time and time again in Prasad's (2018) recount of interpretivism. Considering this research, it might be asked: what meaning constitutes credibility?

By exploring the subjective and social nature of line management-HRM interactions, we hope to be able to develop a better understanding of personal perceptions, interpretations, and underlying norms. To understand these complexities, interpretivism guides us to investigate topics such as credibility and intention, as is relevant to the HRM-line management relationship. Fundamentally, SI at the basis of this research seeks to put meaning to the *"multiplicity of realities"*, namely how it can be possible to establish relationships of credibility amongst myriads of understanding (Prasad, 2018, p. 22).

3.2 Research Approach

Qualitative research aims to develop an understanding of the meaning of social relations and their correlated social experiences within their surrounding environments (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). In light of interpretivism and symbolic interactionism, this research explores the social interactions and experiences which constitute relationships of credibility.

In light of the interpretivist and symbolic interactionist approach, the research takes an abductive stance, finding a balance between deductive and inductive approaches. Abduction can be divided into a three-step process, namely: the application of an already existing and established framework, the observation of surprising empirical phenomena in view of the framework, and then the creative expression of a newly developed framework (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). Alvesson and Sandberg (2011, p. 257) consider this as essentially helpful as, in their opinion, although it may prove useful to concentrate on some theoretical assumption, *"it is often better to vary one's focus and, at least initially, consider what in-house, metaphor, paradigm, ideology, and field assumptions underlie a particular domain of existing literature."* An abductive stance was thus implemented, as there was a perceived value in understanding theoretical frameworks in advance, while allowing the empirical results to influence our understanding of the theories.

The study is centered around a single case organization which allowed the research to explore in depth and focus on the various participants of the organization, as opposed to creating a study of and comparing multiple case organizations (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). In addition, this grants the advantage to invest more time in analyzing a single organization within a limited time frame. A single case study is therefore deemed the most appropriate method for responding to the question of how credibility is established in relationships between HRM and line management.

3.2.1 Background of the Case Organization

In order to address the research inquiries, access has been gained into the HRM and line management departments within a multinational construction firm, to collect empirical data needed for the study. To keep anonymity, the pseudonym Velki was chosen to represent the firm.

Velki is a multinational construction organization, employing around 1,500 employees worldwide. The organization has been in business for over 45 years, and is firmly rooted as a family-company. The main employee groups in the organization consist of installation and sales. Additionally, the organization is equipped with a production function, and supported by various administrative functions. Having many of the employees working 'in the field', namely installation and sales, employees especially within these employee groups are, by nature of their work, largely separated from a daily office environment. For HRM, this often means that the connection to these employees is largely achieved through line (middle) management.

The choice to approach Velki was, at large, due to the factors noted above. Firstly, the connection to the construction world seemed an interesting one to explore HRM relationships, and secondly, the multinational nature of the organization seemed intriguing. Moreover, with personal connections to the organization, there were some existing insights on the current position of HRM, and how the organization had, for some time, been struggling with implementation of HRM initiatives.

Although the research would have of course been made more simple with interviewing only one country subsidiary of Velki, and perhaps reduced cultural biases, the decision to interview both line management and HRM from three different countries was on the basis that the HRM resources in the organization, overall, are quite limited. Thus, HRM managers were chosen from three of the largest operating countries, where line managers were subsequently chosen from these three countries. To gain additional insight into the overarching HR initiatives in the organization, three 'Group' HR managers were interviewed as well. At the time of interview, two of the line managers in question had been promoted very recently to higher line manager positions, but the perspectives considered here are to do with the work that they have been conducting with managing employees 'on the field.'

A primary introductory interview was first held with one of the HR Managers, after which both researchers were present at all interviews. All of the interviews were conducted through Teams. Although there was a personal connection to the organization, the presence of one of the researchers as an 'unbiased' party helped to objectively characterize the interactions.

3.3 Data Collection

Styhre (2013) emphasizes that data serves as the "raw material" on which studies are built, and acknowledges that the collection of empirical data can be influenced by subjective beliefs. As a result, researchers must take great care in the way they collect and present data (Styhre, 2013). Therefore, in the specific context of this study, data was collected through a combination of methods. Seven in-depth interviews were conducted with local HRM and line management, while three additional interviews were conducted with Group HRM. The careful selection and use of these data collection methods was essential to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data collected. To enable effective interpretation and analysis, the data presentation had to also be clear and transparent.

3.3.1 Sample

In the early stages of the research, there was an interest in conducting a study on the role of Human Resource Management (HRM) in an organizational context. With a personal connection already established with Velki, the agreement to study the HRM department was easy to establish. With knowledge of struggles of implementation of some HRM initiatives in the organization, line (middle management) was chosen to represent the 'other side' of this nature of HRM work.

In order to begin the development of the interviews, a relevant sample had to first be determined. Due to elements of time and resources, a selective sample -approach was adapted. Schatzman and Strauss (1973, p. 38-39) note that selective sampling is *"shaped by the time the researcher has available to him, by his framework, by his starting and developing interests (...)"*. When looking for the sample, we first determined the 'available' HRM managers, and those who had spent at least two (2) years within the organization. The length of time of employment was determined as important to gather depth into the *time* element of relationships, which is discussed in the research. Moreover, in order to characterize the sample as being purposeful, it should involve various perspectives, as well as take into consideration information-rich sources (Patton, 1999). For this additional perspective, interviews of line management were selected on the basis of also having a longer-term (over 2 years) relationship with the organization, and those who had some kind of relationship with HRM already established. An additional requirement was that the line (middle) manager had a level of English that was adequate to have a conversation of this nature.

One challenge in qualitative studies is the suggestion that the number of interviews should be determined before theoretical saturation is reached. Bell, Bryman, and Harley (2019) address this issue in relation to sample size during their discussion of qualitative research. Because of the belief of possible interview cancellations, this had to be taken into consideration. It was originally planned to have twelve (12) interviews (six HRM representatives, and six line (middle) management representatives). Two of the initial six line managers unfortunately were not able to attend. To mend this situation and establish better equality in the number of perspectives, we chose to divide HRM into Group and local functions, where there would be three (3) representatives for each, and then a total of four (4) line managers. As perspectives from line management were crucial to the study, this division seemed appropriate, and helped to contextualize the empirical discussion.

3.3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

For creating an open dialogue, semi-structured interview was chosen in the form of conversations with all ten interviewees due to the qualitative nature of the research. An interview guide was used and helped the interview maintain structure and not miss any questions that were important, yet follow-up questions were included that were relevant to the answers. According to Bryman (2012), semi-structured interviews are flexible and include more questions if necessary during the interview, even though questions from a prepared interview guide are used. However, even though different roles were interviewed within the organization, the research followed one interview guide. Having one interview guide helped the research to ensure consistency and objectivity, making the interview process fairer for the purpose of the study to identify the differences between the answers. After all, Kvale (1996) mentions the most important objective of the interview is to have structure and purpose, but also as an interviewer it is needed to control the situation through guiding the conversation and through follow-up questions.

In total, the interviews took between 45 and 60 minutes for each respondent to complete an interview, depending on the length of their response. They were all conducted through Teams which created the ability to get in touch with candidates located in the different geographic areas without the need for travel. Not only did it increase the pool of candidates for the interview, but also the quality of the interviews by having the right candidates. Since they were all anonymous, it was also possible to easily record and analyze the whole interview afterward by not only what was being said but also in which way they expressed themselves. The possibility of conducting face-to-face interviews remotely enables the action to observe the interviewees' facial expression which according to Vogl (2013) enhances the quality of the interview. Therefore, it was important for the candidates to be in a relaxed and comfortable environment to get a sincere expression, which Teams interviews allows, as they can conduct it from their own home or preferred location.

Considering the amount of two researchers, it was possible to divide the tasks during the interviews. Even though the interviews were recorded, the first person observed the respondent and wrote down notes during the interview while the other adopted the role of an interviewer and concentrated fully on the interview process. In this way, it enhanced the effectiveness of the interview by being able to focus on the criteria for being a successful interviewer, as outlined by Kvale (1996). According to Kvale (1996), it is important to pay attention to what is being said, remembering everything, and be critical if necessary, along with questioning the respondents if their responses are inconsistent. Therefore, taking notes and having them available during the interviews ensured that all participants expressed themselves in a correct and consistent manner. But due to the fact that the participants have backgrounds from different countries and their native languages are not the same, conducting the interviews in a common language such as English would ensure that all parties can communicate effectively and give the interview a fair outcome. English is widely spoken and a second language in all of their countries, making it a practical choice for an international setting.

3.4 Data Analysis

As suggested by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), qualitative data hardly arrives neatly sorted. A useful methodology to begin sorting data is suggested as going through the *"whats and hows"* which have emerged from the data (p. 71). As this research adopts an abductive approach, the evaluation of recurring themes is considered increasingly important (the empirical data shapes the storyline of the research as much as the storyline shapes the empirical data). The categorization of topics was made easier with the involvement of two researchers, as there was a possibility for discourse about topics which consistently arose in the conversation. It was quickly determined that one of the underlying themes was that of "trust". In a setting of exploring relationships, this seems relevant.

Firstly, the interviews were automatically transcribed with the use of an AI -tool. Afterwards, the researchers reviewed the automated transcripts for potentially interesting quotes, both individually. The quotes were then reviewed together and discussed. From this, emerged the mutual understanding that an underlying theme was that of "trust", and other sub-themes were determined on the result of re-appearing concepts in relation to this now-determined central concept. Both of the researchers spent extensive time also reviewing the portions of interview that were time-stamped on the automated transcripts, trying to understand underlying meanings by *"spending time with the material"* (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018, p. 83). The repeated analysis of the video transcriptions also helped to *"get a grip of expressive and original details in the material"* (p. 91).

As qualitative interviews are *"open to ambiguities"* and *"based on human interaction",* they depend on the analysts *"perceptions and interpretations"* (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018, p. 29). To combat some of the bias which may occur here, we each analyzed a set of selected empirical quotes, and then would consult the other researcher on whether they thought the analysis was appropriate and relevant.

Lastly, as a practical note about the analysis, we present the following: To preserve anonymity, employee pseudonyms will be used in place of the names of actual employees. Table 1.1. presents a breakdown of the roles and respective countries of each individual. In the empirical analysis, each person will first be referred to by their name, role, and country, after which they will be referred to by only their given pseudonym.

Employee pseudonyms

Name (pseudonyms)	Role	Country
Emma	Local HR Manager	Country A
Mark	Middle Manager	Country A
Edward	Middle Manager	Country A
Charles	Middle Manager	Country B
Lisa	Local HR Manager	Country B
Joe	Group HR Manager	Country C
Anna	Group HR Manager	Country C
Lucy	Group HR Manager	Country C
Sandra	Local HR Manager	Country C
Brian	Middle Manager	Country C

Table 1.1.

3.5 Reflexivity and Ethical Principles

Since interpretation plays a central role in the study, it was decided at the outset that a high level of reflexivity was necessary. According to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018), reflection is recognized as an essential component of qualitative research. However, they posit that the dynamic interaction between reflection and interpretation is what ultimately gives rise to reflexivity. They emphasize that researchers need to recognize that interpretations of findings are not derived from a singular truth, but are instead influenced by the researcher's own contextual background. Additionally, they also suggest that researchers should engage in a meta-interpretation of the data by closely considering the elements of the research tradition that inspire them. Therefore, there is a need for reflexivity to be aware of how interpretations are impacted by external factors, such as theoretical assumptions, and the importance of language.

As researchers, reflexivity refers to the recognition of awareness in the research process and outcomes, involving a continuous and mutual influence between the researcher and object of study, leading to a constant re-evaluation and evolution of understanding, which ultimately shapes the research itself (Symon & Cassell, 2012).

Reflexivity served an important role especially in the creation of the interview questions. Developing questions which encourage open discussion can sometimes be challenging. Therefore, it was essential that we ran a 'practice' interview to further understand our own possible biases or 'accidental' development of leading questions. Reflexivity together with interpretation here was visible, as the asking of the questions shed light on how the interviewee may interpret our questions, versus how we, ourselves, had interpreted them. We had informed the interviewee that we would be simultaneously reflecting on our interview questions, which made for an interesting on-going interpretation-reflexion process.

Furthermore, as one of the researchers had quite some personal relationships already within the organization, it was important to discuss the interpretations of the other researcher in how something was presented. This is where the value of two researchers was really brought to light - the ability to form discourse about various interpretations and reflections as the research progressed.

It was also evident that the interviewees were undergoing their own reflection process during the interviews, which helped to pause around certain topics especially. For example, it would not be uncommon for an interviewee to state: *"wow, this is a really difficult question",* after which they would go on a long explanation of their thoughts, where certain emotions could easily be distinguished (e.g., frustration about some matter). To be ethical and reflexive in this process, to us, was about being present in a conversation that could allow for the exploration of individual truths.

3.6 Limitations and Critique of the Study

The study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. Upon reflection, certain limitations were recognized associated with the interviews themselves. The use of digital format (Teams) hindered the opportunity for meaningful face-to-face in physical terms, which was a result of the geographic distance preventing the researchers from meeting the interviewees in person at the office. The use of remote interviews conducted through platforms like Teams has become increasingly popular, offering numerous advantages such as convenience and the ability to reach participants across great distances. However, it is important to critically examine the limitations and potential critiques associated with this approach.

Firstly, the physical distance and inability for face-to-face interaction limited insight into certain gestures and physical cues in regard to the interviews. Even though remote interviews make it possible to see each other and have a verbal discussion, it can still be difficult to capture and interpret non-verbal cues accurately. Remote interviews may hinder the ability to perceive body language before, during and after interviews. This could include perceptions related to physical movement, gestures, postures of the body, and other subtle non-verbal cues which are important for understanding participants' responses. Furthermore, remote interviews introduce a loss of control over the interview environment where the participants may be situated in various settings, which could lead to distractions or interruptions. At the same time, however, the remote video-call environment provides opportunity for interviewees to be in a 'comfortable' setting, with some of the interviews even in this research being conducted from home offices. Oliffe, Kelly, Gonzalez Montaner and Yu Ko (2021) suggest that the remote setting of qualitative interviews can be useful in creating a comfortable environment for free-form discussion. Considering elements of symbolic interactionism, the possible creation of this environment is favorable.

Another limitation of virtual interviews was the possible presence of technical issues. Reliance on stable internet connections and functioning audio/video equipment can be challenging. Poor audio or video quality, dropped calls, and connectivity problems can disrupt the interview process and compromise the quality of the data collected. Due to poor connection, the video may also slow down the call, which would imply the turning off of the video. This could possibly result in challenges in consideration of the importance of evaluation of gestures and cues during the conversation. It was thus vital to address these technical challenges to ensure a smooth and effective interview experience.

Lastly, utilizing English as the language for conducting the interviews may have resulted in the loss of valuable nuances in verbal descriptions, as English was not the native language for most of the interviewees. Expressing their thoughts, ideas, and experiences accurately in English can be challenging since the language barrier may hinder their ability to fully convey certain perspectives. This could potentially result in misunderstandings or incomplete responses. Therefore, it is imperative to be mindful of one's own language proficiency in order to mitigate any potential impact on the interview process and the subsequent interpretation of data. By practicing reflexivity and acknowledging one's linguistic limitations, the overall validity and quality of the research can be enhanced. This self-awareness fosters a more nuanced understanding and ensures that the data collected accurately reflects the participants perspectives and experiences. As researchers, it was also considered a due responsibility to help clarify questions as often as needed to create mutual understanding around the conversation at hand.

4. Empirical Findings and Analysis

The chapter presents the empirical findings from the interviews conducted at Velki. The chapter will begin with a brief outline of the birth of HRM at Velki and how credibility within HRM has slowly been achieved. Competence and intent will be discussed as a sub-theme of credibility. Then, the relationship between HRM and line (middle) management will be discussed, as well as the development of coherent identity narratives.

4.1 The Birth of HRM at Velki: "What are they doing in HR?"

"Knowledge is power. Sharing knowledge is the key to unlocking that power."
- Martin Uzochukwu Ugwu

This chapter gives an introduction to the overall structure of HRM at Velki, when HRM became a relevant topic of discussion, and the fundamental value systems at the basis of its HRM operations.

Velki is a construction organization with relatively 'fresh' HR operations. Velki recruited its first HR employee in 2017 to the main operating country, after which HR operations have expanded. Sandra, who was the first HR employee to enter the house and currently is a Local HR Manager in Country C, explains HR operations at the time of her starting in the following way:

> *"First of all, when I started (2017), we didn't have this kind of Group HR function at all, so basically all of the countries worked really independently around HR. I think the ways of working were in every country, the HR focus, I assume, that that was quite different."*

Local HR Manager Emma from Country A continues:

> *"HR was a part of the finance department, and it was really just administration (when I first started - in 2017), so it has really changed."*

The basis for the HRM function was established on Velki's strategic picture. In fact, Charles, a line manager in Country B claims that: *"our strategic picture - basically that's our religion".* Velki has contended to find its direction in HR, but one thing has seemingly always been clear: it should be based on the values of Velki. Joe, the a Group Manager of HR in Country C, explains the importance of value-driven employee-related work in the following way:

> *"I think that this journey - values, strategy, vision - is what people love. It's why people want to stay with us. It is much more important than other things."*

The values and 'strategic picture' of Velki are well-understood by both middle managers and HR managers, and largely drive the decision-making within the HR department. As per the comment of Joe from Country B, the picture seems to take permanence over other 'things'. There is also an overall trust that everyone will follow the strategic picture. In fact, Charles continues that

> *"I had some turnover in my team, and it was because of that [non alignment with strategic picture]. So it's something like if you don't like the company where you are, it is not your place, and I have no problems to fire someone."*

As mentioned previously, the strategic picture is taken seriously when it comes to making decisions within the organization, to the extent of justifying an employee's firing. Considering the costliness of employee turnover, it seems that firing in accordance to a lack of alignment with the strategic picture is nonetheless justified.

Currently, the HR function within Velki is split into local and Group HR. The aim of the Group's HR function is to be oriented towards processual and strategic issues, while local HR is seen somewhat through the lens of adhocracy, at least by employees. This is implied by Group HR Manager Joe when defining the perceptions of the role of HR:

> *"It really depends on the people and what they expect from us. And, what is the role of Group HR and the role of local HR. When we are speaking about perceptions related to employees, they are usually asking or waiting for something from the local HR. For example in Country A, they are asking Emma why we have this, and it's more about local things and local policies. Expectations are related to really small things (...)"*

According to Joe, the perceived local issues related to HR are related to incomplex adhocracies. In local environments, the realities of HR are seen as a bit more complex, local HR Manager Emma from Country A explaining:

> *"I think most people see HR as onboarding and offboarding (...) I do think that that's all they think about when it comes to HR. HR is sooo much more than that (...) Our fingers are in everything. Because we follow people's career journey, therefore you're in almost everything. Like, now, even from HR's perspective, you're part of the organizational strategy as well, when it comes to your vision, mission, and values. And how the company is relying on HR to make some of these calls."*

Here, Emma notes that HR's fingers *"are in everything."* This seems like a vastly more complex reality than the one's employees perceive, as alluded to by Joe. The comment *"HR is sooo much more than that"* also suggests that what HR does for the organization is perhaps infinitely complex and difficult to portray in words.

4.1.1 The Current Status of the HRM-Middle Manager Relationship

This chapter discusses current perceptions on the HRM-middle manager relationship beyond the "strategic picture."

The middle management-HRM relationship at Velki has developed over the years. However, there still exists some confusion from the side of middle management towards the ongoings of HRM. Here we consider both the perspectives of a local as well as a Group HR representative.

Anna, a Group Manager in the HR department in Country C explains the following about this lack of understanding:

> *"Here we come again to the communication - that they don't know what we are developing here, or it's kind of outside of reality, or they think it is. We just develop our processes and implement them, and they don't fit to the organization… I personally think we need to be flexible for the organization… It's a combination of both: the process that we plan, and the process that is workable in practice."*

From the side of middle management, there seems to be limited understanding of the ongoings of HRM. There is also a recognition that the HRM practices planned by the organization may not actually fit realities 'on the shop floor.' The consultation of reality here is thus considered an important tool for helping middle management value the work of HRM. It is also noted that a lot of the 'people' work is in fact handled by middle management, strengthening the impression that HRM and middle management must develop a relationship for better implementation. Brian goes on to explain:

> *"I think our direct supervisors have a lot of responsibilities and take on a lot of responsibility for their employees in every field, so maybe some people don't think they need HR, and because of that, they don't know what they are doing and what HR's part is in everything."*

Brian expresses that middle management (here referred to as superiors) may have the perception that HR is 'unnecessary' or perhaps does not provide any immediately visible added value to their work. Although evidently there has been a lot of work for development in the HRM department, there is still a need for HRM to 'prove' their value. Brian also notes that to some extent, middle management should carry the responsibility for communicating the value of HRM in the organization, noting:

> *"I think HR and middle management are working very well together, and it's the management's job to show that cooperation to their underlinks."*

In a sense, for a better understanding of HRM as a whole, there needs to be a relationship which is communicated to employees at the base of the organization.

However, despite some positive reflections on the current state of the middle management-HRM dynamic in the organization, there are still some ambiguities. In fact, as will be seen through the empirical results, the comments of both sides sometimes seem contradictory to their own previous statements.

Anna notes on these ambiguities:

> *"I don't know, somehow I sense the feeling that some managers have this feeling that 'what are they doing in HR?' - that they don't really know what we are doing. So, we are*

> *kind of outside the business, I would say, somehow. But, on the other hand, I think we are very close to the business. Because, the organization at Velki, I think, is somehow simple to understand"*

Although the middle management and HRM hold strong collective views about the building of HRM alongside Velki's vision, mission, and values, as presented in the first chapter, there is still a lack of understanding about what HR actually *does*.

4.2 Building Credibility - "I want them to trust me"

Credibility of HRM at Velki seems to be characterized by two elements: personal credibility and time. This chapter explores the development of credibility within Velki, and which factors in the eyes of middle management have hindered the development thereof.

This chapter begins with a comment from Emma, implies that credibility from the side of HRM has not always been a given:

> *"HR is taking leaps and bounds, and people are taking HR a lot more seriously (...) I think it's also from an external side of things, too. Because I've had to build my relationships with leaders for them to take me seriously."*

This excerpt implies that personal credibility is connected to the overall credibility of the HR department. Emma first starts talking about HR being taken *"a lot more seriously",* and concludes by saying that she has personally had to build *"relationships with leaders for them to take me seriously".* It is not thus sufficient, according to this reflection, to merely be 'credible as a department or function', but to be 'credible as an individual.' Another interesting note here is that although the conversation was geared through middle management, Emma chose to discuss relationships *"with leaders."* This, to some extent, portrays the importance placed on serving the organization.

Another implication of this quote is that the development of credibility is involved with time. Here, a differentiation could be made between 'being credible' and 'becoming credible.' That, a person cannot just 'be credible', but needs to prove this throughout time with their actions and fulfilled promises. If credibility is considered a competence, the *capability* of doing something, this can be then interpreted in the light that HR must prove to be *capable* of fulfilling their promises. This, as it is suggested, does not happen overnight.

Continuing on from Emma's comment, a central theme reflected in both local HR and Group HR interviews was the very desire for credibility. HR Managers portray their desire to be perceived as *a reliable, helpful person - and a professional* (Anna), or *strategic business partner* (Sandra). Emma, even goes on to explicitly state: *"I want them to trust me."* The reference of 'them', here, is to middle management. Personal credibility is thus considered an important element in the building of credibility for the entire department.

Sandra describes the phenomenon in the following way:

> *"I really would like to see that our opinions* [are trusted]*, and based on that, that we are real professionals, and that they listen to us and trust our opinions"*

The desire for trust stems here from a personal level, where there is a hope that middle managers would trust the *opinions* of HR Management, that their competence would not be put into question. It may be noted here that there is an assumption that this desired reality would 'already just happen.' This again portrays the challenging work which is to be put in to achieve credibility from middle management. The spontaneity of HRM interactions may also challenge credibility However, as with any relationship, it might be said that there is a need to upkeep interaction for the eventual realization of this very personalized credibility. Sandra continues on the same topic:

> *"If we, for example, give some kind of guidance to our superiors, or to our top management, or area managers, or whatever, they think that… they can like trust us… that we know what is the best way to proceed."*

Again, there is an underlying assumption that HR is superior in knowing the kind of guidance which they give out to middle management or other employee groups. Even though this comment is expressed as a 'desire', there seems to be a lacking of credibility granted for HR as a starting point.

The previous comments from HRM suggest that credibility 'must be earned.' Another challenge which is posed concerns the situational nature of HRM's interactions. This is expressed by Edward, a Middle Manager from Country A:

> *"Some people will say that it's completely incompetent [the HR department] and they don't know what they're doing, some people perceive it as really good - so it's really mixed - but I don't think anybody really understands what it is. Nobody really examines the fact. And also, it's situation based, they have an interaction with HR, and all of the sudden they have this opinion, and tomorrow they have a different opinion."*

Although middle management is not mentioned here specifically, this comment provides insight into the generalized nature of HRM within Velki. Most of the time, HRM is present to fulfill some certain current concern, and therefore, there may not be longevity in the relationship. This may also pose challenges in long-term credibility and relationship-building. For example, if a middle manager only approaches HRM when they have a specific need, it can be difficult to create cohesiveness and care for the other's concerns, or communication as a whole.

Anna highlights the nature of interactions between middle management and HRM by saying:

> *"It starts with a negative sign, or tone, that you have some kind of problem, then you reach out to HR. So maybe I would wish that it would be more positive, that we could help beforehand, and they would solve the problem themselves, and they would have the support from us… that we could win together."*

So, middle management usually approaches HRM with some sort of 'issue' that needs 'fixing.' Rather, the hope from the relationship from HRM would be that communication would enable the consistent understanding from middle management in how to react in various HRM situations. There is also the desire to *help*.

So far, this chapter has proved that credibility must be built over time and 'earned'. It is also suggested that if middle management does not perceive the value of HRM or their competence, the relationship between the two can become sporadic, incoherent, and even *"negative."* A certain pressure is placed on both middle management and HRM to develop a relationship which occurs and builds over time. The element of time is highlighted again by Group HR Manager Lucy from Country C, noting:

> *"Obviously, I have been working here for sixteen years, so people know me quite well in City A, and I think they trust me - which makes me an easy target."*

The context of being an 'easy target' means that people feel comfortable approaching Lucy in HR -related matters, even if they are not her specific area of expertise. Or, completely absurd matters. Lucy recounts a case where an employee came to her, concerned that:

> *"There's no soap in the bathroom"*

While this is just a random case, it presents the trust which people place in HRM for solving everyday problems. That is to say, once credibility is established, the 'floodgates' to the development of the relationship are officially opened. On the other hand, there may be a perception to approach HR in these 'trivial' problems, which may distract them from building organizational credibility and value.

From the perspective of middle management, if a relationship of credibility is indeed established, the credibility between the two becomes extremely personal.

Mark, another Middle Manager in Country A expresses this by saying:

> *"HR in the workplace, for myself as a Middle Manager, it functions as a really strong sounding board (…) HR provides that bit of a safe space you can go into(…) quite often we know the answer, it's just (…) sometimes you just need to get it out of your head, say it out loud to somebody, have some feedback, and come to a matter of agreement or a decision of some kind (…) It's also nice because, yeah, as HR professionals, you are trained in dealing with those matters."*

That is to say, middle management trusts in HRM to have the competence, as they are "*trained in dealing with those matters."* Here, there is a strong trust that HR has the competence to deal with not specifically everyday adhocracies, but almost as a moral guide for middle management. There is also a strong desire from middle management for HR to 'echo' those issues which are presented (in the metaphor of the *"sounding board"*). That HR, to some extent, should reaffirm the positions held by middle management. When following up with a question of whether trust is necessary for the middle management-HRM relationship, Mark notes:

> *"Is it necessary? Maybe technically not… No, I would say it is necessary. You would have to have some sort of level of trust between your management team and your HR Manager.*

I think that's very hard to come by, where every manager working directly with an HR manager has that level of trust, but at some point, you just have to let it happen."

Mark goes through a moment of self-reflection at the beginning of this comment, concluding that the level of trust between HRM and middle management is indeed necessary. And, that at some point, even if there is not some fundamental trust, *"you just have to let it happen."* Perhaps to those who have not established a relationship of credibility with HRM, that is easier said than done. The individual relationships and their value is especially highlighted here.

4.2.1 Understanding HRM Competence at Velki through Middle Manager Ideals

What, then, does middle management want out of HRM? Although the building of credibility was discussed in the previous chapter, the topic is further explored by the ideals which line management has for HRM. This, to better understand how HRM at Velki can be of more service and value to the middle management function. At the same time, the chapter discusses some issues which HRM presents in the fulfillment of a better relationship with HRM. Some of these ideals were expressed through quite interesting metaphorical references, while some through concrete day-to-day experiences.

Middle management often finds themselves providing for the day-to-day needs of their employees. Charles relates to this by noting that sometimes he ends up *"being more of a psychologist"*. Amongst other responsibilities, middle managers also have the responsibility to care for their employees mentally. He elaborates on this topic:

> "(*Sometimes I'm more of a psychologist than a manager…) That's what makes us special, I think - I go with my whole team, sometimes we go for lunch, or sometimes we do special activities which creates a connection at work. Actually, when you need some help from others, if you have that connection, it's easier to get it. I think it's like a relationship - you have to be there in the good and the bad moments."*

Here, Charles speaks about the relationship with his subordinates, but it is telling in the way in which he perceives the value of relationships, and, to some extent, what his expectations are of those. Charles also speaks about the 'easiness' of getting help once a relationship is established.

The desire for HRM from the perspective of middle management is also for them to understand the daily hurdles which they go through in relation to initiatives set by HRM. Brian explains this by giving a concrete example, first explaining the trajectory and hopes for HRM:

> *"I think its going forward, but we can still do more in regards especially to mental health things and doing those doctor check-ups and how HR is bringing those things up constantly. It's very different nowadays and I think it's much better. I think still we should consider more the benefits that are not regarding the workplace and the job itself, supporting things like – I have been on a mission for a year and a half, in Country C we have this bike benefit nowadays. So we make a partnership with these companies, and they offer any kind of bicycles we want, and we get the tax benefit from it if we do it through our company. I think it has been too much of a struggle to get through because it doesn't cost the company basically nothing, it's just kind of like management work, and I have offered myself to do the management work if needed and things like that."*

Brian echoes the comment of Charles in the support of 'mental heavy lifting' done by middle management, and that there is a special need for support through initiatives regarding mental health. He also implies that the carrying out of HRM initiatives, in his case at least, is largely done by middle management. Although Brian does not specifically finish what his *"mission"* is, it can be interpreted that it has something to do with the ending of the bike initiative. The bike example also presents a challenge where some ideas from HRM can have 'perceived value' to the employees, but are actually relatively cost-free to the employer. This can also present a challenge for middle management to accept and implement HRM's desired initiatives, because they are exposed to the true value thereof. In essence, middle management already handles a heavy load in managing their subordinates, so if they are to offer something more to them, it should at least advance the credibility relationship towards HRM.

Naturally, budget's and desires from top management are involved in the enablement of certain initiatives, but the overall interpretation is that for middle management to find it worthwhile to carry out HRM's initiatives, they should have true value to the employee.

Another less prominent proponent of this comment is that a part of the success of HRM's implementation of issues comes down to the communication. For example, HRM may actually offer certain resources, but the employees are not aware of these. HRM needs to be better at *"bringing up"* matters.

Charles continues on his comment:

> *"And… its just kind of clunky [the bike initiative] and maybe sometimes old-fashioned when we think about what we can do as a company and also to our employees, especially in these times when we need the employees to do so much more with so much more difficulty, especially in sales and install, and things like that. I think it's the hardest time any of us have seen. People are doing a lot of work and it shows, and I think its very important that the company shows a little 'too' much their support, and giving something extra to the employees, and thanking them for their work."*

Here, Brian almost hints at a level of 'embarrassment' at the old-fashioned methodologies of some HR initiatives within Velki, and that there is room to 'do more.' He also suggests that there should be attunement from the organization to the current nature of work or external pressures involving work. Moreover, perhaps even a specific focus in the employment groups which are perceived to be under the heaviest load at some given moment - in this case, *"sales and install."*

As mentioned previously, HR might find themselves stuck in this scenario, given the expectations set by top management:

> *"The challenge we have here is that, as I mentioned, that our company, and top management, have quite high hopes for us (...) I think that the challenge is the implementation of everything."*

This perhaps highlights even more the need for HRM initiatives to have 'real' value in the eyes of middle management. In the earlier comments, Brian felt happy to help in the practical management of the initiative, but was still somewhat lacking excitement due to the fact that it was not exactly 'worth the hassle.' So, if HRM is dealing with pressures from top management, their work with middle management should be all the more intentional.

The previous example provided insight into middle management ideals and concerns at a practical level. Now, some metaphorical examples from other middle managers are explored.

Edward hopes that HRM would be capable of exercising fair judgment:

> *"I can say that HR, to an extent, has a role of being almost like a judicial system of the company. Not necessarily so in terms of executing the sentence, but at least having a support system and influence be on the objective side."*

The *execution of the sentence* here can be understood as the ultimate decision-making regarding certain matters. Here, it is portrayed that HR should not necessarily be taking full responsibility for this, but that their input is valued more in the *support* of making decisions. A unifying theme with the earlier comments is that of support - support for the daily concerns of middle management in supporting their subordinates, a role they evidently take seriously. There is also the desire for HRM to remain *"objective",* in that they should exercise fair moral judgment in their actions.

The metaphorical reference of the *"judicial system"* implies that HRM should be guiding what is right or wrong, depending on the context, while always taking the perspective of what is best for the company into consideration *(objectivity)*. Meaning that HRM should consider less what is best from one individual's personal perspective. Mark supports the desire for objectivity, saying:

> *"It's very hard to separate a personal opinion from a professional opinion. I'm of the mindset that that's very very important, to separate those. To say that: oh, I don't know about this person or this idea because - or I don't like this idea because of the source it came from. Or: I don't know if this person should be in this role because of what he or she said in the past. You know, at the end of the day, if you're looking at someone going into a role, if their underlying foundation for wanting to go into that role is because they are actually, in fact, aligned with the company's vision, they understand the mission, and they hold the values firm and true, that is at least more into the discussion - as opposed to just saying: no, I've had this encounter and no, I now have formed this opinion of this person."*

The paradox of personal credibility and objectivity here somewhat presents itself. One one hand, HR should be a credible person to turn to, but on the other, their personal credibility is still limited to their ability to remain objective.

The credibility of HR, through the desires of middle management, is here characterized by the ability of HR to respond to the current concerns of middle management, their ability to provide 'actual' value in their initiatives, their ability to respond objectively to issues, and HR's ability to effectively communicate the perceived benefit of their work for both middle management, and through them, their subordinates.

4.2.2 Communicating HRM Intent

This chapter explores the importance of HRM intent for the establishment of credibility in the line manager-HRM relationship.

The focus of HRM at Velki has been consistently changing over the years. Sandra characterizes this by discussing various 'HR projects' that change on the basis of what is a current challenge within the organization. She explains:

> *"First of all, when I started (2017), we didn't have this kind of Group HR function at all, so basically all of the countries worked really independently around HR. I think the ways of working were in every country, the HR focus, I assume, that that was quite different. I think the first step was that, from the Group's side, we started to take more support and guidance to learning and development related themes. We started to have this eNPS survey, and we started to build onboarding frameworks for all countries, even though those have not been that well implemented to all countries. But… that is something we started already then. Then, we started to have these same kind of leadership training everywhere. I think that was 2017, 2018… around those years. So, we started from the learning and development side. And then, I think, the next bigger area was safety (…) we have to have some kind of common guidance (...) then started these project-based 'battles'(...) the next theme is workability and sick leaves."*

This comment from Sandra suggests that the focus areas of HRM have been, to this point, somewhat of a 'revolving door.' This also places challenges on the development of consistency within Velki's HRM operations. Again, Sandra notes the challenges in 'implementation.' According to Sandra's comment, the intention of HRM seems to be difficult to pin down. As concerns arise within the organization, the focus of HR changes.

Although it can be difficult to get a grasp of what exactly HRM 'wants to do', on the basis of Sandra's comment, Anna notes that a perhaps even more important component behind the revolving initiatives of HRM is the communication of them. Further, although the HRM initiatives are many, there should be a clear setting of expectations in what each party is to do. In Anna's words:

> *"With superiors, basically… to clarify to them what HR's role is, how we support superiors, but what they have to do themselves. So that we are doing things for them, and we are supporting them, but they have to sometimes do the hard work."*

Anna states the importance of clarifying intent to develop a mutual understanding of tasks. She further notes that *"they have to sometimes do the hard work"*, noting the weight of the work placed on middle management, and their responsibility to carry it out. In other words, middle management takes a large responsibility in implementing HRM initiatives, specifically the issue earlier highlighted by Sandra. Anna's comment also alludes to the importance of communicating intent, so that each party could understand the responsibilities in their task. This topic of communication is further elaborated on by Lisa:

> *"We have to lead Middle Management as HR, because they are leading the big amount of employees… We have to be more focused in the way that we communicate to our supervisors the information to be shared with the rest of the team."*

In some senses, there is a recognition for the need of a relationship between line management and HRM, but there are still uncertainties on how to achieve it. At the same time, the desire for the communication of intent is clearly perceived from the side of middle management. This is highlighted by Edward, saying:

> *"It should be a department which is clear in its intentions. Right? I think it should neither be the employee servant, which is never the truth, or the company's servant, which will always be detrimental to the company. It should be clear in its intention to balance between the two. I think it should be clear in communication, and also, as much as possible, objective…"*

According to this comment, HRM must first develop an understanding of their own intent, which should then be clearly communicated to the rest of the organization. He also explicitly states that HRM is never 'only' the employee's servant, where the needs of the individual are considered primary - that there is always a need for HRM to also fulfill organizational objectives. However, that too much focus on the organization can also create the impression of intent that HRM only cares about meeting certain metrics set by the organization.

If the 'birth of HRM at Velki' -chapter is considered here again, perhaps the focus towards organizational objectives can be highlighted. That, since the beginning, the 'strategic image' of the organization has been a guiding force within HRM. Here, the split between Group HR and local HR should be brought to light. Lucy notes:

> *"I think we need to define the critical things from the Group side (...) I think we also need to leave room for local adjustments."*

Here, Lucy mentions the 'criticality' of the Group's *'critical things.'* This implies that the HRM initiatives at Group level are critical for the aims at a local level. At the same time, there seems to be a recognition that at least in the past, there was not much room left for local adjustment.

Comments from Mark further suggest a certain level of confusion on the intent of HRM. On the one hand, he feels that HRM is crucial in acting as a *"sounding board"*, but, on the other hand, he seems fixated on managing his work in a way that is not distraught by the guidance of others. He notes about desired perceptions from HRM about him as a middle manager:

> *"At the end of the day, I don't want to care at all. At the end of the day, everyone's going to formulate their own opinion. And everyone's entitled to do that. Someone can come up to me and share their opinion, I'm not going to call them an idiot… Well, to their face. Because I will in my head, and maybe behind their back."*

Here, although the discussion was about HR, he turns the discussion to the overall consideration of another's aims in their work, and that at the end of the day, everyone will form their opinions about various issues. This whole comment from Mark perhaps suggests that one should not focus excessively on 'trusting someone', because the social landscape is constantly influenced by various perspectives.

This chapter highlights that even with multiple projects, HRM needs to be able to communicate their intentions and the division of roles in relation to their initiatives. HRM should also keep a coherent narrative in order to preserve their credibility. This chapter presents the nuanced nature of determining intent, in that it should not necessarily mean that HRM has one intention over another, but that they are able to express it, and thus create a mutual understanding within this relationship.

4.3 Exploring a Split in Interests in the HRM-Middle Manager Relationship

As prefaced earlier, HRM struggles to balance the needs of the employer and employees. This chapter explores the orientations which HRM has in fulfilling one or more of these interests, and where middle management perceives the value of the work to be. This chapter is not meant to imply that an organization's needs cannot be indeed fulfilled through the employee base, that there is 'one interest or another', but to explore the empirical commentary of where the interests of each group lies, and to make a suggestion on how this may influence impressions of credibility.

Joe summarizes the prerequisite for middle management's understanding of HRM work:

> *"If they understand what is the power of people, and the power of people who are healthy and safe, then they have understood the whole concept of HR."*

Through the comments of middle management, it is evident that a lot of responsibility is taken on in serving especially the physical and mental needs of employees. As their relationship with middle management is so tightly-knit, middle management may sometimes even feel as though HRM is not focused enough on delivering to the needs of the employees authentically. Brian notes this by saying:

> *"We have these surveys each quarter, about employee happiness (...) employee satisfaction. But, I think, especially in these harder times, there should be more of them (..) And make them a little bit different from each other. I think sometimes you don't see in those surveys the 'how are you doing? -question. There are just questions like: How do*

you feel about the company? How do you feel about the way we are going? How do you feel about what should be changed within the company? And they are always kind of work related, of course, but there should be the question: "How are you doing?"

Brian implies the pronounced focus of some HR initiatives on company -related issues, and lack of focus on employee -focused issues. He also alludes to the fact that middle management is often the one asking these questions from their subordinates, and that the distance of HR may make it seem like they are relatively unbothered about employee concerns. It is evident here that middle management takes great responsibility for their subordinates.

Charles supports the vision of HR as an employee support function by saying:

> *"It's related to the needs of the employees (...) They do everything in the shadows, and if you have any kind of trouble, for example with payroll, it's solved through there."*

Here, it should perhaps be noted that although Charles recognizes the extensive nature of HRM work (*"the needs of employees"*), the example provided is a rather trivial task of HRM, implying that *"the needs of employees"* when it comes to HRM are perhaps quite limited.

The 'people' focus of HR is further communicated by charles when explaining what HR should stand for:

> *"It should be about people. That they know who are working within the company and in what sections, what their responsibilities are, what is expected of them, and of course the physical and mental health side of things (...) I feel like HR is the carrying force within the company, especially when it comes to people's own experience of the company."*

Charles further supports the intensity of the personal relationship with subordinates, saying:

> *"Sometimes I'm more of a psychologist than a manager. That's what makes us special I think - I go with my whole team, sometimes we go for lunch, or sometimes we do special activities which creates a connection at work. Actually, when you need some help from the others, if you have that connection, it's easier to get it. I think it's like a relationship - you have to be there in the good and in the bad moments."*

Edward goes onto explain the recognition from middle management about the “balancing act” of HR:

> *“It's a balance between making sure that employees have their rights, have their conditions for work in accordance with the contemporary value-systems, but at the same time, keeping the interest of the company in mind, so basically it’s a fine balance. That’s what HR does. If they switch to one or the other side, it becomes an imbalanced company (...) It’s never in the middle, that’s why it’s balancing - so it’s always switching. The goal of HR is to not switch too far.”*

Again, there is a defense of representation of employees within this argument. Edward suggests that credibility may be lost if HR switches too far to one side of the “balancing act”, while recognizing that the task of HR is never completely in serving the organization or serving the interests of employees.

On the side of HRM, the reality strikes as somewhat different. Emma notes where the bias may stem from, saying:

> *“You do fall into this bias of ‘well, they’re paying my bills.’ So you have to kind of submit, but that’s kind of normal in any organization, any employee kind of has to submit to the organization they’re affiliated with.”*

This suggests that as the company is responsible for granting the employees their livelihood, to some extent, HRM (and perhaps everyone in the organization) *should* be geared towards serving the needs of the company. Emma’s comment also suggests that perhaps the strongest tie to the organization is indeed involved with ‘the paycheck’, and that ultimately, everyone is going to view the company through that lens.

The ‘access’ which employees have to HRM varies significantly, referring to the relationships of personal credibility. While some middle managers develop quite a personal relationship with HRM, some, not so much so. In Anna’s perception, taking the initiative for the formation of this relationship should come more from the side of middle management, noting:

> *“My feeling is that the managers don’t communicate enough to HR. For example, if you think about recruitment or offboarding, things will just pop out, you know. We will get the*

information of employees leaving too late, you know, they have already left, so there's no offboarding to do. Or the recruitment processes, they start too late, there's not enough time to go through with the process(...)"

This takes into focus the "*process"* in the fulfillment of HR's needs from line management. As the previous comments have implied, middle management views their task as quite closely related to the needs of their subordinates, but the viewing of HR through a set of 'processes to follow' might challenge the desire to approach HRM and to have a consistent relationship. Again, HR needs to 'prove' their value to middle management.

With some middle management, the relationship with HRM seems to be operating quite well. Charles explains this by saying:

"I think what we have at the moment, everything should be improved. But, I think what we have now is really good. They have a department of training, and they have another department of follow-ups, just to see if the employees are happy with the environment, and about recruiting. My feeling at the moment is that it's a really nice atmosphere."

Here, it is implied that in fact, that the tasks of HRM are clearly defined. That is to say, Charles feels that HRM is fulfilling current needs from the side of middle management, creating a good atmosphere around HRM. His perspective of HRM also seems more objective - it consisting of *these and these* tasks, while the relationships suggested by other quotes in this chapter add layers of complexity to the relationship.

Essentially, this chapter can be concluded that each middle manager and HRM professional interprets the relationship to one another differently, but some balance in fulfilling individual needs and organizational needs is required for the firm establishment of a relationship. Middle management also carries a lot of responsibility for their employees, also in a psychological and mental sense, and this should be corresponded with support from HRM. HRM clearly holds an important status within the organization ("*the carrying force"*), but there is a responsibility to communicate in order to benefit from the middle manager-HRM relationship.

4.4 Summary of Empirical Findings and Analysis

To gather a comprehensive and succinct summary of the empirical findings and their analysis, one core takeaway for each chapter and its sub-chapter will be pointed out.

Chapter 4.1 provides empirical findings on the development of HRM at Velki, a construction organization. HR operations initially operated independently in each country, but over time, a Group HR function was established. The strategic picture and values of the organization play a significant role in HRM, with non alignment leading to employee turnover. The HR function is divided into local and Group HR, with employees approaching local HR for specific local issues. Middle managers struggle to understand HRM activities, emphasizing the need for better communication.

Chapter 4.2 focuses on building credibility in HRM as perceived by middle management at Velki. Personal credibility and time are seen as important factors, with HRM needing to be seen as credible both as a department and as individuals. Middle managers desire trust, professionalism, strategic partnership, and reliability from HRM. They also expect HRM to understand and support their day-to-day needs and challenges. Establishing trust and effective communication is crucial for a strong relationship.

Chapter 4.3 highlights the different perspectives and dynamics in the relationship between HRM and middle management. Middle managers stress the importance of HRM understanding and addressing the physical and mental needs of employees. They want HRM to be more attentive to employee well-being and see themselves as providing support and mentoring. HRM acknowledges the need to balance employee and company interests and recognizes the complexity of the relationship. Better communication and initiative from middle managers are suggested to improve the relationship.

A key finding of the research is that HRM should be aligned with the organization's strategic picture, credibility should be built, trust should be established, and middle managers must understand their role in the organization. Managing HR effectively is crucial for maintaining a strong relationship and meeting the needs of employees.

5. Discussion

The discussion chapter reflects on the empirical findings through the use of appropriate literature. Firstly, we will go on to discuss the importance of understanding the HRM function as a component of building credibility. Then, the relationship between line management and HRM will be discussed in relation to value and intentionality. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the association of time with credibility, as well as the connection between competence and credibility.

5.1 What does HRM do? - A Relationship of Credibility through Understanding

The empirical results present that the establishment of credibility is fundamentally related to understanding. Without a clear understanding of what HR does, it is difficult to establish credibility for the individuals in the department, but also for the department as a whole.

Understanding is defined by Schwandt (1999, p. 452) as: *"literally to stand under, to grasp, to hear, get, catch, or comprehend the meaning of something."* To be able to *"grasp"* something, the development of meaning should be characterized by some level of continuity. That is to say, it is difficult to understand (*"grasp"*) something when the point of attention is constantly evolving. Challenges in understanding at Velki are disputed by the constantly changing nature of HRM initiatives. The HRM initiatives seemed to be taken on on a whim, but never carried out to a point where line management developed a clear understanding of value to bring initiatives to the level of implementation. Ulrich (2016, p. 161) further highlights the importance of consistency, clarity, and high impact in communications, alluding that the ability to do this is a component of fulfilling criterion for being a *"credible activist."* Communications were also consistently alluded to being lacking, or where there was not an established comprehension for who was to communicate to who. Both parties thus need to first understand one another and their respective roles concerning HRM, after which relationships of continuity can be established.

Ulrich (1998, p. 133) also notes that HR should be *"held accountable"* for the determination and carrying out of deliverables. However, without a lack of understanding of HRM's function in relation to line management, accountability becomes a difficult thing to manage. At the same time, the understanding of HRM often comes down to a better establishment of the roles which both line management and HRM should take in their collective relationship. Torrington and Hall (1987, p. 11) allude to this by saying that the task of 'personnel management' is "*a series of activities which: first enable working people and their employing organizations to agree about the objectives and nature of their working relationship, and, secondly, ensures that the agreement is fulfilled".* Thus, HRM must be focused on establishing relationships, but also to determine the parameters around which these relationships function. For example, if line management is not clear on the objectives of HRM on some certain projects, or even more so, on their relationship as a whole, it can be difficult to coherently and consistently fulfill agreements, which ultimately construct the relationship of credibility.

5.1.1 A Relationship of 'Actual' Value

Line managers are constantly surrounded by the responsibility of taking care of a large number of employees. As seen through the empirical results, this role is often taken very seriously, with the line managers communicating a lot of care for their subordinates. McConville (2006) suggests this by explaining that line managers have a difficult role in balancing the tensions of the organization as well as those individual employees at the employee base. Thus, when HRM steps into the picture (figuratively and literally) with line management, the value which they provide must be 'actual' and relevant to the tensions which they are experiencing. The interest of line management to engage in the initiatives set by HRM is thus influenced by the 'actual' value for themselves and their subordinates.

One such determined 'actual' value contribution, through the empirical results, is perceived as the 'support' which is received from HRM. Here, remembering the reference of Parker, Hawes, Lumb and McCarthy(1971, p. 23), who highlight the importance of the HRM function through the explanation that the main role of HRM lies in advising and assisting line management in their task of executing the 'actual' people management. The theme of support is expressed by Legge (1995) as the involvement of HRM with line management. That is to say, 'personnel management' should not only be confined to some limited set of initiatives circling around the HRM personnel, but that their role is necessarily that of involvement with the organization.

Line management should similarly develop an understanding of the value of the human resources management (Guest, 1987). In order to fully internalize HRM's initiatives, line management must see a benefit of their work in order to consider the development of a relationship. Guest (1987, p. 519) suggests that this could be done with the introduction of *"involvement programmes."* HRM is thus encouraged to build a relationship with line management which is focused on involving line management in the practice of HRM. Here, it is also important to recognize that line management should be aware of what exactly they are looking for - that is, they should have a certain level of understanding of the scope of HRM. If HRM is to be of *"service to the line"*, as they ought, line management should be clear in its desires of how it wishes to collaborate with HRM (Legge, 1995, p. 8). The empirical examples of Velki clearly presented that there exists a desire for collaboration from both sides. The importance of intentional integration is however required to limit existing or further alienation. This also requires a certain understanding of the 'balancing act', and the cruciality of HRM's role in serving the employees *through* the often trusted line management.

5.1.2 Intentional Relationships at the basis of Creating Credibility

The determination of intent in an organizational setting is about defining what one *intends* to do, so that others can keep up with one's intentions. The empirical results highlight a demand for consistency for intentions, at the same time suggesting that a lack of communication of intent can cause line management to be doubtful of the ongoings of HRM.

Bratman (1984, p. 380) suggests that a distinguishing fact of intentions, in comparison to desires, is a *"demand for strong consistency."* As the empirical results have presented, the fragmented nature of HRM work can become a challenge in determining intentions of consistency.
On the one hand, as the empirical results have proven, HRM has quite a strong desire to serve the organization, while the intent of middle management is often much more involved in employees' day-to-day work.

The challenge of HRM's split interests also challenges the way in which HRM is accepted. For example, if a general perception that HRM is in their work to search for *"gimmicks"* to satisfy management (Drucker, 1954, p. 275), and in general, HRM is guided by desires of management, employees may fear that they are being exploited (Nishii, Lepak, & Schneider, 2008). The role of communicating intention then becomes important, even if solely in its act of presenting to the employee their non-exploitation. As suggested by an interviewed middle manager, middle management holds an important task in communicating HRM's actions to 'underlinks'. This relationship thus holds importance in not only building credibility amongst middle management and HRM, but also in the deliverance of HRM's intent and credibility to 'underlinks.'

Gratton (1994, p. 55) further suggests that aims of management concerning HRM work are either related to the individuals own *"cognitive frame",* or, are concerned with the issues which management has been facing in the last months. HRM must thus also be communicative in understanding the motives of middle management's desires, and in organizing them into consistently understandable goals which serve the credibility relationship between HRM and line management. Here, consider that there is often an *"exploration and learning process"* which ensues from understanding the different ideas of HRM's focus (Gratton, 1994, p. 55). Consistency in communication is thus not enough, but there must also be space for the exploration of the HRM-middle management relationship, which ensures that various viewpoints are considered to create collective understanding and credibility. This "*exploration"* also involves time, which, concerning the development of the HRM-middle management relationship at Velki, can be said to be limited (thus far). Ultimately, as suggested by Nishii, Lepak and Schneider (2008, p. 534), it would seem of great benefit for HRM to communicate the intentions of their practices in a way which is *"unambiguous and salient."*

5.2 Credibility and Time

The empirical results provide insight into the development of credibility within HRM, and how personal credibility and time play important roles in building relationships with middle management.

Ulrich's (2016) work emphasized that the credibility of HR professionals is established by doing what they promise, building personal relationships of trust, and being reliable. However, time also plays a crucial role in the development of credible relationships, as trust makes itself apparent through *"personal relationships that endure"* (Ulrich, 2016). The orientation of middle management and HRM is similar, with both fulfilling the needs of multiple stakeholders, and both responsible for organizational effectiveness. To develop credibility, HRM must prove to be capable of fulfilling their promises, and this does not happen overnight. Credibility for HR departments is also built on personal credibility. The desire for trust and to be perceived as a reliable, helpful person, and a professional, is evident in the interviews conducted with HR managers, where personal credibility is considered to be an important element in the building of credibility for the entire HR department. While building personal relationships and personal credibility is essential, it takes time to prove oneself as a reliable and trustworthy HR professional. Taking into account, Likert (1961) highlights the role of middle management as "*linking pins*" within an organization, and stresses the importance of building relationships and internal binding. Therefore, for the HRM and middle management relationship to work effectively, HRM needs to focus on building relationships over roles and proving their capabilities through the fulfillment of promises over time. As mentioned, credibility is *trust, built over time.*

Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953) also suggests that people tend not to expose themselves to sources towards which they have developed a negative view. So, for the enablement of the relationship of credibility and time, one should also consider that the overall impression of line management or HRM of the other should be *positive*, so that the processual development of a relationship over time can take place. It is understandable that HRM may experience certain 'growing pains' when entering the organizational rhetoric, which means that a lot of work is involved in merely creating a positive impression of HRM from the beginning. Working with line management ensures that the growth of HRM is characterized by real-life issues 'on the shop floor.' In addition, as line managers have already most likely adapted a lot of responsibility for HR tasks, the collaboration enables the understanding of the trajectory of the credibility relationship (Gilbert, De Winne & Sels, 2015). The socially complex development of this relationship thus should be taken into consideration from the beginning.

5.2.1 Credibility and Competence

The empirical results portray the importance of personal credibility as an HRM competence. As suggested in the previous section, credibility is built over time - thus, an HRM representative can 'hold' certain competences and domains of knowledge, but the competency of credibility involves effort through the formation of relationships. For example, an HRM professional can explicitly be trained and acquire know-how on the *"knowledge of business, knowledge of HR, knowledge of change/process",* but is forced to place personal resources into the relationship building process regarding credibility (Ulrich, 1997, p. 314). In fact, Ulrich, Brockbank, Johnson, and Younger (2007, p. 9) conclude that being a *"credible activist"* is the most important element in the prediction of an effective HR professional. They go further to note that this involves the building of relationships, but also *action.* That is, HR professionals should be active in their role of establishing credibility relationships. If an active stance is not presented to the line managers, one may become only a component of the *"credible activist"* competence domain, that is, credible, but not active. These two are then essentially connected for the realization of credibility relationships with line management.

6. Conclusion

The conclusion discusses the main empirical findings of this research, the theoretical and practical implications, the limitations and critique of the study, as well as opportunities and suggestions for future research.

6.1 Empirical Findings

This chapter outlines the main findings from the empirical analysis, exploring concepts which were brought out in the interview discourse.

The main question sought to be answered throughout this research was how credibility can be established in the line manager-HRM relationship within a multinational construction organization. While the nature of the organization was not necessarily a core topic of discussion, it provided a valuable context for the exploration of a topic which still goes relatively unexplored. The conclusions of this research are divided into the main themes of: the line manager-HRM relationship, credibility and its relation to competency, and intentionality.

1. **The line manager-HRM relationship:** The relationship of line management and HRM is often characterized by mere confusion of the tasks of one or the other. In fact, we make the argument that a lack of understanding, and thus lack of communication, is the root cause of the challenges in this relationship. In many ways, HRM and line management also share similar duties, and so the understanding of the tasks of the other, and their needs in relation to the other, become increasingly imported. Otherwise, both are at risk of devolving into the roles of the other so much that perceived value towards the other may begin to lack.

   As a cause of this understanding, HRM should also recognize its own importance in the role of support, while handing over ‘people’ responsibilities to line management. The very name of HRM in this case can be challenged, as HRM is actually limited in its capacity to deal with all of the ‘human resources,’ especially in organizations where the function is just beginning to evolve. This is where the supporting role of HRM is even further highlighted (amongst understanding of the basic 'judiciary' duties).

Lastly, the relationship of line management and HRM should further be characterized by consistency. Both should be involved in the relationship upkeep in a way which enables discourse throughout the phases of evolving organizational life.

2. **Credibility and competence:** Credibility of line management is largely impacted by personal relationships of credibility, as well as a proven consistency in responding to line management's current and actual needs. They also need to remain consistent in how elements of the organization are evaluated (promotions, for example), and avoid extensive fluctuation.

   The paradox of objectivity and personal credibility was highlighted especially in the empirical results. HRM professionals are expected to be able to serve as support systems which are not *too* influenced either by the employee base, nor by the 'whims' of top management. They should build relationships of personal credibility, but also be able to make judgments which are rooted in a commonly understood and cohesively communicated message. The 'physical' distance of HRM from employees, which may be increasingly highlighted in construction organizations, also means that HRM is not necessarily observing the 'objective' realities of line management's work. It is thus crucial for HRM to be connected to the employee base through line management in order to be able to make decisions which are fairly justified. A credible HRM professional thus sticks to a unified set of processes, while also claiming personal relationships of trust to understand the current troubles of line management and their essential connection to the employee base. Occasionally, the trust relationship is characterized by distinctly defined tasks (e.g., recruitment), but sometimes, HRM becomes much more involved in being a support system (e.g., *"sounding board"*). Either way, HRM must prove its competency through knowledge domains, but in addition, through establishing a relationship of credibility which is influenced by the interest of both parties involvement in the relationship.

3. **Intentionality:** When it comes to intentionality, HRM should recognize how involved line managers are in the day-to-day struggles of their employees. They should also be clear in how they are to serve the organization, and clearly determine those areas where they are serving top management, but when the line manager relationship rises to be especially important. For better intentionality, HRM and line management must explore the relationship with each other. In organizations where a certain impression around HRM has been determined (they are 'too' oriented towards the organization, or 'too' oriented towards the employee), the changing of the intent narrative may prove to be challenging. However, if line management considers themselves as important messengers of HRM's initiatives, the development of this relationship also clarifies HRM's intent as a whole.This also begins to narrow down the gaping void to the question: What does HR even do?, as the entire organization becomes part and parcel of the conversation.

6.2 Theoretical Contribution

This chapter analyzes the appropriate connections made to literature, theory framework, and theoretical concepts, and how these theories may be re-looked at, or re-evaluated.

The theoretical contributions of this research are focused on three themes: line manager-HRM relationships, credibility as an HRM competence, and intent as a function of credibility. These will be discussed separately and together throughout this chapter. It is noted that the main theoretical frameworks used in this research were that of source credibility theory (SCT) and social judgment theory (SJT). In addition, the resource-based view (RBV) was used to conceptualize the work of HRM, while theories of intent were explored through the theory of planned behavior (TPB). These theoretical elements were explored through relevant sub-themes, leading to the exploration of credibility as the main research theme.

Firstly, our research suggests that there are still challenges in the line manager-HRM relationship. This points to the recent emergence of the HRM field, and perhaps a lack of understanding from the beginning of how line management's and HRM's responsibilities should be divided, and how a positive relationship should be formed. Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953, p. 35) note that *"reactions to a communication are significantly affected by cues as to the* *communicator's intentions, expertness, and trustworthiness."* Although the roles of HRM and line management are extensively explored, they are seldom understood. Doherty and Kruz (1996) note that in social judgment theory (SJT), if an environment is further influenced by an air of uncertainty and groups with varying interests, there is an increasing possibility for conflict. The recent emergence of HRM, specifically in the empirical organization at hand, paired with a lack of understanding, constitutes challenges in the implementation of a credibility relationship - albeit, the trajectory of the initiatives seemed quite positive at times.

This research calls for a rather desperate call for the better understanding of relationships within organizations, not just a mere note of them 'being important'. HRM is still navigating its way in finding its organizational stance, and we do not want line management to feel intruded by HRM, but like the relationship can be of mutual and consistent value. One way that the value of this relationship is visualized is by reflecting on the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm, where line managers are viewed to be taking an increasingly important stance in how the 'human resources' of an organization are handled (Storey, 1992). This research determines that the importance of the line manager-HRM relationship ultimately lies in the ability to 'access' the resources of the organization. HRM professionals should not thus fear *"giving personnel away" to line management*, but focus on the ways in which they can establish fair and consistent policy throughout HR organizations, and how they can grow the relationship of personal credibility with line management (Guest, 1987, p. 519). When considering this in relation to the objectivity-personal credibility paradox presented in the empirical results, it may be considered that objectivity can be established through the creation of consistent HRM processes, while personal credibility is achieved through building relationships of trust, over time.

We also argue that current literature about line management and HRM does not sufficiently focus on the development of the line manager-HRM relationship, but rather on the individual 'roles' which each should be serving. McConville (2006, p. 647) notes that line managers are like *"agents of HRM",* which means that, to some extent, line managers are the representatives of HRM work. Line managers should thus be given the sufficient tools to understand HRM processes to be able to interpret HRM's work better, and to gain sufficient understanding of its importance. HRM work is often considered to be challenging, even *too* challenging, considering expectations set forth, where the consideration of the utilization of relationships and building a credible function is not even considered (Ulrich, Brockbank, Johnson & Younger, 2007). It is not, then, that the expectations for HRM are set too high, but that because of a lack of understanding, expectations are not even properly set or set at all (here, consider line management), and thus the relationship of credibility for HRM is subject to its ever-lasting ambiguity.

Lastly, to make a note on the theory of planned behavior (TBD), it should be recognized that *"attitude toward the behavior"* is a component of building intention and its eventual realization (Ajzen, 1991, p. 182). This means that the development of attitudes within HRM towards a behavior (the desire to be close to line management), can constitute for eventual actualized behavior. This means that the fundamental understanding of organizational relationships requires an evaluation of attitudes. For example, if HRM work is being distracted consistently, it may be difficult to develop attitudes towards certain kinds of behaviors which would perhaps be desirable.

6.3 Limitations

Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953) also suggest that credibility, in itself, can vary across cultures. Due to a lack of HRM resources at Velki, it was necessary to include HRM representation from various countries. Although this situation may not prove itself ideal in the consideration of cultural differences and their implications on the consistency of the research, we believe that in the case of using a lens of symbolic interactionism, the various cultures are justified - and, in fact, add depth to the research. Prasad (2018, p. 22), notes the importance of considering *"multiple realities"* in the face of the symbolic interactionist approach, which becomes a distinguished element of the findings considered here. Moreover, Doherty and Kruz (1996) emphasize the importance of exploring samples in various environments, specifically within the framework of social judgment theory (SJT). Social realities are hardly consistent, which is why the sample was deemed appropriate and interesting despite possible implications of cultural difference and associated understandings of the concept of credibility.

Another limitation in regard to this research was concerning the size of the sample interviewed. Due to restricted time, it was only possible to interview a smaller sample, although elements of symbolic interactionism may suggest that a larger sample would provide more valuable insight. Sometimes, even spending *"long hours in the organization"* is relevant in getting a better understanding of the *Lebenswelt,* or life world of the interviewees (Prasad, 2018, p. 26). Unfortunately, this would have required a lot of time and resources, which was not possible, considering the scope and timeline of the research. However, the interviews were characterized by the open-ended nature referred to in symbolic interactionism, where interviewees were interrupted as little as possible, and where the conversation was given space to take even unexpected turns. All things considered, the approach of symbolic interactionism may have been restricted in the setting of this research, but was nevertheless relevant and maximized considering situational circumstances.

6.4 Future Research

This chapter looks at the results of this research in light of important discoveries and suggestions for a way forward.

Personal credibility has weaved its way into Ulrich's (1997, p. 314) list of HRM competencies, listed alongside: *"knowledge of business, knowledge of HR, knowledge of change/process."* Here, it is important to understand the social complexities of credibility, and their involvement with *"expertness", "trustworthiness"*, and *"intention"* (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953, p. 35). Credibility is considered a fundamental competence of HRM, but the basis of what that credibility constitutes is still poorly understood. For example, 'knowledge' of things can be acquired, but credibility is much less understood in its seemingly crucial stance in the HRM competence -listing. Dave Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank, and Mike Ulrich (2016, p. 2) define credibility as being able to be *"relied on to meet commitments,"* and although this gives some explicitness to the idea of credibility, it is still insufficiently defined. For example, this definition of credibility as a competence does not necessarily take into consideration *"expertness"* or *"intention"*.

We argue that the social complexity of credibility as an HRM competence is still poorly understood, and needs better evaluation and empirical contextualization. This, especially considering organizational relationships which are easily labeled as ‘strategically important’ - such as that of line management and HRM.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the introduction of new organizational rhetorics, such as that of HRM, does not come without its fair share of ‘exploration’ work. It is thus important in the emergence of new and developing organizational phenomena to attempt to enter the *Lebenswelt* or ‘life world’ of organizational members, to help make sense of the placement of relationships and their implications on organizational life (Prasad, 2018). Dunford, Snell, and Wright (2001) allude to the importance of examining the socially complex nature of resource-based firms (RBV). To truly understand the framework to building a resource -based organization, one needs to explore notions of credibility in how relationships can become better understood and communicated. As the empirical portion of this research suggests, there is a clear emotionality associated with the interpretation of relationships. The building of understanding in these relationships can thus build or deconstruct the opportunities for better collaboration or lack thereof.

6.5 Practical Implications

The practical implications are related to the concept of credibility as a competence. If personal credibility is considered such a highly-valued element in the HRM-line manager relationship, HRM should own the tools to develop the ‘competence’ of credibility. Again, credibility is characterized by competence, trust, and intention, which means that it is not enough to label HRM credibility as a ‘competence’, but that it must be developed through tools which clarify the place of HRM in organizations. Line managers are fundamentally the ones communicating information to their subordinates and managing the employee base, which means that HRM has an important duty of supporting line management in various current struggles. If the struggles are limited to for example recruitment and onboarding, the parameters of the relationship can be determined accordingly. What matters is that the components of credibility (competence, trust, and intention) are understood and communicated across the board.

HRM competencies are easily ‘lumped’ into a recipe-like list of suggestions for what HRM is to do. However, this research recognizes the importance of the separation of HRM’s competencies into interpersonal and skills-based competencies, in order to understand the function of HRM better. Furthermore, these competencies should further be analyzed and distinguished to determine their true value. HRM is loaded with a variety of tasks and demands, but this research sheds light on how the responsibilities of HRM lie more in the building of relationships than the ‘implementation’ of an intervention. Through relationships the role of HRM can be better understood in its interpersonal and skills -based facets, and thus can be better characterized by an air of credibility.

As practical advice from this research, HRM and line management should consider the training of one another on arising issues, where even difficult questions such as that of mental health can be brought up and highlighted. Top management must also be aware of the importance of these relationships in order to enable the exploration of the relationship. If HRM is consistently distracted by *“high demands”* from top management (as noted by one of the interviewed HR managers), it can be difficult to focus on building relationships.

The HRM function in its novelty is still experiencing a phase of exploration. However, as noted in the beginning, HRM is fundamentally about the relationship between an employee and their employer. HRM and line management thus have great possibilities in collective collaboration, better understanding of each other, and ultimately, building an image of credibility for HRM - together.

“The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them.” -Ernest Hemingway

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Note:

The quotes at the beginning of each chapter were derived from goodreads.com with appropriate key-word searches. The quotes are meant to orient the reader for the content of each chapter.

Appendix

Appendix A - List of Interviewees

Name (pseudonyms)	Role	Country
Emma	Local HR Manager	Country A
Mark	Middle Manager	Country A
Edward	Middle Manager	Country A
Charles	Middle Manager	Country B
Lisa	Local HR Manager	Country B
Joe	Group HR Manager	Country C
Anna	Group HR Manager	Country C
Lucy	Group HR Manager	Country C
Sandra	Local HR Manager	Country C
Brian	Middle Manager	Country C

Appendix B - Interview Guide

The interviews began with an introduction of the researchers, followed by a short explanation of the scope of the research. Some casual conversation was involved to set the tone for the conversations. Then, the respondents were asked to approve of the recording of the interviews, after which the interview began with the thematically defined questions in accordance with the research. As the interviews were semi-structured, there was an attempt to limit the number of questions, so as to leave more room for the exploration of conversations and follow-up questions. The original intention of the research was to focus on the topic of 'identity' in relation to HRM, but the empirical results guided us to interpret this more from a relationship -basis. The topic of credibility was determined as a consistently arising topic, which was then also implemented into the research. This is the benefit of using an abductive approach - and, in this context, it was important to really listen to what the respondents had to say, and to mold the focus of the resource accordingly.

Relationship to HRM work

- How do you experience HRM?
- What are some myths associated with HR work within your organization?
    - What are the realities?
- What is the role of HR in the organization?
- What is your role in working with HRM?
- Has HRM work developed within the organization in the past years? Since it started?
    - If so, how?
- How does HRM collaborate with middle management?
- Do you think the business goals of HRM and middle management are aligned?
    - If so, how?

Identifying HRM

- What is the goal of the organization?

- How do you ensure that employees work towards this shared goal within the organization?
- What are the ideal HR operations from your perspective?
    - Does this correspond to current realities within the organization? If so, why/why not?
- How is the identity of HR being challenged in the current organizational environment?
- What does identity mean to you?
- In what ways do you construct your identity within the organization?
- How do you wish to be perceived by HR // by Middle Management?
- What shapes the relationship between middle management and HR?
- As an HR/middle manager, what are the general problems you are trying to solve?