

# Organizational Civility: Assessing IR Competencies of HR Professionals

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*This article adopts an assessment center (AC) methodology to understand how the industrial relations (IR) competencies of HR professionals in their early career are evolving. We find that IR competencies are correlated with several other competencies which are essential for professional success. However, IR competencies lag behind the others. It is argued that the erosion of IR competencies embodies a loss of civility in organizations. This loss of civility is closely associated with the proliferation of functionalist and instrumental discourses which severely corrode dialogical possibilities in organizations.*

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## Introduction

Industrial Relations (IR) competencies may not be as much about the efficacy of negotiations as they may be about producing organizational spaces as sites of civility. Negotiation relies on instrumentality. On the other hand, civility implies a larger sense of ethos. When people are uncivil in their engagements with each other, they produce a variety of affects. The absence of civility implies a breach in social relations. There is interesting data about the lack of civility that Porath and Pearson (2013) have collected over a decade and a half.

About a quarter of employees surveyed felt that they had experienced uncivil behavior at least once a week in the workplace in 1998. This number increased to a half in 2011 (Porath & Pearson, 2013). We argue that this could be on account of a significant erosion of industrial relations competencies which have been taking place over the years. The erosion of industrial relations competencies often leads to an erosion of a common sense of justice from the workplace. Yet, this common sense of justice is vital for reducing negative emotions and

emotional exhaustion from the workplace (Frenkel, Li & Restubog, 2012).

In the absence of civility, people may nurture a sense of resentment towards each other. In contemporary times, one of the major concerns of industrial relations thinkers and trade unionists is the individualization of the employment relationship. We argue that the loss of civility is a major cause of individualization of agency. Employment relations become psychologized and less social when the lack of civility permeates interactions between people. The absence of civility inaugurates a climate of personalized nastiness. When an important IR competency such as knowledge of labor laws declines, what declines is the ethos of the law.

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In this article, we present evidence from an assessment center that measured competencies of thirty five participants. The participants are pursuing their final year post graduate program in human resource management. Upon completion of the two years post graduate and professional qualification, they will be placed in different organizations as human resource professionals. We compare the IR competencies of these budding HR professionals with other competencies that were assessed during the assessment center. We, then comment on the gaps which exist and how they can be bridged

in order to build a greater sense of civility in organizations. We also comment on which other competencies that IR competencies are correlated with and suggest what implications these correlations may hold.

In what follows we first discuss a theoretical conceptualization of IR competencies in the form of offering a catharsis of dialogue. Next, we offer a brief description of the methodology of the assessment center conducted by us and the range of competencies that were measured in the assessment center. We, then, present the results of the assessment center and compare IR competencies with other competencies. Finally, we offer some suggestions for the IR community of practitioners and academics about the alarming erosion of IR competencies during the past few years.

### **Situating IR Competencies**

HR can process grievances and resolve issues. HR makes a decision which is resolved in favor of one actor or another. HR engages in an act of judgment. An act of judgment is always sub-optimal. There is an element of violence in the exercise of judgment. It has been found that HR managers are hugely inadequate to the concerns of employees such as bullying. Instead of doing anything to prevent employees from being subjected to bullying, HR managers often enact symbolic violence against employees by legitimizing the bullying behavior of managers as being a part of normal performance management processes (Harrington, Warren & Rayner, 2013).

HR practitioners can argue that civility can be sustained in an organization without an accompanying process of judgment. Instead, it may be brought about by building systems and processes inside organizations. But the nature of these systems and processes is likely to be theological rather than dialogical. HR systems and processes rely on the sovereignty of the human being. The imagination of sovereignty is often a fetishized image of the human being that is deployed inside organizations (Arnould & Cayla, 2015). The sovereign human being as an individual is recruited and selected into the organization.

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She is then compensated and appraised. She is also developed. Her career is managed. She may even be mentored. Whenever, there is a need, she may also require disciplining. At the end of the day, the imagination of HR engages with sovereignties. In conceptualizing human agency as being sovereign and not politically negotiated, HR processes may end up producing a range of injustices for employees (Joseph & Jagannathan, 2015). Sovereignties often tend to be theological. The sovereign atom immersing itself in a universal truth. The atom is however an enclosed space. The very act of rendering the atom enclosable also makes it autonomous. Conceptualizing fundamentality in terms

of atomistic existence is a process of reductionist social analysis (Thalos, 2011). The human being as an atomic unit is also held culpable for her actions.

She will eventually be judged for her actions. There is an accounting calculus of sin and virtue that she is accumulating. However, an accounting calculus of sin and virtue is also closely associated with the politics of producing guilt and the figure of the criminal (Brennan, 2003). The moment we start accounting for sin and virtue, we may force people to regard themselves as some form of criminals who are always deviating from one or the other moral norm. An interesting balance can arise here. We argue that authority and power can often influence the asymmetry of nastiness inside organizations. However, if HR is a theological process that holds human beings accountable, then there may be a possibility of counteracting the effects of power and authority.

Yet theological processes have a strange, mystical method of escaping accountabilities. In an institutional sense, theologies are often about legitimizing the spirit of status quo. In a critical sense, theologies are about contesting climates of injustice by calling for a passage beyond the material. They look at the solidarity that is necessary for producing the material. However, critical theologies are not as much about sovereignties as they are about de-institutionalization and re-inventing the spirit of institutions. Critical theologies are focused on expanding solidarity and contesting violence (Auga, 2013).

Yet, as we have seen, HR is more complicit in the production of sovereignties than in the imagination of injustice. Therefore, the social relations of HR are more likely to be in line with the logic of institutional theologies rather than critical theologies. Institutional theologies are implicated in the processes of structuring social relations in the form of policing and violation. Thus, HR systems and processes can create an atmosphere of behavioral normality, HR processes can lead to the accumulation of guilt among subjects. This is closely linked to the project of producing obedience in organizations and curbing dissent (Chwastiak, 2015).

Unlike HR, the tradition of IR has not been complicit in regimes of individualization and sovereignty. IR has engaged with collective desires and aspirations of workers. The practice of the working class has been an important historical reality and memory for IR. Women's rights and working conditions have ensured that gender forms another important context for IR. The figure of the marginal has also been a significant consideration for IR. In considering the figure of the marginal, IR has paid attention to the intersection of individual and institutional factors (Buchmann, Kriesi & Sacchi, 2010).

IR has dealt with issues such as minimum wages and social security. IR has dealt with the practice of resistance and struggle. International economic processes such as outsourcing and their impact on unionization have also been an important part of the focus of IR (Luce,

2005). As a consequence, IR is more attuned to the idea of collective identities rather than sovereign identities. This does not mean that IR has not been manipulative and devious in engaging with workers. IR has engaged in various acts of injustice and violence against workers.

**IR does not perpetuate the same narrative vacuums of work history that HR does.**

However, the assaults of IR have been experienced by workers in a collective sense. There is often a shared working class memory and history associated with IR. Consequently, IR does not perpetuate the same narrative vacuums of work history that HR does. Within the paradigm of HR, the very possibility of a commons where disclosures can flourish is curbed. There is a sense of suspicion and fragmentation that permeates the atmosphere of HR. Identities are often fragmented as a consequence of implementing HR practices that aim at standardization and homogeneity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Therefore, we acknowledge that the paradigm of IR cannot be accepted as it is. There is a need to transform the paradigm of IR. But a transformed paradigm of IR has greater potential to reinforce the relations of civility within organizations.

### Methodology

Competency based assessment is an integral part of most of the knowledge-intensive organizations today. The assess-

ment is used for identifying and developing human resources across different levels and functions in the organizations. Boyatzis (1982) defines competency as an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to criterion-referenced effective and/or superior performance in a job or situation. Thus, competency is a combination of knowledge, skills, attitude and personality of an individual as applied to a role or job in the context of the present and future environment that accounts for sustained success within the framework of organizational values.

We designed a competency framework based on conducting Behavioral Event Interviews (BEI) with subject matter experts, HR managers, consultants and line professionals. Job description and job specification of HR professionals from the organizations appeared in the recent 'Best Companies to work for' survey and recruiters of last three years of leading management institutes offering post graduate programs in HRM were collected. BEI data from 170 interviews, job description, job specification, literature review and discussion with line managers and HR professionals facilitated in designing the competency framework.

The framework presents the list of competencies (eight) with their behavioral indicators (seventy eight) essential to become HR professionals in early career. Based on the competency framework developed, an assessment center was conducted for participants who pursue their career in human resource man-

agement. Assessment Center is a method in which a candidate, an employee or an employee to be, is assessed on various tests to determine his/her suitability for particular roles. Competency based AC is demonstrated to be an exceptional diagnostic tool as this provides an assessment of individual's abilities, knowledge and skills into specific job dimensions.

The participants were assessed based on seventy eight behavioral indicators clustered under eight competencies. We developed the exercises and tools to assess the participants based on the competency framework designed. The exercises designed and used to assess the participants were In-basket Exercise (2 hours), Group Discussion – Consensus Building (55 Minutes), Business Case Study (2 hours), HR Case Study (1 hour and 30 minutes), Role Play (45 minutes), HR Café: Group Discussion in a simulated hospitable space (45 minutes), Paper and Pencil Test (2 hours), Essay Test (30 minutes) and, Personal Interview (30 – 90 minutes). The participants had gone through a minimum of 12 hours of assessment. Sixty four participants participated in the process, out of whom, thirty five completed all the exercises, tests and methods conducted for assessing the competencies. It is important for a participant to participate in the multiple methods conducted in diverse contexts and evaluated by different assessors. Thus, the study included the assessment of thirty five participants only. All the methods were designed to customize the requirements of assessing the competencies required to become HR professionals at the entry level. Twenty

three assessors were drawn from corporate and academia. Methods were chosen based on its suitability to the competencies identified. Each competency is measured in at least two or more tests. Special observation forms and noting sheets were designed for the assessors to observe and evaluate different participants in each exercise. The observation and evaluation reports from different assessors on different methods were consolidated for providing the participants with individual development plans and to derive the findings of the present study.

Based on the participants' performance in each indicator, the scoring was done. 5 Point rating scale was used for the assessment. (5 – Excellent, 4 – Very Good, 3 – Good, 2 – Average, 1 – Poor). By taking the average of all indicators, a final score was calculated for each competency. Following are the details of assessment of participants competency-wise.

### **Human Resources Technical Expertise**

The participants are evaluated based on behavioral indicators such as willingness to learn, strong conceptual background and update with the current trends and demands in the field, good understanding of different HR functions, application and execution challenges, aligning HR practices with business requirements, execute HR processes with efficiency and quality deliverables, desire to create good impact in the business through quality HR deliverables, demonstrating more scientific, analytic

and evidence based HR practices with good conceptual and analytical reasoning, and moving the role of HR beyond being common sensical and administrative to strategic partner.

Fig. 1 reveals that the highest score obtained by the participant is 4.09, the lowest score obtained is 2.31, and the average score is 3.12.

### **Leadership**

The scores secured by the participants on competency 'Leadership' is presented in fig. 2. The behavioral indicators used are: Demonstration of adaptability, risk taking, active participation and perseverance, Identifies creative and innovative methods to execute HR functions, processes, transactions and deliverables, Ability to convince members within the department, other HR functions and line functionaries, Leading through good employer branding initiatives within and outside the organization, Takes ownership of one's actions, responsibilities and mistakes, Ability to influence others by demonstrating the outcomes of any decision at the departmental and organizational levels, and Ability to see the larger picture in executing the HR deliverables. The highest score obtained was 4.07, the lowest score being 1.57. The average score is 3.14.

### **Communication**

Fig. 3 exhibits the scores secured by the participants on competency 'Communication'. The behavioral indicators used are: Comprehends, articulates, re-

Fig. 1 Score on 'Human Resources Technical Expertise' Competency

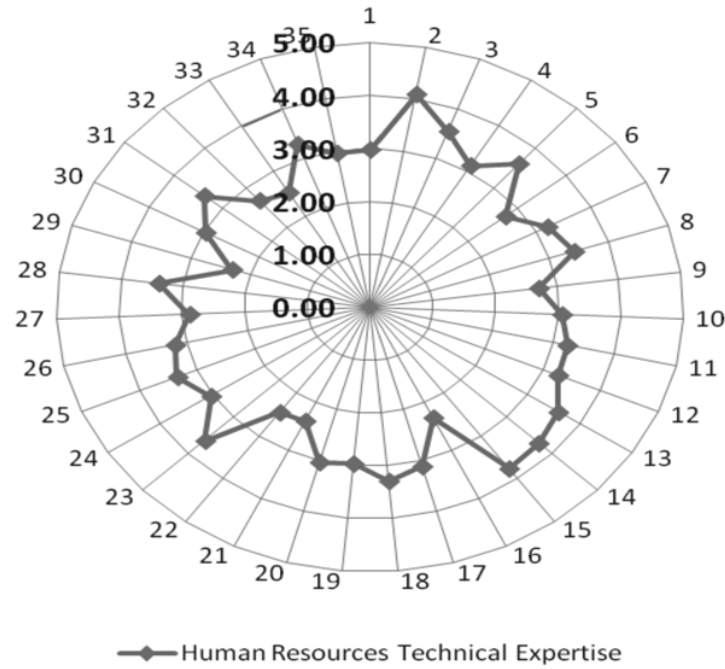
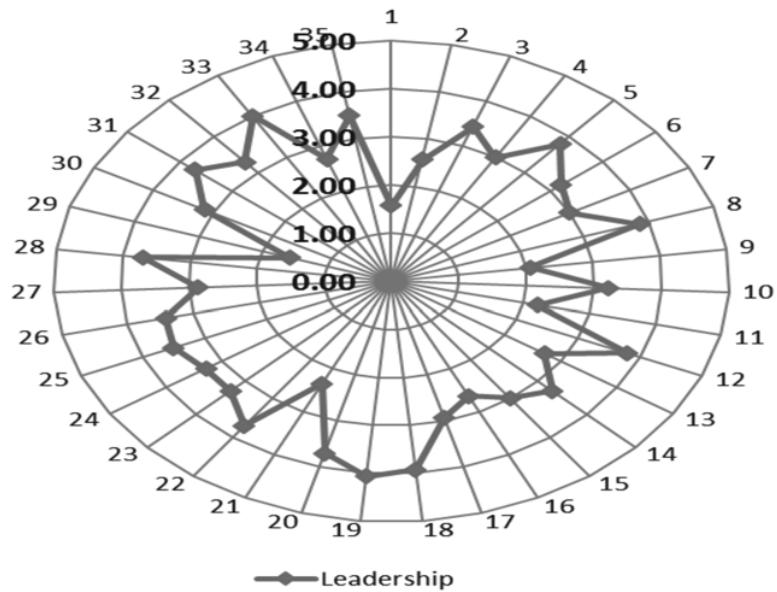


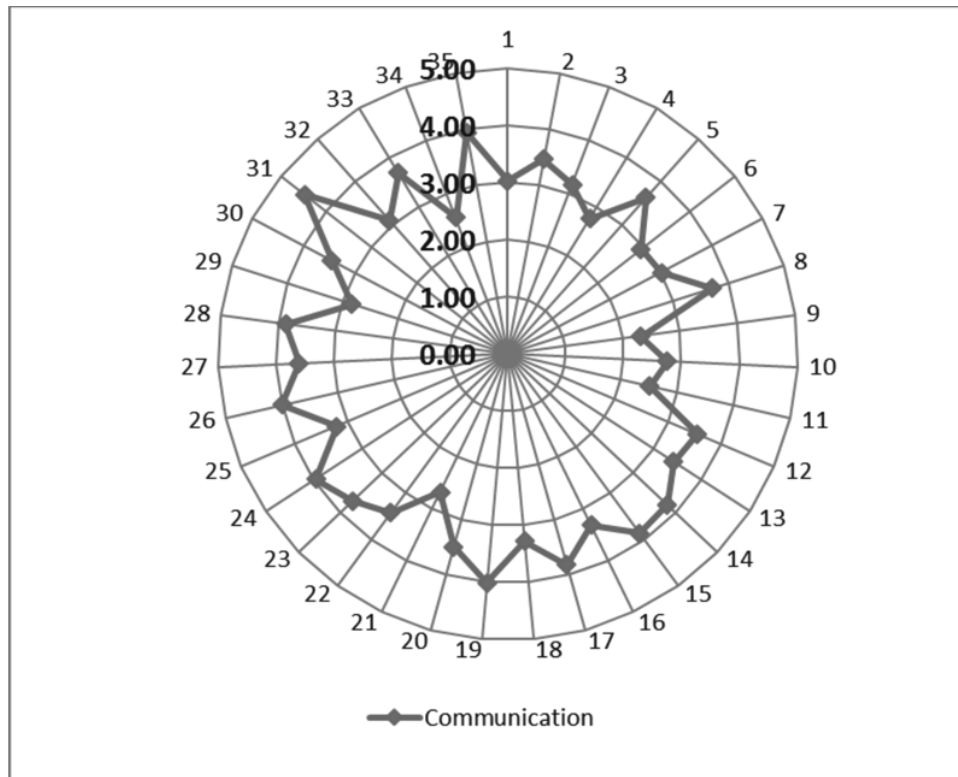
Fig. 2 Score on 'Leadership' Competency



sponds promptly and appropriately with different stakeholders through written, verbal, or electronic communication, Delivers accurate, clear, and concise messages and confident in conveying the information, Chooses appropriate channels of communication and communication patterns to communicate the relevant messages, Communicates professionally both verbal and written in formal and informal settings, intranet and in meetings, Assists and creates reports, memos, letters, policies and other official documents, Good in creating reports and delivering good presentation, Complies with the directions given by the

management in all communication especially when sharing important, confidential and sensitive information, Notifies the senior managers regarding any issues or concerns of employees appropriately being the first person of contact, Creates communication to positively impact employees' attitudes and beliefs, Demonstrates good listening skills, Demonstrates good receptivity to feedback and suggestions, Creating good power-point presentation, and Sensitizes to diversity to co-create inclusive workforce. The highest score obtained is 4.48, the lowest score obtained is 2.32, and the average score being 3.38.

Fig. 3 Score on Communication Competency

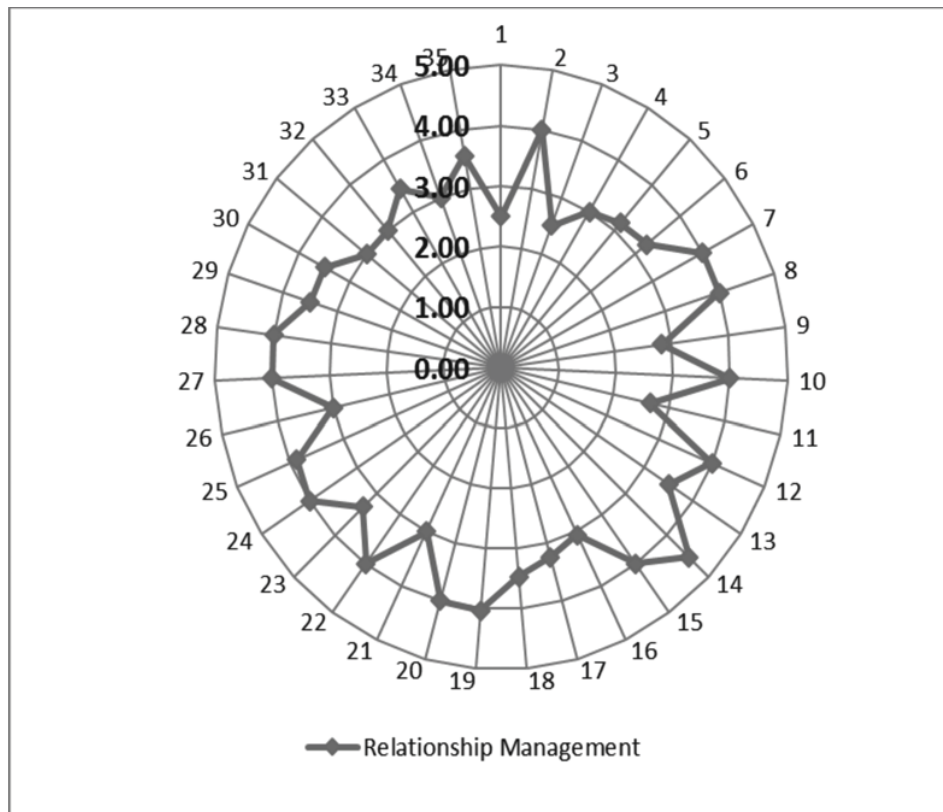


**Relationship Management**

The assessment by the participants on competency relationship management is presented in fig. 4. The following are the behavioral indicators: Creating avenues to interact and fostering effective teambuilding with different stakeholders, Approachable, maintaining friendly, reciprocal and warm relationship with the people, Develops good network in the team, Maintains good rapport and regular engagement with line functions and all other relevant stakeholder groups to understand business and their require-

ments, Engages with employees and other stakeholders through personal connect and healthy relationship, Maintaining high engagement and building personal connect with shop floor employees and trade union representatives, Good interpersonal, collaborative, confrontation, conflict handling and negotiation skills, Listens and handles employees' concerns and queries, and Maintaining credibility, Trust and treat individuals with respect and dignity. Data revealed that the highest score is 4.53, the lowest score obtained is 2.50, the average score being 3.48.

**Fig. 4 Score on Relationship Management Competency**

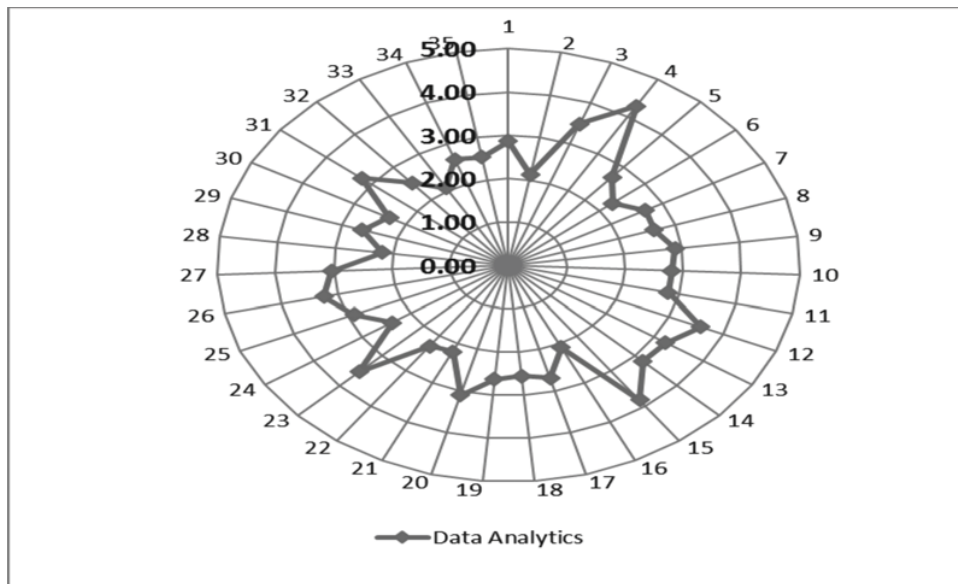


**Data Analytics**

Fig. 5 exhibits the assessment on competency data analytics. Following are the behavioral indicators: Engages in deep understanding of the problems with research orientation, Ability to manage data integration and dealing with large amount of data, Ability to conduct meetings, discussion, interviews, surveys, focus group discussion to collect rich data, Demonstrates expertise in statistical tools and data analysis software packages both quantitative and qualitative,

Being practical, rational, good in data analytics, number crunching and logical reasoning in problem solving, Command over research methods, report writing, developing metrics and presentation, Capability to develop and implement problem solving techniques, critical evaluation, assessment and auditing skills to address people and business concerns, and Ability to quantify the outcomes of HR to create evidence based HR practices. Data revealed that the highest score is 4.28, and the lowest score is 2.08, the average score being 2.80.

**Fig. 5 Score on Data Analytics Competency**



**Assimilation of Business Rationalities**

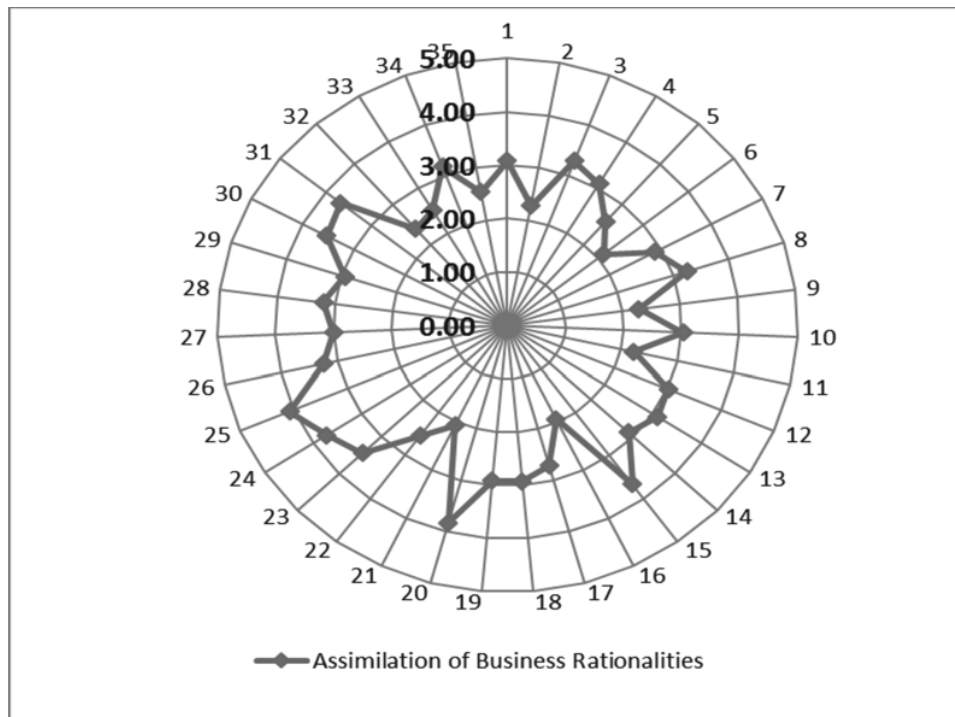
The assessment on competency Assimilation of Business Rationalities is presented in fig 6. Following are the behavioral indicators used: Clarity about mission, vision, goals, strategies and policies

of the organization, Capability to assimilate key narrative underpinning and core rationalities of the business, Understanding the intricacies of business, processes, business requirements, business indicators and the business model, Assess the financial status of the organization in different economic fluctuations and be re-

sponsive to the market conditions, Transfer of HR expertise from one business function to another, Comprehending the role and expectations of different line functions and other stakeholders, Inquisitive about the future needs of the business and cognizant of the business demands from HR, Creating an impact and visibility in the business, Demonstrates an understanding of the strategic relation-

ship between effective human resource management and core business functions, Keeness to learn new trends and technologies in HR and integrate with the business requirements, and Contributes to the business innovation and organizational change and development. The highest score obtained is 4.08, the lowest score is 1.94, and the average score being 2.95.

Fig. 6 Score on Assimilation of Business Rationalities Competency



**Decision Making & Execution**

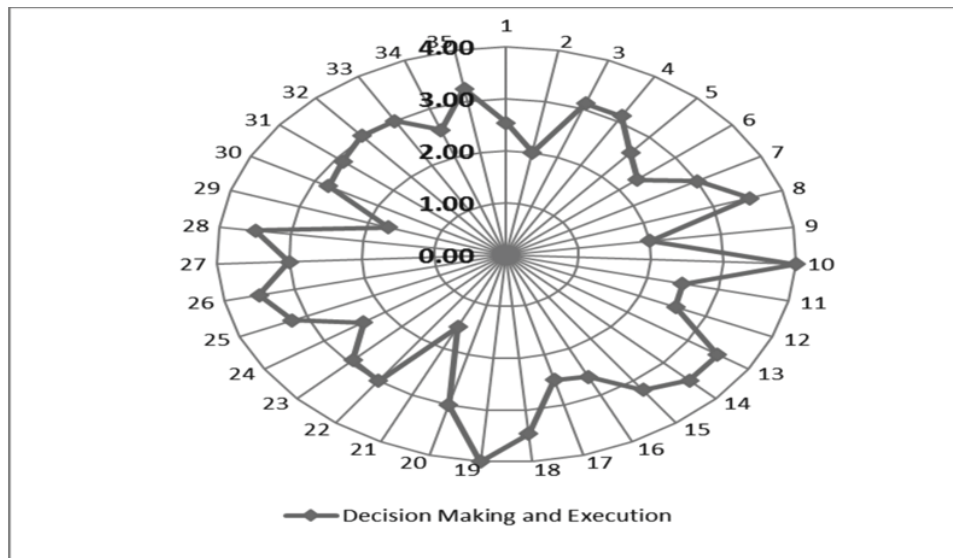
Fig. 7 exhibits the assessment on competency Decision Making and Execution. The indicators studied are the following: Understanding the organization and its policies, processes, functions, guidelines, norms and bye laws, Has role

clarity, personal accountability, professional integrity and maintains transparency, Demonstrates multitasking and high levels of commitment in completing the tasks, Ability to work under pressure and demonstrates readiness to put in extra efforts (as and when required) to meet the timelines and expectations, Reflects

on the individual's involvement, capabilities, energy levels in executing the tasks at regular intervals, Trusts in others work and delegates appropriately when required, Demonstrates compliance and pays attention to details in all HR transactions and job deliverables, Action oriented and supportive to the members in the team in task completion, Seeks help and guidance appropriately, Prioritizes the tasks in hand and decides appropriate

action plans, Optimizes the utility of resources available in the organization, Good at organizing, decision-making, tactical and strategic planning, Quick judgment and good execution skills to deliver the tasks in short notice, Pro active and prepared to face any emergency that arises and to meet ad hoc requests if any. Data revealed that the highest score is 4.0, the lowest score is 1.54, the average score being 2.90.

Fig. 7 Score on Decision-making & Execution Competency



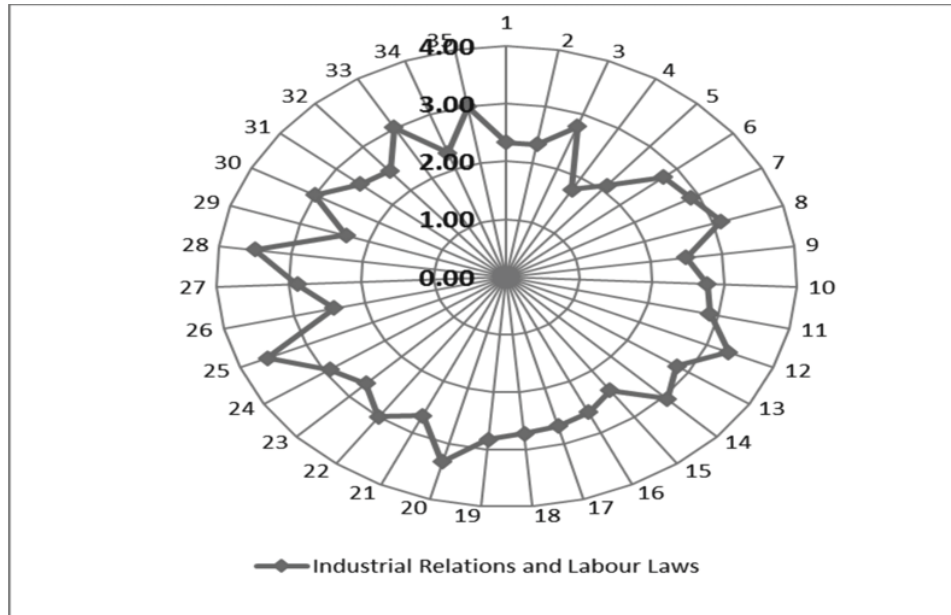
**Industrial Relations & Labor Laws (IRLL)**

Similarly, fig. 8 reveals the scores secured on competency industrial relations and labor laws. The behavioral indicators studied to examine the competency are: Knowledge of employment and labor laws (KLL), Principles of industrial relations (PIR), Familiarity with industrial relations dynamics (IRD), Orientation towards labor rights (OLR), and

Negotiation with multiple stakeholders such as employers, employees, state, trade unions and industry bodies (NMS). The highest score obtained is 3.58, the lowest score is 1.76, the average score being 2.75.

Factor analysis revealed the validity of the five indicators of IRLL. They indicated 95.9% of the variance of IRLL. All the factor loadings are above 0.9 (PIR: 0.947, IRD: 0.986, KLL: 0.988, OLR:

Fig. 8 Score on Industrial Relations & Labor Laws Competency



0.982, NMS: 0.993). The reliability of these five indicators of IRL was adequate as the Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was 0.989. This indicates that the five indicators reinforce each other to a great extent. Since these ratings were accumulated

through different exercises and using multiple observers, the high reliability and validity indicate the robustness of the assessment center exercise. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for each of the five indicators of IRL.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for IRL Indicators

Construct	Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation
PIR	1.67	3.58	2.74	0.40
IRD	1.78	3.58	2.77	0.38
KLL	1.78	3.58	2.74	0.40
OLR	1.78	3.58	2.76	0.41
NMS	1.78	3.58	2.76	0.38

**Discussion**

We compared the scores of competencies pertaining to industrial relations and labor laws (IRLL) and human resources technical expertise (HRTE). We found that

IRLL scores are significantly lower than HRTE scores (mean scores lower by 0.37,  $p < 0.01$ ). All the five indicators of IRL lag behind HRTE scores (mean scores lower by 0.35 and 0.38,  $p < 0.01$ ). However, IRL and HRTE scores are not cor-

related with each other ( $r = 0.004, p > 0.1$ ). The lack of correlation between HRTE and IRLLE scores indicates that HR does not position itself as an antagonistic discourse to IR, where the pursuit of several anti-union policies has led to the coercive establishment of HR (Stevens & Nesbitt, 2014). Instead, HR has simply failed to imbibe several vital institutional memories of IR that are crucial for maintaining a sense of civility inside the organizations.

**HR has simply failed to imbibe several vital institutional memories of IR that are crucial for maintaining a sense of civility inside the organizations.**

We found that IRLLE scores are significantly lower than Leadership scores (mean scores lower by  $-0.39, p < 0.01$ ). All the five indicators of IRLLE lag behind leadership scores (mean scores lower by  $0.38$  and  $0.41, p < 0.01$ ). However, IRLLE scores are significantly correlated with leadership scores ( $r = 0.45, p < 0.01$ ). This indicates that there is a lot in common between IR and leadership competencies. In HR parlance, leadership can be about transformation and the individual manager performing a set of outstanding tasks. However, in terms of IR conceptualization, leadership is about engaging with a variety of programs that enhance the sense of welfare and security for workers. It is about building a sense of community and connectedness that delivers a greater sense of welfare (Frick & Frick, 2010).

We tested the difference between IR competency scores and communication

competency scores and found that IR competency scores are significantly lower (mean scores lower by  $0.63, p < 0.01$ ). All the five indicators of IRLLE lag behind communication scores (mean scores lower by  $0.62$  and  $0.65, p < 0.01$ ). Further, IR competency scores and communication competency scores are correlated with each other ( $r = 0.29, p < 0.1$ ). Thus, we find that while an IR dimension continues to remain important for communication in businesses, yet the pluralism and collective finesse of IR communication is on the wane.

**The pluralism and collective finesse of IR communication is on the wane.**

We found that IR competency scores are significantly lower than the relationship scores (mean scores lower by  $0.73, p < 0.01$ ). All the five indicators of IRLLE lag behind relationship management scores (mean scores lower by  $0.72$  and  $0.75, p < 0.01$ ). However, IR competency scores continue to be strongly correlated with relationship management scores ( $r = 0.54, p < 0.01$ ) indicating that relationship management can draw to a great extent from the legacy of IR where the expression of tensions between multiple stakeholders and regular articulation of differences is seen as a testimony of the health of robust relationships.

It is interesting to note that there is no significant difference between IR competency scores and data analysis competency scores ( $p > 0.1$ ). None of the five indicators of IRLLE is significantly differ-

ent from data analysis competency scores ( $p > 0.1$ ). It is also necessary to note that IR competency and data analysis competency scores are not correlated with each other ( $p > 0.1$ ). This implies that the kind of IR competencies and data analysis that is required to carry forward a nuanced form of governance are jointly missing.

We found that IR competencies lag behind competencies pertaining to assimilation of business rationalities (mean scores less by 0.19,  $p < 0.01$ ). All the five indicators of IRLI lag behind assimilation of business rationalities scores (mean scores lower by 0.18 and 0.21,  $p < 0.1$ ). Further, IR competencies are not correlated with assimilation of business rationalities competencies ( $p > 0.05$ ). This indicates that business rationalities are today articulated as spaces which do not accommodate the interests of multiple stakeholders and instead rely on trickle down logics. Once the business itself profits, then the interests of other stakeholders will also be met.

**Business rationalities are today articulated as spaces which do not accommodate the interests of multiple stakeholders and instead rely on trickle down logics.**

We found that there was no significant difference between the IR competency scores and decision-making and execution competency scores ( $p > 0.1$ ). None of the five indicators of IRLI is significantly different from decision-making and execution scores ( $p > 0.1$ ). Further the IR competency scores and decision-

making and execution competency scores were correlated with each other ( $r = 0.31$ ,  $p < 0.1$ ) indicating that a retrieval of IR competencies may be necessary for increasing the effectiveness of decision-making that can strike a delicate balance between contending discourses.

### Conclusion

We believe that IR competencies significantly lagging behind other competencies indicates an important trend. Our management education processes have become highly instrumental. They are producing selves which have no understanding of a larger ethics of justice. Further, they also have a limited understanding of analysis. Consequently, the decline of IR competencies represents a decline of organizational civility.

The poetics of civility refers to romantic and imaginative ways of engaging with difference. It refers to an atmosphere of community in which a variety of conflicting issues are discussed. It refers to the possibility of appealing to each other's sense of ethics rather than merely appealing to instrumental outcomes. The poetics of civility is a process of retrieving human agency as a civil site of radical differences. On the other hand, the politics of instrumentality conceives human agency as a site of harmonizing differences.

The identity of the Indian manager is different from the Indian worker. There are tensions between these two identities. The Indian manager still believes in a Taylorist ethos that the Indian worker needs to be controlled for the organiza-

tion to be productive. The Indian worker is deeply suspicious of managerial projects as they are complicit in several inequalities such as the contracting of work. The spirit of industrial relations constitutes spaces where managers and workers can hold civil conversations with each other without giving up their tensions and anxieties.

Civil conversations have the capacity to moderate positions. As a consequence of civil conversations, contradictions and tensions do not disappear. However, civil conversations ensure that differences do not contribute to personalized resentments and angsts. Instead, differences become a part of plural organizational scapes. They consolidate different ways of thinking and being which will continue to be in institutional opposition with each other.

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