Exploring the Power of Words: Domesticating the Competence/Competency Concept in Ugandan Organisations

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Abstract : The study set out to examine a number of theories that have directly or indirectly implied that words are potent but that the potency depends on the context or practice in which they are utilised. The theories include the Freudian theory of Cathexis, which directly suggests that ambiguous events when named become potent as well as the word that is used to name them. We briefly examine Psychological differentiation, which submit that ambiguity is often a result of failure to distinguish figure from ground. The investigate Prospecting Theory, which suggests that in a situation when people have to make decisions, they have options to utilise intuition or reasoned judgment. It suggests that more often than not, the tendency is to utilise intuition especially when generic heuristics such as representativeness and similarity are available. That usage of these heuristics may depend on lack of a salience or accessibility of the situation due to ambiguity. We also examine Activity Theory, which proposes that meaning of words emerge directly and dialectically from the activities in which they are used. The paper argues that the power of words will depend on either or all of the theories mentioned above. To examine this general proposition we test the utilization of a generic competence framework in a local setting. The assumption is that generic frameworks are inherently ambiguous and lack the potency normally associated with the competence concept in the management of human resources. A number of case studies provide initial supporting evidence for the general proposition.

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