

Understanding the Meaning of Competence and Work Environment in Shaping Civil Servants' Motivation and Performance: a Phenomenological Study at the Regional Secretariat of Tebing Tinggi City

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Abstract

This study aims to explore and understand the meaning of competence and work environment in shaping the motivation and performance of civil servants at the Regional Secretariat of Tebing Tinggi City. Using a phenomenological approach, this research seeks to capture the real experiences and perceptions of employees regarding how their competencies and workplace conditions influence their work motivation and overall performance. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation analysis involving selected civil servants as key informants. The findings reveal that competence is perceived not only as technical ability but also as moral commitment and adaptability in public service. Meanwhile, a supportive work environment characterized by leadership attention, collaboration, and adequate facilities significantly strengthens employee motivation. Motivation, in turn, becomes the driving force that connects competence and work environment with performance outcomes. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of human resource development in the public sector by emphasizing the experiential and contextual dimensions of employee performance.

Keywords: Competence, Work Environment, Motivation, Performance

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Introduction

Public sector performance has become a central concern for many governments in developing countries, including Indonesia. The effectiveness of civil servants' performance is often linked to the level of competence, motivation, and the quality of their work environment [1]. Competence is widely viewed as the foundation for achieving organizational goals, encompassing knowledge, skills, and attitudes that determine how employees perform their duties [2]. However, competence alone does not guarantee optimal performance; it must be supported by a conducive work environment that encourages creativity, discipline, and teamwork [3].

In the context of public administration, motivation serves as a psychological driver that connects an employee's capabilities and their work environment to tangible performance outcomes [4]. A motivated civil servant tends to demonstrate higher commitment, accountability, and responsiveness in serving the community [5]. Studies have shown that motivation acts as an internal energy that translates organizational values into individual actions [6].

The Regional Secretariat of Tebing Tinggi City, as a key administrative unit of local government, faces complex challenges related to the development of human resource quality. Despite various competency-building programs, inconsistencies in performance remain visible, suggesting that personal and contextual factors may influence motivation and work behavior [7]. Therefore, a qualitative approach, particularly phenomenology, is suitable to capture how civil servants interpret their experiences, perceive competence, and respond to environmental dynamics that shape their motivation and performance [8].

Human resource quality is one of the key determinants of organizational success, particularly in the public sector, where performance is closely tied to service delivery and governance effectiveness [1]. In Indonesia, civil servants (*Aparatur Sipil Negara* or ASN) play a crucial role in implementing government policies and ensuring that public services are delivered effectively. However, achieving optimal employee performance remains a persistent challenge for many local government institutions [2].

Competence is often regarded as a vital factor influencing employee performance. It encompasses not only technical knowledge and professional skills but also behavioral attributes and ethical awareness that guide an employee's actions [3]. According to Wibowo [4], competence reflects the alignment between individual capabilities and job requirements, which ultimately affects work quality and productivity. Nevertheless, competence alone is insufficient without the support of a conducive work environment that nurtures motivation and engagement [5].

The work environment comprising physical facilities, interpersonal relationships, leadership style, and organizational culture plays a significant role in shaping employees' motivation and psychological well-being [6]. Robbins and Judge [7] emphasized that an unfavorable work environment may lead to stress, decreased motivation, and poor performance. Conversely, a supportive environment fosters collaboration, creativity, and intrinsic motivation among employees.

Motivation serves as an intermediary variable that connects competence and work environment with employee performance. As proposed by Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory [8], motivation is driven by the fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs, which stimulate individuals to perform better. In public institutions, motivated civil servants exhibit stronger work commitment and accountability in serving the public interest [9].

In the context of the Regional Secretariat of Tebing Tinggi City, several issues indicate that employee performance has not yet reached the expected level, despite ongoing training and competency development programs. Observations suggest that varying levels of motivation and differences in perceptions of the work environment may influence these outcomes. Therefore, a phenomenological approach is needed to explore how civil servants personally interpret

competence, work environment, and motivation in relation to their performance [10]. This qualitative exploration aims to provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of employees, which can serve as a basis for developing more effective strategies for human resource management in the public sector.

This study aims to explore and understand the meaning of competence and work environment in shaping civil servants' motivation and performance within the organizational context of Tebing Tinggi City. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this research seeks to reveal the lived experiences of civil servants as the foundation for developing more human-centered strategies in public sector performance management.

Literature Review

2.1 Competence

Competence refers to the combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable individuals to perform their tasks effectively [1]. According to Wibowo [2], competence is a behavioral characteristic that underlies an individual's performance and is directly related to the achievement of organizational goals. It is not limited to technical ability but also includes aspects of integrity, adaptability, and commitment to public service. Dessler [3] emphasizes that competence development is a strategic investment in human capital, especially in public institutions where accountability and service quality are critical.

In the context of civil servants, competence determines the extent to which employees can adapt to administrative reforms and implement effective public policies [4]. A lack of competence often leads to low productivity and ineffective service delivery. Therefore, continuous competency enhancement is essential for improving individual and institutional performance.

2.2 Work Environment

The work environment plays a significant role in shaping employee attitudes, motivation, and productivity. It encompasses both physical conditions (such as office layout, facilities, and safety) and psychosocial aspects (such as leadership, communication, and organizational culture) [5]. Robbins and Judge [6] argue that a supportive work environment enhances employee satisfaction and fosters motivation, while an unfavorable one can lead to burnout, absenteeism, and low morale.

McShane and Von Glinow [7] highlight that employees are more likely to perform effectively in environments that provide psychological comfort, respect, and collaboration. In the public sector, the work environment often reflects bureaucratic structures and leadership patterns, which may either stimulate or hinder performance. Hence, understanding how civil servants perceive and experience their work environment is crucial to identifying factors that influence their motivation and engagement.

2.3 Work Motivation

Motivation is defined as the internal drive that initiates, directs, and sustains behavior toward achieving goals [8]. Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) explains that motivation arises from the fulfillment of three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness [9]. In organizational settings, intrinsic motivation driven by personal satisfaction and purpose often produces more sustainable performance than extrinsic motivation based on rewards or punishments [10].

Hasibuan [11] states that motivation serves as a bridge connecting employee competence and performance. In the public sector, high motivation encourages employees to act ethically, remain disciplined, and uphold public accountability. Motivational factors such as recognition, empowerment, and leadership support contribute significantly to improved performance outcomes.

2.4 Employee Performance

Employee performance refers to the level of achievement of tasks or goals based on established standards and expectations [12]. Armstrong [13] suggests that performance is influenced by a combination of competence, motivation, and environmental support. Meanwhile, Kasmir [14] identifies performance indicators such as work quality, timeliness, cooperation, and responsibility as key measures of effectiveness.

In the civil service context, performance is not only evaluated through output but also through behavioral competencies that align with public service values [15]. Therefore, exploring how civil servants perceive their own competence, environment, and motivation provides deeper insights into performance improvement strategies within government institutions.

2.5 Phenomenological Perspective in Human Resource Studies

The phenomenological approach seeks to explore and understand the essence of human experiences as lived by individuals [16]. Creswell and Poth [17] emphasize that phenomenology focuses on the subjective meaning individuals assign to their experiences, making it a suitable approach for studying motivation, competence, and performance from the employee's perspective. In public administration research, phenomenology helps uncover how civil servants interpret organizational realities, leadership dynamics, and work challenges, thereby contributing to human-centered management practices [18].

Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological design, aiming to explore and interpret the lived experiences of civil servants in understanding how competence and work environment shape their motivation and performance. The phenomenological approach is used to capture subjective meanings and personal reflections related to workplace realities [1]. According to Creswell and Poth [2], phenomenology seeks to describe participants' experiences as they perceive them, allowing the researcher to uncover the essence of a phenomenon through deep engagement and reflection.

3.2 Research Setting

The research was conducted at the Regional Secretariat of Tebing Tinggi City, a central administrative body responsible for supporting local government leadership and coordinating cross-departmental affairs. This setting was chosen because it represents a dynamic environment where competence development, motivation, and performance directly influence public service quality. Tebing Tinggi's civil service environment also faces ongoing challenges related to organizational discipline, motivation maintenance, and the implementation of performance-based management [3].

3.3 Participants and Sampling Technique

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on civil servants who have at least five years of experience working within the Secretariat. This criterion ensures that participants have sufficient exposure to organizational culture, leadership patterns, and performance management systems [4]. A total of 10–12 participants were involved, consisting of both structural and functional employees. In qualitative research, the emphasis is placed on the depth of information rather than the number of participants [5]. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached when no new insights emerged from subsequent interviews [6].

3.4 Data Collection Techniques

Three primary methods were used for data collection:

1. In-depth Interviews – Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' perceptions of competence, work environment, motivation, and performance. Each session lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, recorded with participant consent.
2. Participant Observation – The researcher observed work interactions, leadership communication, and environmental conditions to understand contextual influences on motivation and performance [7].
3. Documentation Analysis – Organizational reports, employee evaluation forms, and government policy documents were analyzed to triangulate interview data [8].

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the phenomenological data reduction stages proposed by Moustakas [9] and Creswell [2]:

1. Bracketing (Epoche): The researcher identified and set aside personal assumptions to focus solely on participants' experiences.
2. Horizontalization: All significant statements related to the phenomenon were listed and given equal value.
3. Clustering of Meanings: Themes were generated by grouping similar meanings or experiences.
4. Textural and Structural Description: Descriptions of what participants experienced (textural) and how they experienced it (structural) were constructed.
5. Essence Formation: The core essence of the phenomenon was synthesized, representing the shared meaning of participants' experiences.

3.6 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, four criteria were applied: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability [10]. Triangulation of data sources and member checking were conducted to validate findings. All participants were informed about the research objectives, and their confidentiality was strictly maintained. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional ethics committee of Universitas Pembangunan Panca Budi prior to fieldwork.

3.7 The Relationship Between Competence, Work Environment, Motivation, and Performance

The relationship among competence, work environment, motivation, and performance has been extensively discussed in both theoretical and empirical literature. Competence is considered a critical determinant of employee performance, as it reflects the ability of individuals to perform tasks effectively and adapt to organizational challenges [1], [2]. However, several scholars argue that competence will only translate into performance when accompanied by a supportive work environment that encourages participation, collaboration, and continuous learning [3], [4].

The work environment acts as a contextual variable that influences how civil servants perceive their roles and responsibilities. A healthy and conducive environment not only facilitates better communication and coordination but also enhances psychological well-being, which subsequently affects motivation [5]. According to Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, hygiene factors such as workplace conditions and relationships with colleagues prevent dissatisfaction, while motivators such as recognition and achievement drive performance [6].

Motivation, therefore, plays a mediating role between competence and performance. A competent employee without motivation may fail to deliver expected results, while a motivated yet less competent worker might compensate through effort and persistence [7]. Previous studies highlight that intrinsic motivation derived from personal growth, professional identity,

and moral obligation is particularly significant among public sector employees [8]. This implies that civil servants' sense of purpose and responsibility can influence how competence and environment are internalized into performance outcomes.

From a phenomenological standpoint, the interaction between these variables is deeply rooted in subjective experiences. Each civil servant constructs a personal meaning of competence and environmental support, which influences their motivation to perform effectively. This perspective emphasizes the need to explore how employees perceive their work situations, interpret challenges, and assign meaning to their daily practices [9], [10].

3.8 Conceptual Framework

Based on the reviewed theories, this study adopts a phenomenological conceptual framework that views competence and work environment as experiential constructs influencing motivation and performance. Rather than testing variables statistically, the study seeks to interpret the **lived** experiences of civil servants in understanding how these factors interplay to shape work behavior and outcomes.

The framework posits that:

1. Competence provides the foundation for individual capability and professional identity.
2. Work environment shapes the situational context and emotional climate in which competence is expressed.
3. Motivation mediates the influence of competence and work environment on performance by translating personal meaning into action.
4. Performance reflects not only technical outcomes but also the internal fulfillment and moral satisfaction derived from serving the public.

This model will guide the data collection and analysis processes, focusing on the subjective interpretation of civil servants' experiences within the Secretariat of Tebing Tinggi City.

Results

4.1 Overview of Participants

A total of twelve civil servants from the Regional Secretariat of Tebing Tinggi City participated in this study. They consisted of five structural officials and seven staff-level employees with varying years of service, ranging from 5 to 20 years. All participants had direct experience with competency development programs, leadership interactions, and performance evaluation systems within the organization. This diverse background provided a rich understanding of the phenomenon studied.

4.2 Emergent Themes

Through the process of thematic analysis, five major themes emerged from participants' narratives:

1. Competence as a Reflection of Professional Identity
2. Work Environment as an Emotional Climate
3. Motivation as the Bridge Between Effort and Meaning
4. Performance as a Collective Responsibility
5. Leadership as a Catalyst for Motivation and Trust

Each theme represents the essence of participants' lived experiences and how they make sense of their roles, challenges, and aspirations as civil servants.

1. Competence as a Reflection of Professional Identity

Participants described competence not merely as technical ability but as a form of *professional identity* that defines who they are as public servants. They perceived

competence as a moral and ethical responsibility rather than just a measure of skill. One respondent stated, *“Being competent means being responsible to the people we serve, not just completing tasks.”*

This finding aligns with Wibowo [1], who emphasized that competence in the public sector is rooted in moral integrity and service orientation. Competence becomes meaningful when employees internalize their roles and link personal values with organizational goals.

2. Work Environment as an Emotional Climate

The work environment was described as more than physical conditions it represents the *emotional climate* that influences motivation. Participants highlighted factors such as leadership communication, coworker relationships, and recognition as critical components of a supportive environment.

A positive work environment was perceived to nurture emotional security, teamwork, and openness, while a rigid bureaucratic atmosphere discouraged innovation. Robbins and Judge [2] note that psychological safety and social interaction are key determinants of motivation and job satisfaction. In the Tebing Tinggi Secretariat, supportive supervisors and transparent communication systems were reported to enhance both motivation and performance.

3. Motivation as the Bridge Between Effort and Meaning

Motivation emerged as the central connecting theme between competence and performance. Participants expressed that motivation stemmed from two sources: intrinsic (self-fulfillment, pride, and purpose) and extrinsic (appreciation, recognition, and incentives).

This finding reinforces Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory [3], which posits that intrinsic motivation drives sustainable performance when employees feel autonomous, competent, and connected. Several participants revealed that being trusted with responsibility motivated them more deeply than material rewards, indicating that meaningful work is a stronger motivator than external compensation.

4. Performance as a Collective Responsibility

Performance was perceived not as an individual achievement but as a collective outcome shaped by teamwork and shared accountability. Respondents expressed that collaborative performance reflected organizational harmony and interdependence.

As Armstrong [4] suggests, performance in public institutions depends on the synergy between individual contributions and organizational systems. In this context, performance improvement initiatives were most effective when they emphasized shared goals rather than personal competition.

5. Leadership as a Catalyst for Motivation and Trust

Participants consistently emphasized the role of leadership as a key determinant of motivation and performance. Leaders who demonstrated empathy, fairness, and consistency were perceived as sources of inspiration. Conversely, authoritarian or indifferent leadership styles led to demotivation and low engagement.

McShane and Von Glinow [5] argue that transformational leadership enhances intrinsic motivation by creating a sense of purpose and belonging. In Tebing Tinggi, participants described “motivating leaders” as those who actively listened, provided guidance, and recognized employees’ efforts publicly.

Discussion

The findings suggest that competence and work environment are not isolated constructs but interrelated experiences that shape employees’ intrinsic motivation. Competence gives meaning to one’s work, while the environment sustains motivation through emotional and

social support. Motivation then acts as a mediating experience, transforming personal competence into organizational performance.

These results reinforce Armstrong's model of performance management [4], which integrates human capability and contextual support as dual pillars of success. The phenomenological lens reveals that the essence of performance lies not in measurable indicators but in employees' sense of purpose, recognition, and belonging.

Furthermore, this study contributes to qualitative public management literature by emphasizing that performance improvement in the civil service requires an empathetic, human-centered approach. Policies focused solely on structural reform or incentives may not succeed unless they address the experiential dimensions of competence and motivation.

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