

**Romy Steinhäuser**

# Passion in corporate cultures?! The role of passion in the organisational culture of a Dutch and a German business

A qualitative analysis

**Master's Thesis**

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# **Passion in corporate cultures?!**

A qualitative analysis of the influence and role of passion in the organisational culture of a Dutch and a German business

**Romy Steinhäuser**

Master thesis submitted in part fulfilment of the degree of Master of Science in Educational Sciences and Technology – Track: Human Resource Development

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**University of Twente, Enschede, The Netherlands**

## Executive summary

Even though, the concept of passion is not particularly well researched, it yet has become a hot topic in the academic world in recent years. For, passion offers insight into how people relate to various aspects of their work. The present study therefore aimed to gain a more research-based understanding of the underpinning elements of the concept of passion. By connecting it with theory on corporate cultures it could furthermore be investigated how the concept translates in organisational settings as well as which factors actively contribute to its existence and which may hinder it.

The analysis of the literature confirmed that the concept of passion is only very badly explored. In addition, it was found that also its relation to corporate cultures has been determined only insufficiently. Hence, a new framework was developed, which was based on the notion that human beings are four-dimensional and argued that also corporate cultures could be seen as four-dimensional.

To test and explore the questions and findings raised in the literature review, a case study research design was chosen, which employed multiple, exploratory research methods such as a so-called preparatory booklet, interviewing, and observations. Overall, two organisations agreed participate in the study: the Dutch HRD Consultancy firm Kessels & Smit, *The Learning Company* and the German four-star superior hotel Günnewig Hotel Bristol Bonn. Taken together, in total 25 interviews were carried out and 21 situations were observed over a course of eleven weeks.

It was found that passion does not only have a spiritual origin but also that it is commonly triggered through an external event or person. Moreover, it has three distinguishable phases (1. recognition, 2. maintenance and 3. development) that generate both positive and negative effects and are influenced by various internal (e.g. self-confidence) and external (e.g. family members; organisational processes) factors. Furthermore, a new type of passion was found that was referred to as 'corporate passion'. This underlies similar principles as the individual-based concept but is determined different influences and thus creates different effects. Finally, various factors were established that either supported or inhibited peoples' passion. These were among others: co-workers, autonomy, appreciation, and individual/organisational development.

The findings indicate that passion is a greatly underestimated concept that does not only generate effects on a personal level but also in organisations as well as beyond (e.g. at clients, with guests). Therefore, it should no longer be asked whether passion is an incorporated element in corporate cultures but how it can be translated into daily practice.

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## Acknowledgements

*"Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma – which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary."*

*Steven Jobs, 2005*

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Meckenheim, August 2006

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## 1. Introduction

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This chapter aims to give an in-depth introduction into the topic and set-up of this research. For this, firstly background information about the research topic as well as its relevance will be provided. Secondly, the central research themes and questions will be outlined. Thirdly, the research aims will be presented and finally, an overview of the structure of this master thesis will be given.

### 1.1 Background and relevance of the study

*Passion in corporate cultures?! –* While this may sound strange, awkward, or simply impossible in some people's ears, it might be the daily reality or at least something to aspire to for others. In fact, there is a fair amount of organisations where the word passion can be used at best when describing the love affairs amongst its employees. However, there are also businesses, which openly state in their advertisements or on their homepages: We have a passion! L'Oréal, for instance, has a 'passion for adventure', Prêt A Manger a 'passion for food' and Deutsche Bank a 'passion for excellence'.

Interestingly, also many academics and business professionals have shown interest in the idea of passion in the workplace in recent years. Chang (2000) and Chaudhuri (2001), for example, have proposed models to characterise passionate people/ employees. Likewise, Johnston (2002) and Koonce (1998) have argued that passion is a vital factor for successful job hunting. Chaudhuri (2001) and Zaleznik (2004) point out its importance in leadership and management and finally, Kessels (2001), Keursten et al. (2005), and Verdonshot (2005) have stressed that passion can be seen as a key principle in knowledge productive organisations. – In short, passion is a hot topic!

This is of particular relevance for HRD professionals as it is fundamentally their job to contribute to the development and learning of their co-workers and their organisation (Desimone et al., 2002). That is, they are required to be system thinkers, designers as well as conductors of measurements and analyses. They are expected to be 'pin-pointers' who link theory and practice, productivity and organisational performance and they are needed to be researchers and developers (Harrison & Kessels, 2004; Preskill & Russ-Eft, 2003; Short et al., 2003). In short, they are seemingly not only "*learning architects*" (University Forum, 1998) but also "*holistic organisational developers*" (Damhuis & Steinhäuser, 2006) that have to show great awareness of the different processes in their organisation and the factors influencing them.

According to Kessels (2001), any actions to enhance the learning and development of people or even entire organisations are likely to fail or produce only short-term effects, if they are unconnected to the topics and themes that are closest to people's hearts, i.e. to their passions. For, people cannot be smart against their will (ibid). In that respect, it seems worthwhile to explore the notion of passion as it seemingly offers insight into how people relate to various aspects of their work.

Unfortunately though, there is very little academic research on and thus rather limited understanding of the concept of passion. What is meant when people talk about passion? What are the underlying dynamics? What is it influenced by and how can organisations play in role in connecting and enhancing people's passion?

At least with regards to the latter question, literature from the Business and Management field provide a starting point for explorations. For, as the work of Bruch and Ghoshal (2003), Handy (1995) and Weymes (2005) shows, passion can be seen as an important factor in the corporate cultures of organisations. It follows from this that the concept of passion and the concept of corporate cultures might be fundamentally intertwined. – What role would passion play? How would it influence corporate cultures? How does it translate to the different levels in an organisation (e.g. individual, client and organisational level)?

Essentially, all these questions form the starting point of this research! So, what are they all about?

### **1.2 Central research themes**

*Passion* – In general, the term passion can be defined as the level of meaning persons assign to certain tasks or objects as well as an indicator of their inner need to repeatedly attach themselves to them (Hirschhorn, 2003). Thus, passion can be characterised as a measure of intensity for the feelings someone holds for specific jobs or things.

Although the concept of passion seemingly has not been researched as a single, independent factor in published academic literature, several scholars have attempted to outline and specify the behavioural aspects of passion. Chang (2000) and Chaudhuri (2001), for instance, have demonstrated that passionate people show very distinguishable characteristics. For instance, they feel thorough joy for a specific theme, job or task, they involve all senses while expressing their passion, they value, protect and nurture their passion and so on. A study by Gubman (2004) has even indicated that the concept of passion can be linked to the 'Big Five' personality dimensions outlined by McCrae and Costa in 2002<sup>1</sup>.

However, all these ideas and findings are rather vague as they exclusively focus on the behavioural aspects of passion. The present study was therefore also underpinned by academic theories or frameworks on careers (Leider, 2000), motivation (Maslow, 1943; 1954) as well as philosophy (Weymes, 2005) in order to gain a better understanding of its origins and to better grasp its meaning.

The same is true for the second main theme of this research: (passionate) corporate cultures. Here too, older, more traditional as well as newer, more recent business and management literature but also anthropological and philosophical ideas and notions were examined to gain an in-depth understanding of the concept and its connection to passion.

*Corporate cultures* – In anthropology, the term culture can generally be defined as “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life”

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<sup>1</sup> The Big Five are: extraversion vs. introversion, conscientiousness vs. undirectedness, agreeableness vs. antagonism, emotional stability vs. neuroticism, openness vs. closed to experience.

(Geertz, 1973, p. 89). Interestingly, in the HR field an organisational culture is also defined as: “a pattern of assumptions – invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration – that has worked well enough to be considered valuable, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems” (Schein, 1985, p. 9).

Even though there is no qualitative difference between the definitions, the comparison of both is yet important as corporate cultures are so-called ‘sub-cultures’, i.e. a smaller culture within an already existing, larger one (Kottak, 1984). This, as will be explained later, has relevance for the interpretation and understanding of corporate cultures.

The comparison moreover indicates that the concept of corporate culture and the concept of passion are equally complex and therefore explains why it was rather difficult to define and understand the connection between both. For, only three theoretical constructs were found that provided insight on the topic, namely Bruch and Ghoshal’s “Four energy zones model” (2003), Handy’s “Gods of Management classification” (1995) and Weymes’ philosophical argument to apply Confucianism or the theory of the Ren and the Li to design people-focused organisation (2005).

Upon critical reflection on the theories however, it was found that they had one pitfall: they largely disregarded the differentiation outlined by Kottak (1984). That is they did not give enough attention to the fact that organisations are “*living phenomena*” and that every member is therefore “*an active agent in enacting the organisational culture*” (Senge et al., 2005, p. 49). For, this signifies that it is in fact more useful to look at human beings than abstract concepts of corporate cultures.

Therefore, a new framework was developed that in order to investigate which aspects might support the existence of passion in corporate cultures and which might lead to its absence in people. It was based on the notion of individuals as being four-dimensional, i.e. consisting of a body, mind, soul and spirit (Gordon, 2002).

The literature used to explain this notion did not only support the fact that persons are four-dimensional but also gave indications why organisations/ corporate cultures can too be described as four-dimensional.

This finally led to the development of a model that combined the findings from the literature on human beings with theories on organisations.

### 1.3 Central research questions

As stated above, research-based literature on the concept passion is sparse. Thus, its current understanding can be considered superficial and dismissive of the complexity and possible power of the construct. The first research question in this study hence was:

<b>What is the concept of passion?</b>
--

It was moreover pointed out that the connection between passion and corporate cultures – despite being acknowledged in literature – is not very well researched either. Secondly, it was thus asked:

<b>What does the concept of passion relate to in corporate cultures?</b>
--

Lastly, it was hinted that the models and theoretical frameworks used to explore the concept of (passionate) corporate cultures focused too little on investigating on human beings as being the organisational culture. Therefore, a new framework and model were developed that were based on the idea that corporate cultures are four-dimensional. Both functioned as a tool to gain a better understanding of the elements, processes and dynamics that complimented and/ or restrained people's passion in the culture of work. Accordingly, the final two research questions studied were:

**What factors nurture passion in corporate cultures?**

**What factors inhibit passion in corporate cultures?**

### **1.4 Central research aims**

The study investigated two rather complex concepts that are both only partly understood and defined. Linking to the central research themes and research questions, this study therefore aimed:

- To examine the diverse and multi-layered facets of the concept of passion.
- To practically test its relevance as a fundamental ingredient in corporate cultures.
- To investigate the factors that compliment and/ or restrain passion in the culture of work.
- To contribute to a more holistic, research-based understanding of passion in general and in particular regarding its connection to corporate cultures.

### **1.5 Contribution of the study**

Overall, the current study uniquely contributes on three levels: 1) on a scientific, 2) on a practical, and 3) on a personal level.

1. *Scientific contribution:* As outlined in the research aims, by working towards a more holistic, research-based understanding of the concept of passion in general and especially its connection to corporate cultures, this study has attempted to make a unique contribution to the field of science. Since it was carried out in part-fulfilment for a master in Human Resource Development, its contribution is primarily aimed at the field of HRD. However, as a large part of the referenced literature for this research stem from other fields, it also contributes to the fields of HRM, Business Studies, and Management.
2. *Practical contribution:* The practical contribution is two-fold. Firstly, as will be shown in the latter parts of this thesis, the research findings have practical meaning for HRD respectively HRM, Business and Management professionals, as they give insight into how passion contributes and how it can be uncovered, developed and sustained in corporate cultures. Secondly, the study has practical implications for researchers, as it uses a somewhat exceptional method to analyse data. For, instead of transcribing the data, they were largely summarised in a story telling format. This allowed for a more in-depth analysis of the findings and enabled the researcher to account for elements such as the atmosphere and feelings