C4RE
talks

Competencies that determine the scientific success of a researcher

Interview with **Prof. Corinna Peifer** from Department of Psychology, University of Lübeck

Conducted by:

prof. dr hab. Barbara Kożusznik, University of Silesia in Katowice

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ICSD

The Interdisciplinary Centre for Staff Development

Prof. Corinna Peifer

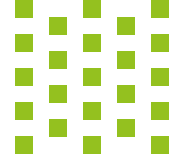Department of Psychology, University of Lübeck

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■ **Barbara Kożusznik: Hi! Welcome to the Interdisciplinary Centre for Staff Development at the University of Silesia in Katowice. We would like you to listen to the interview with Prof. Corinna Peifer, and this interview will be on competencies management at the university. The interview will be conducted by Professor Olaf Flak and myself, Barbara Kożusznik.**

■ **Olaf Flak: Our guest today is Prof. Corinna Peifer, who is a professor of work and organisational psychology at the Department of Psychology at the University of Lübeck. Her research focuses on topics such as flow experience, stress management and well-being at work. She applies the flow concept of human-centred design of human-machine interaction. She is a founding member of the European Flow Research Network and Vice-President of the German Society for Positive Psychology Research. Welcome, Prof. Corinna.**

■ **Corinna Peifer:** Thank you so much.

O. Flak: I would like to ask you several questions about competencies, competency management at university and your experience in this area. Prof. Corinna, what are you currently involved in academic work? What is your current work?

■ **C. Peifer:** My current work usually goes around the concept of flow experience. Flow experience is an experience when you are totally involved in what you are doing. So the challenges of the task fit perfectly to your skills, and you do not think about what to do next but it all goes very fluently. And this is a phenomenon that has interested me in my research for many years; not only the individual experience of being absorbed in work or a certain task but also what happens if a team is absorbed in a task. So, the phenomenon of team flow is another thing I'm very interested in at the moment.

■ **O. Flak: And what are you most proud of at work at university? What are your main achievements?**

■ **C. Peifer:** I think my main achievements are some of the publications of the past, which I'm very proud of. And maybe even more of the funding I achieved together with my team. Lately, we have had several research projects going on, and now my research team has grown to a very good size, we are 7 researchers plus me in my team. So, I'm very proud of my team.

■ **B. Kożusznik: It sounds very interesting and inspiring. Corinna, I have my question connected with the competencies. You told us about your achievements connected with this problem I want to ask about. What factors cause a researcher to publish in top journals?**
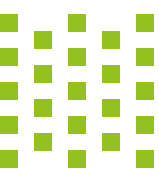
■ **C. Peifer:** I think most importantly, it's being highly ambitious in research; also, to be read by other researchers. And I think that the top journals are those that are cited most often and are read by many other researchers. And that makes up the motivation to publish there. But of course, that's the more intrinsic part of it: to be read and to spread one's own research results. Of course, also some universities give special rewards if someone is published in a top journal, and that can—of course—also be a motivation to publish there. One further factor to publishing in top journals is to have good funding for highly qualitative studies; I think that the main hindrance to publishing in top journals is not having enough funding, and then not enough resources, for example, to pay for participants or pay for the resources, like very good equipment that you need for good research. And if you want to publish in these top journals, it's necessary that you have a high number of participants and resources to do very good experiments and to do longitudinal studies. So you need immensely good data in order to be able to publish there, and for that you need resources.

■ **B. Kożusznik: Yes, it's a very good remark.**

■ **O. Flak: I would like to ask you about creativity. It is said that creativity is the main feature or one of the main features when the researchers are concerned. What do you think? When is a researcher most creative? What factors or features play the main role? When is a researcher most creative?**

■ **C. Peifer:** I think, to be creative, it is necessary that you have enough time to think about things. I mean, we—as researchers—often have many, many obligations, from teaching to a lot of administrative things to do, and in the end, there is really not as much time for research as we wish to have. What we need is more time, also to think; more time in one piece, and not one hour here and one hour there, but for example a day or week, where we can really think through the different problems. Also, having

no pressure is, I think, something that is important there. Not to be obliged to have a creative solution by tonight or tomorrow. But really having several weeks, a night to sleep on it—or several nights to sleep on it—to really develop good ideas. Additionally, I think that intrinsic motivation is very important here. So that I can be creative in problems that I'm very much interested in. Researchers should have the autonomy to choose topics they are interested in, and maybe fewer topics that are the interest of someone else from the outside. However, I think the most creative ideas come from the inside and if they are in line with the competencies and experience of the researcher. Another point is having an excellent team, which is interested in similar things but also has different kinds of experiences and works interdisciplinary so its members can bring their ideas together so that brainstorms are much more effective. And I think for such a team, it's also important that ideas can flow freely, there's no hierarchy between the team members, and everybody can really speak about what he or she thinks could be relevant here without the fear of having maybe a stupid idea or something. It's essential that everybody feels safe in this context and can sometimes speak about crazy ideas. But without crazy ideas, there wouldn't be any further development. That belongs to creativity as well.

■ **B. Kożusznik: These are very important things.**

■ **B. Kożusznik: Corinna, you mentioned the team and people who are observing your achievements and you—as a professor who is so great and known in Europe and the world—probably are thinking about what her competencies are. Corinna, could you tell us what, according to your opinion, are your competencies, which are conducting you to these high achievements? Because I know that you are perfect, but people may be perfect in some chosen areas. Could you tell us something about it?**

■ **C. Peifer:** Thank you so much. I wouldn't agree that I'm perfect. So thanks for the compliment. Maybe some of the things that make me being creative or help me in achieving scientific results… I think, many of the things I have just said. I'm very intrinsically motivated, I'm very much interested in the topic of flow experience, I've been fascinated by the topic of flow experience since the end of my studies. I studied psychology at the University of Trier in Germany. Already at the end of my studies, I found this topic and I followed it in my doctoral studies, and later on. It's with me all the time. In the meantime, I'm an expert in this topic and I'm still very much fascinated by it. So I think that being interested, engaged, immersed, that's something that helps me a lot; I'm very curious in general as well, also about the opinions of others. I think I'm good at listening and integrating people into a team. I think that being interested also helps a lot with being persistent. I think that research is something where you need a lot of persistence in order to achieve results because sometimes it can be very frustrating. You submit a paper, and I think it's normal that the feedback

that you get is not always positive, but journals sometimes don't like your submission and then it's rejected. It can be very hard to publish your results. Even though you think it's high quality and it's very interesting, others might not necessarily think so. But, it's essential to learn from these experiences and to try again and again. That's another competency I think I have, combined with being really optimistic that one day my results will be published.

■ **B. Kożusznik: Yes, optimism is a good trait.**

■ **O. Flak: At your work, you are focused on flow, and you carry out research on the flow and examine how the flow works. When can you get your own flow when conducting research? What are the conditions of your work that you can get into the flow?**

■ **C. Peifer:** It's funny because I'm also doing research on what helps people to get into the flow. At least in some of my own research, I try to follow some of my own research results, and what is necessary to get into the flow is, again, enough time to really perform the tasks without being interrupted. What you need is to, for example, switch off these automatic emails that pop onto your screen while you are doing something else. It's necessary to really divide your time into blocks where you can work in a concentrated manner without being interrupted by anyone else. Or even trying to keep some days free of other appointments. For example, I know some colleagues who block their Fridays for nothing but their own research. I really try to find these times, when I can work without interruptions. Also, clear goals are important for that. So that I know exactly what I want to achieve in this timeframe, which is not interrupted; and it has to be realistic, the aim shouldn't be too high for this certain time frame, otherwise it can be frustrating again. It should be a good experience. One more thing, it depends a little bit on the personality. At least for me, after I had several weeks to think through—that's still important—but in the end, there has to be a deadline. Otherwise, you can overthink things and maybe never come to an end because it can always be better or perfect. All in all, the deadline is helpful to then do all the rest of the work in flow.

■ **B. Kożusznik: It's very interesting and I think that in your work you mention some individual activities. But now I would like to ask you about team features. Could you tell us what makes people in your team ready and happy to share ideas, talk about problems, and be open? It is very important but this is a group/team factor. I think that you very much cherish it.**

■ **C. Peifer:** I think it is necessary that the team knows each other quite well, so they can be open to each other. Also that there is a low hierarchy, and everybody can just share ideas without the fear that one could think she or he is stupid. I think that's the most important thing in teams they can be free to share ideas because there's a

low hierarchy and little fear of failure. And not just little fear of failure but that the team is a culture of failures, which means that failures are okay, they are accepted as necessary in order to be successful?

■ **B. Kożusznik: So this is the leading feature; it's an incredibly interesting thing when you mentioned the failure acceptance culture. We will remember it.**

■ **C. Peifer:** Maybe one more point added to that. I think a clear vision and purpose of the work are necessary; if people know what it's good for, it also helps them to be creative as a team.

■ **O. Flak: I would like to go deep into this topic. What is the cause of team cohesion and that team plays well? What do you mean by that? How can you feel that the team is playing well?**

■ **C. Peifer:** After this time of coronavirus and countless virtual meetings, I think that what is really helpful for a higher team cohesion is meeting face-to-face. I think that trust in teams… It's not just that I think but there are also many research results showing that trust in teams is higher in teams that work together face-to-face compared to those working together virtually. I really think it's worth meeting at least from time to time to help people, find trust in each other. That helps team cohesion; it makes, informal communication possible. It means you can meet in the kitchen without having any work aim in your mind; you're just casually talking to each other about whatever you are interested in at this moment. It helps people to understand what others are working on; it's a form of social support. So when someone has a problem, and talks to another team member about it, they can help each other. And I think this mutual support is very helpful for team cohesion, being open to each other and not just looking at his or her own success but being interested in the work of others and helping them. That makes team cohesion possible.

■ **B. Kożusznik: My next question is also connected with team members. We were observing many people, and I think that you have good experience in diagnosing what motivates members of the research team to work. Is it only this inner motivation or do you see some other factors?**

■ **C. Peifer:** I think that particularly in research teams, intrinsic motivation is the most effective factor. Of course, there are other motivators, like being rewarded with publishing in the top journal. Of course, what is always present in academia is usually research assistants with their aim to become a doctor and they want to earn a PhD. It is also a reward that they see at the end of at least this scientific phase. That can be a motivation as well. But in my experience, people can only be really good if—in addition to this aim of becoming a PhD—they are highly and intrinsically motivated

and deeply interested in what they are doing.

▪ **B. Kożusznik: What is the motivation you don't like or think is ineffective?**

▪ **C. Peifer:** As I said, if it's really and completely extrinsic motivation and not intrinsic. For example, solely the aim of becoming a PhD in the end. I don't like that. Maybe it's because I'm so intrinsically motivated and very much interested in this topic and if someone is not burning for his or her topic. It's really difficult to work with such a person.

▪ **B. Kożusznik: Have you experienced that someone was pretending he or she is interested, and it was otherwise in reality because people know that you are so intensively motivated by your topics? Are people sometimes pretending it?**

▪ **C. Peifer:** Yeah, I think that in recruitment processes. Of course, people think this is what others want to hear so they can get the job. Until now, I think most people were honest; in the end, the team could convince them that the topic is engaging indeed. I think it has spilt over to most of the people so far.

▪ **B. Kożusznik: I do think you are a good detector. There is chemistry between you—as a main researcher—and younger researchers who are applying to your team. Thank you very much.**

▪ **C. Peifer:** You're welcome. If I may add one point to what motivates members of a research team to work. I think that autonomy is something that is essential here. The autonomy to think about own problems. That it's not, let's say, my ideas that people work on but they are free to identify their own problems that they are interested in. As I said, I've been interested in flow for so many years but many other topics are also interesting and I am very open to, hopefully, related topics; topics that are not my idea but someone else finds interesting. Thus, I also try to motivate people to be autonomous and find their own research questions they want to follow.

▪ **B. Kożusznik: I agree with you very much. I have heard about some research leaders who are so jealous of their researchers that they do not really allow them to develop their autonomy. It's a pity. I hope that this is the end of these kinds of procedures.**

▪ **C. Peifer:** I hope so, too. I even see something in student teams, I'm quite happy that every year I have some student teams to develop their research questions, and even student teams have amazing ideas and it's always so inspiring. It really is incredibly fruitful if people have autonomy in choosing their research questions, for everybody in the end.

▪ **B. Kożusznik: Yes, and I've noticed that when you are an authority, it is so easy to give an end to their creativity because when they see that it is unpopular or there is something wrong with this autonomy, they stop. It is a shame, it is a waste of their potential. It happens, sorry. Maybe we should change the topic.**

■ **C. Peifer:** Your answers are much better than mines, as for what you said. Of course, you need people who just do and don't fear to bring something to a close. That's true.

■ **B. Kożusznik: Now, a much more general question about some organisational factors. What measures does your university take with a respect to individuals to strengthen their competencies?**

■ **C. Peifer:** What our university offers is training and coaching with respect to several topics that could be helpful for researchers. It's also very needs-oriented because they also ask what topics could be interesting, and everybody can also suggest topics. Taking part in such training and coaching is not obligatory but everybody can choose it. It is an instrument that can also be used in the yearly employee reviews, which I highly suggest being done between the leaders of a research team and research assistants. This is not obligatory as well, but it's something we also have a template and recommendations on how to do; in these meetings, it's also about the aims for the following year and doing training or coaching could be part of this yearly employee review.

■ **B. Kożusznik: A very interesting form of strengthening competencies of the employees at the university.**

■ **O. Flak: Which of the competencies assessed at the level of individuals are rewarded by your university?**

■ **C. Peifer:** Maybe there is one. When people are very successful, they will be part of the University's Newsletter. So if there is a highly-ranked publication, you can let people know, or if you have a very successful grant that has been accepted, then it will be shown on the University's website, which is a very nice way to be seen and feel appreciated.

■ **B. Kożusznik: And now, it will be our last question, Corinna. Could you Share with us and with our listeners some tips you have for the leaders of the research teams? You are a leader of a few research teams; if you had any advice for people, what kind of competencies they should develop, and which are not as important as they suspect? Because sometimes people are going in the wrong direction. Please tell us what for you—a very successful leader—are the really needed competencies to become a leader of a research team?**

■ **C. Peifer:** I think what is really necessary is to have a clear vision of where you want to go in the next years with your research topic and to share this vision so that the members of the team are aware of the purpose of their own work. I think having the competencies to provide clear aims is important. I think that these yearly meetings with employees are an excellent strategy there and a very good measure but it
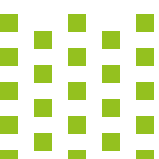
shouldn't be just yearly but more often that our aims are well communicated. Finally, I think it's necessary to be very well structured so it helps employees to be effective.

■ **B. Kożusznik: Olaf, would you like to ask Corinna about something else?**

■ **O. Flak: Maybe we can give you a question to summarise. What are the advantages of taking competencies into the management system and competency management at a university? Do you think this is a good way of managing and leading a university?**

■ **C. Peifer:** Yes, I think it's highly important to look at competencies and support the intrinsic motivations of researchers. I consider it much more important than all the extrinsic kinds of motivation. I even think that sometimes all the extrinsic rewards for publishing in high-ranking journals or having high funding can be hindering to creativity and a high scientific standard because it forces people to look for opportunities rather than for the really interesting questions. Of course, maybe in the end, it should be balanced, but I have the impression that in the meantime, these extrinsic motivations have become too much and that there is not enough focus on the interest of the researchers, which makes them very good at what they do.

■ **B. Kożusznik: Thank you, Prof. Corinna Peifer, for your interesting answers to our questions and especially for the last answer connected with the importance of the competencies. It means a lot to us because these arguments you mentioned are also very important to us. We do believe that the system should be changed. Of course, we are aware that the old measurement will survive; we will not cancel it completely. But when we suggest new forms of appraisal, it will go parallelly. Maybe this system which assesses our points, etc., will not be so painful when we are aware that our competencies are developed. Thank you very much. Your answers were very inspiring, and I hope that our listeners will develop their awareness of competency management in a modern university. Thank you very much.**

■ **C. Peifer:** You're welcome, thanks.
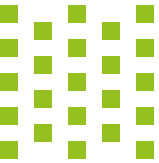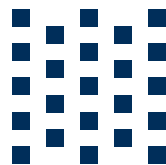
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