

The Relational Potentials Matrix (RPM)

Diagnosing the conditions under which competences can be exercised

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Same person. Different contexts. Different possibilities for action.



Carlo Ancelotti (AI-generated photo)

A SIMPLE INTUITION

A highly experienced professional does not enter every context with the same possibilities to act.

Milan	UEFA Champions League · 2002-2003, 2006-2007 FIFA Club World Cup · 2007
Real Madrid	UEFA Champions League · 2013-2014, 2021-2022, 2023-2024 Spanish League (La Liga) · 2021-2022, 2023-2024 FIFA Club World Cup · 2014, 2022 FIFA Intercontinental Cup · 2024
Chelsea	English League (Premier League) · 2009-2010
Paris Saint-Germain	French League (Ligue 1) · 2012-2013
Bayern Munich	Bundesliga · 2016-2017
Napoli	Dismissed in December 2019

What changes when the person remains capable, but the context changes?

A trained person still needs conditions for action

Imagine a trained project manager asked to lead an AI-enabled innovation programme in an SME.

Training may have developed the capability. Using it still requires:

ACCESS

Relevant information,
data and tools

AUTHORITY

Permission to make
decisions and changes

COOPERATION

Time and contribution
from other people

RECOGNITION

Organisational
attention and value
assigned to the work

Which of these conditions are actually available to this person, for this task, in this organisation?

Context is not just a background variable

Workplace conditions can make a specific action:
possible · costly · difficult · impossible

And actions can, in turn, change those conditions.

This is what I mean by a **relational affordance**: an opportunity for action that depends on the relationship between a person's capabilities and the conditions of the situation.

The unit we need to understand is therefore not only the person or the workplace, but their relationship around a specific act.

Building on what Cedefop already shows

WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW

Cedefop's ETLS shows that skills development and skills use are shaped by both individual and workplace factors.

Autonomy, managerial support, workload, information and workplace learning conditions matter.

Source: Cedefop (2026), *Beyond skills development: unleashing human potential. First findings from Cedefop's European Training and Learning Survey*

WHAT RPM ADDS

RPM moves from:

"Does this workplace generally support learning and skills use?"

to:

"How does this specific workplace condition affect this specific act of competence?"

It then connects that diagnosis to: evidence; responsibility; intervention.

RPM is intended as a complement to learning and workplace measures—not as a replacement for them.

Context should enter before training begins

1

Needs analysis

The gap between the competences the role requires and those the person has.

2

Course design

Contents and methods to close that gap.

3

Delivery and evaluation

Satisfaction and learning are measured at the end of the course.

4

Context, afterwards

The workplace is considered only when transfer fails.

TRADITIONAL QUESTION

What competence is needed and how should we develop it?

ADDITIONAL RPM QUESTION

What must the workplace make possible for that competence to be exercised?

Context becomes a training-design variable, not only an explanation after transfer fails.

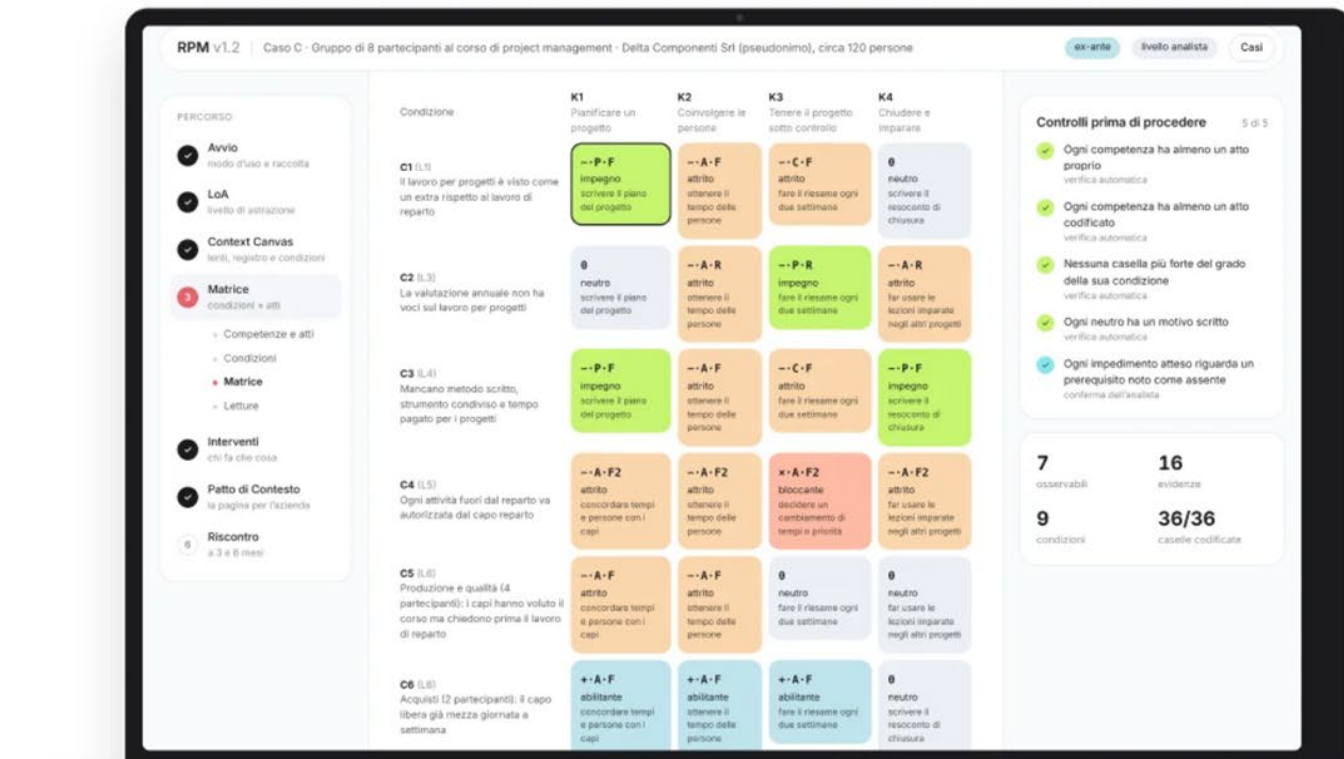
RPM in a nutshell

1 **DEFINE THE QUESTION**
Level of Abstraction
 What exactly are we trying to observe?

2 **READ THE CONTEXT**
Context Canvas
 What workplace conditions matter?

3 **CONNECT CONDITIONS TO ACTION**
Relational Potentials Matrix
 How does each condition affect each act of competence?

4 **ACT**
Intervention Plan
 What should change, who can change it, and how will we check?



ILLUSTRATIVE WORKED EXAMPLE

Worked example: designing a project- management course

TARGET GROUP

8 employees in a research organisation

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Develop project-management capability

TARGET WORKPLACE ACTION

Lead a real project from initiation to closure

Diagnostic question: Which workplace conditions enable or constrain the acts required to lead that project?

Start with evidence, not assumptions

LISTEN TO AT LEAST THREE POSITIONS

- 1 Learner / employee
- 2 Manager or decision-maker
- 3 Relevant colleague or stakeholder

COLLECT CONCRETE TRACES

- 1 Who decides what?
- 2 When is time actually available?
- 3 How does approval work?
- 4 What happened in a recent comparable case?

Rule: facts first. If we do not know, "unknown" is a valid finding.

Step 1 · Define exactly what you are diagnosing

Level of Abstraction

WHAT IT DOES

Defines in advance: the target action; the unit of analysis; the time window; what will be observed; alternative explanations.

WHY IT MATTERS

It prevents the diagnosis from becoming an explanation of “everything happening in the organisation”.

CASE C · KEY OBSERVABLES AND LENSES			
ID	OBSERVABLE	LENSES	
01	Protected time for projects	L4 Possibility	
02	Who authorises project work	L5 Constraints	L6 Network
05	How project work is recognised	L3 Value	

Next: the Context Canvas reads each observable defined here through seven lenses.

One element, seven lenses

OBSERVABLE 01

Protected time for projects

The same observable can reveal different aspects of the context.

LENS	IT ASKS	WHAT WE SEE IN CASE C
L1 Frame	How is this work understood?	An extra, done after department work.
L2 Attention (Salience)	What gets noticed and prioritised?	Nobody raises it in team meetings.
L3 Value	What is recognised or rewarded?	The appraisal has no items on project work.
L4 Resources (Possibility)	What is actually available?	No paid time: the budget covers only the course.
L5 Rules (Constraints)	What is allowed or required?	Time outside the department needs the head's approval.
L6 Relationships (Network)	Who depends on whom?	The department head, not the trainer or HR.
L7 Time	When can this actually happen?	No free window in the peak months of the calendar.

One element, seven different facts. Without lenses we stop at the first one.

Level of abstraction

The sheet that decides what goes into the observation and what does not, at what grain and with respect to which question. It is completed before any observation.

Observables

Step 6 of 6

GUIDING QUESTION

Which facts at Delta do you observe — protected time, who authorises, tools, recognition — and how do you measure them?

For each one, state the possible values, the source, the date and the lens of the Canvas it serves. Decide this before collecting the data.

01

Protected time for projects

×

ADMISSIBLE VALUES

hours per week agreed with the
department head: yes · on request ·
no

SOURCE

department heads, calendar

DATE OR INTERVAL

Sep 2026

Lenses fed

L1

L2

L3

L4

L5

L6

L7

We now know what to observe. Next, we examine what those observables tell us about the context.

Context Canvas

WHAT IT DOES

Helps read the context more clearly by filtering the observables through seven lenses.

WHAT IT GIVES US

Each *observable* × *lens* combination produces an evidence statement with a source and an explicit evidence grade.

CASE C · EVIDENCE LOG (EXTRACT)

EV-07

The training budget covers the course, not tools or working time for projects.

L4 Possibility · Direction + finance (2 sources)

2 sources

EV-09

Any activity outside the department must be authorised by the department head.

L5 Constraints · Two department heads

Two independent sources

Reported (F) · 2 sources (F2) · Observed (R) · Unknown (?)

From evidence to conditions

1 Group related evidence

Several pieces of evidence may describe the same workplace condition.

2 Keep uncertainty visible

The confidence assigned to a condition reflects the evidence supporting it; missing information is never silently completed.

THREE PIECES OF EVIDENCE

EV-06

There is no written method or shared tool for projects: everyone uses their own Excel sheet.

L4 Possibility · Focus group

F

EV-07

The training budget covers the course, not tools or working time for projects.

L4 Possibility · Direction + finance

F2

EV-10

Time for the 5 course days is granted; time for projects after the course has not been discussed.

L5 Constraints · Direction

F

↓ ONE CONDITION

C3

No written method, shared tool or paid time for projects

L4 Possibility · EV-06, 07, 10

F

16 pieces of evidence → 9 workplace conditions → rows of the matrix

Conditions

Step 9 of 10

GUIDING QUESTION

Which of the 16 evidence items say the same thing about Delta?

Drag evidence items that say the same thing into the same condition: one row, one lens. The condition's grade is that of its weakest evidence item.

EVIDENCE · 3 NOT YET USED

EV-01 F L1 Frame

In the focus group, the participants describe project work as an extra, to be done after the department's work used in C1

EV-02 I L1 Frame

Project management is not part of everyday vocabulary in the company

EV-03 R L2 Saliency

In the management meetings of the last six months, the talk is of orders and deliveries; internal projects appear only once used in C1

Drag an evidence item onto a condition (or tap it and then choose the condition). An evidence item can serve more than one condition.

C1 F X

Project work is seen as an extra on top of department work

EV-01 In the focus group, the participants describe project work as an extra, to b...

EV-03 In the management meetings of the last six months, the talk is of orders a...

Lens (only one) L1 L2 L3 L4 L5 L6 L7

The evidence comes from several lenses (L1, L2): choose the one that best describes the condition.

C2 R X

We now have evidence about the context. Next, we ask what each condition does to specific acts of competence.

RPM

How conditions and competences affect each other

From competences to acts

A competence is too broad to diagnose. RPM therefore decomposes it into observable acts.

1 Name the competence

What the course should make possible at work.

2 Make it visible

Write when it can be seen in practice.

3 Break it into acts

An own act, done alone, and an act that requires others.

COMPETENCE

A1 · CAN BE DONE DIRECTLY

A2 · REQUIRES OTHERS / AUTHORITY

K1

Introduce a new way of working

Visible when: replaces personal Excel sheets with a written, shared method

Write the project method and a shared template

Get the heads to adopt it in their departments

K2

Understand people's needs

Visible when: listens to heads and colleagues and builds their needs into the plan

Interview each head about priorities and constraints

Agree with each head the time and people the project can use

K3

Get the new process used

Visible when: others use the shared method and record project data without being asked

Record decisions and project data in the shared tool

Get project work recognised in the annual appraisal

Each act meets each condition in one cell of the matrix.

Condition	K1 Planning a project	K2 Involving people	K3 Keep the project under control	K4 Close and learn
C1 (L1) Project work is seen as an extra on top of department work	--P·F commitment write the project plan	--A·F friction get people's time	--C·F friction do the review every two weeks	0 neutral write the closing report
C2 (L3) The annual appraisal has no items on project work	0 neutral write the project plan	--A·R friction get people's time	--P·R commitment do the review every two weeks	--A·R friction get the lessons learned used in other projects
C3 (L4) A written method, a shared tool and paid time for projects are missing	--P·F commitment write the project plan	--A·F friction get people's time	--C·F friction do the review every two weeks	--P·F commitment write the closing report
C4 (L5) Every activity outside the department must be authorised by the department head	--A·F2 friction agree timings and people with the department heads	--A·F2 friction get people's time	×A·F2 blocking decide a change of timings or priorities	--A·F2 friction get the lessons learned used in other projects
C5 (L6) Production and quality (4 participants): the department heads wanted the course but ask for the department's work first	--A·F friction agree timings and people with the department heads	--A·F friction get people's time	0 neutral do the review every two weeks	0 neutral get the lessons learned used in other projects

CONDITION C1 · L1 FRAME

Project work is seen as an extra on top of department work

×

COMPETENCE K1

Planning a project

It shows when the person writes a plan with objective, timings and people

Choose the act this condition weighs on most: only that one enters the matrix. If you change act, the code moves to the chosen act.

ACT (ONE ONLY)

write the project plan

agree timings and people with the department heads · needs others

— · P · F

commitment

The person can change the condition alone (P) → commitment.

1. Effect. What does this condition, as it is today, do to "write the project plan»?

+ helps

0 does not touch it

— makes it effortful

× prevents it

Think about what is needed to do the act: a permission, a piece of data, a tool, someone's help. Is it there? Does it arrive in time? If it arrives but late it is –, if it does not arrive it is ×. Ask yourself: "if nothing changes, can it still be done?" Yes, with effort → –. No → ×.

2. Who can change it. Who can change this condition in the coming months?

P the person

C the person with others

A others

N none

P: the person alone, with their own work. C: the person, but someone is needed with them. A: only someone else (owner, supplier...). N: no one in the observed period.

We now know where action is enabled, costly, blocked or uncertain. Next, we turn diagnosis into intervention.

Group

Step 1 of 5

GUIDING QUESTION

Which Delta problems — time, projects, method, recognition — are solved by the same action?

Drag the cells that hold back or block onto an intervention. Cells with the same cause go together. Write what needs to change in the context.

CELLS THAT WEIGH IN · 18

C1×K2 · get people's time · friction

in I6

C1×K3 · do the review every two weeks · friction

in I6

C2×K2 · get people's time · friction

in I6

C2×K4 · get the lessons learned used in other projects · friction

in I6

Drag a cell onto an intervention (or tap it and then choose the intervention). Cells with the same cause go in the same intervention.

I1

prerequisite

×

One real project per participant, chosen and assigned before the course

C8×K1 · write the project plan · expected impediment

×

C8×K2 · bring together and lead the project group · friction

×

C8×K3 · do the review every two weeks · friction

×

C8×K4 · write the closing report · friction

×

Interventions

Given these conditions, what do we change in the training design and in the context?

Intervention Plan

WHAT IT DOES

Groups cells with the same cause into interventions, each with roles, an expected state and a check.

WHAT IT GIVES US

It turns a transfer problem into a design problem.

Before the course starts, the organisation knows: what it must provide; who is responsible; what the learner is responsible for; what remains uncertain; what will be checked later.

CASE C · INTERVENTIONS

Prerequisite

A real project for each participant, assigned before the course
Authorises: Direction

Prerequisite

Protected project hours, written and agreed with each head
Authorises: Department heads

Prerequisite

A written threshold within which the participant decides time and priorities
Authorises: Direction

Prerequisite

Kick-off meeting with the five department heads
Authorises: Direction

Urgent

A written method and a shared tool for projects
Authorises: Direction

Later

Two items on project work in the annual appraisal
Authorises: Direction

Ordered by dependency, not by importance.

The Context Pact

WHAT IT IS

A short written agreement that records the interventions before the course starts.

Direction, heads and learner each sign what they will provide, who is responsible and when it will be checked.

CONTEXT PACT · VERSION 1 DATED 12 OCTOBER 2026

Case C · Group of 8 participants in the project management course · Delta Componenti Srl (pseudonym), about 120 people

1 · Objective and success criterion

Within 6 months	Every participant has written the plan for a real project and holds a review every two weeks.
Within 12 months	At least five projects closed with a report, with the lessons learned shared across departments.
Criterion	Project hours used every week; plans and reports delivered on time; at least one item on project work in the 2027 appraisal.

2 · Conditions the company sets up

Condition	Who grants it	By when	How we notice it
One real project per participant, chosen and assigned before the course (entry condition)	Management	Before the start of the course	Plan written within one month of the course

What RPM gives us

1 · An actionable diagnosis

We identify which workplace conditions enable, constrain or block specific acts of competence.

2 · Clear responsibility

We separate what the learner can change from what requires managers, colleagues or organisational decisions.

3 · An intervention plan

Conditions become concrete actions, with owners and checks.

4 · A cycle, not a snapshot

At 3 and 6 months we ask what was provided, what was used and what changed.

Training can develop capability. RPM examines whether the workplace allows that capability to become action.

Could this be useful to you?

FOR TRAINERS

Do not ask only what learners need to learn.

Ask what must be possible when they return to work.

Implication: diagnose transfer conditions before training and negotiate prerequisites with the organisation.

FOR RESEARCHERS

Separate learning, opportunity to use and workplace outcomes.

Implication: analyse condition × act relationships rather than relying only on aggregate person and context scores.

FOR POLICYMAKERS

Skills supply is only part of the problem.

Implication: policies for adult learning should also consider whether workplaces enable people to use and further develop their skills.

Current status: a diagnostic proposal to be validated

WHAT THE CURRENT WORK SHOWS

The protocol can be applied consistently and can distinguish configurations that an individual competence measure would treat similarly.

WHAT IT DOES NOT YET SHOW

It does not measure learning gains or support generalisation across organisations.

NEXT VALIDATION STEPS

- independent double coding and inter-rater agreement;
- longitudinal measures of competence use;
- comparison with simpler context indicators;
- testing across more organisations and sectors.

From diagnosis to quantitative validation

THREE SETS OF VARIABLES

INDIVIDUAL POTENTIAL

Relevant action repertoires and capabilities

CONTEXTUAL AFFORDANCES

Workplace conditions captured through the seven lenses

ACTUALISATION

Observed episodes and behavioural traces of competence use

POSSIBLE ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

MULTILEVEL MODELS / SEM

Test whether individual potential and workplace conditions interact across levels.

LATENT CLASS ANALYSIS

Identify recurring configurations of enabling and constraining conditions.

The diagnostic protocol comes first; the quantitative measurement model is the next research step.

Items, scales and sampling procedures are not yet validated.

After training, do not ask only:

Did they learn?

Also ask:

Can they use what they learned here and create the desired impact?

RPM is a methodological proposal to make that second question observable, discussable and actionable.

Thank you

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