A Working Model of Employee Competence in the Thai Workplace: What Constitutes Employee Competence?[1]

Somsri Siriwaiprapan[2]

The purpose of this paper is to share one possible way of viewing employee competence. It is hoped that the Five Common Domains of Employee Competence presented herein would add to the contemporary literature on Thai HR practices, as well as to the advance in HR-related research, especially in the context of Thai business and industry.

1. Introduction

In response to the increasingly competitive, global economy, many Thai organizations, either private or public ones, are in search of a new strategic lever to improve their performance management systems. So, the ideas of Performance-based Management, Benchmarking, KPI, Balanced Scorecard or Six Sigma then have come as a result of such endeavors. These messages, thus, have been translated into competency-based HR practices.

As to the extent to which HRD efforts are concerned, one of the most fundamental goals of HRD is to improve employee performance. It is this demand that places individual development in the inner core of HRD functions

---

[1] Gest Professor of the Grafuate Program, Master of Human Resource Management, Business Administration Department, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Burapha University.

[2] This paper was developed from the author's study on the perceptions of Thai HR practitioners about the concepts, the practices and the future of HRD in Thailand (Siriwaiprapan, 2000).

of many organizations. Currently, the more controversial issue in Thai management is not over whether HRD is relevant to the overall organizations' performance but rather over what constitutes employee competence that enable them to perform their tasks in order to accomplish the objectives of the work units and, hopefully, to fulfill the goals of the organization.

2. The Iceberg Model of Competency

Basically, organizations can maximize employee performance through the development of a wide rage of competencies. Spencer & Spencer (1993) define a competency as underlying personal characteristics, which indicate a person's ways of behaving and thinking. As such, the authors classify human competencies into two broad categories: hidden and visible competencies. These two groupings ought to be regarded as a continuum of perceptibility, not a separate, either-or category.

The hidden grouping includes motives, traits and self-concept. These three types of competencies are termed as "hidden" because they are closer to the inner part of a person's personality, and thus, difficult to assess. Whereas, knowledge and skills are more visible and more easy to assess in terms of action or behavior. The crux of Spencer & Spencer model is that a person's "intent" guides that person's action. In other words, motives, traits, self-concept and knowledge are the drives for skill action behaviors and, finally, job performance. When it comes to performance measurement, it might be easily to confuse performance drivers with performance outcomes, due to their causal relationships.
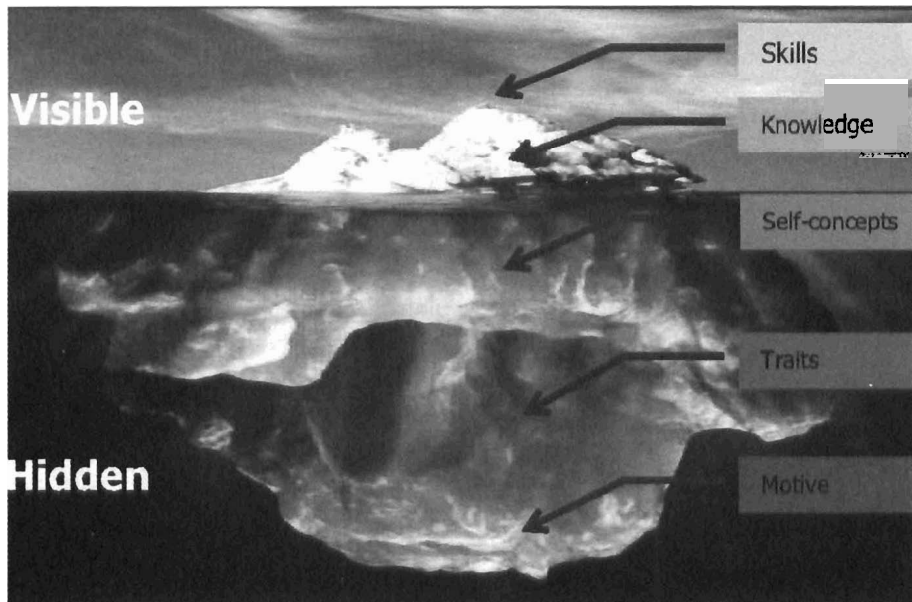
Figure 1: The Iceberg Model of Competency

3. Five Common Domains of Competence in the Thai Workplace

According to a study on Thai HR practitioners' perceptions of HRD initiatives (Siriwaiprapan, 2000), employee competencies in the Thai workplace can be grouped into five common domains of individual development. Included in the following diagrams are some examples of the constituent elements of employee competencies. The criticality of these developmental domains and their constituent elements do vary from one work unit to another and, more importantly, from one organization to organization, depending upon the work unit's/organization's unique needs and available resources.
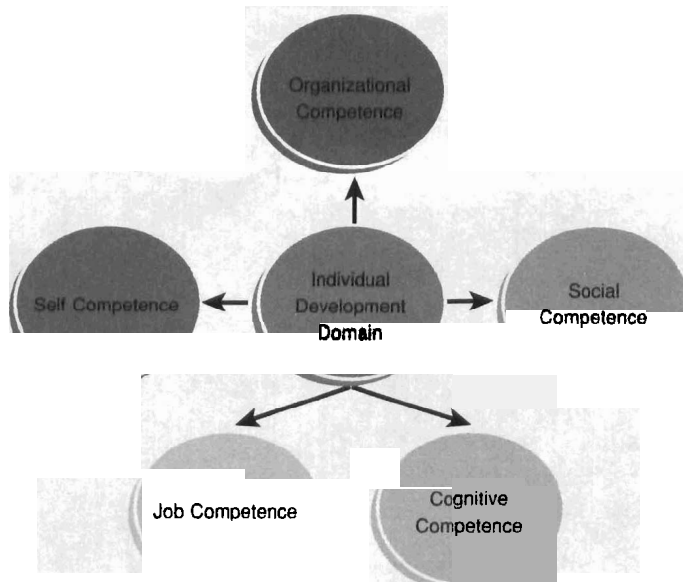
Figure 2: Five Common Domains of Competence in the Thai Workplace

3.1. Organizational Competence

Organizational competence represents organization-specific knowledge, such as business types, organizational cultures, policies, procedures, goals and objectives, and etc. The purposes of this competence development are three-fold:

§   Mutual understanding of an organization's specific contexts

§   Maintenance of an organization's culture

§   Promotion of a sense of unity

Understanding of the organization's overall operation is imperative so as to enable employees to function more effectively as they relate their work

processes with those of other parts within the organization. Employees have to know what they have to do and also why they got to do so. Each organization has its own view of the qualities of employees who enter into the organization. "The good fit" between the organizational culture and personal characteristics then determines the individual growth in the organization. Knowing organizational frames of reference may not be sufficient for employees to function unless they can accept and commit to the organization's values and norms, by demonstrating the preferred attributes and behaviors. Through the acculturation process come a sense of unity and a sense of common interests and responsibilities.

Organizational competence is not just to acquire knowledge of organizational contexts or not just to learn to get along with the culture, but it is also to share the same visions and goals towards the success of the organization.
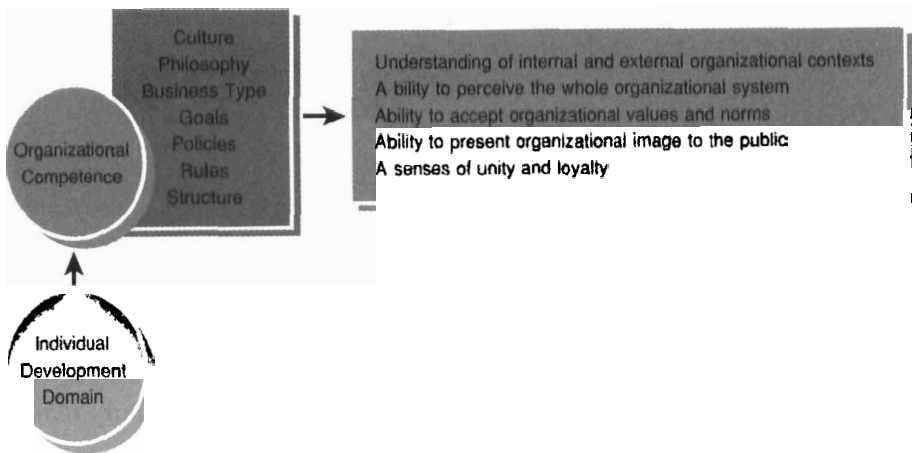

Figure 3: Organizational Competence

3.2 Social Competence

Social domain entails basic abilities for social interaction and communication. Social interaction competence includes skills in networking (making connections); maintaining interpersonal relations, and enjoying the benefits of peer relations. Communication skills are necessary for engaging in social interaction in the workplace, to enable employees to express one's thoughts to others and interpret the meaning of communications from others. However, when language skills are critical to accomplishing work assignments (e.g. ensuring that messages received and services delivered meet the customers' demands), in this case, communication skills might be viewed as job or technical competence.

The purpose of this social learning is to develop four types of social capabilities, all of which help develop team relationships among employees:

§   Social acceptability

§   Social perspective taking

§   Social cooperation

§   Social integration

Social competence not only helps create a congenial working environment but it also facilitates learning of other competence domains. For instance, the ability to accept organizational culture requires social perspective taking to make sense of the values and norms. Or, a sense of unity requires social integration competence to raise the awareness of employees that they are members of the organization. More importantly, one's own career success depends on the person's ability to develop a network of contacts and expertise.
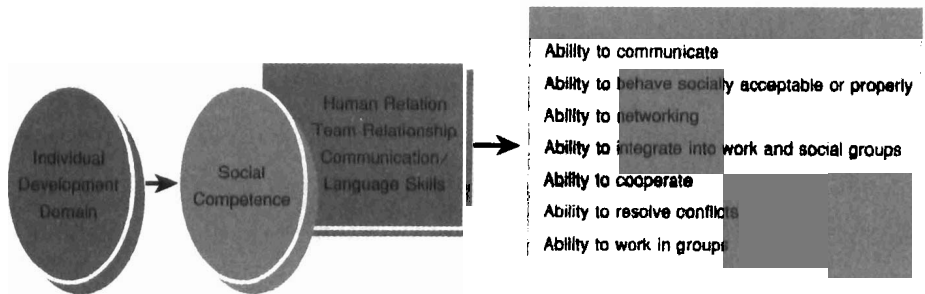
Figure 4: Social Competence

3.3. Cognitive Competence

Development of cognitive competence in the workplace covers most of the whole continuum of logical thinking, from accumulation of information to application of knowledge, to creative thinking, to envision, or to acquisition of wisdom. In daily work, employees at all levels need the ability to learn and to perform analytical thinking, planning, and problem solving which enable them to take responsibility for handling contingencies that may arise.
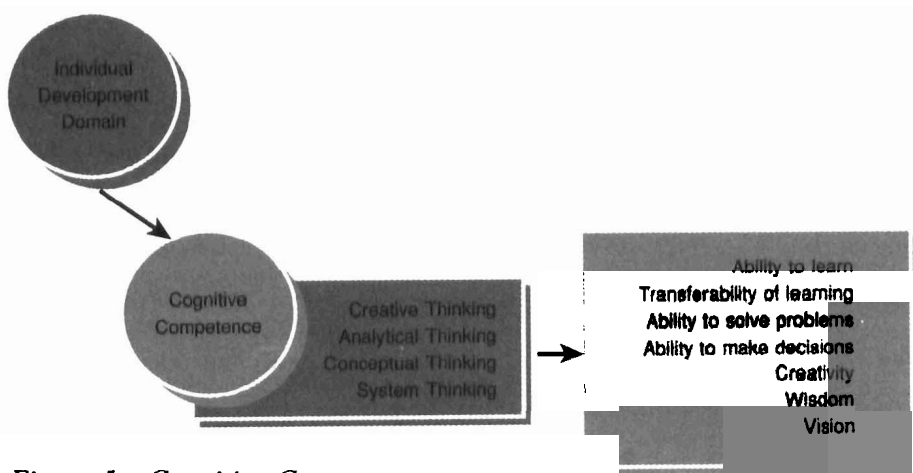

Figure 5: Cognitive Competence

129

One distinction between the cognitive competence required for non-management employees and that of management staff lies in the different job expectations of the two groups. That is the non-management levels are expected to "do things right the first time" while the management level has to "do the right things the first time." Where jobs are less routinized or less predictable and when employees receive minimal prior training, creativity and problem-solving ability become more critical to job accomplishments. Job settings, therefore, differ in demands on cognitive capabilities.

The ability to perceive a whole system of work involved in the organization (systems thinking) allows employees to realize how the work flows from one line to another; and this broader understanding enhances their creative thinking or problem solving skills. While systems thinking is more geared toward a person's spatial perspective, envisioning ability focuses on the time perspective. Envisioning ability is simply defined as the ability to think about the future. In dynamic work settings, envisioning ability is imperative to employees across functions and levels.

As the future symbolizes change, the ability to envisage and understand the future trend or direction of the organization enables employees to be more flexible and prepare for the change. For some people, the word, "vision" is synonymous with "worldview" and also linked to "open-mindedness" or "broad-mindedness." Therefore, envisioning ability may entail a combination of systems thinking and futuristic thinking.

An ideal cognitive competence for individual development is the ability to think wisely (wisdom). That is to have the power of discerning and judging properly as to what is true or right, to grasp human nature, especially one's own limitations and possibilities. Essentially, this ability is closely related to the development of self competence. While wisdom guides one's actions through

difficulties and changes toward good ends, the power of wisdom comes from self-knowledge and moral sensitivities.

Acquisition of wisdom seems outside the realm of competence in the workplace. Wisdom, however, offers the ability to break with and question one's entrenched principles, perceptions, values, or thinking so that one can truly understand and tactfully face the problems at hand.

In essence, cognitive competence is comprised of all sorts of abilities in logical reasoning that allow employees to see things in a multi-dimensional way. It is the fundamental domain of human development, a requisite for other types of competence. In particular, cognitive competence affects the employees' trainability for job competence.

3.4. Job Competence

Obviously, employees need job competence or the knowledge, theory, methods, and skills to perform a specific job in an efficient way. Job competence have a direct impact on the performance level, not only because it empowers employees to carry on their work assignments, but also because it affects their sense of self-efficacy or sense of confidence in taking charge and making decisions. This competence domain also includes the development of proper work attitudes and attributes. This is apparent in time of organizational transformation where attitude change training becomes indispensable to facilitate the transition. Changes will not take place until the employees have altered their attitudes toward the new work processes.
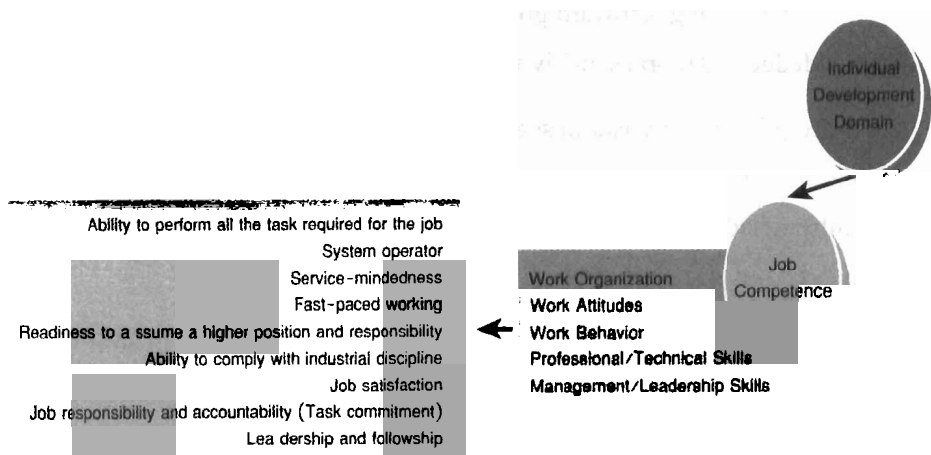
Ability to perform all the task required for the job
System operator
Service-mindedness
Fast-paced working
Readiness to a ssume a higher position and responsibility
Ability to comply with industrial discipline
Job satisfaction
Job responsibility and accountability (Task commitment)
Lea dership and followship

Individual
Development
Domain

Job
Competence

Work Organization
Work Attitudes
Work Behavior
Professional/Technical Skills
Management/Leadership Skills

Figure 6: Job Competence

Very often, job competencies are distinguished by authoritative responsibilities, as either functional or management skills. However, the shifts in business and job demands, caused by downsizing or re-engineering, call for employee empowerment. Flatter organizations and smaller work groups designed for participative management can be effective only when employees are empowered to assume some of the management roles and are given some latitude in decision making. Simultaneously, employees have to be more self-expressive to be able to participate in management's decision making, or to express their ideas, or even to take charge in designing their own work organizations.

Expanding employees' traditional job competencies to entrepreneurial skills becomes also common in flat organizations where mutual understanding of organizational contexts and effective communications between the management and the empowered employees are critical to the performance of the team.

As work attitudes can motivate employees to act in a certain manner, their performance is also influenced by how they see the world, how they think about themselves, or how they think about others, which all embedded in the development of self competence, as to one's own self-concept and self-control.

3.5. Self Competence

This domain of competence sounds like those hidden competencies of the Iceberg Model. The main purpose of self development is personal growth, socially, psychologically, and morally. This is the area where "psychological maturity" or "emotional maturity" or so-called EQ takes the major roles in employee competence in the workplace.

Among the attributes of psychological maturity are ability to adjust to change, readiness to learn, readiness to develop oneself, readiness and ability to initiate action, trust, endurance, receptiveness, broad-mindedness, self-discipline, self-esteem, individuality, and self-determination. Employees' feelings of worthiness, pride, or discouragement all affect their performance.

On the other hand, ethical responsibilities range from ability to make decisions regarding right or wrong, integrity, social responsibility, and good citizenship. This sounds like private matters, except when directly related to job demands (policemen and government officials). Business ethics involves the principles of conduct founded upon a society's moral code, which is not viewed as an area of expertise of an entity that seeks to maximize profitability, and strives to survive in the business world.

However, the globalization of the concepts of good governance or corporate governance has brought the ethical codes of conduct back to the spotlight. Business enterprises no longer deny the relevance of ethical development in the workplace.
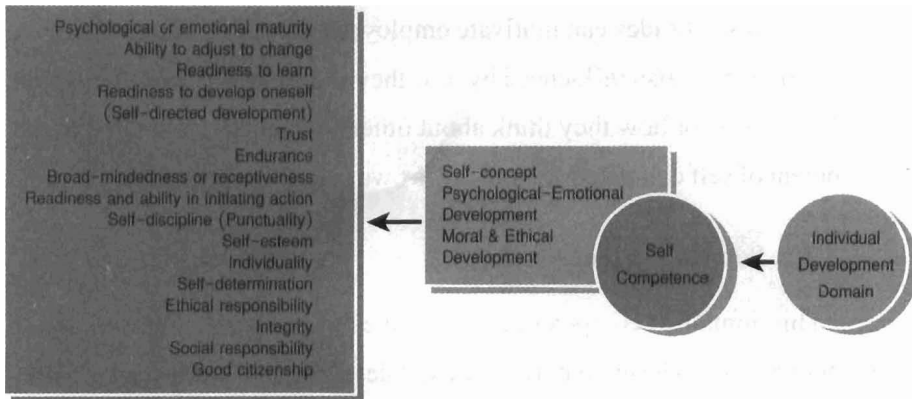
133

Psychological or emotional maturity
Ability to adjust to change
Readiness to learn
Readiness to develop oneself
(Self-directed development)
Trust
Endurance
Broad-mindedness or receptiveness
Readiness and ability in initiating action
Self-discipline (Punctuality)
Self-esteem
Individuality
Self-determination
Ethical responsibility
Integrity
Social responsibility
Good citizenship

Self-concept
Psychological-Emotional
Development
Moral & Ethical
Development

Self
Competence

Individual
Development
Domain

Figure 7: Self Competence

4. A Holistic View of Employee Competence

The concept of five common domains of competence suggests that employee competence in the workplace is organization-specific. While some may view that self competence is non-job related and thus, not crucial to job performance, some may think otherwise. It is a matter of how "employee competence" is defined in a given organization. Organizations differ markedly in their demands on the employees, the nature of the work, the degree of competitiveness, the amount of stress, and so forth. This results in the uneven importance given to each composite domain of employee competence and to the constituent elements of individual competency profiles.

Regardless, employee competence in the workplace involves all five developmental domains, though in different degree.
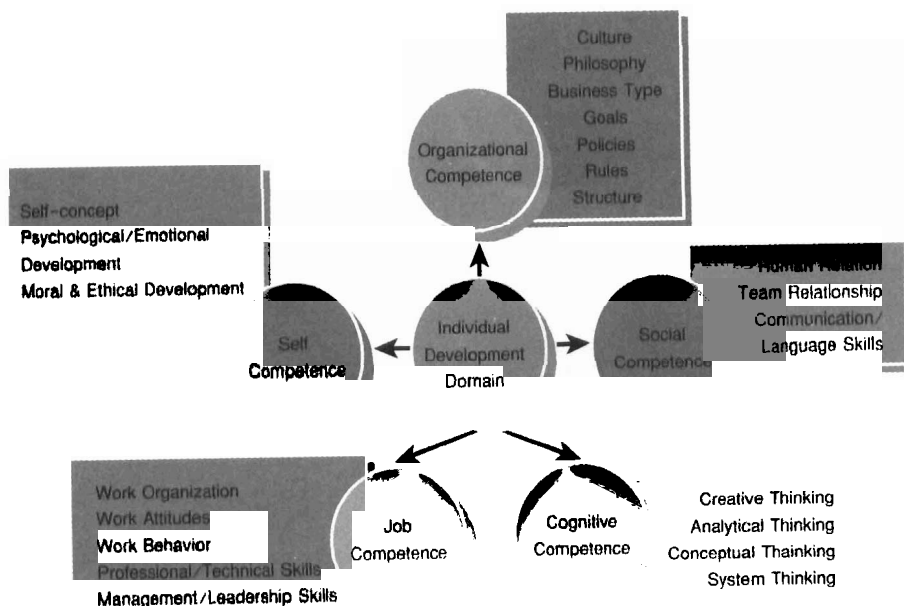
134

Figure 8: A Holistice View of Employee Competence

Reference

Spencer, L. M. & Spencer, S. M. (1993). Competence at work. New York: John Wiley & Son.

Siriwaiprapan, S. (2000). The concept, practice, and future of human resources development as perceived by Thai human resources practitioners, Doctoral Dissertation. The George Washington University, Washington D.C. May 2000.

135

ใบสมัครสมาชิกวารสาร
รัฐประศาสนศาสตร์

วันที่___/___/___

ชื่อ - สกุล _____

ประเภทสมาชิก

○ ศิษย์เก่าคณะรัฐประศาสนศาสตร์ หลักสูตร_____ จังหวัด_____ รุ่นที่ _____

○ บุคคลทั่วไป

○ หน่วยงานหรือบริษัท

ที่อยู่ในการจัดส่งวารสาร _____

_____

_____

โทรศัพท์_____ โทรสาร _____

มือถือ_____ E-mail-Address:_____

○ สมัครสมาชิก วารสารการจัดการภาครัฐและภาคเอกชน

      - กำหนดออกปีละ 3 ฉบับ อัตราค่าสมาชิก 220 บาท/ปี

○ สมัครสมาชิก วารสารรัฐประศาสนศาสตร์

      - กำหนดออกปีละ 3 ฉบับ อัตราค่าสมาชิก 220 บาท/ปี

○ สมัครสมาชิกวารสารรัฐประศาสนศาสตร์ และวารสารการจัดการภาครัฐและภาคเอกชน

      - อัตราค่าสมาชิก 440 บาท/ปี

หมายเหตุ -   *ชำระเงินโดยตรงที่โครงการวารสาร อาคารอเนกประสงค์ชั้น 7*

               ชำระเงินโดยโอนเข้าบัญชี "โครงการวารสารทางวิชาการ"

               เลขที่บัญชี 040-2-20390-2 ประเภทออมทรัพย์ ธนาคารกสิกรไทย

               สาขาคลองจั่น

กรุณาส่งแบบฟอร์มใบสมัครพร้อมใบนำฝากธนาคารมายัง

โครงการวารสารทางวิชาการ คณะรัฐประศาสนศาสตร์ สถาบันบัณฑิตพัฒนบริหารศาสตร์
เลขที่ 118 ถนนเสรีไทย แขวงคลองคลองจั่น เขตบางกะปิ กรุงเทพฯ 10240
หรือ Fax แบบฟอร์มการรับสมัครพร้อมใบนำฝากธนาคารไปที่เบอร์ 0-2375-9164

ประชาสัมพันธ์

    ขณะนี้วารสารรัฐประศาสนศาสตร์ได้เปิดรับบทความทางวิชาการ เพื่อจัดพิมพ์ลงในวารสารรัฐประศาสนศาสตร์ ซึ่งมีจุดมุ่งหมายเพื่อเผยแพร่ บทความทางด้านรัฐประศาสนศาสตร์ และแลกเปลี่ยนทัศนะแนวคิดด้าน รัฐประศาสนศาสตร์ โดยท่านสามารถจัดส่ง บทความไปยังโครงการวารสารตาม ที่อยู่ด้านล่างนี้

    พร้อมทั้งขอรับคำแนะนำในการเตรียมต้นฉบับได้ที่ โทร.0-2727-3900