Essential Skills for Leadership Development in a Multicultural Organization

By
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Think about the first time you were in a leadership position. How did you feel? Now imagine that you are in charge of a team with members from cultures other than your own. This is the situation facing many frontline managers in the company in which this study was conducted. Recognizing the challenges facing new and even seasoned managers, company leadership supported this study to explore leadership skills essential within the multicultural workforce. Ultimately the goal was to lay the foundation for a new leadership development program (LDP).

Several research gaps were discovered through an iterative literature search. First, despite a large body of knowledge regarding leadership in general, there is no consensus regarding a list of essential leadership skills. Additionally, the gap appears to be even greater when considering multicultural environments.

Pilot study interviews were conducted with team members and managers to identify a preliminary list of leadership themes. When combined with the literature review, a list of six leadership skills evolved and formed the basis

> This research addressed leader effectiveness within a multicultural workforce. Six leadership skills emerged from interviews and a survey. Results informed a new leadership development program.

for a survey. The survey was developed to explore the following research question.

What leadership skills are essential for frontline managers in a multicultural organization?

The survey included quantitative (Likert scales and rank ordering) and qualitative (open-ended) questions that were designed to analyze two hypotheses, based on situational leadership theory (Bass & Bass, 2008; Van Fleet & Yukl, 1986; Yukl, 2013).

H1: Perceived essential leadership skills vary across scenarios

H2: Perceived essential leadership skills vary across demographic groups

Scenario-based and demographic questions were included to explore these hypotheses. Demographics included team member/manager, years with the company, years of supervisory experience, military experience, education level, gender, foreign language experience (proxy for culture), and age. All participants worked in the social media industry, focused within one major region of the world.

Of the 96 team members and managers who were eligible to complete the survey, 39 chose to participate (41% response rate) representing a cross-section of all demographic groups.

Findings

Non-parametric statistical procedures were used to analyze the data, given the small sample size. Results tended to support the two hypotheses, suggesting that both the situation and demographic factors impact leader effectiveness. Significant demographics included years with the company, education level, language (culture), and age. In addition, the survey results validated the six leadership skills identified in the pilot study and literature review. The findings imply that when making decisions, managers should consider not only <u>what</u> is happening but also <u>who</u> is involved.

Several limitations of the study were identified, including the small sample size mentioned previously. Future research could include teams from within the same company but with expertise in other regions of the world, in order to increase the sample size. An additional limiting factor was that the study was conducted within the social media field. The survey could be administered in companies across different industries to assess the generalizability of results.

Conclusions

In conclusion, survey results tended to support both hypotheses, suggesting that <u>what</u> is happening and <u>who</u> is involved impacts which leadership skills are essential for a manager to be effective. The overall result of the research was a prioritized list of essential leadership skills for frontline managers in a multicultural organization. The list was based on a combination of the pilot study, literature review, and survey findings.

1. Communicating with team members/others
2. Building team cohesion
3. Motivating team members
4. Leveraging individual differences, such as strengths, preferences, etc.
5. Resolving conflicts
6. Managing expectations of team members

Ultimately, the objective of the research was to inform company management of leadership skills that were perceived as being critical for managers to be effective within a multicultural environment. Even before the study concluded, preliminary results were used to identify a leadership development opportunity for team members and managers alike. Currently, the results are being used to refine the vision for this first step in the company's new LDP initiative.

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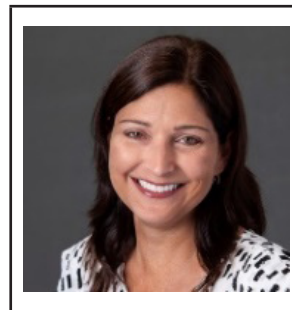
Where to Find Out More

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Review

This article was accepted under the ***constructive peer review*** option. For futher details, see the descriptions at:

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