



## Service-leadership competencies for hospitality and tourism management

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### ABSTRACT

Competency models have become useful tools for management development in hospitality and tourism organizations. At the same time, these models provide limited focus on leadership behaviors that facilitate employee service performance and customer satisfaction. The present study seeks to address this issue by developing a “service-leadership” competency model for use in the hospitality and tourism context. The following study reports on the results of interviews with 110 industry managers, which yielded a model of some 100 behaviors in 20 competency areas. These competencies cluster into 3 high order categories, namely business savvy, people savvy and self savvy. The results of the study are discussed in the context of extant research.

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### 1. Introduction

Competency models have become a useful method for identifying requisite skills in both hospitality and tourism education (Chung-Herrera et al., 2003) and operations (Tas, 1988). These models serve a variety of organizational functions and help to develop important managerial skills. Certainly, a number of studies have been conducted identifying important competencies in the hospitality arena (Johanson et al., 2010). At the same time, which specific success behaviors should be included in such models has been under debate for some time (Guerrier and Lockwood, 1991; Ladkin, 2000; Tas, 1988). Some models focused on technical skills (Hsu and Gregory, 1995; Mariampolski et al., 1980; Sapienza, 1978), others have focused more on leadership and management skills (Chung-Herrera et al., 2003), and still others have balanced their approach (Agut et al., 2003). Although various approaches have been taken in developing and enhancing these models, little has been done in the way of emphasizing service quality. More specifically, in spite of a number of models developed for hospitality, there seems to be a limited focus on service-specific leadership behaviors (i.e., those that would facilitate customer satisfaction). Despite identification of the importance of guest satisfaction principles in Buergermeister's (1983) seminal study, the customer seems to be ancillary in many studies. As competition increases, leaders who can drive the highest levels of service quality with fewer resources may be essential for organizational success in hospitality and tourism.

Lucia and Lepsinger (1999) provide two reasons for the importance of competency models in the competitive environment. First, they posit their utility in “ensuring that employees are doing the right things; clarifying and articulating what is required for effective performance, such models help organizations align internal behaviors and skills with the strategic direction of the company as a whole” (p. xiii). Second, they suggest that competency models are most useful when efficiency is necessary for competitive advantage. The authors note that “Competition has also made it imperative for many companies to become “lean and mean” if they are to survive.” “To maintain the same or higher productivity with fewer people, those who remain must have the needed skills and knowledge” (p. xiii).

The difficulties many hospitality and tourism organizations face in the current and future economic crises will continue to create pressure to do more with less (Wang and Wang, 2009). Given the ongoing struggles of hospitality and tourism organizations to execute service standards with shrinking resources, a service-leadership competency model may be an invaluable tool for emerging hospitality and tourism managers. Through such a model, these leaders may find a blueprint for maximizing their staff's efforts and directly impacting the guest service experience. The purpose of the current study is to create such a tool. Drawing on the unique characteristics of the industry, extant literature and an extensive interview process with current service leaders, a model of service-leadership behaviors for the hospitality and tourism context is developed.

### 2. Leadership competency models and service quality

Competency models, first created by David McClelland (1973), are descriptive tools used to build human resources capability. These “behavioral” frameworks provide direction for practitioners

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and educators seeking to develop requisite skills. Many organizations use competencies in their human resources practices such as job analysis, recruitment and selection, training, career development, succession planning, and performance appraisal (Chung-Herrera et al., 2003).

The literature clearly delineates the factors that differentiate services from manufacturing (Bitner et al., 1994) and much has been done to illustrate why leaders must act differently in the service setting than in the manufacturing environment (Sergeant and Frenkel, 2000; Yoon et al., 2001). At the same time, most of the competency models developed in the hospitality and tourism settings seem to provide limited focus on specific categories of behavior which might facilitate customer satisfaction. That is, customer-focused behaviors appear in many models, but to a very limited extent. For example, Tas's (1988) early study which has been the foundation for much future work, focused on hotel general managers and cites only two guest service behaviors out of thirty-six in a model for management trainees. While the two were considered "essential" and received both the first and fourth highest mean scores, they represent only a small part of the model. In a later study, Tas et al. (1996) looked at competencies for property-management. Again, a service-related competency was at the top of the list; however, the emphasis of the competency was "interacting with a wide variety of people," which included "staff and contractors" as well as "customers." More recently, Chung-Herrera et al. (2003) identified 99 lodging-related behaviors of which only 2 specifically mention the "guest" or "customer." Lastly, in a study focusing on Australian hospitality education, customer or service related competencies are not explicitly identified (Dimmock et al., 2003). Table 1 provides a summary of major leadership competency studies conducted in the hospitality environment.

"Customer-centered" competencies do appear in a study by Kay and Russette (2000). When looking at "core essential competencies" across varying functional areas and management levels, behaviors such as "recognizing customer problems," "maintaining customer satisfaction," and "managing customer problems with understanding and sensitivity," yielded the highest mean scores (4.86–4.89 out of 5.0). We suggest that while "the guest" appears in many studies, customer-focused competencies remain underutilized, particularly at the front line level. In addition, we believe that these competencies are actually behaviors within a competency area. That is, the areas focused on customer service behavior should be more specifically identified and refined. For example, services are often defined by two broad constructs, one focusing on the hard or "technical" aspects such as wait times, cleanliness and organization, while the other focuses on the interpersonal or "expressive" components, which might include "wowing" the guest, anticipating needs, and treating the guest with courtesy and respect (Gronroos, 1983). We suggest that excellence in the service setting requires managers to understand and be competent in both areas as they must both plan and execute in customer service systems. As noted in the literature, these technical service aspects tend to be expected by guests while the expressive components truly exceed customer expectations (Gronroos, 1983). Consequently, managers in the service setting may need to take a variety of approaches in addressing the demands of both expressive and technical service quality problems.

Given the dichotomous nature of service delivery (i.e., technical vs. expressive) it seems reasonable to assume that both management and leadership skills will be necessary for achieving the highest levels of service quality. While the similarities and differences between management and leadership have been strongly debated in past study (Zaleznik, 1977), it is important to identify our approach in the context of the present study. We suggest that overlap exists between management and leadership, and both must exist in the hospitality setting. Managerial skills such as planning and decision making may be necessary for ensuring that the

technical components of service are addressed. In similar fashion, role modeling service quality, inspiring performance and effective communication may be necessary to maximize expressive service quality. A context specific model including both management and leadership components will assist hospitality and tourism managers by focusing on service quality and aligning organizational efforts. It is also hoped that such a model would provide a touchstone for constant leadership development.

The following study presents the process of developing a competency model which takes a qualitative rather than quantitative approach. Almost all of the studies described in Table 1 were conducted using a survey process, many of which were derived from behaviors identified by Tas (1988). A qualitative approach may provide a more current set of important competencies.

The authors make several assumptions regarding hospitality and tourism management in the development of this model. First, that service quality and/or customer satisfaction is the primary goal of such organizations that takes a strategic or systems approach (McCole, 2004). Second, that a balance of business and people-related competencies is required for effective service leadership (Sandwith, 1993). Third, that a service leadership model across hospitality and tourism segments is useful. Chung-Herrera et al. (2003) note the dearth of such a model suggests that a broad model is a more comprehensive and valuable model. Finally, that long-term managerial success is result of constant development. That is, the best managers constantly and consistently strive to develop their own skills. Indeed, self-development may be the most pressing issue for leaders in the service sector given the importance of role modeling (Kay and Russette, 2000). To the extent that leaders act professionally, model service standard behavior and live the values of the organization, the service climate is either positively or negatively impacted (Yoon et al., 2001). We believe a comprehensive model of service leadership behaviors would be a useful tool in the leadership development process.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Data collection

The proposed competency model was created following considerations as outlined by Schippmann et al. (2000). The authors discussed the strengths and weaknesses of various techniques of competency modeling as well as comparing it to job analysis. One of the strengths identified in the Schippmann et al. (2000) study is the link between competencies and business goals and strategies of the organization. In addition, the authors provide insight into core competencies that are common to multiple jobs within an organization. Following the aforementioned criteria, the next step was to solicit information from successful industry managers through structured interviews. Interviews are common in such situations where a predetermined set of categories does not exist (Yukl and Van Fleet, 1982).

The primary researchers, along with student research assistants trained in the interview protocol, collected the data. Some 5% of the interviews were conducted online, 15% in person in the respondent's work location, and the remaining 80% were conducted by phone. Data collectors read through a script which included information regarding the research, use of the data and the actual interview process. Participation was voluntary and responses were anonymous and kept confidential.

#### 3.2. Sample

In-depth interviews were conducted with a diverse group of leaders corresponding to major segments of the hospitality and

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