A model of hospitality leadership competency for frontline and director-level managers: Which competencies matter more?

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ABSTRACT

Competency models are useful tools for hospitality organizations and academic programs to identify skills and behaviors needed in the workforce. Using two studies, the present study provides an updated leadership competency model for frontline and director-level managers in the hospitality industry. In a pilot study, we updated the model of hospitality leadership competencies (in a list of 195 behaviors, grouped into 15 competencies comprising 44 skills) based on existing competency models and the opinions from 30 senior hospitality leaders. We further clustered these competencies into business leadership competencies, personal leadership competencies, and people leadership competencies. In the main study, we surveyed 98 director-level managers on the relative importance and competency priority for frontline and director-level managers. Rank-test results showed that while business leadership competencies were the top priority for director-level managers, people leadership competencies ranked first for frontline managers. This study yields both research, practical and educational implications.

1. Introduction

Competency models are useful tools for human resource managers and educators to identify and develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for future industry leaders (Chung-Herrera et al., 2003; Kay and Russette, 2000; Testa and Sipe, 2012; Sisson and Adams, 2013). Developing competence in employees is related to employees' professional confidence and job satisfaction (Ko, 2012) and business performance (Blayney, 2009). As such, increasing number of studies examined both generic leadership competencies (e.g., Chung-Herrera et al., 2003; Testa and Sipe, 2012) and job-specific competencies (e.g., Ko, 2015; Koenigsfeld et al., 2012) for hospitality managers.

Despite these notable works, previous studies focused on developing competency models for a single (hierarchical) level of managers, without comparing the relative importance of frontline managers and director- level managers' competencies or prioritizing these competencies. The existing universalism approach implies that there is a single best set of equally important competencies for all managers (cf. Chung-Herrera et al., 2003; Koenigsfeld et al., 2012), which limits the potential for practitioners to develop the *right set of people* with the *utmost important competencies* (Antonacopoulou and FitzGerald, 1996; Huselid and Becker, 2011; Lepak and Snell, 1999). To better utilize limited resources, hospitality organizations need to understand whose competencies are more important. They also need to know which

competencies have the highest priority with the assumption that priority of competencies may differ for frontline and director-level managers. Addressing these issues can also help hospitality educators to differentiate their undergraduate and master programs by aligning curricula with critical competencies for jobs- undergraduate programs prepare students to become successful frontline managers whereas master programs often focus on developing students to become successful director-level managers (Raybould and Wilkins, 2005). Thus, we aim to compare the relative importance of frontline and director-level managers' competencies, as well as investigate the priority of these competencies for frontline and director-level managers, respectively.

To address the issues raised above, it is essential to have an updated model of hospitality leadership competency. Recent development of competency models has focused on specific jobs, such as golf club managers, food and beverage researchers, and training managers (e.g., Bharwani and Jauhari, 2013; Ko, 2015; Koenigsfeld et al., 2012; Wong and Lee, 2017). While these job-specific models are useful for specific jobs, these cannot be easily applied to the general hospitality industry (Koenigsfeld et al., 2012; Zagar et al., 1983). Thus, their implication on hospitality education and training programs (e.g., university programs, management trainee programs, etc.) - which tends to train generalists (Cho et al., 2006; Tynjälä et al., 2006) - are limited. With the majority of generic hospitality competencies focused on competencies needed in the 2010 s (e.g., Chung-Herrera et al., 2003; Testa and Sipe, 2012),

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there is not sufficient knowledge on generic hospitality leadership competencies in 2020s. Given the dynamic nature of hospitality industry and time-specific nature of competency models (Winterton and Winterton, 1999), it is time to update the generic hospitality competency model for hospitality leaders. This can enhance the hospitality industry's ability to recruit, select, train, and appraise future leaders (cf. Pavesic, 1993).

In sum, we used two studies to answer three questions: RQ1) What are the competencies needed for hospitality managers in the 2020s? RQ2) What is the relative importance of these competencies for frontline and director-level managers? and RQ3) Which competencies have the highest priority for frontline and director-level managers, respectively? In the pilot study, we answered RQ1 and developed an updated model of hospitality leadership competency. In the main study, we answered RQ2 and RQ3 and explored which frontline or director-level managers' competencies should hospitality organizations and educators invest in.

2. Literature review

2.1. Hospitality competency model

Hospitality researchers have been interested in the study of competency models because human resource managers use competency models as a basis for various talent acquisition processes (see Chung-Herrera et al., 2003; Kerr and Jackofsky, 1989, for detailed discussions). Competency models are also useful for curriculum and class designs (Chung-Herrera et al., 2003; Sisson and Adams, 2013; Tesone and Ricci, 2005). Employing competent employees, in turn, can increase job satisfaction (Ko, 2012), improve guest service quality (Bharwani and Jauhari, 2013) and result in better financial performance (Blayney, 2009).

There are two major lines of competency research. First, job-specific models focus on developing specific competencies needed for jobs (Ko, 2015; Koenigsfeld et al., 2012; Wong and Lee, 2017). Examples of specific competencies include product knowledge and capacity for foodservice research and development employees (Ko, 2015), administrative and technical domains for private club managers (Koenigsfeld et al., 2012), and training and facilitation skills for training professionals (Wong and Lee, 2017). Despite the importance of job-specific competencies (Koenigsfeld et al., 2012), there are some "common core" generic competencies, such as business competencies (e.g., strategic management, innovation, and change), self-characteristics and interpersonal competencies (e.g., team player, people skills), and leadership competencies (e.g., coaching). Indeed, Sisson and Adams (2013) showed that generic competencies account for 86% of all competencies.

The second line of competency research focused on the development of generic competency models for hospitality leaders. Generic models put more emphases on business, self-interpersonal and leadership competencies and less emphasis on technical skills (Chung-Herrera et al., 2003; Kay and Russette, 2000). For example, Chung-Herrera et al. (2003) developed 8-factor models including strategic positioning, implementation, critical thinking, communication, self-management, interpersonal, leadership and industry knowledge. It is generally agreed that there are three-major generic competencies factors. These factors

are empirically distinguishable (Mumford et al., 2007; Sisson and Adams, 2013). Testa and Sipe (2012) called these three leadership competencies factors as business-, self-, and people- savvy. Based on the Testa and Sipe's (2012) study, we proposed that generic hospitality leadership competencies can be clustered into 3 factors: 1) business leadership competencies - defined as competencies required for managing business functions; 2) personal leadership competencies − defined as self-focused competencies required for a personal growth and interpersonal needs; and 3) people leadership competencies - defined as other-focused competencies required for leading and developing subordinates.

While both job-specific and generic competency models advance our knowledge of hospitality leadership competencies, recent competency research focuses on sector-specific models which cannot be readily applicable to all hospitality managerial jobs. Moreover, existing generic models are dated with most of them focusing on competencies needed in the 2010s (e.g., Chung-Herrera et al., 2003; Testa and Sipe, 2012). However, the hospitality industry is highly dynamic (Koenigsfeld et al., 2012). For example, there is an increasing emphasize of social media competencies (Leung et al., 2013; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014), cross-culture competencies (Pizam, 2014) and emotional intelligence (Bharwani and Jauhari, 2013). As such, competency models are time-specific (Winterton and Winterton, 1999). Thus, we adopt a future-focus approach, incorporate recent changes, and update the generic hospitality leadership competency model in the pilot study.

Research question: What are the leadership competencies needed for frontline and director-level hospitality managers in the 2020s?

2.2. Level of management

Another limitation in existing studies is that they did not differentiate the competencies needed for different levels of management. Organizations are designed with multiple hierarchical levels to coordinate functions as well as monitor and react to different aspects of organizational environments (Zaccaro and DeChurch, 2012). For example, in a hotel setting, while frontline managers are responsible for monitoring the interactions between frontline employees and guests, director-level managers have broader responsibilities such as monitoring the general external environment for trends that can have impacts on the whole business unit. Table 1 summarizes the difference between the two level of management. Given the differential nature of jobs and job-specific competency requirements, the degree of importance differ across levels (Mumford et al., 2007; Zaccaro and Klimoski, 2001).

Addressing DeChurch et al. (2010) call to understand director-level managers (i.e., middle management) - an under-studied hierarchical level (DeChurch et al., 2010; Zaccaro and DeChurch, 2012) - we contrasted the relative importance of frontline and director-level managers, as well as the differential priority of the two levels. Throughout this study, we defined frontline managers as managerial employees that have employees directly reporting to them and director-level managers as mid-level managers that oversee teams of managers.

Table 1
Differences between fronline and director-level managers.

	Frontline managers	Director-level managers
Definitions	Managerial employees that have employees directly reporting to them	Mid-level managers that oversee teams of managers
Examples	Restaurant managers, front-desk managers and club managers, and sales managers	General managers of a small hotel property, directors of food and beverage, director of hotel operations
Major responsibilities	Manage systems and to lead frontline employees, including assigning work tasks, scheduling, managing operation cost, monitoring work processes, train and develop, and to create accountability for performance	Monitor the external environment, planning and organizing multiple business units