

The Perception of Hotel General Manager on the Leadership Competencies for Future Success

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the most critical competencies for career development as perceived by hotel general managers and to determine whether their perceptions varied from resort and city hotels. This study involved a cross-sectional design to collect data. After a review of the literature, a survey instrument was developed from previous research to conduct this study. The general managers of full-service hotels were surveyed. Data was collected through a mail questionnaire. Descriptive statistical methods were used to analyze the characteristics of the respondents. Principal component analysis with varimax rotation was employed in exploratory factor analysis. The study derived six necessary leadership competencies for the future success of general managers. Competency in coaching and team-building was rated highest, followed by ethic and concern for community, strategic planning, empowerment, problem solving, and interpersonal skill. Then, t-test was employed to identify differences between resort and city hotels' general managers on their perception of leadership competencies perceived as importance for future success. The results showed that there were significant differences between resort and city hotels' managers on their perception of leadership competency factors that have impacted on the future success in Thai hotel industry.

Keywords: leadership, competency, hotel management

Introduction

Thailand is a rapidly expanding tourism destination; one of the major trends of the past year is the growing internationalization of Thai resorts. Thailand's hotel industry has grown significantly in the past decade. There are approximately 6,017 hotels across Thailand (Thailand Tourism Review, 2007) with the best performing locations being Bangkok and Phuket. Moreover, between 2006 and 2008 nearly 100 hotel development projects are planned to begin operation. One of major threats for the Thai hotel industry is that growth in the presence of multinational hotel chains could create increased competition, room supply and labour turnover. Olsen

(1999) pointed out that the rise in employee turnover rate which is seen as the common situation has dramatically affected negatively on the service quality and profitability of the organization. This turnover is often a function of the poor job environment, poor supervision and leadership styles. Additionally, globalization, the free market system, a knowledge-based environment, labor challenges and a growing concern for health and well being are emerging as the drivers of change in the 21st century. Additionally, the move by global hotel chains to Thailand is certain to be carefully watched to assess its impact. This situation leads to highly

competitive environment in Thai hotel industry. While these groups will give hotels and resorts more marketing exposure and raise professional standards, it will affect the high staff departures. In order to compete in this environment, the hotels need to understand the leadership competencies necessary for managers in order to remain competitive. Selecting individuals with the right qualification and developing managers into high performing leaders are among the most pressing challenges facing hospitality organizations today. The ability to identify and develop the skills and competencies required for managers is essential for Thai hotels that hope to remain competitive. Such information will prove useful in identifying hotel managers' development needs and in designing strategies for selecting and assessing future leadership talent. Therefore, the objective of this study is to determine the leadership competencies essential for hotel general managers in Thailand.

Leadership

Bass (1999) proposed that the leadership process occurs in one of two ways, either transactional or transformational. Transactional leadership refers to the exchange relationship between leader and follower to meet their self-interests. It may take the form of contingent reward in which the leader clarifies for the follower through direction or participation what the follower needs to do to be rewarded for the effort. It may take the form of active management-by-exception, in which the leader monitors the follower's performance and takes corrective action if the follower fails to meet standards. Or it may take the form of passive leadership, in which the leader practices passive managing-by-exception by waiting for problems to

occur before taking corrective action and avoids taking any action. The transactional leader is a leader who initiates contact with subordinates in an effort to exchange something of value, such as rewards for performance, mutual support, or bilateral disclosure. Based on path-goal theory, the leader's role is instrumental rather than inspirational, is based on the principle of exchange, and functions to provide the necessary incentives or disincentives to obtain desired task outcomes (Gupta, MacMillan, and Surie, 2004). According to Bass and Avolio(1994), transactional leaders clarify the responsibilities for their followers, the tasks that must be accomplished, the performance objectives, and the benefits to the self-interests of the followers for compliance. In its more corrective form, the transactional leader specifies the standards for compliance, and may punish followers for being out of compliance with those standards. Transactional leaders usually operate within the boundaries of the existing system or culture, have a preference for risk avoidance, and emphasize process rather than substance as a mean for maintaining control. They are also likely to be effective in stable and predictable environments in which monitoring current activity against prior performance is the most effective strategy (Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramanian, 1996). Concisely, transactional leadership is based on bureaucratic authority and legitimacy associated with one's position within the organization. Transactional leaders pay attention to the clarification of tasks, work standards, and outcomes. They emphasize on the organizational rewards and punishments to influence employee performance. Bass, Avolio, Jung, and Berson (2003) emphasized that transactional leadership can build

a base level of trust in the leader as he/she clarifies expectations and rewards and reliably executes what has been agreed. On the other hand, transformational leadership is characterized as a process that motivates followers to achieve performance beyond expectations by transforming followers' attitudes, beliefs, and values as opposed to simply gaining compliance. Transformational leaders provoke feeling of trust, loyalty, and respect from followers by: generating awareness and acceptance of the purpose and mission of the organization, inducing them to transcend their own self interest for the sake of the organization, and activating their higher-order needs. Transformational leadership behavior is related to a number of positive individual and organizational outcomes. Indeed, transformational leadership behavior has been empirically linked to increased employee satisfaction (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, and Fetter, 1990), organizational commitment (Bycio, Hackett, and Allen, 1995), satisfaction with supervision (Podsakoff et al., 1990), organizational citizenship (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, and Bacharach, 2000), and overall employee performance (Yammariono, Spangler, and Bass, 1993). Krishnan (2005) investigated how the leader-member exchange and suggested that one should pay attention to developing transformational leadership capabilities in managers if a change in terminal values of subordinates is contemplated. Subordinates are likely to fall in line with the terminal value systems of their leaders if their leaders are more transformational.

Many hospitality organizations are increasingly viewing leadership

development as a source of competitive advantage. Since the industry tends to be labor intensive and has increasingly harsh environmental demands imposed upon it, leadership skills may help organizations to utilize the available human resources more effectively and may help to increase performance. However, large parts of the hospitality industry are managed by traditional leadership styles. For example, Worsfold (1989) argued that managers in the hospitality industry had an awareness of participative styles of leadership but were more inclined to use autocratic approaches. Mok, Pine, and Pizam (1998) also revealed that Chinese managers were autocratic and paternalistic in their leadership style. Ogaard, Marnburg, and Larsen (2008) found that the realm experience their organization to be significantly more organic than their employees and this could be one reason why management in the hospitality industry is traditional and bureaucratic, simply because management does not see any need to change the way things are. The hospitality industry might have a general problem with their managers who are characterized by traditional leadership styles that fail to make the most of the employee's resources. An exception is the research of Tracey and Hinkin (1996) who reported that hospitality business required leaders who were able to examine holistically their organization, use vision to recognize what changes were required and manage those changes to fit with the organization's environment. With increased attention being paid to successful change management in the last decade, organizations, generally, are accepting transformation leadership behavior as an important component of leading such change.

Leadership/Managerial Competency

For the managerial positions, building leadership competencies is a career-long activity—whether the managers want to maintain a competitive edge in the current position, or they want to move to a bigger, more challenging maze (Estep, 2005). Many organizations took account of the identified leadership competencies for the manager position of its subsidiaries to enhance the recruitment strategy for future managers. Moreover, they capitalized on the leadership competency concept to pinpoint essential competencies of their managers, and then to design training and development programs for these people. Some management studies attempt to identify the skills and capabilities that should be of greatest importance to managers. In general, the results confirm that conceptual skills should be prioritized by top managers (Torkildsen, 1999, as cited in Garrigos-Simon, Palacios-Marques, and Narangajavana, 2008). Many researchers, such as Barner (2000), Ulrich, Zenger and Smallwood (2000) have focused on the issue of leadership competencies in manufacturing and project management with the idea of identifying qualities and abilities possessed by successful leaders. This competencies could be used as the basis for strengthening an organization's leadership team and determining the types of educational and leadership development opportunities that are needed for future leaders.

Leadership/Managerial Competency in the Hospitality Industry

Day (2001) argued that leadership effectiveness depends upon an individual's "fit" with the demands of the particular situation in which he or she operates. The individual's skills

and personal attributes need to match the organization's opportunities and requirements. The leadership competency needs in service environments have been distinguished from those in other type of industries. Although, many studies focus on the managerial competencies in other industries, there are few studies in the hospitality industry. Previous studies showed that the hospitality industry is unique and therefore requires a particular set of personal competencies. Brownell (1994) explored the characteristics that general managers believed were most important to their career development and found that determination, excellent communication skills, hard work, strong interpersonal skills, goal-oriented, honesty and integrity contributed significantly to the career advancement. Future Leaders in the hospitality industry need to bring a keen sense of ethical responsibility and high standards of integrity that will clearly require many tough decisions in the future. Enz and Siguaw (2000) revealed that the goals of management development in high-performing hotel companies, such as Choice Hotels, Marriott International, Motel 6, and Day Hospitality, are to ensure that their future leaders develop essential skills and competencies and, that pipeline of future leaders remains full. Two of these high-performing organizations — Choice Hotels and Marriott International — developed comprehensive, chain-wide leadership-development programs. Choice Hotels International assessed the core competencies needed by its future leaders and created an integrated executive-training and development system. Likewise, Marriott International used leadership competencies to help senior managers in selecting, developing, and coaching future leaders. Chung-Herrera, Enz,

and Lankau, (2003) investigated the future based leadership-competency model in hospitality industry and found that competency in self management is the most important factor, followed by knowledge of strategic positioning, implementation skill, critical thinking, communication and interpersonal skill. Chiang and Jang (2008) suggested that hospitality managers need to motivate employees continuously and provide on-going feedback since feeling good about themselves, having a sense of accomplishment, taking responsibility, and having challenging work are good motivators for employees. Good managers should listen to employees, care about employees, encourage employees involved in job or job-related decisions, take care of employee advancement, and reward employees. However, Brownell (2008) argued that factors that influence managerial demands at the macro level include elements of the organization itself such as the structure and size of the unit, the scope of authority, traditions, and the nature of current practices and systems.

Methodology

This study involved a cross-sectional study to collect data. The survey was applied to collect data. The first section of the survey requested demographic information. Respondents were asked to indicate such items as their gender, age, nationality, educational background, and years of experience in the hospitality industry. Next, the respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they perceived various leadership competency items which was adapted from Chung-Herrera, Enz, and Lankau (2003). Respondents were asked to indicate their level of importance with each leadership competency items on a five-choice Likert-type metric (1 = not need, 2 = slightly important, 3= fairly important,

4 = very important, and 5 = extremely important). Prior to the administration of the questionnaires, all questions were translated in Thai and then back-translated in English to ensure that the Thai version of the questionnaire captured the same constructs as the English version. The general managers of full-service hotels in Thailand were targeted. Full service properties were distinguished from those with limited services because it was assumed that these organizations were more likely to provide an environment where managers would confront a range of workplace challenges due to role relationships, status, and the like. However a current, accurate list of appropriate individuals is not available. Therefore, the list of accommodation in Thailand conducted by Tourism Authority of Thailand in 2004 was used. 2,000 questionnaires were mailed to the hotels in that list, 535 questionnaires completed by general managers were returned and only 265 claimed their hotels as full-service hotels.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

There were 162 (61.4%) male and 102 (38.6%) female respondents. In respect to age, two groups were almost equally distributed (30.3% from the 35-44 age group, and 34.1% from the 45-54 age group). Only 15.9% of respondents were under 35 years of age, while 19.7% of the respondents were above 55 years of age. In terms of educational background of respondents, 152 (57.6%) respondents held a bachelors degree, 50 (18.9%) respondents held a diploma while 62 (23.5%) respondents held a master degree or above. As for the professional background, the results indicated that 39 (14.8%) respondents had 11-15 years of experience, 66 (25%) respondents had 16-20 years of experience, and 92 (34.8%)

respondents had more than 20 years of experience. Overall, 74.6% had more than 10 years of professional experience in the industry. In term of hotel type, there were equally distributed (134 resort hotels and 130 city hotels).When Pearson Chi-Square

test was conducted to compare the respondents' demographic characteristics, the results showed that there are no significant difference in demographic characteristics between resort and city hotels (Table 1).

Table 1: Respondents' demographic characteristic profile

Demographic characteristic	Total		City Hotel (n=130)		Resort (n=134)		Sig.*
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Gender							0.14
Male	162	61.4	74	45.7	88	54.3	
Female	102	38.6	56	54.9	46	45.1	
Age							0.48
less than 35	42	15.9	19	45.2	23	54.8	
35-44	80	30.3	34	42.5	46	57.5	
45-54	90	34.1	48	53.3	42	46.7	
Over 55	52	19.7	29	55.8	23	44.2	
Education							0.78
Certificate/Diploma	50	18.9	27	54.0	23	46.0	
Undergraduate	152	57.6	75	49.3	77	50.7	
Postgraduate	62	23.5	28	45.2	34	54.8	
Professional experience							0.19
1-5 years	26	9.8	9	34.6	17	65.4	
6-10 years	41	15.5	22	53.7	19	46.3	
11-15 years	39	14.8	22	56.4	17	43.6	
16-20 years	66	25.0	27	40.9	39	59.1	
more than 20 years	92	34.8	50	54.3	42	45.7	

* Pearson Chi-Square test at 0.05 significant levels.

Principal component analysis with varimax rotation was employed in the exploratory factor analysis to extract from 99 competencies into a set of simplified composite factors that could be used to describe the original construct to analysis the leadership competencies necessary for success as a general manager. First, Kaider-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) statistic was calculated as 0.953, so the 99 leadership competencies could be considered interrelated and they shared common underlying dimensions. Second, the Bartlett test of sphericity was conducted in order to test the significance of the correlation matrix ($\chi^2=20407.64$, $df=4753$, $p<0.000$). Both tests indicated that factor analysis

was appropriate for this study. Then, an exploratory factor analysis using principal component with varimax rotation was used. The competencies with a factor loading of 0.5 or higher were clustered together; fifty-two of ninety-nine competencies were excluded from this process. As shown in Table 2, from the varimax-rotated factor matrix, six factors were extracted that explain 60.32% of the overall variance. The factors had generally acceptable reliability coefficients ranging from 0.85 (Interpersonal skills) to 0.92 (coaching and team-building). These factors were named based on the common characteristics of the items in each factor as "coaching and team-

building”, “empowerment”, “problem solving”, “interpersonal skill”,

“Strategic planning”, and “ethic and concern for community”.

Table 2: Factor Analysis

Factor	Eig.	R*	F**
Factor 1: coaching and team-building	10.19	0.92	
○ Treats people with respect			0.57
○ Coaches others in skill development			0.50
○ Works as a member of a team			0.52
○ Champions new ideas and initiatives			0.55
○ Employs team approach to solve problems when appropriate			0.66
○ Promotes respect and appreciation for diversity and individual differences			0.67
○ Treat people fairly			0.70
○ Promotes teamwork among groups; discourages “us versus them” thinking			0.78
○ Monitors progress of others and redirects efforts when necessary			0.54
Factor 2: Empowerment	3.21	0.91	
○ Encourages employees to used their initiative to remedy problems when they first occur			0.62
○ Allow others to lead under the appropriate circumstances			0.70
○ Deliberately allows direct reports to use their own methods for completing tasks			0.67
○ Inspires and motivates others			0.59
○ Prepares people to understand changes			0.60
○ Defines and sets up quality standards for employees			0.52
○ Gives others the authority necessary to accomplish their objective			0.61
○ Involves others in critical decisions that affect them			0.55
○ Delegates enough of own works to others			0.56
○ Promotes quality initiatives	0.54		
Factor 3: Problem solving	2.75	0.88	
○ Handles multiple demands and competing priorities			0.52
○ Knows the strengths and weaknesses of competitors			0.55
○ Identifies and defines problems			0.61
○ Determines which of many problems may become crises			0.59
○ Creates needed systems and procedures to support changes			0.66
○ Understands owners’ and stakeholders’ values and how they perceive things			0.56
○ Applies cross-functional knowledge to			0.50

understand and solve problems				
Factor 4: Interpersonal skill	2.51	0.85		
○ Interact with people in a direct and open manner				0.63
○ Listens to people without interrupting				0.59
○ Writes in an effective manner				0.61
○ Presents ideas in a convincing manner				0.51
○ Challenges others to make tough choices				0.50
○ Take a stand when resolving important issues				0.52
○ Models the changes expected of others				0.51
○ Selects leadership style most appropriate for the situation				
Factor 5: Strategic planning	2.07	0.86		
○ Anticipate obstacles and develop plans				0.58
○ Manages time to ensure productivity				0.58
○ Integrates planning efforts across work groups or functional units				0.61
○ Identifies measurable action steps that support strategy and mission				0.58
○ Considers a broad range of factors when resolving problems and making decisions				0.63
○ Translates business strategies into clear objective and tactics				0.59
○ Examines and monitors trends in the hotel business				0.51
○ Bring together different perspectives and approaches and combines them in creative ways				0.56
Factor 6: Ethic and community concerns	1.87	0.86		
○ Commits organizational resources for community events				0.66
○ Considers ethical implication prior to taking action				0.51
○ Considers the effect of decision on community well-being				0.67
○ Builds partnerships and alliances with community organizations				0.66
○ Acts in an ethical manner				0.64

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
 Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
 *R = The Cronbach's alpha reliability test
 ** F = Factor Loading

Table 3: Hotel type and leadership competencies

Factor	Hotel type	Mean	Order	SD.	Mean difference	Sig* (2-tailed)
Coaching and team-building	City	4.06	1	0.68	-0.12	0.13
	Resort	4.18		0.63		
Empowerment	City	3.86	4	0.68	-0.15	0.06
	Resort	4.01		0.60		

Problem Solving	City	3.78	5	0.68	-0.17	0.04*
	Resort	3.95		0.63		
Interpersonal skill	City	3.73	6	0.67	-0.19	0.02*
	Resort	3.92		0.61		
Strategic Planning	City	3.91	3	0.57	-0.15	0.03*
	Resort	4.06		0.56		
Ethic and community concerns	City	3.95	2	0.72	-0.15	0.09
	Resort	4.10		0.69		

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level

From Table 3, competency in coaching and team-building was rated highest, followed by ethic and concern for community, strategic planning, empowerment, problem solving, and interpersonal skill. Then t-test was employed to identify differences between resort and city hotels' general managers on their perception of leadership competencies perceived as importance for future success. Surprisingly, the result showed that, at the 0.05 level, there were significant differences between resort and city hotels' managers on their perception of leadership competency factors that have impacted for the future success in Thai hotel industry. Resort general managers perceived problem solving, interpersonal skill, and strategic planning more important than city hotel general managers.

Discussion and Implications

In the growing and increasingly complex industry, senior leadership matters. Human capital is definitely a hospitality organization's most valuable resource and has the potential to provide one of the most sustainable competitive advantages in today's marketplace. Selecting the right individuals and developing middle-level managers into high performing unit leaders are among the most pressing challenges facing hospitality organizations today. The purpose of this study was to identify the most critical competencies for career

development as perceived by hotel general managers and to determine whether their perceptions varied from resort and city hotels. The factor analysis revealed that soft leadership skills (e.g. coaching and team-building, ethic and community concerns, strategic planning, empowerment) continue to be more important for future success in senior level hospitality management positions than hard or technical leadership skills. The results of this study support previous research that a transformational, contingency, or democratic approach to leadership may be preferred and more effective than a transactional or autocratic approach. This may be a reflection of the service mentality that is a foundation of the hospitality industry. While hotel general managers require a broad array of competencies, several important differences emerged between resort and city hotel general managers' perceptions of the relative importance of leadership competencies for career development. Resort hotel managers perceived problem solving, interpersonal skills and strategic planning more important than city hotel managers. This finding contributes support to Brownell's finding that organizational factors influence managerial demands.

From a professional practice perspective the results of this study can be implemented in post secondary hospitality education programs,

professional development programs and other educational venues to improve leadership competency development early in a career. It would be beneficial to early career hospitality professionals to understand how their traditional leadership competency preferences will need to change in order to be successful in senior level hospitality management positions where the industry determines appropriate and preferred leadership styles. Also, selection processes should be tailored to identify individuals who possess the specific competencies that hotel general managers believe contribute most significantly to high performance.

Several demographic results are interesting and worth further exploration to determine their impact. First, the majority of the respondents had a formal post secondary education. This may have enhanced their understanding of leadership competencies as opposed to General Managers who rose through the ranks by hard work and were not formally educated. Second, the responses from males were a large part of the total response. While a glass ceiling probably still exists for women, a growing number of female hold senior level management positions in the hospitality industry. This merits additional examination to understand more completely

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