A qualitative approach to middle managers’ competences

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to contribute further insights into how organizations can diagnose if they have middle managers who are able to reach their objectives, to be outstanding in the competitive environment that they belong to, that is to give new roles and initiatives, using a qualitative approach.

Design/methodology/approach – In this management research, the critical incident technique through semi-structured interviews is used to identify the critical job requirements which are indicated through the difference between doing the job correctly and doing it incorrectly or efficiently and inefficiently. The events of critical incidents could be coded for various characteristics or competences, which seem to be relevant to the particular middle managers’ job. After that, they were grouped into five teams for the easiest assessment and the annotation of the findings, i.e. competences directed on management job, on integrity, on personal effectiveness and performance, on people and on specialized knowledge.

Findings – Qualitative evidence was found for managerial competences, values and the way these competences are related to effectiveness and job satisfaction.

Research limitations/implications – Future research should explore how these results can be linked to contextual elements and to business performance.

Practical implications – This study contributes to increased managerial competence awareness, which is important for intrapersonal development and interpersonal cooperation.

Originality/value – This is one of a few studies that have centered on the middle managers only of the organizational chart and compared their different skills, needs and requests. It provides relevant insights into a thorough understanding of middle managers’ competences, which are 21 in total. These 21 areas are divided into five main categories/clusters.

Keywords Middle managers, Management skills, Competences, Business performance

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In organization theory, the popularity of the concept of organization change reflects the uncertainties in many branches of industry. The maturity of concepts such as total quality, re-engineering, empowerment, synergy, core competences, benchmarking, team management, etc. are introduced in organizations as some recent reasonable answers to enhance competitive opportunities. So, they have increased the strategic emphasis on the human resources of organizations.

The HR strategy is no longer merely a passive reflection and an adjustment to the business strategy. In reverse, the HR strategy can in fact determine the business strategy. This presents a move from “business-driven HRM” to “HRM-driven business”. Morgan (1988) say that, the demands of an information society require organizations and their members to promote creativity, learning and innovation.

Intertwined with this are the changing demands on middle managers. First, middle managers are playing an integrative role for downward and upward communication about strategy formulation and implementation. Thus, a line is established between
the overall business strategy via departmental objectives to personal goal setting (Smith, 1989; Nonaka, 1991; Breen, 1984; Van Gils, 1997). Second, by the middle managers play an important role in the articulation and change of organizational culture as a means of achieving organizational flexibility (Burgelman, 1983a, b; Ishikawa, 1985; Wilkinson, 1993; Livian and Burgoyne, 1997). Third, by the combination of jobs and individuals (which is an important middle manager task) has an inherent learning effect, as experiential learning, on the job and is a powerful way of enhancing employees’ competence (Sayles, 1993; Handy, 1990; Wisdom and Benton, 1990). Finally, middle managers are to a large extent assigned the responsibility for dealing with a broad range of human resource issues.

Burgelman (1983a, b) points to the crucial role of middle managers in supporting initiatives from operating levels, combining these with firm strengths and conceptualizing them into new strategies.

Dopson et al. (1992) says that “Greater flexibility and adaptability as well as ability to learn new competencies is now a requirement for middle managers”.

As a consequence, it is crucial for an organization to underline the competences that middle managers might possess today in order to give new roles and initiatives in its middle managers throughout theirs development.

Obviously, it would be known if the middle managers are able to undertake the new roles and respond successfully. It would also be known what competences are part of them and to what extent they exist, so as to decide how to develop the ones that they are deprived of. On condition that they will become competent managers, will they manage to transform themselves into their work place change?

Thus, it is of vital meaning for an organization to know the competences of the people that compose its staff at the period on which it has decided to base its following strategic movements. In other words, an organization must cast light on the question about what is nowadays the quality of middle managers in order to be able to predict whether these people can be elevated as the pioneers in the next organizational and strategical games of it.

This paper builds on the platform created by these views by considering one critical research question:

**RQ1.** What kind of skills do middle managers need in order to be able to cope with their challenging roles within the contemporary organizations?

Particularly, the study is expected to contribute to the HRD efforts to improve its middle managers effectiveness. Also, it would be characterized as a frame or a technique of performance appraisal to evaluate individual employee productivity regarding the level and the type of the middle managers’ competences.

The study centers on the middle managers only of the organizational chart and compare their different skills, needs and requests, a point of view which is not common in the body of literature. Besides, one of the significant characteristics of the study is the intention to emphasize on clusters of competences and values and the way these competences are related to effectiveness and job satisfaction.

It is therefore useful to be recognized, that the research offers the beginning of a thorough understanding of middle managers’ competences, which are 21 in total. These 21 areas are divided into five main categories/clusters:

1. competences orientated to management effectiveness;
2. competences orientated to integrity;
(3) competences orientated to personal effectiveness;
(4) competences orientated to people; and
(5) competences orientated to specialized knowledge.

Methodology

Research design
The qualitative approach is the chosen method of this research and there are some very important reasons for making that choice. Holding with Bryman’s (1988) ideas, the qualitative research emphasizes on the perspective and the interpretations of the individuals being studied, their meanings and perspectives. Also, the study lies within an interpretive paradigm (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). It ensures the qualitative approach, which focuses upon interpretation rather than quantification. So, there is an emphasis on subjectivity rather than objectivity; flexibility in the process of conducting research; an orientation towards process rather than outcome. In this study, the researcher will try to construe how the middle managers’ competences link to the organization efficiently and effectively.

So, the case here is to answer the research question based on the particular organization and the organization’s own reality. Remenyi et al. (1998) highlight another significant point. That point is important for the researcher to discover “the details of the situation in an organization, to understand the reality or perhaps a reality working behind it”.

The research method which provides the appropriate data is by critical incidents and the gathering of primary data.

Furthermore, a transcript of a research interview was utilized, while the interview was structured around the collection of critical incidents. The interviews were asked of any incident at work the middle managers could recall that seemed to them to raise questions of right and wrong or of fairness in the treatment of people. Dialectical critique is the interpreting research material.

This method represents a bridge between exploratory research on what managers do and research on effective behavior. The method is based on the assumption that respondents such as middle managers can provide descriptions of effective and ineffective behavior for themselves and so it is fairly easy to examine specific, situational relevant aspects of managerial behavior.

The case study
The research uses a single case study as a strategy in order to understand or explain the phenomena, that is middle managers’ competences and job effectiveness and efficiency, by placing them in their wider context, that is the specific organization within the Greek market.

The reason for the choice was based on the knowledge that case studies are the most appropriate ones for examining the processes by which events unfold, as well as for exploring causal relationships (Yin, 1994) and also for providing a holistic understanding of the phenomena (Kitay and Callus, 1988).

The chosen case study is a successful, large and powerful banking organization in Greece, called Emporiki Bank. It is one of the main players in the banking sector of Greece and plays a definitive role in promoting entrepreneurial and investment activities in the country and decisively contributes to the business and investment activities of the country and to the modernization of the banking system.
A building block of the organizational structure within Emporiki (and consequently, within the majority of banking or financial institutions) is the “Branch”.

The Emporiki Bank’s branches are mainly operating in three modes according to:

1. the capacity of their employees;
2. their employees’ job responsibilities; and
3. the products and services they are offering to the businesses and to the individuals.

The subdivision of the branches is as follows:

- Full service branches.
- Small- and medium-sized businesses and individuals branches.
- Individual customers service branches.

The organizational structure of the branches defines the job roles and responsibilities of Emporiki’s employees. In particular, Emporiki’s middle managers are:

- those who have managerial status;
- those who manage small branches and having managerial status;
- those who manage the “businesses and individuals” banking sectors in the full service branches; and
- those who act as “account officers” or “investment consultants” or “head of operations” in the full service branches.

Based on their status, position and job responsibilities, middle managers have some common characteristics:

- Their basic duty is to manage their departments’ or workgroups’ operations, to coordinate and control their workgroups’ activities (with the assistance of their colleagues) in order to achieve the strategic objectives of the organization.
- They have the authority to allocate work to their subordinates.
- They have the responsibility for their subordinates’ or their workgroups’ activities.
- They are able to take initiatives and direct their workgroups towards achieving the organization’s objectives.
- They direct and achieve results through their subordinates.

**Instruments and coding**

The processing of the findings is based on the structure of the questions in the order of the interviews (see interview schedule, the Appendix).

The data are presented in tables whenever it is feasible. The type of the table is used to create the most effective comparisons and form conclusions about the middle managers’ competence, the types of the problems that are usually coped with in the work environment and the kind of the competences that usually affect the handling of the problems in managing the staff, as they appear in the branches of Emporiki Bank where these middle managers work (Tables I and II). More commonly, in this management research, the critical incident technique through semi-structured interviews is used.
to identify the critical job requirements which are indicated through the difference between doing the job correctly and doing it incorrectly or efficiently and inefficiently. It is an objective of this study to explain some of the differences in general qualitative distinctions of performance (e.g. how many times a competence is revised in middle managers) which may occur across specific jobs and organization as a result of certain competences which middle managers share. Also, the objective in this study is to generate a list of every competence that has been shown to be related with effectiveness as a manager, regardless of the specific job and the bank.

The structure of the following data processing begins with some introductory questions that help to group the interviewees and give some background information. Questions one to nine are the starting questions. The main purpose for gathering this information is to know the profile of the interviewees. The first, second and third questions present the position of each interview within the organizational chart and their responsibilities, by giving a job title and a synoptic description. The fifth and sixth questions show the years occupied in the particular organization and more specifically in their current position as middle manager. Question six gives the average age of the middle managers that have this specific position and who are 49 years old.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Working experience</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Educational background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loukas</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Branch Manager of the “Individual Customer Service” Branch</td>
<td>Diploma in Economics, Athens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theodoris</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Branch Manager of the “Small and Medium-Sized Business and Individuals” Branch</td>
<td>High School Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonidas</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Periphery Law Manager Peloponnesus</td>
<td>Faculty of Law, Athens and Master, Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makis</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Branch Manager of the “Individual Customer Service” Branch</td>
<td>Faculty of Law, Athens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John P.</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Branch Manager of the “Small and Medium-Sized Business and Individuals” Branch</td>
<td>High School Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John F.</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Branch Manager of the “Full service” Branch</td>
<td>Diploma in Economics, Athens</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Business Manager of the “Full Service” Branch</td>
<td>Diploma in Economics, Athens and Master in Marketing, Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakis</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Branch Manager of the “Small and Medium-Sized Business and Individuals” Branch</td>
<td>Diploma in Economics and Political Studies, Athens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John M.</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Branch Manager of the “Small and Medium-Sized Business and Individuals” Branch</td>
<td>High School Graduate</td>
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<tr>
<td>John K.</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Branch Manager of the “Small and Medium-Sized Business and Individuals” Branch</td>
<td>High School Graduate</td>
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</table>

Table I. Grouping middle managers
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of problem</th>
<th>Louka’s incident</th>
<th>Theodoris’ incident</th>
<th>Leonidas’ incident</th>
<th>Makis’ incident</th>
<th>John’s P. incident</th>
<th>John’s F. incident</th>
<th>Nick’s incident</th>
<th>Sakis’ incident</th>
<th>John’s M. incident</th>
<th>John’s K. incident</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Out of the fringe, inactive colleague who was activated effectively</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anti-professional behavior of an assistant</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indifference of a new assistant to work</td>
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<td>✓</td>
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<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transfer of a basic executive of the working team</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There are people who have worked for the company from 18 to 36 years and as middle managers from two to eight years. Moreover, in these questions, there is information about their previous employment. It is shown that out of all the middle managers, ten people have not worked in other companies.

In questions seven, eight and nine, there is a presentation of the educational background. It is useful to know that six of the interviewees have university degrees from Greek universities and two of the interviewees have master degrees.

Subsequently, the rest of the questions seek to find out how much the competences influence the job effectiveness.

There is a systematic effort of the qualitative analysis to generate concepts based on observational data. The logical ordering followed to test the hypothesis involves moving from the “plane” of observation of this empirical study to the construction of explanations and theories about what has been observed.

The coding technique works by first identifying the central idea, that is the competences that middle managers have today in order to improve the organization productivity. This forms the core category. It follows the link between the core category and its subcategories that is by means of relational concepts:

- the conditions in which the action took place;
- the strategies adopted for dealing with the phenomenon; and
- the outcomes of the action.

The next step is to identify what strategy the researcher adopts in order to achieve the particular outcome. The case study shows that the interviewee’s initial strategy is to take on a business partner. After that, the critical incident enables the coder to examine how this was handled and what the outcome was. The coding system is a standardized guide for analysis of interviews and it attempts to explain how an interview should be assessed to determine the presence of any particular characteristic. Codes are efficient data labeling that they empower and speed up analysis.

To examine, how this was handled is to identify what events took place (Table II). Thus, the critical incident technique identified by the coder in the case is: setting up a business partnership. Further analysis seeks to identify what the properties of the events were. In the case, this was the quality of the middle managers’ performance. “Quality” means the characteristics or competences of middle managers which enable them to reach their organizations’ objectives. However, the aims and objectives of the document need more detail. The further detail is required the dimensions of properties are identified. Thus, the quality of middle managers’ performance was categorized as effective or ineffective, persistent, insightful, etc. Each event adds evidence in relation to the central theme of document.

The researcher used three important “streams” to document the interviewee’s behavior, their thoughts, their feelings, in order to determine the potential key characteristics or competencies, to structure code content and then to code the detailed description of critical incidents (interviews).

The first source was Emporiki’s strategic thinking and vision. That is “to be one of the European premier companies, distinctive and successful in everything we do”. Values are defined as central to the vision: “people, teamwork, speed, innovation, customers, integrity and performance”.
The second source is the annual report of evaluation of the productivity of the employees of the organization and the applications for promotion that Human Resources Department of Emporiki Bank always uses as a part of its politics in order to promote and take advantage of the most capable managers and the ones that dispose quality and effectiveness of their abilities. The analyzed information about the success/effective attributes and behaviors that are required by both the Board of Directors of Emporiki Bank and the Human Resource Department is available in Table III.

The third resource knowledge and information, for this study, coding manuals from prior research studies were combined, with minor editing and revision, to incorporate characteristics not adequately addressed in prior studies but hypothesized to be of critical importance.

Taking into consideration all the above topics, the researcher attempted to analyze with her personal sense and to examine systematically the events of critical incidents. These events could be coded for various characteristics or competences, which seem to be relevant to the particular middle managers’ job. After that, they were grouped into five teams for the easiest assessment and the annotation of the findings:

(1) Competences directed on management job:
   • think strategically;
   • champion change; and
   • innovate.

(2) Competences directed on integrity:
   • lead courageously;
   • foster open communication; and
   • act with integrity.

These competences and competences directed on management job are a vital part of effective work with people in a variety of settings, as they may help to ensure that middle managers are clear about what they are trying to achieve and how they are going to do it.

(3) Competences directed on personal effectiveness and performance:
   • use sound judgment;
   • convey information;
   • adopt and develop oneself;
   • know the organization and the business;
   • establish plans;
   • manage execution;
   • influence others; and
   • drive for results.

These competences may play an important part so as to ensure that middle managers make the most of the personal resources available to them.

(4) Competences directed on people:
   • foster enthusiasm and teamwork;
   • reward and celebrate achievement;
attract and develop talent; and
build relationship.

These competences are also central so that they can help the middle managers to handle their dealings with other people as constructive as possible.
(5) Competences directed on specialized knowledge:
  
  - improve systems and process;
  - commit to quality; and
  - focus on customer needs.

These competences can be considered practical and effectively usable every time they turn to fields of product and technology functions which are interrelated with the goals and roles of the middle managers.

All five sets of competences are therefore basic tools in any middle managers’ repertoire. To a certain extent, the categories are arbitrary always in accordance with the researcher’s concept. That is, there is no hard and fast rule as to which competence should go into which cluster. For example, foster open communication is presented here as a competence orientated to integrity, but could equally be seen as an personal effectiveness competence. The point remains, however, that all these competences seem to be fundamental aspects of good practice for the researcher’s aim. In addition, the list of five clusters of characteristics is traced in Figure 1.

The operational hypothesis for this research will be that the effective middle managers would demonstrate which of the five clusters of characteristics they possess.

The interviews were coded for frequency of occurrence of each of the five clusters of characteristics. Although the average length of each interview was 1 hour, the interviews did vary somewhat in the length of time.

The available data allowed comparisons to be made on ten middle managers, their number types of competences and the kind of problem coped with their work. To address each of these objectives can explain differences in general qualitative distinctions of performance of middle managers in the Emporiki Bank.

Analysis of the data

By identifying the general context in which Emporiki Bank operates and by conceptualizing its culture, it is easier to discuss the data. The following discussion emphasizes on the ten different incidents that ten middle managers deal with their staff in the working environment. Based on the ten incidents that were written down from ten middle managers and by combining the key questions of the interview, an answer will be given to the research question which was set in this article.

1. The competences orientated to management job

The competences in management job cluster appeared relevant to middle managers level of work in the Emporiki Bank (Figure 2).

It is perceived that out of the three competences (i.e. thinking strategically, innovating and champion changing), thinking strategically and champion changing were demanded and required more to deal with daily professional needs with their staff. At the middle level, managers are responsible for progress towards certain goals in accordance with certain plans. They provide feedback to subordinates, primarily as individual contributors, with respect to the goals, plans and performance standards established for their jobs. It is likely that the middle level managers have been given the goals, plans and standards of performance by managers at higher levels in the organizations. These managers are concerned about observing the events with logical
and strategical thought, about organizing resources efficiently and many times developing the goals and plans for their unit or branch.

By and large, the middle managers’ competences orientated on management job can be linked with functions that are demanded in their particular job.

In performing the planning function, the managers must determine the goals and plans for their branch. Also, they establish plans of action for achieving those goals and they determine how the plan should be accomplished. In performing the organizing function, the middle managers determine what people and resources are needed to accomplish the plan. Also, they determine how these people and resources should be structured to do that and they establish the standards of performance. The above functions become more noticeable in the incidents of Loukas, Theodoris and John P.

First, it is essential to commence the competence of thinking strategically, that appears to gain the highest score among all of them (100 percent, Table IV and Figure 3). All middle managers in that group concentrate on it and it was demonstrated by the highest percentage. However, thinking strategically is one of the most significant needs for them.
It is noteworthy that they underlined the significance of thinking strategically in every case they could, as for example, in the question for thinking of and describing one case that they faced recently in their work and they have tackled with it successfully or one case in which the matters went worse. Strategical thinking is essential for effective planning, organizing and problem solving. A major administrative responsibility is coordination of the separated, specialized parts of the organization. To accomplish effective coordination, middle managers need to understand how the various parts of the organization relate to each other and how changes in one part of the system affect the other parts. Probably, it would be worth mentioning that a basic hypothesis for the successful strategical thinking is their intuition. According to Simmon (1987), intuition is not a mystical process but it is rather the result of extensive earlier experience with similar problems. Thus, the way that the intuition functions over the strategical thinking exemplifies the option that it (intuition) is fundamental for the middle managers. Besides, the incidents of the middle managers (Loukas, John F., Sakis, John M. and John K.) that are related mainly with the anti-professional behavior of an assistant, rather justify the relationship between the strategical thinking and intuition.

The majority of the people (60 percent) seems to agree that the ability of champion change is fundamental and relevant to their particular job.

In that group, there is a considerable number of middle managers, who feel rather defensive by taking initiatives to changes procedures in work place or to deal with the problem of the staff with a more dynamic and optimist way. This may be a reflection of the fact that some middle managers may have less control over performance standards and goals than the others. A quote of a middle manager illustrates this fact:
This situation was originally the result of lack of adequate means from the side of the rules of the bank together with the difficult character of the assistant. It is known to the assistants (although they may be new in the bank) that their permanency is protected by the total mechanisms of the workers and this reacts reflectively to their productivity since they feel secure and irreplaceable. Moreover, great labor and long procedure is needed in order to convince the upper mechanisms but also the rest colleagues that face such a difficult situation.

As a result, the impression of the researcher is that one of the most important competence that middle managers estimate relevant to their management job is thinking strategically. This competence may possibly derive from the commitment with the organization and their job satisfaction.

2. Competences orientated to integrity

The competences oriented on integrity cluster appeared extremely relevant to middle managers’ level work in the Emporiki Bank (Figure 2).

Their present position has provided them with confidence and self-esteem as they know how to achieve tasks, build teams through communication and exercise “inspirational” leadership.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competences</th>
<th>Louka's incident</th>
<th>Theodoris' incident</th>
<th>Leonidas' incident</th>
<th>Makis' incident</th>
<th>John's P. incident</th>
<th>John's F. incident</th>
<th>Nick's incident</th>
<th>Sakis' incident</th>
<th>John's M. incident</th>
<th>John's K. incident</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orientated to management job</td>
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<td>Think strategically</td>
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<tr>
<td>Innovate</td>
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<td>50</td>
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<td>Champion change</td>
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<td>Orientated to integrity</td>
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<td>Lead courageously</td>
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<td>Forest open communication</td>
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<td>Act with integrity</td>
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<td>Orientated to personal effectiveness and performance</td>
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<td>Use sound judgment</td>
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<td>Convey information</td>
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<td>Adopt and develop oneself</td>
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<td>Know the organization and the business</td>
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<td>Establish plans</td>
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<td>Manage execution</td>
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<td>Influence others</td>
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<td>Drive for results</td>
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<td>Orientated to people</td>
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<td>Foster enthusiasm and teamwork</td>
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<td>Reward and celebrate achievement</td>
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<td>Attract and develop talent</td>
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<td>Build relationships</td>
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<td>Improve systems and processes</td>
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<td>Commit to quality</td>
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<td>Focus on customer needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average of the total existence of the competences in each one (%)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>61.9</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>33.3</td>
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These three competences can be said to have primary relationship to effective management and each other. To demonstrate a presence as a branch manager, a person must speak clearly, concisely and convincingly (i.e. foster open communication). At the same time, it would be difficult to speak in such a manner without the competence of leading courageously. In order to lead effectively, represent the organization and inspire others, the middle managers should be able to:

- identify the common objectives, values and the mission of their group and identify themes and patterns in the performance of the organization;
- present themselves convincingly and with a presence;
- communicate ideas, themes and patterns to others; and
- make decisions with the spirit of calmness, coolness, objectivity and respect to others.

The three competences (i.e. leading courageously, fostering open communication and acting with integrity), emphasized their own strong personality and their open mind. Consequently, just because it is shown that the competences orientated on integrity are met in the highest level in middle managers (93.3 percent, Figure 2) we can say that middle managers posses personal impact and have serious evidence of the competence of leadership.

Obviously, these people are satisfied by the nature of their work and held an instrumental attitude to work.

In this point, the researcher should comment on the fact that the competence of acting with integrity, arises for all ten middle managers. This is naturally proved simply by their comments in the question about the rules that became suddenly visible through each incident.

A remarkable observation shows that middle managers feel real commitment and this engagement to the organization has usually been created through strong interpersonal relations with people from the top-management team. This was mostly demonstrated by the managers answers in question “Who became involved and in what way?” In most cases, the highest staff got involved and supported the options of the middle manager in order to solve the problem.

However, as mentioned, the majority of managers at that level have their personal timetable to follow and their personal goals and objectives. It is interesting to consider their age (an average of 49 years, Table I) which shows that they are going through a crucial period of their career path, as they build up a better future, with the prospects to become a part of the top-management team. Thus, the commitment is in combination with the firm and towards their personal ambitions. This is certainly influenced by their principles and their political views according to which they move. Furthermore, they are quite self-confident of their qualifications and their contribution to the overall result of the organization.

The middle managers’ competences orientated to integrity can be described in terms of functions. So, when performing the organizing function, the manager is communicating with others, is establishing the standards of performance and determining how these people and resources should be structured to do something. Through the use of these competences, the middle managers communicate with the others in the organization about the direction of the organization’s efforts and the basic expectation as to the level of organizational performance.
They are also inspired by the production of service, which is characterized by them as “the positive and competitive environment that must be created in the branch while the demand for the increase of production must be achieved”. Differently, it is called as “good function”, or “the organization’s power” so as to win not only in the Greek market but of course, in the international market as well. Additionally, they have a very positive approach towards their job as they feel that it is a means of self-expression, it matches with their personality and they enjoy the communication and creativity. What is already mentioned is revealed in the fact that only one, Leonidas expresses pessimism for the managing systems of the bank. Similarly, John K., as well in some points refers to the excessive labor in the work of the assistants which prevents them from completing their job consistently.

Still, they mentioned that they receive recognition from the top management, and this is a result of the modern pattern of the management of the bank to the lower levels, which causes organization and presence of formal procedures, such as evaluation and appraisal. It seems that this affects positively their dynamic solving of the difficult event with their staff, their continuous concern with the branch’s problem, their successful decision making for which they often undertake the risk personally. It must be kept in memory that in the incidents of problems in handling down the staff, examples — cases described by them, the middle managers had to cope with the initial negative attitude of the staff and their hesitation concerning the success of their initiative which was to place again an “inactive colleague” or to change an “anti-professional behavior of an assistant”. It is understood that if they failed in their initiative, their prestige would be harmed.

So, it is obvious that the motivation that strengthens their competence to lead courageously, to foster open communication, and to act with integrity, emanates from non-financial aspects of their job and more qualitative issues like growth, developments, promotions, interpersonal relationship and the faith in the consolidation of the form as one of the most powerful players in the local market.

Finally, the middle managers seem more affective with their people, with a low profile and an evident focus on the interpersonal relations with their employees and an emphasis on communication and the friendly environment. On the contrary, there are some exceptions of middle managers who are obliged to be more focused on the strict deadlines and the fast pace of work, since they have been working to a highly competitive environment.

3. Competences orientated to personal effectiveness and performance

The noteworthy observation about that level and the interviews is that the 67 percent of the middle managers possess these competences (i.e. use sound judgment, convey information, adapt and develop oneself, know the organization and the business, establish plans, manage execution, influence others and drive for results).

It is essential to mention that issues of using sound judgment, influencing others and driving for results are met in the 100 percent of middle managers, in the 90 percent and in the 90 percent, respectively. The impression of the researcher is that these competences are relevant to the competences orientated on integrity that are well developed in middle managers, as already being analyzed in the previous unit. More scrutinizingly, there is a direct link between acting with integrity and using sound judgment. The competence of fostering open communication and influencing others is also interrelated.
Similarly, when they lead courageously, they can drive for results either of economical or non-economical ones.

Furthermore, they mentioned that they are willing and decisive to “improve the staff relationships”, “to give a good example for imitation”, “to contribute and maintain in their branch the assistant with the deepest experience”, “to reinforce the efficient function of team work”, “to return the peace in the branch” and “to offer justice to any case that insults a colleague or the bank itself”.

Nevertheless, through the analysis of the interviews, it seems that middle managers do not convey information in a satisfactory rate (10 percent, Table IV). In other words, there is a slight relationship between the concern to convey information and the managerial effectiveness. This can be possibly explained as a matter of fact of their job since they must, during a short period and under stress and pressure to make decisions, to resolve conflicts, develop and adapt policies and procedures of management for the everyday needs of the work in the least possible cost.

Since all eight of these characteristics seem to be theoretically related to psychosocial development (i.e. maturity), it is not expected or predicted that a social-role level of these characteristics would exist.

It is interesting that middle managers have the influential behavior that is needed by them in order to be effective as managers. In other words, they have the internal need for impact and they can translate this into their behavior. This is evident in the fact that nearly all the incidents had a positive and effective outcome. Also, there should be mentioned that as the managers move up in the hierarchy, they must spend more time influencing others to do their jobs and less time performing the actual tasks that result in production or sales. The fact is that nine out of ten middle managers can influence their staff positively, which proves the importance and the existence of this competence of middle managers in Emporiki Bank (Figure 2 and Table IV).

4. Competences orientated to people
The evidence suggests that there is a positive relationship of the middle managers and the competences as it is provable through the interviews. This cluster of competences is gathered by the 42.5 percent of middle managers.

The four competences – characteristics in the orientating people cluster appear to be related to managerial effectiveness and certain qualifications of middle managers.

Both, fostering enthusiasm and teamwork and building relationships show an overall relationship with middle managers’ effectiveness, but in a curvilinear manner. This suggests that, although it is important that middle managers have these competences effective and accurate, the fact that they have a great deal of them does not necessarily relate them directly to superior performance. It may be that managers who spend a lot of time using the fostering teamwork and building relationship competences substitute for the development of colleagues (through the teamwork and close relationship) as a primary goal of their organizational branch rather than keeping the development of colleagues in the context of organizational output and task performance goals. Certainly, fostering teamwork and building relationships within the branch should lead to improved branch performance.

For example, in Loukas’ incident, clearly, decisively and rapidly a suggestion is made to the “problematic colleague”. Later, the choice was in the hands of the colleague if he would like to enter the body of the rest staff and become an active member of the team. In any case, Loukas would proceed to the accomplishment of his targets
whether this colleague takes part in them or not. Similar is the attitude of middle managers in other incidents, too.

Yet, having a realistic view of themselves but also of the situation that they face in general, and building such coalitions and work groups would enhance middle managers’s ability to initiate action, establish plans and influence others. So, in this point, it is obvious that there exists a relation between the degree of the competences orientated to people that are developed in middle managers and the competences orientated to personal effectiveness and performance. Furthermore, the two clusters (competences orientated on people and competences orientated on personal effectiveness and performance), appear to participate in a lower percentage than in the other clusters of competences in middle managers (Figure 2 and Table IV).

5. Competences orientated to specialized knowledge
Nearly, all the middle managers improve systems and processes (90 percent, Table IV), while the 70 percent of middle managers focuses on customer needs and even fewer commit to quality. Something that must be clarified is that middle managers as professionals in the management field may think that they should have much information about systems, processes, wider professional and other knowledge because it is expected that they know it, because of the position they possess, not necessarily because it has any utility in functioning as a manager.

For them, it seems to be crucial to apply to what is to be anticipated by the systems of the management, the function and the organizational structure of the bank related to the particular functions performed, the particular services produced or the technology used by the organization. Maybe, once more, the commitment that middle managers have with the organization is ascertained. Of course, it must be taken under consideration that these middle managers have great experience in the banking work and many working years in Emporiki Bank where their average of working experience overpasses the 26 (Table I).

Also, it seems that more than half of them are concerned about the customer needs. This is noticed obviously because of two reasons either because they know that the economic amounts of the branch and its profits depend on them or because they are satisfied by the recognition they gain in a level of personal contact or perhaps because of both causes.

Furthermore, they are concerned about the nature of the work itself, their responsibilities, the status and the prestige they acquire.

Finally, they have an expectancy stance and they place their expectations on the promising prospects of the Emporiki Bank. The challenge for them is that the Emporiki Bank is changing and they believe that the results are likely to reward them. So, they become motivated and productive by the prospects and they have faith in the strategies of the organization.

Discussion
At this point, the researcher undertakes the combination of middle managers’ competences with a type of evidence that they described through their interviews (Table II). A careful examination of the Table II shows that the 40 percent of the cases of staff handling that must be faced by middle managers in Emporiki Bank are problems of anti-professional behavior of an assistant while the following problems are also common and reoccurring:
out of the fringe, inactive colleague who was activated effectively;
- indifference of a new assistant to work; and
- transfer of a basic executive of the working team.

The total of middle managers that participated in the research gather competences from all five groups and nine out of ten interviewed middle managers dispose more that the 50 percent of the 21 of the competences that are defined in this research. It is also remarkable to comment the issue that shows that the middle managers who were occupied with the problems of an out of the fringe, inactive colleague who was activated effectively gather the highest average of competences of all the rest (Table IV).

Finally, the middle managers’ competences context in Emporiki Bank seem that can draw together three main strands of thinking:
- they seem to have the right personality, appearance, attributes and voice;
- they seem to be caring, inspirational and visionary, ethical and risk takers; and
- they seem to have a style that is consistent with a hostile and rapidly changing environment, with the need to develop flexible organizational forms and with the need to motivate knowledge workers.

It is the researcher’s view that the analysis of the research shows that middle managers work within the borders of five principles, “tenets”.

1. By standing up for themselves and letting themselves be known to others, they gain self-respect and respect from other people.

Being a “shrinking violet” does little to earn the respect of their colleagues, nor does it provide a very firm foundation on which to build self-respect. This raises significant questions about self-esteem. If, due to low self-esteem, they do not stand up for themselves, they will not earn respect, and will not, therefore, have opportunities to boost their self-esteem. In this way, they can become trapped in a vicious circle of low self-esteem.

It is therefore important that, in working with people, they are able to act assertively by standing up for themselves. If they are not able to represent their own interests, how will they be able to represent the interest of others?

Through the elaboration of the critical incidents, it is obvious that the good percentage that the middle managers accumulate in competences oriented to personal effectiveness (67.5 percent) and to integrity (93.3 percent), may possibly empower the option that this principle is valid for the middle managers.

2. By trying to live their lives in such a way that they never cause anyone to feel hurt in any circumstances, they end up hurting themselves- and other people.

It is ironic that, in trying not to hurt the feelings of others, they can produce a situation in which a great deal of “pain” is caused to them. That is, if they do not face up to difficult situations for fear of hurting someone, then issues will not be resolved, and greater harm may be caused in the long run. Consider, for example, the case of a new assistant to work who is not undertaking his work properly (such kinds of events are presented by Leonidas and John P.). He is skimping on important aspects of the job, but they (Leonidas and John P.) know that it will hurt his feelings if they bring the matter to his attention. However, if they do not bring it to his attention, then the poor quality of his work may produce a very damaging outcome for all concerned. The desire to avoid causing harm
on somebody is, of course, a positive part of people working but, as this example illustrates, it needs to be balanced against other considerations.

Sometimes it is necessary to risk hurting someone, and a reluctance to take this risk can prove very problematic indeed. Being energetic and assertive involves not being frightened of hurting people’s feelings if this is necessary for the greater good. This can be done tactfully, gently and constructively – it does not have to involve an aggressive response. The accepted percentage in competences orientated to people (42.5 percent) but also the quite good percentage in competences orientated to personal effectiveness (67.5 percent), possibly converge in the option of the researcher that the middle managers move within the margins of this principle.

3. When they stand up for themselves and express their honest feelings and thoughts in a direct way, everyone usually benefits in the long run. Likewise, when we demean other people, they also demean themselves and everyone involved usually loses in the process.

Direct expression of feelings makes a positive contribution to situations, while masking one’s feelings can stand in the way of making progress. In particular, hinting can cause resentment and act as an obstacle to effective communication. Direct expression of feelings tends to be more effective than indirect expression in terms of making constructive progress. For example, stating simply and clearly: “I feel annoyed that […]” sets the scene for a more constructive outcome than a more indirect expression of one’s annoyance. This is closely linked to the need to do their best by the people they work with, regardless of how positive or negative their feelings towards them may be.

The emphasis, then, must be on creating an atmosphere of openness and positive regard, with no hidden agendas.

According to the researcher’s view, the good percentage of the competences oriented to personal effectiveness (67.5 percent), competences oriented to management job (70 percent) and competences oriented to people (42.5 percent) shows that middle managers act with this principle, as well. It is typical that in the nine of the ten incidents that middle managers described, they are the ones who handled the situation directly and honestly.

4. By sacrificing their integrity and denying their personal feelings, relationships are usually damaged or prevented from developing. Likewise, personal relationships are damaged when they try to control others through hostility, intimidation or guilt.

A relationship premised on a lack of integrity or denial of feelings is a relationship that has very unsound foundations, and is therefore very vulnerable in a number of ways – for example in terms of unresolved tensions that are nor addressed and therefore “fester” beneath the surface. It can also place a great deal of strain on those concerned.

Similarly, attempting to control others through some form of coercion can prove stressful for those on the receiving end, and, especially if it backfires, for the person doing the coercing. It can be much more subtle in bullying people into following a course of action or accepting a point of view. Making people feel guilty is a clear example of this more subtle form of coercion. It is important, then, that they do not allow their eagerness to help people overspill into coercing them into a particular form of behavior.

Actually, almost all the incidents described by the middle managers except for those of Theodoris’ and John’s K. incidents, show that middle managers respect this principle. Besides, the good percentage of competences orientated to personal effectiveness (67.5 percent) and competences orientated to integrity (93.3 percent) strengthens the researcher’s belief.
5. Personal relationships become more authentic and satisfying when they share their true reactions with other people and do not block others sharing their reactions to them.

Once again this refers to the need to avoid hidden agendas, to put matters “on the table”, rather than deal with them underneath it. Achieving this openness can be particularly difficult when emotional issues are to the fore. For example, in dealing with matters of loss and bereavement, it may be very painful to share feelings and reactions. The person concerned may feel too vulnerable to talk openly and, indeed, the worker may feel very reluctant to discuss such sensitive issues, even though such discussion may be an important part of the processes involved in grieving. Even in less extreme circumstances, feelings of threat and vulnerability can hamper open expression of feelings and effective communication. Working towards creating an atmosphere in which people feel safe to express their feelings and reactions openly is therefore, an important aim to pursue.

The high percentage of the competences orientated to integrity (93.3 percent), according to the researcher’s opinion shows that middle managers respect this principle, too.

Finally, the fact that middle managers represent an adequate percentage of competences orientated to management job and specialized knowledge (70 percent), shows from the point of view of the researcher that they have clear objectives and focus on the actions being taken and their effects. In other words, it might seem that middle managers know what they are trying to achieve, they know how they are going to achieve their goal settings and also they know when they have achieved them. It might be stated that middle managers follow a task-centered practice in their work in which emphasis is placed on the specific tasks that lead them, step-by-step, from the current problem to the identified goals.

All the comments displayed previously concerning middle managers would possibly describe “win-win” scenarios, situations from which all parties emerge positively, with no one losing out. This is a central feature of effective people competences as it makes a significant difference to the outcomes of interpersonal relations. It is therefore important to explore ways in which such positive outcomes can be promoted.

The subject of this research gains special interest nowadays that the important and constantly successful organizations try to create a working environment that can attract, maintain and develop ideal managers and mainly make them devote the best of them, think and act managerially, make their efforts passionately and enthusiastically.

The research was conducted in a bank organization operating in Greece. The challenge in this concept was the divergence in conceptual contexts for instance, the way of perceiving the topics that middle managers have, their character and principles, their beliefs of each one of them and their coexistence in the organizational environment. The existence and the combination of competences that lead to effectiveness was one of the main concerns of the research. That is the reason for choosing the qualitative approach for conducting the study as it emphasizes the interpretations of the individuals being studied, their meanings and perspectives (Bryman, 1988).

So, this study sought to answer its research question for middle managers’ competences, within a peoples’ interpretation and perspective on the issue.

References


Further reading

Appendix. Interview schedule

For middle managers

Date:

(1) What is the content of your position in the bank?
(2) In which branch does the position belong to?
(3) What is the number of your subordinates? Directly […] Indirectly […]
(4) How many years have you been working in Emporiki Bank?
(5) How long have you had this current position in the Emporiki Bank?
(6) What was your age when you got this specific position?
(7) What is your level of education? (Do you own a postgraduate diploma, a university degree, a bachelor degree, or no degree?)
(8) How many training programs did you attend concerning topics of banking interest and how many concerning management issues?
(9) Did you have any experience in other departments before the acquisition of your current position? In what?
(10) For what qualities of yourself do you believe you were selected for the position you possess today in Emporiki Bank?
(11) Could you, please, think of and describe one case that you have faced recently in your work and have tackled with it with success and one case in which the matters went worse:
   (a) What are your experiences and feeling after each case?
   (b) According to your opinion, which was your ability that led to the solution of the case or your negative point that prevented the effective result of the problem?
   (c) How did this situation emerge?
   (d) What were the consequences?
   (e) What rules became suddenly visible through the incident?
   (f) What nickname was given to it, if any?
   (g) Do you often meet similar incidents?
   (h) Who became involved and in what ways?
   (i) How did people in the organization respond, and what did people say about it afterwards?
   (j) How significant was the settlement of this issue for your everyday work?
   (k) How long did it take you to arrange it?
   (l) Why was the arrangement of this incident so difficult?
   (m) Can you tell me a little more about it?
   (n) Anything else?
   (o) How often do you become physically involved with others out of anger (patterns)?
   (p) Do you often meet similar incidents?

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