

Becoming a Better Manager of the Service Sector

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Abstract

In the last 10 years the business world is completely changed, and this obviously also applies to the service sector. New technologies, a new generation of employees and new competitors from emerging economies are all factors that contribute to what is often called an iper-competitive VUCAD (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous and digital) world. Service sectors' managers need to recognize this shift and reframe the skills needed to work successfully in such a new world. There is a lot of experimentation underway in terms of how the managers of the service sector have to adapt or change their skills. There is very little in the academic literature to support this change, either theoretically or empirically.

The article aims to investigate what are today the most important skills for the managers of the service sector and what are the main gaps between what they think is fundamental (How important do you think it is?) and how good they are (How good are you?) and also some significant differences across companies' dimensions and industry sectors. We surveyed more than 1,000 managers of the service sector across multiple companies located in Italy with different dimensions, in an effort to learn about which are the skills they consider most important and if there are differences on the basis of company size and between the different sectors that make up the service sector.

Our article advances the ongoing debates till the moment that, with very few exceptions, most of the previous studies remained to a theoretical level.

Keywords: managerial behavior; engagement; leadership; people management; organizational behavior.

1. Introduction

The tertiary sector, within developed countries, has become the real engine of the economy (Ng and Vargo, 2018). This has been a significant shift and an ongoing transition from an agrarian (farming) economy to manufacturing, and, ultimately, to the service economy that we see today (Hamel, 2012).

Service industries face different challenges than manufacturers (Malone, 2004; Carlborg, Kindström, & Kowalkowski, 2014). Chief among them is the fact that the product delivery process is significantly more complex than when delivering a product (Toister, 2017). With tangible products, consistency can be maintained more readily, and quality can be monitored and impacted. Furthermore, in the last 10 years the business world is completely changed, and this obviously also applies to the service sector (Vermeulen, 2010; Gratton, 2011).

New technologies, a new generation of employees and new competitors from emerging economies are all factors that contribute to what is often called an iper-competitive VUCAD (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous and digital) world (Bennett, Lemoine, 2014). This increasingly iper-competitive market and the war for talent, oblige organisations to face significant challenges in the way they manage their business, no exception for the service industry.

Service sectors' managers need to recognize these shifts and refrain the skills needed to work successfully in such a new world. Faced with this new changing business environment and this new digital and millennial generation, there is a lot of experimentation underway in terms of how the managers of the service sector have to adapt or change their skills (Buckingham, 2005; Minzberg, 2013; Birkinshaw, 2010; D'Amato, 2015; Hlupic, 2014). There is very little in the academic literature to support this change, either theoretically or empirically.

The article aims to investigate what are today the most important skills for the managers of the service sector and what are the main gap between what they think is fundamental (How important do you think it is?) and how good they are (How good are you?), and also some significant differences across company size and industry sectors.

Having said that, our research questions can be formalised in the following way:

1. *What are the most important skills of the managers of service industry?*
2. *What are the main gaps between what they think is fundamental and how good they are?*
3. *Are there some significant differences across company size and industry sectors?*

To respond to these questions, we run an online survey conducted on more than 1,000 managers of the service sector across multiple companies located in Italy with different dimensions, in an effort to learn about which are the skills they consider most important, and if there are differences on the basis of company size and between the different sectors that make up the service sector.

As a first step, we looked at the sample of our managers of the service sector to learn which management behaviours they consider most important in four areas: managing yourself, managing people, managing internal contest, managing external contest (Mintzberg, 2009-2013).

Based on our survey we found that, knowing your own strengths and weaknesses was defined as the fundamental one with a value of 5 (maximum of the scale) by 70.73% of respondents.

Managing the external context, which includes understanding the external environment, developing strategic thinking, developing a future-oriented perspective, working effectively

with external customers and stakeholders is the one that despite being considered very important has achieved the lowest average value 4.06. Among the top 12 skills considered fundamental by about 53% building a network of contacts that helps to have access to new opportunities, understanding the view of the world of its customers, develop new ideas through understanding the unmet needs of customers are the main distinctive skills that characterize an effective service manager. Based on our survey we also came to see that among the top 12 skills considered to be fundamental by at least 50% of respondents 10 are closely connected to communication and active listening skills.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Next section provides an analysis of the literature on the subject. This is followed by a description of the adopted research methods. In the second part of the paper, we present the findings. We conclude by discussing the theoretical contribution and managerial implications.

2. Literature Review

What should be the competencies of an effective manager has engaged management academics and practitioners for a good part of the latest 20 years, resulting in different conclusions (Druker, 2004; Buckingham, 2005; Boyatzis, 2008; Sutton, 2010; Mintzberg, 2013; Birkinshaw, 2010-2013; Ashkanasy, Humphrey and Huy, 2017). In addition, the fact that the list of possible competencies could change according to the industrial sectors adds complexity to the identification of a framework.

The manager's job is to plan, organise, coordinate, and motivate (Mintzberg, 2009). Managers are those who promote efficiency, plan, organise and control inside a company (Covey, 2004; Kotter, 2013; Nayar, 2013). On the other hand, managers use persistence, hard work, intelligence, analytical ability and, perhaps, most important, tolerance and good will (Barling, 2014). Communicating occupies most of their time: communicating consists of listening, getting fact and, on the basis of the collected information, making decisions (Hamel, 2009; Sinek, 2009; Mol, and Birkinshaw, 2008).

Joffe and Jones (2006) have conducted a research lasting over 25 years with the aim of providing an answer to the question: "Why should anyone be led by you?" Throughout, the focus of their research has been on leaders who excel at inspiring people, leaders who succeed in capturing hearts, minds, and soul. At the end they identify seven competencies: 1) be yourself; 2) know and show yourself; 3) take personal risk; 4) read and rewrite the context; 5) remain authentic; 6) manage social distance; 7) communicate.

In his book *Superbosses*, Finkelstein (2016) describes what based on his research are the skills of the superboss. At pag. 33 of his book he said: "No two superbosses are alike. They are ethically, socially, and geographically diverse, and they pursue widely different passions in life. Despite these differences, some common themes become evident. Superbosses are innovative visionaries who compete to win. They are strong-minded, imaginative, authentic people. They aren't all nurturing souls who gives others the warm and fuzzies, or fun-loving people who don't blink an eye when camels traipse through their office. They are all fully

committed to their businesses and to the people who help them succeed. Yet superbosses don't only help others succeed, they achieved tremendous personal and career success. “

Effective managers have to put in action 8 behaviours: 1) they ask “What needs to be done?”, 2) they ask “What is right for the enterprise?”, 3) they develop action plans, 4) they take responsibility for their decisions, 5) they take responsibility for communicating, 6) they are focused on opportunities rather than problems, 7) they run productive meetings, 8) they think and say “we” rather than “I.” The first two practices give them the knowledge they need. The next four help them convert this knowledge into effective action. The last two ensure that the whole organisation feel responsible and accountable (Druker, 2004). Boss success depends on staying in tune with how others think, feel, and react to you. The best bosses embrace six beliefs that can be considered as steppingstones to effective action: 1) don't “crush the bird”: it means that effective bosses are aware of the fact that it could be better not to interfere in employees' activities, leaving them free to take their choices, sometimes. Therefore, in some circumstances, the best management is less management or no management at all; 2) “grit gets you there”: the best bosses think and act like they are running a long marathon, instead of a single sprint; 3) “small wins are the path”: having long term goals, and doggedly working toward them day after day, is the hallmark of bosses with grit; 4) “beware the toxic tandem”: bosses tend to become self-centred and oblivious to what their people need, do and say; 5) “get their backs”: a hallmark of effective bosses is that they doggedly protect their people; 6) “performance and humanity”: the best bosses are able to balance performance and humanity, getting things done in ways that enhance people's dignity and pride, rather than destroy them. These six beliefs originate 25 behaviours: 1) create confidence to be in charge, 2) get and give credit, 3) blame yourself, 4) manage to influence the events, 5) have a healthy dose of humility, 6) permit people to be safe in doing mistakes and learn from them, 7) spark collective imagination by creating a safety zone, 8) dig for evidence that clashes with their presumptions, 9) fight over ideas with mutual respect, 10) don't expect followers to participate in every decision, 11) be aware of their weaknesses and do something about it, 12) demonstrate empathy and compassion, 13) thank people, 14) bring in employees who will weave their vigour and talents with others, 15) be aware that people who know the most are sometimes the least vocal and pushy, 16) deep understanding of the work they led, 17) be repetitive and concrete, 18) battle unnecessary intricacy, 19) taking actions and seeing what you can get done, 20) do what is right and not what everyone else does, 21) let the workers do their work and protect them from time wasters, 22) give people the right resources to carry out the job, 23) take the heat for employees' errors, 24) don't delay difficult deeds, 25) communicate when and how distressing events will unfold (Sutton, 2010).

Birkinshaw, in 2013 conducted a relevant study on the topic, through direct interviews with about 50 people and a questionnaire, which was filled in by almost 1,000 people across more than ten companies in UK. Both interviews and questionnaire, asked people to evaluate their bosses, listing what make them effective or ineffective. What is interesting to notice, is the fact that, for the first time, the research perspective has been inverted utilizing the so called “employees' point of view”.

In fact, all the studies which had been mentioned till now collected contributions and perspectives of managers. Managers were asked about their behaviours, jobs, routines, tasks. The risk of this approach is the fact that the great majority of managers would tend to talk about their strengths, instead of giving an objective evaluation of his/her behaviours and attitudes. In Birkinshaw's study, respondents first were asked to indicate to which extent their bosses exhibited the good habits of effective managers. The following behaviours obtained the major priorities: 1) is always available to talk, 2) provides support on my work when I need it, 3) pushes decision-making down to lower levels, 4) matches assignments to individual's interests and skills, 5) understands my strengths and weaknesses, 6) communicates information quickly, 7) structures projects to make them interesting and challenging, 8) looks for ways to help me improve my effectiveness. He concluded, identifying five hallmarks of a good manager: a) gives employees challenging work to do, b) creates place from them to do it, c) provides support when needed, d) gives recognition and praise, e) is not afraid to make tough decisions.

As mentioned above, our research is aimed at understanding among all the skills that a good manager must have which one are the skills that a service sector manager has to possess. To answer this question the authors have collected the service managers' perspective, directly.

3. The Methodology and Model

In preparing this article, we surveyed using an online questionnaire, more than 1,000 managers of the service sector across multiple companies, during 2019-2020, with different dimensions and across a broad range of industries (consultancy, financial services, tourism, commercial), in an effort to learn about what are the skills considered most important, and if there are differences within the various sectors and what are the skills that need more development.

The questionnaire is free and anonymous. Respondents were assured of the confidentiality of results and were free to decline to participate at any stage. The questionnaire is lean and requires no more than 15 minutes to be completed. When a questionnaire is too long or complex, respondents may get tired or bored by the interview process and this may negatively affect the accuracy of their answers (Brace, 2008). The questionnaire is composed of two parts. Part A collects general information about the respondents: gender, working experience, education degree, business function, role, direct reports, company seniority. This first part requested high accuracy to be defined, since it is essential to get all the needed information about respondents in order to reach the most complete and correct description of the whole sample. In case of online data collection, as previously underlined, it is of crucial importance, in order to eliminate eventual items, which do not fit with the target sample (Wright, 2005).

In part B, a list of 60 managerial' skills are presented. The list was defined based on the most important management research, studies, and theories of the past 25 years (Druker, 2004; Goffee and Jones, 2006; Sutton, 2010; Birkinshaw, Manktelow, D'Amato, Tosca and Macchi, 2019; Mintzberg, 2009-2013). In particular we identified four categories of activities that all managers, including that of the service sector, must attend to in their work: 1)

Managing yourself, including understanding yourself better, using time effectively, coping with change and managing yourself and your carrier; 2) *Managing others*, we have divided this cluster into two sub-cluster: task focus (running projects and activities efficiently, making decisions, solving problems, fostering creativity in the work place) and people focus (building understanding of others, getting the best out of your team, managing difficult situation, developing good people overtime); 3) *Managing internal contest*, such as communicating effectively, working effectively with the wider organisation, making change happen within your organisation, working effectively with internal/external customers and other stakeholders; 4) *Managing external contest*, such as developing strategic thinking, being inclined to innovation, knowing the market environment, developing organisational learning.

Each of the four macro classes contains four subgroups and each subgroup is made up of four behaviours with the exception of the cluster managing people which is made up of eight behaviours for a total of 60 managerial behaviours. In the questionnaire we used the 60 managerial behaviours and not their division into clusters in order not to influence the choice of respondents. For each of the 60 managerial skills we asked for “How important do you think it is?”, using a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not important at all, 2 is important enough, 3 is important, 4 is very important and 5 is fundamental, and “How good you are?”, using a scale a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is really bad, 2 is good enough, 3 is good, 4 is very good and 5 is excellent.

Respondents are asked to indicate with an ‘X’ all the behaviours they recognize as significant for a service sector manager. The researchers’ choice to present a pre-defined list of behaviours to respondents is aimed at avoiding the problem of critical data comparison. Even if close-ended questionnaires risk biasing the results and influencing the responses, they reduce, or even eliminate, the problem of missing data or inadequate answers, which are very common in open-ended questions (Reja et al., 2003).

In the second phase of the research 50 open-ended interviews were conducted in order to identify which are the most important skills in order to perform at best. This second approach allowed us, in this case, to confirm what was identified in the online questionnaire.

4. The Findings

Below we describe each of the four areas described in the methodology and method: *managing yourself*; *managing others*; *managing internal contest*, *managing external contest*.

These areas, focusing on the skills that service managers deem most important for the future, offer in the end a global cross-section of what are the main skills of the effective manager of the service sector. In addition, some significant differences existing by industry will be analyzed.

Table 1: List of 20 managerial competencies

BECOMING A BETTER SERVICE MANAGER- LIST OF 20 MANAGERIAL BEHAVIOURS - MEAN		
	How important do	How good

			you think it is?	you are?
Managing Yourself mean important: 4,17 mean good: 3,29		Understanding yourself better	4,30	3,53
		Personal time management	3,95	3,16
		Coping with change	4,15	3,37
		Managing yourself and your career over time	4,28	3,09
Managing Others mean important: 4,21 mean good: 3,53	Task-focus mean important: 4,22 mean good: 3,52	Running projects and activities efficiently	4,15	3,38
		Making decisions	4,11	3,47
		Solving problems	4,28	3,63
		Fostering creativity in the workplace	4,32	3,62
	People-focus mean important: 4,20 mean good: 3,55	Building understanding of others	4,26	3,82
		Getting the best out of your team	4,17	3,58
		Managing difficult situations	4,28	3,53
		Developing good people over time	4,09	3,26
Managing the Internal Context mean important: 4,13 mean good: 3,50		Communicating effectively	3,98	3,28
		Working effectively with the wider organisation (managing up, managing across)	4,06	3,54
		Making change happen within your organisation	4,20	3,39
		Developing organisational learning	4,26	3,79
Managing the External Contest mean important: 4,06 mean good: 3,27		Knowing the market environment	3,94	3,05
		Developing strategic thinking	4,24	3,51
		Develop a future oriented perspective	3,84	3,10
		Working effectively with internal/external clients (customers) and other stakeholders	4,24	3,42

1) Managing yourself.

This cluster includes the ability to know each other well, to know how to manage time and change as well as to know how to manage oneself and one's career. Our findings support the view that understanding oneself is essential to becoming an effective manager. Respondents value this cluster with the second highest average value ever 4.17 after managing people. Within the cluster, better understanding oneself with an average value of 4.30 was found to be the most popular followed to manage oneself and one's career 4.28, manage change 4.15, manage one's time 3.95. Knowing your own strengths and weaknesses behaviour is the one with the highest score on average 4.66. With an average value of 4.41, investing time and energy in improving one's skills and professionalism is the second most important skill and also 5 in absolute terms. There is no doubt that improving competencies allows both people and an organisation to remain adaptable and competitive, ultimately contributing to increased productivity and greater revenue. To achieve the success you deserve, you need to find ways to be constantly improving. The task of building competence never ends. With 4.38 building a

network of contacts that help to have access to new opportunities turns out to be the third most important within the cluster and absolutely eight.

2) Managing people.

This cluster had the highest average value in absolute 4.21. The cluster was divided into task focus (running projects and activities efficiently, making decisions, solving problems, fostering creativity in the workplace) and people focus (building understanding of others, getting the best out of your team, managing difficult situations, developing good people over time). In fact, the most effective managers are those who help other people to work at their best and to be fully engaged. They tend to have a deep awareness of their employees' skills, interests, and expectations. One of the tools they rely on is listening carefully and intensely to others. But an effective manager is also a person able to define strategy, objectives, clear role and responsibility as well as making difficult decisions. As for the goal orientation, encouraging creativity in the workplace, which includes both creating the right environment and leaving space for the generation of ideas by collaborators, with an average value of 4.32 was found to be more valued by managers. This result confirms the main academic research which see the future task of effective managers always as creators of a context based on trust, dialogue and the continuous search to do better. This absolute competence ranks eleventh. The ability to solve problems with an average value of 4.28 is among the skills considered most important. Managers must increasingly be able to identify the causes of problems and build, together with their collaborators, a clear action plan.

3) Managing internal context.

Managing the internal context refers to the way people get things done in an organisation, including managing up and across, communicating effectively, and making change happen. The statistical analysis shows that this cluster has an average value of 4.13, ranking third after managing people and managing themselves. Making change happen within your organisation with an average value of 4.20 and facilitating organisational learning with an average value of 4.26 are the behaviours deemed most important. This is in line with the fact that there is an extensive literature which demonstrates how in times of strong change and crisis these two skills make the difference. In addition, the competence encourages the sharing of knowledge in all the areas within the organisation with an absolute average value of 4.42 ranks 4th.

4) Managing external context.

Managing the external context (everything outside the boundaries of the organisation) includes developing an understanding of the operating environment, thinking strategically about the company's competitive advantage, and learning to work with stakeholders - especially customers and clients. Among the 4 clusters, it is the one that on average achieved the lowest value 4.06. The two elements with the lowest values are: develop a future-oriented

perspective, average 3.84 and understand the external environment 3.94. Within the cluster, developing a future-oriented perspective the competence to keep under control the changes in the political, economic, social and technological fields with an average value of 3.62 ranks 57th out of 60 behaviours. The results highlighted the growing difficulty on the part of managers both to understand the evolution of an increasingly turbulent environment and to develop strategic thinking.

Table 2: Frequencies of 20 managerial competencies

BECOMING A BETTER SERVICE MANAGER - frequency of answers with value 5 - descending order	
	How important do you think it is?
Knowing your own strengths and weaknesses	70,73%
Being always available to talk when your direct reports need advice	56,66%
Creating a network which helps you to have access to new opportunities	56,00%
Recognizing and rewarding results	55,15%
Investing time and efforts in building your reputation, earning trust and establishing credibility inside and outside the company	54,39%
Facilitating knowledge exchange and transfer at all the organisational levels	54,30%
Reflect on successes and failures to make better decisions	53,16%
Defining roles and responsibilities clearly	52,60%
Understand what the general mission/vision of the organisation is and how to contribute to it	52,41%
Promptly communicating any useful data and information to carry out the activities	50,80%
Creating an environment which stimulates ideas generation and dialogue	50,71%
Agreeing on clear expected results with the clients (internal/external)	50,05%
Making considerations about what we are doing today and how to improve it	49,95%
Providing your direct reports with immediate feedbacks on their performance and behaviours	49,39%
Finding the right people who make change happen	49,29%

5. Summary and Conclusions

Although there is a lot of research on what the skills of effective managers must be there is very little in the academic literature either theoretically or empirically concerning which must be the skills of an effective manager of the service sector.

With a percentage of 70.73% of the sample, knowing their strengths and weaknesses was identified as the absolute fundamental competence. Knowing your own strengths and weaknesses gives you a better understanding of yourself and how you function. Understanding your strengths keeps you ahead in a lot of things. For instance, if you are looking at career options, you would be able to narrow down specific job scopes based on the things you know you are good at. It also helps you to grow more. Knowing what you can excel at enables you to aim higher and achieve much more. Knowing your weaknesses gives

you a clearer understanding of things that may be holding you back, and you can then work around finding ways to not let your weaknesses pull you behind.

Among the top 12 skills considered fundamental by about 53% of the sample building a network of contacts that helps to have access to new opportunities, understanding the view of the world of its customers, develop new ideas through understanding the unmet needs of customers are the main distinctive skills that characterize an effective service manager. Connection is a constant flow of information between you and another person. Business connections let you understand the people you are working with and make it much easier to approach them no matter the topic. The key to this flow is the mutual benefit both of you get from exchanging stories and ideas. If you need new marketing methods or meet a challenge that has you at a loss, you can seek out answers using the connections you have formed.

Understanding the customer's vision and needs of the world and developing new ideas requires the union of two fundamental skills, empathy and listening.

Having empathy and knowing how to listen are critical to managing a successful team or to better serve the customer. Leaders with empathy have the ability to put themselves in someone else's situation. If you want to earn the respect and loyalty of your client, then show them you care by being empathic. Empathy and the ability to listen helps us connect and help others, but like other traits, it may have evolved with a selfish motive: using others as a "social antenna" to help develop new opportunity or to detect danger. Effective managers take the time to look at situations from other people's perspectives. These are characteristics that organisations of the service sector will need to emphasize more and more in the hiring and development of managers. Our research has also allowed us to identify the existence of some significant gaps (how important do you think it is vs how good you are) of some skills including building a network of value assessed as a fundamental skill by 56% with a gap of 1.37, investing time and energy to improve their skills and professionalism, 54.39% with a gap of 1.24 was assessed as a fundamental skill, knowing their strengths and weaknesses others to be recognized as the most important skill ever 70.73% of the sample and also the one that obtained the third gap in terms of significance 1.03. For both of those skills, managers recognized not only their high level of importance but also highlighted the greater need for development. There are numerous publications that demonstrate how the ability to build relationships and contacts capable of contributing to the emergence of new opportunities certainly represents a crucial skills for a manager especially in a VUCAD world where it seems that the only certainty is that the future will be different from the past drives managers are increasingly looking for different ways of business growth; our findings also support the main research on managerial skills highlighting the need to know one's own strengths and weaknesses, what Richard Boyatzis and Anna McKee (2005), gurus of emotional intelligence, would define the real self, which arises from a deep individual reflection on oneself supported by a comparison with those who know us well. Investing time and energy to improve one's skills and professionalism is the second skill with the highest gap. From the analysis of the three main gaps, a confirmation emerges that the relational and emotional intelligence skills, that fall within the classes understanding better oneself and managing oneself and one's career, have been identified not only important but also those that need the greatest

development.

What are the implications of these findings?

For those responsible in the service sector for managing people and the business, our framework can be useful for having identified which skills are considered most important for being an effective manager in the service sector as well as having defined, through the gaps between what is considered important and what I am good at what are the skills, which need to be further developed.

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