

The Missing Link to Leadership: Filling the Leadership Void through Development of Effective Management Skills

In a turbulent economic environment, the ability to adapt to internal and external change is crucial to a company's survival. But adaptation requires leadership, and companies continually struggle to find leaders who can drive them through periods of transformation. The demand for leaders is high, and the supply is shrinking as experienced professionals from the baby boom generation retire with little succession planning in their wake.

Most would agree that people who can create a vision, define strategies, and lead the execution of those strategies are rare. The dilemma most organizations face is that they need more leaders than they currently have to achieve their goals. What makes the challenge seem even greater is the popular belief that leaders are born, not created; leadership is seen as a quality that cannot be taught. On the surface, successful leadership development may appear to be an insurmountable problem. Fortunately, the leadership void is not as large as commonly believed. Many of the qualities referred to as leadership competencies (organization, change management, communication, project management, etc.) are management attributes.

As any leader knows, a capable manager is extremely valuable. Interestingly, many leaders also recognize that they do not, in fact, make good managers. Effective management and proper execution is crucial to the success of any leadership vision. The good news is, these managerial attributes and the skills behind them, can be taught, learned, measured and improved on a systematic basis.

Companies and government agencies are recognizing the value of developing high quality managers to ensure leadership success. They are identifying and cultivating professionals to provide capable management, and in the process they are ensuring that the leadership vision is supported through execution to achieve business results. How can organizations develop the management capability they need to execute on the leadership vision? Skills measurement systems provide an effective solution by dramatically accelerating the identification, acquisition and improvement of critical management skills.

What types of managerial skills support leadership today?

Have you ever received an email that was intended to get your cooperation in a project, but had the opposite effect?

Have you ever sat through an interview where the interviewer did all the talking?

Have you ever met a manager who seemed to be constantly “putting out fires” with no strategic direction?

Each of these scenarios is familiar to anyone who has ever been affected by a lack of key management skills. Fortunately, each of these skills can be taught, learned and measured. From managing people to interviewing and project management, a variety of specific skills and proven techniques can help managers do their jobs better. Ultimately, these skills can have a profound effect on the day-to-day execution of a leadership vision. If leaders don't have these skills themselves, they must have a clear knowledge of who has these skills within the organization. That's where the manager plays an important role—providing the skills that put the leadership vision to work.

Establishing the Management Job Role

In its simplest form, a manager's job description may include a focused list of basic duties. In the real world, however, a manager must manage a variety of tasks to turn specific leadership objectives into reality. A manager must communicate with employees and clients, plan projects, adjust to changes in plans, know the ground rules of personnel management, and have specific knowledge of relevant products, processes, or technologies.

If no two managerial job roles have exactly the same requirements, how can organizations help individuals measure, track and improve management skills? Companies can address this issue by compiling job role-based skills objectives and competency models. A management job role has several major components, including an established job role definition, a defined set of required management skills, and a defined set of job-specific skills.

Job Role Definition—A common and accepted job definition is essential for establishing the skills needed for a particular management role. For prospective managers, it sets expectations with respect to responsibilities and accountability, and in the process, establishes skills objectives. An effective job role definition may be developed by decision-makers within the organization, or it may be derived from pre-established job role definitions. The example below illustrates the scope of a general management job role definition, as found on the Web at www.Brainbench.com:

Responsible for directly overseeing and coordinating the activities of workers in a given organization or company. A Manager/Supervisor plans and establishes work/project schedules; assigns employees to specific duties; addresses and resolves worker problems; determines equipment needs; and hires, trains, and evaluates personnel. A person in this position also prepares reports for management; coordinates operations with other groups within the organization or company; and develops methods and procedures to increase productivity, improve product quality, promote business, and expand markets. Other duties may include budgeting, purchasing, and accounting.

The example above establishes the relationship between the manager's skills and the manager's role in the organization. In a complex organization, a common definition such as the one above can form the basis for a more specific description pertaining to a given department, group or other managed entity.

General Management Skills Requirements—On the following page is an example of a general management skill selection, each of which can be covered by assessments in a skills measurement system. These skills represent a core selection of assessments a manager or prospective manager can take to verify job capability. While they do not serve as a sole determinant of management capability, they do represent a basic set of competencies for nearly every management position. An accepted practice is to establish a core set of five to ten required skills, and use assessments in those skills as a prerequisite for determining readiness.

Examples of core skills include:

- Business Math
- Business Writing
- Project Management
- Change Management
- Diversity Awareness
- Interviewing and Hiring Concepts
- Legal Issues for HR and Management
- Listening Skills
- Managing People
- Sexual Harassment Awareness

Other general management skills:

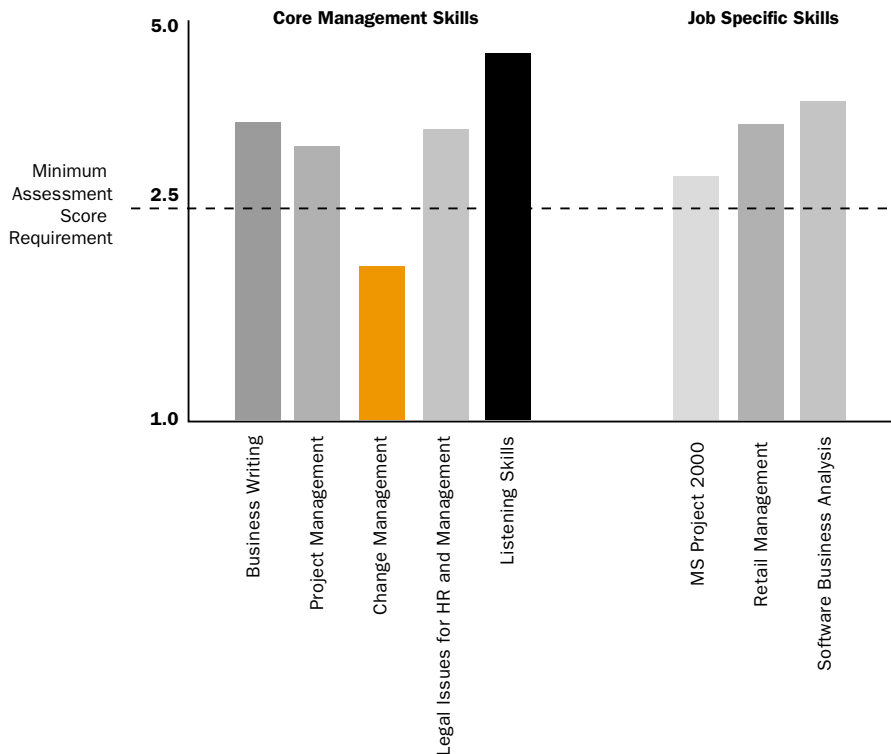
- Behavioral Interviewing
- Business Fundamentals
- Business Process Reengineering
- Internet Research and Evaluation
- MS Project 2000
- Negotiation Strategy
- Office Management
- Operations Concepts
- Purchasing Process
- Purchasing Supply Environment
- Retail Management
- Software Business Analysis

Job-specific Skills Requirements (Electives)—The challenge of successful management is often found in the need for general management skills, as well as job-specific skills. A manager of a product support department, for example, must not only be familiar with such skills as communications and managing people, but he or she must also possess in-depth knowledge of the product itself. Once again, an online skills measurement system can provide access to skills assessments covering specific industry and product knowledge.

Tracking Skills with Objective Metrics

Once key management skills are identified, an objective measurement system can be implemented, holding managers accountable for achieving a minimum skills baseline. That baseline may require a minimum score for achieving a certification or a “passing” grade. If an individual does not meet a minimum requirement, he or she may repeat the assessment. The need for improvement is established clearly through objective metrics, and the opportunity for learning can be augmented by repeat testing.

Job Role Skills Objectives vs. Individual Results



This chart reflects a selection of skills and minimum score requirements for a typical management job role, along with an individual’s results in those required assessments. While assessment scores are not sole determinants of an individual’s capability, they do provide valuable insight and a milestone for improvement for the prospective manager. In this case, the individual has a strength in listening skills, and a learning need in “Change Management.” (Note: This chart was created based on sample data. It is not a direct representation of system reporting features.)

Identify, Quantify, and Improve Management Skills

One of the primary functions of the skills measurement system is to help individuals and decision-makers identify the skills needed to perform effectively. The system then gives individuals the ability to measure their capabilities in each of the necessary skills and make improvements where necessary. Using skills measurement systems, decision-makers can identify people with needed management skills or give employees the tools to develop their skills and advance within the organization. Compared to traditional pencil-and-paper or classroom tests, online skills measurement systems provide significant advantages, including:

Online Accessibility—Skills measurement systems can be implemented as part of an organization’s intranet. Employees access the system and take skills assessments at any time. Assessments can cover all major professional skills, including management capabilities.

Challenging Assessments—The skills assessments delivered through online systems utilize advanced computer adaptive features. These assessments determine the test-taker’s skill level based on answers to each question. The assessment can then use this information to select the level of difficulty for each subsequent question. As a result, test-takers do not waste time with questions that are too easy, nor do they strain under questions beyond their levels of skill. The result is an assessment of maximum challenge, even for users who are taking repeat assessments.

Objective Metrics—Possibly the most powerful advantage offered by online skills measurement systems is the ability to arrive at detailed objective scores for each management skill being assessed. Since all test-takers utilize assessments from the same system, they can be assured that their skills are tested against a consistent standard. This standard is independent of traditional and subjective methods such as self-rating systems or peer reviews, and provides valuable data for verifying abilities and development needs.

Immediate Feedback—Unlike offline “pencil-and-paper tests” online systems deliver scores to test-takers immediately following test completion. With immediate feedback, test-takers can take action for improving their results while motivation for improvement is still high.

Learning Support—Online skills measurement systems can provide users with unprecedented access to learning resources. The system can refer a test-taker to books, company training modules or online learning programs. Users can access these resources at any time, for any skill covered by the system, and they can do so without requiring input on the part of a teacher or mentor. The result is a system that facilitates independent learning, an important feature for reaching out to individuals with varying skills development needs.

Broad Skills Coverage—Over the past five years, enterprise skills measurement company Brainbench has developed and refined its skills measurement system to cover more than 400 professional skills. For companies, government agencies, or any organization that seeks to develop management skills to address a variety of needs, this wide selection of skills provides a crucial level of flexibility. In addition to core management skills, more specialized skills can be required to create a complete picture of skills needed for any particular management role.

Putting it all together—Building Skills to Support Management and Leadership Development

Define management roles. Establish a clear set of skills objectives—and give employees a learning and measurement system for meeting those objectives. These are key tasks in an effective strategy for developing managerial skills. Objective skills measurement systems provide a common platform for administering a skills development program across the enterprise.

Whether a company needs to give employees individual access to goal setting and measurement tools, or use objective data to identify top performers, skills measurement systems deliver immediate, objective, and relevant skills data. As a result, decision makers can build the management resources they need to ensure that leadership vision is followed with effective execution.

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