

1.14: Skills of a Retail Manager

Learning Objectives

- Discuss the most valuable skills for a retail manager to possess

Robert Katz identifies three critical skill sets for successful management professionals: technical skills, interpersonal (or human) skills, and conceptual skills. Successful managers must possess certain technical skills that assist them in optimizing managerial performance. While these three broad skill categories encompass a wide spectrum of capabilities, each category describes the way in which these skills interact with management at various levels.

Technical Skills of Successful Managers

Defining Technical Skills

Of the three skill sets identified by Katz, technical skills are the broadest, most easily defined category. A technical skill is defined as a learned capacity in just about any given field of work, study, or even play. For example, the quarterback of a football team must know how to plant his feet and how to position his arm for accuracy and distance—both technical skills. A mechanic, meanwhile, needs to be able to deconstruct and reconstruct an engine, to employ various machinery (lifts, computer scanning equipment, etc.), and to install a muffler.

Front-Line Managers' Technical Skills

Managers also need a broad range of technical know-how. All industries need management, and management must exist at various organizational levels. Front-line managers represent a substantial part of management who must use their technical skills daily. Front-line managers must communicate up the chain of command while still speaking the language of the workers who are executing the hands-on components of the industry. A technical skill for a front-line manager might include a working understanding of a piece of equipment: the manager must be able to coach the employee on its operation, as well as communicate to upper managers the basic functions of the machinery.

Technical Skills in Upper Management

In addition to front-line managers, managers in other corporate roles and at higher levels require critical technical skills. These can include office-based competencies such as typing, programming, website maintenance, writing, giving presentations, and using software such as Microsoft Office or Adobe. Office environments require a complex set of communicative, technological, and data-organization skills in order to optimize managerial performance.

Successful managers in an organization must therefore learn to use the technological assets at their disposal, collecting critical information and data to communicate upward for strategic planning. An example of information management is a mid-level manager in the automotive industry who is responsible for recognizing global marketing potential. This individual must be capable of realizing the legal, demographic, social, technological, and economic considerations of entering a market; the manager will use effective research and delegation skills and also consolidate the information into a useful presentation using technological and communicative skills.

Katz postulates that the higher up in the organization an individual rises, the more conceptual skills (and fewer technical skills) are necessary. Senior managers need fewer technical skills because strategic decision-making is inherently more conceptual; mid- and lower-level skills such as data collection, assessment, and discussion are all more technical. Even so, all disciplines of management require a broad range of skill sets for effective business processes to occur.

✓ Example

A technical skill for a front-line manager might include a working understanding of a piece of equipment: the manager must be able to coach the employee on its operation, as well as communicate to upper managers the basic functions of the machinery.

Conceptual Skills of Successful Managers

Conceptual skills revolve around generating ideas through creative intuitions and a comprehensive understanding of a given context.

Defining Conceptual Thinking

Conceptual skills represent one of the three skill sets identified by Robert Katz as critical to managerial success in an organization. While each skill set is useful in different circumstances, conceptual skills tend to be most relevant in upper-level thinking and broad strategic situations (as opposed to lower-level and line management). As a result, conceptual skills are often viewed as critical success factors for upper managerial functions.

Conceptual thinking is difficult to define but can generally be considered as the ability to formulate ideas or mental abstractions in the mind. Conceptual skills primarily revolve around generating ideas, utilizing a combination of creative intuitions and a comprehensive understanding of a given context (i.e., incumbent 's industry, organizational mission and objectives, competitive dynamics, etc.). When combined with a variety of information, as well as a degree of creativity, conceptual thinking results in new ideas, unique strategies, and differentiation.

Conceptual Skills in Upper Management

While all levels of management benefit from conceptual thinking, upper management spends the most time within this frame of mind (as opposed to thinking more technically—looking at and working with the detailed elements of a given operation or business process). Upper management is largely tasked with identifying and drafting a strategy for the broader operational and competitive approach of an organization.

This strategic planning includes generating organizational values, policies, mission statements, ethics, procedures, and objectives. Creating this complex mix of concepts to use as an organizational foundation requires a great number of conceptual skills—formulating concepts and predicting their effects in an organizational setting.

Conceptual Skills in Lower and Middle Management

While upper management may use conceptual skills the most, middle managers and lower managers must also both understand and participate in the generation of company objectives and values. Of particular importance are the abilities to communicate these critical concepts to subordinates and the ability to gather useful information to convey to upper management so that the concepts can evolve.

Collecting the results of conceptual thinking represent a feedback loop. Conceptual skills are important in empowering managers in all levels of an organization to observe the operations of an organization and frame them conceptually as an aspect of that organization's strategy, objectives, and policies. Conceptual thinking allows for accurate and timely feedback and organizational adaptability.

Interpersonal Skills of Successful Managers

A manager must be both analytical and personable when it comes to managing time, resources, and personnel.

Leadership

Over the years, the common definition of management has become less specific, as managerial functions can include staffing, directing, and reporting. Modern companies have fewer layers of management, as these companies instead rely on the delegation of responsibilities and authority to achieve goals. As a result, businesses often speak of leading or guiding, people rather than giving instructions for every action. Leading people represents a central component of human skills.

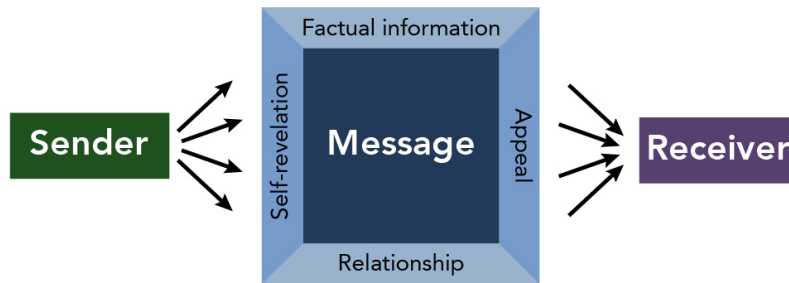
Under this definition of management, leadership is actually a subcategory of management. Management characterizes the process of leading and directing all or part of an organization, often a business, through the deployment and manipulation of resources (human, financial, material, intellectual or intangible).

Interpersonal skills differentiate a manager from a leader. A manager is simply manipulating resources to achieve a given objective, while a leader appeals to the human side of employees to generate creativity and motivation.

These concepts of “manager” and “leader” can be distinguished within a team setting. A team leader who is unconcerned with team members’ needs or who has a personal agenda that is perceived to be more important than the team’s goals is more of a manager than a leader and may alienate team members. Conversely, team leaders who are admired and loyally followed are those who show concern for the team members as individuals with real needs and who place their team above their own personal agendas.

Communication

Realistically, most organizations need leaders who can view their teams analytically and objectively, evaluating inefficiencies and making unpopular choices. However, it is misleading to think that a manager has to be distant from or disliked by subordinates to execute these responsibilities. Creating a healthy environment conducive to development, criticism, and higher degrees of achievement simply requires strong human skills, particularly in the realm of communication.



The “four sides” communication model: This model provides a theoretical framework for the act of communicating, which lies at the heart of effective management. A sender communicating a message to a receiver is not simply transmitting factual information; self-image, context, charisma, and the relationship between the two people also impact the reception of the message.

Interpersonal skills and communication skills lie at the center of human-based managerial considerations. Good managers understand not only what they are trying to say but also the broader context and implications of saying it. Empathy, self-reflection, situational awareness, and charisma all play integral roles in communicating effectively and positively.

Experiential Learning for Managers

Defining Experiential Learning

Aristotle once said, “For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.” Experiential learning is the process of making meaning from direct experience. The experience can be staged or left unstructured. David A. Kolb, an American educational theorist, helped to popularize the idea of experiential learning, drawing heavily on the work of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget. Kolb’s work on experiential learning has contributed greatly to expanding the philosophy of experiential education.

The Process

Experiential learning involves learning through reflection on doing; it is often contrasted with rote or didactic learning. Experiential learning is related to—though not fully synonymous with—experiential education, action learning, adventure learning, free-choice learning, cooperative learning, and service learning.

Experiential learning focuses on the learning *process* for the individual (unlike experiential education, which focuses on the transaction between teachers and students). An example of experiential learning is going to the zoo and observing and interacting with the zoo environment, as opposed to reading about animals in a book. It is the difference between firsthand knowledge and hearing or reading about other people’s experiences.

Experiential learning does not require a teacher; instead, it draws solely upon the process of making meaning based on direct individual experience. According to Kolb, knowledge is continuously gained through both personal and environmental experiences. While gaining knowledge is an inherent process that occurs naturally, certain elements must be present for a genuine learning experience to occur. Kolb states that to gain genuine knowledge from an experience requires the following abilities:

- the learner must be willing to be actively involved in the experience
- the learner must be able to reflect on the experience
- the learner must possess and use analytic skills to conceptualize the experience
- the learner must possess decision-making and problem-solving skills in order to use the new ideas gained from the experience

Experiential learning can be a highly effective way to learn new skills, new attitudes, or even entirely new ways of thinking. It engages the learner on a more personal level by addressing the needs and wants of the individual. It requires initiative and the ability to self-evaluate. To be truly effective, it should span goal-setting, experimenting and observing, reviewing, and planning future action.

Role in Business

Experiential learning plays an important role in business learning and managerial training. It is an integral component to many training programs, as it engages both the intellect and the senses much more comprehensively than lectures, books, or videos. For example, a computer simulation of change management can be a useful application of experiential learning, as can a board game simulating operational efficiency in a factory.

Business skills are inherently intangible, evading the capture of most textbooks without external materials to create context. Management spans a wide variety of personal capabilities and requires different skills based upon the specific role and context, making it a challenging subject to teach. Motivating others and navigating a complex organizational structure are not skills individuals can learn via textbooks; experiential learning in business may therefore serve a useful focal point for study.

This principle is particularly noticeable in business programs that utilize a cohort or group-based educational structure for students. These programs enable students to select leaders and actively practice delegation, communication, and multitasking as they work on projects. Case studies offer another effective method of capturing these complex managerial skill sets in a real-life setting. Cases place students in the shoes of managers and allow them to experience and apply the variety of skills and considerations necessary for success in a specific situation and industry.

? practice questions

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