

Managerial Skills: Does Culture Really Matter?

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Abstract

In Kuwait, the government, represented in its various authorities, has started to import theories and practices from western countries, particularly the United States. Included in these imports, are managerial skills models. From this perspective, the main argument for this research was whether managerial skills are generic in nature or not. The role of national culture, in determining the required managerial skills for the industrial manager was measure. The sample of the study, represented the industrial companies working in Kuwait, where a questionnaire was distributed to 318 managers. The industrial managers were asked to determine the required skills from proposed model that comprised of five groups (25 skills) in order for the manager to effectively perform the assigned duties. The results suggest that managerial skills are not universal, but there is tendency to universality, where the effect of national culture was minor.

Key Words: Managerial skills, national culture Kuwaiti industrial companies.

Introduction

The world is increasingly becoming global, which means one big market, one big interdependent system with “soft” boundaries, in which people, products, technologies, and ideas migrate. In the case of management, Western – mainly American – theories and practices of management are spreading around the world. Western business schools are opening branches all over the world, teaching management theories and practices. This has promoted a theory that management is or can be “culture-free.” As an approach to reform, developing countries have become concerned about these management theories and practices. One of these practices is managerial skill. Recent trends have seen an increasing pressures in managers to acquire experience and skills in effectively working, managing, developing, and utilizing more diverse workforces (Qin et al., 2009; Roberson and Park, 2007; Diane et al. 2012). For that, many management scholars (Katz, 1974; Sweeney, 1986; Badawy, 1995; Whetten and Cameron, 1998; Analoui, 1995, 2000) have suggested different modules of skills that enhance managers’ knowledge and increase their capabilities and performance. Developing countries had previously been concerned with those modules, but most of their efforts were focused on importing them from abroad, particularly from the United States of America and Western Europe. This was because they thought that adopting such theories and their use would contribute to the acceleration of industrial development as in developed countries. Another reason for such thinking was that the early management scholars (Taylor, 1911; Weber 1947; Fayol, 1949) had ignored the environmental factors and were more concerned with the best managerial practices for all situations. On the other hand, Hofstede (1993) argues that “export of Western – mostly American – management practices and theories to poor countries has contributed little, or nothing, to their development.” This inadequacy is attributed to the fact that the process of implementation by local organizations is mediated by their cultural infrastructure, and so we cannot import managerial practices in a packaged form. Consequently, with much evidence that significant cultural differences exist across nations (Schein, 1992; Adler et al, 1986; Hofstede, 1980) Moreover, it remains to be seen whether these or other skills might be more or less important in an international sample (Bücker and Poutsma, 2010; Suutari and Mäkelä, 2007). The question then is whether these managerial skills can be transplanted universally. This research study problem can be stated thusly:

What is the impact of national culture on managerial skills?

Although a significant number of empirical studies have investigated the topic of managerial skills, limited research has been carried out on the effect of national cultures on determining the required managerial skills for managers, especially in Kuwait’s industry sector, where there has been greater dependence on foreign labor in most manufacturing industries.

Even though diversifying income sources was one of the main targets, as proclaimed by the Kuwaiti government since the 1950s, it was not translated into action until after the decline of fuel prices in 1986. The government increased offering grants and incentives to the industrial sector by establishing industrial zones and low rents, supplying water and electricity at reduced prices, and exempting imported machinery and equipment from customs duties and taxes. Government subsidies did not extend to human resources working in industry, particularly to managers, who represent most of the Kuwaitis working in the industrial sector. The importance of this study lies in two factors. First, it is addressed to a leading category of

people working in the industrial sector, namely, managers who are important to the development of this sector and who are of different nationalities. Second, this study is the first fieldwork in Kuwait that focuses on determining managerial skills in industry.

This study attempts to contribute to the knowledge base by exploring the influence of national culture on the managerial skills in the Kuwait industry sector. *National culture* is defined as “The collective programming of the mind acquired by growing up in a particular country” (Hofstede, 1991), whereas *managerial skills* are defined as “the ability to accomplish a particular type of managerial goal through personal action. The action may be as simple as a single behavior, or may comprise a system of behavior implemented interactively over a period of time” (Bigelow, 1994).

Methodology

This study differs from other studies that sought to compare nations or cultures. The typical problem when conducting comparative studies among nations or cultures is the interpretation of results amid numerous environmental factors relating to the study. This is because other things besides culture influence many of these studies, for example, economic, political, and social factors. The research design of the current study has the advantage of comparing the skills of industrial managers in one country, Kuwait.

Instrument

An extensive review of literature and research on managerial skills reveals several skills that managers should possess (refer to appendix A). The required skills cover personal, financial, technical, and other aspects. A thorough comparison of such skills revealed repetition and overlap, thus prompting once again sorting out managerial skills. The related literature can be used to construct a model underlying these skills and to help develop a questionnaire to survey the industrial managers constituting the study sample. The proposed model comprises five groups:

1. **Personal Skills:** These relate to the personal objectives sought by the manager, along with personal development (five skills).
 - a. Developing self-awareness
 - b. Managing time and stress
 - c. Solving problem creativity
 - d. Self-evaluation and motivation
 - e. Career planning and development

2. **Interpersonal Skills:** These are the skills enabling the manager to work effectively within a group by developing personal relationships with the members of this group (five skills).
 - a. Motivating employees
 - b. Empowerment and delegating authority
 - c. Facilitating work of others
 - d. Effective communication
 - e. Team management

3. **Functional Skills:** These are the skills enabling the manager to perform the functions required to execute the manager's duties (six skills).
 - a. Effective decision-making
 - b. Managing financial aspects of work
 - c. Working with computers
 - d. Organizing and controlling
 - e. Planning and evaluation
 - f. Goal setting

4. **Technical Skills:** These are the skills targeting the efficient performance of certain activities, particularly those relating to the various manufacturing stages (four skills).
 - a. Developing work standards
 - b. Technical knowledge
 - c. Knowledge and experience in manufacturing
 - d. Knowledge of advanced manufacturing technologies

5. **Global Skills:** These are the skills that enable managers to deal successfully with employees belonging to different cultures, whether at home or abroad (five skills).
 - a. Effective negotiation
 - b. Comfort level in handling people from different cultures
 - c. Knowledge of social, economic, and political environments of other nations
 - d. Adaptability to change
 - e. Speaking proficiency in two or more languages

The industrial managers were asked to determine the required skills for the manager to perform the assigned duties effectively.

Hofstede's national culture questionnaire (1980; 1991) was used because of its vast reliability as well as having a large sample (80,000 individuals from 70 countries). In addition, various studies have provided support for Hofstede's questionnaire result. This questionnaire consists of five dimensions. In line with the objective of the present study, however, two dimensions out of the five, power distance along with individualism versus collectivism, are used to examine the impact of national culture on managerial skills, for the following reasons:

1. The power distance and individualism dimensions have been selected because they clearly reflect significant difference between the United States and the Western Europe countries states on one hand, and among Arab states on the other (samples of the study of Hofstede [1980]). This group included the following Arab countries: Egypt, Iran, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (these countries have been treated as a single unit and thus have been given a collective point compared with other countries).

2. Most researchers agree that Arab culture is greatly influenced by the Islamic religion. Power distance, as viewed by Hofstede, relies on the fact that in every community, power is unevenly or unequally distributed among people. In Islam, however, equality is a major principle, with emphasis placed on the consultation (Shura) prior to the decision-making process.

The power distance and individualism–collectivism dimensions are measured through the answers to four questions:

1. Power Distance Index (PDI): The values of power distance are determined by the following items:

- a. Having good relationships between subordinates and superiors
- b. Being consulted by superiors
- c. Being afraid to express disagreement with superiors
- d. Working in a place where subordinates have more than one superior

2. Individualism Index (IDV): Individualism value is determined by the following items:

- a. Time for personal and family life
- b. Good working conditions
- c. Security of employment
- d. Adventure in the job

A pilot study was conducted to test the questionnaire that would be used in this study and to examine its efficiency for achieving the study objectives. Regarding reliability the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.849 for the managerial skills and 0.793 for the national culture. The validity coefficient was 0.921 for the managerial skills and 0.891 for the national culture. It is therefore clear that the value of the reliability and validity coefficients is acceptable for all the items of the questionnaire.

Participants

The sample represents industrial companies operating in Kuwait. To ensure the best representation of the sample, some criteria have been adapted. In the selection of industrial companies, first, the number of employees in these companies must not be fewer than 100; this number ensures the presence of clear managerial hierarchy. Second, the sample must contain companies from all of the industrial activities existing in Kuwait. Third, these companies must represent the various forms of ownership (e.g., private, government, or joint venture). After the implementation of these criteria, the number of industrial companies representing the sample comes to 56. Because the study units are the industrial managers and not the companies, this requires listing the managers from each of these companies. We then contacted these companies to obtain their consent to participate in the research and to find out about the number and hierarchical levels of managers hired by every company in the sample. As a result, 420 questionnaire forms were required to be administered to the industrial managers; of these, 344 were returned. These questionnaires were then carefully reviewed to ensure that they fulfilled the criteria for analysis. Incomplete questionnaires (numbering 26) were removed. This left 318 completed questionnaires, which represents 75.7 percent of the total number of questionnaires distributed (95 Kuwaiti, 133 Arabic, 76 Asian, 4 United States, 2 Europe, 8 indefinite).

Results and Discussion

The most important managerial skills needed by the industrial manager to perform the job, from the managers' perspective, are listed here. These skills were listed as being between *Important* and *Very important* on the scale (Grades were considered in which the mean lies between 3.5 and 5).

1. Technical knowledge (Technical)

2. Working with computers (Functional)
3. Team management (Interpersonal)
4. Organizing and controlling (Functional)
5. Managing time (Personal)
6. Goal setting (Functional)
7. Planning and evaluation (Functional)
8. Effective decision making (Functional)
9. Effective communication (Interpersonal)
10. Comfort level in dealing with people from different cultures (Global)
11. Adaptability to change (Global)
12. Motivating employees (Interpersonal)
13. Solving problem creativity (Personal)
14. Speaking proficiency in two or more languages (Global)
15. Managing financial aspects of work (Functional)
16. Self-evaluation and motivation (Personal)
17. Career planning and development (Personal)
18. Developing technical work standards (Technical)
19. Developing self-awareness (Personal)
20. Facilitating work of others (Interpersonal)
21. Knowledge and experience in manufacturing (Technical)

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Managerial Skills According to Degree of Importance

| Managerial Skills | Mean | Std. De. |
|------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Personal Skills | 3.95 | 0.62 |
| Managing time | 4.27 | 0.75 |
| Developing self awareness | 3.74 | 0.95 |
| Solving problem creativity | 3.99 | 0.87 |
| Self-evaluate and motivation | 3.90 | 0.86 |
| Career planning and development | 3.89 | 0.93 |
| Interpersonal Skills | 3.93 | 0.55 |
| Motivating employees | 4.03 | 0.81 |
| Effective communication | 4.15 | 0.86 |
| Empowering and delegating | 3.47 | 0.96 |
| Facilitating work of others | 3.74 | 0.91 |
| Team management | 4.30 | 0.80 |
| Functional Skills | 4.22 | 0.49 |
| Effective decision making | 4.23 | 0.75 |
| Managing financial aspects of work | 3.91 | 1.11 |
| Working with computers | 4.37 | 0.91 |
| Organizing and controlling | 4.28 | 0.69 |

| | | |
|---|-------------|-------------|
| Goal setting | 4.27 | 0.82 |
| Planning and evaluation | 4.27 | 0.76 |
| Technical Skills | 3.87 | 0.71 |
| Developing technical work standards | 3.86 | 0.99 |
| Technical knowledge | 4.45 | 0.73 |
| Knowledge and experience in manufacturing | 3.73 | 1.20 |
| Knowledge of advanced manufacturing technologies | 3.44 | 1.06 |
| Global Skills | 3.71 | 0.58 |
| Effective negotiation with international companies | 3.20 | 1.29 |
| Comfort level in dealing with people from different cultures. | 4.13 | 0.83 |
| Knowledge of social, economic, and political environment of other nations | 3.22 | 0.98 |
| Adaptability to change | 4.10 | 0.76 |
| Speaking proficiency in two or more languages | 3.95 | 1.04 |

To clarify the eight most important items that represent the national culture and affect managerial skills, a stepwise regression was used. Table 2 shows the stepwise regression models for the dependent variables (managerial skills y_1) on the independent variables (national culture items).

Table 2. Stepwise Regression Models for Managerial skills in the National Culture

| Dependent Variable | Independent Variable | F (Sig.) | R ² | | β | T | Sig. |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------|----------------|------------|---------|----------|-------|
| Managerial skill (y_1) | Good working conditions (d_3) | 6.449* (0.012) | 0.020 | (Constant) | 4.075 | 69.150** | 0.00 |
| | | | | d_3 | -0.072 | -2.539* | 0.012 |

** Significant at the level 0.01.

* Significant at the level 0.05.

From Table 2, it is clear that the most important item affecting managerial skills is the third item “Having good working conditions (e.g., good ventilation, lighting, adequate work space [the Individualism dimension]). The determinant coefficient is 0.026. This means that item No. 3 of the national culture items explains only 2.6% of the change that occurs to the dependent variable y_1 . It is clear that national culture does not greatly influence most of the managers in determining the most important skills, which indicates that managerial skills are not absolutely universal but that they tend toward universality. The regression model, of the dependent variable on the national culture, could be written as follows:

$$y_1 = 4.075 - 0.072 d_3$$

One argument holds that some cultures and countries are particularly resistant to change and to outside influences, borrowing little and remaining culturally and politically isolated. Often this argument is cast in terms of modernity and the idea that some cultures are unwilling or unable to embrace modernity. This in turn is often referred to in geopolitical terms, suggesting that such a refusal to embrace modernity is at threat to global well-being. For example, Maroya (2004) thought that the most common allegation in Western literature is the supposed failure of the Arab world to embrace “modernity,” by which can be meant some combination of open market economies, secular materialist culture, and plural politics. Our research suggests that in the business world, and in Kuwait if not elsewhere in the Arab world, this argument is false. Both Kuwaiti managers and managers from other countries (Arab or non-Arab) appear to share similar professional attitudes toward managerial skills. This also suggests that the current debate about modernity is miscast, or misstated, because based on this research, Arab culture appears to be no more resistant to change or the adoption of new ideas than any other culture. For most management periodicals, culture has been a main theme of discussion in recent years. This is largely because culture is a crucial element of failure or success in an organization. From the outset, the concept of “international management” started a debate about the impact of social or environmental factors, mostly national culture, on the nature and effectiveness of management, when implemented in various countries. Consequently, we can state that in Kuwait, industrial managers, notwithstanding their national culture, do not differ in the managerial skills that they use or their views about the managerial skills needed to perform their jobs.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this research was to examine managerial skills to determine whether they are generic in nature. This subject of enquiry is considered to be of growing importance in global affairs, particularly in recent years, where organizations have encountered changes such as work re-engineering, home-based working, development in information and communication technology, and globalization. This has led to an increase in the competition environment, forcing companies to be flexible, adaptable, and learn quickly. The nature of managerial work has also changed, which in turn has necessitated upgrading managers’ skills to meet the new environment (Worrall and Cooper, 2001).

In the Arab world, some managers and decision makers are hesitant to adopt western managerial skills models because they think that they are unsuitable to their culture. They say that Arabs have a deeply rooted culture and history, and therefore have to find their own special managerial models. This belief is not based on sound research, however. This study suggests that managerial skills tend to be universal. This does not preclude adopting western managerial skills, but benefiting from western managerial models should go hand in hand with studying those models before their implementation in the Arab environment.

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APPENDIX A

Managerial Skills Models

Table 3. Managerial Skills in General

| Katz, 1974 | Sweeney, 1986 | Bigelow, 1994 | Whetten & Cameron, 1998 | Analoui et al., 2000 |
|----------------------|----------------------|---|--|---|
| 1- Technical skills | 1- Decision making | 1- Interpersonal skills (decision making) | 1- Personal skills (self-awareness) | 1- Task-related skills (financial issues) |
| 2- Human skills | 2- Planning | 2- Interpersonal skills (communication) | 2- Interpersonal skills (communication) | 2- People-related skills (motivational) |
| 3- Conceptual skills | 3- Organizational | 3- Learning skills (self-awareness) | 3- Group skills (effective team leading) | 3- Analytical and sales-related skills (career development) |
| | 4- Problem solving | 4- Personal skills (proactive) | | |
| | 5- Team leading | 5- Entry skills (relationships) | | |
| | | 6- Administrative (planning) | | |

Table 4. Managerial Skills in View of Managerial Work Changes

| Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1997 | Hiltrop, 1998 | Rodacker, 2002 | Worrall & Cooper 2001 |
|---|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1- Operating-level entrepreneurs (commitment, motivational) | 1- Vision and planning skills | 1- Set goals | 1- Using IT |
| 2- Senior-management developers (delegation, relationships) | 2- Information handling skills | 2- Effective communication | 2- Managing information and knowledge |
| 3- Top-level leaders (work environment, confidence) | 3- Influencing and negotiating skills | 3- Networking | 3- Financial management |
| | 4- Creativity and learning | 4- Negotiation | 4- Strategic thinking |
| | 5- Team working and leadership | 5- knowledge | 5- Project management |
| | 6- Changing management skills | | 6- Communication skills |
| | | | 7- Leadership/ motivational skills |
| | | | 8- Marketing skills |
| | | | 9- Negotiating |
| | | | 10- Environmental management |
| | | | 11- Coaching and Counseling |
| | | | 12- Foreign languages |
| | | | 13- Interpersonal skills |
| | | | 14- Working as part of a |

team

Table 5. Managerial Skills in View of Globalization

| inesmith, 1992 | Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1992 | Adler & Bartholomew 1992 | Ali & Camp 1996 | McDonald, 2002 |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1- Managing competitiveness 2- Managing complexity 3- Managing adaptability 4- Managing teams 5- Managing uncertainty 6- Managing learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1- Business manager (recognize opportunities) 2- Country manager (local and external competitors) 3- Functional Manager (innovation, best-practice wording) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1- Global perspective 2- Local responsiveness 3- Synergistic learning 4- Transition and adaptation 5- Collaboration 6- Foreign experience | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1- Global perspective 2- Human resource 3- Flexible 4- Technical literacy 5- Comfort ability 6- Knowledge of other countries 7- Problem solving 8- Adaptability to change 9- Foreign assignment 10- Long-term perspective 11- Experience 12- Language 13- Personal relations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1- Be open-minded 2- Shown interest in other cultures 3- Get used to complexity 4- Develop a resilient spirit 5- Act honestly 6- Stable personal life 7- Develop expertise |