



# Managerial competencies for middle managers: some empirical findings from China

Managerial competencies

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June Xuejun Qiao

*Graduate School of Education, Peking University, Beijing, China, and*

Wei Wang

*American Society for Training and Development, Alexandria, Virginia, USA*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to identify managerial competencies required for successful middle managers in China.

**Design/methodology/approach** – First a questionnaire survey was distributed among MBA and EMBA students at a major university in China, and then two case studies were conducted to collect more in-depth data.

**Findings** – The findings of this study suggest that team building, communication, coordination, execution and continual learning are critical competencies for the success of middle managers in China. Implications for future research and practices are also discussed.

**Originality/value** – The literature review shows that although previous leadership competency studies are extensive, little research has been conducted to explore the competencies required for middle managers. This study would contribute to fill the gap in the literature.

**Keywords** Leadership development, Middle managers, Competences, China

**Paper type** Research paper

In recent years, competency study has gained more and more interest and attention. Numerous attempts have been made by scholars to study competency (Boyatzis, 1982; McCleland, 1973; McLagan, 1989; Prahalad and Hamel, 1990; Spencer and Spencer, 1993; Ulrich, 1997). Competency modeling, in addition to being regarded as a focal point for planning, organizing, integrating and improving all aspects of human resource management systems (McLagan, 1980), is also regarded as an approach focused on improving organizational performance (Rothwell and Lindholm, 1999).

There is an assumption that all effective leadership behaviors are applicable across the different levels of managerial positions (Bass and Stogdill, 1990; Dopson and Stewart, 1990; Lee, 1981). However, overwhelming evidence shows that to be effective, different hierarchical positions require different managerial behaviors (Kraut *et al.*, 1989). Furthermore, there is very little research reported in the literature for exploring the competencies required by middle managers. Therefore, this study explores the competencies critical to the success of middle managers in China. In the following sections, we begin with a brief literature review. Then, we report the methodologies of the two studies and their results. Finally, we conclude with our findings and implications for future research and practices.



## Literature review

McCleland (1976) described "competency" as the characteristics underlying superior performance. In the US, traditionally, the competency modeling starts from observing successful job performers to determining how these individuals differ from less successful performers. However, some researchers argued that, this approach in identifying competencies tended to produce competencies that were too generic and abstract, therefore, of limited value in competency development (Sandberg, 2000). In comparison, Sandberg (1994) argued that competency should be viewed as a function of the context in which it was applied, and Sandberg (1994) further suggested that competency should be constituted by the meaning of one's work rather than a specific set of attributes.

Many studies attempted to identify the key competencies that defined effective leadership (American Management Association, 2005; Boyatzis, 1982; Development Dimensions International, 2005; Hayes, 1979). Several research studies were conducted in China on leadership competency modeling (Kakabadse and Wang, 2003; Wang and Chen, 2002; Wang and Schneider, 2003). Wang and Chen (2002) conducted a study of managerial competency modeling for assessment and selection in China. They used a strategic hierarchical job analysis and a survey on leadership competency to formulate a model of managerial competency structure. The findings of their study suggested that the managerial skills necessary for middle managers included strategic decision-making, relationship coordination, empowerment and facilitation, business monitoring, and innovation. Wang and Schneider (2003) conducted a three-year longitudinal research project to examine the dynamics of multicultural leadership team development. Their emphasis was on a cross-cultural managerial competency-performance framework. They identified four dimensions of leadership competencies that were crucial to working in multicultural leadership teams in joint ventures in China. Their findings indicated that managers in China shared several common competencies with western managers. However, some competency differentiations were unique to the Chinese culture.

The perception of informants in the work situation is frequently used by researchers when studying competency (van der Velde *et al.*, 1999), and the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) has been widely used as one key methodology in rigorous competency studies. In addition, Pernick (2001) proposed that competencies could be derived from the organization's mission statement and core values. Rothwell and Lindholm (1999) argued that the approach to developing a competency model is crucial to ensuring validity and reliability for the effort.

## Methodology

Based on our literature review, we chose to explore competencies of middle managers by way of mixed approaches. To be more specific, two studies were conducted separately to explore the competencies critical to the success of middle managers in China. In study 1, a questionnaire survey was distributed to Managerial Business Administration (MBA) and EMBA students at a major university in China to examine their perceptions of managerial competencies required for successful middle managers. In study 2, two case studies were conducted respectively to identify critical competencies for the middle managers in participating companies. Focus groups, critical incidence interviews, and survey questionnaires were adopted because, as suggested by Yin (1994), multiple sources of evidence could add validity and reliability to case study findings.

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In both of the studies, middle managers were identified to be those who were positioned in the middle of the organization and served as vertical links between the strategic decision-makers and the first-level supervisors as well as front-line employees in their business units. As such, middle managers were usually held accountable to translate organizational strategy into actions, deliver qualified outcomes and meet deadlines within budget. In this sense, their roles in the organization were more or less the same in China as those of their counterparts in the western countries.

### *Study 1*

The purpose of study 1 was to explore the perceived importance of managerial competencies critical to the success of middle managers in China. Specifically the research questions included: what managerial competencies were perceived to be important for the success of middle managers in China, and what were the top five most frequently identified managerial competencies for middle managers in China?

*Sample and instrument.* In this study, the questionnaire was distributed to 450 MBA and 70 EMBA students enrolled in a major university in China. The majority of students in the two programs were part-time students, who were either middle managers or supervisors to middle managers in their respective companies. They were chosen because the students in these two programs at this university had been selected from people who had proven track records of success and had high potential to be promoted in the future.

The survey questionnaire was developed based upon the 1998 leadership competency model, which was thoroughly researched and validated (Eyde *et al.*, 1999). The model had a set of 27 competencies grouped into five clusters, including leading change, leading people, business acumen, building coalitions and results-driven. This set of competencies was applicable to all levels of leadership within the US federal government (Eyde *et al.*, 1999), including senior managers, middle managers and frontline supervisors.

To make this US-based leadership competency model applicable to middle managers in China, the survey was first reviewed and validated by a subject expert panel, including several native Chinese. As such, its face and content validity were established. The purpose of this validation was to ensure that the modified questionnaire reflected the Chinese cultural context. Next, the survey was translated into Chinese and verified by a third party bilingual researcher. To establish the reliability of the instrument, a cognitive group interview was administered to pilot test the instrument among selected Chinese students. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for internal consistency across the total of 27 leadership competencies was obtained to be 0.925.

As with the 1998 leadership competency model, the final version of the questionnaire included a set of 27 competencies, and a detailed definition was provided for each of the 27 competencies. For example, accountability was defined as a characteristic that "holds self and others accountable for rules and responsibilities, and can be relied upon to ensure that projects are completed," and team building was defined as a characteristic that "inspires, motivates, and guides others toward goal accomplishments. Encourages and facilitates cooperation within the organization and with customer groups; fosters commitment, team spirit, pride, trust." The participants were asked to provide their perceptions of the importance for each of the 27 competencies on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 representing "not important" and 5

“extremely important”. The demographic data such as age, gender, highest position held, and organizational background data such as size of organization, ownership of organization, business type of organization were also collected. In addition, the participants were asked to identify the top five most important managerial competencies critical to the success of middle managers in China.

### *Study 2*

The purpose of study 2 was to explore, by way of case study approach, the core competencies required for successful middle managers in two case companies. The two companies participated in this study included one joint venture of a multinational manufacturing company and a local privately-owned IT company. The first company had 16 middle managers, and the second had about 30.

*Method.* The method in this study was the borrowed-and-tailored approach, which is typically used in competency studies (Rothwell and Lindholm, 1999). The competency modeling process was composed of two phases, i.e. competency identification and competency verification. Both of the two cases followed the same process where possible. In the competency identification phase, the middle managers of each company were first asked to vote for two to three exemplary performers among themselves and list the reasons for each nomination. Based upon data analysis, five most frequently mentioned qualities were identified. Then, a group of candidate competencies were identified based on the 1998 leadership competency model (Eyde *et al.*, 1999), which was used in study 1, and the company's mission statement and core values. Following an intensive group discussion and debate, the middle managers were asked to vote for eight core competencies and rank the competencies by their relative importance for middle managers in the company.

In order to collect more in-depth data regarding the critical competencies required for middle managers in the company, the critical incident technique (CIT) was used, first to triangulate the findings from the previous steps and second to identify those competencies that were not included in the reference model but were critical for the company. The critical incident interview basically included three questions:

- (1) What were the most difficult job challenges you had encountered in your job and how had you handled the situation.
- (2) What were the most common job challenges in your daily operation and how did you usually handle them.
- (3) What were the most common areas for improvement you had seen with new employees in your job category.

Critical competencies were identified following the thematic analysis. Next, the competencies identified from the CIT were triangulated with those identified from the peer nomination and focus group discussion process. Therefore, the critical competencies required for middle managers were established for each company.

To verify the identified managerial competencies among larger samples, a competency verification questionnaire was developed and distributed to three groups of people, including the middle managers, their bosses and their direct subordinates. In the questionnaire, all the competencies identified in the previous stages were listed. The participants were asked to evaluate the relative importance of each competency on

the seven-point Likert scale, with 1 representing “the least important” and 7 “the most important”. Table I summarizes the strategies used in this study to develop a profile of competencies for middle managers.

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## Results

### *Major findings of study 1*

A total of 260 usable survey questionnaires were returned, resulting in the response rate of 51 percent. The respondents included 45 percent middle managers and 10 percent executives. They were predominantly male (70 percent) and more than 30 years old (54 percent), representing all major ownership types of organizations, including private, state-own and multinational companies, as well as, government and non-profit organizations.

The findings suggested that all 27 competencies were perceived to be “important” or “very important”. The top five most important competencies for middle managers included accountability, team building, relationship management, continual learning and conflict management. They were all rated as “very important” to the success of middle managers with average mean values higher than 4.00 out of 5.00, Table II. The above findings were consistent with those from former studies (Conference Board of Canada Organizational Performance Group, 2002; Gregory and Park, 1992; Sull, 2005; Wang and Schneider, 2003; Wiggenhorn and Cheah, 1997).

### *Major findings of study 2*

*Peer nomination.* A total of 13 middle managers in case company I and 29 in case company II participated in the peer nomination. After the nomination people were ranked by the number of votes they had received from their peers. Then, the reasons

Stage	Competency modeling approach	Sample
Competency identification	1. Peer nomination: target group vote for exemplary performers and list reasons for the nomination 2. Intensive group discussion and debated 3. Critical incidence interview	Middle managers Same as above Same as above
Competency verification	4. A competency verification questionnaire was distributed among middle managers, their bosses and the direct reports	Middle managers, their direct bosses and subordinates

**Table I.**  
Competency modeling approach in study 2

Ranking	Managerial competency	Average mean	Total (%)
1	Accountability	4.25	64
2	Team building	4.18	46
3	Relationship management	4.14	35
4	Continual learning	4.05	31
5	Conflict management	4.05	28

**Notes:**  $n = 260$ ; The response scale was 1 = not important; 2 = slightly important; 3 = important; 4 = very important; 5 = extremely important; Percentage represents the percentage of 260 respondents

**Table II.**  
Top five most frequently identified competencies for middle managers in China

for nomination were analyzed. In case company I, the people who received the highest votes were described as "highly capable in communicating with other people, know how to effectively coordinate with other departments and passionate to work." The results showed that the competencies mentioned most frequently included communication, coordination, decision making, ability to work under high pressure, execution and technical expertise. The behavioral indicators for communication, for example, included the ability to "know how to express themselves well and win buy-in from other people, etc." In case company II, the one who received the highest number of votes was described by his colleagues as having very strong technical capacity, excellent team-building skills, outstanding coordination and communication skills, good at execution, responsible and modest. Data analysis showed that communication, execution, team building, coordination and technical expertise were regarded as the most important competencies for middle managers in this company.

*Group discussion and debate.* Based on intensive debate and discussion, eight competencies were selected as most important for the success of middle managers in case company I. Table III shows that coordination and communication received the highest mean scores and very low variances, which suggest that these two competencies are important for middle managers. In contrast, competencies such as process management, motivating others, continual learning and technical expertise received mixed opinions.

*Critical incidence interview.* Ten people in case company I and 19 in case company II participated in the critical incidence interview. First, the problems that middle managers often encountered in the two case companies were collected. Second, actions that were central for dealing with those problems were identified. Third, those actions were transformed into competencies. By doing this way, concrete and detailed descriptions of competencies were generated. For example, the problems frequently encountered in case company I included:

- coordinating among different departments;
- accomplishing task requirements under high pressure;
- motivating subordinates in order to fulfill job tasks; and
- helping new employees who were inexperienced.

As a result, communication, coordination, working effectively under high pressure, motivating others, and developing others were identified as critical competencies to the

Ranking	Managerial competency	Total scores	Average score	Variance
1	Team building	91	7.58	2.45
2	Communication	85	7.08	3.72
3	Process management	67	5.58	5.17
4	Problem solving	66	5.5	4.82
5	Motivating others	59	4.91	5.9
6	Continual learning	49	4.08	5.54
7	Developing others	43	5.58	4.63
8	Technical expertise	41	3.4	6.63

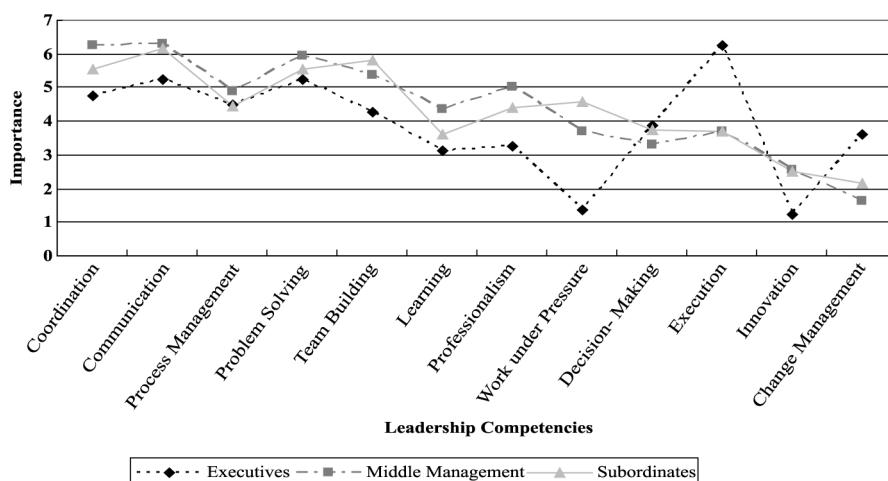
**Table III.**  
Ranking of managerial competencies – results from the group discussion in case 1

**Notes:**  $n = 11$

success of middle managers in this company. In case company II, the data suggested that two of the most difficult problems to deal with were coordinating between front-line sales and rear end technical support and effectively managing subordinates to improve work efficiency. Therefore, communication, coordination, and developing others were identified as required competencies for the middle managers in the company. Based on the findings from peer nomination, group discussion and debate, and critical incidence interview, the core competencies for each case company were established.

*Verification survey.* In order to verify the identified competencies among a larger sample, a verification survey was distributed to middle managers, their direct bosses and their subordinates. For example, in case company I, 71 questionnaires were collected, including 16 middle managers, eight direct bosses and 47 subordinates. The statistics showed that, although three groups shared common views on certain competencies, such as coordination, communication and problem solving, there were significant differences among the three groups in perceived importance of other managerial competencies. For example, while the executives assigned a much higher value to "execution," the middle managers and their subordinates favored coordination, motivating others and technical expertise. With regard to working under high pressure, there were again significant differences among three different groups. To be more specific, the executives believed this competency was not important, but middle managers and subordinates held quite different views. Another important point was that, although innovation was one of the core values in the company, it was not ranked high by the participants as we expected, Figure 1.

In Table IV, the identified managerial competencies for middle managers for each company in study 2 are listed and compared with those identified in study 1. Accountability in study 1 means a characteristic that "can be relied upon to ensure the projects are completed." Therefore, accountability in study 1 is similar to execution in study 2. We can see from this table, that team building, communication, coordination, execution and continual learning are critical for the success of middle managers in China. In other words, to be successful, the middle managers in China are expected to



**Figure 1.**  
Relative importance of leadership competencies rated by executives, middle managers and their subordinates

effectively express his/her ideas, are highly capable to lead his/her team, know how to build and maintain good relationships with others and others.

### Conclusions

This research attempted to explore the competencies critical for middle managers in China. From the findings of the two studies, the managerial competencies including team building, communication, coordination, execution and continual learning were critical for the success of middle managers in China.

In addition, this research found that the middle managers required different set of competencies from senior managers. For example, in study 1, all the competencies that were rated as important or very important to the success of middle managers in China did not include items that were more strategically focused. Competencies such as vision and strategic thinking were less frequently mentioned as important and gained relatively lower mean values. Therefore, our research was consistent with findings in earlier studies (Kraut *et al.*, 1989) reporting different hierarchical positions require different managerial behaviors.

Furthermore, the five competencies identified for middle managers in this study were relevant to their positions in their company. As an integral vertical link between the strategic decision-makers and the first-level supervisors and front-line employees in their business units, middle managers were usually held accountable to translate organizational strategy into actions, deliver qualified outcomes and meet deadlines within budget. Therefore, their ability to execute and implement strategy was critical to the success of middle managers, resulting in execution being an important competency for middle managers. In addition, middle managers were sometimes referred to as "glue" in an organization because they were often relied upon to lead their teams to achieve the goals of the organization. They were expected to inspire, motivate and guide their team toward goal accomplishment. As such, team building was another critical competency for middle managers. The above findings corresponded with those in previous studies in that, compared to executive managers, middle managers needed to focus more on execution and leading people (Farquhar, 1998; Kraut *et al.*, 1989). Due to their unique position in the organization, middle managers faced quite different challenges than senior managers. To be more specific, middle managers were positioned in the middle of an organization, which placed them in a complex network with other people. As such, the competency of developing, adapting and maintaining good relationships was extremely important for middle managers. In the turbulent workplace, the pace of change and the required evolution of skills place a premium on continuous learning (Morgan, 1991). To catch up

**Table IV.**

Comparison of leadership competencies identified in study 1 and 2

	Study 1 Survey questionnaire	Study 2	
		Case 1	Case 2
1	Accountability	Team building	Team building
2	Team building	Communication	Communication
3	Relationship management	Coordination	Continual learning
4	Continual learning	Problem solving	Execution
5	Conflict management	Execution	Technical expertise

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with the rapidly changing environment in China, middle managers must keep updating their knowledge and skills so that they can keep their professional competence in their current jobs and be prepared for the next higher positions.

Lastly, as this study explored middle management competencies in Chinese context, when compared with the studies conducted in western context, we can see that relationship management was highly emphasized in China. For example, in study 2, communication and coordination apparently reflected relationship management in study 1. This suggested that relationship building was crucial in Chinese culture.

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### **Implications, discussions and limitations**

#### *Implications*

This research concludes that team building, communication, coordination, execution and continual learning are critical managerial competencies for the success of middle managers in China. The results of this study have rich implications for middle managers and leadership development professionals in China.

*For practitioners.* First, current and potential middle managers are informed of the competencies critical to their success in the organization. They may assess their current proficiency level with regard to the five competencies identified in this study and actively acquire knowledge and skills through relevant training and development initiatives. Second, for executives and top management, the five competencies identified in this study should be attached with the highest priority when selecting, developing and evaluating middle managers because these competencies may lead to successful middle managers. Third, the findings of this study also suggest that top management team may perceive the importance of managerial competencies differently from middle level managers. Therefore, it is of vital importance for middle managers to see the difference and take actions to meet the expectations of their bosses.

*For leadership development professionals.* In order to manage training and development efficiently, leadership development professionals need to understand what constitutes competency profiles for managers. Without such an understanding, competency development cannot be managed effectively. This research concludes that the middle managers require different set of competencies from senior managers. In view of such difference, the leadership development professionals should take effort to design and develop training programs tailored for middle managers to develop managerial competencies identified in this study. Second, the results also show that the leadership competencies identified in the US are all perceived to be important for middle managers in China. Therefore, when developing leadership competency models and designing leadership development programs for middle managers in China, the tools, instruments and programs from western countries can be borrowed as foundations or references.

#### *Discussions*

Although Chinese culture is quite different from the USA, this research finds that the middle managers in China share the same competencies as their counterparts in the USA. One possible explanation is that, the middle managers in China shoulder the same responsibilities as their counterpart in the USA. The same responsibilities require the same managerial competencies. Another plausible explanation is that, although they share the same competencies, it does not mean the managers behave the same

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way in China as their counterparts in the USA because the behavioral indicators for each competency may be different.

Furthermore, as argued by some researchers, culture is a collective mental programming that determines values, attitudes and behaviors and has profound implications for management (Hofstede, 1980; Smith and Peterson, 1988). In fact, this research does reveal some characteristics that are unique to the Chinese culture. For example, the results of study 1 showed evidence of the influence of the Chinese culture on the ranking of managerial competencies. The items that gained relatively higher rankings, including relationship management, team building and conflict management, were mostly related to relationship and people. This reflected the cultural context in China, which respected harmony and conformity on interpersonal relations (Hsu, 1981).

### *Limitations*

We acknowledge there were some limitations in this study. First of all, this study used a US-based model in China. Although we adopted relevant strategies when we attempted to adapt this model into Chinese context, there were still some problems. Some researchers believed that managerial competencies were generalizable across situations (Boyatzis, 1982; Spencer and Spencer, 1993) while others argued that different cultural contexts influence the understanding of competence. This suggested that the terms, such as team building, did not mean the same thing in China as in the USA. Therefore, we propose that more consideration of meanings and culture issues should be dealt with in future studies. Second, this was one exploratory study only. Due to the limited sample, the results might not be representative of China. Therefore, further study is needed in future research before it is possible to generalize the findings of this study.

Third, although the two case companies in study 2 shared many things in common, such as they were all high tech companies, both were fast growing and facing the same micro environment in China and others, they were different in many ways. For one, the two companies represented different types of businesses. Each had different organizational cultures, which might have had a high impact on the data collected. Therefore, we should be cautious in generalizing the findings of this study, and more cases should be studied in the future.

### **How this research contributes to the field of HRD**

This research was intended to identify the leadership competencies required for successful middle level managers in China. As such, it contributes to the field of HRD in two ways. First, it informs the HRD professionals of the critical leadership competencies required for successful middle managers in China and, therefore, serves to fill in the gaps in leadership competencies. Second, the findings of study 1 show that the leadership competencies identified in the US are all perceived to be important for middle managers in China, suggesting that successful middle managers in China share many common attributes with managers in the US. Therefore, for HRD professionals in China, when developing leadership competency models and designing leadership development programs for middle managers in China, the tools, instruments and programs from western countries are applicable as foundations or references.

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#### About the authors

June Xuejun Qiao currently works as Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Graduate School of Education, Peking University. She holds an MBA degree from Guanghua School of Management, Peking University, and a PhD degree in Human Resource Development from the Pennsylvania State University, USA. Her research interests include leadership development, organization development and competency modeling, etc. June Xuejun Qiao is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: juneqiao@gmail.com

Wei Wang is the International Relations Manager, Asia Pacific, at the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), US. Her expertise areas include leadership development, competency study, training and development. Wei holds a master degree in Management from Nankai University in China and a PhD degree in Human Resource Development from The Pennsylvania State University in US. She has presented at ASTD International Conference and Expo and many other professional international conferences.