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## LEADERSHIP MASTERY - A THREE-DIMENSIONAL FRAMEWORK OF COMPETENCES BASED ON RELATIONSHIPS

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### Abstract

The object of the paper was to demonstrate that for a better leadership understanding, a three-dimensional segregation of competences is needed. When looking at the term, leader from an empirical business perspective, we often find the definition to be a person who is being followed by teams and organizations. The term leadership as a competence, can further be classified as a sub-set of competences and values build around the idea of working with people. As working with people is rather a general term, I consider that a three-dimensional leadership framework would help better understand the different competences needed to successfully navigate the business environment in any organization. The three dimensions are: team leadership, upper and peer leadership and finally personal-leadership. we have run a survey in an organization that values leadership development in a unit of around 50 employees that have ranked leadership among the best in class worldwide; this exercise was run in order to verify the theory that different leadership competences need to be developed for each layer of communication (team employees, management-peers and the relationship with self) and to draw different conclusions.

### Keywords

Leadership, Competences, Team, Management, Personal Development

### JEL Classification

M1, M10, M19

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### Introduction

There are many different schools of thought and many manuals on what it takes to be a leader such as *The Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (John C Maxwell, 1998) , however; if we go deeper, often times the traits and the competences of a leader, one who is generally accepted by the majority as the “right” type, we find that there are more resemblances then differences and often times are a result of superficial changes in terminology or use of words.

The scope of this paper is not dissect the differences between a leader and a manager as we will be using both terminology terms with the same weight; to be more clear we, will be discussing about formal leaders, or leaders that have also leadership positions in their organization charts, typically referred as manager, with different terminologies such as team leader, team coordinator, head of, C-level etc.

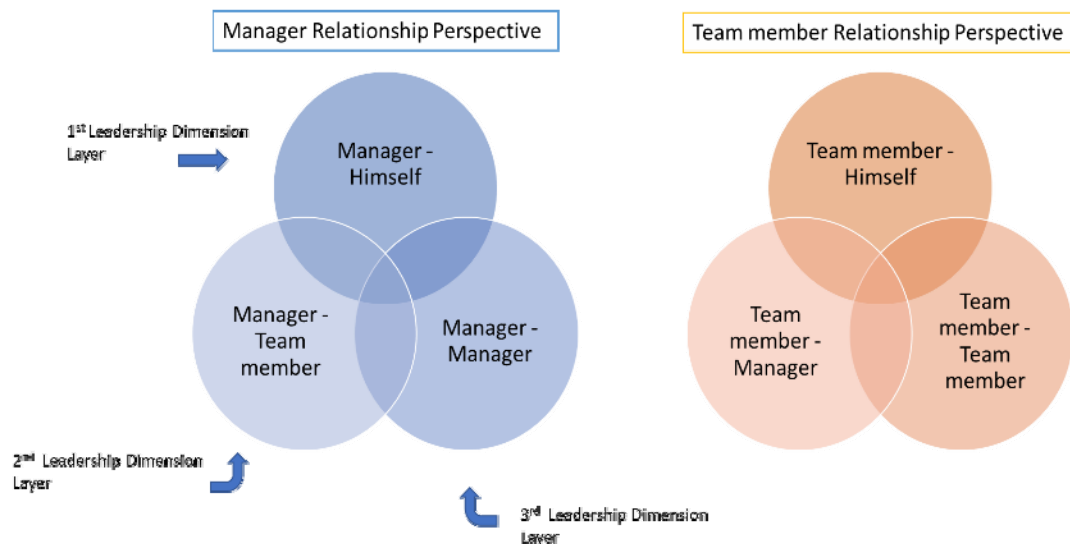
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From personal experiences managing different teams and people for the last couple of years, we have started to develop a theory based on which, like anything else, leadership is a sum of competences and these competences are different if we look at them from a relationship perspective (Özmen, Sârbu, Săseanu & Toader, 2017). Because personal experience is biased and usually tends to have a greater weight on objective judgement, a survey was sent in a well-established multinational corporation, where we asked both managers who are considered leaders by the majority of their peers, to respond a survey with the aim of ranking the competences they master through the optics of the Three-Dimensional (3D) Leadership Competence Model thus putting it to test.

**The Layers of the 3D Leadership Model**

Let’s start by describing the conceptual 3D Leadership Model:

The 3D Leadership Competence Model identifies three distinguished layers where relational leadership competences can be grouped by. We will categorize the layers from the relational point of view or else, the one the leader has with himself, his team or his peers and upper managers.



**Fig. no. 1 Leadership 3D Model – Manager perspective and Team Member perspective**  
*Source: authors*

*The First Leadership Layer – The deep-sea level*

At this stage we will be looking at the relationship the manager has with himself or self-leadership. The first layer comprises of competences that a leader needs to develop to master his personal leadership. Often, we hear that a leader must be a role model for the people he is leading, he must walk the talk. But which are the competence we need to develop to master this first leadership layer or as I like to call it, the deep-sea level. In the Self-Leadership (Bryant & Kazan, 2012) we find that there are three main focal points: self-awareness or how we are in tune with our intentions and values, self-confidence or the exercise of knowing our strengths and weaknesses, and finally self-efficacy or the belief that we have the control to handle anything. Having this in mind, we can deconstruct several competences that can derive from them which can be generally accepted in as self-competences: wisdom, courage, decision making, expertise, ethics, balance, composure, learner, integrity, confident, creative, innovative, values and principles etc.

From our research we've started with the all-time best seller management books and found that this is usually the most overlooked layer of leadership as in other worlds it implies having the discipline to continue to develop one's skills and competences and the constant checkups. This can be often difficult for managers and formal leaders as when the person identifies with the position, it's very likely that he or she will consider that they are self-sufficient, and this is proven by the organizational position they hold.

#### *The Second Leadership Layer – The offshore level*

The second layer comprises of competences that a leader needs to develop in relation with his team, whose members are supposed to follow him. A supposition can be made here that this level is the most important and most well covered layer, considering the level of attention it gets from the specialized books and lectures lately. Starting from the principle that a leader is the person whose main responsibility is to steer a group of people, in our case the team members, to a common goal, then there is no wonder why most of the leadership development and study books out there mainly focus on this layer.

At this stage, we slightly move from the inward leadership development perspective to the outward leadership perspective. From a human relationship perspective, the manager is developing his relationship with each team-member one to one, there can't be any one to many relationship developments as there is no one single team entity, but a team is formed from several individuals thus a sum of one to ones relationships. One of the most prolific recent authors in leadership studies is Simon Sinek, the author of *Leaders Eat Last* (Sinek, 2014), who has elegantly groups leadership competences, in what we have defined as the second leadership layer, in three big categories: selflessness or in other words caring about people in one's team; empathy is the second one and is about making sense of the other person's feelings, situation and condition and taking them into consideration; and finally grace under fire, or the ability to withstand the pressure, urgency and possible problems and not spread it in the team. Deriving from this model and other source, we can add the following competences mapped at this 2nd Leadership Layer: ability to inspire and motivate, problem solver, results oriented, relationship building, strategic view, develop others, communicates clearly and openly, creates a feeling of teamwork, develops leaders, creates a safety environment for mistakes etc.

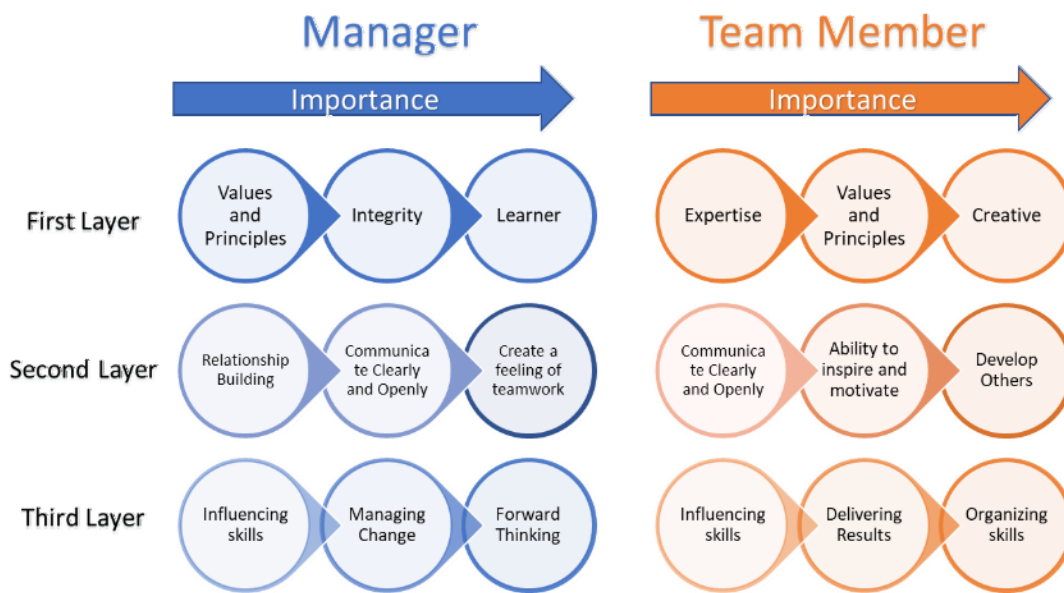
#### *The Third Leadership Layer – The high inland level*

At this final stage we are looking at the relationship the manager has with other peer or upper managers. Comparing with the previous layer, the manager-team level, and looking at the extent of books and articles that have been researched on what competences a manager needs to successfully navigate the relationships with his management team including the direct manager, we can say that the level of interest is less than on the more covered second leadership layer. This is a bit of a paradox as most of the times most of the time a manager spends, about 1/3 of total time according to some studies, is spent on administration tasks which includes exchange of emails with other leaders or peers and leadership meetings or meetings with other managers, where strategy, results, negotiations and other topics are being discussed and agreed upon. In order to successfully navigate these lands, we see that the relationship still remains outward oriented and one to one but this time, there is no responsibility over the management team and the direct manager, such was the case with the manager and his or her team; the manager is now part of a team of managers and he is responsible with his part of own tasks agreed or given by own manager and peers. If we check the interpretation (Fig. no. 1), we can see at the third leadership layer looking from manager or team members perspectives, the relationship that each needs to build and the

competences both needs to develop can be quite the same, as it looks like the manager is in a team of managers much like the team member in his own team of team members, the only differentiation is that the setup is made at an upper organization chart level.

Based on this, we can nominate the following leadership competences: experience, influencing skills, negotiation, managing change, delivering results, meeting deadlines and commitments, critical thinking, forward-thinking, self-confidence, collaboration, seeing the bigger picture, organizing skills, conflict resolution, delegating, decision making, flexibility etc.

To assess the importance of the competences on each separate leadership layer of the 3D framework, I have run a survey on a unit of 50 people who is well established as leadership driven within the organization. The results are based on the input of the three managers and cross checked with the response of their respected team member, to see whether correlations and conclusions can be drawn. The second figure (Fig. no. 2) represent the which are the top three leadership competences that the manager things are important to focus on, marked with the blue color, and which are the top three leadership competences that a team member believes are important for the manager to develop, marked in orange. The importance is weighted from left to right, meaning that a competence on the left side is more important than that follows next to the right side and so on.



**Fig. no. 2 Survey Results – Top 3 key competences from a manager and a team member perspective**

*Source: authors*

**Survey and results interpretation**

We'll start interpreting the results and putting to the test different hypothesis which could help us better understand if and why there are gaps when it comes to the importance of different leadership competences, when we look through the eyes of the managers or their team members.

We'll start first with the results given by the managers:

We see in results (Fig. no. 2) that managers believe that the most important competence is knowing and having values and principles. In the best-seller book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey, 1989), the author explains that principles are permanent rules and laws that cannot be challenged thus universal in nature while the values are internal and subjective and sometimes change over time such as personal beliefs or opinions. Based on this we could draw the conclusion that because it is so personal, and it can incorporate a lot of interchangeable skills and competences, the idea of having values and principles has a more holistic approach on leadership, a more idealistic concept than something pragmatical. The second most important competence is integrity which could be explained as the act of being align on what you say, what you feel and what you do, thus showing integrity in relation with yourself and others. This is one of the important pillars of building trust in any relationship. Finally, we have the third most important competence which is being a learner. We go around and reiterate that leadership or the act of leading is a continues process, there is no clearly defined threshold that if someone passes, we can consider him a leader, so continues development through learning is critical.

The second layer is where we investigate what is important in relationship with the team: we find that the most important leadership competence is relationship building, or the ability of the manager to truly connect with each team member. One explanation is because of the importance given to IT changes in any industry and business, the focus on digitalization, on working with software and tools the result becomes a need for human to human relationship building. The second one is communicating clearly and openly; this could be the case especially in the case of the millennials labeled generation where an emphasis is put on self-importance and self-contribution - how each can make a difference, how important his or her voice is, how he or she can contribute and have an impact in the organization. This can only be done through communication on both sides on what the expectation is and how to move it forward. Finally, we have the creation of the feeling of teamwork. Organization are competitive environments that compete with one another for supremacy and survival which also results in competitiveness within the company members, who compete for better organization hierarchical positions. Because of this a key focus and challenge for managers is to keep his or her team members not to compete between themselves or sabotage one another, but to work together for the same win.

The third layer where we look at competences needed to perform in relation with other managers, we find that influencing skills are rated the highest. Because the company's or unit's resources such as employees, budgets, strategic decisions are limited and often shorter than the apparent need, influencing skills comes into play for driving them towards the best outcome. Thus, the more influence a manager carries, the easier he or she will persuade other managers to move in his direction. The second skill is managing change which indeed is picking up increasingly importance due to the everchanging business environment which dictates that quick and bold decisions need to be taken to survive or prosper this highly competitive environment. Since we as humans are reluctant to changes, this is becoming a very important skillset to possess on how to manage change in a positive and with minimum unsettlement way as possible. Lastly, we have forward thinking which can also be defined the ability to see and plan-ahead. In many cases such as a recent article in *Harvard Business Review*, it is said that tomorrow is already now, as again the speed of business development is reaching new records, the ability to decide now on things that will have a positive repercussion also in the future is something not to be ignored.

Let's continue with the results given by the team members:

In the results (Fig. no. 2) in orange, the team members believe that the most important skill for the first layer of leadership is expertise. The average team member is required to perform different tasks and activities, the majority of which can be repetitive. In this regard, the more experience he has, the better he will perform and be better evaluated for. The second

competence is the mix of values and principles which like in the same case of the manager, can be rephrased as the creation of the individual, and how we do things and take control, based on own set of internal rules. Finally, we have the creative competence. This is in many cases, in many teams and in many companies one of the differentiators. Having the ability to be creative means that can help do things faster or in an innovative way, that in both cases is a value add for the person and ultimately team or company.

The second leadership layer starts with the competence of communicating clearly and openly. Communication is the key for starting to build trust within a team whether it is explaining why we do things in certain way, what is the result of my work, why this decision was taken or simply keeping a transparent view within the organization. The second competence is the ability to inspire and motivate. In other words, the ability to make team members understand and keep on working for the common goal, despite hardships and failures that they may encounter, is something that team members value a lot. The final one is the skill of developing others, or for the manager to develop his team members. Common sense dictates that if a leader has the organization position then he deserves it for his competences and merits. Given the hierarchical structure of any organization and the general concept that employees always want better for themselves, also from a professional perspective, then we can think that he or she can share something with the team member thus helping him succeed professionally as well.

Finally, we have the third leadership layer where we also notice that negotiating skills are the most important when it comes to building relationship on the horizontal scale. This is also how informal leaders appear within teams as they most of the time possess very good influencing skills amongst each other. The second competence is the ability to deliver results. In any organization we might find somewhere stated that at the end it's the results that count and that makes or breaks a team, a unit or an organization. Finally, we have the last competence which is the organizing skills and again we often hear the concept of doing more with less. This is not possible unless team member possesses high organizing skills to prioritize important tasks first that have a higher change of yielding a positive impact and deprioritize low value ones.

### **Conclusions**

We've started this exercise with the scope of structuring the multitude of competencies a leader is believed to have possessed from a relational perspective given that leadership is more or less, the art of communication. By using the Three-Dimensional Leadership Competence Model, managers and team members can focus on specific competences where they would want to fill possible competence gaps or strengthen existing ones thus have higher changes of success in the corporate business or entrepreneur world. All the three layers are needed to become a successful complete manager in the eyes of oneself, his or her team or his or her management peers. We found that the perspectives of the manager and his team member on key competences have both common points and different views, which could mainly be justified by the subjective experiences of each. Naturally, another supposition can be made which is that the importance of competences derived from the study is given either by the lacking or the poor development of competences from the leader's toolkit, thus the increasing want for them to be possessed or, key differentiators or strengths in terms of competences that the leader possess and believes to be the results of his or her success, this by looking in comparison with other leaders. By looking at the common ground of perspectives of leaders and team members we can state that Values and Principles for the First Layer, Communicate Clearly and Openly for the Second Layer and finally Influencing Skills for the Third Layer can be a competence bridge between different layers of organization and an indicator of successful leadership development. Further research is needed to understand to what extent there could be a leadership competence gap between

existing or perceived competences of leaders and the importance it is given to each by them or by their team members.

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