

Characteristics of Successful Managers: A Study of Thai Employees' Perception

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ABSTRACT

The purposes of this study were to examine the characteristics perceived to be required for managerial success and to test whether differences exist between men and women in their attributions of such traits. Data were collected based on a survey of 350 employees in organizations in Thailand. Intraclass correlation coefficients and independent samples t-test were employed to analyse the data. The results indicated overall similarity between men and women in their perceptions of requisite attributes for success in managerial positions though there were significant gender differences in the ratings of some traits. Implications for career management are discussed.

Keywords: characteristics, managerial success, gender differences, Thailand

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent studies provide evidence suggesting changes in the description of leadership over time. Leadership in recent years has been described in terms of both male and female attributes and characteristics (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell & Ristikari, 2011). Research studies have been undertaken to identify the characteristics perceived to be requisite for success in managerial positions (Berkery, Morely & Tiernan, 2013; Schein, 1973; 1975; 2007). While there may be reported changes in how leaders are described, such changes are not yet evident in a corresponding increase in the number of women occupying management positions. Women remain under represented in managerial positions worldwide. In the case of Thailand, 27% of women occupy executive positions (Grant Thornton, 2015). The present study seeks to address the question: Do women and men in the Thai cultural context differ in how they perceive and rate the characteristics necessary for managerial success? Specifically, the objectives of this research are to a) identify which traits are perceived to be characteristic of successful managers; b) which traits are rated as more important than others; and c) whether men and women differ in their perceptions and ratings of the requisite characteristics of successful managers.

The following sections present a review of the literature, theoretical framework, methodology, and data analysis employed for the current study followed by the results, discussion, implications for managerial success and conclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior studies have been conducted to determine attributes and characteristics for managerial success. Evidence from research suggests that agentic qualities such as active, ambitious, assertive, competent, efficient, energetic, forceful, independent, persistent, self-confident are strongly associated with men (Duehr & Bono, 2006; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Communal traits including cooperative, helpful, honest, kind, nurturing, sympathetic, trustworthy and warm are strongly linked to women and such qualities are perceived to contribute to resolving interpersonal problems and relational issues (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001), but are often not mentioned among those traits necessary for managerial success. On the other hand, agentic qualities are often perceived to be imperative for success in management positions (Duehr & Bono, 2006; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Research suggests that the qualities required for success in managerial positions are more likely to be held by men than by women (Schein, 1973; 1975).

A review of the literature reveals that in Thailand, there is still a paucity of research investigating traits required for success in management. There is some evidence in the Thai cultural context that personal characteristics of patience, sincerity, honesty, consensus, persistence, flexibility and a willingness to learn have been mentioned as necessary attributes linked to career success for women in Thailand (van der Boon 2003). Thai women are expected to be attentive, humble, respectful, discreet, and understanding. In the workplace, a “motherly” approach towards subordinates and a non-confrontational style are cited as being important for managing relationships and maintaining harmony (van der Boon, 2003, p. 142). While such attributes and behaviour might be requisite for managerial success for Thai women, the traits are those that would appear on the list of communal characteristics, attributes of relationship-oriented leadership (e.g., compassionate, fair, shows appreciation, sociable, tactful) and transformational leadership (e.g., encouraging, energetic, inspiring, optimistic, sense of purpose) and are not among agentic characteristics required for managerial success as reported in previous research (Duehr & Bono, 2006). Hence, given some inconsistent results, such finding is worthy of further investigation. As noted earlier, the current study will examine the characteristics perceived to be essential for managerial success among Thai women and compare the results to those of Thai men.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current study adopts the implicit theory of leadership (Lord and Maher, 1991) as a theoretical framework to explain the attribution of qualities to leaders. According to the theory, leadership qualities are attributed to individuals including the attribution of status and privileges to the leader (Hanges, Lord, Day, Sipe, Smith and Brown, 1997; Sipe and Hanges 1997). Individuals hold beliefs and assumptions regarding effective and ineffective leaders. The acceptance of leaders is influenced by these beliefs and assumptions and the degree to which such beliefs are consistent with the leader’s behavior. Furthermore, the theory suggests that leader attributes and behavior, organizational practices and culture simultaneously interact with one another and, in turn, shape leader behavior and attributes, and the enactment of leadership behavior (Kopelman, Brief and Guzzo, 1990).

4. METHODOLOGY

Data were collected using a measuring instrument based on Schein Descriptive Index (SDI) (Schein, 1973; 1975). SDI was used to define the characteristics of successful managers. A shorter version of SDI was administered to the respondents. The survey consisted of 42 descriptive terms or adjectives commonly used to characterize people in general and included both agentic and communal characteristics, some of which were positive (e.g., courteous, helpful), negative (e.g., selfish, submissive) while some were neither positive nor negative (e.g., competitive, curious) (Berkery, Morely & Tiernan, 2013).

Respondents were asked to rate how characteristic the 42 descriptive words or phrases were of successful managers. The ratings were made on a 5-point scale: 1 – not characteristic, 2 – somewhat characteristic, 3 – neither characteristic nor uncharacteristic, 4 – somewhat characteristic, 5 – characteristic. A total of 145 men and 205 women who were employees in Thai organizations participated in the survey. Data were analyzed using intraclass correlation coefficients and independent samples t-test to assess gender differences.

5. RESULTS

Intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) were employed to test for the degree of consistency between descriptions of successful managers for men and women. For men, $ICC = .874$, $p < .001$, while for women, $ICC = .863$, $p < .001$. As the difference in the intraclass correlation coefficients did not exceed 0.29, the difference was not statistically significant (Duehr & Bono, 2006, p. 828).

Table 1 presents the ratings of descriptive words for successful managers for male and female respondents based on means scores. Independent samples t-test was conducted to test for differences between male and female ratings of the characteristics for managerial success. Among the 42 descriptive terms, there were significant differences in the mean ratings between men and women for only four items. For “leadership ability”, female rating ($M = 4.77$, $SD = .52$) was significantly higher than male rating ($M = 4.57$, $SD = .70$), $t(348) = 2.95$, $p < .005$; “desires responsibility”, female rating ($M = 4.53$, $SD = .65$) was significantly higher than male rating ($M = 4.34$, $SD = .72$), $t(347) = 2.56$, $p < .05$; “well informed”, female rating ($M = 4.29$, $SD = .72$) was significantly higher than male rating ($M = 4.09$, $SD = .87$), $t(347) = 2.39$, $p < .02$; and “strong need for monetary rewards”, male rating ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.26$) was significantly higher than female rating ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.16$), $t(348) = 2.67$, $p < .005$. No significant differences were found between male and female ratings on the remaining items.

The items that were ranked the same according to the mean scores within each group (i.e., male respondents versus female respondents) were: “leadership ability” (1), “decisive” (11), “persistent” (25), “curious” (30), “submissive” (36), “desire to avoid controversy” (37) and “selfish” (42).

Table 1 Ranking of descriptive terms of successful managers by mean scores

Male Ratings		Female Ratings	
Descriptive terms	Mean Scores	Descriptive terms	Mean Scores
1. Leadership ability*	4.57*	1. Leadership ability*	4.77*
2. Analytical ability	4.45	2. Desires responsibility*	4.53*
3. Logical	4.41	3. Analytical ability	4.52
4. Competent	4.38	4. Logical	4.47
5. Self-confident	4.35	5. Creative	4.45
6. Emotionally stable	4.35	6. Competent	4.44
7. Desires responsibility*	4.34*	7. Self-confident	4.40
8. Strong need for achievement	4.33	8. Intelligent	4.39
9. Creative	4.30	9. Strong need for achievement	4.39
10. Intelligent	4.29	10. Emotionally stable	4.37
11. Decisive	4.23	11. Decisive	4.36
12. Consistent	4.20	12. Well-informed*	4.29*
13. Helpful	4.16	13. Objective	4.14
14. Competitive	4.16	14. Tactful	4.09
15. Steady	4.09	15. Helpful	4.06
16. Well-informed*	4.09*	16. Consistent	4.05
17. Grateful	4.03	17. Aware of feelings of others	4.05
18. Aware of feelings of others	4.00	18. Ambitious	4.04
19. Objective	4.00	19. Steady	4.03
20. Ambitious	3.98	20. Competitive	4.01
21. Tactful	3.94	21. Grateful	3.98
22. Sociable	3.93	22. Cheerful	3.93
23. Cheerful	3.92	23. Intuitive	3.90
24. Frank	3.90	24. Sociable	3.89
25. Persistent	3.89	25. Persistent	3.88
26. Intuitive	3.83	26. Assertive	3.79
27. Independent	3.81	27. Frank	3.78
28. Generous	3.80	28. Strong need for social acceptance	3.77
29. Adventurous	3.74	29. Independent	3.76
30. Curious	3.72	30. Curious	3.69
31. Strong need for social acceptance	3.71	31. Generous	3.67
32. Assertive	3.63	32. High need for power	3.64
33. High need for power	3.59	33. Modest	3.62
34. Forceful	3.54	34. Adventurous	3.59
35. Modest	3.48	35. Forceful	3.55
36. Submissive	3.14	36. Submissive	3.09
37. Desire to avoid controversy	3.04	37. Desire to avoid controversy	3.07
38. Strong need for monetary rewards*	2.82*	38. Aggressive	2.64
39. Aggressive	2.82	39. Strong need for monetary rewards*	2.47*
40. Deceitful	1.76	40. Shy	1.71
41. Shy	1.74	41. Deceitful	1.65
42. Selfish	1.45	42. Selfish	1.35

Note: * Denotes significant gender differences; ratings on a 5-point scale, male sample = 145; female sample = 205.

Among the top 20 items with a cut-off point of 3.98 for male ratings and 4.01 for female ratings (on a 5-point scale) in terms of mean scores, “tactful” was ranked 14 by female respondents, but was not among the top 20 of male ratings and “grateful”, ranked 17 by male respondents, did not appear in the top 20 of female ratings of attributes. Thus, out of 20 top items, 19 attributes appeared in the list of both male and female ratings, suggesting a relatively high level of agreement on the qualities required for managerial success.

6. DISCUSSION

The aims of the study were to identify which characteristics were perceived to be necessary for managerial success and which traits were rated most important. The study also examined whether there were gender differences among Thai employees.

Overall, the results indicated that men and women had a relatively high degree of similarity in their perception of the characteristics necessary for managerial success. Among the top 20 attributes, there were 19 common items appearing in both male and female ratings. There was only one item from the male ratings and one from the female ratings that did not appear on the other group's list of attributes. These results were consistent with intraclass correlation coefficients which did not find overall significant differences in the descriptions of successful managers between male and female ratings.

A focus on the top five attributes revealed some interesting observations. With respect to traits that were rated most important in terms of mean scores, for male respondents, the top five traits on the list were leadership ability, followed by analytical ability, logical, competent, and self-confident. Female respondents rated leadership ability most essential followed by "desires responsibility", analytical ability, logical, and creative among the top five qualities. The three items that were common to both male and female ratings in the top five were leadership ability, analytical ability and logical. However, for women, having the desire for responsibility and being creative were perceived to be important top five qualities for managerial success but these items did not appear in the top five for men who rated being competent and self-confident as key traits for success as managers, both of which did not show up in the top five for women. Thus, there were some differences between men and women in terms of their ratings of the top five traits.

Among the top 20 attributes, the ratings indicated that not all 20 were exclusively agentic qualities. Among male respondents, four of the qualities (e.g., creative, helpful, grateful, aware of feelings of others) would be classified as communal traits or relationship-oriented according to prior research (Duehr & Bono, 2006). Similarly, four of the qualities on the female ratings list (e.g., creative, tactful, helpful, aware of feelings of others) would be grouped under communal traits or relationship-oriented. The remaining qualities were either agentic or task-oriented. Hence, the majority of the top 20 characteristics deemed to be critical for managerial success were those that were either agentic or task-oriented attributes.

At the bottom of the list for both male and female respondents, the least desirable traits were being submissive, the desire to avoid controversy, being aggressive, having a strong need for monetary rewards, being deceitful, shy and selfish. In part, due to Thai cultural norms that emphasize harmonious relationships and non-confrontational approach (Komin, 1990a; 1990b) being aggressive is viewed as a negative trait. Similarly, being assertive is not high on the list of desirable traits, consistent with the GLOBE study which found Thailand to have the least assertive societal values among the Southern Asian cluster of countries (House, Javidan, Hanges, and Dorfman, 2002). Therefore, the evidence supports the implicit leadership theory which suggests that national culture influences and shapes leader attributes and the enactment of leadership behavior (Kopelman, Brief and Guzzo, 1990).

Finally, the results suggest that women in the current study rated the characteristics of successful managers in ways that are similar to men's ratings. The female ratings of qualities differed from the attributes required for career success reported in an earlier study of Thai women (i.e., van der Boon, 2003), which emphasized communal and relationship-oriented attributes more so than agentic qualities, in contrast to the results of the present study. It is possible that as noted earlier, there is some evidence suggesting that in more recent years, leadership is described in terms of both male and female attributes (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell & Ristikari, 2011).

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERIAL SUCCESS

There are several implications for men and women in strategically managing their career. Firstly, as women are under represented in the upper echelons of organizations in Thailand as noted earlier (Napasri & Yukongdi, 2015; Yukongdi, 2005, Yukongdi, 2009), men are more likely to be serving on the performance evaluation committee and making promotion decisions. It would be beneficial for women to review those attributes that are rated highly by men in this study as women will be more likely to be evaluated on whether they possess such attributes. Women who are in a position to display many of the traits required to be a successful manager are more likely to be perceived as promotable.

Secondly, men and women who aspire to managerial success should pay attention to the highly rated attributes perceived to be necessary for success in managerial positions. If they do not already possess those requisite characteristics either on the basis of self-assessment or 360-degree performance feedback, they should learn to develop those qualities and display them to be perceived as having the necessary traits for promotion to managerial positions.

Thirdly, men and women should review those traits that have been poorly rated in the current study and avoid displaying such traits which are perceived to be uncharacteristic of successful managers.

Fourthly, the results suggest that the qualities of successful managers are not exclusively agentic characteristics, though they form the majority of the top 20 attributes, the requisite characteristics also include communal and relationship-oriented traits whose rating may be influenced by Thai cultural norms and values as well.

Finally, the findings underscore the importance of national culture's influence on enactment of leadership behavior. One's behavior is more likely to be accepted and viewed positively if such behavior is also consistent with local norms, in this case, Thai cultural values.

8. CONCLUSION

The results from the study suggest that the requisite characteristics for managerial success are a combination of agentic and communal qualities as well as relationship- and task-oriented attributes. Leadership behavior that overemphasizes "male"

characteristics to the exclusion of communal or relationship-oriented traits may not lead to career success at the management level. Regardless of gender, leadership ability was perceived to be the most important attribute for successful managers followed closely by analytical ability and being logical.

Some differences exist in the ratings between men and women and such differences reflect, to some extent, the differing level of importance assigned to such traits and the influence of Thai cultural values. Certain attributes are rated more important than others and women and men who wish to be viewed as having the characteristics fit for promotion to management positions should pay attention to those qualities, demonstrate and exhibit those characteristics that are highly rated and less of those qualities that are poorly rated.

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